



The Four Chaplains

By Ken Aldridge

In 1998, Congress designated February 3rd as “Four Chaplains Day” to honor four men of faith who gave their lives to save others on February 3, 1943. They were aboard the *Dorchester*, a U.S. troop transport ship, when it was torpedoed by a German U-boat shortly after midnight off the coast of Greenland. The ship sank within twenty minutes and of the 904 on board, only 230 survived, making it one of the worst losses of life of U.S. personnel of any American convoy during WW II. The chaplains represented four different faiths. As the ship began sinking, they did whatever they could to calm and comfort the troops and direct them out of harm’s way. When it became clear there were not enough life jackets for everyone, they gave theirs to men who needed them. As the ship went under, the chaplains were huddled together, praying and singing hymns. Their bodies were never recovered.

The chaplains were: Rev. George Fox (Methodist), Rabbi Alexander Goode (Jewish), Rev. Clark Poling (Dutch Reformist), and Father John Washington (Catholic).

The chaplains were honored with a Commemorative stamp, Scott #956 that was issued on May 28 1948, and was designed by Louis Schwimmer, the head of the Art Department of the New York branch of the U.S. Post Office Department (now called the USPS). This stamp is highly unusual, because until 2011, U.S. stamps were not normally issued in honor of someone other than a President of the United States until at least ten years after their death.

The stamp went through three revisions before the final design was chosen. None of the names of the chaplains were included on the stamp, nor were their faiths (although the faiths had been listed on one of the earlier designs): instead, the words on the stamp were "These Immortal Chaplains...Interfaith in Action." Another phrase included in an earlier design that was not part of the final stamp was "died to save men of all faiths." By the omission of their names, the stamp commemorated the event, rather than the individuals per se, thus obfuscating the ten-year rule in the same way as did later stamps honoring Neil Armstrong in 1969 and Buzz Aldrin in 1994.

The Chapel of the Four Chaplains was dedicated on February 3, 1951, by President Harry S. Truman to honor these chaplains of different faiths in the basement of Grace Baptist Church of Philadelphia. In his dedication speech, the President said, "This interfaith shrine... will stand through long generations to teach Americans that as men can die heroically as brothers so should they live together in mutual faith and goodwill."

The Chapel dedication included a reminder that the interfaith team represented by the Four Chaplains was unusual. Although the Chapel was dedicated as an All-Faiths Chapel, no Catholic priest took part in the Dedication ceremony, because, as Msgr. Thomas McCarthy of the National Catholic Welfare Conference explained to Time magazine, "canon law forbids joint worship."

In addition to supporting work that exemplifies the idea of Interfaith in Action, recalling the story of the Four Chaplains, the Chapel presents awards to individuals whose work reflects interfaith goals. 1984 was the first time that the award went to a military chaplain team composed of a rabbi, priest, and minister, recalling in a special way the four chaplains themselves, when the Rabbi Louis Parris Hall of Heroes Gold Medallion was presented to Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff; Catholic Priest Fr. George Pucciarelli; and Protestant Minister Danny Wheeler, the three chaplains present at the scene of the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing. The story of these three United States Navy Chaplains was itself memorialized in a Presidential speech by President Ronald Reagan, on April 12, 1984.

In 1972, Grace Baptist Church moved to Blue Bell and sold the building to Temple University two years later. Temple University eventually decided to renovate the building as the Temple Performing Arts Center. February 2001, the Chapel of the Four Chaplains moved to the chapel at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard.

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