

Engine Room Artificer Robert Alexander Lang V-976



R. A. LANG
Sault Ste. Marie
Missing

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Sault Ste Marie ON, 12 February 1919**
- **Enlisted: HMCS Carleton, 3 March 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Machinist, Northern Foundry and Machine Company**
- **Death: while serving in HMCS Alberni on 21 August 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12, Sault Cenotaph, Sault Ste Marie Sea Cadet plaque, St Andrews United Church**

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csvc.csmc@gmail.com

Alexander and Anna Lang were both born in Ontario and were of Scottish descent. They gave birth to their only son, Robert Alexander Lang on February 12, 1919, in the family residence at 516 Bay Street, Sault Ste. Marie. He had three older sisters: Ernestine, Alexandra, and Kathleen. Early on in his life he exhibited sea going interests, participating in the Navy League for one year followed by four years with the Sea Cadets.



Plaque dedicated to former
Sea Cadets from the Soo who
died in WW2.

Robert completed his Senior matriculation at Sault Collegiate High School in 1936, and then did a machinist apprenticeship before obtaining full time employment as a machinist at the Northern Foundry and Machine Company in 1937. This company was located on the waterfront and repaired cargo ships operating on the Great Lakes. Today the company is known as the Soo Foundry. Robert was single and living at the family residence at 516 Bay Street, Sault Ste. Marie until his enlistment.

In July 1940, Robert enlisted in the Army Reserves with the Sault Ste Marie & Sudbury Regiment (MG). He continued this part-time Army training and his work as a machinist until the Navy offered him a position as an Engine Room Artificer (ERA) in early 1942. Robert accepted the offer and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve at HMCS *Carleton* in Ottawa on March 3, 1942. He was 23 years old at enlistment, 5'9" tall, weighed 140 lbs, had light brown hair, blue eyes, and a medium complexion.

Engine Room Artificer 4th Class Lang had completed Basic Training with the Army Reserves and was therefore posted immediately to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, BC for ERA training. His background as a machinist was perfectly suited for his new trade operating and maintaining the engine room and boilers of steam powered warships. On completion of his training, Engine Room Artificer 4th Class Lang was sent across the country to HMCS *Stadacona*, (now known as the naval portion of Canadian Forces Base Halifax). From there, he joined HMCS *Alberni*, a Flower-Class Corvette, September 26, 1942, while she was undergoing a refit in Liverpool, NS. This was his first (and only) sea-going ship, and he remained part of her crew until his death in August 1944.



HMCS Alberni moored alongside other corvettes, Imperial War Museum, licensed CC BY-SA

After the refit, *Alberni* was tasked to the UK as part of Operation *Torch* which was the Allied Invasion of North Africa. From October until February 1943, she escorted convoys between Gibraltar and the UK. Robert was part of several heroic efforts including the rescue of 12 survivors from the torpedoed American tanker *Gurney E. Newlin* and the rescue of 81 survivors from the torpedoed British whaling ship *Sourabaya* in October 1942. For service in this theatre, he was awarded the Africa Star.



The Sault Ste Marie Cenotaph Nov 2021
Photo Credit: Graham Elder

During the following year, *Alberni* was deployed to the Western Local Escort Force and then the Quebec force before going into refit in November 1943. After work-ups in Bermuda in April 1944, *Alberni* was one of 17 Royal Canadian Navy ships assigned to *Operation Neptune* which was the naval portion of the Normandy D-Day landings. In June and July of 1944, *Alberni* escorted merchant ships (between Southampton and the Beaches), as well as landing craft, floating piers (for Mulberry harbour), tugs and barges. On July 26, 1944, Robert witnessed his ship shoot down a German aircraft (Junkers Ju 88) that reportedly struck the water approximately 100 yards from the ship.

After 15 Convoys and 696 days of service in HMCS *Alberni*, Robert's time came to an end. On August 21, 1944, while performing an anti-submarine patrol east of the D-day landing site in the English Channel, *Alberni* was struck on her port side by a torpedo fired from a German U-480 submarine. She sank in less than a minute, taking 59 sailors to a watery grave, including Engine



Room Artificer 4th Class Lang. Robert was 23 years old when he was determined missing and presumed dead. His body was not recovered.

For his service, Engine Room Artificer Robert Alexander Lang was awarded: 1939-45 Star, Atlantic Star and Clasp, Africa Star, and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp War Medal. His mother, Ann Lang was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Engine Room Artificer Robert Alexander Lang is commemorated on Panel 12 of the Halifax Memorial, as well as on the Honour Roll at St. Andrew's United Church in Sault Ste. Marie and on a plaque dedicated to former Sea Cadets from the Soo. He is also

remembered on the Western face of the Sault Ste. Marie Cenotaph located in front of the Courthouse at 426 Queen Street East, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The inscription on the Cenotaph was written by poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling. It reads:

From little towns, in afar land, we came,
To save our honour and a world aflame;
By little towns, in a far land, we sleep,
And trust those things we won

Prepared By:

Residents of Sault Ste Marie, Andrea Reibmayr & Dr. Graham Elder (Master Seaman (ret'd) - Canadian Naval Reserves) & Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Researcher



Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – Robert Alexander Lang
- Library and Archives Canada - Service file for Robert Alexander Lang
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMCS_Alberni
- <https://www.alberniproject.org/Museum.html>
- Canada Virtual War Memorial- Retrieved 19 Dec 2021 from <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/2639828?Robert%20Alexander%20Lang>
- Sault Ste.Marie Public Library (Bentley Ahonen)
- Personal communication, Rev. Phil Miller, Canadian Royal Canadian Legion Branch 25

- Personal communication, Karen Cozette
- Discussion Kim Kubeck/Robert Pihlaja, RCSCC Royal Sovereign, 19 Dec 2021
- HMCS Alberni Convoys. Retrieved on 19 Dec 2021 from <http://www.convoyweb.org.uk/hague/index.html>

Post Script: Given the importance of the Soo Locks, the town of Sault Ste Marie found itself “militarized” during WW2. The locks needed to be defended at all costs since 90% of the USA iron ore shipments destined for factories on the East Coast, and millions of tons of Canada’s grain shipment destined to feed Allied troops on the Western Front, passed through these locks. The Soo locks were defended from land, sea and air by men and equipment. One of the most obvious defences was the barrage balloon. These large balloons were anchored to the ground by steel cables and were the first line of defence against dive bombers. These balloons appeared in the Spring of 1942, seemingly overnight and much to the surprise of the local residents. Some of the anchors are still embedded in the ground today and have been known to destroy the occasional lawn mower blade.



Military History of the Upper Great Lakes: The Soo Locks in WWII.
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