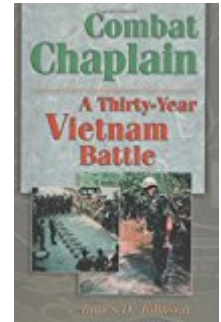


James D. Johnson. *Combat Chaplain: A Thirty-Year Vietnam Battle.* Denton: University Of North Texas Press, 2015. 312 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-57441-620-6.



Reviewed by John Young

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In this era when the role of the chaplaincy within the American armed forces is under increasing scrutiny, James D. Johnson's memoir *Combat Chaplain: A Thirty-Year Vietnam Battle* serves as a useful reminder of the capacity of chaplains to ease the suffering of those under their care. Readers interested in either military or religious history will find much of value in this fascinating account, which demonstrates clearly the Vietnam War's jarring juxtapositions of machine guns and monotony, the pious and the profane, and even the worst and best of human nature. *Combat Chaplain* follows Johnson from his enlistment through his nearly nine months of wading in the muck and mire of the Mekong Delta with the members of his "parish" (p. 2) and into his decades-long struggle with posttraumatic stress disorder. Reconstructed from the author's regular journal entries, correspondence, and audio cassette recordings, this powerful book also reminds readers of the troubling reality that for Johnson and so many other soldiers and support

personnel, the Vietnam War did not simply vanish from memory on the plane ride home.

The first chapter of *Combat Chaplain* begins *in medias res* as Johnson returns to the United States after his year abroad. Having anticipated reassignment from Fort Knox in early 1967, Johnson had "decided that if I was going to spend a year away from my family, I wanted to go to Vietnam" (p. 7). Within a few months and after a few well-placed phone calls, Johnson was on his way to the Mekong Delta, which would be his home for the next several months. The author's backstory is revealed gradually in the following pages—former Wake Forest football player from rural North Carolina, trained at a Baptist seminary, husband, father—but the real foci of Johnson's memoir are the soldiers and Vietnamese citizens whose lives he touched.

The next six chapters of Johnson's memoir cover his time in the Delta, providing a nearly day-by-day accounting of his stay there. His early decision to embed with the "river rats" of the Mo-

bile Riverine Force, a joint army-navy effort aimed at controlling the waterways in and around the Delta, sets the stage for the remainder of the book. Whereas most chaplains, Johnson notes, had the option of ministering to their charges from their battalion aid station, the itinerant nature of the Mobile Riverine Force meant that if Johnson wanted “to minister to them before, during, and after they fight ... then I *have* to be with them in combat” (p. 29). Johnson’s time in the field included both terrible carnage, most notably at a river bend known as “Snoopy’s Nose,” but also a pair of baptisms and numerous opportunities to provide pastoral care and spiritual guidance to the soldiers who so desperately sought it.

Following his time in combat with the Mobile Riverine Force, Johnson moved to divisional headquarters for roughly three months as he awaited DEROS. This brief period of his chaplaincy breezes by in chapter 8 of *Combat Chaplain*, and his days were filled with frequent worship services, hospital visits, graduation ceremonies, and personal counseling sessions rather than fire-fights and funerals. Yet the struggles Johnson would face upon his return to the United States also began to rear their ugly heads. “After such an intense eight and one-half months of being in life and death situations almost daily,” Johnson admits, “my routine here is less than challenging” (p. 234). And the difficulties Johnson faced in communicating with, and explaining the harsh realities of combat to, those who had not experienced it would only grow as time went on.

The final two chapters and epilogue of *Combat Chaplain* cover over thirty years of Johnson’s life, and so the writing style shifts from the continuous coverage of the preceding sections to a less comprehensive accounting. (Readers looking for more detail would be well advised to peruse Johnson’s other book, *Combat Trauma: A Personal Look at Long-Term Consequences*, recently rereleased in 2012). Nevertheless, it is clear that even though Johnson’s career was taking off and

his family was growing, the physical and emotional pain of his time in Vietnam continued to linger. He confesses that “only Barbara [his wife] knows the depth of my feelings, and she really knows very little” (p. 250). As the years progressed, however, Johnson came to believe that the periodic flashbacks he experienced were “God’s way of telling me I can still be healed of those old wounds” (p. 262). In 1996, Johnson returned to Vietnam; without spoiling too much of the story, suffice it to say he experienced a poignant reunion that offered a measure of “cleansing” and confirmation of his belief in a Romans 8:28-influenced “theology of timing” (p. 272).

At times, Johnson’s internal struggles remain tantalizingly vague, especially his early difficulties with depression and homesickness upon arrival in Vietnam. Similarly, as the book approaches the present day, his entries become fewer and farther between. Although this stylistic shift is partly due to the nature of the sources from which he crafted the book, readers may be left wanting more. Regardless, *Combat Chaplain* remains a worthy read for religious and military historians. For the former, especially those of us whose stock-in-trade is theological history, the book is a compelling reminder that theology is not simply an intellectual discipline but can also manifest itself in the ways people choose to live and serve. For the latter, *Combat Chaplain* provides value as a well-written memoir that accurately reflects the on-the-ground soldier experience: the physical and mental destruction of war, resentment of the seemingly clueless politicians managing the war (p. 91), and the occasional glimpse into events taking place on the home front (p. 243). An assortment of diagrams and photographs rounds out this enthralling volume and orients the reader within Johnson’s world.

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