

Able Seaman Radar 3rd Class Ralph Zbarsky V-37720



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Saskatoon, SK, 23 October 1924**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 27 April 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: University Student and worked in his father's retail store.**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Esquimalt* was torpedoed and sank on 16 April 1945**
- **Buried: New Westminster (Schara Tzedek) Cemetery, Plot 22. Grave 9**
- **Commemorated: HMCS *Unicorn* Memorial; Baron de Hirsch Monument, Montreal; Flames of Memory Memorial and Jewish Canadian Veterans Memorial, both in Toronto; and Zbarsky Bay in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory**

Ralph Zbarsky, born on 23 October 1924 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, was the younger son of Ethel Zbarsky and Jack (Jacob) Zbarsky. His older brother, Sidney, was born in 1920. Both his parents were born in the Pale of Settlement, Jack in 1894 and Ethel in 1900. The Pale of Settlement was a region of the Russian Empire that existed between 1791 and 1917 and included present-day Belarus, Moldova, and much of Ukraine, as well as portions of neighbouring countries where permanent residency by Jews was allowed and beyond which Jewish residency was mostly forbidden.

Jack Zbarsky emigrated to Canada in 1914 and settled in the Saskatoon area. Ethel emigrated to the United States in 1918, married Jack in New York City, and settled in Saskatoon with Jack. They initially lived in a modest neighbourhood on the west side of the city in a series of five rental properties until 1935 when they purchased a house. Jack soon found work as a sales clerk at Adilman's Department Store, a newly established local family-owned retail business. The store quickly grew, as did Jack's responsibilities, and by 1933, Jack was a senior manager. In 1935, Jack left Adilman's and established a successful clothing store on his own.

Ralph was enrolled in the nearby Princess Alexandra Public School in 1930. When it became evident that Ralph was a gifted student, he was transferred to Victoria Public School, skipping two grades. He then enrolled in Bedford Road Collegiate Institute, where he graduated at age 15. In 1941, he enrolled in the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan,

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where he studied mathematics for two years before enlisting. While a student, he worked in his father's store, played baseball and basketball, participated in dramatic productions, attended the YMCA and Hebrew School, and was the vice-president and president of the Saskatoon branch of Canadian Young Judaea at the neighbouring synagogue.

Ralph was sworn in at the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary) on 27 April 1942. He was 17 years old, single, 5 feet 8 inches tall, and weighed 172 pounds with dark hair, hazel eyes, and a fair complexion. His brother Sidney was a university student when the Second World War began. Sydney obtained a Ph.D. in biochemistry from the University of Toronto in 1946. Eventually, he became a preeminent member of the faculty of the College of Medicine at the University of British Columbia.

Anti-Semitism in the 1930s and 1940s was found throughout Canadian society. For example, there were quotas for Jewish students in many universities, as well as open discrimination in hiring. The refusal by the Canadian government to allow over 900 Jewish refugees onboard the SS *St. Louis* to land in Canada in 1939 demonstrated that anti-Semitism existed in Canada's highest offices.

This was the backdrop against which many Jewish Canadian volunteers encountered official and unofficial anti-Semitism at local recruiting offices, with some branches of the military presenting more barriers than others as each branch had its own recruiting policies and procedures. The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) initially had a written policy that expressly limited enlistment to recruits "of pure European decent and British subjects." These guidelines were often used to reject Jews and other volunteers outright before these discriminatory regulations were lifted in 1942. Faced with severe battlefield attrition and competition with the RCAF and the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), the Canadian Army presented the fewest barriers. The evidence suggests that the RCN was the most challenging branch for Jewish volunteers to join. Only about 600 Canadian Jews were accepted into the RCN. Initially, it had restrictive recruiting policies similar

to those of the RCAF. These were compounded by ties to Britain's Royal Navy with its elitist attitudes with regard to officer recruitment in particular.

