

## Petty Officer Stoker William Garfield Ross V-10019



Stoker PO William Ross. Photo: For Posterity Sake

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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Indian Head NWT, 15 May 1900**
- **Enlisted: Regina Half-Company RCNVR, 29 June 1923**
- **Civilian Occupation: Postal Clerk, Royal Mail**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Fraser* sank after a collision with HMS *Calcutta* on 25 June 1940**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel Panel 7; the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 17, Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa and Ross River (Lat 56° 46'N Long 103° 33' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory**

*Stoker Petty Officer Third Class William Garfield Ross was one of three Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reservists (RCNVR) who enrolled in 1923 when the service was established and perished in World War II.*

William Garfield Ross, known as William, was the second of five children born to Emma Ross and William Ross, Sr. on 15 May 1900 in Indian Head, Northwest Territories. (Saskatchewan was not established until 1905). His sisters Sarah and Laura were born in 1897 and 1902 respectively and his brothers Robert and Harold were born in 1910 and 1911 respectively. William Sr. was born in Ontario in 1863 and Emma was born in the United Kingdom in 1879. Emma emigrated to Canada in 1885, settled in Indian Head with her parents, and married William there in 1896. Indian Head is about 40 miles (64 kilometers) east of Regina. It was founded in 1882 mainly by Scottish settlers who, for the most part, travelled there by oxcart from Brandon, Manitoba until the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) came to the area. The town grew rapidly and by 1906 had a population of 1,545. Sometime after, according to the 1911 census, the family moved to the village of Grand Coulee about 7 miles (11 kilometers) west of Regina and William Sr. is recorded as working for the CPR.

In 1916 the census records William is boarding in Regina and working as an office boy for a law firm. No information was found regarding William's childhood education or his subsequent

employment beyond that. What is known, however, is that he enlisted in the 249th (Saskatchewan) Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, based in Regina, on 31 March 1917. Since the lower age limit to enlist was 18 years it is obvious that William was economical with the truth about his date of birth. About six weeks later, on 15 May, he was released - perhaps his actual age was revealed - and the battalion eventually sailed to Europe without him in March 1918.

On 29 January 1918, still underage, he again stepped forward and was enrolled in the 260th Canadian Infantry Battalion established in Victoria, British Columbia. The battalion drew volunteers and conscripts from the Maritimes, the Prairies, and British Columbia and was one of two battalions with the strength of about 1,000 officers and other ranks each which together constituted the 16th Canadian Infantry Brigade, Canadian Expeditionary Force (Siberia). Their mandate was to protect Allies' lines of communication in Siberia and Northern Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution. The Brigade was quartered and trained in Willows Camp, now Oak Bay, until it was transported by sea to Vladivostok leaving on 26 December 1918 and arriving on 15 January 1919. There, they were billeted in barracks without conducting any significant operations until 22 April 1919 when they were withdrawn and returned to Canada. William was released on 26 May 1919. By then his family had moved to a farm about 100 miles (160 kilometers) southwest of Regina.

William again took up residence in Regina on his own and, according to the Regina Henderson's Directory, quickly found work as a fireman at the newly established Imperial Oil Refinery. Settled with a steady job, he married Marguerite in December 1924 and became a father in November 1926 with the birth of their daughter Shirley Anne.

His naval career began on 29 June 1923 when he enrolled in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at the newly formed Regina Half-Company. An applicant had to be a physically fit; a British subject between 18 and 32 years of age; willing to sign up for a three-year term; prepared to serve whenever needed; able to attend 30 drill nights a year; and be available for at least two weeks of naval training annually either in Halifax or Esquimalt. Ratings were paid 25 cents per drill night and Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) pay while on naval training. An RCNVR officer was not paid for drills and had to provide his own uniform.

It cannot be determined for certain why William joined the RCNVR given his Army experience. It may have been because of his Army experience or, perhaps, his voyages to and from Vladivostok had kindled an interest in the sea.

In any event the opportunity arose as a result of the decision of Rear-Admiral Walter Hose, the Director of the Naval Service, at a time when the Navy faced drastic budget cuts. The Admiral saw the establishment of a reserve force as a way for the struggling RCN to survive and build public support from coast to coast. Authorized by Parliament in January 1923, the initial strength was set at 1,000 all ranks which the Admiral envisioned as being spread among fifteen cities across Canada. With the exception of Toronto and Winnipeg where "companies" with a strength of 100 all ranks were established, "half-companies" of 50 all ranks were established in twelve other cities by April. In Montreal, two half-companies were established: one English and one French.

