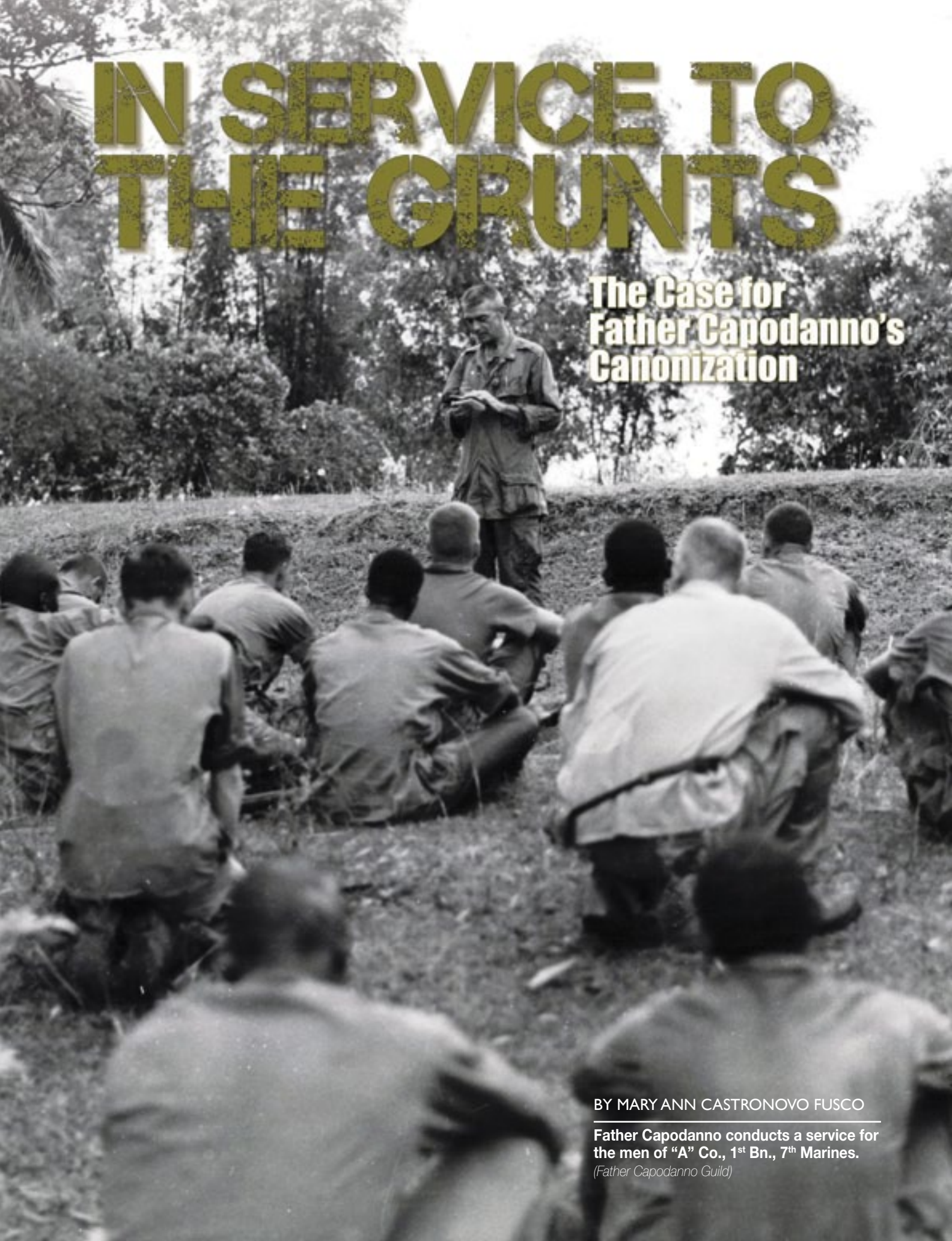


IN SERVICE TO THE GRUNTS

**The Case for
Father Capodanno's
Canonization**



BY MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO

**Father Capodanno conducts a service for
the men of "A" Co., 1st Bn., 7th Marines.**

(Father Capodanno Guild)

Each September on a leafy campus in the shadows of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, a Mass is conducted for Father Vincent Capodanno at the Fort Wadsworth chapel on New York's Staten Island. A local boy who became a missionary and then a Navy chaplain in support of the Marines, Father Capodanno was killed on September 4, 1967, while administering medical aid and last rites to his ambushed comrades in Vietnam. For his valor, Father Capodanno was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, the United States' highest military award.

Each year another anniversary Mass, presided over by the Most Reverend Timothy P. Broglio, Archbishop for the Military Services, is held in the crypt church of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. and televised live on EWTN, the Global Catholic Television Network.

