

## *Combat Stories of the U.S. Coast Guard*

### **The Story of Charles Walter David, Jr.: African-American Hero on the Cutter *Comanche***

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For many individuals it takes a lifetime to learn the skills of leadership, while others come to it naturally. African-American Charles Walter David, Jr., knew instinctively how to lead others despite barriers imposed by the nation's racially-segregated society of the mid-twentieth century. David served in the Coast Guard early in World War II, at a time when African-Americans were barred from the officer ranks and limited to such enlisted ratings as steward's mate.

Charles David was a unique Coast Guardsman in every way. Mess Attendant 1/c David reached the ripe old age of twenty-six during his time on board the cutter Comanche in the Coast Guard's Greenland Patrol, making him one of the ship's older enlisted crewmembers. He already had a family at home in New York City when many of his shipmates had just learned how to shave. At well over six feet tall and 220 pounds, David's stature could intimidate men; however, David counted many friends among the cutter's crew of sixty. He had a natural talent for music, playing the blues harmonica in jam sessions with his shipmate, friend and saxophone player Storekeeper 1/c Richard Swanson. The characteristic that really distinguished David was his loyalty to the crew and natural inclination to the service's core values of "honor, respect and devotion to duty." This last fact seems even more astonishing given the second-class status African-Americans held in the military at that time.

David demonstrated his devotion to duty and concern for fellow shipmates in February of 1943, while Comanche served as one of the Coast Guard escorts for the three-ship Convoy SG-19, bound from St. Johns, Newfoundland, to southwest Greenland. Weather conditions during the convoy's first few days proved horrendous as they usually did in the North Atlantic during the winter. The average temperature remained well below freezing, the seas were heavy and the wind-driven spray formed tons of ice on virtually every exposed surface of Comanche's decks and superstructure.

The Coast Guard not only fought the elements, it fought an ever-present enemy lurking in the frigid waters as German U-boats hunted the convoys bound for Greenland. At about one o'clock in the morning on 3 February 1943, German submarine U-223 torpedoed one of the convoy's vessels. It was the U.S. Army Transport Dorchester, which carried over 900 troops, civilian contractors and crew. Two hours later, the task force commander ordered Comanche to the scene of the disaster to screen rescue efforts by the other Coast Guard escorts. By this time, Dorchester had slipped beneath the waves and those passengers and crew that survived the sinking had taken to the water or lifeboats. On recording the situation for the survivors in the water that night, the ship's log noted, "all men in lifejackets lifeless." However, when Comanche's lookouts spotted lifeboats full of freezing survivors a cargo net was thrown over the cutter's port side and Charles David, Dick Swanson and several shipmates clad only in ordinary un-insulated uniforms swung into action as the cutter pulled alongside.

In a race against time and with waves ten feet high, David climbed down the forty-foot cargo net and helped hoist Dorchester's living yet frozen survivors from the lifeboats to the Comanche's deck. Swanson worked alongside his musician friend as they saved nearly 100 survivors from the

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lifeboats. At one point in the operation, Comanche executive officer Lt. Langford Anderson fell into the frigid seas. Without hesitation, David plunged into water that could kill within minutes and helped Langford back on board the cutter. After hoisting the last survivors on board Comanche, David ascended the cargo net to the ship's deck. Despite being six years younger than David, Dick Swanson's limbs had succumbed to the cold and exhaustion and he made it only half way up. David encouraged his friend, yelling "C'mon Swanny. You can make it!" But Swanson was too tired and frozen to go any further. David descended the net and, with the aid of another crewmen, pulled Swanson back up to the Comanche's deck.

David had placed the needs of others above his own, risking his own life to save dozens of Dorchester survivors, Comanche's executive officer and his friend Swanson. Dick Swanson later described Charles David as a "tower of strength" on that tragic day, even though David performed these feats while fighting off his own serious illness. Days before the rescue operation, he had had a raspy cough and, due to his exposure to the frigid water and sub-freezing air temperatures, he contracted hypothermia. Later, when Comanche delivered its Dorchester survivors to an army base hospital in Greenland, doctors ordered an ambulance to bring in David as well. It was the last time his shipmates would see him alive. He became bed-ridden as his hypothermia turned the cough into full-blown pneumonia and within a few weeks he succumbed to the illness. It was a few weeks later when Dick Swanson and Comanche's crew learned that their friend and shipmate had died.

Charles Walter David, Jr., exemplified the Coast Guard's core values of honor, respect and devotion to duty. Despite his secondary status in a segregated service, he placed the needs of others above his own and played a key role in the rescue of nearly 100 Dorchester survivors. For his heroic service, David received the Navy & Marine Corps Medal and, in 1999, he was posthumously awarded the Immortal Chaplains Prize for Humanity in the same ceremony as famous South African archbishop, Desmond Tutu. In the final irony of David's story, his own family believed he had been buried at sea; when he had been temporarily buried in Greenland and, after the war, his remains re-interred in the Long Island National Cemetery at Farmdale, Long Island. For decades, his family had lived in New York City, within miles of Charles Walter David's final resting place without knowing it, but sixty years after his heroic end the service undertook a systematic search for his immediate family and notified his next of kin.