

# If We Can Die Together, Can't We Live Together?

SIXTY YEARS LATER, THE SACRIFICE OF FOUR ARMY CHAPLAINS  
STILL INSPIRES HOPE FOR PEACE IN A WAR-TORN WORLD.

On February 3, 1943, the USAT *Dorchester*, a troop transport, was torpedoed and sunk by the German submarine U-223 while off the coast of Greenland.

Of the 902 men aboard, only 230 survived. Among those who perished were four Army chaplains—John Washington, a Catholic priest; Clark Poling, a Dutch Reformed minister; Alexander Goode, a Jewish rabbi, and George Fox, a Methodist minister. As the order came to abandon ship, the chaplains helped keep the men calm, handed out life vests, and when they ran out, took off their own vests and gave them away. Survivors recalled seeing the chaplains link arms and pray as the ship went down. One survivor called the chaplains' action, "the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven."

For their actions, the chaplains were awarded the Purple Heart and Distinguished Cross medals in 1944. A postage stamp honoring their actions was issued in 1948, and the chaplains were later awarded a Medal of Valor and a Special Medal for Heroism by the U.S. Congress. Their actions are also memorialized by the Immortal Chaplains Foundation; the Chapel of the Four Chaplains in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania; and by stained glass windows at the Pentagon, West Point, and the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

In the sixty years since the *Dorchester's* sinking, the four chaplains' sac-

rifice has stood as an example that people of different faiths can together live out the grace and love of God. This Memorial Day, as we remember the sacrifices—past and present—that men and women have made in defense of their country, the chaplains give us hope that one day we will live in peace.

As the Foundation of the Immortal Chaplains asks, "If we can die together, can't we live together?"

## A Survivor's Story

Not a day goes by, says Benjamin Epstein, where he doesn't think about his buddy, Vince Frucelli.

Today, Epstein, eighty-one, is a retired business person living in Delray, Florida. "There's a light breeze here," he says, "the sun is shining—it's God's country." But sixty years ago, he and Frucelli were soldiers, traveling aboard the USAT *Dorchester* in the frigid waters of the North Atlantic. They had met in boot camp and became close friends. "I met his wife before we left," he says. "She was so thrilled that we had this friendship. I don't know, I guess it gave her some sense of security."

In early February 1943, the *Dorchester*, as part of the SG-19 convoy, was headed to the Army base on Greenland. Because of reports that German U-boats were following the convoy, the men were under orders to sleep in their clothes and to keep their life preservers with them at all times. On the evening of February 2, with the con-

voy closing in on Greenland, the captain addressed the crew.

"The captain told us, 'If we make it through the night we will be fine,'" says Epstein. "We will have air cover, and the submarines don't like air cover.'" The captain finished his address by saying, "Good luck to you all."

