

No Greater Glory: The Four Chaplains and the Sinking of the USAT Dorchester

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Photos courtesy of the U.S. Army Chaplain Museum

In the early morning hours of 3 February 1943, First Sergeant Michael Warish nearly gave up hope as he floated helplessly in the freezing waters of the North Atlantic. Just minutes earlier, he and the almost 900 others aboard the USAT Dorchester were near safe waters when a German torpedo slammed into the engine room. Soon, the Dorchester began to slip under the waves.

Warish accepted his fate, fully aware that life expectancy in these cold waters was about twenty minutes.

Surrounded by hundreds of his equally doomed shipmates, the blinking red lights of their life preservers reminded him of Christmas lights. Other than a burning sensation in his throat from swallowing oil-fouled salt water and some minor pain from wounds suffered when the torpedo hit, he mostly felt numb.

Resigned to losing consciousness and freezing to death shortly thereafter, his thoughts turned to the courageous and selfless acts of the four Army chaplains he witnessed just before abandoning ship. These four chaplains, according to Warish and other eyewitnesses, remained calm during the panic following the attack, first distributing life preservers and assisting others to abandon ship, then giving up their own life preservers and coming together in prayer as the ship disappeared beneath the surface.

The story of these four chaplains, a Catholic, a Jew, and two Protestants, stands out among the countless stories of commitment and bravery that make up the pantheon of the U.S. Army, as one of the finest examples of courage to God, man, and country. Each, John P. Washington, Alexander D. Goode, George L. Fox, and Clarke V. Poling, was drawn by the tragedy at Pearl Harbor to the armed forces. Each wanted more than anything else to serve God by ministering to men on the battlefield. Each felt great disappointment at being relegated to service in a rear area, in this case the airfields and installations of Greenland. Yet, each, when the moment came, did not hesitate to put others before self, courageously offering a tenuous chance of survival with the full knowledge of the consequences.

Though the chaplains had vastly different backgrounds, their similar experiences brought them together on the deck of the Dorchester. Each was tested at a young age and came to the realization that his would be a life of service to God and man.



John P. Washington, born in Newark, New Jersey, on 18 July 1908, was eldest of seven children. He was the product of tough Irish neighborhoods, where he almost lost his sight to a BB gun accident, nearly died of fever, and then lost his sister Mary to a sudden illness. By the age of seven, John was on the path to the priesthood. After attending Catholic elementary and high schools, he entered the seminary in Darlington, New Jersey, and was ordained on 15 June 1935.

After short stints in two parishes, he moved to St. Stephen's in Arlington, New Jersey. Father Washington was initially turned down by the Navy after Pearl Harbor because of his poor eyesight. Disappointed but

not defeated, Washington went to the Army. This time, when it came to the eye test, he covered up his bad eye both times when reading the eye chart, correctly assuming that the doctors would be too busy to pay much attention. He hoped that God would forgive his subterfuge.

In May 1942 Father Washington left for training at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana. After a month, he was posted to Fort George G. Meade, Maryland. Eager to serve overseas, he applied for a transfer. In a letter to Army Headquarters dated 23 September 1942, he wrote, "Once more may I ask you to consider my application for overseas duty. If I am being too fresh in requesting it, then slap me down." The requests finally worked when, in November 1942, he was transferred to Camp Myles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts, to await overseas deployment. There he met fellow Chaplains Fox, Goode, and Poling.



Alexander D. Goode was born on 10 May 1911, the son of a rabbi. When he was young, his parents divorced. He went to Eastern High School in Washington, DC, where he earned medals in tennis, swimming, and track, and was an excellent student. From his earliest days, he planned to follow in his father's footsteps as a rabbi. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Cincinnati in 1934, followed by a degree from the Hebrew Union College in 1937. Virtually penniless as a college student during the Great Depression, Alexander contemplated quitting school and giving up on his dream to become a rabbi, but he believed that it was God's plan for him to pursue a religious vocation. For much of his youth, he served in the National Guard to help make ends meet. In 1935, he and his childhood sweetheart, Theresa Flax, daughter of a rabbi and niece of the singer and motion picture star Al Jolson, were married. His first assignment as a rabbi was in Marion, Indiana. Later, he moved to the Beth Israel synagogue of York, Pennsylvania, where he excelled in ecumenicalism, crossing the divide between religions.

