

Able Seaman Ronald Earl Grant V-27279



Able Seaman Ronald Grant. Photo:
Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Moose Jaw SK, 12 October 1922**
- **Enlisted: Toronto Division RCNVR, 26 May 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Mail Room Order Filler, Robert Simpson Company**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *St. Croix* was torpedoed and sank on 20 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; Book of Remembrance Vaughan Road Collegiate Institute, Toronto, Ontario.**

Ronald Earl Grant, known as Ronald, was the first of three children born to Edith Anne Grant and Wilfred Laurier Grant on 12 October 1922 in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Sisters Irene and Jean were born in 1929 and 1930 respectively. Wilfred was born in Ontario in 1894. Edith was born in the United States in 1901 and emigrated with her family to Western Canada in 1906. In 1928, Wilfred, Edith, and Ronald moved to The Pas, Manitoba where the girls were born. It is not known how Wilfred and Edith made a living in either Moose Jaw or The Pas. In 1933 the family moved again – this time to Toronto – where Wilfred found work with the Canadian Transfer Co. Limited, a trucking firm that transported mail in bulk. After working as a helper for about a year, he was promoted to truck driver and worked in that position until retirement. Ronald and his sisters were enrolled in nearby Humewood Public School where Ronald completed Grade 8 before moving on to Vaughan Road Collegiate Institute. After completing Grade 10 he left school at 18 and found work as a mail order filler at the Robert Simpson Company, a forerunner of Simpson-Sears.

On 26 May 1941, Ronald was sworn into the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at the Toronto Division (HMCS *York*) as an Ordinary Seaman. He was 18 years old and single, 5 feet 6 Inches tall, and weighed 104 pounds with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. The Medical Officer observed that Ronald was “underweight but should improve” and that his weight was “not of sufficient importance to cause his rejection.”

The first three weeks of Ronald’s time at *York* involved attending further appointments and completing administrative details until 16 June 1941 when basic training began in earnest. At this period of the War, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) counted on the seventeen naval reserve divisions, like HMCS *York*, then operating across Canada to recruit and initially train men. The training, however, was not standardized and divisions were short of training equipment, accommodations, and instructors. So, on 12 August 1941, Ronald was on a train bound for HMCS *Stadacona* at Halifax, NS. *Stadacona*, like HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, BC was one of two initial

training establishments where recruits like Ronald were being trained because of the inadequacies of the system. There, he took New Entry training, the syllabus of which included naval discipline, squad drill, small arms familiarization, seamanship, and damage control; the sort of training that equipped the graduates to be safe and useful members of the ship's company of a warship. Upon completion, Ronald was drafted to HMCS *Windflower* on 10 October 1941.

Built for the Royal Navy (RN) at Lauzon, QC by George T. Davie & Sons Ltd, the Flower-class corvette was commissioned on 20 October 1940 as HMS *Windflower* (K155). Delivered by a Canadian crew to Scotland, she was assigned to Escort Group 4 (RN), Greenock, still with the Canadian crew, escorting convoys between the United Kingdom and Iceland. On 15 May 1941, she was transferred to the RCN and commissioned as HMCS *Windflower*. Now assigned to Newfoundland Command, she completed two round trips as an ocean escort between St. John's and Iceland before being placed in refit in Liverpool, NS on 29 August 1941. There, Ronald joined her as she was completing her refit in mid-October and made his first-round trip to Iceland in November as part of the escort of Convoy SC-52. While doing so, *Windflower* rescued 27

survivors from a torpedoed merchant ship. On the morning of 7 December 1941, *Windflower* was part of the Mid Ocean Escort Force group led by the destroyer, HMCS *St. Laurent*, and five other corvettes, HMC Ships *Buctouche*, *Hepatica*, *Moose Jaw*, and *Pictou*, and HMS *Nasturtium*. They had taken over responsibility for the 49-ship Slow Convoy SC 58 from a local escort group the day before south of Newfoundland. The convoy was arranged in ten columns of five ships each (with one exception) and was proceeding on a course of 062 degrees at a speed of 7 knots in dense fog passing over the Grand Banks.



At 0740, the outgoing Officer of the Watch onboard *Windflower* took a radar fix using the very crude radar of the day and determined that *Windflower* was about two and a half miles from the lead ship of the extreme starboard column of the convoy and 20 degrees off her starboard bow. There was some confusion over *Windflower's* correct station (she had a day station and a night station). It would appear that the incoming Officer of the Watch concluded that *Windflower's* correct station was now off the starboard beam of the lead ship of the column. Consequently, at 0800, in the dense fog, he radically altered course to port to resume station or regain contact with the convoy. He also had the option to simply alter course to port moderately, reduce speed and wait for the convoy to catch up. Nevertheless, *Windflower* proceeded on a course approximately reciprocal to that of the convoy in the dense fog. In doing so she passed the first three ships of the starboard column with an ever-decreasing closest point of approach.

