

Father Emil



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Above, CPT Emil Kapaun (center, left), who served as a chaplain during World War II and the Korean War, helps a wounded soldier off a Korean battlefield. Right, Father Kapaun uses the hood of his jeep as an altar as he conducts a field Mass west of Taegu, Korea. Opposite top, after enemy fire damaged his jeep, CPT Kapaun rode an abandoned bicycle to visit the frontline units. Opposite bottom, Father Kapaun joined the Army in 1944.



Ray Skeehan/Courtesy Photo

Kapaun

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Ray Skeeihan/Courtesy Photo



Family Photo

On the night of November 2, 1950, U.S. Army chaplain CPT Emil Kapaun huddled in a dark, cold dugout near the Korean village of Unsan, surrounded by Chinese communist soldiers. Two days earlier, the dugout had been a command post for the 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, but Chinese communists had overrun the battalion on the night of November 1, and most of the survivors had withdrawn inside a small perimeter. The dugout lay in no-man's-land outside the American lines, but Kapaun ignored the danger to care for the men who had sought shelter. Chinese infantry had already killed several Americans defending the dugout, and now the enemy soldiers crept closer, preparing for a final assault on the unguarded position.

Fortunately, a wounded Chinese officer in the dugout spoke English. Kapaun persuaded the man to call out to his comrades and negotiate a surrender. Instead of slaughtering the wounded, the Chinese evacuated Kapaun and 15 other walking wounded. Emerging from the hole, the prisoners saw American and Chinese corpses strewn across the moonlit cornfield. Marching away under armed guard, Kapaun saw a wounded GI lying in a ditch with a Chinese soldier standing over him preparing to shoot. Instinctively, Kapaun moved towards the enemy soldier, pushed him aside and lifted SSG Herbert Miller to his feet. Six decades later, Miller still remembers the puzzled look on the Chinese soldier's face. "He didn't know what to do," recalled Miller. "Father Kapaun had that effect on those guys."

Emil Kapaun was born on April 20, 1916, in Pilsen, Kan., a tiny farming town on the edge of the Great Plains. Life on the farm endowed Kapaun with a rugged physical endurance that would serve him well in captivity, while his Catholic upbringing provided a deep-seated faith that no amount of suffering or ideological pressure could shake. At the age of 14, Kapaun left Pilsen to attend a Catholic boarding school. After graduation in 1932, he entered a seminary in Saint Louis, Mo. In 1940, the diocese of Wichita ordained him as a priest and assigned him as the assistant pastor in Pilsen.

The outbreak of World War II provided the energetic young priest with another outlet. He vol-

Soldiers serve as acolytes as Father Kapaun conducts a service. He landed at Pohang, Korea, in late June 1950 with the 8th Cavalry Regiment.

unteered to spend his days off ministering to Catholics at a nearby military base, and he soon developed a desire to become a military chaplain. Kapaun's bishop in Wichita denied several requests before finally permitting him to join the Army in 1944. Having completed training at Fort Devens, Mass., the young priest shipped out to India, where he served two years along the malaria-ridden border with Burma.

Kapaun came home and received his discharge in 1946. He earned a graduate degree at The Catholic University of America and served in various pastoral roles in the Wichita diocese. He missed the challenges of military life, however, and felt that he could best serve the Lord by resuming his role as a military chaplain. His bishop reluctantly agreed, and Kapaun rejoined the Army in 1948, briefly serving at Fort Bliss, Texas, before shipping out for Japan in early 1950.

In January, Kapaun arrived in Tokyo and joined the 8th Cavalry Regiment. After the North Koreans invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, Kapaun and the 8th Cavalry Regiment landed at Pohang as part of the first wave of American reinforcements. Upon landing, the regiment's two battalions moved northwest to establish blocking positions near Yongdong, and they fought their first action against enemy forces on July 23rd.

As the men of the 8th Cavalry fought and died in the nameless Korean mountains and rice paddies, Kapaun seemed always to be in the line of fire, helping with the wounded and sharing apples and encouragement with the men in the foxholes. For one particularly fearless mission, Kapaun earned a Bronze Star for rescuing a wounded soldier in the midst of a firefight.

The chaplain acknowledged the horrors of war. One letter to friends at home painted a gruesome picture of the carnage: "I have seen soldiers with both legs blown off; one had the top of his head completely blown off. He never knew what hit him." In another letter, Kapaun confessed: "I have been on the front lines for eight days. We were machine-gunned, hit by mortars and tanks. Three times we escaped with our lives . . . God has been good to me. Others



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have not been so fortunate. A fellow can stand only so much."

Despite his private feelings, Kapaun maintained a brave front among his fellow soldiers. On one occasion, a North Korean tank round missed his head by a few feet, and the resulting blast knocked off his helmet. On another occasion, an artillery barrage landed within 150 yards of where Kapaun was holding an open-air mass. Nobody was hurt, and the mass continued. When enemy fire damaged Kapaun's jeep, he found an abandoned bicycle on which he visited the frontline units.

