

Able Seaman Robert John Botham V-11889



Able Seaman Bob Botham. Photo: For
Posterity Sake

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Melfort SK, 21 January 1921**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 21 October 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Farmer**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *St. Croix* was torpedoed and sank on 20 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; and Botham Bay in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory**

Robert John Botham, known as Bob, was the first of ten children born to Doris and Robert Botham on 21 January 1921 in Melfort, Saskatchewan. Shortly after his birth, the family established themselves in the village of Plato, Saskatchewan about 90 miles as the crow flies southwest of Saskatoon. His mother Doris was born in Iowa in 1903 and emigrated with her family in 1904 to an area about 25 miles south of where Plato would later be established. His father Robert was born in Ontario in 1893. It is not clear where and when Frank and Doris met. The 1921 census taken in June records that they were living in the village and farming land nearby. After Bob, five brothers followed: William born in 1922; twins Harold and Charles in 1925; Donald in 1928; and Gerald in 1939. Sister Pearl was born in 1932; Audrey in 1934; Marjorie in 1935; and Joyce in 1937.

Perhaps the best way to form a picture of Bob is to examine the environment in which he grew up. Plato was established in the rural municipality of Snipe Lake in 1915. The municipality was established in 1905 on a 600 square-mile parcel of prairie bounded on the south by the South Saskatchewan River. The administrative center was established in the town of Eston 100 miles southwest of Saskatoon and 180 miles west-north-west of Regina.

The settlement came in two waves – 1905 and 1910. The settlers laboriously came overland by carts and wagons pulled by oxen and horses from relatively distant railway points. The best-equipped settlers were Americans with farming knowledge and experience. The least equipped were from Britain with little or no knowledge of agriculture. The third group was from eastern Europe. Often impoverished, the Eastern Europeans sought to be free from oppression and turmoil. Upon arrival, they all began to break the grassland with ploughs pulverizing the soil and destroying the elaborate grass root system which had anchored the soil and preserved moisture for thousands of years. Thus, they set the stage for the dust storms, soil erosion, and crop failures of the 1930s.

The Canadian Northern Railway built a line across the municipality along which villages were built about every twenty miles. That interval was set because that was the distance horses could draw a wagon full of grain to town and return in a day. Thus, Plato was established about twenty miles east of Eston. The decade between 1915 and 1925 saw a building boom in the village. Two churches, two grain elevators, a school, soon replaced with a larger one, a railway station, a lumber yard, a bank, a drug store, two blacksmith shops, a Case implement dealer, an automobile service station and garage,



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two general stores, a hardware store, a rooming house, and about thirty dwellings in all were built in the period.

The population grew to 135 in the first year and serviced a surrounding rural population of about four times that number. Despite its rapid growth, however, it remained in the 19th century for decades. There were no electrical or water/sewage systems in the village and the water table was deep underground making well digging difficult. Consequently, water was transported by wagons drawn by oxen, mules, and horses from various sources up to forty miles away. Heat for cooking and comfort was provided by wood and coal-burning stoves. Firewood was also collected from distant sources while coal was brought in by the railroad and sold in the lumber yard as was coal oil which was burned in lamps to provide illumination. In the winter, ice was cut from the South Saskatchewan River some twenty-five miles away and stored in ice houses in the village to later be distributed for use in domestic ice boxes. All this transportation provided Frank with an opportunity that he took by establishing a dray business to augment his farming income.

The villages were the hub of each district with the churches and schools at their center. Agriculture fairs were the highlight of the summer with horse racing and baseball tournaments. Hockey rivalries developed in the winter. Democracy flourished with elected officials overseeing such concerns as education, road construction, tax policy, and even weed control.

