



D-DAY:

Two chaplains remember

The scene of Normandy beaches June 6, 1984, will be far different from the storm of wind, waves and bullets that met the men who landed there 40 years ago

by RICHARD DOWD

D-DAY — June 6, 1944. Operation Overlord, the long-awaited Allied Forces' invasion of France is ordered by General Dwight Eisenhower.

In the English Channel over 2,700 ships and small craft, crammed to the gunwales with men, tanks, trucks and ambulances, plug across the storm-tossed sleeve of water ready to hit five beaches in Normandy at dawn in the greatest sea invasion the world has ever known.

In the sky overhead, at 1:30 in the morning, a massive airdrop is forming as 925 planes carrying 13,000 men head for six drop zones behind the German beach defenses.

"We were put in small craft a few miles from the beach and we went in on those. Each held about 30 or 35 men. Our schedule was D-Day, H-Hour. The only outfits ahead of us were engineers or air people."

Remembering that day was Army First Lieutenant Joseph Lacy, chaplain of the Second and Fifth Ranger Battalions, who landed with the first wave on Omaha Beach in Normandy. Msgr. Lacy is now the pastor of St. Luke's Church in Hartford, Connecticut. His memory of the day and the men he landed with is quick and laced with love and wit.

There was a withering rifle and machine gun fire at Omaha that kept the troops pinned down. Whole boatloads of men died as they waded ashore and ran for cover. How did the chaplain survive? "I just walked



A chaplain conducts services just prior to the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944, 40 years ago

around and didn't get hit." Others did. "We lost a lot of people," he said.

"We were under fire immediately. My job was to move along with the men. We didn't stay on the beach. We went on up across the beach, up the hill and on into the little town of Virville."

How many didn't make it? "A tremendous number — at least 40 percent, I'd say, but the Army knows the numbers — not all dead, but dead and injured." The voice becomes quieter, remembering.

In the sky overhead flew an armada of planes of all types: fighters and bombers, gliders and cargo planes, "Flying Boxcars," C-119s and C-47s with members of the 101st Airborne. There were 12 chaplains in the division. Two died in the drop.

"We took off from England. From about five airbases. I was in a C-47 with 22 other troopers. We landed inland near Ste.-Mère-Eglise (behind the lines).

"I landed in water. I usually do. A Baptist chaplain told me I should have been a Baptist because of my frequent immersions."

That's the memory of Msgr. Francis L. Sampson, speaking now from the campus of Notre Dame University in Indiana where he's just taken a new job as assistant to the president for Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) affairs.

"We were scattered pretty badly because the German anti-aircraft was so heavy that the planes dispersed. We

didn't land where we were supposed to, which was a good thing actually, because they had pretty good intelligence."

"I jumped," he explained, because some chaplains rode in the gliders. "It was pretty hard to assemble in any kind of groups. We were scattered too badly. We carried a little metal cricket to identify ourselves." All night long the sound of toy crickets sang back and forth as U.S. and British soldiers tried to find their leaders and avoid the enemy.

Msgr. Sampson eventually found an aid station. "In the Airborne a chaplain can be most effective at an emergency aid station where the wounded are brought in. I tried to locate command headquarters and when the command had to move back I stayed with the wounded men. One medic who had drawn the short straw stayed with us. We were shelled the rest of the night.

"A boy with a grenade wound died in my arms. He was clutching the crucifix I had taken down from the wall and given him. It was a peaceful and holy death. All the boys joined in prayer for him."

Would you have given last rites to people before the day was out? he was asked.

"Oh yes. Oh yes. Several." His voice grew quiet, just as Msgr. Lacy's had. "I was always amazed how calmly they took death. I was overwhelmed by the almost serenity of kids with serious wounds.

"It was an entirely new experience

— kind of startling to me — how Catholics and Protestants and . . ." there was a long pause.

Did he mean they accepted it? "Accept it? I don't know whether they accepted it. But I found no bitterness or screaming, 'why did this happen to me?' They were amazingly composed.

