

BELL, Joseph Griffiths (#V/35750)

Joseph “Joe” Bell, athletic and young, twice risked his life to save others before he was later killed in action in 1943. The death of their only son left a void for parents Joseph and Edith in Sarnia.

He was born in Brantford, Ontario on February 18, 1922, the only child of Navy Lieutenant Joe “Griff” and Edith Laura Bell, who grew up at 144 Davis Street, Sarnia. His parents had been married in Woodstock on September 17, 1917, five years before Joe’s birth and, at some point, the family moved to Sarnia. Joe was a talented young man. He received his education at Brantford, at Sarnia public schools, and at Sarnia Collegiate. As well, he was a member of Central United Church and of the Central Century Club. With the latter, he played softball and basketball, but his athleticism shone at SCITS. At Sarnia Collegiate, he was an outstanding all-round athlete who starred in high school football, in WOSSAA basketball and rugby, and in boxing and wrestling. He was also on the school’s track, shooting and swimming teams, and was a member of the Boy’s Athletic Association at Sarnia Collegiate. His talents weren’t confined to sports. Joe wrote Sarnia Collegiate news for the *Canadian (Sarnia) Observer*. In October 1940, prior to enlisting, Joe became a banker employed with the Canadian Bank of Commerce in the Sarnia and Parkhill branches, as Senior Ledger Keeper. The bank granted him a leave of absence for him to enlist.

The men in the Bell family had much in common. They were, for instance, both eager to do their duty. In an unusual twist, Joe “Griff” Bell would follow his son by joining the navy in August of 1943. The navy was a natural fit for him, for “Griff” had been active in marine affairs for years; for example, at the Sarnia Yacht Club during its early history, his main hobby was building outboards, motorboats and sailboats. His shop was situated in the building known as the *H.M.C.S. Repulse*, the local Sea Cadet headquarters at the corner of Front and Johnston Streets. Like his son, “Griff” Bell was talented. Prior to coming to Sarnia, “Griff” was a member of the Brantford Symphony. In Sarnia, he was a drummer and xylophone soloist with the Lambton Garrison Band and a member of the Devine Street United Church Sunday School orchestra. To join the navy, he was granted leave of absence by the Ontario Hydro Electric Power Commission, where he had been employed for 31 years. “Griff” Bell would be a Lieutenant in the special branch of the Supervising Naval Engineers’ Department, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, stationed at Deep Brook, Nova Scotia.

Prior to joining the navy, Joe Bell had attempted to enlist in the air force, but was unsuccessful. Eager to serve, Joe, age 20, was successful in enlisting in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve on May 4, 1942, in Windsor, Ontario. He stood five feet ten inches tall, had blue eyes and brown hair, and was single. When he enlisted he was residing at his parents’ Davis Street home. Joe’s navy training was rather extensive. It included serving on a number of establishments and ships: the *HMCS Hunter* (Windsor); *HMCS St. Hyacinthe* (Quebec); *HMCS Stadacona* (Halifax); and the *HMCS Avalon* (St. John’s, Nfld.). He was also posted on the Corvette *HMCS Morden (K170)* on the North Atlantic convoy for approximately one month in November-December 1942. Ironically, the *Morden* would later be involved in rescue operations involving the ship on which Joe Bell would lose his life.

Beginning on the opening day of the Second World War, the **Battle of the Atlantic** would be the longest continuous campaign of the war, and one in which Canada played a central role. The Royal Canadian Navy, along with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and Canada’s Merchant Navy, played a vital role in defending the country’s eastern coast and escorting convoys of ships carrying men and essential machinery, arms, fuel and basic resources between North America and Europe.

Joe’s athleticism served him well in two situations that occurred within two months of each other. An article, dated December 14, 1942 in the *Canadian Observer*, provided details about an attack on a merchant ship that occurred on October 22nd. On that date, the German submarine *U-443* had torpedoed the Canadian Pacific Steamships cargo and passenger vessel *Winnipeg II* as it was en route from Liverpool to St. John, New Brunswick. Joe Bell was a member of the gallant crew of the Corvette *HMCS Morden* that rescued the approximately 200 crew members and passengers of the torpedoed merchant ship. Everyone aboard was rescued before the *Winnipeg II* sank--from the crew and the adult passengers to the children, including a 7-month-old baby. Though the *Morden* had living quarters for only 60 persons, the crew somehow managed to find space for the 200 survivors before it docked in St. John’s Atlantic port. Later, on December 12 when he was stationed in Newfoundland, Joe suffered second-degree burns when he helped rescue several people from a disastrous fire that swept the Knights of Columbus Hostel in St. John’s.

