

This Day in History... February 3, 1943

Sinking of the SS *Dorchester*

On February 3, 1943, after the SS *Dorchester* was sunk, the Four Chaplains sacrificed their lives to protect the other men on their boat. The sinking is considered the second-worst sea disaster of World War II.

The US Army Transport *Dorchester* (formerly a coastal liner) left New York on January 23, 1943, with 904 passengers and crew aboard. Among them were four men who had met at Army Chaplains School at Harvard University – Methodist minister George L. Fox, Protestant minister Clark V. Poling, Catholic priest John P. Washington, and Reform rabbi Alexander D. Goode.

The *Dorchester* was one of three troop transport ships in a convoy. The crew was on high alert because German U-boats had attacked American ships in the same area near Newfoundland. Because of the concern of attack, the men were ordered to sleep in their clothes and wear their life jackets. But many ignored the command because they found it hot and uncomfortable. Shortly after midnight on February 3, the *Dorchester* was hit by a torpedo. The blast knocked out the electrical system, and left passengers trapped below deck in darkness.

Chaos ensued, but the four chaplains calmed those on board while organizing the evacuation. As they passed out life jackets, they found there weren't enough for everyone, so the four chaplains gave theirs away to other men on board. After helping as many of the men into lifeboats as they could, they linked arms, said prayers, and sang hymns until the ship eventually sank.



The Dorchester was struck by the German submarine U-223.

According to one survivor, "As I swam away from the ship, I looked back. The flares had lighted everything. The bow came up high and she slid under. The last thing I saw, the four chaplains were up there praying for the safety of the men. They had done everything they could. I did not see them again. They themselves did not have a chance without their life jackets." Of the 904 men initially aboard the ship, just 230 were rescued, as hypothermia took countless lives.



The Four Chaplains posthumously received the Purple Heart in 1944.

In December 1944, the four chaplains were posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart. Members of Congress hoped to award the chaplains the Medal of Honor, but because they were not under fire at the time of their bravery, they didn't qualify. Instead, Congress created the Four Chaplains' Medal. In 1961, President Eisenhower presented the new medal to the chaplains' families. Congress further honored the Chaplains in 1988 by proclaiming February 3 as Four Chaplains Day.

In the years since the sinking, the Chaplains have been honored in a number of ways. These include several chapels and stained glass windows, sculptures and plaques around the country, as well as books and a documentary. In 2002, survivors of the *Dorchester* and the German *U-223* that attacked it, met in a reconciliatory meeting.



This stamp was a rare exception to the rule. At the time, no one other than presidents were honored on stamps within 10 years of their death.



The Distinguished Service Cross is the Army's second highest military decoration.

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