

# Chaplain Emil Kapaun: A Hero of Faith

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## Abstract

Of the 3,535 Medals of Honor that have been awarded, only nine chaplains have received one. The last chaplain to receive this medal was Father Emil Kapaun for his service in the Korean War. Chaplain Kapaun earned this medal because of the values that flowed out of his faith and his willingness to sacrifice his life for others. He lived out his faith for Jesus and was humble, calm, and generous. I researched Kapaun through books, articles, and documents at the Jerry Falwell Library, the Liberty University Chaplain's Museum, and the Chaplain Kapaun Museum. Kapaun started his walk with Christ as a child and decided to become a priest in high school. He was ordained a priest in 1940 after he graduated college. He joined the US Army Chaplain Corps four years later and served in India until World War II ended. He was discharged but rejoined the Chaplain Corps shortly before the Korean War began.

In Korea, Chaplain Kapaun showed upmost courage and made the ultimate sacrifice. He greatly encouraged his soldiers and eventually was captured while saving a wounded man from being killed. While held in a POW camp, Kapaun showed compassion for the other prisoners and sacrificed his own health while doing so. He built them fires, distributed food, melted snow to drink, and cleaned them. He offered to bury the dead and prayed with the soldiers every night. Chaplain Kapaun died at that prison camp after doing all he could to care for his men. He earned the Medal of Honor through the courage and compassion he showed to his soldiers during the war. This research highlights the heroism of one military chaplain and points to the need to explore the other eight who were also awarded the Medal of Honor.

## Father Kapaun's Early Days

Kapaun started his walk with Christ at an early age. He attended a Catholic school, and his parents were very devout. He was invited to be an altar boy at the church, and he took the job very seriously. He worked diligently on his family farm and always completed what needed to be done. But even with all his schoolwork and chores, he always made the time to uphold his church duties. Kapaun also had skills in handiwork. He constructed various things including a threshing. The skills he learned and the hardships he faced on the farm helped him when he was a Prisoner of War in the last years of his life.

He started to seriously consider becoming a priest when he entered high school. He attended an all-male Catholic school and college in Conception, Missouri and was ordained as a priest on June 9, 1940, by Bishop Christian Winkelmann. He became an auxiliary chaplain on an army base in Harington, Kansas. While he was there, he realized how badly chaplains were needed. He requested to join the US Army Chaplain Corps, and his bishop recommended him on July 12, 1944. He was sent to Army Chaplaincy School at Fort Devens, Massachusetts where he learned he enjoyed military life. After completing school, he was assigned to Camp Wheeler in Georgia.

## Kapaun's Life as a Chaplain

In 1945 he was sent overseas to Burma and India to help soldiers in the last days of World War II. While he served there, he traveled great distances to get to his troops. It was during his time here that we start to see Kapaun's true faith and character. He gave up a percentage of his military pay to assist the local children. He was generous, compassionate, and he cared to listen to people. After the war ended, Kapaun was sent back to the states and was released from service. He used his GI Bill to study at the Catholic University of America. After going back to school, he requested to go back into military service. His bishop denied the request. So Kapaun finished school and was assigned to be a parish priest.

Later, the opportunity to join the military rose again when he was to be transferred to another parish. His Bishop used the transfer to return Kapaun to uniform. In 1950, he was assigned to Japan. On June 25, 1950, the North Korean Army attacked democratic South Korea and Father Kapaun's regiment was the first American unit sent to help the South. While in Korea, Kapaun quickly earned a reputation for being courageous. He prayed with men in foxholes, said mass on the battlefield using his jeep as the altar, risked his life to give last rites, saved wounded soldiers, and buried dead soldiers. He would bury any man, even enemy soldiers. He received the Bronze Star Medal for bravery in action on August 2, 1950, after rescuing a wounded soldier under fire.



Figure 1. Chaplain Kapaun with his bike he would use to get to soldiers on the battlefield (Department of Defense)



Figure 2. Only surviving photo of the prisoner of war camp in Pyoktong, where Kapaun was held and eventually died (Department of Defense)

