



# A Profile In Spiritual Resilience

**CHAPLAIN (CAPT.) EMIL KAPAUN**

**BY CHAPLAIN (COL.) SCOTT A. OFSDAHL**

“The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But ... the Good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

What exactly is resilience? I like this simple definition: “resilience is the ability to bounce back.” Those with resilience are able to ‘bounce back’ from setbacks, disappointments, defeats and failures. Sometimes setbacks or life challenges come like a boxer taking continuous jabs and uppercuts that keep you off balance. Resilience is what allows you to recover and stay in the fight with your goal in mind. At other times, however, setbacks come like a roundhouse knockout blow. Out of nowhere, tragedy strikes and knocks you flat. When life hands you a knockout blow and you feel flattened, you must dig even deeper in order to dust yourself off, pick yourself up and stay the course. Sometimes this may take a long time. So where do we find this “strength” that can help us pick ourselves up? We find it through our spiritual, physical, mental and emotional pillars. This article will highlight the benefits of the spiritual pillar.





So what is “spiritual” resilience? Again, keeping it simple, I’d say that “spiritual” resilience is based on one’s purpose and meaning in life which may or may not come from faith-based resources. Your purpose and meaning in life provide an essential resource or compass for paddling through life’s whitewater. A perfect example of faith-based “spiritual” resilience is the life of Ch., Capt. Emil Kapaun. Kapaun’s story offers us important keys to finding our inner strength not only to overcome life’s jabs, uppercuts and knockout blows but his story also illustrates the power of a “purpose” driven life. A life defined by one of our core values—“service before self.”

On 11 April 2013, President Obama told the story of Father Emil Kapaun, an Army Chaplain from Kansas, who served in the US Army during the Korean War and then posthumously awarded him the Medal of Honor at the White House. Kapaun’s story is best told in the President’s own words (*abbreviated with some editing*):

After the communist invasion of South Korea, Kapaun was among the first American troops that hit the beaches and pushed their way north through hard mountains and bitter cold. That’s when the Chinese forces entered the war with a massive surprise attack—perhaps 20,000 soldiers pouring down on a few thousand Americans. In the chaos, dodging bullets and explosions, Kapaun raced between foxholes, out past the front lines and into no-man’s land—dragging the wounded to safety.

When his commanders ordered an evacuation, knowing that he would be over run, he chose to stay—gathering the injured, tending their wounds. When the enemy broke through and the combat was hand-to-hand, he carried on—comforting the injured and the dying, offering some measure of peace as they died.

When enemy forces bore down, it seemed like the end—that these wounded Americans, more than a dozen of them, would be gunned down. But Kapaun spotted a wounded Chinese officer. He pleaded with this Chinese officer and convinced him to call out his fellow Chinese. The shooting stopped and they negotiated a safe surrender, saving those American lives.

Then, as Kapaun was being led away, he saw another American, US Army Staff Sgt. Herbert Miller—wounded, unable to walk, lying in a ditch, defenseless. An enemy soldier was standing over him, rifle aimed at his head, ready to shoot. Kapaun marched over and pushed the enemy soldier aside. And then as the soldier watched, stunned, Kapaun carried that wounded American away.

He carried the injured sergeant, for miles, as their captors forced them on a death march. When Kapaun grew tired, he’d help the wounded SSgt Miller hop on one leg. When other prisoners stumbled, he picked them up. When they wanted to quit—knowing that stragglers would be shot—he begged them to keep walking.

In the camps that winter, deep in the valley, men could freeze to death in their sleep. Kapaun offered them his own clothes. They starved on tiny rations of millet and

corn and birdseed. He somehow snuck past the guards, foraged in nearby fields, and returned with rice and potatoes. In desperation, some men hoarded food. He convinced them to share. Their bodies were ravaged by dysentery. He grabbed some rocks, pounded metal into pots and boiled clean water. They lived in filth. He washed their clothes and cleansed their wounds.

The guards ridiculed his devotion to his Savior and the Almighty. They took his clothes and made him stand in the freezing cold for hours. Yet, he never lost his faith. If anything, it only grew stronger. That faith—that they might be delivered from evil, that they could make it home—was perhaps the greatest gift to those men; that even amidst such hardship and despair, there could be hope; amid their misery in the temporal they could see those truths that are eternal; that even in such hell, there could be a touch of the divine. Looking back, one of them said that is what “kept a lot of us alive.”

Yet, for Kapaun, the horrific conditions took their toll. Thin, frail he began to limp, with a blood clot in his leg. And then comes the dysentery, then pneumonia. That’s when the guards saw their chance to finally rid themselves of this priest and the hope he inspired. They came for him. And over the protests and tears of the men who loved him, the guards sent him to a death house—a hellhole with no food or water—to be left to die. And then, as he was taken away, he did something remarkable—he blessed the guards. “Forgive them,”

he said, “for they know not what they do.” Two days later, in that house of death, Kapaun breathed his last breath. He was 35 years old. His body was taken away, his grave unmarked, his remains unrecovered to this day.

As the President said, “this is the valor we honor—an American soldier who didn’t fire a gun, but who wielded the mightiest weapon of all, a love for his brothers so pure that he was willing to die so that they might live.

This holiday season, we might ask ourselves a few important questions. On a scale of 1-10, how do you rate your own spiritual resilience? Love, faith, hope, forgiveness and service before self were keys to Kapaun’s ability to draw upon inner strength and overcome the trauma of war. Where do you go to find the strength to overcome? Have a happy holiday season. 🌟



Copyright of Combat Edge is the property of United States Department of Defense and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.