

Ukrainian Orthodox Chaplains in the Canadian Armed Forces in WWII

“Кожен воїн повинен, за заповіддю Христовою, “покласти душу (віддати життя) свою за друзів своїх”, на захист віри й батьківщини.”

—Закон Божий

■ *The Ukrainian Orthodox Church had four very important and dedicated chaplains who devoted much time, effort and energy to the Canadian Forces servicemen in the Second World War. They played a key role in empowering the Ukrainian Canadian military personnel spiritually and morally to meet the demands of military service during war-time. Having Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains proved to be also an important cultural component to the military service.*

Organizing the Chaplaincy

There were three stages of formation of Ukrainian Orthodox Chaplaincy, which evolved in a fascinating process. Ukrainian Canadians overall made a significant contribution to the war effort. Between 32,000-35,000 Ukrainian Canadians served overseas and in WWII out of a population of upwards of 300,000 (1941 statistics), or almost 12% of Ukrainian Canadians took part in Canada's military effort. Ukrainian Canadians were the fourth largest ethnic group participating with 65.17% being Canadian born. From this, it can be concluded that about 10,000-12,000 of these were Ukrainian Orthodox servicemen and women.

In the Canadian military, there was a general rule of one chaplain per 1,000 military service people for those stationed in Canada, and per every 500 for those overseas. The Canadian Forces also had a formula for part-time chaplains: a chaplain received a one day salary for between 100-250 soldiers, two-days for 250-375 soldiers, and three days salary for 375-500 soldiers. Thus, it was important for chaplains to gather as many of the faithful as possible to justify to Ottawa for the need for Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains.

The Canadian Forces had set up its predominantly Christian chaplaincy service with three categories: RC for Roman Catholic; P for Protestant denominations; and OD for all other denominations. This included the Ukrainian Orthodox, who were called at the time "Ukrainian Greek Orthodox."

First Stage — No Chaplaincy

There were no Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains in the early part of the war, between 1939 and the start of 1941, when there were fewer Ukrainian Canadian soldiers, compared to the later years. However, early in 1940 Ukrainian servicemen began calling for chaplains to serve them in their own faith tradition. But responding to this need resulted in a dilemma for the Church, which was short of clergy. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church had to balance between ensuring parishes in Canada were served, and responding to the Ukrainian military service people.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada was administered in Canada by Fr. Semen Sawchuk. Fr. Sawchuk and the Consistory, made up of clergy and laity, played a foundational role in introducing Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains into the Canadian Forces during WWII. After the war started in 1939, Fr. Sawchuk had close discussions with the Chaplain General in Ottawa. Fr. Sawchuk became the driving force

behind the initiative to establish a Ukrainian Orthodox chaplaincy in the Canadian Forces.

The Ukrainian chaplaincy issue was resolved in 1941 after the war started. In November 1941 Fr. Sawchuk prepared a 4-page brief with a memorandum on the Ukrainian Orthodox Chaplain Service, which was sent to the Federal Government. Fr. Sawchuk's brief went to Professor Simpson, who was instrumental in promoting Ukrainian Canadian issues and the chaplaincy issue. Simpson attached his own, well-researched, 5-page appendix to Fr. Sawchuk's brief.

Fr. Sawchuk argued that military chaplaincy would greatly benefit the UOCC and the Canadian Government. Providing services for Ukrainian Orthodox servicemen would remove harmful feelings and discrimination against Ukrainian soldiers. Fr. Sawchuk's brief and Simpson's work were influential in changing the mind of the Canadian Government and the Defense Department.

Second Stage — In Canada Only

The first two Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains were appointed starting in January 1942. One of these was Fr. Semen W. Sawchuk himself, a 22-year veteran of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. He volunteered to service the Central Command, including Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Priests were needed at the growing parishes throughout Canada, and there was reluctance to remove them to the military. Fr. Sawchuk, at 47 years old, still met Canadian Forces requirements, which set age limits for chaplains between 30-50 years.

