In the Day of Battle:
Canadian Catholic Chaplains in the Field, 1885-1945

Duff CRERAR

We lined up on deck just as we had done on schemes. I took the pyx from my tunic pocket and received Holy Communion; then as shells screamed and whistled and our planes droned above I gave my men a general absolution... It was seven o’clock.... Joel Murray from Cross Point and I landed together in the water but we could reach bottom and made shore. A young lad next to me fell, a bullet got him. I dragged him ashore, and there in that awful turmoil I knelt for a second that seemed an eternity and anointed him - the first of a long long list I anointed in action.... There on the open beach they lay dead or dying. It was our duty to get to them, so with our stretcher bearers and first aid men, Doctor Patterson and I crawled back again across that fifty yards of hell ... right next to you, perhaps someone you had been talking to half an hour before, lay dead. Others dying, might open their eyes as you reached them. By the little disc around their neck I knew their religion. If Catholic, I gave them Extreme Unction with one unction on the forehead, but whether Catholic or Protestant, I would tell the man he was dying and to be sorry for his sins, and often I was rewarded by the dying man opening his eyes and nodding to me knowingly... ¹

Father R.M. Hickey’s first hour on Juno Beach, rendering the traditional services of the military chaplain, made a deep impression on the men of the North Shore Regiment, recurring even in this fiftieth anniversary year of the Normandy landings.² Yet the figure of the chaplain, praying, giving Sacraments, comforting the dying, preaching in the field and burying the dead has been part of Canada’s Catholic heritage since the days of New France, creating a tradition which, in the place of formal training, served as an invaluable model for the neophyte padres who served in Canada’s twentieth century wars.

² J.A.L. Robichaud, North Shore Regiment, quoted in Maclean’s, June 6, 1994, pp. 45-46.
Nevertheless, the padre’s life in the field remains a shadowy memory in the warrior lore of most Canadians. This paper will trace the field ministry of Canadian military priests from the days of the Northwest Rebellion to the middle of this century. In the era before Cold War anxieties stimulated Canadians to embody a standing Army (and a permanent cadre of chaplains), no cleric hanging about militia camps and regimental church parades prepared too seriously for wartime ministry. Yet, occasionally, and especially during World Wars I and II, they confronted battlefield realities for which no seminary or summer camp could prepare them. By 1939, both the torch and the accumulated lore was being handed on personally from one generation to another, as former altar boys and students of the Great War veterans exchanged cassock for khaki. Their experiences confirmed that, though technology, tactics and the scale of war itself had changed from that waged on the smoky prairies of the Canadian Northwest or the sweltering killing grounds of South Africa, there remained a strong continuity in the field work of the padre which linked them to the pioneers of 1885 and 1900.

By 1914, Canadian Roman Catholics could point to a long tradition of priests who had made heroic names for themselves on the battlefield. For nationalistic Irish, English and Scottish Catholics, the roots of padre lore went back to Loyalists such as John McKenna and Edmund Burke, who served in Upper Canada as stipendiary chaplains to British regiments and colonial garrisons. One of the most famous was Alexander Macdonell, chaplain to the Glengarry Fencibles, who had settled with his veterans in Canada after 1802, and rejoined the colours when the regiment was revived in 1813. These men cast the first mould of heroic fighting priest into which later clerical material was to be poured. Holding high a large crucifix, it was said, Macdonell led his military parish in the storming of Odgensburg, as well as a dozen other regimental exploits in Upper Canada.3 French Canadian Catholics, too, could point to their own heroes in vestments: during the 1813 American invasion of Lower Canada, two French Canadian priests were appointment chaplains to militia regiments serving in the Chateauguay campaign.4

After Confederation, however, sectarian and racial differences made it far more difficult for patriotic priests to follow in their footsteps. George Etienne Cartier’s appointment of Father Marie-Joseph Royer, OMI, as chaplain to the French Canadian militiamen in the 1870 Red River force, became

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4 Canadian Military Institute, L.H. Irving, ed. Officers of the British Forces in Canada During the War of 1812 (Welland: Tribune, 1908, pp. 20, 35, 102.
so entangled in controversy with Protestant sects that subsequent politicians vetoed any form of permanent chaplaincy. In 1885, even after the fighting had begun in the Canadian Northwest, Minister of Militia Adolphe Caron did not appoint padres for the contingent he was mobilizing. Catholic officers of the 65th Carabiniers de Montreal and 9th Voltigeurs de Quebec, however, pressed him to make such “absolutely necessary” appointments. This time, after all, there was danger of death! The Voltigeurs had their candidate – F.X. Faguy – at the ready, and the Carabiniers already had recruited Philemon Prévost, OMI, with the backing of church authorities. Caron relented. When word of the Catholic appointments reached Protestant ears, ten more non-Roman Catholic chaplains, chosen by regimental ballot, soon caught up to their regiments in the field.6

To Catholics following events in the field, their insistence on active service padres was well worth the argument with Caron. Both war reporters and veterans immortalized Prévost and Faguy in their tales told Canadian Catholics back home. At the battle of Frenchman’s Butte, Prévost, in white surplice, blessed the Carabiniers before the attack on Big Bear’s band, and, when a casualty was left behind, Prévost and the force commander, General T.B. Strange, went back with a stretcher and rescued him while under heavy fire.6 Father Faguy, on the other hand, did not see any fighting, as the 9th garrisonned the railway stations in Southern Alberta, but there he shone as the dedicated priest, shuttling back and forth between detachments by handcar to give Sacrament to all, exuding bonhomie in all directions.7 Thus the two priests created a contemporary model of military ministry which became almost the ideal in the minds of Canadian soldiers and civilians.

