

Wireless Telegraphist 3rd Class (Radar) Thomas Edward Lawrence V-37688



Telegraphist 3c Tom Lawrence. Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Gilbert Plains MB, 3 December 1916**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 4 May 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Yardman, Canadian Pacific Railway**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Shawinigan* was torpedoed and sank on 24 November 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; Memorial in the City of Shawinigan; stained glass window in the chapel at Canadian Forces Base Halifax; Lawrence Island in Wathaman Lake (Lat 56° 58'N Long 103° 43'W) in Northern Saskatchewan**

Thomas Edward Lawrence, known as Tom, was the fourth of five children born to Mary Jane and Charles Edward Lawrence on 3 December 1916 in Gilbert Plains, Manitoba about 120 miles northwest of Winnipeg. Sister Margaret was born in 1908, brother Clayton in 1910, brother Robert in 1913, and sister Margorie in 1925. Tom's father Charles was born in England in 1879 and emigrated to Manitoba in the mid-1890s. Mary was born in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba in 1887. They were married in Gilbert Plains in 1905 where they operated a farm. Sometime after the 1921 Census, for reasons which are unclear, they moved to Canora, Saskatchewan and were there during the 1926 Census. The source of the family's income was not recorded.

In 1930, the family moved to Saskatoon and settled into a modest neighbourhood on the northern edge of the city. Charles found work as a labourer with the City of Saskatoon. The family was closely knit with the older children living at home and contributing to the family's income. Tom and Margorie were enrolled in Wilson Public School, Robert enrolled in a nearby high school then worked as a clerk in a butcher shop while Margaret found steady work as a cashier in a movie theater and Clayton started a series of jobs in men's clothing/tailoring stores.

After completing grade 8, Tom attended City Park Collegiate and completed Grade 10. Tragedy struck the family in January 1935 when Robert died at the age of 21. Then in October 1936 Tom's mother Mary also died at the age of 50. The cause of both deaths is not contained in the information available. Also, in 1936 Tom joined Clayton in Clayton's tailor shop as a salesman.

This arrangement continued until Clayton left Saskatoon for Toronto in 1937 after which Tom found a series of sales positions in men's clothing stores. In 1938 the remaining family members moved to a smaller house still pooling their resources. In 1941 Tom found well-paying work with the Canadian Pacific Railway as a yardman. Margaret was married soon afterwards, and Margorie found work as a dental assistant. Charles retired and then became ill. This resulted in another move to accommodate him, Tom and Marjorie.

On 4 May 1942, Tom enlisted at the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). It is telling that one of his first acts was to initiate the necessary administrative steps to name Charles as his dependent thus providing Charles with financial benefits.

Once sworn in, Tom waited until 10 June to commence basic training at *Unicorn* in earnest along with 11 other recruits completing the course on 4 October 1942. He was single, 5 feet 8 ¾ inches tall and weighed 135 pounds. He had brown hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion.

From *Unicorn* he was drafted to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, British Columbia where he completed Seamanship and Gunnery training in December 1942. After a period of time in the Manning Pool he was drafted to HMCS *Armentières*, a Battle-class naval trawler, which entered service in 1918. She was tasked with acting as an examination vessel at Prince Rupert, British Columbia. An examination vessel inspected and verified all merchant ships and small craft entering or departing a port. Duties included providing boarding parties to examine papers to establish identity and belligerent status, query crew and passengers and inspect cargoes.



Tom remained with *Armentières* until 22 September 1943 – a total of 255 days. During that time, he was promoted to Able Seaman on 13 June 1943, and he married Ruth Shaw of Victoria, BC on 5 July 1943. Shortly after their wedding, Ruth moved to Saskatoon to wait for the war to end and Tom's return. She took an apartment and found work as a receptionist in a doctor's office.

In September 1943 Tom was returned to *Naden* for administrative purposes and he then travelled by train to HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Once there he was transferred from the Seaman Branch to the Communications Branch and placed on a Wireless Telegraphist 3rd Class course which provided instruction in the operation of radars. (At the beginning of the Second World War several technological innovations entered the realm of Naval warfare. It appeared that any new piece of equipment that was contained in a metal box with knobs and dials on the outside and vacuum tubes and wires on the inside was placed in the domain of the Communications Branch.)

