

MISSOURI STATE SOCIETY DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Proudly Honors

CARL LEROY OWENS

UNITED STATES NAVY

ENSIGN (O-1)

LOST AT SEA

1942 – FEBRUARY 21, 1944

as

PURPLE HEART PATRIOT

APRIL 2026

Julea Donn Owens Gerhard, Honoring Her Granduncle's Service and Sacrifice

Sponsored by: Columbian Chapter, NSDAR



Carl LeRoy Owens was born March 15, 1921, to Leonard and Millie Mae (New) Owens, Hopkins, Nodaway County, Missouri. He was the youngest of five children and a surprise baby being born 10 years after the fourth child, his sister Eula.

Carl grew up on the family farm along the Missouri-Iowa line and did farm chores as he grew up. My father, Donald Owens, would reminisce about going to his grandparents' and following Carl around the farm while he was working. Dad was the eldest of the grandchildren and was only nine years younger than his Uncle Carl. He viewed Carl as more of an older brother than an uncle.

After completing high school in Hopkins, Missouri, Carl enrolled at Northwest Missouri State Teachers College in Maryville, Missouri. Carl was the first of his family to attend college. He graduated from Northwest Missouri State Teachers College on May 26, 1942, at the age of 21.

I don't know the exact date that he enlisted in the Navy. The first letters home are not dated, but he tells of his trip to New York, his arrival on the training ship *The Prairie State*, and being sworn in as a Midshipman. The fourth letter, which was sent to his sister, was dated January 11, 1943, and mentions his receiving Christmas presents from her. This leads me to speculate that he enlisted in November or December of 1942.

Carl wrote home to different family members, and after his death, they shared their letters, and one niece copied them for all the family members.

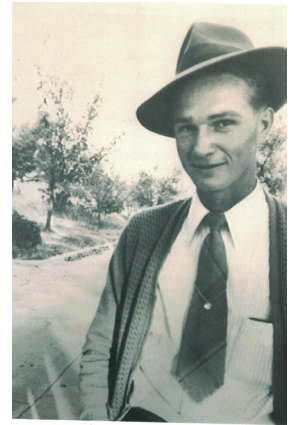
My Great Grandmother refused to believe Carl was gone, as evidenced by the letters she continued to write after the telegram they received on February 25, 1944. On July 20, 1944, a Lieutenant Junior Grade who had served with Carl sent her a letter telling of what he knew of Carl's last hours and confirming his death.

Carl was survived by his parents, his brothers Dale, Paul, and Earl Owens, and his sister, Eula Owens Crane, and at that time, 13 nieces and nephews. All of Carl's siblings are deceased, along with most of the nieces and nephews who would have been old enough to have known him.

Most of what I know about him is from stories that my Dad would tell occasionally and from

the letters Carl wrote. I wasn't even aware of the existence of his Purple Heart Medal until after my Dad passed away in 2008. Great Mom (M. Mae Owens) did not have it on display. After she passed, my grandfather, as the oldest child, inherited it, and then my dad, but I never saw it displayed. I think it was a painful reminder of who they had lost.

The effect on the family, besides grief, was lasting in a positive way, which probably added guilt to the family. Coming out of the Great Depression, Carl's family farm was in jeopardy of being lost to the bank. The money the family received from the government after Carl died paid off the loan and secured the farm. It continues to be owned by the Owens family and is a designated Century Farm. They would rather have lost the farm and had Carl home.



Owens family gathering at Leonard and Mae Owens farm. Carl LeRoy Owens, first in the back row. Last gathering before Carl left for New York for Navy Training.

(Note: On the following transcripts of the original letters, the words and sentences are written as they are written in the letters. Blanks “___” represent words that were unreadable.)

Letter from Carl to the Dales – Postmarked November 20, 1942

Dear Dales,

Your writing and telling about getting that cow and that you expect to go hunting soon sure doesn't make me like it any better here. I was just kidding then as I don't have time to get homesick but sure would like to be back to go hunting with you fellows again. It came a little skift of now Sat nite here and it made me feel a little homesick to be home where I could be out in it. When you go hunting and have any luck, as I am sure you will, send me back some snapshots of your success as that will be seemed back to being able to go along (Be darned if there isn't) water in my eye, first since I left some.) The only animals around here are the squirrels which are so tame they come up when you whistle and eat out of your hand. I think I'll go to the zoo one of these days just to see the skunks & foxes.

