

Lieutenant Stuart Clarke Lane O-40270



Lieutenant Stuart Clarke Lane. Photo: *The Province*, 9 September 1943, pg 8.

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Vancouver BC, 26 July 1914**
- **Enlisted: Vancouver Division RCNVR, 5 October 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Barrister at Locke, Lane, Nicholson & Sheppard**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMC MTB 310 was attacked by enemy aircraft on 14 September 1942**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 8; Shawinigan Lake School War Dead; and the Law Society of the University of British Columbia Memorial Plaque**

Stuart Clarke Lane was born in Vancouver, BC on 26 July 1914 to William S. Lane and Pauline H. Lane. His father was a partner in the law firm of Locke, Lane, Guild and Sheppard. He had one brother George (age 22) and two sisters Marjorie (age 21) and Pauline Jr. (age 15). Stuart was known to his family as "Stu." He had completed four years of high school at Shawnigan Lake School, probably as a boarder, between the years 1927 and 1931. This was one of four important private schools in British Columbia and was dedicated to preparing students for university and professional careers. There would also have been a strong motivation to serve in the military.

Following graduation, he attended the University of British Columbia where he completed Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Commerce degrees. Following in his father's footsteps he then attended Dalhousie Law School in Halifax, NS and after three years completed a law degree. At the time of his enrollment, he was employed in the law firm of Locke, Lane, Guild and Sheppard. In the words of the interviewing officer in the Vancouver Division, his educational qualifications were superior and that he should make a good officer.

He also had additional qualifications with four years' experience operating small craft, both sail and power as he had been a member of the Vancouver Yacht Club for six years. What more could the RCNVR ask of a potential officer candidate? There were, however, to be problems.

In his Offer of Service for Hostilities (Naval) document he clearly stated that he wished to be enrolled as an officer. He left blank the answer to the line, "If you cannot be accepted as an officer are you willing to enter as a rating?" On a form headed "Selection of Ratings for Commissions R.C.N.V.R. (Temp)" dated 30 September 1940, all his many qualifications were spelled out with the following proviso: "It is agreed that should I prove unsuitable for Commissioned Rank during

the special course, or should I fail to 'Pass Out', I will continue to serve as 'H.O.' (Hostilities Only) rating for the period of the war."

The comment made by Acting Commander J.M. Grant appended to the document was: "Recommended but has not made up his mind that he will join up if selected." His hesitation was understandable. It is not clear what eventually swayed his decision to enlist under these terms, but his Attestation Form, dated 5 October 1940, rated him an Ordinary Seaman and so he remained during the two weeks he spent in the Vancouver Division. In brief remarks made during his time in the Vancouver Division he was assessed as "Keen and Interested", "Regular in Attendance", and "Recommended."

At the time of his enrollment, he was 26 years of age and described as 5' 10½" with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. He had no scars or marks, and he passed the medical exam without any difficulty.

In due course, he was sent to HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, NS and by 30 October 1940 he was in the United Kingdom on the books of HMS *Victory*. Here he remained until 31 December 1940. This was not good enough for his parents. On 27 December 1940, his mother, Pauline Lane, wrote a blistering letter to the Honourable Angus L. Macdonald, Minister of Defence for Naval Services in Ottawa. Her complaint focused on the requirement of officer candidates, like her son, to volunteer to serve as Ordinary Seaman. She pointed out, and quite accurately, that this was very unfair. As of January 1941, the policy had changed, and officer candidates were sent HMCS *Royal Roads* in Victoria, BC where they would receive training and their commissions. The wartime program was designed to be fast tracked and completed in 90 days. Meanwhile, in her words, volunteers under the old program. "... have now been in England the past six weeks, washing windows, peeling potatoes, and polishing floors ...". She went on to say:

"I have only one question to ask you. Do you think this is fair play? Surely Mr. McDonald [sic] when you realize that the men representing your department told these lads what has proved to be a deliberate falsehood you will, as speedily as possible, do what you can to make amends, and to alienate a bit the bitter feelings they are almost bound to have when the news of what is going on here reaches them. Surely the authorities at Ottawa want the men overseas to feel that the government at home is playing the game fairly and squarely with them."

She requested an answer to her letter, but no response was located in her son's file. In Stuart Lane's service file, it showed that he was promoted Lieutenant (Temporary) on 31 December 1940 and appointed to HMS *King Alfred* for officer training. *King Alfred* was the primary training establishment for all reserve officers joining the wartime Royal Navy. The normal procedure in *King Alfred* was that officer candidates arrived as Ordinary Seamen and were commissioned on completion of training. However, by 1940 rank was determined by age – those under 19½ became Midshipman, those over 19½ became a Sub-Lieutenant. Upon receiving their commissions, the new officers received their rank insignia: Midshipmen wore a maroon lapel flash, while Sub-Lieutenants wore a single 'wavy' gold stripe on their tunic sleeves. To enter as a Lieutenant (Temporary) was unusual, but we will never know the impact of Mrs. Lane's letter or if there was a response. Lieutenant Stuart Lane remained in *King Alfred* for a period of roughly six months.

