The Four Chaplains and the U.S.A.T. Dorchester

“As I swam away from the ship, I looked back. The flares had lighted everything. The bow came up high and she slid under. The last thing I saw, the Four Chaplains were up there praying for the safety of the men. They had done all they could. I did not see them again.”

– Grady Clark, a survivor
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The Four Chaplains

The Four Chaplains, also referred to as the Immortal Chaplains or the Dorchester Chaplains, were four World War II Chaplains who died rescuing civilian and military personnel as the American troop ship U.S.A.T. Dorchester sank on February 3, 1943, in what has been referred to as the second-worst sea disaster of WWII. The Dorchester was a civilian liner converted for military service in World War II as a War Shipping Administration troop transport. She was able to carry slightly more than 900 military passengers and crew.

The ship left New York on January 23, 1943, en route to Greenland, carrying approximately 900 as part of a convoy of three ships escorted by Coast Guard Cutters Tampa, Escanaba, and Comanche. During the early morning hours of February 3 the vessel was torpedoed by the German submarine U-223 off Newfoundland in the North Atlantic. The Chaplains helped the other soldiers board lifeboats and gave up their own life jackets when the supply ran out. The Chaplains joined arms, said prayers, and sang hymns as they went down with the ship.

The impact of the Chaplains' story was deep, with many memorials and extensive coverage in the media. Each of the four Chaplains was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Purple Heart. The Chaplains were nominated for the Medal of Honor, but were ineligible as they had not engaged in combat with the enemy. Instead, Congress created a medal for them, with the same weight and importance as the Medal of Honor.

The Chaplains

The relatively new Chaplains all held the rank of First Lieutenant. They included Methodist minister Reverend George L. Fox, Reform Rabbi Alexander D. Goode (PhD), Catholic Priest Father John P. Washington, and Reformed Church in America minister Reverend Clark V. Poling. Their backgrounds, personalities, and denominations were different, although Goode, Poling and Washington had all served as leaders in the Boy Scouts of America. They met at the Army Chaplains School at Harvard University, where they prepared for assignments in the European theater, sailing on board Dorchester to report to their new assignments.
George Lansing Fox

George L. Fox was born March 15, 1900, in Lewistown, Pennsylvania, the eldest of eight children. When he was 17, he left school and lied about his age in order to join the Army to serve in World War I. He joined the Ambulance Corps in 1917, assigned to Camp Newton D. Baker in Texas. On December 3, 1917, George embarked from Camp Merritt, New Jersey, and boarded the USS Huron en route to France. As a Medical Corps assistant, he was highly decorated for bravery and was awarded the Silver Star, Purple Heart and the French Croix de Guerre.

Upon his discharge, he returned home to Altoona, where he completed high school. He entered Moody Bible Institute in Illinois in 1923. He and Isadora G. Hurlbut of Vermont were married in 1923, when he began his religious career as an itinerant preacher in the Methodist faith. He later graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, served as a student pupil in Rye, New Hampshire, and then studied at the Boston University School of Theology, where he was ordained a Methodist minister on June 10, 1934. He served parishes in Thetford, Union Village, and Gilman, Vermont, and was appointed State Chaplain and historian for the American Legion in Vermont.

In 1942, Fox volunteered to serve as an Army chaplain, accepting his appointment July 24, 1942. He began active duty on August 8, 1942, the same day his son Wyatt enlisted in the Marine Corps. After Army Chaplains School at Harvard, he reported to the 411th Coast Artillery Battalion at Camp Davis. He was then reunited with Chaplains Goode, Poling and Washington at Camp Myles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts, where they prepared to depart for Europe on board the Dorchester.
Alexander David Goode
Reform Rabbi Alexander D. Goode (PhD) was born in Brooklyn, New York, on May 10, 1911, the son of Rabbi Hyman Goodekowitz. He was raised in Washington, D.C., attending Eastern High School, eventually deciding to follow his father’s footsteps by studying for the rabbinate at Hebrew Union College (HUC), where he graduated with a B.H. degree in 1937. He later received his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1940. While studying for the rabbinate at HUC, he worked at the Washington Hebrew Congregation during summer breaks.

