

Rafael Ramirez Rivera

Born: 1922
Hometown: Mayaguez, Puerto Rico
Class: 1942
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Third Mate
Date / Place of death: March 11, 1943 / 51-35N,
28-30W
Date / Place of burial: March 11, 1943 / Lost at
Sea -- 51-35N, 28-30W
Age: 21



Rafael R. Rivera signed on aboard the *SS William C. Gorgas* as Third Mate in Mobile, AL on January 27, 1943, shortly after the ship was delivered to the War Shipping Administration from its builder. Joining Rafael Rivera were four U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Cadet-Midshipmen, James Cordua, Edwin Hanzik, James Moon, and Edwin Wiggins. Six weeks later, on March 10, 1943, the *Gorgas* was traveling in convoy HX-228 en route from New York to Liverpool loaded with general cargo, including 900 tons of explosives and a deck cargo of an LCT and two PT Boats. The ship carried a crew of 41 merchant mariners and 26 Naval Armed Guard Sailors.

At around 2030 on March 10, another ship in the convoy was torpedoed, and the general alarm was sounded. The crew remained on alert, with the Naval Armed Guard manning the battle stations. The weather was hazy, with moderate to heavy swells and ten to fifteen knot winds in bright moonlight. At 2330, the *Gorgas* was hit on the starboard side amidships by a torpedo fired by U-757. The explosion destroyed the engine room, instantly killing the three engineers on watch. The master ordered the crew to abandon ship. By 2350, when 51 survivors in lifeboats and rafts had left the ship, snow had begun falling in higher winds. The U-757 located one of the boats and questioned the survivors. Shortly thereafter the submarine found the ship still afloat and fired another torpedo to sink it. Immediately after the ship settled under the waves its ammunition cargo exploded, damaging U-757 so much that it was unable to dive. The submarine was escorted on the surface back to France by another submarine.

The *Gorgas'* 51 survivors were picked up at about 0700 on March 11th by the destroyer *HMS Harvester (H 19)*. Shortly after rescuing the *Gorgas'* survivors, the *Harvester* sighted U-444 on the surface. Although the submarine dove to escape the *Harvester's* gunfire, a depth charge attack brought the submarine to the surface. It is unclear why

the *Harvester's* commander made his decision, but U-444 was rammed at full speed by the *Harvester*, severely damaging both ships.

Although U-444 was able to break free of the *Harvester*, it was rammed again and sunk by the Free French corvette *Aconit* (K 58). However, the almost motionless *Harvester* was easy prey for U-432 who fired two torpedoes, quickly sinking the destroyer with nearly all of its crew and 39 of the *Gorgas's* survivors. The *Aconit* was immediately on scene attacking the U-432 with depth charges and forcing it to the surface. The *Aconit* fired at the surfaced submarine and then rammed it, sending the U-432, and all but 20 of its crew to the bottom. With this vital task accomplished, the *Aconit* rescued twelve *Gorgas* survivors, 48 survivors of *HMS Harvester*, and 24 German Sailors from U-444 and U-432.



Launching of SS William C. Gorgas

Rivera joined the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps on November 28, 1940.

After the *Harvester* sank, the Master of the *Gorgas*, James Calvin Ellis Jr., was seen by some of the survivors floating in a life ring in the cold seas. When he was offered a place on a life raft by one of the seamen, he declined, telling the man to keep his place. Soon after, he lost his grip on the life ring and was lost in the icy waters.

Rafael R. Rivera and all four U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Cadet-Midshipmen were among those lost. It is believed that all five survived the initial attack, but were lost in the subsequent sinking of *HMS Harvester*.

Rafael R. Rivera was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Defense Bar, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Merchant Marine Academy records indicate that Rafael R.

However, Rafael Rivera was not appointed a Midshipman, USNR because he did not meet the Navy's minimum standards for height, weight and number of teeth. Despite not meeting Navy physical standards, he was assigned to the *SS Shawnee*, *SS Mexico*, *SS Oriente* and *SS Agwiprince* as Deck Cadet. He returned to Kings Point on February 27, 1942 to complete his education and prepare for the U.S. Coast Guard examination for Third Mate. He received his license as Third Mate, Ocean on June 4, 1942.