

Ernest Heaton, veteran instrumental in Four Chaplains monument, dies at 89

By James Kirley

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VERO BEACH — Clergy of many faiths will gather this week to remember Ernest Heaton, an 89-year-old Vero Beach veteran who spent his last years fostering the memory of four chaplains of different faiths who drowned on a sinking ship in 1943 after giving away their own life jackets.

Heaton was 19 when the Army troop transport ship Dorchester was sunk in the North Atlantic by a German U-boat. The cold water nearly sapped the life from Heaton while he hung for hours to the side of an overloaded lifeboat awaiting rescue. He was among 230 men who survived the

sinking, in which another 672 died. Heaton was one of the last survivors of the wartime disaster when he died Monday at VNA Hospice House.

While abandoning ship, Heaton witnessed American history in the making: As hundreds of scared soldiers rushed to their lifeboat stations, Jewish Rabbi Alexander D. Goode, Catholic priest John P. Washington, Methodist minister George L. Fox, and Dutch Reformed minister Clark V. Poling ministered to them.

In a 2003 Press Journal interview, Heaton described seeing three of the four chaplains standing with a group of GIs as the ship was going down.

"The chaplains did not have life jackets on," Heaton said. "And they were telling the GIs to be calm, that everything would work out."

The four chaplains were last seen praying on deck, with their arms linked, as the ship sank. The scene was immortalized on a U.S. postage stamp and through the efforts of the Chapel of the Four Chaplains — which promotes annual Four Chaplains Memorial Services in communities across the nation on or about the Feb. 3 anniversary of the Dorchester sinking.

It was after attending one of these services at St. Sebastian Catholic Church that Heaton began to publicly speak about his experience.

Heaton and fellow veteran Larry Wapnick began promoting the story of the Four Chaplains as an example of interfaith action. Together, Heaton, Wapnick and others designed and collected donations for a Four Chaplains memorial in Sebastian's Riverview Park. It was dedicated last Memorial Day.

Heaton was chairman emeritus of the Four Chaplains Monument Committee and a board member of the Chapel of the Four Chaplains in Philadelphia, which awarded him with its Legion of Honor medal.

"(Heaton) never thought of himself as a hero," Wapnick said of his friend. "But he was proud to be part of the greatest generation. That's where his pride resided."

Wapnick said Heaton's story began to unfold as the two traveled to area churches to promote the kind of interfaith understanding exemplified by the four chaplains.

In 2005, Rabi Michael Birnholz took Heaton and Wapnick into his study at Temple Beth Shalom to prepare for the service. Wapnick asked Heaton if he ever actually met the four chaplains.

"And he said, 'Yes, many times!'" Wapnick said.

Wapnick recounted Heaton telling them how he ran into the four chaplains onboard the Dorchester before it was torpedoed. He, an Army private, was shocked and worried when this group of four officers called him over to talk.

Heaton recalled the chaplains asked him, a 19-year-old kid from West Virginia, whether he was writing his mother. They asked about Heaton's brothers and sisters.

Later in the voyage, they bumped into Heaton and joked with him.

"They raised him up and made him feel good," Wapnick said.

That came flooding back when Heaton began attending the local Four Chaplains services.

"He didn't realize, until we rekindled the flame, how important the four chaplains were," Wapnick said. "He always knew he was a witness."

George and Judy Fuller were Heaton's neighbors at Vista Royale, until failing health forced Heaton into assisted living.

"The only thing he would always talk about is that he had such a bond with the chaplains," Judy Fuller said. "It meant a great deal to him to do anything he could to honor them."

Heaton services

An interfaith funeral service for Ernest Heaton of Vero Beach will be 10 a.m. Dec. 5 at the Thomas S. Lowther Funeral Home, Vero Beach. Rabbi Michael Birnholz, Pastor Andrew C. "Jack" Diehl and Chaplain Dave Newhardt will officiate.

Military services by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion will be Thursday at the South Florida National Cemetery in Lake Worth.



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