

Leading Sick Berth Attendant Cyril James Albert Gordon V-47603



Leading Sick Berth Attendant Cyril Gordon.
Source: Saskatchewan Virtual War
Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Webb SK, 10 November 1914**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *York*, 9 September 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Nurse, Toronto General Hospital**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *St. Croix* was torpedoed and sank on 20 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; and Gordon Lake (Lat 55° 47'N Long 106° 33'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory**

Cyril James Albert Gordon, known as Cyril, was the fourth of seven children born to Mary Ethel Gordon and Francis (Frank) Mavor Gordon near Webb, Saskatchewan on 10 November 1914. Sisters Helena, Gladys, and Alma were born in 1910, 1912, and 1920 respectively; while brothers Calvin, Dellis, and Milton were born in 1913, 1918, and 1921 respectively.

Cyril's parents Ethel and Frank were both born in Perth, NB in 1888 and married there in June 1909. They came to Saskatchewan and acquired 160 acres under the Dominion Land Act for \$10 in February 1910 about a mile from Webb, a hamlet 164 miles west of Regina in the large Great Plains area known as the Palliser Triangle. Despite the poor farming techniques widely practiced (that were naturally ameliorated by unusually high rainfall through the 1920s), the family farm prospered and eventually grew to 800 acres. The Great Depression and drought of the 1930s changed all that. Drought led to soil erosion and dust storms which blackened the sky. The total rain and snowfall equivalent for the whole of 1937 recorded eighteen miles away in Swift Current was only 8 inches. These conditions took a huge toll on the family economically and otherwise. Sadly, Cyril's father Frank died in 1939 at the age of 51 leaving the eldest brother Calvin to carry on running the heavily mortgaged farm. At the same time, the family members began to leave. The three sisters married; Dellis and Milton joined the armed forces, and Mary moved to Regina in 1942.

Cyril attended Webb Public School completing Grade 11 before leaving at age 16 to work on the farm. Then in 1937, he traveled to Whitby, ON where he had been accepted into a three-year nursing training program conducted by a school associated with the Ontario Hospital. The hospital was considered a model of mental health care for its era. Upon graduation, Cyril worked at the hospital for two years. At the same time, he enrolled in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps No. 2 Casualty Clearing Station (Non-Permanent Active Militia) in April 1941 and was

granted the rank of Acting Sergeant. He remained with the Corps until October 1941. He then accepted a position at the Toronto General Hospital in early 1942 that he held until he enrolled in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR).

On 30 July 1942 Cyril approached the Toronto Division (HMCS *York*) RCNVR and was sworn in on 9 September. The Navy was not as generous as the Medical Corps however and they offered Cyril the rank of Sick Berth Attendant (Temporary), the equivalent of two ranks lower than that of Sergeant. He was 27 years old, single, 5 feet 10 ¼ Inches tall, and weighed 179 pounds with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. Brothers Dellis and Milton were both serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Perhaps on the premise that everyone is a seaman first, and notwithstanding his Army experience, Cyril took basic training at *York* from 9 September to 13 December 1942. However, his service with the Medical Corps was eventually recognized when he was awarded his first Good Conduct Badge on 23 September 1942. His time served in the Medical Corps was included in the calculation. He was next drafted to HMCS *Cornwallis*, in Halifax, NS to undertake New Entry training, which included a comprehensive section on seamanship. On 5 January 1943, Cyril was drafted to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) Hospital in HMCS *Stadacona*, the large naval base also in Halifax, for further training as a Sick Berth Attendant. There he was promoted to Leading Sick Berth Attendant on 28 January 1943.

On 5 June 1943, Cyril was drafted to HMCS *St. Croix* (I-81). The next day, his youngest brother, Flight Sergeant Milton Gordon, was killed in a flying accident.

HMCS *St. Croix* was a Clemson-class destroyer commissioned into the United States Navy (USN) as USS *McCook* (DD-252) on 30 April 1919. After a short period of service, she was laid up in Philadelphia in 1922. Recommissioned into the USN in December 1939, she was one of 50 ships to be transferred to the Royal Navy under the *Destroyers for Bases Agreement* between the United Kingdom and the United States. Subsequently, she was transferred to the RCN and re-commissioned in Halifax on 24 September 1940 as HMCS *St. Croix* – named after the river that marks the New Brunswick and Maine border.



