

# The Four Immortal Chaplains of the SS Dorchester

Over 900 servicemen were packed aboard the SS Dorchester in early February 1943. The former cruise ship was designed to hold just over 400 passengers and crew, but was converted for military service and was now travelling from Newfoundland to an American base in Greenland. The Dorchester was part of a 3-ship convoy through U-boat infested waters where numerous transports already had been sunk.

By 1am, the Dorchester was within 150 miles of Greenland when a periscope poked up out of the chilly Atlantic waters. Through the cross hairs, an officer aboard the German submarine U-223 spotted the Dorchester.

Under the cover of darkness, the Nazi sub approached the convoy on the surface, and after identifying and targeting the ship, fired three the torpedoes. The ship was hit on its starboard side near the engine room, killing 100 men and knocking out all power and radio contact. With the Dorchester rapidly taking on water, Captain Hans J. Danielsen gave the order to abandon ship.

On the frigid, overcrowded deck, panic set in. Men jumped from the ship into lifeboats, stuffing them to the point of almost capsizing. Other rafts drifted off into the Atlantic before soldiers could board them.

Amid the disorder, four Army chaplains quietly spread out among the soldiers, preaching courage to the frightened, offering prayers to the wounded, and guiding the disoriented. Methodist minister George L. Fox, Rabbi Alexander D. Goode, Catholic priest John P. Washington, and Dutch Reformed Reverend Clark V. Poling all held the rank of first lieutenant.

The chaplains opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. When there were no lifejackets left, the chaplains removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men. When giving their life jackets, Rabbi Goode did not call out for a Jew; Father Washington seek out a Catholic; nor did the Reverends Fox and Poling call for a Protestant. They simply gave their life jackets to the next man in line.

“I could hear men crying, pleading, praying,” Private William B. Bednar said. “I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going.”

Another sailor, Petty Officer John J. Mahoney, tried to reenter his cabin when Rabbi Goode stopped him. A disoriented Mahoney explained that he had forgotten his gloves. The rabbi calmed Mahoney and gave the petty officer his own gloves.

Less than 30 minutes after the torpedo struck the Dorchester, the ship was about to go under. The four chaplains locked arms on the slanted deck and prayed as the water reached their knees. A wave swept over the ship, then another, and another. The ship lurched vertically then plunged into the seething ocean.

Of the 902 men aboard the Dorchester, 672 died. When the news reached American shores, the nation was stunned by both the magnitude of the tragedy and by the heroic actions of the four chaplains.



**George L.  
Fox**



**Alexander  
D. Goode**



**Clark V.  
Poling**



**John P.  
Washington**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# The Four Immortal Chaplains of the SS Dorchester

**Directions:** After reading the story of the chaplains about the SS Dorchester, answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. In paragraph 1, what is the best synonym for *convoy*?
  - a. Retreat
  - b. Group
  - c. Attack
  - d. Mission
  
2. How were the conditions of the ship dangerous?

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3. What is the author's purpose of including the above sentences?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Why do you think Officer John J Mahoney was disoriented?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How many men survived the attack on the SS Dorchester?
  - a. 230
  - b. 400
  - c. 672
  - d. 902
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What is an adjective that best describes the four chaplains? Explain your reasons for selecting that adjective.

**Extension Activity:** Design an award plaque that will be awarded to the four chaplains. Include a name for the award, picture, and short descriptive paragraph about why they are being awarded.

