

## **THE FOUR**

**Stephen D. Strauss**

**The Literary Club  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
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**Time: 12:55 AM, Wednesday, February 3, 1943, in the midst of WW II**

**Place: The freezing cold North Atlantic Ocean, 80 miles off the coast of Greenland**

**The U.S. troopship Dorchester, en route from New York to Greenland is struck by a torpedo fired by a German submarine.**

**The Dorchester sinks. Only 230 of the 902 men aboard survive.**

**Unfortunately, more than 2,700 Allied ships were sunk by Nazi U-boats in the Atlantic during WW II. Thousands of sailors, soldiers and civilians perished. What makes the sinking of the Dorchester extraordinary and remarkable is what happened during the 27 minutes between the impact of the torpedo and the ship sinking beneath the frigid waves of the North Atlantic.**

**There were 4 Army Chaplains aboard the Dorchester - 2 Protestant, 1 Catholic and 1 Jewish.**

**The torpedo struck the Dorchester amidships below the water line, knocking out the power and plunging the ship into darkness. Many men were killed or wounded by the initial impact of the torpedo.**

**Panic and chaos immediately set in. Quickly and quietly the 4 chaplains spread out offering prayers for the dying, tending to the wounded and guiding the disoriented to the deck.**

**Navy Petty officer John J. Mahoney was heading back to his cabin. The Rabbi Chaplain asked "Where are you going?" Mahoney answered "To get my gloves." "Here take these" the Rabbi said as he handed a pair of gloves to Mahoney. "I can't take those gloves" Mahoney replied. "Never**

**mind I have 2 pairs” said the Rabbi. It was only later that Mahoney understood that the Chaplain never intended to leave the ship.**

**After the torpedo blast Army Private William B. Bednar found himself half submerged in oily water surrounded by dead bodies and debris. “I could hear men crying, pleading, praying” Bednar recalled. “I could also hear the Chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going.”**

**The Chaplains opened a storage locker on deck and began to distribute life jackets to the men. When the supply of life jackets was exhausted, the 4 Chaplains simultaneously removed their own life jackets and gave them to 4 terrified young men. While distributing their life jackets the Priest did not ask for a Catholic, the Ministers did not call out for Protestants, the Rabbi did not look for a Jew.**

**Survivor John Ladd witnessed the Chaplains’ selfless act and later said “It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of Heaven.”**

**As the ship sank the Chaplains linked arms and were last seen and heard singing hymns and reciting prayers.**

**Who were these 4 brave, heroic, selfless (I don’t know what an adequate adjective would be) Chaplains, one of whom had a Cincinnati connection?**

**George L. Fox, born in Lewiston, Pennsylvania in 1900, ran away from home at age 17 to join the army to serve in WWI. He was a medical orderly and received the Silver Star, Purple Heart and Croix de Guerre. After the war Fox studied at the Moody Bible Institute and Boston University School of Theology and was ordained a Methodist Minister in 1934. He rejoined the army in 1942, the same day his son enlisted in the Marines.**

**John P. Washington was the son of Irish immigrants. He was described as possessing his father’s Irish grin and his mother’s Irish stick-to-itiveness and was talented musically. He was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1908 and attended Seton Hall University, was ordained a Priest in 1935 and served several parishes in New Jersey. He enlisted as an army chaplain shortly after learning of the Pearl Harbor attack.**

**Clark V. Poling, the son of a Baptist Minister, was born in 1910 in Columbus, Ohio but was raised in Massachusetts and New York. He attended Hope College in Michigan and graduated from Rutgers. He then went to Yale Divinity School and was ordained as a Minister of the Reformed Church of America. His father, who served as a Chaplain during WW I, warned Clark that chaplains in that conflict had the highest mortality rate of all military personnel. Nevertheless, Clark became an army Chaplain in June, 1942.**

**Alexander D. Goode, whose father was a Rabbi, was born in New York City and raised in Washington, D.C. He received his undergraduate degree from University of Cincinnati and enrolled at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the seminary where Reform Rabbis are trained. While a rabbinical student he married Theresa Flax, a niece of famed singer Al Jolson. After ordination in 1937 Rabbi Goode served a congregation in York, Pennsylvania. He commuted from York to Baltimore where he earned a PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1940.**

**The 4 Chaplains met at Army Chaplain School at Harvard University and, as fate would have it, were reunited on the Dorchester.**

**A unique posthumous Special Medal of Heroism was awarded to the Chaplains by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1961. A special commemorative stamp honoring the Chaplains was issued by the Post Office in 1948.**

**The epic tale of the 4 Chaplains is not connected to Christmas, Chanukah or any other holiday but it is inspirational and in today's world we need all the inspiration we can get.**