Tom successfully completed the course in November. As a result, he was eligible for promotion and received a small specialist pay raise. From the course Tom was drafted to HMCS *Avalon* in St. John's, Newfoundland. Originally designed as a temporary ocean escort base, as the war progressed, St. John's evolved to become one of the most important bases in the Atlantic, second only to Halifax. Along with repair facilities, work-ups training for ships' crews, and recreational facilities, there were several training centres at Avalon including a Radar School which Tom likely attended. He also served in ML *Q065*, a Fairmile B motor launch for 8 days. Known as Holy



HMCS Waskesiu Photo: Government of Canada

Rollers, they were about 112 feet long with a displacement of 80 tons and accommodated 2 officers and 14 crew.

On 30 November 1943 Tom was drafted to HMCS *Waskesiu*. (K330). Commissioned on 16 June 1943, she was the first River-class frigate built at Yarrows Ltd.in Esquimalt, British Columbia and named in honour of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Since the name *Prince Albert* had been assigned to another Commonwealth ship, *Waskesiu* took her name for the principal lake in nearby Prince Albert National Park. After a wait for a transatlantic passage, Tom joined *Waskesiu* in the United Kingdom. The

307 days Tom served in her mirrors the plot of a Nicholas Monserrat novel. Late in October 1943, *Waskesiu* left Halifax for Londonderry to join Escort Group 5 assigned chiefly to Western Approaches Command. On 24 February 1944, *Waskesiu*, was escorting convoy SC.153 (Halifax to Liverpool), when she sank U-boat *U-257* about 830 nautical miles west of Brest.

The Escort Group was then assigned to Gibraltar and Sierra Leone convoys. In April 1944 the Group proceeded to Kola Inlet in northern Russia to escort convoy RA.59 to Loch Ewe in Scotland and was attacked by U-boats. In the ensuing battle, one American Liberty ship, SS *William S. Thayer*, was sunk with the loss of 43 lives. Aircraft from the Royal Navy escort carrier, HMS *Fencer*, sank 3 U-boats in exchange. The convoy dispersed during the attack with its surviving ships reaching Loch Ewe and the Clyde on 6-7 May.

Waskesiu was next assigned to Operation Neptune, the naval portion of the Normandy invasion and its aftermath. On 6 June 1944, her Escort Group was among the ships deployed to counter the U-boat threat to the invasion fleet in the area from southern Ireland to the Bay of Biscay. On 10 June at roughly 0200, HMCS *Teme* made an asdic contact with a U-boat and moved to intercept. The Royal Navy escort carrier, HMS *Tracker*, operating with the group, maneuvered at the same time. *Tracker* rammed *Teme* and nearly cut her in half. *Teme* was towed to Cardiff where she underwent repairs until December 1944 only to be seriously damaged by another U-boat and subsequently written off in March 1945.

Waskesiu left Londonderry on 14 September 1944 escorting a convoy to Canada. Upon arrival she began an extensive refit at Shelburne, Nova Scotia and Tom was drafted to HMCS *Peregrine*, a shore unit in Halifax, to await his next draft.

On 24 November 1944 Tom joined HMCS *Shawinigan* (K136), a Flower-class corvette, just in time for her sailing in company with the American cutter, USCGC *Sassafras*, together tasked with escorting the ferry *Burgeo*, from Sydney to Port aux Basques, Newfoundland. 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 and departed on an independent anti-submarine patrol. At 0230 on 25 November, less than twenty-four hours after Tom had joined *Shawinigan*, she was torpedoed by the U-boat 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 Able Seaman Thomas Lawrence, perished. He was 27 years old.



Tom 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. Tom is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 11. Additionally, Lawrence Island in Wathaman Lake (Lat 56° 58'N Long 103° 43'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

For his service, Wireless Telegraphist 3rd Class Thomas Edward Lawrence was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star and Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. Mrs. Rose Lawrence, his widow, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Tom was dedicated to his family and contributed to their economic welfare from an early age. He was described as intelligent and hardworking by his divisional officers and was one of the first to become involved in radar technology. His wide-ranging service took him to the waters off British Columbia, Newfoundland, West Africa, Europe, and the Arctic where he faced the dangers of the seas and the violence of the enemy.

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