

Petty Officer Harry Carl Riecke V-10435



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Weyburn SK, 28 August 1916**
- **Enlisted: Regina Division RCNVR, 14 August 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Police Constable, City of Weyburn**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *St Croix* was torpedoed and sank on 20 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 9; and Riecke Lake (Lat 54° 34'N Long 103° 03'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.**

Harry Carl Riecke, born on 28 August 1916 in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, was the second of three children born to Mary Mini Riecke and Carl August Riecke. His sisters, Elizabeth and Catherine, were born in 1915 and 1920, respectively. Mary and Carl were born in Germany in 1887 and 1897, respectively, and emigrated to Canada – Mary in 1912 and Carl in 1913. They were married in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, in October 1913. Carl was a blacksmith, and it is possible that he was employed by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and transferred from Moose Jaw to Weyburn, Saskatchewan, where Harry was born.

Weyburn is located on the Souris River, about 110 kilometres southeast of Regina and about 70 kilometres north of the North Dakota border. The name Weyburn is said to be a corruption of the Scottish expression “wee burn”, which refers to a small creek. The CPR reached the future site of Weyburn from Brandon, Manitoba, in 1892, and the Soo Line, an American railway, reached there in 1893.

As the community established itself as an important railway hub, Weyburn grew rapidly. It was constituted as a village in 1900, a town in 1903 and finally as a city in 1913. Its population grew steadily when Harry lived there, from 2,210 people in 1911 to 6,119 in 1941. The establishment of the Saskatchewan Hospital in 1921 was also a significant addition to Weyburn’s economic base. A psychiatric hospital, it was the largest building in the British Commonwealth at the time. The facility had a patient population of approximately 2,500 at its height.

Harry escaped the effects of the Great Depression. His father owned their home and had steady employment, which provided the family with stability and economic security. Harry was enrolled in elementary school in 1921 and Weyburn Collegiate Institute in 1929. Graduating in 1934 at 18, Harry was unlike many of his cohort, who were forced to leave school to find whatever work

they could help support their families. In June 1934, he enlisted in the South Saskatchewan Regiment (Non-Permanent Active Militia), where he served until September 1937, attaining the rank of sergeant. He also worked on farms on a casual basis for about five years as a youth. In 1937, he began an apprenticeship as a painter with a local company. In October 1938, Harry married his wife, Patricia, in Plentywood, Montana. In late 1939, Harry joined the Weyburn Police Department as a constable and served in that capacity until he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR).

On 13 August 1940, Harry was sworn in at the Regina Division RCNVR (now known as HMCS *Queen*) as an Ordinarily Seaman (Temporary). His enrollment documents recorded that he was married, 23 years old, 5 feet 11 1/4 inches tall and weighed 178 pounds with green eyes, brown hair and a dark complexion.

Harry then commenced initial training at the Division, completing the course on 18 January 1941. Even though Harry had spent three years in the militia, he was required to take the course – perhaps on the premise that everyone was to be a sailor first. He also passed the Educational Test 1, which confirmed his academic standing and retention. On 19 January 1941, Harry was on a train bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia and HMCS *Stadacona*. HMCS *Stadacona* and HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, British Columbia, were the two principal training establishments where recruits like Harry were being largely retrained because of the inadequacies of the system. At the beginning of the War, the seventeen naval reserve divisions, like Regina, were largely understaffed and without training aids or even a standard syllabus. At *Stadacona*, Harry took New Entry training. The syllabus covered the sort of things that equipped the graduates to be safe and useful members of the ship's company of a warship.

Next, Harry was placed on a course for further training as a member of the Seaman Branch. Training in the Navy during the War fell into two parallel streams – substantive, which provided leadership, and non-substantive, which provided technical expertise. The Seaman Branch 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 Harry 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; Antiaircraft 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 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Class, with 1st Class being the most skilled. Harry qualified as a Layer Rating 3rd Class on 12 March 1941.

