

A Revived Calling: The Chaplains of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force during the Second World War

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During World War II, the Brazilian Expeditionary Force (BrazEF) reinstated religious assistance after decades of military secularization. This article examines the role of these chaplains in providing emotional and spiritual support to soldiers on the Italian front. Drawing on archival records, chaplain reports and personal testimonies, it explores how faith influenced troop morale and psychological resilience. While inspired by global chaplaincy models, Brazil's case was distinctive: religion, long absent from military life, became central once again. Despite their rushed training and the logistical challenges they experienced, chaplains became indispensable figures. Their experiences not only reshaped the BrazEF's wartime dynamics, but also influenced the permanent re-establishment of military religious assistance in 1946.

INTRODUCTION

Amid the devastation of war, a small church stood as a battered relic of faith. Its walls, scarred by shrapnel, bore silent witness to the chaos that had engulfed it; its altar – once the sacred heart of worship – lay fractured, reduced to little more than a ghost of its former sanctity. Yet, in this ruined sanctuary, Chaplain Friar Orlando made a quiet but resolute decision: faith would not surrender to war.

In a letter dated 2 February 1945, written to his family in Brazil, he described his situation: ‘Today, the first Friday of the month, I will hold an adoration of the Blessed Sacrament at the little church in the area – poor thing, utterly devastated by the bombers. How long has it

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been since there was any adoration there?’¹ His words, simple yet profound, transcend the moment. They speak to the endurance of belief when all else is crumbling. That bombed-out church, silenced by war, becomes a symbol of the spiritual and physical fragility of soldiers themselves. And yet, in its desecrated halls, Friar Orlando rekindled something that war had sought to annihilate. This episode serves as a gateway into a deeper examination of an overlooked wartime reality: the role of Brazilian chaplains in the Second World War and the reintroduction of military religious assistance after decades of secularization.

Far from being a mere formality, religion functioned as an essential psychological tool in the building up of troop resilience within the Brazilian Expeditionary Force (BrazEF). As soldiers faced the relentless uncertainty of combat, chaplains became lifelines, offering solace to the fearful, guidance to the uncertain, and last rites to the dying. They stood beside men who had never previously left their homes, now thrust into the brutality of war, providing a bridge between the battlefield and the lives they had left behind.

Yet their presence was not the result of careful planning but a hasty improvisation. With little preparation, limited resources and minimal institutional support, chaplains were expected to minister to thousands of soldiers while navigating the battlefield themselves. Although the Brazilian experience mirrors the global patterns observed among British, American, and other forces, where faith was likewise important to morale, it displayed distinct characteristics. Unlike its counterparts, the BrazEF was reintroducing, rather than maintaining, religious support to troops, reviving a long-dormant tradition in a military that had officially distanced itself from faith.

By situating the Brazilian case within this broader context, this article contributes to a comparative understanding of the intersections between faith, war and the military. While historians such as G. Kurt Piehler, Lyle W. Dorsett, Michael Snape and Alan Allport, among others, have examined religion and morality among American and British forces,² Brazil remains absent from the discussion. Incorporating the BrazEF into

¹ Gentil Palhares, *Frei Orlando, o capelão que não voltou* [Friar Orlando, the Chaplain Who Never Returned] (Belo Horizonte, 1969), 181–3. Translations from the Portuguese are by the author, unless indicated otherwise.

² See, for example, G. Kurt Piehler, *A Religious History of the American GI* (Lincoln, NE, 2021); Lyle W. Dorsett, *Serving God and Country: United States Military Chaplains in World War II* (New York, 2012); Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London, 2007); Alan Allport, *Browned*

this discussion thus not only addresses this gap, but also expands the scope of scholarship on religion in wartime militaries.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND MILITARY CHAPLAINCY IN BRAZIL

To understand the role of the chaplains in the BrazEF during the Second World War, it is necessary to consider the role of the Serviço de Assistência Religiosa (Religious Assistance Service, or RAS) within the Brazilian army. In 1824, in the Constitution of the Empire – implemented shortly after Brazil's independence from Portugal in 1822 – Catholicism was declared the official state religion, thereby establishing a close relationship between the church and military institutions. During this period, religious practices, such as the recitation of the rosary and the celebration of Sunday mass, were integral to the army's routine.³

The formal institutionalization of chaplaincy in the Brazilian army, however, occurred only in 1850.⁴ This measure granted chaplains the status of parish priests to the troops, assigning them the responsibility of celebrating masses, hearing confessions and promoting moral conduct among soldiers. The organized mobilization of chaplains became particularly evident during the Paraguayan War (1864–70), a period in which, according to Maria Dourado, religious assistance proved crucial for maintaining discipline and cohesion among the troops.⁵

In 1874, in an effort to consolidate and expand these functions, the army's Ecclesiastical Corps was established to formalize the role of military chaplains and extend their influence within the armed forces.⁶

Off and Bloody-Minded: The British Soldier Goes to War, 1939–1945 (New Haven, CT, 2015).

³ Frank D. McCann, *Soldados da Pátria: História do Exército Brasileiro (1889–1937)* [*Soldiers of the Fatherland: A History of the Brazilian Army (1889–1937)*] (Rio de Janeiro, 2009), 42.

⁴ 'Decreto nº 747, de 24 de Dezembro de 1850' ['Decree No. 747, 24 December 1850'], *Câmara dos deputados* [*Chamber of Deputies*], online at: <<https://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/decret/1824-1899/decreto-747-24-dezembro-1850-560178-publicacaooriginal-82804-pe.html#:~:text=Approva%20o%20Regulamento%20para%20a%20Reparti%C3%A7%C3%A3o%20Eclesiastica%20do%20Exercito>>, accessed 2 January 2025.

⁵ Maria Teresa Garritano Dourado, *A história esquecida da guerra do Paraguai: fome, doenças e penalidades* [*The Forgotten History of the Paraguayan War: Hunger, Disease, and Punishment*] (Campo Grande, 2014), 252, 264.

⁶ Marcelo Coelho Almeida, 'A religião na caserna: o papel do capelão militar' ['Religion in the Barracks: The Role of the Military Chaplain'] (MA dissertation, University of São Paulo, 2006), 23.

