



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 15, 2013

Chaplain Awarded Medal of Honor Six Decades After Death in Korea

A Catholic U.S. Army chaplain who died nearly 62 years ago in a North Korean prisoner of war camp was awarded the Medal of Honor April 11 in a White House ceremony attended by family, friends, and the few soldiers remaining who witnessed his selfless heroism on the battlefields of the Korean conflict.

The [Rev. Emil Joseph Kapaun](#) was just 35 years old when he perished from starvation and pneumonia as a prisoner of war on May 23, 1951. But a handful of men who served with him never forgot his actions both under fire and as a captive going beyond the call of duty to shield, protect, and offer spiritual guidance to his fellow soldiers. After a six-decade campaign to persuade the powers that be that Kapaun was deserving of the nation's highest military honor, those who loved and remembered him stood by while President Obama presented the Medal of Honor to the late chaplain's 56-year-old nephew, Ray Kapaun.



"This is an amazing story," the president told those assembled in the East Room of the White House for the somber ceremony. "Father Kapaun has been called a shepherd in combat boots. His fellow soldiers who felt his grace and his mercy called him a saint, a blessing from God. Today, we bestow another title on him — recipient of our nation's highest military decoration."

Father Kapaun was honored for his heroic actions during combat at Unsan in November 1950 when his unit — the Third Battalion, Eighth Cavalry Regiment, First Cavalry Division — was attacked by Chinese Communist forces. According to the official [Medal of Honor Citation](#), on November 1, as the American troops were being viciously assaulted, "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."

A [U.S. Army narrative](#) recalls that during the battle, as Chinese Communist forces encircled his battalion, "Kapaun moved fearlessly from foxhole to foxhole under direct enemy fire in order to provide comfort and reassurance to the outnumbered soldiers. He repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire to recover wounded men, dragging them to safety. When he couldn't drag them, he dug shallow trenches to shield them from enemy fire."

The Medal of Honor Citation notes that while the Americans successfully held off the attack, they were



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surrounded by the enemy and all able-bodied soldiers were ultimately ordered to evacuate. “However, Chaplain Kapaun, fully aware of his certain capture, elected to stay behind with the wounded,” continued the Citation. “After the enemy succeeded in breaking through the defense in the early morning hours of November 2, Chaplain Kapaun continually made rounds, as hand-to-hand combat ensued. As Chinese Communist Forces approached the American position, Chaplain Kapaun noticed an injured Chinese officer amongst the wounded and convinced him to negotiate the safe surrender of the American Forces.”

Father Kapaun’s heroism continued shortly after his capture, the Citation relates, as “with complete disregard for his personal safety and unwavering resolve,” he intervened as an enemy soldier was preparing to execute a U.S. soldier, Sergeant First Class Herbert A. Miller, stepping forward and pushing aside the Chinese soldier. “Not only did Chaplain Kapaun’s gallantry save the life of Sergeant Miller,” reads the Citation, “but also his unparalleled courage and leadership inspired all those present, including those who might have otherwise fled in panic, to remain and fight the enemy until captured.”

The Army narrative relates that following their capture on November 2, 1950, “Kapaun and other prisoners were marched for several days northward toward prisoner-of-war camps. During the march Kapaun led by example in caring for injured soldiers, refusing to take a break from carrying the stretchers of the wounded while encouraging others to do their part.”

As a prisoner of war Father Kapaun continued his service as a faithful shepherd of the men under his spiritual care. “Once inside the dismal prison camps, Kapaun risked his life by sneaking around the camp after dark, foraging for food, caring for the sick, and encouraging his fellow soldiers to sustain their faith and their humanity,” the Army narrative continues. “On at least one occasion, he was brutally punished for his disobedience, being forced to sit outside in subzero weather without any garments.”

On Easter Sunday morning, against his captors’ orders, Father Kapaun gathered the men in his camp together for a sunrise morning Mass, complete with a makeshift wooden crucifix. One soldier who was present later recalled that at the end of the Christian service, the hills and valley surrounding the dismal North Korean prison camp echoed with the sound of the voices of U.S. soldiers singing “America the Beautiful.”

Ultimately the brutal treatment took its toll on Kapaun. As he began to fail physically, “the Chinese transferred him to a filthy, unheated hospital where he died alone,” recalls the Army narrative. “As he was being carried to the hospital, he asked God’s forgiveness for his captors, and made his fellow prisoners promise to keep their faith.”

The Medal of Honor Citation noted that Father Kapaun’s “extraordinary heroism and selflessness, above and beyond the call of duty, are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, the 3d Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, the 1st Cavalry Division, and the United States Army.”

“This is the valor we honor today,” President Obama said as he presented Kapaun’s belated Medal of Honor to Kapaun’s nephew, who was born five years after his uncle’s death. “An American soldier who didn’t fire a gun, but who wielded the mightiest weapon of all, a love for his brothers so pure that he was willing to die so that they might live.”

Among those on hand for the White House ceremony were three POWs who witnessed first-hand Kapaun’s heroism and selflessness: Mike Dowe, 85; Robert Wood, 86; and Herbert Miller, 86, the soldier whom Kapaun saved from execution at the hands of the communist Chinese. Over the decades



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after his death, the three, along with more than one U.S. senator, campaigned for Kapaun to receive the Medal of Honor, all to no avail.

That all changed, reported [Fox News](#), when William Latham, Jr., a retired lieutenant colonel, teacher, and historian, began pushing for the honor after he learned of the extent of Kapaun's heroism while doing research for a book he was writing, [Cold Days in Hell: American POWs in Korea](#).

After scouring the National Archives for evidence confirming Kapaun's actions in battle and captivity, and collecting affidavits from POWs who had witnessed the chaplain's selfless heroism, Latham delivered five pounds of documents to Kapaun's family, who forwarded them to their congressman — who turned them over to the Army. This time the Army took notice, and Kapaun was approved for America's highest military honor.

"Emil Kapaun didn't need a medal to prove his heroism," Latham said, "but this recognition is very important to the men who served with him and to the families of the many other POWs who never came home. How many chances do any of us have to recognize so many unsung heroes?"

Dowe, a West Point graduate, was one of the last men to see Kapaun alive in the chaplain's final days. He recalled that just before Kapaun was carried away he told him, "Hey, Mike, don't worry about me. I'm going to where I always wanted to go, and I'll say a prayer for all of you."

Wood, who helped carry the dying Kapaun to a filthy POW hospital dubbed by GIs the "Death House," recalled that both in battle and as a POW facing the daily abuse of his captors, Father Kapaun "didn't just talk the talk, he walked the walk. When I think about him, I get all choked up. It was chaos. It was hell. To have this one man who still had the spark of civility in him — it was an inspiration."

Ray Kapaun told Fox News that in everything his uncle did, "he led by example. He wasn't a preachy person. He never expected anything from anybody that he wouldn't do himself." He said that having Father Emil Kapaun receive the Medal of Honor is a huge honor for his family, as well as an opportunity to share his uncle's story of selflessness. "It's a huge validation, but it's also an opportunity for a lot more people to know and see what kind of man he really was," he said. "I still read stories about him and get teared-up about what he did."

Images: Chaplain Emil Kapaun (left) and Kapaun giving Mass in 1950 (right)



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