

RIGBY, Robert Charles (#V/41295)

Robert Charles Rigby enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) on July 2, 1942. One year after enlisting, he became an Ordinary Telegraphist aboard the Canadian destroyer *HMCS St. Croix*. On September 20, 1943, a torpedo from a U-boat sank the *St. Croix*. Only one crew member survived; the 147 men who perished on the *St. Croix*, including Robert Rigby, made it the heaviest single loss suffered by the R.C.N. in the war.

Robert Charles Rigby was born in St. Andrew's, Charlotte, New Brunswick on April 3, 1915, the only child of Robert Desbrisay Rigby Sr. and Charlotte Elvada (nee Worrell) Rigby. Robert Sr. and Charlotte Worrell were both born in New Brunswick, and were married in St. Andrew's, New Brunswick on September 18, 1907. In 1927, when Robert Jr. was twelve years old, the Rigby family moved from New Brunswick to Ontario.

Prior to enlisting, Robert Jr. completed his high school education at age eighteen and worked for six years as a builder's hardware salesman with Aikenhead Hardware on Temperance Street in Toronto. In 1942, the same year that Robert Jr. enlisted, his mother Charlotte passed away at the age of sixty-six in St. Andrew's, New Brunswick. Robert Rigby Sr. was employed by Anglin-Norcross Ontario Limited in Sarnia during the time his son Robert Jr. was serving in the war.

Twenty-seven-year-old Robert Charles Rigby enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) on July 2, 1942 in Toronto. He stood five feet eight and a half inches tall, had blue eyes and fair hair, was single, and recorded his permanent address as St. Andrew's, New Brunswick. His post-war ambition was to either return to the hardware store in Toronto or become involved in marionette entertainment. Taken on at Divisional Strength at *HMCS York* (Toronto), Robert Jr. entered Active Service on October 10, 1942, where he received training at *HMCS York* until February 1943. He continued his training at *HMCS St. Hyacinthe* (Quebec) until mid-June 1943 where he advanced from Ordinary Seaman to Ordinary Telegraphist in March 1943. On June 16, 1943, he was transferred for further training to *HMCS Stadacona* where he was stationed until early July 1943. On July 8, 1943, one year after enlisting, Ordinary Telegraphist Robert Rigby became a member of the Canadian destroyer *HMCS St. Croix*.

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 escorting convoys of ships carrying men and essential machinery, arms, fuel and basic resources between North America and Europe.



Town Class Destroyer *HMCS St. Croix 181*

The Canadian Town Class destroyer *HMCS St. Croix (181)* operated in the North Atlantic. Aboard the same ship was Coder Joseph Griffiths Bell of Sarnia (included in this Project), and Stoker Second Class William Norman Roder of Arkona. The *St. Croix* was one of the "four-stacker" destroyers acquired by Great Britain from the United States Navy in September 1940, in exchange for sites for air and naval bases on British territory in the Atlantic area (she was formerly the *U.S.S. McCook*). The *St. Croix* and six other destroyers, transferred to the

Royal Canadian Navy at the time, were manned immediately by Canadian crews and performed invaluable service on Atlantic convoy duty. Of note, one of those transferred destroyers was the *St. Clair*.

Despite repeated problems with minor equipment failures, the *HMCS St. Croix* had put to sea time and time again and distinguished herself in the early days of the Battle of the Atlantic. Guarding vital convoys and patrolling for German submarines, she was credited with two U-boat kills (*U-90* in late July 1942 and *U-87* in early March 1943) and picked up many survivors of German U-boat attacks on Allied ships. The *St. Croix* was to be the first of the destroyers to be lost. Not long prior to the sinking of the *St. Croix*, Robert Rigby was in Sarnia on leave visiting his father and friends.

In August 1943 *St. Croix* was transferred from the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) to the Royal Navy's Western Approaches Command. Along with the RCN Town Class destroyer *St. Francis* and the RCN corvettes *Chambly*, *Morden* and *Sackville*, the *St. Croix* became part of Escort Group 9, a support group of North Atlantic convoys. The support groups were designed to reinforce the close escort of endangered convoys or to hunt submarines in mid-ocean and kill them.

In mid-September 1943, Escort Group 9 was ordered to reinforce Escort Groups B 3 and C 2, which were guarding the westbound convoys ONS-18 and ON-202, respectively. ONS-18, the slower convoy, had sailed from the United Kingdom on September 13; the faster ONS-202 had departed several days later on a similar track and was now approaching the south of Iceland, just behind the first convoy. At sea, a patrol line of U-boats awaited.

On September 20, after the Admiralty picked up increasing signs of a German submarine concentration, they ordered the two convoys to merge, a combined assemblage of 63 merchant ships. As the convoys closed their gap, the escorts were picking up U-boat signals. Undoubtedly, the U-boats were gathering in large numbers and the wolfpack was maneuvering into position for a night attack. They were about to measure the success of their newest "secret weapon", the Gnat acoustic torpedo. Fired in the direction of the intended victim, the Gnat was designed to circle until it picked up the appropriate propeller noise, then hone in on it.