Both services are held not only in honor of the fallen priest's memory, but also in supplication for his canonization. Though the foot soldiers he

served knew him as "the Grunt Padre," the Catholic Church has named him a Servant of God, the first step on the path toward sainthood.

"He chose to go into battle," says Vincent Maligno, a retired Air Force major from Staten Island who served in Vietnam and is a longtime friend of the Capodanno family. "He wanted to be where the action was, where he was most needed. He could've sat back at the base chapel and been there for confession, but that wasn't enough for him."

The youngest of ten children, Vincent Robert Capodanno, Jr. was born on February 13, 1929—the year the stock market crumbled. His father, Vincent, had left his hometown of Gaeta, Italy (Lazio region) at age sixteen and worked on the docks of New York Harbor as a ship caulker. His mother, Rachel Basile, whose ancestral roots were in Sorrento (Campania region), was born in the United States. Vincent's father died on the day Vincent turned ten, just seven months before the start of World War II.



Maryknoll Father Vincent Capodanno

Despite the tumultuous times in which Vincent lived, nothing in his early life seemed to foreshadow a military vocation, though two of his brothers served in the Army and another in the Marines. The family thought that brothers Philip or Albert, who'd been altar boys, would have been more likely to enter the priesthood. Vincent, meanwhile, had been endowed with movie-star looks. "If there were twenty people in a room," said his brother James, who passed away in 2014, "there'd be forty eyes on Vincent. He projected like a flashlight."

While working as a clerk by day and attending education classes at Fordham University by night, Vincent felt drawn to the priesthood. Inspired by articles he read in *The Field Afar*, a magazine published by the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America (commonly known as Maryknoll), he decided to join the society and was ordained on June 14, 1958 at age twenty-nine.



The ceremony held in front of the Capodanno monument outside the Fr. Capodanno Chapel on the grounds of Fort Wadsworth on September 6, 2015.

(Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco)

Father Capodanno's first assignment was a six-year stint in Taipei, Taiwan, where he had to learn the Hakku Chinese dialect. After a leave in 1964, which allowed him to visit the Holy Land and his family back in the States, Father Capodanno was reassigned in 1965 to Hong Kong, which required him to learn yet another language, Cantonese. He sought to return to Taiwan, but that request was denied, and his relationship with his superiors became strained.

Aware of other Maryknollers who had served as chaplains, Father Capodanno wrote to the chief of chaplains in Washington, D.C., inquiring about the possibility of joining the Navy Chaplain Corps and expressing his desire to serve with the Marines in Vietnam. "Father Vincent felt he was no longer needed in Hong Kong or Taiwan as much as he would be in Vietnam," wrote Father Daniel L. Mode, author of *The Grunt Padre*, a biography about Father Capodanno.

In August 1965, the priest received permission to begin the process of military induction. His training at Camp

Pendleton, California, included battle first aid, counter-insurgency tactics, physical fitness, and survival skills. Appointed a lieutenant, he reported for duty and arrived in Vietnam during Holy Week of 1966—"congruent with the zenith of United States involvement in the war," wrote Mode. Although Father Capodanno was required to wear a Colt .45 pistol for protection, Corporal John Scafidi, one of the men he served with, said "he would never use it for anything more than a paperweight."

Soft-spoken and, at thirty-seven years old, considerably older than most of the Marines he considered his parishioners, Father Capodanno gained respect as an attentive listener. The infantrymen, known as grunts, confided in him during their darkest hours.

But he proved to be more than a confidante. He chain smoked and played cards with them. He carried the pack they carried, traveling with them into the jungle and into battle, something chaplains rarely, if ever, did. Though he was known to be fastidious



A monument of Father Capodanno administering to a fallen soldier at Fort Wadsworth. (Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco)

about his appearance, he was adamant about living the same grimy, grueling life that those he served with lived.

As chaplain, Father Capodanno celebrated fifteen Masses a week, taught catechism, counseled soldiers of all faiths, conducted memorial services for the fallen, helped evacuate civilians, and frequently asked to be placed with the company most likely to suffer the highest casualties. For meritorious service during six combat operations, he received the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star. He was notified of having earned the Navy Bronze Star as well, but did not ask to receive it. Though he wrote home, his family knew nothing of his commendations.

"He was so humble," says his nephew Vincent Capodanno of Hamilton, New Jersey. "When he died, he had a little box. And everything he had was in that box: his medals that he never spoke of." It wasn't until 1999 that Father Capodanno's brother James officially accepted the Bronze Star on his behalf.



Father Capodanno beside a Nativity Scene on Christmas Day 1966 in Chu Lai, Vietnam. (Father Capodanno Guild)

In January 1967, Father Capodanno applied to extend his tour in Vietnam for six months to serve with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. While on leave back home, his family noticed changes in his demeanor. His war experiences had aged him, recalls James's widow, Lydia. His hair had grayed. "His mind was always in Vietnam with the fellas," she says.

