

William Edward McCann

Born: September 12, 1920
Hometown: Detroit, MI
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: August 4, 1943 / SS Thomas Paine
Date / Place of burial: August 6, 1943 / St. Patrick's Cemetery, Madras, India, Grave #24



Age: 22

William E. McCann signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the SS Thomas Paine on April 12, 1943 at Baltimore, MD. By July the ship was discharging cargo in India. On July 28, 1943, the ship left Calcutta bound for New York but stopping in several Indian ports for cargo before sailing via Ceylon, Australia the Panama Canal and Key West. During the vessel's trip down the eastern coast of India, the crew suffered greatly from malaria. Lieutenant (junior grade) J. N. Heroy, USNR, Commanding Officer of the ship's Naval Armed Guard, estimated that 83 percent of the gun crew was ill during one three-week period.

The Thomas Paine arrived in Vizagapatam (Visakhapatnam), India, a port in the Madras section of India on August 1. Several crew members, including William McCann, were so ill that the Master asked the ship's local agent to have an Indian doctor to come aboard the ship and examine them. According to Lt. (j.g.) Heroy's voyage report, the doctor believed that McCann would make it to Colombo, Ceylon, a major British Naval Base, where more adequate medical assistance was available. However, shortly after sailing for Madras, the ship's next port of call before Colombo, McCann's condition worsened. According to his Report of the Death of an American Citizen, Cadet-Midshipman William E. McCann died at 4am local time aboard the SS Thomas Paine in Madras Harbor. He was buried in Saint Patrick's Cemetery, Madras, India on August 6, the day after the Thomas Paine sailed for Colombo.

In his voyage report Lt. (j.g.) Heroy stated that the Indian doctors obtained by the ship's agent in these ports were, ". . . superficial, disinterested and professionally incompetent." He mentions that one of his Sailors was examined three times by Indian doctors who were unable to diagnose his condition while a British Navy Doctor in

Colombo instantly diagnosed the man as having malaria. He noted that in each port there were large numbers of British Army troops and concluded that they would have their own doctors. Based on this conclusion, he recommended to Naval Armed Guard Commanders that allied military medical personnel be called to provide medical attention for merchant ship crews and Armed Guard Sailors in these ports rather than relying on local medical personnel. He concluded,

“I believe that Cadet McCann could have been saved, had competent medical assistance been available.”

Cadet-Midshipman William E. McCann was posthumously awarded the Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

William E. McCann was born in Ontario, Canada, the youngest of John J. McCann and Mary McCann's three sons. William's older brothers were Francis and Joseph. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, John McCann worked in one of Detroit's automobile factories. According to William's sister-in-law, Kathleen, he graduated from Holy Redeemer High School in 1939, where he played football and basketball. She said that he was noted as being able to draw out the best in his team mates. In addition, Kathleen says that William also served as an altar boy in his parish church. She recalled that William had an innate mechanical ability, and a natural inclination for engineering training at the Academy. Although, according to Kathleen, William had initially gravitated towards aviation, she noted that “this was not to be.” Kathleen said the following about her brother-in-law.

“Religious strength was a sustaining force in his life reflecting the wisdom that he concentrated on things that would outlast his mortality.”