

Aloha Oe, Father Damien de Veuster

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It was 1873, a century ago, when Father Damien de Veuster consciously cast his lot with that of the outcast sufferers from leprosy then resident on the peninsular strip of land jutting north from under the steep cliffs of Molokai Island in the Sandwich Islands, now known as Hawaii. Sixteen years later he died with this affliction and was buried (April 17, 1889), as he had wished, under the shade of a large pandus tree—the same tree where he had spent his first nights on the island. There his remains lay for 46 years, till in 1936 they were removed and reinterred in Belgium. Brief notice of this was taken in the pages of this JOURNAL (4 [1936] 527) but the heartache and sorrow that the move occasioned among those whom Father Damien came to serve passed unnoticed. Remarkable enough this sorrow still remains as an acute sense of loss to many. The fact was recently brought to mind again when we had the opportunity to page through several photographic albums of one of the older resident patients, recently deceased, of Kalaupapa, Molokai. Some of his photographs of the removal of Father Damien are here presented together with supplements from other sources as a centennial tribute to Father Damien and a renewed acknowledgement of the tremendous influence of his life and work in the annals of the struggle to overcome this disease and the opprobrium that has been associated with it.

The original leprosarial site, established in 1866, lay at Kalawao on the eastern side of the neck of the peninsula. It was here that Father Damien worked and was laid to rest. However, beginning about 1888, the settlement was moved to the opposite side of the peninsular neck and the original site was inevitably somewhat neglected. Word of this spread to Belgium where justifiable

pride in Damien's accomplishments and sacrifices ran deep. It is probable that rumors of lack of care of the gravesite played a role in stirring King Leopold III to request that Damien's remains be returned to Belgium. In turn, some rumor of this request was probably the stimulus for the Governor of Hawaii to sign a law in 1935 setting up an annual contribution of \$3,000 to preserve as a monument that part of Molokai where were located Father Damien's church and grave. If so, it was too late, for President Roosevelt, without consulting the people of the distant isles of Hawaii and without regard to Damien's chosen parishioners, concluded an agreement for his last journey.

Thus it came to pass that, bewildered and helpless in the face of impersonal international politics, the patients on Molokai on January 27, 1936, spontaneously expressed their grief in doleful Hawaiian chants intermingled with the old Hawaiian funeral songs of warriors past as they watched the exhumation of he who had, through his own sacrifice, so markedly changed the condition of their lives for the better. They had themselves, always kept flowers growing at his grave and many frequently visited it in prayer, but this was not enough to keep their shrine intact and so it was recorded that their final farewell song, *Aloha Oe*, was heartrending.

"We have heard your protest and sympathize with your opposition to his removal from your midst. But today his native country, which gave him to us, claims him. His country desires to bestow upon him honors which cannot be given in this remote island spot." Thus spoke the presiding bishop, and a U.S. Army Air Corps plane lifted the remains on the first leg of Damien's long last voyage.

The world took note of this journey and it was recorded step by step by the press. In Honolulu a Pontifical Mass was celebrated in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace, where many years before Damien had been ordained deacon and priest. A new

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coffin of *Koa* wood traditionally reserved for Hawaiian royalty, was provided and the casket was carried under military escort through the throng-lined street to the U.S. Army transport "Republic" which carried it first to San Francisco and then to Panama. In San Francisco the remains were carried on a gun carriage through a bare-headed crowd of people during a gun salute, to the cathedral where the Archbishop conducted Mass and prayed for the soul of Damien. The "Republic" then steamed south to Panama where the Belgian training ship "Mercator," a slim-hulled, three-masted barkentine, took over the task of carrying the remains to his homeland. It arrived in Antwerp on May 3. There it was met by the King, Cardinal Van Roey, Primate of Belgium, the government, the church hierarchy and throngs of common people.

Cannons boomed, trumpets sounded, the bells of the city pealed and a hearse drawn by six white horses carried Damien's body to the Cathedral where a solemn pontifical Mass was celebrated and eulogies pronounced.

Late that evening a hearse slowly made the journey through the Tremeloo countryside, where Damien was born, to a crypt in St. Joseph's Chapel at Louvain, a national shrine dedicated to Father Damien's patron saint. There, under a beautiful black sarcophagus, lie the remains of Father Damien de Veuster, awaiting, still awaiting the decision of his church as to whether or not he is to be officially accorded the sainthood he has already held for so long in the hearts of many, not least of whom are those from whom he was taken.



Molokai peninsula, site of Kalawao (far side) and Kalaupapa (near side) settlements.



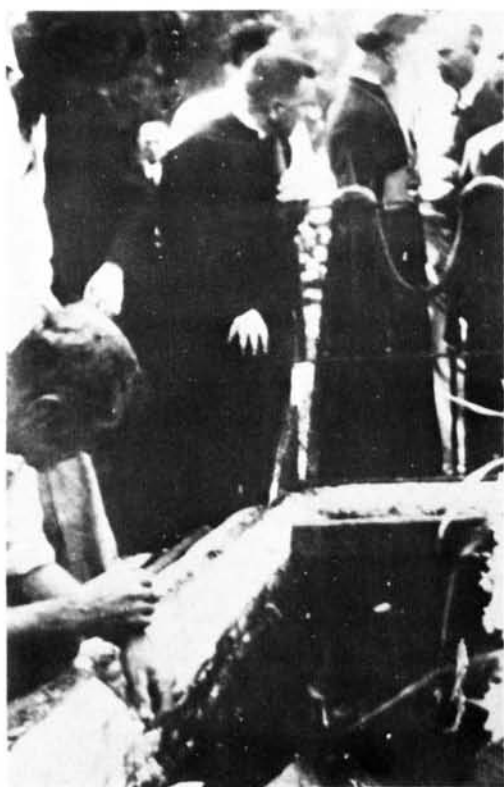
Kalawao settlement at the time of Father Damien.



