

The Sodality Medal
AKA: Jumping Mary Medal

In 1962 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky military orders brought three Catholic chaplains from three different battle groups together for the first time. Captain Victor Bieberle of the 101st, Captain Francis X. McCarthy of the 187th, and Captain Frederick W. Straub of the 327th. All three were active paratroopers and very tight with their men. Over the next several months they became great friends. At least once a week they would get together for dinner and drinks.

At Fort Campbell a former 101st Airborne chaplain and now their commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Thomas. E. Waldie had started a Catholic organization called The Sodality of Our Lady for Paratroopers. At the time St. Michael medals (Patron Saint of Paratroopers) were difficult to come by and were not all that popular with the Airborne units. The three now-friends came up with the idea to make a medal specific to the Airborne and to represent the local Sodality at Fort Campbell. Despite many ideas regarding design, they were not artists. At the time Captain McCarthy was helping a young private's wife with instruction in the Catholic faith when he learned her husband was an artist. Her husband, Private First Class Richard DeSpain, also of the 187th, was invited to meet with the three chaplains where their thoughts and ideas were shared. Private DeSpain combined these ideas and came back with pencil drawings for their review.

Within a couple of meetings the design was complete. On the front of the medal is a relief of the Blessed Virgin Mary superimposed over a paratrooper's open canopy. Around the octagonal medal read "Our Lady of Angels Protect Us in Combat". The back of the medal depicted the Miraculous Medal. This medal was unique as it was the first to be directly connected with an Airborne Sodality. After getting permission from Lieutenant Colonel Waldie the first medals were cast. Fr. McCarthy believes a member of their unit had a father who was a jeweler in New York who offered to cast and produce the first Sodality medals. The first run consisted of a couple hundred medals cast in sterling silver. These medals were professionally done in exquisite detail. The three Airborne chaplains quickly gave them out within a couple of months. Usually adding "if you wear this medal you will land safely!"

The medals turned out to be extremely popular quickly gaining interest outside of the Airborne units. A second run was produced and proved just as popular despite being cast of an alloy and slightly lower quality. As the three chaplains moved on to other assignments, they remained great friends. All three were frequently sought out to provide the medal to others. The bigger story today is the many personal accounts attributed to the medal, where it miraculously brought the wearer through a harrowing experience unscathed. Anyone familiar with this medal seems to have a story. The popularity of the medal never waned with other military groups having had them recast at different times.

I became aware of part of this story after the death of my wife's uncle Fr. Victor Bieberle on 02/02/15. A serviceman told me how much he appreciated Fr. Bieberle supplying him with another medal just a year earlier. He knew no history other than he believed Fr. Bieberle was one of the original designers. Fr. Vic had never mentioned anything about it and I thought little of it until I came across a photograph of three Airborne chaplains with the medal superimposed in the corner. During the subsequent journey, I had the pleasure of speaking with Frank McCarthy and Richard DeSpain who provided the most of the history above. As an interesting side note, Fr. Victor Bieberle passed away having always worn this medal. Frank McCarthy and Richard DeSpain still wear this medal today.

If you happen to have one of original medals you truly own a unique piece of military and Airborne history and lore.

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