

The Story of The Four Chaplains

In early 1943, as the United States was locked in conflict in World War II, the U.S. Army transport ship Dorchester set sail from the east coast of the United States. The Dorchester was packed with more than 900 American military personnel bound for England. It was one of three troop transport ships traveling in a convoy accompanied by three Coast Guard cutters.

The weather in the North Atlantic Ocean was bad and the troop transport ships were bounced around in the rough seas. On board the Dorchester, the four chaplains made their rounds through the ship, lifting the spirits of the men through visits, worship services and special programs.

The four chaplains were George Fox, Clark Poling, John Washington and Alexander Goode. Chaplain Fox was a Methodist Minister; Chaplain Poling was a Dutch Reformed Minister; Chaplain Washington was a Catholic Priest and Chaplain Goode was Jewish.

As the convoy got further from the safe shores of America, the personnel on board were aware they were entering dangerous waters. German submarines patrolled the seas, and hundreds of Americans had perished when German torpedoes sank other troop transport ships.

The tension and nervousness on board the Dorchester mounted, and the four chaplains did what they could to bring a sense of calm and peace.

On the evening of Feb. 2, one of the escort cutters detected a German submarine on its sonar. The ships in the convoy tried to steer in an evasive pattern, but at 1 a.m. the next day, a German sub fired a torpedo at the Dorchester. The torpedo struck far below the water line, hitting the Dorchester near the engine room.

The explosion killed a hundred men instantly and knocked out its power. The ship quickly began filling with seawater. After only a few minutes, the captain of the Dorchester ordered his men to abandon ship. Below deck in the darkness, chaos ensued. Men scrambled to find their way to the staircases leading up to the deck. At the top of a stairwell was a large storage locker containing life jackets.

The four chaplains positioned themselves beside the storage locker, handed out life vests to the men as they came on deck, and pointed them the way to the lifeboats.

Soon the storage locker was depleted and no life jackets remained, leaving many men without life jackets. In an act of selfless service, all four chaplains took off their own life jackets and handed them to men who had none.

Twenty seven minutes after the torpedo hit the Dorchester, the ship listed heavily and began to go down. The four men were standing arm-in-arm at the top of the boat singing hymns, as the ship disappeared beneath the waves. One survivor said, "It was the finest thing I have ever seen this side of heaven."

Eyewitness accounts from survivors of the four heroic chaplains spread. In 1944 each of the chaplains was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for "extraordinary heroism."

In 1951, the "Chapel of the Four Chaplains" was dedicated in their honor in Pennsylvania and the Chapel of the Four Chaplains continues today promoting service before self and religious cooperation between faith groups.

None of us know what kinds of challenges lie ahead or what kinds of sacrifices we may be called to make. Whatever the future holds, we can find inspiration in the example of the four heroic chaplains that we too might put the needs of others ahead of our own, and ourselves become examples of service before self.

(Information provided by the Misawa Main Base Chapel staff)