

Leading Signalman Ralph Gardiner Hancock V-13220



Leading Signalman Ralph Gardiner Hancock.
Photo: www.forposteritysake.ca

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Calgary AB, 4 July 1919**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 18 June 1937**
- **Civilian Occupation: Steward, Union Steamship, BC**
- **Death: Drowned when HMCS *Skeena* was grounded in a storm on 25 October 1944**
- **Buried: Reykjavik (Fossvogur) Cemetery, Iceland, Grave C49.12**
- **Commemorated: HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque, Naval Museum of Alberta Honour Plaque, and Field of Crosses Memorial Calgary**

Ralph Gardiner Hancock was born on 4 July 1919 in Calgary, AB. His mother, Elizabeth (Bessie) May Hancock (nee Whited), of Scottish descent, was born on 2 May 1897 in Chicago. She became a naturalized Canadian in 1912. Ralph's father, William John (James) Hancock, married his mother in Calgary on 2 February 1917.

The Hancocks had three children, Ralph being the oldest. The second child was named Violet-May and was born in 1921; while the last child, William Alexander, was born two years later. The family stated they were members of the Church of England.

While in Calgary, Ralph completed his education, including two years of high school, attending Victoria Sandstone School. As Calgary grew, the school underwent several additions and uses, including being used as an emergency hospital during the Spanish influenza outbreak in 1918, as well as housing the Calgary Sea Cadets in the Second World War. During high school, Ralph proved to be an excellent athlete and was involved in boxing and was captain of his school basketball team.

There was an early interest in the military as Ralph served in the Alberta Militia Institute Cadets (AMIC) from 1 January to 1 June 1937, where he earned the rank of corporal. He lived at 1709-2nd Street East in Calgary when he enlisted at the Calgary Division of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR), later known as HMCS *Tecumseh*, on 18 June 1937 at age 17. His rating at enrolment was as a Bugler. An Occupational History form indicated that he had one

month's experience as a Steward for the Union Steamship Company in Vancouver, BC and his ambition was to work for the Dominion Fisheries Marine Service.



RCNVR CALGARY, September 1938. Reading Left to Right: Row One: C. Street, C. Mawer, R. Jackson, J. Rowlands, C. Lowe, J. Abercrombie. Row Two: L. Smith, J. Hancock, J. Levy, G. Gammie, J. Bicknell, T. Angus, R. Hancock, C. Kent, J. Monteath, J. Pym. Row Three: W. Martin, R. Shelley, A. Boden, R. Dean, Ed Harris, C. Drew, A. Cannell. Row Four: J. Peakman, T. Anderson, D. Bateman, P. Skirrow, A. Carrington, F. Andrews. Row Five: T. Toogood, J. Mathews, A. Baker, S. Smith. Row Six: W. Nielsen, J. Deal, C. Tucker, F. Peakman. Row Seven: R. McLaughlin, W. Kirk, J. McDonald, M. McDonald, M. Soltice, M. Laak

Photo: forprosperityssake.ca

Medical records describe Ralph as 5 feet 6 inches tall, 136 pounds, and of good development. He had brown hair and eyes, a fresh complexion, and a vaccination mark on his upper left arm.

As a pre-war sailor in the RCNVR, Ralph's training was not unlike that of Naval Reservists today. He had to commit to attending 30 drill sessions per year, and he had to complete a minimum of two weeks of full-time training with the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) each year. The drill sessions would have been scheduled in the evenings or on weekends so that these part-time sailors would not miss school or work. Ralph kept boxing and became the district army and navy lightweight boxing champion that year.

Ralph's rating and trade were changed to Ordinary Signalmán on 13 September 1937. In May 1938, he was sent for Visual Signalling training to HMCS *Naden*, Canada's west coast training and operations base in Esquimalt, BC. A month later, after scoring 91.3% on his examination, he was rated Acting Signalmán before heading home to Calgary. He returned to *Naden* in May 1939 and completed four weeks of training before returning home.