In addition to creating a foundation for recruitment and training, the RCNVR acquired an unintended role for the half-companies on the drought-devastated Prairies in the 1930s. What served to attract and retain members was the call of the sea, the uniform, mess and social functions, and sports. But most importantly for men who were unemployed, under-employed, or

forced to take large pay cuts, the opportunity to wear the uniform gave them back a measure of their self-respect.

William was the nineteenth man to be enrolled in the Regina Half-Company. He was 5 feet 7 ½ inches tall with brown hair, brown eyes and a fair complexion. His brother Robert volunteered sometime later and also served during World War II.

| <b>Stoker Petty Officer Ross</b>   |  |
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| <b>Pay Per Diem 1940</b>   |  |
| Pay  | \$2.65   |
| Living Allowance   | 1.45   |
| Good Conduct Badge   | 0.10   |
| Hard Lying Money (HML) *   | 0.15   |
| Marriage Allowance   | 0.75   |
| Dependents' Allowance<br>(Maximum 2 Children @ . \$ .25)   | 0.25   |
| <b>Total Per Diem</b>  | <b><u>\$5.35</u> (Equal to \$101.54 in 2023 dollars)</b> |
| *Compensation for living conditions in ships   |  |
| Other Per Diem Allowances:   |  |
| Able Seamen received \$0.10 for attaining Class 3 in their trade   |  |
| One Good Conduct Badge entitled the recipient to \$0.10; two \$0.15, and three \$0.20  |  |
| Leading Seaman and below received Kit Upkeep Allowance of \$0.12   |  |
| Ratings 19 and older who declined the daily rum ration received Grog Money (GM) \$0.06   |  |
| Unmarried ratings could apply for Dependents' Allowance on behalf of parents or siblings in cases where illness or disability created a financial responsibility for the rating.   |  |
| Members of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service received 2/3 of the pay of a male of equivalent rank. This was raised to 4/5 towards the end of the War.   |  |
| Note: These amounts were only paid to ratings on Active Service. Recruits were first placed on Divisional Strength and performed part-time evening drills and attended appointments as required. Then, as a training space became available, they were called to Active Service and received Initial Training at the Division on a full-time basis for a period of four to six weeks. On completion, they were drafted to one of the establishments in Esquimalt or Halifax for more intensive training and, eventually, an operational posting. |  |

William was enrolled as a Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> Class. There were two distinct classes of engineering ratings – Stoker, and Engine Room Artificer (ERA). (The term “stoker” is an anachronism. Prior to oil-fired boilers, Stokers were primarily responsible for shoveling coal into the fire boxes of marine boilers. With the advent of oil-fired boilers in the early 20th century, the job changed but the name remained. It is still used today as slang for a Marine Technician who operates marine engines which no longer even use steam.)

During World War II Stokers made up about ten per cent of the Navy's strength and were divided into three groups: Steam, Motor Mechanics (MM), and Fire Fighters (FF). In addition to boiler operation, Stokers were also responsible for the operation of boiler room ancillary equipment such as pumps, evaporators, condensers, and the like, oiling and cleaning the main engines and auxiliaries, and doing rounds of the machinery spaces. Fire Fighters served on shore and Motor Mechanics served in diesel powered ships, motor torpedo/gun boats, landing craft, and motor launches.

Stoker training courses dealt with boilers, ships' engines, types of fuel, fitting, copper smithing, molding, bricklaying, machine shop work, and firefighting. Different subjects were stressed, depending on the Stoker's group ie Steam, MM, FF. Promotion and employment were determined through experience, specialized training, examinations and attainment of a series of certificates or "tickets". For example, a certificate was required before a Stoker Petty Officer could be put in charge of a watch in a boiler room. Leading Stokers, Stoker Petty Officers, and Chief Petty Officers were in the chain of command and exercised authority over their juniors. The highest rating to be obtained in this branch was Chief ERA (M)

ERAs were highly skilled technicians who received extensive training in one or more specific trades. At sea they were in charge of a watch in the engine room, performed maintenance routines, and made running repairs. They enjoyed the pay and privileges of Leading Stokers, and Chiefs and Petty Officers although they were not actually either. Their pay and status compensated them for what they knew not where they were in the chain of command. When not on watch they had no authority over junior ERAs and Stokers. Only the Chief ERA of a ship exercised such authority

William's naval service was divided into three distinct periods. The first period was from his date of enrollment until 12 December 1927. During that period, he underwent two three-week periods of training at HMCS *Naden*, the large training establishment in Esquimalt, British Columbia in addition to drills at the Regina Half-Company. He was promoted to Leading Stoker on 1 March 1924.

