

Alumni Spotlight: Robert Stone (MAR '00, MDiv '09, DMin '20)



Current Title & Military Branch: Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel), United States Air Force

Family: Wife: Sarah, Children: John and William

Favorite professors: Dr. Jim Critchlow

Favorite class: Church History

Favorite memory: One-on-one discipleship with Dr Jim Critchlow while a young MAR student and studying in Israel with our DMin cohort

What have you been doing since you left Gordon-Conwell and what are you doing now?

I consider myself blessed to have two careers that I love. I serve bi-vocationally as a chaplain in the United States Air Force and have a secular career as civilian airline captain. For the past seventeen years, I have had the opportunity to serve both part-time and full-time as an Air Force chaplain. Currently, I serve part-time in the Texas Air National Guard where I hold the military rank of Lieutenant Colonel. In my secular career, I work as an airline captain flying domestically and internationally from Orlando, Florida.

What do you love about your work as a military chaplain?

Serving as a military chaplain is an honor, privilege, and, often, a pleasure. I have the opportunity to share in some of the most significant events in the lives of those who sacrifice so much for all of us. With the exception of my family, it has been my greatest joy and proudest accomplishment.

As an Air Force chaplain, I have had hundreds of adventures. Some of my favorite adventures were serving as a member of the US Space Force at a remote Space Force Base in Alaska where the temperature was -40 degrees and there was less than five hours of sunlight. I have also had a chance to fly in the back of a C-130 cargo plane while wearing night vision goggles as they opened the back of the plane in flight to parachute drop supplies. Once, I even had a chance to march through downtown New York City as a part of a Veterans Day parade. The list of adventures of all types goes on and on!

However, my greatest joy as an Air Force chaplain has been having a chance to interact with so many talented and dedicated men and women who have chosen to do extraordinary things with their lives.

What are the particular challenges of serving as a military chaplain in general and/or in your specific context?

Serving as a military chaplain has been both my proudest accomplishment and the hardest thing that I have ever done. On day one, you are welcomed to the Air Force at Officer Training School by having your door kicked at 4:00 a.m. with the sounds of military training instructors yelling at you. Fortunately, it does get much, much better! Still, as a military chaplain, we are fully qualified military officers. Throughout our careers we are required to complete the same rigorous academic and physical training as any other military officer.

The reason for this is that as military chaplains, we are called upon to see and do things that are hard—really hard. For me, the hardest thing that I have ever done professionally is to serve on a Casualty Notification Team. Our team put on our formal uniforms, went to a house that we had never been to before, knocked on a front door and had to tell an eight-year-old boy that his daddy was never coming home. I have officiated over the funerals of heroes, comforted the grieving, and strengthened those who have endured so much. Earlier this year, I served on the US border at the focal point of the US immigration crisis. With my own eyes, I witnessed the human trafficking of children, pregnant women climbing over barbed wire, and families huddled together in prayer with tears in their eyes.

If all of that sounds scary or hard, that is because it is scary and hard. God, by His grace, provides strength, but these things do take a toll emotionally. After each significant military assignment, I needed a time of recovery. The most important part of finishing the race well as a military chaplain is self-care. I have been incredibly blessed during these seasons of recovery through the ministry of Christian counselors, good friends, and godly leaders.



How has God woven together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now? How did you come to be doing your current work?

There is a saying that “God does not often call the qualified, He qualifies the called.” That has certainly been true for me, and over the years God has repeatedly used Gordon-Conwell to mature and develop me as a servant leader and military chaplain.

I entered Gordon-Connell straight out of my undergraduate degree. I had become a Christian during my senior year of high school and then joined a college ministry. However, for a variety of reasons, I slipped through the cracks. I was never disciplined and did not mature very far in my faith. However, I felt called to ministry and to seminary. As a relatively young student at Gordon-Conwell, I was disciplined by an older second career student who had just retired as an Army officer. Through his mentorship and friendship, I describe my time while completing a MAR degree by saying that, “the boy who entered seminary was almost unrecognizable spiritually from the young man of God who graduated.”