The RCNVR was activated for war service 10 days before the declaration of war, and A/Signalmán Hancock found himself back at *Naden* on 6 September 1939. Qualified signalmén were always

in demand, and A/Signalman Hancock spent much of the next five years serving in multiple shore establishments and ships. Working in any one place varied from two weeks to just over one year.

From HMCS *Naden*, he was transferred to the Battle-class Trawler HMCS *Armentieres*. This ship was built at the end of the First World War and was the first class with a distinct Canadian designation. She was a training and examination vessel based out of Prince Rupert, BC. A/Signalman Hancock served in her until 19 February 1940, when he was shipped back to Esquimalt to join HMCS *Malaspina* (another examination vessel), followed by service in HMC Ships *Norsal* and *Nitinat*. These ships were employed for local patrols, examination, and miscellaneous duties. Duty in the smaller vessels had the benefit of providing Ralph with plenty of On-the-Job training (OJT), which was an essential element for promotion. In late March 1940, he was declared a Trained Operator (T.O.) and six months later he was promoted to Signalman.

During the Spring of 1940, Ralph's best friend, Harold Douglas Richards, RCNVR, proposed to Ralph's sister, Violet-May, who was then living in Victoria, BC. Harold Douglas Richards went on to attain the rank of Chief Petty Officer and was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) and a Bar to the DSM.

Promoted to Acting Leading Seaman on 1 Dec 1940, Ralph was posted to HMCS *Sans Peur* on 1 January 1941. A significant change from the smaller ships he served on, *Sans Peur* was a



**HMCS Sans Peur on the British Columbia Coast 1940.
Photo from the MacFarlane collection.**

luxury yacht belonging to the Duke of Sutherland, a Commander in the Royal Naval Reserve in the First World War. The Duke returned to the United Kingdom for wartime duties in the Second World War, and the ship, still under Admiralty authority, was requisitioned in 1939 for coastal patrol service out of Esquimalt, BC. Ralph served in *Sans Peur* for 371 days, which was his longest posting. Ralph's year-end evaluation, like his previous ones, assessed him to be of very good character and satisfactory efficiency. He was promoted to Leading Signalman on 1 December 1941.

Ralph's subsequent five postings were for very short periods, often only a couple of months in duration. The first was to HMCS *St. Hyacinthe*, a specialized signalling/communications school located in Saint-Hyacinthe, QC. The next four postings were with the Harbour and Coastal Defence forces: Yorke Island Battery (Tofino, BC), Church Hill (Strait of Juan de Fuca), Naval Officer in Charge Staff (Esquimalt), and the Port War Signal Stations at both Kenahan Island and Barrett Point Battery at the entrance to Prince Rupert (HMCS *Chatham*).

It was during this period that Leading Signalman Hancock received his Good Service Badge for five years of service on 4 July 1942. A short time later, on 21 September 1942, he was charged with a civil power offence, with a punishment of one day's pay and time.

In mid-May 1943, Ralph returned to HMCS *St. Hyacinthe* for almost two months before being shipped to HMCS *Stadacona*, the main naval training base in Halifax, NS. Leading Seaman

Hancock worked ashore at *Stadacona* for nine months before being drafted to HMCS *Skeena* on 31 March 1944.

HMCS *Skeena* was a River-class destroyer, one of the first two ships built to Canadian order. Commissioned at Portsmouth on 10 June 1931, she spent her first six years working out of Esquimalt, BC before returning to Halifax for local escort duties when war broke out. In 1940, she was ordered to the United Kingdom to take part in the evacuation of France and escorting convoys. She was later tasked to the Newfoundland Command, where she saw continuous duty with the Mid-Ocean Escort Force. On 31 July 1942, the ship shared in the sinking of U-588 with HMCS *Wetaskiwin*. Leading Seaman Hancock would have been aboard HMCS *Skeena* when she was present at D-Day on 6 June 1944.



