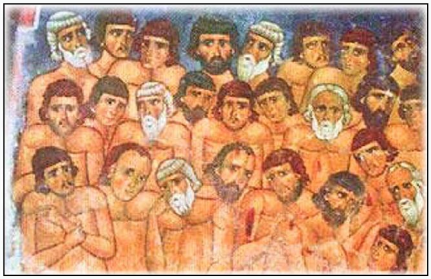
Serving God within the military

David d'Lima JP BTh Dip Ed

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- from a 12TH century painting of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste

Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved - Luther

Civic authority and the rightful use of military force

Many believers during history have rejected all military action, policing and self-defence, while other Christians have tried to curb immorality by forcing the faith upon unbelievers. Both of those approaches hold a wrong concept of physical force. In contrast, a correct view recognises how God wants his message to be shared without the use or threat of violence. Yet he requires the various civic authorities to ensure justice and community security - but without triumphal or smug self-sufficiency, or unwarranted action.

Rejecting self-reliant or self-assertive uses of force, the Psalms (20:7) state: *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD*. Jesus similarly warned against wrongly motivated actions, saying: *"all who draw the sword will die by the sword"* (Matthew 26:52). So he rebuked James and John for asking to burn a faithless town (Luke 9:54) and he said: *"Put your sword away!"* (John 18:11) as Peter began asserting a faulty messianic agenda. Nor are spiritual victories obtained by force, as God's people *do not wage war as the world does* (II Corinthians 10:3).

But those warnings do not negate the role of each civic authority, who as *God's servant ... does not bear the sword for nothing* (Romans 13:4). So Jesus informed the Roman governor: *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above"* (John 19:11) and he also declared: *"if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one"* (Luke 22:36). A humble and right use of forceful intervention is approved in Psalm 44:6 - *I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory*. Moreover, David rejoiced in God who *trains my hands for battle* (II Samuel 22:35). Affirming government and its God-given duty to curb criminal activity, we may heed the biblical example of soldiers who served justly and graciously.

Biblical examples of soldiers providing justice and grace

Almighty God has often used military action to secure justice and provide a ministry of grace. So well before God destroyed the city of Sodom, Abram's 318 armed men restored its king - in whose presence Melchizedek spoke of *"God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth"* (Genesis 14:19). Then to prefigure the gospel reaching the Gentiles (Luke 4:27), Elisha ministered to Naaman *the commander of the army of the king of Aram*; this *great man* by whom *the LORD had given victory* was a *valiant soldier* (II Kings 5:1).

After the Exile, the people of God were instructed by Nehemiah (4:14) to *"fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes ..."*. Their resolve to take armed action enabled the restoration of the city and the temple of Jerusalem, in which the Jewish people were to *pray for the well-being of the king* [pagan Darius] *and his sons* (Ezra 6:10).

The New Testament also links justice, grace and the action of the military:

- In the Judean desert, soldiers responded to John the Baptist by asking, *"And what should we do?"* He replied, *"Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely - be content with your pay"* (Luke 3:14).
- In Capernaum, Jesus helped a centurion who loved the Israelite nation and whose authoritative role provided a pattern of faith (Luke 7:1-10).
- At Calvary, a centurion gave testimony after seeing the death of Christ: *"Surely this man was the Son of God!"*, he said (Mark 15:39).
- At Caesarea, the centurion Cornelius who served in the *Italian Regiment* came to faith in Christ, as the first Gentile convert to Christianity (Acts 10).
- In Jerusalem, Claudius Lysius (commander of the Antonia Fortress) took *officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd* to restore peace, saving Paul, who was *carried by the soldiers* (Acts 21:31-35). In the barracks a centurion's report *This man is a Roman citizen* spared Paul from a brutal and illegal scourging (22:25-29). The troops then used force to free Paul from a violent session of the Sanhedrin (23:10). Finally, the commander kindly heeded Paul's nephew, as he *took the young man by the hand*, and dispatched a vast force that escorted Paul safely to Caesarea (23:16-35).
- At Sidon, the centurion Julius *who belonged to the Imperial Regiment* was gracious to Paul (27:1-3) and intervened to save his life (27:42-43).