Harry was next drafted to HMCS *Hochelaga* in Montreal. *Hochelaga* was a “stone frigate”. By regulation inherited from the Royal Navy, all naval personnel were assigned to commissioned ships. Originally, personnel not assigned to a ship were assigned to hulks for accommodation purposes. As hulks became decrepit, they were replaced by buildings. These buildings were then commissioned to comply with the regulation. In reality, Harry had been drafted to the Flower Class corvette, HMCS *Dauphin (K-157)*, which was being built by Canadian Vickers Ltd in Montreal but was not yet in commission. There was plenty to do as the ship was cluttered with mountains of equipment waiting to be unpacked and installed by the ship's company and the builder's workers. Named for Dauphin, Manitoba, the ship was commissioned on 17 May 1941 and immediately sailed for Halifax, arriving there on 24 May 1941. From Halifax, she was assigned to the Sydney Force based in Sydney on Cape Breton Island where, with Harry onboard,

she took part in the escort of seven convoys from either Sydney or Halifax to waters off Newfoundland, where the convoys were handed over to another escort group. The taskings took between two to eight days to complete. Harry remained in *Dauphin* until 31 August and made significant career advances during that time. On 1 August, he received his first Good Conduct Badge, which recognized his three years of service in the South Saskatchewan Regiment in addition to his RCNVR time; on 19 August, he was promoted to Able Seaman; and on 21 August, he passed the examination qualifying him for promotion to Leading Seaman.

On 31 August 1941, Harry left HMCS *Dauphin* and returned to *Stadacona* for further Gunnery training, this time as a Quarters Rating. On 16 September, he qualified as a Quarters Rating 2nd Class. He drafted to HMCS *Restigouche* on 7 October 1941.



HMCS *Restigouche* (H-00) was a C-class destroyer commissioned into the Royal Navy as HMS *Comet* in 1932. In June 1938, Canada purchased her and commissioned her as HMCS *Restigouche*. She was named for the Restigouche River, which rises in New Brunswick and, along its course, partially forms the border between New Brunswick and Quebec before flowing into Chaleur Bay.

The 314 days in which Harry served in *Restigouche* were very active. During that time, she escorted seven convoys in the North Atlantic. In the case of two convoys, heavy weather forced ships to straggle, and this resulted in two merchant ships being sunk by U-boats.

In December 1941, during a third convoy designated ON-44 that sailed from Liverpool, *Restigouche* encountered severe weather conditions that caused heavy damage to the ship. The ship was sent to Greenock in Scotland for repairs and modifications to its armament, fire control system, and radar. The repair took several months to complete and was finally finished in March 1942.

On 1 June 1942, Harry was promoted to Leading Seaman and passed the qualification examination for promotion to Petty Officer in August. He then left *Restigouche* for a series of shore postings in *Stadacona* and HMCS *Cornwallis*, also in Halifax, and sixteen days in the destroyer, HMCS *Skeena*. During this 295-day period, his wife moved to Montreal to be closer to him; he passed the Higher Education Test in November 1942, which further validated his general knowledge retention, and qualified as a Quarters Rating 1st Class on 9 March 1943. For his efforts he was also promoted to Petty Officer on 15 April 1943.

It should be noted that it was very rare for an individual to progress from Ordinary Seaman to Petty Officer in less than three years. It is likely that his experience in the Militia, his training and experience as a police constable, his physical presence and bearing (he was six feet tall and weighed 178 pounds), his education, and his age, which was about three years older than his peers set him apart in a positive way and contributed to his progress.

On 9 June 1943, Harry was drafted to HMCS *St. Croix* (I-81).

HMCS *St. Croix* was a Clemson class destroyer built by Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation in Quincy, Massachusetts and commissioned into the United States Navy (USN) as USS *McCook* (DD-252) on 30 April 1919. After a short service period, she was laid up in Philadelphia in 1922. Recommissioned into the USN in December 1939, she was selected as one of 50 ships to be transferred to the Royal Navy under the *Destroyers for Bases Agreement* between the United Kingdom and the United States. Subsequently, she was transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and re-commissioned in Halifax on 24 September 1940 as HMCS *St. Croix* – named after the river that marks the border between New Brunswick and Maine. Thus began her eventful career.