Unfortunately for the regiments, however, sectarian controversy still followed padre appointments, when Protestant politicians learned that Prévost preached crusading sermons to French Canadian soldiers on their vocation as missionaries of Catholic civilization, and Protestant onlookers objected to the sight of a Catholic chaplain leading a Corpus Christi procession that summer. These incidents, along with the Riel trial, stirred up the bigotry which justified Ottawa’s view that chaplaincies should not be maintained in peacetime.8 Militia officers, however, kept Faguy and Prévost ille-

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gally on their paylists back at the armouries. As the commander of the 9th Voltigeurs, Lt. Col. Roy, explained to Militia headquarters, a padre was necessary in the regiment, to keep up the image of the unit and aid recruiting.⁹

By 1896, the insistence of Roy and other officers brought Ottawa to concede the creation of a peacetime militia chaplaincy.¹⁰

The wisdom of this measure, to Catholics, was proven during the South African War. In spite of outraged howls from Orangemen in Parliament and the Protestant press, the heroic work of Father Peter O’Leary, with the Royal Canadian Regiment at the battle of Paardeberg, put the Anglican and Presbyterian chaplains of the unit completely in the shade. When Boer sharpshooters brought the regiment’s attack to a halt, O’Leary and the Medical Officer fearlessly moved about in broad daylight, succouring wounded, bringing water, encouragement and last rites as needed:

Then there was that noble, self-sacrificing priest, Father O’Leary, who has time and time again in this war proved himself worthy of the Victoria Cross. Than he there was no braver soldier in South Africa. Wherever a wounded man needed succour he was there; where a dying lad needed to be shriven he was to be found. Out of the firing line he could not keep, and his escapes were miraculous. Dangers, privations, hardship effected him but lightly; his only thought was for the men he had come to Africa to sustain and comfort in the hour of danger and sickness, and the only commander he heeded was his duty. He was courting death in the firing line that bloody Sunday in February, but death passed him by; and yet how close it came!¹¹

That night, it was O’Leary who laid the dead to rest by moonlight, making an indelible impression on the minds of the Royal Canadians. O’Leary’s determination to follow his men through all privations, however, led to his collapse with enteric fever contracted from contaminated water, and evacuation to Canada after weeks in a British hospital. Just a few days after Paardeberg, the fighting priest of the Royal Canadians ended up out of the war and headed for home.

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⁹ NAC, RG9, Ila, Deputy Minister of Militia’s Correspondence, vol. 373, 13304, Lt.Col. Roy to Panet, March 31, and reply April 2, 1894.
¹⁰ For an example of the militia chaplaincy at work before the Great War, see JeanYves Gravel, L’Armée Au Québec: un portrait social, 1868-1900, (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1974), pp. 85-86, 103-104 and Chambers, 65ème, p. 130.
Mentioned in dispatches, lionized by the Canadian press, O’Leary set a new standard for the chaplaincy until 1914, when another South African veteran, Sam Hughes, was creating the Canadian Expeditionary Force (C.E.F.). Among the first he appointed at Valcartier in 1914 was O’Leary himself, sixty-four years old but still game, who served as hospital chaplain in France until recurrent pneumonia forced him to retire. As he was responsible for approving all chaplains nominated by unit commanders, Hughes’s preferences for genial and ebullient priests like O’Leary, whatever their other qualifications for chaplaincy, predominated in the recruitment of the first C.E.F. Roman Catholic chaplains. Events proved Hughes too partial to South African veterans, French-speaking clerics and headline-gathering priests, some too old, others too taken to drink or Tory politics to be adequate pastors in the field. Most glaring of all poor appointments was that of A.E. Burke, who passed himself off as Catholic head of the Chaplain Service, scandalizing priests overseas and clerics at home until forcibly retired during the Chaplain Service reforms of early 1917. Hughes’s system discouraged church or episcopal consultation on the numbers or quality of priests appointed, and discouraged church organization of its own chaplaincy boards until late 1916. Then padre scandals and protests from an outraged Catholic hierarchy, advised by returned padre-casualty J.J.O’Gorman, caused the removal of Hughes’s immensely unpopular Anglican (and Orangeman) Director of Chaplain Services.

As a result of this maladministration, the first two years of war for Canadian Catholics overseas were characterized by a perennial shortage of priests, especially English-speaking. In the summer of 1915, for example, only one English-speaking chaplain was available to serve Anglophone Catholics in two whole divisions of the Canadian Corps. Meanwhile, the three other – Francophone – priests were having difficulty being accepted by non-French-speaking units. Whatever the language and cultural problems, the sight of four chaplains trying to cover a parish of approximately 7,000 Catholic men scattered across a three-Division Corps front proved that more
chaplains were needed in the field! Consequently, throughout the first years of the war, both padres and the church press repeatedly complained of soldiers not having access to Sacraments, and suffering from a lack of priests of their own language (Gaelic as well as English-speaking). Service conditions were made even more arduous by the British Army taking horses away from padres in early 1917, on the grounds that it was a waste of horseflesh and hay. This loss of mobility added to the labour of getting out to scattered detachments for mass – without breakfast – and the loneliness of padres, whose meetings became even fewer and far between. The result, combined with the arduous conditions of war, was frequent chaplain burnout – and outrage at the mismanagement of the Service.

These vexations were relieved, gradually, by the reforms initiated by the Borden government and Canadian commanders overseas in the winter of 1917. Thereafter, the Knights of Columbus ably provided welfare agency support for Catholic padres and, under the chaplains’ direct control (in contrast to the Protestant padres continually at loggerheads with the fiercely independent YMCA) established the famous chain of Catholic Army Huts, stocking supplies of religious artifacts, Holy Name Society forms and canteen goods. The Catholic Army Huts and Chapel Tents were considered a great aid by the padres, and most attributed higher turnouts for Sacraments to having their own portable chapel tents. Most importantly, the number of priests steadily grew, until, by the summer of 1917, most complaints about chaplain shortages were resolved.

