

Byron
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Four chaplains' lesson of sacrifice endures today

Don Roth never lets me forget the four chaplains.

Every year at this time — when many others are preoccupied with the Super Bowl and basketball, Oscar nominations, politics and foreign conflict — Roth, a retired Louisville jeweler and bookstore owner, leaves a simple message on my work phone that the anniversary of the four chaplains is coming up on Feb. 3.

One year he had just arrived home from a 13-week hospital stay when he called to remind me, "We must never forget."

The 82-year-old Army Air Force veteran never knew the four chaplains, but he has accumulated a 2-inch-thick clipping file about their selfless acts of heroism aboard the sinking U.S. troop transport ship *Dorchester* in 1943.

The four chaplains, all first lieutenants, were George L. Fox, a Methodist pastor from Vermont, Alexander D. Goode, a rabbi from Pennsylvania, Clark V. Poling, of the Dutch Reform Church in America, New York state, and John P. Washington, a Catholic priest from New Jersey.

Three were in their early 30s. Fox, the 42-year-old father of two, had enlisted in the Army on the same day his 18-year-old son joined the Marines. Poling had one infant son and another child on the way. Goode had a young daughter.

The *Dorchester* departed New York on Jan. 23 with more than 900 new soldiers. The ship was torpedoed by Germans off Greenland just after midnight on Feb. 3 and sank 27 minutes later.

As the vessel was being swallowed up by the icy North Atlantic, eyewitnesses told of seeing the chaplains passing out life jackets and comforting frightened young soldiers.

When the life-jacket boxes were empty, each chaplain removed his own life jacket and gave it to a soldier who had none. Then they helped calm the fears of many terrified soldiers who were afraid to jump overboard — their only hope of being saved.

The War Department reported many months after the tragedy that 230 soldiers were rescued, but that nearly 700 others, including the four chaplains, had gone down with the ship in the darkness.

As the ship was sinking, survivors told of seeing the four chaplains — arms locked together and bracing themselves against the deck railing — praying and singing hymns until they disappeared into the water.

It was, one survivor remembered, "the finest thing I have ever seen this side of heaven."

Kentuckian Glenn Porter of Ohio County, an 8th Army Air Force veteran of World War II who narrowly missed being one of the troops aboard the *Dorchester*, remembered hearing at the time of the tragedy that "it was easier for those four chaplains of different faiths to die together than it is for the rest of us of different faiths to live together."

The chaplains were posthumously awarded Purple Hearts, Distinguished Service Crosses and a special congressional Four Chaplains Medal for valor. A stained-glass window in Washington's National Cathedral commemorates their sacrifice.

"I've seen artist's drawings of what they think the scene might have looked like with the four chaplains onboard ship," said Roth. "I can't imagine four men agreeing to give up their life jackets and sink and drown in the middle of the ocean, so that four other people anonymous to them could survive."

Roth has never found the words to adequately express his admiration for the chaplains' compassion and courage. But again this year, as in many years past, he quietly did what he could.

He called to ask that I remind whoever might read this that Feb. 3 will be the anniversary of the deaths of the four chaplains — and that no one should ever forget their sacrifice, or the lessons for living that they left us in dying.

Byron Crawford's column appears on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Reach him at (502) 582-4791 or bcrawford@courier-journal.com. Comment on this column, and read previous columns, at www.courier-journal.com/byron.