Though Joe’s parents in Sarnia were pleased to learn that their son participated in the rescue, they were still

worried. They had been reading the dispatches from St. John's, Newfoundland that described the ravaging fire that had destroyed the K. of C. hostel. Reportedly, a large number of service men had lost their lives. Mr. and Mrs. Bell in Sarnia anxiously awaited further news about their son Joe, fervently hoping that their son's ship had not been docked in St. John's. Only days after the fire, Joe's mother Edith in Sarnia would receive the following registered letter from the Secretary of the Naval Board:

Dear Mrs. Bell,

I regret I must confirm the telegram of the 14th of December from the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services informing you that your son, Joseph Griffiths Bell, Ordinary Coder, O.N. V35750, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, has been admitted to hospital in St. John's, Newfoundland suffering from injuries.

According to reports received, your son was one of a large number of Service personnel who were being entertained in the Knights of Columbus Hostel in St. John's when that building was completely destroyed by fire late in the evening of Saturday, 12th December.

While the extent of his injuries is not known, you may rest assured that your son is receiving the best possible medical care and you will be notified immediately of any change in his condition.

The fire in the hostel was devastating for two reasons. Ninety-nine people died and many more were burned horribly, including Joe Bell who spent time convalescing in a St. John's hospital. Beyond the deaths and injuries, however, were the suspicious circumstances of the tragedy. The fire occurred on a Saturday night when the K. of C. hostel was crowded, for it was a gathering place for Newfoundland civilians and U.S. servicemen based on the island. Wartime blackout regulations meant that plywood shutters covered the windows, thus preventing light from escaping into the inky night. Those shutters became death traps for the hundreds of people scrambling to get out through the smoke and flames in the auditorium. Investigators concluded that the fire had been deliberately set, likely enemy sabotage orchestrated by agents of Nazi Germany. The hostel tragedy was one of many suspicious fires in St. John's that winter.

In early February 1943, nearly two months after the fire, Edith Bell had still not heard any more information about her sons' condition. She wrote the following letter to the Secretary of the Naval Board:

Dear Sir,

On December 14th we were advised by telegram from your office, that our son Joe Griffiths Bell... was injured in the St. John's K. of C. fire and admitted to the Naval Hospital there. In a letter which followed two days later, you stated that you did not know the extent of his injuries. Now, with the exception of one letter written by our son about the Dec 22, we have not received any communication from Naval authorities, Naval Hospital, no, not even a chaplain. Naturally we are very much concerned. Civilian morale is of paramount importance at this time. The citizens of our country are entitled to the utmost consideration in cases such as this. We have tried to be patient but at a loss to know, why we are not further advised as to his condition. After seven (7) weeks we feel that we are perfectly within our rights in asking for full particulars as to our sons condition. Thanking you in anticipation of an early reply...

Following is a portion of the response from the Secretary of the Naval Board she received later that month:

... I am directed to inform you that the department has received no information concerning your son... The injuries which he sustained in the Knights of Columbus Hostel fire were not of a sufficiently serious nature to warrant his being placed on the seriously ill or dangerously ill lists and in the absence of further reports, it must be presumed that he is progressing satisfactorily.

Under the stress of wartime conditions it is not possible to render individual reports on Naval personnel confined to hospital and it is only cases of serious or dangerous illness that such reports are received...

Joe did not report for active duty for three months. He spent almost three weeks recuperating in hospital and even played basketball for the Naval Basketball Team. On April 16, 1943, he was posted on the Canadian destroyer *HMCS St. Croix* with the rank of Coder. In a letter to his mother not long after that, Joe told of being transferred to a destroyer, but did not name the boat. He also told of his enjoyable visit to Scotland, a country he spoke of in glowing terms and his expectation of being home on furlough shortly.

The Canadian Town Class destroyer *HMCS St. Croix (181)* operated in the North Atlantic. Aboard the same ship was Ordinary Telegraphist Robert C. Rigby (included in this project), and Stoker Second Class William Norman Roder of Arkona. The *St. Croix* was one of the “four-stacker” destroyers acquired by Great Britain from the United States Navy in September 1940, in exchange for sites for air and naval bases on British territory in the Atlantic area (she was formerly the *U.S.S. McCook*). The *St. Croix* and six other destroyers, transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy at the time, were manned immediately by Canadian crews and performed invaluable service on Atlantic convoy duty. Of note, one of those transferred destroyers was the *St. Clair*. Despite repeated problems with minor equipment failures, the *HMCS St. Croix* had put to sea time and time again and distinguished herself in the early days of the Battle of the Atlantic. Guarding vital convoys and patrolling for German submarines, she was credited with two U-boat kills (*U-90* in late July 1942 and *U-87* in early March 1943) and picked up many survivors of German U-boat attacks on Allied ships. The *St. Croix* was to be the first of the destroyers to be lost.