However, the proclamation of the Republic in 1889 initiated a process of secularization, which led to the revocation of Catholicism's official status and the dissolution of the Ecclesiastical Corps. This shift effectively eliminated the institutionalized religious rituals that had, until then, characterized military life.⁷ Subsequently, the Brazilian army lacked a formal structure for religious support and, as a result, there were no specific regulations or ranks designated for chaplains.

THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF RELIGIOUS ASSISTANCE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The integration of military chaplaincy into the Brazilian army occurred in the context of Brazil's entry into the Second World War, following its declaration of war against the Axis powers in August 1942. As the nation transitioned into a belligerent state, with US support, over 25,000 Brazilians were mobilized to form the BrazEF, undergoing selection, accommodation and training for combat. Despite mobilization, no real effort was made to reinstate a structured chaplain corps. Ordinance No. 47-44 (9 August 1943) nominally integrated a religious service into the First Expeditionary Infantry Division, mirroring the US military.⁸ However, it lacked institutional support, remaining an afterthought even as troops trained in Rio de Janeiro and prepared to embark for Italy in 1944.⁹

The re-establishment of military chaplaincy in 1944, despite gaps in documentation and lingering uncertainties, appears to have been driven by both political influence and strategic necessity. One widely cited account, though lacking direct corroboration, attributes this decision to an interaction between Cardinal Dom Sebastião Leme and President Getúlio Vargas during the BrazEF's farewell parade in Rio de Janeiro on 24 May 1944. According to a lieutenant in the expeditionary force, Vargas, observing the procession, asked the cardinal if he was pleased to see the nurses marching. Leme allegedly

⁷ Adriane Piovezan, 'Morrer na guerra: instituições, ritos e devoções do Brasil (1944–1967)' ['Dying in War: Institutions, Rites, and Devotions in Brazil (1944–1967)'] (PhD thesis, University of Curitiba, 2014), 51.

⁸ Maria de Lourdes Ferreira Lins, *A Força Expedicionária Brasileira, uma tentativa de interpretação* [*The Brazilian Expeditionary Force: An Attempt at Interpretation*] (São Paulo, 1975), 264.

⁹ Ibid.

responded: ‘Yes, Mr. President, but the military chaplains are missing’; prompting Vargas to assure him: ‘Very well, Your Eminence, the BrazEF shall have them.’¹⁰

While the officer himself acknowledged that he had only heard this account second-hand, and no official records confirm its accuracy, just two days after this alleged exchange, on 26 May 1944, President Vargas signed Decree-Law No. 6,535, officially re-establishing the Religious Assistance Service in the armed forces. The decree outlined three primary responsibilities for military chaplains: providing religious assistance to troops abroad without coercion or restriction; contributing to the instruction of moral and civic education within military units; and supporting commanders at all levels in matters related to religious, moral and overall well-being.¹¹

The timeline underscores the belated and rushed nature of the initiative. Although the RAS was reinstated in May 1944, the first BrazEF contingent departed for Italy in July, just two months later. The mobilization, selection and training of chaplains were therefore conducted under considerable time constraints. Despite numerous applicants, only twenty-seven chaplains – twenty-five Catholic priests and two Protestant pastors – were appointed to the BrazEF, charged with providing spiritual support to over 25,000 Brazilian troops. The selection process and the resulting demographic of the chaplains reflected the broader religious demographics in Brazilian society. Although soldiers’ service records did not record religious affiliation, the 1940 national census offers some insight: 95.01% of Brazilians identified as Catholic, 2.61% as Protestant, and 0.13% as Jewish (listed as ‘Israelites’).¹² These figures explain the predominance of Catholic priests among the chaplains. While the US army – whose model influenced the BrazEF – included rabbis, ministers and priests,¹³ the Brazilian chaplaincy was limited to Catholic priests and Protestant pastors, reflecting the troops’ religious composition.

¹⁰ Jacob Emílio Schneider, *Vivência de um ex-capelão da FEB [Experiences of a Former Chaplain of the BrazEF]* (São Paulo, 1983), vii.

¹¹ ‘Decreto-Lei nº 6.535, de 26 de Maio de 1944’ [‘Decree n.6.535, 26 May 1944’], *Câmara dos Deputados [Chamber of Deputies]*, online at: <<https://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/declei/1940-1949/decreto-lei-6535-26-maio-1944-451974-publicacaooriginal-1-pe.html>>, accessed 2 January 2025.

¹² Piovezan, ‘Morrer na guerra’, 78–9.

¹³ Dorsett, *Serving God and Country*, 13.

ORA ET LABOR: THE ACTIVITIES OF THE BRAZEF CHAPLAINS

The BrazEF's twenty-seven chaplains first gathered in Rio de Janeiro, where they met one another and the soldiers preparing for deployment. Sergeant Gentil Palhares recalled their introduction as 'a day of celebration on Capistrano Hill', which was the military village that served as the main training centre for Brazilian combatants.¹⁴ Reflecting on this encounter between chaplains and soldiers, Chaplain Joaquim Dourado wrote:

It was there that my humble life as a military priest would begin, aiding soldiers who arrived daily from all corners of the country. ... Each of these newcomers carried within their hearts and souls the weight of serious personal concerns, overshadowed by the spectre of death, which, like a backdrop, set the stage for harrowing tragedies.¹⁵

One of the chaplains' earliest observations was the pervasive anxiety among the soldiers, even before they had set foot on the battlefield. Though still thousands of miles from combat, the awareness of impending war deeply unsettled them. This psychological burden echoes the sentiment expressed by J. R. R. Tolkien, who, long before gaining renown for *The Lord of the Rings*, served in the British army during the First World War. His wartime experiences probably shaped the following passage from *The Return of the King*: 'I am no warrior at all and dislike any thought of battle; but waiting on the edge of one that I can't escape is the worst of all.'¹⁶ The same dread and helpless anticipation were palpable among the Brazilian troops. Many soldiers, overcome by fear and uncertainty about what awaited them on the other side of the Atlantic, deserted. As Palhares notes: 'Many would obtain leave, go home, and, once their time had expired, never return.'¹⁷

Chaplains were acutely aware of this atmosphere. Joaquim Dourado, for instance, reflected:

War, seen from a distance through the imagination of a twenty-two-year-old, assumes terrifying proportions. In the mind of a man recruited

¹⁴ Palhares, *Frei Orlando*, 117.

¹⁵ Joaquim J. Dourado, *Estou Ferido; Homens que lutaram; E a Guerra Acabou* [*I Am Wounded; Men who fought; And the War is Over*] (Fortaleza, 1972), 9.

