

11-2020

**A Gift of Faith from WWII Foxhole [Article]**

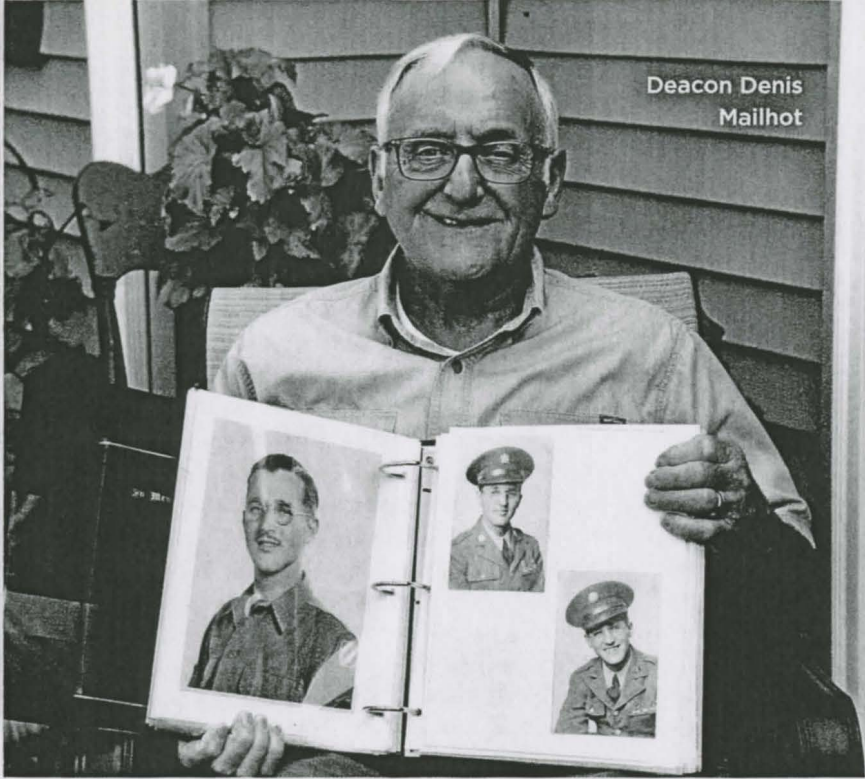
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Deacon Denis  
Mailhot



# A gift of faith FROM A WWII FOXHOLE

**“A little metal crucifix as plain as it can be, but only God in heaven knows how dear it is to me.”**

**So begins a poem penned by a soldier more than 75 years ago, a sign of the faith he carried with him from the neighborhoods of Lewiston to the battlefields of WWII.**

“I have it always with me, in every step I take, at evening when I slumber, at morning when I awake,” the poem continues.

Entitled “The Crucifix,” the poem was written by Private First Class Elisé Dutil on the beachhead of Anzio-Nettuno, Italy, in 1944. It is one of many treasures preserved by his nephew Deacon Denis Mailhot, who serves at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Auburn.

“I decided to take on this project because, for years, my mother and my aunts on the Mailhot side had meticulously kept all these pictures and postcards and photos and newspaper clippings,” he says. “Once I saw all this, I said, ‘I have to put it together. I have to do this right.’”

Deacon Mailhot began organizing the collection in 2019, but when the coronavirus struck, it gave him the time he needed to immerse himself in the project. The result was two large binders full of mementos and messages capturing his family’s history of military service, from a great uncle who

served in WWI, to uncles who served in WWII, to his own service in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War.

“I decided to put them in a logical order — WWI, WWII, Vietnam — and the biggest piece of it was Elisé,” he says. “Almost that entire second book was Elisé.”

The photos and postcards, many written in cursive French, paint a picture of service, sacrifice, and faith. In a postcard to his parents shortly before he shipped overseas in January 1943, Elisé writes, “God, he had hardship, so why do we think we would not have a little hardship [too]?”