On 5 July 1941, Lieutenant Lane was appointed to HMS *St Christopher* for M/B training. *St Christopher* was a shore establishment located in Fort William, Scotland, was commissioned in October 1940 and was in service for only four years. The base existed to train the crews of a variety of different inshore patrol craft. Most of the courses lasted several weeks and it was the primary training establishment for Motor Torpedo Boats (MTB). The base was estimated to have

trained around 55,000 personnel from several allied countries during its years in commission. By April 1942, there were around 80 to 90 boats at the training base, comprised several different flotillas. Lieutenant Lane remained under training here until early November 1941.

It was not made clear in the record why he did not join one of the Canadian MTB Flotillas but was sent to HMS *Nile* in Alexandria, Egypt for service in MTB 57 on 5 November 1941. MTB 57 was an MTB of the Vosper 70 feet-type class. On 22 February 1942, he was appointed to HMS *Mosquito* for MTB 266 as 1st Lieutenant and spare MTB officer. MTB 266 belonged to the 10th MTB Flotilla that was later merged with the 15th Flotilla. HMS *Mosquito* was also located in Alexandria. *Mosquito* was commissioned at Mahroussa Jetty on 15 February 1942. The base and slipways were situated alongside King Farouk's palace. It seemed clear from the record that as Lieutenant Lane gained experience his responsibilities increased. On 24 February 1942, he was assigned as the permanent 1st Lieutenant of MTB 266. On 30 May 1942, he was the spare MTB commanding officer and on 20 June 1942 he became the commanding officer of MTB 310.

MTB 310 was designated as part of Operation Agreement, a ground and amphibious operation



carried out by British, Rhodesian, and New Zealand forces on Axis-held Tobruk, Libya from 13 to 14 September 1942. The goal of this raid was to destroy Rommel's fuel supplies. The plan: British Commandos posed as British prisoners of war and they were "guarded" by members of the Special Interrogation Group

disguised as German soldiers. Through this deception, they would reach the city of Tobruk and destroy the German fuel reserves. What could go wrong?

MTB 310 was part of Force C consisting of 16 MTBs each with 10 troops embarked. This raid on Tobruk was an Allied disaster with heavy losses. The British lost several hundred men killed and captured, one cruiser, two destroyers, seven motor torpedo boats and dozens of small amphibious craft. Only three MTBs managed to launch torpedoes at the naval vessels in harbour, but without result. ML 353 was set on fire and scuttled, either hit by the Italian warships or strafed by Italian fighters. MTB 310 and three other boats were lost to German and Italian aircraft.

Central to Operation Agreement's failure was the plan itself. Three separate and badly coordinated missions, grouped under the umbrella of Operation Agreement, were based upon a "hodgepodge of ill-conceived initiatives." Most of these failed to receive the proper support necessary to achieve their desired results. The Allied objectives were over-ambitious, and the resources employed were inadequate. Other factors contributing to the failure of the operation included an underestimation of Axis forces, failure to learn from the past, and excessive dependence on deception resulting in confusion. The German and Italian response was highly effective and a much better plan than that put forward by the Allies and this planning superiority would also have contributed to the Allied failure on that day.

MTB 310 was part of Force C destined for Tobruk harbour, but the MTBs were unable to stay in contact with each other as they approached their target. During most of the trip to Tobruk, the MTBs proceeded at what was described as a “plodding pace.” During the final approach to Mersa Umm Es Sciausc, they picked up speed but by this time there was no longer any sense of coordination and matters devolved into chaos. The degree of chaos was so severe that only two of the MTBs landed in the correct area to drop off their load of Fusiliers. The other MTBs, unable to disembark their troops, scattered along the coast and attempted to avoid probing Axis searchlights and the fire that inevitably followed from the shore batteries and aircraft.

MTB 310 was apparently dive bombed and hit in the bow. One source indicated that the crew abandoned ship in an assault boat and headed for the coast.

When German forces recovered these survivors near the coast a week later only three, including the First Lieutenant, were still alive and all were suffering from thirst, sunburn, and dehydration. The reliability of this source and specific reference to MTB 310 remained open to question long after the actual event and was never communicated to the parents of Lieutenant Stuart Lane. It was hardly surprising that the British authorities had very little idea of the losses that resulted from this disastrous operation. This fact shapes the inability of Naval authorities to determine which men were lost, simply missing, or possibly prisoners of the Germans and Italians.

There followed a protracted delay and a long trail of correspondence with many gaps for the parents of Stuart Lane. Did he survive the sinking of his boat? Was he possibly a prisoner of war? On 18 September 1942, a telegram followed by a letter was sent to Mr. and Mrs. Lane in Vancouver that indicated their son was “missing” following action with the enemy. After more than a month had passed with no further information, Stuart Lane’s father wrote Angus L. Macdonald, the Naval Minister, expressing the frustration of the family. This letter was dated 29 October 1942. He wanted specific and detailed information regarding the loss of the MTB that his son commanded. Were there any survivors? Was his son “mixed up in the Tobruk commando raid on the 13th of September?”

