

Peter John Biemel

Born: September 13, 1924
Hometown: Cleveland, OH
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: November 1, 1943 / off Naples, Italy
Date / Place of burial: November 3, 1943 / Grave 27, Row 8, Plot C, Sicily-Rome American Cemetery, Nettuno, Italy
Age: 19



Peter J. Biemel signed on aboard the *SS Salmon P. Chase* as Engine Cadet at New York, NY on July 19, 1943. By October 23, 1943 the *Salmon P. Chase*, which was carrying troops and cargo between Mediterranean Ports, sailed from Algiers, Algeria bound for Naples, Italy via Augusta, Sicily. Among the ship's cargo were troops and equipment of the 450th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion, an all-black unit. The ship joined Convoy UGS-20 for the Algiers to Malta leg of its voyage, breaking off from the main convoy on October 26 in a smaller five ship convoy to Augusta. After arrival at Augusta on the following day the ship worked cargo until departing on October 30 for Naples. The ship arrived in Naples on the morning of November 1, 1943.

At 1845 while the *Salmon P. Chase* was at anchor in Naples Bay thirty-eight JU-88 bombers attacked the area. According to the report of Lt. (j.g.) William F. Saunders, USNR, the Armed Guard Officer, the ship's General Alarm sounded simultaneously with the air raid signal ashore. The Armed Guard's Sailors immediately manned their guns while the Army unit, under the command of Lt. Whiteside, USA, broke out two 40mm guns and four .50 caliber machine guns and readied them for action.

Although the gunners aboard the *Salmon P. Chase* initially withheld their fire so as not to disclose their position, within five minutes of sounding the alarm flares illuminated the *Salmon P. Chase* and the order was given to fire on the attacking aircraft. At 1920 an aircraft attacked the ship's starboard bow and was taken under fire and shot down by Navy Sailors manning the 3" gun. Ten minutes later another plane attacked the port bow. While the 3" gun could not take it under fire one of the Army 40mm guns could, and shot it down. Shortly thereafter the smoke screen being laid by naval escorts shrouded the ship concealing it from the attacking planes. The attack ended at 1950

with the sounding of the “all clear” signal. During the attack Sailors, Soldiers and Merchant Mariners aboard the SS Salmon P. Chase crewed and fired fifteen guns expending 28 rounds of 3", 800 rounds of 40mm, 1,595 rounds of 20mm, and 1,000 rounds of .50 cal ammunition.

Except for Cadet-Midshipman Peter J. Biemel, none of the ship's crew, Armed Guard Sailors or Army “passengers” were injured in the attack. Biemel, whose battle station was at the carbon dioxide manifold, insisted on going on deck during the attack. According to Lt. Saunders' report, crew members twice told Cadet-Midshipman Biemel to stay off the exposed decks and return to his station in the Engine Room. However, on his third attempt he finally made it out onto the boat deck in the midst of the attacks. Soon after, he staggered back inside bleeding from the nose, mouth, and ears, although he had no visible wounds, other than that the tip of his tongue and a front tooth was missing. Despite the efforts of the ship's first aid party and Army medical personnel, the bleeding could not be stopped. At 2030 a doctor from the British destroyer *HMS Lookout (G32)* came on board in response to the ship's request for medical help. However, Biemel died at 2100 while the doctor was working on him.

Cadet-Midshipman Peter J. Biemel's body was taken ashore the following morning, and turned over to Army medical authorities for autopsy and burial. According to Lt. Saunders' report, Army medical personnel concluded after the autopsy that Peter J. Biemel's death was caused by a hemorrhage at the apex of his lung from piece of lead, possibly from a .50 cal bullet, which entered through his right nostril and passed down his throat. Cadet-Midshipman Peter J. Biemel's body was interred in a temporary cemetery and permanently interred at the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery after the war.

Peter J. Biemel was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Peter John Biemel, was the youngest of three children, and the only son, of Peter Biemel and Anna Radler Biemel. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, John Biemel was a crane operator for an automotive business in Cleveland. Peter's older sister Marie describes him as a quiet and dignified young man who was very close to her, and his mother, during his youth. An above average student and a hard worker, he graduated from West Technical High School's Machine Shop program in 1942. At West Technical he was known as “Bruno” and was involved in Student Government. His sister Marie noted that Peter was quiet and dignified and drew to himself a number of lasting friends. She also noted that the unsung hero of Peter's short life was his mother who sacrificed not for herself, but to shape and make a life for her son.

“My Mother was the making of me.”