

Richard Homer Holbrook

Born: January 9, 1922
Hometown: Wayland, NY
Class: 1943
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: April 11, 1942 / Berhampur, India
Date / Place of burial: April 12, 1942 / Catholic Cemetery, Berhampur, India
Age: 20



Richard H. Holbrook signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the SS Bienville at the Port of New York on December 12, 1941, less than a week after the United States officially entered World War II. He was joined by his Academy classmate, Cadet-Midshipman Robert W. Corliss who signed on as Deck Cadet. According to Corliss' report, the Bienville sailed from New York on December 15, 1941 with a crew of 43 bound for Suez and other ports in the Middle East as directed. After discharging its cargo the Bienville was ordered to Calcutta, India to load a cargo of manganese ore, jute, burlap and general cargo. The ship sailed from Calcutta on April 3, bound for Columbo, Ceylon. Unfortunately, the ship was also bound for a collision with six Japanese aircraft carriers, escorted by cruisers and destroyers, that were conducting a raid into the Bay of Bengal known by the Japanese Navy as "Operation C".

During the morning 4 to 8 watch on April 6, 1942 Cadet-Midshipman Robert Corliss was a lookout on the bridge when he heard gunfire ahead. In light of the situation he was ordered to wake all hands. At 0718 the Bienville was attacked by Japanese aircraft and was hit at the Number 2 hatch, starting a fire. While the crew was fighting the fire two more Japanese aircraft attacked the Bienville, but without hitting the ship. At this early point in the war the Bienville had no defensive armament.

In the growing light the crew of the Bienville saw a Japanese aircraft carrier, later identified as the IJNS Ryujo, and its escorting cruisers and destroyers. The captain attempted to run from the Japanese fleet and lay a smoke screen to hide behind. However, their efforts were in vain. At about 0740 a Japanese cruiser, identified after the war as the heavy cruiser IJNS Chokai, opened fire from less than two miles away, hitting the ship at least five times, severely wounding Richard Holbrook.

As the firing began, the Captain ordered the crew to abandon ship. However, by this time three of the ship's four lifeboats had been destroyed. Most of the crew had to jump into the ocean and swim for life rafts. Cadet-Midshipman Corliss joined a group of men at the #4 hatch who were trying to launch a life raft there. However, due to their wounds the men could not get the raft launched. The men cut the raft loose in hope that it would float clear of the Bienville as it sank. Incredibly, the raft did just that.

The one lifeboat that had survived the sinking picked up 24 men, including Cadet-Midshipmen Corliss and Holbrook. After a little more than a day at sea, the lifeboat reached land. The wounded, including Cadet-Midshipman Richard Holbrook were taken to the Government Headquarters Hospital in Berhampur, India for treatment. After several days of treatment, Richard Holbrook died at 0835 on April 11, 1942 of a fractured skull and penetrating wounds of the abdomen. He was buried in the Catholic Cemetery in Berhampur. Four other survivors also died of their wounds.

Cadet-Midshipman Corliss' return to the United States was a lengthy adventure in which he found himself at sea in a lifeboat again after his second ship was torpedoed. He was subsequently assigned to a ship so short of crew that he was rated Ordinary Seaman at the Captain's request to fill out the crew. Corliss finally arrived at Philadelphia, PA on August 20, 1942 nine months after he left New York aboard the SS Bienville.

In an historical note, the Japanese cruiser Chokai that sank the Bienville was sunk with all hands by U.S. Navy ships and aircraft at the Battle off Samar in 1944.

Cadet-Midshipman Richard H. Holbrook was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, the Atlantic, Mediterranean - Middle East and Pacific War Zone Bars, the Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Richard H. Holbrook was the oldest of Pearl W. Holbrook and Myrtle R. Holbrook's two sons. He had an older sister Flora, a younger brother William and two younger sisters, Kathryn and Sharon. The Holbrook family lived in the Village of Wayland, NY in West Central NY. In 1940 Richard was working part time as a waiter in a restaurant while his father worked as a weaver in a silk mill. Richard's sister Sharon said that, while Richard had some health problems as a young boy, hockey was his favorite sport at school. He was consistently outgoing and became popular with his classmates. Sharon and the rest of the Holbrook family remember Richard as patriotic and a consistent worker at the United Brethren Church in Wayland. She believed that the following quote from W. Drummond best summarizes her recollections of Richard,

“There are some men and women in whose company we are always at our best. All the best stops in our nature are drawn out, and we find a music in our souls never felt before.”