

## Ralph Jacob Kohlmeyer

Born: October 28, 1919  
Hometown: Rego Park, NY  
Class: 1944  
Service: Merchant Marine  
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet  
Date / Place of death: February 23, 1943 / 46-15N, 38-11W  
Date / Place of burial: February 23, 1943 / Lost At Sea -- 46-15N, 38-11W  
Age: 23



Ralph J. Kohlmeyer signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the SS Jonathan Sturges at the Port of New York on January 12, 1943. He was sworn in as a Midshipman, USNR on September 18, 1942. Also onboard were Cadet-Midshipmen Harry Burlison (Deck), Grover Lietz (Engine), and William Wilson (Deck). The ship's Chief Mate was 1940 Cadet Officer David L. Edwards. After safely delivering its cargo to England the Jonathan Sturges was returning to New York with Convoy ON-166 from Liverpool to New York City when it fell behind the convoy on the night of February 23/24, 1943. The ship, with a crew of 44 merchant mariners and a Naval Armed Guard of 31 was carrying 1,500 tons of sand ballast. In bad weather and poor visibility the Sturges was making 6 knots, about ½ its full speed.

At about 1 am, the vessel was struck in the forward part of the ship by two torpedoes fired by U-707. The engines were secured, but the ship, which had apparently been broken in two, began to sink bow first. Survivors recalled that the explosions gave off a sweet odor, and left a sweet taste in their mouths for hours after the incident.

Although the radio officer was able to send a distress signal, there was no time to await a reply as the crew abandoned ship. Two lifeboats and four life rafts were successfully launched. According to the post sinking report of the survivors, nineteen men were able to get into one life boat while the Master, Chief Mate David Edwards and fifteen others were in the other boat. The other twenty-four survivors were able to reach the four life rafts. However, the boats and rafts were soon separated.

On February 27, three days after the sinking, the boat with nineteen men aboard met up with a lifeboat carrying three survivors from the Dutch ship SS Madoera who had been in the same convoy. Eight of the Sturges' survivors climbed into the Madoera's

boat. Although one of the Jonathan Sturges' crew eventually died of exposure, the other eighteen (along with the three Madoera survivors) were rescued by the USS Belknap (DD 251) on March 12, 1943. However, the other lifeboat with its seventeen survivors was never seen again. Of the twenty-four men on the life rafts, only 6 survived. These men were rescued on April 5 by U-336 and spent the rest of the war as Prisoners of War.

Cadet-Midshipman Ralph J. Kohlmeyer, along with the three other cadets, was killed in the incident. He was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Ralph Kohlmeyer was the youngest, by thirteen years, of Jacob Kohlmeyer and Matilda Kohlmeyer's two sons. According to Ralph's niece, Joan Cabbie, Ralph loved dancing and was a frequent listener to the "Make Believe Ballroom" radio show. While he was attending Richmond Hill High School he worked as a Life Guard. The yearbook for his senior year (1939) lists his accomplishments as receiving the "Scholarship Pin", being a "Junior Arista" and being involved with the Commercial Honor Society, Who's Who Committee and basketball intramurals. According to the 1940 Census after graduating from High School Ralph was employed as a clerk in a brokerage house.