

Alan Arlington Atchison, Jr.

Born: November 6, 1922
Hometown: Saint Louis, MO
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Deck Cadet
Date / Place of death: September 20, 1943 / 57°3N,
28-8W
Date / Place of burial: September 20, 1943 / Lost at
Sea – 57- 3N, 28-8W
Age: 20



Cadet-Midshipman Alan A. Atchison, Jr. Alan reported for training at the Pass Christian, MS Basic School around April 15, 1943. After completing Basic School he signed on as Deck Cadet aboard the SS Theodore Dwight Weld at Mobile, AL on July 27, 1943. Also aboard was Cadet-Midshipman Frank H. Cain, the Engine Cadet. The Theodore D. Weld sailed from Liverpool, England on September 15, 1943, en route to New York in convoy ON-202 loaded with 1200 tons of sand ballast. The ship had a crew of 42 merchant mariners, including two Cadets, and 28 Naval Armed Guard.

This “fast” convoy was composed of thirty-eight ships, escorted by a Canadian Navy escort group composed of two Destroyers (HMCS Gatineau and HMCS Icarus), a frigate HMS Lagan and three corvettes, HMCS Drumheller, HMCS Kamloops and HMS Polyanthus. A “slow” convoy of 27 ships bound for Halifax, NS, ONS-18, sailed on September 12 with seven escorts followed an almost identical route as ON-202. On September 19 U-270, one of 21 submarines assigned to Wolf Pack Leuthen, damaged HMS Lagan. Aware that Convoy ON-202 was heading into a large wolf pack, the British Admiralty ordered Convoy ON-202 to join up with ONS-18 on September 21. In addition, another escort group with a destroyer, frigate and three corvettes was ordered to reinforce the combined convoy. Thus began one of the major convoy engagements of the Battle of the Atlantic.

On the morning of September 20, the Theodore Dwight Weld was the first ship in the second column of Convoy ON-202. The convoy was making 9.5 knots in clear weather and choppy seas, but was not taking any evasion action. The Theodore Dwight Weld had posted numerous lookouts. At 0736 GMT one of four torpedoes fired by U-238 struck the SS Frederick Douglas in the next column over from the Weld. The Weld’s alarm bells immediately began ringing. One minute later, at 0737, when the ship was

about 500 miles southwest of Iceland, the ship was hit by at least one of the other three torpedoes fired by U-238.

Cadet-Midshipman Frank H. Cain later reported that he was just beginning an inspection of the degaussing system that morning when he heard a series of short rings on the general alarm. Noting the urgency of the ringing, he rushed to his quarters on the bridge deck to don his life jacket. There he crossed paths with Alan Atchison. According to Cain, Atchison had just put his own life jacket on, and was proceeding to the lifeboats. Just after Atchison left the room, the torpedo hit the vessel on the port side, amidships, at Number 3 hold. Observers noticed a large white flash, but no smoke. About 20 seconds after the impact, the engine room blew up, breaking the ship in half, just forward of the accommodation house.

Cain reported that he was blown into the air by the force of the explosion and nearly fell through a gaping hole in the deck. Fortunately, he was able to pull himself up and rushed to the starboard boat deck. The ship was listing heavily to starboard, and beginning to break up. Cadet-Midshipman Alan Atchison, along with the First Mate and several other crew members had lowered the Number 3 boat into the water. However, the sea was already breaking over the Weld's main deck and the lifeboat, the only one not damaged by the torpedo explosion, was destroyed before it could get away from the ship. Several crew members, including the Captain, were washed overboard by the breaking seas, including Cain as he tried to help the Captain back aboard. In the process, Cain reported that he became entangled in the lifeboat falls as the ship sank.

After freeing himself from his entanglement, Cain swam to the surface. He said he could see the after gun mount of the ship going under, and managed to cling to a fragment of one of the Weld's lifeboats. After about two hours in what he nonchalantly termed "cold" water, Cadet-Midshipman Frank Cain and thirty six other survivors were picked up by the rescue ship SS Rathlin. Cadet-Midshipman Alan A. Atchison, Jr. was among the nineteen crewmen and thirteen Armed Guard that were missing and presumed lost.

Cadet-Midshipman Alan A. Atchison, Jr., was posthumously awarded the Mariners' Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Victory Medal, and Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Alan A. Atchison was the only son and youngest of Alan A. and Cecelie Atchison's two children. Alan's big sister was Alice, who was nine years older. Alan, Sr. was the President of Lacquer Service Corporation and later the owner of the Atchison Celucoating Company.