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Canadians Charge Into Fight With Prayer on Lips of All; Padres in Thick of Fighting

(A personal account of the Canadian Chaplains Services and the part chaplains played in the Sicilian campaign, as related by Major Gordon Jones, senior Protestant chaplain, headquarters, 1st Canadian Division, Central Mediterranean Force. Major Gordon Jones was former minister at James Street Baptist Church in this city, resigning after being granted leave of absence in December, 1939, to join the chaplain service. He is a graduate of McMaster University.)

"BATTLES are won before they are begun." These words of Gen. B. L. Montgomery strike the keynote of our preparation for the Sicilian campaign. In every conceivable way we had trained ourselves for the day when we would go into battle. Now, at long last, the time had come for us to put our training to the test. The first intimation that there was "something afoot" came on Easter Sunday morning, April 25, 1943. The senior chaplain, together with other senior officers at H.Q., First Canadian Division, was summoned to a conference with General Salmon, at which time we were told to prepare to go into action. Quickly the news spread throughout the division. Our Easter celebrations and services were much disturbed. Nevertheless, the news was welcomed by us all; for it meant we were about to write a new chapter in our experiences as chaplains.

The Preparation

By May 10, all chaplains were with their units in Scotland. Combined operational training made heavy demands upon us all (so much so that one of our number broke down. He was replaced at the West Nova Scotia Regiment.) During these days, most chaplains made a check-up of all the men in their units, making wills, and recording the names of next of kin on their card index files. This period of preparation was rich in opportunities for us all. Our soldiers seemed more receptive to religion and more appreciative of our services than at any time in our experience. Church parades, padre's hours and celebration of Holy Communion were largely attended and highly inspiring. A number of soldiers came forward requesting confirmation, baptism and church membership. Our associations with the churches in Scotland were most helpful. We were "right royally" received in their homes and canteens. I held two baptismal services while in Scotland—one at the Baptist Church in Crieff, and the other in Cumnock, where I baptized Lieut. Keene of the Royal Canadian Regiment. In these new surroundings, a considerable number of domestic and personal problems were uncovered, all of which required careful investigation and legal advice. In part, this was due to the desire of our soldiers to "set things right" before leaving Britain. Above all, these days brought with them an opportunity for chaplains, by conversation, discussion and sermons, to prepare their men for facing difficulties and the dangers of the future.

Carelessness Costly

Not less important was the preparation of the padres themselves for the tasks ahead. This meant the careful sorting and packing of kits. Carelessness in this matter is costly. Every inch of space, and every item of luggage had to be scrutinized, not once but several times. By taking too much, some chaplains lost all. Every padre had to make sure that his luggage was properly marked, that it was deposited on the proper day in the right place, and finally that it went aboard the convoy to which it had been assigned. Many padres were able to place boxes of comforts and service books in the regimental aid post trucks which landed on the first flight of vehicles. Above all else, the chaplain had to provide for his own comfort and hygiene. His personal kit had to be packed in such a way that he could carry it on his back on long marches, and live on it for several days when he might be separated from his unit and large pack. It is just here that the padre's batman plays such an important role. Some chaplains, because of circumstances over which they had no control, become separated from their batmen for several weeks. Our batmen were invaluable to us when we were burying the dead, whenever we came back to our lines after a trying day at the front, and in a hundred ways too numerous to mention.

For Better or Worse

In our experience, we made some mistakes, all of which proved costly. However, having done our best, we went forth, for better or for worse, like Wordsworth's Happy Warrior,

"Who, doomed to go in company with pain
And fear and bloodshed, miserable train!
Turns his necessity to glorious gain."

