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Popular priest celebrates 50 years

TOM HOWARD Of The Gazette Staff May 18, 2007

\$3 FOR FIRST 13 WEEKS



Deb Hanley of Billings congratulates Father Thomas McTague during a celebration of the 50th anniversary of McTague's ordination Friday at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Billings. Hanley knew McTague when he served in Forsyth.

DAVID GRUBBS/Gazette Staff

The Rev. Thomas McTague, a beloved priest who has touched the lives of thousands of Montanans, was honored Friday for his 50 years in the priesthood.

McTague's face lit up as parishioners at St. Thomas the Apostle Church welcomed him with applause at a reception that followed Mass on Friday morning.

A green carnation pinned to his lapel served as a reminder of McTague's Irish heritage. With hugs and handshakes, people thanked McTague for his service. He served parishes in Billings, Great Falls, Hysham, Livingston and Forsyth before retiring. He now lives in Billings and will celebrate his 88th birthday next week.

"He's someone who the people have loved for many years," said County Commissioner Bill Kennedy, a former parish administrator at St. Thomas. "He does a great job of sharing the word of God."

People who meet this small man with stooped shoulders and bright blue eyes are frequently astounded to learn that he was a member of the French resistance during World War II. As a young man, he spent his nights learning how to sabotage German military trains.

"Since the secrecy of our operation with the French Underground was of the utmost importance, we would drill under the cover of night in the protection of the thick French forests," McTague wrote in his memoirs, which have appeared in "The Harvest," a monthly publication by the Diocese of Great Falls and Billings. His writings will soon be published in book form.

Darkest period

McTague describes his war experiences as the darkest period of his life, yet they helped prepare him for a life dedicated to serving God.

"During all of our late-night drills we were repeatedly told 'Do not remember the names of people or places.' Obviously this training was to protect the French Underground's objectives in the event that we would be captured," he wrote.

He recalled his first mission.

"It was probably the most terrifying night of my life," he wrote. "My job was to plant the explosives onto the train tracks to slow the army's ability to transport troops and supplies to the front line. I was able to accomplish the first mission undetected, but not

all of our missions would go as planned. Oftentimes we would escape gun battles with the Germans only by the grace of God."

Fled to France

McTague, the third of 11 children born to Hugh and Bridget McTague in County Cavan, Ireland, was attending school in Belgium when the German blitzkrieg overran western Europe in 1940.

McTague and his schoolmates fled to France, which also was soon overrun by the invaders. McTague said his fate was sealed when he refused to register with the Nazi government.

"Not wanting to die in a factory working to help Hitler's army, we were left with only one option: to join the French Underground," he wrote.

Eventually, McTague escaped war-torn Europe by fleeing through Spain and Portugal and ended up in the United States, where two brothers and a sister lived.

How does one escape Nazi-occupied France?

"I had a lot of good help," he said simply.

McTague worked a series of jobs in the United States and met a priest who got him interested in attending college and joining the priesthood.

He attended St. Thomas College in Minnesota and later St. Jerome's College in Ontario. After entering the priesthood, McTague had to decide where he wanted to serve.

McTague had visited Montana during his college years. He made friends here and soon fell in love with the state, in part because it reminded him of Ireland.

"When you've been to New York City and see all the traffic backed up, you say to yourself that you'd love to get back to a place like that and get out of that rat race," he said.