In December 1927 William was discharged because he and his wife and daughter emigrated to Detroit, Michigan. At the time, Detroit was the fourth-largest city in the United States with a population of 1.6 million, 10% of whom worked in the auto industry. By 1930, auto sales had declined by 75%, putting tens of thousands of Detroiters out of work. As a result, the unemployment rate in the city rose to 34% compared to 26% nationally. While it isn't certain that William became an autoworker, it is certain that he acquired notable drafting skills and likely worked in the auto industry, or an industry influenced by it. In any event, he and his family returned to Regina in the fall of 1930.

On 20 October 1930 William's personnel file was notated "Re-Entry" to mark the beginning of his second period of naval service and his return to the Regina Half-Company. Unfortunately, his return also coincided with the onset of the Great Depression in Canada as well as the severe drought on the Prairies which decimated the agriculture industry and seriously weakened those associated with it. The Saskatchewan unemployment rate rose to 30%. Perhaps William had hoped to find work at the new General Motors assembly plant located in Regina which had opened in December 1929. Unfortunately, the plant suffered the same fate as those in Detroit. By 1930 layoffs began before it closed completely in 1931 and remained closed until 1937.

The Regina Henderson's Directory listed William but did not specify an occupation for him between 1930 and 1934 which can be seen as an indication of unemployment or sporadic short-

term work. Not to be deterred, however, William used the situation to further his RCNVR career. He proceeded to HMCS *Naden* soon after re-entry for a period of about a month during which he passed the professional examination and the education level examination which qualified him for the rank of Stoker Petty Officer. He was consequently promoted on 1 December 1930. As well it was noted in his personnel file that he was “a very good *draughtsman*.”

In the New Year, William was back in Esquimalt. In a six-week period from 25 January to 7 March 1931 he spent about two weeks in *Naden* and 28 days in the training trawler HMCS *Armentières* before returning to Regina to attend drills at the Half-Company. His brief annual review noted that he was a “*good draughtsman and instructor*.” As well he received his first Good Conduct Badge on 20 October.

In 1932 William continued the pattern of training in Esquimalt and attending drills in Regina. From 7 March to 16 April, he spent two weeks in *Naden* and four weeks in the destroyer HMCS *Skeena*. He was considered “*keen and intelligent*.”

The pattern set in the previous two years did not materialize as planned in 1933. After two weeks in *Naden* commencing 15 May, William was diagnosed with appendicitis requiring surgery and hospitalization before returning home in mid-June. On the positive side, he was able to avoid the medical expenses he would have otherwise had to pay had he not been on naval training. His annual review noted again that he was “*keen and intelligent*” but added that he “*should get sea experience next training period*.”

William again followed the pattern of local drills in Regina and time in Esquimalt in 1934 – this time without mishap. He spent fourteen days in *Naden* training plus another sixteen days assisting in the installation of a marine diesel engine in a tender. Again, he was praised: “*A hard working S/PO and takes a keen interest in his work....*”

In 1935 the Regina Henderson’s Directory records William as working for the Post Office. Apparently, the job put restrictions on his time, and he was discharged on 2 December because of his “*inability to attend drills*.” By October 1938 William found that he could balance his job at the Post Office with his commitment to the Navy and he re-entered the renamed Regina Division RCNVR. Then, on 14 September 1939, just four days after Canada had declared War on Germany, William began active service and was drafted once again to HMCS *Naden*. One week after that he was drafted to HMCS *Restigouche*.

