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## THE FORGOTTEN WAR'S POW SAINT

By Dennis P. Halpin

This summer's 60th anniversary of the end of the Korean War is little remembered in a country where other conflicts loom larger, from the Civil War up to the War on Terrorism. Thus, the Korean conflict has earned the appellation "the Forgotten War." Among those things forgotten is the horrific treatment endured by the POWs—American, South Korean and allied—at the hands of their North Korean and Chinese captors. The film noir *The Manchurian Candidate*, with its sinister depiction of the new Cold War term "brain washing," briefly raised the Korean War POW issue with the American public. But the world quickly moved on as is clearly demonstrated by the forgotten South Korean POWs who have languished for decades inside North Korea in violation of the Armistice-linked exchange agreements: Big Switch and Little Switch. The South Korean Defense Ministry recently estimated that approximately five hundred of these elderly men remain alive inside North Korea.

Just how bad was the treatment of POWs by the other side? "Not very" is the answer given to those who visit the "Museum to Commemorate the War to Resist American Aggression and Aid Korea" in the Chinese border city of Dandong, which I have done twice. Photographs there depict smiling POWs receiving Red Cross packages and singing Christmas carols with Santa Claus. The camps are presented as models strictly adhering to the Geneva Convention.<sup>1</sup> However, the museum relies more on propaganda than substance, for I have heard another story.

While serving in the Peace Corps in South Korea in the 1970s, I met a French missionary priest, Father Coyes, who had personal experience with the POW issue. He had been captured and taken north to a camp with young American soldiers. Father Coyes remembered the frigid cold, the beatings, the starvation conditions, and the utter despair. Some of the soldiers, he told me, "just curled up and died." Senate Report 848, presented to the

83<sup>rd</sup> Congress at the Korean War's conclusion confirms these recollections. It includes testimony from General Matthew B. Ridgway, former commander of the United Nations Forces in Korea on the "studied and calculated course of criminal misconduct carried out with such callous disregard of human life and suffering as to indicate a design on the part of the Communist leadership to exterminate prisoners of war in one way or another."<sup>2</sup>

Father Coyes also mentioned hearing of another priest whose ministry to the POWs was "saintly." This priest did not survive to tell his story, as Father Coyes did when he appeared on American television after the war. This priest was Emil J. Kapaun of Kansas.

Emil J. Kapaun was, like Dwight David Eisenhower, a son of the Kansas prairie who also answered the call to serve his nation overseas, both in the Second World War and then in Korea. He hailed from the small town of Pilsen, Kansas, which was settled by Czech immigrants, like his family. A 60-year effort by his fellow POWs who refused to forget the man who ministered to their spiritual and physical needs during their greatest tribulation finally bore fruit this past spring. President Obama awarded Father Kapaun posthumously the Medal of Honor in an April 11, 2013 ceremony attended by surviving POWs. President Obama said, "Father Kapaun has been called a shepherd in combat boots... Today we bestow another title on him—recipient of our nation's highest military decoration." The award citation stated that at the November 1950 Battle of Unsan, "Chaplain Kapaun calmly walked through withering enemy fire in order to provide comfort and medical aid to his comrades and rescue friendly wounded from no-man's land." It further noted, "Shortly after his capture, Chaplain Kapaun, with complete disregard for his personal safety and unwavering resolve, bravely pushed aside an enemy soldier preparing to execute Sergeant First Class Herbert A. Miller." That same Korean War survivor Herbert Miller was present at the White House ceremony.

Father Kapaun's nephew, Ray, gave credit to these fellow POWs for the honor that was bestowed on his uncle. Speaking immediately after the Medal of Honor ceremony, he noted:

A country boy from a small town in Kansas just received the nation's highest award for valor. That boy was my Uncle Emil. I didn't know him. We never met. He died tragically in that prisoner of war camp some sixty years ago. But the resilient and amazing prisoners of war who knew him would not let him die in our hearts.<sup>3</sup>

The *New York Times* report on the ceremony carried some of Father Kapaun's fellow POWs' recollections:

Guards tortured him for his shows of faith, but on Easter, Father Kapaun offered Mass in church ruins at the camp as guards looked on... The priest had a blood clot, dysentery and then pneumonia, and in May 1951, guards sent him into isolation, without food or water, to die. As Mr. Obama recounted, based on testimony from Father Kapaun's comrades, the priest looked at the guards and said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."...At war's end, the surviving POWs walked out of the camp with a four-foot crucifix they had made in his honor.<sup>4</sup>

An April 10 report in the *Wichita Eagle* indicates that the movement to canonize Father Kapaun, led by his fellow Kansas citizens, has gained momentum due to the Medal of Honor ceremony.

"It shows that Father Kapaun is more than somebody being honored by the Catholic Church," said Reverend John Hotze, who for nearly 15 years has led the Wichita Diocese's investigation of Kapaun's candidacy for sainthood. "He transcends matters of faith."<sup>5</sup>

A mass for the canonization of Father Kapaun is conducted

every month in Wichita and a pilgrimage in his honor is held annually as well.

On this 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Korean War Armistice, it behooves those advocating over another largely forgotten legacy of that war—the continuing grievous human rights violations which echo the Second World War's death camps—to voice their support for official Church recognition of this young man who died in a North Korean POW camp. Father Emil J. Kapaun provides a face for all those faceless victims who have perished largely forgotten in these camps for the past six decades.

This was, after all, a man no different in many ways from his fellow veterans who came forward to "defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." Father Kapaun's remains are likely in an unmarked grave near the former POW camp in Pyoktong, North Korea. This year's award ceremony, however, ensures that this saint from the Korean War will not be forgotten.

## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> The Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 75 U.N.T.S. 135, entered into force October 21, 1950.

<sup>2</sup> Hearing before the Subcommittee on Korean War Atrocities of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate, Eighty-Third Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 40 Parts 1, 2, and 3. Hearing held on December 2, 3, and 4, 1953. Report (S. Rep. No. 848), January 11, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0N0K2IoRGck>.

<sup>4</sup> Jackie Calmes, “Medal of Honor Awarded to Korean War Chaplain,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/12/us/politics/father-emil-j-kapaun-awarded-medal-of-honor.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/12/us/politics/father-emil-j-kapaun-awarded-medal-of-honor.html?_r=1&).

<sup>5</sup> Stan Finger, “Medal of Honor will help Kapaun’s case for canonization, church officials say,” *Wichita Eagle*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.kansas.com/2013/04/10/2756314/medal-of-honor-will-help-kapauns.html>.

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