

BROTHER GEORGE L. FOX

MSA is deeply appreciative of the work done by Wyatt Fox, in preparing the following Short Talk Bulletin on the life of his father, George L. Fox, one of the "Four Immortal Chaplains" Bro. George Fox was a member of Moose River Lodge #82 in Concord VT A plaque in his memory hangs in the Lodge. Editor

It was snowing gently across the entire Susquehanna watershed that morning of 15 March, 1900.

Probably it was not of much concern to George L. Fox, as he was born in Lewistown, PA early on that day. His parents soon moved the family to Altoona where the father could find better employment in the large switching yards of the several railroads that passed through the city. This was soon to be short lived for he was in an accident coupling two freight cars, when the train lurched and he was crushed. As a result, he lost a leg and had to use an artificial limb.

By now, George had two younger brothers and a sister along with his older brother. Childhood was more work than play as they all had to help with family finances as they grew older. In spite of this, George managed to go to high school and graduate at age sixteen.

After graduation from high school, George worked as a shipping clerk for the Altoona Manufacturing Company for a year. He watched the war clouds over Europe with increasing concern, so it was with great interest that he followed President Wilson's request to the full Congress on April 2, 1917 for a Declaration of War against the Central Powers. George enlisted in the Army on the 12th of May. There was some concern about a birth certificate and his age but he had graduated from high school and he had worked for a year so he was accepted as older than his seventeen years and he was soon on his way to El Paso, Texas and recruit training. After basic training, he was assigned to Ambulance Company Number One and began a training program in ambulance driving and learning to operate a new motorcycle for courier operations and battlefield first aid.

American units were being rushed to France that summer to bolster the sagging Allied morale and by fall, George's Ambulance Company was on the way to France to join the Second U.S. Army division being formed over there.

The men were hastily loaded into boxcars and trucks and rushed toward Paris. Near Paris, the way was clogged with departing French civilians and discouraged French soldiers. The Division was ordered to form and hold a line from Southwest to Northwest of Chateau Thierry. There the Division received its first taste of real combat. One half of the Division were comprised of US Marines; the only Marine infantry units in France. These men were ordered into a stretch of dense forest that had been an old hunting preserve. It was crisscrossed by ravines and covered by large boulders.

The marines approached in formation across a new waist-high wheat field interspersed with blooming red-orange poppies. The enemy machine guns had been set up to fire enfilade down the rows of men as they passed. The withering fire decimated each row as they passed. The aid men tried to reach the fallen but were taken down by the fire themselves and had to wait until nightfall to reach and retrieve the wounded. The battle went on for over twenty days to clear the woods. George reported he once had to carry the wounded back four miles through a shallow ravine to the first aid station in a stone culvert under the road. Bodies lined the way and one could not avoid stepping on them. After a rest, the Division was sent into the line east of the City of Toul. This was a relatively quiet sector but every day there were casualties. Here, George was wounded by mustard gas.

In September, the offensive started with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) moving up over a forty mile front. George was gassed again at the front in the initial attack. In just a few days, the front line was straightened out from Metz to west of Verdun and the Second Division was withdrawn back to the old French barracks in the Bois l'Eveque (The Bishops Woods) on the Moselle River west of Nancy.

As usual, the rest period was not long, for at the end of September, the Division was called on again as Shock Troops. They were entrained and moved to an old French camp just South of Suippes. Blanc Mont ridge lay just north of Somme a short distance north of their encampment. This ridge had been dug in and fortified for years south of the Hindenburg Line, the main German lines of fortifications. The Shock Troops were called upon again, to take this position and to move north.

The battle was fierce and lasted nine days. George won the Silver Star there for taking off his gas mask in a gas attack, putting it on a wounded American officer and while under fire bringing him in to the aid station.

After the war, memories muddled away at him. In France he has been called "the little minister" for he often settled arguments regarding religion. Finally in 1923, he decided to act and went to Chicago and enrolled in Moody Bible Institute to study for missionary work.

George decided he had a call to preach so he got in touch with the District Superintendent of the Methodist Church which covered northern Vermont. He enjoyed the long valleys and hills of Vermont which reminded him of his early home in Pennsylvania. The rural churches even then were having a hard time surviving so he had no trouble being placed as a licensed probationer in the Berkshire villages near the Canadian border.

