

Joseph Leonard Driscoll

Born: August 20, 1923
Hometown: Brooklyn, NY
Class: 1945
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Deck Cadet
Date / Place of death: January 6, 1944 / 37-22N,
9-55E
Date / Place of burial: January 8, 1944 / 2nd Corps
U.S. Army Cemetery, Mateur,
Tunisia, Plot E, Row 5, Grave 23
Age: 22



Joseph L. Driscoll signed on as Deck Cadet aboard the *SS Robert Erskine* on July 17, 1943 at the port of New York. In the coming months the *Robert Erskine* made two voyages across the Atlantic to ports in the United Kingdom and returned to New York. On September 29, 1943 Joseph Driscoll was joined by Cadet-Midshipman Robert W. Hempel (Engine). The *Robert Erskine* sailed from Norfolk, VA on its third voyage on December 14, 1943 as part of convoy UGS-27 bound for Naples, Italy. The ship's cargo was 500 pound aircraft bombs, detonators, aircraft engines and Army trucks.

On January 2, 1944 the convoy passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and began to split into groups headed to different ports. The *Robert Erskine*, with about 75 other vessels, proceeded to the port of Bizerte, to await a convoy to Naples, Italy. The vessel dropped anchor just inside the submarine nets at the harbor entrance a little after 2230 local time January 5, 1944 in a heavy storm.

However, by 0200 local time on January 6, 1945 the ship's anchor chain began jumping off of the wildcat on the anchor windlass due to the heavy seas. The Captain decided to pull up the anchor and cruise just outside the harbor until daylight. The ship returned to Bizerte harbor and dropped anchor again at about 0500 on January 6. However, the anchors began dragging in the heavy seas. By 0520 the *Robert Erskine* was hard aground inside Bizerte harbor and was unable to work itself off.

At 0730 the ship broke in two just forward of the engine room. The crew was ordered to collect their personal effects and be ready to be taken off by an Army tugboat. However, after waiting for an hour the *Erskine* was informed that the tug was unable to come alongside due to the heavy seas. At this point the Captain ordered the crew to abandon ship. Despite the heavy seas and interference from the drifting forward

portion of the ship, the ship's motor lifeboat and a life raft were launched. Both of the craft were overturned before reaching shore, throwing their occupants into the sea. However, the occupants were able to swim to the safety of the nearby beach.

The Captain next ordered Cadet-Midshipmen Driscoll and Hempel, along with an Ordinary Seaman and the ship's Carpenter to try to make shore in a small "doughnut" raft. Just as with the larger craft, the raft and its four occupants overturned in heavy seas. No sooner did the men clamber back onto the raft than it overturned again. Cadet-Midshipman Hempel, noticing that the raft was snagged in a rope, took out his knife and cut the rope. He, Driscoll and the Carpenter managed to climb on once again, but the Ordinary Seaman could not reach the raft. He eventually made it safely to shore. The raft then began to drift back towards the ship. The cold and exhausted men decided to swim back to the ship. After making it back to the ship Hempel discovered that Driscoll had remained on the raft. It is unclear from the available reports whether Cadet-Midshipman Driscoll actually returned aboard the *Robert Erskine* on January 6, 1945. His body was found on the beach and identified by Cadet-Midshipman Hempel on January 8, 1945. He was buried in the Second Corps Army Cemetery at Mateur, Tunisia with full military honors. At some point after the war his remains were exhumed and returned to the U.S. for final burial.

Cadet-Midshipman Hempel and the rest of the crew were rescued from the remains of the wreck on the morning of January 7 when the seas had calmed sufficiently to permit a rescue by boat. The salvage of the *Robert Erskine's* cargo lasted until February. Several members of the engine crew, including Cadet-Midshipman Hempel, remained to provide steam to the cargo winches. They, along with most of the crew of the *Robert Erskine* were transferred to the bomb damaged *SS James W. Marshall* which was being repaired for return to the U.S. Cadet-Midshipman Hempel sailed on the *James Marshall* as Acting Third Assistant Engineer until its arrival in England in March. Cadet-Midshipman Hempel boarded the *SS Emma Willard* to return to the Academy for further training.

Cadet-Midshipman Joseph L. Driscoll was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Joseph L. Driscoll listed Mrs. Dorothy E. Wells of Brooklyn, NY as his next of kin. No other information on his background can be located.