



Robert John Kelly "Jack" Craig
U.S. Maritime Merchant Marine
World War II - June 1943 – 1945

During World War II the U.S. Merchant Marines were called on to transport fuel and supplies to the war fronts. Robert J.K. "Jack" Craig served as a Merchant Marine attached to a Navy Armed Guard unit aboard the S.S. Fort Lee. "Bobby Jack" or "Jack" as he was affectionately called by his friends and family enlisted in June of 1943 and was a Fireman Water Tender and one of a 46 man merchant crew aboard the American Tanker SS Fort Lee while it was en route from Abadan, Iran to Brisbane, Australia filled to the brim with 93,000 barrels of Navy Bunker C fuel. Unfortunately, the SS Fort Lee was torpedoed and sunk in the Indian Ocean by the Germans on November 2, 1944.

As taken from Naval Archive Records of War Crimes Trials, the first torpedo struck the port quarter directly under the boilers at 8:00 p.m., flooding the fire room and killing two men. Eighteen minutes later a second torpedo struck the starboard quarter right, damaging the engine room and striking just below lifeboats #3 and #5 as they were being lowered – 7 died in the blast and the others were picked up by other lifeboats.

It took less than an hour after the first torpedo for the SS Fort Lee to sink. Lifeboats # 1, #2, #4 and #6 were safely launched. "Jack" was recorded to be on lifeboat #4. On November 5, 1944 lifeboats #1, #2 and #6 were rescued by other ships. The rescued survivors reported that lifeboat #4 drifted out of sight and lost at sea.

After 57 years of research by an Australian researcher, the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam Air Force Base, the U.S. Coast Guard-Marine Personnel Section in Arlington, VA and the National Archives; research uncovered the fate of the men in the missing #4 lifeboat. Written records revealed that lifeboat #4 from the SS Fort Lee made a landing on Soemba Island, Indonesia on January 13, 1945. Amazingly, this lifeboat had traveled approximately 2850 miles from the position where the SS Fort Lee was sunk. When the lifeboat landed there were three of the 16 men of lifeboat #4's roster still alive. According to Japanese and native reports one man died immediately after the boat landed and the other two were taken as prisoners and transferred to a Japanese Naval Stockade. War Crimes Investigation Reports suggest the two survivors were taken from the stockade and executed in March/April of 1945. We will never know if "Jack" was one of the survivors who made it to Soemba Island 72 days after the sinking of the SS Fort Lee, only to be executed, or, if he was one of the 13 who died at sea during those 72 days of traveling, thirst, hunger and witnessing the death of their fellow shipmates only to face their own death at the hands of the Japanese.

Richard Craig, the younger brother of "Jack" Craig remembers coming home from school to hear his mother's words, "your brother has been lost at sea"! On a recent visit to Richard and Sheila Craig, lifelong residents of Mercer, Richard said "he was only 19 years old and he was my hero – it's been 60 long years piecing together the information that gives some closure as to what fate my brother faced in his final days. He is now recognized for his efforts and service to his community and country."