

The U.S.S. FRANKLIN'S Hero Priest

by Katie O'Brien

It was 6:05 a.m. on a cool morning, March 19, 1945, the Feast of St. Joseph, when Fr. Joseph Timothy O'Callahan, S.J., a Boston priest, sat down for his breakfast. He had just given general absolution over the PA system to the men who were to take off in their planes on a bombing mission to Kyushu, one of the islands of Japan. During World War II, Fr. O'Callahan was serving as chaplain aboard the aircraft carrier the U.S.S. Franklin, nicknamed "Big Ben." He had just finished visiting the pilots and asked them to join him in a prayer before they set out on their



mission. He knew that their mission was very dangerous and that some of the boys with whom he was praying probably would not come back. But he did not want to scare them.

Whenever he talked to the boys before they set out on a mission, he told them to ask God to help them do a good job for Him and their country, and if they were to die in action they would die in

complete friendship with God. Fr. O'Callahan would ask the boys to say an "Our Father" followed by the "Act of Contrition," after which he would absolve them of their sins. Although he was a Catholic chaplain, he always invited the non-Catholics to join him in prayer as well.

As he sat down with his french toast thinking about the fact that it was St. Joseph's feast day, who, coincidentally, is the Patron Saint for a happy death, he hoped that those boys who may be killed on that day would be looked after by St. Joseph. He could hear the planes leaving from the flight deck and again he said a silent prayer for them. Suddenly, he heard a loud bang and then another. He and the other officers crouched under a table to protect themselves from the flying glass of the shattered light fixtures. No one knew what had happened. Could one of their own bombs on the ship have exploded or could it have been a Japanese attack? Although stunned, Fr. O'Callahan remembered the words of absolution and once again gave a general absolution to the men nearby.



Fr. Joseph Timothy O'Callahan, S.J.

Fr. O'Callahan then ran to his room to get the holy oil that he needed for the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, which he knew he was going to have to

perform. He got his oil and proceeded through the smoke-filled hallways to the junior aviators' quarters where he found many badly injured and dying boys. He prayed with each boy for a minute or two and in some cases administered Last Rites. Fr. O'Callahan would bend over the boys and put his hand on their forehead or hold the boy's hand tightly, trying to comfort him amidst the noise and confusion of the explosions.

After he had seen to the men in that room, he decided he must go to the hangar deck or the flight deck where undoubtedly there would be many more casualties. He went to the hangar deck but saw that it was engulfed in flames, and he knew no one could have survived there. He then went above to the flight deck where, as he expected, he found many injured boys. It was cold on the top deck, and he ordered some men to get blankets for the injured. At some point that morning, although he does not remember when it happened, Fr. O'Callahan received a deep gash on his left leg after being hit with a bomb fragment. He did not tend to it right away, as he had more important work to do. Several hours later, the ship's doctor forced him to allow his wound to be bandaged and in exchange Fr. O'Callahan and the doctor prayed together.



Fr. O'Callahan comforts a wounded comrade

It was only 9:30 in the morning, and the Franklin was ablaze and dead in the water. Men were desperately fighting the many fires, and Fr. O'Callahan joined in. He led some boys into an area where ammunition was stored and began throwing the 5 inch shells overboard. The shells had become so hot that at any time they could explode, and Fr. O'Callahan knew that if that happened, no one would survive to tell about it. But without concern for his own safety, he helped dispose of the dangerously hot shells. He also organized a group of boys to spray water on the 1,000 pound bombs that also were getting very hot. He knew that if these bombs were to explode, the ship would be destroyed.

Even after endless hours of fighting the fires and administering to the wounded, Fr. O'Callahan's work was far from done. For the next two days he would have to bury at sea the many men who did not survive.

Due in great part to Fr. O'Callahan's energy and leadership, the Franklin did not sink and was to be the most heavily damaged vessel to survive in World War II. After the battle, Captain Gehres recommended Fr. O'Callahan for the highest honor that can be given to a man in the armed services, The Congressional Medal of Honor. Captain Gehres claimed that Fr. O'Callahan was

"the bravest man I've ever seen in my life." President Harry Truman presented the medal to Fr. O'Callahan on January 23, 1946, making him the first chaplain ever to receive such a high honor.

Lieutenant Commander Joseph Timothy O'Callahan, according to the citation with his medal, "ministered to the wounded and dying, comforting and encouraging men of all faiths... Serving with courage, fortitude and deep spiritual strength... inspired the gallant officers and men of the Franklin to fight heroically and with profound faith in the face of almost certain death..." Fr. O'Callahan served as a model for all of us to follow. Even though he was serving as a naval officer, Fr. O'Callahan was, first and foremost, a Catholic priest. He knew what his job was and did it well. He went above and beyond the call of duty, helping to keep his ship afloat. Yet he always remembered that in his job as chaplain, his spiritual duty in caring for the souls of his men was his most important duty of all.



President Truman presents Father O'Callahan with the Congressional Medal of Honor