

“Chaplain’s Corner: No Atheists in Foxholes: Chaplains Gave All in World War II”

By Lt. Col. Kenneth Reyes

Many have heard the familiar phrase, “There is no such thing as an atheist in a fox hole.”

Where did this come from?

Research I verified in an interview with former World War II prisoner of war Roy Bodine (my friend) indicates the phrase has been credited to Father William Cummings.

As the story goes, Father Cummings was a civilian missionary Catholic priest in the Philippines.

The phrase was coined during the Japanese attack at Corregidor.

During the siege, Cummings had noticed non-Catholics were attending his services.

Some he knew were not Catholic, some were not religious and some were even known atheists.

Life-and-death experiences prompt a reality check.

Even the strongest of beliefs can change, and, I may add, can go both ways – people can be drawn to or away from “faith.”

With the pending surrender of allied forces to the Japanese, Cummings uttered the famous phrase “There is no such thing as an atheist in a fox hole.”

In one of my many discussions with Roy, he distinctly remembered a period on the “Hell Ships” – these were ships the Japanese used to bring POWs from the Philippines back to Japan.

They were unmarked and thus ‘fair game’ for attacks from the allies from the air and sea.

Of the 3,000-plus POWs listed on the ships, only 180 survived the journey.

“When our own planes were attacking us,” Roy said, “I remember Father Cummings calming us down by reciting the Lord’s Prayer and offering up prayers on our behalf.

For a brief moment I did not hear the yells and screams of dying men as our boat was attacked by our own men.”

He went on to say, “There was a peaceful quiet during the attack that I cannot explain nor have experienced since.”

Later on during the trip to Japan, Cummings, after giving his food to others who needed it more, succumbed to his own need and died of starvation.

Everyone expresses some form of faith every day, whether it is religious or secular.

Some express faith by believing when they get up in the morning they will arrive at work in one piece, thankful they have been given another opportunity to enjoy the majesty of the day; or express relief the doctor’s results were negative.

The real question is, “Is it important to have faith in ‘faith’ itself or is it more important to ask, ‘What is the object of my faith?’”

Roy never affirmed or expressed whether his faith was rooted in religion or not, but for a moment in time on the “Hell Ships,” he believed in Cummings’ faith.

What is the root or object of your faith?

Is it something you can count on in times of plenty or loss; peace or chaos; joy or sorrow; success or failure?

What is ‘faith’ to you?