

**78th D-Day Anniversary
Ceremony in Honour of
+Father Ignatius Maternowski, OFM Conv.
Gueutteville, Normandy, France
2nd June 2022**

Reflection delivered by Fr. James McCurry, OFM Conv.

We stand today on hallowed ground – the place where an heroic chaplain of the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army died to save the local men, women, and children of Gueutteville. Indeed Fr. Ignatius Maternowski shed his blood at this very site not only for the people of this hamlet, but for the total liberation of all France and all Europe from the tyranny of Hitler’s Germany.

Try to imagine for a moment what life was like for the eighty (80) inhabitants of this small hamlet of Gueutteville during the days of June 1944, leading up to D-Day. Soldiers of the German infantry regiment had invaded and occupied the hamlet. These rough infantry soldiers moved into the people’s houses along this one main street where we are now standing. The local women were forced to cook for them. The local men were forced into slave labour. The children lived in fear. Then suddenly, early in the morning of the sixth (6th) of June, amidst the sound of bombs and the noise of low-flying airplanes, the people of Gueutteville saw parachutes descending from the sky. These parachutes signaled hope for deliverance – hope that their liberation from the oppressors was at hand.

Among the parachutists who landed on D-Day was their Franciscan priest-chaplain, Father Ignatius Maternowski. His rank of Captain made him the highest-ranking

officer to set foot in Gueutteville that morning. He was unarmed. His only “weapons” were faith and courage. He immediately began tending to the injured and wounded American soldiers, who quickly filled up the café-grocery building at one end of the street. Fr. Ignatius needed to assure their protection. With the enemy soldiers headquartered at the other end of the street, Fr. Ignatius had only one course of action. He would need to impress upon the Germans the rules of the Geneva Convention, guaranteeing that no attacks were allowed against the wounded and the non-combatants. This strategic plan was risky, but it was the only “weapon” left for Fr. Ignatius to use. He understood the danger, but he knew that he must go to meet with the highest-ranking German officer, to convince him that, according to the Geneva Conventions, Gueutteville must be declared a protected medical zone. Thus, Fr. Ignatius bravely walked the full length of this street, to meet the German major, and his ultimate destiny. Despite this valiant attempt to defend human rights, Fr. Ignatius was shot dead on the very spot opposite this memorial site where we are now standing.

Three of the teenage participants in today’s ceremony come from St. Francis High School, near Buffalo, New York, in the United States – the *alma mater* of Fr. Maternowski. Permit me to share an insight from each of these young men about Fr. Ignatius’s legacy: Joseph Pivarunas wrote: *“Father Maternowski died demonstrating peace and goodness. He exhibited the most perfect form of love by laying down his life for his friends.”* Luke Nowak wrote: *“I was amazed by this man’s courage and dedication to serve his comrades... His heroism is a treasure too valuable to forget.”* Ethan Karalus wrote: *“He put the lives of his brothers before his own, going to extents that few would dare traverse...”*

Let me conclude. The Franciscan Friars, the soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division, and the people of Normandy have one important thing in common: our commitment to what is right and just. We all see ourselves in today's world as true "instruments of peace" – a peace that is grounded in justice and respect for human rights – the values we commemorate today as we pay tribute to the heroism of Fr. Ignatius Maternowski. May this sacred hamlet of Gueutteville, which preserves his memory, remain forever an icon of justice and peace.

God bless America. Vive la France!