

Muslims in the Military

*The first Islamic chaplain
is sworn in*

By Lee Adair Lawrence

The commissioning of the first Muslim military chaplain on Dec. 3 was filled with symbolism. Imam Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad stood before a mural depicting a pastoral American landscape complete with prairie Protestant church and its trademark white steeple. A short time later, the Islamic call to prayer reverberated through the broad hallways of the Pentagon while, a level below, shops geared up for Christmas.

For Muslims in uniform the ceremony

Lee Adair Lawrence is a Washington, D.C. based freelance writer.

heralded a day when their peers and superiors would more fully understand them; a day when Chaplain Muhammad can accomplish his goal of establishing a norm that will allow Muslims to fulfill their religious obligations without affecting their military mission. Civilian Muslims like Ajab Abdussamad, in charge of communications at the Masjid Muhammad mosque of Washington, D.C., greet the commissioning with enthusiasm. "It feels great," he exclaims. "It means that we are entering the mainstream."

And so Muslims are. More than 1,100 mosques have sprung up in cities around

the country. Girl Scouts from Brooklyn recently visited the capital wearing the traditional Muslim head scarf. And the town of Kountze, Texas, voted in the first U.S. Muslim mayor.

Muslims in the U.S. now number an estimated four to five million—there are no accurate figures since the U.S. Census does not classify the population by religious affiliation—and it is believed that Muslims will outnumber Jews by the early part of the next century. Within the ranks of the military, too, an accurate count is hard to come by. According to the Department of Defense, 2,500 Muslims are currently in uniform, but many believe this figure reflects the reluctance of many ►

MUSLIMS

servicemembers to declare Islam as their religion. Like Qaseem Ali Uqdah, executive director of Muslim Military Members, they believe Muslims are better represented in the military. "The max right now that you can put your hands on is 10,000," he says. "Of that 10,000, 6,000 are active or devout Muslims."

Whatever the numbers, Islam is widely regarded as the fastest-growing religion in the United States as well as one of its least understood faiths. A game of free association would more often link Islam to Middle East terrorists, the Iranian death warrant on author Salman Rushdie, or the racist preachings of Louis Farrakhan than to the lives and beliefs of some billion Muslims worldwide.

Although the faithful are spread out over different continents and cultures, the faith of all Muslims begins with The Word as embodied in the Koran, a book of 114 chapters or *suras*, which was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed in stages from the age of 40 till his death in 632 at 63. Twenty years later, his followers wrote down the contents of the Koran, and these have survived virtually unchanged to the present day.

However, it is not enough to say that the Koran—or Qu'ran—is Islam's holy book. It is more than that, as scholar Daniel Boorstin points out in his 1992 book "The Creators": "Christians believe in the Incarnation, the taking on of human form by Jesus, conceived as the Son of God. But Muslims believe in the Inlibration, the embodiment of God in a Book. That book is the Koran. The reverence and mystery that Christians feel toward Jesus the Christ is what Muslims feel toward their Book."

The Qu'ran, in turn, speaks repeatedly about Jesus, movingly relates the Annunciation and the Virgin Birth, and forcefully enjoins Muslims to believe in Jesus as God's messenger. In the third sura, God—whom Muslims call Allah—

addresses Jesus and says: "Jesus, I am about to cause you to die and take you up to Me. I shall take you away from the unbelievers and exalt your followers among them till the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me you shall all return and I shall judge your disputes. The unbelievers shall be sternly punished in this world and in the world to come: there shall be none to help them. As for those that have faith and do good works, they shall be given their reward in full. Allah does not love the evil-doers."

Just as the Qu'ran affirms many of the



Capt. Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad with his wife Saleemah after his commissioning ceremony.

teachings of Jesus, it also reveres Abraham, Isaac, Moses and other prophets of the Old Testament. This is not to imply that Islam agrees in all respects with Christianity or Judaism, merely that it shares some fundamental beliefs with both, not the least of which are faith in a single, omnipotent God and the forswearing of idolatry.

If the Qu'ran is the embodiment of God, it follows that the language itself is sacred, and this in turn explains why Muslims the world over, regardless of their mother tongue, pray and greet one another in classical Arabic. For African-American believers, Arabic takes on an additional role.

Many believe that a large percentage of slaves were Muslim, but that White America effectively erased all traces of their beliefs either by pressuring slaves to adopt Christianity or simply by ignoring them. There is no way of knowing how many among them were practicing Muslims, but research into African-American history continues to find records of Muslims who brought their beliefs to American shores.

To many African-Americans, adopting an Arab name upon conversion to Islam is a way of reaching beyond the legacy of slavery to carve out an identity rooted in history. Indeed, this is what first attracted African-Americans to Islam—or, more precisely, teachings presented as Islam by Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975) and others. Known as The Nation of Islam, the movement promoted self-respect, discipline and pride. But it also violated many Islamic fundamentals: its leader preached separation of the races, declared himself the last prophet and denied the existence of an afterlife.

