

unexpected happened. Padre Pio approached the man and before the man could utter a single word, Padre Pio said to him, "Tell the young priest from Canada that I am aware that he has come here to offer thanks on behalf of his entire family for my intercession in saving his brother's life during the war."

*You reached down from on high and took hold of me. You drew me out of deep waters. You delivered me from my strong enemy, from those who hated me. – 2 Samuel 22*



A group of soldiers visiting Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo

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## Padre Pio and Desmond Montague



Desmond Montague –  
An officer of the  
Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II

# Padre Pio and Desmond Montague

*We are hard pressed on every side yet not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed. – 2 Corinthians 4:8-9*

Canadian-born Desmond Montague served the Allied cause during World War II as an airman and navigator. He was assigned to the Royal Air Force Squadron Number 142 which specialized in long range bombing missions. Along with the others in his squadron, Desmond was stationed in Foggia, Italy. They all lived in tents on the military base. Desmond had heard many positive statements about the mild climate in southern Italy but during the time that he was in Foggia, he found it ironic that it rained incessantly.

One day, Edward Wiseman, the pilot of the aircraft that Desmond was assigned to, asked him if he knew the meaning of the word, “stigmata.” Desmond told Edward that he was familiar with the term. Desmond was a devout Catholic. He kept a Rosary in his pocket at all times and had always been a person of faith. His own brother was a Catholic priest. Edward Wiseman told Desmond that he had heard that there was a priest living at the monastery of Our Lady of Grace in the nearby town of San Giovanni Rotondo who had the stigmata. Desmond was interested in what Edward shared about the priest but he was also very skeptical. He was almost sure that it was not true.

The next day, Desmond and his good friend Lyell Bachelder, a fellow air force officer, decided to find out for themselves if Edward’s information about the priest who reportedly had the stigmata was correct. The two men walked from the airfield where they were stationed to the monastery of Our Lady of Grace in San Giovanni Rotondo. Due to the heavy wartime bombing that had taken place in and around Foggia, there were no longer any roads to travel on. They walked over hills and embankments through the dry and desolate terrain.

Padre Pio. Desmond had a wonderful reunion with his entire family. He felt strong, both physically and mentally, and was profoundly grateful to be alive.

Desmond then traveled to Montreal, Quebec to be reunited with his good friend, Lyell Bachelder. Desmond learned that Lyell had made a complete recovery from the malaria that had prevented him from participating in the doomed bombing mission to Budapest. After Lyell recovered, he was assigned to a Canadian Bomber Squadron. He flew on sixty bombing raids in enemy territory. At that time, the mortality rate for airmen sent on bombing missions was as high as 50 percent. Lyle safely and successfully completed all of his assigned missions.

When Lyell greeted Desmond, he had the crucifix that Padre Pio had given him in his hand. Lyell repeated the words of Desmond’s mother and said, “Des, it is because of Padre Pio’s protection that we are both alive!”

Desmond’s brother, Father Robert Montague, was deeply grateful that Desmond had survived the grave dangers of the war. He hoped that someday he would be able to go to San Giovanni Rotondo so that he could thank Padre Pio personally for saving his brother’s life. In 1963, he was finally able to make the trip.

Father Robert did not speak Italian and he knew that Padre Pio did not speak English. He was concerned about the language barrier and wanted to make sure that he would be able to communicate with Padre Pio. At the monastery of Our Lady of Grace, he met a man who was fluent in both Italian and English. He asked the man if he would relay his message to Padre Pio and he happily agreed. One day, when Father Robert and his new found friend were at the monastery, the

Desmond quickly buried his parachute. He did not want the Germans to suspect that there were any survivors in the plane crash. He then walked toward an isolated farmhouse which he saw in the distance. As he drew closer, he noticed that there was debris from his fallen plane in the yard of the farmhouse. Desmond knocked on the door. The farmer and his wife who greeted Desmond were very kind. The wife cleaned and dressed the wounds on his leg and face. The man handed him a glass of an unidentifiable liquid which he was very happy to accept. As he drank it, he felt an intense burning sensation in his throat and stomach. It turned out to be straight vodka.

Desmond could sense the fear of the farmer and his wife and under the circumstances, their fear was understandable. In German-occupied Yugoslavia, it was very dangerous for anyone to assist a member of the Allied troops. By allowing Desmond to come inside their house and by helping him, the couple was putting their own lives in danger.

Desmond was hoping that the farmer would help him to escape by directing him to the Yugoslavian partisans who, at that time, were resisting the German occupation. The farmer put Desmond in his wife's care and left the house momentarily. He soon returned with several well-armed German soldiers. They arrested Desmond on the spot. He would spend the next thirteen months in Prisoner of War camps in different parts of Germany.

