

Thomas Kellegrew

Born: October 22, 1921
Hometown: Brooklyn, New York
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: May 19, 1943 /At Sea
Date / Place of burial: May 22, 1943 / Stellawood
Cemetery Durban, South
Africa



Date Unknown / North Africa American Cemetery, Carthage,
Tunisia, Plot H, Row 18, Grave 5

Age: 21

Thomas Kellegrew signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the SS John Drayton by September 17, 1942 at Wilmington, NC where the ship had been built. His Academy classmate Herman E. Rosen (Deck) also signed on at Wilmington, NC before the ship sailed to load cargo in New York for its maiden voyage. In New York Cadet-Midshipmen Morton Deitz (Deck) and Jack Stadstad (Engine) joined the ship.

The John Drayton sailed on October 12 from New York bound for Abadan, Iran loaded with a general cargo of military supplies including canned goods, ammunition, tanks and aircraft. From January 31 to April 1, 1943 the John Drayton discharged and loaded cargo at several ports in Iran. On April 4 the ship sailed from Bandar Abbas for Cape Town. With the exception of the first two days, the John Drayton was not escorted.

On the evening of April 21, 1943 the John Drayton was approximately 275 miles east of Durban, South Africa when its luck ran out. According to the Navy report on the sinking, the ship came under attack at 1700 GCT when the crew reported seeing torpedoes miss the ship. The maintained its speed but was zig-zagging around its original course. Later that evening the ship turned to evade what appeared to be a surfaced submarine. Upon returning to course another torpedo, later determined to have been fired by the Italian submarine "Leonardo Da Vinci", struck the John Drayton on the starboard side at #3 Lifeboat, destroying the engines and killing the men on watch, including Cadet-Midshipman Stadstad. Cadet-Midshipman Morton Deitz stated in his report,

“A large gaping hole was blown in the hull, demolishing the #3 boat, and since the torpedo hit about at the generator platform in the engine room, all lights were blown out. Immediately after the explosion of the torpedo, the “abandon ship” signal was given from the bridge and all hands proceeded to their respective boat stations. The crew of the #3 boat was ordered to distribute themselves among the remaining boats.”

Cadet-Midshipman Rosen was actually assigned to boat #4, but because he left his station to collect clothing and a blanket from his cabin he was accidentally left aboard. His only option was to jump into the water and swim for the #2 boat which would contain Cadet-Midshipmen Deitz, Kellegrew and twenty-one other survivors. The men in the #1 and #4 boats were all rescued within a week of the sinking.

However, the voyage of the John Drayton's #2 boat started out poorly and never recovered. The two Deck Officers aboard, the Chief Mate and Third Mate, were unable to effectively command the boat due to illness and their injuries. Gale force winds prevented the survivors from raising its sail until the next morning when they attempted to set course for Durban. After six days of stormy weather the boat capsized, resulting in the loss of everything aboard, including the survivor's food, water and clothing. By what Rosen described as a “miracle of seamanship” the boat was righted and bailed out by the twenty-four men. For the next three weeks they were, in Rosen's words,

“wet and frozen by night and baked and thirsty by day.”

After the capsizing the survivors, including the two deck officers, began dying, mainly due to drinking sea water. Eventually command of the boat fell upon Cadet-Midshipman Rosen although he “. . . felt immature and unequal to the task.” Unknown to Rosen and the other survivors, the search for the John Drayton's life boat had been called of on May 8. Cadet-Midshipman Thomas Kellegrew died in Herman Rosen's arms just hours before they were rescued on May 20 by the Greek freighter SS Mount Rhodope. At that point the boat was just twenty miles from land, but contained only eight survivors, of which three later died in the hospital.

Cadet-Midshipman Thomas Kellegrew was posthumously awarded the Mariner's Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Pacific War Zone bar, Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter. Although he was initially buried in Durban on May 22, 1943, Thomas Kellegrew's final resting place is in the North Africa American Cemetery in Carthage, Tunisia. Two other Kings Pointers, Otto E. Kern, Jr. and Niles Stevens, are buried in the same cemetery. The name of another Kings Pointer, Frederick Whitehead is inscribed on the Cemetery's list of those lost at sea.

Thomas Kellegrew was the only son of Alexander R. Kellegrew, an attorney, and Adelaide Kellegrew. His sister, Joyce, who was four years younger, traveled to Europe in 1938 with her parents while Thomas, apparently, had to stay in school.

Herman Rosen, wrote a moving account of the loss of the SS John Drayton in his book, "Gallant Ship, Brave Men". In October 2004 he said,

"Tom Kellegrew, Engine Cadet aboard S.S. John Drayton was popular aboard our ship. He was always pleasant and eager to do more than his share. He stood extra watches in the Engine Room when the Third Assistant Engineer was ill. He was often praised by the Chief Engineer for his dedication. Tom hoped to make a career of the sea. In our Lifeboat he rowed until his hands blistered. He was constantly cheerful, expecting rescue day after day. He boosted morale! He was my buddy and died in the lifeboat on the 30th day, only hours before our rescue."

"Tom's mother visited me while I was hospitalized at Staten Island, NY. She insisted on giving me his pocket watch engraved "TK" which I have and treasure to this day!"