

William West

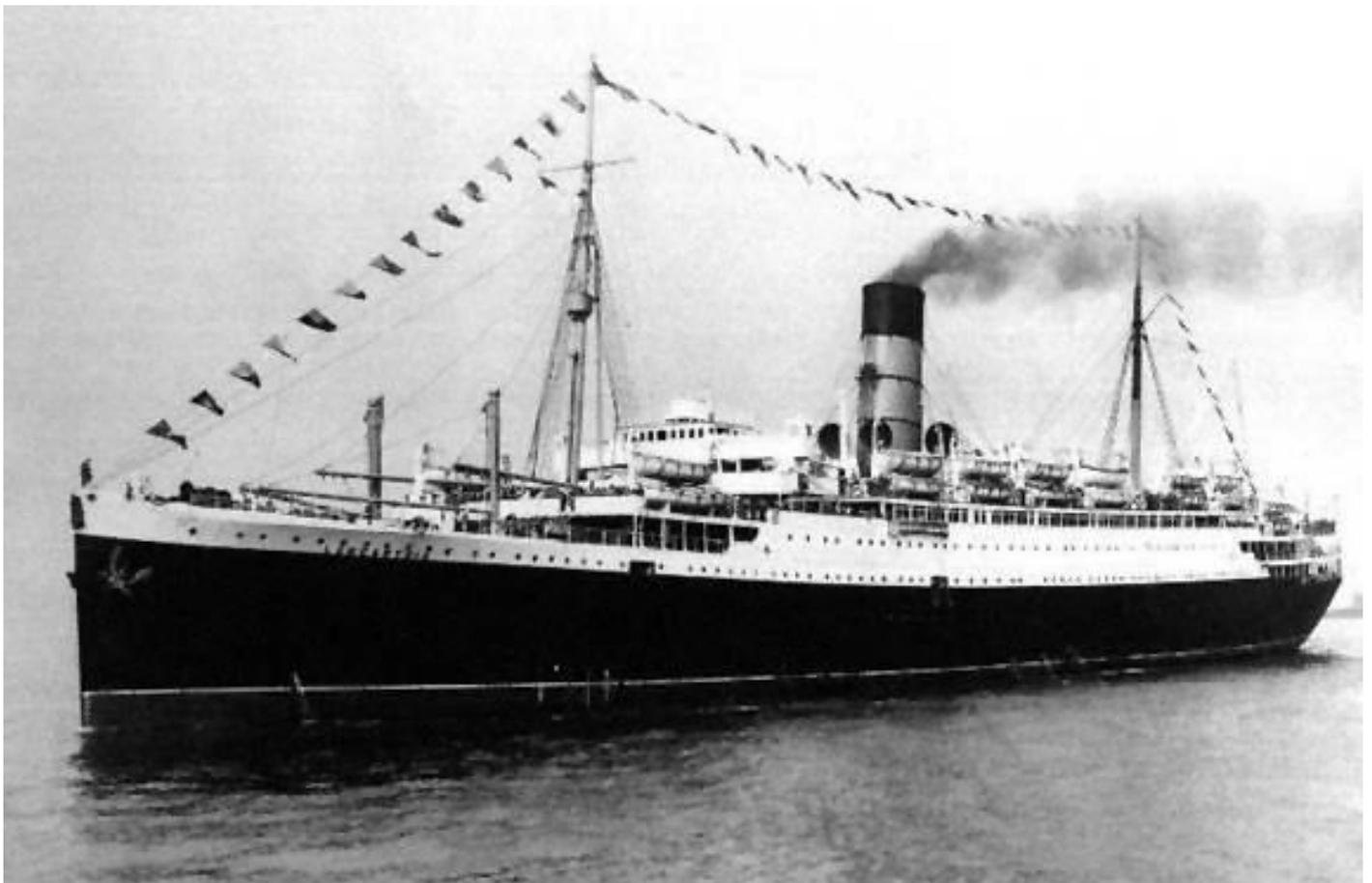
William was the son of John Alfred and Alice West who lived in a bungalow at Torksey Lock and are buried in Kettlethorpe churchyard. He served in the Royal Engineers and achieved the rank of WO1 (Warrant Officer Class 1) with the service number 1861885. He was married to Beatrice who lived in York. He was in France as a Clerk of Works with the Air Advance Striking Force when Dunkirk fell to the advancing German Army in 1940. With many others he made his way to St Nazaire and ships were sent to get them back to England. He was on board the RMT Lancastria when she was sunk at her mooring off St Nazaire. He is remembered on the Dunkirk Memorial (Nord).

