



A Padre in Jump Boots

by Lawrence P. Grayson

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At 1:15 am on June 6, 1944, as most people in German-occupied Normandy were asleep, the largest air armada ever assembled was passing overhead. The 882 U.S. planes began to disgorge their contents: 13,000 paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st airborne divisions. The Americans' task was to secure a number of causeways and to create safety zones where gliders could land to bring in reinforcements. Offshore, 5,000 ships carrying 200,000 men were assembling. Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Europe, had begun. It was D-Day!

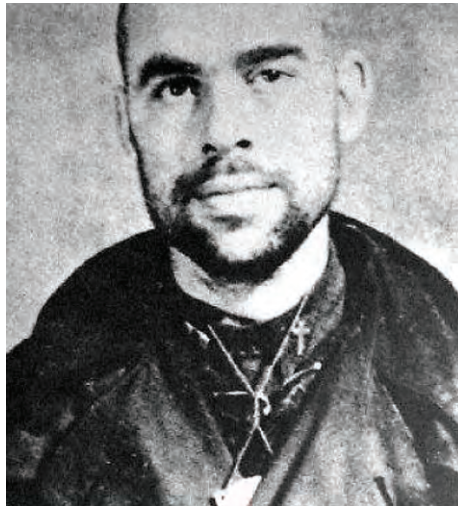
Among those dropping in the dark sky was Father Francis L. Sampson, a young Catholic chaplain and member of Big Sioux Council 5029 in Flandreau, S.D., who was making his first combat jump. Landing in a deep stream, he cut away his pack and chute before diving repeatedly into the water to retrieve his weapons: a Mass kit and holy oils, items he soon would need.

Father Sampson joined other paratroopers as they made their way to a French farmhouse that was being used for those who were severely injured. A Protestant chaplain was there, and the two men provided first aid for most of the day. When it was clear that some of the men needed a doctor's care, Father Sampson left to find the regimental aid station. Shortly after locating it, a decision was made to pull out. The chaplain volunteered to remain with the men who could not walk.

German troops soon overran the house. Two soldiers took the priest outside and raised their rifles to shoot him, but a German non-commissioned officer, a Catholic, stopped them. Father Sampson was allowed to return to the wounded.

That night, the house was shelled, collaps-

ing a portion of the roof and killing several men. The Americans soon regained the position, and Father Sampson accompanied the injured to the division hospital, where he assisted the unit chaplain in spiritually administering to some 500-600 wounded men. Father Sampson saw another three weeks of combat, working with aid men to rescue the wounded, offering Mass, hearing confessions, anointing the dying and praying for the dead.



Father Francis L. Sampson as a prisoner of war circa 1945.

Francis Sampson was born in Cherokee, Iowa, on February 29, 1912, but grew up in Dalles, Ore. Ordained in 1941, he served briefly as a parish priest before enlisting in the Army. While in chaplains school, he volunteered for the paratroopers and was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division.

Three months after Normandy, Father Sampson took part in an airborne assault on Holland. After jumping behind enemy lines, he and the regimental doctor set up an aid station in a castle. The priest went to locate the commanding officer, but Germans seized the position while he was away.

In December, the enemy forces began a massive offensive known as the Battle of the

Bulge. Learning that a number of American paratroopers were machine-gunned and left on a nearby road, Father Sampson went to aid them. On the way, though, he encountered a German unit and was taken prisoner.

In the ensuing days, Father Sampson and a growing number of Allied prisoners were marched from Belgium through Luxembourg to Germany. On Christmas Eve, while in a school auditorium, American planes bombed the area. Father Sampson led the men in prayer and spoke of the presence of Christ among them. Over a 10-day period, the prisoners were marched 185 miles before being herded into overcrowded boxcars for a trip to a prison camp in Germany.

Initially, Father Sampson was the only Catholic priest among more than 5,000 Americans in a camp that held some 80,000 prisoners of various nationalities. He held daily Mass and non-denominational prayer services, and on Good Friday led the men in the Stations of the Cross. Finally, after four months in the Stalag, the Russians liberated the camp.

Father Sampson briefly left the armed forces before reenlisting. During the Korean War, he made his third combat jump with the 11th Airborne Division. After the conflict ended, Father Sampson remained in the service. In 1967, he was appointed chief of chaplains of the U.S. Army with the rank of major general and served as head of the USO following his retirement. During the Vietnam War, he spent Christmas with the troops each year and was untiring in visiting hospitalized soldiers. He died in January 1996, having received many military honors, including the Distinguished Service Cross for his heroism at Normandy and the Distinguished Service Medal. ♦

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