Born Feb. 14, 1895 in Volkiivsi in Western Ukraine, Fr. Sawchuk's parents immigrated to Canada in 1899 when he was four years old. They settled in Insigner, Saskatchewan where Fr. Sawchuk went to school. He went on to further his studies at the Petro Mohyla Institute in Saskatoon, completing high school, his Teacher's College certification, and started university. He was involved in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church movement in 1919, and was ordained in 1920. Fr. Sawchuk was motivated to go overseas because he wanted to ensure the proper functioning of the Ukrainian servicemen's club, and to assist the displaced persons. While overseas, Fr. Sawchuk managed to write 26 community letters, averaging one per week, which were published in the *Ukrainian Voice* and other newspapers, about Ukrainian Canadian servicemen, the DP's and other issues. These were influential in gathering aid from the Ukrainian Canadian service personnel abroad in the Ukrainian Canadian Servicemen's Association and Club in London, as well as the DP's. Notably, Fr. Sawchuk remained in the reserves until 1965.

The Pacific Command was also pushing for a chaplain, resulting in the appointment of the UOC's second chaplain, Fr. Michael Fyk, who was born in Gardenton, Manitoba. Fr. Fyk studied at the agricultural college in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and later completed three years at St. John's college. He was ordained in 1936 and spent the next 7 years serving in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Fr. Fyk moved his family to B.C. to serve in the Pacific Command from May 1, 1942 to June 30, 1943. However, Fr. Fyk had to step down from his duties for health reasons.



Банкет Союзу Українських Канадійських Вояків в Лондоні під час Різдвяного З'їзду дня 7 січня, 1945. Зліва: капітан С. Варшавський з Едмонтону, Алта.; майор М. Сиротюк з Едмонтону; капелян-майор Вівер; Ф/Л Б. Панчук, голова Союзу, Саскатун, Саск.; капелян-полковник О'Ніл з Келларі, Алта.; капелян-капітан М. Горошко, укр. катол. капелян; капітан П. І. Воробець; капітан-капелян С. В. Савчук, укр. прав. капелян з Віннипегу, Ман.



С. В. Савчук, український православний капелян з Віннипегу, Ман.
UOCC Archive Fr. Semen Sawchuk 1945

result of this UCC support, in May 1944 the Canadian Government had a change of heart and agreed to send Ukrainian chaplains overseas.

Fr. Sawchuk was one of the first to go overseas, first, for a two-month stint based in England, and then eventually extended to six-months. Fr. Symchych replaced him in Europe. England was Canada's base in Europe and the base for the chaplaincy, but there was also the impetus to get the chaplains out to the continent in Belgium, Holland, Germany, and France. Fr. Symchych participated quite actively in chaplaincy on the mainland from September 1945 to January 1946.

The Chaplaincy Service and Conclusion

Despite the demand for Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains, all of the chaplains still had to meet the Canadian Forces requirements as they do today. Chaplains had to pass a medical review and a month's military training in Ontario. They received the military rank of captain.

Although none of the Ukrainian chaplains were at the major battle fronts, they nevertheless preserved the morale and spirituality of Ukrainian Orthodox military personnel. In general, the Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains played an important role in several key areas: to unite Ukrainian Canadians, to develop future leaders in the Ukrainian Canadian community. Many of the men and women returning from WWII went on to be leaders Ukrainian Canadian organizations that flourished in the post-war period. The four chaplains also enhanced the religious life of the Ukrainian Church in Canada with key UOCC leadership roles. They were also early witnesses to the plight of the displaced persons and assisted them.

Finally, the importance of the Ukrainian Orthodox chaplain's work can best be summarized by the soldiers themselves. One soldier personally thanked Fr. Sawchuk meeting him after the war, "You came and gave me a hand. You took care of me when I was in a hospital bed nursing my wounds. And you know, this was the first time, and I am not a religious person, that I really felt the spirit and when I came back to Canada, the first thing I did, I joined a Ukrainian church."

The UOCC revived its chaplaincy program only recently. Fr. Charles Baxter is the chaplain to the Canadian Forces. His Eminence, Metropolitan Yuriy is a member of the Inter-Church Commission of Military Chaplains.

—report by Marusia Kaweski, Visnyk editor

*This article is a summary of the portion of the major conference presentation by Dr. Roman Yereniuk, Associate Professor, Theology, St. Andrew's College and Director, Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies, University of Manitoba to the Conference, *Becoming Canadian: Ukrainian Canadians and the Second World War*, held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Nov. 11-12, 2011. Additional material was supplemented from the Archives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada. The full article by Dr. Roman Yereniuk with illustrations will be available later this year.