The Voyage and Landing

Life on board ship was pleasant. Our relationships with the British army and naval chaplains were cordial. The sunshine, change of food and comfortable beds gave the voyage some of the qualities of a pleasure cruise. Most chaplains did something to assist their units, such as taking charge of baggage, or acting as censor, while all of them did much for the troops in the way of providing contests, taking part in quiz and brain trust programs, distributing books and writing paper, as well as giving lectures and addresses on themes of general interest. As a matter of course, chaplains visited the ships' hospitals and prisons, held padre's hours and interviewed soldiers about personal problems. There were moments of excitement when warnings were broadcast about the presence of enemy submarines and bombers. To see the lights of Tangier and the snow-capped mountains of the Sierra Nevadas was a real pleasure. When we put into Algiers, and sailed past Malta and Pantellaria, every one thought of the part these islands had played in the present war, and how, throughout the centuries, they had seen the rise and fall of nations. Now, as part of the Central Mediterranean Force, Canadians were playing a part in the centuries-old struggle for freedom.



MAJOR GORDON JONES

Ask God's Blessing

Nor was our religious work overlooked. On most ships we had a daily celebration of Holy Communion, and on Sundays largely attended church parades. The big event of the voyage was the service of intercession on July 4. All available personnel on every ship in the convoy assembled in appropriate places for the purpose of asking

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essing on our enterprise. ... remarked on the beauty and appropriateness of the service. At the close of the service, one padre was approached by a captain of his regiment who said, "Before the war I was practically an atheist. From the experiences I have had now, I am convinced not only of the existence of God, but of His care and support of our cause." When the service of intercession was concluded, we were informed of our destination—Sicily. Never once during the two months since Easter had we heard definitely about the plan and place of attack. They had remained a well-guarded secret. Now we knew. Maps were eagerly scanned so as to familiarize ourselves with the nature of the country and the successive objectives. The 1st Division was to be associated with the 51st Highland Division in the 13th Corps, as part of the 8th Army. General Montgomery was in command. To our left, on the west of the island, the American army would make a landing at Gela, while on our right the 30th Corps would attack along the coast. Our first objective was the airfield at Pachino on the southeast tip of the island.

Prepare for Landing

At last "D" day arrived—July 10—and our men prepared for the landing. In the R.C.R.'s, just before the zero hour, Lt.-Col. R. M. Crowe had all his men repeat together the following prayer: "O God, now that the night comes, I commit myself and my loved ones into Thy care. I will be trustful, whatever comes to me, that I am with Thee. Forgive all my sins, the wrong I have done, and the duty which I have left undone. Guard our country and bless the cause for which we fight. Into Thy hands I commit myself, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen." Just north of Malta the convoy ran into stormy seas. The wind was blowing a gale, while heavy waves battered the ships. The smaller vessels wallowed along, sometimes disappearing from sight when caught between the waves. Under such circumstances the landing looked like a grim business. In some circles there was talk of postponing it. One officer, seeing the storm and remembering the service of intercession, turned to his chaplain and said, "Padre, what is God doing about things now?" "He is testing our faith," replied the chaplain. "What are you doing about it?" continued the officer. "I am going to pray about it," was the answer. So with a prayer on our lips, and in our hearts, hopes intermingled with fears, we went ashore. It was still dark when the first serials pushed off. The naval bombardment and the attacks of our air force were impressive. Gradually the shore batteries were silenced. By daylight the worst was over. On the beach, the chaplain referred to above happened to meet the same officer who had questioned him before landing. "Well, padre," he said, "I certainly have to hand it to you; your prayers worked miracles." "No," said the chaplain, "you do not hand it to me; you hand it to God."

Had God's Help

That is the way most of us felt. We had sought God's help in our enterprise and He had heard our prayers. The news of our landing went out over the air—"American, Canadian and British troops are in Sicily." That night we heard "Lord Haw Haw" say, "The landing force is being systematically exterminated." His bombastic words did not bother us; we were ashore and the battle for Sicily had begun.

