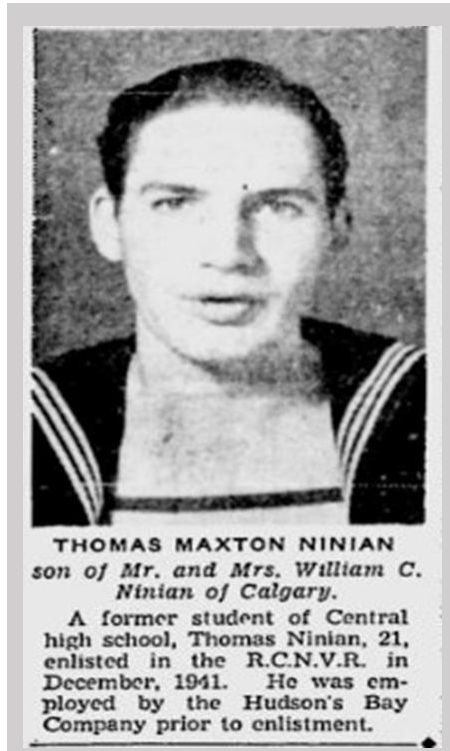


Telegraphist Thomas Maxton Ninian V-13776



Telegraphist Maxton Ninian. Photo:
Calgary Herald Article 16 February 1943

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Calgary AB, 4 March 1921**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 30 April 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Retail Clerk, Hudson's Bay Company**
- **Death: Lost at sea while serving in HMCS *Louisburg* on 6 February 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; Western Canada High School WW2 Memorial Plaque; the Field of Crosses in Calgary; HMCS Tecumseh Memorial Plaque in Calgary; and the Alberta Naval Museum Plaque in Calgary**

Thomas Maxton Ninian lived in the Bankview area of Calgary, Alberta until he enlisted into the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at the age of 20 on 30 April 1941. He preferred to be called by his middle name, Maxton. Maxton was the second child and oldest son of Scottish immigrants, Elizabeth Craig Ninian (nee King) and William Clement Ninian. Maxton had an older sister named Mary Craig who had been born in 1913, then on 4 March 1921 came Maxton followed by his younger brother George Angus on 29 August 1923. Their mother Elizabeth Craig Ninian was born in Edinburg, Scotland in 1883 and immigrated to Canada in 1906. William Clement Ninian had emigrated from Glasgow, Scotland; he had been born there on 9 November 1883.

When Maxton's father, William, was old enough he joined the Royal Engineers and served for four years. He learned carpentry skills during his service so when he entered Canada, he had a marketable skill. He immigrated to Canada in early 1906 and originally settled in Toronto but moved west and settled in Calgary in 1911. It was in Calgary that he met Elizabeth Craig King and they were married on 21 July 1911. They lived at 313 17 Ave. N.W., William found work easily and in 1913 they had their daughter Mary Craig. When World War 1 started William felt it was his duty to join the Canadian Army, despite being 32 years old and married with a child. He enlisted on 22 January 1915 and because of his previous service was sent directly overseas as part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. William was in excellent physical condition, and they gave him the rank of Sergeant and made him a physical fitness instructor.

Late in 1915 Sergeant Ninian was too close to a bomb explosion; he was knocked unconscious and suffered a severe concussion. William never fully recovered from this injury and eventually, in 1917 he was assigned to light duties in the United Kingdom and eventually received a medical discharge in 1919.

For the last two years of his service Elizabeth and Mary had returned to Scotland. After William was discharged the family moved back to Canada and once again settled in Calgary. William found it difficult to work as a carpenter as a result of his injury but was able to find employment as a letter carrier for Canada Post. They lived in the Bankview area of Calgary, probably because it was close to his mail route in lower Mount Royal. The Ninians lived in an apartment until 1923 when they rented a house at 2125 21 Ave. S.W. and finally purchased a house at 1815 17 Street S.W. This became their permanent residence and William and Elizabeth lived here until William retired from the Post Office in 1949.

In 1927 Thomas Maxton Ninian started school. He attended the Bankview Public School located at 1826 16A St. SW for grades one to six, then attended Central School located at 930 13 Ave S.W. for grades seven through nine and some of his high school years. He finished High School at Western Canada High School which was located at 641 17 Ave. S.W. Maxton graduated from school when he was 18, and although he was interested in Interior Decorating, he went to work for the Hudson's Bay Company as a retail clerk. He had just quit this job a month before enlisting in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR). When he enlisted, he stated that he would only serve for the "duration of the hostilities" and planned to return to a career as an interior decorator when discharged.

He enlisted in the RCNVR on 30 April 1941 at the Navy Base in Calgary which was later named HMCS *Tecumseh*. For six weeks he was put on "division strength" in Calgary. Maxton was given a uniform and some basic military training. According to his medical document he was 5'11" tall and weighed 140 pounds. He had brown eyes and brown hair. He listed his religion as Presbyterian. Maxton had some knowledge and interest in radio technology and requested to be trained as a wireless radio operator. His younger brother George Angus also enlisted at HMCS *Tecumseh* and also requested to be trained as a wireless radio operator. Ordinary Telegraphist George Angus Ninian was active in the Battle of the Atlantic while stationed on the Minesweeper HMCS *Minas*. George Angus Ninian was discharged in 1945 at the end of WW 2.