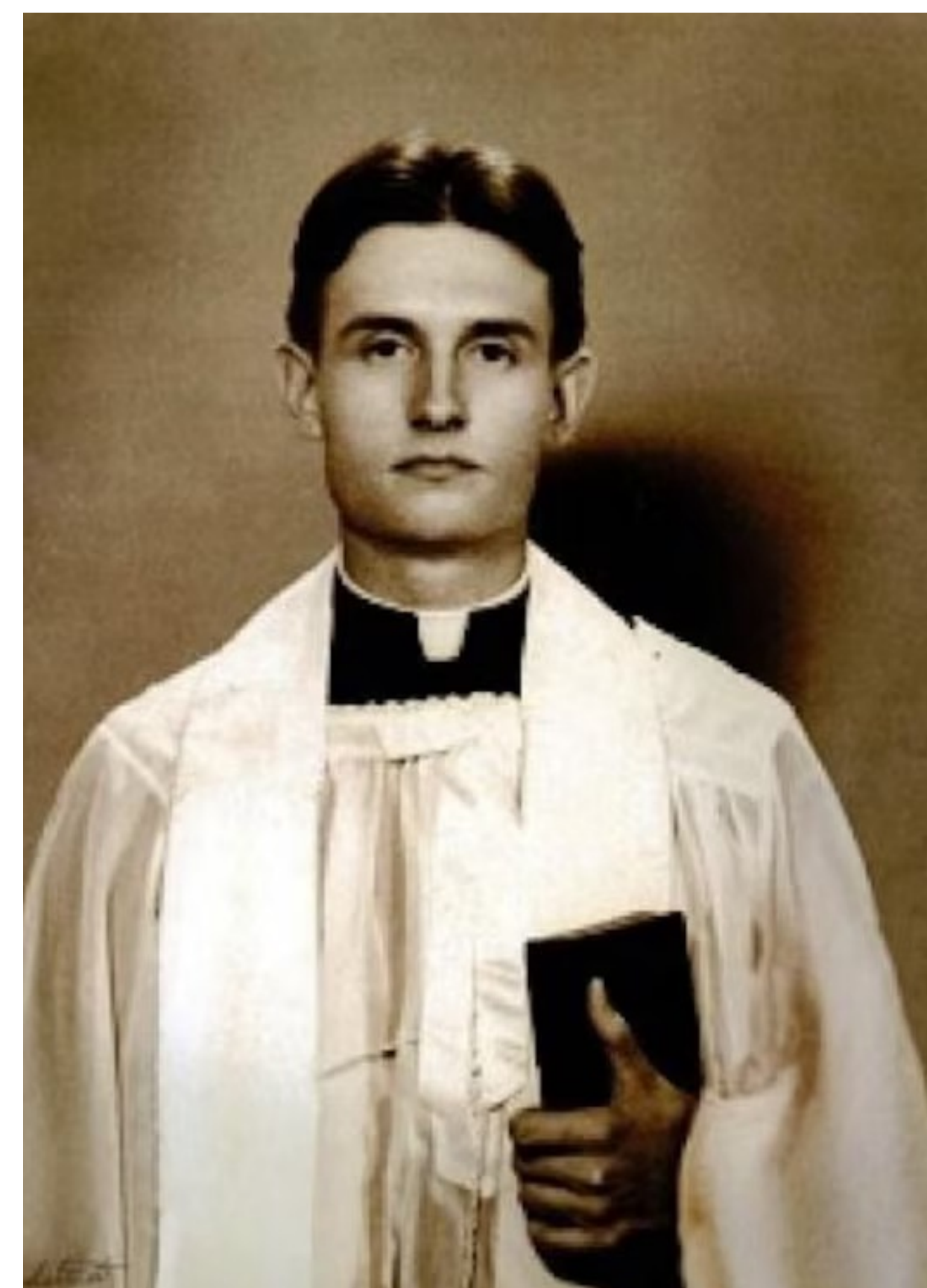


Figure 3. Father Kapaun in liturgical dress (Department of Defense)

