

Jay Francis Litton

Born: August 11, 1924
Hometown: Detroit, MI
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: December 2, 1943 / Bari, Italy
Date / Place of burial: December 2, 1943 / Lost at Sea
– Bari, Italy
Age: 19



Jay F. Litton signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the SS John L. Motley at Philadelphia, PA on June 4, 1943 shortly after it was delivered from its builders, Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipbuilding, to the War Shipping Administration. He joined his classmate, Edward D. Howard, who signed on as Deck Cadet, and Academy alumnus Second Mate Fulton E. Yewell. The John L. Motley made one voyage to the Mediterranean and returned to New York from Oran in mid-September 1943. After loading a cargo of ammunition, the John L. Motley sailed on its second voyage to the Mediterranean, reaching the crowded harbor of Bari, Italy on November 28, 1943.

On December 2, 1943 the John L. Motley was moored alongside the jetty at Bari, Italy discharging its cargo when a massive German air attack on the port took defenders by surprise. The attack and ensuing explosions sank seventeen ships and put the harbor out of use for three weeks. This attack became known as “Little Pearl Harbor”.

A Naval Armed Guard member on the SS John Bascom, moored next to the John L. Motley, reported that the vessel sustained three bomb hits, one in the Number 5 hold, one in the Number 3 hold, and one down the vessel’s stack. The crew was able to control the fires caused by the first strike, but after the second hit, the fires on board raged out of control, burning through the vessel’s mooring lines, and setting her adrift. The subsequent explosion of the Motley’s cargo killed everyone on board, including Cadet-Midshipmen Jay F. Litton and Edward D. Howard and the ship’s Second Mate, Kings Point alumnus Fulton E. Yewell.

However, the damage caused by German bombs to the John L. Motley did not end there. When the Motley blew up, the ship was only 50 feet or so distant from the SS John Bascom. The Motley’s explosion destroyed the port side of the Bascom, sinking the ship within minutes. The explosion on the John Motley also set off a chain reaction

on the nearby Liberty ship SS John Harvey, which was carrying a secret cargo of mustard gas munitions. The John Harvey, which had already been hit and was on fire disintegrated when the Motley exploded, releasing deadly mustard gas into the air and water around the vessel.



Explosion of Either John L. Motley or SS John Harvey at Bari, Italy

The death toll in Bari was more than 1,000 civilians and Allied seamen. Six Kings Point cadets were lost, on three different vessels. Thousands more seamen and civilians sustained serious injuries caused by the exposure to mustard gas. The effect of these injuries was exacerbated by the fact that doctors in the area didn't realize they were treating mustard gas victims.

Cadet-Midshipman Jay F. Litton was posthumously awarded the Mariner's Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Mediterranean - Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Jay Litton was the oldest of John Litton and Grace Litton's two sons. He attended Southeastern High School where his younger brother, Jack, remembered him as a leader in all his activities. He was President of his High School Class and was selected to be a senator at Michigan Boys State. He is also remembered as being a leader in his church group and among his friends. Jay was an avid athlete who concentrated his efforts on baseball, but also played varsity tennis. He also enjoyed stamp collecting, and at the time of his death, he was "going steady" with a girl from his high school class.