



Seated below
Fr Cummings,
also from left
Redemptorist
Chaplains Frs
Mulrooney
Tronson and
Hartigan

A Chaplain's Wartime Letters

On 5 June 1944, the Allied armies launched the invasion of Normandy, the beginning of the end of the Second World War. The months which followed were among the most bloody of the war.

BRENDAN MCCONVERY, C.S.S.R. tells the story of an Irish Redemptorist priest, Fr. Daniel Cummings, whose experience as a chaplain helped plant a small seed of hope in his native Belfast.

In 1942, with war raging across Europe, Fr. Dan Cummings gave up his teaching job in the Redemptorist seminary in Galway and volunteered for service in the British Army as a chaplain.

After his initial training, he served with several regiments before finally being posted to the Third Battalion of the Irish Guards, where he spent the remainder of the war. In the Guards, Catholic farm-labourers from Kerry drilled and sometimes died alongside Protestants from Sandy Row. Many of the officers were drawn from the old Anglo-Irish aristocracy, as well as from a few European Catholic noble families who wished to serve in a more 'Catholic Regiment.' Even though it had a higher proportion of Catholics than most other regiments in the British Army, one could never go just on names or birthplace, as Fr. Dan soon discovered; Guardsman Mooney from Phibsborough turned out to be C. of E. while Sgt. Silcocks from near Sandy Row was a Roman Catholic!

Terrible cost

Fr. Dan had the advantage of knowing both German and French. This was to prove a god-send in the advance through France and Belgium, as it made it easier for him to make first-hand contact with both the locals and the German soldiers taken prisoner by his unit.

His letters to his provincial superior, Fr. Hugo Kerr, provide a lively source of information about the

day-to-day life of an army chaplain. His letters were often humorous and full of human detail. Sometimes, military censorship meant that he had to be discreet about his movements. Often they were written in exhaustion during a few moments snatched from attending the wounded or burying the dead. Always they convey something of the terrible human cost of war.

Tension

Waiting in England for the great push to begin, the routine of a chaplain's life was not very different from that of any other priest but, as D-Day approached, the tension about what lay ahead became almost unbearable. Fr. Dan's letters contain discreet references to exercises at sea which he was not at liberty to describe in full.

"When the invasion begins," he wrote at Easter 1944, "will you ask the (Redemptorist) houses to say a weekly Mass for the chaplains and their men? I have no illusions about what lies ahead; we will need every help you can give us ... I have no regrets about it; we came into the army for good motives, and God won't forget us in life or death."

Preparing for death

For a chaplain, the time of waiting entailed preparing healthy and lively young men to be ready to look death in the face. "I have bought rosaries for the men," he wrote to Fr. Kerr. "Don't faint! They cost me

about £5. Some men gave me the cost price; some did not. Anyhow, every one of my men now has his rosary."

For some, it was a time to return to the religion of youth. Others came inquiring. "Today I received a young soldier into the Church. Four months ago, he walked over to me and asked to be instructed. I told him he would never regret his deci-

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sion. This morning tears were in his eyes. I asked him what was wrong. "Nothing, Father, it is just that I am so happy."

Fr. Dan had to think too of making up a masskit small enough to fit into a ruck-sack, which he could carry above his head as he waded ashore. An aunt was enlisted to be on the lookout for feather-weight vestments.

Slow push

In June, the Third Battalion embarked for Normandy. The weeks that followed were a long slow push through northern France and into Belgium. "Since we arrived in France,

our routine has been arrival in a section of the line, digging of deep slit trenches, the Germans observe our arrival and the air becomes noisy with the whine of shells and the explosion of 'Nebelwerfers,' a shout for stretcher bearers and my speedy crossing of a field or two to the ruined house or barn where a busy doctor is injecting morphia into a writhing, groaning shape covered with blood that a few minutes earlier was a man. In one place we had this continually for over a week and frankly it was as much as a human being could stand."

Sleep was snatched where possible - in the corner of a field, in a half-ruined church whose stones threatened to fall at the next round of artillery fire, on the camp-bed which doubled as an altar.

Three of the Redemptorist chaplains were lucky in their comradeship. "We three keep seeing each other as much as possible. You can't imagine the relief it is to lie on the grass and talk about De Valera and the little items of news about the (Redemptorist) Province. Even a meeting with other priests has not the same ease and tranquillity."

Down fighting

As a priest, Fr. Dan's pastoral care could not be confined to Catholics on the Allied side. His knowledge of German was useful. He had managed to get a supply of small German prayer books to help the Germans and Poles.

"The cream of the German army

faces us here in the west. I have met and talked to quite a number of the S.S. who are the cementing force of the Wehrmacht. They are young - 17, 18, 19 years, long haired, grumpy and amoral. We meet their work in the ruins of a house or a church or along the deep lanes."

On one occasion a captured German soldier was determined to go down fighting. "One S.S. man came in wounded. I was standing beside his stretcher helping the doctors to cut away the blood-stained sleeve of his tunic. I felt something knock against my side. I felt a fully primed grenade in his pocket. It was not there by chance for he had no other arms or ammunition nor had he any documents."

For others, capture was a blessed relief. One "took a cup of tea and exclaimed, 'This is the happiest day of my life, I am out of the German army!' Why can't you stop the war? I said to a Catholic lad who was slightly wounded. 'An order is an order,' he answered. That is their outlook: militarily quite sound."

