

Sick Berth Attendant William Allen Rennie V-18336



William Rennie – Canadian Virtual War Memorial. Photo from a book titled “Book of Remembrance” held at the Oshawa Public Library

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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Toronto ON, 19 March 1921**
- **Enlisted: Kingston Division RCNVR, 6 May 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Press Operator, Pedlar People Ltd**
- **Death: Lost at sea while serving in HMCS *Spikenard* on 10 February 1942**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 9; Oshawa war memorial; and HMCS *Cataraqui* Memorial Passageway, Kingston, ON**

William Allen Rennie was born in Toronto, ON on 19 March 1921. He was one of four children born to Herbert Hedley Rees and Alice Amelia (Hanna). Herbert was a widower when he remarried and there were also three children from his first marriage. In various of his military documents, William noted that “. . .his father had left home... in 1929 and never returned”. Alice and her children thereafter used the surname, Rennie. William had a twin sister, Wilma. The family belonged to the United Church of Canada. After Herbert left, Alice, William and the rest of the family moved to Oshawa, ON.

William attended Mary Street School, and the Oshawa Collegiate and Vocational Institute. A newspaper article from the *Toronto Telegram* published after his death noted that William was well-known in sporting circles as an active member of the Oshawa Cycle Club.

William was attracted to the military at an early age. He served in the Oshawa Sea Cadets from 1934 to 1941 rising to the rank of Lieutenant. He also served in Oshawa’s local militia unit. Specifically, his service record shows a period of service with the Ontario Regiment (R.F.) in 1935 and service with the Ontario Regiment (Tank) in 1937. While there is no documentary evidence that William was ever released from his militia service, he was clearly underage. He was 14 years old in 1935 and only 16 years old in 1937.

In 1939, while in his late teens and living in Oshawa, William was the primary earner for his family which was comprised of his mother and sisters. He worked as a press operator for Pedlar People Limited in Oshawa, and he paid \$40 a month to his mother for room and board. Following his enlistment, William continued to give a portion of his pay to his mother.

On 6 May 1941, William joined the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) in Kingston, ON and was rated probationary Sick Berth Attendant. This assignment was perhaps in part due to his expressing interest in becoming a doctor. He had taken a First Aid course with the Sea Cadets and before his enlistment, he had worked at a medical clinic under the supervision of Dr. G.L. Bird. His medical examination at the time showed his age as 20 years and 2 months, he was 5 foot 8½ inches tall and weighed 150½ pounds. He had brown hair and eyes and a clear complexion. William spent about six weeks training at Kingston before transferring to HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, NS. *Stadacona* was the Royal Canadian Navy's (RCN) shore facility adjacent to the Dockyard in Halifax. "Stad" was originally a British Army Barracks and was appropriated by the RCN prior to the First World War and was later commissioned in 1923.

On 5 August 1941, the probationary status of William's rating was removed. His character was evaluated as "very good" and his efficiency was rated as "satisfactory". From 12 October 1941, William continued his training at HMCS *Avalon* near St. John's, Newfoundland. *Avalon* was part of the independent Newfoundland Command established in June 1941 and was under the Commander-in-Chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic. *Avalon* was located at Buckmaster's Field near St. John's. While this establishment was referred to as "HMCS *Avalon*", it was never formally commissioned. Newfoundland had not yet joined Confederation.

On 21 January 1942, William reported on board HMCS *Spikenard* as a qualified Sick Berth Attendant. HMCS *Spikenard* was a Flower-class corvette built by Davie Shipbuilding and Repairing in Lauzon, QC, was launched on 10 August 1940 and commissioned as HMS *Spikenard* on 10 December 1940. On 15 May 1941, she was one of 10 corvettes loaned to the RCN and retained the name *Spikenard* and the pennant number K198. Flower-class corvettes were small, 950 tons, 205 feet long, 33 feet wide, and drew 11.5 feet. They were lightly armed with small guns, machine guns, and depth charge throwers. Many Canadian Flower-class corvettes served as convoy escorts throughout the war.



HMCS Spikenard. Photo: u-boat.net

William Rennie's experience in *Spikenard* was brief and tragic. On 1 February 1942, *Spikenard* left St. John's to join convoy SC.67 as an escort on the recently inaugurated "Newfie-Derry" run. On 10 February 1942, HMCS *Spikenard* was torpedoed and sunk by U-136, about 465 nautical miles west of Malin Head, Ireland in position Lat 56°10'N Long 021°07'W. The torpedo struck *Spikenard* at virtually the same instant as another torpedo exploded against the nearby Norwegian tanker, MS *Heina*. The other ships in the escort group believed that only the *Heina*, which was ablaze, had been struck and they managed to rescue her entire crew. *Spikenard* was not on fire and the other escorts did not realize she was hit and sinking. The other ships had been caught up chasing contacts and did not realize that *Spikenard* was gone until she failed to answer repeated radio calls. Some escorts fell back and found only eight survivors from a crew of 85 officers and men when they were picked up the next day. Sick Berth Attendant William Rennie's

body, along with so many of his shipmates, was never recovered. Sick Berth Attendant William Allen Rennie was 20 years old when he died.

On 19 February 1942, his mother Alice received the news from the Minister of National Defence,

“Your son was serving in HMCS Spikenard which was torpedoed and sunk by enemy action on 10 February 1942. Details of the action are not, however, available at this time. ...The possibility of your son having been rescued by other ships cannot be estimated but it has been established that he was not among the survivors landed at a United Kingdom port and very little hope is held out for the survival of the remainder...”

For his service, Sick Berth Attendant William Allen Rennie was awarded: the 1939-1945 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His Mother, Alice, was awarded the Memorial Cross.



Oshawa War Memorial. Photo: Oshawa Museum archival collection

Sick Berth Attendant William Allen Rennie is commemorated on Panel 9 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; on the Oshawa war memorial; on the Honour Roll in the Memorial Passage of HMCS *Cataraqui*, Kingston, ON; and the Second World War

Book of Remembrance, Page 109, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

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Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission profile for William Allen Rennie
- Library and Archives Canada Service file for William Allen Rennie
- uboat.net
- Wikipedia

- Ancestry.com
- Photo of William Rennie – In memory of the Fathers, Husbands and Sons of the Oshawa Branch of the Silver Cross Women of Canada. From their book titled *Book of Remembrance* held at the Oshawa Public Library. Submitted for the project, Operation: Picture Me.
- Newspaper clipping – From the *Toronto Telegram* February 1942. Submitted for the project Operation: Picture Me