He originally applied to become a Navy Chaplain in January 1941, but was not accepted. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, he applied to the Army, receiving his appointment as a Chaplain on July 21, 1942. Chaplain Goode went on active duty on August 9, 1942, and was selected for the Chaplains School at Harvard. Chaplain Goode was then assigned to the 333rd Fighter Squadron in Goldsboro, North Carolina. In October 1942, he was transferred to Camp Myles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts, and reunited with Chaplains Fox, Poling and Washington, who had been among his classmates at Harvard.
Clark Vandersall Poling

Clark V. Poling was born August 7, 1910, in Columbus, Ohio, the son of Evangelical minister Daniel A. Poling, who was rebaptized in 1936 as a Baptist minister. Clark Poling studied at Yale University's Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut and graduated with his B.D. degree in 1936. He was ordained in the Reformed Church in America, and served first in the First Church of Christ, New London, Connecticut, and then as pastor of the First Reformed Church, in Schenectady, New York. He married Betty Jung.

With the outbreak of World War II, Poling decided to enter the Army, wanting to face the same danger as others. His father, who had served as a World War I Chaplain, told him Chaplains risk and give their lives, too—and with that knowledge, he applied to serve as an Army Chaplain, accepting an appointment on June 10, 1942, as a Chaplain with the 131st Quartermaster Truck Regiment, reporting to Camp Shelby, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, on June 25. Later he reported to Army Chaplains School at Harvard, where he would meet Chaplains Fox, Goode, and Washington. Clark V. Poling's father, Daniel A. Poling was pastor of Grace Baptist of Philadelphia when the Dorchester was sunk. The church had been planning a memorial for its well-known pastor Russell Conwell but decided to put all efforts towards creating the Chapel of the Four Chaplains in the basement of the church instead.
John Patrick Washington

John P. Washington was born in Newark, New Jersey, on July 18, 1908. He studied at Seton Hall, in South Orange, New Jersey, to complete his high school and college courses in preparation for the Catholic priesthood. He graduated in 1931 with an A.B., entering Immaculate Conception Seminary in Darlington, New Jersey, where he received his minor orders on May 26, 1933. He served as a subdeacon at all the Solemn Masses and later became a deacon on December 25, 1934. He was elected prefect of his class and was ordained a priest on June 15, 1935.

Father Washington's first parish was at St. Genevieve's, in Elizabeth, New Jersey. He later served at St. Venantius for a year. In 1938, he was assigned to St. Stephen's in Kearny, New Jersey. Shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack of December 7, 1941, he received his appointment as a Chaplain in the United States Army, reporting for active duty on May 9, 1942. He was named chief of the Chaplains' Reserve Pool, in Ft. Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, and in June 1942, he was assigned to the 76th Infantry Division in Ft. George Meade, Maryland. In November 1942, he reported to Camp Myles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts, and met Chaplains Fox, Goode and Poling at Chaplains School at Harvard.
The Ship and its Sinking

The Dorchester had been a 5,649 ton civilian liner, 368 feet long with a 52-foot beam and a single funnel, originally built in 1926 by Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, for the Merchants and Miners Line, operating ships from Baltimore to Florida, carrying both freight and passengers. It was the third of four liners being built for the Line.

The ship was converted for military service in World War II as a War Shipping Administration troop transport operated by Atlantic, Gulf & West Indies Steamship Lines (Agwilines) allocated to United States Army requirements. The conversion was done in New York by the Atlantic, Gulf, and West Indies (AGWI) SS Company, and included additional lifeboats and liferafts; guns (a 3-inch gun forward, a 4-inch gun aft, and four 20 mm guns); and changes to the large windows in the pilot house so that they would be reduced to slits to afford more protection.

Designed for 314 civilian passengers and 90 crew, she was able to carry slightly more than 900 military passengers and crew. Dorchester left New York on January 23, 1943, en route to Greenland, carrying the four Chaplains and approximately 900 others, as part of a convoy of three ships (SG-19 convoy). Most of the military personnel were not told the ship's ultimate destination. The convoy was escorted by Coast Guard Cutters Tampa, Escanaba, and Comanche.

