

## Kapaun's Battle

**Jeff Gress**

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*Written with the flair of fiction, Kapaun's Battle is the engaging biography of a true war hero.*

Jeff Gress's admiring biography of US Army chaplain and Medal of Honor recipient Emil Kapaun, *Kapaun's Battle*, records the subject's experiences in the Korean War.

Beginning with a transcript and pictures from Kapaun's posthumous Medal of Honor ceremony, the book then rewinds to show how the chaplain earned this distinction. Its scenes from wartime show Kapaun braving enemy fire to deliver sacraments to a wounded soldier, and also moving from combat to prisoner of war camps, where he continued to serve. His ultimate fate is a matter of public record.

For dramatic effect, the book is written in novelistic form, recreating conversations between Kapaun and others and focusing on the action of its given scenes. Lively and involving, it also follows those who were involved in Kapaun's story. These figures include an Army captain, a sergeant, and a nurse. But the members of this extended cast are not developed beyond the functions of their roles. They come to feel like stand-ins for other officers, enlisted men, and medical staff—all people whom Kapaun would have interacted with while serving.

Throughout the book, people's exchanges with each other are unrealistic, cliché-driven portrayals of wartime talk. As a result, scenes with emotional heft that recount real tragedies (as with the death of a soldier who was in a relationship with a nurse) sacrifice their potential power—which is further undermined by repeating terminology, as around the flowing and streaming of the bereaved woman's tears.

In his interactions with other people, even Kapaun himself flattens out: his virtues are emphasized to excess, and any flaws he may have possessed are absent, which is unbelievable, even for a potential saint. Those on the other side of the war, including a communist official, are similarly dimensionless, leading to scenes that strain credulity, as with a religious debate between the chaplain and a communist in the POW camp.

In the book's middle comes a pause to recount Kapaun's story in more formal terms. Here, the book reproduces articles about him from multiple news sources. This factual material adds missing information to the text, but it also interrupts the book's established flow, further muddling its progression.

Written with novelistic flair, *Kapaun's Battle* is the engaging biography of a true war hero who saw considerable action during his periods of service.

MATT BENZING (July 7, 2022)

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