

Thank you, Father Kapaun

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By Ned Forney

After 70 years, he's coming home. In an unexpected announcement in early March by the United States' Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, family members of U.S. Army chaplain Emil Kapaun were told that the 1950-53 Korean War hero's remains had been identified and would be returning to Kansas. No one, not even his relatives or the 50 citizens of his hometown of Pilsen, had expected this news.

I, too, was shocked. Having read and written about Father Kapaun (pronounced Ka-PAWN) for years, I have great admiration and respect for the Catholic priest who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Battle of Unsan (Nov. 1-2, 1950), where he braved “withering enemy fire,” provided “comfort and medical aid to his comrades,” and saved numerous American lives.



What he did after the attack is just as amazing. With American forces retreating, Kapaun refused to leave wounded soldiers behind. He was captured by Chinese forces and marched 80 miles to a prisoner of war camp.

During his six months in the hellish prison located deep in the mountains of North Korea, he administered last rites to sick and dying prisoners, defied sadistic guards who beat him when he prayed for his fellow inmates, stole food for men too weak to move, and through other countless acts of selflessness and courage, inspired his fellow Americans to endure the hardships of captivity.

Reading accounts of Father Kapaun's time as a prisoner, I was reminded of an interview I had with William Funchess, an American POW who served with Kapaun in Korea and had watched the seemingly fearless chaplain die from malnutrition and pneumonia in May of 1951. The story of Kapaun's final days in what the Chinese called “The Sick House,” a dilapidated building from which no one ever returned, was heartbreaking.

For many who served and sacrificed with the Army chaplain during the war and for South Koreans and Americans familiar with his story, the news of Emil Kapaun's remains — 95 percent intact and identified through dental records — being returned to his family is nothing short of a miracle.

It's been a tough year, and the stories of Kapaun's courage, faith, and love for his fellow man will undoubtedly be a source of inspiration and hope for millions. Only thirty five years of age when he died, the humble, selfless servant of God is an example of goodness and compassion in the world, two things we could all use a lot more of these days.

Kapaun's story is also a reminder of those who have yet to “come home.” More than 7,500 Americans who

served in Korea are still unaccounted for. As the words on the Korean War Memorial so poignantly state, they “answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met.” And we will never rest until they all return.

Ned Forney (ned@nedforney.com) is a writer living Seoul.