

Rank Matters

Visibility, Structure, and The Meaning of Insignia

*This essay is **Part 1 of a three-part series** prompted by recent Department of Defense policy reforms concerning chaplain uniforms and Religious Affiliation Codes. Each essay examines a different aspect of how those reforms shape institutional identity, function, and trust.*

I had just completed the Chaplain Officer Basic Course and arrived at my first assignment. During my first week of in-processing, I was sent through the full slate of required inoculations—everything needed to make me deployable into our anticipated area of operations.

Rather than spread them out, the medics administered all of them in one sitting.

The next morning, I was down. Completely. I called in sick and stayed in bed—at least until the phone rang. It was the Division Chaplain, reminding me that I was expected at the Officers Club for my welcome luncheon with the other division chaplains.

So I got up, pulled on my uniform—the old green fatigues—and made my way to the Club.

While filling my plate at the buffet, I looked across the serving line and came face-to-face with a college classmate from my ROTC days. I called his name. He registered the appropriate surprise. We exchanged greetings.

Then he asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for my welcome luncheon,” I said.

He shook his head. “No—what are *you* doing *here*?”

“I’m having lunch.”

“But this club is for officers.”

“I *am* an officer,” I said—and reached for my collar to make the point.

When my fingers touched the fabric, I realized there was nothing there.

In my condition that morning, I had grabbed the wrong fatigue blouse. No rank. No branch insignia. Nothing to indicate who I was.

In that moment, I wasn’t a chaplain. I wasn’t an officer.

I was, for all practical purposes, a private who had wandered into the wrong room.

No explanation mattered.

No intent mattered.

What mattered was what could be seen.

In the military, rank is not decoration. It is a language.

It communicates authority, responsibility, and role—instantly, and without explanation. It tells others where you stand within the structure, how you are to be engaged, and what responsibilities you carry. In an environment that depends on clarity, that language is not optional. It is foundational.

For chaplains, that language carries an additional weight.

Chaplains are clergy, but they are not external to the military. They are commissioned officers whose ministry is exercised within the structure of the force. That distinction is not incidental—it is the basis upon which the chaplaincy exists. The chaplain is not a visitor granted access. The chaplain is part of the formation.

Rank is one of the ways that integration is made visible.

It signals that the chaplain shares the conditions of service, participates in the same system of accountability, and operates within the same chain of responsibility as every other officer. It situates the chaplain not alongside the force, but within it.

That visibility matters, because recognition in the military does not begin with conversation. It begins with what can be seen.

There is, understandably, a recurring concern within the chaplaincy that visible rank may create distance—that it may inhibit approachability or introduce barriers between the chaplain and those seeking care.

That concern is not misplaced. Chaplains are called to be accessible, and the willingness of a service member to seek out a chaplain often depends on trust.

But accessibility in the military is not created by the absence of structure. It is created by clarity within it.

Service members do not approach chaplains because rank is absent. They approach chaplains because the role is understood. They know who the chaplain is, what the chaplain does, and how the chaplain fits within the life of the unit. That understanding is shaped, in part, by the same visual language that governs the rest of the force.

To remove that language is not to remove hierarchy. It is to remove one of the primary means by which hierarchy is interpreted and navigated.

What remains is not simplicity, but uncertainty.

This becomes more apparent in environments where recognition must be immediate.

In operational settings, rank is not ceremonial. It is functional. It allows individuals to orient themselves quickly—who is responsible, who carries authority, and how interaction should proceed. These are not abstract concerns. They are part of how the organization maintains coherence under pressure.

For chaplains, visible rank has served an additional purpose in those environments. It communicates that the chaplain is not an external presence brought in to provide religious support, but a member of the unit who shares its conditions and its risks.

That signal carries meaning.

It affects how commanders receive the chaplain's counsel.

It shapes how service members understand the chaplain's role.

It reinforces the trust that allows the chaplain to move freely within the formation.

To diminish that signal—even with good intent—is to alter how that presence is understood.

None of this changes the underlying reality. Chaplains will continue to be commissioned officers. They will continue to hold rank, to be assigned by grade, and to operate within the same structures that have always defined their role.

But making rank less visible does not make it less real. It makes it less legible.

And in a system that depends on legibility, that distinction matters.

Without visible indicators, the chaplain's place within the structure becomes less immediately apparent. Junior personnel may not know how to situate the chaplain within the organization. Senior leaders may encounter subtle friction in initial engagement. What has long been communicated at a glance now requires explanation.

And explanation, in the military, always comes later.

The question, then, is not whether chaplains should be accessible.

They must be.

The question is whether accessibility is enhanced by obscuring the very signals that make the chaplain's role understandable within the system in which it is exercised.

The experience that morning in the Officers Club was not a misunderstanding of identity. I was, in fact, an officer.

But without the visible signs of that identity, I was not recognized as one.

In the military, recognition is not a matter of assertion. It is a matter of signal.

And when the signal disappears, so does the clarity upon which the system depends.

Rank matters.

Michael T. "Terry" Bradfield

Winchester, Virginia

Written: April 2026 / Revised: July 2026