Escort Group 9 took up outer screening positions ahead and astern of the merchant ships, on the port (south) side of the convoy. Unfortunately, as the collection of escorts and merchant vessels headed west, fog and rain engulfed them. On the night of September 20, *St. Croix* was on station to the rear of the merging convoys when it was ordered to proceed farther astern to check out a possible U-boat sighting reported by an orbiting Coastal Command aircraft. In the gathering gloom, *St. Croix* turned eastward and headed back along the convoy track, zigzagging at 24 knots. As it approached the spot where the sighting was reported, her captain ordered the *St. Croix* to begin an asdic sweep.

At 9:51 pm, the German U-boat *U-305* struck the *HMCS St. Croix* with two Gnat torpedoes near her port propellers. With the two massive explosions, the ship glided to a stop and listed immediately and uncontrollably. To the British frigate *HMS Itchen*, a few miles away, *St. Croix* sent the cryptic message, "*Am leaving the office.*" It was the last word from the *St. Croix*. Seconds later, a third electrically directed torpedo, the final blow, hit the stern of the *St. Croix*. A tremendous explosion occurred, flames shot into the air, and within three minutes, the *St. Croix* was gone. Eighty-one members of her crew remained on life rafts and Carley floats, clinging to whatever they could.

Two RN ships from the escort force, the *HMS Itchen* and the RN corvette *Polyanthus*, rushed to the area, to see what had taken place and what could be done. The frigate *HMS Itchen* signaled: "*St. Croix torpedoed and blown up. Forecastle still afloat. Survivors in rafts and boats. Torpedoes fired at me. Doing full speed in vicinity. Will not attempt to P.U. survivors until Polyanthus arrives.*" But the RN corvette *Polyanthus* was herself torpedoed by *U-952* just after midnight. It sank rapidly with the loss of all hands save one. *Itchen* then had to become involved in attempting to locate the attacking U-boat. Later, in the foggy daylight of September 21, the *Itchen* was eventually able to pick up one *Polyanthus* survivor and 81 *St. Croix* survivors, but only after they had been in the very cold water for thirteen hours. Most of those lost had perished in the sea after abandoning the ship.

The few hours of rescue came to an ironic and bitter end two days later. On September 23, 1943 at approximately 2:00 am, the German U-boat *U-666*, using a Gnat torpedo, struck the *HMS Itchen*. Apparently hit in its magazine, the *Itchen* exploded with an ear-splitting roar and a spectacular display of pyrotechnics and then vanished into the sea. Only three men survived this time: two from the *Itchen* and one from the *St. Croix*, 23-year-old Stoker William Allan Fisher of Black Diamond, Alberta. In total, 147 lives were lost from the *St. Croix*, including Ordinary Telegraphist Robert Rigby.

In October 1943, the sole survivor of the *St. Croix*, Stoker William A. Fisher, told his story in a newspaper account. Following is a portion of his account:

We were part of an escort detailed to a large convoy. We received a signal that submarines were about. We stayed astern of the convoy, but on September 20, we had come up and take on oil from a tanker in the convoy. On our way back to our position we saw a Canadian four-motored Liberator signaling us. We were told that they spotted a submarine and dropped depth charges. We flashed two boilers and made for the spot at 24 knots. As we neared, we had to reduce speed. As we slowed up we were hit in the screws. Fisher said there was no panic and no one thought of abandoning ship. But in two minutes another torpedo struck, this time near the mess deck, and water began to pour in. The captain, Lieutenant Commander Dobson, then issued orders to abandon ship.

Some men were injured by the explosions which followed the torpedoes; some were burned and cut. They were put in the motor launch before it was lowered over the side. The motor boat pulled away. Meanwhile attempts were made to lower a 60-passenger oar-driven whaler... Carley floats were dumped over the side and the men began jumping into the water. *No one seemed worried then, many of the crew laughed that they would be due for 29 day survivors' leave.* The rowboat pulled away from the sinking destroyer, and picked men out of the water. *Even then I thought the ship would be saved. Then I saw the captain dive off the boat. I knew everyone was off then and that the captain had given up hope.*

Fisher was in charge of the motor boat. *No one in the boats died during the night. It was morning that everything happened. Men on the Carley floats insisted on getting into the rowboat. As the men got in, it settled lower in the water. Just before the rescue ship came along, it sank. The whaler did not have any injured men aboard. They were oil-grimed and cold. I saw men who were tough, big men. They hung out all night in the hope a boat would pick them up. Then when the boat did not come into view they died. I guess they couldn't hang out any longer. We dropped them into the sea.*