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As a result of these reforms, the battlefield ministry began to grow to the level of effectiveness that padres demanded. In 1915 they had been too few and far between.\(^2\) They had no time to venture into the trenches, despite clear signs that this was necessary to win the affection of the men and assist them where they fell. Forced to wait in the rear, or minister at Casualty Clearing Stations as men were brought in long after being hit, often unconscious, dead or dying, most padres chafed under British and Canadian army regulations which forbade them access to the front line.\(^2\) A few, such as Ambrose Madden, a forty-one year-old Oblate from Vancouver, however, against advice (and regulations) followed their units into the line. There Madden earned a Military Cross, the first decoration for Canadian chaplains of all denominations, for binding up wounds, leading blinded men to dressing stations under fire, and digging out others buried by shelling. His cheerful courage was credited with steadying the men and won general praise from the officers.\(^2\) After the Mount Sorrel battle, fought in June 1916, Corps Commander Julian Byng made it clear that all his padres would be welcome to serve in the front line, and the British Army soon withdrew its regulations forbidding padres to go ahead of the dressing stations.

This new attitude paid dividends during the Battle of the Somme, as chaplains rotated from dressing stations to regimental aid posts as their brigades went into combat. Chaplains found the new opportunities exhilarating and dangerous: Father J.A. Fortier, with the cavalry, won his Military Cross for care of wounded under fire, but J.J. O’Gorman was maimed by shellfire when bringing his wounded in off the battlefield.\(^2\) Problems still cropped up, however, over where priests might best serve in battle: in trench warfare, should the padre be in the brigade dressing station, with the wounded collected and brought to him by stretcher bearers down the communication trenches, or should he isolate himself in a forward Regimental Aid Post, in the hopes of getting to casualties still conscious (and perhaps too close to death’s door to make it all the way back to the station)? Doctors, too, sometimes resented their presence. On the Somme front, some


\(^{22}\) Nevertheless, dangers still existed, as German long-range and medium artillery often caught CCSs in their shelling. At the Mount Sorrel battle in spring of 1916, Father W.H. Thornton had his eardrums blown in and was permanently deafened when his CCS was shelled. NAC, RG9, IIIC15, vol. 4644, Thornton file.

\(^{23}\) NAC, RG9, 111C15, vol. 4621, A. Madden file. See also Canada, August 26, 1916, p. 246.


Medical Officers told padres they were getting in the way at the aid posts. On the other hand, padres themselves noticed a growing devotion among their troops as the deadliness of the war was impressed on them: at least, the confessions grew increasingly fervent when punctuated by shellfire. This was widely contrasted to the apocryphal story of the recuperating Canadian safe in an English hospital who requested a priest: when the padre arrived, the patient, though heavily bandaged about the legs, dove through an open window and struck out for a nearby wood, followed closely by his would-be comforter calling, “Come back, my son, Come back!”

Where did a padre do the most good? The question occupied Canadians throughout the great 1917 battles: Vimy Ridge, Hill 70 and Passchendaele. At Vimy, the epitome of fixed positional warfare, non-Catholic padres emerged from tunnels and attack trenches carefully located as close to the objectives as possible. As their attacking battalions swept over the top and down the far side of the ridge, they cleaned out enemy trenches and turned captured dugouts into first aid posts. Senior Chaplains, however, still placed the Catholic priests at central dressing stations well behind the attack line, where they could see the largest number of wounded and give last rites to the dying. Yet priests were not satisfied, and in the subsequent fighting a few, again led by Ambrose Madden, challenged the orthodoxy, winning praise for intrepid rescues during trench raids.

Some officers and Senior Chaplains, however, still frowned on priests scattering their efforts over an extended battlefield. Madden himself was forced to see the wisdom of those who argued for a conservative policy at Hill 70, the hotly-contested struggle for the high ground north of Lens which the Canadians took part in that August. He tried to cover the three Regimental Aid Posts of his brigade by going forward to visit them, one by one. He never made it beyond the first two: the intense artillery fire playing over his sector and the hectic activity with wounded and dying in his first station absorbed all his time and energy. Unable to bring the wounded on stretchers down into the dugouts, Madden spent the worst day dressing wounded, praying and anointing in the open, hastily burying the dead in circles around him, as the
bodies decomposed so quickly in the August heat. Clearly the dilemma remained unresolved: was it not necessary that a few Catholic men die without ministry, so that the padres could see the many in the dressing stations?

The condition of the battlefield at Passchendaele that autumn, which ruled out the highly-organized and tightly scheduled rotations of Vimy and Hill 70, provided both sides of the debate with more ammunition. Veterans could not recognize their old battle haunts of 1915-1916: rain and ceaseless shelling had turned them into miles of reeking, murdered earth. Getting into the front line meant taking a nightmare journey along slippery “duckboards” in darkness, harassed by intense shelling and aerial bombing. For stretcher bearers it meant hours of deadly and exhausting labour, requiring from six to sixteen bearers to extricate each casualty from the ooze. Scattered among the blasted ridges and hollows were small concrete emplacements built by the Germans and dubbed “pillboxes” by the Canadians. The only safe shelter above ground, these were commandeered by officers, medics and padres for first aid and command posts.

