

William Vaughan O'Hara

Born: August 15, 1921
Hometown: Cambridge, MA
Class: 1943
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Deck Cadet
Date / Place of death: November 29, 1942 / 28S, 54E
Date / Place of burial: November 29, 1942 / Lost at Sea -- 28S, 54E
Age: 21



William V. O'Hara signed on as Deck Cadet aboard the MS Sawokla at the port of New York on June 16, 1942. Also aboard was his classmate, Meyer Egenthal, the Engine Cadet. The ship sailed two days later loaded with general war cargo bound for the Soviet Union via Abadan, Iran. After arriving in Abadan via Port of Spain, Trinidad and Capetown, South Africa the Sawokla delivered its cargo. The ship then sailed in ballast for Colombo and then to Calcutta, India where it loaded a cargo of gunny sacks in bales. The Sawokla returned to Colombo for sailing directions and to pick up some home bound passengers.



MS Sawokla

On November 21, 1942, the MS Sawokla sailed from Colombo with a crew of 41, a Navy Armed Guard contingent of 13 and five passengers. Eight days out of port, and about 400 miles south of Madagascar, the Sawokla was sighted and attacked by the German surface raider Michel. Junior Third Mate Stanley Willner, a Merchant Marine Cadet Corps Cadet Officer on his first voyage as a ship's officer, was standing the 8-12 watch on the bridge the night of November 19, 1942. According to Willner, at about 2035 he saw the outlines of a ship take shape in the darkness and immediately called the Captain to the bridge. However, just as the Captain was opening his cabin door the Michel opened fire on Sawokla, hitting the bridge and radio shack with its main battery.

The captain was killed immediately as were most of the bridge watch and forecastle lookout. During the attack all of the ship's lifeboats had been so badly damaged by the gunfire that they were no longer seaworthy. The crew, Armed Guard and passengers who survived the initial attack were forced to jump overboard into the rough seas. Willner and 38 other men were rescued by the Michel. The raider remained in the area for two days searching for survivors. In the very precise and detailed report written by Stanley Willner after the war, he stated that according to his questioning of the other crew members, Cadet-Midshipmen William V. O'Hara and Meyer Egenthal were seen jumping overboard after the attack, but were not seen again.

For those that had survived the initial attack, the ordeal had just begun. On February 19, 1943 the Michel arrived in Singapore where its prisoners were taken to the Japanese Prisoner of War camp at the former Changi Prison. According to Willner, on May 17, 1943 he, five other Officers from the Sawokla and one of the Sawokla's passengers were among 8,000 Officer POWs taken from Changi to work as slave labor on the Thailand-Burma Railway. This railroad is sometimes known as the "Death Railway" and immortalized in the book and film "The Bridge Over the River Kwai". Willner was one of approximately 3,000 survivors of his group. When Changi Prison was liberated September 7, 1945 Willner weighed 75 pounds, almost ½ of his normal 135 pounds. Willner, along with the Sawokla's Second Mate, Dennis Roland, worked for decades to earn official veteran's status for merchant seamen in World War II. As part of this effort Stanley Willner served as a named plaintiff in litigation that finally bore fruit in 1988, more than four decades after Willner's ordeal.

Cadet-Midshipman William V. O'Hara was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar with star, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Mediterranean Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

William V. O'Hara was the youngest son and second of Thomas E. O'Hara and Bernice J. O'Hara's four children. William's older brother was Thomas, while his younger sisters were (Bernice) Jane and Ruth. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, Thomas O'Hara was a Dentist in Cambridge, MA. Following his graduation from High School, William entered Northeastern University where he was a member of their class of 1945. However, based on the dates of his service, William V. O'Hara left Northeastern in early 1942, shortly after America officially entered World War II.