

## Medals for WWII meteorologists lost at sea

By Michael E. Ruane

*The Washington Post*

Published: November 19, 2015



The USS Muskeget sank on Sept. 9, 1942, after it was struck by torpedoes about 400 miles northeast of Newfoundland. Among the 121 men on board were four civilian meteorologists from the U.S. Weather Bureau who were transmitting crucial weather reports amid World War II's Battle of the Atlantic. On Thursday, they will receive Purple Hearts, the first given for National Weather Service war-time duty.

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ASSOCIATION

The U-boat first spotted the Muskeget's masts emerging from a rain squall in the distance, and despite a heavy ocean swell it moved in to attack.

It was 2:54 on the afternoon of Sept. 9, 1942 in the submarine-infested waters of the North Atlantic. The German sub, U-755, was part of a large wolfpack, and the U.S. Coast Guard's aged weather ship was a choice target.

Among the 121 men on board were four civilian meteorologists from the U.S. Weather Bureau who were transmitting crucial weather reports amid World War II's Battle of the Atlantic.

On Thursday, 73 years after U-755 stalked the American ship, the four men are scheduled to become the first National Weather Service employees to get the Purple Heart for service in the line of duty.

They had been eligible for the medal, which during World War II could be given to civilians killed in battle, according to Capt. Jeremy Adams, of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which oversees the weather service.

But they had never been put in for it.

That recently discovered lapse, along with the U-boat's grim account of the sinking, cleared the way for the medals, officials said.

Lester S. Fodor, 27, a weather observer from Cleveland, Luther Brady, 27, an assistant weather observer from Atlanta, George Kubach, 24, an assistant weather observer from Sandusky, Ohio, and Edward Weber, 24, a junior weather observer from Brooklyn, will be awarded the medals posthumously.



The ceremony is scheduled for 11 a.m. at the Naval Heritage Center auditorium at the U.S. Navy Memorial in Washington. Families of some of the men are expected to attend.

The four, all volunteers, perished when U-755 hit the Muskeget with two torpedoes about 400 miles northeast of Newfoundland.

The sub heard the explosions, then the sounds of the Muskeget's boilers and bulkheads bursting. Kapitänleutnant Walter Göing, the 28-year-old U-boat captain on his first patrol, brought his new sub to the surface. He spotted survivors in the water and in a life raft, according to the log he kept.

There was little wreckage, he recorded, and he left the area.

But several hours later he came back, probably to try to learn the name and type of the ship. There was now a huge oil slick.

There were also two life rafts tied together, holding eight men. They began shouting, but all Göing could hear was that they were from an American ship named Muskogee, or Mukited, or something like that.

He took note of the probable tonnage of the vessel, and departed for his patrolling station.

A few days later, when another U.S. weather ship reached the area, there was no trace of the Muskeget. No bodies were ever recovered and the wreck was never found. It was the only weather ship lost during the war, officials said.

Richard Fodor was 13 when the Western Union boy knocked on his parents' door that Saturday evening in Cleveland. He answered, and took the telegram.

"It's something I will never forget," Fodor, now 86, said by telephone from his home in Arizona last week.

His parents were Hungarian immigrants. They had four children, and his father was the business manager for a Hungarian-language newspaper in Detroit, and later Cleveland.

Richard Fodor knew his big brother, Lester, whom he adored, was serving on a weather ship in the Atlantic, and he knew the ships regularly encountered enemy submarines.

He handed the telegram to his father.

"He opened it and he turned white," Fodor said. "He didn't say anything at first. Then my mother looked at it, and she started to cry. And I knew something terrible had happened."

"The telegram read that [Lester] was missing in action," Fodor, a retired physician, said. "I was shocked at first, and then heartbroken, because he was my favorite brother and we were very close."

Similar notifications went out to the families of the other three meteorologists, saying the ship and crew had disappeared and nothing further was known.

According to records supplied by NOAA, the families were told that they would be notified promptly if anything new turned up.

Agonizing months passed.

On March 16, 1943, Weber's father, David, an immigrant plasterer who spoke Yiddish, wrote to F.W. Reichelderfer, the head of the Weather Bureau.

"We . . . appeal to you to let us know anything which might be at your command to tell us," he asked. "Or if that is impossible, to let us know . . . what organization might be capable of enlightening us in our darkest moment. Our hopes for the safety of our son . . . are as high as ever."

On Oct. 12, 1943, Margaret Fredenberg, of Athens, Pennsylvania, wrote to the Navy personnel office in Washington. George Kubach, a tall, bespectacled man who had flunked a Navy eye test, was her fiance.

"Can you tell me any information regarding the whereabouts of the officers or compliment of the . . . 'Muskeget'?" she wrote.