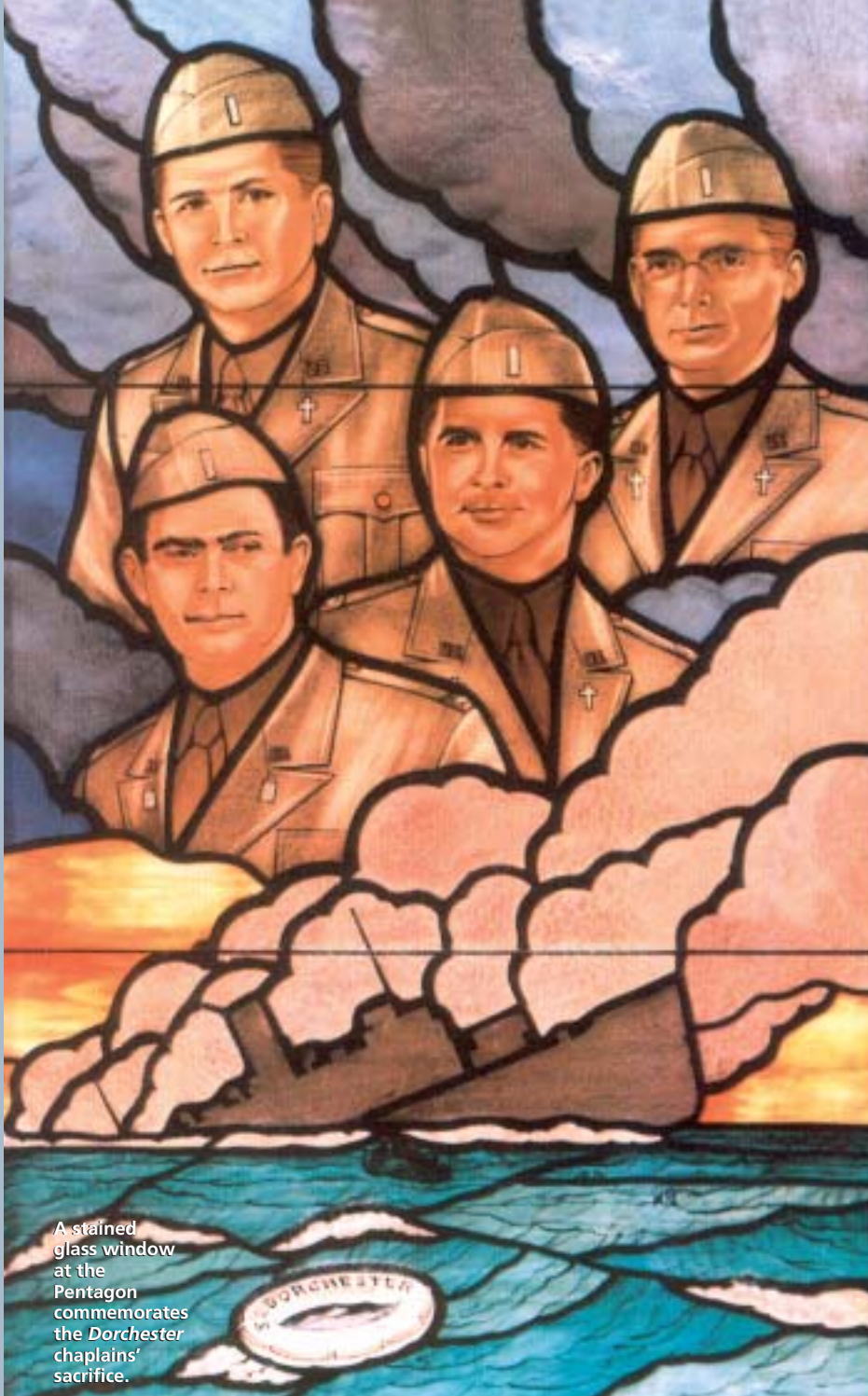
A few hours later, the crew and soldiers on the *Dorchester* were awakened by an explosion. The U-223 had fired three torpedoes at the *Dorchester*, with one striking the ship on the starboard side, near the engine room. The ship rolled onto its starboard side and began taking on water. She would sink in less than eighteen minutes.

Epstein and Frucelli made their way in the chaos on board—the ship lost power and light almost immediately—to their lifeboat station. The boat was already in the water but was still attached to the *Dorchester* by a rope.

"I said to Vince," says Epstein, "I'll jump over the railing and grab the rope, and then you jump over and follow me.' So I jumped over the rail, grabbed the rope and slid down—I never saw Vince again. Whether he jumped or not I don't know."

Meanwhile, the chaplains took charge of handing out life vests. The *Dorchester* carried enough life vests, says Jim Eardley, another survivor, but "some of the guys got scared" or could not find theirs in the chaos following the torpedo hit.

The chaplains "simply would not



A stained glass window at the Pentagon commemorates the *Dorchester* chaplains' sacrifice.

leave the men behind,” says David Fox, nephew of Chaplain Fox, and executive director of the Immortal Chaplains Foundation. Fox says that kind of dedication was characteristic of the four Chaplains. His uncle, for example, had served in World War I as an ambulance driver and twice went onto the battlefield to save wounded soldiers. In one case, following a mustard gas attack, he took off his gas mask and gave it to a wounded soldier, suffering damage to his own lungs in the process. When World War II broke out, Fox volun-

teered, telling his wife, “I have to go—I know what those boys are up against.”

### “Not a Pleasant Thing”

Going into the North Atlantic was “not a pleasant thing,” says Epstein. The water was frigid, and the waves crashed around the lifeboat. It was pitch black, with no moonlight visible. Soon after Epstein left the *Dorchester*, the lifeboat he was in capsized. Several of the men aboard were trapped underneath the boat, but Epstein was thrown clear.

“When I came up, I was next to the

*Dorchester*. I had read that when a big ship goes down it creates suction,” he says. “So I started to swim. I had no idea of where I was swimming. By pure luck, I got to one of the two lifeboats that had gotten away. There were thirteen or fourteen lifeboats on board and only two got away.” The *Dorchester* also had a number of large rafts, which survivors clung to.

Freezing, with his clothes and boots waterlogged, Epstein had to be helped aboard the lifeboat. As he turned around, Epstein saw a sight that he has never been able to get out of his mind.

“I saw the ship make one last lurch as she went down,” he says. “It looked like a Christmas tree—each life preserver had a red light on it—and lined up against the rail were all my fellow

**The chaplains “simply would not leave the men behind,” says David Fox, nephew of Chaplain Fox.**

soldiers. They just went down with the ship.”

