

Joseph Carlo DiCicco

Born: September 10, 1922
Hometown: Brooklyn, NY
Class: 1943
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: September 10, 1942 / South Atlantic
Date / Place of burial: September 10, 1942 / Buried at Sea
– South Atlantic
Age: 21



Joseph C. DiCicco signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the MS American Leader, a C-1 freighter, on April 13, 1942 at the port of New York. According to the account of Captain George Duffy, then the ship's Third Mate, the ship was carrying a general cargo of war supplies including boots, barbed wire and vehicles along with a deck cargo of nine twin engine bombers from New York to the Persian Gulf for Russia. The ship



MS American Leader

and latex. The American Leader headed alone down the coast of Africa to Cape Town, South Africa. Upon arrival at Cape Town on September 7, 1942 the ship was ordered to continue westward, without escort, toward the Straits of Magellan and the Pacific Ocean.

At about 1930 on September 10th, the American Leader ran afoul of the German Navy commerce raider, Michel, a converted merchant ship that had been operating in the South Atlantic. The Michel, disguised as a neutral merchant ship, fired on the American Leader, with deck guns and then launched two torpedoes. The Michel's crew managed to destroy two of the lifeboats as the crew attempted to launch them, forcing the crew to abandon in life rafts. The American Leader sank in about 25 minutes, and ten crew members, including Cadet-Midshipmen Joseph C. DiCicco and Gordon Tyne, were killed in the attack. The 39 crew members and nine Naval Armed Guard who survived the sinking were taken prisoner by the Michel.

In addition to the survivors, the crew of the Michel recovered one body which could not be recognized. After interviewing George Duffy the Michel's doctor determined that the body was that of Joseph C. DiCicco. Cadet-Midshipman Joseph C. DiCicco was buried at sea on the evening of September 10, 1942 with full military honors, including an American flag to cover him. The Michel's Commanding Officer, Helmuth von Ruckteschell, invited the American Leader's Captain, Chief Officer, and First Assistant Engineer to the service. During the service von Ruckteschell reportedly said, "If all the people of the world held each other in the same respect as their seamen do, we would not be in this terrible situation on board here tonight." Joseph DiCicco is believed to be the only U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Cadet-Midshipman to have been given a formal funeral by the enemy.

The survivors, now prisoners of war, including the American Leader's Second Mate, 1940 Cadet Officer Walter Hay Lee, were handed over to the Japanese in Batavia, Java (present day Djakarta, Indonesia) in November 1942. In September 1944 Lee and several other American Leader survivors were killed in the sinking of the prisoner transport Junyo Maru when it was torpedoed by HMS Tradewind (P 329). Other American Leader survivors were killed in the sinking of the Japanese prisoner transport Tomahaku Maru. Of the 58 merchant seamen and Naval Armed Guard on the

American Leader, only 28 (including Captain Duffy) eventually made it home. All of these had survived more than two years as prisoners of war.



**Cadet-Midshipman Joseph C. DiCicco
in Kings Point Color Guard (on left)**

Cadet-Midshipman Joseph C. DiCicco was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Joseph C. DiCicco was the oldest child and only son of Joseph John DiCicco and Elizabeth DiCicco. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, the elder DiCicco was a carpenter.