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Barack Obama

Medal of Honor Award Ceremony for Chaplain Emil Kapaun

delivered 11 April 2013, East Room, White House, Washington, D.C.



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

President Obama: Good afternoon, everybody. Please have a seat. On behalf of Michelle and myself, welcome to the White House. Thank you, Chaplain.

This year, we mark the 60th anniversary of the end of the Korean War -- a time when thousands of our prisoners of war finally came home after years of starvation and hardship and, in some cases, torture. And among the homecomings, one stood out.

A group of our POWs emerged carrying a large wooden crucifix, nearly four feet tall. They had spent months on it, secretly collecting firewood, carving it -- the cross and the body -- using radio wire for a crown of thorns. It was a tribute to their friend, their chaplain, their fellow prisoner who had touched their souls and saved their lives -- Father Emil Kapaun.

This is an amazing story. 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, the Medal of Honor. After more than six decades of working to make this Medal a reality, I know one of Father Kapaun's comrades spoke for a lot of folks here when he said, "It's about time."



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Father, as they called him, was just 35 years old when he died in that hellish prison camp. His parents and his only sibling, his brother, are no longer with us. But we are extremely proud to welcome members of the Kapaun family -- his nephews, his niece, their children -- two of whom currently serve in this country's National Guard. And we are very proud of them.

We're also joined by members of the Kansas congressional delegation, leaders from across our armed forces, and representatives from the Catholic Church, which recognizes Father Kapaun as a "Servant of God." And we are truly humbled to be joined by men who served alongside him -- veterans and former POWs from the Korean War.

Now, I obviously never met Father Kapaun. But I have a sense of the man he was, because in his story I see reflections of my own grandparents and their values, the people who helped to raise me. Emil and my grandfather were both born in Kansas about the same time, both were raised in small towns outside of Wichita. They were part of that Greatest Generation -- surviving the Depression, joining the Army, serving in World War II. And they embodied those heartland values of honesty and hard work, decency and humility -- quiet heroes determined to do their part.

For Father Kapaun, this meant becoming an Army chaplain -- serving God and country. After the Communist invasion of South Korea, he was among the first American troops that hit the beaches and pushed their way north through hard mountains and bitter cold. In his understated Midwestern way, he wrote home, saying, "this outdoor life is quite the thing" -- and "I prefer to live in a house once in a while." But he had hope, saying, "It looks like the war will end soon."

That's when Chinese forces entered the war with a massive surprise attack -- perhaps 20,000 soldiers pouring down on a few thousand Americans. In the chaos, dodging bullets and explosions, Father Kapaun raced between foxholes, out past the front lines and into no-man's land -- dragging the wounded to safety.

When his commanders ordered an evacuation, he chose to stay -- gathering the injured, tending to their wounds. When the enemy broke through and the combat was hand-to-hand, he carried on -- comforting the injured and the dying, offering some measure of peace as they left this Earth.

When enemy forces bore down, it seemed like the end -- that these wounded Americans, more than a dozen of them, would be gunned down. But Father Kapaun spotted a wounded Chinese officer. He pleaded with this Chinese officer and convinced him to call out to his fellow Chinese. The shooting stopped and they negotiated a safe surrender, saving those American lives.



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Then, as Father Kapaun was being led away, he saw another American -- wounded, unable to walk, laying in a ditch, defenseless. An enemy soldier was standing over him, rifle aimed at his head, ready to shoot. And Father Kapaun marched over and pushed the enemy soldier aside. And then as the soldier watched, stunned, Father Kapaun carried that wounded American away.

This is the valor we honor today -- 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. And yet, the incredible story of Father Kapaun does not end there.

He carried that injured American, for miles, as their captors forced them on a death march. When Father Kapaun grew tired, he'd help the wounded soldier hop on one leg. When other prisoners stumbled, he picked them up. When they wanted to quit -- knowing that stragglers would be shot -- he begged them to keep walking.

In the camps that winter, deep in a valley, men could freeze to death in their sleep. Father Kapaun offered them his own clothes. They starved on tiny rations of millet and corn and birdseed. He somehow snuck past the guards, foraged in nearby fields, and returned with rice and potatoes. In desperation, some men hoarded food. He convinced them to share. Their bodies were ravaged by dysentery. He grabbed some rocks, pounded metal into pots and boiled clean water. They lived in filth. He washed their clothes and he cleansed their wounds.

The guards ridiculed his devotion to his Savior and the Almighty. They took his clothes and made him stand in the freezing cold for hours. Yet, he never lost his faith. If anything, it only grew stronger. At night, he slipped into huts to lead prisoners in prayer, saying the Rosary, administering the sacraments, offering three simple words: "God bless you." One of them later said that with his very presence he could just for a moment turn a mud hut into a cathedral.

