

Compton Chamberlayne

Roll of Honour



Lest we Forget World War II



APPRENTICE

William Alan SOUTHALL

ROYAL MERCHANT NAVY

6th FEBRUARY, 1942 AGE 19

William Alan SOUTHALL

William Alan Southall was born at Welwyn, Hertfordshire in 1922 to parents John and Muriel D Southall (nee McWilliam). His birth was registered in the September quarter of 1922, in the district of Hatfield, Hertfordshire (Welwyn was in the district of Hatfield).

William Southall arrived in New York on 3rd October, 1940 as part of the crew of the *Otaio*. He was aged 22 & had been an Apprentice for 10 months in the Merchant Navy. (3 other Apprentices were also included on this trip but for those 3 it was their first voyage – B. Harding, H. Rockett & B. Worthington). The *Otaio* had departed from the port of London, England on 14th September, 1940. Prior to the departure from the Port of London, the *Otaio* was one of a number of ships that had been damaged by the German Luftwaffe when they launched heavy air attacks on 7th September, 1940, with 300 aircraft dropping 337 tons of bombs.

(A country's Merchant Navy is made up of its commercial and trading ships, and their crews. In 1939, Britain's merchant fleet was the largest in the world. The country was dependent on merchant shipping for the import of food, munitions, essential equipment and raw materials in times of peace, but the shipping was also needed in wartime, to carry servicemen overseas to fight, and to carry the supplies to equip and sustain those fighting men.

All those who served in the Merchant Navy were civilians and volunteers. Like those who served in the Royal Navy, they faced not only the dangers of enemy attack but the hazards of the elements as well. Although some merchant ships were armed, they were not built for war & not designed to withstand enemy attack. The merchant seaman was also not trained for war, whereas the crews of the Royal Navy were highly trained in damage control and gunnery and if his ship was sunk at sea, the merchant seaman's chances of survival were poor.

Some Merchant ships were armed & groups of merchant ships travelled in a convoy system and were escorted by the Royal Navy to try and prevent merchant ships being sunk by German submarines (or U-Boats).

On 3rd April, 1941, the *Otaio*, with Captain Gilbert Kinnell at the helm, encountered the drifting & still smoking wreck of the unescorted & neutral Swedish *Castor* that had been hit starboard side by a torpedo from German U-boat U-46 on 31st March, 1941, about 430 miles east-southeast of Cape Farewell, Greenland in the Atlantic Ocean. The *Castor* had a cargo of 12,000 tons of fuel and benzole. 21 survivors in lifeboats, out of a complement of 36, were picked up by the *Otaio* & landed them on Curaçao, an island in the southern Caribbean Sea.

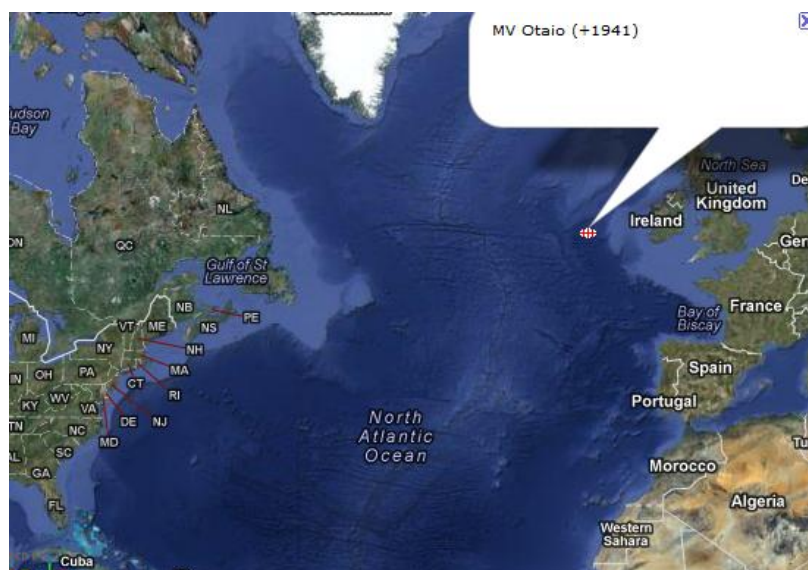
On 23rd August, 1941 the *Otaio* had sailed from Liverpool for Australia via the Panama Canal in convoy. While in the Atlantic, north of Ireland, the convoy was attacked twice by U-boats west of Slyne Head County Donegal, Ireland. Three British ships & a Norwegian ship were sunk. U-boats continued to shadow the convoy as it proceeded at 7.5 knots. The convoy was dispersed & ordered to proceed at full speed, independent of their respective courses. On 28th August, 1941 the *Otaio*, in rough seas & a heavy swell, was torpedoed at around 1541 hours, located about 330 miles west by north of Fastnet Rock, Ireland in the North Atlantic. The *Otaio* had been torpedoed on the port side by 2 torpedoes from German U-boat U-558. The first torpedo exploded at No 5 Hatch, followed by one that exploded in the engine room. The ship took a heavy list to port, with all on duty in the engine room killed outright by the explosion. The *Otaio* was settling rapidly when Captain Kinnell gave the order to abandon ship. No 3 lifeboat crashed with 2 men aboard lowering, but No's 1 and 2 were away safely. No 4 lifeboat was also destroyed on lowering. Some crew scrambled back on board & were taken off by other boats, some drowned when the