St. Philomena Church, as enlarged and remodeled by Father Damien, with his grave (arrow) adjacent.



Father Damien shortly before death.



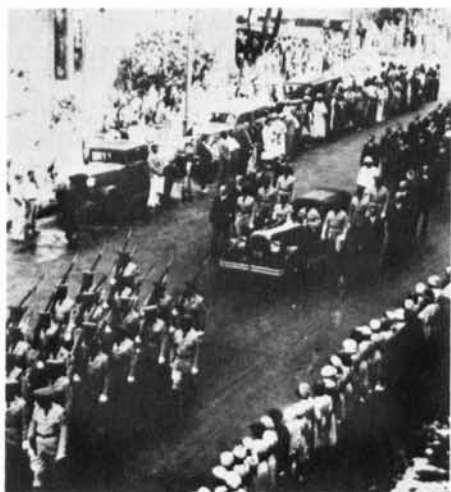
Exhumation



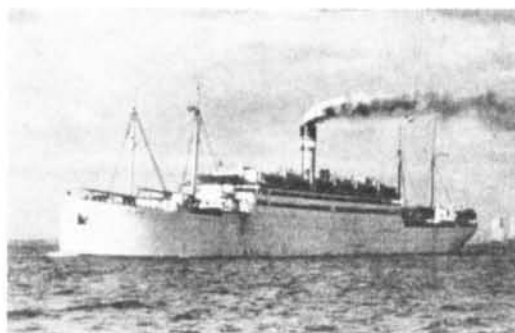
Final departure from St. Philomena Church.



Coffin loaded on U.S. Air Corps plane for transport to Honolulu.



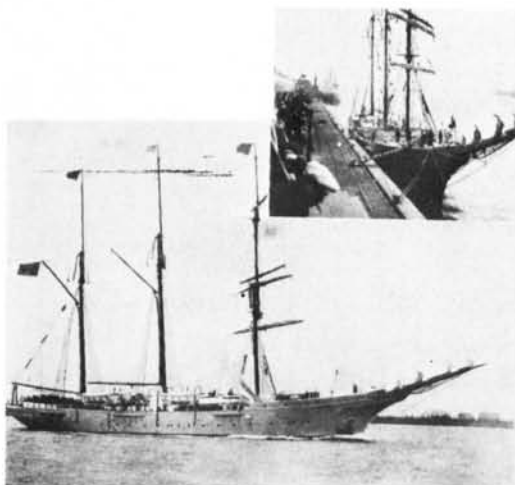
Honolulu funeral cortege.



U.S.S. Transport carried remains to San Francisco and then to Panama.



Coffin loaded on U.S. Army Transport "Republic."



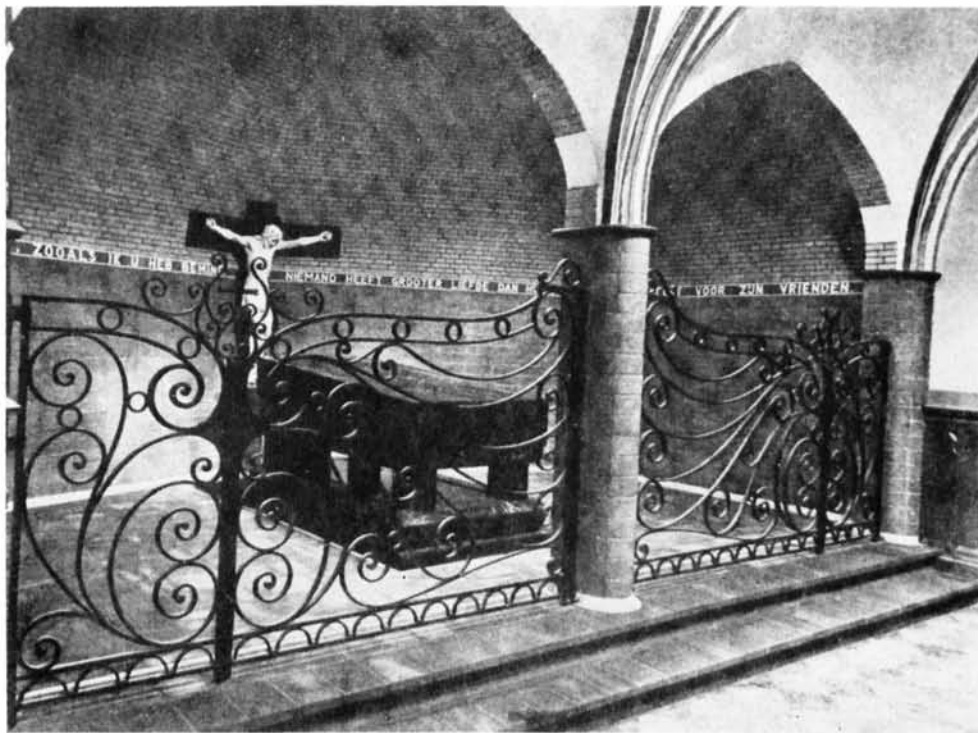
Belgian training ship "Mercator" transported remains from Panama to Belgium.



Funeral cortege in Antwerp.



Pontifical mass at cathedral in Antwerp.



Father Damien's sarcophagus, St. Joseph's Chapel, Louvain.