With the coming of the Great Depression and its accompanying drought, the rather idyllic circumstances changed. The drought did not devastate agriculture in the area, but it did have a profound effect on crop yields exacerbated by falling commodity prices. Not willing to wait for the Dominion and Provincial governments to take action, the elected Council set up a system of relief (now referred to as social assistance). As well, a bartering system emerged in which farmers used produce as currency. In 1934, the Council signed the Doctors' Agreement in which two resident doctors agreed to operate the hospital located in Eston and to provide emergency medical services to residents across the municipality paid for by the taxpayers without charge to the individual patients. For the next eighteen years, the program worked very well, reducing the burden of worry during extremely difficult times.

Bob attended the village school and completed grade nine before leaving at the age of 15 to work on a neighbouring farm. He grew up in an atmosphere where equal parts of self-reliance, initiative, and community cooperation, seasoned with pinches of optimism and fear, prepared him for life as a member of a ship's company at war.

On 21 October 1941, Bob enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). When sworn-in, Bob was 20 years old, single, 5 feet 11 inches tall, and weighed 172 ½ pounds with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. His brother William joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. Both twins joined the Canadian Army, Charles joined the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, and Harold joined the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps.

Bob spent the next two and a half months at *Unicorn* seeing to administrative tasks until 28 December when he and six other recruits began basic training. Upon completion in April 1942, Bob was drafted to HMCS *Naden*, the large naval base in Esquimalt, BC where he first took New Entry training. On completion in July 1942, he was selected for Submarine Detector training which involved ASDIC, the submarine detection system now referred to as sonar.

There were four ASDIC ratings: the Anti-Submarine Artificer, the Submarine Detector, the Higher Submarine Detector, and the Submarine Detector Instructor. The first were highly trained technicians (referred to as artificers) who worked onshore installing, maintaining, and repairing ASDIC equipment. The Submarine Detector operated the ship-borne ASDIC equipment and performed minor maintenance under the supervision of the Higher Submarine Detector, who was the maintenance expert and senior operator onboard ship. The Submarine Detector Instructor taught ratings ashore. The four training courses, which were the pathways to these ratings differed only in emphasis. To succeed, a knowledge of seamanship, a grasp of underwater tactics and sea conditions, and an acute sense of hearing were required. The theories of sound propagation and electricity, operational procedure, and practical work-shop skills were covered.

That Bob was successful – given his rudimentary education, the “19th century” environment in which he grew up, and his unrelated work experience – is a testament to his learning ability. Bob completed Submarine Detector training on 22 August 1942 in *Naden* and was drafted to HMCS *Stadacona*, the large naval base in Halifax, NS for administrative purposes before being drafted to HMS *Manitoulin* (T-280) on 14 September 1942.

Manitoulin (T280) was built at Midland, ON for the Royal Navy and, likely, Bob travelled there for *Manitoulin*'s commissioning on 28 September 1942. Bob's time in her was short and uneventful and on 20 October he was drafted back to *Stadacona*. After three more short drafts of a few weeks each in *Stadacona* and HMCS *Annapolis*, he was drafted to HMCS *St. Croix* on 9 November 1942.

HMCS *St. Croix* was a Clemson-class commissioned into the United States Navy (USN) as USS *McCook* (DD-252) on 30 April 1919. In 1939, the ship was transferred to the Royal Navy under the *Destroyers for Bases Agreement* between the United Kingdom and the United States. Subsequently, she was transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and re-commissioned in Halifax on 24 September 1940 as HMCS *St. Croix* – named after the river that marks the New Brunswick and Maine border.

Before Ordinary Seaman Bob Botham joined *St. Croix* in early November 1942, the ship had been heavily damaged in a hurricane in 1940; damage that required four months of repairs. She had escorted 25 North Atlantic convoys, and she was credited with sinking U-90 in July 1942.