*Restigouche* was one of five C Class destroyers built for the Royal Navy and commissioned as HMS *Comet* in June 1932. She and her four sisters were sold to Canada just prior to World War II, re-classified as River Class destroyers, and renamed after principal rivers in Canada. Her namesake, the Restigouche River, rises in the northern Appalachian Mountains in New Brunswick and meanders northeastward for about 200 miles (320 kilometers) to the Bay of Chaleur. A portion of its length forms the border between New Brunswick and Quebec.



**HMCS Restigouche.**  
Photo: [www.naval-history.net](http://www.naval-history.net)

With William onboard, *Restigouche* left Esquimalt for Halifax, Nova Scotia on 15 November 1939. As a Stoker Petty Officer he joined the Engineering Department. Stoker Petty Officers at sea generally were in charge of a watch in a boiler room supervising junior Stokers who operated the boiler and its ancillary equipment. In William's case, however, that is unlikely. There is no evidence in his personnel file that he held the necessary certificate to be in charge. Further, he had only served in a River Class destroyer (HMCS *Skeena*) for four weeks in 1932. It is more likely that he was under training to qualify for a charge certificate.

Upon arrival in Halifax, *Restigouche* escorted convoys in the waters off Nova Scotia before handing them off south of Newfoundland to other escorts. One of these convoys carried half of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division to Britain in December 1939. These were the first Canadian soldiers to be deployed to Europe. Months later, *Fraser* would be involved in the evacuation of these same troops from the French coast.

On 23 March 1940, following leave in Regina, William was next drafted to HMCS *Fraser*.



HMCS Fraser. Photo: readyayeready.com

*Fraser* was also a River Class destroyer and had served in the Royal Navy as HMS *Crescent*. Purchased by Canada in 1937 she was named for the Fraser River, which is the longest river within British Columbia, rising in the Rocky Mountains and flowing for 854 miles (1,366 kilometers) southwestward into the Strait of Georgia immediately south of the City of Vancouver.

William needed to quickly adapt to his new ship. Within ten days of his joining, *Fraser* was ordered to join the Royal Navy's America and West Indies Station based in Jamaica which was deployed to bottle up German shipping caught in the Caribbean by the war.

Then in May, three of the River Class destroyers - HMC Ships *St. Laurent*, *Restigouche*, and *Skeena* - were ordered to sail from Halifax to the United Kingdom. *Fraser*, still in the Caribbean, was ordered to join them in Plymouth. The order was in response to the deteriorating military situation in Western Europe. In May the German army made a rapid advance through Belgium and the Netherlands into northern France driving the Allied armies to French sea ports on the English Channel and the Bay of Biscay.

Three operations were organized to evacuate the Allied troops by sea:

Operation DYNAMO – between 26 May and 4 June 1940, 338,226 Allied troops were evacuated from Dunkirk in Northern France. The Canadian ships did not take part. They did not arrive in Plymouth until 31 May and were further delayed while their anti-aircraft armament was upgraded.



Operation CYCLE – from 9-13 June, 14,380 Allied troops were evacuated from Le Havre and surrounding ports. *St. Laurent* and *Restigouche* played a minor role and exchanged gunfire with shore batteries.

Operation AERIAL– from 15-25 June 1940, 191,870 Allied troops (including 21,474 Canadians of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division whom *Fraser* had escorted in December 1939) and 30,000-40,000 civilians were evacuated from nine French ports from Cherbourg in the north to St. Jean du Luz in the southwest near the Spanish border.

On 21 June, *Fraser* was ordered to proceed to St. Jean du Luz. Specifically, *Fraser* was ordered to

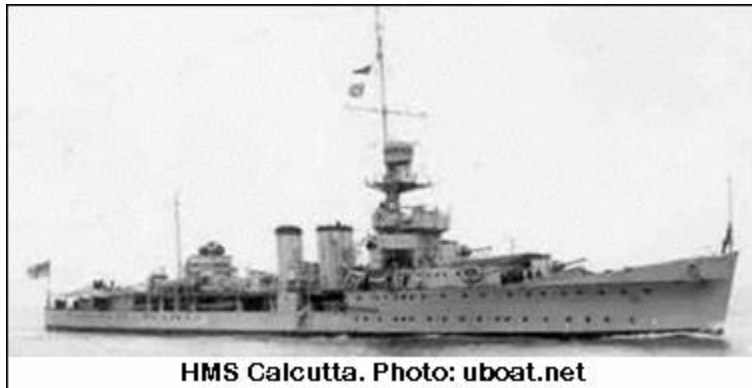
evacuate Sir Ronald Campbell, the British ambassador to France whom, by a chance encounter on 25 June, they found offshore in a small fishing vessel. Among others in the boat, they found Lieutenant Colonel Georges Vanier, the Canadian hero of the First World War and recipient of the Military Cross who had been serving as the Canadian Minister to France, (He also served as Canada's Governor General from September 1959 to March 1967). *Fraser* transferred the officials to a ship waiting offshore then returned to the harbour to continue ferrying evacuees from shore until evening. She then left the area to join *Restigouche* and the British light cruiser HMS *Calcutta*. The Flag Officer Commanding Second Cruiser Squadron, who was riding in *Calcutta*, assumed command of the small force as they set course for Plymouth.

