

STORY OF THE FOUR CHAPLAINS

.... a rendezvous with destiny, February 3, 1943

The freighter rose and fell sluggishly at her pier, with the dark waves slapping at her sides. The garish New England night was full of shadows and the sound of winches, screeching cranes, and the shuffling cadence of weary troops. One of the black shadows hung over the stern of the freighter almost obliterating her name ... the DORCHESTER.

The vessel was old and small, and only the exigencies of total war had forced her transformation into the troopship. On this night in mid-January, 1943 she was being loaded with troops at the Massachusetts port; her destination hidden in an envelope of secret orders.

Soldiers, 904 men in all, tramped through the companion-way down into the bowels of the ship. Naked light bulbs showed them their quarters -- bunks hastily built into the hold, four tiers high, six meager feet of space per man. Among their number walked four chaplains. Their names - Fox, Goode, Poling, and Washington - told nothing.

At 0600 the next morning the DORCHESTER cast off her lines and headed out to sea. The men grew tense with fear of the unknown moments ahead, and rumors as to their destination flew across the ship. Only the sky pilot knew they were headed for Greenland.

At this period of World War II, allied shipping, under constant attack by wolf packs of Nazi U-boats, were being sunk almost as fast as it could be built. All available destroyers were sent to guard the carriers and battlewagons pounding the Japanese Islands in the far Pacific and the vital convoys to the United Kingdom. For such as the lumbering DORCHESTER, there were only a few Coast Guard cutters and make-do craft for escort.

Day became night and night became day as the little convoy followed the course to Greenland. As the month of January ran out, the four chaplains bunked, talked, and worked together, comforting the sick, reassuring the troubled ones, and joined in the singing and daily banter. All admired them, because, while they were men of GOD, they were first of all real men.

A mysterious sense of danger was prevalent throughout the ship. On the evening of the second day of the new month one of the three escort's Coast Guard cutters blinked a message across the water:

"WE ARE BEING FOLLOWED BY A SUBMARINE."

The P.A. System crackled with orders, and the crew jumped to their guns! The DORCHESTER'S engine whined and labored to gain speed but could push the ungainly freighter along at only ten knots. The convoy stopped briefly at St. John's, Newfoundland and then moved on northeastward through the strange whiteness of an Arctic night.

On the next morning, February third, the ship's bells sounded one o'clock. They never sounded again. A minute later a torpedo smashed into the DORCHESTER well below the water line amid ship.

The torpedo exploded with all its terrific fury in the engine room! Bursting steam lines fatally scalded the engineers and oilers with cruel abandon. The sea rushed into the hole like a tidal wave, drowning a hundred men like rats in a trap.

Stark panic whipped across the ship, blotting out in an instant the so-newly acquired training in discipline and survival. Men cursed bitterly and others wept -- as they struggled feverishly with boats and lines. Others rushed below deck in search of forgotten life belts - never to return.

Through this scene of terror moved a few strong men, purposeful, calm, and seemingly unafraid. Among these were the four chaplains, rushing everywhere about the ship, in the terror-ridden interior and on the crazily tilted deck, giving some men the strength to live and others the courage to die.

Suddenly, the ship shivered and men everywhere cried out - "She's going down! We'll be sucked under!"

The chaplains sensed the threat. "Over the side men, make it fast," they cried. The wind tore the words from their lips. "Get away from the ship before it pulls you down!"

Men looked at the four chaplains with new wonder, seeking a sign, some symbol to carry with them into the valley of death.

One man, more boy than man, made his way to the group at the rail. "Padre, I've lost my life-jacket. I can't swim. I'll..." One of the chaplains tore off his own and put it about the boy's shoulders. "Take this. I'm staying. I won't need it." The soldier tied the jacket's strings, mounted the rail, and dipped into the sea - now almost level with the deck.

The other chaplains followed without hesitation, with the full realization that there could be no survival in the icy sea without their life jackets.

During the last dying moments of the freighter, four chaplains, their crosses on their collars and one with the Tablets of the Law on his, stood with arms linked in devoted prayer as the vessel's bow came up and then slid under the raging surface.

Somewhere off in the seething seas four other men escaped the jaws of death, supported by the chaplains' lifejackets.

Of the 904 men aboard the DORCHESTER, only 209 survived.

Many of these survivors owe their lives to the spiritual courage and supreme sacrifice of the FOUR CHAPLAINS who have passed on a legacy of Brotherhood to all men.

Aboard the DORCHESTER were four U.S. Chaplains - Protestant, Catholic, Jewish - who each in his own way answered the call to serve GOD and man. With arms linked, symbolic of their common bond, the FOUR CHAPLAINS remained praying on the deck until it sank into the black waters of everlasting glory.

Rev. George L. Fox	- Methodist
Dr. Alexander Goode	- Rabbi (Jewish)
Rev. Clark V. Poling	- Reformed (Dutch)
Father John P. Washington	- Catholic

"Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends."