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Here, however, conditions and not policy dictated chaplain tactics. Most Protestant padres were sent up with their home unit, told to find a pillbox and stay put, close to the men. There they would at least be able to comfort casualties during the long wait for evacuation. Clearly, many men would never survive the long carry back to the dressing station, even if they were brought alive to the aid post. Yet initially, most Catholic chaplains were still stationed in the dressing stations. Before long, though, a few priests, such as Fathers R.A. Macdonnell and W.L. Murray (with the 4th Division), found they were needed to patrol the evacuation route between aid post and dressing station, to anoint those who were not going survive the middle passage. Both men were convinced that waiting back at the station was a mistake. Eventually the exhausted Macdonnell was forced to return to the dressing station, while the burly and indefatigable Murray roamed the muddy approaches, especially the Zonnebeke road, visiting dying men at relay posts and ambulance rendezvous further forward. 30

Another encouraging discovery was the warmth and devotion they discovered when forced into close contact with the men in pillbox or aid post. Combat reports gathered by Father Francis French repeatedly stressed how

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men were often reconciled to the church in the last minutes of their lives. After three days at an advanced dressing station set up against the infamous “Tyne Cot” pillbox, Father R.C. MacGillivray related:

Some days previously I had the Catholics of certain Brigade paraded to Church. As I was in the Confessional the Officer in charge entered...“something prompted me to come and have a talk with you”...I told him it was undoubtedly his mother’s prayers...“She sent me a Sacred Heart Badge last night, and I know she always prays for me. Father I will go to Confession” and he went. It was his body I found among the dead, and as I covered it up with a blanket I said a little prayer to St. Monica...the second day of the show a man was brought in in a dying condition, calling aloud for a Priest. I went up to him and he said, “Are you a Holy Roman Catholic Priest?” I told him I had grave doubt as to the ‘Holy’ but was unquestionably a Catholic Priest. “Father, I am dying, I want you to baptise me.” After a short instruction I administered the first and last Sacraments. Near him on a stretcher was a boy shot through the throat whose eyes were becoming glassy. I placed my hand on his forehead, and as he looked at me and then smiled, I recognised one of my men. Laboriously he removed a ring from his finger, and placed it in my hand. I bent down to hear what he had to say, and was rewarded by a faint whisper ‘Souvenir, Father.’ The effort was too much and he relapsed into coma and was hurried away. The ring is in my possession; it may have cost a franc, but I value it above money....
MacGillivray’s report reflects the pastoral impulse which drove chaplains closer to the front of battle in the Great War. Concluding his lengthy Passchendaele report, he mused:

Even as I write this report, I can in fancy see their eager faces and hear their sincere, “Good-bye Father, Pray for me.” These words kept ringing in my ears yesterday as I said Mass for the noble boys we left in Belgium. The life of a chaplain is usually a hard one, and as he struggles along, the indifference of those who should know better frequently causes him to ask the old question, ‘cui bono?’ But on the other hand when he sees the courage of his men and their trust in God, when he receives back to the fold men who for years scoffed at religion; when men not of his faith grasp his hand and ask to be remembered by him as they go to face death, he is amply rewarded for his toil. I would not exchange these few hours in the mud and cold for years of peaceful parish work.\(^{31}\)

What was evident, too, at Passchendaele, was that pushing priests forward towards the front line would eventually cost some their lives: even after the attacks were over, when priests found time to get up forward to their home units, the passage from rear to pillbox nearly killed them. MacGillivray recalled the walk over shell-swept walkways as a hell of fire, gas, hunger and thirst, while the dead lay thick on both sides of the board walk, and wounded men cried out from shellholes asking for stretchers. Wounds and honours were plentiful Passchendaele outcomes for padres: Father T. McCarthy was hospitalized temporarily by poison gas, while F.P. Lowry and F. Costello were pulled from combat with battle exhaustion. Fathers J.G. Coté and W.B. Carleton, on the other hand, were recommended for battle honours.\(^{32}\)

Passchendaele thus made it abundantly clear that the current allotment of four priests to a division, while better than that of 1915-1916, was nevertheless completely inadequate to the needs of Catholics under fire. Either greater numbers, or greater mobility was needed in future. It also provided the inspiration to push for priests spending more time in the line and under fire: the quality of their ministry depended upon their freedom to meet the men where they fell, or as near as possible. Whether or not they would be able to meet such a challenge, with their few numbers, remained an object of great concern to senior Catholic chaplains, such as W.T. Workman, in London, and F.L. French at Canadian Corps headquarters.

A bright spot, however, was the arrival before Passchendaele of the first


of the Catholic Army Huts tent-canteen-chapels: one for each division, and
another for the 22nd Battalion. By the spring and summer many more had
appeared, offering shelter and recreation as well as worship for padres and
Catholic soldiers, and forming a new base of operations for the religious
work priests intended to prepare the men for the 1918 offensives. Plans for
devotional campaigns by the Holy Name Society and Sacred Heart dedications,
however, were interrupted in early 1918, when the German spring
offensive pulled the Canadians into holding long stretches of the line while
the British and French struggled to survive. Father Maurice de la Taille,
padre to the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, recalled seeing a wounded man in
one dressing station with serious facial wounds. When asked if he wanted
Communion, he could not speak, but simply wrote “Yes” on the canvas side
of the ambulance in his own blood. During the same period, Father B.J.
Murdoch observed a Highlander stop by a mortally-wounded pal he had just
annointed: “‘What will I tell your people at home’... ‘Tell them – ’ he
laboured a little for breath – ‘tell them,’ he repeated, ‘I had the priest!’.”

Now units spent up to two months in the line, under intense shelling,
forcing chaplains to use the ancient chalk caves at Ronville (near Arras), or
burlap and corrugated-iron huts amidst heavily-shelled clearings as chapels
when in reserve or, scrambling from aid post to dressing station visiting their
flocks up front, always carrying along their ciborium, with consecrated
Host. During one of these hasty visits, Ambrose Madden was wounded for
the second time by shellfire. Father A.B. Coté, too, was wounded. Worse
was to come. During a gunnery duel in the Arras sector, the chaplain to the
22nd Battalion, Rosario Crochetière, took shelter for the evening in a
battalion aid post. Early in the morning, the sandbagged hut took a direct hit.
There were no survivors. B.J. Murdoch, then ministering to the 3rd Brigade,
received the news at breakfast: “Not a year before he had sung the great
open-air Mass at Witley Camp when the Catholic soldiers had been conse-
crated to the Sacred Heart. Just yesterday he had gone to the Sacred Heart to
receive the reward of his stewardship. I sat back from the breakfast and
wondered who would be next.” Previously Crochetière had confessed
privately that he was nearly paralysed with fear before going into action.