That spring, he went further -- he held an Easter service. I just met with the Kapaun family. They showed me something extraordinary -- the actual stole, the purple vestment that Father Kapaun wore when he celebrated Mass inside that prison camp.

As the sun rose that Easter Sunday, he put on that purple stole and led dozens of prisoners to the ruins of an old church in the camp. And he read from a prayer missal that they had kept hidden. He held up a small crucifix that he had made from sticks. And as the guards watched, Father Kapaun and all those prisoners -- men of different faith, perhaps some men of no faith -- sang the Lord's Prayer and "America the Beautiful." They sang so loud that other prisoners across the camp not only heard them, they joined in, too -- filling that valley with song and with prayer.



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That faith -- that they might be delivered from evil, that they could make it home -- was perhaps the greatest gift to those men; that even amidst such hardship and despair, there could be hope; amid their misery in the temporal they could see those truths that are eternal; that even in such hell, there could be a touch of the divine. Looking back, one of them said that that is what "kept a lot of us alive."

Yet, for Father Kapaun, the horrific conditions took their toll. Thin, frail, he began to limp, with a blood clot in his leg. And then came dysentery, then pneumonia. That's when the guards saw their chance to finally rid themselves of this priest and the hope he inspired. They came for him. And over the protests and tears of the men who loved him, the guards sent him to a death house -- a hellhole with no food or water -- to be left to die.

And yet, even then, his faith held firm. "I'm going to where I've always wanted to go," he told his brothers. "And when I get up there, I'll say a prayer for all of you." And then, as was taken away, he did something remarkable -- he blessed the guards. "Forgive them," he said, "for they know not what they do." Two days later, in that house of death, Father Kapaun breathed his last breath. His body was taken away, his grave unmarked, his remains unrecovered to this day.

The war and the awful captivity would drag on for another two years, but these men held on -- steeled by the memory and moral example of the man they called Father. And on their first day of freedom, in his honor, they carried that beautiful wooden crucifix with them.

Some of these men are here today -- including Herb Miller, the soldier that Father Kapaun saved in that ditch and then carried all those miles. Many are now in their 80s, but make no mistake, they are among the strongest men that America has ever produced. And I would ask all of our courageous POWs from the Korean War to stand if they're able and accept the gratitude of a grateful nation.

I'm told that in their darkest hours in the camp, in that valley, these men turned to a Psalm. As we prepare for the presentation of the Medal of Honor to Father Kapaun's nephew, Ray, I want to leave you with the words of that Psalm, which sustained these men all those years ago:

*Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely, your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.¹*

Ray, would you please join me on stage for the reading of the citation?



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MILITARY AIDE: The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, March 3, 1863, has awarded in the name of Congress the Medal of Honor to Chaplain Emil J. Kapaun, United States Army, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the all of duty.

Chaplain Emil J. Kapaun distinguished himself by acts of gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty while serving with the 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy at Unsan, Korea, from November 1st to 2nd, 1950.

On November 1st, as Chinese Communist Forces viciously attacked friendly elements, 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.

Though the Americans successfully repelled the assault, they found themselves surrounded by the enemy. Facing annihilation, the able-bodied men were ordered to evacuate. However, Chaplain Kapaun, fully aware of his certain capture, elected to stay behind with the wounded.

After the enemy succeeded in breaking through the defense in the early morning hours of November 2nd, 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.

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. Not only did Chaplain Kapaun's gallantry save the life of Sergeant Miller, 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.

Chaplain 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 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, the 1st Cavalry Division and the United States Army.

[The Medal of Honor is presented.]

CHAPLAIN RUTHERFORD: And let us pray together:

Lord, God, let us go forth into the world in peace and dedication to your service. Let us follow Chaplain Kapaun's example and hold fast to that which is good; render to no person evil for evil; strengthen the faint-hearted. May we support the weary, encourage the tired, and honor



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all peoples. Let us love and serve, and may God's blessing be upon us, pray with us today and always, as we ask and pray in your Holy Name. Amen.

President Obama: Well, I can't imagine a -- a better example for all of us -- whether in uniform or not in uniform, a better example to follow. Father Kapaun's life I think is a testimony to the human spirit, the power of faith, and reminds us of the good that we can do each and every day regardless of the most difficult of circumstances. We can always be an instrument of his will.

So I hope all of you have enjoyed this ceremony. I certainly have been extremely touched by it. To the Kapaun family, God bless you. To all our veterans, we're so proud of you.

¹ Psalm 23: 4-6