

Kings Pointers in World War II

A Legacy for Kings Point Cadets and Graduates who lost their lives in World War II

Brewster, John P.

John P. Brewster

Born: March 9, 1919

Hometown: Teaneck, NJ

Class: 1943

Service: Merchant Marine

Position / Rank: Engine Cadet

Date / Place of death: May 26, 1942 / North Atlantic,
72-35'N, 5-30'E

Date / Place of burial: May 26, 1942 / North Atlantic,
72-35'N, 5-30'E / Lost at sea

Age: 23



John P. Brewster, and his Kings Point classmate Raymond Holubowicz, signed on aboard the SS Syros at Philadelphia, PA in early May 1942. The ship sailed loaded with general cargo and ammunition bound for Murmansk, Russia via Reykjavik, Iceland. When the Syros sailed from Reykjavik on May 21, 1942 it joined Convoy PQ-16. The convoy was located by German "Condor" search planes on May 25 and remained under nearly constant air and submarine attack for the next four days due to the nearly constant daylight of the northern summer.

In the early morning hours of May 26, when the Syros was about 200 miles southwest of Bear Island, the ship was sighted and attacked by U-703. Two of U-703's torpedoes hit the Syros despite being seen and fired on by other ships in the convoy. The first torpedo hit amidships at the engine room while the second hit at #2 hatch, detonating the ship's ammunition cargo. The ship sank in 30 seconds, carrying Holubowicz down with it, but he was able to break free and reach the surface. According to Holubowicz' report of the sinking, Cadet-Midshipman John Brewster was among the men on watch in the engine room when the torpedo hit and was most likely killed instantly.

With no time to launch any of the lifeboats or life rafts the survivors hung on to one life raft that broke loose from the ship and floating wreckage. Fortunately, one of the escorts, the minesweeper HMS Hazard (J02), was able to rescue 30 men from the icy waters. However, two of these men died on board the Hazard and were buried at sea. The 28 survivors were taken to Murmansk and placed aboard ships bound for Iceland. Eleven of the Syros's crew, including all of the engineers on duty in the Engine Room, and the Captain perished in the sinking.

Cadet-Midshipman John P. Brewster was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter.

John P. Brewster was the youngest of Charles F. Brewster, Sr. and Amie Brewster's three children. John's big sister was Marjorie, who was eight years older. His brother, Charles, Jr., was five years older. John's mother Amie, was born in the Virgin Islands and had emigrated to the U.S. from the Virgin Islands. The 1940 U.S. Census indicates that both Charles Sr. and Jr. were involved in sales in the "electric industry", while John was working as an office boy in a nearby manufacturing plant.

John P. Brewster is remembered by his shipmate Raymond Holubowicz as being a practical young man, made friends rapidly, was at home in any type of situation and "fearless in pursuing his goal of superior service aboard ship."

Photo of SS Syros