

Wren Messwoman Mary Rech W-3431



Wren Messwoman Mary Rech. Photo
Credit: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service**
- **Born: Carbondale AB, 26 October 1924**
- **Enlisted: Edmonton Division later known as HMCS *Nonsuch*, 3 July 1943**
- **Civilian Occupation: Housework, Mrs. Prior and Mrs. Carter, Edmonton**
- **Death: Accidental drowning while serving in HMCS *Protector II* on 24 July 1944**
- **Buried: Edmonton (Beechmount) Cemetery, Block 206. Grave 11**
- **Commemorated: HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial Plaque; and Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque**

Mary Rech was born on 26 October 1924 in Carbondale, AB. She was the daughter of Charles and Pearl Rich. Although her family name was "Rich", Mary chose to use the surname "Rech". There was nothing found in the historical record to explain the change of name.

Charles (Chas) Rich immigrated to Canada from Germany and was naturalized in 1900. Perlina (Pearl) Smith's parents also immigrated from Germany at the turn of the 20th Century and Pearl was born in Namao, AB. Pearl's father worked as a miner. Charles Rich and Pearl Smith were married in Morinville, AB in 1911; Charles was 27 years her senior. Charles Rich also made his living as a miner and Pearl Rich was a homemaker.

During this period, Edmonton was a small city that was the capital of Alberta and home to the province's only university. Rich oil deposits had yet to be discovered in nearby Leduc. Edmonton was a major railway hub and centre for local agriculture, including the meat packing industry. It was also the jumping-off point for bush pilot flights into the North. The Declaration of War resulted in a significant uptick in economic activity in Edmonton and the surrounding area. New projects included the construction and support to the nearby Commonwealth Air Training Plan Centre and the construction of the Alaskan Highway and Conol pipeline.

Charles and Pearl Rich had a large family and Mary had 10 siblings: Eight brothers (William, George, Charles, Frank, Thomas, Jack, Harold, and Gordon), and two sisters (Rosie and Helen). The Rich family were members of the Beulah Christian Alliance Church and resided at 9360 - 103A Avenue, Edmonton. Mary left school at the age of 15, after partially completing Grade 7. She was employed by Mrs. Prior and Mrs. Carter for housekeeping duties but appears not to have learned how to cook.

At the age of 18, Mary was recruited into the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) at the Edmonton Division, later known as HMCS *Nonsuch*, on 3 July 1943. Her enlistment, initial administration, and medical were completed at the Edmonton Division. She was accepted despite having only completed Grade 6. Enlistment documents described Mary as 5' 1¼" tall, weighed 110lbs, had light brown hair, brown eyes, and a medium complexion. She had a scar on the back of her right hand and had a small birthmark on the left side of her chest. The medical officer identified a "mitral-systolic murmur", a condition that did not prevent her from serving in the Navy. Mary believed that her previous work experience qualified her for work as a cook or steward. The interviewer described her as pleasant, willing, and keen to be trained as a cook. Mary Rech enlisted as a Probationary Wren and was posted to HMCS *Conestoga* in Galt, ON, where she commenced basic and occupational training on 9 August 1943. She was promoted to Wren on 11 September 1943 and subsequently qualified for "General Duties" on 7 October 1943. Wren Messwoman Rech was deployed to HMCS *Protector II* on 2 November 1943 at Sydney, NS.

The WRCNS was established for the duration of the hostilities and was separate from the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve. Its objective was to enlist women to assume important non-combat roles to free up men for the fighting. WRCNS recruiters selected women between the ages of 18 and 45, typically with a minimum Grade 8 education. New recruits completed three weeks of training at HMCS *Conestoga* before being deployed to a naval base. HMCS *Conestoga* was a "stone frigate" in Galt that served as the basic training establishment for the WRCNS. Basic training included physical training, personal hygiene, etiquette, drill, naval customs, protocol, and traditions; and was designed to enable a rapid transition from civilian to military life. The WRCNS made a significant contribution to Canada's war effort. Wrens did the same work as men but did not serve on warships at sea. In 1943, Wrens received only four-fifths of the salary of a man in the same position, but they were paid better than both their civilian and British Women's Royal Naval Service counterparts. By 1945, more than 6,500 women had enlisted, and 39 trades had been opened to women.

Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) base HMCS *Protector*, also known as the Point Edward Naval Base, was located next to Sydney Harbour, on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island. It was established on 22 July 1940 and used by the RCN during the Second World War. It was mainly used to provision, protect, and repair the various merchant convoys to Quebec, Halifax, and the United Kingdom. HMCS *Protector* was initially stationed on the Sydney waterfront and used commercial wharves and buildings along Esplanade Street, where the present armouries and marine terminal are located. On 15 March 1943, a new custom-built shore facility and extensive piers were opened at Point Edward, on the opposite western shore of the harbour, and was named HMCS *Protector II*, while the original was then renamed HMCS *Protector I*.

Wren Messwoman Rech's Divisional Officer at HMCS *Protector II* rated her character as "Very Good" and her efficiency was assessed as "Satisfactory". During this period, three of Mary's brothers were fighting overseas in Italy. William, George, and Thomas had enlisted as Privates in the Edmonton Fusiliers and subsequently transferred to the Loyal Edmonton Regiment (RCIC). Wren Rech experienced a personal tragedy shortly after arriving in Sydney when she learned that her brother Thomas had been wounded, and both William and George had been killed (Private William Rich, Date of Death: 2 November 1943; and Private George Rich, Date of Death: 22 December 1943). George and William are both buried in the Moro River Canadian War Cemetery in Italy.

