

lost his kosher MREs [meals ready to eat]; I had to ship kosher food to him. He ate the food I sent along with fresh fruits and vegetables. He learned how to make grape juice for Kiddush by soaking raisins in water and then squeezing out the juice.

**JA:** *How did being a military wife affect your faith?*

**SK:** Certain mitzvos became that much more important. Like shul. It's easy to go to shul when it's six blocks away. The closest shul to me was five miles away, so I couldn't go. There was no kosher supermarket near Fort Carson so I learned which *hechsherim* were acceptable. My *davening* changed. Some *tefillos* became more relevant, and I *davened* with much more *kavanah*, asking Hashem to keep my husband safe.

**JA:** *Tell me about the Jewish Soldier Foundation.*

**SK:** The Foundation was set up to help individual Jewish soldiers and families of Jewish soldiers, Orthodox and not. Most soldiers don't know their rights. For instance, they're allowed

to wear a *kippah*. There's an article in the United States Military Justice Code that states that a *kippah* is allowed to be worn. It actually says the word "*kippah*." You are also allowed time for prayer.

We provide information and send packages to soldiers.

**JA:** *What are your plans for the future?*

**SK:** Joe is taking an early retirement from the military and will receive a pension. We're hoping he'll be able to get a job with the federal government. Joe is still involved with the military; he's working with the Wounded Warrior Project, a non-profit organization that provides jobs and assistance to injured service men. It tries to help the wounded find productive things to do, such as getting a job or taking trips so they're not sitting at home wasting away. Joe still loves soldiers and loves the military. **JA**

*To find out more about the Jewish Soldier Foundation, visit [www.jewishsoldier.org](http://www.jewishsoldier.org).*

## Is There a Rabbi on the Base? The Life of a Jewish Army Chaplain

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

In 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War, Chaplain (Colonel) Sanford Dresin, having just received *semichah* from Yeshivas Chasam Sofer in Brooklyn, New York, became an Army chaplain. After serving two years on a United States Army base in Fort Meade, Maryland, he knew that if he remained on active duty, the next stop would be Vietnam. He chose active duty.

In Vietnam, the self-described "traveling rabbi" went from base to base, from Saigon to the Central Highlands, flying helicopters in and out

---

*Bayla Sheva Brenner is senior writer in the OU Communications and Marketing Department.*



*Photo courtesy of the Dresin family*

of hostile areas in order to offer Jewish soldiers moral support and *divrei chizuk*, words of inspiration. They eagerly welcomed his visits. "Some would actually risk driving down a road amid [enemy] fire to come to a class," says Rabbi Dresin. "One night, down in the Mekong Delta, in the middle of singing *Lechah Dodi* during Kabbalat Shabbat, we started getting rocketed. Everyone just continued singing. I told them this was a case of *pikuach nefesh* and we better head for the bunkers."

Rabbi Dresin, sixty-five, calls the chaplaincy a "ministry of presence." "Just by being there, you're helping," he explains. Rabbi Dresin reports that many of the soldiers he worked with

became observant because of the relationship he forged with them. “Very often the Army experience brings out the *pintele Yid*. With bullets flying overhead, suddenly soldiers get in touch with their *neshamot* [souls],” he says. Similarly, for some Jewishly unaffiliated soldiers, living among those who have a stronger Jewish background helps bring them closer to their roots. “[I’ve heard] a lot of stories about observant soldiers getting up early in the morning, putting on their *tallit* and *tefillin* and *davening* in their tents,” says Rabbi Dresin. “Other soldiers inquire about ‘the little boxes’ and after the soldier explains, they ask to hear more. The next thing you know, some ask to wear them. One of the best areas to do *kiruv* is in the military.”

Sometimes a chaplain witnesses the fruits of his labor many years later. In the 1970s, Rabbi Dresin served as Jewish chaplain and division artillery chaplain for 3,000 servicemen at a base in Fort Lewis, Washington. A Jewish couple there had a baby boy, and Rabbi Dresin told them that he would be happy to arrange a *brit milah*. “We’re not that religious,” the wife told him. “We’ll just have a doctor do it.”

