

Prepared for Action

THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE UNITED STATES NAVY MAKE UP CMDR. MELODY GOODWIN'S CONGREGATION.

Since the American Revolution, women have played an active military role in every United States conflict. Three thousand women served in World War I, 7,000 in Vietnam, and during Desert Storm, 7 percent of deployed American forces were women—more than 40,000.

Events involving U.S. military women gained international attention during Operation Iraqi Freedom, including the dramatic rescue of prisoners of war Jessica Lynch and Shoshana Johnson, and the loss of Lori Piestewa, the first Native American woman killed by enemy action in our nation's wars.

On the other hand, little focus has been placed on a group of well-trained women in active duty who view the American armed forces as both a congregation and a mission field: female chaplains. The military has made chaplaincy open to women for more than 25 years.

There are now 130 female chaplains on active duty—28 in the Air Force, 49 in the Army and 53 in the Navy. Among those serving the Navy, Chaplain Melody Goodwin—the daughter of two Pentecostal ministers—has been promoted to the rank of commander. This rank has elevated her to her current position as ethical adviser and pastoral planner for the assistant commander, Navy personnel command, fleet support.

A quick glance at Goodwin's résumé confirms her qualifications for her position: doctor of ministry, master's degrees in theology and divinity, extensive professional studies, college-seminary instructor, book author and editor, and numerous military certifications and awards, among which are three Navy and Marine Corps Commendations Medals and three

Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medals.

Surprisingly, her journey to this level of achievement began more than 25 years ago when Goodwin was an Atlanta teenager. "At 15, I felt the call to ministry," she told SpiritLed Woman. "But with the number of ministers in my family, including my parents, my uncles and cousins, I felt that there should be at least one teacher in the family; and I wanted to be a high school teacher.

"The Lord and I had a few active discussions about that. It was very difficult for me spiritually because the Lord wasn't taking 'no' for an answer. After a lot of sleepless nights—a lot of what I call 'spiritual beatings'—I gave in.

"I realized that I am the kind of person that whatever I believe I am supposed to do, I do it 110 percent. So I went to Bible college after high school, and from Bible college I went straight into seminary, where I was recruited [by the Navy]."

TAPPED FOR SERVICE

Goodwin's choice to serve the Lord in the military was influenced by the fact that her denomination limited the role of women in ministry. "Since our church would not ordain women as ministers," she recalls, "I had been praying for some clear direction as to how I was going to answer God's call.

"I said, 'Lord, I will go wherever

You want me to, and I'll do whatever You want, but I am not going to hunt for it or chase after it. If it happens, it's going to happen because You want it to, and it's going to be plain and clear.'

"During this time, military branches were recruiting for chaplains at the seminary I was attending. At first I was interested in the Air Force because it required less traveling than the other branches.

“However, a Navy recruiter visited my college and explained to me about ministry in the military—the vastness and variety of it. Totally captivated, I filled out the paperwork and enrolled in chaplain training.”

But one dilemma had to be resolved before Goodwin could begin her ministry. “Years earlier,” she remembered, “when I was making the decision as to which college I should attend, my parents arranged for me to have an educational adviser who happened to be a teacher at Beulah Heights Bible College. Due to his influence, I enrolled in Beulah Heights, and this adviser—Dr. Bennie Eugene Goodwin—became my educational director and, later, my husband.”

Three years after they were married, both Goodwins were teaching in the seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. But Goodwin felt she wasn’t doing what God had called her to do.

“Although I had trained to be a chaplain, I chose teaching to remain close to my husband. Noticing my distress, he said to me, ‘Melody, you trained to be a minister in the military, so why don’t you do it?’ I answered, ‘I don’t believe the Lord brought us together to separate us at this point.’

“He replied, ‘It’s time for me to retire—I will travel with you.’ As a result, the Lord has opened double doors for us. Everywhere we are stationed, someone finds out he’s in the area, and they reach out for him to be on their staff at a Bible college or seminary.”

Goodwin’s ministry experiences during her travels range from braving sandstorms in the desert to conducting Sunday services on submarines. She explains: “The military doesn’t assign any females, including chaplains, to submarines. However, while I worked at a submarine base, I was allowed to minister on board.

“In many ways female chaplains and male chaplains are treated

as equals in the military, so access to such places is granted no matter what your gender is," she notes. "But being a female chaplain and a senior female chaplain and officer, when I go to different places I make sure that, in addition to my regular ministry, I seek out enlisted females—especially the junior enlisted females. I ask them, 'What are some of your struggles?' and 'How are things going for you?'

"I have followed several of these women throughout their military careers. [I] opened myself up to be called by them for anything they need, both as a friend and a spiritual leader."

Goodwin is willing to go the extra mile to help others who are walking a path similar to her own because she knows the importance of having a godly role model to emulate. For many years, she has had the privilege of closely observing a woman whose desire to obey the Lord compelled her to pursue her destiny against great odds.

HER MOTHER'S EXAMPLE

Chaplain Goodwin credits her mother, Dorothy Humphries, with instilling in her strong leadership qualities at an early age. Humphries now serves as pastor of the independent Faith and Prayer Pentecostal Church in Atlanta.

"My mother is a phenomenal woman," the chaplain notes. "When she started raising our family, she hadn't finished high school. At the same time, my father was terminally ill.

"So my mother, while taking care of him and all six of us children, went back to school, earned her GED and attended college. Because of her tenacity and her ability to motivate people, a large number of women in our community and in our church did the same.

"When my father passed away," she adds, "my mother took over as pastor, bringing the church into a new way of thinking. She started what is called the Deborah House, where church members

set up apartments for indigent and low-income families, providing them with furnishings and clothing. Under my mother's leadership, the church has established a prison ministry and a weekly homeless outreach in Atlanta's inner city."

Goodwin acknowledges that her mother's ministry, too, continually blesses her. On those occasions when she especially needs God's intervention, she receives prayer from a team of prayer warriors Humphries has assembled to intercede on her daughter's behalf.

"It's amazing how the Lord works," Goodwin recalls, "how He has used my mother and my home church to be pivotal in my career. So I do everything I can to assist them.

"Every base I go to, I take a group of young adults from the church and expose them to the military life there. For example, when I served at the submarine base, I actually took the church members on a tour on a submarine.

"Some of the mothers who had never been outside of their immediate neighborhoods got to see things they had never dreamed of seeing. And some of the young people in the church have gone on to college and into the military because of these experiences."

As an African American, Goodwin believes that in fulfilling her calling, she serves as an encouragement for other African Americans pursuing similar goals. Also, she states: "As an African American woman, naval officer and female chaplain, I have followed some great women who paved the way for me.

"Some of my male colleagues have told me that, because of the senior position I hold in the chaplain corps, it is my turn to pave the way for those who come after me. So when I find that there is an African American female chaplain coming on active duty in the Navy, I seek her out and connect with her to provide any mentoring, camaraderie or support I can.

“African American females are a double minority, and I sometimes work extremely hard at things I shouldn’t have to. But I know that because God has called me here, it is His responsibility to take care of me.

“Doors may need to be opened, but I’m not going to push it open or knock it down. I just want to be ready to walk through the door when it appears. Those are the kinds of prayers that I pray.”

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