

## Leading Seaman Gordon Colquhoun Wyckoff V-13349



Leading Seaman Gordon Wyckoff.  
Photo: Calgary Herald 1 Oct 1943

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Regina SK, 8 December 1918**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 17 October 1939**
- **Civilian Occupation: Delivery, Calgary Herald & Crystal Dairies**
- **Death: Died when HMCS *St. Croix* was torpedoed and sank on 20 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 9; Western Canada High School War Memorial; HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; Field of Crosses, Calgary; and Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque**

Gordon Colquhoun Wyckoff was born on 8 December 1918 in Regina, SK. He was the second of three children in the family of Barclay William Wyckoff and Caroline Mae Colquhoun. He had an older sister, Marjorie and a younger brother, David Lyman Wyckoff.

His father Barclay Wyckoff was born in Council Bluffs, Iowa, USA in 1886. He was of Scottish descent and immigrated to Canada in 1909. He was working in Edmonton, AB when he met Caroline Mae Colquhoun. Gordon's mother was born in 1888 in New Annan, NS; she was also of Scottish decent. They were married in Edmonton in 1910. They lived in the Edmonton area for several years and their oldest child, Marjorie, was born there in 1911. The family then relocated to Regina where they resided at 722 17 Ave. According to census documents, Barclay was working as a salesman for a meat packing company. In 1918, Gordon was born, followed by his brother David in 1923. Apparently, it was a Scottish custom at that time to give the oldest son his mother's maiden name as a middle name. The family lived in Regina until 1925 when they relocated to Calgary, where Barclay Wyckoff had found employment with McGavin's Bread Company in the Calgary area.

The family moved into the Cliff Bungalow Community of Calgary at 312 – 22<sup>nd</sup> Ave. W. Gordon attended Cliff Bungalow School for grades 1-6, Rideau Park School for grades 7-9, and finally he completed four years of high school at Western Canada High School. The family also attended the Wesley United Church located at 1315 - 7<sup>th</sup> SW. This area of Calgary was quite prosperous, and the homes were well built. The three schools and Wesley United Church are still standing and being used today. Gordon started delivering the *Calgary Herald* newspaper in his area when he was 14 years old. He worked at this job until 1938 when he started working for Crystal Dairies.

Crystal Dairies was the Ice Cream branch of the Union Milk Company located at 130 – 5th Ave SE, Calgary.

Gordon Wyckoff enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) in Calgary on 17 October 1939. His attestation documents show him to be 5'10" tall, 153 pounds with black hair and brown eyes. His religion was stated to be Presbyterian. He enlisted "for the duration of hostilities." He asked to be trained in Radio Engineering as that had become his hobby. He also stated that that this was the line of work he wished to pursue after his service. He was held on divisional strength at the RCNVR Calgary base until 15 June 1940. During this time, he took basic military, naval training and attended to various appointments at the Calgary RCNVR base (later named HMCS *Tecumseh*).

Gordon was placed on active duty on 15 June 1940 as an Ordinary Seaman, but unlike most recruits he remained at RCNVR Calgary. As his job at Crystal Dairies was not just physical labour but also included some bookkeeping and inventory work, he was a good candidate for the "Quartermasters" job, which consisted of being the main storesman for the base. He was on active duty at this position until 20 January 1941. With the high level of enlistment that was taking place at that time, he was very busy as a quartermaster.

On 21 January 1941, Gordon was drafted to HMCS *Stadacona*, the training base in Halifax, NS. At *Stadacona* he was given training in basic seamanship, and he was also sent to HMC Signal School where he qualified in Radio Detection Finding – the precursor to radar operations. He remained ashore in the Halifax area until 6 November 1941 and was employed at Port War Signal Station Camperdown, HMCS *Venture*, and Duncan's Cove.



Port War Signal Station Camperdown. Circa 1949.  
Photo: <http://www.coastalradio.org.uk>

In early November 1941, now Acting Able Seaman Wyckoff was dispatched to HMCS *Prince Henry*. He served aboard *Prince Henry* for only 21 days. At the time, *Prince Henry* was one of the Newfoundland to Londonderry convoy escorts. For most of these 21 days the ship acted as a depot ship in St. John's harbour. As a depot ship, HMCS *Prince Henry* was used as a supply storage ship and served as accommodation for sailors waiting for their ships to return to harbour or waiting to be deployed elsewhere.

In early December 1941, Gordon was drafted to an active ship: HMCS *Prince David*. Both *Prince David* and *Prince Henry* were Armed Merchant Cruisers that had belonged to the Canadian National Steamship Company before the war. Because of their design they were not very effective warships and were better suited as troop movement or depot ships. After the attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, HMCS *Prince David* was transferred to the west coast and stationed in Esquimalt, BC where she took part in west coast patrols. While serving in *Prince David*, Gordon was rated to Able Seaman on 15 March 1942. He served 175 days aboard HMCS *Prince David* before he was drafted back to Halifax.

In early June 1942, he was once again stationed at HMCS *Stadacona* where he completed additional radar training before his next sea assignment. Because German submarines (U-Boats) could only reach a speed of 9 knots (16 km/hr) when submerged, they were often forced to surface

to be able to catch up to convoys and thus radar and aircraft were increasingly useful in locating U-Boats during the Battle of the Atlantic. On completion of his radar course, Gordon was rated to Leading Seaman.