Despite these barriers, Canadian Jews stepped forward in numbers comparable to the general population. The 1941 Census recorded the Canadian population as 11,506,655, of which 168,565 or 1.46% were identified as Jewish. Of

Jewish Enrolment by Service

Service	Jewish Recruits	Total Strength	Percentage
RCAF	5,900	260,000	2.3%
Army	10,250	730,000	1.4%
RCN	600	106,000	0.57%
Total	16,750	1,096,000	1.53%

the total Canadian population, 1,096,000 or 9.52%, enlisted compared to 16,750 Jews or 9.9% of the total Jewish population.

From an examination of his service file, it would appear that Ralph did not experience anti-Semitism. He first contacted *Unicorn* in mid-February 1942, was sworn in at the end of April on completion of his university year and began training five days later. His performance was often rated as "Superior," and he qualified for promotion to Able Seaman. According to a Personnel Selection report,

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“Ralph mixes readily and gets along well. Likes the Navy. A pleasant, nicely humoured chap. Highly intelligent- reasons well. Appears well adjusted and stable. Ambitious and eager to learn. Mentally alert ...”

Once sworn in, Ralph waited until 1 May 1942 to commence basic training at *Unicorn*. From *Unicorn*, he was drafted to HMCS *Naden*, the large naval training base in Esquimalt, British Columbia, where he completed Seamanship and Gunnery training on 10 September 1942. Following graduation, he was placed in a manning pool. He was engaged in a variety of tasks associated with the operation of a base while he waited for an operational draft. The manning pool assignment first took him to HMCS *Burrard*, a land base on Jericho Beach in Vancouver, where he worked in base maintenance until 25 March 1943. He was then assigned to *Naden*, where he worked as a messman in the Petty Officers’ Mess until 20 June 1943.

In total, Ralph spent 281 days in the manning pool. That may seem like an excessive period to be stuck in limbo; however, it is important to note that when war was declared, the RCN consisted of 13 ships and 3,843 officers and ratings, including reservists, and that it counted on the 17 Naval Reserve Divisions (NRDs) operating across Canada to recruit and initially train men. At the onset of the war, this training was not standardized, and Naval Reserve Divisions were short of training equipment, accommodations, and instructors. As a result, HMCS *Stadacona*, the large training base in Halifax, Nova Scotia and HMCS *Naden* were soon overcrowded, with recruits being retrained mainly because of the system's inadequacies. In addition to training issues, the production of ships to man was fraught with difficulties. The ambitious program to build 122 vessels (including 64 corvettes) ranging from motor launches to destroyers announced in 1940 failed to deliver on schedule. This failure was due to the extraordinary expansion in shipbuilding at the same time as expansion in other fields such as aviation, munitions, and the automotive industries. This created competition for resources. So, while it was relatively easy to recruit men, it took time to train them and even longer to produce the ships in which they would serve. While in *Naden*, Ralph was promoted to Able Seaman on 1 May 1943.

In June 1943, Ralph was on a train to Halifax and HMCS *Stadacona*. Once there, he was transferred from the Seaman Branch to the Communications Branch and placed on a Radar 3rd Class course, which provided instruction in the operation of radars. At the beginning of the war, technological innovations entered the realm of naval warfare. It appeared that any new piece of equipment that was contained in a metal box with knobs and dials on the outside and vacuum tubes and wires on the inside was placed in the domain of the Communications Branch.

Radar ratings were classified as R.D.F. (Radio Direction Finder, later Radar), 1st, 2nd, and 3rd

Radar Class III Pay per Diem 1945	
Pay	\$ 1.85
Living Allowance	1.45
Hard Lying Money *	0.13
Radar Class III	0.10
Total per Diem	\$ 3.53
* Hard Lying Money was paid to ratings serving in small vessels which had less than the standard naval accommodations when compared with what the Navy offered as the norm.	

Class, with the 1st Class level being the most skilled. Radar Operators worked a high-frequency electronic beam that produced echoes shown on the instrument's screen. These were caused by the beam striking an object on the sea's surface or in the air and being reflected from it. The object's nature, distance, and bearing were interpreted from the echo. Radar Operators were also trained in navigation and plotting, both of which were employed in determining the course and speed of surface and aircraft contacts. At the peak of the RCN's strength, the Communications Branch had about 9,300 ratings. Of these, 2,338

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were Signalmen; roughly 3,200 were Telegraphists; about 1,000 were Coders; 2,200 were Radar Operators; and 399 were Radio Artificers.