Difficult question

War conditions for a chaplain are always difficult. He shares the frustration, anger and fear of his men, but has to exercise a restraint on the human instinct of retaliation. The question which Dan raised at the end of one letter probably conceals a great deal of anguish. From the point of view of moral principles, he knew the answer, but the raw emotion is unmistakable.

"By the way," he wrote, "is it lawful or unlawful to shoot an enemy who keeps firing until you are right up on him and then when he sees all is hopeless, puts up his hands? Also, what about the sniper who has lain low behind our lines and snipes our men and then puts his hands up when discovered?"

Admired

Fr. Dan was the first Catholic chaplain to arrive in Brussels at its liberation. "People came down in night attire shouting, screaming, weeping, singing. It was bedlam! ... I missed a German patrol by a few minutes. Our machine guns raked them and killed a number outright. I thanked my stars."

He admired the passive resistance the Belgians had devised during the occupation. In the crowded trams and trains, they used cigarettes to burn V for victory signs "by accident" on the back of the Germans' great-coats and tunics.

"Unlike the Dutch who gave blunt pig-headed refusals and were eventually compelled at gun point to work, the Belgians nodded wisely and promised to do this and that and after twelve months were still 'trying' to reproduce a German railway engine. Flaws in small essential steel parts were 'unnoticed' and it took three weeks dismantling to readjust them. German coal was demanded on a quadruple scale of normal usage, and 70 per cent went on the black market.

"Everything in shops was hidden

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thought
about becoming
a Priest...



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away. The Germans emptied the Belgian banks and then went to buy in the shops, but the Belgians had emptied the shops. Business was done in private houses. The Germans insisted on German professors in the universities. The Belgians refused and the universities were closed. The students met in their homes and got lectures in typescript and talks from qualified students, so that now most medical students are doing finals."

Made contact

Fr. Dan was delighted to make contact with his Belgian Redemptorist brothers. Most of their monasteries had been closed during the occupation, the destruction of others would cost a fortune to restore. Despite freedom, scraping a daily living was difficult for them but the Irish chaplain was told to make himself at home.

At Christmas, one of his three masses was a sung mass for the local French-speaking population. "It was interesting to hear the old French carols sung as they had been sung for centuries. Candle shortage means that one candle is lighted on the altar at the beginning of the Canon. For the whole of the Mass two tiny, reddish electric bulbs glow on top of the imitation candle sticks. ... Wounded men swathed in bandages came down on trolleys and were placed facing the altar.

"One young boy who had been blinded by a shell saw nothing, but kept saying his Rosary. He said to

me afterwards: 'You know Father, it all becomes tremendous when your eyes are closed. If I still had my sight I would be looking around me.' Another soldier whose head wound had injured the motor nerves controlling his speech lay still and quiet before the altar. Afterwards when I asked him did he like the Christmas

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Mass, he just blinked his eyes once to show me he was pleased."

Deep thoughts

For a young priest like Fr. Dan (he was only 35 when he enlisted but older than most of the men who depended on him), the war gave rise to deep thoughts. "If we are spared to return (home), we shall be all the better for the experience," he wrote. "Living close to death is an experience which changes your mind irrevocably. No meditation, no purposeful thinking, no continued reflection brings that vivid stark reality of death so closely to mind as does this kind of life we now live. The years will not be long enough

for us to thank God for his mercies."

As he recognised during that time of war, life for Dan Cummings would never be quite the same again. For three years, he had lived among Irish men of vastly different backgrounds who had learned to trust one another for comradeship and survival. The memory instilled in him a deep desire to bring something of that experience of tolerance and fellowship to his own city, Belfast.

Frail planting

In 1947, with Dan's help, the first 'Clonard Mission for Non-Catholics' was held. One of its purposes was to explain, in as reasonable a manner as possible, the beliefs and way of life of Catholics to their non-Catholic

fellow-citizens. It was the frail planting of what was to become twenty years later the ecumenical movement. It is still an important part of the Redemptorist presence in Clonard.

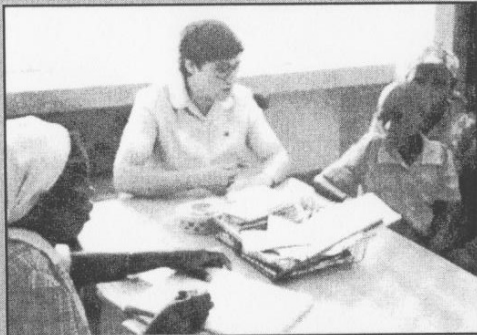
For the last ten years of his life, Fr. Dan was a chaplain again, this time ministering to Irish hotel workers in Birmingham. He died there in 1977, at the age of seventy, having lived his life, and risked it, in the service of God and of his fellow human beings, irrespective of creed, background or political affiliation. ■

A Belfast native, Fr. Brendan

McConvery, C.Ss.R. lives in Marianella, Dublin. He teaches scripture at the Kimmage Mission Institute, at the All Hallows Institute for Mission and Ministry, at Maynooth College and at Marianella.

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HONEY IN DECEMBER

Through the dazzling cold of a December dawn
you make this Winter's journey - drive
past songless woods and the dead fields, leaving
your farm house warm as toast to bring to my
invalid and ageing father
your unageing friendship
and a gift of honey.

Pale as frost in the kitchen's electric heat,
my father
revives in your shared talk above the emptied
tea-cups
and the honey-jar half empty of it's amber.
Your words recalling the Summer of his days as
the sticky
sweetened juice awakes in us the memory
of sunlight in the flowering hedgerows;
in a Winter's vapid chill the taste of Summer.

LIAM AUNGIER

