

John Robert Lambert

Born: June 1, 1924
Hometown: Del Rio, TX
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Deck Cadet
Date / Place of death: March 16, 1943 / 50-38N, 34-46W
Date / Place of burial: March 16, 1943 / Lost at Sea – 50-38N, 34-46W
Age: 18



John R. Lambert signed on as Deck Cadet aboard the SS James Oglethorpe on February 22, 1943 at Savannah, GA, just a few days after it was completed. He joined three other Cadet-Midshipmen who were already aboard; Wayne D. Fajans (Engine), William H. Ford (Deck), and Richard Record (Engine). After the SS James Oglethorpe completed the installation of its armament and final fitting out and adjustments, the ship sailed for its first loading port. The ship joined convoy HX-229 in New York on March 9, 1943 for a journey to Liverpool, England. The James Oglethorpe was loaded with a cargo of steel, cotton, food in the holds and a deck cargo of aircraft, tractors and trucks.

Cadet-Midshipmen Fajans later reported that,

“The weather was the usual kind experienced during this time of year in the North Atlantic, i.e., dirty and heavy seas.”

In his report of the sinking, Cadet-Midshipman Ford stated,

“The day before our vessel was lost No. 2 boat was carried away by heavy seas and Nos. 1 and 3 extensively damaged. As a result of this damage, our available life savings equipment was materially reduced.”

Early in the evening of March 16, Cadet-Midshipman Wayne D. Fajans reported that he had seen the conning tower of a submarine on the starboard side of the ship while at his gun station and reported this fact to the gunnery officer. However, no action was taken by the ship’s gun crews. Analysis of German Navy records found that the submarine reported to have been seen by Cadet-Midshipman Fajans was not one of the submarines that later attacked the James Oglethorpe.

At 2120 GCT on March 16, 1943, U-758 fired a "spread" of four torpedoes at convoy HX-229, hitting, and sinking, the M/V Zaaland with one torpedo and the James Oglethorpe with another. The U-758's other two torpedoes missed. The James Oglethorpe was hit in either Number 1 or Number 2 hold (survivor reports differ). The torpedo's impact started a fire in the cargo which was quickly extinguished. According to the accounts of survivors, although the ship settled about three feet lower in the water it did not appear to be in danger of sinking. However, the Captain did give permission, or at least some crew members believed that he had given the crew permission, to abandon ship despite the ship being in a hard left turn with its engines still running.

Of the remaining lifeboats (Number 4, 5 and 6) only the Number 6 boat was safely launched. Cadet-Midshipman Fajans, who was in Number 5 boat, fell into the sea when the boat's forward fall broke. Seeing the chaos occurring with lowering the boats, the Chief Mate and Cadet-Midshipman William Ford jumped into the sea, joining the men from Number 4 and 5 boats in the water. The crew of the Number 6 lifeboat were able to pick up some of the men in the water. The nine men in this boat were rescued by the corvette HMS Pennywort (K 111). The destroyer HMS Beverly (H 64, ex-USS Branch (DD 197)) rescued 21 other men from the water. These men were landed in Scotland (HMS Pennywort) and Northern Ireland (HMS Beverly). Some of the men, including Cadet-Midshipman Ford, returned to the U.S. aboard the SS Queen Mary.

About 30 members of the crew stayed on board to help the Captain sail the ship to St. John's, Newfoundland, the nearest harbor. The James Oglethorpe was last seen by those in the lifeboat and in the water at about 0200 GCT still afloat and underway. The ship, and its remaining crew, were never seen again. Although some accounts credit U-91 with sinking the crippled SS James Oglethorpe on March 17, German Navy records only credit U-91 with sinking the SS Irene Du Pont and SS Nariva. It is likely that the SS James Oglethorpe foundered due to the torpedo damage and high seas. From the accounts of the thirty survivors it is unknown whether Cadet-Midshipmen John Lambert and Richard Record were among the seventeen men who perished abandoning the ship on March 16 or were among the thirty men lost when the James Oglethorpe sank.

Cadet-Midshipman John R. Lambert was posthumously awarded the Mariner's Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

John R. Lambert was the only son of Gladys Lambert, a Registered Nurse. At some point between 1935 and 1940 the Lamberts moved from Ypsilanti, MI to Del Rio, TX.