

February 3rd is “National Four Chaplains Day” – Why?



by Rees Lloyd (JD)

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“Four Chaplains Day” is to be observed annually on February 3 in America by the unanimous resolution of the U.S. Congress in 1988. It is a day to remember February 3, 1943, when one of the most remarkable and inspiring acts of heroism in the history of warfare took place in World War II. It is a day to honor the heroism of the Four Chaplains, who selflessly gave their lives “that others may live.”

However, although veterans in The American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and other veterans organizations, will hold special observances on Four Chaplains Day and weekend, most American media, most American schools, and, therefore, most Americans, will not observe it.

Indeed, most Americans, including children who will not be taught about it in their schools, will not even know that there is a National Four Chaplains day, or why. This is true even though a former soldier who owed his life to them has said: “[T]heir heroism is beyond belief. That is one of the reasons why we must tell the world what these people did.”

FEB. 3, 1943: THE TROOP SHIP “DORCHESTER” IS TORPEDOED IN WWII

On February 3, 1943, the Dorchester, a converted luxury cruise ship, was transporting Army troops to Greenland, escorted by

three Coast Guard Cutters and accompanied by two slow moving freighters.

On board were some 900 troops, and four chaplains, of diverse religions and backgrounds, but of a common faith and commitment to serve God, country, and all the troops, regardless of their religious beliefs, or non-belief. The four Chaplains are:

Rev. George Fox (Methodist); Father John Washington (Roman Catholic); Jewish Rabbi Alexander Goode; and Rev. Clark Poling (Dutch Reformed).

At approximately 12:55 a.m., in the dead of a freezing night, the Dorchester was hit by a torpedo fired by German U-boat 233 in an area so infested with German submarines it was known as "Torpedo Junction."

The blast ripped a hole in the ship from below the waterline to the top deck. The engine room was instantly flooded. Crewmen, who were not scalded to death by steam escaping from broken pipes and the ship's boiler, were drowned. Hundreds of troops in the flooded lower compartments were drowned, or washed out to the frigid waters, where most would die.

In less than a minute, the Dorchester listed on a 30-degree angle. Troops on deck searched for life jackets in panic, clung to rails and other handholds, saw overloaded life boats overturn in the turgid water, leaped overboard as a last desperate hope for life. Many with life jackets drowned when the life preservers became waterlogged.

Of the 900 troops and crew on board, two-thirds would ultimately die; most of those who survived, had lifelong infirmities and pain from their time in the icy waters.

Dorchester survivors told of the wild pandemonium on board when it was hit and began sinking. Many men had not slept in their clothes and life vests as ordered because of the heat in

the crowded quarters below. There was panic, fear, terror; death was no abstraction but real, immediate, seemingly inescapable.

THE FOUR CHAPLAINS SACRIFICE THEIR LIVES TO SAVE OTHERS

The four Chaplains acted together to try to bring some order to the chaos, to calm the panic of the troops, to alleviate their fear and terror, to pray with and for them, to help save their lives. The Chaplains passed out life jackets, helping those too panicked to put them on correctly – until the awful moment arrived when there were no more life jackets to be given out.

It was then that a most remarkable act of heroism, courage, faith, and love took place: Each of the four Chaplains took off his life jacket, and, knowing that act made death certain, put his life jacket on a young soldier who didn't have one, refusing to listen to any protest that they should not make such a sacrifice.

They continued to help the troops until the last moment. Then, as the ship sank into the raging sea, the four Chaplains linked hands and arms, and could be seen and heard by the survivors praying together, even singing hymns, joined together in faith, love, and unity, as they sacrificed their lives so "that others might live."

The few survivors testified to the selfless act of the four Chaplains:

"The ship started sinking and as I left the ship, I looked back and saw the chaplains with their hands clasped, praying for the boys. They never made any attempt to save themselves, but they did try to save the others. I think their names should be on the list of 'The Greatest Heroes' of this war"," testified survivor Grady L. Clark.

"They took off their life belts and gave them to soldiers who

had none. The last I saw of them, they were still praying, talking, and preaching to the soldiers," attested Thomas W. Myers, Jr.