"I think it's because of a special grace that must be given to people who are dying. No. I just can't account for it."

Both chaplains were young like the soldiers. Msgr. Lacy was ordained in 1938 before the war formally began. He joined the Army Chaplain Corps in 1943.

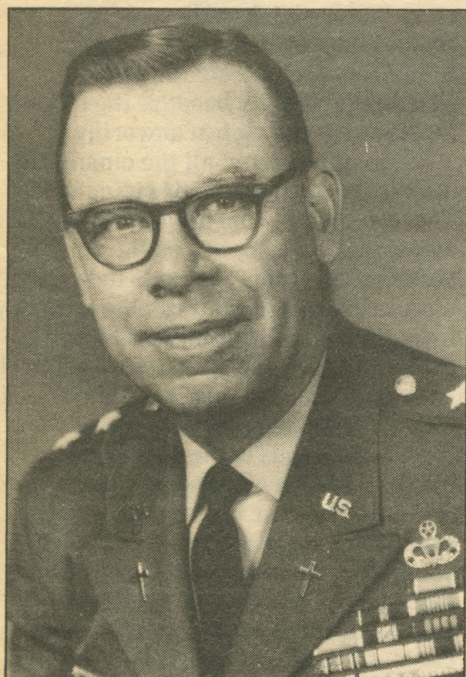
What led them to join?

"Why not? After all I was only five years out and it was time," Msgr. Lacy said. "I felt that men of my age should be volunteering because all the men in our parish, you know, the young men, were going. I just felt it was the thing to do."

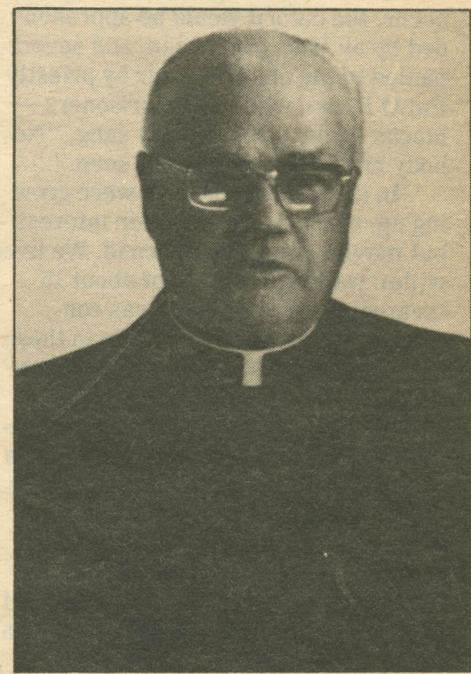
Both priests went to chaplains' school at Harvard. Msgr. Sampson arrived first in 1942. He had been ordained only the year before and needed special permission to become a chaplain. He volunteered for the paratroops before he left, so his first assignment was Jump School at Fort Benning. He confessed he didn't know chaplains were expected to actually jump out of airplanes when he volunteered.

Msgr. Lacy had not had the chance

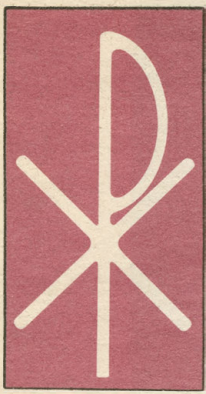
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Msgr. Francis L. Sampson, when he served as chief of chaplains for the U.S. Army



Msgr. Joseph Lacy, who now serves in the Archdiocese of Hartford. Catholic Transcript photo



THE TEACHING OF CHRIST

Natural revelation

OVER the course of centuries people of various nations and cultures have in fact come to a knowledge of God by reflection on the physical and moral orders God has created. The philosophers and sages of many nations have pointed out various paths by which men may come to know Him who is the source of all. Men have indeed proved able to realize that this world, which bears clear marks of its own transiency and borrowed reality, must be caused to be by One who is the Author of time and all passing things.