Her letter was passed to Reichelderfer, of the Weather Bureau. He informed her that Kubach had been declared dead a month earlier.

She wrote back, pleading to know what had happened:

"Certainly a boat couldn't just disappear without leaving some clue. . . . Our country can't afford to have morale broken down by conditions of this sort. Can't someone do something?"

Reichelderfer replied. "Nothing further has been learned," he wrote. "The long time that has elapsed makes it extremely doubtful that any account of what happened will ever be known."

About three years ago, Robert Pendleton, 76, a retired cartographer and private historian who specializes in Purple Heart research for the Coast Guard, was trying to see how many people on the Muskeget received the medal.

As he worked, he realized that while the rest of the ship's military crew had, the four weathermen had not, he said in a telephone interview last week from his home in Ocala, Fla.

"There were a lot of oversights like that," he said. "They just went through the cracks."

Pendleton said he learned through research that the Muskeget had been attacked by U-755, and got the submarine's log from the National Archives, which has a trove of U-boat documents.

He alerted the Coast Guard's Atlantic-area historian, William Thiesen, who told officials at NOAA.

It was quickly determined that the four men deserved Purple Hearts, said James P. Delgado, director of maritime heritage at NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries.

"It was the right thing to do," he said.

Genealogists at NOAA and the Coast Guard began researching the four men and trying to track down their families. Relatives of three of the four were located, he said. The family of Luther H. Brady, who reportedly had studied at Emory University and the University of Georgia, could not be found.

"As somebody who has worked with history and who has worked with wrecks, you read about it, and it's a name on a piece of microfilm, or an old faded news clipping," Delgado said in an interview this month. "It's a statistic."

The Battle of the Atlantic, in which Nazi naval and air forces tried to shut down the flow of troops, goods and equipment crossing to Europe, claimed 102,000 lives and was the longest continuous battle of the war, he said.

Three thousand merchant ships were lost, along with 175 warships and 783 U-boats, he said.

For the fathers, mothers, and siblings of the men, the numbers were painfully real. "While this was 73 years ago, the impact of that loss is still there for those families," Delgado said.

On the afternoon of Aug. 24, 1942, the Muskeget sailed from Boston for Weather Station No. 2, a spot off the southern tip of Greenland marked only by latitude and longitude.

The ship sent back its first weather report four days later, and reached the station on Aug. 31.

The Muskeget, built in Baltimore in 1923 as the Cornish, was slow and obsolete. It had one screw, one stack, and a top speed of 11 knots. The Navy acquired the ship in 1941, renamed it and turned it over to the Coast Guard in 1942.

It was armed with two heavy deck guns, four lighter guns, depth charges and other anti-submarine weapons called "mousetraps" that could destroy a careless U-boat.

Its job was solitary. The weathermen sent up balloons, checked the pressure, humidity, wind and temperature, and sent the data back for the use of Allied convoys and aircraft.

And they did so in extremely hazardous waters.

"The area between Halifax, Nova Scotia, Cape Race, Newfoundland, and Iceland was a seething and continuous mass movement of convoys and enemy submarines," a Coast Guard officer, Lt. Cmdr. J.R. Hinnant, wrote after the Muskeget was lost.

"As a general rule [there were] two or more convoys and shadowing enemy submarines found operating within the area of Weather Station No. 2 daily," he wrote.

On Sept. 9 the Muskeget sent back its last weather report and awaited the arrival of its relief ship, the Coast Guard cutter Monomoy.

Two days later, the Monomoy reported that it couldn't contact the Muskeget. Two days after that, the Monomoy reached Weather Station No. 2, where there was no sign of the Muskeget.

All ships and planes in the area were ordered to look for the missing ship, but the search was unsuccessful.  
Submitted by xAG WAVE Bertha Taylor

[Editor...Following paragraph is from *Some Meteorological Aspects of the D-Day Invasion of Europe 6 June 1944*  
Proceedings of a Symposium 19 May 1984  
Sponsored by CA American Meteorological Society Chpts. and  
Published by AMS  
From chapter: "Forecasts Leading to the Postponement of D-Day" by Robert C. Bundgaard, Page 14]

"In many respects, as far as weather was concerned, World War II warfare support was rather agonistic, being carried out and fought according to special game rules. This was especially true in the weather field, because of the past international character of

meteorology. For example, almost daily, the Luftwaffe weather reconnaissance out of Brest and the R.A.F Lancasters out of St. Mawgen, in Lands End, would meet over the water and rendezvous in the Biscay area, saluting one another with wing dips. And those allied planes maintaining surveillance over the two German weather subs {about 300 miles west of Ireland and Scotland] were carefully instructed, I was told, not to bomb them. Due to an error, however, one did. And, the next day or so thereafter, in retaliation, one of the allied weather ships was torpedoed and sunk by the Germans.”