

## George Morris Rutan

Born: August 14, 1920  
Hometown: Albany, CA  
Class: 1944  
Service: Merchant Marine  
Position / Rank: Third Mate  
Date / Place of death: July 2, 1944 / 3-28S, 74-30E  
Date / Place of burial: July 2, 1944 / Lost at Sea –  
3-28S, 74-30E  
Age: 23



George M. Rutan signed on aboard the *SS Antigua* as Deck Cadet on October 14, 1942 at San Francisco, CA after completing Basic School at San Mateo. He signed off on February 15, 1943 to report to Kings Point. He signed on again as Deck Cadet aboard the *SS Walter Reed* at New York on August 9, 1943. He signed off on February 4, 1944 after a return voyage from Algeria. George Rutan received his license as Third Mate on April 12, 1944 at San Francisco, CA. Two weeks later, on April 28, 1944 he signed on as Third Mate aboard the *SS Jean Nicolet*. He was joined by another Kings Pointer, Floyd Roach, who signed on as Second Assistant Engineer.

The *Jean Nicolet* sailed on May 12, 1944 from San Pedro, California, en route to Colombo, Ceylon with a cargo of heavy machinery, trucks, steel plates, and other general cargo. As usual with war-time practice the ship also had a deck cargo of steel mooring pontoons, disassembled barges and more steel plates.

On July 2, 1944, at about 1907 local time, shortly after securing from evening General Quarters, the *SS Jean Nicolet* was struck by two torpedoes on the starboard side, thus initiating a chilling tale of death and atrocity. The torpedoes were launched by the Japanese submarine I-8, while the *Jean Nicolet* was traveling unescorted alone in the Indian Ocean.

After the impact, the ship began to list dangerously to port, and the engines were secured in preparation for abandoning ship. The Captain feared the ship would capsize, and ordered the crew to abandon around 1920. Four lifeboats and two rafts were successfully lowered, and the entire complement, 41 crew members, 28 Naval Armed Guard, 26 passengers, and 1 U.S. Army medic, abandoned ship. After the boats had been lowered, the submarine began shelling the ship, and fires were seen on the main deck. The radio operator had been able to send a distress signal before

leaving the *Jean Nicolet*, which probably saved the lives of the 23 men who survived the Japanese atrocities to follow.

The submarine commander, Tetsunosuke Ariizumi, ordered the boats and rafts to approach the submarine, and all of the survivors, except for five men who were able to pull away unseen on a small raft, were taken onto the deck of the submarine. The survivors, including George Rutan, were then subjected to brutal and violent treatment. After their hands were bound behind them with wire, many of the survivors were bayoneted and thrown into the water. Others were made to run through a gauntlet of Japanese crew members armed with steel stanchions, bayonets, and rifles. Many of the men died on the deck of the submarine while the rest either drowned after being thrown into the water, or were finished off by hungry sharks attracted to the scene by the blood in the water.

Only when an approaching plane was heard, several hours after the torpedoing, did the submarine submerge. Many of those left on deck drowned, with their hands were still tied together. A few survivors managed to stay afloat until another plane, flying over at 0630 the next morning, dropped bread, water, and life jackets. A total of 23 men were eventually rescued by *HMS Hoxa (T-16)*. However, crewmen, Armed Guard Sailors and passengers, including George M. Rutan, died either at the hands of the Japanese or drowned. The Captain, the radio operator, and Francis J. O’Gara, a representative of the War Shipping Administration were taken on board the submarine as prisoners. Of the three, only Mr. O’Gara survived to be liberated from a Japanese Prisoner of War camp in 1945. Presuming that Mr. O’Gara died, the U.S. Maritime Commission named a Liberty Ship after him, the only Liberty Ship named after a living person.

The I-8 was sunk later in the war by U.S. Navy destroyers, killing most of the crew which perpetrated the atrocities on the *Jean Nicolet*’s survivors and those of the Dutch freighter SS *Tjisalak*. Upon the announcement of the Japanese surrender Tetsunosuke Ariizumi committed suicide, evading responsibility for his actions. Two surviving crew members were convicted of their crimes by post-war tribunals and sentenced to prison terms.

Based on his service both as a Cadet-Midshipman and Licensed Officer, George M. Rutan was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, Pacific War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter.

George M. Rutan was the only son of George C. Rutan and Estelle M. (Mae) Rutan. The senior Rutan’s occupation is listed as “Driller” in the 1940 U.S. Census while George M. Rutan is shown as being employed as a professional photographer while attending college.