As the war drew to a close, the Prisoner of War camp south of Lubeck, Germany where Desmond was held captive was liberated by General Montgomery's troops. World War II, which caused more casualties than any other war in history, finally ended on May 8, 1945. Desmond was flown back to England on the eve of V-E Day and a short time after that, returned to his home in St. John, New Brunswick. When he saw his mother, she said to him, "Desmond, I am certain that it was the priest in Italy who saved your life!" After his first trip to the monastery of Our Lady of Grace, Desmond had written to his parents and told them all of the details of his visit. He also sent them a photograph of

When Desmond and Lyell finally arrived in San Giovanni Rotondo, the first person they met was a friendly American woman named Mary Pyle. Mary confirmed that what Edward Wiseman had told them about the priest was true. Mary told them that the priest's name was Padre Pio and that he had the five wounds of Christ, the stigmata. "Would you like me to take you over to the church so that you could meet him?" Mary asked. Desmond and Lyell said that they would be very happy to be introduced to him.

Mary took the two army officers over to the church and gave them specific instructions. She said that it was important that all visits with Padre Pio be conducted in a dignified and respectful manner. She added that they should let Padre Pio handle the visit his way.

Desmond and Lyell followed Mary upstairs to the choir loft of the church. Mary directed them to a pew where she told them to kneel. It was in that very choir loft that Padre Pio had received the stigmata on September 20, 1918. "Padre Pio will soon come into the church and kneel in the pew right behind you," Mary told the two men. "When he comes in, do not turn around and stare at him." She explained that Padre Pio was a very humble person and did not want to be the object of anyone's curiosity. He did not like to feel that he was "on display."

Soon Desmond and Lyell heard Padre Pio come into the church. Just like Mary Pyle had told them, Padre Pio knelt down in the pew behind them. They could hear his soft voice and the sound of his beads as he prayed the Rosary quietly. After a time, Padre Pio touched them on the shoulder and they stood up to greet him. Padre Pio seemed happy to meet the two officers. He had magnificent dark eyes and a beautiful smile. Trying to be discreet, the two men could not help but glance at Padre Pio's hands. Mary Pyle had already confirmed

to them that Padre Pio had the stigmata. They noticed that Padre Pio wore brown woolen half gloves which covered the wounds completely.

Padre Pio was very friendly to the officers. He gave both of them a small crucifix as a gift. He also gave them his priestly blessing. Before he said goodbye, he patted both of the men on their heads. The simple and loving gesture reminded them of the way a father might affectionately pat the heads of his own sons. Padre Pio made Desmond and Lyell understand that he would watch over both of them.

A short time later, the two men made a second trip to Padre Pio's monastery. They were able to attend Padre Pio's Mass but were not able to speak with him. They brought jam, sugar and tea for Mary Pyle and for the Capuchins. On their previous visit, they had noticed that those items were in short supply due to wartime food rationing.

The next day, Lyell woke up feeling very ill. A visit to the doctor revealed that he had contracted malaria. His condition was so serious that he had to be hospitalized. Desmond and the other members of the crew were departing on a bombing mission to Budapest, Hungary that very evening. Lyell's position as bombardier had to be filled by another airman.

The crew left on the evening of April 16, 1944 with the railway yards of Budapest as their central target. They all considered it to be a routine bombing raid, no different from many others they had already participated in. The aircraft used for the bombing mission was a Wellington Mark II – a twin-engine night bomber. At that time, flights were accomplished by celestial navigation. Noting the position of the stars as well as consulting air almanacs and tables, and using instruments that measured horizon and altitude, the navigator could plot a very accurate course to the designated target area.

After successfully completing their bombing mission in Budapest, Desmond and the other crew members set course to return to their military base in Foggia. They kept on a constant lookout for dangerous German night fighter planes. That particular night, the stars were magnificent, shining like jewels against a dark canopy of endless sky.

They were not far from Belgrade, Yugoslavia when suddenly and without any warning, their aircraft was fired upon. In seconds, the plane went violently out of control. The pilot quickly gave his order over the intercom, "Emergency! All jump!"

The men always wore their parachute harnesses during flight, with the parachute pack right beside them for immediate access. Hearing the pilot's order, Desmond quickly tried to clip his pack to the parachute harness so that he could jump out of the plane. However, the simple task proved to be impossible. The sudden change in altitude and the strong gravitational forces that were present prevented Desmond from moving his arms. Completely immobilized, he was pressed against the wall of the plane. As the plane made a nose dive to the ground, Desmond was certain that he was going to die. He said a very quick prayer, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, help me!" and then he lost consciousness.

When Desmond regained consciousness, he was shocked to find that he was wrapped up in his parachute. How could it be? He had not been able to clip his parachute pack on after the plane had been hit. The plane had gone down in a mountainous region of Yugoslavia. He estimated that it had been approximately two hours since the plane had crashed. Desmond had received only minor injuries. There was a deep cut on his leg and on his face. Also, some of his teeth had been broken off. Other than that, he was in good condition. It seemed like a miracle to him that he had survived. All of the other members of the crew had died in the crash.