Wren Messwoman Mary Rech's service also came to a tragic end, when she accidentally drowned while on shore leave from HMCS *Protector II*. On 24 July 1944, she joined a party of shipmates headed to a local quarry to swim. Three Seamen and six Wrens walked approximately 1.5 miles

to the abandoned quarry at Point Edward, which was often used for recreational swimming. An RCMP report provided details of the accident. Eyewitnesses reported that Mary and two of her friends, Wren Imelda Stever (W-3419, HMCS *York*) and Wren Lillian Penteliuk (W-3792), ran ahead of the rest of the party, excited to arrive at the quarry. Wren Lillian Penteliuk reported that the three friends walked into the water together “holding hands” when Wren Stever “fell into a hole”.

The investigator concluded that the women were unfamiliar with the structure of the quarry and unaware that the gradual slope would abruptly drop off to a depth of 60 feet. None of the women was able to swim and the remainder of the party was approximately 15 minutes behind them. Only Wren Penteliuk survived the accident. Wren Stever was pulled from the water but could not be resuscitated. Their shipmates were initially unaware that Wren Rech was also in the water and had disappeared below the surface. Her body was recovered the following day by Navy divers from the Boom Defence Depot and finally returned to HMCS *Nonsuch* for service burial. She died wearing a ring with a Navy crest. Wren Messwoman Mary Rech and her friend Wren Imelda Stever were both 19 years old when they died.

An enquiry concluded that Wren Messwoman Rech’s death



Wren Rech’s grave marker.

was incurred during service in Canada, but did not arise out of, nor was it, directly connected with military service. It is hard to imagine the impact this tragedy had on the Rich family. Mary’s brothers George and William had been killed in late 1943, and three other brothers were serving (Thomas and Frank overseas and Harold at Camrose), at the time of Mary’s death.

For her service, Wren Messwoman Mary Rech was awarded: the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. The Canadian Memorial Cross was awarded to her mother, Pearl Rich



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Newspaper article (unknown) of Mary’s three brothers who were killed or wounded in action. Photo credit: Canadian Virtual War Memorial.

Wren Messwoman Rech was buried on 3 August 1943 in Edmonton's Beechmount Cemetery (Block 206, Grave 11). The inscription on her grave reads:

We loved her much

We love her still

But she has gone

To the great beyond

Wren Messwoman Mary Rech is commemorated on the HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial Plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta Plaque; and in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 424, Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

Postscript: This is the experience of many Canadian families that we think of when we parade every Remembrance Day. Mary's mother Pearl Rich was named the 1968 National Memorial Silver Cross Mother and on Remembrance Day she laid a wreath at the National War Memorial on behalf of all mothers who have lost a child in military service. A photograph in the *Ottawa Citizen* shows her at the National War Memorial, flanked by Governor General Roland Michener and Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. Pearl Rich died two years later on 22 October 1970, aged 74, and is buried in Vancouver, BC. Her grave is marked by a simple headstone embellished with maple leaves.



Photo Credit: Ottawa Citizen, 12 November 1968

Prepared By:

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Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – Mary Rech
- Library and Archives Canada – Service file for Wren Mary Rech
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial – Photos of Mary Rech; Mary Rech's 3 brothers; Pearl Rech (1968 Silver Cross Mother); certificate and *Ottawa Citizen* photo.
- <http://www.ancestrylibrary.com> (Rich family records)
- <http://www.veterans.gc.ca> (National Inventory Canadian Memorials Database)
- <https://www.findagrave.com> (Wren Mary Rech, headstone)
- Census of Canada (1911 and 1921)
- Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta (1906)
- *Ottawa Citizen* Nov 12, 1968
- *The Edmonton Journal* July 27, 1944
- *The Lethbridge Herald* July 28, 1945
- <http://www.forposterityssake.ca> (HMCS *Protector*, HMCS *Conestoga*)
- <http://www.forposterityssake.ca> (The Development of the WRCNS and their Role in Communications and Intelligence; Julie Anne Redstone-Lewis)
- <https://navalandmilitarymuseum.org> ("Wrens Lost in Service"; Chris Perry, Command Historian, Royal Canadian Navy)
- <http://www.journal-forces.ca> ("Serving their Country: The Story of the Wrens, 1942-1946"; Emilie Anne Plows)



GALT WREN MEMORIAL

Galt, Ontario

This memorial is dedicated to the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. It was erected in 1972.

(Upper Plaque)

TO HONOUR THE WOMEN'S
ROYAL CANADIAN NAVAL SERVICE
AND TO EXPRESS THANKS TO THE
CITY OF GALT, WHERE THEY
RECEIVED THEIR BASIC TRAINING
1942-1946

(Lower Plaque)

Canadian Naval Centennial Rose
AC NAVY LADY

Sponsored by the Wren Associations in
Canada

In recognition of the 100th Anniversary of the
Canadian Navy

A TRIBUTE TO OUR SHIPMATES
ALL THE GALLANT MEN AND WOMEN
WHO SERVED AT SEA AND ASHORE IN
THE CANADIAN NAVY
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

May 16, 2010

*As Wrens did not serve at sea, there are few
'ship memorials' that identify by name, Wrens
who lost their lives in the service of Canada.
This bronze memorial is a fitting tribute to all
Wrens who trained at HMCS Conestoga, in
Galt, ON.*