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Pennsylvania Merchant Mariner Lost at Sea

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



Photo of medal awarded to Walters.



This US Merchant Mariner's Medal was posthumously awarded to Eugene Weaver Walters of Brownsville, Pennsylvania. Walters entered the Merchant Marine at the age of 22 on October 14, 1942 and served as a Deck Cadet aboard the SS Louise Lykes.

During World War II, the United States Merchant Marine was comprised of civilian volunteers whose ships transported weapons, men, and materiel to US forces serving overseas. Merchant marine vessels worked in conjunction with the US Coast Guard and Navy, sailing under near-constant threat of attack from German U-boats and Japanese destroyers.



Photo of Walters.

Late in 1942, Walters sailed with the *Louise Lykes* in a convoy of vessels escorted by the battleship *Arkansas* to Casablanca and back. In January 1943, Walters and the *Louise Lykes* again set sail, this time bound for Belfast, Northern Ireland with a cargo of munitions. The ship sailed alone, with no US Navy escort on a zig-zag course across the North Atlantic. On January 9, 1943, about 500 miles south of Iceland, they encountered German submarine U-384 and fired unsuccessfully upon the vessel. The submarine returned fire, and struck the ship with two torpedoes, sinking the ship and killing all 85 crew members aboard.

Nearly 1 in 26 Merchant Mariners were killed during World War II, a higher casualty rate than any branch of the armed forces. As civilian volunteers, sailors of the Merchant Marine were ineligible for military benefits or veteran's recognition. An Act of Congress passed on May 10, 1943 established the Mariner's Medal to recognize the brave service of Merchant Mariners. The Medal was awarded to any seaman who was killed or wounded as a direct result of armed conflict.

In 1988, Merchant Marine veterans of World War II successfully sued for veteran's status and were granted the military benefits available to veterans at that time. Today, the United States Merchant Marine remains a civilian agency and is administered and financed by the United States Maritime Administration under the United States Department of Transportation.