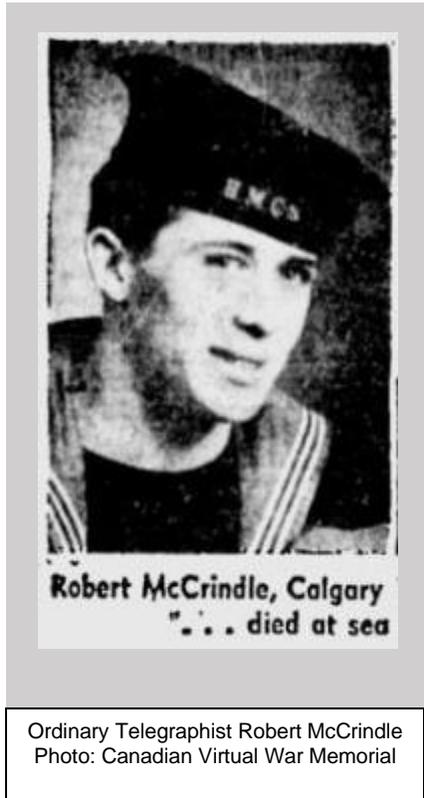


Ordinary Telegraphist Robert Reynolds McCrindle 3692



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, then Royal Canadian Navy**
- **Born: Warner AB, 24 February 1921**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 19 September 1939**
- **Civilian Occupation: Student**
- **Death: Lost at sea when SS *Nerissa* was torpedoed and sunk on 30 April 1941**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 5; the HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; the Calgary Field of Crosses; and the Western Canada High School Memorial**

Robert Reynolds McCrindle was born in the small southern Alberta town of Warner. His father was Robert S. McCrindle, who was of Scottish heritage. His mother was Ada Elizabeth Reynolds. He had a younger sister Isabella Margaret McCrindle who was later Mrs. Isabella Field. There is no record of his father after his wedding to Ada. He may have left the family. It appears Robert and his sister grew up in Calgary with his mother and the Reynolds' grandmother. Records indicate that his mother was seriously ill for much of his youth. Her obituary says that she died after a lengthy illness in 1940, not long after Robert enlisted.

For a time, Robert, and perhaps his sister too, lived at the Wood's Christian Homes Orphanage in the Calgary area.* Of note, by 1944 Wood's Orphanage had 19 motherless children living there who had fathers serving overseas in the Army, Navy, or Air Force (*Calgary Herald* 20 March 1944). However, in Robert's case, it appears he was living with his mother and his grandmother for his high school years at Western Canada High School. He completed Grade 11 before enlisting in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR). The Navy was not Robert's first experience with the military; in January 1938 he joined the 13th District Signals (RCCS) Militia unit that trained at the Sarcee Army base near Calgary. This may have afforded him a small income to help support his family while also attending high school.

Robert enlisted in the RCNVR at the Calgary Division (later known as HMCS *Tecumseh*) on 19 September 1939 as an Ordinary Telegraphist (O Tel). Enlistment documents describe him as 5' 7 ½" tall, having black hair, hazel-coloured eyes, and a fresh complexion. He stated that he was a member of the Church of England. He also stated that his nearest relative to be notified in the event of his death or injury was his sister, who by then was living at the Sacred Heart Roman

Catholic Convent. Lieutenant Reginald Jackson was the Commanding Officer in Calgary who signed the enlistment papers. Jackson went on to a distinguished career as a wartime ship's captain and was known as Cowboy Jackson.**

Robert's enrolment was shortly after Canada's declaration of war, and O Tel Reynolds was immediately sent to HMCS *Naden*, the training base in Esquimalt, BC. There, telegraphists learned Morse Code and communications procedures. He completed his training and was rated as being of "Good Character" and "Superior Efficiency". It was while in *Naden* that he transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) on 6 May 1940.



In March 1941, O Tel McCrindle was sent to HMCS *Stadacona*, the major naval base in Halifax, NS. There, he awaited transport to England where he would join HMCS *Niobe*, the RCN manning depot. On 20 April 1941, O Tel McCrindle embarked on the troop ship *SS Nerissa* bound for England. The ship's complement was 290 passengers and crew.

