

Engine Room Artificer 3rd Class Robert Oliver V-30100



ERA Robert Oliver. Photo: Ancestry.ca public photos

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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Gateshead near Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, 7 August 1900**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Naden*, 9 January 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Machinist, Riverside Iron Works, Calgary**
- **Death: Died of cold-water immersion shock while serving in HMCS *Saskatoon* on 26 February 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial, Calgary; and Field of Crosses in Calgary**

Robert Oliver was born on 7 August 1900 in Gateshead near Newcastle-on-Tyne, England. He was the oldest son and second child of 11 children born to Edward Oliver and Mary Ann Oliver (nee Sinton). Robert and his older sister, Evelyn, were born on the River Tyne's south side, directly south of Newcastle. Robert's father was born in Gateshead in 1872, and his mother was born in Newcastle, also in 1872. They were married in Gateshead in 1898. Edward was a House Painter and Ship Painter by trade and worked as a Sign Writer.

Robert's ten brothers and sisters were: Evelyn (1899-1975), Edward (1902-1953), Mary Ann (1904-1973), Ernest Charles (1906-1987), William (1908-1997), George James (1911-1993), Sidney Sinton (1912-1994), Ellen Sinton (1912-1994), Frank (1916-1991), and Norman (1916-1993).

In 1902, the family moved to Kings Cross in London, where seven more children, including the first set of twins, were born. They then moved to Edmonton, Middlesex, on the north side of London, where the last set of twins were born. In his later years, Edward worked as a fitter for the Benjamin Electric Lighting Company in London. Edward enlisted with the Royal Fusiliers in 1914, and later, during the First World War, he worked in the dockyards at Invergordon Naval Base in Scotland.

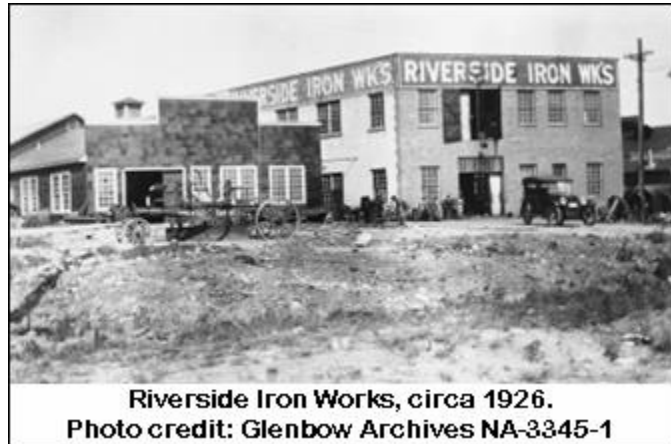
Robert completed nine years of public school and two years of college when he enlisted in the Royal Air Force (RAF) on 24 February 1921. He reached the rank of Leading Aircraftsman and

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worked as a “Turner” making metal parts for aircraft. At some point, Robert met Margaret (Meg) Ramsey of Dunfermline, Scotland and they were married in Dunfermline on 23 November 1926. They lived in Edmonton, Middlesex, near Robert’s parents. Tragedy struck the young family on 28 May 1927 when Meg died in childbirth, and the twins she was carrying also died.

After this tragedy, Robert immigrated to Canada in 1928. He lived in and found work in Camrose and Edmonton, AB. It is unclear whether Robert requested a discharge from the RAF, but he was officially discharged on 13 April 1929. Robert remarried on 20 May 1929 to Marguerite Olive McKenzie. Marguerite was born in Edmonton, AB in 1907. Robert and Marguerite moved to Calgary shortly after they married.

Robert worked as a machinist for Precision Machine Shop and then for Riverside Iron Works. Riverside Iron Works was bought out by the Dominion Bridge Company when Robert worked for them. The shops were located in the Ramsey Industrial area near 24 Avenue and 7 Street SE, where several original buildings still exist. Robert and Marguerite lived in the Erlton area of Calgary at 2417 1A Street SE. This address was within walking distance of Robert’s work.



On 9 January 1940, at 39 years of age, Robert enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR). Although he and his wife lived in Calgary, Robert enlisted at HMCS *Naden*, Canada’s west coast training and operations base in Esquimalt, BC. His enlistment so far from home likely resulted from a recruiting trip from the coast where Navy recruiters were looking for engineers with specific skills and experience. It is possible that Robert decided to enlist because six of his brothers had also enlisted back home in England. Frank, Norman and Ernest had joined the RAF, George was in the British Army, Sidney was in the 17th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, and Edward had made a career in the army, joining The Middlesex Regiment from 1920 to 1927. Edward then joined the Essex Regiment and Pioneer Corps from 1940 to 1946, serving primarily in France. All six brothers were actively involved in the hostilities and survived the war.

Robert’s attestation documents show he was 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighed 160 pounds. He had brown hair and eyes and stated his religion as the Church of England. Robert had not discussed his service and reinstatement with his civilian employer because he planned to start his own company after the hostilities ended.

