

# WITHOUT A TRACE!



A NATION LOCKED IN A DESPERATE SEA WAR HAD LITTLE TIME — OR INCLINATION — TO DELVE INTO THE MYSTERIOUS LOSS OF THE SS SUMNER I. KIMBALL, A LIBERTY SHIP THAT SEEMINGLY VANISHED FROM THE OCEAN'S SURFACE  
**BY JIM HUFFSTODT**

The SS *Sumner I. Kimball*, a Liberty ship named for the Chief of the Revenue Cutter Service in the 1870s, was launched at Portland, Maine, in September 1943. Painted a drab wartime gray, she was no different from the hundreds of others of her ilk that were mass-produced to overcome the German effort to strangle the Allied lifeline to and from a battle-weary England. Born of steel and the sweat of the workers of the New England Shipbuilding Company, she gained her soul as her crew came aboard. They were men of various levels of experience, from 63-year-old Ernest von Berg who held not only a Chief Engineer's license but also a Master's

Certificate from the British Board of Trade, to 18-year-old Navy gunner Durward Johnson, Jr., who

was making his second voyage, having previously sailed in the SS *Campfire*.

The *Kimball* had made a voyage from Boston to Hull, England, in October 1943. It was her maiden voyage and under the command of Captain Harry Atkins of East Boston. No troubles were encountered and ship and crew arrived safely. Having delivered her cargo, she was returning to New York in Convoy ON-219 in January 1944. This was her last voyage and lost with her were her 39 merchant seamen and 30 Navy gunners. The weather was atrocious and it was presumed that the ship was lost to an enemy submarine when she straggled from the convoy. The presumption was correct but the actual details of what happened would not come to light until some 47 years later. In due course, the Navy Department sent out the usual notices to the next of kin.

"Seaman First Class George B. Lovett was reported missing in action after his Merchant Marine cargo ship, the SS



The Liberty ship was named after Sumner Increase Kimball who was Chief of the Revenue Cutter Service.

Sumner I. Kimball was presumed lost to enemy action."

And then about a year later another telegram was sent out.

"In view of the fact that the ship on which your son was serving was lost in the mid-Atlantic during the month of January 1944, and because none of the personnel known to have been aboard that vessel have been reported to be prisoners of war, I am reluctantly forced to the conclusion that he is deceased."

The letter was signed by Secretary of the Navy



To the captain of any U-Boat, a Liberty ship presented a most tempting target — especially one such as the *Sumner I. Kimball* that was alone and lacking any form of armed escort.