



# Combat Chaplain: A Thirty-Year Vietnam Battle

*James D Johnson*

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Chaplain James D. Johnson chose to accompany his men, unarmed, on their daily combat operations, a decision made against the recommendations of his superiors. During what would be the final days for some, he offered his ministry not from a pulpit but on the battlefields—in hot landing zones and rice paddies, in hospitals, aboard ship, and knee-deep in mud. He even found time for baptisms in the muddy Mekong River.

“You've never really lived until you've almost died,” writes Johnson, one of the youngest army chaplains at the time. Through his compelling narration, he takes us into the hearts of frightened young boys and the minds of experienced men. In *Combat Chaplain*, we live for eight and one-half months with Johnson as he serves in the field with a small unit numbering 350 men. The physical price can be counted with numbers—ninety-six killed and over nine hundred wounded. Only those who paid it can understand the spiritual and psychological price, in a war that raised many difficult moral issues. “It placed my soul in the lost and found department for awhile,” Johnson writes.

Also provided here is an in-depth look at the “Mobile Riverine Operations,” a rare joint effort in which the U.S. Army and Navy combined forces. Johnson describes the workings of the flotilla and the complexity of having these two military branches in combat operations.

This is one man's chronicle of Vietnam and the aftermath of war, of his coming to terms with his posttraumatic “demons,” and his need for healing and cleansing which led him to revisit Vietnam twenty-eight years later. Veterans of the Vietnam war and other wars, their family members, pastors, chaplains, mental health workers, and anyone who has experienced trauma will find this story of interest.

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