

## George Walter Alther, Jr.

Born: April 14, 1918  
Hometown: Melrose, MA  
Class: 1940 - USMMCC Cadet Officer  
1939 - Massachusetts Nautical School  
Service: Merchant Marine  
Position / Rank: Second Mate  
Date / Place of death: July 14, 1943 / Avola, Sicily  
Date / Place of burial: July 14, 1943 / Lost at Sea - Avola, Sicily  
Age: 25



According to U.S. Maritime Commission records, George W. Alther was assigned to the SS President Monroe as a Cadet Officer in September 1939. Prior to being assigned to the President Monroe he was employed aboard ship as a Quartermaster for the Eastern Steamship Company. In 1940 George Alther was promoted to Third Mate aboard the SS President Monroe. He subsequently served in the same capacity aboard the SS President Buchanan until 1942. Sometime in April 1942 George Alther signed on aboard the MS Chant, the former MS Hulda Maersk, which was owned by the War Shipping Administration and operated on their behalf by American President Lines.



The Chant sailed for Scotland where it was loaded with aviation gasoline in drums plus a deck cargo of coal and two motor launches for the embattled island of Malta. The Chant sailed in convoy WS-19Z to Gibraltar with three other ships. Upon their departure from Gibraltar to Malta the ships and their escort became part of one of the great convoy battles of World War II, Operation Harpoon. The convoy was escorted by a powerful task force of twelve Royal Navy ships, known as "Force X" which included the anti-aircraft carrier cruiser HMS Cairo. The escort proved to be not quite powerful enough. On the run through the Mediterranean, the convoy and its escorts fought off attacks by Italian cruisers, destroyers, high altitude bombers, dive bombers and torpedo bombers. On June 15, 1942, after days of fighting off attacks, a bomber got through the escort's anti-aircraft fire, hitting the Chant with one of its bombs. The bomb struck the Chant at #4 hold, igniting the gasoline and setting off explosions in the rest of the gasoline and the ammunition for the ship's guns. George Alther and nearly all of the crew were able to abandon ship and were rescued by the

British Minesweeper HMS Rye (J-76). He arrived back in New York aboard the SS Queen Mary on September 19, 1942.

George Alther signed on as Second Mate aboard the SS Timothy Pickering at the port of New York on December 11, 1942. Also signing on were four Cadet-Midshipmen; Christopher Brennan (Deck), William Lyman (Deck), Warren Marks (Engine) and Lawrence McLaughlin (Engine). On the morning of July 13, 1943, just three days after the Invasion of Sicily began, the Timothy Pickering arrived off the British Army's invasion beach at Avola, Sicily with 130 British soldiers aboard. In addition, the ship was carrying an almost identical cargo to that of the ill-fated MS Chant; munitions, TNT, high octane gasoline, artillery pieces and trucks. On the morning of July 13, the vessel was anchored in the harbor, about half a mile from shore, with the bow in and the starboard side closest to the shore. The crew had begun unloading the vessel's cargo.

At 1040 GCT, the allied shipping off Avola was attacked by German dive bombers. One of them dropped a single 500-pound bomb on the Timothy Pickering at its Number 4 hold. The bomb detonated in the ship's engine room, causing a massive explosion of the ship's cargo with resulting fire. The explosion left a gaping hole in the starboard side of the ship causing it to quickly begin sinking. With no time to either launch lifeboats or be given an order to abandon ship the crew began to leave the ship immediately, leaping over the side into the oily waters, or sliding down ropes and the anchor chain. In May 1944 the Academy's newspaper, *Polaris*, printed a report on the loss of the Timothy Pickering which expanded on the report of the sinking by Cadet-Midshipman Brennan, one of only 29 survivors.

"The ticklish cargo of explosives and high-test octane was being gently worked over the side to waiting supply barges when one such raider appeared and began to attack. The plane's bomb landed squarely into the open number four hatch of Brennan's ship. The explosion was instantaneous. Sheets of yellow flame and billowing clouds of smoke rose hundreds of feet in the air. Two adjacent ships were set afire; others were bombarded with huge chunks of metal. Cadet-Midshipmen on other vessels heard the explosion some 50 miles out at sea. To stunned observers nearby, the doomed ship seemed to dissolve into thin air.

However, Brennan was the only survivor of four Cadet-Midshipmen who signed on aboard the Timothy Pickering. The other three perished in the explosion and ensuing fire. In addition to the three Cadet-Midshipmen, nineteen other crew members, eight Naval Armed Guard Sailors, and 100 British soldiers perished.

Second Mate George W. Alther, Jr., the Timothy Pickering's 25-year-old Second Mate and 1940 Cadet Officer was killed while helping the ship's wounded Armed Guard Officer abandon ship. For this action he was posthumously awarded the Merchant Marine's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award. His citation reads,

**The President of the United States takes Pleasure in Presenting the Merchant  
Marine Distinguished Service Medal to**

George W. Alther, Jr.  
Second Mate on SS Timothy Pickering  
October 14, 1943

For heroism above and beyond the call of duty.

The vessel in which he was serving in 1941 was bombed by enemy planes and again a ship in which he served in 1942 was bombed and sunk. During an enemy air attack on a Sicilian port [Avola, Sicily] his third wartime vessel, loaded with ammunition, TNT, aviation gasoline, and British troops, was hit by a 500-pound bomb. The ship was split in two--ammunition exploded in the holds--and the water around the ship was a surface of burning gasoline. The Gunnery Officer was wounded on the lower deck amidship which was enveloped by flames, but with utter disregard for his own safety, Second Officer Alther went to his assistance and in so doing gave his life.

In unhesitatingly risking, and subsequently giving, his life in an heroic attempt to rescue a wounded fellow officer he maintained and enhanced the finest traditions of the United States Merchant Marine.

For the President  
Admiral Emory Scott Land

For his merchant marine service, George W. Alther was also awarded the Mariner's Medal, Combat Bar (with two stars), Merchant Marine Defense Bar, Atlantic War Zone Bar, Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, Pacific War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal and Presidential Testimonial Letter. In addition, the Liberty Ship George W. Alther was also named in his honor.

George W. Alther was the oldest of George W. Alther, Sr. and Hilda Alther's four sons. George's younger brothers were Edward, Frederick and Richard. Hilda Alther died in 1940. The 1940 and 1930 U.S. Census indicates that George Alther, Sr. was a railroad fireman working on steam locomotives.