The *Nerissa* was launched in the 1920s as a cruise ship for passage between the United Kingdom and North America. On the declaration of war,

Nerissa was converted to a troop ship. She had completed 39 transatlantic wartime crossings by the time O Tel McCrindle embarked. It is noteworthy that *Nerissa* was one of the ships that transported British children being evacuated to safety in Canada.

While most ships were formed up into convoys for the Atlantic crossings, cruise ships were thought to be safer by proceeding independently. This was because a convoy typically proceeded at 10 knots (18.5 km/hr), whereas a cruise ship like *Nerissa*, would travel at 15 knots or more (28 km/hr) and could outrun a U-boat submarine.

Nerissa had a narrow escape on her penultimate crossing. She had inadvertently caught up to a convoy and came under attack with torpedoes passing down both her port and starboard sides. *Nerissa* was judged to be a "lucky ship" as she escaped unharmed.

O Tel McCrindle boarded *Nerissa* in Halifax, then:

"For 7 days Nerissa ploughed her way eastward, the almost idyllic time broken only by daily lifeboat drill and the occasional "stand to" for the gun crews. On 30 April '41 she entered the patrol area of Royal Navy Coastal Command aircraft whose duty was to ensure that lurking submarines were located, reported and dealt with.

As darkness descended a Hudson patrol aircraft flew over and signalled by Aldis lamp that the area was clear of U-boats. At 11:30 pm the first torpedo struck amidships. Immediately the ship began to settle and the passengers calmly donned life jackets and went to their assigned lifeboat stations as though taking

part in a drill. Boats were filled and in the process of being lowered when catastrophe struck. A tremendous explosion ripped the foundering ship in two, splintering the partially lowered boats and sending a geyser of wreckage and water hundreds of feet into the air. The U-boat to ensure the completeness of its kill had fired an additional two torpedoes which struck and exploded simultaneously. Within 4 minutes of the first strike Nerissa was gone. In the brief interval between the first torpedo and oblivion, the ship's telegrapher was able to send an S.O.S. and the position of 10° 08' W, 55° 57' N (which is about 100 miles North East of Ireland).

The survivors spent a harrowing night in the near freezing Atlantic and were first hand witnesses to the effects of shock and hypothermia as man after man slipped beneath the surface. At first light a British Blenheim aircraft appeared and circled the flotsam of the sunken transport ship and at 7:50 a.m. two British destroyers appeared on the scene, H.M.S. Veteran and H.M.S. Hunter. While Hunter circled the area Veteran proceeded to pick up survivors. The 84 men who had survived the sinking and the night in the frigid waters were sped the 200 miles to Londonderry, Ireland, where they were distributed among several hospitals to ensure immediate and maximum care.

The NERISSA was the only troopship to lose Canadian troops en route to England in WW2. "Lucky Nerissa" had gone to her nautical Valhalla taking with her 83 Canadian servicemen, (including 13 Navy Telegraphists), virtually an entire graduating class of R.A.F. British Commonwealth Air Training Program pilots, 3 pilots of the Royal Norwegian Air Force, 11 American ferry pilots and 43 members of auxiliary organizations artillerymen, civilians and crew." (SS Nerissa website)

O Tel Robert McCrindle's body was not recovered. Due to wartime censorship, news of the sinking of SS *Nerissa* was kept from the public so that the loss would not be revealed to the enemy and morale / public confidence related to the war effort would not be damaged. McCrindle's sister wrote to authorities seeking answers, but official replies would only confirm his loss at sea with vague details. The newspaper account of his loss was equally vague. Ordinary Telegraphist Robert McCrindle was 20 years old when he died.

For his service, Ordinary Telegraphist Robert Reynolds McCrindle was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His sister, Isabella was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Ordinary Telegraphist Robert McCrindle is commemorated on Panel 5 of the Halifax Memorial, at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; the Calgary Field of Crosses; the Western Canada High School Memorial; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 37 at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

Prepared By:

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* The author's Great Uncle Dave Robertson was Business Manager at Wood's Christian Homes Orphanage and would have known Robert McCrindle.



** The author personally knew Captain Jackson while serving as a Junior Officer in HMCS *Tecumseh*. Captain Jackson was long retired but was a most welcome visitor in *Tecumseh*.

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