Coast Guard Cutter USCGC Escanaba rescues Dorchester survivors

The ship's Captain, Hans J. Danielsen, had been alerted that Coast Guard sonar had detected a submarine. Because German U-boats were monitoring sea lanes and had attacked and sunk ships earlier during the war, Captain Danielsen had the ship's crew on a state of high alert even before he received that information, ordering the men to sleep in their clothing and keep their life jackets on. It was reported that many of the soldiers sleeping deep in the ship's hold disregarded the order because of the engine's heat and the life jackets were uncomfortable. During the early morning hours of February 3, 1943, at 12:55 am, the vessel was torpedoed by the German submarine U-223 off Newfoundland in the North Atlantic.
The torpedo knocked out the Dorchester's electrical system, leaving the ship dark. Panic set in among the men on board, many of them trapped below decks. The Chaplains sought to calm the men and organize an orderly evacuation of the ship, and helped guide wounded men to safety. As life jackets were passed out to the men, the supply ran out before each man had one. The Chaplains removed their own life jackets and gave them to others. They helped as many men as they could into lifeboats, and then linked arms and, saying prayers and singing hymns, went down with the ship.

One survivor, Grady Clark stated: “As I swam away from the ship, I looked back. The flares had lighted everything. The bow came up high and she slid under. The last thing I saw, the Four Chaplains were up there praying for the safety of the men. They had done everything they could. I did not see them again. They themselves did not have a chance without their life jackets.”

According to some reports, survivors could hear different languages mixed in the prayers of the Chaplains, including Jewish prayers in Hebrew and Catholic prayers in Latin. Only 230 of the 904 men aboard the ship were rescued. Life jackets offered little protection from hypothermia, which killed most men in the water. The water temperature was 34 °F (1 °C) and the air temperature was 36°F (2°C). By the time additional rescue ships arrived, "hundreds of dead bodies were seen floating on the water, kept up by their life jackets."

**Remembrance**

**Four Chaplains' Medal**

On December 19, 1944, all four Chaplains were posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross. Additionally, members of Congress later authorized a special medal, the Four Chaplains' Medal, approved by a unanimous act of Congress on July 14, 1960, through Public Law 86-656. The medals were presented posthumously to the next of kin of each of the four Chaplains by Secretary of the Army Wilber M. Brucker at Fort Myer, Virginia, on January 18, 1961.

**Four Chaplains Day**

Ceremonies and services are held each year on the first Sunday of February, Four Chaplains Day, by numerous military and civilian groups and organizations. In 1998, February 3 of that year was established by Senate Resolution 169-98 as “Four Chaplains Day” to commemorate the 55th anniversary of the sinking of United States Army transport Dorchester and subsequent heroism of these men. Some state or city officials commemorate the day with official proclamations, sometimes including the order that flags fly at half-mast in memory of the fallen Chaplains. In some cases, official proclamations establish observances at other times: for example,
North Dakota legislation requests that the governor issue an annual proclamation establishing the first Sunday in February as Four Chaplains Sunday.

On February 14, 2002, as part of the annual award of the Immortal Chaplains Prize for Humanity, a special reconciliation meeting took place between survivors of both the American and German sides of the sinking of the Dorchester. Kurt Röser and Gerhard Buske, who had been part of the crew of the German U-boat that had torpedoed the Dorchester met with three Dorchester survivors, Ben Epstein, Walter Miller, and David Labadie, as well as Dick Swanson, who had been on board the Coast Guard Cutter Comanche, escorting the Dorchester's convoy.

On February 3, 2011, the Library of Congress Veterans History Project and the United States Navy Memorial co-hosted a special program at the memorial, in Washington, D.C. The Jewish Chaplains Monument at Arlington National Cemetery's Chaplains' Hill was dedicated on October 24, 2011. The monument honors 14 Jewish Chaplains who died during their military service. The monument is a granite upright with a bronze plaque, similar to the three other monuments at the site honoring Catholic, Protestant and World War I Chaplains. Rabbi Goode's name is the first listed on the plaque. The Jewish Chaplains Monument was approved by the United States Congress in May 2011, and the monument itself, designed by Debora Jackson of Long Island, New York, was reviewed and approved by the U.S. Fine Arts Commission on June 16, 2011. The dedication ceremony was held in Arlington's Memorial Amphitheater. The ceremony was attended by Ernie Heaton, who survived the Dorchester sinking, and Richard Swanson who was on the Coast Guard rescue team.

**U.S. Postage Stamp**

**Four Chaplains stamp, 1948**

The Chaplains were honored with a commemorative stamp that was issued in 1948, and was designed by Louis Schwimmer, the head of the Art Department of the New York branch of the U.S. Post Office Department (now called the USPS). This stamp is highly unusual, because until 2011, U.S. stamps were not normally issued in honor of someone other than a president of the United States until at least ten years after his or her death.

