

Hezekiah Clarence Turner

From Paul Carter as published in Orange County Historical Society *Record*¹:

“Hezekiah Clarence Turner, son of Aaron and Susie Turner of the Taylor area of Orange County, was born 20 June 1892 in Lynchburg, Virginia. He only attended seven years of elementary school. Hezekiah was from a big family that included six brothers and one sister. His brother, Paul, worked for many years as a waiter at the James Madison Hotel (most recently the President Madison Inn).

“Hezekiah enlisted in the Navy in April 1917 at Boston, Massachusetts and served as a cook throughout World War I with continuous sea duty. He later was promoted to cabin steward. During this time of discrimination in the Navy, most African-American sailors were assigned to the duties of cooks or cabin stewards, dressed in white jackets serving meals to officers. This was his primary job, but he also fulfilled the position of gunner during combat.

“One of his first assignments was as a steward aboard the *USS Gamble* (DD123). The *Gamble* was originally commissioned as a destroyer in World War I and later reworked to be a mine layer during World War II. He later was assigned to the *USS Coughlan* (DD326) stationed in Charleston, South Carolina on 24 January 1922. The *Coughlan* was the first of two ships named *Coughlan*. It was a destroyer commissioned in 1921 and decommissioned in 1930.

“On 20 January 1936, he joined the crew of the *USS Leary* (DD158). The *Leary* was a destroyer completed in 1919 and carried 176 officers and men. While on the *Leary*, he was promoted to Steward First Class and remained on the *Leary* until his death.

“On 24 December 1943 about 585 miles west-northwest of Cape Finisterre off the northwest coast of Spain, the *USS Leary* was participating in escort duties of the *USS Card*, a carrier of an American hunter-killer task group, when it was spotted by a German reconnaissance plane. The plane contacted a German wolfpack, a mass-attack group of German submarines that was in the area, and the attack followed.

“At about 2:00 a.m., a sub fired on the *Card* and barely missed. Then about 5:00 a.m. the German Submarine U0275 fired a GNAT, German Navy Acoustic Torpedo, at the

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USS Leary and hit the destroyer on the starboard side near the engine room causing a huge explosion and she sank within one minute.

“U-275 went on to sink the English ship *Lornaston* in its total of nine patrols and four wolfpacks. It eventually met its doom in March 1945 when it was sunk by a mine off Beachy Head in the English Channel. All forty-eight German sailors perished.

“In the early morning hours of Christmas Eve 1943, there were ninety-seven survivors of the *Leary* in the cold water of the Atlantic, but Turner was not one of them. By this time, he had served over twenty-five years in the Navy. His body was never recovered. He was officially declared dead on 25 December 1944 and memorialized on the Tablets of the Missing at Cambridge American Cemetery in England. He was awarded the Purple Heart, the Navy Good Conduct Medal, and the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal.

“Throughout his military service he never lost his connection with Orange County. In February 1945 his brothers and sister divided up his estate consisting of \$485.00 in a Citizens National Bank account.”