Ralph successfully completed the course on 23 July 1943. As a result, he received a small specialist pay raise of 10 cents per day and was drafted to HMCS *Avalon* in St. John's, Newfoundland. Originally designed as a temporary ocean escort base, during the war, St. John's evolved to become one of the most important bases in the Atlantic, second only to Halifax. Along with repair facilities, work-ups training for ships' crews, and recreational facilities, several training centres were also located on the base. There, Ralph served as crew on harbour craft and as a messman while he again awaited an operational draft. This assignment lasted until 6 October 1943, when, at last, he was drafted to an operational warship.



On 7 October 1943, Ralph was drafted to HMCS *Esquimalt* (J272), a Bangor-class minesweeper built by Marine Industries Ltd at Sorel, Quebec. Commissioned on 26 October 1942, she was named for the City of Esquimalt, British Columbia. Bangor-class minesweepers, as the name implies, were designed to operate in coastal waters to sweep mines. However, since enemy mines were laid only once in Canadian waters in 1943, the Bangors were used primarily to escort coastal convoys. Like all Bangors, *Esquimalt* had extremely poor habitability. They were designed to accommodate a crew of 40, but her ship's

company grew to 71 to cover an increasing spectrum of equipment and the men to operate and maintain it. The Bangors had a shallow draft to enable them to operate in shallow coastal waters that made them very unstable in the swells of the open ocean, and their short length caused them to bury their bows when steaming into the sea.

When Ralph joined *Esquimalt*, she was part of the Halifax Local Defence Force undergoing a refit until November 1943. Ralph's service in *Esquimalt* was largely uneventful, with the ship conducting routine patrols and escort work in the Halifax area. With regard to his career, Ralph was further recommended for training as both a Radar Operator 2nd Class and eventually a Radar Training Officer on 27 October 1943 during the Personnel Selection session mentioned above. He also qualified for promotion to Leading Seaman on 15 November 1944.

U-190 sailed from her base in occupied Norway on 21 February 1945, bound for the coast of Nova Scotia under the command of Kapitänleutnant Hans-Edwin Reith. He proceeded submerged using a schnorkel to evade detection. Reith intended to operate in the approaches to Halifax, where other U-boats had met with success. Poor sonar conditions off Halifax made the detection of submerged or bottomed U-boats difficult at the best of times. U-190 arrived off Nova Scotia in early April, sighted two merchant ships on the 12th and made unsuccessful attacks on both

vessels. Then, on the night of the 15/16 April, Reith audaciously took U-190 to within 15 nautical miles of Halifax Harbour in search of more targets.

On the evening of 15 April, HMCS *Esquimalt* sailed unaccompanied from Halifax to conduct a routine anti-submarine patrol in the harbour approaches overnight and then was to rendezvous with HMCS *Sarnia* off Chebucto Head the following morning. Naval intelligence reports indicated that a U-boat was lurking in the area. What would follow was a series of events which would demonstrate inaction, indecision, inattention, cunning, and luck – both good and bad.

Towards dawn, Kapitänleutnant Reith heard the pinging sound of *Esquimalt's* sonar and listened intently as *Esquimalt* circled above. When no attack followed, Reith took U-190 to periscope depth for a quick look and observed *Esquimalt* at a range of about 1,500 metres. *Esquimalt* suddenly turned towards U-190 and closed rapidly, prompting Reith to fire an acoustic homing torpedo. While *Esquimalt* carried an anti-homing torpedo decoy, known as CAT gear, it had not been engaged. The torpedo hit *Esquimalt* at 0630, ripping a gaping hole in the starboard quarter and knocking out electrical power. This prevented *Esquimalt* from transmitting a distress signal. The resultant heavy list pushed the ship's boat underwater before the ship's company could release it from the davits, but they succeeded in getting four Carley floats clear of the ship and plunged into the icy water after them. Carley floats were 9 feet x 14 feet oblong doughnut-shaped rafts, which theoretically held eight men but could support many more clinging to ropes fastened to the sides. Within about four minutes, *Esquimalt* sank at 44° 28'N 63° 10'W about 20 nautical miles southeast of Point Pleasant Park in Halifax. The survivors huddled together, 14 or 15 to a raft. An aircraft flew overhead 10 minutes later and sighted the Carley floats, but the aircrew thought the rafts were fishing boats and made no report.

