

William Stewart Sempell

Born: January 23, 1924
Hometown: Brooklyn, NY
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Engine Cadet
Date / Place of death: September 14, 1943 / Gulf of Salerno
Date / Place of burial: September 14, 1943 / Lost at Sea – Gulf of Salerno
Age: 19



William S. Sempell signed on as Engine Cadet aboard the *SS Bushrod Washington* on May 7, 1943 at New York, NY, just two weeks after the ship had been completed. He was joined by his classmate, Cadet-Midshipman George E. Pancratz who signed on as Deck Cadet the same day. Shortly thereafter the *Bushrod Washington* sailed for the Mediterranean where it remained for the rest of its short life.

On September 3, 1943, the *Bushrod Washington* sailed from Oran with a convoy bound for the landing beaches at Salerno, Italy, with a cargo of ammunition, high octane aviation gasoline in drums, bombs, "C" rations, Army trucks and landing craft. The vessel arrived at Salerno on September 11th, and anchored about three quarters of a mile off Salerno Beach, in a northeast-southwest direction, stern to shore. The *Bushrod Washington* was carrying a crew of 42 merchant seaman and 33 Naval Armed Guard. The ship's Master was Jonathan Wainwright, V, son of General Jonathan Wainwright, the American Commander at Corregidor and Bataan in the Philippines.

On September 14th at 1322, the vessel was attacked by either German dive bombers or glide bombs. Much of the cargo had been unloaded over the previous days, but the gasoline and explosives were still on board. One bomb missed the ship by about 150 feet while another struck the vessel in the midship house between Lifeboat #2 and #4. This bomb went through the crew mess room and exploded below the main deck. Reports differ on whether the bomb hit the engine room directly, or landed in the ice machine room nearby. In either case, the ship's engines were moved to starboard by the force of the explosion, and the port boiler exploded. The engine crew on duty, which included the First Assistant Engineer and the Cadet-Midshipman William Sempell, never made it out of the engine room.

The explosion also ignited the gasoline in the Number 4 hold, and within minutes the entire ship was a raging inferno. At 1352, the Captain ordered the crew to abandon ship. Many crew members made it into the #1 and #3 lifeboats. Others jumped overboard and were rescued by small boats that came alongside the ship. The injured crew members were placed on a hospital ship. The Captain and four other crew members later re-boarded the ship in an attempt to extinguish the fire, but this proved impossible, and the ship was finally abandoned. Six members of the *Bushrod Washington's* crew and one of the Naval Armed Guard were lost in the bombing.

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

William "Bill" Sempell was the oldest son and second of Otto William Sempell and Helen Sempell's three children. Bill's big sister was Carol, while his little brother was Warren. The family lived in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn where Otto was employed as a plumber. According to the Sempell family, William was baptized by his great-grandfather, a minister in Ocean Grove, New Jersey where the family had a summer home.

Bill's sister Carol recalled that he sold magazines on the street as a child, and later ushered in local movie theaters. Bill was a Boy Scout, was active in his church, and often took advantage of the cultural events in nearby New York City. Carol recalled that he spent many days at the New York World's Fair in 1939, and also visited Radio City Music Hall soon after its opening. After Bill graduated from Erasmus High School he applied to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. Helen Sempell, who lived to be 106, always kept a framed picture of Bill near her. Otto Sempell always led the Memorial Day activities in Pocantico Hills, NY where the family moved in 1945. Warren, Bill's younger brother, followed Bill to Kings Point. He began his Sea Year on January 1, 1945 as a Deck Cadet aboard the *SS Alden Besse*, less than two years after his brother's death.