

Rear Admiral Frederick Lois Riefkohl

By: Tony (The Marine) Santiago



Rear Admiral Frederic Louis Riefkohl

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Rear Admiral Frederick Lois Riefkohl (February 27, 1889–September 1969), a native of Maunabo, Puerto Rico, was an officer in the United States Navy and the first Puerto Rican to graduate from the United States Naval Academy to be awarded the Navy Cross. The Navy Cross is the second highest medal, after the Medal of Honor, that can be awarded by the U.S. Navy for heroism or distinguished service. He was a World War I Navy Cross recipient who served as Captain of the USS *Vicennes* during World War II.

Early years

Born and raised in the town of Maunabo, Riefkohl was the son of Luis Riefkohl and Julia Jaimieson. His older brother was Rudolph Riefkohl, a Colonel in the United States Army Corps of Engineers, who was the first Puerto Rican to receive a "tombstone promotion" of Brigadier General after his death, which technically made him the first Hispanic brigadier general in the United States Army. After he graduated from high school, Riefkohl received an appointment on July 5, 1907, from Beekman Winthrop, the U.S. appointed governor of Puerto Rico from 1904 to 1907, to attend the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. In 1911, he became the first Puerto Rican to graduate from the Academy.

During World War I, Lieutenant Riefkohl served as Commander of the Armed Guard of the USS *Philadelphia* and on August 2, 1917 he was awarded the Navy Cross for engaging an enemy submarine. The Navy Cross is the second highest medal that can be awarded by the U.S. Navy and are awarded to members of the U.S. Navy or U.S. Marine Corps for heroism or distinguished service.

Navy Cross citation



Riefkohl, Frederick L.

Lieutenant, U.S. Navy
Armed Guard, U.S.S. Philadelphia
Date of Action: August 2, 1917
Citation:

“The Navy Cross is awarded to Lieutenant Frederick L. Riefkohl, U.S. Navy, for distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commander of the Armed Guard of the U.S.S. Philadelphia, and in an engagement with an enemy submarine. On August 2, 1917, a periscope was sighted, and then a torpedo passed under the stern of the ship. A shot was fired, which struck close to the submarine, which then disappeared.”

World War II

Upon the outbreak of World War II, Riefkohl, who was the Captain of the USS Vincennes, was assigned to the Fire Support Group, LOVE (with Transport Group XRAY) under the command of Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner's Task Force TARE (Amphibious Force) during the landing in the Solomon Islands on August 7, 1942.



USS Vincennes

On August 9, 1942, the Northern Force which consisted of the USS Vincennes, USS Quincy and the USS Astoria, found themselves just off Guadalcanal. Riefkohl commanded this force. Rear Admiral Victor A. Crutchley, the commander of the Northern Force left with his flagship HMAS Australia to meet with the top brass without notifying Riefkohl.

Japanese Admiral Mikawa and his navy decided to make a surprise attack on the American ships. He first destroyed an Australian cruiser, then the USS Chicago before going after the USS Vincennes. Riefkohl was summoned up to the bridge and believed that a minor skirmish was taking place with some ship. When the Japanese ships turned on their searchlights, Riefkohl mistook them for the American ships from the Southern Force and asked them over the radio to turn off their lights because enemy vessels might be near. The Japanese answered the message with a fusillade of shells and torpedoes.

Riefkohl ordered a starboard turn, but torpedoes hit and exploded, destroying both engine rooms. The USS Vincennes fired back and may have hit the Kinugasa, a Japanese cruiser. The Vincennes received 85 direct hits and Riefkohl ordered his men to abandon ship. The sailors manned the life rafts and the Vincennes rolled over and went down with 342 men still aboard. Riefkohl was presented a Purple Heart Medal for the wounds which he received.

Rear Admiral Riefkohl wrote in an epitaph: "The magnificent Vincennes, which we were all so proud of, and which I had the honor to command since April 23, 1941, rolled over and then sank at about 0250, August 9, 1942, about 2½ miles [5 km] east of Savo Island . . . [sic] Solomons Group, in some 500 fathoms [900 m] of water."

Rear Admiral Frederick Lois Riefkohl died in Brevard County, Florida in 1969 and was buried with full military honors in the United States Naval Academy Cemetery of Columbarium. He was married to Louisa Gibson Riefkohl (1902–1974) and didn't have any offspring.

Awards and recognitions

Among Rear Admiral Frederick Lois Riefkohl's decorations and medals were the following:

Navy Cross,
Navy Distinguished Service Medal,
Purple Heart Medal,
World War I Victory Medal,
American Defense Service Medal,
Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal,
World War II Victory Medal