

Able Seaman Robert Frank Rayner V-65706



Submarine Detector trade badge

Do you have a picture of Able Seaman Rayner that you can share? Please submit to CSVC.CVMC@gmail.com

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Saskatoon SK, 28 January 1924**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 6 July 1943**
- **Civilian Occupation: Postal Clerk, Royal Mail Canada**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Shawinigan* was torpedoed and sank on 25 November 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; Memorial in the City of Shawinigan; Stained Glass window in the chapel at Canadian Forces Base Halifax and Rayner Lake (Lat 59° 21'N Long 106° 41'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.**

Robert Frank Rayner was the third of four children born to Bessie Melina Rayner and Herbert Frank Rayner on 28 January 1924 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Brothers Thomas and Alan were born in 1920 and 1922 respectively and sister Sheila in 1930. Bessie and Herbert were born in England in 1887 and 1888 respectively and married in Stanwell, Middlesex in December 1918. Herbert's name first appears in the 1920 Saskatoon Henderson's Directory. He is recorded working as a clerk in a flour mill. Also, according to the directory, the family moved three times between 1922 and 1926 before settling into a home in 1927 in a comfortable neighbourhood where they lived until 1938. Herbert remained at the flour mill until 1923 then became a commissioned salesman with Fuller Brush until 1926; then a bookkeeper with a cartage company until 1929 after which he became a life insurance agent and manager with Metropolitan Life Insurance Company for the remainder of his working life. Robert attended nearby Wilson Public School from grade 1 to 8 between 1930 and 1938.

The family then moved to North Battleford, Saskatchewan about ninety miles northwest of Saskatoon. North Battleford and the separate community of Battleford are situated on the opposite banks of the North Saskatchewan River. For thousands of years prior to European settlement, succeeding cultures of indigenous peoples lived in the area. European settlement began with French fur traders in the late 18th century. In 1875 Battleford was founded and a Northwest

Mounted Police (NWMP) post established. Battleford also served as the capital of the North-West Territories between 1876 and 1883. The NWMP post played an important role in the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. In 1905, the construction of the Canadian Northern Railway main line between Winnipeg and Edmonton placed the line on the north side of the North Saskatchewan River resulting in the establishment of North Battleford. In 1941 the population of North Battleford was 4,694 while Battleford's population was 1,336 for a total of 6,030. There Herbert developed a life insurance agency. Robert left school in June 1941 after completing Grade 9 at North Battleford Collegiate Institute and enrolled as a private in the Battleford Light Infantry (BLI) (Non-Permanent Active Militia). In September he started work as a postal clerk with the Royal Mail. On 18 May 1942 Robert left the Post Office, transferred to the Canadian Postal Corps as a private and was posted to Ottawa. On 2 July 1943 Robert was released from the Postal Corps to enable him to transfer to the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve.

On 6 July 1943, Robert was sworn into the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). His two brothers had also enlisted – Thomas in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps and Alan in the Royal Canadian Air Force. When sworn in Robert was 19 years old, single, 5 feet 9 ½ Inches tall, and weighed 137 pounds with dark brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. About a week after being sworn in, Robert commenced basic training at *Unicorn* completing the course in mid October 1943.

From *Unicorn* he was drafted to HMCS *Cornwallis* in Deep Cove, Nova Scotia where Robert first took New Entry training. On completion in January 1944, he was selected for Submarine Detector training which involved asdic, the submarine detection system now referred to as sonar. There were four asdic ratings: the Anti-Submarine Artificer, the Submarine Detector, the Higher Submarine Detector, and the Submarine Detector Instructor. The first was a highly trained technician (referred to as artificer) who worked on shore installing, maintaining, and repairing asdic equipment. The Submarine Detector operated the ship-borne asdic equipment and performed minor maintenance under the supervision of the Higher Submarine Detector who was the maintenance expert and senior operator on board a ship. The Submarine Detector Instructor taught ratings ashore. The four training courses which were the pathways to these ratings differed only in emphasis. To succeed a knowledge of seamanship, a grasp of underwater tactics and sea conditions, and an acute sense of hearing were required. The theories of sound and electricity, operational procedure, and practical work-shop skills were covered. At the beginning of the War, asdic training was very rudimentary with a severe lack of equipment, instructors, and suitable accommodations. Suitable accommodations were not obtained until training was moved to *Cornwallis*, where training facilities were housed in what was termed "the finest anti-submarine school building in the British Empire"

On completion of the Submarine Detector course Robert was drafted to HMCS *Brockville* (J270) on 13 April 1944. *Brockville* was a Bangor-class minesweeper. She was named for the town of Brockville, Ontario. During the three weeks Robert served in her, *Brockville* was a member of the Escort Group EG W-2 of the Western Local Escort Force until May 1944, when she transferred to the Sydney Force based in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Robert was drafted to HMCS *Shawinigan* (K136) on 12 May 1944. She was a Flower-class corvette named for the town of Shawinigan Falls located on the Saint Maurice River 22 miles upstream from the St. Lawrence River. Her service life was busy and varied. When Robert joined her, *Shawinigan* was undergoing a refit in Liverpool, Nova Scotia. On completion of the refit in June, she was transferred to Escort Group W-2 and proceeded to Bermuda to work up. On completion of work-ups *Shawinigan*, as a member of Escort Group W-2, provided, among other services, anti-submarine escort to ferries sailing from Sydney, Nova Scotia.

On 12 July Robert was promoted to Able Seaman.

On 24 November 1944, *Shawinigan* sailed 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 she was torpedoed by the U-boat *U-1228* in the Cabot Strait. Later that morning *Burgeo* left Port aux



HMCS Shawinigan. Source: Government of Canada

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. In all, the entire crew of ninety-one, including Able Seaman Robert Rayner, perished. Robert was 20 years old when he died.

Robert 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. Robert is commemorated on Panel 11 Halifax Memorial and in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 424 at the Centre Blocks of Parliament, Ottawa. Rayner Lake (Lat 59° 21'N Long 106° 41'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

For his service, Able Seaman Robert Frank Rayner was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Bessie Rayner, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Epilogue

Sometime shortly before Robert's death Herbert, Bessie, and Sheila moved to Vancouver. There Herbert became the manager of the Metropolitan Life Insurance office and, in due course, busied himself with the paperwork involved with Robert's estate. Bessie's sorrow was recognized by receipt of the Memorial Cross. Sheila, as a 15-year-old, observed her parents' anxiety and grief brought on by her brothers' service. Thomas was serving in No. 22 Field Ambulance Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps attached to the 3rd Canadian Division. He had landed in Normandy of the afternoon of D-day and was still in harm's way in Northern France. Alan was a Halifax bomber pilot in the RCAF serving with Royal Air Force 78 Squadron conducting bomber

operations over Europe from Yorkshire. He was promoted to Flight Lieutenant four days before Robert's death and, in 1945, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Prepared By:

John Dalzell, Capt(N) (retired), Commanding Officer HMCS *UNICORN* 1983-88 & Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Research Team.



Sources:

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