Like his fellow soldiers, Kapaun spent weeks sleeping on rocky ground, enduring swarms of mosquitoes and suffering from diarrhea, but he maintained a cheerful endurance that proved contagious. SGT Bill Richardson first met him one morning after surviving a series of enemy night attacks. Surrounded by enemy corpses, the sergeant and his men were understandably edgy. According to Richardson, however, Kapaun carried himself with a serene confidence and good cheer. "It was not long," Richardson wrote, "before he had us all smiling."

On October 26, a South Korean division ran into stiff enemy resistance near the hamlet of Unsan. Interrogating prisoners after the first day's fighting, the South Korean commander discovered an even greater surprise: The enemy forces were not North Korean remnants but three divisions of well-organized communist Chinese. Having already predicted that Chinese forces would not dare intervene in Korea, higher headquarters dismissed the report.

Still, the South Koreans had clearly encountered significant resistance, and the I Corps commander dispatched American reinforcements. Within a few days, soldiers of the 8th Cavalry Regiment arrived at Unsan and began digging in north and west of the village. The weather was unseasonably warm, but clouds of black smoke drifted over the valley, thanks to fires set by the Chinese to conceal their movements. The Americans soon discovered clues suggesting the possibility of a trap. LT Bob Wood, for example, reported hearing Chinese conversations on his platoon radio, but

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In Korea, CPT Kapaun “seemed always to be in the line of fire.” On November 2, 1950, he dragged numerous wounded soldiers to safety until captured by the Chinese near Unsan.

these warnings were ignored. The South Koreans had withdrawn, and the nearest American unit was located 10 miles south. The 8th Cavalry was “out on a limb,” according to their division commander.

For once, Emil Kapaun was not located on the front lines, having agreed with another chaplain to exchange assignments for a couple of days. At Unsan, Kapaun and his assistant, PFC Patrick Schuler, had pitched their tent in a plowed field located a few hundred meters south of the village, where the regiment’s 3rd Battalion established its position as the regimental reserve. Three of the battalion’s four rifle companies were spread out along low ground around the field—poor terrain if the enemy mounted a determined attack. Assuming that any opposition would come from North Korean stragglers, most leaders in the battalion expected little or no contact.

November 1 is All Saints’ Day on the Catholic calendar, and it meant a busy day for the 8th Cavalry Regiment’s only Catholic chaplain. Kapaun and Schuler rose early, and the priest moved about the perimeter, saying masses, hearing confessions and visiting with the troops. Throughout the day, 8th Cavalry patrols encountered indications of a strong enemy presence, but nobody in authority took the time to piece together this evidence.

Shortly after dusk, the Chinese showed their hand, launching a heavy rocket barrage against the regiment’s 1st Battalion north of Unsan. Soon another wave of Chinese slammed into the 2nd Battalion’s positions northwest of town. With the regiment’s position in danger of collapse, higher headquarters finally directed the 8th Cavalry to withdraw south.

Like most of the men in the 3rd Battalion perimeter, Kapaun had no inkling of the fierce battle raging north of the village. He and Schuler had gone to bed early that evening but were roused at 2300 hours and prepared their vehicle to move out. Shortly after midnight, the two drove their jeep east to join the column of retreating 8th Cavalry vehicles, but Chinese ambushed the convoy. Kapaun and Schuler retrieved as many wounded Americans as they could.

Meanwhile, the 3rd Battalion was preparing its own withdrawal, with support vehicles lining up near the battalion command post. At 0300 hours on November 2, enemy troops struck the 3rd Battalion’s positions. Infiltrators made their way to the battalion command post, and skirmishes erupted in and around the vehicles. Separated from Kapaun in the confusion, Schuler eventually escaped to the south. Kapaun darted around the battlefield, dragging wounded soldiers to safety. At one point during the melee, Chinese soldiers captured him. An American soldier saw the priest being hustled away from the fight and shouted, “There goes the chaplain!” Several Americans turned their fire on the Chinese, and Kapaun escaped.

Fighting continued until dawn. Kapaun helped the battalion surgeon, Dr. Clarence Anderson, establish an impromptu aid station in an abandoned dugout near the main road. Other Americans manned hasty defensive positions around three tanks that had been attached to the battalion. The firepower from the tanks helped the Americans drive off the Chinese attackers.

Surrounded by the Chinese, several hundred survivors formed a small defensive work around the three American tanks. The dugout full of wounded Americans lay well outside the perimeter, but American aircraft kept the enemy at a distance. All through the day, Kapaun repeatedly dashed into no-man’s-land to drag wounded soldiers to the dugout’s relative safety, while Chinese snipers and mortar crews tried to kill him. The fearless priest saved 15 soldiers that day and would later receive the Distinguished Service Cross for his heroism.

