

## **“Saints at War” Project article**

As a Marine stationed at Camp Hoa Long near Da Nang, Republic of South Vietnam in 1967-68, I met U.S. Navy Chaplain Lt. Preston Neil Kearsley. Our small base bordered on the South China Sea. We were boxed in by a Vietnamese orphanage, a civilian supply depot and MAG-16, a Marine helicopter base.

Chaplain Kearsley would periodically visit our cantonment to conduct worship services. I liked him. He was friendly and easy to talk to and although our conversations were limited I felt he was sincere.

Having never talked to a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints other than just casual greetings with two girls who were church members in my high school class I was curious and a little apprehensive. My apprehension was related to my being a non-practicing member of another religious denomination and the son of an ordained minister of that faith. I know I felt some discomfort around him because I was not living the standards to which I was raised. He never commented on my use of tobacco. I don't know if he knew that I also drank alcoholic beverages, but he probably did. If he inquired about my lifestyle I don't recall such a conversation. Nor did he attempt to share his testimony with me. I've since learned that would have been inappropriate. As far as I could tell he was true to his faith and assigned responsibilities.

His duties took him to many different locations to conduct services with those assigned there. Some of these units were in remote locations and for his safety, a security detail was assigned, me. As a member of the 5th Communication Battalion we were more “in the rear with the gear” than in harms way. So this young “gung ho” Marine who was looking for some action volunteered to ride “shotgun” for him.

Wearing my flack jacket, helmet and carrying my M-16 I accompanied him on several such forays out into the “boonies”. There was nothing special about the jeep that took us to these sites. I sat in front with the driver, who was similarly dressed and armed and he sat in the back. Looking back at it, we were anything but secure in that vehicle. If an opposing force were to have ambushed us, our efforts to protect him and ourselves would have very likely been insufficient. But no one ever did. Blessings for his service I'm sure, and grateful for His protection.

Upon arrival at these outposts, I helped set up folding chairs, distribute hymnals and do anything else that needed to be done. Our time together was cordial and professional.

My time “in country” ended just after the Viet Cong Tet offensive in early 1968. I never saw or heard from Chaplain Kearsley again.

In December 1979, I was baptized and became a member of the church. Not because of his influence or invitation but because of my wife.

For 8 years, she endured my behaviors that were not consistent with her upbringing. But two years before my baptism I began keeping the Word of Wisdom, I attended church, held a calling,

sang in the choir, even spoke in church and helped fellowship a non-member. He didn't get baptized but I did.

Years later after having served in

numerous callings including Bishop, YSA Branch President and Patriarch I wanted to reach Chaplain Kearsley and share with him my conversion and membership. However, that was not possible as my research found he had died in 1992.

From my perspective, Chaplain Kearsley was a wonderful example of his beliefs. He was kind and accepting of who I was. He performed his duties in what I know now was in an exemplary way. The young Marine Sergeant that I was then who found his way years later regrets not being able to share his conversion and service with him.

**\*Written in response to a Church News article published on**

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