

The Saga of the Four Chaplains



It was known as Torpedo Junction, the U-boat infested icy waters of the North Atlantic during World War II. On February 3, 1943, the USAT DORCHESTER, an old coastal steamer quickly pressed into military service, was slowly making her way through those waters bound for Greenland.

Most of the men were seasick, and green with nausea. Because they were in submarine waters, the captain directed the men to keep outer gear and life jackets on at all times. Moving among them were four Army Chaplains: George Fox (Methodist), Alexander Goode (Jewish), Clark Poling (Dutch Reformed), and John Washington (Roman Catholic). The Chaplains talked with and listened to the men - soothing apprehensions, offering encouragement, or sharing a joke. By their concern, their camaraderie with the men and one another, and their very presence, they brought solace.

An enemy submarine, stalking the ship undetected, fired a torpedo toward the ship's aging flank. The missile exploded in the boiler room, destroying the electric supply and releasing suffocating clouds of steam and ammonia gas. Many on board died instantly; some were trapped below deck. Others, jolted from their bunks, groped and stumbled their way to the decks of the stricken vessel. Taking on water rapidly, the ship began listing to starboard.

Because security reasons prevented the use of distress flares, escort vessels, still close enough to assist, pushed on into the darkness unaware that the DORCHESTER was sinking.

Overcrowded lifeboats capsized; rafts drifted away before anyone could reach them. Men clung to the rails, frozen with fear, unable to let go and plunge into the dark, churning water far below. The Four Chaplains calmed frightened men, got them into the spare lifejackets, and urged them

over the side. The supply of extra jackets ran out with men still waiting. Having decided to remain with the sinking ship, the Four Chaplains either gave to or forced upon frightened servicemen their own lifejackets.

Too quickly, no more lifeboats could be launched and many men were left aboard, but there was more for the Chaplains to do. When last seen, they were standing together on the deck leading the men in prayer. With arms linked in friendship and heads bowed in prayer, they sank beneath the waves. Two of those chaplains were Protestant, one was a Catholic, and one was a Jew. Monsignor John McNamara, former Chief of Chaplains of the U.S. Navy, said at a Four Chaplains Award Service, "No casting director in Hollywood could have selected a better cast of characters than these four to portray the basic unity of the American people".

The self-sacrifice of the Four Chaplains was a heroic act. It was not the only heroic act aboard the DORCHESTER. But it was the identity of these four young men, representing three great faiths of the American people that add symbolism to their sacrifice.

It is our charge to see that this brief, but significant, portion of American history is not lost, and that the lessons of cooperation and selfless service are proclaimed.

Contact the Chapel at:
THE CHAPEL OF FOUR CHAPLAINS
1201 Constitution Avenue
Philadelphia Naval Business Center, Building 649
Philadelphia, PA 19112 TEL:
(215) 218-1943
FAX: (215) 218-1949
www.fourchaplains.org
Email: chapel@fourchaplains.org