

## Leading Seaman Mike Laak V-13193



Leading Seaman Mike Laak. Photo: For Posterity Sake website

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Calgary AB, 19 February 1916**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Half-Company RCNVR, 14 July 1934**
- **Civilian Occupation: Labourer and Seaman with Canadian Pacific Railway**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Margaree* was rammed during convoy operations on 22 October 1940**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 7; the HMCS *Tecumseh* memorial plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta plaque; and the Calgary Field of Crosses**

Mike Laak was born on 19 February 1916 in Calgary, AB. His parents were Charly (Jacob) Laak and Annie Laak (nee Solonyinka). His father was Russian, and his mother was Ukrainian. He had four siblings: John (born 1914), Annie (born 1915), George (born 1921), and Rose (born 1923). His brother George was also in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR). Mike's father, Charly, died when Mike was young. The family was Roman Catholic, and in 1934 they resided at 620 6th Ave SW, Calgary.

Mike attended St. Angela School in the Bridgeland neighbourhood up to Grade 8. Following that, he was employed as a labourer, sometimes with the Canadian Pacific Railway. Given that he was part of a family that included five children and a widowed mother during the Depression, there is little wonder that he was not able to obtain a more complete education.

Mike enrolled in the RCNVR as an Ordinary Seaman at the Calgary Half Company Division RCNVR on 14 July 1934. He was 18 at the time and he enlisted for the standard three-year term. His mother was listed as his next of kin.

Much like the Naval Reserve of today, Mike spent several weeks/months every year under training on the West Coast in Royal Canadian Naval (RCN) ships or schools. Mike was trained in the Seaman Branch of the Navy and over the years he gained proficiency in gunnery, seamanship, ship's husbandry, and watchkeeping positions such as look-out, helmsman, and roundsman.

His training began in 1934 when Ordinary Seaman Laak trained for three weeks at HMCS *Naden*; a RCN training base in Esquimalt, BC. Part of this training took place on HMCS *Armentières*, a naval trawler used as a training ship. His training continued for another three weeks aboard HMCS *Skeena*, a River-class destroyer.

In 1935, he trained for five weeks at HMCS *Naden* and was promoted to Able Seaman on 14 July 1935. In 1936, Able Seaman Laak spent four more weeks training ashore at HMCS *Naden*, receiving Seaman Gunner for his efforts. Later that year, Mike applied to enlist in the regular force of the RCN. Incredibly, the doctor who examined him found him to be unfit for service due to defective vision – his eyesight was 20/40. This did not seem to affect his career or effectiveness with the RCNVR.

In 1937, Able Seaman Laak was back at sea. He trained in HMCS *Skeena* for two months and was then transferred to HMCS *Fraser*, another River-class destroyer, for two more months. He also re-enrolled for another three years of service in the RCNVR. He served for four more weeks in 1938 on HMCS *Armentières*, after which he was promoted to Acting Leading Seaman. In 1939 he completed more training at HMCS *Naden* and his promotion to Leading Seaman was confirmed. He also received his first Good Conduct Badge that year. In every evaluation, his character rating was “Very Good” and most of his Efficiency ratings were “Superior”. His final training report in 1939 described Leading Seaman Laak as “A very capable rating” who, in due course, “would be recommended for advancement”.

In 1938 and 1939, Mike was working as a seaman aboard the SS *Princess Victoria*. She was a passenger ship owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway, sailing between Vancouver, Victoria, and Seattle. He no doubt put his RCNVR training to good use.

On 5 September 1939, Leading Seaman Mike Laak was placed on Active Service. Unlike most wartime Navy recruits, Mike already had years of naval training and experience. He was initially sent to HMCS *Naden* for a few weeks and on 11 October 1939 he was drafted to the merchant ship SS *Loch Dee* as a DEMS gunner. DEMS ships were “Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships” that carried naval guns for defence against surfaced U-boats. DEMS gunners signed on as members of the merchant navy crew and wore civilian clothes. This way, if the ship stopped in a neutral port they would be seen as a merchant seaman and not be interned. The Navy paid the DEMS gunners their regular pay, and the merchant ships owners were expected to pay them an additional \$1.05 per week. DEMS gunners were issued special pay books to keep track of the pay they received from the merchant ship owners. About 2,000 Canadians served as DEMS gunners.

