It was Feb. 3, 1943, and the Dorchester was moving across the Atlantic from Newfoundland to an American base in Greenland. A converted luxury liner, the Dorchester was crowded to capacity, carrying 902 servicemen, merchant seamen and civilian workers.

It was only 150 miles from its destination when shortly after midnight, an officer aboard the German submarine U223 spotted it. After identifying and targeting the ship, he gave orders to fire. The hit was decisive, striking the ship, far below the water line. The initial blast killed scores of men and seriously wounded many more.

Through the pandemonium, four men spread out among the Soldiers, calming the frightened, tending the wounded and guiding the disoriented toward safety. They were four Army chaplains, Lt. George Fox, a Methodist; Lt. Alexander Goode, a Jewish Rabbi; Lt. John Washington, a Roman Catholic Priest; and Lt. Clark Poling, a Dutch Reformed minister.

Petty Officer John J. Mahoney, reeling from the cold, headed back towards his cabin. "Where are you going'" a voice of calm in the sea of distressed asked' "To get my gloves," Mahoney replied. "Here, take these," said Rabbi Goode as he handed a pair of gloves to the young officer. "I can't take those gloves," Mahoney replied. "Never mind," the Rabbi responded. "I have two pairs." It was only long after that Mahoney realized that the chaplain never intended to leave the ship.

Once topside, the chaplains opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. It was then that Engineer Grady Clark witnessed an astonishing sight. When there were no more lifejackets in the storage room, the chaplains simultaneously removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men. When giving their life jackets, Rabbi Goode did not call out for a Jew; Father Washington did not call out for a Catholic; nor did Fox or Poling call out for a Protestant. They simply gave their life jackets to the next man in line. One survivor would later recall, "It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven."

As the ship went down, survivors in nearby rafts could see the four chaplains -- arms linked and braced against the slanting deck. Their voices could also be heard offering prayers and singing hymns.

Of the 902 men aboard the Dorchester, only 230 survived.

Although the Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart were later awarded posthumously Congress wished to confer the Medal of Honor but was blocked by the stringent requirements which required heroism performed under fire. So a posthumous Special Medal for Heroism, The Four Chaplains' Medal, was authorized by Congress and awarded by the President on January 18, 1961.

It was never given before and will never be given again.

\*An edited version of the article entitled, “Chaplain Corps History: The Four Chaplains” by John Brinsfield.