¹⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London, 2005; first publ. 1955), 766.

¹⁷ Palhares, *Frei Orlando*, 125.

as a soldier, there exists an unshakable conviction that, in the battles to come, he will be the preferred victim: he, the foot soldier, cannon fodder, cheap merchandise, a fragile vessel doomed to disappear.¹⁸

This observation encapsulates the existential angst that permeated the ranks of young recruits, many of whom had never ventured beyond their hometowns before being thrust into the machinery of global conflict. Their transition from civilian life to the battlefield was not merely a physical and geographical journey, but a profound psychological rupture. The sense of impending doom described by Dourado underscores the vulnerability of these men, who, despite their training, struggled to internalize the reality that war would soon place them in mortal peril. The chaplain's choice of words – 'cannon fodder', 'cheap merchandise' – reflects a deeply ingrained fatalism, and an awareness amongst the troops that individual survival was at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

Against this backdrop, the celebration at Capistrano, marked by the arrival of the chaplains, can be understood as more than a mere formal introduction; rather, it represented a moment of profound psychological and spiritual significance for the soldiers. The presence of military chaplains served to afford both symbolic and practical reassurance, offering a sense of moral and emotional support to men who were on the precipice of an experience that would test their resilience to its limits.¹⁹ The uncertainty of war, compounded by the inevitability of danger and the proximity of death, created an atmosphere in which the need for spiritual fortitude became paramount.

This meeting marked the beginning of a transformation, not only for the soldiers, but also for the chaplains themselves. Just as the troops were preparing for the physical and mental hardships of combat, these priests and pastors were undergoing their own adjustments. Unlike the soldiers, however, whose training was rooted in military discipline and strategy, the chaplains faced an entirely different challenge: reconciling

¹⁸ Dourado, *Estou Ferido*, 9–10.

¹⁹ Gentil Palhares recounts that Frei Orlando sometimes toured the barracks, playing his harmonica and encouraging the men with the phrase 'A cobra vai fumar!' ('The snake will smoke!'). This expression, originally circulated as a sarcastic rumour that Brazil would only enter the war 'when snakes smoked pipes', was later reappropriated by the soldiers themselves as a symbol of defiance and resilience. This case illustrates how chaplains' work extended beyond liturgical duties into the realm of morale-building; Palhares, *Frei Orlando*, 117.

their pastoral mission with the realities of war. Their preparation, though partially focused on physical endurance, required something far deeper: a fundamental redefinition of their spiritual vocation. In a context in which death was omnipresent and human suffering was inescapable, their role extended beyond religious duties; they became confidants, sources of solace and, in many cases, the last voice a dying soldier would hear.

This transition was particularly complex given that the Brazilian army had not maintained an official chaplain corps for over fifty years. Most of the clergy who served as chaplains came from small parishes scattered across Brazil, where their pastoral duties were deeply embedded in local communities and often extended into education and social work. Their previous roles had been defined by stability, routine and a sense of permanence. Now, however, they were thrust into an unfamiliar and volatile reality.

Their integration into military life therefore demanded adaptation on multiple fronts. As Fr Jacob Schneider observed, balancing religious identity with military expectations was not simple. The traditional black cassock, once worn for religious functions, was gradually set aside at the front in favour of the military uniform,²⁰ a practical choice that also signalled incorporation into the military structure. Equally, ministry itself had to be reshaped: services once held in churches now took place in open fields, improvised chapels, or even on the backs of trucks.²¹

Chaplain J. J. Dourado recalled how soldiers gravitated toward these improvised sacred spaces:

In the midst of a vast open field, a large platform was raised, supporting an altar crowned by a wooden cross. At the appointed hours for Mass, all eyes turned toward it. At night, hundreds of soldiers sought, in a moment of prayer, that which only prayer could provide. Even those who, outside the camp, had been carried away by pride – who once hesitated to admit that humbling oneself before God out of fear of death was not an act of cowardice but, rather, a profound demonstration of courage – even these former sceptics found themselves drawn to the solace of faith.²²

²⁰ Schneider, *Vivência de um ex-capelão da FEB*, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.* 13.

²² *Ibid.*

Dourado's reflection underscores how the realities of war stripped men of their ordinary bearings, exposing them to vulnerability and mortality in ways civilian life rarely demanded. Faith, often peripheral in peacetime, became a vital resource for confronting uncertainty and the omnipresence of death. This dynamic aligns with historian Alan Allport's analysis of British combatants in the Second World War, who likewise grappled with the dual fear of killing and being killed. Allport argues that the tension between exercising lethal force and confronting one's own vulnerability profoundly reshaped soldiers' psychological landscapes, producing both terror and a strange fascination.²³

Chaplain Dourado's account captures the psychological metamorphosis occurring within the ranks. Soldiers who had once been indifferent or even dismissive toward religious faith began to seek spiritual solace to cope with the relentless prospect of death. The war's constant confrontation with mortality appeared to rekindle religious sentiment, transforming personal beliefs under the strain of existential threat. Michael Snape documents this phenomenon among British troops during the Second World War. He notes that communal prayer gatherings became a catalyst for a notable resurgence of faith among soldiers who had previously drifted away from religious conviction.²⁴ In the midst of war's uncertainties, the re-emergence of belief – whether as a revival of previous convictions or as an entirely new embrace of spirituality – provided a refuge from the overwhelming dread of the unknown.

While much has been written about the palpable fear among soldiers, the apprehension experienced by military chaplains presents an equally compelling, albeit distinct, dimension of wartime anxiety. Chaplains were expected to serve as unwavering sources of moral and spiritual support. Their fear was compounded by the dual burden of maintaining personal piety while simultaneously offering solace to those on the brink of despair. In this context, the experiences of Friar Orlando are particularly instructive. His candid letter to his sister illuminates the inner turmoil of a chaplain confronted with the overwhelming responsibilities of his role. Orlando writes:

Dear sister, never forget to have your children pray for me – always, every day. A child's prayer is always pleasing to God. Perhaps you think I

²³ Allport, *Browned Off and Bloody-Minded*, 204.