While at home, Father Capodanno liked to stay up talking until the early hours of the morning. "Many of those conversations were about the purpose of the Vietnam War," recalls Al Lambert, of Parlin, New Jersey, a singer and bandleader whose father was a first cousin to Father Capodanno. "He said, 'I don't care about the politics. Men are dying and I have to be there.'"

In July 1967, Father Capodanno's request to the Commanding General of the First Marine Division for a second extension was denied, and he was expected to return home by December. He would never make it.

On Labor Day, September 4, the United States launched Operation Swift. It began as a routine maneuver to flush out enemy soldiers who might keep local villagers from participating in the national election that was taking place. Around 4:30 am, wrote Mode, "the skies lit up with enemy mortars and bullet tracers" from a North Vietnamese Army ambush.

Having attended a briefing on the battle, Father Capodanno waited with his unit in case the companies of the 3rd Battalion were called into action. Since he'd spent the previous week with the soldiers of Company M, he asked to accompany them when they were ordered to the combat medical aid station. Mode wrote that the Company's 1st Sergeant, Richard L.



There have been just seven U.S. Navy ships named in memory of chaplains. On November 17, 1973, the Navy commissioned the *USS Capodanno*, a ship that just two years later would save a shipwrecked Italian family off the coast of southern Italy.

The *USS Capodanno* was the first ship in the U.S. fleet to receive a Papal blessing. On July 30, 1993, it was decommissioned. Its motto was "Duty with honor."

Kline, reported, "This was unheard of for a chaplain to go out with a Line Company, where he would be exposed to enemy small arms fire. I personally denied his request, to the extent that I did not even inform the Company Commander of the Chaplain's request. However, Chaplain Capodanno informed me that he would see the Battalion Commander for his approval. Evidently, this was approved somewhere along the line."

The Marines were outnumbered in a vicious, close-combat ambush that prompted Private First Class Stephen A. Lovejoy to radio back to the command post, "We

can't hold out here. We are being wiped out! There are wounded and dying all around." When Father Capodanno heard the message, he ran toward the area where Lovejoy was pinned down by automatic gunfire and mortar explosions and helped him scramble with his bulky radio equipment to safety. Exposing himself to enemy fire, Father Capodanno ad-

Feeding the Enemy by CDR J.R. Sharp, USN (Ret.)



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ministered last rites to other soldiers, carried the wounded to safety, and gave up his own gas mask to a Marine missing his. All the while, he was telling the men, “Stay cool; don’t panic.”

While running toward a dying sergeant, Father Capodanno was hit in the right shoulder by the shrapnel of a mortar. Undeterred, he made his way to the sergeant and prayed with him until the end. Father Vincent refused medical attention and continued to tend to those around him, bandaging wounds and offering solace.

In late afternoon, Father Vincent was wounded again by shrapnel, in the arms, hand, and legs. He waved off medical attention a second time, insisting that others be taken care of instead.

According to Mode’s biography, Corporal Ray Harton was the second to last person Father Capodanno tended to. Bleeding from a shot to his left arm, Harton said he felt an inexplicable peace come over him as Father Capodanno cupped the back of his head and said, “Stay quiet Marine. You will be okay. Someone will be here to help you soon. God is with us this day.”

Meanwhile, Armando G. “Doc” Leal, Jr., a corpsman who’d tried to come to Harton’s aid, had been shot in the leg. Father Capodanno left Harton’s side to tend to Leal. He began to give medical attention to the corpsman when a machine gunner opened fire. Father Capodanno was hit twenty-seven times in his spine, neck, and head.

Stateside, Al Lambert was in his mother’s kitchen when they received



For paying the ultimate sacrifice, Father Capodanno was awarded several medals, including the Purple Heart. (Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco)

word that Father Capodanno had been killed. “The scream that came out from her mouth, I’ll never forget it,” says Lambert. “She never said his name, but I knew instinctively it was Father Vincent.”

After a funeral Mass at Queen of Peace in North Arlington, New Jersey—the church Father Capodanno would visit when staying with his sister, Pauline—the grunts’ beloved chaplain was buried in St. Peter’s Cemetery on Staten Island, alongside his parents.

Just a short drive away, family, including his last surviving sibling, Gloria, and friends gather each year at Fort Wadsworth on the Sunday closest to the anniversary of his death. After Mass at the chapel named in Father Capodanno’s honor, they listen

to speeches, prayers, and anthems before a bronze sculpture of Father Capodanno administering to a fallen soldier. To them and countless others Father Capodanno already is a saint.

Note: The Order Sons of Italy in America Father Vincent R. Capodanno Lodge 212 is located on Staten Island, New York.

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In 2013, the Father Capodanno Guild was formed to disseminate information on his life and to raise funds in support of the cause for his canonization. To find out more, visit www.capodannoguild.org

