

## William Crocker Wilson

Born: January 26, 1924  
Hometown: Loudonville, NY  
Class: 1944  
Service: Merchant Marine  
Position / Rank: Deck Cadet  
Date / Place of death: February 23, 1943 / 46-15N,  
38-11W  
Date / Place of burial: February 23, 1943 / Lost at  
Sea -- 46-15N, 38-11W  
Age: 19



William C. Wilson signed on as Deck Cadet aboard the *SS Jonathan Sturges* at the Port of New York on January 12, 1943. Also onboard were Cadet-Midshipmen Harry Burlison (Deck), Ralph Kohlmeyer (Engine) and Grover Leitz (Engine). The ship's Chief Mate was 1940 Cadet Officer David L. Edwards. After safely delivering its cargo to England the *Jonathan Sturges* was returning to New York with Convoy ON-166 from Liverpool to New York City when it fell behind the convoy on the night of February 23/24, 1943. The ship, with a crew of 44 merchant mariners and a Naval Armed Guard of 31 was carrying 1,500 tons of sand ballast. In bad weather and poor visibility the *Sturges* was making 6 knots, about ½ its full speed.

At about 1 am, the vessel was struck in the forward part of the ship by two torpedoes fired by U-707. The engines were secured, but the ship, which had apparently been broken in two, began to sink bow first. Survivors recalled that the explosions gave off a sweet odor, and left a sweet taste in their mouths for hours after the incident.

Although the radio officer was able to send a distress signal, there was no time to await a reply as the crew abandoned ship. Two lifeboats and four life rafts were successfully launched. According to the post sinking report of the survivors, nineteen men were able to get into one life boat while the Master, Chief Mate David Edwards and fifteen others were in the other boat. The other twenty-four survivors were able to reach the four life rafts. However, the boats and rafts were soon separated.

On February 27, three days after the sinking, the boat with nineteen men aboard met up with a lifeboat carrying three survivors from the Dutch ship *SS Madoera* who had been in the same convoy. Eight of the *Sturges'* survivors climbed into the *Madoera's* boat. Although one of the *Jonathan Sturges'* crew eventually died of exposure, the

other eighteen (along with the three Madoera survivors) were rescued by the *USS Belknap (DD 251)* on March 12, 1943. However, the other lifeboat with its seventeen survivors was never seen again. Of the twenty-four men on the life rafts, only 6 survived. These men were rescued on April 5 by U-336 and spent the rest of the war as Prisoners of War. All four Cadet-Midshipmen plus David Edwards perished.

Cadet Midshipman William Wilson was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

William C. "Billy" Wilson was the youngest of James Wilson and Emma Crocker Wilson's two sons. Billy's brother James was two years older. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, James Wilson and his wife's brother, William Crocker, both worked at a local gas station.

According to Ann Crocker Lawton, the daughter of William Crocker and Billy's first cousin, the Crockers and Wilsons lived in separate houses on the family farm. Although she was only six years old at the time of William's death, Ann remembers that he treated her like a "little sister". Her fondest memories of Billy are being taken for bareback rides on his horse, rides in the farm's buckboard, tobogganing and ice skating with her on the pond in winter. She recalls that Billy had his own "combo", The Trubadors, in High School. He also played a "mean barroom piano" although his mother preferred him to play classical music.