

The Courage of the Four Chaplains

On a bitterly cold night in February 1943, one of the great maritime losses of World War II occurred – the sinking of the United States Army Transport ship *Dorchester* in the North Atlantic.

Of the 904 men aboard, 678 lost their lives. The vessel – sailing to Greenland as part of a naval convoy – was sunk by a torpedo from a German U-boat.

On board was a young chaplain named Clark Poling assigned to the ship. Before going to sea, he asked his father, Daniel A. Poling, to pray for him. His request, however, had a stipulation: pray not for his safety, but that he would be adequate for any situation. Poling prayed as his son had requested.



When the enemy's torpedo struck the *Dorchester*, boiler power was lost, and there was inadequate steam to sound the full six-whistle signal to abandon ship, and the *Dorchester* sank by the bow in about 20 minutes. Two of the United States Coast Guard cutters *Comanche* and *Escanaba* rushed to the rescue.



The crew of the *Escanaba* employed a new retriever rescue technique whereby swimmers clad in wet suits swam to victims in the water and secured a line so they could be hauled onto the ship. By this method, *Escanaba* saved 133 men (although one died later), and the *Comanche* saved 97 men.

As the ship began to sink, many of the men became paralyzed with fear. Young Poling and three other chaplains strapped their own life belts to fear-stricken men. They helped load the lifeboats, and then joined hands in a circle of prayer as they sank to their watery graves.

The elder Poling's prayer had been answered. Although his son had not remained safe, he had been "adequate for the situation." And so were his fellow chaplains.

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Because of their courage in the sacrifice of their lives to save others, the sinking of the



Dorchester is often referred to as the Four Chaplains or the Immortal Chaplains. In addition to Poling, who was a minister of the Reformed Church in America, the other chaplains were George L. Fox, a Methodist minister; John P. Washington, a Roman Catholic priest; and Rabbi Alexander B. Goode. Congress established February 3 (the date of the sinking) as Four Chaplains Day to commemorate their act of heroism.

What was the source of their love for others and the bravery that motivated them? It was their faith in a God of mercy and compassion – the Lord who

had called them to a life of serving others. They willingly chose the ultimate way to do so.

In the final analysis, our adequacy for any situation is found only in Christ. He provides what we need to remain true to Him, and to be His brightest light in the darkest of circumstances.

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends (John 15:13).

– Beecher Hunter