Epstein was picked up by the Coast Guard cutter *Escanaba*, which was escorting the convey along with cutters *Tampa* and *Comanche*. The *Tampa* accompanied the remaining ships to Greenland, while the *Comanche* and *Escanaba* searched for the U-boat and rescued survivors. After he was rescued, Epstein heard about the chaplains giving away their life jackets. He had met the chaplains on several occasions—attending a service led by Rabbi Goode, and talking to the chaplains when they visited the soldiers on the *Dorchester*, many of whom were suffering from severe sea sickness because of the rough seas of the North Atlantic.

“They used to come walking through the ship,” Epstein says, “looking to give aid and comfort to the men who were sick in bed. The chaplains were as sick as the rest of us, and still they would come and give you an uplift [ing word].”

Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*.

Epstein says his own experience gave him a greater appreciation of what the chaplains faced when they gave away their life jackets. It was “hell,” he says—besides the pitch black and frigid cold, he could hear voices calling out, “Father, save me, I am freezing,” but couldn’t see where the voices were coming from.

“You can read about this in a book and say it was heroic and so on,” he says. “I was there—they knew when they took off the life preservers they had no chance of survival—that’s what’s called heroism.”

Later, Epstein learned that several of the chaplains had children, including Rabbi Goode. “He had a three-year-old baby,” says Epstein. “It was something to give away your life when you had a family waiting for you.”

had gotten frozen and fallen off.”

### The Rescuers

Dick Swanson, a member of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Mead, Nebraska, was aboard the Coast Guard cutter *Comanche* the night the *Dorchester* sank. A storekeeper and sonar operator, the then twenty-year-old Swanson heard the torpedo as it hit the *Dorchester*. “I heard the explosion, and reported it to the captain,” he says. The *Comanche* was ordered at first to hunt for the submarine, but quickly returned to pick up survivors. A forty-foot cargo net was let over the side to allow survivors to climb aboard.

Because many survivors were weakened by exposure, Swanson and some



The 1948 postage stamp honoring the chaplains

came at a terrible cost, says Swanson. He contracted pneumonia from exposure to the elements, and died a few days later.

In 1997, the Immortal Chaplains Foundation

awarded David one of its first “Prizes for Humanity,” which honors those who risk their lives for a person of another faith or race. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa also was honored that year for his opposition to apartheid.

Since none of David’s family could be contacted, Swanson was asked to receive the honor on behalf of his friend. “I still have the award and am trying to find his family,” he says. “I told the foundation I would go anywhere to deliver it.”

## “They knew when they took off the life preservers they had no chance of survival—that’s what’s called heroism.”

Jim Eardley had also met the chaplains, who he says “seemed like nice men.” On one occasion, they had talked about what would happen if the ship went down.

“They told us if we were in the water, we’d last two-and-a-half minutes,” Eardley says, “and that God would be with us.”

After jumping overboard, Eardley made it to one of the *Dorchester*’s life rafts. He spent six hours in the raft, kicking his feet against the bottom to keep them from freezing. “There were twenty-five in the life raft with me—they were piled on top of each other,” he says.

“When we were rescued, there were only seven or eight of us left. The rest

of his shipmates climbed down to get them. “We went down to the rafts,” he says, “and put a line around them. Then the fellows on deck would hoist [the men] up.”

The rescue work was dangerous and exhausting. “The seas were a bit rough,” says Swanson, “with six- or eight-foot waves. It was hard to keep up against the lifeboats.” Ninety-seven survivors were brought on board the *Comanche*. Since the *Comanche* was a small vessel, with only a crew of about sixty, things were cramped with all the survivors. “We put them in our bunks and gave them our blankets,” says Swanson.

By the time rescue efforts were complete, Swanson and several of the rescuers were so worn out that they had to be hauled up by Charles David, one of their shipmates. David, who was African-American, also dove into the frigid waters to rescue one of the *Comanche*’s officers. “He was just a tower of strength that day,” says Swanson. “He just kept going after survivors. I was exhausted and he came down and pulled me up—he just wouldn’t quit.”

But David’s heroic efforts

Swanson says that there were no African Americans living in Mead when he was growing up. And the public prejudices of the times meant that he and David “couldn’t associate together off the ship,” says Swanson. “He couldn’t go where I went on liberty, and I couldn’t go where he went on liberty.”

But aboard ship, the two became friends. Because David was the chief steward for the officers’ mess, he had to get supplies from Swanson, the ship’s storekeeper. The two also found they shared a common love of music.

“I had my sax and he had a harmonica, and we used to play the blues together,” Swanson says.

David was not the only rescuer to lose his life. Four months later, the *Escanaba* was torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat. “Everyone was lost except one or two survivors,” says Epstein. “We went into a state of depression—these were our saviors.”

The *Dorchester* survivors were taken to Greenland, and most were sent home within a few months. A few, like Jim Eardley, part of a group of a medics coming to relieve the staff at the base



*Comanche* rescuer Richard Swanson (center and at right) with *Dorchester* survivors Ben Epstein (left) and David Labadie (right)



hospital, stayed on in Greenland. “They didn’t have replacements for us,” Eardley says, “so we had to stay there.”

