

About English field chaplains during the First world War

Introduction

The Army Chaplains Department was established in 1796, but already from 1662 chaplains had been attached to certain units.

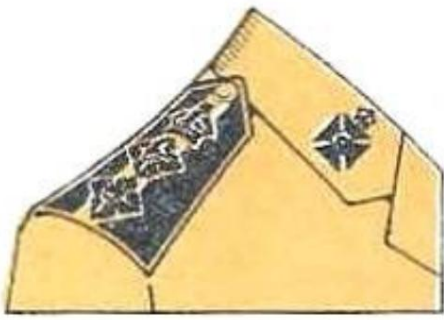
In the beginning, the field chaplains were only from the Anglican Church, but later other denominations were added (1836 for Catholic field chaplains 1)). In the style of some of the other corps, the field chaplains were also honored for their efforts in the First World War, and the corps received per 22 February 1919 designation *Royal Army Chaplains Department*. The corps is also today an umbrella organization for field chaplains of all faiths.

About the field chaplains

In 1914 the Army Chaplains Department numbered 117 field chaplains - 89 Anglican, 11 Presbyterian and 17 Catholic. The expansion of the army created a corresponding need for new field chaplains and by August 1918 there were 3,406 field chaplains - 1,941 Anglican, 298 Presbyterian, 643 Catholic, besides 524 belonging to other faiths. 176 chaplains fell during the war.

The field chaplains were royally appointed, in the same way as officers, and were distinguished in the style of officers. The grades did not give the field chaplains any command authority, but indicated their officer status and rank among themselves:

Grade in the Army Chaplains Department Corresponds to	Distinction (surrounded by black lids)
Chaplain to the Forces Class IV	Captured Three stars
Chaplain to the Forces Class III	Major A crown
Chaplain to the Forces Class II	Lieutenant Colonel A star and a crown
Chaplain to the Forces Class I	Oberst Two stars and a crown
Deputy Chaplain-General	Brigadier General Sword and marshal's baton, over cross
Chaplain-General	Major General Sword and marshal's baton, over cross, and star



Chaplain to the Forces
Class I (oberst) 2).

The senior clergy were Chaplain-General, Bishop Taylor Smith and Deputy Chaplain-General, Bishop Llewellyn H. Gwynne. The latter was responsible for the clerical service on the Western Front.

The field chaplain's formal task was to be a spiritual provider for the soldiers, but he also quickly came to function as a kind of welfare officer, so much so that some field chaplains believed that they served two masters - *Mr. God and Mr. Cinema*.

The relationship between field chaplain and soldier was not the informal one that exists today. The times were different and in the class-divided English society, many, especially Anglican field chaplains, came from the same social strata as the officer corps. The fact that the field chaplains wore officer-like distinctions - and belonged to the officers' mess - meant that some soldiers regarded the field chaplain as an officer, rather than someone they could freely confide in.

Some field chaplains were eagerly agitating towards the not particularly religious soldiers, which did not improve relations; other field chaplains had a more relaxed attitude to their work, which they exercised to a greater extent when the soldiers sought them out. In the Irish regiments, which numbered many Catholics, the faith had deeper roots than the weekly church parade *in* which all soldiers were ordered to participate.

One of the tasks that the field chaplains also had to perform at the units was to censor the soldiers' letters. It was actually an officer's task, but since the field chaplains often participated in this work. Many field priests thereby gained a completely new insight into the thoughts and feelings of their "parishioners".



Chaplain Edward Noel Mellish, who received the Victoria Cross in 1916. From Gallaher Cigarette Card No. 114.

The field chaplains who shared conditions with the soldiers naturally gained great respect, while those who rarely appeared in the front line had more difficulty being taken seriously. One of the points which especially distinguished the Catholic field chaplains from the Anglican ones was the instructions given by the respective ecclesiastical authorities. The Catholic field chaplains were required to carry out their work everywhere, while the Anglicans, in the most literal sense, had to be more restrained - they had better not move too far forward towards the battle lines. Many Anglican field chaplains, however, took these instructions seriously and were at least as forward with the soldiers as their Catholic colleagues.

The field chaplains often carried out their service under extremely difficult conditions, and their care for the wounded often led to being rewarded with distinctions.

In this connection, it should be mentioned that three field chaplains have received the Victoria Cross over time - all during the First World War. Read about the three Victoria Crosses here: [The Chaplain VCs of the Great War.](#)