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boat capsized, while other crew got clear on the only remaining raft that remained after others had been destroyed in the explosions. The master, Gilbert Kinnell, 53 crew members & 4 gunners, a total of 58, were picked up by the destroyer HMS *Vanoc* (H33) & landed at Liverpool. 12 crew did not survive & they are remembered on the Tower Hill Memorial, Trinity Square, London, close to The Tower of London. Captain Kinnell paid tribute to his officers and men and in particular the four cadet apprentices, **Southall**, Rocket, Harding and Stewart-Scott who had carried out their duties efficiently. William Southall had been one of the survivors of the sinking of the *Otaio* on 28th August, 1941.



Charts used with permission from [Wrecksite](http://www.wrecksite.eu)



At around 12.10 hours on 6th February, 1942, under the command of Captain Wilfred George Evans, the unescorted *Opawa* was hit by a torpedo from German U-boat U-106 about 400 miles north-northeast of Bermuda. William Southall was one of the crew members aboard at this time. The *Opawa* had loaded 4,000 tons of copper & 2,000 tons of sugar in Australia, sailed to New Zealand & loaded refrigerated cargo – lamb, butter also 1,533 bales of wool then sailed from Lyttleton, New Zealand via Panama Canal. The ship had been chased since 8.32 hours & stopped after the hit. The U-boat dived to get closer & observed

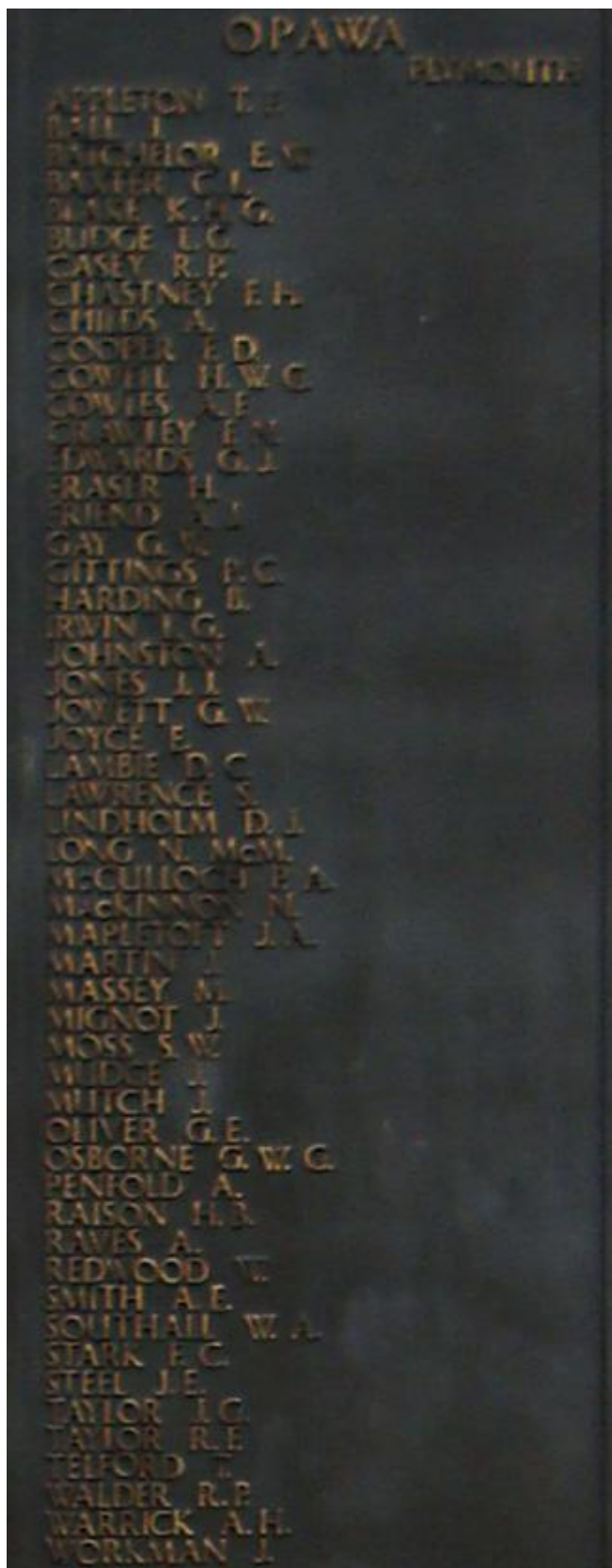
the launching of four lifeboats. Captain Evans reboarded the ship to send a distress message & salvage some navigational instruments and gather some warm clothing as most of the crew were scantily clad. At 14.17 hours, U-106 surfaced & shelled the *Opawa* with 93 rounds until she sank at 14.59 hours. The lifeboats shaped course for Bermuda but parted company due to the heavy seas & swell. On February 8th, the lifeboat containing the Captain & survivors experienced gale force winds, swell was running at thirty feet high & for 6 days the men were soaked through. The master & 14 crew members were eventually picked up by the Dutch steam merchant *Hercules* & landed at New York on 13th February, seven days after the *Opawa* had been torpedoed. Two engineers were killed in the explosion & three of her lifeboats, carrying 51 crew members, were lost without trace. It was concluded they had foundered in heavy weather. William Southall was one of the missing crew members, along with his fellow apprentice, Barry Harding, from their previous ship – the *Otaio*. William Alan Southall was listed as having died at sea in the North Atlantic Ocean on 6th February, 1942.

