

Walter Hay Lee

Born: August 23, 1913
Hometown: Los Angeles, CA
Class: USMCC Cadet Officer - 1940
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Second Mate
Date / Place of death: September 18, 1944 / 02-52S,
101-12E
Date / Place of burial: September 18, 1944 / Lost at
Sea 02-52S, 101-12E
Age: 31



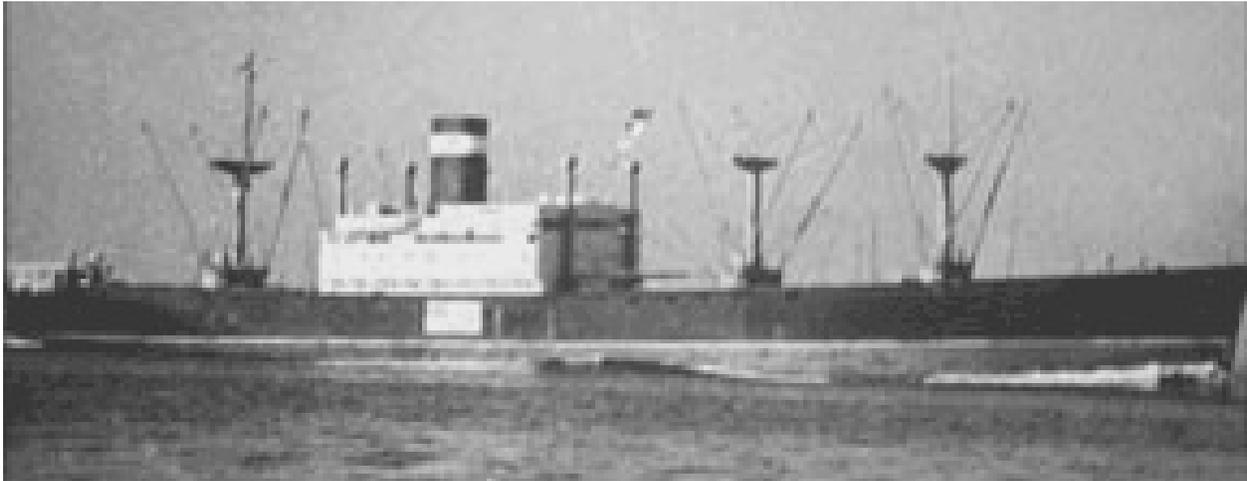
Walter H. Lee is believed by his relatives to be the first Chinese-American licensed officer in the U.S. Merchant Marine. Walter started out in the merchant marine in 1933 as an Ordinary Seaman aboard the SS Golden Peak of the Oceanic and Oriental Navigation Company sailing to the Far East. On September 14, 1934 he received his U.S. Coast Guard certificate as Able Bodied Seaman. He continued sailing aboard the SS Golden Peak in this capacity for the next two years. By March 3, 1936 he had been promoted to Deck Cadet aboard the SS Golden Star. After just one year of study and training aboard the Golden Star, Walter earned his license as Third Mate from the U.S. Coast Guard on April 6, 1937.



Walter Lee (in blues) George Duffy (khakis) and Stan Gorski on Flying Bridge of American Leader

It is unknown in what capacity Walter sailed during the two years after he received his Third Mate's License. However, he began sailing as a Cadet Officer (Deck) aboard the SS Sawokla on May 20, 1939. After a year sailing as Cadet Officer he signed on as Junior Third Mate aboard the SS Sea Witch on June 30, 1940. He signed off as Third Mate on May 5, 1941. Six weeks later, on June 17, 1941 he signed on as Third Mate aboard the MS American Leader. With the exception of the month he took off in the fall of 1941 to sit for his Second Mate's license examination, Walter H. Lee served continuously aboard the American Leader thereafter.

On April 13, 1942 at the port of New York two Kings Point Cadet-Midshipmen joined the ship, Joseph DiCicco (Engine) and Gordon Tyne (Deck). According to the account of Captain George Duffy, then the ship's Third Mate, the ship was carrying a general cargo of war supplies including boots, barbed wire and vehicles along with a deck cargo of nine twin engine bombers bound for Russia via Persian Gulf ports. The ship was also loaded with several thousand tons of steel ingots for India. The American Leader was armed with a handful of antiquated weapons manned by nine Navy Sailors.



