

Benjamin Harris Wilkinson, Jr.

Born: July 24, 1918
Hometown: Wilkinsburg, PA
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: June 1, 1943 / 36-53N, 76W
Date / Place of burial: June 1, 1943 / Lost at Sea –
36-53N, 76W
Age: 24



Benjamin H. Wilkinson signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the *SS John Morgan* on May 19, 1943 at Philadelphia, PA, a few days after the ship was delivered from its builder, Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard in Baltimore, MD. He was joined by Cadet-Midshipman John O. Talbott who signed on as the Deck Cadet. After loading a cargo of 5,000 tons of high explosives bound for the Persian Gulf the ship, with a crew of forty-one plus twenty-eight Armed Guard Sailors, sailed for Hampton Roads to join its convoy.

At about 0400, on June 1, 1943 the *John Morgan* was about 20 miles off Cape Henry maneuvering with other ships to form up into their assigned positions in the convoy. As part of the maneuvering, the tanker *SS Montana* was crossing the *John Morgan's* bow from starboard to port, apparently intending to pass port-to-port. According to survivors, during the maneuver the *John Morgan* veered to the left, hitting the *Montana* on the port bow. The *Montana's* petroleum cargo burst into flames and quickly spread to the *John Morgan*. Within minutes the fire detonated the *Morgan's* cargo of explosives, disintegrating the ship and killing all but three of the men aboard, including Cadet-Midshipmen Benjamin Wilkinson and John Talbott.

Cadet-Midshipman Benjamin H. Wilkinson was posthumously awarded the Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Benjamin H. Wilkinson was the oldest of Benjamin H. Wilkinson, Sr. and Virginia "Vergie" Ball Wilkinson's three sons. Benjamin's little brothers were the twins Henry and Jack. According to U.S. Census data, Benjamin, Sr. died in the 1920's, at which time Virginia moved in with her parents. In 1930 Virginia Wilkinson was working as a waitress in a restaurant. However, by 1940 Benjamin was working as a clerk in a steel mill while Henry worked as a truck driver and Jack was a pin setter in a bowling alley.