"It is impressed clearly in my mind that these chaplains demonstrated unsurpassed courage and heroism when they willingly gave their life belts to four enlisted men, who, because of the utter confusion and disorder brought about by the torpedoing, had become hysterical. They helped save the lives of many of the troops," testified John F. Garey.

These testimonies, taken from author Dan Kurzman's valuable book, "No Greater Glory: The Four Immortal Chaplains and the Sinking of the Dorchester in World War II," are but some of the sworn statements of grateful survivors upon which Congress awarded the Four Chaplains an unprecedented "Congressional Medal of Valor" in 1961.

Earlier, in 1944, they were awarded Purple Hearts and the Distinguished Service Cross. They did not receive the Medal of Honor because of restrictions limiting that medal to combatants. In 2004, delegates to The American Legion National Convention, then representing some 2.7-million wartime veterans, voted to support making an exception and awarding the Medal of Honor to the Four Chaplains.

Ben Epstein, a Jewish survivor who often spoke to audiences about the Four Chaplains, was quoted by author Kurzman as describing the meaning of their sacrifice by putting a question to himself, and, thereby, to all other Americans:

"I ask myself, could I do it? Take my life preserver and give it to someone else? Absolutely not. I don't think I could do it. I didn't do it. And I ask you in the audience, how many of you could do it? And I don't want an answer. That's why I say their bravery; their heroism is beyond belief. That is one of the reasons why we must tell the world what these people did."

AMERICA'S MOST DECORATED LIVING VETERAN, MAJ. GEN. PATRICK

BRADY: "I WILL ALWAYS BE IN AWE OF THEM, THE FOUR CHAPLAINS."

One American who knows something about courage in war and who honors the Four Chaplains is Maj.Gen. Patrick H. Brady (USA, ret.). A recipient of the Medal of Honor in the Vietnam War as a "Dust Off" medical evacuation combat helicopter pilot, Gen. Brady is credited with saving some 5,000 wounded soldiers from combat zones, flying where no one had flown before to save the wounded as battle raged. (See his book: "Dead Men Flying: Victory in Viet Nam—The legend of Dust-off: America's Battlefield Angeles")

For his bravery in combat, Gen. Brady is considered today to be the most decorated living American veteran. But he defers to the Four Chaplains when it comes to bravery.

"The heroism of the Four Chaplains, their courage, is of a different order," Gen. Brady explained to me in an interview.

"I, and others who have received the Medal of Honor and other decorations for bravery, did what we did in the heat of battle. That is one kind of courage," Gen. Brady said.

"But what the Four Chaplains did was deliberate, thought out, willed. I fought in combat knowing I might die, but not wanting to die. They had the extraordinary, different kind of courage and heroism to do what they were doing knowing it meant death was certain—and they went ahead did it. They deliberately sacrificed their lives so others, those young troops, might live.

"I will always be in awe of them, the Four Chaplains," Gen. Brady concluded.

THE ETERNAL VALUE OF THE EXAMPLE OF THE FOUR CHAPLAINS

At the dedication of the Chapel of the Four Chaplains in 1951, then-President Harry Truman said their sacrifice reflected the fact that: "[T]he unity of our country is a unity under

God...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 good will.”

Those are inspiring words, and truths. They will stir the hearts of patriots and especially veterans who know what it means to serve as they gather in their American Legion, VFW, and other veterans’ Posts to honor the Four Chaplains, hopefully joined by other members of their communities.

But a question is raised on this Four Chaplains Day, Feb. 3, 2025: Do Americans of this era, in government, in the media, in the public schools as teachers or administrators, still believe in those truths? Will Americans express that belief by honoring the Four Chaplains as once the American nation did?

On Four Chaplains Day, Feb. 3, 2025– the 82nd anniversary of the day in which the Four Chaplains sacrificed their lives “so that others may live.” –will the media again fail to report on it, and the schools fail to teach it, and Americans, in the main, fail to observe it?

May God bless and keep the Four Chaplains, and may the America they so selflessly, patriotically, and faithfully served, always remember and honor them.

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