Historical Note

The RMT Lancastria was built for Cunard in 1920 as RMS Tyrrhenia by William Beardmore & Co of Clydebank, Glasgow. Given the nickname "Old Soup Tureen" as it was difficult to pronounce, the name was changed to Lancastria in 1924 and she became RMT Lancastria when requisitioned in April 1940. With the Oronsay and three other transports she was sent to St Nazaire on the 14th June 1940 from Liverpool. She arrived at the mouth of the Loire estuary on the 16th and anchored 11 miles SW of St Nazaire. By noon on the 17th she had embarked between 4000 and 9000 people, comprising civilian refugees (including embassy staff and Fairy Aviation employees), line-of-communication troops (such as Pioneer and RASC soldiers) and RAF personnel. Although a tally was kept, this was lost when she sank. The ship's official capacity was 2,200, including the 375 man crew, but the captain was instructed by the Royal Navy to "load as many men as possible without regard to the limits set down under international law".

At 1350, during an air raid, the nearby Oronsay was hit on the bridge by a bomb, but was able to sail. Lancastria was advised to sail but the captain elected to wait for a destroyer escort. In a fresh air raid she was hit by 3 bombs and she rolled over and sank within 20 minutes. Many drowned or were choked by fuel oil, but there were 2,477 survivors.

The Lancastria Association lists 1,738 deaths, the highest death toll for UK forces in a single engagement in the whole of WW2. The immense loss of life was such that the British Government suppressed news of the disaster through the D Notice system; However it was reported in the USA some five weeks later and then in the British press.



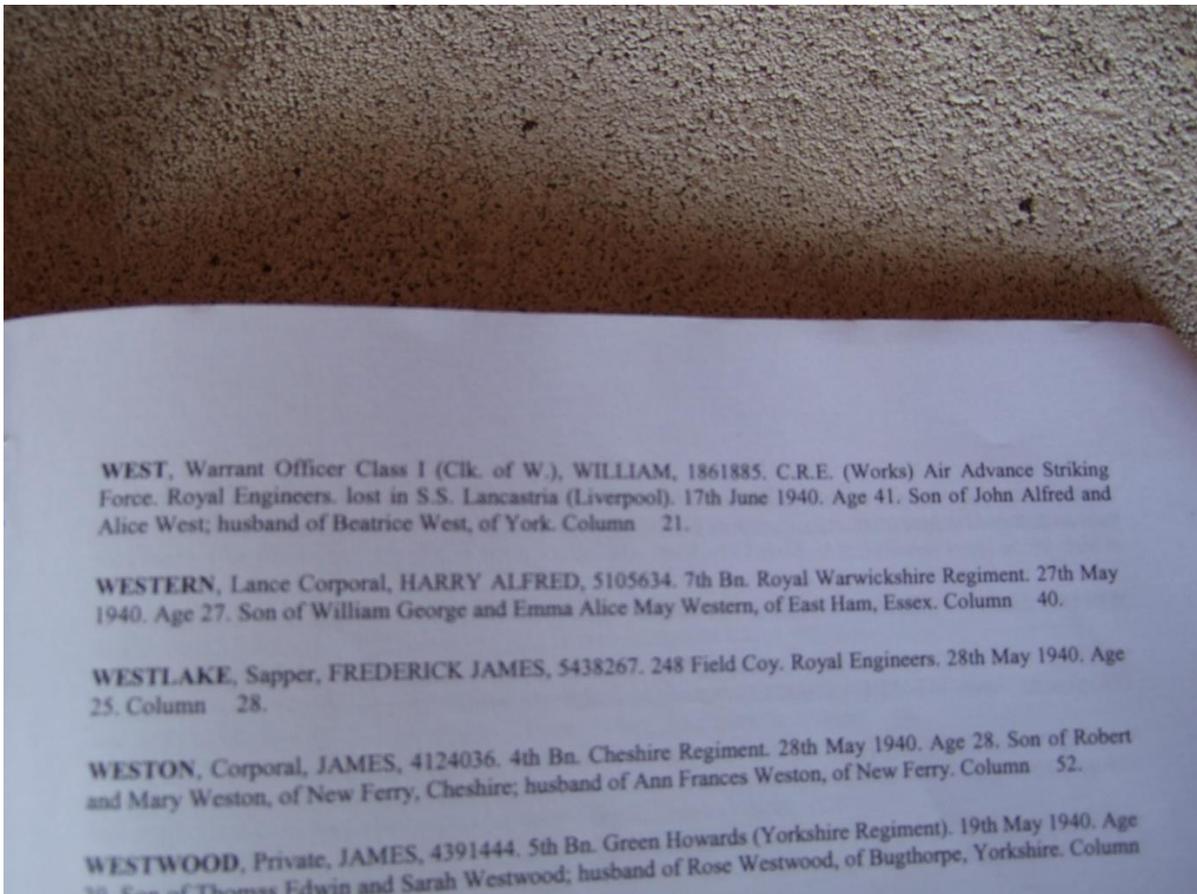
RMS Lancastria before her requisition in 1940



