

Honoring Those Who Serve

The Bravery of the Four Chaplains

BY JOHN BRINSFIELD | U.S. Army Chaplain Corps News

It was February 3, 1943, and the U.S. Army Transport *Dorchester* was one of three ships in a convoy, moving across the Atlantic from Newfoundland to an American base in Greenland. A converted luxury liner, the *Dorchester* was crowded to capacity, carrying 902 servicemen, merchant seamen and civilian workers.

It was only 150 miles from its destination when shortly after midnight, an officer aboard the German submarine U2 spotted it. After identifying and targeting the ship, he gave orders to fire. The hit was decisive, striking the ship, far below the water line. The initial blast killed scores of men and seriously wounded many more.

Others, stunned by the explosion were groping in the darkness. Panic and chaos quickly set in! Men were screaming, others crying or frantically trying to get lifeboats off the ship.

Through the pandemonium, four men spread out among the soldiers, calming the frightened, tending the wounded and guiding the disoriented toward safety. They were four Army chaplains, Lt. George Fox, a Methodist; Lt. Alexander Goode, a Jewish Rabbi; Lt. John Washington, a Roman Catholic Priest; and Lt. Clark Poling, a Dutch Reformed minister.

Quickly and quietly the four chaplains worked to bring calm to the men. As soldiers began to find their way to the deck of the ship, many were still in their underwear, where they were confronted by the cold winds blowing down from the arctic.

Petty Officer John J. Mahoney, reeling from the cold, headed back towards his cabin. "Where are you going?" A voice of calm in the sea of distressed asked. "To get my gloves," Mahoney replied. "Here, take these," said Rabbi Goode as he handed a pair of gloves to the young officer. "I can't take those gloves," Mahoney replied. "Never mind," the Rabbi responded. "I have two pairs." It was only long after that Mahoney realized that the chaplain never intended to leave the ship.

Once topside, the chaplains opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. It was then that Engineer Grady Clark witnessed an astonishing sight. When there were no more lifejackets in the storage room, the chaplains simultaneously removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men.



PHOTO COURTESY OF U.S. COAST GUARD

U.S. Army Transport *Dorchester*.

When giving their life jackets, Rabbi Goode did not call out for a Jew; Father Washington did not call out for a Catholic; nor did Fox or Poling call out for a Protestant. They simply gave their life jackets to the next man in line. One survivor would later call it "It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven."

As the ship went down, survivors in nearby rafts could see the four chaplains—arms linked and braced against the slanting deck. Their voices could also be heard offering prayers and singing hymns.

Of the 902 men aboard the U.S.A.T. *Dorchester*, only 230 survived. Before boarding the *Dorchester* back in January, Chaplain Poling had asked his father to pray for him, "Not for my safe return, that wouldn't be fair. Just pray that I shall do my duty; never be a coward; and have the strength, courage, and understanding of men. Just pray that I shall be adequate."

Although the Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart were later awarded posthumously Congress wished to confer the Medal of Honor but was blocked by the stringent requirements which required heroism performed under fire. So a posthumous Special Medal for Heroism, The Four Chaplains' Medal, was authorized by Congress and awarded by the President on January 18, 1961.

It was never given before and will never be given again. ■

These chaplains joined arms, said prayers, and sang hymns as they went down with the ship



George Lansing Fox (1900–1943) was a Methodist minister and a lieutenant in the United States Army.



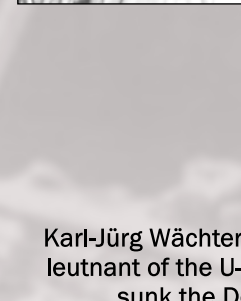
Clark Vandersall Poling (1910–1943) was a minister in the Reformed Church in America and a lieutenant in the United States Army.



John Patrick Washington (1908–1943) was a Roman Catholic priest and a lieutenant in the United States Army.



Alexander David Goode (1911–1943) was a rabbi and a lieutenant in the United States Army.



Karl-Jürg Wächter, Kapitänleutnant of the U-boat that sunk the *Dorchester*.