Elisé was sworn into the U.S. Army on June 9, 1942, at age 22. Born November 24, 1919, he attended St. Peter School in Lewiston and then Lewiston High School. He was active at Saints Peter & Paul Parish (now part of Prince of Peace Parish), singing in the choir and with a male choral society. He also belonged to two fraternal organizations: the Société des Défenseurs du Saint Nom de Jésus (Society for the Defenders of the Holy Name of Jesus) and the Cadets of the Catholic Order of Foresters.

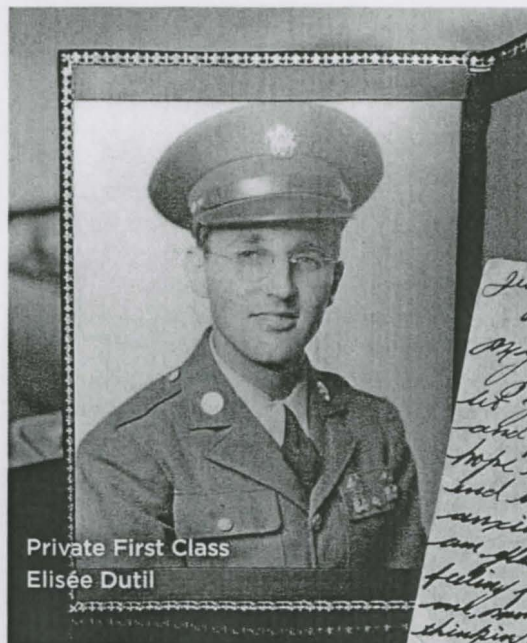
“He was involved in his faith. He never missed Mass ever. If there was a chaplain doing a Mass during the war, he was there, I’m sure,” says Deacon Mailhot.

Elisé was a member of the 7th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division, one of the few divisions to fight in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany during the war. During the invasion of Sicily, Elisé was injured in the leg, for which he was awarded the Purple Heart. He then fought at Anzio-Nettuno, a battle critical in the liberation of Rome. It was there, in a foxhole, that he began writing “The Crucifix.” Elisé dedicated the poem to his brothers in arms, urging them to also keep Christ close to their hearts.

The poem’s dedication reads, “Please soldiers, don’t forget to say every day and night, ‘My Good Lord, I offer Thee this day, or night, all I shall do or think or say, uniting it with what was done on earth by Jesus Christ, Thy Son.’”

“Elisé writes ‘The Crucifix,’ gives it to his men, so they will keep their Catholic faith, their Christian faith, strong in the worst situation that any human being could ever be put in,” says Deacon

Mailhot. “There is no selfishness in that. He’s trying to evangelize his men, the men in the foxholes in 1944. He is writing this dedication hoping they’ll remember their faith. He was concerned that if something happened to them, that they would go to heaven.”



Private First Class  
Elisé Dutil

*Jesus, My God, tonight, P.F.C. - Elisé A Dutil  
Pray for me. Post Hq Co. 7th Inf. 1st  
Army - Anzio-Nettuno  
My dearest Family,  
Just a few words to  
let you all know, that I  
am feeling fine, also I  
hope this war, soon to an  
end soon, because I am  
anxious to see you all. I  
am glad to hear, that everyone  
feeling fine. I got some good  
news, dad. I am always  
thinking about you.*



It was at Anzio-Nettuno that Elisée was wounded again, this time more seriously. He was evacuated to a hospital in North Africa where, his faith unshaken, he completed the poem. A faded, typed copy states: "I started in my foxhole and I finished in the hospital."



PFC Elisée Dutil with his parents, siblings, and sister-in-law

"These pages are what he typed on a typewriter during the war," Deacon Mailhot says, pointing to pages in the binder. "It is my hope and prayer that copies of Elisée's prayer found their way into the hands of all the soldiers 'in the foxholes' he served with, especially those who passed away into the loving and eternal embrace of God."

