



From the Deacon's Desk

As Veteran's Day approaches [11 Nov 17] we take a few minutes to remember our veterans. Veteran's Day is set aside to honor all living veterans [Memorial Day honors deceased veterans]. Among our veterans are Catholic priests. Currently, the Army has 118 Catholic chaplains serving approximately 100,000 active duty soldiers. The Navy has only 52 priests to serve 107,000 sailors and Marines.

The Air Force, the current home of Chaplain, Captain Joshua Janko, has 60 priests for its 63,000 airmen. Even with Fr. Janko, the Air Force needs another 120 priests.

Despite their relatively small numbers, a priest occupies a unique position within the chaplaincy. All military chaplains meet the spiritual needs of active duty men and women and their families. That responsibility crosses denominational borders. It's not uncommon for a protestant chaplain to offer counseling to an Orthodox Catholic for example. Any protestant chaplain can perform the duties of any other protestant chaplain, but only the priest can conduct religious services for protestant and Jewish communities in addition to the Catholic community.

You won't find them in their offices very often; they spend much of their time going to wherever the men and women are – hitting a beach with Marines, climbing around a Navy ship to visit all the work centers, or marching 20 miles and jumping out of airplanes with the Army. Fr. Janko can start his day with a unit run, stop in at several offices, attend meetings, eat meals with the troops in the dining facility, and finish his day dropping in at the dormitories to check-up on the single airman. He is the only priest serving Yokota Air Base Japan [just outside Tokyo] – with over 14,000 people.

There are two Catholic priests designated as Servants of God, the first step towards sainthood. The first is Fr. Emil Kapaun who served in the Korean conflict. While attending to the men on the battlefield, he was taken prisoner and endured a 60-mile march to a prison camp. While at the camp, Fr. Kapaun ignored his own wounds while tending to others. He died of complications from his injuries in 1951. He is one of five priests awarded the Medal of Honor.

The second priest named Servant of God is Father Vincent R. Capodanno who was affectionally known as "the grunt padre" for always being with his troops, especially on the battlefield. In September 1967 he was with a Marine force of 500 in a battle against 2,500 North Vietnamese. Too many times to count, he crisscrossed the battlefield giving first aid and offering last rites. After having his left arm shredded by a mortar and refusing to leave the battlefield, he gave last

rites to a wounded Marine and then covered his body with his own. Fr. Capodanno was killed. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Also awarded the Medal of Honor was Father Joseph O'Callahan. He was a Navy chaplain aboard the USS Franklin operating near Japan in March 1945. A Japanese pilot struck the ship with two bombs, instantly killing over one thousand men. For the next three days Fr. O'Callahan helped rescue injured and trapped sailors, worked as a fire fighter, and performed last rites. Father continued his Naval career retiring in 1953 as a Captain.

The fourth priest- to receive the Medal of Honor is Father Charles Watters. He was on his second Vietnam tour when his unit attacked hill 875 in Vietnam. It was a fierce battle, and Fr. Watters went on to the battlefield retrieving the wounded and offering last rites. He was killed on 19 Nov 67 when a bomb struck the battlefield.

Fr. Angelo Liteky, the fifth priest Medal of Honor winner, was an Army chaplain serving in Vietnam in December of 1967. His unit came under immense fire shortly arriving in the field and were pinned down. Seeing two wounded men, he crawled to within 20 feet of an enemy machine gun position. He placed himself between the gun placement and the two wounded men. After two hours there was a lull in the fighting, and he dragged both men to the evacuation landing zone. For the next 24 hours he moved along the battlefield offering first aid, helping the wounded to return to the landing zone and then

helped put the wounded on the rescue helicopters. He even helped direct the helicopter pilots to their landing space.

Father Tim Vakoc was an Army chaplain serving in Iraq in on 29 May 2004.

Returning to his home base after saying Mass at a field station, his vehicle struck a roadside bomb. Fr. was severely injured; he was paralyzed and sustained brain damage as well. He was in a coma for six-months, but began to show signs of improvement in 2005. Using a computer for limited communication, he began to speak in 2007. Fr. died as the result of his wounds in 2009.

Perhaps the most inspiring demonstration of the chaplaincy at its best is the story of the "Four Chaplains" – also called the "Immortal Chaplains". They were new chaplains, recent graduates of the Army Chaplain's School. They were at sea on board the USS Dorchester headed for Greenland. On 3 Feb 1943, the ship was struck by a torpedo. In addition to the physical damage, the electrical system was destroyed, and the ship was pitch black. The ship's captain ordered that flares be used to help light the evacuation even though it meant the German submarine could find them easily for a second strike. The Chaplains – Methodist minister George L. Fox, Reform Rabbi Alexander Goode, Father John P. Washington, and Reformed Church in America minister Clark V. Poling – organized the orderly evacuation of the ship as well as calmed the men down. They guided the wounded men to safety and helped load the lifeboats. When there were no more life vests to hand out, the chaplains gave up their own.

Once they had helped as many men as possible into the lifeboats, they linked arms, sang, and prayed. Survivors said they could hear the mixed languages of the chaplains including the Jewish prayers in Hebrew and the Catholic in Latin. Out of the 904 men on the ship, only 230 survived.