(U-106 was one of the most successful German submarines of WW2. She completed 10 wartime patrols & sank 22 ships.)



Chart used with permission from [Wrecksite](http://www.wrecksite.eu)

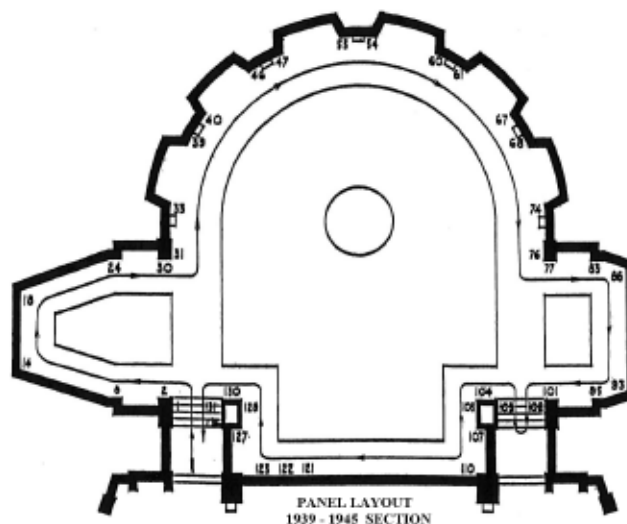
William Alan Southall is one of 53 crew members from the *Opawa* that are remembered on the Tower Hill Memorial, Trinity Square, London, close to The Tower of London. The *Opawa* memorial is located on Panel 76.



(Photo used with permission from Brian Watson - [Benjidog CWGC Tower Hill Memorial site](http://www.benjidog.co.uk))



The Tower Hill Memorial commemorates men and women of the Merchant Navy & Fishing Fleets who died in both World Wars and who have no known grave. It lists 35,749 identified casualties.



TOWER HILL MEMORIAL

The names of the war dead are to be found under the names of the ships in which they served.
The ship names are in alphabetical order, by their branch of service.

William Alan Southall is also remembered on the World War 2 Memorial tablet at St Michael's Church at Compton Chamberlayne, Wiltshire along with Lieutenant H. J. Carbray Richardson of the Royal Navy. In 1946, a Faculty petition was raised to the Church Bishop to request that a memorial tablet be erected on the north wall of the nave of the St Michael's Church at Compton Chamberlayne to remember the 2 men from Compton Chamberlayne that died during World War 2.



Photos by Neil MacDougall



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"The 30,000 men of the British Merchant Navy who fell victim to the U-boats between 1939 and 1945, the majority drowned or killed by exposure on the cruel North Atlantic sea, were quite as certainly front-line warriors as the guardsmen and fighter pilots to whom they ferried the necessities of combat. Neither they nor their American, Dutch, Norwegian or Greek fellow mariners wore uniform and few have any memorial. They stood nevertheless between the Wehrmacht and the domination of the world".

(Historian John Keegan)

Between September 1939 to May 1940, 177 British Merchant ships alone were sunk and for almost six years after there was barely a day went by without the loss of merchant shipping and their civilian crews.

*On all the oceans white caps flow, you do not see crosses row on row,
but those who sleep beneath the sea, rest in peace for your country is free*