Last night we went to a concert given for us by the New York Philharmonic Symphony.

Yesterday a new class started at two of the halls here so we don't get much done as we look out of the window and see how we acted 6 weeks ago.

Tell Andy that I am beginning to think I would rather be a buck private than be here at least I would get more pay. All we have received so far is the 5 buck about 3 wks ago.

Sat. nite while in a subway station to come home I ran into Robert Bolinger who had come up from somewhere in Maryland to see his girl friend. Didn't get to talk to him very long. Sunday I took some snapshots and am inclosing one. Expect I had better send most of this home though as mom will feel like wringing my neck. Mom she won't care though if I send this one like I do you. Well Doris I wish I was back there to come in about 2 oclock for a quick lunch with the fellows after being hunting but I'm not.

Write, Sincerely Carl

P.S. Don't worry about that tape as I put it in there myself.



The Last Letter from Mrs. Owens (Mother) to Carl Owens (Son) February 24, 1944

Dear Son,

Well I got one of the most ___ of my life. Yesterday a cable gram for my birthday. Many thanks. Couldn't of received any thing that gave me more pleasure only it came the 23 instead of Mar 4. You must of gotten our wedding anniversri and my birthday mixed up. Never the less, I ___ real proud of it. This is another nice month not very cold either. Dad is going to paint the ceiling in the kitchen. We washed the walls and cealing yesterday it sure was some job. You didn't explain in your letter about the mail getting destroyed. Hope you get most of your letters. I wrote 8 in January so if you don't get them all – you will probly hear most of the news. Pauls are going to Maryville to-day to fix up the papers for their place. Linda Sue and Emma Mae are coming up here. We are going to the club over to Gladys and I guess we will like them to.

There is quiet a bit of snow left yet but the roads are beginning to dry some now. Pauls won't get to move until next week now. Carl don't forget Dad's Birthday. April 17 put that on your calender if you have one. Be sure and tell us what you need as we can send you things. Again many thanks for the c.g. Lots of love. Dad & Mom

Letter from a crew member to Carl's mother describing his last moments.

July 20, 1944

Dear Mrs. Owens,

Your letter just reached me, I wanted to write you before but didn't know your address.

I hate to say this, but I'll have to as to what the others have told you. I am afraid there is no hope for Carl & I wish to extend my deepest sympathies. I know what a swell fellow & grand

officer that Carl was, as I was with him from the time we arrived in Africa until our accident.

I will tell you all I know & hope that it will help in some way.

Carl was on watch & I was asleep when the first torpedo hit. Of course I got right up & Carl came in the room within a couple of min. & told me what had happened. I got dressed & met Carl upon the bridge & we went up on the bow together to see if anyone was up there injured. Finding no one we returned to the bridge & were standing together talking when the second torpedo hit. Flames broke out. When they died down I couldn't find Carl. Of course I had run around in the fire. That was the last I saw of Carl, but I know he survived the fire all right as two men told me that Carl helped them throw a raft over board some time after the fire. Some other men told me they saw Carl come down a line to get into the small boat, which was alongside & in the water & that he fell into the water & that was the last they saw of him. I know he had on all his heavy clothing & it probably took him down ___ belt & all.

If there is anything I have not made clear or anything I could tell you, feel free to write me, I want to do everything I can for you.

I heard a great deal about you & your family & have seen your pictures, etc.

I know Carl had bought many souvenirs for the family at the Isle of Capri, but never had a chance to mail them.

I was very lucky, even though I was burned badly & spent a week in the hospital. I have just completed more training & am going to sea again soon. Again I care! Please write me if there is anything I can tell you or do for you.

I failed to tell you that the water was searched the remainder of the night & for several hours after daylight. It would have been impossible for anyone to have reached shore... Lt. (j.g.) Wylie Gardt



The Maryville Daily Forum. Friday, May 5, 1944.

