

LeRoy William Kernan

Born: October 5, 1917
Hometown: Elgin, IL
Class: 1942
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Third Mate
Date / Place of death: March 17, 1943 / North Atlantic
50-38N, 34-46W
Date / Place of burial: March 17, 1943 / Lost at Sea –
North Atlantic 50-38N, 34-46W
Age: 25



Leroy W. Kernan was appointed a Cadet in the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps in February 1941, although he had received his Coast Guard papers as Deck Cadet on April 30, 1940 at New Orleans. He attended the Maritime Commission Cadet School at Algiers, LA and had begun sailing as Deck Cadet aboard the SS Arizpa on May 1, 1940. Following receipt of his Unlimited Third Mate License on August 15, 1942, LeRoy Kernan signed on as Third Mate aboard the SS Hawaiian Shipper at New York on November 19, 1942 for a voyage to Casablanca and return.



SS Harry Luckenbach

On March 2, 1943 LeRoy Kernan signed on aboard the SS Harry Luckenbach as Third Mate at New York, NY. The Harry Luckenbach also had four Kings Point Cadet-Midshipmen aboard; Lee T. Byrd (Deck), Walter J. Meyer (Engine), Francis R. Miller (Engine) and William H. Parker (Deck). The ship sailed from New York on March 8 as

one of 40 ships in convoy HX-229, bound for Liverpool with a general cargo of war supplies. A second HX convoy, HX-229A with more ships sailed about 10 hours after the ships of HX-229. During their transit of the North Atlantic the two convoys overtook a slower convoy, SC-122. The three convoys, with a total of 110 ships, but less than 20 escorts, would be the centerpiece of what has been described as the greatest convoy battle of World War II.

The ships of convoy HX-229 had proceeded without incident or attack until March 16. For the next three days the convoy was under attack by over forty U-Boats. On the morning of March 17, when HX-229 was about 400 miles east-southeast of Cape Farrell, U-91 fired five torpedoes at the convoy, not aiming at any specific ship. However, the Harry Luckenbach, sailing in the starboard forward corner of the convoy, was hit by two of the torpedoes at the engine room. The ship sank in minutes, but amazingly, three lifeboats were able to get away from the sinking vessel. One or more of the boats were later sighted by HMS Beverley (H-64), HMS Pennywort (K-111), HMS Volunteer (D-71) and, possibly, the HMS Abelia (K-184). However, none of these ships were able to pick up the survivors from the boats. None of the 54 crew members and 26 Naval Armed Guard of the Harry Luckenbach survived the sinking. By March 20 the surviving ships of the three convoys arrived in the United Kingdom, having lost twenty-two ships and their crews, while sinking just one of the attacking U-Boats. According to a Royal Navy report on the convoy battle,

“The Germans never came so near to disrupting communications between the New World and the Old as in the first twenty days of March 1943”

The fact that the Germans were unable to do so is a testament to the courage of Merchant Mariners like LeRoy W. Kernan, and the example that he set for the Kings Pointers that came after him.

Based on his sailing record LeRoy W. Kernan was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Mediterranean - Middle East War Zone Bar, Pacific War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Leroy was the oldest of three children and only son of William W. Kernan and Crescentia Kernan. LeRoy's two sisters were named Lois and Lenore. According to the 1940 Census, William Kernan was a carpenter while LeRoy's occupation was listed as being a finisher in a pottery factory. However, Leroy had attended Illinois State Normal University at Normal, IL in 1938 where he studied Music after graduating from Elgin High School in Elgin, IL. In high school he played violin in the school orchestra.