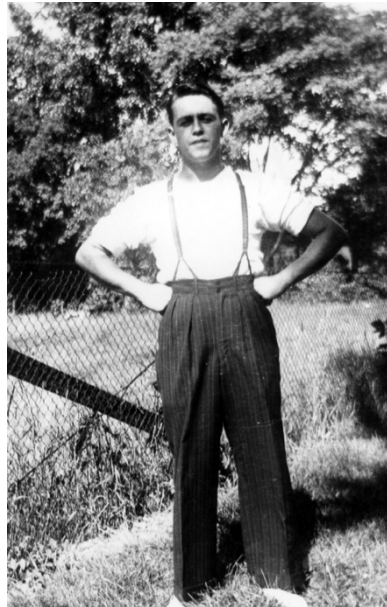


LE GARE, Hector (#A/2084)

As a young child, Hector Le Gare had already experienced loss—the death of his brother and of his father. Yet as a young man, he chose to risk his own life for his country. He would make the ultimate sacrifice during the longest continuous campaign of the war, aboard a ship that would not sink, to what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said was “... the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war...”

He was born in Chatham, Ontario on January 14, 1919, the son of Hector Octave and Hazel D. Le Gare. Hector Octave and Hazel Le Gare were married in Hull, Quebec in 1913. At some point, the Le Gare family moved to Sarnia, living at 330 North Mitton Street. Hector Octave Le Gare supported the family by operating a restaurant and poolroom near the Bell Telephone building. Hector had one brother, William, and five sisters: Jeanne and Katheline (Kay) (both would later move to Toronto); and Grace, Cora and Violet (all resided in Sarnia). On July 16, 1926, when Hector was just seven years old, his brother William passed away at the age of 5. Less than three years later, on January 18, 1929, when Hector was ten years old, he lost his father Hector Octave Le Gare, who died at the age of 39.



H. Le Gare

Hector Le Gare was educated at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Elementary School in Sarnia and then Sarnia Collegiate, where he played football and was reputed to be a good swimmer. Hector was also a member of St. Joseph's Catholic Parish, Sarnia. Prior to enlisting, Hector had navigating experience as a seaman, having served six years on the *Noronic*, *Huronic* and *Hamonic* of the Northern Navigation division of the Canada Steamship Lines. He was a watchman on the latter vessel at the close of the previous navigation season, after which he was employed at the Sarnia General Hospital until he enlisted in the summer.

Twenty-one-year-old Hector Le Gare enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve (RCNR) on July 12, 1940. He stood five feet five and a half inches tall, had blue eyes and dark hair, was single, and was living with his mother on Mitton Street, Sarnia at the time. Hector was initially posted for training at the eastern naval base *Stadacona* in Halifax. On September 4, 1940, he was transferred, becoming a member of the crew of the *HMCS Saguenay*, with the rank of Able Seaman.

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.

The *HMCS Saguenay* (D 79) was a River-Class Destroyer commissioned for service in the Royal Canadian Navy in 1931. The *Saguenay* was the first warship ever to be custom built for the Royal Canadian Navy. In the early morning hours of December 1, 1940, the *HMCS Saguenay* was part of a group escorting a convoy about 300 nautical miles west of Ireland. Travelling at twelve knots and in a zigzagging pattern, she noticed a flare shot up from the dark sea that had been fired by a U-boat moving in to attack the rear of the convoy. The *Saguenay*

increased her speed and made for the position of the flare. At approximately 3:50 am, the submarine was sighted half a mile distant. Almost simultaneously, a torpedo struck the *Saguenay*. The torpedo had been fired by the Italian submarine *Argo*. The *Saguenay* bow was blown off, and flames broke out and raced through the ship. The *Argo* surfaced again, circling to get in a second shot. Able Seaman Clifford McNaught demonstrated the kind of courage indicative of the remaining crew. Clifford was suffering from painful burns to his face, and his hands were horribly mangled. He nevertheless dashed forward to assist the short-handed gun crew by passing shells to them. The *Saguenay* crew was able to fend off the *Argo*. The British destroyer *Highlander* arrived within an hour or so to find the *Saguenay* limping slowly forward. Ninety men were transferred to the *Highlander* to reduce casualties in case of another torpedo attack. Throughout the night and most of the next day, a skeleton crew remained on board the *Saguenay* continuing to fight the fires.