In January 1941, the Navy turned down Rabbi Goode's application to become a chaplain, but the Army Air Forces accepted him after Pearl Harbor. After training at the Harvard Chaplain School, along with classmates Fox and Poling, he was assigned to Seymour Johnson Field in Goldsboro, North Carolina, where he served until October 1942. In November 1942, he was reassigned to Camp Myles Standish.



George L. Fox was born on 15 March 1900 in Lewiston, Pennsylvania, and grew up in Altoona in a Catholic family. His rough childhood under the tyranny of an abusive father shaped him. Determined to escape, he enlisted to serve in World War I before finishing high school. He also abandoned Catholicism due to his inability to reconcile the church's teachings with the abuse he received at home and a desire to leave his past behind. His gallant service in the Great War as a medic earned him the Silver Star, several Purple

Hearts, and French Croix de Guerre.

At the end of World War I, Fox held several jobs before entering Moody Bible Institute in Illinois in 1923. Before graduation, he became an itinerant Methodist minister. While holding a student pastorate in Downs, Illinois, he entered Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, graduating with his Bachelor's degree in 1929. While holding another student pastorate in Rye, New Hampshire, Fox enrolled in the Boston University School of Theology, graduating with a *Sacrae Theologiae Baccalaureus* (Bachelor of Sacred Theology) and was ordained a Methodist minister on 10 June 1934. He assumed the pastorate of a church in Waits River, soon moved on to Union Village, then Gillman, all in Vermont. By this time, he was married and had a son; a daughter followed in 1936. While in Vermont he joined the American Legion and would become state chaplain and historian.

As with the other chaplains, Pearl Harbor drew him back to the military. In July 1942, he was appointed as an Army chaplain and returned to active duty at the age of forty-two on 8 August, the same day that his son Wyatt entered the Marine Corps. After training at Harvard, he joined the 411th Coast Artillery Battalion (Antiaircraft-Gun) at Camp Davis, North Carolina, until he was ordered to Camp Myles Standish.



Clark V. Poling was born into a prominent family that had produced six generations of ministers. His father was a well-known radio evangelist and religious newspaper editor. Born on 7 August 1910, Poling was educated in Massachusetts and New York. In high school, he played football and was student body president. There was never any doubt that he would become the seventh generation of his family to enter the ministry.

After studying at Hope College in Michigan and Rutgers University in New Jersey, he entered Yale University's School of Divinity, after which he was ordained a minister in the Reformed Church of America. His initial posting was at the First Church of Christ in New London, Connecticut, for a short time until he became pastor of the First Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Reverend Poling volunteered to become a chaplain. Before departing for the service, his father, Dr. Daniel A. Poling, reminded him of the high casualty rate of chaplains in World War I. The younger Poling downplayed the danger, confident that God's will was to keep him safe while he served others. He was appointed a U. S. Army Chaplain on 10 June 1942 and reported to the 131st Quartermaster Truck Regiment at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, on 25 June. Later he went on to Harvard and then to Camp Myles Standish. In November 1942, the four chaplains were all together for the first time.

The *Dorchester* was as austere and dank as any of the tubs ferrying troops to and from the war zone across the North Atlantic—a suitable venue for one to suffer the dreaded anxiety of an uncertain future in war or to blissfully contemplate the safety, comforts, and familial joy of home.

Originally commissioned the SS *Dorchester* on 20 March 1926, it was one of three identical vessels built by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company for the Merchants and Miners Transportation Company. As a cruise ship, it plied a regular coastal route between Miami and Boston with its crew of ninety and up to 314 passengers. She weighed in at 5,649 tons, was 368 feet long by 52 feet wide, with a

19 foot draft.

With war looming, the U.S. government requisitioned the Dorchester and had the Atlantic, Gulf and West Indies Steamship Company in New York convert her into a troop transport. Stripped of its original cruise ship luxuries, the USAT Dorchester was outfitted to carry 750 troops, with a complement of 130 crew and twenty-three Navy armed guards.

On 29 January 1943, the Dorchester departed St. John's, Newfoundland, for its fifth north Atlantic voyage, hitting bad weather almost as soon as it entered open water. In addition to the Dorchester, the freighters Biscaya and Lutz, escorted by U. S. Coast Guard cutters (USCGC) Tampa, Escanaba, and Comanche comprised convoy SG 19. Its passengers included 597 soldiers and 171 civilians bound for airbases in Greenland. In its holds were one thousand tons of equipment, food, and cargo. Merchant Marine Captain Hans Danielsen skippered the ship while Army Captain Preston S. Kreckler, Jr., commanded the troops. First Sergeant Warish was the senior noncommissioned officer aboard.

