

February Newsletter

DORCHESTER

By: Fr. O'Dell

Even though it is in the dead of winter, February is an interesting month. Several important events occurred in history that directly impact our lives. During February the 11th, 15th 16th, 20th and 21st amendments to the US Constitution were ratified or approved. On February 1, 1960 four African American students seated themselves at a lunch counter in a Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina. This scene was repeated scores of times in the next few days all over the southern part of the US, effectively beginning the demonstrations for civil rights in our country. On February 8, 1910 the Boy Scouts of America was founded in Washington, DC. In February 1962, John Glenn was the first person to ever orbit the earth. The following people were born during February: Thomas Edison, Susan B. Anthony, Ronald Reagan, Grant Wood and Abraham Lincoln. But, one of the most significant of all February events occurred on February 3, 1943 in the middle of the North Atlantic.

On that day, the *Dorchester*, a US Army transport ship was carrying 751 soldiers and 130 crew members across the Atlantic, bound for service in the Second World War in Europe. On board were four chaplains sent to minister to the needs of personnel serving overseas. One of whom was a Catholic priest, Fr. John P. Washington from Newark, New Jersey. At one o'clock in the morning, a German U-boat torpedo ripped through the side of the Dorchester and the ship began to quickly sink.

Unfortunately, there were insufficient life jackets on board for each person on the ship and only two of the fourteen life boats ever had a chance to be lowered. Fear and pandemonium began to rip through the vessel as it became evident to all that the boat was lost. Quietly, the four chaplains began to spread throughout the frightened men and tried to calm them. One young soldier in tears, shouted out "Padre, help me, I've lost my life jacket and I don't know how to swim." Without a word, the nearest chaplain took off his life jacket and handed it to the soldier and said, "Here, you take this, I won't be needing it. I'm staying behind." The other three chaplains quickly followed suit and searched for soldiers without life jackets and gave them up to them. One witness said this: "It was the finest thing I've ever seen, or will hope to see, this side of heaven."

675 men, including the four chaplains died that day as the Dorchester sank into the frigid February Atlantic. In 1961, the United States Congress authorized the creation and award of a **Special Medal for Heroism** for the four chaplains. The four men included Rev. George Fox, a Methodist minister, Rev. Clark Poling a Dutch Reformed minister, Rev. Alexander Goode a Jewish Rabbi, and Fr. Washington a Catholic priest. This medal has never been awarded again to anyone.

I think that this story is important because it reminds us clearly and forcefully that we really are our "brothers keepers." We are called by God to give in generosity and kindness to those around us, no matter what their need. We are called to give up the things that we cherish the most, including our own lives if necessary, to help someone in trouble. I doubt that anyone of those chaplains thought that the ultimate price would be demanded of them that February day when they boarded the ship in New York. But, when they were confronted with tragedy, all four of them responded without fear and without regret.

Just before the ship left for Europe, as Fr. Washington was telling his mother good-bye, he said this: "Good-bye Ma. No Crying. You'll be hearing from me." And you know something, she did, and so did millions of others who have been inspired by his story and his bravery and the bravery of the other three chaplains. Thank God for their example. This February pray that we can all live up to the courage they showed in the name of the Lord.