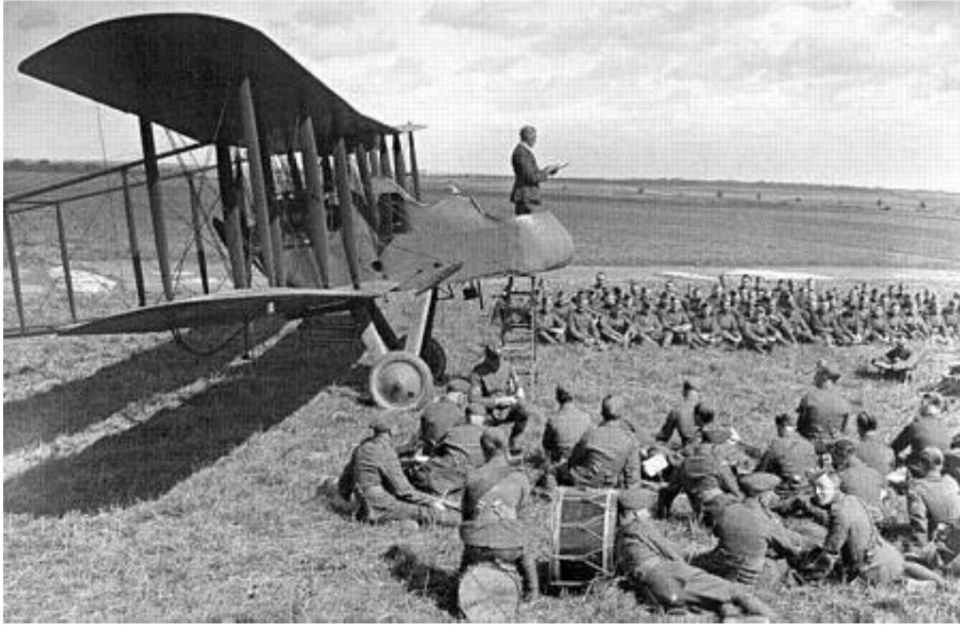
Field chaplain helps the wounded to write a greeting

to their relatives, at a junction near Noyelles, 8 October 1918.
From Source 1.

Examples of the field chaplains' work

Service at various sanitation installations was part of the field chaplain's duties. Here he assisted with the care of the wounded and with notifying the soldiers' next of kin.

Funerals and the religious marking thereof belonged to the field chaplain's natural tasks.



Field service, September 1918.
From Source 1.

Field chaplains had to be able to hold field services under all conceivable conditions.

Here, however, it is under well-ordered conditions, even if the pulpit is somewhat unconventional - an FE 2B (night) bomber.

Fader Francis Gleeson



*Field service by the 2nd Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers, 8 May 1915.
The Last Absolution of the Munsters.*

The picture was painted by the Italian Fortunino Matania (1881-1963), who was associated with the British *Ministry of Propaganda*. His many pictures and drawings were published in *The Sphere*, *Illustrated London News* and *L'illustration*, among others .

The story behind the picture is as follows:

In the evening, Saturday 8th May 1915, the battalion halted near Neuve Chapelle, in northern France, and assembled by the roadside for service. The next day the battalion was to take part in the attack against the Aubers Heights. The four companies of the battalion now lined up; each company carried a green "quarter badge" emblazoned with the Irish harp and the word *Munster* ³) and these badges are seen in the picture.

The field chaplain, Francis Gleeson, gave his absolution (forgiveness of sins), after which the battalion sang the hymn *Te Deum* (Latin: You, O God). Father Gleeson later described being surprised by the soldiers' strong faith.

The next day the battalion attacked, losing 19 officers (including the battalion commander and adjutant) and 374 men

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I will refrain from discussing the subject of religion versus the horrors of war, and simply state that the serious and horrifying experiences that the soldiers - and the field chaplains - went through, naturally gave rise to many religious objections, as well as subsequent questions and reflections.. .



Emergency burial, 1916. From Source 1.



The field chaplain in the picture to the left . . . who may be Francis Gleeson, carries *16th (Irish) Divisions* sleeve tag.

The reproduction of the division's mark is derived from a Player's cigarette card.

About uniforms



*English field chaplain
(Chaplain to the Forces Class IV),
approx. 1916.*

Drawn by Mike Chappel
and reproduced
from *The British
Army in World War I
(1) - The Western Front 1914-16.*

Field chaplains wore ordinary officers' uniforms, with the following distinctive features.

- Black strips along the edge of the shoulder pads, on which the insignia were already worn from the beginning of the war.
- The uniform coat buttons were black.
- Black corps badges, worn as cap badge and collar badge.
- Black strap on the hat.

The field chaplain assists in the book's situation when receiving the wounded at a field hospital. He is clearly wearing an old uniform, which has been repaired with leather patches on the elbows and leather edging at the wrists. His dock strap is of brown leather, and not, as prescribed, of black leather.

The somewhat "worn" appearance is nicely supported by my source in the Royal Army Chaplains Department, Steve Parselle, who has assisted me with information on English field chaplains. He particularly draws attention to the fact that field chaplains do not pay much attention to their clothing.

Closing

Det er sagt om engelske feltpræster, at "*when the padres were good, they were very, very good; but when the were bad they were awful*" ...

Sources

1. *Tommy - The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* af Richard Holmes, Harper Collins Publishers, London 2004, ISBN 0-00-713751-6.
2. *Reflections on the Battlefield - From Infantryman to Chaplain 1914-1919* af Robert J. Rider, Liverpool Historical Studies Nr. 19, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2001, ISBN 0-85323- 897-9.

Per Finsted

To note

- 1) At the Royal Army Chaplains Department (UK) there is an overview of the relevant years.
- 2) From a booklet entitled Rank at a Glance in the Army & Navy, from 1915, which can be found on the very interesting website Digger History - An unofficial history of the Australian & New Zealand Armed Services.
- 3) From The Irish Uniform - Royal Munster Fusiliers website.