

Signalman Robert Grierson Grant V-10693



Signalman Robbie Grant. Photo:
Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Regina SK, 22 September 1921**
- **Enlisted: Regina Division RCNVR, 19 June 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Student**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Shawinigan* was torpedoed and sank on 24 November 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12; First Presbyterian Church, Regina, SK; City of Shawinigan Memorial; CFB *Halifax* Chapel; Grant Island in Wollaston Lake Saskatchewan**

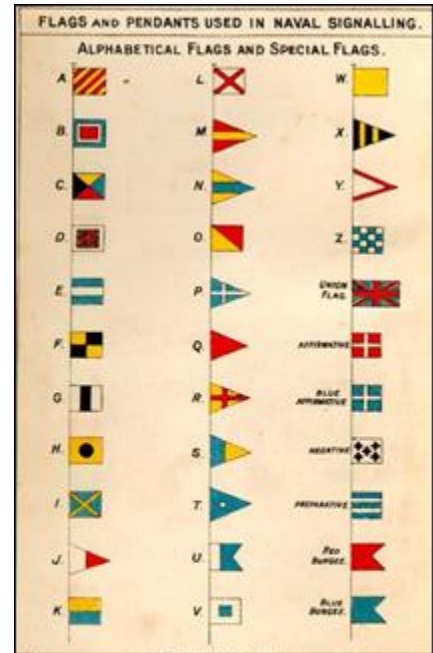
Robert Grant, known as Robbie, was the second child of three children born to Christina and Robert Grant on 22 September 1921 in Regina, Saskatchewan. Brother Lloyd was born in 1918 and sister Beverley was born after 1926. Robbie's parents, Robert and Christina were both born in Manitoba in 1892 and 1891 respectively. They were married in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan in 1915 and moved to Regina in 1919 where Robert continued to practice dentistry. The couple moved several times before settling into a large house in a pleasant neighbourhood in 1922. In 1940 they moved again to a very substantial brick home. The once posh neighbourhood has since been infilled with condominiums and apartment buildings. Robbie attended Thomson Public School (grades 1-8) and Central Collegiate, leaving Central upon completion of grade 11. (The 1937 school yearbook, *Ye Flame*, described Robbie as a very quiet fellow.) He then enrolled in Commercial High School which was associated with Balfour Collegiate, also in Regina, where he took business administration classes until he was 19 years old. There is no evidence in his naval personnel file that he ever had civilian employment. On 1 July 1940 he enlisted in the Regina Rifles (Non-Permanent Active Militia) as a Private and served until 18 June 1941.

On 28 May 1941 Robbie first approached the Regina Division (HMCS *Queen*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve and he was sworn in on 19 June 1941 as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). His father enrolled in the Royal Canadian Dental Corps and served in Toronto, Abbotsford, British Columbia, and Manitoba. Upon enrollment Robbie was single, 5 feet 8 ½ inches tall and weighed 153 pounds. He had brown hair, green eyes and a dark complexion. Robbie spent the first three and a half months at *Queen* attending to appointments and taking some training on "Divisional Strength". On 11 October he transferred to "Active Service" at *Queen* and began basic training in earnest.

On 1 December 1941 he was drafted to HMCS *St. Hyacinthe* in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec to commence formal training in Visual Signals. Communications methods advanced quickly during the Second World War yet some established methods such as Visual Signals (V/S) retained their

importance. Personnel in the V/S branch had five grades: Ordinary Signaller, Signaller, Leading Signaller, Yeoman of Signals, and Chief Yeoman of Signals. Certain requirements involving length of service and special courses along with favourable job performance were necessary for advancement. Instruction given to Ordinary Signallers was the basis for training and advanced ratings simply made a more intensive study of these fundamentals. The syllabus of all grades was concerned with such matters as fleet work (shapes, colours, and uses of flags), fundamental tactics, encoding, morse code, and semaphore. A Leading Signaller qualified as a V/S third class, and a Yeoman as a V/S second class. Training was rigorous with a failure rate of about 20%.

The tasks performed by signallers required that they memorize the appearance and multiple meanings of about 70 flags and pennants; that they master the sending and receiving of semaphore messages at the rate of 15 words per minute (a "word" was defined as 5 characters), thus sending and receiving characters at a rate of more than one per second; and that they learn to send and receive Morse code visually using an array of signal projectors and flashing lights at a rate of 8 words per minute – a rate of one character every two seconds. Their fundamental skills equipped them to send messages on behalf of the "command team" - in present day parlance. To do this signallers first logged the message then either sent the message in plain language using a signal projector or semaphore, or encoded the message using one of three sets of publications – the International Code of Signals; Allied Communications Publications (ACP); or codes contained in Convoy Operation Orders- and then transmitted the message using either signal projectors, semaphore, or



Some of the flags and pennants used for signalling between ships at sea.
Photo: WWI Document Archive page (<http://www.jproc.ca>)

signal flags depending on factors such as the time of day, visibility, urgency, and proximity of the receiving station among others.

