

## Able Seaman Ronald Joseph McDonald V-11491



Able Seaman Ronald McDonald. Photo: Canadian Virtual War Museum

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Saskatoon, SK, 14 April 1920**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 4 September 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Dairy worker, Palm Dairies**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Louisburg* sank during an air attack on 6 February 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; McDonald Falls (Lat 59° 23'N Long 106° 43'W)**

Ronald Joseph McDonald was the fourth of nine children born to Nellie Egan McDonald and Martin James McDonald on 14 April 1921 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Brothers Percy, Kenneth, Mervin, Wilfred, and Lionel were born in 1914, 1915, 1918, 1923, and 1926 respectively, while sisters Margaret, Helen and Rita were born in 1923, 1928 and 1931. Sadly, Kenneth died as an infant. Their parents were born in Low in the Gatineau Hills in western Quebec. The 1911 Census records that Martin was employed as a labourer with a timber company.

Ronald's parents got married in 1912 in Low and later relocated to Saskatoon. Their names first appear in the Saskatoon Henderson's Directory in 1914, living in a new neighbourhood on the west side of Saskatoon – a home the family would own well into the 1960s. Martin is listed as a labourer, then in 1915 as a Bridgeman with the Canadian Pacific Railway. In 1916 he became a policeman with the Saskatoon City Police, a career which lasted until his retirement in 1947. This steady and reasonably paid work would contribute to the well-being and stability of the family throughout the Great Depression and severe drought, which devastated the economy and environment of Saskatchewan in the 1930s.

Ronald attended St. Mary's Separate School (grades 1-8) and then the Saskatoon Technical Collegiate for one year in a motor mechanics course. As a youth, he was a paper boy delivering newspapers in his neighbourhood, a member of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and a member of St. Mary's Young People's Association. Prior to enlisting, he was employed as a butter maker with Palm Dairies Ltd, a large creamery in Saskatoon. Upon enrollment, Ronald stated that he planned to return to motor mechanics after the War.

Ronald was sworn in at the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary) on 4 September 1940. He was 19 years old, single, 6 feet 1 inch tall, and weighed 157 pounds with dark hair, blue eyes and a sallow complexion. Both his brother, Percy, and his sister, Margaret, joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. Percy served as a Pilot Officer in England, while Margaret worked as a Leading Aircraftswoman at No. 11 Service Flying Training School in Yorkton, Saskatchewan.

Ronald remained in *Unicorn*, attending to administrative details and taking basic training until 8 March 1941, 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. While that may seem like an inordinate period of time to receive fundamental training, it is important to remember that when war was declared, the Royal Canadian Navy consisted of thirteen ships and 3,843 officers and ratings, including reservists, and that it counted on the seventeen naval reserve divisions then operating across Canada to recruit and initially train men. This training, however, was not standardized, and Divisions were short of training equipment, accommodations, and instructors. As a result, HMCS *Naden* and HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the two principal initial training establishments, were soon overcrowded with recruits being largely retrained because of the inadequacies of the system.

Notwithstanding the teething problems, training in the Navy during the War fell into two parallel streams – *substantive*, which provided leadership, and *non-substantive*, which provided technical expertise. Ronald was assigned to the Seaman Branch, which included the substantive ratings of ordinary, able, and leading seaman, petty officer, and chief petty officer. In addition, the branch was further subdivided into specialized non-substantive ratings. Gunnery to which Ronald was assigned was one of these specialties, which in turn was divided into five sub-specialties – DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships), which provided gun crews for merchant ships; Anti-Aircraft which included all close-range weapons; and Main Armament, which contained three distinct ratings with three classes in each: Control Rating (CR), principally concerned with determining the range of a target; Quarters Rating (QR), responsible for the stowage and supply of ammunition and breech operation; and Layer Rating (LR), responsible for the movements of the gun as it was brought to bear on a target. These three ratings, in turn, were divided into 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Class, with 1<sup>st</sup> Class being the most skilled.

Ronald qualified as a Quarters Rating 3<sup>rd</sup> Class (QR3) on 6 September 1941. The rating entitled Ronald to a 10-cent per day pay raise.

On 1 October 1941, Ronald was drafted to HMCS *Chedabucto* (J-168). Named for Chedabucto Bay in Nova Scotia, she was a Bangor-class minesweeper built by Burrard Dry Dock Co. Ltd. in Vancouver and commissioned on 27 September. After working up, *Chedabucto* left Esquimalt on 11 November 1941 and arrived at Halifax on 17 December. During this time, Ronald was promoted to Acting Able Seaman before leaving the ship on 22 December.

Following his service in *Chedabucto*, Ronald was drafted to HMCS *Stadacona* over the Christmas period, then to HMCS *Sackville* (K-181), a Flower-class corvette. *Sackville* was named for the town of Sackville, New Brunswick, located near the Nova Scotia border and built by Saint John Dry Dock & Shipbuilding Co. Ltd. in Saint John. She was commissioned there on 30 December 1941 and arrived at Halifax on 12 Jan 1942, where Ronald joined her. Following work ups, *Sackville* joined the Newfoundland Escort Force based in St. John's, Newfoundland.

Ronald was promoted to Able Seaman on 23 January 1942.

Able Seaman Ronald McDonald served on three convoy escort voyages aboard *Sackville* before being drafted back to *Stadacona* for two months. On 20 June 1942, he joined HMCS *Louisburg* (K-143), which was also a Flower-class corvette.

*Louisburg* was built by Morton Engineering and Dry Dock Co. at Quebec City and commissioned there on 2 October 1941. She was named for the town of Louisburg on Cape Breton Island. Lieutenant Commander William Campbell, who had joined the RCNVR in Saskatoon in 1924, was her Commanding Officer. Prior to Ronald joining *Louisburg*, she had been assigned first to the Sydney Force and then the Newfoundland Escort



Force. While escorting convoy SC-67, she was engaged in a battle south of Greenland in which HMCS *Spikenard* and a tanker were lost. After a refit in Halifax, she resumed North Atlantic escort duty with Ronald onboard before being re-assigned to Operation TORCH, the invasion of North Africa.

On the afternoon of 6 February 1943, while underway off Cape Tenes, Algeria, the convoy to which *Louisburg* was assigned was attacked by two formations of enemy aircraft, and *Louisburg* was sunk. It was determined that the explosion of a torpedo killed most of those standing watch in the engine room. Later her own depth charges exploded, killing and wounding more men in the water. In all, forty-three were lost, including Able Seaman Ronald McDonald and Lieutenant Commander Campbell.

Ronald, like most of the others who perished, has no known grave. The exceptions are two men who were rescued but later died of their wounds. Ronald is commemorated on Panel 10 of the Halifax Memorial; and on page 190 of the Second World War Book of Remembrance. McDonald Falls (Lat 59° 23'N Long 106° 43'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

For his service, Able Seaman Ronald Joseph McDonald was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star and Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Nellie McDonald, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

**Prepared By:**

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**Sources:**

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