Call for Military Ministers
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CAREER

# Call for Military Ministers

US Armed Forces are recruiting qualified Hindus as career clergy among its soldiers

Armies since ancient times have required the services of religious guides. Consider, for example, Lord Krishna on the battlefield at Kurukshetra, advising Arjuna on his duties as a kshatriya, or warrior. This reality of war has not changed, and nearly every army in the world provides chaplains to minister to its soldiers. What has changed is the religious make-up of the world's armies. In a dramatic example of America's religious pluralism, the US Armed Forces have commissioned not only Jewish and Christian chaplains of all denominations, but Buddhist and Islamic ones as well. Recently the Department of Defense stated its willingness to commission Hindu chaplains to minister to the nearly one thousand Hindus, mostly doctors, serving in American armed forces.

Chaplain is a general term for a person holding a spiritual office. It encompasses priests, ministers, rabbis, imams--any person of any faith holding such a post. In the United States Armed Forces, chaplains are regularly commissioned career officers, expected to serve twenty years or more.

The Indian Army has the same system, but uses the term "religious teachers." These serve as junior commissioned officers, nayabsubadar. There are religious teachers of five faiths--Hindu, Islamic, Sikh, Buddhist and Christian. They are trained for their religious duties at a special school. Each major military base in India has a sarva dharma sthal where all religions can worship. Some bases have built huge temples--for example, that of the Rajputana regiment in Delhi.

The post of chaplain in a branch of the US Armed Forces presents an interesting career option to a motivated Hindu. The qualifications are quite stringent--American citizenship (or permanent residence), a college degree and the Hindu equivalent of a Master of Divinity in religious study, two years of pastoral experience, character references from one's guru and temple society and the approval of a certified endorsing agency.

There is so far only one endorsing agency for Hindus, Chinmaya Mission West. They will, at present, provide endorsement only for a fully qualified teacher within their own Mission. Other Hindu organizations can request certification as an endorsing agency. There are about 220 endorsing agencies of all faiths nationally. One can enroll in the Chaplain Candidate Program, a pre-commissioning training program, as a graduate student. This is perhaps the simplest way to fulfill all the requirements, including the two years of pastoral experience. The services are prepared to adapt their requirements to the particulars of the Hindu priestly tradition. There are about 3,000 chaplains in the combined US forces, and 100 to 200 are added each year.

Being a chaplain in the US Army, Navy or Air Force is a full-time commitment. One lives on a military base, wears an officer's uniform and is subject to all the regulations of the military. Chaplains are not allowed to carry arms, but if the troops they minister to are sent to the front lines, the chaplain goes with them. Each chaplain ministers to those of his or her own faith through religious services, classes and counseling.

Overall, chaplains are responsible for the morale of the troops and expected to counsel anyone in need. Every chaplain is trained to give last rites to a dying soldier of any religion. "There are no atheists in foxholes," says the old military adage. But proselytizing or "sheep-stealing"--converting soldiers from other denominations or religions--is not only frowned upon but would be cause for disciplinary action, according to one senior chaplain.

Pay is good, beginning at US$30,000 per year at the rank of captain, and perhaps reaching $60,000 as a full colonel by the end of a 20-year career. Benefits are excellent--housing, food, full lifetime medical coverage, discount purchasing at base stores and 30 vacation days per year, to name a few. Lifetime retirement pay is about 50% of the highest salary earned. The entire employment package is far beyond anything the Hindu temples offer their priests.

For the right people, the US military chaplaincy offers a challenging religious ministry, and for Hindus, it would be official recognition of a permanent presence on the American religious scene.

CHAPLAIN RECRUITING CENTERS: CHAPLAIN VANN, US ARMY, 800 223 3735, EXT. 60435; CHAPLAIN JOHNSON, US NAVY, 703 696- 5363; CHAPLAIN LEMMON, US AIR FORCE 800 803 2452