The Struggle

The details of the struggle are now known to all, so it is not necessary to repeat them. Wherever the battles were hardest, our chaplains were there. Whenever a soldier came to a field ambulance or a field dressing station, he met our chaplains. Along the highways and in the olive groves they buried, in neat cemeteries, the bodies of our gallant dead. Such was our work. The story is simply and quickly told. We were not able to hold many services, but we were able to render great service. The chaplains have proved their worth in the Canadian army. We know now what it is to give a cup of cold water in the name of Christ, and we have proved His promise that such ministries are not in vain.

Prisoners Unescorted

We had many interesting and impressive experiences. One day an Italian colonel, 21 officers and over 200 other ranks surrendered to H.-Major Edgar Bailey. He took them to the officer in charge of his unit. It was not possible to handle so many prisoners so they were sent unescorted along the road to the prisoners of war camp. Another day, among the prisoners, we found an Italian chaplain. We were able to set him to work, ministering to his own folk, especially the homeless and injured. Some of our most impressive services were held in the cool of the evening, under the trees, when we sang hymns, offered up a few simple prayers and talked together of One who long ago knelt in a garden and prayed, "Not my will but Thine be done." On several occasions, as we were holding such services, the troops passed by on their way to battle. They could hear us singing Abide With Me, or Nearer My God to Thee. They took up the theme as they marched along the dusty road and, from the distance, we could hear them singing snatches of those grand old hymns. One day a group of the Royal Canadian Regiment, headed by their commanding officer, was cut off from the regiment. They were surrounded by enemy machine-gun nests and mortars. Realizing their desperate need of supporting arms, the C.O. wrote a short description of their position and asked the chaplain, H.-Capt. R. O. Wilkes, to take it back to brigade headquarters, and to return with rations and reinforcements. At 15.00 hours he set out over the mountains, drawing fire from machine-guns and snipers and, as far as Canadians were concerned, the battle for Sicily was over.

The Victory

The chaplains, with their troops, celebrated victory on August 15 in a service of thanksgiving. All units and formations used the same form of service. The press relations officer arranged for the press, the photographers and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to be present at the headquarters parade. Already we have heard the resume of this service broadcast from London. On August 20, General Montgomery spoke to the Canadian troops. "Wherever I go," he said, "I would like to have you with us." That is the way Canadians feel about it, too. The completion of this campaign is but the stepping stone to something bigger and greater. As chaplains, we are ready and willing to face future tasks in the assurance that the "mighty God of Battles" who has been with us in the past will see us through to complete victory.

As a final note, I wish to record my appreciation of the service rendered by our chaplains. Each one did his work well. On every side I have heard commendations of the padres. Each one acted as a true minister of Christ and a loyal soldier of the King. No one could do more. No one calling himself a chaplain could do less. The service of each one was outstanding and praiseworthy.

At Peace With

One night a young C officer was brought to the ing station suffering fro stomach wound. He aske lain for pen and paper. that death was near, he send a last message ho ada. This is what he would like this message if anything happens to n o'clock at night and m turn to home and loved I hate to die, but I fac calm resolution. I am at God and the world. O n you, dad, you gave me life. You gave me the am now leaving. Thar the small details that n happy in the thought wanted. And you, Hel for you and miss you. I loved any one or anythi I loved you. I will alwa ber you until we are re each other. Please sa for me, as I quietly sli wish you good-night. you." H.-Capt. Roy Es as follows: "I was sent with 500 men who we four towns. I found the most destitute. Our t well behaved and exercised a fine restraint. I acted as 'first-aid' man for this group of soldiers as well as tending the sick among the civilians. I assisted in bringing one baby into the world in a cave near Ispica, and doctored men who were injured by high explosives and hand grenades. I treated all kinds of ailments and, generally speaking, had a grand experience." Another chaplain was instrumental in closing a brothel which had been opened in the town where his troops were stationed.

Welcome End of Action

Such is the story of our work. It has nothing to say about battles and bombardments. It deals only with the inner battle for the souls of men, and the fight against sickness and suffering. Tired and weary, both in body and soul, the chaplains welcomed the news that all objectives had been taken, the enemy was retreating on all fronts,

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