

Christmas Crossing

James Lee Loftis of Greenville entered Clemson College after the United States entered World War II. A member of the Class of 1946, Loftis majored in engineering and was assigned to Company G, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment in the Cadet Brigade. At the conclusion of his freshman year, Loftis, like most of the other cadets, was ordered to active duty to help the country fight its two-front war.

On June 11, less than a month after the end of 1943's spring semester, Loftis enlisted at Fort Jackson. He was sent to Fort Riley, Kansas for basic training and then completed six months of study at the University of Nebraska in the Army Specialized Training Program. As military manpower needs evolved, the Army dramatically cut the numbers of men in the ASTP and soon many, like Loftis, were on their way to combat units. Loftis was assigned to the 66th Infantry Division at Camp Robinson, Arkansas. The 66th later moved to Camp Rucker, Alabama where it prepared to deploy overseas.



The 66th shipped out in November 1944 and arrived in England on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. For the next few weeks, the division prepared for deployment into combat. The German winter offensive that became known as the Battle of the Bulge caused the Allies to hurry all available army units in England to the battle front. The subordinate units of the 66th were loaded aboard two transport ships as soon as they reached Southampton and without regard for unit integrity. Soldiers were not kept together in their unit structures, resulting in less discipline and order.

At 0900 hours on Christmas Eve, the 66th sailed from Southampton for the short voyage across the English Channel to Cherbourg, France. Loftis and his 264th Infantry Regiment were aboard the Belgian ship, *Leopoldville*. The ship was a floating microcosm of the Allied effort to defeat Germany. A Belgian ship, it had been chartered by the British Admiralty and had made 24 cross-Channel trips ferrying more than 120,000 British and American soldiers to France. Commanded by a Belgian captain who spoke Flemish, *Leopoldville* was crewed by Congolese sailors from Belgium's African colony. Orders from the captain issued over the ship's loudspeakers were not understood by most of the American and British soldiers on board for this Christmas crossing.

The German submarine *U-486* was also in the Channel as Christmas approached. Commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Gerhard Meyer, *U-486* had sailed from Norway on its first war patrol the same Sunday the 66th had arrived in England. *U-486* sailed west around the British Isles before turning back to the east and transiting the Western Approaches into the English Channel. On December 18, *U-486* had torpedoed and sunk the British merchant ship *Silverlaurel* south of the Eddystone Lighthouse out from Plymouth harbor. By Christmas Eve, Meyer had positioned his boat to attack the steady stream of transports laboring to keep the Allied offensive in Europe supplied with fuel, ammunition, equipment, food, and men.

At 1754 hours, *Leopoldville* was just five miles from the French coast when a torpedo launched from *U-486* struck *Leopoldville* on its starboard side aft, exploding in hold number four and killing approximately three hundred men. Few of the American soldiers understood the hasty orders given in Flemish to abandon ship. Others, failing to realize that the ship had suffered a mortal wound, stayed on board assuming the ship would be towed to the nearby port of Cherbourg.



One of *Leopoldville*'s escorting destroyers, HMS *Brilliant*, maneuvered alongside to attempt to rescue the ship's passengers. Sea swells of eight to twelve feet made transferring from the cargo ship to the smaller destroyer perilous. Some men jumped, breaking limbs as they landed on *Brilliant*'s torpedo tubes and other deck equipment. Others miss-timed their leaps falling in between the two ships where they were crushed. *Brilliant* was able to take five hundred men off the stricken transport, but that left twelve hundred still on board.

Brilliant then attempted to contact American forces at Cherbourg, but the Americans used different frequencies and could not decipher the British code. Next *Brilliant* contacted the British naval base at Portsmouth. Portsmouth telephoned

Cherbourg, but these round-about communications were hindered by minimal staffing due to holiday celebrations. Allied forces in Cherbourg failed to quickly mobilize rescue efforts and by the time rescuers reached the area, many of those who had gone into the frigid Channel waters were already dead from hypothermia.

Sergeant James Lee Loftis was one of more than 750 Allied soldiers killed in the sinking of the *Leopoldville*. His Clemson classmate William Lawrence Ingram was also killed in what was the second-largest loss of life from the sinking of a troop transport ship in the European Theater.

James Lee Loftis was awarded the Purple Heart and survived by his parents and his sister. After the war, his remains were returned to Greenville and buried in Graceland West Cemetery.