²⁴ Snape, *God and the British Soldier*, 48.

have made a reckless decision, but I have not. What I did not realize, however, was how immense the responsibility of this role would be. And, truly, *I tremble with fear at the thought of failure*. My failure would be a tragedy. I trust in God, and He will help me. But I would not have accepted this chaplaincy with such joy had I known then what I now understand.²⁵

This passage exposes the immense burden placed upon chaplains. Friar Orlando's admission – 'I tremble at the thought of failure' – captures the quiet yet pervasive anxiety that accompanied their transition from parish priests to military chaplains. Unlike the raw, paralyzing fear of soldiers in battle, chaplains faced a more introspective struggle: the weight of sustaining hope amid adversity while contending with their own doubts.

In addition to the profound spiritual and emotional burdens imposed by war, BrazEF chaplains encountered another formidable challenge in their military training, a process that was marked both by significant heterogeneity and by extreme brevity. Archival evidence indicates that many chaplains received only a few days – often less than two weeks – of formal preparation before being thrust into the complexities of combat ministry. For instance, Fr Alberto Reis and Fr João Pheeny underwent just ten or eleven days of training before their deployment to Italy. The experiences of Friar Orlando and Fr Francisco Eloí, who benefited from a more extended training period of seventy-eight days, remained exceptional; however, although it was longer, this training was still inadequate in equipping them to meet the demands of wartime service.²⁶

The short training process raises important questions about the institutional view of pastoral support within the BrazEF. Rather than being solely a consequence of wartime exigencies, the abbreviated and fragmented nature of this preparation suggests a pragmatic yet superficial adoption of religious support. On the one hand, chaplains were

²⁵ Palhares, *Frei Orlando*, 129. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Rio de Janeiro, Arquivo Histórico do Exército [Army Historical Archive], Box no. 356, Serviço Religioso – Ficha de Capelães Militares [Religious Service – Military Chaplains' Records], undated, unpaginated; Box no. 155, Relatório do Tenente Coronel Capelão Chefe ao Excelentíssimo Senhor General Comandante: Relatório do Serviço Religioso do 1º Semestre [Report of Lieutenant Colonel Chief Chaplain to the Most Excellent Commander General, Report of the Religious Service for the First Semester], 19 April 1945, 4–10.

expected to serve as beacons of moral clarity and strength in environments dominated by chaos and death. On the other, the institutional neglect of comprehensive training not only exacerbated their sense of personal inadequacy, but also amplified the pervasive fear of failure. As Fr Noé Pereira later recalled, ‘countless difficulties inevitably confronted me, as I came from the calm environment of parish life and entered into military life, which was completely new, full of uncertainties, of anguished apprehensions, and of the most varied trials.’²⁷ His testimony encapsulates the gap between institutional expectations and the lived reality of chaplains, revealing how inadequate preparation left them navigating not only external pressures, but also inner disorientation.

THE ATLANTIC CROSSING

Following the BrazEF’s initial training period, the General Embarkation Order was authorized in late June 1944. On 28 June, the US transport ship *General Mann* arrived in Rio de Janeiro to embark the first contingent of Brazilian troops, which departed for Italy on 2 July 1944. The second and third contingents left together on 22 September, followed by the fourth on 23 November 1944, and the fifth on 8 February 1945.

Reports from the chaplains aboard these voyages reveal a variety of religious engagement during the Atlantic crossing. The BrazEF’s chief chaplain, Fr João Pheeney, recounts the emotional farewell of the first contingent and the extensive spiritual preparations undertaken before departure. As the ship set sail, chaplains organized simultaneous masses on multiple decks, invoking divine protection for the journey ahead. Their liturgical schedule was rigorous: three masses on Sundays – at 7 a.m., 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. – and daily weekday services at 9 a.m. Many soldiers and officers eagerly sought the sacraments, particularly confession and the eucharist. Beyond their liturgical duties, chaplains also assisted soldiers in writing letters to their families, particularly those who were illiterate or lacked the means to express themselves,

²⁷ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Book no. 151, Relatório do Serviço de Saúde, Defuntos, Religioso e Matemático: Relatório Final do Serviço de Assistência Religiosa da FEB [Report of the Medical, Burial, Religious, and Mathematical Services: Final Report of the Religious Assistance Service of the BrazEF], 15 September 1945, 4.

and supported those suffering from seasickness.²⁸ The intensity of this pastoral care is reflected in the work of chaplains such as Friar Orlando, Fr Francisco Eloí and Friar Alfredo, who together celebrated a total of thirty-one masses during the fourteen-day crossing.²⁹

CHAPLAINCY ON THE BATTLEFIELD

All the BrazEF troops crossed the Atlantic without incident, reaching Italy approximately two weeks after their departure. The second and third contingents disembarked in Naples on 6 October 1944, before being transported by truck to the Quinta Real area in San Rossore, near Pisa. This location served as a transitional encampment where soldiers were given time to acclimatize to their new surroundings and to undergo further military training tailored to the conditions of the Apennine front. From this point onward, the trajectory of these two contingents will serve as the primary focus of analysis, as they comprised the largest groups of soldiers and chaplains deployed by the BrazEF between July 1944 and February 1945.

The San Rossore encampment, as described by Chaplain Jacob Schneider, resembled a vast field of thousands of tents, each serving distinct purposes: lodging, kitchens, administrative offices, and sanitation facilities. The most imposing of these structures, however, was repurposed as a chapel. There, in a solemn procession, soldiers installed an image of Our Lady of Aparecida.³⁰

²⁸ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Report of Lieutenant Colonel Chief Chaplain to the Most Excellent Commander General, 5.

²⁹ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Relatório dos Capelães: 1º R.I., 6º R.I., 11º R.I., Relatório de Frei Orlando [Religious Assistance Service – Chaplains' Report: 1st Infantry Regiment, 6th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Regiment, Report of Friar Orlando], 20 September 1944, unpaginated.

³⁰ Schneider, *Vivência de um ex-capelão da FEB*, 34–5. Our Lady of Aparecida ('Nossa Senhora Aparecida') is the patron saint of Brazil and one of the country's most significant religious symbols. Her devotion originated in 1717, when fishermen in the Paraíba River found a small image of the Virgin Mary that soon became associated with reports of miracles. Over time, popular piety surrounding the image evolved into a major national devotion, culminating in the construction of the basilica of Aparecida (today the second largest Roman Catholic shrine in the world). In 1930, Pope Pius XI declared her patroness of Brazil, and millions of pilgrims continue to visit her shrine each year. See Our Lady of Aparecida, online at: <<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/saints/10/12/our-lady-of-aparecida.html>>, accessed 30 October 2025.