33 Canada, May 18, 1918, p. 183
35 Murdoch, Red Vineyard, pp. 170-175, 188.
36 NAC, RG9, IIIC15, vol. 4631, Madden file, also Canada, March 23, 1918,
p. 334.
37 Murdoch, Red Vineyard, p. 175

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Now his remains were buried at Berneville by his Catholic colleagues.38

It was a thoughtful group of Catholic chaplains who set out in the summer of 1918 to prepare their men for the fall offensive, which all hoped would be the last of the war. This sense of urgency was met by renewed efforts of both the home church and the Chaplain Service to be ready for the fray. At the end of May, Bishops Michael F. Fallon and G. Gauthier arrived, to meet with chaplains and Catholic troops, and encourage them with addresses on faith and war. The Holy Name Society campaign by Father R.A. Macdonnell, a Canadian Benedictine of the 4th Division, raised so much interest and sympathy among troops of all denominations, that it was endorsed by senior officers and resulted in pledges against profanity being signed by several thousand soldiers, many of them Protestant. Many chaplains during the fall battles were deeply moved on discovering signed pledge cards in the personal effects of the dead they found on the field.39 The anticipation of victory as well as more intensive operations may have added to the almost revivalistic tone among Catholic chaplains in the Canadian Corps. Moreover, additional priests arrived, as the Army and Canadian


Government added to the numbers at hand. Thus, when the Canadian Corps slipped into their positions before Amiens on August 7, 1918, ambitious plans, including the Catholic chaplains, were about to be realized.

On August 8, 1918, eighteen Canadian chaplains went over the top in the first waves of attacking troops. Supported by supplies from the YMCA, Salvation Army and Catholic Army Huts, Roman Catholic as well as Protestant chaplains roamed the entire Corps area, with immediate access to men wherever they were hit. The provision of more chaplains and their mobility the open warfare of the breakthrough the fighting troops made that day facilitated the close ministry which Madden and others had tried to provide earlier. For the less severely wounded, there now were extra Catholic priests waiting for them in the rear.40 Running or crawling through the field, front line chaplains located wounded who had been missed by medics, offering, with machine gun rounds scything the ripening grain, last rites where the men fell, instead of meeting them hours later, comatose or dying, in the dressing stations.41

The dangers again became evident. A Protestant chaplain was killed outright, while Madden was wounded yet a third time, winning the Distinguished Service Order decoration for tending to wounded under intense artillery and machine gun fire. Fr. Nicholson, following a party of men whose officer had been killed, led them on to the final objective, leaping into a German gun emplacement waving a walking stick and calling on the startled gun crew to surrender. The 5th Brigade’s Fr. Desjardins was winded by a near miss, but brushed it off as a slight occupational hazard.42 Some of the reports from the Catholic priests reveal a new kind of exhilaration, at both the stunning success of the assault and their own sense of satisfaction at sharing dangers and seizing opportunities for ministry which had not been permitted them in the past: as Fr. Miles Thompkins crowed in one report, “I got my tail nearly shot off... Certainly if I had a tail it would have been ‘na poo’.”43 W.L. Murray, concentrating now on stretcher cases in the open (because walking wounded more easily would make the dressing station on their own), was constantly harassed by snipers hidden in the long grain, but his greatest annoyance was the practice some medics made of removing all identification from the dead, making it impossible to sort out Catholics from Protestants for burial. Three Catholic chaplains received Military Crosses for

41 NAC, RG9, 111C15, vol. 4665, “Reports, RC Chaplains, France” file, Fathers Lowry, Murray, Thompkins, August 1918.
42 NAC, RG9, 111C15, vol. 4665, “Reports, R.C. Chaplains, France” file, French to Workman, August 17, 1918.
43 NAC, RG9, 111C 15, vol. 4644, Thompkins file, Thompkins to French, September 23, 1918.
their exploits in the field during the Amiens operation.  

In the next few weeks of open warfare, the new policy brought more priests into the fields of fire. Fr. French, with an unprecedented number of twenty priests available, sent twelve forward with stretcher bearers, leaving only six for dressing stations and two for burials, almost the reverse of the 1917 pattern. Though few reports were written in the last hectic days of the war and few formal services held, the padres scattered across the Canadian Corps held brief devotional services with small knots of soldiers, and dedicate the bulk of their time to the wounded and dying. Catholic chaplains rotated between the field and dressing stations, sometimes taking turns hearing confessions and celebrating mass in local churches or the open air (when their units were in reserve and they could work in pairs or threes). Chaplains found their men turning out in such large numbers before attacks that last-minute confessions and masses were held with men donning their equipment, and turning out with loaded weapons a few minutes before pulling out for their start positions. Like his men, the padre came to loathe or dread aerial bombing more than a barrage. He learned to read the daily office while shelling sprinkled gravel on the pages of his breviary, and draw strength from the encouraging letters of thanks sent him by next of kin to the men he had ministered to. Catholic chaplains found it especially satisfying that, led by Fr. Thomas McCarthy of the 7th Brigade, the Chaplain Service, too, entered Mons with the leading Canadian units on November 11, 1918. By then, five more priests had earned the Military Cross, two more had been wounded, and Murdoch, at least, was clearly suffering from battle fatigue, or, as it was known then, “shell shock.”

The exhilaration of victory, however, soon was replaced by the trials of


46 Murdoch, Red Vineyard, pp. 238-240, 253-257 and R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, Thirteenth Battalion, Royal Highlanders of Canada (Montreal: Gazette, 1925), p. 120.