By 2200, the three ships were proceeding on a northerly course at a speed of 25 knots. It was a dark moonless night, and the ships were running without lights. The Admiral ordered a course alteration to the west and a reduction in speed to 14 knots. Together the ships altered to the new course which put *Fraser* on *Calcutta*'s starboard bow at a distance of about 1.5 nautical miles (2.8 kilometers) and *Restigouche* on *Calcutta*'s port quarter at about the same distance. At almost the same time the Admiral then ordered a change in formation to line ahead which was intended to put *Calcutta* in the lead followed by *Fraser*, then *Restigouche*.

To reach the new station, *Fraser*'s Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Commander W.B. Creery, intended to turn 180 degrees to port and proceed on a course reciprocal to that of *Calcutta* passing her on her starboard beam, turn 180 degrees to starboard to follow in *Calcutta*'s wake, and resume 14 knots. *Restigouche* simply needed to temporarily increase speed, steer to starboard to a point astern of *Calcutta*, reduce speed to 14 knots, and follow in *Calcutta*'s wake leaving enough room for *Fraser*.



Lieutenant Commander Creery described the maneuver in a general way and left the details to the Officer of the Watch (OOW). The OOW complied but ordered a minimal amount of helm. The resultant wider turn placed *Fraser* on a collision course with *Calcutta*. To hasten the maneuver, Lieutenant Commander Creery also ordered an increase in speed to 20 knots which increased the closing speed to 34 knots (63 kph/39 mph). Almost immediately Creery realized the turn was insufficient to turn short of



*Calcutta* and ordered a series of course corrections which were misinterpreted by the Commanding Officer of *Calcutta*, Captain Lees, prompting him to also alter course. As a result, *Calcutta* “t-boned” *Fraser*’s port side abreast her B-gun severing the forecastle which soon sank. Approximately two minutes had elapsed between the initial helm order given by the OOW and the collision.

Oddly, *Fraser*’s bridge detached and fell onto *Calcutta*’s forecastle allowing Lieutenant Commander Creery, the OOW and the others on the bridge to step onto *Calcutta* unscathed. Tragically, the area where *Fraser* took the brunt of the collision was where the majority of the ship’s company was quartered with the Stoker Petty Officers’ Mess, where William was likely sleeping, taking a direct blow.

*Calcutta* sustained very little damage in the collision. Captain Lees ordered a whaler lowered to assist *Restigouche* whom he instructed to collect the survivors but did not remain at the scene. Instead, he proceeded to Plymouth abandoning the Canadians and a number of Royal Navy personnel to their own devices. With great fortitude and persistence, *Restigouche* and her boats’ crews, together with *Calcutta*’s whaler, consequently worked through the night to rescue those still onboard *Fraser*’s after section or in the icy water.

*Fraser* was the first Royal Canadian Navy warship lost during operations in the war. SPO William Ross was one of seven RCNVR sailors to perish in the collision. These seven deaths were the first combat-related suffered by members of Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve in the War.

*Restigouche* rescued fifty-nine sailors while *Calcutta*’s whaler rescued another 107. Stoker Petty Officer Ross, forty-six other Canadians and nineteen British sailors perished. Most, like Stoker Petty Officer Ross, have no known grave. He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 7 and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 17, Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa. Ross River (Lat 56° 46’N Long 103° 33’ W) in Northern Saskatchewan is also named in his memory.

For his service, Stoker Petty Officer William Ross was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His wife, Marguerite, and his mother, Emma, were each awarded the Memorial Cross.

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