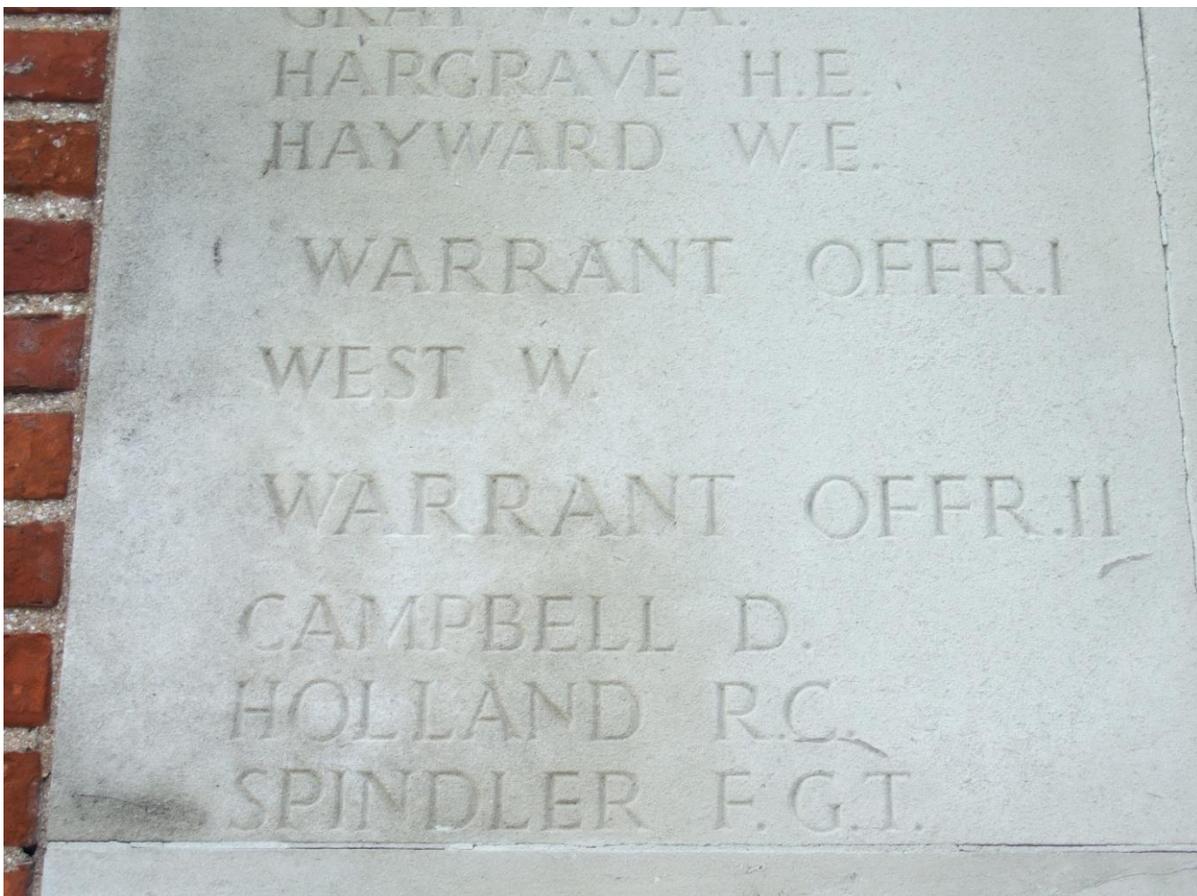
St Nazaire seafront memorial



Dunkirk Memorial (Nord)



Memorial book entry



Column 21