On 16 June 1941 Thomas Maxton was put on active duty and dispatched to the training base, HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax Nova Scotia. Maxton began an extensive training program, both in basic seamanship and also in Telegraphy. Telegraphist was a demanding trade, the recruit had to learn Morse code, understand the basics of the receiving and sending equipment, know the proper format for sending messages and have some knowledge of coding and decoding messages. At the beginning of the war, the RCN was having difficulty training recruits in this trade. A large part of the problem was a simple lack of reading and writing skills, so it became a requirement for all trainees to have completed at least two years of high school. Before the war started it had taken a full year to train an Ordinary Telegraphist, after the war started this was reduced to three months. After six weeks of training a recruit was tested and if they could not read Morse code at 12 words per minute (12/wpm) and pass some other requirements they were dispatched to other trades. The standard for passing the training was reading code at 22/wpm. Late in 1941, a special training base was established at St. Hyacinthe Quebec for Telegraphists, Signalmen and Coders. However, Maxton Ninian had been dispatched to sea duty before this base was established.

Thomas Maxton was a dedicated and intelligent recruit; he was rated Ordinary Telegraphist on 2 August 1941 after receiving less than two months of training. Maxton was to be dispatched

to HMCS *Louisburg* after the ship was commissioned in Halifax on 16 October 1941. While waiting to join the crew of *Louisburg* Maxton spent 10 days aboard HMCS *Venture* taking a crash course in basic seamanship. HMCS *Venture* was a three-masted sailing ship that was used for training purposes in the Halifax harbour.

HMCS *Louisburg* was a Flower Class Corvette built in the Quebec City shipyards; construction was finished on 2 October 1941 and the ship was moved to Halifax, arriving there on 16 October 1941. Some of the crew had joined the ship in Quebec City and the remainder, including Maxton, joined the ship on 18 October 1941.

HMCS *Louisburg* was assigned to escort duty in the Battle of the Atlantic. Initially, she was assigned to the Sydney Force, which would escort Merchant convoys from Sydney Nova Scotia to St. John's Newfoundland where more experienced RCN escorts would take over and escort the convoy to Iceland. At Iceland, the Royal Navy would take over the escort to Londonderry Ireland. The *Louisburg* was on Sydney Force until mid-January 1942 when she was assigned to the Newfoundland to Londonderry escort force. The first escort was SC67 and on 15 February 1942, the first battle with German U-Boats took place resulting in the loss of the lead corvette HMCS *Spikenard*. After this battle, HMCS *Louisburg* was sent to Halifax for an extensive refit until mid-June 1942. While in Halifax Maxton took some training and was rated to Telegraphist on 30 June 1942. At the end of June 1942, *Louisburg* returned to duty on Newfoundland to Londonderry Escorts. These convoys now were known as the Mid Ocean Force and the escorts would take the convoy from Newfoundland all the way to Londonderry Ireland.

In September of 1942, several Canadian ships including the *Louisburg* were dispatched to the UK to Gibraltar Escorts. These escorts would take Merchant convoys from the United Kingdom to Gibraltar and then to Bone Algeria. This was in preparation for "Operation Torch" which was the name given to the Allied invasion of North Africa. The danger in the Atlantic had been German U-boats (submarines) but in the Mediterranean, they also had to deal with enemy aircraft, consequently, *Louisburg* spent a month in Humber Harbour being refitted with anti-aircraft armaments. *Louisburg* suffered further delays when on 9 December 1942 she was accidentally rammed by HMS *Bideford* while at anchor in Londonderry Ireland. The damage was extensive, and *Louisburg* spent five weeks in Belfast Ireland being repaired.



Finally, in late January 1943 HMCS *Louisburg* began duties with the Gibraltar to Bone Algeria convoy escorts. HMCS *Louisburg* was one of eight Canadian corvettes and two British destroyers that were assigned to protect convoy KMS8 from Gibraltar to Bone Algeria. Near dusk, on 6 February 1943, the crew of *Louisburg* were conducting an action station drill approximately six miles off the coast near Oran Algeria when the nearest ship HMS *Laforey* began firing their anti-aircraft guns and there were explosions in the water behind them. Initially, it was thought that the *Laforey* was firing depth charges, but they were actually under attack from high-level bombers.

Suddenly another formation of three dive bombers was attacking HMCS *Louisburg*, these bombers came from behind the mountains on shore and the sun was just setting behind them. The gun crews began firing but it was difficult to zero in on them because the sun was in their eyes. They came in very low, and one fired a torpedo which very quickly struck *Louisburg's* engine room. The resulting explosion was devastating, and the ship began to sink immediately. The command to "abandon ship" was given and in less than five minutes HMCS *Louisburg* sank.

Most of the crew that was stationed in the engine room were killed immediately and there were several more fatalities when the pressure-triggered depth charges began exploding as they sank. There were 45 survivors and 42 deaths. Of the 42 deaths, 5 were British sailors who were being transported to Oran and the other 37 were Canadian sailors, including Telegraphist Thomas Maxton Ninian.

HMCS *Louisburg* had the unfortunate distinction of being the only Canadian ship to be sunk by enemy aircraft.

For his service Ordinary Telegraphist Thomas Maxton Ninian was awarded the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp, the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star and the War Medal. His mother Elizabeth Craig Ninian was awarded the Memorial Cross on 5 April 1943.

On 11 November 1963, Elizabeth Craig Ninian represented the "Silver Cross Mothers" and placed a wreath at the Remembrance Day Ceremonies at the Jubilee Auditorium in Calgary.

Telegraphist Thomas Maxton Ninian is remembered on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; the Western Canada High School WW2 Memorial Plaque in Calgary; the Field of Crosses Calgary; the Naval Museum of Alberta Plaque in Calgary; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 199 at the Centre Block House of Parliament, in Ottawa

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