

## Able Seaman Walter Bertie Sealey V-11500



Able Seaman Walter Bertie Sealey.  
Photo: Canada Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Glasgow Scotland, 14 July 1921**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 3 September 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Truck Driver, Hudson's Bay Company**
- **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; a Stained Glass window in the Chapel at Canadian Forces Base Halifax and Sealey Lake (Lat 54° 16'N Long 104° 36'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.**

Walter Bertie Sealey was the second of six children born to Susan Johnson Sealey and Walter Hayward Sealey on 14 July 1921 in Glasgow, Scotland. Sisters Eva, Mary, and Florence were born 1917, 1923 and 1927 respectively. Brothers John and Albert were born in 1925 and 1932. Susan was born into a Scottish family in England in 1894 and Walter Sr. was born in Colchester, Essex in 1889. They were married in Glasgow in 1915. Walter saw action in World War I while serving in the XXXV Brigade, Royal Field Artillery.

In 1922 he emigrated to Canada and joined Robert Sinclair on a 640-acre farm about 135 miles west of Saskatoon. Walter's relationship with Robert Sinclair is not known. Susan, Eva, Walter Jr. and Mary joined them on the farm in 1923. The family moved to Saskatoon in 1929 and, according to the Saskatoon Henderson directory, Walter Sr. found work as an orderly at the Saskatoon Sanatorium, a large tuberculosis treatment facility, where he worked until 1935. He then worked as a mechanic until 1940 when he returned to the Sanatorium. The family moved from one rental house to another in the same neighbourhood six times between 1929 and 1937 although Walter Jr. and his siblings were able to attend the same school, King George Public School. Walter Jr. left after completion of Grade 8 in 1937 at age 16. After working for a short time as a baker's helper he found work with the Hudson's Bay Company as a truck driver until enlisting. As evidenced by Walter's picture above with his cap tally askew, he was likely a spirited lad.

Walter was sworn in at the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary) on 3 September 1940. He was 19 years

old, single, 5 feet 4 ½ inches tall, weighed 122 pounds with fair hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion.

Defending Canada became a family affair. Walter Sr. enlisted in the Veterans Guard of Canada in 1941. The Veteran's Guard was established in May 1940 as a defence force which at its peak in 1943 had a strength in 451 officers and 9,806 other ranks all of whom were veterans of World War I. Their roles were to act as a defence force, guard installations, and guard prisoners of war in Canada. Susan became active in the Navy Mothers League; Eva and Mary both enlisted in the Canadian Army Women's Corps; John enlisted in the RCNVR; like *Rosie the Riveter - Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl* in Canada, Florence worked in the Victory Aircraft Limited plant at Malton, Ontario assembling Lancaster bombers; and Albert, at 13, became a sea cadet.

Walter remained in *Unicorn* attending to administrative details and taking basic training until 15 December when he was drafted to HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, Nova Scotia. There he continued basic training and gunnery training until 26 May 1941. That may seem like an inordinate period of time to receive fundamental training. It is important to remember, however, that when war was declared the Royal Canadian Navy consisted of thirteen ships and 3,843 officers and ratings including reservists and that it counted on the seventeen naval reserve divisions then operating across Canada to recruit and initially train men. This training, however, was not standardized and divisions were short of training equipment, accommodations, and instructors. As a result, HMCS *Stadacona* and HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, British Columbia were soon overcrowded with recruits being largely retrained because of the inadequacies of the system.



Notwithstanding the teething problems, training in the Navy during the War fell into two parallel streams – *substantive* which provided leadership, and *non-substantive* which provided technical expertise. Walter was assigned to the Seaman Branch which 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 Walter 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; Anti-Aircraft which included all close-range weapons; and Main Armament which contained three distinct ratings with three classes in each: Control Rating (C.R.), principally concerned with determining the range of a target; Quarters Rating (Q.R), responsible for the stowage and supply of ammunition and breech operation; and Layer Rating (L.R.), responsible for the movements of the gun as it was brought to bear on a target. These three ratings in turn were divided into 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Class with 1<sup>st</sup> Class being the most skilled. Walter qualified as a Layer 3<sup>rd</sup> Class on 21 March 1941.

