

## **Gunner William John SAMUEL**

Service number 3906690  
Royal Artillery  
6 Battery, 3<sup>rd</sup> Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment  
Killed in action on 20 December 1942, aged 35

Born in Wales, his father became the landlord of the Rose and Crown public house in Wells. William had a wife and twin boys, and lived in Poole. At the start of the war he was in the Green Howards but transferred to the Royal Artillery, where he manned the guns on merchant ships, the so-called DEMS. He died when the tanker Otina was torpedoed by a German U boat in the middle of the Atlantic.



The Otina before the war

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<http://billedarkiv.mfs.dk/fotoweb/archives/5001-Museet-for-søfarts-billedarkiv/archive/Arkiv-94/000027866.jpg.info>

William was born in Mountain Ash in Glamorgan in 1908. His parents were John Samuel and Florence Louise née Mead, who had married in Bridgwater, where Florence was from. In 1911, the Samuels lived at 26, Bailey Street, Mountain Ash, and William's father was a coal miner.

William was their first child and they went on to have three daughters, Winifred, Mary and Mildred. 1918 was a bad year for the family: first his sister Winifred died and then his mother died. In 1923, his father married his second wife, Winifred Rose Osmond, in Pontypridd. John and Winifred would have one child of their own, John Charles, who is also on the Wells War Memorial.

In 1934 the family moved to Wells and William's father became the landlord of the Rose and Crown public house on St John Street for 21 years. We know that Mary and John came to Wells, but it is likely that William did not, as he was then 26 years old.

In 1935, William married Edith May Aldridge in Bournemouth. A year later, their twins, John and William, were born in Poole. In September 1939, May (as she preferred to be called) and the boys were living in a bungalow called 'Mount Pleasant' at 87, Connaught Crescent, Parkstone, Poole, and they were still there in 1962 when William's probate was finally completed.

On 1 September 1939, William was serving with the Green Howards, but we do not know when he enlisted or if he was a professional soldier. He also served with the South Wales Borderers. The UK-

based battalion of these two regiments fought in either France or Norway in 1949, so he may have seen action before joining the Royal Artillery.

In June 1939, the government started the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship (DEMS) programme, which would provide British merchant ships with some defence against enemy aircraft and surfaced submarines. These guns were manned by Royal Navy and Royal Artillery personnel. In 1940, there were not enough gunners to man all of the ships and in March a request for volunteers was sent to various infantry regiments. 940<sup>1</sup> men responded, and this may be when William joined the Royal Artillery.

By May 1941, over 9,000 soldiers were serving aboard DEMS and it was decided to create the Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Royal Artillery from the existing serving soldiers. William belonged to 6 Battery, 3<sup>rd</sup> Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment which was responsible for South Wales and the Severn Estuary. 6 Battery originally had its headquarters in Cardiff, but in 1941 it moved to Thornbury, and on 1 November 1942, it became the 6<sup>th</sup> Maritime Royal Artillery Regiment.

All of the DEMS gunners signed on as members of the ship's crew, i.e. as merchant seamen, and were therefore under the authority of the ship's master. As a merchant seaman, William could have visited neutral countries without being interned.

William's last voyage was on the Otina, a 6,217 ton tanker, built in 1938 and belonging to the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co Ltd. The Otina sailed from Belfast on 12 December 1942 and joined convoy ON 153 destined for New York. She was sailing 'in ballast', i.e. with her tanks full of sea water, as she was going to the USA to collect a cargo of 'white oil' (refined mineral oil). There were seven DEMS gunners on board the ship: William, five from the Royal Navy, and Thomas Thompson who was also from 6 Battery.

This description of the sinking of the Otina is taken from the website *uboat.net*:<sup>2</sup>

At 20.21 hours on 20 December 1942, the Otina (Master Robert Ranson), a straggler from convoy ON-153, was hit by two torpedoes from U-621 and sank at 21.06 hours [about 1,000 miles] west of Ireland. The master, 52 crew members and seven gunners were lost.

Chillingly, the Otina's 'Merchant Shipping Movement Card'<sup>3</sup> ends:

Torpedoed 47°40'N 33°06W ...  
Going slowly, heavy seas. Taken to boats.  
Sunk

William may have died when the Otina was torpedoed or he may have died some days later in the lifeboats; perhaps the former would have been preferable.

William has no known grave other than the Atlantic Ocean but is remembered on the Chatham Naval Memorial, panel 67.2, and on the 6<sup>th</sup> Maritime Regiment Memorial at the Thornbury & District Museum. In Wells, he is remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

His wife, May, died in 1962, without remarrying.

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<sup>1</sup> "Unsung heroes – the Maritime Royal Artillery and armed merchant ships", The Times of Malta, 17 September 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/2526.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Held at the National Archives, Kew, reference BT 389/23/11.