

Petty Officer Stoker Dwight Russell Cooke V-11244



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Saskatoon SK, 6 March 1917**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 29 January 1936**
- **Civilian Occupation: Radio Service man**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Valleyfield* was torpedoed and sank on 7 May 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12 and Cooke Lake (Lat 56° 17'N Long 105° 17' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.**

Dwight Russell Cooke, known as Russell, was the youngest of five children born to Dora Maud (Smithson) Cooke and Benjamin Billingsley Cooke on 6 March 1918 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Brother Robert was born in 1907, Charles in 1909, Benjamin in 1911, and sister Mary in 1913. Russell's father, Benjamin Sr. was born in Carlisle, Quebec in 1883 and established himself as a wholesale lumber and fuel dealer there before emigrating to Stillwater, Minnesota where he again established a lumber/fuel business. Dora was born in Stillwater in 1879 and married Benjamin there in 1905.

In 1908, they moved to Saskatoon with young Robert and Dora's mother, Laura Smithson. There, as indicated in the Saskatoon Henderson's Directory, they settled into a large three-story house in the comfortable Nutana neighbourhood, and, once again, Benjamin went into the lumber and fuel business operating under the name B.B.Cooke. His timing could not have been better because Saskatoon was on the cusp of a building boom. Sometime after, Dora's brother Dwight, also born in Stillwater, arrived in Saskatoon where he enlisted in the 96th Battalion (Canadian Highlanders) on 30 December 1916. He was killed in action in France in June 1917. Consequently, Russell was named in memory of his uncle. In 1922 the family moved to Banff, Alberta where, tragically, Dora died in June 1923. In 1924 the family returned to Saskatoon and their large home and Russell was enrolled in Buena Vista Public School. The 1926 Census records that Benjamin Sr. married Alice Emma Marshall. Alice was born in Wisconsin in 1891, emigrated to western Canada in 1902 and had two daughters - Dorothy 14 and Florence 12 at the time of her marriage to Benjamin.

Russell completed Grades 1-8 at Buena Vista and Grades 9-10 at the Saskatoon Technical Collegiate Institute in 1934 before leaving school at the age of 16. The older brothers began leaving home around the same time which resulted in the family moving to an apartment in 1934.

Following his completion of Grade 10, Russell worked as an apprentice radio repair man for two years.

On 29 January 1936, Russell enrolled in the Royal Canadian Navy Voluntary Reserve (RCNVR) at the Saskatoon Division as an Ordinary Seaman. (Note: He was attested by Lieutenant W.F. Campbell who as the Commanding Officer of HMCS *Louisburg* would be killed in action in 1942.) He also applied for entry into the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) on 1 June 1936. There are no documents in Russell's naval personnel file which denote the disposal of the RCN application. The results of a medical examination dated 14 August 1937, however, indicate that Russell did not pass a subsequent Ishihara colour blindness test. Since colour differentiation was a requirement in the Seaman branch, Russell was deemed medically unfit and released on 30 September 1937.

In May 1940 Russell reapplied for enrollment in the RCNVR. In doing so he reported that he had had three civilian jobs between 1936 and 1940 each lasting about one year. He had been a coal miner, a store clerk, and a bus boy at the Hotel Vancouver. His application was successful, and he returned to the naval fold in Saskatoon on 31 May 1940 as a Stoker 2nd Class – a trade with a more lenient colour vision standard. He was single, 5 feet 11 ½ inches tall and weighed 143 ½ pounds with brown hair, hazel eyes and a dark complexion. Brothers Robert and Benjamin apparently both enrolled in the armed forces but no details are available.

Russell remained in *Unicorn* attending to administrative details and taking basic training until 10 December 1940 when he was drafted to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, British Columbia. There he continued training until 30 September 1941. During that period, he successfully completed New Entry training and Gunnery training by the end of January. His performance in those two courses was rated "superior". He was next loaded onto the Technical Training Course at the Stokers' Training Establishment in *Naden* from which he graduated on 7 April again with a "superior" rating.

He was then engaged in various duties in *Naden* and rated Acting Stoker 1st Class in May. On 1 August 1941, Russell was drafted to HMCS *Minas*, a newly constructed Bangor class minesweeper, in Vancouver where she was commissioned the next day. After acceptance trials and work ups, *Minas* set out for Halifax, NS in September arriving there on 19 October 1941. Russell was awarded an Auxiliary Machinery Watchkeeping Certificate and drafted to HMCS *Stadacona*, the large shore establishment, on 21 November. There he was employed in the dockyard and machine shop as well as ships undergoing repairs alongside. In January 1942 Russell was back in the classroom taking the Leading Stoker course. He successfully completed it on 9 April with marks over 80%. It was noted that Russell was "*conscientious; above average ability.*" His performance in the course also qualified him for promotion to Stoker Petty Officer and further advanced training.

