

Surgeon Lieutenant William James Winthrope, MiD, O-79230



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Saskatoon SK, 20 February 1912**
- **Enlisted: Toronto Division RCNVR, 4 February 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Physician, University of Toronto**
- **Death: Killed as a result of enemy action at St. Nazaire, France on 28 March 1942**
- **Mention in Despatches**
- **Commemorated: Escoublac-La-Baule War Cemetery, 2. B. 4, Winthrope Lake named in his memory (Lat 54°10' N Long 106° 56' W)**

William James Winthrope, known as Jock, was the second of two children born to Mary Letitia Winthrope and Paul Walker Winthrope on 20 February 1912 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. His sister, Margaret Jean, was born in 1910. His parents were married in Winnipeg, Manitoba in June 1909 and moved to Saskatoon shortly thereafter. There Paul Winthrope established a dental practice. At the time, Saskatoon was booming as a result of the Dominion Government, as it was referred to then, making a concerted effort to recruit immigrants from the United Kingdom and Europe and encourage them to settle on the Prairies.

Jock completed grade 1 at Albert Public School before the family moved to a new three-story brick home in the affluent new neighbourhood of Nutana. He then attended Victoria Public School (grades 2-8), and Nutana Collegiate Institute (grades 9-12). He earned a B.Sc. from the University of Saskatchewan (1932) and an M.D. from the University of Toronto (1936). While at both universities he was a member of the Canadian Officer Training Corps. Upon graduation from medical school, he interned at the Hamilton General Hospital for one year and spent six months in both the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. From 1938 to 1940 he worked as a general practitioner for Noranda Mines in Quebec.

Jock enrolled in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve on 4 February 1941 as a Surgeon Lieutenant at the Toronto Division RCNVR. Immediately prior to enrollment he was an instructor in the Anatomy Department at the University of Toronto. He was 5'9 "and weighed 153 pounds. He was about to turn 29 and was single. He had brown hair and brown eyes. In the University of Saskatchewan student year book the caption with his picture read:

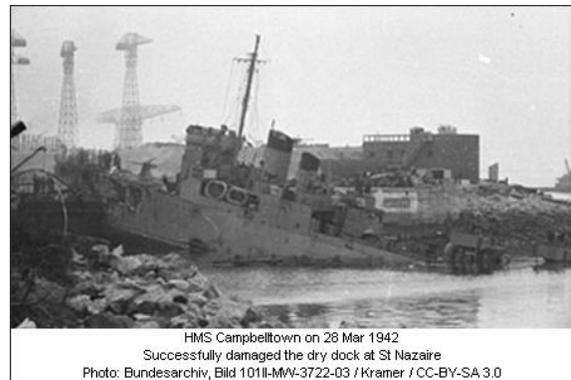
“Jock is a thoroughly fine fellow...he possesses a laugh so singular that it will make his name immortal.”

Jock was immediately posted to HMCS *Naden* for training. In May 1941 he was posted to Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay), Ontario, which had become a training and ship building center, as a Medical Officer. In September, he was posted briefly to HMCS *Stadacona* from where he was loaned to the Royal Navy departing Canada a few weeks later. In October 1941, he was posted to HMS *Campbeltown*.

HMS *Campbeltown* (ex-USS Buchanan) was commissioned into the United States Navy in 1919. She was one of 50 destroyers transferred to the Royal Navy in 1940 in accordance with the Destroyers for Bases Agreement. With Jock as Medical Officer, *Campbeltown* conducted convoy escort duties with the 7th Escort Group between Britain and West Africa until December 1941. In January 1942 she was taken out of service for repairs in Devonport.

In Devonport, *Campbeltown* was selected for a special operation and was withdrawn from regular service to prepare her for use in Operation Chariot, an assault operation on the docks at Saint-Nazaire on the west coast of France. In 1942 the German battleship *Tirpitz*, anchored in a Norwegian fiord, was considered by the Admiralty to present a grave threat to Atlantic shipping. Should *Tirpitz* enter the Atlantic, the huge drydock at Saint-Nazaire would be vital for *Tirpitz*'s operation because it was the only German-held drydock on the European Atlantic coast that was large enough to service the battleship. By pre-emptively putting the drydock out of action, any offensive sortie by *Tirpitz* into the Atlantic would be much more difficult and riskier the Admiralty reasoned.

The plan called for *Campbeltown* to be extensively modified to reduce her draft and change her appearance to mimic a German warship. She was packed with 4.5 tons of explosive in a concealed compartment and her complement was reduced to 75 men. With these modifications she would navigate up the Loire estuary and ram the drydock gates. The explosives were timed to detonate later. Accompanying *Campbeltown* would be 16 Fairmile B motor launches (MLs), one motor torpedo boat (MTB) and one motor gun boat (MGB). A total of 612 seamen and commandos were embarked in the task force. As the gates were rammed the commandos would land and destroy dockyard infrastructure then re-embark in the MLs and withdraw to sea. Two destroyers would escort the task force from Falmouth to the Loire estuary and then stand out to sea. A submarine would be stationed at the mouth of the estuary to operate a beacon from periscope depth.



The task force departed from Falmouth at 1400 on March 26, 1942. *Campbeltown* rammed the dry dock gates 0134, just 4 minutes later than planned, on 28 March. The task force met heavy resistance transiting the estuary and attempting to land and recover the demolition parties. While the operation succeeded in achieving its aim, the cost was enormous. One hundred and five seamen and 64 commandos were killed, 106 seamen and 109 commandos were captured, 223 returned to the UK by sea and 5 evaded capture and returned to the UK via Gibraltar. Only three

Fairmiles B motor launches returned to the UK, one was captured, one had turned back, and the rest were either destroyed by enemy fire or scuttled. Neither the MTB nor the MGB survived.



Remains of an unidentified Motor Launch 28 March 1942.
Credit: Bundesarchiv, Bild 101II-MW-3717-12A / Kramer / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Jock was the only Medical Officer in *Campbeltown*. Upon receiving the order to abandon ship, Jock's evacuated the wounded onto the waiting Fairmile B ML 177. Onboard ML 177, he continued treating his patients as ML 177 made for the open sea until it was hit by gun fire from the shore. On fire and dead in the water, ML 177 was abandoned. In frigid water, Surgeon Lieutenant Winthrope continued to assist the wounded until he succumbed to hypothermia. He was 30 years old.

His body was eventually recovered, and Surgeon-Lieutenant Winthrope was buried in the nearby Escoublac-La-Boule War Cemetery, France, grave reference II-B-4

For his service, Surgeon Lieutenant Winthrope was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the War Medal, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp. He was Mentioned in Despatches posthumously on 24 November 1945, "*For service in raid on St. Nazaire, March 1942.*". Additionally, Winthrope Lake in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory (Lat 54°10' N Long 106° 56' W).

Prepared By:

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Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- Library and Archives Canada Service Record for Surgeon Lieutenant William James Winthrope
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial – Profile page for Surgeon Lieutenant William James Winthrope
- Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial - Profile page for Surgeon Lieutenant William James Winthrope
- The St. Nazaire Society. *Operation Chariot*. Retrieved August 31, 2021, from www.Operation-Chariot.org
- Wikipedia. (22 July 2021), HMS *Campbeltown (I42)*. Retrieved 31 August 2021 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Campbeltown_\(I42\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Campbeltown_(I42))