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Rev. George L. Fox, Methodist  
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Priest

### U.S.A.T. *Dorchester*

The *U.S.A.T. Dorchester* was an aging, luxury, coastal liner that was no longer luxurious. When the soldiers boarded in New York on January 23, 1943, the *Dorchester* was filled to capacity. In addition to the Merchant Marine crew and a few civilians, young soldiers filled every available space. Soon 902 lives were about to be cast to the mercy of the frigid North Atlantic.

As the *Dorchester* left New York for an Army base in Greenland, many dangers lay ahead, for the *Dorchester* would be sailing through an area that had become infamous as "Torpedo Junction."

Most of the men who boarded for the trip were young, frightened soldiers. They were packed head to toe below deck, a steaming human sea of fear and uncertainty. They were men in need of a strong shoulder to lean on, a firm voice to encourage

them, and a ray of hope in a world of despair. In their midst moved four men, Army Chaplains, called to put aside their own fears and uncertainties to minister to the needs of others.

With so many men crammed into so small a space, all of them in need of the ray of hope Spiritual guidance could afford, differences ceased to be important. All shared the same level of misery and fear, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. The title "Rabbi", "Father", or "Reverend" was of little consequence when a man needed a CHAPLAIN. A prayer from Rabbi Goode could give strength to the Catholic soldier as quickly as a hymn from the beautiful voice of Father Washington could warm the heart of a Protestant. The Jewish soldier facing an uncertain future on foreign shores could draw on the strength of a Protestant to help him face tomorrow. When sinking in the quicksand of life, one does not ask for the credentials of him who offers the hand of hope, he simply thanks God that the helping hand is there.

Finally, on February 2nd, the *Dorchester* was within 150 miles of Greenland. One of the *Dorchester's* three Coast Guard escorts had received sonar readings during the day indicating the presence of an enemy submarine in "Torpedo Junction."

Hans Danielson, the *Dorchester's* captain, listened to the news with great concern. His cargo of human lives had been at sea for ten days and was finally nearing its destination. If he could make it through the night, with daylight air cover would arrive to safely guide his ship home. In the

distance a cold, metal arm broke the surface of the stormy seas. At the end of that arm, a German U-Boat (submarine) captain monitored the slowly passing troop transport. Shortly before one in the morning he gave the command to fire.

Quiet moments passed as silent death reached out for the men of the *Dorchester*, then the early morning was shattered by the flash of a blinding explosion and the roar of massive destruction. The "hit" had been dead on, tossing men from their cots with the force of its explosion. A second torpedo followed the first, instantly killing 100 men in the hull of the ship. Power was knocked out by the explosion in the engine room, and darkness engulfed the frightened men below deck as water rushed through gaping wounds in the *Dorchester's* hull. The ship tilted at an unnatural angle as it began to sink rapidly, and piles of clothing and life jackets were tossed about in the darkness where no one would ever find them. Wounded men cried out in pain, frightened survivors screamed in terror, and all groped frantically in the darkness for exits they could not find. Somewhere in that living hell, four voices of calm began to speak words of comfort, seeking to bring order to panic and bedlam. Slowly soldiers began to find their way to the deck of the ship, many 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 who would never have survived the trip to his cabin and then back to safety.

"I can't take those gloves," Mahoney replied.

"Never mind," the Rabbi responded. "I have two pairs." Mahoney slipped the gloves over his hands and returned to the frigid deck, never stopping to ponder until later when he had reached safety, that there was no way Rabbi Goode would have been carrying a spare set of gloves. As that thought finally dawned on him, he came to a new understanding of what was transpiring in the mind of the fearless Chaplain. Somehow, Rabbi Goode suspected that he would himself never leave the *Dorchester* alive.

Before boarding the *Dorchester* back in January, Reverend 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.*" He probably never dreamed that his prayer request would be answered so fully. As he guided the frightened soldiers to their only hope of safety from the rapidly sinking transport, he spoke calm words of encouragement, urging them not to give up. In the dark hull of the *Dorchester*, he was more than adequate. He was a hero.

Likewise Reverend Fox and Father Washington stood out within the confines of an unimaginable hell. Wounded and dying soldiers were ushered into eternity to the sounds of comforting words from men of God more intent on the needs of others than in their own safety and survival. Somehow, by their valiant efforts, the Chaplains succeeded in getting many of the soldiers out of the hold and onto the *Dorchester's* slippery deck.



In the chaos around them, life boats floated away before men could board them. Others capsized as panic continued to shadow reason and soldiers loaded the small craft beyond limit. The strength, calm, and organization of the Chaplains had been so critical in the dark hull. Now, on deck, they found that their mission had not been fully accomplished. They organized the effort, directed men to safety, and left them with parting words of encouragement. In little more than twenty minutes, the *Dorchester* was almost gone. Icy waves broke over the railing, tossing men into the sea, many of them without life jackets. In the last moments of the transport's existence,

the Chaplains were too occupied opening lockers to pass out life jackets to note the threat to their own lives.

In less than half an hour, water was beginning to flow across the deck of the sinking *Dorchester*. Working against time, the Chaplains continued to pass out the life vests from the lockers as the soldiers pressed forward in a ragged line. And then...the lockers were all empty...the life jackets gone. Those still pressing in line began to realize they were doomed, there was no hope. And then something amazing happened, something those who were there would never forget. All Four Chaplains began taking their own life jackets off...and putting them on the men around them. Together they sacrificed their last shred of hope for survival, to insure the survival of other men... most of them total strangers. Then time ran out. The Chaplains had done all they could for those who would survive, and nothing more could be done for the remaining...including themselves.

Those who had been fortunate enough to reach lifeboats struggled to distance themselves from the sinking ship, lest they be pulled beneath the ocean swells by the chasm created as the transport slipped into a watery grave. Then, amid the screams of pain and horror that permeated the cold dark night, they heard the strong voices of the Chaplains. "Shma Yisroel Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echod." "Our Father, which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."

Looking back they saw the slanting deck of the *Dorchester*, its demise almost complete. Braced against the railings were the Four Chaplains...praying...singing, giving strength to others by their final valiant declaration of faith. Their arms were linked together as they braced against the railing and leaned into each other for support, Reverend Fox, Rabbi Goode, Reverend Poling, and Father Washington. Said one of the survivors, "It was the finest thing I have ever seen this side of heaven."

And then, only 27 minutes after the first torpedo struck, the last vestige of the *U.S.A.T. Dorchester* disappeared beneath the cold North Atlantic waters. In its death throes it reached out to claim any survivors nearby, taking with it to its grave the four ministers of different faiths who learned to find strength in their diversity by focusing on the Father they shared. On that day.....