In August 1943 *St. Croix* was transferred from the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) to the Royal Navy’s Western Approaches Command. Along with the RCN Town Class destroyer *St. Francis* and the RCN corvettes *Chambly*, *Morden* and *Sackville*, the *St. Croix* became part of Escort Group 9, a support group of North Atlantic convoys. The support groups were designed to reinforce the close escort of endangered convoys or to hunt submarines in mid-ocean and kill them.

In mid-September, Escort Group 9 was ordered to reinforce Escort Groups B 3 and C 2, which were guarding the westbound convoys ONS-18 and ON-202, respectively. ONS-18, the slower convoy, had sailed from the United Kingdom on September 13; the faster ONS-202 had departed several days later on a similar track and was now approaching the south of Iceland, just behind the first convoy. At sea, a patrol line of U-boats awaited. On September 20, after the Admiralty picked up increasing signs of a German submarine concentration, they ordered the two convoys to merge, a combined assemblage of 63 merchant ships. As the convoys closed their gap, the escorts were picking up U-boat signals. Undoubtedly, the U-boats were gathering in large numbers and the wolf pack was maneuvering into position for a night attack. They were about to measure the success of their newest “secret weapon”, the Gnat acoustic torpedo. Fired in the direction of the intended victim, the Gnat was designed to circle until it picked up the appropriate propeller noise, then hone in on it.



Navy Coder Joseph Griffiths



Town Class Destroyer *HMCS St. Croix 181*

Escort Group 9 took up outer screening positions ahead and astern of the merchant ships, on the port (south) side of the convoy. Unfortunately, as the collection of escorts and merchant vessels headed west, fog and rain engulfed them. On the night of September 20, *St. Croix* was on station to the rear of the merging convoys when it was ordered to proceed farther astern to check out a possible U-boat sighting reported by an orbiting

Coastal Command aircraft. In the gathering gloom, *St. Croix* turned eastward and headed back along the convoy track, zigzagging at 24 knots. As it approached the spot where the sighting was reported, her captain ordered the *St. Croix* to begin an asdic sweep.

At 9:51 pm, the German U-boat *U-305* struck the *HMCS St. Croix* with two Gnat torpedoes near her port propellers. With the two massive explosions, the ship glided to a stop and listed immediately and uncontrollably. To the British frigate *HMS Itchen*, a few miles away, she sent the cryptic message, "*Am leaving the office.*" It was the last word from *St. Croix*. Seconds later, a third electrically directed torpedo, the final blow, hit the stern of the *St. Croix*. A tremendous explosion occurred, flames shot into the air, and within three minutes, the *St. Croix* was gone. Eighty-one members of her crew remained on life rafts and Carley floats, clinging to whatever they could.

Two RN ships from the escort force, the *HMS Itchen* and the RN corvette *Polyanthus*, rushed to the area, to see what had taken place and what could be done. The frigate *HMS Itchen* signaled: "*St. Croix torpedoed and blown up. Forecastle still afloat. Survivors in rafts and boats. Torpedoes fired at me. Doing full speed in vicinity. Will not attempt to P.U. survivors until Polyanthus arrives.*" But the RN corvette *Polyanthus* was herself torpedoed by *U-952* just after midnight. It sank rapidly with the loss of all hands save one. *Itchen* then had to become involved in attempting to locate the attacking U-boat. Later, in the foggy daylight of September 21, the *Itchen* was eventually able to pick up one *Polyanthus* survivor and 81 *St. Croix* survivors, but only after they had been in the very cold water for thirteen hours. Most of those lost had perished in the sea after abandoning the ship.

The few hours of rescue came to an ironic and bitter end two days later. On September 23, 1943 at approximately 2:00 am, the German U-boat *U-666*, using a Gnat torpedo, struck the *HMS Itchen*. Apparently hit in its' magazine, the *Itchen* exploded with an ear-splitting roar and a spectacular display of pyrotechnics and then vanished into the sea. Only three men survived this time: two from the *Itchen* and one from the *St. Croix*, 23-year-old Stoker William Allan Fisher of Black Diamond, Alberta. In total, 147 lives were lost from the *St. Croix*, including twenty-one-year-old Joseph Bell.



Last known photograph of the *St. Croix* ship's company
St. John's, Newfoundland May 30, 1943



Toronto Daily Star October 1, 1943

In October 1943, the sole survivor of the *St. Croix*, Stoker William A. Fisher, told his story in a newspaper account. Following is a portion of his account:

We were part of an escort detailed to a large convoy. We received a signal that submarines were about. We stayed astern of the convoy, but on September 20, we had come up and take on oil from a tanker in the convoy. On our way back to our position we saw a Canadian four-motored Liberator signaling us. We were told that they spotted a submarine and dropped depth charges. We flashed two boilers and made for the spot at 24 knots. As we neared, we had to reduce speed. As we slowed up we were hit in the screws. Fisher said there was no panic and no one thought of abandoning ship. But in two minutes another torpedo struck, this time near the mess deck, and water began to pour in. The captain, Lieutenant Commander Dobson, then issued orders to abandon ship.

