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ALUMNI

GWU Alumnus Promoted to Rear Admiral in U.S. Naval Reserves Chaplain Community

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON DECEMBER 1, 2020



Terry Eddinger, '88, Serves Navy While Holding at Least Nine Other Titles

In his 25 years of service to the U.S. Naval Reserves, Rear Adm. Terry Eddinger, Deputy Chief of Chaplains for Reserve Matters, has held at least nine other titles. The 1988 alumnus of Gardner-Webb University was an Old Testament professor and college administrator for 19 years, and is a humanitarian assistance advisor, archaeologist, certified master diver, runner, speaker, author and volunteer.

How does he find time to do everything? "You just take advantage of opportunities," responded Eddinger, who lives in Winston-Salem, N.C. "Everybody says, 'Someday I want to do that,' but someday is not on the calendar. When I was stationed at Guantanamo Bay, some of the best diving is right off the coast, so I did it while I was there."

Eddinger became Rear Admiral on Oct. 1, 2020. He is the first Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) chaplain to achieve this rank in CBF's nearly 30-year history. "I have a sense of pride in that I managed to reach the highest position a person can attain in the U.S. Navy chaplain community," he reflected. "With that said, I also feel the weight of responsibility that goes with the promotion. Many people are counting on me to make good and correct decisions. I want to do the best job I can for God and for the Navy."



▲ Terry Eddinger leads a Christmas service while serving on the USS John F. Kennedy from 1999 to 2000.

Eddinger has had 21 billets (assignments) during his career in the Naval Reserves, including five active duty tours in Iraq; Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; USS John F. Kennedy; Rota, Spain; and Marine Corps Air Base New River (Jacksonville, N.C.). His service includes eight years with the Marines and four and one-half years with the Coast Guard, because Navy chaplains serve all three branches. His decorations and personal awards include the Fleet Marine Force Qualified Officer Chaplain Insignia, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Meritorious Service Medal (two awards), the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal (four awards), Coast Guard Commendation Medal (two awards), and various other service, campaign, unit, and personal awards.

A military chaplain preaches, leads Bible studies and special events, counsels and performs ceremonies. Their ministry is inclusive, and Eddinger plans activities to reach those who might be reluctant to seek his help. When he was on active duty with the Joint Task Force (JTF) at Guantanamo Bay, he coordinated and supervised 13 community service projects with 233 volunteers giving over 850 hours of service. One of the projects was to clean up the beach after Hurricane Sandy came through. "I did that for a number of reasons," he said. "The beach needed cleaning up for the people coming later. It also gave me time to spend with about 50 people—many of whom would never come to my office. From those events, one or two would come to see me afterward and say, 'I was on the beach with you and I had this issue come up and I thought I would come by and talk to you.'"



▲ Rear Adm. Terry Eddinger was promoted to his position in October 2020. The photo in the middle above was made at his swearing-in ceremony. The other photos are from various times he has served over the last 25 years, including Iraq and Guantanamo Bay. The center photo in the right column is when Eddinger came to Boiling Springs, N.C., to visit one of his professors from GWU, Dr. Bob Lamb.

As one of three admirals in the Navy Chief of Chaplains Office, Eddinger supervises the training, administration, and operational readiness for over 240 chaplains and 218 enlisted personnel. "My job is to keep everybody going, keep everybody in contact and get ahead of people as quickly as we need them," Eddinger observed. "There's a physical readiness, a mental readiness, and we have what we call a spiritual readiness. If we can help somebody become spiritually ready before deployment, that's what you want to do."

In everything he does, his guiding principle is to align the chaplain community with the goals of the Navy. "The Chief of Naval Operations and Secretary of Defense all have a strategy and the way they want us to go," Eddinger noted. "It's my job to make sure what we do as religious ministry personnel is in alignment and parallel and in support of what they want to do."

When Eddinger was a student at Gardner-Webb University in 1986, his goal was to teach college. The courses were harder than he thought they were going to be. Despite the rigorous studies, he and his friends found time for fun and serving the community. He was on a F.O.C.U.S. (Fellowship of Christians United in Service) team, which is a group of students who lead retreats for church youth groups, locally and regionally. His roommate was Tracy Jessup, GWU Vice President for Christian Life and Service and Senior Minister to the University. They lived in Lutz-Yelton Residence Hall. "We played homerun derby on the steps of Lutz-Yelton," he related. "If you hit the back of the chemistry building it was single; the roof, it was a double; and if you hit it over, a home run. We used tennis balls. We never broke a window, but one time we hit the ball into an open window."

After earning a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies, he went to Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Kansas City, Missouri) for his Master of Divinity. There, for the first time, he began to consider chaplaincy in the Navy. "Gulf War fighting started in 1991," Eddinger explained. "My suite mate was the oldest guy in seminary—he was 60—and he had a son, who was a fighter pilot, who flew off of the USS Ranger. We were concerned about his safety."



▲ Terry Eddinger, left, during his training for service with the Marines.

The first time he applied for chaplaincy in 1991 he wasn't accepted because of a Navy drawdown. Eddinger applied again in 1995 and was commissioned as a lieutenant junior grade. The same year, he finished his Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Old Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, Ky.) and began teaching. "I thought the military chaplaincy would be a good offset to the teaching side," Eddinger observed. "The teaching side being purely academic, but I needed the practice side, too. I thought it would make a good balance."

Eddinger taught at Carolina Graduate School of Divinity (Greensboro, N.C.) and served in various administrative roles from 1996 until the school closed in 2016. The small seminary had 18 faculty members and about 75 students.

He is the author of "Malachi: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text" and co-author of a book on pronouncing Bible names. He has contributed numerous articles to journals and reference books. He credits his GWU professors for teaching him the skills he needed for scholarly pursuits. "The professors helped me to think critically and helped to develop my research and writing skills," Eddinger noted. "The faculty just made you want to follow them and want to teach—my advisor, Dr. Bob Lamb, (Dean Emeritus School of Divinity), Dr. Alice Cullinan (professor emerita of religion), Dr. Vann Murrell (professor emeritus of religion), and Dr. Jack Partain (professor emeritus of religion). Dr. Partain's son donated his father's library to me and the Carolina Graduate School of Divinity."



▲ Terry Eddinger poses with his special guests for his promotion ceremony to Rear Admiral. Throughout his 25 years in the Navy, Eddinger has met many incredible people, including former President Bill Clinton. From left are, Capt. John Caraballo, USCG, retired, who served with Eddinger at Guantanamo Bay. He was the commanding officer of the Port Security Unit. He is a friend and is the epitome of integrity. Master Chief James Parlier, US Navy, retired. He was the ship's Master Chief on board when the USS Cole was attacked in Yemen. He helped save lives and the ship. Next is Eddinger. Then, Caroline Ogonowski. Her father was the pilot of flight 11, John Ogonowski, who was hijacked and hit the north tower of the World Trade Center. Ogonowski and Eddinger work for the US Agency for International Development. Last is Bernice Sheffield, a World War II survivor. He was shot five times by a German machine gun and left for dead on April 15, 1945. He is a member of First Baptist Church, High Point, N.C., where Eddinger attends.

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