

A Christian and a soldier

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Growing up in my Presbyterian youth group, we read about the Bible's centurions with the assumption that they're the antagonists. They help arrest Jesus, nail his hands and feet to the cross, mock him, gamble over his clothes and finally pierce his side. Other biblical warriors we read differently—like Samson, who mightily fights off a lion and bravely brings down a Philistine temple, killing all the enemy inside.

Then I spent six years in the army, including a long deployment to Iraq, and my perspective shifted. I focused on the centurion of great faith in Matthew and Luke, as well as on Cornelius, the first gentile convert who did not undergo circumcision. Like the centurion, I found myself "a man under authority"—and I too needed heroes to guide me in my journey of faith. These biblical characters provided a rubber stamp to seal my superficial faith.

But after I came home from the hell of war, everything seemed in question. The battlefield had taken itself to my heart and mind; forces raged within me between the common good and necessary evil. Who was friend, and who was foe? Were these soldiers saints or sinners? Heroes, or monsters?

[I've written](#) about my struggles with finding my way in a world at war, my place as a Christian soldier under secular authority. Over time, I came to find Christ's call to

love my enemies to be in conflict with my professional obligations as an artilleryman. I applied to be a noncombatant conscientious objector, and I became at times militant—not so much in my faith as in my ideological commitments. I started to find myself scoffing at the term “Christian soldier.”

The pacifists I associate with now generally echo this, seeing “Christian soldier” as an oxymoron. Other Christians do the opposite, conflating the two words—as though a soldier is by definition doing God’s work. But what I’ve found since leaving the army is that they’re both right in some ways and wrong in others. Christians can make good soldiers, when they’re called to embrace instead of eviscerate. What’s more, soldiers sometimes make good Christians. Often their stories challenge our expectations about war and peace, while overturning our assumptions about other things as well.

The history of the Christian soldier reveals quite a diverse set of people (a subject I explore in [my new book](#)). Here’s just a sampling of the lineage of soldier-saints the church has recognized:

- ◦ **Florian**, the patron saint of firefighters, was a Roman officer who refused better treatment than other Christians received, thereby securing his execution (by drowning).

- ◦ After more than 20 years in the Praetorian Guard, **Martin of Tours**—the patron saint of chaplains—refused to continue serving Caesar in battle. November 11 has been his feast day for 1,500 years, though today in America it belongs to veterans.

- ◦ Both **Francis of Assisi** and **Ignatius of Loyola** were prisoners of war who turned their backs on war and military service. The Franciscans and Jesuits—the largest Catholic orders in the world today—are fundamentally based on martial principles.

- ◦ **John of God**, a Portuguese soldier and the patron saint of booksellers, sustained heavy post-trauma stress and had a breakdown during a sermon

by John of Avila. He was reintegrated into the church by working in hospitals. His order, the Brothers Hospitallers, maintain the largest pharmacy in the world, on the grounds of the Vatican.

- ◦ In 1601—long before the Red Cross—former Venetian soldier **Camillus of Lellis** organized the first group to provide medical care for soldiers in battle, regardless of which side they fought for.
- ◦ **John Vianney**, the patron saint of priests and pastors, was a draft dodger.
- ◦ **Alvin York** applied as a conscientious objector and was unsuccessful. So he prayed for protection and went to war—and became one of the most decorated U.S. soldiers in World War I.
- ◦ **Desmond Doss**, who left a deferment to serve in World War II but refused to carry a weapon or work on Saturdays, earned a Medal of Honor. He considered himself not a conscientious objector but a conscientious participant.

To the chagrin of partisans, soldiers and Christians have much overlap. Instead of enlisting them as proof-texts for or against things we believe, we should give their lives a listen. After all, whatever I learned in youth group, Samson was more arrogant than confident. And I find it poignant that, according to tradition, the same soldier who pierced Jesus' side was the first to confess him as Son of God.

In soldiers we find the heights of human accomplishment and the depths of human despair. Their lives may help put our feet on solid ground as we journey toward a better understanding of this thing we call war.