

## Edwin Joseph O'Hara

Born: November 27, 1923  
Hometown: Lindsay, CA  
Class: 1943  
Service: Merchant Marine  
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet  
Date / Place of death: September 27, 1942 / 28-08S,  
11-59W  
Date / Place of burial: September 27, 1942 / Lost at  
Sea -- 28-08S, 11-59W  
Age: 18



Before he sailed into history, Edwin J. O'Hara was just another Cadet from the Maritime Commission's West Coast Basic School. Although he was initially appointed as a Deck Cadet, Edwin O'Hara signed on aboard the SS Mariposa as Engine Cadet on March 14, 1942. However, in a unique twist of fate, Edwin O'Hara signed off the Mariposa after it arrived in San Francisco on May 3, 1942 due to an infection in his knee. On May 16, 1942, with the infection cleared up and ready for duty, he and Cadet-Midshipman Arthur R. Chamberlin (Deck) signed on aboard the newly delivered SS Stephen Hopkins at San Francisco, CA.

After sailing across the Pacific with war cargo, the Stephen Hopkins called at Durban and Cape Town, South Africa before sailing across the South Atlantic, bound for Paramaribo, Suriname. On September 27, 1942 the visibility was reduced due to fog and haze. Despite having five lookouts, no one aboard the Stephen Hopkins sighted either the German Raider Stier (known as Raider J) or its supply ship Tannenfels until 1235 GCT when they appeared out of the mist. Ordered to stop by the Stier, the Stephen Hopkins' master, Captain Paul Buck, refused and turned the ship away from the Germans to bring his heaviest weapon to bear, a single 4" gun.

The Stier was armed with six 150mm guns, one 75mm gun, a twin 37mm anti-aircraft gun and four 20mm anti-aircraft guns with modern fire control and trained naval gunners. The ship also had two float planes and two torpedo tubes. The Tannenfels was only armed with anti-aircraft machine guns. Against this armament the Stephen Hopkins had one 4" gun, two 37mm and several .50 and .30 caliber anti-aircraft machine guns manned by a small detachment of Naval Armed Guard and the ship's crew.

At 1238 the Stier began firing on the Stephen Hopkins at close range. Shrapnel and machine gun bullets wounded several men, including the Armed Guard Commander, Lieutenant (j.g.) Kenneth M. Willett, USNR, while killing others. Despite his wounds, Willett got the guns manned and began returning fire a range of about 1,000 yards. Lt. Willett steadfastly continued to direct gunfire from the Stephen Hopkins at the two German vessels while the ship's Captain maneuvered to keep the ship's stern pointed at the German ships. In their exposed post the Naval Armed Guard crew was decimated by shells and machine gun bullets, leaving only the wounded Willett to keep the 4" gun firing at the Stier's waterline, inflicting heavy damage. When the ammunition magazine for the 4" gun magazine exploded, Willett was knocked out. However, Cadet-Midshipman Edwin J. O'Hara, who was nearby, rushed forward to take Willett's place. Before being mortally wounded by enemy fire, O'Hara fired the five shells remaining in the gun mount's ready service locker at the Tannenfels.

After twenty minutes of uneven combat the Stephen Hopkins was on fire and sinking. With no other recourse, Captain Buck gave the order to abandon ship. The Second Assistant Engineer and the Steward lowered the only undamaged lifeboat over the side while other crew members, including the now conscious Lt. Willett, lowered or cut rafts loose. The lifeboat then collected crew members that were in the water or on rafts until the men in the lifeboat could no longer see in the fog and mist. One raft with five men, including possibly Captain Buck, was lost in the fog and was never seen again. The survivors were able to see the Stephen Hopkins sink stern first. Shortly afterward they were rewarded by the sound of the Stier's ammunition magazines exploding, sinking their attacker. Only nineteen of the sixty men aboard the Stephen Hopkins made it to the lifeboat, including five wounded men. Among those who did not survive the battle were Cadet-Midshipmen Edwin J. O'Hara and Arthur R. Chamberlin.

On September 28 the survivors of the Stephen Hopkins set their course west for South America. After a voyage of 31 days and 2,200 miles, fifteen of the men arrived at Barra do Itabopoana, Brazil, on October 27. The next day the survivors told the story of the Stephen Hopkins' fight with the two German ships to Timothy J. Mahoney, the American Vice Consul in Brazil. However, press reports of the Stephen Hopkins did not appear until December.

When the press was able to report the story of the Stephen Hopkins the ship was hailed as a "Hero Ship." The accounts cited the action as the first between a German surface raider and U.S. merchant ship which resulted in sinking the raider. For the action of September 27, 1942 the SS Stephen Hopkins, and its crew, were awarded the U.S. Maritime Commission's Gallant Ship Unit Citation.