Warish, as the ship's first sergeant, warranted a stateroom. As he was settling in, Father Washington, his next-door neighbor, paid him a visit. As a lapsed Catholic, he was ambivalent about making the acquaintance of the priest but recognized the value of having chaplains on board during the perilous voyage. After exchanging small talk, Warish excused himself to inspect the ship.

While on his rounds, he observed the chaplains in a "football huddle" engaged in an animated discussion. Seeing Warish, they asked for his help in getting the message out about religious services and plans for an amateur talent contest, which they hoped would serve as a useful diversion for the troops who had nothing to do except worry while transiting through "Torpedo Junction," as the stretch of dangerous waters was known.

Despite heavy security, there were few secrets in St. John's. German authorities had become aware that convoy SG-19 was bound for Greenland, so four U-Boats took up stations along its route. One of those was U-233, on her maiden voyage, commanded by twenty-six-year-old Lieutenant Commander Karl-Jürg Wächter. In the fog and darkness of 3 February, U-233 floated on the surface as Wächter, binoculars raised to his eyes, studied the dark silhouettes of SG-19 passing in the distance.

Earlier, U-233 survived a depth charge attack brought about by the sonar indications of the escorts. When submerged, U-boats could be detected by sonar, but when on the surface, the escorts were blind to their presence because they lacked radar. As a result, Wächter used that advantage, along with the haze and darkness, to keep pace with the convoy.

All the ships of SG-19 knew that a U-boat was in the area. The evening before Captain Danielsen of the Dorchester announced over the ship's public address system, "Now here this: This concerns every soldier. Now here this: Every soldier is ordered to sleep in his clothes and life jacket. Repeat, this is an order! We have a submarine following us...If we make it through the night, in the morning we will have air protection from Blue West One, which is the code name for the air base in Greenland, and of course, we will have protection until we reach port."

Between the known presence of a submarine and the rough weather that necessitated cancelling the talent show, there would be little sleeping on the Dorchester that night. The weather abated enough within a few hours that the chaplains quickly threw together an impromptu party in the main mess area. Many of the soldiers attended, remaining until about 2330. First Sergeant Warish skipped the party, choosing instead to share the hardship of soldiers assigned to lookout positions out on the open deck in the thirty-six-degree weather.

The chaplains bid good night to the men by reminding them of Captain Danielsen's warning about wearing

all their clothes, including boots and gloves, along with life jackets to bed. After the party, three of the chaplains made the rounds of the ship in an attempt to raise men's spirits. Meanwhile, Father Washington said mass in the mess area that was attended by men of many faiths.

Earlier that night, Captain Krecker had called his men together in the hold. He repeated Captain Danielsen's earlier warning. "This will be the most dangerous part of our mission," he said. "We're coming through the storm and now we're in calm waters. And they can really spot us out here." He finished with the admonition to wear life jackets, telling the men that they were not in a "beauty contest."

As the clock ticked past midnight, many began to breathe easier with the knowledge that they were near safe waters and would soon be under an umbrella of protection from Greenland-based planes. Warish was making the rounds among the troops. Aboard U-233, torpedo man Erich Pässler prepared to fire three torpedoes. Within minutes, the three deadly fish were in the water heading toward the shadow creeping past at a distance of 1,000 yards.

Warish had just looked at his watch when, at approximately 0055 hours, one of the torpedoes ripped into the Dorchester's starboard side. The ensuing explosion ripped a hole near the engine room from below the waterline to the top deck. The lights went out, steam pipes split, and bunks collapsed like cards one on top of another. The sounds of screaming and the smell of gunpowder and ammonia filled the air. The initial explosion killed dozens outright, and a wave of cold water entering the ship quickly drowned dozens more. Nearly one-third those aboard died in the first moments of the disaster.

Men, many of whom had disobeyed Captain Danielsen's orders to wear their clothes and life preservers, wandered through the darkened and mangled passageways searching for their clothes. Warish lay trapped under some bunks that pinned his leg to the deck. Within a minute, the ship listed thirty degrees to starboard. Panicked men rushed topside, but many never made it through blocked passageways. Others were overcome by ammonia fumes. Those who did emerge into the freezing night faced tough choices. Several life boats could not be deployed due to the Dorchester's dramatic list. Many others were so fouled by ice that they could not be freed before the ship went under.