The Port War Signal Station had contacted Esquimalt at 0627, a few minutes before the torpedoing. The station could not raise her by radio at 0741 or again at 0901, but no action was taken. Two minesweepers, on their daily sweep, closed to within two miles of the Carley floats at 0930 but moved on without seeing the survivors or hearing their desperate calls for help.

When *Esquimalt* did not appear at the rendezvous off Chebucto Head at 0800, *Sarnia* radioed her absence to shore authorities at 0950, then began a search on the assumption that *Esquimalt* had been sunk. At 1002, *Sarnia* made a sonar contact with a submerged contact about 9.5 nautical miles west of the position where *Esquimalt* sank. According to doctrine, the pursuit of the enemy took priority over the search for survivors, and *Sarnia* carried out two depth charge attacks on the contact without effect. At 1125, she gave up the hunt and resumed the search for *Esquimalt*.

Aboard the rafts, the numbers dwindled as the hours passed. One Carley float had initially held 13 men, but over the morning, seven died from exposure. The six survivors paddled the Carley float towards the Halifax East Light Vessel, waving a white shirt. They closed the distance to a half mile before the lightship, and *Sarnia* finally noticed them. The six were picked up by the light ship's boat.

By now, the authorities ashore had concluded that *Esquimalt* was indeed missing. Another aircraft, sent out to search, sighted the remaining Carley floats and informed *Sarnia*, who reached them at 1230, six hours after *Esquimalt* had been torpedoed. In all, *Sarnia* rescued 21 men and recovered the bodies of 16 others, including that of Ralph Zbarsky. In total, 27 men survived, and 44 died. The remaining 28, whose bodies were not recovered, were considered MPK (Missing Presumed Killed). Able Seaman Ralph Zbarsky was 20 years old when he died.

Additional ships were subsequently dispatched to search for U-190, but after five days, the search was called off. U-190 had moved close into shore and remained submerged or on the bottom at about 25 metres for seven days after the attack. Reith correctly assumed that the Canadians would not suspect that he would remain in the area in such shallow water. Nor did they consider that he could take advantage of the degraded sonar effectiveness caused by the rocky bottom and the pronounced water temperature layering.

U-190 headed for home on 29 April but never reached her base in Norway. Like all U-boats then at sea, she received instructions from Kriegsmarine Headquarters to surrender on 11 May 1945 by surfacing and broadcasting their position in plain language. Two Canadian warships intercepted U-190 and escorted her to Bay Bulls, Newfoundland. The RCN commissioned U-190 a few days after her surrender, and she served for two years before being sunk in a live fire exercise on 21 October 1947 near the position where she had sunk *Esquimalt*.

HMCS *Esquimalt* was the last Canadian warship to be lost in the war.

The remains of all those recovered were returned to their families for burial. Ralph's remains were placed on a train for the journey to Vancouver, where his parents had moved.

When the train stopped in Saskatoon, the B'nai B'rith Lodge paid their respects in a ceremony at the train station. Upon arrival in Vancouver, he was taken to New Westminster and buried in the Schara Tzedek Cemetery.

For his service, Able Seaman Radar 3rd Class Ralph Zbarsky was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Ethel Zbarsky, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Able Seaman Radar 3rd Class Ralph Zbarsky is commemorated on the HMCS *Unicorn* Memorial; on the Baron de Hirsch Monument in Montreal; the Flames of Memory Memorial and the Jewish Canadian Veterans Memorial, both in Toronto; on Page 83 of the memorial book *Canadian Jews in World War II, Part II: Casualties*; in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 578, at the Centre Block, Houses of Parliament, Ottawa; and Zbarsky Bay in McTavish Lake (Lat 55° 53'N Long 105° 14'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

Prepared By*:

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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.



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