

Release of U.S. pilot is 'happy end,' friend says

But crew chief is buried in Maine

By Carol Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The release of U.S. pilot Michael J. Durant, who was held captive for 11 days in Somalia, is "a happy end to a tragic story," said one of his former classmates.

"As you can imagine, everyone's ecstatic," said Jim Brannen in Durant's hometown of Berlin, N.H.

"It's the best news. We're all walking around with big smiles," he told Catholic News Service in an Oct. 14 telephone interview.

Mohamed Farrah Aidid's militia released Army Chief Warrant Officer Durant and a Nigerian soldier, Umar Shankali, Oct. 14 as part of a goodwill gesture. A senior U.S. administration official said the release came about without any secret agreements.

The two men were driven to the U.S. Embassy by Red Cross officials where they were handed over to U.S. special envoy Robert Oakley. Durant, 32, appeared relaxed and looked like he was chewing gum as he was loaded into an ambulance. U.S. doctors said Durant was in good overall condition, but that he might have a fractured right jaw. He suffered a broken leg, a back injury and a shot in his arm when he was captured.

The U.S. pilot was taken captive Oct. 3 after his Black Hawk helicopter was shot down during a raid against Aidid militia. During the raid and fighting between U.N. peacekeeping forces and



AP/Wide World Photos
Brad Reeder of Logan, Utah, joins senior airman Kim L. Tucker of Gloversville, N.Y., as they welcome Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant at U.S. Ramstein Air Base in Germany on Friday, Oct. 15.

Aidid forces, at least 15 U.S. soldiers were killed and several others wounded.

During his captivity, Durant spoke with a Red Cross official and a British reporter. He was also shown in a videotape filmed by his captors and broadcast on Cable News Network. In the tape, his face was cut and he appeared dazed as he answered questions about his role in the fighting.

Although Durant left the town of Berlin 14 years ago when he graduated from high school, he was fondly remembered by the mill town near the Canadian border. When the townspeople saw his image on their television screens, they immediately put out flags and hung yellow ribbons as signs of support. Former classmates of Durant met to discuss what they could do for the family.

"In situations like this, people don't know what to do," said Brannen, who graduated with Durant in Berlin High School's class of '79. Brannen, who is on the parish council at St. Kieran in Berlin, decided to organize a Mass.

Durant's parents, Louise and Leon, parishioners of St. Kieran, were unable to attend the Mass because they were in Clarksville, Tenn., at their son's home with his wife and son Joey, born last year.

After news of his release, Mrs. Durant told the Associated Press Oct. 14 from Clarksville, "I'm ecstatic." As she described seeing him on television, she wept, saying, "He looked so good. It's so great." She added that her daughter-in-law, Lorrie, was to fly to Germany to join her husband.

Father Pare told CNS Oct. 12 that the Somalia situation "hit home" in Berlin unlike any other conflict since the Vietnam War. He called it "heart-warming to see people come to the aid (of Durant's family), supporting them in a difficult time."

When asked if the townspeople would have a ceremony in thanksgiving for Durant's release, Brannen said, "We'll do something. It's not concrete yet."

During the 11 days his friend was in captivity, he said he didn't know what to think and that many of the townspeople "feared it would go on longer."

"This has never happened to us before," he said. "But all's well that ends well."

While Americans celebrated the release of Durant, the soldier who served as crew chief on Durant's Black Hawk helicopter was buried in his hometown.

About 900 people, including a military honor guard, attended the Oct. 14 funeral at St. Anne's Church in Lisbon, Maine, for Army Sgt. Thomas Field.

"It was a great shock to everyone," St. Anne's pastor, Vincentian Father Mitchell Wanat, told Catholic News Service in an Oct. 15 telephone interview.

Field was one of at least 17 U.S. soldiers killed Oct. 3 in a battle with Aidid's militia forces. At least 70 Americans were wounded and hundreds of Somalis were killed or wounded.

Although the small-town church seats only 500, hundreds more watched the service from closed-circuit television in the church's basement or stood outside the church dotted with small yellow ribbons.

Field, 25, was originally listed as missing in action after the helicopter was shot down during the firefight in Mogadishu. His body was not recovered until several days after the battle.

Father Wanat said parishioners had "nothing but glowing reports to say about the young man who was very caring and loved his family a great deal."

Pope asks for prayers on 15th anniversary of election

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II marked the 15th anniversary of his election saying that the job is tough and asking prayers for strength and pastoral energy over the coming years.

