

Ben Prentice Gafford

Born: March 21, 1922
Hometown: Sherman, TX
Class: 1943
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: January 1, 1943 / 35-45N, 00-45W
Date / Place of burial: January 1, 1943 / Lost at Sea – 35-45N,
Age: 20



Benjamin P. Gafford signed on aboard the SS Arthur Middleton as Engine Cadet on November 21, 1942 at New York, NY. Also aboard was Cadet-Midshipman Denniston Charleton who signed on as Deck Cadet. At New York and Norfolk, VA the Arthur Middleton loaded a cargo of ammunition, explosives and mail with LCT-21 stowed on deck. The ship sailed from Hampton Roads on December 12, 1942 for Oran as part of a "slow" convoy, UGS-3 with 42 crew, 27 Armed Guard and 12 passengers (11 crew from LCT-21 and one Army officer).

Upon arrival at Casablanca eleven ships bound for nearby Oran split off from the convoy and proceeded to their destination. When the eleven ships were about eight miles away from Oran, the convoy slowed and the signal was given for single column for entry into the harbor. The SS Rhode Island, the Commodore's ship, was maneuvering at slow speed to line up for the harbor approach while the other ships formed a line astern.

The Arthur Middleton was near the port quarter of the Rhode Island when it was struck near the bow by two torpedoes fired by U-73 at 1411 GCT. According to U-73's Commanding Officer, the Arthur Middleton violently exploded less than 20 seconds after being hit by the torpedoes, sending flames and parts of the ship soaring 1,000 feet into the air. The front half of the ship disintegrated from the Number 5 hatch to the bow, but a small section of the stern remained afloat for about a minute. Of the 81 men on board, only three men, members of the Armed Guard who had been stationed on the after section and were able to jump overboard, survived. These three were picked up 25 minutes after the attack by the HMS Boreas (H77), and transferred to the British Hospital Ship, HMHS Oxfordshire. Cadet-Midshipmen Ben P. Gafford and Denniston Charlton, Jr. were among those lost in the attack.

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

Before joining the SS Arthur Middleton, Ben Gafford had also sailed aboard the SS Nishmaha from January to March 1942. For unknown reasons, perhaps illness, Passenger Lists on file in New York, NY list Ben Gafford as a passenger, along with two other U.S. merchant seamen, aboard the MS Kota Gede, a Dutch passenger - cargo ship. The ship arrived at New York on June 28, 1942 after a month long voyage from Durban, South Africa.

Ben Gafford was the only son of George Prentice Gafford and Allie Belle Gafford. George P. Gafford, better known as "Prentice", was identified in the 1930 U.S. Census as Clerk of the District Court in Sherman, TX.



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According the notation for Ben Prentice Gafford in the Austin College memorial for its World War II Dead;

"He entered Austin College in the fall of 1940. At the end of his freshman year, Ben Prentice declined a nomination to Annapolis as second alternate and entered the Merchant Marine.

After passing a competitive examination, he reported to New Orleans for 8 weeks of shore training. In his twenty months of service he completed voyages to South America, South Africa and the West Indies. At the time of his death he would have received his commission on completion of the voyage."

A memorial to Ben Prentice Gafford was added to his family's grave markers in the West Hill Cemetery, Sherman, TX.