

Walter Paul Seperski

Born: October 17, 1917
Hometown: East Pepperell, MA
Class: 1942
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: A. B. Seaman
Date / Place of death: November 2, 1942 / 01-25N,
36-22W
Date / Place of burial: November 2, 1942 / Lost at
Sea – 01-25N, 36-22W;
Age: 25



Walter P. Seperski graduated from the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps in 1942. His U.S. Coast Guard records show that he was issued U.S. Coast Guard papers as Deck Cadet on December 9, 1939 at New York, NY. As a Deck Cadet he sailed aboard the *SS Washington*, *SS Manhattan* and *SS Sarcoxie* in 1940. The Master of the *SS Washington* when he was aboard was Giles C. Stedman, who would later become the first Commandant and second Superintendent of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. In 1941 Walter Seperski sailed aboard the *SS Alcoa Ranger* and *SS West Honaker* from which he signed off from on March 5, 1942. On May 7, 1942 Walter P. Seperski was issued U.S. Coast Guard papers as Able Seaman and Lifeboatman at New York, NY. There is no evidence that he was issued a license as Third Mate.

On May 22, 1942, two weeks after being issued his Able Seaman's papers, Walter Seperski signed on in that rating aboard the freighter *SS Examelia*, a World War I "Hog Islander". Two Kings Point Cadet-Midshipmen, Bernard Spillman and Samuel Schuster, also joined the ship on the same day.

On October 9, 1942 the ship was traveling unescorted and not zig-zagging, about 50 miles south of the Cape of Good Hope bound from Colombo, Ceylon to Cape Town, South Africa loaded with a cargo of chrome ore, jute and hemp. According to a report submitted by the Commanding Officer of the ship's Naval Armed Guard, at 0148 local time on October 9, 1942 the ship was hit by a torpedo on the starboard side at the bulkhead between the Fire Room and Engine Room. Post-war reports identify the submarine that fired the torpedo as U-68. The torpedo explosion immediately disabled the engines and the ship sank in minutes.

Walter Seperski and Cadet-Midshipman Bernard Spilman survived the sinking of the *SS Examelia*, although Cadet-Midshipman Samuel Schuster perished. After their rescue, Seperski, Spilman and the other survivors were landed at Port Elizabeth, South Africa. They were then taken by train to Cape Town where they could catch a ship bound for the United States. At Cape Town the *Examelia*'s survivors were assigned to the Dutch cargo-passenger ship *MV Zaandam* for return to the United States. In addition to the *Examelia*'s survivors, the *Zaandam*'s 169 passengers were mostly merchant seamen from other ships which had met the same fate as the *Examelia*.

At 1627 on November 2, 1942, when the *Zaandam* was about 400 miles north of Recife, Brazil, it was torpedoed by U-174. The torpedo struck the vessel at on the port side at the engine room, destroying the main engines and the decks above the engine room. The crew prepared to abandon ship, but the Captain, who believed that it was only a minor engine room explosion, ordered them to remain on board. Ten minutes later, another torpedo struck the *Zaandam*, between Number 2 and 3 hold on the port side. At this point, the *Zaandam* began to sink rapidly. The crew was able to launch three of the lifeboats and several rafts. The #2 lifeboat capsized, but the crew managed to right the boat. Sharks, attracted to the scene by blood in the water, caused many casualties. Three lifeboats with survivors were picked up within days of the sinking. However, three survivors spent 83 days in life raft, before being rescued by the *USS PC 576*. In total, 165 of the 299 individuals on the *Zaandam* survived the sinking. However, 74 of the 169 passengers, including Walter P. Seperski and Cadet-Midshipman Bernard W. Spilman perished.

Based on his service as Deck Cadet and as A. B. Seaman aboard the *SS Examelia* Walter P. Seperski was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with two stars, the Atlantic War Zone Bar, Pacific War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Walter was the second of William Seperski and Stella Seperski's four sons. The Seperski's were Polish immigrants. Walter's only sister, Edna, was two years older. Stanley, Walter's older brother was three years older, while his two younger brothers, Louis and Edward, were three years and twelve years younger, respectively. In 1930 William Seperski was employed at a paper mill, but the 1940 U.S. Census does not list an occupation for him. However, the same census indicates that Stanley and Louis were working in forestry. The two census indicate that the family had lived in New Hampshire and Pennsylvania before settling in Massachusetts in the 1920's.