Sixty men were still alive on the whaler. The ship that headed to their rescue was the Royal Navy frigate *Itchen*, completed last September. As the frigate steamed through the lifting morning mist, the men in the whaler received the signal that the *Itchen* would come directly to their rescue. As the *Itchen* neared, a torpedo was seen to explode 30 yards to her stern. A message was flashed to the *Polyanthus*, a corvette of the Flower class, to come out of the convoy escort and circle the *Itchen* while the men were taken aboard. *The Polyanthus was just coming in and she was struck. I guess she went down in about 10 minutes. We rescued 10 men in our whaler. The Itchen headed for the convoy.... On September 2, two days after we were rescued, we were ordered to our action stations because submarines were around. We had three orders. The first started at 6 at night. There was another one at 7 and again at 9. At 9 o'clock I was standing beside the funnel when a torpedo struck. I was knocked 30 feet and landed against a gun platform. As I crawled toward the rail I kept yelling for my pal... He didn't answer and I jumped over the side. As I hit the water there was another explosion and I felt that my stomach was being squeezed through my ears. The water just cracked. When he reached down to tug off his boots, his left boot was missing. It had been blown off. Fisher grabbed a board and looked to see other men jumping from the ship. Most of them drowned. A Carley float drifted by and Fisher jumped on. During the night others jumped on, but most of them died.*



Last known photograph of the *St. Croix* ship's company
St. John's, Newfoundland May 30, 1943



Toronto Daily Star October 1, 1943

In late September 1943, widowed father Robert Rigby Sr. received a cable from the Navy informing him

that his son, ROBERT CHARLES RIGBY, R.C.N., HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING AT SEA. Soon after, Robert Rigby Sr., c/o Anglin Norcross Company, Sarnia, received a letter from the Secretary, Naval Board. Following is a portion of that letter:

Dear Mr. Rigby:

I deeply regret that I must confirm the telegram of the 28th of September, 1943, from the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services informing you that your son, Robert Charles Rigby, Ordinary Telegraphist, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, Official Number V-41295, is missing on war service.

According to the report received, your son is listed as missing, due to enemy action, while serving on Convoy duty in the Atlantic. For reasons of security further details of this incident of war cannot be released at this time. It is requested that you will regard as confidential anything beyond the fact of your son's loss on war service until such time as an official announcement is made, as this information might prove useful to the enemy....

While your son is listed as missing and virtually no hope can be held out for his having survived, Canadian Naval Authorities are unable to make an official presumption of death until a period of not less than three months has elapsed. If further information has not been received at that time, it is probable that official certification of death will then be made and you will be informed accordingly.

Please allow me to express sincere sympathy with you on behalf of the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services, the Chief of the Naval Staff, and the Officers and men of the Royal Canadian Navy, the high traditions of which your son has helped to maintain.

It was not until October 1, 1943 that the Honourable Angus L. MacDonald, the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services officially announced the sinking of the destroyer *St. Croix*. No details of the sinking were released, other than the list of names of 147 men who lost their lives, which included Surgeon-Lieutenant William Lyon MacKenzie King, nephew of the prime minister; Stoker Second Class William Norman Roder of Arkona; Coder Joseph Griffiths Bell of Sarnia (included in this Project); and Ordinary Telegraphist Robert Charles Rigby.

In late December 1943, Robert Sr. in c/o Anglin Norcross Co., Sarnia received the following letter from the Secretary, Naval Board:

Dear Mr. Rigby:

Further to my letter of the 27th of September, 1943, in view of the length of time that has elapsed since your son, Robert Charles Rigby, Ordinary Telegraphist, Official Number V-41295, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, was reported "missing" after the sinking of H.M.C.S. "ST. CROIX", and as no information has since been received of his having survived, the Canadian Naval Authorities have now presumed his death to have occurred on the 20th of September, 1943. May I again express the sincere sympathy of the Department in your bereavement.

Robert Rigby would later be officially recorded as, *Missing, presumed dead. He was serving on H.M.C.S. "St. Croix" which was lost on Convoy duty in the Atlantic, due to enemy action.* In September 1945, widowed Robert D. Rigby received a War Service Gratuity of \$106.00 for the loss of his only child, Robert Charles Rigby, in the sinking of the *HMCS St. Croix*.

The sinking of the *St. Croix* was the heaviest single loss suffered by the R.C.N. in the war. Within weeks of this incident, the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy began to equip their escorts with towed decoy devices to counter the homing torpedoes – the British used Foxer, and the Canadians utilized the simpler and lighter CAT gear – thus effectively neutralizing one of Germany's most important new innovations.

Robert Charles Rigby, 28, has no known grave. His name is inscribed on the Halifax Memorial, Nova Scotia, Canada, Panel 10. In November 2019, his name along with 25 others was added to the Sarnia cenotaph, engraved in stone to be remembered always.

From: *The Sarnia War Remembrance Project*, by Tom Slater