

Father Quitman Francis Beckley, O.P.

By: J. Michael Finn



On April 6, 1917 the United States declared war on Germany. Recognizing the need for more Catholic chaplains, the U.S. Catholic bishops formed the National Catholic War Council. The bishops assigned quotas to each diocese based on the number of priests in the jurisdiction. They also appealed directly to religious orders to contribute what personnel they could to the military.

According to the U.S. Military Archdiocese, at the end of World War I a total of 1,026 Catholic priests were serving as commissioned chaplains with the armed forces. In addition, there were 165 priests serving without commission as civilians paid directly by the Knights of Columbus. Approximately 30% of all chaplains in the First World War were Catholic priests. Seventeen Catholic chaplains died in service during the war.

One of 24 Dominican priests who volunteered for service in the Great War was Father Quitman Francis Beckley, O.P. He was one of seven Dominicans who also served as professors at Aquinas College High School in Columbus.

Quitman Beckley was born in Frederick, Maryland on February 5, 1891. He was the son of Quitman Shields Beckley and Caroline (Kreh) Beckley. He entered the Dominican Order at St. Joseph's Priory in Somerset, Ohio on November 25, 1908. He was sent to his theological training at the Dominican House of Studies and at Catholic University, both in Washington, D.C. Father Beckley was ordained in the chapel of the House of Studies, June 23, 1915 by Archbishop John Bonzano, the Apostolic Delegate. Following ordination he continued his education at the House of Studies and Catholic University doing post-graduate work in social sciences. His studies, however, were interrupted in 1917 due to his service in World War I.

Responding to the Bishop's call for Catholic chaplains, Father Beckley was commissioned a Lieutenant in the Chaplain Corps of the United States Navy on June 22, 1917 and first served with the US Navy Atlantic Fleet on board the battleship U.S.S. Kearsarge. He was reported to be the first chaplain of any faith to be assigned to the US Navy during the Great War.

At his own request, he was transferred to the US Marine Corps on April 2, 1918. He served with the 10th Field Artillery Marines, Quantico, Virginia, and subsequently with the 3rd Replacement Battalion Marines.

He was sent to France with the American Expeditionary Force in 1918 and served there with the famous 2nd Marine Division, 6th Marine Regiment. He was present during the Battle of Chateau-Thierry (May 31, 1918). He was also with the 6th Marine Regiment when it participated in the Battle of Belleau Wood (June 6-28, 1918).

The Battle of Belleau Wood were days of horror. The 6th Marines were under fire for almost a month without being relieved. In addition to the artillery and machine gun fire, large amounts of mustard gas were used during the battle. Father Beckley stood alongside the Marines, suffering with them, sharing the dangers and bearing the strain of combat.

Throughout the battle, the US Marines refused to give up, prompting the Germans to call them *Teufel Hunden*, or "Devil Dogs," a name the Marines proudly claim to this day. During the

terrific fighting the Marine Corps lost 1,811 men killed, and 7,966 wounded. The Marine Corps suffered more casualties at Belleau Wood than it did in its entire history to that point. The US victory at Belleau Wood halted the German advance on Paris, blunted their forward momentum, and altered the course of the war.

On July 2, 1918 Father Beckley was severely gassed while working on an evening burial detail. He spent the next three months in a military hospital near Bordeaux, France. The use of poison gas in the World War often left surviving veterans of the war with serious lung and other health complications after the war.

As a member of the 6th Marine Regiment at Belleau Wood, Father Beckley earned the unit award of the French Croix de Guerre with two Palms and one Gilt Star and the privilege of wearing the French Fourragere (a braided and knotted cord in the green and red colors of the Croix de Guerre, which is worn on the left shoulder of the Marine uniform). As a wounded veteran he would have received the Purple Heart. Father Beckley was also twice cited for his battlefield bravery in the French Orders of the Army.

After his release from the hospital, Father Beckley was transferred, by special order of General Pershing, to the headquarters of the American Army in Paris. There he worked with the U.S. Army Graves Registration Unit. He was a liaison with the French Government on the disposition and burial of American war dead. In December 1918 he returned to sea duty with the US Navy Atlantic Fleet aboard the U.S.S. Prometheus.

Father Beckley was discharged on July 7, 1919. During his period of service in the military Father Beckley had the unique distinction of serving with three military branches, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Army. After his military discharge, Father Beckley became an officer in the U.S. Naval Reserve Forces.

On July 9, 1919 he was assigned to the faculty of Providence College where he was a member of the first faculty for that institution. In September 1919 he was assigned as a professor at Aquinas College High School in Columbus, Ohio where he served until 1922.

On January 6, 1921 he was commissioned Senior Chaplain in the Ohio Naval Militia. He received commendations for his military service from President Woodrow Wilson and Ohio Governor James M. Cox.

In 1922 he was sent to St. Mary's Parish, Johnson City, Tennessee. From 1923 until 1926 he was with the Western Mission Band, at Holy Rosary Priory, Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 1926 Father Beckley was transferred to St. Mary's Priory, New Haven, Connecticut as assistant. Continuing his education, he received the degree of Doctor of Laws from Providence College in 1928. He was forced to resign from mission duties due to poor health.

In 1928 he was appointed the first permanent Catholic Chaplain and Director of Catholic Activities at Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey and was highly esteemed for his work there. It was reported that in Father Beckley's first three years as university chaplain, "There has been a conspicuous increase in the reception of the Sacraments among the Catholic students and many conversions, notably among the graduate students and the faculty. Of thirty Catholic members of the class of 1929, four are now preparing for the priesthood."

In 1952 he gave up the Princeton chaplaincy due to ill health. He was a member of the Army and Navy Club of New York and a commander and chaplain of the American Legion.

After several parish assignments he was assigned to the House of Studies in Washington, D.C. He died at Georgetown Hospital on February 24, 1963 at the age of 72. A Solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated by the Very Rev. Charles H. McKenna, O.P., Prior at the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D.C. He is buried at Mount Olivet Cemetery, Washington, D.C.