

Howard Timothy McGrath

Born: June 10, 1923
Hometown: New York City, NY
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: March 10, 1943 / 19-49N, 74-38W
Date / Place of burial: March 10, 1943 / Lost at Sea -- 19-49N, 74-38W
Age: 19



Howard T. McGrath signed on aboard the brand new SS James Sprunt as Engine Cadet on February 23, 1943 at Charleston, South Carolina. He was joined by his Academy classmates Michael Buck (Engine), James Rowley (Deck) and John Tucek (Deck). The ship loaded at Charleston for a voyage to Karachi, India via Texas and the Panama Canal with general cargo and 4,000 tons of high explosives.



SS James Sprunt shortly after completion

On the morning of March 10, 1943 the James Sprunt was traveling in convoy KG-123 about three miles southeast of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Another ship in the convoy, the Virginia Sinclair, had been torpedoed at 0430 on the same morning. At 0809 U-185 fired torpedoes at the convoy, hitting the James Sprunt.

The James Sprunt's cargo of explosives blew up with extraordinary force, completely disintegrating the ship. The glare from the explosion was seen more than forty miles away. Witnesses on other ships recalled the violent tremors, and debris that fell like hail on the other ships. There were no survivors among the 43 crew members and 28 Naval Armed Guard members including all four Kings Point Cadet-Midshipmen; Michael Buck, Howard McGrath, James Rowley, and John Tucek.

The thirty day life of the SS James Sprunt may have had the shortest life span of any Liberty ship. The ship was delivered from North Carolina Shipbuilding to the War Shipping Administration on February 13, 1943, loaded cargo from the 19th to the 29th and was destroyed on March 10, 1943.

Cadet Midshipman Howard T. McGrath was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Howard McGrath was the oldest son and second child of Timothy McGrath and Winifred McGrath. His big sister, Helen, was five years older, while Howard was six years older than his little sister Winifred and nine years older than his little brother Robert. The family lived at 322 Holly Avenue, in the Throgs Neck neighborhood of the Bronx in New York City. Just across Long Island Sound from Throgs Neck is Kings Point, the home of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. According to the 1940 U.S. Census, Timothy McGrath was an Inspector for the Interborough Rapid Transit Railroad, part of New York City's subway system. He had previously worked for them as an Electrician.

Howard's brother Robert said that Howard loved to be on Long Island Sound fishing. According to Robert, their father built Howard a number of rowboats from which he would come home with buckets of flounder. The fish fed the family, friends and neighbors while the remains were used to fertilize their father's prize roses. Robert said that Howard wrote to his mother every day and enjoyed his short career.