That night, the Chinese captured Kapaun and several other prisoners, including SGT Herbert Miller, whom Kapaun had saved from execution. The prisoners moved east away from the battlefield and were eventually confined in a barn, where they could hear American planes flying overhead. After several days, the small group began moving north, travelling on foot and occasionally by truck. A few miles north, Kapaun’s group was reunited with several hundred prisoners captured at Unsan, including Dr. Anderson, who had stayed with the wounded in the dugout.

Having heard rumors and seen proof of North Korean brutality, many American prisoners expected to be shot. Instead, the Chinese treated them cordially, promising warm barracks and plenty of food and medical attention. The large group of prisoners spent most of November marching north to the Yalu River, eventually reaching the town of Pyoktong. Shortly after their arrival, however, an American air strike destroyed half of the town. The prisoners turned back south, marching along icy trails to a remote valley and the village of

Sombakol, where they would spend the next two months.

The group included several men on stretchers, and getting volunteers to carry these men grew increasingly difficult as time passed. Kapaun led by example, never missing a turn at the end of a stretcher and loudly encouraging those around him to pitch in and do their share. En route, Kapaun received word that a colleague, Chaplain Kenneth Hyslop, was in danger. Wounded at Unsan, Hyslop could no longer keep pace with the column of prisoners, and his injuries made him incapable of eating. Kapaun located his weakened comrade in the darkness and sat with him through the long night, as Hyslop lapsed into a coma and eventually perished. Kapaun saw to it that his colleague was buried with dignity.

The Americans soon discovered that earlier Chinese promises of warm barracks, medical care and plenty of food were, at best, overly optimistic. The prisoners received no blankets, no medicine and meager rations. Both on the march and after they reached Sombakol, prisoners subsisted on about 500 grams of food per day, usually in the form of millet, cracked corn or soy beans.

Kapaun and several other officers quickly realized that their survival depended on their ability to steal extra food from their captors. The priest concluded that the commandment against theft did not apply to men in such desperate straits and began venturing forth each night in search of food. He began returning with corn, garlic, peppers, salt and, on one occasion, a hundred-pound sack of potatoes.

Kapaun also began sneaking down to the enlisted huts. Many Sombakol prisoners were soldiers of the 8th Cavalry captured at Unsan, and they welcomed their chaplain's visits. Praying with some and joking with others, the priest did more than simply cheer up the young prisoners. He also provided desperately needed hope amid desolate conditions.

At the end of eight weeks, the American prisoners left Sombakol. Although some Americans had died in the valley, many of them due to battlefield wounds, these losses proved a fraction of the casualties suffered by American prisoners at other temporary camps that winter. By word and deed, Emil Kapaun had given his fellow prisoners an invaluable gift—the will to survive.

In mid-January, the Sombakol prisoners marched back to Pyoktong, where they found conditions worse than those they had left in the valley. Rumors of imminent rescue had helped keep spirits high at Sombakol, but those hopes now faded. Meanwhile, winter had arrived in full and deadly force along the banks of the

Yalu, with temperatures dipping well below zero. Finally, Pyoktong soon grew dangerously overcrowded, as the Chinese herded more and more prisoners into the squalid quarters.

Kapaun persisted in his ministry at the new camp. During the day, he assisted American medical personnel at the camp hospital, feeding and bathing those men too weak to care for themselves. Many soldiers in the hospital lay in their own feces, unable to stagger to the latrines. Kapaun gently removed their soiled clothes, bathed them in hot water and dressed them again. At night, he sneaked past guards to visit the enlisted huts, sharing news and encouragement and saying a brief prayer during each visit. He also continued to steal various necessities from the Chinese, including food, tobacco and even firewood, all of which he would share with the other prisoners during his visits.

On Easter Sunday, Kapaun openly defied communist ideology—which renounced religious faith—by celebrating an ecumenical sunrise service in the ruins of a burned-out church. Holding a makeshift crucifix, Kapaun wore his priest's stole, the purple ribbon signifying his pastoral office, and recited the Stations of the Cross. Most of the men in the officers' compound attended, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews and atheists. While Chinese guards watched nervously, Kapaun ended the service by leading the men in song. "America the Beautiful" echoed from the surrounding mountains, still blanketed by snow. The officers sang at the top of their lungs, hoping the music would reach the other prisoners at Pyoktong.

By now, Kapaun was visibly weakening due to various physical ailments that had accumulated during his five months in captivity. He had developed frostbite during his first weeks of captivity. At the valley, a chip struck his eye while he was chopping wood, forcing him to wear an eye



Camp # 5, on the Yalu River, was one of several holding sites near Pyoktong, North Korea, where Father Kapaun was taken. He ministered to the other prisoners there until his death in May.