Then at 0920 disaster struck. The Dutch freighter, SS *Zypenberg*, the fourth ship in the column, appeared suddenly out of the fog less than 400 yards from *Windflower* as she was about cross *Zypenberg's* bow from starboard to port. *Windflower's* engine was immediately ordered full speed ahead and her helm was ordered hard to starboard. At the same time, *Zypenberg's* engine was ordered full speed astern and her helm was put hard to starboard. But it was too late. *Zypenberg's* bow cut into *Windflower's* port side at a forty-five-degree angle slicing away the engine room and everything aft exposing to the sea the watertight bulkhead which had separated the engine room

from the after-boiler room. *Zypenberg's* momentum then carried her forward and she disappeared into the fog. *Windflower's* Captain concluded that the ship could be salvaged and taken into tow if the watertight bulkhead held, flooding was controlled, and the boilers' fires were extinguished. Within ten minutes, however, the exposed watertight bulkhead gave way and ice-cold seawater rushed into the boiler rooms. The ten minutes since the boiler fires had been extinguished were not sufficient to dissipate the heat and the forward boiler exploded. The force of the explosion travelled upward blasting the seamen on the deck immediately above, who were attempting to launch the starboard ship's boat, with live steam and throwing them and the boat into the sea. The port boat on the same deck above had just been lowered to the water line but capsized when a fall jammed throwing the boat's crew into the sea as well. Then, at 0950, *Windflower* sank leaving those in the water who had survived the collision and the explosion clinging to whatever flotsam they could reach.

In the meantime, *Zypenberg* reappeared out of the fog going astern, stopped, and put two boats in the water all the time sounding her horn continuously so that those in the water could maintain contact with her. Nevertheless, SS *Baltara*, the fifth ship in the column narrowly missed *Zypenberg* and the men in the water. And if that was not enough chaos, HMS *Nasturtium* heard the explosion of the boiler. Assuming that a ship had been torpedoed, she came from her station astern of the convoy at speed, made ASDIC contact with what she assumed to be a U-boat, and dropped a pattern of depth charges. The submerged contact, of course, was the sinking *Windflower*. One of *Nasturtium's* depth charges exploded prematurely while the others likely detonated *Windflower's* depth charges. As a resultant huge explosion, *Nasturtium's* ASDIC was destroyed, all her antennae were toppled, her hull was damaged and oil began to leak from her fuel lines; however, within 45 minutes, 47 men were rescued by *Zypenberg's* boats, three of whom died before *Zypenberg* was able to reach St. John's, Newfoundland in company with the damaged *Nasturtium*. In all, 23 men perished.

The circumstances of the collision were the topic of a Board of Inquiry held in St. John's a few days later. The sequence of events that lead to the course alteration toward the convoy and the resultant collision were largely deduced by the Board because the officers who ordered them did not survive.

Where was Ronald during the chaos? In an article in the *Toronto Sun*, Ronald's mother related what Ronald told her. He had been working on the upper deck mid-ships when the collision occurred. He was nearly thrown overboard by the impact but managed to remain on board. He then ran down to his mess deck and retrieved his life belt and a life jacket he found there before returning to the upper deck. The boiler explosion blew him overboard where he was able to throw the life jacket to another seaman and then helped him put it on. They then both clung to the capsized ship's boat with others until rescued by one of *Zypenberg's* boats. At the time of rescue, Ronald had been in the water for about 45 minutes and was unconscious.

After 30 days of leave at his home in Toronto, Ronald returned to HMCS *Stadacona* where, as an unrated seaman, he was selected for further training. Technical and leadership training was divided into two parallel streams – *substantive* which provided leadership, and *non-substantive* which provided technical expertise. Upon recruitment, Ronald was assigned to the Seaman Branch which included the substantive ratings of Ordinary, Able, and Leading Seaman, Petty Officer, and Chief Petty Officer.

Through New Entry training he had been exposed to substantive training. In addition, the branch was further subdivided into specialized non-substantive ratings. Gunnery to which Ronald was assigned was one of these specialties that in turn was divided into five sub-specialties: DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships), which provided gun crews for merchant ships; Anti-

Aircraft which included all close-range weapons; and Main Armament which contained three distinct ratings with three classes in each: Control Rating (CR), principally concerned with determining the range of a target; Quarters Rating (QR), responsible for the stowage and supply of ammunition and breech operation; and Layer Rating (LR), responsible for the movements of the gun as it was brought to bear on a target. These three ratings in turn were divided into 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Class with 1st Class being the most skilled.

Ronald qualified as a Layer Rating 3rd Class (LR3) on 25 March 1942. This rating entitled Ronald to a 10-cent per day pay raise.

On 8 March 1942, Ronald was drafted to HMCS *St. Croix* (I-81) and promoted to Able Seaman on 4 May entitling him to another raise of thirty-five cents per day. His total pay per diem was now \$3.65.

HMCS *St. Croix* was a Clemson-class destroyer commissioned into the United States Navy (USN) as USS *McCook* (DD-252) on 30 April 1919. In 1939, the ship was 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. Thus began her eventful career.



HMCS *St. Croix*. Source: Uboat.net

On 30 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 – 18 after Ronald joined her. The majority of the convoys were between St. John's, Newfoundland and Northern Ireland. While doing so, she sank U-boat U-90 while escorting

convoy ON.113 on 24 July 1942, and on 4 March 1943, while escorting convoy KMS.10 from Britain to Algeria, she assisted HMCS *Shediac* in destroying U-87.

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, *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 Able Seaman Grant. 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. Upon arrival back in Canada on December 6, Stoker Fisher was able to give a detailed account of the two sinkings.



For his service, Able Seaman Ronald Earl Grant was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Edith Grant, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Able Seaman Ronald Earl Grant, 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 Book of Remembrance at Vaughan Road Collegiate Institute, Toronto, ON; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 165, at the Centre Block, Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

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