Suggestions for a Four Chaplains Day observance

Four Chaplains Day services vary in length and format, but all should tell the story of the chaplains' supreme sacrifice – and bring together people of diverse backgrounds and creeds in recognition of our common humanity.

- Invite representatives of different faith groups to participate. Clergy representing the faiths of the Four Chaplains is especially fitting.
- Ask your mayor or governor to issue a proclamation designating the first Sunday of February "Four Chaplains Sunday."
- Create a focal point, placing photos of the Four Chaplains, four red roses, life jackets, or four empty seats near the altar or podium.
- Include a candle lighting or wreath laying.
- Have a message that centers on the Four Chaplains and selfless service.
- Spread the word about your program through social media, local newspapers, and radio and TV stations. Encourage reporters to write an advance or follow-up story. Send copies to the Chapel of Four Chaplains for its archives.
- Collect an offering to support the work of the Chapel of Four Chaplains.

For a suggested program, download The American Legion Chaplain's Handbook at legion.org/publications or contact the Chapel of Four Chaplains at chapel@fourchaplains.org.

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The story

Early on Feb. 3, 1943, an enemy torpedo struck the Army transport Dorchester as it carried 902 officers and enlisted men, Navy armed guard, merchant seamen and civilian workers in the North Atlantic. The Coast Guard cutter escorts Comanche and Escanaba rescued 230 men.

As Dorchester took on water, four Army chaplains – Lt. George L. Fox (Methodist), Lt. Alexander D. Goode (Jewish), Lt. John P. Washington (Roman Catholic), and Lt. Clark V. Poling (Dutch Reformed) – calmed frightened soldiers, aided the wounded and guided the disoriented toward safety.

On deck, they opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. When there were no more available, the chaplains removed their life jackets and gave them to four young men. “It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven,” said John Ladd, a survivor.

As the ship went down, men in rafts saw the four chaplains, arms linked and braced against the slanting deck, singing hymns and praying.

Congress attempted to confer the Medal of Honor on the chaplains but was prevented by strict requirements of heroism under fire. It authorized a one-time posthumous Special Medal for Heroism, awarded by President Eisenhower in 1961; it was intended to have the same weight and importance as the Medal of Honor.

How we remember them

Every year, American Legion posts nationwide commemorate the selfless acts of the Four Chaplains on or near Feb. 3, designated Four Chaplains Day by Congress in 1948. Through interfaith services, memorial ceremonies and other solemn events, members of the American Legion Family lead their communities in honoring the chaplains and 668 other men who died when Dorchester sank.

Founded in 1951, the Chapel of Four Chaplains in Philadelphia encourages and supports these observances, and recognizes selfless service to community, nation and humanity through its Legion of Honor award program.