In the middle of the confusion on deck was Roy Summers, a Navy gunner stationed on the Dorchester. A few months earlier, he had survived the sinking of the Dorchester's sister ship, the Chatham, and he believed that he would survive this attack. Resigned to abandoning ship, he ran aft toward the stern, but thought better of it when he realized that jumping there would bring certain death from the still turning propellers, which had already breached the surface and claimed the lives of several who had already jumped. Turning around, he witnessed two of the chaplains handing out life vests and assisting soldiers as they slid down ropes to the sea below. One hysterical soldier grabbed a chaplain as if to choke him. Summers wrestled the soldier away from the chaplain and watched the soldier run down the deck toward the rising water and probably to his death. Summers then climbed over the railing and went down a rope into the ocean.

Elsewhere on the top deck, Father Washington gave absolution to soldiers as they went over the side. Private First Class Charles Macli, a former professional boxer, unsuccessfully urged Washington to go over the side with the men. Instead, Chaplain Washington remained aboard as Macli slid into the cold water. Another soldier, Walter Miller, saw knots of men in seemingly catatonic states bunched against the railings of the listing ship. Too afraid to jump into the sea, they awaited the inevitability of being swallowed by it. Over the din, he heard a terror-filled plaintive voice repeating, "I can't find my life jacket." Turning toward that voice, Miller clearly heard Chaplain Fox say, "Here's one, soldier." Then Miller witnessed Fox remove his life jacket and put it on the soldier. At the same time, Navy Lieutenant John Mahoney cursed himself for leaving his gloves in his quarters. Chaplain Goode stopped him from returning for the gloves, saying, "Don't bother Mahoney. I have another pair. You can have these." Goode then removed the gloves from his hands and gave them to Mahoney. Mahoney later realized that a man preparing to abandon ship probably would not carry a second pair of gloves.

Many of the survivors reported similar encounters with one or more of the chaplains. They seemed to be everywhere on the deck until the very end. Many survivors reported that the four chaplains locked arms and prayed in unison as the ship sank. Whether this part is accurate is unimportant, for the truth is that these four Army chaplains sacrificed themselves for the soldiers and the God that they served.

First Sergeant Warish freed himself after a ten-minute struggle. He dragged himself through the passageways and over the side in time to see the *Dorchester* sink below the waves just twenty-five minutes after being struck by the torpedo. After some confusion, the Coast Guard began rescue operations, saving 230 of the nearly 900 aboard and losing one Coast Guardsman in the process.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the story of the Four Chaplains garnered popular notice. Many thought that they should be awarded the Medal of Honor. Instead, on 19 December 1944, they were each awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross. In 1948, the U.S. Post Service issued a commemorative stamp in their honor, and Congress designated 3 February as "Four Chaplains Day." Twelve years later, Congress created the Four Chaplains' Medal, which was presented to their survivors by Secretary of the Army Wilber M. Brucker on 18 January 1961 at Fort Myer, Virginia.

Today, one can find memorials to the Four Chaplains all across the nation. Several organizations exist to further their memory, including the Chapel of the Four Chaplains in Philadelphia and the Immortal Chaplains Foundation in Minnesota. Chapels, bridges, memorials, and plaques honoring the Four Chaplains are found in so many locations, including a stained-glass window in the Pentagon, that it is impossible to list them all here.

First Sergeant Warish was rescued. He recovered from his injuries enough to continue serving the Army, although he suffered chronic pain for the rest of his life. He rose to the rank of sergeant major before retiring in 1963. In 2002, he was injured in a car accident and for the remaining year of his life he could only move with the help of a walker. He died in September 2003.

U-233 escaped after firing the fatal torpedo. About a year later, it was sunk by British destroyers with the loss of most of its crew. One survivor, Kurt Rosser, was interned in a Mississippi prisoner of war camp, where he picked cotton and sandbagged levees against flooding. In 2000, the Immortal Chaplains Foundation brought him and the U-233 first officer, Gerhard Buske, to Washington, DC. There they attended memorial ceremonies, toured the Holocaust Museum, and visited with Theresa Goode Kaplan, widow of Chaplain Goode, who reluctantly accepted the visitors' expressions of respect for her husband and regret for her suffering.

Four years later, Buske spoke at the foundation's sixtieth-anniversary ceremony, saying, "we ought to love when others hate...we can bring faith where doubt threatens; we can awaken hope where despair exists; we can light up a light where darkness reigns; we can bring joy where sorrow dominates." Those words, as well as any, represent the lessons of the Four Chaplains.

Submitted by the Editor