Elisée rejoined the 3rd Infantry Division in France, as it began the push toward Germany's

Siegfried Line. He would not, however, live to see the end of the war. He was killed in action near Zweibrücken, Germany, on March 18, 1945, less than two months before Germany surrendered.

"He paid a great price that we as a free people might continue to enjoy all those things that make life worth living. By that, he showed his intense love for us: 'Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' Not only our nation but our very civilization is deeply indebted to him," Lt. Col. Ralph J. Smith, a division chaplain, wrote to Elisée's father.

"These guys were the greatest generation. The only reason, I believe, that the United States of America is still here today is that generation," says Deacon Mailhot. "They sacrificed their lives."

Just weeks before his own death, Elisée received word that his mother had passed away. Deacon Mailhot says the family often said she went to get her son to end his suffering.

Originally buried in a cemetery in France, Elisée's father paid to have his son's body returned home. He is now buried in the family plot at St. Peter's Cemetery in Lewiston. It is not known whether his crucifix lies with him.

Although Elisée died before Deacon Mailhot was born, he says his uncle's faith and poem were inspirations to him as he discerned his vocation to the permanent diaconate.

"Elisée truly imitated Christ throughout much of his too brief life," he says.

Elisée's poem also inspired others beyond the battlefields. Father Mitchell Koprowski, a chaplain who told Deacon Mailhot he was with Elisée at Anzio-Nettuno when he wrote the poem, later shared it with Carmelite Nuns in North Dakota.

## My Crucifix | By PFC Elisée A. Dutil

A little metal crucifix,  
As plain as it can be,  
But only God in Heaven knows  
How dear it is to me.

I have it always with me,  
In every step I take,  
In evening when I slumber,  
In morning when I awake.

In bright or cloudy weather,  
In sunshine or in rain,  
In happiness or in sorrow,  
In pleasure or in pain.

It helps me in my struggles.  
It reproves me when I sin.  
Its look of gentle patience  
Rebukes the strife within.

In days of pain and anguish,  
The greatest help I knew  
Was to hold the little crucifix  
Until I calmer grew.

And looking at the figure,  
Which hung in patience there,  
I saw the dreadful torture  
Which He and love did bear.

His feet are nailed together.  
His loving arms outspread.  
And blood is dripping slowly down  
From His thorn-crowned Head.

And how then could I murmur,  
Or bitterly complain,  
When love for me induced Him  
To undergo such pain?

So when the time approaches  
That I shall have to die,  
I hope that little crucifix  
Will close beside me lie;

That the Holy Name of Jesus  
May be the last that I shall say,  
And kissing that dear crucifix  
My soul may pass away.

## Dedication

### For the Men in the Foxholes

"Men, please don't forget, read this prayer every moment of the day, and also don't forget to say your Act of Contrition perfect, every day and night. Say also, soldiers, five times, Our Father, Hail Mary, and a Glory Be, etc. for the Holy Father and the Church.

Please soldiers don't forget to say every day and night, 'My Good Lord, I offer Thee this day, or night, all I shall do or think or say, uniting it with what was done on earth by Jesus Christ Thy Son.' I wish you soldiers the best of luck and pray God will bless and protect you always."

"The sisters thought it was so wonderful that they took that prayer and made a prayer card. They distributed that in the religious order for decades," says Deacon Mailhot.

As we mark the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII, Deacon Mailhot says he hopes Elisée's story leads readers to reflect upon the sacrifices made by so many, who put others before themselves.

"It was my hope that PFC Elisée A. Dutil's prayer serves to inspire all of us that we are never alone, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, so that we may unite as one community, one state, and one nation under God," he says.

Deacon Mailhot says the Franco-American Collection at the University of Southern Maine plans to digitize and preserve the material he put together. He expressed gratitude to Doris Belisle-Bonneau, a board member of the collection, and to students in Seth Goodwin's French class at Edward Little High School in Auburn for helping to translate some of the articles and postcards from French into English. ■