On the Ground: The Chaplaincy Experiences of a WWII Veteran

■ Mike Sowa, who is president of All Saints Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Wadena, Saskatchewan, is a World War Two veteran. When Canada entered the war in 1939, Mike signed up to the army as a volunteer along with thousands of other young men and women from the Ukrainian Orthodox community. He became a tank driver and served in the Strathcona Regiment, which was based out of Winnipeg. His service saw him stationed in Canada as well as on the front lines of fighting in England and Italy.

When Mike first joined the Canadian army, there were no Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains. Sundays were days off. No training was conducted and servicemen were expected to attend church services. Even out on the battle fields, Mike recalled that there was no fighting on Christmas Day and Easter Sunday. At the time, there were only two options for Christians—Roman Catholic or Protestant, which was predominantly Anglican. Because the military was strict about attending Sunday worship services, the Ukrainian Orthodox servicemen, who did not want to attend the Protestant or Catholic services, were then assigned to "fatigue work" which would involve working in the kitchen. Ukrainians were the fourth largest ethnic group volunteering in

the army. Mike and his fellow Ukrainian Orthodox servicemen soon petitioned the military to have their own Ukrainian Orthodox chaplain to hold their own Ukrainian Orthodox Divine Liturgies. Thus, it was later in the war that the army organized Ukrainian Orthodox chaplaincy and Mike's chaplain became Rev. Sawchuk, a driving force for the organization of Ukrainian Orthodox chaplaincy in WWII.

According to Mike, the chaplains, called padres, played an important role for the servicemen, particularly for those like him on the front lines in the early years. Chaplains were more prominent in the infantry divisions than in the tank division. Therefore, Mike's unit was assigned an Anglican padre during his tour of duty in Italy, while in England, later in the war years, his division received the services of a Ukrainian Orthodox chaplain. Early in WWII, although there were large numbers of Ukrainian servicemen participating in the war, there was still a lack of Ukrainian Orthodox chaplains—one chaplain per division. Mike recalls the loyalty and moral support provided by the chaplains. The chaplains brought for the servicemen the comfort of familiar Ukrainian Orthodox Divine Liturgies as well as the traditions of Christmas and Easter. They

provided an important psychological and moral foundation through counseling and hospital visits. A belief in God was important to the servicemen, Mike recounts. "It was important to believe in God, who gave them protection during the fighting," Mike remembers. He also recalls the ecumenical feelings among servicemen of all religious backgrounds.

Mike returned home to Canada to raise a family, to farming, and community life in Kuroki and Wadena, Saskatchewan. Now, at 90 years old, Mike has carried over the values from his army days to civilian life—a strong Ukrainian Orthodox faith and a life of service for others. He has assumed the role of service and leadership as a member of the All Saints Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Wadena, Saskatchewan parish and in the Kuroki and Wadena, Saskatchewan communities. Both in the army and in civilian life, Mike's leadership style is to set an example by doing. The fact that he has been president of Wadena parish for the past 25 years is a testament to the effectiveness of this leadership style. Mike faithfully attends Church services, not only at his Wadena parish, but he travels with friends and family to support other parishes in the Foam Lake-Wadena-Ituna parochial district. Mike continues to actively participate in Liturgies, singing, acting as cross-bearer, holding candles and



Mike Sowa, who is the president of the Wadena, Saskatchewan parish of the UOCC, and a World War Two veteran.

other duties to assist the priest. He also works diligently behind the scenes to support the Church. Mike can often be found tending the trees and shrubs, doing repairs, and, in a fearlessness from his tank-driver days, he is often the first to climb the tall ladders to fix the roof and Church dome windows. He also plays a key role in fundraising, leading the varenyky-making sessions.

Mike Sowa is a good example of those many WWII veterans who were willing to sacrifice their own lives to defend their country and people, and they kept their faith even in the most difficult times. The service and leadership of Mike and his fellow WWII servicemen leave us much to emulate.

UOCC Chaplaincy Today

■ Fr. Charles Baxter, Captain in the Canadian Forces, is the first Ukrainian Orthodox military chaplain since WWII. He took his Basic Officer Training at CFB Borden in September 2009. Fr. Charles was first posted to Canadian Forces Base Wainwright to serve as one of the Base Chaplains. He has been newly posted to CFB Edmonton this summer. Fr. Charles also has the blessing of Metropolitan Yuriy to serve as a Canadian Forces Military Chaplain in the Regular Force. Fr. Charles has generously taken time from his busy schedule to interview with the *Visnyk*. The *Visnyk* sincerely thanks Fr. Charles and his Command for the background information to prepare this chaplain series.

