

Bernard Washington Spilman

Born: December 20, 1920
Hometown: Arlington, VA
Class: 1943
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
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;
Memorial at Greenwood
Cemetery, Greenville, NC
Age: 21



Bernard W. Spilman signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the freighter *SS Examelia*, a World War I “Hog Islander” at New York, NY on May 22, 1942. This was just two months after he reported to Kings Point to begin Basic School on March 24, 1942. He was joined by Cadet-Midshipman Samuel Schuster who signed on as Deck Cadet. 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.

Cadet-Midshipman Spilman survived the sinking of the *SS Examelia*, although his classmate Samuel Schuster perished. After his rescue, Spilman and the other survivors in his boat 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 the port 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 Cadet-Midshipman Bernard W. Spilman perished.

Cadet-Midshipman Bernard W. Spilman was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with two stars, the Atlantic War Zone Bar, Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Bernard W. Spilman was the youngest of John Barham Spilman and Johnetta Webb Spilman's three children. His older brother was John, Jr. while his big sister was Frances. Bernard's father died in 1935, leaving his mother to finish raising the family. The 1940 U.S. Census indicates that the family was still living in the same home as they had in 1935. At the time John, Jr.'s occupation is identified as Foreman in a tobacco factory. However, when Bernard registered for the draft in 1940 he was employed by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in Washington, DC and was living in Arlington, VA. On his U.S. Coast Guard documents he listed his mother as next-of-kin at his Arlington, VA address.



Bernard is remembered by his brother, John B. Spilman, Jr. as being an individual of steel nerves and stoic manner who had an outstanding sense of humor and a large circle of friends. After graduating from Greenville High School he attended Wake Forest University for one year before enrolling at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. According to his brother, Bernard enjoyed being in top physical condition and was a long distance hiker.

Bernard W. Spilman's Memorial, Greenville, NC