**MEN PADDLED RAFT WITH BURNED HANDS
SPURRED BY COURAGE OF KANSAS OFFICER**

In a Drama of the Stormy Sea Off Anzio Hope Instilled and Sustained by Lieut. Hudson McGuire of Leavenworth Saved Survivors of Torpedoed LST-Sang "Swanee River" Through the Bitter Night Until Picked Up.

The following article about the torpedoing of the LST 348 on which Ensign Carl LeRoy Owens, 22-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Owens of near Hopkins, was stationed. Since the ship was torpedoed, he has been reported missing. The family has received several letters from some of the officers that were with him and they expressed the feeling that although he was reported missing there is no hope for his safety.

A dispatch in The Star a few days ago reported the torpedoing off Anzio beachhead of LST 348. This graphic account of that disaster written by Bill Brinkley, U.S. N. R., staff writer for the Stars and Stripes, and printed in a recent issue of the service paper. The LST (landing ship tanks) had made three invasions, Sicily, Salerno and Anzio. At Anzio she had survived between twenty and twenty-five near-misses from German bombs and had been chased all over the harbor by German long-range guns. Except for a period of twenty-four hours, she was there the first sixteen days at Anzio. Then she began making trips carrying supplies for the forces there and it was on one of those trips that a German submarine downed her with two torpedoes. Bill Brinkley's story of that incident follows in part:

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WHEN it was over and they counted there were twenty-four dead and thirty-four in the big station hospital. Then the ship, too. The ship, the 327 feet of her and the 5,500 tons of her, lay cold and gone on the bottom of the Tyrrhenian sea.

There are no two ways about it. It is no spring picnic, taking supplies over the sea to Anzio.

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The first torpedo was just like running into a stone wall at full speed, the men said. It was not so bad. But the second torpedo, ten minutes later, broke the ship in two. The half of the ship forward of the cargo hatch, disappeared and the men knew she was done for. The skipper gave out the saddest of all sea orders, "Abandon ship."

It was a cold night, no moon, no stars, black as hell. The American LST (landing ship tanks) plowed north in a heavy blowing sea carrying to Anzio some of the sea -borne supplies that are keeping the men on that Allied toehold fighting.

It was 0225 hours.

The first torpedo hit aft of the bow on the port side.

That was pretty bad but not so bad but what the ship could stay afloat. Engine rooms were still untouched. But the punctured bow listed to port. A huge section of the main deck was torn off clear across the ship. Water poured into the tank deck.

"I'm Older; I'll Go."

The engineering officer, a lieutenant (j. g.) started below to set up the ballast pumps for the purpose of trimming the ship--put water into the starboard side to give her an even keel. In the galley passageway leading below decks 'he met John J. O'Brien, chief motor machinist's mate, New York.

"Where are you going, sir?" O'Brien asked.

"I'm going down to trim her," the engineering officer said.

"I'll go down," O'Brien said.

The officer looked at O'Brien. "No, I'm older. I'll go down." He was about four years older. He turned on below into the auxiliary engine room.

That was the last anyone saw of him until several hours later when his body, stiff and swollen, was picked up by an LCI (landing craft infantry).

For shortly after he stepped down into the engine room and O'Brien went on the topside to the fantail to reinforce the gun crew there the second torpedo arrived.

Between torpedoes what appeared to be a submarine had been sighted off the port quarter. Lieut. (j. g.) H. E. Hiestand, Nashville, Tenn., gunnery officer, was standing on the port side supervising the after guns. "There's sub," he said suddenly to Lieut. Stephenson Jennings, Chicago, skipper of the ship.

Jennings looked and barked out: "Shoot the--!"

Hiestand snapped the order: "Set the fuse at 800 yards and fire."

The gun sang out almost simultaneously with the impact of the torpedo. From his post at a machine gun just forward of the conning tower, Sebron Clark, bosn's mate second class, saw the fish coming. Through the dark mists he saw it. Very simply he yelled "Torpedo."

LSTs Can't Dodge.