**HMCS Skeena [Plymouth 31 May 1940],
Ken Macpherson Collection [NMAS], The Military Museum
Library and Archives, University of Calgary Library, Alberta.**

Along with other ships, HMCS *Skeena* was patrolling the approaches to Reykjavik, Iceland when a storm struck and the ship and 15 members of her crew were lost on 25 October 1944. The loss of the ship and crew members was reported in the *Hamilton Spectator* on 16 May 1945:

“With other ships of the flotilla, the *Skeena* was patrolling the approaches to Reykjavik when the 60-knot gale struck. The flotilla was ordered to seek shelter.



**HMCS Skeena wrecked on Videy Island showing
salvage craft [RCN, 1944],
Ken Macpherson Collection [NMAS], The Military
Museum Library and Archives, University of
Calgary Library, Alberta**

A naval release takes up the story:

Skeena dropped her anchor at 10:30 p.m., but when Lieut. William Kidd, of Ottawa, first lieutenant of the ill-fated ship and on watch at the time, got a subsequent bearing through squalls of snow and sleet, and it was discovered that she was dragging [her anchor].

He gave the order to go ahead at 12 knots and that was followed by the ‘full ahead’ [signal] just as the

vessel crashed stern on at five minutes before midnight. Both propellers were sheared away and the ship swung her full length on the rocks. *Skeena* was rolling and pounding when the order "Stand by Carley floats and rafts" was given, almost immediately after came the order, "Abandon ship!"

The destroyer piled ashore on Videy Island, two miles off Reykjavik, ending a career which earned her the title "the grand old lady of the Canadian Navy." She had seen action in the Atlantic and the English Channel and had scored successes against U-boats and enemy surface craft.

Her Commander, Lieutenant Commander. P.F.K. Russell, of Halifax, was one of those who survived the icy seas which so numbed hands that 15 men perished in their grim battle to shore.

The majority of those who survived after taking to the floats that night never knew how they saved themselves or how they were saved. Some found shelter in empty huts and were discovered there by rescue parties after daylight. Others were taken care of by Iceland crofters...

When the *Skeena's* distress signal was flashed ashore, a tug and three drifters were sent to her assistance but the heavy seas prevented them from coming alongside. At 3 o'clock in the morning a Royal Navy rescue craft was forced to work around to the lee of the island where ratings were landed to cross the island to the stricken ship and start rescue work.

At 7:40 a.m. a line was shot to *Skeena* and the men were hauled ashore in Carley floats. At 8:30 all those who had stayed on the ship, including the captain and his officers were safe on land.

The funeral of *Skeena's* dead was held on October 28. The men were buried with full naval honours in the war graves section of Fossaburg Cemetery, Reykjavik, a white cross with the name and number of each man at the head of his grave.

As a practical tribute to their dead mates, the *Skeena* survivors held the navy's traditional sale before the mast. This is an auction of salvaged personal effects of the lost men and \$2,000 was raised in this manner for distribution to relatives. Sailors paid as high as \$25 for a mate's cap tally. Other contributions to the fund made a total of \$4,000."



One of HMCS *Skeena's* propellers was salvaged and erected as a memorial to the 15 sailors from HMCS *Skeena* who were lost.



Leading Signalman Hancock drowned while attempting to take a lifeline ashore at Videy Island. At that time, he was acting yeoman of signals onboard *Skeena*. Leading Signalman Ralph Gardiner Hancock was 25 years old when he died. He was survived by his fiancée, Miss Adele McMillan of Victoria, BC.

For his service, Leading Signalman Ralph Gardiner Hancock was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the France and Germany Star & Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Bessie Hancock, living at 1402 Robson Street, Vancouver, BC was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Leading Signalman Ralph Gardiner Hancock is commemorated on the HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta Honour Plaque; at the Field of Crosses Memorial in Calgary; the HMCS *Skeena* Plaque in Iceland; and in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 327, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

Prepared By*:

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*All stories are edited by the project crew and sometimes altered to conform to the Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph format, length, and content parameters.



Sources:

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- Library and Archives Canada – Service file for Ralph Gardiner Hancock
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- <http://www.forposterityssake.ca/CTB-BIO/MEM005400.htm>
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- Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 327
- List of Second World War Coastal and Harbour Defence Batteries on Canada's West Coast. <https://www.northamericanforts.com/Canada/bc2.html#yorke>