RCNVR recruits with machinist skills were in high demand, and Robert’s previous military experience was also valuable. He was immediately placed on Active Duty, underwent a crash course in Basic Seamanship and was rated Engine Room Artificer (ERA) 4th Class. This was similar to the rank of a Leading Seaman, but ERAs wore a Petty Officer uniform. An ERA 4th Class would be promoted to ERA 3rd Class soon after receiving their engine room certifications and completing a sea duty period where they demonstrated their proficiency.

On 16 February 1940, Robert joined the crew of HMCS *Comox*. HMCS *Comox* was a Fundy-class Minesweeper. These minesweepers were the first warships built in Canada since the end of the First World War. Only four were built when it was decided that the design would change to Bangor-class minesweepers. The main upgrade was oil-burning engines. The Fundy-class used

coal for their steam engines and lacked the endurance of oil-burning engines. HMCS *Comox* was assigned to Harbour Patrol in Esquimalt Harbour until it was decided that *Comox* and her sister ship, HMCS *Nootka*, should be dispatched to the east coast. Robert had only been a crew member for two weeks when HMCS *Comox* sailed to the east coast via the Panama Canal.

HMCS *Comox* reached Halifax, NS in April 1940 and was assigned to the Halifax Local Defence Force. The Halifax Local Defence Force ships performed mine sweeping operations at the entrance to the harbour and completed patrols along the east coast of Nova Scotia. They also controlled the Harbour Defence Boom (anti-submarine nets) at the harbour entrance.

ERA Robert Oliver often worked in the machine shops of the dockyard. Although assigned to HMCS *Comox*, he was also on the books at HMCS *Venture*, an accommodation ship in Halifax Harbour. Robert also served aboard HMCS *Fundy*, another Fundy-class minesweeper on the Halifax Local Defence Force. He served on these minesweepers until 28 February 1941.

On 31 January 1941, Robert was granted his Engine Room Watch Keeper certification.

On 1 March 1941, he was assigned to the Tugboat *Lisgar* W06, also part of the Halifax Harbour Defence Force. He served on the *Lisgar* until 30 April 1942, and was rated to ERA 3rd Class on 1 January 1942. Since he was spending so much of his service time in Halifax, his wife Marguerite decided to move to Halifax and lived near the HMCS *Stadacona* base at 25 North Park Street. In late November 1941, Robert received terrible news from his family in London. On 21 November 1941, his father, Edward, died when he was struck by a trolley in London.



HMCS Saskatoon K158.
Photo credit: For Posterity's Sake website

On 1 May 1942, ERA Robert Oliver was assigned to HMCS *Stadacona*, the main Naval Base in Halifax. He received more training and was recommended for promotion to Chief ERA on 24 July 1942. He began working on Flower-class corvettes to familiarize himself with their engines in preparation for being assigned to one and taking part in convoy duty.

Robert joined HMCS *Saskatoon* on 3 November 1942.

Saskatoon was a Flower-class corvette on the Halifax Force from June 1941 to March 1942. In April 1942, the ship was assigned to the Western Local Escort Force and escorted convoys on the "Triangle Run" between Halifax, New York, and Boston.

Robert had been in *Saskatoon* for four months when at 1830 hrs on 26 February 1943, Ordinary Seaman (OS) William Moffat, who was on “depth charge watch,” witnessed ERA Robert Oliver come on deck from the Petty Officers’ mess, and next he was sighted in the ocean. OS Moffat sounded the “man overboard” alarm, and another sailor at the stern threw out a life-saving buoy. The captain, Lieutenant J.S. Scott, RCNR, was on the bridge and immediately ordered the ship to come about. The body was pulled aboard 31 minutes after the alarm was given, and despite the efforts of the sick berth attendant, who gave artificial respiration for two hours, Robert was declared dead. The cause of death was deemed to be heart failure due to immersion. On 27 February 1943, he was buried at sea. Engine Room Artificer 3rd Class Robert Oliver was 42 years old when he died.

Concerned that he may have deliberately jumped overboard, a Board of Inquiry was held at HMCS *Stadacona* on 21 April 1943. Robert’s shipmates were interviewed as to his emotional state. The other Petty Officers from *Saskatoon* were also interviewed; some stated that he had previously seemed worried and had missed meals for a few days, but not to the extent that they were concerned about him.

For his service, Engine Room Artificer 3rd Class Robert Oliver was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His wife and mother were each awarded the Memorial Cross.

Engine Room Artificer 3rd Class Robert Oliver is commemorated on Panel 10 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta Plaque; the Calgary Field of Crosses; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 200, at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

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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:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database profile for Robert Oliver
- Canada.ca ships histories: HMCS *Fundy*, HMCS *Comox*, and Tugboat *Lisgar*
- Library and Archives Canada: service file for ERA Robert Oliver
- For Posterity’s Sake: HMCS *Saskatoon* K158
- For Posterity’s Sake: ERA Robert Oliver
- Canadian Virtual War Museum: ERA Robert Oliver
- Ancestry.ca: information on the family of Robert Oliver
- E-mail exchanges with Claudia Oliver of Manchester, England, regarding the history of the Oliver Family in the United Kingdom

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