

## **He Died With His Men**

*Sainthood Cause Begins For Vietnam Hero Priest*

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### **PAGE ONE STORY**

by **JOSEPH PRONECHEN**

*Register Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON — This Memorial Day, you can pray to the Maryknoll priest they called “The Grunt Padre.”

On May 21 at the Memorial Day Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., Father Vincent Capodanno received the title Servant of God.

The Vietnam War Navy chaplain was a Medal of Honor winner.

At the Mass, Archbishop Edwin O’Brien, head of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, officially opened the cause for canonization for Father Capodanno, who died heroically in Vietnam on Sept. 4, 1967, during a fierce battle in Operation Swift.

“People remember him as having ‘the courage of the lion and the faith of a martyr,’” said Judy McCloskey, founder of Catholics in the Military (*CatholicMil.org*). “He was KIA offering medical assistance to the wounded and administering last rites to the dying on the battlefield.”

One of the goals of Catholics in the Military, a web-based global outreach ministering to military members and their families, is to further the cause of Servant of God Father Vincent Capodanno. (Also see *Father-Capodanno.org*.)

His story became more widely known thanks to Father Daniel Mode, a priest with the Arlington Diocese and a Navy chaplain himself. As a seminarian, Father Mode researched and wrote a book on Father Capodanno, entitled *The Grunt Padre* (CMJ Publications, 2000).

Currently on assignment in Afghanistan, Father Mode was unavailable to talk about how hundreds of people who knew Father Capodanno responded to his ads for information.

But Mary Preece, the coordinator of the cause, wasn’t amazed by the response from the soldiers who served with him. “So many men said they were not surprised,” she said. “They knew then he was a saint.”

The road toward holiness began in 1929 when Father Capodanno was born in Staten Island, N.Y. He served as a Maryknoll missionary in Taiwan and Hong Kong before he requested assignment as a Navy chaplain with the Marines.

“Father Capodanno volunteered to be a chaplain in Vietnam,” Preece said. “He felt strongly that his ‘grunts’ needed pastoral care. It didn’t matter whether they were Catholic or not. He

wanted to be with them.”

### **Moving Memorial**

Preece calls the testimonies that have poured in from those whose lives he touched both then and now “very poignant and so honest.” The testimonies can be anything from vocations that have sprung from his example to major conversions, including young people.

Several happened at visits to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington.

“The Wall has long been a place of pilgrimage and healing for Vietnam veterans,” McCloskey said, “and I think that will take on a whole new dimension now that panel 25E, Line 95 — where Capodanno is listed among those who served so generously in Vietnam — has been officially recognized as a Servant of God.”

“Appropriately enough,” she explained, “the only way you can get a good look at panel 25E, Line 95 is on your knees. Through Capodanno, I am certain there will be a tremendous outpouring of grace for military vets and their families everywhere. How can there not be? A Servant of God raised from among those who served in the Vietnam War is destined for great things. Praise God for saints on the battlefield — then and now.”

Ray Harton of northwestern Georgia was there when Father Capodanno died.

“It’s very exciting for me for this to come about,” he said. Harton was on the battlefield that day with “Mike” Company, 3rd Battalion 5th Marines, and with Father Capodanno.

But the 20-year-old Marine Harton had been touched earlier by the priest, when they met for the first time as Harton was coming in from patrol. At the chaplain’s invitation, he joined a group he was talking with.

“The first thing I noticed was his eyes and the way he carried himself with this speech; it was soft,” Harton began. “He looked like a Marine but didn’t talk like one. When his eyes came in contact with yours, you couldn’t help pay attention. He drew you to him.”

Harton well remembers how the chaplain was there for the men at all hours, talking, praying, caring, blessing. Radiating Christ not only to Catholics but to “Protestants, Baptists, Methodists — everyone was affected by this man,” Harton said.

### **Battlefield Heroics**

Harton can’t forget that September 1967 day in Operation Swift, when 300 Marines were facing 2,000 North Vietnamese in an exceptionally fierce battle.

Rushing with two others to take out an enemy machine gun yards away, Harton was hit in the left arm, knocked down and was seriously bleeding. He felt he was going to die, and began making peace with God as he went in and out of consciousness.

“When I looked it was Father Capodanno,” he recounted. “He was down on his knees, his left arm behind my head. He said in a real calm voice, ‘Stay calm, Marine, someone will be here to

help soon. God is with us all here today.’