Rabbi Dresin explained to them that though they were not religious, they could not know what direction their son would choose to take in the future. They chose to have a traditional *brit milah*. Recently, Rabbi Dresin received a letter from the couple thanking him for convincing them to give their son a traditional *brit milah*, as he is currently a very learned *frum* Jew.

From 1967 to 1994, Rabbi Dresin held numerous positions in the Army chaplaincy, steadily rising from captain to major, to lieutenant colonel and, finally, to colonel. After his tenure in Vietnam, Rabbi Dresin returned to the US and was sent to Fort Lewis, Washington. He was soon selected to study at Yale University, where he earned an advanced degree in theology. Subsequently, Rabbi Dresin served in the military in various capacities: in the Pentagon, working alongside the

chief of army chaplains; in Korea, as chief of chaplains; in Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, as deputy chief of chaplains and in Germany, where he oversaw 120 military hospitals and clinics throughout Europe. He retired from active duty in 1994.

## With bullets flying overhead, suddenly soldiers get in touch with their *neshamot*.


For the past two years, Rabbi Dresin has acted as director of military programs for the Aleph Institute, which offers Jewish books and other materials as well as moral and spiritual support to thousands of Jewish men and women serving the US Armed Forces.

Through his work as a chaplain and as director of the Aleph Institute, Rabbi Dresin has encountered sticky situations when Jewish law conflicts with military policy. Presently, he is trying to persuade the Department of Defense to grant waivers to rabbis with beards, which is against Army regulations.

Rabbi Dresin also deals with more painful issues. “The Department of Defense mandates that every soldier killed in action has an autopsy,” he says. “The military believes that every autopsy provides information that will help enhance the body armor and armor of Army vehicles and could save lives in the future. We are hoping that someday in lieu of an invasive autopsy, a ‘virtual autopsy’ will be performed with an imaging device. [In the meantime], we try to see to it that there is a rabbi present at every autopsy of a Jewish soldier, to ensure that the procedure is done in keeping with halachah [as much as possible].”

In addition to his work with the Aleph Institute, Rabbi Dresin is also the head of the *chevrah kadishah* in Wilmington, Delaware. He makes sure

to be on hand for most of the autopsies performed on Jewish soldiers at the mortuary in Dover, Delaware, which is the central receiving point for all military personnel killed overseas. “I work very closely with the staff,” he says. “They have been very respectful of [a number of] halachic requirements. One of the chief forensic medical examiners retains the blood on the uniforms, boots and other items to be buried with the soldier. He sits with a scalpel, cutting metal off of uniforms so that no metal\* is placed in the casket.”

Rabbi Dresin truly appreciates the chaplains who travel to the four corners of the world, putting themselves in harm’s way to be there for Jewish servicemen. Of their noble work, he says: “We know that we can count on our military—and our military knows that it can count on us.” 

*\* According to Rabbi Elchanan Zohn, director of the Chevra Kadisha of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens, New York, it is prohibited to place metal in a casket for several reasons. First, in the time of the Talmud, Rabbi Gamliel decreed that no one should be buried with any ornamentation; brass or buttons would be considered ornaments.*

*Also, in many communities it became the custom to avoid placing any metal in the casket, even when the casket was constructed mainly of wood. This is based on a midrash that says that just as Adam hid among the wood of the Garden of Eden after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, so man is to be hidden (buried) among (only) wood when he dies (death being the resultant punishment for Adam’s sin). Similarly, wood allows for decomposition and the natural return of the body to the earth, while metal does not.*

*Some also point out that metal is the material from which armaments and articles of destruction are made. Therefore, metal should not be used during the time of burial when one seeks compassion and wants God to focus on man’s good deeds. This is similar to the Torah prohibition of building an altar from stones hewn of metal (Exodus 20:22).*