On 27 May 1941 Walter was drafted to HMCS *Rosthern* (K 169) via HMCS *Hochelaga II* in Montreal where he was put to work to ready *Rosthern* for commissioning. *Rosthern*, named for Rosthern, Saskatchewan was a Flower-class corvette laid down on 18 June 1940 at Port Arthur Shipbuilding Co. in Port Arthur, Ontario and was launched on 30 November 1940. After waiting for the ice to clear, she proceeded to Montreal where she was commissioned on 17 June 1941.

With Walter in her ship's company, *Rosthern* proceeded to Halifax then joined the Newfoundland Command. *Rosthern* didn't wait long to see combat. For her second operation with Newfoundland Command, *Rosthern* joined a force of 26 warships escorting convoy SC.48 made up of 53 merchant ships sailing from Sydney, Nova Scotia to Liverpool in the United Kingdom on 5 October. Between 15-18 October the convoy was attacked by nine U-boats south of Greenland: nine merchant ships and two escorts were attacked and sank, and a third escort was damaged. Adding to the chaos, *Rosthern* experienced serious engine trouble and was ordered to the Clyde in Scotland for repairs which took two months to complete. Walter left the ship before repairs were completed when he was drafted to HMCS *Red Deer* effective 25 November and promoted to Able Seaman on 20 December 1941.

HMCS *Red Deer* (J 255) was a Bangor-class minesweeper design to operate in coastal waters to sweep mines. However, since enemy mines were laid only once in 1943 in Canadian waters, the Bangors were used primarily to escort coastal convoys. *Red Deer* was built by Canadian Vickers Ltd. at Montreal and commissioned there on 24 November 1941. She was named for the town of Red Deer, Alberta halfway between Calgary and Edmonton. After commissioning, *Red Deer* was assigned to the Western Local Escort Force (WLEF) as a convoy escort from North American ports to a point off Newfoundland called the Western Ocean Meeting Point (WOMP). At this location, warships of the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) assumed responsibility for safely delivering the convoys to the British Isles. The reverse also occurred where MOEF escorts turned convoys over the WLEF for escort to their North American ports. During the 926 days Walter served in her, *Red Deer* took part in 18 convoys to and from the WOMP. At various periods she also served with Sydney Force, Halifax Local Defence Force and the Gulf of St Lawrence Escort Force.

On 12 January 1942, acting alone, *Red Deer* responded to a distress signal and rescued 94 of the 181 souls aboard the British merchant ship SS *Cyclops*, which had been torpedoed 125 miles southeast of Cape Sable. For their actions the ship's company received prize money totaling \$3,105.47. Walter's share as an Able Seaman was \$33.54 (equivalent to about a week's pay). In May 1944, *Red Deer* began a refit at Liverpool, Nova Scotia and Walter was drafted to HMCS *Shawinigan* on 6 June 1944. His final performance report from *Red Deer* stated, "Carries out all his duties in a most efficient manner, a particularly expert helmsman."

HMCS *Shawinigan* (K136) was a Flower-class corvette named for the town of Shawinigan Falls



HMCS *Shawinigan*. Source: Government of Canada

located on the Saint Maurice River 22 miles upstream from the St. Lawrence River. Her service life was busy and varied. When Walter joined her, *Shawinigan* was undergoing a refit in Liverpool, Nova Scotia. On completion of the refit in June, the crew completed work-ups in Bermuda before returning to the East Coast of Canada for assignment with Escort Group W-2. This group

provided, among other services, escorts for ferries sailing between Sydney, Nova Scotia and Port aux Basques, Newfoundland

On 10 August 1944 Walter married Sadie from Black Brook, Boularderie, Cape Breton.

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 she 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 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 Walter Sealey, perished. Walter was 23 years old at the time of his death. His bride was a widow after 3.5 months of marriage.

For his service, Able Seaman Walter Sealey was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War medal. His wife, Sadie and his mother Susan were awarded the Memorial Cross.

Walter 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. Walter is commemorated on Panel 11 Halifax Memorial; and in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 439, Centre Blocks of Parliament, Ottawa. Sealey Lake (Lat 54° 16'N Long 104° 36'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

#### Prepared By:

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