(Space limitations force us to leave out several intervening years between entering the ministry and the advent of WWII. During this period of time George Fox held a Pastorate in Northeastern Vermont, serving several small churches. He also joined the Masonic Fraternity in Concord, VT)

When that infamous Sunday came around, we were sitting at the table eating supper. The news flash of the surprise attack came over the airways. George struck his fists together and said, "Now we'll go after them."

George went to Fort Ethan Allen near Burlington and passed his physical. Then he was ordered to the first class of the new Army Chaplains School at Harvard University on the 3rd of August, 1942. While there he met Chaplain Rabbi Goode and they became fast friends. One month later, George was ordered to Camp Davis in North Carolina and the 411 Coast Artillery BN. Shortly after his arrival, George put in for a transfer overseas where he thought his World War I experience would be more useful to the young soldiers going into combat for the first time. Nine weeks later, his orders came through for Camp Myles Standish, a replacement depot in eastern Massachusetts. They drove to Massachusetts where he left his wife and daughter with her sister in Chicopee Falls.

George was at Taunton just a couple of days when his friend from the Harvard class (Goode) checked in. They were soon holding services together and working with the new transfers. In a few days two more chaplains arrived to join them, Chaplains Poling and Washington. In January, Uncle Bill Morison had written to his Masonic friends in Taunton where Camp Myles Standish is located. The gentleman came to the base and looked Dad up and invited him and a guest to his home for Sunday dinner. George and another officer went the following Sunday. I think it was quite fitting that his last meal in a civilian home was with his Masonic brothers.

By the next Sunday, the Four Chaplains and a detachment from Camp Myles Standish were finally on a train for their trip to the embankment port on Staten Island and their appointment with the USAT Dorchester.

On February 3, 1943 off the coast of Newfoundland a torpedo struck the Dorchester and the order to abandon ship was given.

The main life vest locker was on the main deck under the bridge. The Four Chaplains were there passing out preservers and assisting the men in getting them on. Then they insisted that the men get over the side and swim away from the ship.

Finally, four men came up to the Chaplains with no life preservers. The lockers were now empty. Without hesitation, The Four Chaplains removed their jackets and placed them on the men and ordered them over the side. The ship was now tilted and awash to the starboard rail. The Four Chaplains now began to sing and to offer prayers for the safety of the men in the water. The ship rolled gently to starboard and was gone.

NOTE: Repeated search has been made for the men that received the Chaplain's life preservers but it has to be concluded that they were lost along with most of the men in the water. By far, the majority of the survivors came from two lifeboats and life rafts. In discussion with some of the survivors, we concluded that where they had to swim through the oil room the ruptured fuel tanks as they moved away from The ship, this provided just enough insulation coating to enable them to survive.

This page courtesy of the Chapel of the four Chaplains, Philadelphia, PA.

FOUR MEN OF GOD

It was an icy February dawn on February 3, 1943 and the American Troopship S.S. Dorchester plowed through the cold, black, churning waters off Greenland. Then came a Nazi torpedo ripping into the heart of the troopship crowded with men; and on the ship were four men--four men of God-Chaplain George L. Fox, Methodist Minister; Alexander D. Goode, Jewish Rabbi; Johnny P. Washington, Irish Priest; and Clark V. Poling, Minister of Reformed Church in America.

Each of the Chaplains was awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously. The citation of each

For extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an enemy of the United States. On the night of 3rd of February, 1943, a loaded troop transport was torpedoed, without warning, by an enemy submarine in the North Atlantic and began to sink rapidly. In the resulting confusion and darkness some men found themselves without life jackets and others became helpless through fear and the dread of plunging into the freezing water. These four chaplains heroically and calmly moved about the deck, encouraging the men and assisting them to abandon ship. After the available supply of life jackets was exhausted, they gave up their own. They remained aboard ship and went down with it offering words of encouragement and prayers to the last.

On July 14, 1960, the United States Congress awarded a special medal to each of the Four Chaplains (posthumously).