I completed an MAR degree and thought that God had led me to seminary merely to mature me in my faith. However, as He often does, God had bigger plans. For several years, I volunteered in local churches, served as a pulpit supply preacher and then as an assistant to the chaplain for the Boston Red Sox and New England Patriots. From that experience, God laid it on my heart to combine my passion for aviation and ministry. That is what led me to return to Gordon-Connell to complete a MDiv degree in order to enter the Air Force’s Chaplain Candidate program. I attended Gordon-Conwell part-time while flying full time as an airline pilot. One of the perks of being an airline pilot is that you get to fly for free. I was able to use these flight benefits in order to attend the required courses at the CUME, South Hamilton, and Charlotte campuses. Those were busy days, at one point holding three paid positions while going to school. I’m glad that I did it, but I would not recommend it!

Eventually, I completed the MDiv degree and became an Air Force chaplain serving part-time in the Air National Guard. After several years of serving as an Air Force chaplain part-time, I grew to love it so much that I accepted an assignment as a full time Air Force chaplain on active duty. However, once I completed this assignment, I discerned that my best fit in ministry is serving bi-vocationally. (I just love flying too much to give it up). Still, I had reached a place in my career where it was time to not just serve as a chaplain but to be prepared to be a servant-leader as a chaplain. Gordon-Cowell had begun a DMin track in military ministry, and I was very grateful to be able to return to a place that was so formative in my life to complete a Doctor of Ministry degree in Military Ministry.

What has been Gordon-Conwell’s biggest impact/influence on the work you do now or the way you do your work?

My experience in completing the Doctor of Ministry in Military Ministry at Gordon-Conwell was the best educational experience of my life. We studied leadership under Dr. Jim Critchlow, who is a West Point graduate and retired Army infantry officer. We also studied under Dr. “Blues” Baker, who is a Naval Academy graduate and retired admiral who had served as the Chief of Chaplains of the US Marine Corps. The lessons learned from our conversations have shaped how I process events that are happening around me as a military chaplain. When I assumed my current role, I found myself

working far more independently and working directly with senior non-chaplain officers. My training through the DMin program allowed me to know how to better communicate in the way that senior leaders receive and process information. It also allowed me to see a wider scope of the culture where God has called me to minister.

During our second residency, we traveled to Israel where we studied at Jerusalem University College and throughout the Holy Land. This experience brought the Bible to life for me in a whole new way and allowed me to grow tremendously as a student of God's Word and as a preacher. Through all of this, our cohort shared fellowship and encouragement as like-minded individuals called to serve in this exciting and challenging ministry.

What piece of advice would you give to young alumni who are considering serving as a military chaplain?

Military Chaplaincy is very similar to being a missionary. The military has its own language, culture, and social norms. The key to being effective as a military chaplain is to learn how to thrive in this military culture. I would encourage someone to discern this calling in the same way that they would discern a calling to a mission field. A most important part of knowing if this is a ministry that God has called you to is to discern if God has given you a heart for this "people group."

One piece of pastoral advice that I would share is that military ministry is not something that should be pursued as an extra source of income, for the pension or educational benefits. It is far too hard, and the risks are far too high. Again, I would discern this calling through the lens of becoming a missionary in a foreign land. As I heard a wise pastor share, "do not go too far down this road unless you know that you know that you are called to it."

Do you have any publications or links to share?

As a chaplain, we have the opportunity to lead weekend conferences for military families. During these conferences, we prepare these families for the stress of family separation during military deployments. For my DMin thesis-project, I synthesized the information from these conferences, combined it with other resources and then contextualized it for those in the military aviation community.

My former Air Force commander encouraged me to have my DMin thesis-project made into a website. I was fortunate to be able to work with a former member of my unit to create [this website](#).