47 Murdoch, Red Vineyard, pp. 262-269, 290.

48 Casualties had been so high, in fact, that French had been forced to detain a Glengarry priest, Ewen Macdonald, to the 22nd Battalion, to replace their padre, a victim of poison gas. A Gaelic-speaking Glengarrian, he explained, was the closest equivalent to a French-Canadian available! NAC, RG9, IIIC 15, vol. 4665, “Reports, R.C. Chaplains, France” files, especially E.J. MacDonal report, and McCarthy report, November 17, 1918. Murdoch’s symptoms began to appear in the Amiens campaign: nervousness, tension, quarrelsomeness, then a growing numbness and tendency towards apathy and inaction, Red Vineyard, pp. 288-294.
an army in occupation and garrison duty. The moral perils and pitfalls soon brought the venereal disease rate in the C.E.F. to alarming proportions. Chaplains of all denominations joined with medical officers to warn soldiers of the perils of leisure and lust. Catholic chaplains renewed the Holy Name Society campaign to promote chastity among the troops on leave. At the same time, they rallied the Chaplain Service to oppose mass distributions of prophylactics with special lectures and sermons. Equally effective were the efforts to enlist Cardinal Mercier, Belgium’s most distinguished prelate, to have civic officials close brothels.\(^49\) By then word of rioting in Canadian camps in England, especially Kinmel Park, in Wales, also brought reports from other padres about their work toning down soldier indignation and impatience with their demobilization plans.\(^50\) Clearly, by spring 1919, all the padres were relieved to get their men back to Canada, and their own home clergy! In one of the last few official actions of the Service, John O’Gorman and two assistants visited the Vatican in May 1919, for an audience with the Pope. As O’Gorman reported on the eighteen field decorations earned by Canadian chaplains, “the Pope, looking at the list, said ‘You have no decoration.’ I answered no. At this Fathers Planet and Carleton chorused: ‘Il était blessé’ — and the Pope answered ‘You will be decorated in heaven’”.\(^51\) Other chaplains received Papal commendation in a more tangible form: the bestowal of a Papal Portable Altar on seventy-nine chaplains by Benedict XV.

In the difficult days of the peace, Catholic padres worked to organize veterans. Among the leaders was Father F.M. Lockary who assisted New Brunswick delegates in the founding of the Canadian Legion between 1926-1927.\(^52\) Many were shocked and alarmed, however, at the speedy dissolution of the Service by the Canadian Government. Nevertheless, the lessons learned in the Great War were not forgotten by church or priest: in any future war, they vowed, these lessons would not be disregarded, and old mistakes

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\(^{49}\) NAC, RG9, IIIC15, vol. 4665, “Reports, R.C. Chaplains, France” file, see reports by PT Kelly, J.R. O’Gorman, W.L. Murray, also Vol. 4648, file # 3, J.J. O’Gorman to Workman, March 10, 12, 14, 1919.

\(^{50}\) As I.J.E. Daniel recalled, the turmoil “made one think of the French Revolution. The disorder kept up all day, assisted by beer, but there was some killing done in the afternoon and that quieted things down,” NAC, RG 9, IIIC15, vol. 4621, Daniel file, Daniel to Workman, March 7, 1919.


\(^{52}\) Clifford Bowering, Service: The Story of the Canadian Legion (Ottawa: Canadian Legion, 1960), pp. 36-37.
not repeated.\textsuperscript{53}

This became clear in the opening days of the World War II. In order to avoid any repetition of the bitter disputes in Ottawa and overseas, the Catholic hierarchy insisted that Catholic chaplains be under their own separate but equal Chaplain Service. Bishop C.A. Nelligan was appointed, by the Minister of Defence, as Head of the Roman Catholic Active Service Force chaplaincy. In addition, a number of veterans of the Great War re-enlisted to guide the opening years of chaplaincy anew, until old age or changes in active service conditions forced them to leave the field. Padres such as Ronald MacGillivray, Thomas McCarthy and G. Coté lent their expertise, MacGillivray now as Senior Chaplain of a Division.

Significantly, many new padres, with no previous militia or military experience, drew on the lore and legend of their Great War forerunners. Books by and about chaplains such as Fr. William Doyle of Britain, were seized eagerly, and last-minute interviews granted by Great War survivors. A few of the newly-minted padres, such as R.M. Hickey, were even able to consult their boyhood idols, such as Benedict Murdoch, author of the World War I memoir, \textit{Red Vineyard}, and model their own ministry after the Great War experience. They quickly were reminded that the padre vocation was a serious commitment: perhaps thinking of Crochetière, Murdoch reassured Hickey, “Yes, go Father Raymond, you will make a good Chaplain. It will be a great experience, and then if you are killed, well, you’ll save your soul.”\textsuperscript{54}

Perhaps Murdoch was thinking of the parting words of a British Carthusian on his own departure for France in 1917: “Perhaps,” he said rapturously, “you’ll be a martyr.”\textsuperscript{55}

By October 1940, at least eighty-four Catholic chaplains were on full-time postings, with at least forty more enlisted as part-time chaplains. Twenty-four had gone overseas, and many more would follow over the next five years.\textsuperscript{56} While the early years of preparation in Britain, again, seemed to lead officials and some officers to think of padres as rear area adjuncts, soon the old lessons and dilemmas reappeared, which seemed insoluble unless chaplains could get into the forward area. In the meantime, the days of waiting – which stretched out to three or four years – in Britain, brought back to most chaplains the perennial problems of training, morale, and

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  \item These vows were discreetly kept from public debate, but can easily be found between the lines of the writings of J.R. O’Gorman, himself a former padre, between the wars, see his \textit{Soldiers of Christ: Canadian Catholic Chaplains, 1914-1918} (Toronto: Archdiocesan Press, 1936).
  \item Hickey, \textit{Scarlet Dawn}, p. 16.
  \item Murdoch, \textit{Red Vineyard}, p. 56.
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morality. As before, the best chaplains took part in training – including weapons drill – with their men, and kept busy with entertainment and welfare work, as well as spiritual ministry. Occasionally collisions with commanding officers who distrusted Catholics, and padres in general took place. Most taxing, to wisdom and tempers, however, were the countless cases of moral deterioration – “woman trouble” – as it was dubbed, marital infidelity, or sudden romances which kept men coming to the padres for advice. Some chaplains seemed relieved to set sail for Italy and Normandy, if only to separate the men from their moral entanglements and temptations to indiscipline.

