

Surgeon Lieutenant William Lyon Mackenzie King O-39180



Surgeon Lieutenant Lyon King. Photo:
Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Ottawa ON, 2 January 1913**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *York*, 30 June 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Resident Surgeon, St Michael's Hospital, Toronto**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *St. Croix* was torpedoed and sank on 2 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 9; King Family Plot, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Toronto**

William Lyon Mackenzie King, known as Lyon, was a twin. He and his brother Arthur were born to May Minnie King and Dougall Macdougall (Max) King on 2 January 1913 in Ottawa, Ontario. His mother May was born in Manchester, England in 1880 and emigrated to Canada in 1897 where she joined her brother and eventually her whole family in Toronto. His father Max was born in Berlin, Ontario (later to be renamed Kitchener) in 1878 and was the younger brother of William Lyon Mackenzie King who served as Prime Minister of Canada over three periods: 1921 to 1926, 1926 to 1930, and 1935 to 1948. Max studied medicine at the University of Toronto. After graduating he enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1902 and served in the Boer War in South Africa.

Following his service, Max settled in Ottawa, established a medical practice, and, in 1911, married May. Shortly after the birth of Lyon and Arthur, Max fell seriously ill with what was thought to be pneumonia. His brother Mackenzie escorted him to the Sainte-Agathe Sanitarium north of Montreal for treatment. There it was determined that Max was suffering from advanced tuberculosis with little hope of recovery. Mackenzie refused to accept the prognosis and paid all the expenses for Max and his family to go to Denver, Colorado where he could be treated at the Agnes Sanitarium. Upon his recovery, Max and May decided to stay in Denver. However, within two years Max fell ill again, this time with a debilitating muscular disease that left him paralyzed. Mackenzie, then Prime Minister, visited Max in January 1922 two months before Max died in March. Lyon and Arthur were nine years old at the time. Of Max's death Mackenzie wrote in his diary "It has been a terrible business, but he has set a noble & brave example.... I shall miss Max greatly."

May and the boys remained in Denver where May taught piano lessons and the boys attended school graduating from East Denver High School in 1931.

Lyon returned to Canada in the fall of 1931 and enrolled in Medicine at the University of Toronto on a scholarship. Over the course of six years, he was awarded two more scholarships covering his second and third years, and he won a medal in recognition of his academic achievement in pathology in his fourth year (1934). That same year he also passed the examinations qualifying him as a Junior Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons (Canada). In 1937 he graduated with a Doctor of Medicine degree (MD) and was again recognized for his academic achievements with the Faculty Medal.

In addition to his academic success, Lyon was a member of the Canadian Officer Training Corps from 1 October 1934 until 10 June 1937 attaining the rank of Lieutenant. Upon receiving his MD, he transferred to the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. While an undergraduate he also held executive positions in fraternities and student organizations and played competitive rugby, golf, and tennis.

In 1938 Lyon was awarded a four-year fellowship in surgery and medicine at the prestigious Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota returning to Toronto briefly to marry Margery Little Rean in 1939. They had met at university where Margery earned a Master of Arts in psychology. After the marriage, they returned to Rochester where Margery gave birth to William Lyon Mackenzie King III in 1940. Upon completion of the fellowship, the family returned to Toronto where Lyon became the resident surgeon at St. Michael's Hospital and Margery gave birth to Katherine Elizabeth in 1942.

On 12 March 1942, Lyon wrote a letter to Surgeon Captain A. McCallum, Medical Director General, at Naval Headquarters, Ottawa inquiring about serving in the Naval Volunteer Reserve. That letter was followed up by another letter dated 4 April to Surgeon Captain McCallum written by Dr. Gallie, Dean of Medicine at the University of Toronto which recommended Lyon's recruitment and pointed out that Lyon had received a master's degree in Surgery from the Mayo Clinic and had recently become a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons (Canada). Why Lyon was desirous to serve in the Navy rather than continue in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps is not clear. On 7 April 1942 Surgeon Captain McCallum wrote a response in which he outlined the pay, training, and working conditions Lyon could expect; he also reassured Lyon that he met all the requirements necessary and referred him to the Toronto Division (HMCS *York*) Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR).

Surgeon Lieutenant Pay Per Diem	
Pay	\$7.50
Living Allowance	2.35
Marriage Allowance	1.00
Dependence Allowance (Maximum 2 Children @ . \$25)	.50
Hard Lying Allowance*	.43
Total Per Diem	\$11.78
*Compensation for living conditions in ships Source: Library and Archives Canada Service Record	

On 30 June 1942 Lyon was sworn in at HMCS *York* with the rank of Surgeon Lieutenant. He was 29 years old, married with a two-year-old son and a newborn daughter. He was 5 feet 10¼ Inches tall and weighed 165 pounds with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion.

The next day, 1 July 1942, Lyon was on his way to HMCS *Stadacona*, the large naval base in Halifax where he was employed at RCN Hospital (RCNH). Margery followed with the children and found a house in Bedford, Nova Scotia – immediately north of Halifax. Since there were no medical specialties recognized by the Navy among its medical officers, Lyon performed general duties for the most part although he certainly would have been given the lead in surgical cases. On 5 October Lyon was loaded on a course at HMCS *Cornwallis*, a training base then also in

Halifax, which covered what Surgeon Captain McCallum described in his letter of 4 April as “*the routine procedure of the Navy which involves discipline, documentation and all the traditional sidelights of the Naval Service.*” Following the course, Lyon returned to RCNH and continued his duties there until 7 June 1943 when he was appointed Medical Officer in HMCS *St. Croix* (I-81).

HMCS *St. Croix* was a Clemson class 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 *Destroyed for Bases Agreement* between the United Kingdom and the United States. Subsequently, she was transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy and re-commissioned in Halifax on 24 September 1940 as HMCS *St. Croix* – named after the river that marks New Brunswick and Maine border.

HMCS *St. Croix* had an eventful career. Before Surgeon Lieutenant King joined *St. Croix* in early June 1943, the ship had been heavily damaged in a hurricane in 1940, she had escorted 33 North Atlantic convoys, and she was credited with sinking two U-boats: U-90 in July 1942 and U-87 in March 1943 (credit shared with HMCS *Shediac*).

Lyon joined *St. Croix* in August following leave. During his first voyage, *St. Croix* sailed from St. John's, Newfoundland, and escorted a convoy from Halifax destined for Londonderry between 5-11 August. The voyage was uneventful.

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 the ship. Then, 53 minutes later, at 2244, she was struck by a third torpedo fired by U-305 and sunk within 6 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*. 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.

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

"After the torpedo had struck the injured boys were brought to midships and he bandaged all the boys as quickly as possible and had them removed from the ship and was onboard when the third torpedo struck and he was lost on the ST. CROIX."

Lyon, like the other 146 members of *St. Croix's* ship's company, has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 9, and in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 177, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa. He is also memorialized in the King family plot in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Toronto, which includes the graves of nine members of the King family including the Prime Minister.

For his service, Surgeon Lieutenant William Lyon Mackenzie King was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. May Macdougall King, and his wife, Margery Rean King, were both awarded the Memorial Cross.

Postscript:

On 2 June 1943 Lyon again wrote Surgeon Captain McCallum to follow up on a discussion he had had with the Captain about the possibility of Lyon filling a residency in advanced neurosurgery at the Toronto General Hospital supervised by a preeminent neurosurgeon and open to an armed forces medical officer. On 16 September 1943, just four days before Lyon was killed, Dr. Gallis wrote a second letter to Surgeon Captain McCallum advising the Captain that the residency was available on 1 January 1944 for Lyon.

Prepared By:

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Sources:

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