

Sacrificial Love

Eighty years ago, February 3, 1943, on a frigid night in the North Atlantic, a German torpedo struck the SS *Dorchester* creating a large hole beneath its waterline. The transport began sinking shortly after midnight. Many onboard died when the torpedo exploded, hundreds more would lose their lives later.

Steve Yount, writing for the Denison Forum, described what happened, “In the chaos of abandoning ship, four men began to take charge— chaplains...” Rabbi Alexander Goode saw a soldier returning to his cabin to get gloves, he offered the man his own, claiming he had two pairs. He and the other chaplains, Catholic, John Washington, Protestants George Fox and Clark Poling committed to saving others instead of themselves.

William Bednar, a survivor, who was thrown overboard by the explosion could hear, as he floated in the ocean, those still on the transport crying, pleading, and praying. He vividly recalled listening as the four chaplains cared for his shipmates on the doomed craft, and said, “Their voices were the only thing that kept me going.”

The *Dorchester’s* captain had known his craft was in peril. They were sailing through an area of the Atlantic where Germany was sinking 100 ships a month. He was even aware of a submarine following them. Because of this, he ordered all aboard to remain dressed when they slept and to keep their life jackets nearby or to wear them. However, the heat below deck caused many to ignore his order and after the torpedo struck many soldiers arrived on deck wearing only their underwear.

The attack was made even worse because most of the *Dorchester’s* lifeboats could not be launched. Ice already covered the deck, and the rapid listing of the ship prevented them from being deployed. The chaplains quickly began distributing life jackets and when they ran out, gave away their own. One survivor, John Ladd, said, “It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven.”

As the ship slipped beneath the water numerous survivors witnessed the chaplains standing arm in arm, braced against the slanting deck—praying together.

Coast Guard vessels in the convoy managed to rescue only 230 of the 902 who had been on board. Yount noted, “Only God knows how many survived because of the chaplains’ heroism.”

President Harry Truman memorialized their sacrifice saying, “They obeyed the divine commandment that men should love one another. They really lived up to the moral standard that declares: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’” (John 15:13, KJV)

Sacrificially loving others is rarely easy, but it is always right. Few of us will ever be asked to sacrifice our lives for someone, but each of us can serve someone in need this week. The real question is whether when given the opportunity to serve others we will.

To learn more about the chaplains and their impact check out this inspirational website, <http://fourchaplains.org/>.