Although army chaplains could leave many of these problems behind – at least until the mail caught up with them – naval and air padres based in England were continually confronted with the moral and domestic counselling dilemmas, without the prestige among the men that combat duty could bring them. When an Air Force station chaplain tried to fly with a crew on a bombing mission, he would be in deep trouble with the station commander. Fr. J. Philip Lardie, with 428 Squadron, found this out when he returned to Middleton St. George after riding with a Lancaster crew during a 1944 raid on Kiel. Though buffeted about the flight deck as the bomber dodged fighters and flak, he was more wounded by the punishment meted out by Wing Commander Chester Hull the next day for disobeying orders. Rightly or wrongly, Air Force authorities were convinced that a padre going missing over Germany was both politically and militarily bad for morale. Nevertheless, station padres had their own brushes with war’s horrors, as damaged aircraft crash-landed and burned, dead and wounded crewmen had to be recovered, identified and buried, and letters written to next of kin. Some of the hardest duties involved making calls to families whose loved one had gone missing over Germany the night before.

In both Italy and Northwest Europe, however, army chaplains began the old pilgrimage from rear to front edge of battle once again. This time, technology – in the form of the light truck or “jeep” – made it possible for padres to approach the 1918 dream of ubiquity. Unlike the Great War, when Army authorities had taken away their horses in 1917 as a waste of resources (leaving fasting Catholic chaplains to hike the miles between detachments to say mass) padres now had the vehicles to spread their small numbers over a wide front. While bunking with Brigade or Artillery and Ambulance headquarters, individual priests, such as A.J. Barker, with the First Division in

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58 Hickey, Scarlet Dawn, pp. 49-54, 61-63, 131-133.
Italy, now could make visits to separate units, drive wounded back for treatment and keep up with the line of advance: frequently at the side of the Medical Officer, closely supporting his own men in attack.\textsuperscript{60}

Nevertheless, the life of the solitary priest with a Brigade was often a lonely one, which encouraged many to team up with the more broadminded among the other Protestant chaplains in his formation, for conversation, mutual support during combat, and occasional stunts or time off duty. Many Protestant memoirs, such as those of R.O. Wilkes or Waldo Smith, noted that their appreciation and erstwhile friendships with priests grew into relations of mutual trust and deep respect.\textsuperscript{61} They would read prayers over each other’s dead when combat and hot weather made immediate interment necessary, and their men came to hear each other’s sermons, though intercommunion


\textsuperscript{61} Brodsky, \textit{God’s Dodger}, p. 174-175; Smith, \textit{What Time the Tempest}, (Toronto: Ryerson, 1953), pp. 221, 294, 396, 463. See also the personal diary of Rev. Roy Dumford, Anglican Chaplain to the Seaforth Highlanders in Italy, March 3 and October 1, 1944, in Department of National Defence, Directorate of History, Ottawa, Canada.
was still out of the question. With jeep and radio, these chaplain teams kept in close touch, learning to minister without offending denominational sensibilities of fellow padres or, more importantly, the men who approved, even insisted on a less sectarian ministry from their chaplains. Many padres felt privileged and accepted when, after proving themselves, commanding officers would take them into their confidence, as well as consult them on the state of morale in the unit.\textsuperscript{62}

Catholic chaplains in both Italy and Northwest Europe also encountered opportunities to minister which reminded them of Murdoch’s and others’ experiences in the Great War. In Catholic countries which had turned into battlegrounds, local civilian priests often were killed, conscripted or otherwise absent from their parishes when Canadian chaplains arrived. Soon their ministry involved baptisms, weddings, funerals and service for the area’s civilians, until it was time to move on. In some parts of Italy and France, the press of these flocks could even divert a conscientious chaplain from his military parish until officers or a Senior Chaplain intervened.\textsuperscript{63} Many came from visiting the shattered homes of civilians with a renewed appreciation of their Canadian homeland, and pride in the way many of their men shared whatever they had with the victims of the fighting.\textsuperscript{64}

Many found, as their predecessors had in France and Flanders, the special mood of their pre-combat services both awe-inspiring and exhilarating. Most tried to visit the scattered detachments of their men bringing Sacrament once each week. Men who in England had avoided confession or service now came, humble and sincere. The words of the service took on special poignance: earlier memories of soldier devotions and the peaceful hush of English camp outdoor services flooded into Hickey’s mind in 1944, as he buried many of these same men in the Normandy soil, just as Murdoch, Macdonnell and MacGillivray had experienced at Vimy, Passchendaele and Amiens.\textsuperscript{65} And all reported the appreciation and gratitude felt by men, as they died, that they had received the ministry of the clergy in the hour of their death.


\textsuperscript{63} Hickey, \textit{Scarlet Dawn}, pp. 207-209, 250,254; Smith, \textit{What Time the Tempest}, p. 221.