FOUR CHAPLAINS -- FORGOTTEN MEN

In the early morning hours, on February 3, 1943, the American troopship USS DORCHESTER was torpedoed by a German submarine in the North Atlantic. After saving many lives, the Four Chaplains -- two ministers, a priest, and a rabbi gave their own life jackets to four GIs and went down with the ship. Fifty-eight years have passed since the Four Chaplains sacrificed their own lives that others might live.

Sunday, February 2, 2014 commemorates the 71st Anniversary of the heroic and unselfish example of the Four Chaplains. The American Legion's observance of Religious Emphasis Week follows Four Chaplains' Sunday.

"Four ordinary American men went down with the ship. Why all the notoriety? Many just like them made the ultimate sacrifice for their God and their Country. So, what is so different about these four?"

"They were four ordinary American men, born and reared in a free land by God-fearing families. They advanced in our culture to the fullness of their manhood unto the age of commitment, when each chose to follow their God by living as Servants of the Lord.

"Their God-centered training and educational degrees filled them with the training of love of God and of loving guidance to the people of God. All four served as men of God by serving and loving God's people. They spent their unique personal abilities bringing people to God by meaningful lives filled with honor, faith, trust, and love."

"An enemy attacked the land of their heritage. Each of the four -- on his own -- in his particular field of endeavor left his secure and happy work in the vineyard of the Lord, to follow the challenge to serve our troops fighting for our land."

"Individually these ministers of God reached out to the depth of the needs of the young men heading for battle. These four experienced and dedicated men reached out to the depths of fear, loneliness, agony, pain, frustration, and doubt. They stretched out their hands to touch the valiant fighting man where he really existed, touched his heart and soul, where honor, tribute, physician, or friend could not reach. They sought to help where the human personality really resides, where faith resides, where hope resides, and where love really resides."

"Death, the ultimate terror of mankind, could well be their fate. They knew it as well as their fighting comrades. There would be no one to comfort them, except the deep ideals and faith of their God. Yet these intelligent, well fulfilled men freely chose to leave success, safety, security, and family, to serve their God and their Country at war in the capacity of a non-combatant Chaplain of the Armed Forces."

"Widely separated by miles of theological dogmas, by age, by personality variances, by various other measurable statistics, these four men were brought together by war and destiny of the sinking deck of a torpedoed troopship of World War II. The great moment of final decision came to them when each faced the frightening conclusion of the one brief life that was his to spend."

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"Four men -- a Methodist Minister, a Dutch Reformed Preacher, a Jewish Rabbi, and a Catholic Priest -- faced death armed only with their conviction of their ideals, their faith in God, and that strange dedication to the people of God. They decided not to linger on that ultimate commitment. They made their choice not considering 'self' but only the sacrifice of 'self' for others."

"There was their greatness! They reached out with more than their life jackets that they gave to others. They reached out far beyond the norm of giving 'self' to others. They reached out with the real concept of love."

"Their lives were exemplification of the only truly fulfilling and meaningful action of a lifetime. They were caught up in the finality of death united in a strange, yet absolute friendship."

"No religion, no race, no town, no color, no dogma, no prejudice, no argument, linked them shoulder to shoulder or soul to soul. Only their brave dedication and faith in people and their God could so link them in death and eternity."

"The greatness of the Four Chaplains was not in the mouthing of pious platitudes, not in being preachers of the Word, not in being machines of institutionalism. Their greatness was in their action, speaking more eloquently than their word, in action of being doers of the words they spoke, in being live exemplifications that God was in the midst of the men on the sinking troopship."

"Their actions gave meaning to their lives in the face of death; their lives became a time of action that would never die. Their names - The Rev. Clark V. Poling, Minister Dutch Reformed Church; The Rev. George L. Fox, Minister, Methodist Church; The Rev. John P. Washington, Priest, Roman Catholic; and Dr. Alexander Goode, Rabbi."

"The Four Chaplains of three faiths who stood united in prayer as they went down with the USS DORCHESTER symbolize for all Americans and for all time the unity of this Nation founded upon the Fatherhood of one God though his children may be of different faiths and many races."

"We humbly honor them!"

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"Life hears many voices. Some are voices that call us onward, to great things. Some are voices that stall our progress. Some voices call us backward, by appealing to our worst parts; tempting the weaker self, side-tracking our interests and blurring our purpose in life. Wise is the man who filters that voice that dictates the cadence of his life."

"Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for power equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle. Everyday you shall wonder at yourself, at the riches of life which has come to you by the grace of God."

