

Beacons of Brotherhood: The Four Chaplains

by Booten Herndon

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Today, in at least three nations, veterans and civilian victims of World War II are being helped toward rehabilitation through Four Chaplains Memorial, Incorporated — an organization honoring the memories of four heroic Americans who gave their lives that others might live.

The story of the four chaplains dates back to February 3, 1943, when an enemy torpedo hit the S.S. *Dorchester*, an American merchant ship being used to transport troops and civilian personnel across the Atlantic. The sudden explosion sent men and officers milling over the slanting deck of the *Dorchester*, bewildered and terrified. In the momentary confusion, four men emerged — four chaplains prepared, through lives of self-sacrifice and devotion, for such a crisis.

The four men were a Jewish rabbi, a Catholic priest, and two Protestant ministers — Alex Goode, John A. Washington, George L. Fox, and Clark V. Poling. All young, hearty, friend-

ly men, they bolstered the courage of their companions by handing out words of comfort along with the lifebelts which would keep them afloat in the choppy sea. Then, when the supply of lifebelts was exhausted, the four chaplains gave their own away. As the ship sank into the surging water, the last view the survivors had was of four men kneeling together on a slanting deck, four men of God who died as they had lived.

The story of the four chaplains spread throughout the United States and was retold in many languages, in many other nations. Its drama, its heroism, its self-sacrifice as embodied in the religious ideal, appealed to the imagination of people everywhere and soon movements were afoot to keep alive the memories of the gallant men.

In Italy, a little boy, robbed of both eyesight and hands in World War II by an exploding bomb, is learning to read, seeing the beauties of life through the printed word.

He follows raised letters with his lips and tongue. His education is made possible through the Four Chaplains Memorial.

In Paris, a disabled veteran in a rehabilitation center finds a few moments of relaxation with an American cigarette and a magazine in a warm, tastefully decorated room. This bit of luxurious pleasure is his through the French branch of the Four Chaplains Memorial.

In New York City a veteran who lost both legs learns to use his artificial limbs while buoyed up by the warmed water of a swimming pool, built through contributions to the Four Chaplains Memorial.

Over these three individuals in France, Italy, and the United States, flies the flag of the four chaplains. Funds raised in their name are being spent constantly to help others — the way in which the four men surely would want such money spent. However, the chaplains doubtless would be amazed if they could know the tremendous sums of money people everywhere have contributed in their memory. Because, for all their heartiness and cheer, for all their quiet calm and courage, these four at heart were humble men.

George Fox, one of the ministers, served as a first-aid man in World War I. He was wounded and decorated for heroism. After the war he was a successful public accountant, a husband and father. Then he became a minister. He was over 40 when he left his quiet little Methodist Church in the northeastern State of Vermont to return to the battlefield.

There was Alex Goode, the Jewish Rabbi. As a high-school student he walked the 15 miles from his home in Washington, D.C., to the dedication of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery where America's War dead are buried. Alex was handsome and athletic, brilliant and talented. He was always proud of his country, grateful that he was privileged to grow up in a democracy where a Jewish boy could be the most popular member of his school class.

John P. Washington, the priest, was another humble but happy man. From the time he was a little boy — a poor little boy with holes in the knees of his stockings — Johnny worked hard but he never stopped smiling nor believing that life was a wonderful adventure.

Clark Poling, the other minister, was eighth of an unbroken line of ministers. His father is Dr. Daniel A. Poling, a distinguished Baptist minister in New York City well-known for his participation in religious and charitable work. Clark started preaching about peace and brotherhood in his youth and had, no other desire than to enter the ministry.

Those were the four chaplains. Their spirit must have been near on the evening Mrs. Daisee B. Haberman looked out of the window of her apartment house in New York City and saw the disabled veterans from the veterans hospital near by. They were being taken by autobus to the swimming pool in a neighborhood school. Mrs. Haberman, president of the New York department

of the Jewish War Veterans auxiliary, watched the disabled being helped into the waiting vehicles. She knew that water therapy is of value to many types of sufferers, and upon inquiry learned that the hospital next door had neither a swimming pool nor the funds to build one. Mrs. Haberman was stunned by the amount of money needed for such a project but called on her friend Irving Geist, to see if something could be done to provide such a facility.

Geist was a New York businessman who had retired from business to devote all his time to various wartime activities. Becoming interested in the swimming pool project, he persuaded a number of his friends to contribute \$1,000 apiece, and found a contractor to build the pool at a loss. A New York newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, publicized the project and 40,000 of its readers sent in contributions. One morning Geist told the producer of the radio show featuring the popular singer Kate Smith about the Four Chaplains pool. Miss Smith told the story on the radio. Within a few weeks people who had heard the story on the air had sent in contributions ranging from one cent to \$1,000. Geist cut short his vacation to form a staff to acknowledge contributions and count the money, which totaled \$110,000.

The swimming pool for the veterans was dedicated in July 1947, and Geist commissioned a group of artists to design a flag to fly over the pool. Later President Truman authorized that the design of the flag be used

for a special edition of postage stamps. Geist, invited to Rome to be made a member of the Knights of Malta, learned there of the work being done by the Victor Emmanuel Home for Disabled Children and by the free children's clinic. Geist investigated both institutions, then organized the Rome branch of the Four Chaplains Memorial of Rome, Italy, Incorporated, to donate funds to them.

Later, in Paris, Irving Geist met General de Lattre de Tassigny, president of a society for rehabilitation of disabled French veterans which needed aid. Next day Geist called up some of his friends in Paris, solicited \$1,000 from each, and organized the Four Chaplains Memorial of France, Incorporated. The New organization also contributes to a home for veterans.

But what of the American soldiers for whom the four chaplains died? Still, nine years after their death, the four men are helping others. There was the soldier, a former football player, whose heart failed in combat. He was taken to the United States in critical condition, and, in hospital, was not permitted to make any unnecessary movement. As the years went by, he lay in bed, entirely helpless, and became dangerously overweight. Finally he talked someone into letting him lie in the water. His hospital bed was rolled down the specially built ramp into the pool. He lay there, partially buoyed up by the water, making a few simple motions. Slowly, gradually, he brought unused muscles back into

play. Now he has a semi-active hospital job, and his weight is down.

Swimming and floating in water, wearing inflated swimming trunks, may be helpful to certain patients disabled by multiple sclerosis. The gently supported movements in water sometimes help restore muscles, although this is no treatment for multiple sclerosis itself. Mrs. Haberman was at the hospital recently. One boy, a sufferer from multiple sclerosis, was standing in the pool. He waved to her. "Look," he shouted. Then

he walked, painfully but steadily, up the ramp of the pool and stood before her.

"I did that for you, Mrs. Haberman," he said, "for you and the Four Chaplains."

So the memory of these gallant men lives on. Every day, in France, Italy, or the United States, some victim of World War II finds a reason to be grateful to the four chaplains, the men who, through dying, helped others to live.

FULL CIRCLE

At five, a lad named Reggie Brooks
Was quite content with picture books.

At six, in school, his mind was stirred
To recognize the printed word.

At twelve, quite young, he undertook
Courageously to read a book.

At nineteen, Reggie finished college
With quite a bit of stored up knowledge.

At twenty-one, his state is this:
He's back in childhood's aimless bliss.

For now this educated Brooks
Again reads none but picture books,

Like *Life* and *Look* and *Pic* and *See*,
His mind content with atrophy.

L. F. Hyland

From The Ligourian