That same summer Gordon's younger brother David Lyman Wyckoff was also stationed in Halifax, training to be a Signalman.



**RCN ratings manning a four-inch gun aboard HMCS St. Croix at sea.**

**Photo: Library and Archives Canada Photo, MIKAN No. 3567312**

On 8 August 1942 Leading Seaman Wyckoff was drafted to HMCS *St. Croix*. *St. Croix* was a Town-class destroyer and although having been built in 1919 she had done well as a convoy escort ship and had sunk a U-Boat on her last convoy. HMCS *St. Croix* was assigned to the Mid Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) when Gordon joined the crew. These escorts would take large convoys of merchant ships from St. John's, Newfoundland to Londonderry, Ireland and then return to the east coast of Canada with a west bound convoy. The escorts on these convoys were always alert and often involved in U-boat conflicts.

In early 1943, the Allies were starting to gain the upper hand over

the *Kriegsmarine* in the Battle of the Atlantic. This was due to improved escorting tactics, more experienced crews, and the extended range of RAF and RCAF Trident airplanes. In February 1943, HMCS *St. Croix* was reassigned to the United Kingdom to Gibraltar convoys. UK-Gibraltar convoys would leave Londonderry, Ireland or Plymouth, England, and travel across the Bay of Biscay then around the west coasts of Spain and Portugal, through the Strait of Gibraltar and then end in Gibraltar or occasionally in Algeria. While serving on these convoys, HMCS *St. Croix* came to the assistance of HMCS *Shediac* and was credited with another U-Boat sinking. HMCS *St. Croix* served on these convoys until the end of March 1943 when she was again back on MOEF convoy duty.

Although the Allies seemed to be getting the upper hand in the Battle of the Atlantic, the German Navy had upgraded some of its equipment and weapons. One of these upgrades was the acoustic torpedo. GNATs (German Naval Acoustic Torpedoes) were self-propelled and self-guided and had a homing device that zeroed-in on the sound of a ship's propeller.

In the first part of September 1943, HMCS *St. Croix* was taking on supplies in Plymouth, England when she was dispatched to follow the frigate HMS *Itchen* and five other ships to conduct a U-Boat sweep in the Bay of Biscay, and then escort convoy SG9 to Gibraltar. They had just reached the Bay of Biscay when they were redirected to the northwest. A "Wolfpack" of German U-Boats was tracking a slow west-bound convoy. Convoys ON202 and ONS18 had combined for better escort coverage. The escort ships from SG9 came within sight of this large convoy on 19 September 1943 and they engaged with the U-Boats on 20 September. HMCS *St. Croix* was the first ship to be hit. Late in the night of 20 September, *St. Croix* was struck in the stern with an

acoustic torpedo, followed quickly by a second hit. Initially, HMCS *St. Croix* did not sink but the command was given to abandon ship. Less than an hour later a third torpedo struck *St. Croix* and the ship sank within three minutes. Eighty-one crew members survived the sinking. HMS *Itchen* and a corvette HMS *Polyanthus* dropped back to pick up survivors, but HMS *Polyanthus* was also torpedoed and sunk, forcing HMS *Itchen* to abort the rescue attempt. HMS *Itchen* was able to return on 21 September and picked up one survivor from *Polyanthus* and 81 from *St. Croix*. The survivors had been in the water for 13 hours by this time. Unfortunately, in the early hours of 23 September 1943, HMS *Itchen* was also torpedoed and sank. Only three men survived this attack: two from the *Itchen* and one from HMCS *St. Croix*. Four of the sailors lost had enlisted at HMCS *Tecumseh* as had the survivor PO William Fisher of Black Diamond, AB. A total of 146 Canadian sailors from HMCS *St. Croix* were lost. Leading Seaman Gordon Colquhoun Wyckoff was 24 years old when he died.

For his service, Leading Seaman Gordon Colquhoun Wyckoff was posthumously awarded: the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, the 1939-45 Star, and the War Medal. His Mother was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Leading Seaman Wyckoff is commemorated on Panel 9 of the Halifax Memorial, at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the Western Canada High School War Memorial; the HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque, the Field of Crosses in Calgary; the Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 226 at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

Throughout most of October 1943, the lone survivor of HMCS *St. Croix*, Petty Officer Stoker William Fisher, travelled to major cities in Canada speaking at Victory Bond Rallies. Petty Officer Stoker Fisher spoke with great pride of the way his shipmates had conducted themselves after the ship was torpedoed. He said that they stood their posts until the order to abandon ship was given and even then, the priority was to move injured men to where they could be loaded onto the whaler and Carley floats. Morale and order were maintained even after 13 hours in the water.

#### Prepared By:

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#### Sources:

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- Library and Archives Canada – service file for LS Gordon Colquhoun Wyckoff
- *Calgary Herald* Article: Sinking of HMCS *St. Croix*, 1 October 1943, page 1&2
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- *Calgary Herald* Article: Obituary for Barclay Wyckoff: 23 November 1950

- “Deadly Seas: The Duel between HMCS *St. Croix* and U-305” by David Bercuson and Holger Herwig
- Archives.ca: Barclay Wyckoff Family Tree