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patch for several weeks. At Pyoktong, he developed beriberi. Finally, like most of his fellow prisoners, Kapaun had lost a great deal of weight. His hair was long and scraggly, and he had grown a thick, reddish-brown beard. Unaware of his growing frailty, soldiers teased Kapaun about his increasing resemblance to Christ, and the normally outgoing priest would turn away in embarrassment.

The week after his Easter Sunday service, Kapaun fainted in the midst of a sermon. American doctors discovered a blood clot in his leg, and they insisted that he rest and recover. Fellow prisoners gave Kapaun their medicine and extra food, carried him to the latrine, warmed bricks to help his swelling, and jerry-rigged a trapeze to support his leg. The special attention annoyed him, but after a couple of weeks, Kapaun seemed to recover his old vigor, regaining his mobility with the help of a makeshift cane.

Kapaun's dignified objections to Chinese propaganda, meanwhile, had made him a threat to the Chinese reeducation effort. Kapaun was the only chaplain at Pyoktong, and camp officials seemed to fear his spiritual faith and his enormous influence among both the officers and the enlisted men. In late April, the Chinese summoned Kapaun and accused him of undermining camp discipline and slandering the Chinese Communist Forces. Their threats and accusations, however, had no effect on the priest, and the frustrated officials finally released him, perhaps fearing that any physical abuse would spark a riot.

In early May, the chaplain had recovered enough strength to move about the officers' compound on a pair of crutches. Shortly thereafter he was stricken by a severe case of diarrhea, for which the American doctors had insufficient medicine. Prison officials refused to issue any extra medicine to treat Kapaun, whose quiet opposition to their indoctrination had already branded him a reactionary. Sid Esensten and several other officers solved this problem by fabricating an epidemic in the officers' compound. Dozens of men reported to the Chinese medical team with complaints of diarrhea, and each received a small dose of medicine to treat the problem. The officers collected the medicine and provided it to Kapaun, whose diarrhea subsided after six days. A few days later, however, the priest collapsed in pain and sent for help. His friends found him slumped on the floor of his hut, breathing heavily.

One of the Chinese political officers stumbled on the scene and announced that Kapaun would be transferred to the Chinese hospital in Pyoktong, a half-mile away from the officers' compound. The prisoners knew that this facility

was a hospital in name only. No visitors were allowed, and patients lay on the dirt floor in their own excrement, unfed and unattended, while maggots and lice multiplied on their bodies. Many victims did not survive the night in this building, which prisoners dubbed the dying place. Burial parties evacuated corpses each morning. The officers protested bitterly, to no avail. The Chinese officer left to summon reinforcements.

Knowing that time was short, Kapaun spent his final minutes in quiet conversation with his friends, bravely reassuring them. The company of his friends seemed to revive him. Though still in pain, he sat upright and made a few wisecracks, but a squad of armed guards soon arrived with a makeshift stretcher. Again, the prisoners argued loudly, and the American doctors assured the officer in charge that they could cure Kapaun with the right medicine. The officer refused to listen, finally barking, "He goes! He goes!"

Kapaun's fellow prisoners gently lifted the gaunt chaplain onto the litter, and six of his friends carried him out of the officers' compound, escorted by the Chinese. The other officers fought back tears. Clutching his purple stole and his ciborium, Kapaun smiled and waved goodbye. He begged his friend, Mike Dowe, not to take it so hard: "I'm going where I've always wanted to go, and when I get up there, I'll say a prayer for all of you."

When the procession reached the hospital, Chinese guards placed Kapaun by himself in an unlit room, with a small bowl of food by the door, out of his reach. A Chinese doctor looked in periodically but made no effort to

help the dying man. A fellow patient, Jack Stegall, sneaked into Kapaun's room, but the priest was too weak to answer Stegall's greeting or eat the meager rations. Kapaun survived for two days before he finally perished.

In 1951, the United States Army awarded Kapaun the Distinguished Service Cross in recognition of his courageous actions during the battle of Unsan. He has been nominated for the Medal of Honor on several occasions, most recently in 2000, when U.S. Rep. Todd Tiahrt began a campaign to award the medal to Kapaun. In January, the Kansas congressional delegation asked Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta to recommend approval of the medal for Kapaun.

Emil Kapaun's remains rest in an unmarked grave near the Yalu River, next to hundreds of other American prisoners who never made it home. A few weeks after his death, the Chinese plowed the field where he was buried and planted a garden above the mass grave. Despite their efforts to erase his influence, Kapaun's legacy of selfless heroism inspired countless other prisoners to endure hardship with honor, courage and faith. Sixty-one years later, that legacy lives on. ★



Family Photo

Chaplain (CPT) Emil Kapaun was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his courageous actions during the battle of Unsan.