There is no reason to suppose that God does not assist with His grace

those who seek Him with sincere hearts but who do not have any clear voices to bring them the gift of supernatural revelation. Fathers of the Church often said that the Christ, the Logos, the Word, the Source of all wisdom, gave this knowledge to men by giving them intelligence and quietly guiding it.

It is certainly possible for man to come to a knowledge of God by rational reflection on things that are. In everyday life, however, emotions, pleasures and problems, the demands of work, and so on, tend to obscure the way to God through finite things. In the actual circumstances of a given human life it

might be very difficult to come to certain knowledge of God in a deliberate, rational way. It could be especially difficult to do so in time to allow one's whole life to be illumined by the knowledge of God. Even more difficult would it be to gain a knowledge free of serious error. History tells of many philosophers and cultures that came to know that there is a God, but did not come to know Him well, and thought of Him in ways that discouraged efforts to serve Him with faithful love.

Hence it is only by the gift of God's revelation that even "those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can, even in the present state of the human race, be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude, and with no trace of error." (Divine Revelation) Reason and the world indeed bear witness to God, but the chief witness of God is God himself.

GOD MANIFESTS HIS REALITY AND PRESENCE

God reveals himself more clearly and directly than do His works which speak of Him. He himself speaks. He

personally seeks out the creatures He has made to give them saving knowledge of himself. "For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I Myself will search for My sheep, and will seek them out. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak. . . . I will feed them in justice" (Ezekiel 34:11,16).

To seek God is nothing more than to respond to one's Maker, the Creator who keeps man in being, who cares for man and pursues him. To seek God is really to allow oneself to be found, and to say yes in the light of a wisdom that is greater than all human thought.

God reveals himself through the deeds of salvation history and through the words of the prophets. Most of all, He has spoken to us through His Son (cf. Hebrews 1:2). But it is not only in external ways that God speaks. He who made our minds and hearts speaks also within us. He gives those whom He calls to know Him a light by which they can with certainty recognize that it is the Lord of all who calls them to life. □

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to train with his men.

"I didn't. Aha, that was the important thing. No, I went overseas very innocently. After a few months down in Louisiana and Texas in the infantry, I was transferred to a field artillery outfit that went overseas in January and then about a week before D-Day I was sent on 'temporary' duty with the Rangers."

He laughed remembering this turn of luck. "Just lucky? Well, I'm still here. I didn't get hit or captured or even shot at. They were shooting at the other people.

"My job was simply to take care of people that were sick and dying. I just walked around and took care of those that were hurt on the beach. All the Rangers were volunteers for hazardous duty. I wasn't faced with anything that some of the chaplains were by those boys who were frightened out of their minds.

"That night I slept very comfortably in a farmhouse, in a chair. I didn't sleep very long, however."

When they first landed and went ashore did they conduct any kind of prayer service?

"Oh no. I ducked," Msgr. Lacy said with a chuckle. "We'd been in the ships for a couple of days. We had all the religious services we needed: Mass and general services on both ships.

"I gave them all general absolution, because I didn't have time to hear individual confessions. All of my outfit were volunteers; they'd gone through a terrific training. No difficulty on that part. Their courage was exemplary. I just trailed along with the rest of them."

Msgr. Sampson had anointed soldiers at the aid station. Did Msgr. Lacy give last rites on the beach?

"Oh yes, many, many." Again the painful pause that came when both men spoke of the dead. "I never figured out how many, but I think I reported there were 20 or 30. Some were drowned and

washed up; some were wounded and hadn't been picked up yet."

Could a chaplain know which were Catholic and which were not?

"Just from their dog tags. I didn't worry much about that."

Was there time to bury the dead? "Oh no. That didn't come until several days later."

Msgr. Lacy finished the war continuing his "temporary" assignment to the Rangers as they fought their way across Europe. They were two special battalions, the Second and the Fifth. After D-Day one was assigned to the Third Army and the other to the Fifth.