The stamp went through three revisions before the final design was chosen. None of the names of the Chaplains were included on the stamp, nor were their faiths (although the faiths had been listed on one of the earlier designs): instead, the words on the stamp were "These Immortal Chaplains ... Interfaith in Action".
Another phrase included in an earlier design that was not part of the final stamp was "died to save men of all faiths". By the omission of their names, the stamp commemorated the event, rather than the individuals.

**Chapel of Four Chaplains**
The Chapel of the Four Chaplains was dedicated on February 3, 1951, by President Harry S. Truman to honor these Chaplains of different faiths in the basement of Grace Baptist Church of Philadelphia. In his dedication speech, the President said, "This interfaith shrine ... will stand through long generations to teach Americans that as men can die heroically as brothers so should they live together in mutual faith and goodwill."

In addition to supporting work that exemplifies the idea of "Interfaith in Action", recalling the story of the Four Chaplains, the chapel presents awards to individuals whose work reflects interfaith goals. 1984 was the first time that the award went to a Military Chaplain team composed of a rabbi, priest, and minister, recalling in a special way the four Chaplains themselves, when the Rabbi Louis Parris Hall of Heroes Gold Medallion was presented to Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff; Catholic priest Fr. George Pucciarelli; and Protestant minister Danny Wheeler—the three Chaplains present at the scene of the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing. The story of these three United States Navy Chaplains was itself memorialized in a speech by President Ronald Reagan, on April 12, 1984.

In 1972, Grace Baptist Church moved to Blue Bell and sold the building to Temple University two years later. Temple University eventually decided to renovate the building as the Temple Performing Arts Center. In February 2001, the Chapel of the Four Chaplains moved to the chapel at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard.

**Sculptures and Plaques**
Memorial at Arbor Crest Cemetery, created by sculptor Carlton W. Angell, dedicated to the Four Chaplains in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1954.
The Four Chaplains Prayer

Gracious Lord, we ask Your blessing upon this gathering. We join together as people of many faiths. We join together as people of different experiences and backgrounds. Yet we have all come to this sanctuary to share in this time of worship. Catholics, Jews, and Protestants -- we come together in the house of the Lord, to worship, to praise Your name, to thank You for your constant presence in our lives.

And we come together to honor four men -- men who had gone to war as Chaplains -- to be the human touch of Your love and caring among troops called upon to risk their lives for their country. We honor four Chaplains who knew how to love their neighbors as themselves. We are thankful for the lesson they give to the generations -- a lesson of self-sacrifice; a lesson of true brotherhood. With thankfulness, we ask Your blessing upon the souls of Clark Poling and Alexander Goode, of John Washington and George Fox.

We pray also for the souls of the men who joined these Chaplains in death that February day many years ago. More than 700 men saw the end of their hopes and dreams that icy morning, in the effort to sustain the hopes and dreams of their families at home. May our hearts feel a special kinship today with those who were aboard the Dorchester when a torpedo hit it... and yet who live and remember the experience, and the loss. We know they must recall the morning with sadness, which has remained with them through the decades.

Lord, we know the story we remember today is just one fine example of the many times men and women have sacrificed themselves for others. And we know this story is one among many examples of true brotherhood. Yet we single out and hold it before us as a reminder that all persons of all faiths and colors and creeds are capable of showing such courage and such compassion. Such has been true of so many who have served in all branches of service, in times of war and peace. Such has been true throughout the generations.

Help us to see, even today, the times that we might stand-up for that which is most important, and to do so with more concern for others than for ourselves. Help us to recognize the times when we might overlook the insignificant
differences between people, and respond to the needs of someone just because he
or she is a person in need.

Forgive us for those times in which we participate in the freedoms of our land, yet
fail to honor the rights of all Americans. Help us to learn how to show justice in our
lives, to love mercy in our relationship with others, and to walk humbly with you at
all times.

Thank you, Lord, for watching over us and comforting us in grief. May we also feel
Your presence in the joy of celebrating Your love as it shines through the human
spirit of the four Chaplains we remember today; as it shines through all who truly
love justice and peace.

May all who are present at this service gain wisdom and compassion from
worshiping together this day. Amen.
References

The American Legion Chaplain’s Handbook, Service to God and Country
The Armed Forces Prayer Book
Senate Resolution 169–98