One basic teaching, however, shone through: Prophet Mohammed's injunction to seek knowledge. In the Middle Ages, this injunction saved Arab scholars from being imprisoned by traditional beliefs and enabled them to make new scientific discoveries while their Christian peers in Europe were still locked in by religious dogma. Centuries and oceans later, this same injunction empowered Elijah Muhammad's own son, Warith Deen Mohammed, to search the Qu'ran and other writings and eventually denounce his father's teachings as misguided. The man who came to be known as Malcolm X followed a similar path, with the result that, today, the majority of African-American Muslims belong to mainstream Islam.

Imam Jusuf Saleem, who represented Imam Warith Deen Mohammed at the commissioning ceremony, is not blind to the persistence of old labels. "The historical path that African-American

LIVES CUT SHORT

"You look at him, and he was just...you want to be near that guy."

"I thought he was the kind of kid the whole country would read about one day, but not like this," Grizzard's high school football coach, Thomas Rhodes, told *The New York Times*. Keith Goganious, a linebacker for the Buffalo Bills and Grizzard's former Navy teammate, added, "He had the whole world at his fingertips."

O'Neill's parents said that they would like to see some good come from the tragedy, difficult as that may be. "If she could help someone else by inspiring someone...I know that was important to her," Dr. O'Neill said. Boyle has proposed that, in time, a memorial honoring O'Neill be placed on "Big Bertha," the hill at the 2.5-mile mark on the Navy cross-country course. There, at the point where weary and discouraged runners confront significant obstacles and rough terrain, it would serve as a reminder that what really matters is how the race of life is run. ■

MUSLIMS

Muslims followed through the Nation of Islam, which is now still promoted by Mr. Louis Farrakhan, presents a little problem," he states, "because some people see that group as a legitimate Muslim group, when in fact if we go by the definition of the two main sources of the religion, the Qu'ran and *hadith* (reports of Prophet's saying and actions), they couldn't be viewed as such. Although the group has done some noteworthy things in areas such as drugs, still, to identify them as a Muslim group wouldn't be accurate."

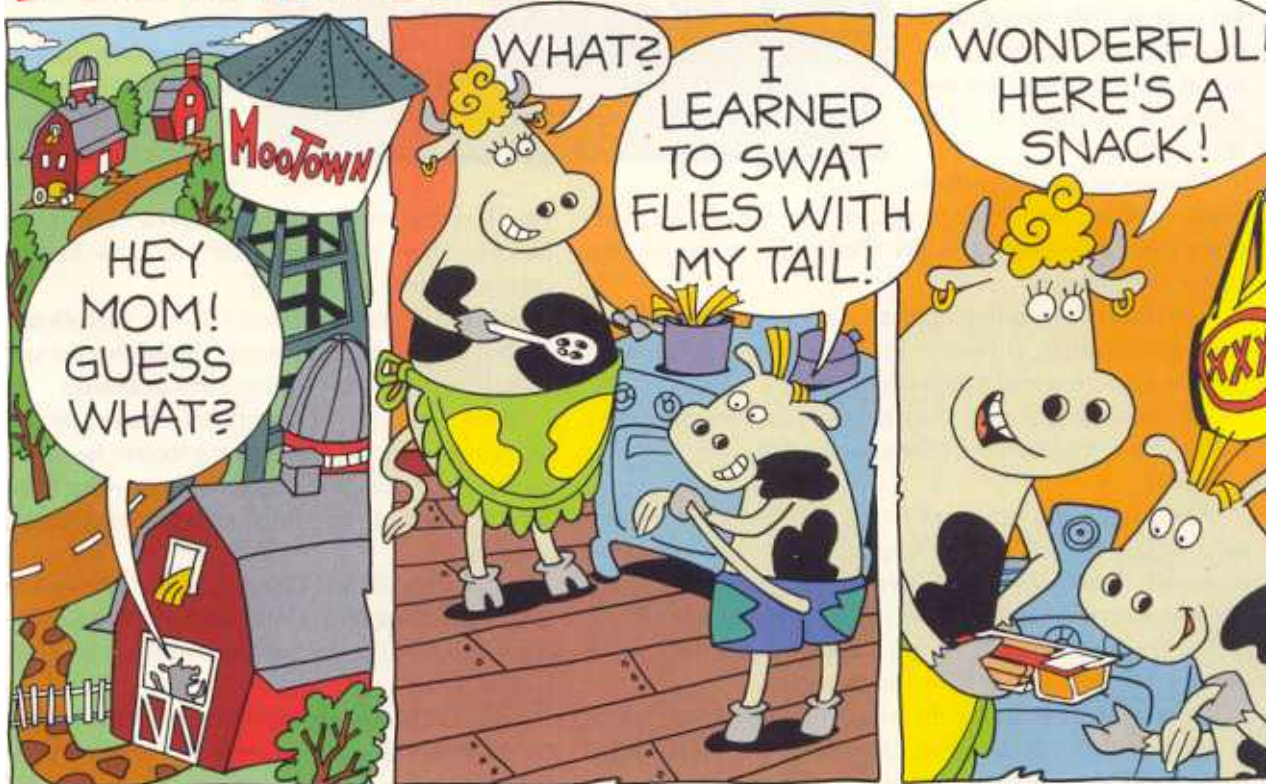
It is perhaps with this in mind that the chaplain at his commissioning vowed "to demonstrate the correct and balanced life of Islam in uniform." In so doing, he means to help Muslims adhere to the so-called "Five Pillars of Islam"—faith in one God and in Mohammed as his messenger, prayer, concern for the needy, self-purification in the form of fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are able—as well as other commands found

in the Qu'ran and in the practice and example of Prophet Mohammed. The latter is known as the *sunna*.