"One ended up in Czechoslovakia and the other in Austria," Msgr. Lacy said. "I went about 35,000 miles in an Army jeep in less than a year — back and forth between the two outfits. I kept contact with all of them."

Does he still keep contact now?

"Our Rangers meet every two years. This year they are meeting over on Omaha Beach for the dedication of a plaque there in honor of the Rangers who died. That's going to be on June 6th."

After the war, Msgr. Lacy went to Rome to study and then to serve on the faculty of the North American College for a decade before he returned to Hartford. He joined the reserve, but the distances made it too difficult to keep up.

Msgr. Sampson had planned on a peaceful priest's life back in Des Moines, but instead served both in Korea and Vietnam as an Army chaplain. He eventually became chief of chaplains before he retired last year as a major general.

While in the service he wrote a book about his experiences in war: *Look Out Below*. It was published by The Catholic University of America Press in Washington in 1958. Original pieces had appeared serially in *The*

D-Day remembered

American Ecclesiastical Review under the title "Paratrooper Padre."

The book is fresh and new, even today, with the insights of a man who has a good deal of self-deprecating humor that keeps creeping into his conversation.

While Msgr. Lacy was shuttling between two armies across Europe, Msgr. Sampson ended up closely confined.

"We had a couple of chaplains captured on D-Day," he said. "My first capture was for only a little over 24 hours. I was captured later on in the war at Bastogne and spent the rest of it in a prison camp." He tells the story in a section of his book called *A POW in Stalag II-A*.

And after the war, why did he stay in?

"I didn't. I got out at the end of the war. Cardinal Spellman (who was then the military vicar responsible for all military chaplains) asked the youngest chaplains to come back in again. My bishop suggested I go back in again. I told him I was very happy in the parish I was in. He said: 'Well, you'll be leaving in about a month, Father.' I said: 'But Bishop . . .' He said: 'You may now kiss my ring.' He was a funny guy. A great bishop (Bishop Bergan of Des Moines who went on to be the archbishop of Omaha).

"I never regretted going back in. You like to feel that you're needed. And right after the war so many chaplains had gone out and the morale was low and they kind of counted on you pretty much. Not long after that, the Korean war broke out (June 1950). I jumped in there, too," Msgr. Sampson recalled.

Can you compare soldiers from one war to another?

"I think they get smarter all the time," he said, then he spoke simply of the soldier's bond of friendship.

"You love your first unit. You know

every man in it. I was with that regiment, you say. You have a great affection for them. Several planeloads of them are going over to the celebrations this year. I remember them as smooth-faced kids, now they're grandparents. I'll go over in September when Holland celebrates its liberation. They do it every five years, like our old-time Fourth of July."

In those days the war was thought of as a "Crusade for Freedom." General Eisenhower wrote a book about the *Crusade in Europe*. What about today's crusade for peace?

Msgr. Lacy answered this way: "I'm all for peace, that's why I'm a priest. We do have to keep ourselves ready. Be constantly prepared."

Msgr. Sampson, who was liberated from his German prison camp by the Russians, doesn't believe Russian communism has changed its objectives at all. "They still want to subject the entire world to their doctrines," he said.

Msgr. Sampson is a Notre Dame grad himself, and knew Father Hesburgh, the president, when both were seminarians. Notre Dame now has the largest ROTC department of any private school in the country, with almost 300 men and women cadets of the Air Force, Army, Navy or Marines.

In this new post, Msgr. Sampson has to respond to lots of questions from the officer trainees. "They're very well educated, sophisticated kids." He sounded as if he'd thought long and carefully about the peace question.

"The military, you know, doesn't make policy. Policy is made by the civilian government. The military responds only to Congress and the civilian chiefs," he said.

Neither chaplain will be in Normandy on June 6th for the festivities this year. But they were there once, 40 years ago to the day, and their memories are as fresh as tomorrow. □

Dowd, a veteran Catholic journalist, writes from Albany, N. Y.