Leading Sick Berth Attendant Gordon joined a ship that had an eventful service career. In late November 1940, she sailed from Halifax for the United Kingdom and encountered a hurricane enroute. Heavily damaged she returned to Halifax for repairs that lasted until mid-March 1941. Then she was assigned to convoy escort duty primarily in the North Atlantic and escorted 36 convoys. While doing so she sank the U-boat U-90 on 24 July 1942, and on 4 March 1943, she

assisted HMCS *Shediac* in destroying U-87.

Upon arriving onboard *St. Croix*, Cyril was placed under the direction of Surgeon Lieutenant William Lyon Mackenzie King, RCNVR, the nephew of the Canadian Prime Minister. Cyril's first voyage was uneventful. *St. Croix* escorted a convoy from Halifax destined for Londonderry from 5-11 August.

On 19 September 1943, an escort group that included *St. Croix*, HMC Ships *St. Francis*, *Chambly*, *Morden*, and *Sackville*, and HMS *Itchen* were proceeding to the Bay of Biscay to conduct an offensive against U-boats that were transiting from five bases on the west coast of France to the Atlantic. The group was diverted to assist several convoys under attack by what turned out to be a force of 13 U-boats in an area about 400 to 500 nautical miles southwest of Iceland.

Upon reaching convoy ON.202 on 20 September 1943, *St. Croix* was struck on the stern at 2151 by two Gnat torpedoes fired by U-305. Gravely damaged but still afloat, her ship's company began to abandon ship. Then, 53 minutes later, at 2244, she was struck by a third torpedo fired by U-305 and sunk within six minutes leaving 81 officers and men clinging to two Carley floats and a swamped whaler. HMS *Itchen* and HMS *Polyanthus* attempted to rescue the sailors in the water but broke off after *Itchen* narrowly avoided a torpedo fired at her at 2253 also by U-305. Instead, *Itchen* went on the offensive to hunt down her attacker. At 0022 on 21 September *Polyanthus* was sunk by U-952.

After dawn, *Itchen* rescued the sole survivor from *Polyanthus* and the 81 survivors from *St. Croix* including Cyril. With her own ship's company of 230 officers and men, *Itchen* now had a total of 312 onboard when she was torpedoed and sunk by U-666 at 0200 on 23 September 1943. Only three survived and were rescued by the Polish merchant ship, SS *Wisla*. They were Stoker William Allan Fisher, RCNVR, from *St. Croix*, and two members of *Itchen*'s ship's company. Leading Sick Berth Attendant Cyril James Albert Gordon was 28 years old when he died.



Back in Canada, on 6 December 1943, Stoker Fisher gave a verbatim report of the events surrounding *St. Croix*'s loss. About Cyril, Fisher reported that:

"He helped Surgeon Lieutenant King in getting all the injured boys off the "ST. CROIX". He dove over the side himself and got on a Carley float and tried to hold some of the injured on the float. When picked up by "INCHEN" he went right to work and helped the Sick Bay Attendant onboard the "INCHEN" and was down in the Sick Bay when the "INCHEN" was sunk."

For his service, Leading Sick Berth Attendant Cyril James Albert Gordon was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Mary Ethel Gordon, was awarded a second Memorial Cross. *

Leading Sick Berth Attendant Cyril James Albert Gordon, like the other 146 members of *St. Croix*'s ship's company, has no known grave. He is commemorated on Panel 10 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 164, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa; and Gordon Lake (Lat 55° 47'N Long 106° 33'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

***Postscript:**

Cyril's brother, Milton Gordon, joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in August 1941, became an Observer, and was promoted to the rank of Flight Sergeant before being lent to the Royal Air Force (RAF) 21 Squadron based at RAF Station Feltwell near Norfolk, East Anglia. On 6 June 1943, Milton boarded a B-25 Mitchell bomber and made his way to his station forward in the aircraft. On take-off in heavy rain, the Mitchell collided with a parked aircraft killing Milton and two of the other three crew members. Within a few days of Cyril's death, Mary was presented with the Memorial Cross recognizing Milton's death.

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