HMCS St. Croix. Source: Uboat.net

Bob arrived onboard *St. Croix* in St. John's, Newfoundland on 9 November and was promoted to Able Seaman on 24 December 1942. On 11 January 1943, Bob sailed into harm's way in *St. Croix* as a member of Escort Group C1 that shepherded convoy HX 222 to Britain. Along the way, one merchant ship was lost to a U-boat. Upon reaching United Kingdom waters, *St. Croix* put into Londonderry before proceeding to the Clyde on the west coast of Scotland, where she and her

escort group joined another convoy – KMS 10 – on 28 February 1943 to escort it to the Mediterranean. Enroute, *St. Croix* and HMCS *Shediac* shared in the destruction of the German submarine U-87 west of the Azores on 4 March 1943 and it can be speculated that Bob lent a hand in that sinking. *St. Croix* and her escort group then returned to the Clyde escorting another convoy without incident. Their busy schedule and good luck prevailed as they escorted four more convoys back and forth across the North Atlantic between 20 April and 11 August 1943.

On 19 September 1943, an escort group that included *St. Croix*, HMC Ships *St. Francis*, *Chambly*, *Morden*, and *Sackville*, and HMS *Itchen* were proceeding to the Bay of Biscay to conduct an offensive against U-boats that were transiting from five bases on the west coast of France to the Atlantic. The group was diverted to assist several convoys under attack by what turned out to be a force of 13 U-boats in an area about 400 to 500 nautical miles southwest of Iceland.

Upon reaching convoy ON.202 on 20 September, *St. Croix* was struck on the stern at 2151 by two Gnat torpedoes fired by U-305. Gravely damaged but still afloat, her ship's company began to abandon ship. Then, 53 minutes later, at 2244, she was struck by a third torpedo fired by U-305 and sunk within six minutes leaving 81 officers and men clinging to two Carley floats and a swamped whaler. HMS *Itchen* and HMS *Polyanthus* attempted to rescue the sailors in the water but broke off after *Itchen* narrowly avoided a torpedo fired at her at 2253 also by U-305. Instead, *Itchen* went on the offensive to hunt down her attacker. At 0022 on 21 September *Polyanthus* was sunk by U-952.

After dawn, *Itchen* rescued the sole survivor from *Polyanthus* and the 81 survivors from *St. Croix*. With her own ship's company of 230 officers and men, *Itchen* now had a total of 312 onboard when she was torpedoed and sunk by U-666 at 0200 on 23 September 1943. Only three survived and were rescued by the Polish merchant ship, SS *Wisla*. They were Stoker William Allan Fisher, RCNVR, from *St. Croix*, and two members of *Itchen's* ship's company. Able Seaman Robert John Botham was 22 years old when he died.

Second Son Killed in Action




PTE. C. R. BOTHAM

A.B. R. J. BOTHAM

Official information has been received by Mr. and Mrs. R. Botham of Plato that the second of their sons, Pte. Charles Raymond Botham, was killed in action May 23, while serving with a Canadian army unit in Italy. Ray was born in Plato January 9, 1924, and received his education at Plato School. His eldest brother A.B. Robert John Botham, was lost in the sinking of the destroyer *St. Croix*. Surviving are their parents, four brothers, Bill, a sergeant in the R.C.A.F. at St. Hubert, Que, Harold (twin of Ray) in the tank corps at Camp Borden, Donald and Gerald at home, and four sisters, Pearl, Audrey, Marjorie and Joyce, all at home.

Source: Saskatoon Star-Phoenix

Stoker Fisher provided valuable information regarding who of *St. Croix's* ship's company had been rescued by *Itchen*. Able Seaman Botham was not among those rescued and Stoker Fisher's observations served to bring accuracy to Able Seaman Botham's story.

For his service, Able Seaman Robert John Botham was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Doris Botham, was awarded the Memorial Cross – sadly, the first of two she would receive before the War's end.

Able Seaman Robert John Botham, like the other 146 members of *St. Croix's* ship's company, has no known grave. He is commemorated on Panel 10 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 38, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa; and Botham Bay (Lat 54° 43'N Long 102°46'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

Prepared By:

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