

## MARTINDALE, Ralph Omar (#V/17891)

Ralph Omar Martindale's plan after the war was to resume his career as a machinist. He joined the Royal Canadian Navy, but his life ended when his ship, the *HMCS Raccoon*, was attacked in the Gulf of St. Lawrence by what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said was "... the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war...".

Ralph Omar Martindale was born in York, Haldimand County, Ontario on July 27, 1922, the son of Ralph Emerson and Ina Agatha (nee Renshaw) Martindale, of 413 Nelson Street, Sarnia. Ralph Emerson (born October 12, 1903 in Haldimand) married Ina Agatha (born March 25, 1904 in Haldimand) on August 13, 1921. Ralph and Ina Martindale were blessed with four children: sons Ralph Jr., Ernest Albert and Edward Lorne (died March 14, 1926), and daughter Geraldine Jane.

Ralph Jr. attended two years of high school at Sarnia Collegiate and left at the age of seventeen. For a year prior to enlisting, Ralph worked as a machinist at Canadian Machinery Corporation in Galt, Ontario. Also, for several years, he had a steady girlfriend in Sarnia and there was talk of marriage in the future.

At age 19, Ralph Martindale enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve on December 27, 1941 in London, Ontario. He stood five feet seven and a quarter-inches tall, had blue eyes and auburn hair, and was single at the time. His plan for after the war was to continue his employment as a machinist.

Ralph began his training as an Ordinary Seaman, at *HMCS Prevost*, the Naval Reserve base in London, Ontario. In mid-February 1942, he was transferred to *HMCS Stadacona*, the naval base in Halifax, where he continued his training until mid-April 1942. On April 21, 1942, Ralph Martindale was transferred to the *HMCS Raccoon*. Two months later, in June 1942, Ralph returned home to Sarnia while on leave to visit his parents and friends. After his leave, Ordinary Seaman Ralph Martindale returned to service aboard the *HMCS Raccoon*.

The *HMCS Raccoon (S14)* was a 148-foot, 377-ton civilian yacht (formerly the *Halongia*), originally built in 1931, and commissioned for military service by the RCN in June 1940. Beginning in the spring of 1942, the *HMCS Raccoon* was assigned to the naval base at Gaspé to patrol the river and Gulf of the St. Lawrence and to escort convoys of ships sailing from Quebec to Sydney, Newfoundland and Halifax.



Armed Yacht *HMCS Raccoon S14*

Beginning on the opening day of the Second World War, the **Battle of the Atlantic** would be the longest continuous campaign of the war, and one in which Canada played a central role. The Royal Canadian Navy, along with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and Canada's Merchant Navy, played a vital role in defending the country's eastern coast and in escorting convoys of ships carrying men and essential machinery, arms, fuel and basic resources.

The **Battle of the St. Lawrence** was an extension of the larger Battle of the Atlantic. It began on May 12, 1942 when after entering the Gulf of St. Lawrence, German U-boat *U-553* sank two steamers south of Anticosti Island, shocking Canadians. Between May 1942 and late 1944, German U-boats repeatedly penetrated the waters of the St. Lawrence River and the Gulf of St. Lawrence--sinking ships, destroying valuable cargo, and costing

hundreds of lives. It was the first and only time since the War of 1812 that naval battles were waged in Canada's inland waters.

In early September 1942, the armed yacht *HMCS Raccoon*, along with corvette *HMCS Arrowhead*, minesweeper *HMCS Truro* and two Fairmile launches *Q-64* and *Q-83*, were escorting the convoy *QS-33* in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The slow-moving convoy, bound for Sydney Nova Scotia, was unaware that two German U-boats, *U-165* and *U-517* were lying in wait on opposite sides of the river, by Cap Chat and Pointe-des-Monts, Quebec. Late on the night of September 6, 1942, west of Pointe-des-Monts where the St. Lawrence narrows to 50 kilometers in width, German U-boat *U-165* intercepted and struck the starboard side of the Greek steam merchant ship *Aeas* with one torpedo just under the bridge. The *Aeas* sank, two of the crew died, and the 29 others survived by abandoning ship and climbing into life rafts.

One of her escorts, the *HMCS Raccoon* left the convoy at midnight, zig-zagging in search of the German U-boat. Shortly after, at 1:12 am (September 7), a loud explosion ripped through the night air when the *HMCS Raccoon* was also torpedoed almost point-blank range by *U-165*. The *Raccoon*'s boiler exploded and the ship sank in minutes. Other ships in the convoy speculated they were hearing depth charges being dropped by the *Raccoon* as it pursued the U-boat. Explosions from both sinkings, which lit up the sky, could be heard for miles around; windows of houses close to shore were rattled by the detonations.

Three days later, only a few bits of debris from the *HMCS Raccoon* were found on the south coast of Anticosti Island: a portion of the ship's bridge, some signal pads, a life preserver and one body was found. The body was that of a well-known McGill University footballer, Sub-Lieutenant Russell McConnell, RCNVR. The entire *Raccoon* crew of thirty-seven men were lost, including Ralph Martindale, who had served less than five months aboard the *Raccoon*.

Days after the sinking, Ralph Sr. and Ina Martindale in Sarnia received a cable informing them that their son Ralph Jr. was reported missing when the Canadian patrol vessel *Raccoon* was lost while in convoy duty. Ralph Martindale was later officially recorded as, *At sea, presumed lost on board H.M.C.S. 'Raccoon'*.

On January 9, 1945, Ina Martindale passed away at the age of 40, a little over two years after she had lost her son. Ina is buried at Lakeview Cemetery in Sarnia. In two years, Ralph Sr. had lost a child and his wife. In July 1945, Ralph Sr. received a War Service Gratuity of \$107.59 for the loss of his son. Ralph Sr., passed away on October 10, 1987, two days before his 84th birthday. He is buried with his wife at Lakeview Cemetery. Twenty-year-old Ordinary Seaman Ralph Omar Martindale has no known grave. His name is inscribed on the Halifax Memorial, Nova Scotia, Canada, Panel 9.

Another sad story in the loss of the *Raccoon*, is that of Supply Assistant John Sheflin, one of Ralph Martindale's crew-mates, who also perished in the sinking. At the very moment that the *Raccoon* was going down, a train sped through nearby Riviere-la-Madeleine carrying John Sheflin's wife, Marguerite, and their two pre-school children. They had made a spur-of-the moment decision to move from Toronto to join family in Eureka, Nova Scotia, so that they could see John when he took his occasional shore leave. It would be years before his family discovered just how close together they were, before tragedy tore them apart forever.

Less than three weeks after the sinking of the *Raccoon*, *U-165* experienced the same fate. The German submarine *U-165* had been commissioned in early February 1942, commanded by Captain Eberhard Hoffman. It carried out only a single war patrol, beginning with its departure from Kiel, Germany on August 7, 1942. It sailed across the North Atlantic, making its first two strikes off the northern tip of Newfoundland on August 28, 1942 (damaging an American merchant vessel and an American oiler). Just over a week later, *U-165* sank the *Aeas* and the *Raccoon* in the St. Lawrence River. By mid-September, it began its return voyage across the Atlantic. On September 27, 1942, on its 52nd day at sea, *U-165* was sunk in the Bay of Biscay by depth charges from an RAF #311 Squadron Wellington aircraft. All 51 hands aboard *U-165* were lost.

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