As combat neared, religious activity intensified. Chaplain reports from this period indicate that religious services became increasingly central to daily life: masses were held frequently, drawing large congregations, and communion was generously distributed. The data from Chaplain Friar Orlando's reports illustrate this shift: in October 1944, 37 masses were conducted, with 607 communicants. By November, as battle approached, those numbers had risen to 89 masses and 865 communicants. This quantitative increase is revealing; it suggests that soldiers increasingly sought spiritual solace as the reality of combat loomed ever closer.³¹

This phenomenon was not unique to the BrazEF. Lyle W. Dorsett, in his study of US military chaplaincy during World War II, observed a comparable pattern among American troops. Chaplain Gordon Cosby, for instance, reported rising attendance at religious services, Bible studies, and a notable increase in soldiers seeking individual spiritual counsel in the days preceding battle.³² G. Kurt Piehler likewise emphasizes that Roman Catholic chaplains viewed access to the sacraments – confession, absolution and holy communion – as an important preparation for combat, and described the profound piety displayed by many Catholic servicemen in those circumstances.³³ Brazilian historian Adriane Piovezan, in turn, argues that the imminence of death often intensifies an individual's connection to the divine, as the human psyche grapples with its own finitude.³⁴ In this light, the surge in religious fervour among BrazEF soldiers reflected a broader wartime pattern: faith, whether rekindled or newly embraced, functioned as a mechanism for confronting mortality and finding meaning amidst the chaos of war.

After a period of acclimatization at the San Rossore camp, the time had come to advance toward the front. The rhythmic cadence of marching boots, interwoven with the grinding of military vehicles, echoed ominously, foreshadowing the inevitable confrontation. As the units prepared for departure, chaplains were assigned to key roles. Five were assigned to field and evacuation hospitals, where they provided comfort to the wounded and administered last rites to the dying. Only one chaplain, however, was permanently attached to the Burial

³¹ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Report of Friar Orlando, unpaginated.

³² Dorsett, *Serving God and Country*, 57.

³³ Piehler, *A Religious History of the American GI*, 151.

³⁴ Piovezan, 'Morrer na guerra', 59.

Platoon (initially combining hospital service until March 1945), responsible for identifying the fallen, documenting their deaths, composing letters to their grieving families, and celebrating daily masses for the repose of their souls. Meanwhile, a third group of chaplains marched alongside the troops into battle itself. They also undertook regular visits to hospital installations, ensuring continuity of assistance along the lines of advance.³⁵

The looming confrontation weighed heavily on the troops. Gentil Palhares recalled that the command to break camp arrived like a ‘fatal and sinister cry’, with an eerie silence permeating the final preparations. This deployment was part of the final Allied effort to breach the German defensive line near Bologna before the onset of winter, a crucial moment in the Italian campaign. The Brazilian division, now fully integrated into the US IV Corps, was ordered to seize enemy-held high ground, particularly Monte Castelo, a strategically vital position controlling the surrounding terrain.

This offensive, launched in late November, placed the BrazEF within a larger multinational effort. On 24–25 November, Task Force 45 – an American-led unit that included the 3rd Battalion of the Brazilian 6th Infantry Regiment – initiated a series of frontal assaults. While US forces managed to capture Monte Belvedere, Monte Castelo remained firmly under German control. The engagement was part of a broader coordination that included British and American artillery support, the involvement of Italian partisans, and elements of the US 92nd Infantry Division. A renewed offensive on 26 November was halted mid-operation, underscoring the resistance posed by entrenched German forces.³⁶

For many Brazilian troops who had arrived in Italy in the second and third contingents of October 1944, this was their first experience of combat. Soldiers from the first contingent, by contrast, had been in battle since 16 September, gaining hard-earned familiarity with the brutal realities of the front. It was during this crucial period that chaplains formally assumed their most demanding wartime role: providing spiritual support on the eve of battle. Before heading to

³⁵ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Report of Lieutenant Colonel Chief Chaplain to the Most Excellent Commander General, 12–3.

³⁶ Cesar Campiani Maximiano, *Barbudos, sujos e fatigados: soldados brasileiros na Segunda Guerra Mundial* [*Bearded, Dirty and Weary: Brazilian Soldiers in the Second World War*] (Grua, 2010), 234–5.

the front, soldiers were given hymn booklets and rosaries. Chaplain Friar Alfredo described the moment:

We arrived at the front line on November 28, setting up at the command post in Silla. Our battalion engaged in combat on the 29th. That rainy afternoon, we visited the various companies, already positioned for deployment, to provide spiritual and moral support in accordance with the gravity of the moment. We administered collective confession, absolution, and entrusted them to divine providence. We then proceeded to Porreta, where we could more easily attend to our soldiers in the hospital. Indeed, we remained on duty throughout the night and the following days, ministering to the wounded.³⁷

Such reports from the Religious Assistance Service indicate that the heightened demand for sacraments observed in the final moments before combat was the culmination of a pattern already evident in the preceding weeks. As previously noted, religious participation had intensified in the San Rossore encampment, where the frequency of masses and the administration of sacraments had steadily risen as soldiers approached their baptism of fire. On the eve of battle, the urgent need for divine reassurance reached its peak. Chaplains, overwhelmed by the number of soldiers seeking absolution, frequently turned to general absolution, a practice used only exceptionally by Catholics, and reserved for extreme circumstances in which individual confession was not possible. The widespread desire for these rites suggests that many soldiers viewed them not only as a source of spiritual protection, but also as a solemn preparation for the very real possibility of death.

At the same time, as chaplains observed, the soldiers were not solely preoccupied with their own mortality. Equally pressing was the moral reckoning with their newfound capacity for violence: the realization that they were not only potential victims but also agents of destruction. This confrontation with war's cruel reciprocity became even more acute in the aftermath of the failed offensive on 29 November, which resulted in significant Brazilian casualties. Despite these losses, the

³⁷ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Relatório dos Capelães: 1º R.I., 6º R.I., 11º R.I., Relatório do capelão Frei Alfredo [Religious Assistance Service – Chaplains' Report: 1st Infantry Regiment, 6th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Regiment, Report of Friar Alfredo], 16 February 1944, unpaginated.

imperative of piercing the German defensive line remained unrelenting. Throughout November and December 1944, Brazilian forces launched successive assaults in an attempt to seize strategically crucial high ground; however, entrenched German resistance repeatedly thwarted their advances, culminating in another devastating setback on 12 December.³⁸

Even when the gunfire subsided, chaplains remained within the ranks. Fr Gregório Comasseto's December report from the Livorno hospital illustrates the scale of this work: in a single month, he visited every ward daily, comforted the wounded at their bedsides, celebrated masses in memory of fallen comrades, heard 578 confessions, and administered holy communion to 839 men. His ministry even extended to American troops during the absence of their own chaplain.³⁹ These numbers underscore that chaplains did not simply accompany soldiers into battle; they also bore the responsibility of guiding them through its aftermath.

