THOSE Immortal CHAPLAINS

BY MARY ELLEN MILLER

During one of the greatest American sea disasters of World War II, four clergymen of different faiths went down with their ship to save the lives of others.

ON THE NIGHT OF Feb. 2, 1943, the captain of the USAT *Dorchester* made an announcement to everyone on board. The ship was scheduled to reach its destination—the Army Command Base at Narsarsuaq in southern Greenland—the next morning. But radar had picked up a submarine following the ship. Hans J. Danielsen ordered his men to sleep in their heavy clothes and life jackets—an instruction many ignored because of the heat in their stifling sleeping quarters.

As midnight came and went, the ship's lookouts breathed sighs of relief, thinking the threat had passed. Soon, the ship would be close enough to receive air protection from the U.S. air base in Greenland. But then, at 12:55 a.m., with the *Dorchester* just 100 miles from its destination, a German torpedo ripped through the ship's starboard side near the engine room, tearing a hole from below the waterline to the top deck.

"I just came off guard duty and, boom!" said one survivor. "The lights went out, the steam pipes broke and the men were screaming. There was a very, very strong odor of burned gunpowder." Several hundred of the 902 servicemen, merchant seamen and civilian workers aboard the *Dorchester* were killed instantly—crushed to death in their bunks, drowned and burned in the engine room or washed into the sea.

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Among those who survived the initial explosion were four clergymen who had enlisted in the Chaplains Corps hoping to see action with the troops in Europe. Initially, they had been disappointed to be assigned instead to a mission where servicemen would improve airfields and operate weather stations in the North Atlantic. But now, with the crippled *Dorchester* listing 30 degrees to starboard, and frightened men running frantically to and fro in pain and confusion, the chaplains sprang into action, determined to save as many lives as possible.

The four men were all of different faiths and backgrounds and had just met the previous month at a military staging camp as they waited to ship out. Yet they formed an immediate bond—with each other and the young men on the *Dorchester* they were there to support. "They were always there. They had tremendous empathy with what most of us were going through—the uncertainty, the fear …" recalled survivor James McAtamney, in author Dan Kurzman's book, "No Greater Glory." "To see these men in the same uniform but of different faiths getting together and actually

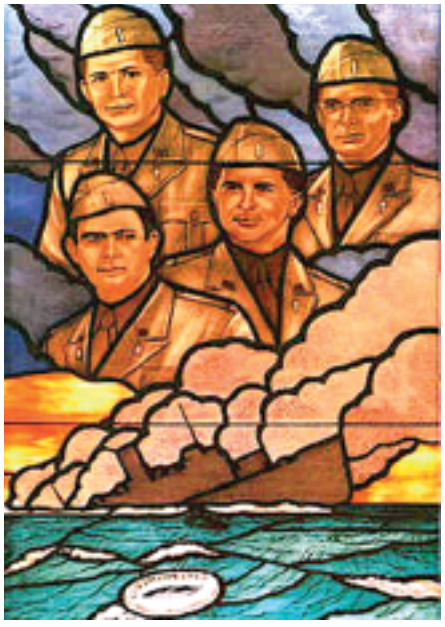
A painting depicts the rescue of USAT *Dorchester* survivors by USCGC Escanaba in the icy waters of the North Atlantic Ocean. Just 230 of the 902 men on board lived through the ordeal.

talking and laughing and smiling and joking with each other was unheard of. I don't think I'd be very far from the truth if I said that the pastor of our church wouldn't be caught dead talking to a Protestant minister."

At 41, the Methodist Rev. George Fox was the eldest of the clergymen. He had not led an easy life. Abused by a violent-tempered father, Fox left home at 17 to volunteer for World War I. He became an ambulance driver, bringing wounded soldiers to hospitals. Suffering spinal injuries that would last a lifetime, Fox earned several Purple Hearts, the Silver Star and the Croix de Guerre, France's highest honor. He enrolled in the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago after the war and eventually became a minister at three parishes in Vermont. Throughout his years in the church, he led a life of such poverty that he was barely able to feed his family.

Rabbi Alexander Goode, 31, who had been beaten up by anti-Semitic bullies as a child, made up for early hardships with his intellect. After graduating from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, he moved to York, Pa., where he became rabbi at Temple Beth Israel. There, Goode helped establish a public school curriculum in "human relations" aimed at breaking down racial and ethnic barriers, which later spread throughout the state of Pennsylvania. He also earned his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in Middle Eastern Languages. The author of a book-length manuscript, "Cavalcade of Democracy," Goode foresaw Christians and Jews coming together after the war to achieve a democratic world—and he was so committed to this vision

Clockwise from top left: Methodist Rev. George Fox, Rabbi Alexander Goode, Roman Catholic priest John Washington and Rev. Clark Poling, of the Reformed Church of America.



WWII veteran Fred Whitaker at the entrance to the Immortal Chaplains Memorial Sanctuary aboard the *Queen Mary* in Long Beach, Calif; the stained-glass window at the Pentagon. Below right, a commemorative stamp issued in 1948.

that he left behind his beloved wife and toddler daughter to join the war effort.

The Rev. Clark Poling, of the Reformed Church in America, came from a long line of religious men; he was a seventh-generation minister and the son of a well-known Baptist minister and radio evangelist. Poling was insatiably curious, held blunt opinions and questioned everything, including his relationship with God. During one family vacation, he snuck away to a nearby mountaintop to seek divine direction; after 36 hours, his frantic father finally found him … and learned that his son had decided on a life in the ministry. The younger Poling graduated from Yale Divinity School and settled in Schenectady, N.Y., where he was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church.