The response from Angus L. Macdonald was not located in the file but is referred to in a second letter written by Mr. Lane on 19 November 1942 thanking the Minister for his letter written of 12 November 1942. The excuse for the lack of information was passed off to the British Admiralty and their failure to release any further detail. An increasingly frustrated father made it clear that he felt the British Admiralty in London were indifferent to the fate of his son. Canadian Naval authorities continued to plead that the want of detail was not for lack of effort made to obtain this information from London.

Meanwhile, Mr. Lane had not limited his correspondence to naval authorities in Canada but had reached out to the Agent General in London for the Province of British Columbia. Not all this



Aerial photograph of the port of Tobruk during the 1941 siege.
Photo: The Imperial War Museums., Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=24476689>

correspondence was found in the file, but a letter from the Agent General written on 10 December 1942 offered a glimmer of hope. He stated that the Navy Office of Canada in London informed his office that Lieutenant Lane might be a prisoner and information was still coming in from the Red Cross.

By this time Mr. Lane was actively involved in doing his own research. On 21 December, he wrote a long and angry letter to Angus L. Macdonald. He began by making it clear that the response from the Minister on 7 December stating that “no further information at present regarding Lieutenant S.C. Lane R.C.N.V.R.” was not acceptable.

“I might say that I am getting fed up with the treatment that my wife and myself have received in this matter and I think it is about time that you were stirring things up in London, if this is an exhibition of the service which is given in London with regard to Canadian boys who go over on loan to the British Navy.

As far as the Department is concerned I received a telegram on September 18th “your son Lieutenant S. C. Lane failed to return from patrol duty on September 14.” Over three months has expired since that message was received and I have had no further word from you or from London except your latest letter. The least that could be done is to give some information and it is incredible that there is nothing further to report during this interval of time.”

He posed five questions to the Minister all of which he felt should have been answered. What exactly did they know about MTB 310 and the possibility that his son might be a prisoner of war? Based on his own research he is certain that the event in question took place during the raid on Tobruk and that 600 or 700 prisoners “principally Naval” were taken by the Axis forces.

“I do not know the duties of the Senior Canadian Naval Officer in Great Britain but it seems to me the least he could do would be to show more interest in in trying to get more information and not confine his messages to such stereotype messages as, “no information?” I have not had an easy time at home since this thing happened and I have not been able to refrain from writing this letter.

You will appreciate that I am complaining about the official attitude throughout.”

An internal memorandum dated 31 December 1942 circulated by Naval Personnel Records went on at considerable length to state that most of Mr. Lane’s questions could not be answered. The facts were that MTB 310 left on operations and did not return on 14 September. Admiral E.R. Mainguy, Chief of Naval Personnel, added a note to this memorandum to the Minister that stated, “as far as we know this ship and her ship’s company disappeared.” He suggested that Mr. Lane must now accept this reality.

On 2 January 1943, Mr. Lane wrote a response to the Agent General for BC in London thanking him for the only optimistic letter he had received. He remained hopeful that his son might still be a prisoner of war but recognized that the situation in North Africa was a “terrible mess”, and so it was.

Finally, on 1 September 1943, a letter was sent from Naval Headquarters which stated that all efforts through the Red Cross and the Vatican had failed to locate his son as a prisoner of war. It confirmed that Lieutenant Stuart Lane was killed in action on 13 September 1942. Lieutenant Stuart Lane was 28 years old when he died.

A source named "Find a Wreck" lists by name 10 members of the ship's company of MTB 310, including Lieutenant. Stuart Lane, who lost their lives. No other officer is included and apart from Lieutenant Lane, all were Royal Navy ratings.

Stuart Lane did not have a Will which is a surprising given his legal education, but his estate was very small. His parents received \$147.20 through the Distribution of Service Estates and \$598.10 from his War Service Gratuity. This was not distributed until 1 October 1945. There were two life insurance policies which named his mother as the beneficiary. Great West Life paid out \$5,000.00 and Sun Life \$3,000.00.

For his service, Lieutenant Stuart Lane was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Africa Star, the Defence Medal, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp and the War Medal. These awards were mailed to his family on 15 October 1949. His mother was awarded the Canadian Memorial Cross.

He is memorialized on Panel 8 of the Halifax Memorial in Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the Law Society of the University of British Columbia; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 88, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa. The Shawnigan Lake School record of war dead recorded his name, but it is unclear if the monument under construction also included the names of all the war dead. Shawnigan Lake School lost 44 alumni who served Canada, Britain, and the United States in the Second World War.

Prepared By:

Lieutenant-Commander (Ret'd) Robert W. White (HMCS *Discovery* 1960 – 1989) Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Research Team.



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