Russell was next drafted to HMCS *Captor II*, another shore establishment, in Saint John, NB on 13 April 1942. There he served in HMCS *Murray Stewart*, a small examination vessel built in 1918. He was also billeted on a dredge which served as a floating barracks. Living conditions were so bad on the dredge that it was condemned by medical authorities in the summer of 1942. In May Russell was arrested by the Naval Train Patrol in Campbelltown, on the Quebec border, and charged with being absent without leave for about 3 days. He was found guilty and sentenced to 14 days detention. It is not clear if the living conditions contributed to his *faux pas*. Nor did it result in any career damage. In August Russell was back in *Stadacona* working in the dockyard until 21 September 1942 when he was drafted to HMCS *York* in Toronto, ON, for administrative purposes while he attended the Machinist Course at Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute. He was promoted to Acting Stoker Petty Officer on 1 October 1942.

Upon completion of the Machinist course at Danforth, Russell was on a train bound for Esquimalt, BC arriving there in late November 1942 where he was loaded onto the academically challenging and comprehensive eight-month long Engine Room Artificer Candidates course commencing 1 February and ending on 2 October 1943. Again, Russell did well, earning an overall average of 80.6% which qualified him as an Engine Room Artificer 4th class with the recommendation that promotion to Engine Room Artificer 3rd class be accelerated. His course report noted that Russell "...has natural ability and should go far...". His promotion to Stoker Petty Officer was also confirmed on 1 October 1943.

Next Russell was back on a train to Halifax and *Stadacona* and the machine shop. Then, on 26 November he was nominally drafted to HMCS *Hochelaga II*. *Hochelaga II* was an administrative base in Montreal responsible for the manning of ships being built in Montreal and the Quebec City area. In reality, Russell had been drafted to HMCS *Valleyfield* then in Quebec City awaiting commissioning. Russell was now eminently qualified to assume a senior position in the Engineering Department of a newly built, advanced warship like *Valleyfield*.

Valleyfield (K 329) was a River-class frigate named for Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, Quebec, situated



HMCS Valleyfield
Source: Government of Canada

on Grande-Île in the St. Lawrence River. The ship was built at Quebec City and was commissioned on 7 December 1943. After arriving in Halifax on 20 December, Stoker PO Cooke and the rest of her ship's company underwent work ups in St. Margaret's Bay, NS and off Bermuda until February 1944. The ship was assigned to the Mid-Ocean Escort Force as a convoy escort. *Valleyfield's* second convoy, which left Halifax on 28 February 1944, was eventful. She was detached to escort a tug and tow to

the Azores and then escort another tug and tow from the Azores to Scotland. Upon completion *Valleyfield* proceeded to Londonderry, Northern Ireland to await her next assignment.

After her third and uneventful return trip, HMCS *Valleyfield* left Londonderry on 27 April 1944 with convoy ONM.234: a 73-ship convoy with 18 escorts, traveling between 9-13 knots (17-24 km/hr) destined for various ports in North America.

In the early hours of 7 May 1944, as was standard practice, *Valleyfield* and the other escorts of the Mid-Atlantic Escort Force handed the convoy of 73 merchant ships over to the Local Escort Force. They parted company with the convoy south of Newfoundland at the Western Ocean Meeting Point and set course for St. John's, Newfoundland.

At 0432, the five escort ships were approximately 50 miles south of Cape Race when *U-548* fired two Gnat torpedoes at the five ships. *Valleyfield* was hit by one torpedo on the port side of the boiler room. The ship broke in two and sank



HMCS Valleyfield's Unofficial Badge
Source: Badges of Distinction

within four minutes. It was still dark when the ship was hit, and *Valleyfield* had been astern of the other ships of the group. Consequently, it took some time for her sinking to be noticed. Then while three ships of the Escort Group conducted an unsuccessful search for *U-548*, HMCS *Giffard*, was dispatched to search for survivors. She approached the area cautiously thus unavoidably delaying rescue from the cold Atlantic Ocean. Including Stoker Petty Officer Russell Cooke, 120 members of *Valleyfield's* ship's company perished in the sinking and five more later died of exposure onboard *Giffard*. Only 38 were rescued and survived. Russell Cooke was 26 years old at the time of his death.

Russell like most of the others killed has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 11 and in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 279, at the Centre Block of Parliament, Ottawa. Additionally, Cooke Lake (Lat 56° 17'N Long 105° 17' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

For his service, Stoker Petty Officer Dwight Russell Cooke was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal.

Russell's father wrote a letter to the Naval Service on 21 September 1944 with regard to the Memorial Cross awarded to the mothers and widows of service members who died on active duty or whose death was consequently attributed to such duty. In the letter he pointed out that:

"Dwight Russell Cooke's mother died when he was 4 years old. His stepmother raised him as if he was her own and I know she would appreciate receiving the Memorial Cross."

The request was denied because the awarding of the Cross did not extend to stepmothers. The regulation was changed to include other relationships on 7 October 2001.

Prepared By:

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