

# The Ultimate Sacrifice

by Hank Foglino

*"The sinking of the troop carrier "Dorchester" in the icy waters off Greenland shortly after midnight on February 3, 1943 was one of the worst sea disasters of World War II. It was also the occasion of an astounding feat of heroism and faith.\**

The *Dorchester* was a 5,680 ton, 367-foot-long luxury passenger vessel launched in 1926 by the Merchant and Miners Transportation Company of Baltimore, MD (figure 1). Like the *Morro Castle* (*Long Island Boating World*, June, 2007), she carried passengers back and forth along the east coast of the United States providing amenities and gambling. However, during World War II, German U-boats were taking a heavy toll on the United States merchant fleet, and in March, 1942 she was converted to a troop ship. One of *Dorchester's* sister ships, *Chatham*, after completing two uneventful voyages, ran out of luck and became the first American troop ship lost in the war. She was sunk in the Straits of Bell Isle. On the bright side, only 26 of her 569 passengers perished.

The *Dorchester* set sail on the cold morning of

passion as he did the members in his parish. George Fox and Alex Goode, Methodist and Jew, became fast friends, both having experienced life living on a shoestring when in fact they didn't have to; Fox was an accomplished business man and Goode was an engineer. They waited impatiently for an overseas assignment, and finally they were sent to Camp Miles Standish to wait for a ship bound overseas. There they continued their discussions on the Old and New Testaments and the role of religion and democracy in the new world. Clark Poling, of the Dutch Reformed Church, and John Washington, a Roman Catholic, soon joined them in their discussions.

Chaplain Clark Poling, 31 years old, was a proponent of brotherly love and almost a pacifist, but Pearl Harbor and Nazi atrocities changed his mind and he enlisted. His father, Dr. Daniel Poling, a well known Baptist minister, radio evangelist and editor of the *Christian Endeavor* was no stranger to strife. His ship was torpedoed en route to a morale-building mission for the War Department and barely made it to shore. Clark's final words to his father were:

vidual filtering his vast knowledge to others without patronizing them. John Washington, sharp-witted street-fighter, never tired of displaying his Irish talent for finding an intriguing story for virtually every event in his life, and Clark Poling was the sensitive poet, the only one from a prosperous, well known family. He sought to search the soul of all who came to him in an effort to analyze the man's problem.

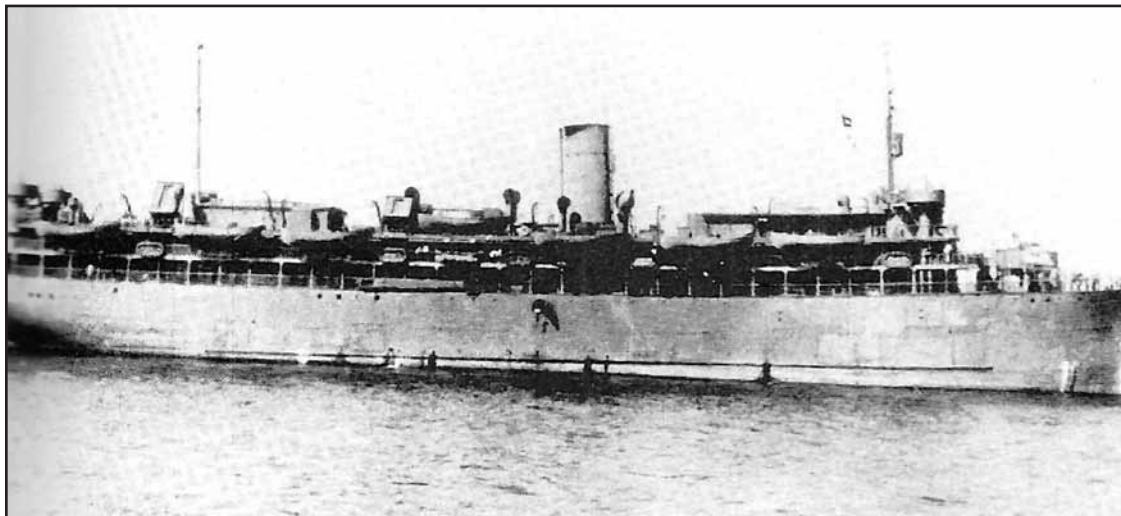
The *Dorchester* set sail on January 23, 1943 on a cold, clear morning, ship number 23 in a sixty-four ship convoy made up of freighters, tankers, destroyers and corvettes. After five days at sea virtually all of the convoy broke off en route to Russian waters with their war supplies. The *Dorchester* was left as the commodore ship, leading the freighters Norwegian *SS Biscayne* and Panamanian *SS Lutz* on an easterly course behind a corvette. The next morning they reached Greenland and pulled into St. John's in the Canadian province to refuel and give the troops a welcome respite. Although only a few on the *Dorchester* knew their destination, it seemed like everyone in Greenland knew they were coming. In fact, one youngster shouted out, "Where were you? You were supposed to get here yesterday."