This was no good as a warning, since no LST can dodge a torpedo. It was just like saying, "Well, here it is," a matter of information. When you're on an LST and see a torpedo coming you pretty much sit and take it. This is because there is nothing else you can do. You are, as the men of these ships like to say, "a sitting duck."

This torpedo hit about midships, port side. Lieut. (j. g.) H. L. McGuire, Leavenworth, Kas., executive officer, standing on the conning tower, could see it all.

Charles M. Ward, motor machinist's mate third class, New York, and one of the quietest men on the ship, rushed up to one of the burning men and started beating out the fire with his bare hands. After getting the fire out on this man he ran over to a second burning man, now a veritable flaming torch, and threw him overboard. The water extinguished the fire and the man now lives. Although burned as a result of these actions, Ward then volunteered to search the ship for injured.

All power was gone. The ship was broken in two. The forward half had disappeared. The remainder of the ship was afire. With these conditions obtaining the two words were passed by the skipper. "Abandon ship."

Coolly the men went about the business of carrying out this order. The skipper personally made a final check to see that all injured been removed. The explosion had torn away all small boats save one. In this boat now huddled forty men. many of them badly burned. The boat's crew had been blown from their stations into fire and sea when the second torpedo hit, so Jennings, the last man to leave the half hulk of burning ship, himself prepared to lower the boat away.

Small Boat Caught Fire.

Now a fearful thing happened. The small boat caught fire from the flames criss crossing the ship. Jennings lowered away. The boat hit the sea. Heavy waves crashed over it. The flames gasped and died. In the boat the men sat with their backs to big waves. Motor power had been lost when the boat hit the sea so the men tore off stretcher boards. Men tried to forget their pain and paddle with these stretcher boards.

Low in the boat Lieut. (J. g.) William A. Wufman, Huntington, W. Va., ship's doctor assisted by W. P. Link, boatswain mate first class, Tampa, Fla., gave morphine shots to those suffering most. Wufman on temporary duty on the ship, had gone below decks to sick bay after the second torpedo hit to get the morphine and other medical supplies.

Jennings said later the men took their intense pain in an almost astounding manner. "Mostly they got madder than hell," he said.

In other parts of the sea around the ship more men clung to life rafts, The rafts had come into the water bottoms up so that it was almost impossible to get to the paddies, which were

secured beneath. The oil-covered men shoved away from their ship, trying to keep rafts together in the choppy sea. The wind blew strong and high, it was a fight between sea and wind on one side and men on the other for control of the rafts.

Some of these men, too, were in deep pain, the pain of burned flesh in salt water. The night was black and in some men the last traces of hope were beginning to fade.

Lighthouse Too Far Away.

McGuire, on one of the three rafts in the group, could see a lighthouse far away. There was no chance, he knew, for the men to reach the lighthouse in this sea. There would have been virtually no chance had they paddles and there was certainly none where the only paddles were burned hands.

But the light gave McGuire an idea. It occurred to him that with a front and a little deceit justifiable under the circumstances he might convince the men that they did have a chance to hand-paddle their way to the lighthouse and so give them the hope which was now their prime need above all other needs. So he called upon them to start paddling. His words somehow took on. Using their burned hands for paddles the men began to splash away, McGuire all the time talking about the island as if it were heaven and they would soon be there. From this effort was born hope.

Now McGuire began having his men sing, calculating that such singing would at least have tendency to keep them warmer - the cold was bitter and 10-foot waves broke constantly over the men. The first song the men sang was "Swanee River." McGuire leading them at the shouting top of his Kansas voice.

*"Way down upon the Swanee river
Far, far way,
That's where my heart is longing ever,
That's where the old folks stay."*

Off across the Tyrrhenian sea drifted the hoarse-voiced strains of this and other American songs. The men sang and the wind and sea roared. The men paddled toward the lighthouse, paddling perhaps 100 feet in an hour.

Later on the men saw the silhouette and started yelling for help.

"Hey, shut up, that might be a sub." said Charles Beebey, he seaman second class, Scranton, Pa. The men shut up, but it wasn't a sub. It was an LCI and later it came back and picked them up.

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