Leading Seaman Laak was the in-charge gun layer. He joined SS *Loch Dee* at a Pacific port and sailed to Halifax, NS. SS *Loch Dee* then sailed to England and returned to Halifax. When she docked in Halifax on 23 February 1940, Leading Seaman Laak was posted to HMCS *Stadacona*, the RCN’s major operational and training base in Halifax.

As a historical footnote, SS *Loch Dee* was in a convoy on 28 February 1940 when she collided with MV *Port Fairy* (more on her below). Both ships were damaged and had to return to Halifax for repairs.

After a couple of weeks ashore at HMCS *Stadacona*, Leading Seaman Laak was loaned to HMCS *Arras*, a naval trawler that was assigned as Gate Vessel 15. Gate vessels were used to open and close the anti-submarine netting that closed-off Halifax Harbour to enemy submarines. His service on HMCS *Arras* continued until 10 July 1940 when he was transferred back to HMCS *Stadacona*. He remained ashore for a month and was then posted to HMCS *Margaree*, which was in London, England undergoing a refit.

Mike travelled to Montreal and crossed the Atlantic on the *Duchess of Richmond*, another Canadian Pacific ship, but this time he travelled as a passenger. They landed at Liverpool on 21 August 1940 and Leading Seaman Laak then travelled to London to join his new ship.

HMCS *Margaree* started life as HMS *Diana*, a Royal Navy Daring-class destroyer. She was acquired by the RCN to replace HMCS *Fraser*, which was lost earlier that year following a collision. Many of HMCS *Margaree's* crew were survivors of the HMCS *Fraser* disaster.



HMCS Margaree (former HMS Diana).  
Photo Credit: For Posterity's Sake website

HMCS *Margaree* was commissioned on 6 September 1940 and completed her refit on 10 October 1940 and underwent a short work-up cruise. She then docked in Londonderry, Northern Ireland.

On 20 October 1940, *Margaree* joined Convoy OL8 as the sole escort. This was a small five-ship convoy. On the night of 21/22 October 1940, she was steaming ahead of the convoy in poor

visibility. Before he went off watch, the First Lieutenant ordered a slight reduction in speed to allow the convoy to gradually move up closer in restricted visibility.

The MV *Port Fairy* was the lead ship in the convoy's port side column. At 0100, the chief officer on the *Port Fairy* noticed a warship – HMCS *Margaree* – off the starboard bow. The warship veered to port, crossing *Port Fairy's* bow. *Port Fairy* rammed *Margaree* just aft of *Margaree's* bridge. The forward section of the destroyer was completely sheared off. This section included the forward guns, the bridge, and the seamen's mess, where most of the off-watch crew were sleeping in their hammocks. The cut-off forward section capsized and sank immediately and no one survived. One hundred and forty-two Canadian sailors were lost, including Leading Seaman Laak. Leading Seaman Mike Laak was 24 years old when he died.

A Board of Inquiry was held, however, with the loss of the bridge watch, the Board was unable to determine the exact cause of the collision.

For his service, Leading Seaman Mike Laak was awarded: the 1939-1945 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Annie, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Leading Seaman Mike Laak is commemorated on Panel 7 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; on the HMCS *Tecumseh* memorial plaque; on the Naval Museum of Alberta plaque; in the Calgary Field of Crosses; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 15 at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

#### Prepared By:

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#### Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission – Profile for Mike Laak

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- Library and Archives Canada Service via Ancestry.com for RCNVR service records and cross-border sailings on SS *Princess Victoria*
- Ancestry.com for family information
- For Posterity Sake website
- Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 15 at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial website
- Naval History Net website
- Uboat.net naval history website
- Peel's Henderson Directories
- The Canadian Naval Chronicle 1939-1945
- Wikipedia for SS *Princess Victoria*