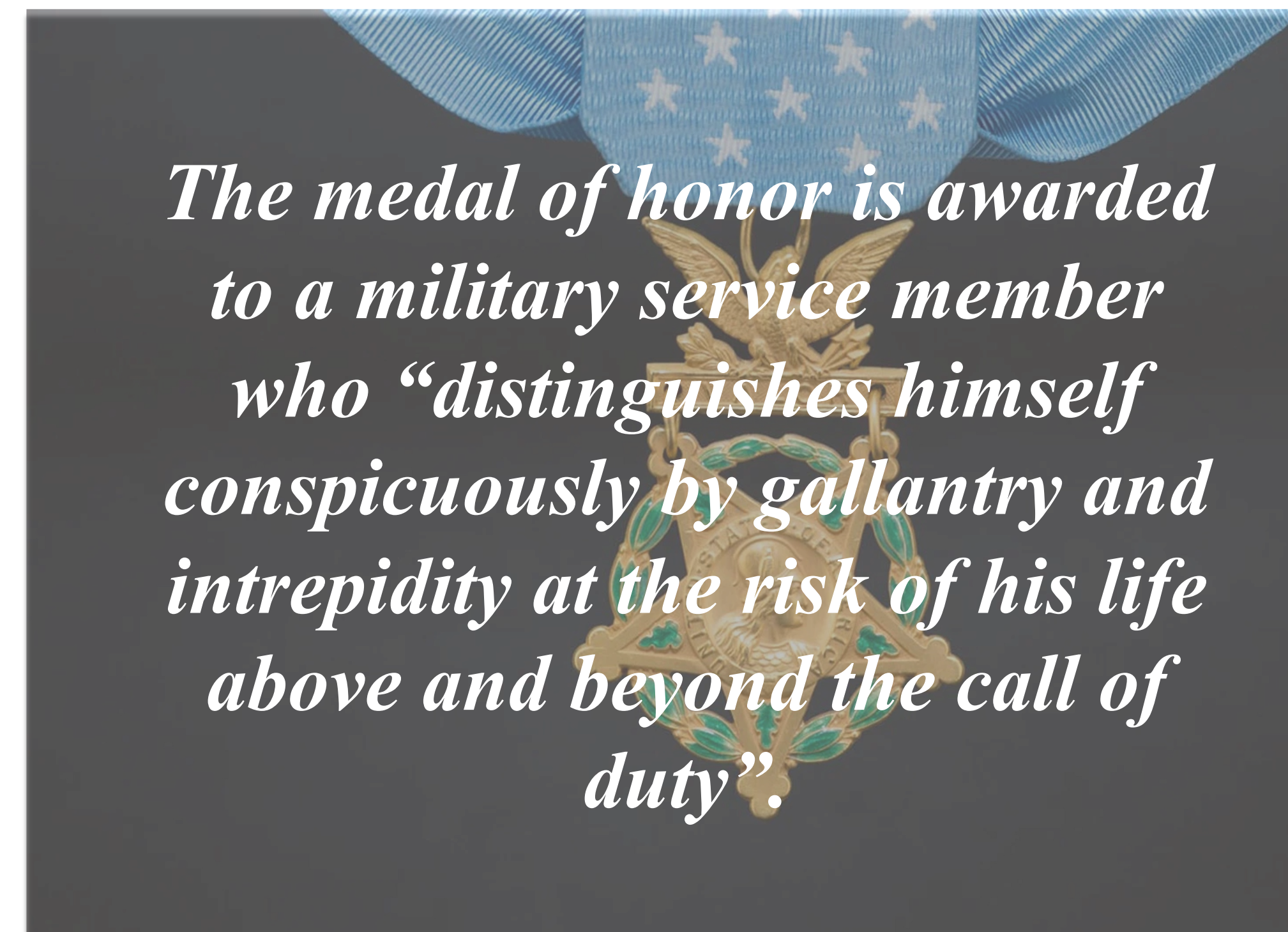


Figure 4. (Congressional Medal of Honor Society)



Figure 7. Chaplain Emil Kapaun in Uniform (Department of Defense)