John Washington grew up as the eldest of seven children in an Irish Catholic family in Newark, N.J., where he delivered newspapers to help support his family. As a child, he was given the last rites after acquiring a throat infection that resulted in a high fever. Why he had been spared on his deathbed was a question that brought him closer to God. He thrilled his family when he announced his plans to become a Roman Catholic priest. He was ordained in 1935 and eventually made parish priest at St. Stephen's Church in Kearny, N.J. His congregants, who quickly grew to admire their fun-loving, down-to-earth young leader, were sorry to see him leave to join the war effort.

From the moment the *Dorchester* set sail, the four chaplains, often walking around together, made regular visits to the men in their cabins, offering words of reassurance and comfort. To lift spirits, they made plans for an Amateur Night, where the crew could come together to share their talents and have a few laughs. The men had a right to feel afraid because they were on a dangerous journey. German U-boats, while not successful at penetrating the American coastline, lurked in the waters of the North Atlantic between Newfoundland and Greenland. The Germans' mission was to ward off Allied supply ships in the Atlantic. They had torpedoed more than 100 Allied ships by the fall of 1942.

When the worst storm in 50 years slammed the North Atlantic soon after the *Dorchester* hit the open sea, plans for the much-anticipated Amateur Night had to be abandoned —most men were so sick they couldn't leave their cabins; those who could keep their sea legs kept busy cleaning up broken dishes, fixing damaged pumps to control flooding and chopping the ever forming ice that coated the decks and threatened to sink the ship.

Thankfully, the churning seas calmed by Feb. 2; but though the respite eased the crew's physical discomfort, it also made the *Dorchester* an easier mark for German U-boats. Capt. Danielsen alerted his crew of the imminent threat around dinnertime. Father Washington said a Mass that evening, which many attended, and urged the men to find courage by singing or saying The Lord's Prayer, noted Kurzman. As evening turned into night, the four chaplains gathered in the mess hall to host an impromptu songfest, with Father Washington at the piano belting out popular songs. The party lasted until about 11:30 p.m.

The *Dorchester* was traveling in a convoy, escorted by three Coast Guard cutters, with two other freighters by its side, when the captain of the German U-223 decided to attack. Although the German Lt. Cmdr. Karl-Jurgen Wachter had been ordered to wait for reinforcements, he saw an opportunity to impress his superiors. The U-boat fired three torpedoes, and just one found its mark—but it proved a fatal blow for the *Dorchester*.

Aboard the Army transport ship, panic, cold and inadequate preparation converged to take a deadly toll.

Suddenly, water gushed into the lower compartments. The four 20 mm

guns, with .50-caliber guns fore and aft, didn't work because the ship was listing. Down below, bunks collapsed and crushed the men who had been sleeping in them. Many died trying to find exits in the darkness. Others, who ignored the orders to sleep in their heavy parkas, gloves and life jackets, were immediately in trouble. When the order was given to abandon ship, the loudspeaker wasn't working.

While there had been enough lifeboats and rafts aboard to accommodate nearly 1,300 passengers, some boats were frozen to the side of the ship. Others were thrown overboard only to drift away. Some capsized because too many people had tried to board them.

Meanwhile, witnesses saw the four chaplains handing out life jackets and lowering men into the boats. When some young crewmen balked at entering the icy waters, the four clergymen calmly reassured them, urging them to grab ropes and lower themselves down. Father Washington reportedly administered absolution to many of the men as they went over the side of the ship. When young Lt. John Mahoney started to run back to his cabin for gloves, Rabbi Goode pulled off his pair and insisted that Mahoney put them on. "I owe my life to those gloves," Mahoney would later tell author Kurzman. Mahoney endured eight hours clinging to a lifeboat in frozen waters before he was rescued—one of just two men in the boat of 40 who survived.

Before long, the supply of life preservers ran out. One by one, each chaplain took off his own and gave it to a man in need, before encouraging him off the sinking ship.

One survivor will never forget the last time he saw the four chaplains. "All I could see was the keel. I saw the chaplains standing arm in arm, the boat took a nosedive and they went right down. They never made a move to get off.

"I think that single act has changed my life," he continued. "I try to do more for people. I don't worry about me so much."

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Only 230 men survived the sinking of the USAT *Dorchester*. She went down in just 20 minutes. Most of those who perished died of hypothermia in the frigid water of the North Atlantic. When rescue ships arrived later that day, hundreds of bodies were seen on the water, kept afloat by their life jackets.

The year after the sinking, each of the chaplains was awarded a Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross. In 1948, even though protocol states that no postage stamp can be issued until 10 years after a person's death (except for a U.S. president), a three-cent stamp of "These Immortal Chaplains" was issued.

In 1961, a posthumous Special Medal for Heroism was established by Congress to honor the four chaplains. It was awarded in place of the Medal of Honor, which has strict requirements of heroism performed under fire. In addition, other honors have been bestowed upon the clergymen, including stained-glass windows at the Pentagon and the Washington National Cathedral, just to name a few.

In 1997, David Fox, the nephew of George Fox who has interviewed more than 30 survivors, relatives and friends of the chaplains, co-founded the Immortal Chaplains Foundation to spread the story of the four chaplains and their ecumenical message. The foundation also created the Immortal Chaplains Prize for Humanity to honor those who risked everything to save others of another faith or ethnicity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was one of the recipients.

"Their story has an amazing power to it," said David Fox. "This is how we keep it alive."

But perhaps one of the foundation's most remarkable moves was to invite the German survivors of the U-223 to attend an anniversary of the World War II event, which was held in 2000.

"I felt that just as the chaplains reached out to others, I had to reach out to them," said David Fox. "There are two sides to the story. The chaplains would've forgiven them."