

Edward Steve Zapletal

Born: January 27, 1923
Hometown: Milwaukee, WI
Class: 1945
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Deck Cadet
Date / Place of death: April 20, 1944 / 37-02N, 3-41E
Date / Place of burial: April 20, 1944 / Lost at Sea –
37-02N, 3-41E
Age: 21



Edward S. Zapletal, a first-generation American of Croatian descent, signed on as Deck Cadet aboard the *SS Paul Hamilton* at Norfolk, VA on March 26, 1944. Less than one month later, on April 20, 1944, the *Paul Hamilton* was traveling in convoy UGS-38 off the Algerian coast, en-route to Bizerte, Tunisia. The vessel which had a crew of 47 merchant mariners, 29 Sailors of the Naval Armed Guard, and 504 U.S. Army passengers was also carrying a cargo of high explosives. One of the officers aboard a convoy escort, *USS Lansdale (DD 426)*, Ensign Frederick C. Whitehead, USNR, was a recent Academy graduate.



SS Paul Hamilton



Destruction of SS Paul Hamilton

At 2055, the convoy was attacked by German Junkers 88 twin engine torpedo bombers. One aircraft launched a torpedo which struck the *Paul Hamilton*. The resulting explosion completely disintegrated the ship in what the Washington Post described as a, "great flare of fire and smoke, lighting the black heavens and rocking the ships around her." There were no survivors and only one body was recovered.

Ironically, the exploding *Paul Hamilton* silhouetted the *USS Lansdale*, making it a better target for the German torpedo planes.

Recent Kings Point graduate Frederick C. Whitehead was killed when a German torpedo exploded in the *Lansdale's* Forward Fire Room where he was on duty.

Cadet-Midshipman Edward S. Zapletal was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Mediterranean - Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Edward S. Zapletal, was the oldest of Stefan (Steven) Zapletal and Anna Zapletal's two sons. The Zapletal's had emigrated to the United States from Croatia in the early 1900's. Edward's little brother, Raymond was just two years younger. According to the 1940 U.S. Census, in 1940 the two boys were living with their father, who was divorced from their mother by that time. Stefan's occupation is listed as being a buffer in a tannery.

Raymond Zapletal said the following about his brother,

"Edward was always an excellent student, an avid reader and inspiration to me. We often played sand lot baseball, football and in the summer we swam in Lake Michigan. After grade school Edward chose to attend Boys Technical High School, where in addition to his academic studies he had to choose a trade. He chose print shop. He excelled at sports, especially track, swimming and weight lifting. In his leisure time he enjoyed chess and dating pretty girls!

He registered for the draft in December of 1941, and learning of an accelerated program to train ship's officers at Kings Point he applied and was accepted. January 27, 1944 his birthday was the date of the last letter he wrote me. Normally his letters were not nostalgic or sentimental; this one was different. He was reminiscing about our lives together."