

## ■ MARIST LIVES

# REV. GEORGE LEPPING, SM

## Through the War With Mary

by Susan J. Illis, Archivist, Archives of the Society of Mary, US Province

“That was when we felt the freedom of the air, the trees, bushes, the birds; everything seemed to be different. Everything seemed to be greener. Everything seemed to change to a brighter color. We were free.”

Marist missionary Father George Lepping recorded his feelings upon hearing of the surrender of the Japanese, after being their prisoner for 3 ½ years during World War II in a Japanese camp. He was forced to endure another month of imprisonment before he could experience the reality of freedom. However, his feelings of relief upon hearing of the war’s end could only compare with those experienced by his family a short time later, when his telephone call proved that the reports of his death were untrue.

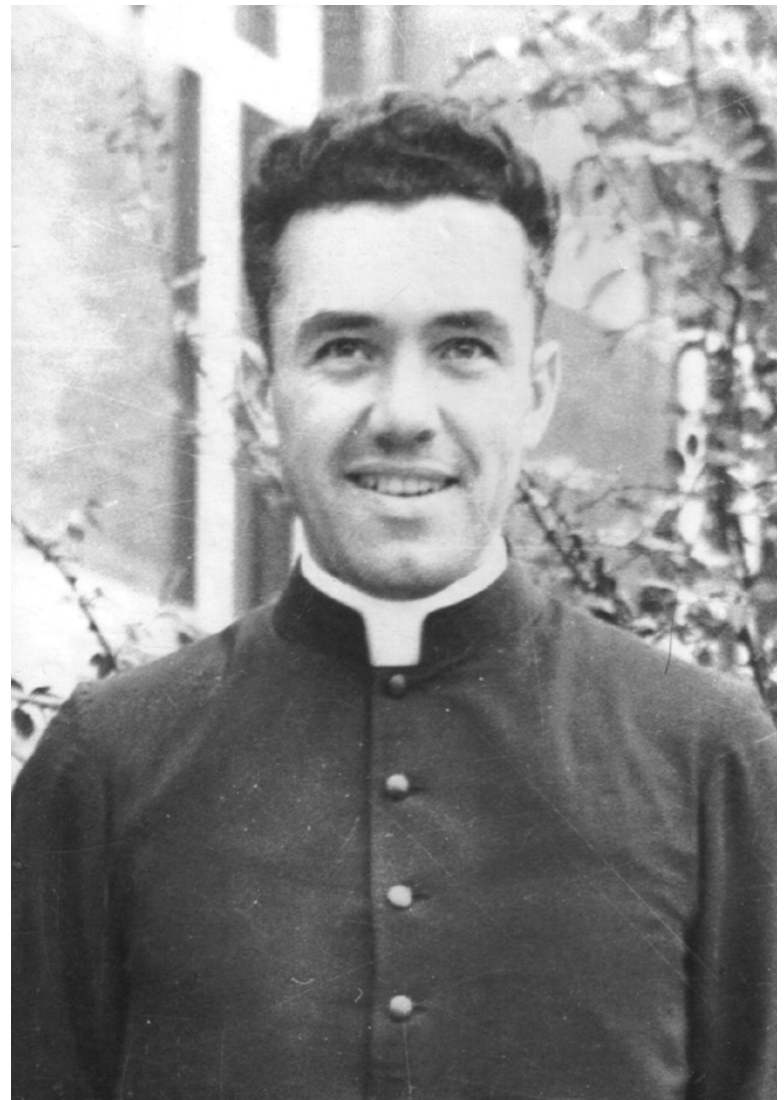
George Michael Lepping was born on October 19, 1909, the middle child of seven. Growing up in a large family in what he called “the edge of poverty,” George contributed to the household economy from a young age, first by gathering and reselling junk and later by selling newspapers. He used his earnings to contribute to his mother’s Christmas savings accounts and support charities at St. Vincent’s School. When he entered the Roman Catholic High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania he paid for his own used textbooks and carfare, easing the burden on his parents.

After graduating from high school and working for a few years, George was called to religious life. He joined the Marists for the most prosaic of reasons - the diocesan Catholic seminary was full at the time, but St. Mary’s Manor, the Marist seminary in Bucks County, was able to accept him.

In 1938, only four months after his ordination, Fr. George Lepping departed for his mission in the North Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, bypassing the year of parish work most Marists completed before embarking on missionary work. At the time, his classmates believed he was fortunate to be going far away from the war looming in Europe. Little did they realize he was sailing straight into another line of fire.

Lepping spent the first few years of his missionary life ministering to a large Catholic population in Lemmananu, Buka, before moving to Poporang, Shortland Islands where his station was less populous but geographically larger. On February 27, 1942, after being evacuated and then returned to Poporang, he wrote to his parents: “If America can send sufficient help we may be saved. If not, then we will probably be under Japanese rule. In what way they will treat the missionaries, no one knows.” Two weeks later, on March 15, he wrote: “I am in very good health and am happy here. We are ready for the worst, but we are in hopes that the Missions will not be molested! We are in the hands of God and nothing happens without his permission!”

Only a few weeks later, Fathers Lepping and fellow Marist missionary Maurice Boch were placed under house arrest by



the Japanese, which proved to be little more than an annoyance as during their frequent “checks” the Japanese soldiers would steal from the priests’ meager stores. Five months later, Lepping and Boch were transported to Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, the Japanese prisoner of war camp, where they spent another six months. This period was very difficult, as scant and spoiled food kept them in a constant state of hunger and sickness.

On February 28, 1943, all missionaries were taken to the Mission Prison Camp in Vunapope, Papua New Guinea. Initially, they found the conditions a huge improvement. They were able to celebrate Mass with homemade banana liquor and enjoy the company of 350 fellow missionaries, including confreres Rev. Joseph Lamarre, SM, and Brother Joseph John Redman, SM, who

joined them early in January 1944. There were many women religious in the camp as well. However, frequent bombings, many of them conducted by the American military who had no idea what the camp was, also began in 1944. Bro. Joseph, who was in poor health, prayed that he would be taken so the priests might be spared. His prayers were answered on February 11, 1944 – the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes – when Bro. Joseph was killed by an American bomb. The missionaries endured months of such bombings until they were moved to the jungle in June 1944, where they remained until being released by the Australians on September 13, 1945. A few days after his release, Fr. Lepping wrote: “We went through the war with Mary; we will start rebuilding with her at our side.”

Fr. Lepping had many stories from his experiences in the camps. He would regale visitors with the stories especially the youngsters in the minor seminary when he would visit. He seemed like an adventurer from across the world. He told how they would see the planes coming and each had to find a place to hide from the bombings that were frequent. One day he was taking a shower when the bombings began. He dashed into a safe spot with nothing to cover him but the small towel he had been using in the shower. This turned out to be a moment of lightness and laughter in an otherwise tragic setting with many deaths of fellow religious.

Despite his long imprisonment, Fr. Lepping held no ill will toward the Japanese, other than resenting their theft of his chalice containing gemstones from his mother’s engagement ring. He even volunteered to mission to Japan after the war. Other than trips home to visit family and fellow Marists, George Lepping remained in the missions (but not Japan) until his retirement in 1989. He spent the last years of his life at the Marist Provincial House in Washington, DC, where he died on August 26, 2005.