FOUR CHAPLAINS' DAY
P R O C L A M A T I O N

WHEREAS, American History - colonial and national - is replete with dramatic narratives of the heroism of fame - laurelled men and women who gave or risked their lives as defenders of their country; and

WHEREAS, on the memorial stones and scrolls that carry the names of America's heroic sons and daughters, none will shine with greater luster than the names of four men - who bore no weapons of war - but wore "The shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit"; and

WHEREAS, the last hour of recorded time the epic story of The Four Chaplains: CLARK V. POLING (Reformed Church of America), ALEXANDER D. GOODE (Jewish), JOHN P. WASHINGTON (Catholic), and GEORGE L. FOX (Methodist) will be remembered and exalted for the voluntary sacrifice of their lives in the early dawn of February 3, 1943; and

WHEREAS, although the event on this fateful morning was not new in the history of naval warfare but it was destined to be hallowed forever to reveal the calm and courage and saintly compassion of the four clergymen ever afterward to be known as "THE FOUR CHAPLAINS". The shock of the torpedo and the listing of the ship caused confusion and panic among the troops. Calmly - without the loss of a moment - the Chaplains led the men to the ship's boxes of life jackets and passed them to the soldiers with boat-drill precision. When the supply was exhausted, the Chaplains gave their life jackets to four young GI's and told them to jump. Twenty-five minutes later the DORCHESTER went down. The last anyone saw of The Four Chaplains they were standing on the slanting deck - their arms linked in prayer - to the one God they all served.

NOW, THEREFORE, I _____, Mayor of the City of _____, Ohio do hereby designate _____.

FOUR CHAPLAINS DAY

And I call upon all citizens to witness that these men of God gave literal obedience to the Biblical dictum - "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends".

MAYOR

THE FOUR CHAPLAINS' SUNDAY

PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS, _____, will mark the seventy-first anniversary of the sinking of the troopship DORCHESTER, which carried to their deaths four Chaplains of three faiths who stood united in prayer as the ship went down; and

WHEREAS, these four Chaplains, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant gave their own life-jackets to four soldiers and thus sacrificed their own lives to save the lives of others; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting at a time when the freedom of the world is imperiled that the City of _____ should give special recognition to the memory of those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of freedom; and

WHEREAS, the heroic deed of the four Chaplains and their combined act of supreme devotion and sacrifice for American liberty and human freedom will be an inspiring and ever shining example of real brotherhood for all time to the people of the world; and

WHEREAS, we must all see to it that their supreme sacrifice to the cause of human freedom and justice for all shall not have been made in vain;

NOW, THEREFORE, I _____, Mayor of the City of _____ do hereby designate _____, to be observed as Four Chaplains Sunday and call upon all citizens to commemorate the day with appropriate observances in public places and by prayers in their homes and houses of worship.

Given under my Hand and Seal of

_____ This

Day of _____, _____

NEWS RELEASE

THE AMERICAN LEGION

POST NO. _____

_____, OHIO

In commemoration of the dramatic sacrifice of four armed forces Chaplains during World War II, The American Legion will observe RELIGIOUS EMPHASIS WEEK, February __ to February __, and Four Chaplains' Sunday, February __, Chaplain _____ of Post No. _____ in _____ has announced.

Legion officials and clergymen are planning special programs for the observance of the 68th Anniversary of the sinking of the USS DORCHESTER and the heroism demonstrated by four valiant Chaplains.

Of the many thrilling incidents of World War II, probably none stirred the nation more deeply than the story of these four men of God whose heroic efforts were credited with the saving of more than 200 lives. These four - a Jewish Rabbi, a Roman Catholic Priest, and two Protestant Ministers - calmly issued life-belts to American servicemen aboard the troop transport after it was torpedoed on February 3, 1943.

When the supply of life preservers was exhausted, the four Chaplains removed their own life belts and gave them to four soldiers and then stood calmly on the sinking ship, their arms around one another's shoulders, and their heads bowed in prayer.

Inspired by the heroic deed of these four Chaplains, The American Legion each year marks the anniversary of their supreme sacrifice through special services and programs throughout the nation. This annual observance, as a part of the Legion's "SERVICE TO GOD AND COUNTRY" program, helps bring new emphasis to the religious aspects of our American heritage and the need for continuing adherence to the basic religious concepts upon which America was founded.

RELIGIOUS EMPHASIS WEEK

P R O C L A M A T I O N

WHEREAS, Many Americans who believe in the existence of God still neglect or reject public worship of Him; and

WHEREAS, Public recognition by our citizens of their faith in their Creator is an essential part of that faith; and

WHEREAS, The family by praying and worshiping together, asking God's blessing and giving Him their thanks for favors received, give spiritual strength and unity to America; and

WHEREAS, The implantation of ideals and the instilling of a sense of moral and spiritual values in our youth are essential to the molding of character and to the preservation of a strong and God-blessed nation;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, _____ do hereby proclaim the week of February _____ as RELIGIOUS EMPHASIS WEEK, and urge every citizen to join The American Legion in observing this special week and the weeks to follow, in regular public worship at the church or synagogue of their faith, daily family prayer, and the religious education of our children.

Given under my hand and Seal of

This ___ Day of _____, _____