As winter set in and combat operations decelerated, the nature of warfare shifted, rather than ceased. By 22 December, the BrazEF entered a phase of relative stability, marked by a temporary lull in large-scale offensives. However, the cessation of major battles did not equate to a reprieve from the strains of war. Soldiers continued to conduct reconnaissance patrols, reinforce defensive positions, and steel themselves for the inevitable resurgence of hostilities.⁴⁰

CHRISTMAS AT THE FRONT AND THE FINAL MISSIONS OF THE BRAZEF CHAPLAINS

Despite the relative lull in combat, the chaplains' responsibilities remained as demanding as ever. Their reports from this period highlight their efforts to bring a sense of normality and spiritual respite to the troops, especially during the Christmas season. Determined to

³⁸ Padre Brito, *Eu fui capelão da FEB [I was a Chaplain of the BrazEF]* (Rio Grande do Sul, 1947), 101.

³⁹ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Relatório dos Capelães: 1º R.I., 6º R.I., 11º R.I., Relatório do Pe. Gregório Comasseto [Religious Assistance Service – Chaplains' Report: 1st Infantry Regiment, 6th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Regiment, Report of Fr Gregório Comasseto], 27 December 1944, unpaginated.

⁴⁰ Floriano de Lima Brayner, *A verdade sobre a FEB [The Truth about the BrazEF]* (Rio de Janeiro, 1968), 301–2.

preserve the significance of the holiday even during war, chaplains organized masses, novenas⁴¹ and nativity scenes, including a mobile nativity that travelled between units. In his December report, Fr João Barbalho emphasized the intensity of religious participation, noting that: ‘The number of Communion in preparation for the feast of Christmas was most encouraging. We always rehearsed hymns, and at Mass we had the pleasure of hearing our good soldiers sing with enthusiasm’.⁴² Meanwhile, Pastor Juvenal Ernesto da Silva described a modestly decorated Christmas tree in the bleakness of war.⁴³

In field hospitals, chaplains combined spiritual care with material support. Chaplain Fr Hipólito recalled his efforts to ensure that Christmas could be marked: ‘This aspect of religious service was not neglected. I wrote to Pernambuco (a state in Brazil) requesting donations of wool and small gifts for my soldiers, ensuring that Christmas at the front would not pass unnoticed.’⁴⁴ Finally, Fr Jorge Brito captured the profound emotional resonance of the holiday amid the mountains of Italy:

How many prayers, filled with longing and trust, must God have heard on that Holy Night! In the snow-covered chapel of Poggio, stretcher-bearers knelt to hear Midnight Mass, and from their rough and battle-worn chests burst forth the tender melody of ‘Silent Night.’ ... In such a solemn hour, words were unnecessary – silence itself carried the weight of shared faith and hope.⁴⁵

⁴¹ A novena is a devotional practice consisting of a prayer, or a series of prayers, recited consecutively over nine days. This prayer, which may be offered privately or publicly, is traditionally undertaken in preparation for a particular feast or to seek a specific divine favour. Fr Peter John Cameron, O.P., *Novenas for the Church Year* (Huntington, IN, 2012), 12.

⁴² Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Relatório dos Capelães: 1º R.I., 6º R.I., 11º R.I., Relatório do Pe. João Barbalho [Religious Assistance Service – Chaplains’ Report: 1st Infantry Regiment, 6th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Regiment, Report of Fr João Barbalho], 13 January 1945, unpaginated.

⁴³ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Relatório dos Capelães: 1º R.I., 6º R.I., 11º R.I., Relatório do Pastor Juvenal Ernesto da Silva [Religious Assistance Service – Chaplains’ Report: 1st Infantry Regiment, 6th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Regiment, Report of Rev. Juvenal Ernesto da Silva], undated [December 1944], unpaginated.

⁴⁴ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Relatório dos Capelães: 1º R.I., 6º R.I., 11º R.I., Relatório do Pe. Hipólito de Almeida Pedrosa [Religious Assistance Service – Chaplains’ Report: 1st Infantry Regiment, 6th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Regiment, Report of Fr Hipólito de Almeida Pedrosa], 19 December 1944, unpaginated.

⁴⁵ Brito, *Eu fui capelão da FEB*, 101.

Throughout this period, the burden of sustaining morale weighed heavily on both military leadership and chaplains. According to the BrazEF commander Mascarenhas de Moraes, a growing sense of discouragement and pessimism had spread among the troops as they endured harsh winter conditions, sporadic skirmishes, and the psychological toll of prolonged uncertainty. In response, commanders and chaplains alike intensified their efforts to counteract this malaise.⁴⁶ Chaplain Jacob Schneider later reflected that: 'The work of commanders and chaplains in maintaining the troops' morale was arduous.'⁴⁷ Their initiatives went beyond religious services, encompassing improved postal services to facilitate communication with loved ones, the distribution of newspapers and magazines, and the orchestration of Christmas celebrations to provide a fleeting sense of normality.

Any respite the soldiers had found during this period was short-lived. As spring approached, the temporary break in combat ended. By early February, Brazilian troops were gradually repositioned for the US IV Corps offensive – Plan Encore – which aimed to break through German defences between the Panaro and Reno valleys. The primary objective remained unchanged: the long-contested stronghold of Monte Castelo. Once again, the troops prepared for battle, and once again, chaplains were expected to accompany them on their arduous journey.

As preparations intensified for yet another offensive against Monte Castelo, the Brazilian troops braced for what would be one of their most gruelling battles. The weight of prior failed offensives, and the resilience of German defences hung heavily over the ranks. On 18 February 1945, the BrazEF launched a renewed assault, advancing under intense enemy fire. Amid the chaos, soldiers hastily dug trenches to fortify their positions, while chaplains moved between the wounded and dying, offering prayers, last rites, and whatever words of solace they could muster. Chaplain João Filson Soren reported conducting twenty-seven religious services throughout February, often under fire and in the immediate vicinity of combat.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ João B. M. de Moraes, *A FEB pelo seu comandante* [*The BrazEF according to its Commander*] (São Paulo, 1947), 171; Brayner, *A verdade sobre a FEB*, 128.

