

RIGHT REVEREND FRANCIS JOSEPH WALMSLEY CBE

RIP

1926 – 2017

ROMAN CATHOLIC BISHOP OF THE FORCES

1979 -2002

Francis Joseph Walmsley was born on 9th November 1926 at Woolwich, South East London. During his early years he lived at Eltham and Dartford, Kent. He attended St Anselm's Primary School, Dartford, and St Stephen's RC Secondary School, Welling.

At the age of 14 he felt that he had a vocation and was sent by the Diocese of Southwark to the junior seminary of St Joseph's at Marks Cross.

In 1944 he volunteered for military service rather than wait to be called up. He opted for the Royal Navy but at that time there were no vacancies nor were there any in the RAF. He did not want to join the Army so he was told he should become a Bevan Boy and work in the coal mines. Because many members of his extended family were in the Merchant Navy he applied there instead and was successful.

Either God's will or Fate accounts for three narrow escapes he experienced during his war-time service.

The first occurred after a period of training when he was sent to join his first ship in the London docks. On arriving and reporting for duty the Bosun informed him that he was too inexperienced and sent him back to the pool. There he was told to report to another ship which was moored next to the ship which had rejected him. Both ships left on different convoys to Canada. The ship which rejected him was torpedoed with the loss of half the crew.

SS Temple Yard, was loaded in Montreal with grain, clothing and tanks. She unloaded the grain and clothing in London and went on to Antwerp. The tanks were unloaded onto a barge and whilst a mere 200 metres away from the freighter, whilst crossing the harbour, was sunk by a doodlebug. Bishop Francis recalls: "All that effort and time for nothing. I never discovered whether the tanks were ever hoisted up from the seabed." It never occurred to him that the doodlebug could easily have hit his ship rather than the barge as it had been aimed in the direction of the harbour.

His luck held when on a laden tanker sailing from the United States to London in the middle of a convoy of 60 ships. Suddenly a U- boat surfaced and fired two torpedoes both of which went right across the tanker's bows and sank two of the freighters. The strict rule was that no ship in the convoy was to stop and search for survivors; this was left to the escorting Royal Navy ships. He never found out if there were any.

Francis was released from the Merchant Navy in 1946 and he returned to St Joseph's College, and then to St John's Seminary at Wonersh to train for ordination for the Archdiocese of Southwark.

He was ordained priest in 1953 and appointed to St Peter's Parish, Woolwich. In 1958 he was transferred to St Peter's Parish, Shoreham-by-Sea, Sussex.

In 1960 he joined the Royal Navy as a Chaplain and was appointed to HMS Ariel, Lee-on-the Solent. Subsequently he served at sea in HMS Ark Royal, HMS Centaur, HMS Victorious, HMS Hermes and

HMS Bulwark, both in the Mediterranean and the Far East, and ashore at Devonport, Portsmouth, Chatham and Rosyth; he also served at the Naval Base, Singapore. Fr Frank, as he was known, is still remembered by naval veterans as a very hard-working, dedicated and effective naval chaplain.

In 1975 He was appointed Principal Roman Catholic Chaplain to the Royal Navy, in succession to Mgr George Pitt. He was named a Prelate of Honour by Pope Paul VI later that year.

Early in 1979 he was nominated Titular Bishop of Tamalluma and third Military Vicar by John Paul II - the first bishop in the United Kingdom to be appointed by the newly elected pope. His episcopal ordination followed on 22 February 1979 at the Garrison Church of SS Michael & George, Aldershot.

Bishop Walmsley was appointed CBE in the 1979 Queen's Birthday Honours.

In 1980 the Headquarters of the Military Vicariate was established at Farnborough, Hampshire, where Bishop Walmsley lived.

In 1986 Pope John Paul II approved a new ecclesial and canonical framework for churches which serve military personnel: military vicariates were to be established as military ordinariates, equivalent in Canon Law to dioceses. Reflecting the changed status, the Military Ordinariate of Great Britain (known in local usage as the Bishopric of the Forces) came into being on 21 July 1987, Bishop Walmsley becoming the first Military Ordinary or Bishop of the Forces.

On 18 June 2002, Bishop Walmsley retired and became Bishop Emeritus after a 23 year term as bishop which had witnessed the Falklands War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the First Gulf War, the Balkan wars and the UK intervention in Sierra Leone. He was succeeded by the Rt Rev Tom Burns SM who writes:

*"Bishop Frank's long and varied life and service to the Church, and as Bishop of the Armed Forces, made him known and appreciated widely. His ability to match names and faces was unique, and his way of working a crowd at events, giving everyone special attention, especially the annual Military Pilgrimage to Lourdes, was exceptional. He championed the cause of soldiers "Shot at Dawn" (the campaign for pardons for the 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers who were executed by firing squad for desertion and cowardice during World War One.) Bishop Francis was motivated by his strong sense of charity and justice. The soldiers were eventually pardoned in 2006. He will be remembered fondly for his frequent smiles, laughter, and stories – endless and enjoyable, like himself!"* - Bishop Tom Burns, Bishop Frank's successor as Bishop of the Forces is currently Bishop of Menevia in South Wales.

After retiring, Bishop Frank moved to a bungalow at St John's Convent, Kiln Green where he was an active member of the community of retired priests. There he supported the work of catechetical preparation of children for the sacraments and in his spare time enjoyed writing and gardening. He continued to travel widely and regularly supplied in local parishes.

Bishop Walmsley chronicled his long ministry in the three volumes he wrote after he retired: *From Sea to See* which fully details his fascinating life as wartime sailor, priest, Royal Navy Chaplain and Bishop.

He died on 26 December 2017 at St John's Convent, Kiln Green.

MAY HE REST IN PEACE