

Lost at sea

Tales my grandfather would have told me. A sailor's life 1910-1941

A sailor's life – 47. In remembrance

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Panel for the oil tanker Chama,
Tower Hill memorial, London

The last fighting Tommy of the first war is dead, at 111. The [last RN is 109](#), deaf and blind. Now trips to the beaches at Dunkirk too are thinning. Every Christmas another card fails to appear. One by one, the voices who have told me their stories over the past fifteen years fall silent.

On [Tower Hill](#) in London every September and November, wreaths appear in the sunken garden that is the merchant navy memorial. Here are commemorated – ship by sunken ship – the thousands of British merchant seamen lost in the second world war who “have no grave but the sea,” as the stone inscription reads.

The brass panels with the names ripple round the walls, punctuated by allegorical figures of the seven seas and frisking dolphins. It is a tranquil and strangely happy memorial, alive and visited. On a sunny day it is like stepping down into a swimming pool. Traffic noises recede overhead. Peace closes around you.

Often there are single poppies, sticktaped beside a name. Or little wooden crosses and stars of David, left by relatives.



Statue on the Merchant Navy memorial, Tower Hill

A small skipping girl and a grey-haired woman passed me one afternoon. “Were they pirates, granny?” the little voice wafted back. The woman smiled wryly at me and I grinned. I, too, was first brought here as a child, to read my grandfather’s name on panel 27. This place is not about glorifying war, but acknowledging loss.

It is estimated that more than [32,000 of the 185,000 merchant seamen](#) who served on British ships during the second world war either drowned with their ships, were killed by enemy attack, or died in prisoner of war camps – proportionally more than any of the three armed forces, including the RAF.

Yet until [1999, merchant seamen were not included](#) in the national Armistice Day commemorations at the Cenotaph. They were civilians, not “under command”. So the merchant navy held its own remembrance service, here on Tower Hill. And in true non-conformist spirit, it still holds its own service – on the Sunday nearest September 3rd, marking the day in 1939 when the first merchant ship was sunk, a bare nine hours after Britain declared war. The [SS Athenia](#), of the Donaldson Line, Glasgow, was torpedoed by U30, killing 93 passengers and 19 crew – mainly men trapped deep in the engine rooms. There were no “phoney” first months of the second world war for the men and women at sea.



Merchant Navy memorial Tower Hill, London, September 2010 - little flags

Over the years, events on Tower Hill have swelled not stilled. Nowadays there is a brass band, and big-wigs, and prayers are led by leaders from a range of faiths. There is a crowd. This year all present on September 5th were invited to commemorate an individual or ship, and the lawn beside the compass rose erupted in fluttering paper flags.

By now, the ships on the brass panels have become familiar. I can pick out the Shell and BP tankers, the Liberty ships, the freighters with the last bananas, the passenger liners carrying troops. I know many of their stories.

I have also learned that the panels, comprehensive though they seem, mislead. Many more names – perhaps thousands – are missing here. Not just the shipmates who survived only to die in captivity as PoWs, but men like my grandfather's Chinese crew: all 38 of them, from Yow Siong Kong, the bosun, down to 23-year-old Foo Yee Yain, the pantry boy.

It took me years to realise that the fourteen names listed below HS Sivell, master of the Shell tanker Chama, could not be the whole story of what happened that night in March 1941 when the ship disappeared with all hands. After the war Shell estimated it had lost [1,009 Chinese](#) "ratings". They are [commemorated in Hong Kong](#), separate from the officers they died with and far from their families in Hainan and Fujian who waited. Not British seamen.

Yet Shell's Chinese survivors between them garnered 35 awards, ranging from the Distinguished Service Medal and Lloyd's medal for bravery, to three Bronzen Leeuwen from the restored Dutch government. If anyone happens to be passing the mariners' memorial in Hong Kong any time, perhaps they could look up young Foo Yee Yain, and the others, and leave a token for me. I'd love a photo.



The sunken garden at Tower Hill, with wreaths for Anglo Saxon and Chama

It was business as usual at Tower Hill last Friday when I turned up with a wreath for the steamer Anglo Saxon, on behalf of a donor in America and the then 10-year-old son of the chief engineer. There were two elderly ladies in one corner struggling to stick a poppy beside a name too high on one of the brass panels, a lunchtime jogger doing his stretches against the Portland stone, and tourists hung about with cameras snapping the sculptures – strays from the Tower of London beyond the underpass.

Anglo Saxon was attacked and sunk by the raider Widder on 21st August 1940, and seven men made it into the ship's jolly boat. In November 1940, just two of them – Bob Tapscott and Roy Widdicombe – crawled ashore on Eleuthera, in the Bahamas, more dead than alive after 70 days adrift, watching their five fellow survivors die one by one of gangrene and thirst.

But [their story](#) does not end there. Widdicombe was lost en route back to Europe aboard the Siamese Prince. Tapscott eventually committed suicide. Their 70 days isn't even a record. And their experiences never made quite the headlines in wartorn Britain that they had in the neutral US. In 1997 the relatives managed to get the jolly boat brought back to the UK, where it and the 24 notches carved in the port gunwale before the men gave up hope now sit in the Imperial War Museum, as part of its hands-on Explore History exhibition.

Just one story from the thousands on Tower Hill.

Coming next: [Oil tanker apprentice, 1919](#)

Previously: [Through a glass, darkly](#)



Flags down for the three minutes' silence at the merchant navy memorial, Tower Hill, London, September 2010

Lest we forget

Full list of the 53 officers and men of the Shell oil tanker Chama, lost with all hands March 1941:

HS Sivell, Master
JE Black, 2nd Engineer
IC Cunningham, 3rd Mate
A Gray,
R Hilhouse,
WH Hume
CW McCarthy, W/O
AH McKnight
PH Manderville, 5th Engineer
JC Miller
MT Murphy, W/O
RG Novak, apprentice
J Walker
F Wellings
ALF Williams, Chief Engineer
Yow Siong Kong, 42, bosun
Ngai Ah Sai, 44, storekeeper
Ah Yee, 33, quartermaster
Leng Ah Moy, 35
Lee Ah Chay, 29
Wong Ah Chong, 36, quartermaster
Wong Ah Tay, 33, sailor
Yang Siew Luk, 24
Lim Loon, 31
Ee Long Tatt, 30
Lim Sin Keng, 41
Kim Kwang, 24
Chao Ah King, 30
Ting Meng, 28
Teong Ah Tay, 32
Chan Sum Sang, 23
Ling Ah Chaw, 34
Wong Tung Kuam, 21, Sailors Boy
Tiew Khek Guan, 41, carpenter
Chong Song, 38, no 1 fireman
Choung Hee, 25, no 2 fireman
Li Kan, 42, no 3 fireman
Thoe Foon, 27, donkeyman
Chong Fai, 44, pumpman
Mik Kia, 37, fireman
Lam Kan, 37, fireman
Siong Wah, 40, fireman
Chong Wo Fook, 31, fireman
Fung Kim, 27, fireman
Wong Choo, 30, firemen's cook
Juan Seng, 35, chief steward
Joe Jim Fatt, 28, 2nd steward

Tan Tian Teek, 40, chief cook
Mew Po Heng, 33, 2nd cook
Lee John San, 32, mess room boy
Ee Muay, 35, mess room boy
Foo Yee Yain, 23, pantry boy
Sim Tie Jong, 26, saloon boy

Written by Jay Sivell

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