Nothing was secret in town. German agents arrived all the time on merchant ships and using water taxis or "bum boats," kept the U-boat commander offshore well informed of shipping schedules.

Late afternoon January 29, 1942, *Dorchester*, with full fuel tanks, sailed with a small convoy labeled SG19, consisting of the *Biscaya*, *Lutz* and three Coast Guard Cutters as escorts, the 240-foot *Tampa* and the 165-foot *Escanaba* and *Comanche*. The *Tampa* carried convoy commander Capt. Joseph Greenspun, who controlled speed, course and formation using only visual signals; the *Escanaba* had no radar capability. The convoy was described by some as a couple of Chihuahuas trying to fend off a pack of wolves. They began their journey slowly, limited to the average speed attainable by the *Escanaba* and *Comanche* (8 knots) and almost at once ran into a raging storm.

A few weeks earlier 26-year-old Lt. Cdr. Karl Jurgen Waccher, commander of U-boat U223, was on his maiden voyage when he detected the convoy. Although headquarters ordered more U-boats to reinforce U223 and form a wolf pack, he was impatient and shadowed the convoy waiting for the storm to subside. At 3:30 p.m. on February 2, *Tampa* detected the submarine on sonar equipment and ordered the convoy to close in. Captain Danielson put all the classified documents in a perforated sheet metal box which would be jettisoned upon a torpedo hit. Lieutenant William Arpaia, armed guard commander, ordered the gun crews to begin firing if they saw a wake. However, he wondered why the convoy commander aboard the *Tampa* did not order a zigzag maneuvers, making for more elusive targets. Depth charges were dropped, hoping to keep the U-boat submerged so that it couldn't keep up with the convoy. At 6:30 p.m. the men were ordered to sleep in their clothes, including shoes, and with their life preservers on. However, many did not heed the orders, making the grave mistake of opting for comfortable sleeping conditions rather than a better chance of survival in case of attack.

Shortly after midnight, February 3, 2007, the storm had passed and the Lt. Cdr. Waccher stood on the conning tower of the U223 as it floated on the surface cloaked in mist. If the *Encanaba*, stationed



U.S.S. *Dorchester*

January 23, 1943 with the ultimate destination of Greenland. The interior of the vessel was redesigned so that instead of carrying 314 passengers in comfort, she now housed 900 passengers and crewmen, 597 of which were military men. They were assigned to replace those based in Greenland to maintain and improve the airfield in southwest Greenland. The *Dorchester* functioned under army orders, but was commanded by a Merchant Marine Officer, Captain Hans Danielson. There were four military chaplains assigned to the mission.

Senior Chaplain George Lansing Fox was a mild mannered, baby-faced individual who showed all the characteristics of a committed warrior. He was seriously wounded in World War I and had received numerous decorations attesting to his bravery. After his discharge, he became a Methodist minister. Deeply affected by Pearl Harbor, he never seemed younger than when he re-enlisted and passed his physical in August, 1942.

Rabbi Alexander Goode also was shocked by Pearl Harbor. He just had resigned as the leader of the congregation of a temple in York, PA., because of a conflict of views with the temple's administrators. He did not have to serve in the military, being 31 years old and married with a 3 year old daughter. However, he felt he had to and enlisted.

Both chaplains were sent to Harvard Chaplain School, where the commandant, a priest from a Brooklyn diocese, welcomed them with the same

*"Pray, Dad, that I shall not be a coward. Pray that I have the strength and courage and understanding of men and especially that I may patient. Dad, just pray that I may be adequate."*

John Washington grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Newark, the oldest of seven children. He loved sports but never really excelled. Due to an early accident, he had lost most of the sight in one eye. The neighborhood was tough and he was taunted without pity about being a four-eyed sissy. In baseball he made sure that he was the catcher, to hide his glasses, and learned to earn respect with his fists. He entered the seminary and was ordained in 1935. He was visiting his widowed mother when the news of Pearl Harbor arrived and immediately went to join the Navy, but was turned down because of his eyesight. His old pastor, an army veteran, advised him to join the army. When John reminded him about his bad eye, the old veteran advised him to "cover the bad eye twice", i.e., look at the eye chart with his good eye and when asked to change, lower the eye cover and immediately cover the bad eye again. It worked. He was troubled by his deceit but soon decided some ingenuity was required to do God's work. He was sent to Camp Mile Standish and met the other three chaplains.

They really made a good team. Each chaplain had his own forte. George Fox, medal winner in WWI, exuded authority without trying to force his will on anyone. Alex Goode was an idealistic indi-

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