Some men were injured by the explosions which followed the torpedoes; some were burned and cut. They were put in the motor launch before it was lowered over the side. The motor boat pulled away. Meanwhile attempts were made to lower a 60-passenger oar-driven whaler... Carley floats were dumped over the side and the men began jumping into the water. *No one seemed worried then, many of the crew laughed that they would be due for 29 day survivors' leave.* The rowboat pulled away from the sinking destroyer, and picked men out of the water. *Even then I thought the ship would be saved. Then I saw the captain dive off the boat. I knew everyone was off then*

and that the captain had given up hope.

Fisher was in charge of the motor boat. *No one in the boats died during the night. It was morning that everything happened. Men on the Carley floats insisted on getting into the rowboat. As the men got in, it settled lower in the water. Just before the rescue ship came along, it sank. The whaler did not have any injured men aboard. They were oil-grimed and cold. I saw men who were tough, big men. They hung out all night in the hope a boat would pick them up. Then when the boat did not come into view they died. I guess they couldn't hang out any longer. We dropped them into the sea.*

Sixty men were still alive on the whaler. The ship that headed to their rescue was the Royal Navy frigate *Itchen*, completed last September. As the frigate steamed through the lifting morning mist, the men in the whaler received the signal that the *Itchen* would come directly to their rescue. As the *Itchen* neared, a torpedo was seen to explode 30 yards to her stern. A message was flashed to the *Polyanthus*, a corvette of the Flower class, to come out of the convoy escort and circle the *Itchen* while the men were taken aboard. *The Polyanthus was just coming in and she was struck. I guess she went down in about 10 minutes. We rescued 10 men in our whaler. The Itchen headed for the convoy.... On September 2, two days after we were rescued, we were ordered to our action stations because submarines were around. We had three orders. The first started at 6 at night. There was another one at 7 and again at 9. At 9 o'clock I was standing beside the funnel when a torpedo struck. I was knocked 30 feet and landed against a gun platform. As I crawled toward the rail I kept yelling for my pal... He didn't answer and I jumped over the side. As I hit the water there was another explosion and I felt that my stomach was being squeezed through my ears. The water just cracked.* When he reached down to tug off his boots, his left boot was missing. It had been blown off. Fisher grabbed a board and looked to see other men jumping from the ship. Most of them drowned. A Carley float drifted by and Fisher jumped on. During the night others jumped on, but most of them died.

In late September of 1943, Edith Bell in Sarnia would receive a cable from the Navy informing her that her son, JOE GRIFFITHS BELL, R.C.N., HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING AT SEA. Father Lieut. J. Griff Bell, who was a member of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve, was away from home in Cornwallis when the news arrived in Sarnia. For parents Griff and Edith Bell, the last thing they knew was that Joe was aboard a destroyer. It was not until October 1, 1943 that the Honourable Angus L. MacDonald, the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services officially announced the sinking of the destroyer *St. Croix*. No details of the sinking were released, other than the list of names of 147 men who lost their lives. Included in the list were Surgeon-Lieutenant William Lyon MacKenzie King, nephew of the prime minister; Ordinary Telegraphist Robert Charles Rigby (a Sarnia-connection, and included in this Project); Stoker Second Class William Norman Roder of Arkona; and Sarnian Coder Joseph Griffiths Bell.

Joe's death was officially recorded as, *loss of H.M.C. ship, at sea*. The sinking of the *St. Croix* was the heaviest single loss suffered by the R.C.N. in the war. Within weeks of this incident, the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy began to equip their escorts with towed decoy devices to counter the homing torpedoes – the British used Foxer, and the Canadians utilized the simpler and lighter CAT gear – thus effectively neutralizing one of Germany's most important new innovations.

In early January of 1945, a morning service was held in Central United Church, Sarnia, to honour the memory of Coder Joseph Griffith Bell, lost at sea in September of 1943, and Private Melvin Fisher, killed in action in Italy in December of 1944 (included in this Project). Both men were members of the congregation. The Rev. E.W. Jewitt extended the sympathy of all the congregation to the bereaved parents, and voiced the hope for a just and enduring peace. In July 1945, parents Joe "Griff" and Edith Bell received a War Service Gratuity of \$189.85 for the loss of their only child in war.

Twenty-one-year-old Joseph Griffiths Bell has no known grave. His name is inscribed is on the Halifax Memorial, Nova Scotia, Canada, Panel 10. On the Sarnia cenotaph, his name is inscribed as J.C. Bell.

From: *The Sarnia War Remembrance Project*, by Tom Slater