

STEVENS, Ross Edward

In 1943, Ross Edward “Buddy” Stevens enlisted with the Canadian Merchant Navy when he was only sixteen. Unfortunately, while serving as a 4th Engineer aboard the Imperial Oil tanker *SS Sunset Park*, Buddy was critically injured at sea during a storm. He died in a hospital in Barbados, a day before he turned eighteen.

Ross (who went by his nickname “Buddy”) Stevens was born in Petrolia on March 21, 1927, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Hubert Stevens. The Stevens family moved to Sarnia around 1936 when Buddy was nine and resided at 407 London Road. Ross’ grandmother was Mrs. Edward Shannon of Petrolia. Buddy had one sister who, at the time of his death, was Mrs. S. Round of Sarnia. After beginning his education at Central School in Petrolia, Buddy attended Johnston Memorial School in Sarnia. In 1943, Ross Stevens joined the Canadian Merchant Navy on his 16th birthday, becoming a member of the crew of the Imperial Oil tanker *SS Sunset Park*, with the rank of Oiler. He later obtained the rank of 4th Engineer.

Canada’s Merchant Navy was the “fourth arm of service” of the Royal Canadian Navy. It played a vital role in carrying men and essential machinery, arms, fuel and basic resources across the Atlantic in the **Battle of the Atlantic**, the longest continuous campaign of the war. Cargo was also shipped to and from ports in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific, the Arctic, and in European waters. When the war began, Canada had only 38 ocean-going merchant ships, including 10 tankers of Imperial Oil Limited, and about 1,500 sailors. By war’s end, Canadian shipyards had manufactured 403 merchant ships.

The Allied merchant fleet suffered significant losses in the early years of the Battle of the Atlantic as a result of U-boat attacks. In the face of the now urgent need, Canada embarked on a massive shipbuilding program to help replace the lost vessels and to administer the movement of materiel. Two main types of cargo ships were produced under the Canadian program: “Fort ships” and “Park ships”. Park Steamship Company was created by the Canadian government in April 1942. The *Sunset Park* was one of the “Park ships”. Built as a tanker by Foundation Maritime Limited in Pictou, Nova Scotia, it was completed on November 24, 1944, as a modified Scandinavian-class cargo ship of 2894 tonnes. After the war, the *Sunset Park* would become *Siderurgica Cinco* and was scrapped in 1965.

Even being protected by armed escorts and even by traveling in zig-zag patterns, the merchant ships in convoys usually had a treacherous voyage across enormous tracts of ocean. Maneuvering in crowded ranks without lights and wireless or navigational aids and using haphazard communication added to the risks the ships faced. They were under the constant threat of fierce attacks by German U-boats or air attack; the danger of collision and underwater mines; and the natural dangers of rough water, hazardous weather, fog, gales and ice conditions.

Canadian mariners served in the Canadian merchant fleet and in all manner of vessels from other nations, and by the end of the war, an estimated 12,000 Canadian and Newfoundland men and women served in the merchant navy. More than 1,600 Canadian and Newfoundland Merchant Navy men and women lost their lives in the war.

Buddy Stevens had been home on furlough the Christmas before his death in December of 1944. Three months later, in March of 1945, he was critically injured in a storm while at sea on board the Imperial Oil tanker *SS Sunset Park*. On March 20, 1945, Merchant Marine Ross Stevens lost his life in St. Michael’s Hospital in Bridgetown, Barbados, British West Indies. He died one day before his eighteenth birthday.

On March 21st 1945, parents Mr. and Mrs. Hubert Stevens in Sarnia received word on their son’s 18th birthday that he had died in the Barbados, British West Indies while serving with the Imperial Oil marine department. In late April of 1945, the Rev. J.F. Anderson of St. Paul’s United Church, Sarnia conducted a memorial service in memory of Ross Edward Stevens. Eighteen-year-old Ross Stevens is buried in the Barbados. His name is inscribed on the Sarnia cenotaph and on the Petrolia cenotaph and is also inscribed in the *Merchant Navy Book of Remembrance* located in the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill, Ottawa.

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