To send a message by signal flag, signallers worked rapidly as a team to select the appropriate signal flags from a vertical flag locker located near the bridge in which folded flags were arrayed in a specific grid, clip them together in order and then hoist them using halyards. Receiving signals basically reversed the process, i.e., messages were received, acknowledged, decoded as required, recorded and logged, and provided to the command team as quickly as possible. All these tasks were performed on open bridges in all weather, sometimes under fire.

Robbie was classified as an Ordinary Signaller on completion of the course and travelled to Halifax, Nova Scotia on 31 March 1942 where he joined *ML Q054*. *ML Q054* was a Fairmile B motor launch. The ship was about 112 feet long with a displacement of 80 tons and



Signalman aboard the Fairmile motor launch Q078.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada
Photo, MIKAN No. 3575335

accommodated 2 officers and 14 crew. A unique design feature allowed them to be reconfigured with weapons and specialist gear such as torpedo tubes, mines, depth charges, and guns so they could carry out the roles of convoy escort, minesweeper, minelayer, navigation leader, coastal raider, patrol boat, and ambulance or rescue launch. Ordinary Seaman Grant remained with *ML Q054* working out of both Halifax and Sydney, Nova Scotia until 30 May 1942.

Ordinary Seaman Grant was then drafted to HMCS *Protector*, the naval base in Sydney where he constructively remained for the next nineteen months. During that time, he spent a week on *Star XVI*, a whale catcher loaned to the Royal Canadian Navy by the Norwegian government in exile; 19 days on the armed yacht, HMCS *Reindeer*; and 34 days on the Bangor-class minesweeper, HMCS *Clayoquot* operating as part of the Sydney Force escorting local sections of transatlantic convoys. While not at sea, Robbie was assigned shore duties at HMCS *Protector* located on the Sydney side of the harbour and HMCS *Protector II* located on the Point Edwards side of the harbour as well as short periods at HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax and HMCS *Cornwallis* in Deep Cove, Nova Scotia. On 1 October 1942 Robbie was promoted to Signalman.

Between 8 December 1943 and 2 March, 1944 he attended the V/S Third Class course at HMCS *St. Hyacinthe* before being drafted to HMCS *Stadacona* again. Then on 9 June 1944 he was drafted to HMCS *Shawinigan*.



HMCS *Shawinigan* (K136) was a Flower-class corvette built by George T. Davie & Sons Ltd. in Lauzon, Quebec. Commissioned on 19 September 1941, at Quebec City, HMCS *Shawinigan* was

named for the town of Shawinigan Falls located on the Saint Maurice River 22 miles upstream from the St. Lawrence River. The ship's service life was busy and varied. Before Signalman Grant joined the crew, *Shawinigan* had escorted 41 trans-Atlantic and coastal convoys and she was undergoing a refit at Liverpool, Nova Scotia where her forecastle was extended. On completion of the refit Robbie joined *Shawinigan* and the ship proceeded to Bermuda for work ups. After work-ups Signalman Grant and the crew returned to the North Atlantic and escorted five more trans-Atlantic convoys before *Shawinigan's* luck ran out.

On 24 November 1944 *Shawinigan* and the USCGC *Sassafras* escorted the ferry *Burgeo*, from Sydney to Port aux Basques, Newfoundland. Ever since the sinking of the SS *Caribou* in 1942, this ferry route was always protected with warship escorts. Enroute *Sassafras* was detached from the escort without relief. With *Burgeo* safely delivered, *Shawinigan* informed *Burgeo* that she would rendezvous with her in the morning for the return trip to Sydney. *Shawinigan* then departed on an

independent anti-submarine patrol. At 0230 on 25 November, *Shawinigan* was torpedoed by the German submarine *U-1228* in the Cabot Strait. Later that morning *Burgeo* left Port aux Basques on schedule in dense fog. Unable to find *Shawinigan* and keeping radio silence, *Burgeo* proceeded to Sydney unescorted. On arrival at 1800 it was evident that *Shawinigan* was missing. Over the next three days searchers looked for survivors and were only successful in finding flotsam and, eventually, the remains of five members of *Shawinigan*'s ship's company. The entire crew of ninety-one, including Signalman Robert Grant, perished. He was 23 years old.

Robbie like most of the others who perished has no known grave. The exceptions are the five whose remains were recovered. They were returned to their families for burial in their home communities. The entire ship's company is remembered by a memorial in the City of Shawinigan and a stained glass window in the chapel at Canadian Forces Base Halifax. Robbie is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 11 and named with others on a stained glass window in the First Presbyterian Church in Regina. Additionally, Grant Island in Wollaston Lake, (Lat 58° 25'N Long 103° 05' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory. For his service, Signalman Robert Grant was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Christina Grant, was awarded the Memorial Cross.



Window in First Presbyterian Church, Regina. Inscription under the windows reads: "There is no greater love than this that a man lay down his life for his friends". John 15: verse 15. Photo: Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial

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