

New Chaplain Pin Making Waves Across the Surface Force



NAVAL BASE CORONADO (November 2, 2023) Lt. Ross Engel receives the Surface Chaplain Officer (SCO) warfare pin during a ceremony held at Commander, Naval Surface Forces, U.S. Pacific Fleet. The Surface Chaplain Officer pin is a newly introduced warfare pin for members of the surface chaplain corps. The qualification insignia was approved this year and made available in Navy Exchanges around the world last week after being approved by the Navy Uniform Board. Nearly 70 Chaplains fleet-wide have earned the qualification to-date. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Mikal Chapman)

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SAN DIEGO – Chaplains have been working side by side with Sailors since 1775, keeping to their core principle “to promote the spiritual, religious, moral, and personal well-being of the members of the Department of the Navy.” Now, after close to 250 years of service, they are getting their own surface warfare device.

For the first time, chaplains who serve on a surface ship are eligible to receive the Surface Chaplain Officer (SCO) pin. Like every warfare pin in the Navy, chaplains have to complete a personal qualification standard (PQS) and pass multiple oral boards prior to earning the device.

According to Force Chaplain, Capt. Scott Cauble, and his deputy, Cmdr. Justin Bernard, the introduction of a surface warfare device for chaplains helps them integrate with their crews and gain trust that enables chaplains to better serve alongside Sailors.

This new qualification standard gives chaplains a better understanding of how ships operate and what sailors do professionally. Bernard is one of the chaplains that completed the PQS prior to the pins introduction, and it’s clear that the process granted him deeper insight into the technical aspects of being a Navy Sailor.

“I was going from space to space, not only counseling Sailors, but asking them pointed questions about the nuances of their job and equipment,” said Bernard. “This fostered a cooperative environment between myself and the sailors and broadened my perspective as to their lifestyle.”

The Navy will be giving more chaplains the chance to qualify for the SCO pin as they continue to integrate with individual ships rather than just at a squadron level. “As of December we

will have a chaplain on half of all destroyers. Our goal is to get a chaplain on every ship over the next few years," Cauble explains.

Having more chaplains dedicated to one ship will give them the chance to develop closer bonds with a single crew, rather than being stretched across up to 10 ships.

"Often times you connect with a group of Sailors, then leave and go support another crew. That can be incredibly difficult for the crew and chaplain alike," said Bernard. According to Bernard, it's immensely important for a ship to have the chaplain. For leadership, they use the chaplain as a confidant who can serve as a spiritual advisor when making challenging decisions. For Sailors, chaplains are the ones they can turn to during dark moments in their life and know that they will be supported.

The job of a chaplain is unique in its depth and breadth of reach—tasked with counseling junior enlisted to senior officers often in the same day. For Capt. Cauble, it was a moment on his first assignment with a destroyer squadron that helped solidify his desire to stay in the Chaplain Corps.

"I was sent out to ride a ship in the U.S. Fifth Fleet, and I remember going up to the bridge at 9:30 p.m. to give evening prayer thinking, "there is really nothing else I would rather be doing right now than being a chaplain on this warship." Those five minutes spent on the intercom can put a crew at ease in the midst of the chaos of ship life.

In contrast to the serenity of the evening prayer, surrounded by the inky blackness of the Atlantic Ocean, Bernard found himself in a position that all sailors dread—man overboard. Suddenly, the ship was thrust into the chaos of searching for the lost Sailor, ships rushing to lend help from the surrounding area.

"This went on for a few hours and I spent the majority of my time walking the deck plates and encouraging sailors that we would find their shipmate—their friend. I spent time in the pilot house with the commanding officer praying and hoping for the safe return of the service member," said Bernard.

Around midnight, hours into the ordeal, Bernard began shifting from the mentality of lending encouragement to providing grief counsel—words of prayer swimming in his mind. Then, in the eleventh hour, a call came over the ship that a man was found in the water. He was loaded into the back of a helicopter to be transported to a hospital, in what can only be described as a miracle.

"The crew really bonded over the experience and the celebration of a life saved by their hard work. That is something you can't get anywhere else."

Spiritual readiness is key for every sailor to be ready for the high-stress moments that are inevitable in the armed forces, and chaplains are critical for fostering spiritual readiness on ships. As Cauble explains, spiritual readiness enhances readiness by strengthening the connection between warfighters and their purpose.

"We talk about spiritual readiness as a connection to divine participation in the community of faith, sacrifice for the greater good, and the pursuit of meaning, value and service," says Cauble. "We as chaplains facilitate for others, we care for everyone, and all those capabilities work towards the development of spiritual readiness."

The Chaplain Corps has a rich history built on a rock-solid foundation set by the example of members within its ranks. Chaplains like Cauble, Bernard, and even further back, Lt. Vincent Capodanno. Nicknamed "The Grunt Padre" because he was

so beloved by his Marines, Capodanno was awarded Medal of Honor on Jan. 7, 1969 for his actions during the Vietnam War. On a steamy September day in the Que Son Valley, Capodanno's battalion was ambushed by a large North Vietnamese Army force. The Navy chaplain ran through intense enemy gunfire to administer last rites and give medical aid.

Despite being struck by shrapnel in the upper arm, Capodanno came to the aid of five wounded Marines and even dragged one man, Sergeant Howard Manfra, to safety. As his last act, Capodanno raced to the side of a fallen corpsman, and was killed instantly by enemy machine gunfire. His legacy was not only celebrated with the Medal of Honor, but the warship USS Capodanno bore his name for over twenty years—a testament to his strong example.

The introduction of the SCO pin is both a recognition of the warfighting necessity of chaplains and a new era of closer integration with the Sailors whom they serve. The addition of chaplains on destroyers is hopefully just the start according to Cauble. He already envisions chaplains embarked on the newest frigate models when they hit the fleet, ready to bolster spiritual readiness for warfighters like they have for the past 248 years.