

## Engine Room Artificer 3rd Class Walter Bretwalda Brett V-10403



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: London England, 31 January 1911**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Queen*, 9 July 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Steam Engineer, City of Regina Light & Power**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *St. Croix* was torpedoed and sank on 20 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; Brett Creek flowing into Primrose Lake (Lat 55° 01'N Long 109° 40' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.**

Walter Bretwalda Brett, known as Walter, was the sixth of ten children born to Emma Elizabeth Brett and Ernest Ethelbert Brett on 31 January 1911 in London, England. His brothers James, Collan, Thomas, and John were born in 1903, 1905, 1913, and 1918 respectively, and sisters, Emmiline, Eva, Doreen, and Dorothy were born in 1904, 1907, 1910, and 1916. Walter's father Ernest was born in Cornwall in 1879 and his mother Emma was born in Dublin in 1882. Sadly, Emma died in 1924.

At the time of Walter's birth, the family was living in Essex, immediately northeast of London and they eventually moved to Manchester. There Walter attended school until the age of fifteen. He became an apprentice fitter and turner (lathe operator) at the John I. Thorneycroft & Company shipyard in Southampton, Hampshire. He worked there for two and a half years before returning to Manchester to complete his apprenticeship at Mather & Platt, a large engineering firm manufacturing industrial pumps.

Upon completion of his apprenticeship, at the age of 20, he emigrated to Canada alone in 1931 and settled in Regina, Saskatchewan. That year was very significant for him. He settled in a new country, met and married Hilda, and he became a father to a daughter named Helen Joy. He also found a secure well-paying job with City Light & Power operated by the City of Regina. His employment there lead him to acquire a second-class stationary engineering certificate which qualified him to operate and maintain large, complex boilers, a position he held for nine years.

In June 1940, Walter saw a newspaper advertisement placed by the Navy seeking candidates for engine room artificer positions and wrote a letter outlining his resume. It cannot be known what motivated him – perhaps patriotism. He was married with a child, he was older than the majority of recruits, and he held what was considered an essential job by the Dominion government.

Whatever the motivation, he was sworn into the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve at the Regina Division (HMCS *Queen*) on 9 July 1940 as a Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> Class (Temporary). This was upgraded the next day to Acting Engine Room Artificer (Temporary) 4<sup>th</sup> Class. He was 29 years old and married with a ten-year-old daughter. He was 5 feet 7  $\frac{3}{4}$  Inches tall and weighed 171 pounds with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion.

There were several artificer classifications in addition to Engine Room Artificer - including Radio Artificer and Electrical Artificer. Artificers were highly skilled technicians who received extensive training usually within the Navy. Their selection was usually based on the training and experience candidates had gained outside the Navy. Others were selected from “efficient” stokers. In Walter’s case, his apprenticeship at Thornycroft and Mather & Platt, his stationary engineering certificate, and his work experience at City Light & Power were directly transferable to the Navy and made him an ideal candidate.

Artificers enjoyed the pay and privileges of leading seamen, and chiefs and petty officers although they were not either. Their pay and status compensated them for what they knew not where they were in the chain of command. Engine Room Artificer 5<sup>th</sup> Class was the lowest and equated to a Leading Seaman; 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Classes equated to Petty Officers; while 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Classes equated to Chief Petty Officers.

While under initial training, which lasted well over one year, the typical Engine Room Artificer recruit wore the “square rig” of a Rating (bell bottoms, a jumper, a large square collar, and a peakless cap). Upon graduating from their initial training their uniforms were converted to the “round rig” of Chiefs and Petty Officers (four-button double-breasted jacket, straight trousers, white shirt and tie, and a peaked cap).