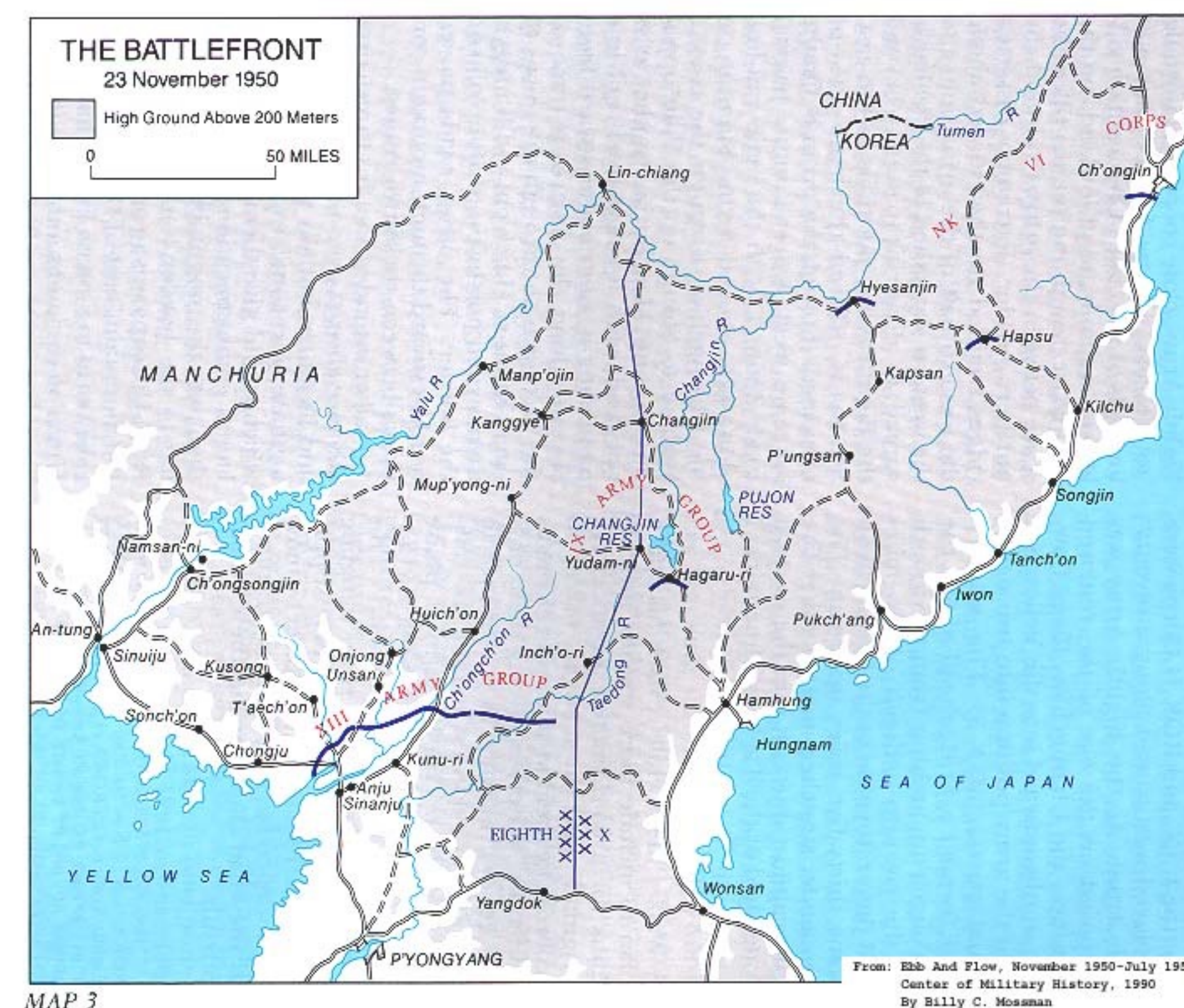


Figure 8. The Battlefield in Korea, 1950 (Department of Defense)



Figure 5. Chaplain Kapaun writing a letter in Korea (Department of Defense)



Figure 6. Chaplain Kapaun using his jeep as an altar for Mass (Department of Defense)



Figure 9. Chaplain Kapaun and his pipe after it was shot out of his mouth (Father Kapaun Catholic Diocese of Wichita)

## Captured in Korea

Father Kapaun continued to show acts of bravery as the war continued. One day while his unit was under heavy fire, he wanted to go to the front lines to say Mass. His captain told him that it was probably not a good idea since the line was hot, but Kapaun insisted. Even though there were shells falling 150 yards away, but he ignored the danger and continued to pray. He held services no matter how close he was to the enemy, and he never preached about the war, only the gospel. He was known for his calm demeanor; it gave people peace. A fellow POW with Kapaun reported "He was never bothered by enemy mortar and small arms fire coming into the vicinity of where he was helping others". He never seemed to fear the enemy and was determined to always help the wounded no matter the conditions.

On November 1 he was captured while trying to save a wounded soldier from being shot by a North Korean. The group of prisoners after this battle were marched north to Pyoktong which was 60 miles away. During this brutal march, the Chaplain went from man to man encouraging them and helping those who could not walk. Lieutenant William A. McClain who was with Kapaun in the march stated, "Father Kapaun never complained and kept on struggling". At the prison camp Father Kapaun showed his true bravery and Christ-like love. He would get up earlier than everyone else to gather sticks for fire, melt snow to drink, and scrounge for food like corn and grain outside the camp. He cared for his fellow prisoners and comforted them. He laundered their clothing, gave aid to the wounded, bathed the weak and sick, and even plucked lice off the men. When someone died, he volunteered to bury them and pray over their grave. He always stood up for his faith and argued about God's existence with the guards. He tried to lighten the mood around camp and would make jokes to cheer the men up

## Conclusion

He died May 23, 1951, at the age of 35 in the POW camp. He saved countless lives, not just their physical lives, but spiritual too. In the end he made the ultimate sacrifice. In John 13:15 Jesus states, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Father Kapaun laid down his life for his friends, he had that great love. He was awarded the Medal of Honor on April 11, 2013. Father Emil Kapaun showed great bravery and compassion during his time as a Chaplain. The medal of Honor was a well-deserved award of recognition for his actions during the war. His faith in God led him to be a courageous, selfless, soldier and save countless people.

## Future Work

1. Explore the other eight chaplains that have received the Medal of Honor
2. Study other chaplains that served in the Korean War
3. Analyze the importance of chaplains in U.S. military history

## References

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