“When he said that everything went blank,” Harton continued. “There was no pain. No fear. No noise, no sound. No one screaming. It was like I had died, the peace that came over me. Something I never witnessed before and never witnessed since.”

Father Capodanno was himself seriously wounded, bleeding around the face, his hand half gone.

“He was messed up, in bad shape, his right hand wrapped in a dirty and bloody bandage,” Harton continued. “When he laid my head down he blessed me with his left hand. I never can forget those eyes.”

Harton spoke of the spiritual power flowing at that moment through Father Capodanno.

“Just by him touching me, I believe that really had something to do with me still being here. I do believe that the second Father Capodanno leaned over and touched me, that was God touching me through him,” he said. “When he said ‘Stay calm, someone would be there to help and God is with all of us there that day,’ I believe he was — through Father Capodanno.”

While the priest ministered to Harton, a corpsman tending to other wounded was hit. “Father Capodanno got up and ran to him, to help Corpsman Leal,” Harton recalled. “As he did, the machine gun opened up and killed both of them.”

Harton paused as he retold the day’s events.

“When the news got around the whole division it was terrible,” he said. But, he added, “No one could have kept him away. This is what he was there for and no one could have kept him away from what he did.”

Said Harton, “Here was a man who had his shoulder ripped apart, had his hand gone, and running around, and he wasn’t shouting, he wasn’t excited. He was just as calm — the spiritual power he had to have. You don’t forget that — it’s like it happened to me yesterday.”

### **Archbishop O’Brien**

Father Capodanno’s recognition as a Servant of God will help to deepen the inspiration he provides to chaplains and priests everywhere.

“His life dramatizes the call to complete giving of self, pledged at ordination,” Archbishop O’Brien told the Register via e-mail. “That self-sacrifice takes many forms in the priesthood but all are bound to the commitment.”

Archbishop O’Brien finds that the life of a priest in the military is stereotyped in many a Catholic mind, often as the result of media fiction. The life — and death — of the Grunt Padre tells the real tale.

“The Capodanno story along with many other stories of chaplains’ heroism in the past will help keep alive the call of the chaplain as a vocation within a vocation, with the unique spiritual ministry to the young, sacrificing far from home,” the archbishop said.

Today's servicemen and servicewomen can find the same inspiration from Father Capodanno. "Hopefully, they will gain a deeper insight into and respect for their priests in uniform," wrote Archbishop O'Brien, "and possibly seek a vocation as priest or consecrated religious in service of neighbor."

Preece agreed. "Military personnel can look to him," she said, "and see how he so magnificently served God and his country at the same time."

*Joseph Pronechen is based  
in Trumbull, Connecticut.*

### **Medal of Honor Citation**

#### ***Awarded posthumously To Capodanno, Vincent R.***

Rank and organization: Lieutenant, U.S. Navy, Chaplain Corps, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division (Rein), FMF. Place and date: Quang Tin Province, Republic of Vietnam, 4 September 1967. Entered service at: Staten Island, N.Y. Born: 13 February 1929, Staten Island, N.Y. Citation: For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as Chaplain of the 3d Battalion, in connection with operations against enemy forces. In response to reports that the 2d Platoon of M Company was in danger of being overrun by a massed enemy assaulting force, Lt. Capodanno left the relative safety of the company command post and ran through an open area raked with fire, directly to the beleaguered platoon. Disregarding the intense enemy small-arms, automatic-weapons, and mortar fire, he moved about the battlefield administering last rites to the dying and giving medical aid to the wounded. When an exploding mortar round inflicted painful multiple wounds to his arms and legs, and severed a portion of his right hand, he steadfastly refused all medical aid. Instead, he directed the corpsmen to help their wounded comrades and, with calm vigor, continued to move about the battlefield as he provided encouragement by voice and example to the valiant marines. Upon encountering a wounded corpsman in the direct line of fire of an enemy machine gunner positioned approximately 15 yards away, Lt. Capodanno rushed a daring attempt to aid and assist the mortally wounded corpsman. At that instant, only inches from his goal, he was struck down by a burst of machine gun fire. By his heroic conduct on the battlefield, and his inspiring example, Lt. Capodanno upheld the finest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life in the cause of freedom.

— *From the U.S. Army Center of Military History*