

Lieut-Commander Clifton Rexford (Tony) Coughlin, D S C, O-16110



Lieutenant-Commander Tony Coughlin, DSC.
Photo credit: Queens University Archives

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Bryson QC, 14 April 1913**
- **Enlisted: Montreal Division RCNVR, 9 January 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Statistician, Jones, Howard & Company**
- **Death: Accidental death while serving in HMCS *Iroquois* on 19 October 1944**
- **Honours: Distinguished Service Cross & Mentioned in Despatches**
- **Commemorated: Lyness Royal Naval Cemetery, Plot H. North Border. Grave 7**

Clifton Rexford “Tony” Coughlin was born on April 14th, 1913, in Bryson, Quebec to Frederick A. Coughlin and Eliza A. Coughlin. Raised in Ottawa, Tony attended Lisgar Collegiate Institute and spent five years as a Sea Cadet, before moving to Kingston for studies at Queen’s University. Studying commerce at Queen’s, Tony was a prolific athlete, and served as the President of the Queen’s Arts Society for the 1936-37 academic year. Upon his graduation, he moved to Montreal, where he completed his Master of Commerce from McGill University and worked at a statistician at Jones Heward & Company. During this period, Tony carried on a seven-year long engagement to Martha Hazel Coughlin (née Dent), from 1932 to 1939. In March 1939, he joined the RCNVR Supplementary Reserve at the Montreal Division. At the outbreak of war, Tony travelled home to Ottawa and married Martha, before returning to Montreal as he awaited his call to active service.

In March 1940, Tony joined the second class of officers trained at HMCS *Stone Frigate*, a temporary RCNVR training establishment in Kingston, Ontario. Tying for first in his class, Tony was then transferred to Halifax, where he completed his Long Gunnery Course in the fall of 1940. In January 1941, after a brief spell of leave, Tony joined the wardroom of HMCS *Assiniboine*, as gunnery control officer. Tony’s service in *Assiniboine* was relatively uneventful, save for an evening docked in Greenock – unable to move - during the Luftwaffe’s Greenock Blitz. He also earned his watchkeeping certificate. By July 1941, he was back in Canada, for a brief period of service on the staff of Captain (D) Halifax. In September, he was loaned to the Royal Navy, where he served in the battleship HMS *Resolution* as it finished a refit, worked up, and then joined an unsuccessful, if actionless, attempt to keep the Imperial Japanese Navy from dominating the

Indian Ocean. While serving in *Resolution*, Tony gained respect from ratings and officers alike, proving immensely popular on board and rising to become Fleet Recreational Officer by the time he left the Royal Navy in May 1942. Returning to Halifax, Tony was reunited with Martha, and returned to the staff of Captain (D) Halifax. On January 1st, 1943, he was appointed an Acting Lieutenant Commander, and in February, he joined the first class of the RCN's Command Course. In the summer of 1943, he was given command of HMCS *Chilliwack*, a Flower-Class Corvette undergoing a refit in Halifax, and was nominated for a Royal Humane Society Lifesaving Award for his attempt to save a drowning sailor in Halifax harbour. In October, Tony and *Chilliwack* went to sea, in convoy duty on the North Atlantic. On January 1st, 1944, Tony was made a full Lieutenant Commander, and on March 6th, commanded *Chilliwack* in the sinking – after a 31-hour chase – of the German submarine U-744. He won a Distinguished Service Cross for the action, and within weeks, received his next assignment.

In April 1944, Tony joined HMCS *Iroquois* as first lieutenant (executive officer) to Commander Jimmy Hibbard - who had been Captain (D) Halifax for most of Tony's time in that office - with further gunnery duties. He was also soon confirmed as a fully qualified Lieutenant-Commander; meaning he met all requirements for promotion to the rank of Commander, a status shared by only three other RCNVR officers at that point in the war. While *Iroquois* missed D-Day for a refit, her service in the subsequent months would have no lack of action: In August 1944, she helped sink 22 German ships (mostly flak trawlers and minesweepers) in anti-shipping patrols off the coast of France. With gunnery at the forefront in these actions, Tony received a Mention in Despatches for his work.



Credit: David Niddam-Dent, September 2021

Always ambitious, Tony would have been elated to hear the news, but he did not live to do so. On October 16th, 1944, on its way to service in the North Sea, *Iroquois* took a heavy roll in a storm. It did so as Tony was moving aft after reporting his rounds, and it left Tony with his left leg twisted around a gangway stanchion. His femur broken, fluid soon entered the lungs, and despite being successfully transferred to the Royal Navy hospital at Northness, on October 19th, Tony died, aged 31. He was buried only meters away, at the Lyness Royal Naval Cemetery on the Isle of Hoy, in Scotland's Orkney Islands. Despite its remote location, his wife Martha visited his grave 10 times over the course of her life. She never remarried and remained dedicated to Tony for the rest of her life.



LCdr Tony Coughlin (left) & Cdr James C. Hibbard (right) on the bridge of HMCS *Iroquois* after a five-hour battle in which eight German ships were destroyed or damaged while attempting to escape from St. Nazaire, France, 21 August 1944. Credit: PO Glen M. Frankfurter / Canada. DND / LAC / PA-179886

For his service Tony Coughlin was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star and Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, the War Medal 1939-45, a Mention in Despatches, and a Distinguished Service Cross. His wife Martha, and his mother Eliza were awarded the Memorial Cross.

Lieutenant-Commander Coughlin is buried in the Lyness Royal Naval Cemetery, Plot H., North Border, Grave 7. The inscription on his grave reads:

“Many are called but few are chosen”

In Canada, he is remembered on the Second World War Plaque in the Memorial Hall of Lisgar Collegiate, on the memorial plaque at the Glebe Collegiate Institute and on the memorial plaque at St Luke’s Anglican Church. All are found in Ottawa, Ontario.

Prepared By:

David Niddam-Dent, Great-Nephew of Tony Coughlin, and Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph researcher



Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – record for Clifton Rexford “Tony” Coughlin
- Library and Archives Canada (through Ancestry.ca) – file for Clifton Rexford “Tony” Coughlin
- Records of the Department of National Defense (RG 24). Library and Archives Canada.
- Queens University Archives – record for Clifton Rexford “Tony” Coughlin
- Coughlin, Clifton R., & Martha Hazel Coughlin. The Coughlin Papers. In the author’s possession.