⁴⁷ Schneider, *Vivência de um ex-capelão da FEB*, 92.

⁴⁸ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Relatório dos Capelães: 1º R.I., 6º R.I., 11º R.I., Relatório do Pastor João Filson Soren [Religious Assistance Service – Chaplains' Report: 1st Infantry Regiment, 6th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Regiment, Report of Rev. João Filson Soren], 9 March 1945, unpaginated.

The sheer unpredictability of the battlefield tested not only the soldiers but also the chaplains, who found themselves exposed to the same life-threatening dangers as those to whom they ministered. Chaplain Jacob Schneider, recalling his experience at Monte Castelo, described the harrowing ordeal of evading German artillery fire:

They were feverishly digging shelters when they spotted me, and soon, mortars from Monte Castelo were zeroing in on my position. At a time like that, even the most arthritic man would move like an athlete. I leaped over barbed wire, vines, mines, and rocks, taking cover among the ancient chestnut trees. In eight frantic moves, I was out of sight and out of their range. I collapsed on my back, terrified – but still alive, miraculously unharmed. There was not even time to recall what one soldier once said: ‘While I run, my father still has a son.’⁴⁹

Schneider’s account offers a rare glimpse into the vulnerability of chaplains who were also subject to the visceral terror of war. His fear and disorientation were not unique to him but shared by many other chaplains in combat. Colonel Waldemar Dantas Borges related an episode in which Sergeant Justo encountered a priest who, overwhelmed by artillery fire, had lost his bearings, and was stumbling toward the front lines in a daze:

Justo told me that as he was returning, he saw the priest, falling about, gripped by fear amidst the shelling. He put him in a jeep and brought him to report to the Battalion Commander. ... Hours later, when I arrived at the Battalion Command Post to deliver a communications report, I found the priest huddled in a corner, shivering from the cold, waiting to be seen.⁵⁰

These moments highlight the immense psychological strain placed on chaplains. Unlike soldiers, they lacked formal combat training, making them particularly vulnerable in active battle zones. Their role required them to confront death in its most immediate and brutal form: offering final blessings to the mortally wounded, witnessing the agony of young men gasping for their last breaths, and standing in the blood-soaked mud of the trenches with no means of defence beyond their faith – indeed, archival sources contain no evidence that

⁴⁹ Schneider, *Vivência de um ex-capelão da FEB*, 98.

⁵⁰ Aricildes de Moraes Motta, *História Oral do Exército na Segunda Guerra Mundial* [*Oral History of the Army in the Second World War*], 8 vols (Rio de Janeiro, 2001), 6: 191.

chaplains carried arms. This emotional toll is poignantly reflected in the words of Chaplain Joaquim Dourado, who, after narrowly escaping a combat zone, found himself overwhelmed by the weight of his experiences:

What is the matter with you? Didn't you say you would give your life for your country? Are you afraid? Didn't you volunteer for this? My own conscience reprimanded me. ... I cried, but no one saw the priest cry, thankfully. A priest at war must never cry, not even out of pity. It would spread among the soldiers. But I cried because these battered men displayed an extraordinary example of selflessness and courage. It was as if they were saying: 'Here, we fight until the end.'⁵¹

The inner turmoil expressed by Joaquim Dourado – his desperate attempt to suppress tears, his self-reprimanding conscience, and the crushing weight of what he witnessed – exemplifies the profound transformation experienced by Brazilian chaplains during the war. In the mountains of Italy, they became silent witnesses to the psychological devastation that war inflicted upon those who survived.

Compounding these challenges was the fact that, as already discussed, their training had been short, inconsistent and, in most cases, woefully insufficient for the realities they encountered at the front. The expectation of unwavering composure only intensified their burden. The image of a priest breaking down in front of his men was something to be avoided at all costs, as Dourado's own words reveal: 'A priest at war must never cry, not even out of pity. It would spread among the soldiers.' Chaplains were not merely expected to endure war; they were required to absorb its horrors without outwardly faltering, lest their own vulnerability undermine the fragile morale of the troops.

Despite these mounting challenges, the chaplains advanced closer to the heart of battle. Among them was Friar Orlando, who carried only his rosary and consecrated hosts as he travelled by jeep alongside Captain Francisco Ruas Santos on 20 February. Tragedy struck when an accidental gunshot fatally wounded him. His death sent ripples of sorrow throughout the ranks. His body was solemnly buried in a chapel dedicated to Saint Anthony, where soldiers and fellow chaplains gathered to pay their final respects.⁵²

⁵¹ Dourado, *Estou Ferido*, 21.

⁵² Palhares, *Frei Orlando*, 201–2.

This loss was deeply felt among the troops of the BrazEF, yet it did not halt their advance. The following day Brazilian forces pressed forward against Monte Castelo. Under relentless German artillery fire and the chaos of close combat, the BrazEF fought with renewed determination, consolidating its positions and securing victory by 24 February. This hard-fought triumph marked a pivotal moment in the campaign. With Monte Castelo secured, the BrazEF advanced under the strategic framework of Plan Encore, successfully seizing key positions as Soprassasso, La Serra, Bela Vista, Castelnuovo and Santa Maria Villiana.⁵³ Chaplain João Filson Soren recorded conducting thirty-eight religious services in combat zones throughout March 1945.⁵⁴ Similarly, Pastor Juvenal Ernesto worked tirelessly to sustain morale through pastoral care and personal engagement.⁵⁵ Whether sharing a quiet conversation beside a modest fire or offering prayers within the cramped confines of foxholes and infirmaries, these chaplains provided words of comfort that helped soldiers endure the bitter cold, acute pain, and the ever-present heartache of separation from home.

As the troops withdrew to Porretta Terme for much-needed rest, recuperation and reorganization on 11 March, a stark contrast emerged between the promise of renewal and the grim reality of war.⁵⁶ Easter Sunday fell on 1 April, and the celebration of Holy Week and Easter in late March and early April provided a fleeting moment of respite, and an opportunity for soldiers to reconnect with their faith before facing yet another ordeal.⁵⁷ Yet these observances took place in the shadow of the forthcoming offensive at Montese: a town that, within days, would become the site of the bloodiest engagement of the BrazEF's Italian campaign.

