

Able Seaman Charles Austin Barnett V-14304



Able Seaman Barnett. Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Vancouver BC, 26 August 1920**
- **Enlisted: Vancouver Division RCNVR, 13 September 1938**
- **Civilian Occupation: Shipper, J.S. Hargrave Wholesale Paper**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Guysborough* was torpedoed and sank on 18 March 1945**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 13; and the HMCS *Discovery* Memorial Plaque**

Able Seaman Charles Austin Barnett was born on 26 August 1920 in Vancouver, BC, the youngest child of Mary Barnett and Charles Ambrose Barnett. Charles had one older sister, Mary Elizabeth Barnett. The family lived in a residential pocket of East Vancouver, except for Charles who lived a few blocks away. He identified as belonging to the Anglican Church and completed four years of high school at Magee High and Vancouver Technical School, after which he worked as a shipping clerk for J.S. Hargrave Wholesale Paper, a wholesale paper manufacturer, before enlisting in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) on 13 September 1938. Barnett initially enlisted in a reserve capacity well before Second World War hostilities commenced in September 1939 but remained employed as a civilian up until he reported for active duty on 18 May 1940.

Barnett's attestation form recorded on 14 July 1941 describes a 108 pound, 5' 7" caucasian male with brown hair, brown eyes, and a fair complexion. He had some sort of lesion on his foot that was significant enough to warrant mention in the report. He was 18 years and one month old when he enlisted in the RCNVR.

The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) employed Barnett at their divisional headquarters in Vancouver for the one-month period between when he reported for active duty until 15 June 1940, when he was sent to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, BC. He remained at *Naden* until 11 October 1940 where he completed Basic Training almost within sight of his first ship, HMCS *Norsal*.

Ordinary Seaman Barnett was posted to *Norsal* on 12 October 1940. Vancouver's W.R. Menchions & Co. Ltd. launched *Norsal* from their Burrard Inlet shipyard in 1921, and the vessel was initially owned by the Powell River Company Ltd. *Norsal* was 122' long, 19.25' in beam and 12.75' deep and two sets of four-cylinder semi diesel Fairbanks Morse engines powered a single shaft at 270 horsepower.

The Navy requisitioned *Norsal* at the beginning of the Second World War, and one wonders if Barnett counted himself lucky – the sleek lines, numerous portholes and very spacious aft parlour were certainly a far cry from some of the more traditional warships usually seen at Esquimalt's dockyard.



Barnett remained on *Norsal* until 1 June 1941, although both his day-to-day activities onboard as well as the operational history of the vessel are vague in the historical record. He served onboard *Norsal* before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and before naval hostilities in the Pacific Theater began in earnest, so he likely participated in auxiliary patrol craft duties

around Victoria. However, he did have an important rite of passage as part of his service on that vessel – he was promoted to Able Seaman on 12 February 1941.

Barnett left *Norsal* and returned to *Naden* from 2 June 1941 to 28 October 1942. The following day, the next chapter of Barnett's naval service began – he reported to HMCS *Guysborough*, a newly ordered Bangor-class minesweeper. North Vancouver Ship Repairs Ltd. (also cited as North Van Ship Repair) constructed *Guysborough* over the summer of 1941 and launched it on 21 July of that year. *Guysborough* was 180' in length, 28' in beam, had a draught of 9' and displaced 572 long tons. The Bangor-class had two variants powered by different engines either diesel or vertical triple expansion steam engines – *Guysborough* had two of the latter type of engine, which powered two shafts and provided a maximum speed of 16.5 knots. The Navy commissioned *Guysborough* on 22 April 1942, nine months after its launch.

As Barnett snapped off a salute while crossing the brow and boarding *Guysborough* for the first time, he must have considered how the war had evolved since his time on *Norsal*. Axis powers had declared war on the United States, and the Imperial Japanese Navy was making strategic advances in the western Pacific. Closer to home, the Axis effort to destroy shipping off the eastern seaboard, *Operation Drumbeat*, had inflicted staggering losses and played a large role in prompting the Americans to adopt the convoy system, which pushed hostilities farther into the Atlantic. The war probably seemed much grimmer than it did when Barnett sailed aboard *Norsal*.

Barnett served in *Guysborough* through the autumn and winter of 1942 and into the spring of 1943, and he remained posted to the ship when the RCN decided to transfer it to Halifax in support of hostilities in the Atlantic. *Guysborough* arrived in Halifax at the end of April 1943 and joined the Western Local Escort Force, the organization of anti-submarine escorts that serviced eastern Canada and New England. The RCN reassigned the ship to the Halifax Local Defence Force not long after, and Able Seaman Barnett would have put in at Baltimore while the ship had a six-week refit in September 1943. Afterwards, *Guysborough* was assigned to *Operation Neptune*, the naval component of the Normandy Invasion which occurred on 6 June 1944.



Guysborough operated with the Royal Navy 14th Minesweeping Flotilla, and directly participated in minesweeping waters tactically significant to Operation Neptune beginning the day before the invasion. The ship and her crew remained engaged in that activity both during the invasion and up until almost two weeks after Allied powers had secured Normandy (from 5 to 21 June 1944). After the successful operation at Normandy, the Navy assigned *Guysborough* to escort duties in the English Channel.

Barnett and *Guysborough* returned to Canada in the winter of 1944 for a refit in Lunenburg, NS. Once the refit was complete, Barnett watched Lunenburg recede into the distance as *Guysborough* again turned east to cross the Atlantic.

Guysborough initially had an uneventful transit – she successfully steamed from Lunenburg to Horta, in the Azores, and then sailed for Plymouth, England. It was during this transit that the German Submarine U-868 attacked at a position approximately 210 miles east of the Bay of Biscay. At 1850 on the evening of 17 March 1945, one of U-868's torpedo's hit *Guysborough's* stern. The crew somehow only suffered one casualty from the hit, but at 1935 U-868 fired another torpedo that struck the minesweeper's starboard side, causing the vessel to sink rapidly. The crew managed to transmit a distress signal and took to several Carley floats that they rafted together, but many sailors died of exposure while HMS *Inglis* steamed towards the scene.

Historians are fortunate that a Naval Press Relations Officer interviewed a handful of *Guysborough's* survivors, and there are firsthand accounts of the event. An unnamed sailor reported to this officer, "only one death occurred from the explosion, but many died during the 19 hours the men who had survived the explosion spent in the water clinging to the Carley floats. Only six men of 42 on one overcrowded float lived until the rescue ship, a Royal Navy frigate, arrived." Another survivor reported that "both the air and the water were cold. Most of the men who died, died smiling. If they suffered any, you'd never have known it." One of these men was Barnett, whose body was never recovered. Able Seaman Charles Barnett was 24 years old when he died.

Barnett's mother was informed by telegram on 21 March 1945 that her son was missing. A subsequent letter stated that "the position of the action is such that there is little possibility of him being a prisoner of war and slight hope can be held for his survival."

During 1945 the Distribution of Services Estates Branch paid Barnett's modest estate to his mother, and the Navy also paid a War Service Gratuity of \$768.85 to his mother.

For his service, Able Seaman Charles Austin Barnett was posthumously awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star & Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother was sent the Canadian Memorial Cross on 4 July 1945.

Able Seaman Barnett is commemorated on Panel 13 of the Halifax Memorial, at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the HMCS *Discovery* Memorial Plaque; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 493 at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

Prepared By:

Lieutenant (Navy) W. Bush (HMCS *Discovery*) Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Research Team.



Sources:

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