

Vincent Gordon Cathey

Born: January 7, 1923
Hometown: Andrews, NC
Class: 1943
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: July 30, 1942 / 28-40N,
88-30W
Date / Place of burial: July 30, 1942 / Lost at Sea –
28-40N, 88-30W
Age: 19



Vincent G. Cathey signed on aboard his first ship, the passenger ship SS Robert E. Lee, as Engine Cadet on July 2, 1942 at the port of New Orleans, LA. Also aboard the ship were Cadet Midshipmen Carl C. Gross (Deck) and Howard A. Hanson (Engine).



SS Robert E. Lee

In late July 1942, the Robert E. Lee sailed from Port of Spain, Trinidad bound for Tampa, FL in convoy TAW-7 with 270 passengers and 47 tons of general cargo. The latter was identified as being mostly the personal effects of the passengers. Many of the Robert E. Lee's passengers were survivors of ships that had previously been torpedoed, including the MV Andrea Brovig and SS Stanvac Palembang. Upon arrival at Key West, FL the convoy and its escorts dispersed to their assigned discharge ports. However, when the Robert E. Lee, escorted by USS PC 566, arrived off Tampa on July 29, no pilots were available to take the ship into port. After discussion with the commanding officer of PC 566 by blinker light, the Robert E. Lee's master decided to proceed to New Orleans. The USS PC 566 was ordered to accompany the ship.

At 1630 Central War Time (CWT) the following day the Robert E. Lee and PC 566, were about 30 miles south of the mouth of the Mississippi River. Unfortunately, this was also where U-166 was hunting for targets to sink. The submarine fired one torpedo, hitting the Robert E. Lee just aft of the Engine Room. The explosion destroyed the #3 hold, and the ship's radio and engines. At the time of the explosion Engine Cadet Vincent Cathey and the ship's First Assistant Engineer were working in the shaft alley. Both men are believed to have been killed instantly. Immediately following the torpedoing, USS PC 566 detected U-166 on its sonar and began dropping depth charges, sinking the submarine. The wreck of U-166 lays near its last victim, the Robert E. Lee.

Immediately after being hit by the torpedo the Captain, William C. Heath, ordered the passengers and crew to abandon ship. Six lifeboats and 16 life-rafts were launched in the minutes following the attack. Thanks to a speedy evacuation, warm water, sufficient boats and rafts and the nearby shore only the First Assistant Engineer, Herman J. Coates, Engine Cadet Vincent G. Cathey, 8 other crewmen and 15 passengers of the 407 people aboard the Robert E. Lee were lost in the incident. The survivors were picked up by USS PC-566, another patrol boat, USS SC 519 as well as the tug Underwriter, and were landed at Venice, Louisiana.

Cadet Midshipman Vincent G. Cathey was posthumously awarded the Mariner's Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Vincent G. Cathey was the youngest of Andrew R. Cathey and Cora Greene Cathey's three children. Vincent, who went by Gordon, grew up on the family farm outside of Andrews, NC. Gordon was a 1942 graduate of Andrews High School where he was remembered as a popular student. He was in the cast of the junior class play and was selected to be the Toastmaster for the annual Junior-Senior banquet. The Catheys were members of the Andrews Lutheran Church where Gordon was the president of the Luther League and active in the church's "Light Brigade." After Gordon's death, his family presented a pair of altar vases in his name which are believed to still be in the church.