

Meyer Egenthal

Born: March 17, 1922
Hometown: Brooklyn, NY
Class: 1943
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: November 29, 1942 / 28S, 54E
Date / Place of burial: November 29, 1942 / Lost at Sea
– 28S, 54E
Age: 20



Meyer Egenthal signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the MS Sawokla at the port of New York on June 16, 1942. Also aboard with him was his classmate, William O'Hara, the Deck Cadet. The ship sailed two days later loaded with general war cargo bound for the Soviet Union via Abadan, Iran. After arriving in Abadan via Port of Spain, Trinidad and Capetown, South Africa the Sawokla delivered its cargo. The ship then sailed in ballast for Colombo and then to Calcutta, India where it loaded a cargo of gunny sacks in bales. The Sawloka returned to Colombo for sailing directions and to pick up some home bound passengers.

On November 21, 1942, the MS Sawokla sailed from Colombo with a crew of 41, a Navy Armed Guard contingent of 13 and five passengers. Eight days out of port and about 400 miles south of Madagascar, the Sawokla was sighted and attacked by the German surface raider Michel. Junior Third Mate Stanley Willner, a Merchant Marine Cadet Corps Cadet Officer on his first voyage as a ship's officer, was standing watch on the bridge on the 8-12 watch. After the war Willner reported that about 2035 he saw the outlines of a ship take shape in the darkness and immediately called the Captain to the bridge. However, just as the Captain was opening his cabin door at 2037 the Michel opened fire on Sawokla, targeting the bridge and radio shack with its main battery of six 150mm guns.

The captain was killed immediately as were most of the bridge watch and forecastle lookout. The Michel also launched a motor torpedo boat, which circled the Sawokla, spraying the decks with machine gun fire, and preventing the crew from launching any of the lifeboats. Willner reported that eight minutes after the attack began the Sawokla was on fire from stem to stern and sank. The crew, Armed Guard and passengers who survived the initial attack were forced to jump overboard into the rough seas. Cadet-Midshipmen Meyer Egenthal and William V. O'Hara were among those seen jumping overboard by other crew members.

According to Willner, the Michel, including its two aircraft, spent two days searching for Sawokla survivors. Willner and 38 other men were rescued by the Michel and its crew. Sawokla's wounded survivors, including Willner, were treated by the Michel's medical staff. However, Cadet-Midshipmen Meyer Egenthal and William O'Hara were not among those rescued by the Michel. They are presumed to have drowned.

For those that had survived the initial attack, the ordeal had just begun. On February 19, 1943 the Michel arrived in Singapore where its prisoners were handed over to the Japanese by the Michel's crew, which was their normal procedure. The prisoners were taken to the Prisoner of War camp at the former Changi Prison. According to Willner, when the Sawokla's survivors arrived at Changi they were "fairly fit". However, after a few months about ½ of the survivors were taken from the camp while most of the remainder were taken to work on the Thailand-Burma Railway, sometimes known as the "Death Railway" and immortalized in the film "The Bridge Over the River Kwai". Willner and the men of his group returned to Singapore in December 1943 and remained there until the camp was liberated September 7, 1945. Willner, along with his shipmate Dennis Roland worked for decades to earn official veteran's status for merchant seamen in World War II, serving as a named plaintiff in litigation that finally bore fruit in 1988, more than four decades after Willner's ordeal.

Cadet-Midshipman Meyer Egenthal 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.

Meyer Egenthal was the only son of Abraham Egenthal, a Polish immigrant, and Pauline Egenthal a Romanian immigrant. Meyer was the middle child of a family that included his older sister Fay, although she was often known as Fanny, and his younger sister Freida. By 1940 Fanny was employed as a sales clerk in a department store while Meyer attended the Manual Training High School in Brooklyn. In high school Meyer was active in athletics, and received a varsity letter in track. Meyer's father owned a grocery store in Brooklyn where Meyer worked part time. His outgoing nature and cheerful service made him popular with the customers. According to his family, Meyer was ambitious and had a strong desire to make himself valuable to the family business. His family also said that Meyer had learned that the priceless value of a good nature costs nothing and benefits the individual and those around him. Meyer's "magnetic" personality resulted from his unusual mental, social and emotional characteristics.