

# Wanted: A Few Godly Men

An Interview with Chaplain Joe Willis

Later this year, CH (COL) Joe Willis will complete a long and illustrious military career. Nevertheless, his chaplaincy ministry will not only continue, it will expand. We have already begun a transition in FBFI chaplaincy that will involve Chaplain Willis more and more in the months and years ahead, if the Lord tarries His coming. His current international role with other chaplains at CENTCOM provides a natural stepping stone to a role with FBFI in which he can recruit, train, and help to manage an expanding cadre of chaplains like himself. The following interview will introduce our readers to what Chaplain Willis's responsibilities in the army involve. In addition, those who come to the Annual Fellowship in June will have the opportunity to hear him in person and to congratulate him on this new milestone.

*FrontLine:* Where do you currently work and what is your title?

*Willis:* Currently I work as the Deputy Command Chaplain assigned to the US Central Command Headquarters (USCENTCOM) in MacDill Air Force Base, Florida.

*FrontLine:* What is USCENTCOM?

*Willis:* The US Central Command is one of the six geographic combatant commands in the Department of Defense arsenal. A combatant command (or COCOM) is a unified command that is composed of forces from at least two Military Departments and that has a continuing mission in peace and/or war. They are organized either on a geographical basis (known as "Area of Responsibility") or on a functional basis. This particular COCOM is in charge of the geographic region making up most of the countries in the Middle East and several of the southern countries which were formerly a part of the Soviet bloc or USSR. This command is also a joint command comprising of all five military services (Army, Air Force, etc.) and many coalition partner countries from all over the world (UK, Australia, Italy, France, etc.).

*FrontLine:* What level of command is this?

*Willis:* This command primarily functions at the strategic national or strategic theater level of war/control. This particular command is commanded by a four-star

general officer or flag officer, depending on the military service they represent. In laymen's terms, the boss of this command answers to three people: the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, and the President of the United States. This command has been honored to have some of the greatest leaders in recent military history as the USCENTCOM Commander—men such as Schwarzkopf, Petraeus, Franks, and, currently, Lloyd Austin.

*FrontLine:* What do you personally do?

*Willis:* As the deputy command chaplain, my main responsibility is to provide coverage when the command chaplain is absent from the area or his post. Collectively, we chaplains in this command work at all three levels of war/control. At the strategic level, we work internationally with other countries in our Area of Responsibility that have chaplains or religious leaders in their national militaries. I personally have had the privilege of working and creating relationships with chaplains from all over the world. Many of these individuals are men of great renown and highly respected religious leaders in their respective countries. Operationally, we are responsible to work with our military services and coalition partners to make sure that we have the right mix of chaplains to meet the constitutional religious needs of all those in our area that desire to worship freely, wherever they may be located in the world. At the height of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom this number exceeded 500 chaplains and more than 500 chaplains' assistants or religious program specialists. But our fail-safe responsibility, like any other chaplain in the Department of Defense inventory, is to tactically take care of the servicemen and women that make up our headquarters staff. In other words, as clearly captured in the words of my former commander, General James Mattis, "Chaplain, take care of the lads." In the eyes of the American people who support and fund us to do this job, we are the ambassadors in providing for the free exercise of religion to the greatest commodity the world has ever known: the American Serviceman.

*FrontLine:* What are privileges in working at this level of command?

*Willis:* We chaplains have the opportunity to travel the world, preach the Word of God to our personnel in

foreign lands, and to be a part of the greatest military that the world has ever known. In the past several years here at USCENTCOM, my travels have allowed me to preach in embassies and churches in Pakistan, palaces in Iraq, chapels in Afghanistan, and in the deserts along the Nile in Egypt. I have walked in the land of Musa (or Moses) and the children of Israel as they passed by Petra and stood upon Mt. Nebo. I have stood in the Ur of the Chaldees and descended into the depths of the chambers of the great pyramids. On a daily basis I am a part of an organization where decisions are being made that affect the whole world. I am privileged to work on high-level projects that people watch on the national news weeks later. I am a part of history in the making! But my greatest privilege in the entire world is to see souls being impacted for God, souls who accept the glorious gospel of Jesus and who are being transformed daily into the image of our precious Lord and Savior.

*FrontLine:* What challenges do you face?

*Willis:* Many of the challenges we face are manpower related. With large budget cuts across the board federally, it is difficult to keep the number of chaplains that we need in order to meet all the daily tasks. Secondly, in our travels it is obvious that we here in the US are very compartmentalized in our thinking. We are constantly confronted with the premise of "separation of church and state." That may work well for us here in our coun-

try, where we have grown accustomed to such thinking, but is a foreign concept to many of those we work with. In our area of responsibility religion transcends and permeates into every aspect of life. Religion is a part of education, finances, employment, economics, etc. Therefore, when we as Americans build relationships with our foreign counterparts, they sometimes doubt the sincerity of our religious beliefs, since those beliefs don't seem to impact all the other areas of our lives. This concept is challenging to address at times.

*FrontLine:* What insight can you share as you come to the end of your military career?

*Willis:* Properly pass the baton to the next generation of those who will fill our ranks in the ministry of our churches and in the ministry of the chaplaincy. Secondly, I would remind our young men to stand firm in the faith and be willing to stand in the gap to proclaim the truth. My experience shows me that there are a lot of young servicemen and women out there who are hungry for the truth! We who have the truth must be prepared to carry that truth to the mission fields around the world. The Lord told us that the "fields . . . are white already to harvest," "but the labourers are few." It is my desire to fill the chaplain ranks with solid men who have a heart for the Lord and have a little sense of adventure as well. The Marines may be looking for "a few good men," but we here in FBFI are looking for a "few godly men"!



CH (COL) Joe Willis (left) receiving the 2014 Army Officer of the Year Award from Mayor Bob Buckhorn, Vice Admiral Mark Fox, and representatives of the Greater Tampa Bay Chamber of Commerce.

