

# BAPTIST FEATURES

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Southern Baptist  
Preaches In Viet Nam

By Jim G. Lucas  
Scripps-Howard Staff Writer

VINH LONG, South Viet Nam-- The chaplain's sermon for the day was on brotherly love and "a life worth living forever." After he had delivered it, he climbed in behind the mounted machine gun and headed for his next pulpit, 15 miles away by jeep.

Maj. Frank Deese is a Southern Baptist who affects the role of a country bumpkin while quoting classic Greek. He's also an authentic circuit rider--covering some of the most dangerous country in the world. His circuit is the Mekong delta, where there are an estimated 300,000 Viet Cong Reds.

Each Sunday, by jeep, helicopter and plane the chaplain travels 250 miles to preach at five posts. He takes with him a small altar and a sunny disposition that makes him welcome wherever he goes.

"I've got with me today Jim Lucas of the Scripps-Howard Newspapers," he told them this Sunday for a change of pace. "He's an old Methodist boy, but he's heard this Baptist sermon four times already and if the Viet Cong get me he's got it memorized by now."

Major Deese, of Greensboro, N. C., knows what it is to be shot at. In fact, it happens every Sunday, and sometimes during the week if he holds Bible classes. He has not been downed yet, though his predecessor was hit twice.

Major Deese arrived her just before Christmas. The last lap of his circuit--from Vinh Long to Sa Dec--is by jeep, over 15 miles of Viet Cong-infested highway which is frequently mined. He makes the run at breakneck speed, hoping he won't hit anything. He crosses streams over which the bridges have been blown and repaired, and are likely to be blown again.

"You don't worry about it," he says. "My deacons are waiting for me, and I don't intend to let them down. I like to think they look forward to seeing their chaplain. If they can go to these places, I can, too. Sometimes they'll try to trick me into staying."

"They'll feed me their best chow, and they'll say, 'Chaplain, stick around a little longer and chew the fat with us.' But I'll say, 'Shucks, boys, there's another bunch awaiting down the Mekong, and you wouldn't want me to neglect their eternal souls, now would you?'"

The chaplain tries to function as a conscience for his men. Frequently, he says, he'll approach one and ask why he hasn't been to church.

"That boy will sometimes say, 'Chaplain back home my father has been superintendent of the Sunday school for 25 years and my mother sings in the choir.' Now what kind of answer is that?"

Negroes and whites sit together in Major Deese's congregations, which range in size from eight to 50. They meet in mess halls, barracks or out in the open. He preaches straight from the shoulder.

At each post, he has a group he calls his deacons, with whom he leaves a supply of hymnals. They also take up collections. The money goes to Viet Nameese missions. The Major lingers over coffee and doughnuts as long as he can, and then takes off. Sometimes there's an emergency and they use his plane for a priority military mission. Then he's stranded until someone comes after him. But the chaplain's run each Sunday has a pretty high priority itself.

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Like most chaplains, Major Deese is a reservist on permanent active duty. He has had 13 years' service, and intends to put in 20 before retiring to take a civilian pulpit. When that day comes he'll miss the Army and hopes it will miss him.

"It takes something out of me, this circuit," he confesses. "I'm tense. Anyone in his right mind would be. I know I could be shot any time, and my shoulders are hunched, half-way expecting it. I'm bushed on a Sunday night. I don't sleep well. But I love this work."

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