As congratulatory messages — including a letter from President Bill Clinton — poured in from around the world, the 73-year-old pontiff attended a concert in his honor at the Vatican Oct. 16. He thanked the several thousand people who had come to help him celebrate the day.

"I want to ask with insistence that you all say a special prayer to God for me, so that I be given the strength necessary to do my best — to give myself completely, like St. Paul, in the service of the church," he said.

The pope said the papal ministry

was a taxing one, involving a constant commitment of his spirit as he tried to be a "builder of communion between the various particular churches."

Additionally, the promotion of peace and justice in a world full of tensions adds "more worries and more burdens" to the papacy, he said.

The Polish-born pope was elected on Oct. 16, 1978, the first non-Italian pontiff in 455 years. On the anniversary, the world's media and church leaders recalled the historic event in detail, and the Vatican marked it as a holiday. But the pope did not spend much time reminiscing — he was busy with other things, as usual.

In addition to morning Mass and meetings with several Italian church officials, the pope held an hourlong private audience with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer and dissident under communism.

Both men had turned a spotlight on human rights abuses under the Soviet regime, and both have been critics of the moral shortcomings of Western society. Asked to describe the encounter afterward, the 74-year-old Solzhenitsyn said that such a profound conversation could not be condensed.

But he added: "If we want to recover from communism, we should not apply the selfish vision of capitalism."

The concert was performed by a German symphony orchestra and chorus, the Mitteldeutscher Runfunk of Leipzig. Among the works was the Vatican anthem, accompanied publicly for the first time by a set of lyrics written by an Italian Jesuit, Father Raffaello Lavagna.

The new anthem lyrics, after recalling the death of St. Peter in Rome, describes every pope as a "fisher of men," a "beacon among the shadows"

and a defender of freedom and unity.

Among the congratulatory messages was one delivered in person at the concert by Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, dean of the College of Cardinals. He thanked the pope for launching a "new evangelization," for enriching the church's teaching office with documents and a new catechism, for carrying the Gospel message to more than 100 countries on 61 foreign trips, for being a voice for the poor and for warnings about the environment.

"The church still has great need of you, of your teaching, your pastoral energy, your untiring apostolic labor. People at the end of this century need you greatly," he said.

In his letter to the pope, President Clinton offered best wishes from all Americans and said he was confident the Vatican and the United States will keep working together toward a more humane and secure world.

South African reaction mixed to announcement of Nobel Peace Prize

By Bronwen Dachs
Catholic News Service

CAPE TOWN, South Africa — South African church leaders, like others in their country, had mixed reactions to the news that African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela and South African President F.W. de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The award to the two men "cheapens the meaning of the prize," said Archbishop Wilfrid Napier, president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference.

But Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the 1984 peace prize, said the award was a fitting climax to the struggle to end apartheid, South Africa's system of racial segregation.

Others said the prize should help ensure that Mandela and de Klerk, the two most powerful men in South Africa, stand firm against political violence and do not give up their work for a peaceful transition to democracy.

"Although I congratulate them and acknowledge the contribution they have made to bringing about change, what is the peace prize for when 10,000 people have died since 1990?" Archbishop Napier said in a telephone interview from Durban, where most of the killings have occurred.

De Klerk released Mandela from prison in February 1990 and began to dismantle apartheid.

"De Klerk did break the deadlock the country was in, and Mandela's contributions to negotiations have

been extremely positive, and for this we must rejoice, but I really can't be over the moon about the prize when so many people are dying in ongoing political violence," Archbishop Napier said.

"I hope the award will be a challenge to both of them to redouble their efforts and show South Africans that they really are men of peace," he said. "Now is the time for them to show that they really mean what they say, to back up their words of peace with action."

Archbishop Tutu congratulated Mandela and de Klerk at a news conference in Cape Town Oct. 15 — the day the prize was announced.

"Here we have two men, one white and one black. One who stood at the

head of a racist government but contributed to peace through his courageous initiatives in February 1990. The other, who had spent many years in prison fighting for peace and freedom, contributed through his dignity," Archbishop Tutu said.

But Archbishop Napier said neither Mandela nor de Klerk was truly committed to peace.

"It seems that neither leader is doing all in his power to end the violence, particularly de Klerk, who has the army, police and other state structures at his command," he said.

"But Mandela is also at fault," he said. "It is his duty to ensure that wrongdoers among his followers are disciplined and that they are seen to be brought to justice."