Q: Can you tell us about yourself?

Fr. Charles: I am serving at CFB Edmonton, and just posted into this base in August. Previously, my first posting was at CFB Wainwright. This is a training base that is located in Eastern Alberta. At other times of the year, there are exercises and other training classes all going on at the same time. In Edmonton, I am working with two very active units. 1 Field Ambulance provides medical support including ambulances, treatment by medical professionals, and nursing and dental care to all of the other units posted in Edmonton such as infantry, armoured, combat engineers and many others. 1 Field Ambulance also runs the Base Clinic, which provides for the health care of the military personnel posted to Edmonton. 408 Tactical Helicopter Squadron also works very closely with infantry and armoured units. Many of their members have just returned from deployments in Afghanistan. There is a very busy cycle of training, support and exercises with the Griffon helicopters coming and going from the hangars throughout the day and night.

The Chaplain team in Edmonton supports these and all of the other units in Edmonton. There is a very high "operational tempo" but we work very well together and it's been a real thrill to be a part of it.

Q: What moment made an impression on you in your pastoral work?

Fr. Charles: The first Orthodox Divine Liturgy served in a Canadian Forces Chapel in over 60 years happened in Wainwright (See *Visnyk*, No.2, February 2011). I had the assistance of the Bonnyville District's pastor and congregation to help make this happen. It was an exhilarating and very proud moment for us all.

Q: What are the advantages of being both a priest and service person?

Fr. Charles: I have the unique role of being a "trail blazer" for the Orthodox in the Canadian Forces chaplain branch. As a priest, I have the privilege of working with a variety of fellow chaplains who come from many different faith traditions. As a Canadian Forces officer, I have the distinct honour of serving with some of the most dedicated, talented and motivated people I've ever had the good fortune to meet.

Q: What are the challenges to holding these dual positions?

Fr. Charles: As an Orthodox priest, one must have a very strong and living connection to the Holy Orthodox faith despite not always being able to do the things one usually would be able to do as a priest. There are exercises, deployments, taskings and other duties that may not always be convenient to the yearly, monthly or even daily cycles of an observant Orthodox. It's not always an easy thing to do. There is a great need for flexibility. The main thing I've found is that one needs to remain humble, but also to work hard on hav-

ing integrity in both the military and Orthodox worlds. It's a balance that I work on every day.

Q: What is the most challenging aspect of your pastoral work?

Fr. Charles: Well, one of the most challenging things as a Canadian Forces chaplain is to maintain the overall physical fitness that's required of all service members. Once you get to that level, it needs to be maintained and improved. Even though service members normally get an hour of each working day to do "PT" (physical training), it's not as easy as it was 10 or 15 years ago. The inspiration I get, however, by doing some of the PT with the units as well as the tests makes it all worthwhile.

Q: What are the most rewarding aspects of your pastoral work?

Fr. Charles: Sharing something as simple as chanting The Third Hour service in chapel for an Orthodox service member that just discovered that their faith is actually now represented by a chaplain for the first time in a very long time. That means a lot.

Q: Can you provide a sense of what is a typical day for you as a pastor?

Fr. Charles: A chaplain's day is rarely ever typical. I spend a great deal of time visiting in the unit lines (places of work). I will do what is best described as a "ministry of presence" to visit, share and get acquainted with members while walking the unit lines, but not to get in the way or interfere. It's usually during one of these times I'll become aware of an issue or a member that might need the assistance of the chaplain. There are other days where I'll spend time briefing the commanding officer or other senior officers about morale or other issues in the unit. A few minutes later I can very easily be climbing around a vehicle with a mechanic or riding out into the field to visit someone who needs to see the Padre. I've even been able to get the occa-



Fr. Charles Baxter in military training

sional helicopter ride when time and conditions permit.

Q: What are the special pastoral needs of service people?

Fr. Charles: The commitment a member makes to the CF is very real and profound. It can mean moving yourself and your family across Canada to a strange town. The husband or wife may be away from their family for a deployment overseas or on a naval vessel. The Orthodox members may not have an Orthodox parish that is nearby to serve their spiritual needs. They may not be aware of other Orthodox either on the base or in nearby communities. It's easy to feel a bit isolated and disconnected.

I am pleased to say that I have been warmly welcomed and treated with friendship and collegiality by my Canadian Forces brother and sister chaplains. I just hope that I will not be the only one who is able to "take the plunge" and enroll in the CF as a military chaplain.