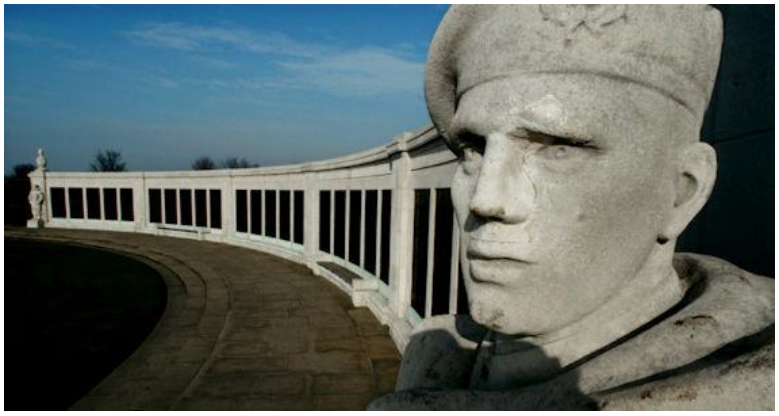
Fred Somerset Mann





Rank: - Marine

Number: - CH/X 1559

Regiment: - Royal Marines H.M.S. Curacoa.

Died: - H.M.S. Curacoa sunk after collision with the ocean liner Queen Mary 2 October 1942 aged 24 years.

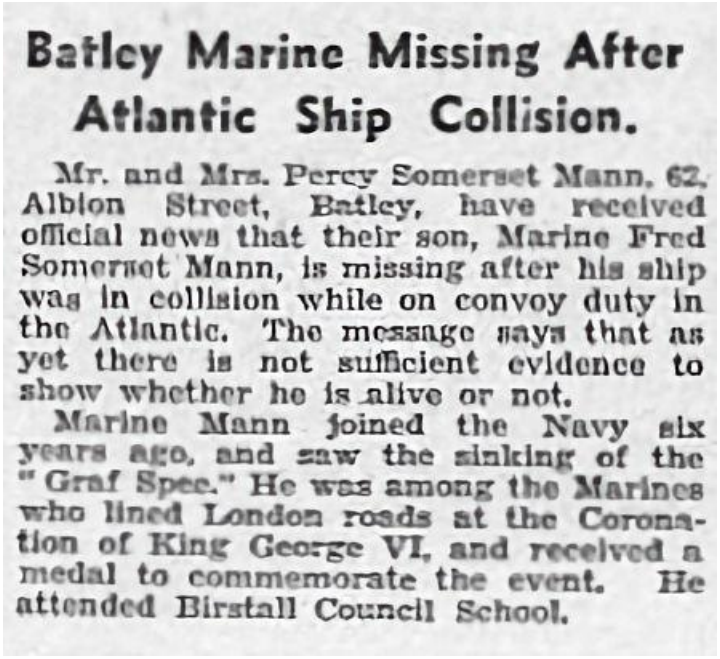
Cemetery: - Chatham Naval Memorial Ref 65, 2.

Fred Somerset was born in Batley on 30 April 1918 the son of Percy Somerset and Doris Mann (nee Wilson, m. 1917, registered Dewsbury) of 62 Albion Street, Batley

Fred attended Birstall Council School and joined the Navy in 1936.He saw the sinking of the “Graf Spee” and was among the Marines who lined London roads at the Coronation of King George V1 and received a medal to celebrate the event.

On a near perfect afternoon on 2nd October, 1942 the troopship carrying 15,000 US troops, was off the Irish coast. The vessel was setting a zigzag course to help evade U-boats and long-range German bombers. The “Queen Mary” had

caught up with her 4,290-tonne escort vessel, the RN's "Curacoa", and was set to overtake her.



Batley Marine Missing After Atlantic Ship Collision.

Mr. and Mrs. Percy Somerset Mann, 62, Albion Street, Batley, have received official news that their son, Marine Fred Somerset Mann, is missing after his ship was in collision while on convoy duty in the Atlantic. The message says that as yet there is not sufficient evidence to show whether he is alive or not.

Marine Mann joined the Navy six years ago, and saw the sinking of the "Graf Spee." He was among the Marines who lined London roads at the Coronation of King George VI, and received a medal to commemorate the event. He attended Birstall Council School.

Batley News, 17 Oct 1942

Aboard the "Curacoa", seaman Ernest Watson, was admiring the "Queen Mary's" majestic lines when he noticed the bow was swinging toward the cruiser. To his horror, she continued to swing and was soon on a collision course. The gap narrowed inexorably as the stunned Watson finally found his vocal cords and screamed, "She's going to ram us." Later Watson described how many of his mates had been so shocked they could not move. Within seconds, there was a screech of twisted metal followed by the hiss of steam and the screams of those injured or trapped below. The "Queen Mary", 20 times larger than the cruiser, had been travelling at top revs giving her a speed of 28.5 knots. The impact swung the "Curacoa" broadside on and the troopship sliced through her 10 cm armour plating. It was all over in seconds, and the troopship continued on her zigzag course leaving the "Curacoa" cut in two with the ford and aft ends divided by a 100 m strip of ocean.

At the moment of impact, as the "Curacoa" reeled in the water, Watson and many other seamen on deck were thrown into the freezing water. Even as they surfaced, they watched in horror as the stern quickly sank taking with it the men trapped behind the water-tight doors. The for'd section followed soon after, leaving the men in the murky water surrounded by debris, oil and drowned or mutilated bodies. It was every man for himself as survivors clung to floating wreckage. They were about 20 nautical miles off the Irish coast which, had boats or rafts been launched, would have meant they were within easy reach of safety.

The survivors believed the "Queen Mary" would turn back to pick them up; it was with obvious despair that they watched her disappear over the horizon. To sail on was probably the toughest decision "Queen Mary's" captain, Cyril Illingworth, ever had to make. The WW I veteran had many years of experience

by the time he had risen to become Cunard White Star's senior commander and master of the "Queen Mary". He was obeying orders that under no circumstances was he to stop until the "Queen Mary" had safely delivered the troops to Britain. His only option had been to signal nearby British destroyers to rescue survivors.

Two reacted to his message and steamed toward the wreckage where two hours after the collision, they found many bodies of sailors who had died of hypothermia. Only the hardiest lived long enough to land in Londonderry the next day. Of the "Curacoa's" 430 personnel only 99 seamen and two officers survived. Because of war-time security the official inquiry was delayed until the war in Europe was over. Then, in June 1945, only a few weeks after VE Day, the Admiralty Commissioners sued Cunard White Star Line claiming the "Queen Mary" had been responsible.

It appeared to be a clear-cut case. The "Curacoa's" captain, John Boutwood, had given evidence to a RN inquiry and was acquitted without a reprimand. Later he gained the DSO and MID. Boutwood said the "Curacoa" steamed at some 3 knots slower than the larger vessel which had been in the process of overtaking at the time of the collision. He said he had been amazed when the troopship continued turning to starboard and closed the gap between the vessels. When the collision occurred, he, and all others on the bridge, had clung to whatever was nearest.

Fred Somerset is remembered with Honour at Batley War Memorial.



Thanks to Naval Historical Society, Australia