The men of the Stephen Hopkins were also honored by a grateful nation. Lt. (j.g.) Kenneth M. Willett, USNR was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross .

Of the crew, Paul Buck, (Master), George S. Cronk (Second Assistant Engineer), Joseph Earl Layman (Second Mate), Richard Moczowski (Chief Mate) and Ford Stilson (Chief Steward) were awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal. The awards for Buck, Layman and Moczowski were made posthumously.

For his brave sacrifice of his own life in manning the Stephen Hopkins' 4" gun and firing the last five shots into the Tannenfels, O'Hara was also posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

Five ships were named in honor of the crew of the Stephen Hopkins and of the ship itself.

SS Paul Buck  
SS Edwin Joseph O'Hara  
USS Kenneth M. Willett (DE 354)

SS Richard Moczowski  
SS Stephen Hopkins II



**Artist's Depiction of Edwin J. O'Hara Firing SS Stephen Hopkins' Last Five Shells**

**The President of the United States takes Pleasure in Presenting the Merchant  
Marine Distinguished Service Medal to**

Edwin Joseph O'Hara  
Engine Cadet on SS Stephen Hopkins  
September 27, 1942

For extraordinary heroism under unusual hazards.

Two enemy surface raiders suddenly appeared out of the morning mist to attack the small merchantman upon which he was serving. Heavy guns of one raider pounded his ship, and machine guns from the other, sprayed her decks for one-half hour at close quarters. The heroic gun crew of O'Hara's ship exchanged shot for shot with the enemy, placing thirty-five shells into the waterline of one of the raiders until its crew was forced to abandon their sinking ship. The gun commander was mortally wounded early in the action, and all of the gun crew were killed or wounded when an enemy shell exploded the magazine of their gun.

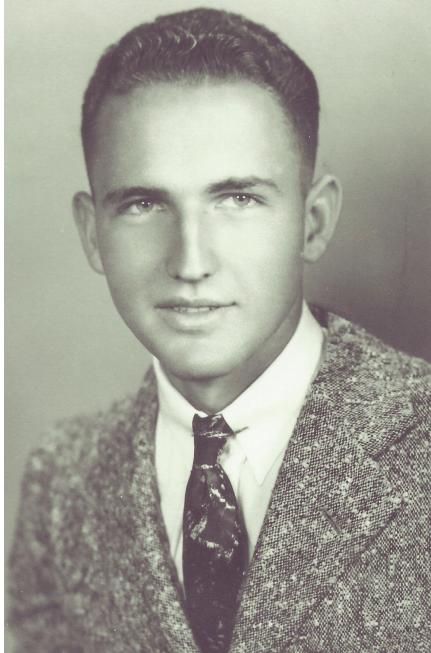
At the explosion, O'Hara ran aft and single-handedly served and fired the damaged gun with five live shells remaining in the ready box, scoring direct hits near the waterline of the second raider. O'Hara was mortally wounded in this action. With boilers blown up, engines destroyed, masts shot away, and ablaze from stem to stern, the gallant merchantman finally went under carrying O'Hara and several of his fighting shipmates with her.

The magnificent courage of this young cadet constitutes a degree of heroism which will be an enduring inspiration to seamen of the United States Merchant Marine everywhere.

For the President  
Admiral Emory Scott Land

Cadet Edwin Joseph O'Hara is one of six Cadet-Midshipmen to be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. He is the only cadet to receive the award posthumously. O'Hara Hall, the Academy's Athletic Center, is named in his honor. In addition to the Distinguished Service Medal and Gallant Ship Unit Citation, Cadet-Midshipman Edwin J. O'Hara was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Pacific War Zone Bar, Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Edwin J. O'Hara was the youngest son of Joseph C. O'Hara and Elma Fugle O'Hara. He grew up on the family farm near Lindsay, CA where his father grew oranges and wheat. According to his younger sister Dorothy O. Norris, Edwin was a member of the Future Farmers of America who disliked sitting at a desk and needed to be "doing things". In his off time he worked on three old cars and dreamt of seeing the world. As graduation from Lindsay High School approached he started looking for ways to turn his dreams into reality. Although the Navy's submarine service interested him he was also



interested in the Maritime Commission's Cadet program which had a Basic School at nearby Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. However, with the war still distant Edwin's parents persuaded him to attend a local Junior College in the spring of 1941. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 Edwin O'Hara applied for the Cadet program and was quickly accepted. Dorothy recalls that on his only weekend leave home from the Basic School his family and friends found a new and happier man than they had known previously. However, all too soon his leave was over and he was away to sea, never to return except to the pages of history as a symbol to all Kings Pointers of the motto, ***Acta non Verba***.

**Edwin Joseph O'Hara  
Lindsay High School  
Graduation - 1941**