‘Keeper of sacred things’

By Chaplain Doug Vrieland

What is a chaplain? This is a question I have asked numerous times when I have been called to give a “chaplain brief” at some command I was serving, explaining what services we offer. I often begin such briefs with the question, “What is a chaplain?” Audience members have that blank look in their eyes; they know instinctively what a chaplain is, but at the same time have a difficult time putting it into words. “A religious leader,” someone will volunteer. And our discussion begins.

Perhaps it would do well for us to consider the origins of the word chaplain. According to Hank Post, in a little book called Keeper of Sacred Things (the title of which I stole for this article), the word goes back hundreds of years. Early Christians began to collect a number of sacred relics—physical items that they considered to have been passed down by the Apostles themselves. These relics were housed in special places called capella, which is the root for the word chapel. A chaplain, then, was one who was charged with the responsibility of taking care of these sacred relics. They were the “keepers of sacred things.”

The task of the chaplain, then, is to be about that which is sacred. We are to be about the business of looking for where God is at work, pointing to God’s activity when we discover it, and caring for the sacred memories and stories of God’s activity in people’s lives in the past. This is no small task in a society that devaluates the sacred as somehow less real than that which is called “secular.”

Chaplains discover sacred things in all kinds of places. They find them in the midst of communities of believers who faithfully gather to perform rituals that in many cases have been performed for hundreds of years; to give voice to the prayers of their hearts; to hear once again the sacred writings explained; and to make music to the glory of their God. Chaplains discover the sacred in their offices as a couple who have been fighting for months suddenly get in touch with the tender love they have for each other. Chaplains discover the sacred out on ships when they listen to the story of a young sailor in the engine room or celebrate with the crew the arrival once again at homeport after several months of deployment. Few chaplains today have relics handed down from the Apostles; however we continue to deal with that which is sacred.

What is the role of the sacred in your life? That is an important question, because without that sense of the sacred, we become less than human. What are the stories that come out of your journey that give meaning to life, that offer you encouragement, purpose, and hope? Where do the stirrings of love tug at your heartstrings? What rituals (religious or not) help give order and coherence to your life?

Chaplains are here to help identify, give voice to, and bless that which is sacred in your life. Such sacred things help nourish the soul, which creates resiliency in times of difficulty and stress. Are you having trouble identifying that which is truly sacred in your life? You might want to schedule an appointment with your chaplain, the “Keeper of Sacred Things,” to see if you can find them once again.

***MARINER** Cont. from pg. 1*

Distinguished guests in attendance included Cloyd, the mayor of Ozu, the Honorable Hiroshi Shimizu, and members of the community who participated in the recovery efforts 60 years ago. They spoke to the audience about the significance of the day’s events.

Cloyd thanked the people of Ozu for their generosity and the contributions made to make the memorial monument and the ceremony possible.

“You fine people of the city of Ozu have ensured these crew members will never be forgotten,” Cloyd said in his remarks to the audience. “You have ensured that their sacrifice will not be forgotten now, or for generations to come. Your inspiring monument reflects compassion, humanity and generosity. To describe it in a single word, it is priceless.”

The Navy aircraft and its crew were one of many flying from forward-deployed locations in Japan in support of the Korean War.

The PBM-5 crashed at approximately 2 a.m. in the hills of Ozu after a night take off from then U.S. Air Force Base Iwakuni.

The first responders were firefighters from the nearest village, including the current president of the Memorial Monument Preservation Group Teruo Terada.

At 11 a.m. the following day, U.S forces arrived and collected the remains of the 14 crew members, which had been wrapped in white parachutes along with flowers offered from the local firefighters and volunteers who responded to the crash. As the remains left the site, a temporary altar was created and a local Buddhist priest prayed for the crew members to find peace in their final resting place.

It was through Teruda’s and local community members’ diligence and donation efforts that the monument, commemorating the crew members’ lives was created on April 18, 2009.

“The crash was a sad accident that happened 60 years ago. I wanted to maintain this as a memorial site for those brave people,” Teruda said. “What happened here is a part of the history in this area and I wanted to pay respect to those who died in the plane crash; that was the motivation for building this.”

Shimizu, expressed his gratitude to Cloyd and all in attendance and praised U.S. support during Operation Tomodachi.

“I would like to express my most heartfelt thanks to everyone who attended this ceremony today,” Shimizu said. “This memorial is a fine example of the friendship and trust between the United States and Japan.”

This year marked the first time that a ceremony was held at the memorial and Terada said he wants to ensure this event happens every ten years.

“What I hope for is that the family members of these Sailors will have the chance to come and visit this memorial one day,” he said. “That is a message we are hoping to get through with our memorial. We want them to know that their loved ones will never be forgotten in our community.”

Members of the local community place flowers on a monument commemorating the lives of 14 U.S. Navy PBM-5 Mariner crew members from Patrol Squadron Eight Nine Two (VP-892) during a memorial service Aug. 5. The crew died in a plan crash on Aug. 8, 1952. The U.S. Seaplane VP-892 Memorial Monument Preservation Group, a Japanese organization, conducted the ceremony and established a monument in honor of the crew members.