MV American Leader

After discharging its cargo the American Leader loaded a cargo of rugs, chemicals and other raw materials in India before sailing for Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to load baled rubber and liquid latex. Upon completion of loading the ship sailed for Cape Town, South Africa, arriving there on September 7, 1942. From Cape Town the ship was ordered to continue westward, without escort, toward the Straits of Magellan.

At about 1930 on September 10th, while Walter Lee was standing his bridge watch as Second Mate, the American Leader ran afoul of the German Navy commerce raider Michel. During the brief, one sided, engagement ten crew members, including Cadet-Midshipmen Gordon Tyne and Joseph DiCicco, were killed, two lifeboats were destroyed and Walter Lee was wounded in the leg. The forty-eight survivors (39 crew and 9 Armed Guard) became Prisoners of War, joining a growing group from the Michel's earlier victims. Despite receiving medical care aboard the Michel, Walter Lee's wounded leg never healed properly.

Two months' later the Michel's Commanding Officer turned his Prisoners of War over to Japanese authorities in Batavia, Java (present day Djakarta, Indonesia). According to accounts of the survivors, most of the American Leader's survivors were put to work by the Japanese building a railroad in the jungle. Because of his leg injury, Walter Lee was not considered fit enough for the work parties and remained in camp. According to documents in his U.S. Coast Guard record, a short wave radio message from Walter Hay Lee was received by U.S. authorities in early 1943 by June his Prisoner of War status had been officially confirmed.

In September 1944 Walter Lee and several other American Leader survivors were killed in the sinking of the Prisoner of War transport Junyo Maru when it was torpedoed by HMS Tradewind. Other American Leader survivors were killed in the sinking of the Tomahaku Maru. Of the 58 men aboard the American Leader when it sailed from Cape Town, only 28 made it home after the end of the war.

In 2006 a moving memoir of Walter H. Lee was written by his nephew, Christopher Lee, the son of Walter's younger sister Edna.¹ In his memoir Christopher Lee recounts visits to the Lee family by some of Walter's shipmates in which they told them about Walter's days as a Prisoner of War. Christopher Lee notes that the survivors of the Junyo Maru told the family that;

“As the prisoners were swimming towards shore, Walter was trying to help someone else. The sailors said that Walter was always helping someone. He was just that type of person. They waited for him, but Walter said, ‘ I’m fine, you go on ahead.’ When they looked back he was gone.”

On Sunday June 4, 2000 a Dutch Navy squadron visiting Indonesia conducted a memorial service to the Prisoners of War who perished in the sinking of the Junyo Maru. A memorial wreath with the names of deceased inscribed on it, including those of Walter Hay Lee and his shipmates from the MS American Leader, was dropped on the ocean at the location of the sinking.

Walter Hay Lee was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, American Defense Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Walter was the youngest of Thing “Leo” (known as “Goongsie to the family) Lee and Chan She Lee’s two sons and the third of their four children. Mr. Lee was a successful businessman who owned a clothing store, Leland’s Mens Furnishing, as well as a cigar store. Thing Lee’s ownership of these stores was very important to the family as under the laws of the time only Chinese men who owned business could bring wives over from China. Although his brother and sisters went to local high schools, Walter attended Polytechnic High where he majored in Engineering. However, he began sailing as an Ordinary Seaman before he graduated.

Christopher Lee wrote the following about what Walter was like,

“Edna recalls that when Walter came home on leave, he would use a car for a date and to go out with his friends. He and George shared a car, but George was always more “relaxed” about upkeep. Edna remembers Walter muttering and fuming: ‘That George! All he does is *drive* the car. He never washes or cleans it. He just doesn’t take *care* of things!’ And he’d get a bucket of water, go out and wash the car with spit, polish and vigor. Whether it was life at sea or just the difference in the brother’s personalities is hard to say. Probably both.”

¹“An Officer and a Chinaman: A War Hero I Never Met”; Topography of War, Asian American Essays, Asian American Writer's Workshop, 2006