

Remembering Chaplain Colgan of World War II Former Chicago Streetcar Union Chaplain

Editor's Note: This article first appeared in the Will County Record, Thursday, 13 April 1995

For the family member or friend at Mt. Olivet Cemetery on Chicago's South Side, the marker may seem too simple and plain for the last resting place of one of the courageous chaplains of World War II. The gray marker simply reads: The Rev. Aquinas Colgan -- Order of Mount Carmel -- Died 6 May 1945.

The marker tells almost nothing of the life of this great priest who spent his life for others, and culminated his time on earth by giving his life to rescue a wounded corpsman cut down by enemy fire.

This final, heroic act took place on 6 May 1945, as the 31st ("Dixie") Division of the United States Army was attempting to dislodge the Japanese from the Philippines in the closing days of World War II. It also won for Padre Colgan, posthumously, the Distinguished Service Cross for valor. He is one of only seven chaplains so honored in World War II. In addition, he had already won the Purple Heart with an Oak Leaf Cluster for heroism and two previous wounds.

In his life before World War II, this thin, sandy-haired lad grew up on the South Side of Chicago, one of four sons and a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Colgan. His life-long devotion to people and Chicago stayed with him no matter what work he did. In addition to teaching Spanish, after he was ordained a Carmelite priest in 1936, at Mt. Carmel High School in Chicago, he became chaplain at Lewis Aeronautical School (now Lewis University) in Romeoville, Illinois. And as pastor of Mt. Carmel Mexican Chapel in nearby Joliet, he was a friend and champion of the Mexican migrant workers in the area. His interest included young and old, as evidenced with his work in the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) of Will County. He was also chaplain of the Chicago Streetcar Union.

"Every man is a thought of God, and has his particular destiny to fulfill," he once confided to a fellow Carmelite.

Pearl Harbor and After

With the coming of World War II, Padre Colgan immediately volunteered for chaplain duty. After training at the Harvard University Chaplain School, he was assigned to the Dixie Division, and landed with the group in Buna, New Guinea, in 1942.

During both basic training and afterwards, he was known as the chaplain who did anything his men had to do. This included long jungle hikes, amphibious landings, and front line duty. If the men were there, Padre Colgan was, too.

To help with morale, he drove from campsite to campsite, and often visited ships offshore, to attend to the spiritual needs of the United States Forces. His jeep was easily distinguished with the lettering "Chicago Street Fighter" painted beneath the windshield.

Padre Colgan also formed the "Chicago Street Fighters" Club and issued engraved membership cards to all whom he deemed worthy of the honor. The card entitled the holder to a "day-light stopover in Chicago." But a slogan on the bottom warned: "Don't Let the Sun Set Upon You." In Chicago, that is. The card also contained the names of Chicago city officials, including the director of the House of Corrections, and also Padre Colgan as "Supreme Brawler."

His ability to poke fun at life regardless of whatever circumstances was an ability that endeared him to all with whom he came in contact. In many ways, Padre Colgan symbolized the ideals of chaplains of all Faiths who went into battle with nothing other than their Faith and a desire to serve as their guide. He was particularly noted for this fact that he ministered to men of all denominations in their last moments here on earth.

When news came of his death, men of Dixie Division, most of whom were Baptists, wept openly for the loss of their beloved chaplain. He touched the lives of all he met.

When Padre Colgan landed in the Philippines, he had been on front line duty for almost 12 months. In a rain forest in central Mindanao Island, the Dixie Division was held up by heavy fire in a thickly-wooded area and had suffered great casualties. Although advised not to go into the woods, Padre Colgan did and was almost immediately wounded. He kept on going to reach a wounded corpsman. A quick burst of enemy fire killed the chaplain instantly.

Six days later, when the area was finally cleared, men of the Dixie Division found their chaplain with his arms wrapped around the feet of the medic he was trying to draw out of the line of fire.

In honor of their beloved chaplain, the soldiers dubbed the shell-shredded grove of trees as "Colgan Woods." It remains so to this day as a sacred place for them. In the spring, Padre Colgan will be again honored as part of the memorial to the deceased troops of the Dixie Division.

In his honor, too, Lewis University awards the Fr. Aquinas Colgan Medal each year to the graduate who has shown the most progress in education, and most exemplifies the leadership qualities of Fr. Colgan.

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