Chaplain Muhammad does not view these religious requirements as incompatible with military service. "We have some concession in our religion," he says. "It's not so rigid within the discipline that there is no flexibility. But the thing I will have to work on is not to allow the flexibility to be taken out of context and to establish what would be considered as an amiable compromise as long as it doesn't affect the mission of troops."

Fulfilling the commitment to daily prayers—or *salat*—does not usually present a problem, for they are said at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall, which means at most three, and sometimes only two, fall during the working day. Muslims have found that lunch and coffee breaks usually afford the time necessary to recite their prayers. However, circumstances can sometimes make it difficult if not impossible to comply with *salat* or to attend the Friday con-

MooTOWN. USA



gregational prayer service.

Similarly, circumstances do not always favor the yearly self-purification, which takes the form of a month-long, dawn-to-dusk fast known as Ramadan. The fast, which aims at instilling in the believer an understanding of others' suffering and at promoting spiritual growth, causes obvious hardship to people performing strenuous jobs or in training.

Another point of debate concerns the compatibility of military and Muslim dress codes, primarily the head-covering known as *hijab*. As Chaplain Mohammed makes clear, the hijab forms an important part of Muslims' identity. "Islam allows for a certain consistency—and conservatism, if you wish to use that word—which I think protects society throughout the ages," he adds. He argues that such modesty of dress tends to engender respect for women as well as an elevated sense of morality, both central to a system of belief that honors family and prescribes sobriety and ethical and moral behavior.

Muslims need not agree with these the-

ses, and the chaplain is the first to point this out. "The Qu'ran talks about how a woman should be covered, but not just the woman, also the man. And," he adds, "Muslims are required to obey the injunc-

The Prophet Mohammed was renowned as much for his military prowess and ingenuity as for his religious leadership.

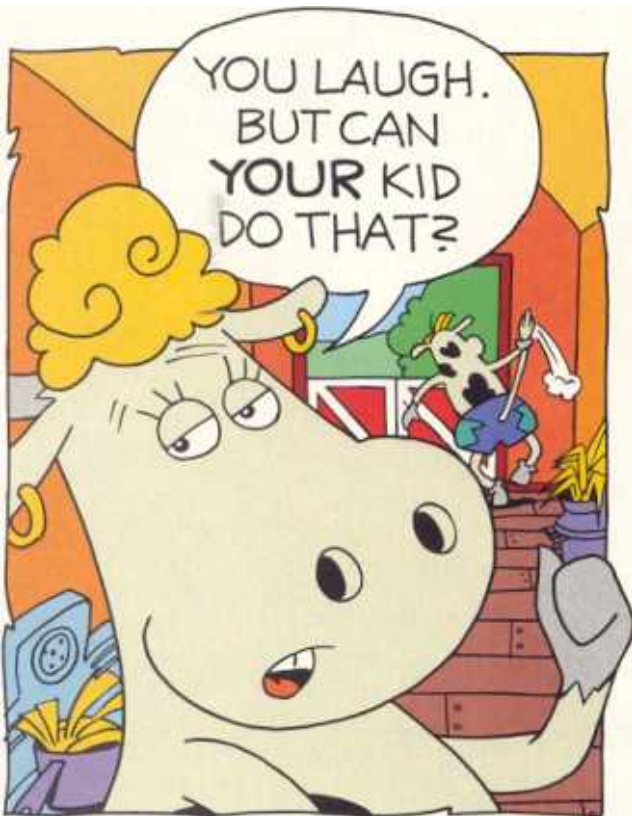
tions of the Qu'ran. We don't really need to go any further than that."

For those who might think that matters of dress or ritual might interfere with Muslims' ability to perform in uniform, the chaplain and others are quick to point

out that "American Muslims are not the first ones to be under these conditions. For many hundreds of years, there have been Muslims who have fasted in wartime situations. What we are going to learn is to play catch-up from those who have already established themselves."

In this respect, the example of Prophet Mohammed himself is invaluable, for he was renowned as much for his military prowess and ingenuity as for his religious leadership. His soldiers fought valiantly and relentlessly, winning battle upon battle. But Mohammed was also a master at outfoxing the enemy, sometimes so cunningly that he avoided bloodshed altogether. Another little-known fact is that, notwithstanding his reputation for militancy against non-Muslims, Prophet Mohammed provided for contingencies in which Muslims would fight Muslims, provided they had tried first to resolve the conflict through negotiation.

It's a policy that Americans—in or out of the military—should have no trouble recognizing. ■



Great accomplishments call for great rewards. So give 'em the good stuff.

Mootown Snackers