Esteem for military activity in the letters of Paul - and beyond

Though imprisoned by the military for many years, Paul so greatly valued their work that he frequently utilised martial terminology. That usage may deeply encourage God-honouring activity among military personnel today:

- Writing to the Ephesians (3:1), *Paul the prisoner* effectively upheld the work of the military as he urged the disciples: *put on the full armour of God*, with *the belt of truth ... the breastplate of righteousness* ... and with *feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel ... the shield of faith ... the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit* (6:13-17).
- Responding to the Philippians (1:7) while he was *in chains*, Paul so loved his captors that the *whole palace guard* heard about Christ (1:13), and Paul urged his readers to *stand firm ... contending as one man* (1:27).
- Contacting the Colossians (2:8), Paul urged them: *See to it that no one takes you captive*, and commending Epaphras who *is always wrestling in prayer* (4:12), Paul exhorted the disciples: *Remember my chains* (4:18).
- Petitioning his friend Philemon (verse 1), Paul *a prisoner of Christ Jesus* sent his greetings to Archippus - *our fellow soldier* (verse 2).

Army personnel today would do well to *fight the good fight of the faith* (I Timothy 6:12), and to *endure hardship ... like a good soldier of Christ Jesus* ... since ... *No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs - he wants to please his commanding officer* (II Timothy 2:3-4). Soldiers would do well to *put on the armour of light* (Romans 13:12) - along with *faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet* ... (I Thessalonians 5:8), communicating clearly, because *if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?* (I Corinthians 14:8).

Naval and coastguard personnel may rejoice in the hope of the faith that is *an anchor for the soul* (Hebrews 6:19). Seafarers may especially heed the example of Paul who provided remarkable leadership to warn, comfort and guide his shipmates in distress (Acts 27) though he held no rank or position.

Aircrew and airborne military may gladly rejoice as their nation-building or rescue actions replicate aspects of God's own work: Flight excellence to secure the peace is akin to the authoritative benevolence of God who said, *"I carried you on eagles' wings"* (Exodus 19:4) and who takes firm action, *like an eagle* who *spreads its wings* to catch its young (Deuteronomy 32:11).

Encouraging military personnel and their families

As the military may provide a civic outworking of God's declaration that *a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted* (Jeremiah 18:9), his people may particularly give pastoral support to military personnel and their long-suffering families. Such encouragement can help renew the work entrusted to the military. As the prophet Oded rebuked Israelite soldiers who slaughtered *with a rage that reaches to heaven* (II Chronicles 28:9), we too may caution, uphold, and advise the armed forces. This may reduce the brutalities which are sometimes inflicted by the milititary on itself, the public, or on enemies who should be tackled without unjust, gratuitous or unfettered engagement. It may also affirm pro-family policy in the forces:

> *The officers shall say to the army ... "Has anyone become pledged to a woman and not married her? Let him go home"* (Deuteronomy 20:5-7).
>
> *If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married* (24:5).

Participating in the regular, reserve, or cadet forces

To help the military build up our nation and other countries, God's people may aspire to join and lead the regular, reservist, or cadet forces: Christian ideas of duty and service can help the regulars gain domestic or international security; Godly concepts of volunteering can enrich the reservists - each of whom is *twice the citizen* (as Winston Churchill noted); faithful concerns for youth can help the cadet units engage in useful discipline and training.

Whether supporting or joining the military, we can encourage Christians in the services to witness bravely, especially if persecuted like the believers who served in Rome's Twelfth Legion, which was known as the *Christian Legion*. From its ranks came the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, who died of exposure in AD 320, proving their loyalty not only through military excellence, but in a spiritual battle that outweighs all earthly fights. Christians in the military today are called to witness like those martyrs, and supply security and peace, until all people are ready to *beat their swords into ploughshares* (Isaiah 2:4) at the return and glorious reign of our Lord Jesus the *Prince of Peace* (9:6).

FamilyVoice AUSTRALIA
4th Floor, 68 Grenfell St, Adelaide SA 5000
ddl@fava.org.au www.fava.org.au
Phone: +618 8223 6383

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