

# Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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## The Sinking of the Reuben James

The Sinking of the Reuben James

(Woody Guthrie)

tune: "Wildwood Flower"

Have you heard of the ship called the good Reuben James?  
Manned by hard fighting men of both honor and fame  
She flew the Stars and Stripes of the Land of the Free  
But tonight she's in her grave at the bottom of the sea.

cho: Tell me what were their names, tell me what were their names,  
Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?  
What were their names, tell me what were their names,  
Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James ?

'Twas there in the dark of that uncertain night  
That we watched for the U-boats and waited for a fight.  
Then a whine and a rock and a great explosion roar  
And they laid the Reuben James on the cold ocean floor.

One hundred men were drowned in that dark watery grave  
When that good ship went down, only forty four were saved  
Twas the last day of October that we saved the forty four  
From the cold icy water off the cold Iceland shore.

Now tonight there are lights in our country so bright.  
In the farms and the cities they are telling of this fight.  
Now our mighty battleships will steam the bounding main  
And remember the name of the good Reuben James.

(Fred Hellerman of the Weavers added this verse: )

Well, many years have passed since those brave men have gone  
And those cold icy waters are still and they're calm  
Many years have passed but still I wonder why  
The worst of men must fight and the best of men must die.

I understand that in his original version of the song, Woody tried to name all the members of the crew who lost their lives, but his fellow members of the Almanac Singers convinced him to use this version. (Without the hellerman verse) JO

For some American sailors, World War II began before December 7, 1941. During the latter part of 1941, U.S. Navy ships provided escorts for convoys bound for Great Britain carrying war materials from our "Arsenal

of Democracy." Because German U-boats (submarines) considered all ships in the convoys fair game, it was only a matter of time before we became involved in a "shooting war."

Disaster struck in the early morning hours of October 31, 1941. While escorting convoy HX-156, the American destroyer U.S.S. Reuben James was torpedoed and sunk with the loss of 115 of 160 crewmen, including all officers. Although not the first U.S. Navy ship torpedoed before the war, the Reuben James was the first one lost. After the news of the sinking reached America, many concerned people wrote letters to the Navy to find out the fate of friends or loved ones. Sadly, most of the country ignored the sinking. One who did not was folk singer Woody Guthrie, who wrote his now famous song immediately after the incident: PS

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