**SS Princess Elizabeth sailed between Victoria and Vancouver during World War II.  
Source: West Coast Ferry Archives**

Only the most senior artificers exercised authority over junior artificers and ratings - a Chief Engine Room Artificer of a ship for example. Immediately upon being sworn in, Walter was drafted to HMCS *Naden*, the large training base in Esquimalt, British Columbia, under whose authority he remained until February 1941. During that time, he underwent New Entry training which instilled in the participants that they were seamen first. The syllabus included naval discipline, squad drill, small arms familiarization, seamanship, damage control - the sort of things that equipped the graduates to be safe and useful members of the ship’s company of a warship. Upon completion of New Entry training Walter was assigned to the crew of the Canadian Pacific Railway ship, SS *Princess Elizabeth* from 18 September to 19 October 1940. It was

common practice to place aspirant Engine Room Artificers in commercial ships to gain experience. After *Princess Elizabeth*, Walter worked in the machine shops in HMC Dockyard, Esquimalt.

On 3 February 1941 Walter was drafted to HMCS *Alberni* (K-103). Named for the town of Alberni on Vancouver Island, she was a Flower Class corvette built in Esquimalt and commissioned there on 4 February 1941. Following acceptance trials and work ups *Alberni* sailed via the Panama

Canal for Halifax, Nova Scotia on 17 March in company with sister corvettes HMC Ships *Agassiz* and *Wetaskiwin*. Enroute, they stopped at San Pedro, California for fuel, where Canadian-born, Academy Award-winning actress, Mary Pickford, and her equally famous actor husband, Douglas Fairbanks, hosted a party for their ships' companies. Walter made good use of his time on *Alberni*. On 15 February, he was granted a Boiler Room Watchkeeping Certificate and was confirmed as an Engine Room Artificer 4<sup>th</sup> Class on 23 March 1941.

Upon arrival in Halifax on 13 April 1941, Walter was drafted to HMCS *Bersimis* (W 05), a tug assigned to HMCS *Protector*, the naval base at Sydney, Nova Scotia where he served until 22 January 1942. His time onboard *Bersimis* was uneventful from a combat perspective, this permitted him the time needed to complete all the engineering training requirements to be granted an Engine Room Watch Keeping Certificate in June 1941.

On 23 January 1942, Walter was drafted to HMCS *St. Croix* (I-81).

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 *Destroyed for Bases Agreement* between the United Kingdom and the United States. Subsequently, she was transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy 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. Thus began an eventful career

On 30 November 1940, she sailed from Halifax for the United Kingdom and encountered a hurricane enroute. Heavily damaged she returned to Halifax for repairs which took until mid-March 1941. Then she was assigned to convoy escort duty primarily in the North Atlantic and escorted a total of 36 convoys during her service – 18 after Walter joined the ship. Most of the convoys were between St. John's, Newfoundland, and Northern Ireland. While on escort duty with convoy ON.113, she sank U-boat *U-90* on 24 July 1942, and on 4 March 1943, while escorting convoy KMS.10 from Britain to Algeria, she assisted HMCS *Shediac* in destroying *U-87*.

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 the ship. Then, 53 minutes later, at 2244, she was struck by a third torpedo fired by *U-305* and sunk within 6 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. Upon arrival back in Canada on December 6, Stoker Fisher was able to give a detailed account regarding in sinking of both ships.

Walter, like the other 146 members of *St. Croix's* ship's company, has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 10, and on Page 139 in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 139, Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa. Brett Creek flowing into Primrose Lake (Lat 55° 01'N Long 109° 40' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

For his service, Engine Room Artificer 3rd Class Walter Bretwalda Brett was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His wife, Hilda Brett, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

#### **Postscript:**

From his naval personnel file, it is evident that Walter performed his duties very well. On 9 July 1943 he was awarded his first Good Conduct Badge and on 20 August, just one month before *St. Croix's* sinking, Walter was considered by *St. Croix's* Engineering Officer and Commanding Officer to be:

*"...in all respects capable of taking charge of the Machinery of a small ship; is considered fit for the rating of Chief. E.R.A. and is recommended for this advancement."*

The recommendation was approved on 29 September 1943 - nine days after Walter perished. Such is the fog of war.

#### **Prepared By:**

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