

REFLECTIONS

The D-Day Chaplain Who Died Twice

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<https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.143275>

Military Chaplaincy Review

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2026

In early June 2025, I went with fewer than a hundred fellow paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division to Normandy, France to commemorate the 81st anniversary of Operation Overlord and the D-Day invasion. Dozens of ceremonies take place across the region each June commemorating various battles and heroic actions of American soldiers. Two of those ceremonies honor the life and death of Chaplain Ignatius Maternowski. To those in the Normandy region of France he is known simply as the “D-Day Chaplain.”

A native of Holyoke, Massachusetts and a graduate of St. Francis High School in Athol Springs, New York, he was a paratrooper, chaplain, and Franciscan priest assigned to the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment in World War II. Eighty-one years ago, he jumped into the darkness without a weapon and assembled with small groups of fellow paratroopers near a hamlet of homes and buildings called Gueutteville in the town of Picauville. On the drop zone, he ministered to the wounded and dying in a nearby crashed glider.¹

Gueutteville occupies a single, narrow road no more than a quarter mile long, with stone homes and storehouses lining either side. This humble street became a battlefield where American paratroopers made their stand against German forces. Before sunrise, it became the place where Chaplain Maternowski would lose his life.

Locals in France often describe what they heard about the “D-Day Chaplain” from their parents and grandparents. With American casualties mounting in those early hours of the operation, Chaplain Maternowski decided to walk the narrow street that bisected Gueutteville to find the German aid station and doctor. He sought to create a single aid station to treat the wounded and dying from both sides. One aid station for all wounded personnel, regardless of their uniform. Somehow, he safely navigated the narrow road and found the German aid station. Even more strangely, the German doctor agreed to

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¹ Our Lady of the Angels Province, “In Memoriam: Fr. Ignatius Maternowski,” *Our Lady of the Angels Province*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.olaprovince.org/2019/09/26/in-memoriam-fr-ignatius-maternowski/>.

Chaplain Maternowski's plan. Yet on his walk back down the narrow street, with his helmet dangling from his waist band, a German sniper shot and killed Chaplain Maternowski. The plan to unite German and American aid stations—to save lives—would never come to fruition. His body would lay in the street for three days before Americans could recover him. He was 32 years old and in his fifth year of priesthood.²

I wonder about many aspects of this story. Did Chaplain Maternowski discuss this plan with whoever served as the ground force commander? Was his plan to create a unified aid station naïve? What would I have done? Where would I have placed my energy and focus? But mostly I wonder: What kind of person conceives such a plan, knowing the danger and risk involved?

To better understand his death, we must first understand his identity as a Franciscan priest. He would have known well the writings of St. Francis of Assisi, the namesake of his Holy Order. Francis was no stranger to death and sorrow. He fought in battle and was captured in 1202. As a prisoner of war for nearly a year, he fell seriously ill and endured profound physical suffering, a period that resulted in radical spiritual transformation.

Suffering does not always produce a spiritually transformative, death-in-life experience. Yet Francis, upon his release, abandoned the bourgeois lifestyle granted by his family and chose to serve God and others. Rather than retreat to comfort, he embraced poverty.

Though he never wrote directly about this death-in-life transformation, themes of humility, suffering, penance, and love for all of creation permeate his works. One pithy line from his “Canticle of the Creatures” offers insight into Chaplain Maternowski's bravery eighty-one years ago, even as it illumines St. Francis' own death-in-life experience: “Blessed are those who are found in Your most holy will, for the second death will do them no harm.”³

The second death, among the Church Fathers and in theological literature, refers to the moment when God renders final judgment to those outside of God's will. For those found in God's holy will, according to St. Francis, the second death of final judgment will do them no harm. Viewed more broadly, however, the second death can come to mean physical death. If one is found in God's most holy will, in other words, then physical death itself will do them no harm.

² Steve Weidenkopf, “Fr. Ignatius Maternowski: D-Day Chaplain,” *Catholic Answers Magazine*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/father-ignatius-maternowski-d-day-chaplain>.

³ Francis of Assisi, “The Canticle of the Creatures,” in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol. I: The Saint*, eds. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City, 1999), 113.

To speak of a second death presupposes a first death. In response to God's call, St. Francis renounced worldly attachments and embraced selfless humility before God as a kind of death-in-life. He renounced his good reputation, severed family ties, and relinquished his inheritance. He endured beatings, ridicule, and the condescending eyes of society, submitting and surrendering to God's call of ministry. This is the first death.

The first death has God as both its source and its aim. This death-in-life is a type of surrender, a gift from God that transforms and sends a person back into the broken world as a minister.

Chaplain Maternowski was a priest ordained in the Order of St. Francis. Consequently, one can trace the death-in-life hinted at in St. Francis' writings and find it embodied in Chaplain Maternowski's final acts of ministry. When Chaplain Maternowski jumped into the fields of Normandy eighty-one years ago, he jumped as a man who had already died once. His first death was a surrender and submission to God. His physical death hours later on the narrow street in Gueutteville was not, in fact, the first time he died.

Chaplain Maternowski's death-in-life, his first death, appears to have transformed him in such profound ways that he would be the type of chaplain who would come up with a plan, in the middle of battle, to unite German and American aid stations. As a result, physical death had no hold over him. He was free to live and to die for others and for God. He was a priest in the Order of St. Francis who knew what it meant to sing: "Blessed are those who are found in Your most holy will, for the second death will do them no harm." I pray that I may live out my own ordination vows with similar faithfulness, especially in the crucible of war amidst the constant threat of physical death.

Published: September 16, 2025 EDT.



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