After leaving Greenland, Eardley became part of a “ship corp” of medics sent to bring wounded soldiers home from Europe. He says he had no fear of getting back on a boat, despite his experience on the *Dorchester*.

“It didn’t matter if you were on ship or on land,” he says. “They’d get you one way or the other.”

### A Reconciliation

After the war, the *Dorchester* survivors and Coast Guard cutter crews put their experience behind them. Epstein became an accountant and business per-



(From left to right) U-223 crew member Kurt Röser, rescuer Richard Swanson, *Dorchester* survivors David Labadie and Walter Miller, and U-223 executive officer Gerhard Buske during a 2000 reconciliation ceremony.

son in New York City. Swanson moved to Dallas, where he worked in the audio-visual business before retiring and moving back to Mead.

And they didn’t talk much about their experience. “It was just something that happened in the past,” says Eardley. Epstein says, “I just couldn’t bring myself to write or talk about it.”

Then, in 1999, David Fox contacted Epstein and other survivors. He had tracked down crew members of the U-223, and asked if the *Dorchester* survivors would meet them.

At first, Epstein was reluctant. “When the subject of a meeting was first brought up,” says Epstein, “I didn’t know how we were all going to feel—I lost my buddy that night.”

Then he changed his mind. “If we

are ever going to have peace,” he says, “you have got to talk to each other. You have got to talk and figure out what it was that caused all of these problems.” Swanson was also reluctant to meet the U-boat crew, but eventually agreed to come as a representative of the rescuers.

The group met in Washington, D.C. in February 2000. Two members of the U-boat crew were there—crewman Kurt Röser and executive officer Gerhard Buske. “We sat together and talked for a while,” says Swanson. “It was really something to meet them.”

During that meeting, the *Dorchester* survivors realized they had something in common with the U-boat crew—in 1944, the U-223 was sunk off of Sicily and most of the crew were killed. “These guys were survivors too,” says Swanson.

The group ended up becoming friends as they shared their stories. “[Röser] looked at me and started calling me ‘boom-boom Swanson,’” says Swanson. “We were ping-pong the sub [with sonar] that night, and he said they were terrified because he thought we had dropped depth charges [on them.] Since that initial meeting, Swanson, Epstein, Buske, and Röser, among others, have become involved in the work of the Immortal Chaplains Foundation.

Buske spoke at this year’s Prize for Humanity ceremony, held on the sixtieth anniversary of the *Dorchester*’s sinking. He described meeting the *Dorchester* survivors for the first time, and the emotional power of shaking hands in reconciliation “beneath the stained glass windows in the National Cathedral,” which honors the chaplains.

“We the sailors of U-223 regret the deep sorrows and pains caused by the torpedo,” he said. “Wives lost their husbands, parents their sons, and children waited for their fathers in vain. I once more ask forgiveness, as we had to fight for our country, as your soldiers had to do for theirs.”

In a touching moment, Buske also played “Amazing Grace” on his harmonica, in memory of all who died

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

## PRIZE FOR HUMANITY

Since 1997, the Immortal Chaplains Foundation has presented an annual “Prize for Humanity” honoring those who “risked all to protect others of a different faith or race.” Recipients have included Omri Abdel-Halim Al-Jada, a Palestinian who drowned while saving the life of a Jewish child, and Father Mychal Judge, Franciscan friar and chaplain to the New York City Fire Department, who rushed to the burning World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and was killed as he was giving last rites.

The 2003 honorees were villagers from Le Chambon, France, who from 1940 to 1945 sheltered and protected some 5,000 (mostly Jewish) refugees from the Nazis, and the “Service Volunteers of WWII,” men and women, “who quietly toiled to protect others in the face of infamy, by bearing arms, driving ambulances or rivets into airplanes, and in non-combat services of support.”



Francis Valla, mayor of Le Chambon, France (right), and Nelly Trocmé Hewett (left) receive the 2003 Prize for Humanity.

Rudy Appel, who had been sheltered in Le Chambon as a teenager, described the Christian residents there as “people who did not read the daily paper, but read their Bible daily, and in that Bible is written, ‘Love your neighbor.’”

During the Holocaust, “Christianity’s greatest failure as a religion of love” said Appel, the residents of Le Chambon demonstrated their commitment to “the values of the Ten Commandments.”

“That made it impossible for you to turn away when someone needs your help,” he said, “and made it impossible to let someone else do it; to say ‘I am not equipped to do it; I have not the time; it’s too dangerous. Because this my friends, would have made them into people that they did not want to be.’”

Appel closed with the words of André Trocmé, a Protestant pastor from Le Chambon: “It’s the duty of a Christian to respond to the violence that will be brought upon his conscious with the weapons of the spirit.” □