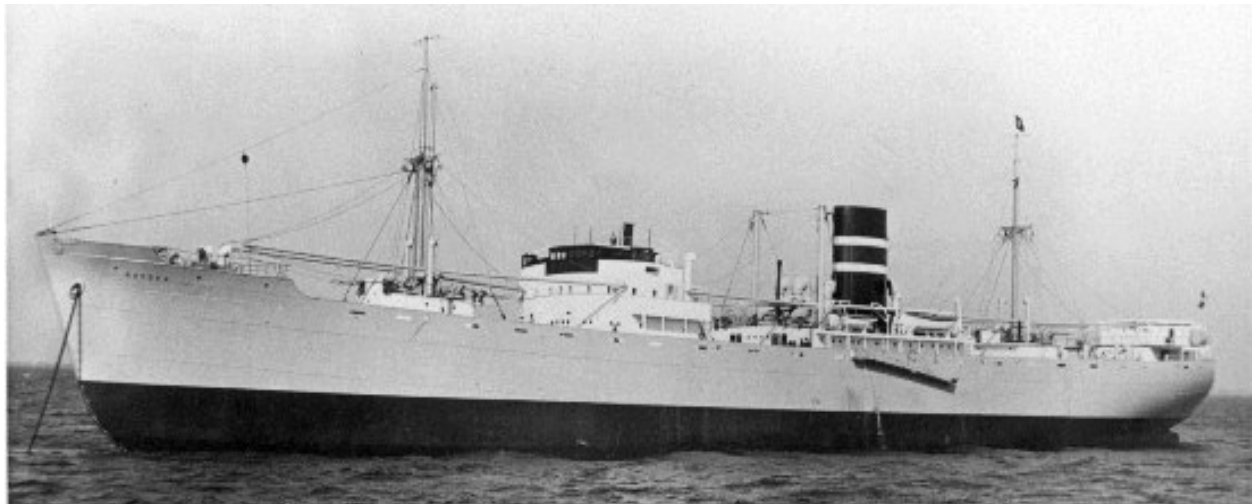


Louis Joseph Rovella

Born: June 5, 1923
Hometown: Philadelphia, PA
Class: 1943
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: October 7, 1942 / 34S, 17-05E
Date / Place of burial: October 7, 1942 / Lost at Sea -- 34S, 17-05E
Age: 19



Louis Rovella signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the *MS Firethorn* on September 6, 1942 at the Port of New York. He was joined by Cadet-Midshipman Robert Nauman who signed on as Deck Cadet. The ship was crewed with 40 foreign merchant mariners and 21 Armed Guard Sailors. Cadet-Midshipmen Louis Rovella and Robert Nauman were the only American merchant mariners in the ship's crew. When the ship sailed it was loaded with a cargo of general war supplies and a deck cargo of tanks.



SS Firethorn (ex-Norden)

The *MS Firethorn* was originally a Danish vessel, the *Norden*, that had been requisitioned by Presidential Executive Order on July 12, 1941. Now owned by the War Shipping Administration it was registered in Panama and bareboat chartered to United States Lines. On February 26, 1942 the ship began operation by U.S. Lines under a General Agency Agreement.

On October 7th, the *Firethorn* was passing about 60 miles northwest of Cape Town, en route from New York to Suez, Egypt. Traveling at about 12 knots, she was zigzagging under overcast skies. At approximately 0830, two torpedoes launched by U-172 struck the vessel in quick succession. The first torpedo hit the ship on the port side at the Number 3 hatch, tearing open the hull and exploding on contact. The second struck the engine room on the port side, penetrating the hull before exploding. The ship sank in less than 90 seconds.

The crew had no time to launch the lifeboats, but the rafts floated free as the vessel went down, undoubtedly saving those crew members who had survived the initial explosions. Of the 61 men aboard the *Firethorn* the Captain, eight merchant seamen, two Armed Guard Sailors and Cadet-Midshipmen Rovella and Nauman were lost. Survivors collected on four rafts, and in one boat that had floated free of the sinking ship. The rafts were lashed together and remained in the vicinity of the sinking, while six men manned the boat and made for the coast of South Africa. The survivors on the boat were picked up by the *HMS Rockrose (K 51)* on October 8. The following day, the *Rockrose* picked up the survivors on the rafts. All were taken to Cape Town.

Sadly, many of the survivors of the *Firethorn* were later placed on the *MS Zaandam* for repatriation to the United States. This vessel was sunk on November 2, 1942 about 400 miles north of the coast of Brazil. Six Navy gunners and 2 of the merchant crew who had survived the sinking of the *Firethorn* were lost in the sinking of the *Zaandam*.

Cadet-Midshipman Louis J. Rovella was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat bar with star, the Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Louis J. Rovella was the only son and youngest child of Santo Rovella and Maria Curcio Rovella. His older sister was Mary. According to the 1940 U.S. Census, Santo Rovella was a mechanic for the Philadelphia Street Car (Traction) Company. Merchant Marine Academy Records show that Louis Rovella reported to Kings Point on the evening of April 23, 1942. However, Louis Rovella was no stranger to the sea as the Rovella family traveled from the United States to Naples, Italy and back in 1930 aboard the *SS Vulcania*.