

William John O'Neill, Jr.

Born: 1922
Hometown: Woodside, NY
Class: 1944
Service: USNR
Position / Rank: Asst. Engineering Officer / Ensign
Date / Place of death: November 1, 1944 / 10-48N 125-22E
Date/ Place of burial: November 1, 1944 / Lost at Sea - 10-48N 125-22E;
Tablets of the Missing at Manila American Cemetery
Age: 22



William John O'Neill, Jr., graduated from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy on February 28, 1944. During his Sea Year, Cadet-Midshipman O'Neill sailed as Engine Cadet board the Standard Oil Tanker SS Dean Emery from December 9, 1942 until May 28, 1943. During this time the ship made voyages to the United Kingdom and Caribbean. Ensign O'Neill reported aboard the USS Abner Read (DD-526) on June 12, 1944. As a merchant marine engineer he was assigned to duty as one of the ship's Assistant Engineering Officers.



USS Abner Read (DD 536)

Beginning on October 29, the USS Abner Read was employed as a patrol and screen ship in Task Group 77, in Leyte Gulf. On November 1, the Abner Read was screening the USS Mississippi (BB-41) along with several other battleships and cruisers. These ships were part of the Seventh Fleet which had destroyed a major Japanese fleet in the

Battle of Surigao Strait.

At 0930, the formation was attacked by Japanese kamikaze aircraft which damaged the USS Claxton (DD-571), USS Ammen (DD-527), and USS Killen (DD-593). The Abner Read was directed to leave the screen and stand by the Claxton, which was alternately lying to and going ahead slowly on one engine. After the Abner Read sent a boat with a medical officer, repair personnel, and oxygen over to the Claxton the crippled ship was able to proceed towards the transport area at about 10 knots. The Abner Read escorted the vessel, traveling about 1500 yards ahead of the Claxton.

At 1340 a Japanese aircraft crashed into the starboard side of the USS Abner Read, even after a wing had been shot off the aircraft during its attack. The impact caused a raging fire in the entire after portion of the ship, including the After Fire Room and Engine Room. There were no communications with the forward part of the ship, and much of the ship's firefighting capability had been disabled. About 10 minutes later one of the ammunition magazines in the after section of the ship exploded. With the ship on fire, listing 10° to port, and the rest of the after ammunition magazines ready to explode the Commanding Officer ordered the crew to abandon ship. The USS Abner Read sank stern first at 1417, after the surviving crew had escaped. Ensign O'Neill was on duty in the After Engine Room when the ship was attacked. He remained in the After Engine Room until all his men had been evacuated, and then directed the evacuation of wounded men off the stern of the ship. Ensign O'Neill's body was not recovered.

Ensign William J. O'Neill, USNR was posthumously awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart. He is believed to be the first Kings Pointer to be awarded the Silver Star, the Nation's third highest military decoration for valor. The recommendation for the award of the Silver Star to Ensign O'Neill states,

“As the officer in charge of the after engine room of a destroyer attacked by a suicidal Japanese dive bomber, he remained steadfastly at his post despite the immediate danger of nearby fire and explosion until all personnel under his authority were evacuated. Making his way to the main deck, he directed, with utter disregard for his own safety, the evacuation of wounded men trapped on the stern by flames, and was thereby instrumental in the major portion of these men reaching safety.”



For his merchant marine service Cadet-Midshipman O'Neill earned the Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter. At the time of his death William J. O'Neill was married to Catherine Ann O'Neill, who was living in Woodside, Queens, New York.