HMCS *St. Croix*. Source: RCN Photo

On 30 November 1940 - Well before Petty Officer Riecke joined the ship – *St. Croix* sailed from Halifax for the United Kingdom and encountered a hurricane en route. Heavily damaged, she returned to Halifax for repairs, which took until mid-March 1941. Then, she was assigned to convoy escort duty primarily in the North

Atlantic and escorted 27 convoys. While doing so, she sank the U-boat *U-90* while escorting convoy ON.113 on 24 July 1942, and on 4 March 1943, while escorting convoy KMS.10 from Britain to Algeria, she assisted HMCS *Shediac* in destroying *U-87*.

Harry's first voyage in *St. Croix* was escorting a convoy from Halifax between 5 August and 11 August 1943. The trip was uneventful for the newly promoted Petty Officer.

On 19 September 1943, *St. Croix* was a unit of Mid-Ocean Escort Group C-9, comprised of her sister ship, HMCS *St. Francis*, corvettes HMC ships *Chambly*, *Morden*, and *Sackville*, and the Royal Navy frigate, HMS *Itchen*. They were proceeding to the Bay of Biscay to conduct an offensive against U-boats transiting from five bases on the west coast of France to the Atlantic when the Escort Group was diverted to assist several convoys under attack by what turned out to be a force of twenty-one U-boats in an area about 400 to 500 nautical miles southwest of Iceland. Upon reaching convoy ON.202 on 20 September, *St. Croix* was struck on the stern at 2151 by two Gnat T-5 torpedoes fired by *U-305*. Gravely damaged but still afloat, her ship's company began to abandon ship. Then, 53 minutes later, at



River Class Frigate Similar to HMS *Itchen*.
Source: Uboat.net

2244, she was struck by a third torpedo fired by *U-305* and sank within 6 minutes, leaving 81 officers and men clinging to two Carley floats and a swamped whaler. HMS *Itchen* and HMS *Polyanthus* attempted to conduct a rescue but broke it off after *Itchen* avoided a torpedo fired at her at 2253, also by *U-305*. Instead, *Itchen* went on the offensive to hunt down her attacker. At 0022 on 21 September, *Polyanthus* was sunk by *U-952*. After dawn, *Itchen* rescued the sole survivor from *Polyanthus* and the 81 survivors from *St. Croix*. With her own ship's company of 230 officers and men, *Itchen* now had a total of 312 onboard when she was torpedoed and sunk by *U-666* at 0200 on 23 September 1943. Only three survived and were rescued by the Polish merchant ship *SS Wisla*. They were Stoker William Allan Fisher, RCNVR, from *St. Croix* and two members of *Itchen's* ship's company.

Harry, like the other 146 members of *St. Croix's* ship's company, has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 9, and Page 207 of *the Second World War Book of Remembrance*. Riecke Lake (Lat 54° 34'N Long 103° 03'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

For his service, Petty Officer Harry Carl Riecke was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mary Riecke and his wife, Patrica Riecke, were each awarded the Memorial Cross.

Post Script:

The battle which claimed Petty Officer Riecke's life pitted two westbound convoys, ONS 18, composed of 27 merchant ships and nine escorts, including a Merchant aircraft carrier (MAC), and ON 202, composed of 38 merchant ships and five escorts, against a concentration of U-boats. The convoys were joined by Support Group 9, which included *St. Croix* south of Iceland and were detected by 21 U-boats forming Patrol Line *Leuthen* on 19 September. For the first time in the War, the U-boats were armed with the newly developed Gnat T-5 acoustic torpedo, which was attracted to its target by the sound of its propellers rather than being aimed visually. The plan was to attack the escort forces first with the T-5s and then the merchant ships. Over the course of the battle, the Allies lost three escorts and six merchant ships. Another merchant ship was damaged. The Kriegsmarine lost three U-boats while three others were damaged and forced to return to base.

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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:

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- Library and Archives Canada Service Record for Petty Officer Harry Riecke
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial – Profile page for Petty Officer Harry Riecke
- Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial -Profile page for Petty Officer Harry Riecke

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