At dawn on 14 April 1945, the BrazEF troops launched a ferocious assault on Montese. The battle unfolded as brutal urban warfare, with close-quarters combat turning the town into a crucible of destruction. The Brazilian troops gradually forced the Germans to retreat into the

⁵³ Brayner, *A verdade sobre a FEB*, 393.

⁵⁴ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Report of Rev. João Filson Soren, unpaginated.

⁵⁵ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Report of Rev. Juvenal Ernesto da Silva, unpaginated.

⁵⁶ Brayner, *A verdade sobre a FEB*, 385.

⁵⁷ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Relatório dos Capelães: 1º R.I., 6º R.I., 11º R.I., Relatório do Pe. Francisco Eloi [Religious Assistance Service – Chaplains' Report: 1st Infantry Regiment, 6th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Regiment, Report of Fr Francisco Eloi], undated, unpaginated.

Po Valley, where their only options were surrender or annihilation. The final phase of the campaign reached its climax on 29 and 30 April 1945, with the surrender of the 148th German Infantry Division. This rare large-scale capitulation in Italy resulted in the capture of approximately 15,000 prisoners, effectively marking the end of the BrazEF's combat operations.⁵⁸

As the Italian campaign drew to a close, the chaplains of the BrazEF confronted the limits of an improvised system. Reports from commanders and clergy highlighted persistent impediments: the absence of a permanent chaplaincy structure, the inadequate preparation of civilian clergy for military life, and chronic shortages of transport and material support. These deficiencies underscored the precarious nature of the RAS, yet did not diminish its significance. On the contrary, the very success of chaplains despite such obstacles reinforced their indispensability.⁵⁹

From late 1944 to mid-1945, correspondence between the chief chaplain and BrazEF officers reveals how military command conceived religious assistance as a strategic resource.⁶⁰ Chaplains were instructed to maintain an intimate pastoral presence, approaching soldiers 'one at a time', identifying weaknesses, and guiding them towards proper conduct. Their liturgical functions were framed within a broader programme of moral regulation: sermons were to emphasize patriotic devotion, obedience to law and hierarchy, and reverence for tradition. In this sense, chaplains operated simultaneously as spiritual ministers and as agents of discipline. Beyond liturgy, they organized recreational activities, monitored the moral condition of units, and served as

⁵⁸ Moraes, *A FEB pelo seu comandante*, 207; Brayner, *A verdade sobre a FEB*, 421.

⁵⁹ Army Historical Archive (Brazil), Box no. 355, Serviço de Assistência Religiosa – Documentos Recebidos do Pelotão de Sepultamento, 1ª Companhia de Manutenção, Serviço de Saúde, 9º Batalhão de Engenharia, 1º Batalhão de Saúde, e Gabinete do Ministro [Religious Assistance Service – Documents Received from the Burial Platoon, 1st Maintenance Company, Health Service, 9th Engineering Battalion, 1st Health Battalion, and Office of the Minister], December 1944 to late June 1945, unpaginated.

⁶⁰ Correspondence addressed to the chief chaplain of the BrazEF from Colonel Commander Geraldo da Camino (28 December 1944), Major Commander Olivio Gondim de Uzeda (30 December 1944 and 1 June 1945), Major Commander João Carlos Gross (23 January 1945), Colonel Dr Bonifácio Antonio Borra (25 May 1945), Major Commander Candido Alves da Silva (25 May 1945), Major Commander Dr Ary Duarte Nunes (1 June 1945), Colonel Commander José Machado Lopes (5 June 1945), Colonel Commander Aguinaldo Caiado de Castro (30 June 1945), and Major Commander Syseno Sarmiento (n.d.): *ibid.*

intermediaries between soldiers and command. Commanders consistently evaluated these practices as indispensable for sustaining cohesion, discipline and combat spirit.

What emerges is a paradox: institutionally fragile, yet functionally important, the RAS embodied both the improvisation of Brazil's chaplaincy and its growing strategic value. This contradiction shaped evaluations across battalion and regimental levels, which converged on a common point: religious assistance had proven its worth and should not be confined to wartime exigencies.⁶¹

It was within this tension that the institutional legacy of the BrazEF chaplains was forged. Although both the BrazEF and the RAS were dissolved in 1945, chaplaincy was no longer seen as an expedient. In 1946, the armed forces re-established the Religious Assistance Service on a permanent basis.⁶² What had begun as a wartime improvisation was thus transformed into a stable peacetime institution, decisively reconfiguring the relationship between religion and the Brazilian military.

CONCLUSION

The reintroduction of religious assistance in the Brazilian Expeditionary Force was not merely an institutional decision, but a pivotal moment in the soldiers' engagement with faith during wartime. The chaplains, drawn hastily into a conflict for which neither they, nor the Brazilian army, were fully prepared, navigated the complexities of ministering to soldiers in an environment where death was an imminent reality, and the structures of pre-war religiosity no longer applied. Their presence – whether conducting mass in makeshift chapels, writing letters for soldiers unable to articulate their final thoughts, or simply offering a familiar voice in an unfamiliar land – redefined the role of religion in a military that had long distanced itself from official ecclesiastical authority.

Beyond the immediate demands of war, this episode reflects a broader shift in the relationship between religion and the Brazilian military. The reinstatement of chaplaincy in 1944 proved not to be an

⁶¹ All of the above documents emphasize that the RAS should be maintained in peacetime: *ibid.*

⁶² Almeida, 'A religião na caserna', 26.

isolated wartime measure, but rather the prelude to a more permanent reintegration of religious services within the armed forces.

This article reveals that the chaplains of the BrazEF were not passive witnesses to history, but active participants in a war that demanded far more from them than their formal duties prescribed. Thrust into an environment where doctrine met devastation, they improvised, adapted and, in so doing, redefined their roles beyond the pulpit. Their actions were not simply an extension of religious duty, but a response to the profound human need for connection and meaning in wartime. Whether offering counsel in the fleeting quiet between battles, navigating the moral complexities of military service, or standing as the last familiar presence in a soldier's final moments, they operated in a space where faith and war collided. Their legacy is not measured in battlefield victories but in the invisible yet enduring impact they left on those they served: men who, in the chaos of war, found in their chaplains a constant support and presence.