\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., pp. 49-50; also 185-189, 191, 212, 251.
As with their predecessors, these chaplains faced the consequences of accompanying the men to the front: Fr. F.J. Deloughery was captured by the Japanese at Hong Kong, while padre Thomas Mooney, from Hamilton, Ontario, was killed by shellfire while ministering to wounded a few weeks after D-Day: he was buried in the Canadian cemetery at Eccloo, Belgium. As a tribute, the Protestant chaplains of his formation served as pallbearers. On February 28, 1945, Fr. J.R. Dalcourt of Rimouski was killed when his vehicle hit a land mine while returning to the Régiment Chaudière from funerals at Bedburg. A few hours later, Hickey and Fr. McCarney laid him to rest in the cemetery he had just left that morning. Like other priests unhappy with rear area postings, Dalcourt had agitated for a front-line post since D-Day. He had been with the regiment since November 1944, relieving the battle-exhausted Father Huard. After surviving night visits to outposts under fire, and a much talked-about stealthy Christmas Night visit to advanced posts with Communion, his soldiers were saddened by news of his death in the relatively calm rear area. For such priests, as for others who were

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66 Ibid., p. 234; Steven, In This Sign, p. 113.
67 Ibid., pp. 249-250.
68 Death report and obituary of J.R. Dalcourt, in NAC, Department of National Defence, Personnel Records, Job 30, Microfilm Reel #83. Thanks to Major Albert Fowler, Chaplain (P), for providing me with a copy of this document.
wounded, the military cost of discipleship was devastatingly real.

Finally, and most importantly, the padres rediscovered the intensity and exhaustion of combat. The illnesses, wounds, deaths and endless burials of members of their flock, often without sleep or rest, used up the physical and moral health of more than one chaplain. A few weeks after D-Day, Fr. Hickey could see the impact of combat on his men at mass: pale faces, hollow eyes, strained expressions, disturbed sleep and bad dreams. He soon found his teeth – like those of his men – chattering during a barrage, and was appalled to discover that he, too, was losing weight and energy at an alarming rate as combat wore them all down. Over time, padres found themselves growing emotionally deadened by the weight of death and destruction, though, often at the slightest stimulation, capable of sudden loss of control in unexpected moments. Even leave to Britain left a padre such as Hickey, like Fr. Murdoch in 1918, unable to settle down without his comrades, the military routine, and even the sound of the guns to lull him to sleep.

Although far more research remains to be done on the pastoral experience of the World War II for Canadian chaplains, some general conclusions may be drawn from juxtaposing their experience with those of the Great War padres. First, chaplains in both wars noticed that the padre encountered extremely high expectations from his men – a padre was to be embodiment of all Christian virtues, especially courage and sincerity. He was NOT to act or think like the other officers, but be, above all, a priest. All chaplains learned of the absolute necessity of getting “up front” with the men and acting as personal as well as official pastor, whenever possible. In any way possible, even rear area chaplains learned that they must be willing to share all the risks as well as activities of their men, which posed special problems for Canadian air force and naval chaplains.

Chaplains of both wars found their emotions stretched on active service. The time spent in aid posts with men, of soldiers dying comforted by their ministry before they passed on, gave chaplains many bittersweet memories, which often needed to be communicated to next of kin. As much as most padres dreaded writing these letters, they often were consoled by the grateful replies relatives sent, thanking the padres for whatever they had done for their loved ones. In this respect, chaplains in both wars often carried some of the responsibility for maintaining home front morale as much as that at the front. Padres, too were deeply moved by the burial of their men, often soon after reconciliation with the church, or in a field service punctuated by noises of war. The emotional drainage they felt continually tested their stamina, as did the physical demands of active service. Often they needed to care for local Catholic civilians as well as soldiers, especially in Italy, where,

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69 Ibid., pp. 215-217, 221.
70 Ibid., p. 244; also Murdoch, Red Vineyard, p. 216.
unlike France, many priests were not in close touch with local people or had fled or been killed. Able to use local chapels freely, they were impressed by “the universality of the Catholic faith”: able to cross all national and military barriers, even with the enemy. In both wars, chaplains felt, whatever the state of organization, supply or transport, that they were too few on the field. Torn between absolutes, most chaplains faced the universal dilemma of which soldiers, which positions, which units, which ranks should receive priority? Here he was helped by greater mobility and speed of casualty evacuation, thanks to the jeep, in the World War II!

In looking back, the field padre’s mind often filled with traumatic memories: the smell of death, awe and horror at the extent of destructiveness of man (especially after battles such as Cassino); the horrors of burying men long dead and often blown to pieces or burned to cinders, and incredible physical and spiritual exhaustion. Yet, most could find plenty of redemptive memories: the beauty of Creation (significantly, often in dawn and wildflowers) in midst of slaughter; of men reconciled to the church after falling away; of most men not skipping Sacraments while in the field; saying mass in the most unlikely places, yet with such poignant sincerity; of hearing men saying the rosary while shells or aircraft screamed overhead. They recalled chumming with Protestant padres and finding sectarian differences fading into trust and respect, of former ecclesiastical enemies sharing use of crucifix and of Protestant officers honouring Catholic rights; of Senior officers taking them into confidence; of hospital and camp work: especially pastoral counselling and writing long letters; and of no little national pride in the quality of their men and how they lived up to their best national traditions when on active service. For most, their war experience, harrowing, and often leaving deep physical and psychic scars, was nevertheless a time of empowerment and affirmation of their faith; of special faculties, of experiencing a special kind of love and respect from their men, and a deepening of their own faith.

The study of recent and contemporary Canadian chaplaincy remains. Major areas still to be covered include a complete survey of the World War II, of Korea, Cold War and peacekeeping operations. Of particular interest must be the study of Canada’s Cold War/peacetime ministry, a reversal of the role and work of the Canadian chaplain between 1945 and the 1990s, especially as the lore of war gave little guidance to these latter padres, now encountered a standing force of men constantly in training and emphasizing preparedness, but at peace and who with a type of congregation few earlier padres would have been equipped to deal with by their field experience: married soldiers and dependents living on bases requiring schools and
chapels, not dressing stations and aid posts. More work needs to be done in the study of the padres’ relationship with the church through these years. Before these, however, it remains to stop and appreciate the contributions of the forerunners of today’s chaplaincy, in this anniversary year of Normandy – for the insights which ought not to be forgotten.

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