River Class Destroyer HMCS Saguenay D79



Torpedo damage December 1940

By noon of the next day, the *Saguenay*, “the ship that would not sink” had managed to limp to the British port Barrow-in-Furness on one engine. The ship would be out of service for six months. A total of 21 of the HMCS *Saguenay* crew lost their lives in the U-boat attack, and another 18 were wounded. Two of the lost crew members were from Sarnia. Hector Le Gare was one of those killed in action in the damaging of the destroyer *Saguenay*. He served only eighty-nine days in the service before his death. Also, on board the ship was Able Seaman Paul Brown of Sarnia, who was also killed in the attack. His name is also inscribed on the Sarnia cenotaph and his story is included in this Project. Hector Le Gare and Paul Brown were the second and third casualties from Sarnia to lose their lives in the Second World War.

Hector’s widowed mother Hazel had not seen her only son since he had enlisted, as he did not receive any leave. She had received a letter from him just before he sailed and a cablegram informing her of his safe arrival in England. A week after the attack on the *Saguenay*, Hazel Le Gare on Mitton Street received the following telegram from Naval Service Headquarters: THE MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENCE FOR NAVAL SERVICES DEEPLY REGRETS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON HECTOR LE GARE ABLE SEAMAN RCNR OFFICIAL NO A-2084 IS MISSING BELIEVED KILLED IN ACTION. After receiving the telegram, Hazel retained hope that he would later be reported rescued. At an assembly at Sarnia Collegiate, Principal F.C. Asbury announced the loss of the two former students, which was followed by a period of silence in respect to the memory of the two Canadian sailors.

In mid-December 1940, Hazel Le Gare received the following letter from the Naval Secretary:

Dear Madam:

It is with very deep regret that I confirm the telegram of the 9th December from the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services that your son, Hector Le Gare, Able Seaman, R.C.N.R., Official Number A.2084, is reported to be missing from H.M.C.S. “SAGUENAY”, believed killed in action following damage to this vessel by a torpedo on the 1st December, 1940.

Please allow me, therefore, to express sincere sympathy with you in your sad loss on behalf of the Chief of the Naval Staff and the Officers and men of the Royal Canadian Navy, the high traditions of which your son has helped to maintain.

Only days later, she received another letter from the Naval Secretary. Following is that letter:

Dear Madam:

With reference to my letter of the 11th December, 1940, it is with deep regret that I must advise you that it has now been definitely established that your son, Hector Le Gare, Able Seaman, R.C.N.R., Official Number A.2084, was killed in action on the 1st of December, 1940, in H.M.C.S. "SAGUENAY".

Advice has been received that your son was buried ashore in England with full Naval honours. Exact location of the grave will be given to you in due course. Please allow me, therefore, again to express sincere sympathy with you in your sad bereavement.

In mid-March 1941, Hazel received the following letter from the Naval Secretary:

Dear Madam:

Further to my letter of the 16th December, 1940, information has now been received that the body of your late son, Hector Legare, Able Seaman, R.C.N.R., O.N. A.2084, who was killed in action on the 1st December whilst serving in H.M.C.S. "SAGUENAY", has been buried in the cemetery at Barrow-in-Furness, Lancs, England. The funeral took place on the 14th December, 1940. The exact location of the grave is #2439 Section 7.

Hector Le Gare's death was later officially recorded as the result of, *Enemy action, at sea*. In July 1945, widowed Hazel Le Gare, then living on Vaughan Road in Toronto, received a War Service Gratuity of \$58.18 for the loss of her son.

One of Hector's closest friends during the war was fellow Sarnian Oliver Jones, who also served in the RCNVR as an Able Seaman. [Note: Oliver Jones was a brother of Glyn Jones, who is included in this Project]. Twice during the war, while on convoy duty in the North Atlantic, Oliver Jones was aboard ships that were torpedoed by German U-boats. Oliver was in the same convoy escort group as his friend Hector Le Gare on December 1, 1940, when the *Saguenay* was torpedoed by an Italian submarine. Oliver Jones survived the war, and after returning home, he married Ilene (nee Kearney), and they had two children together, a boy and a girl. They named their son Ronald Hector Jones in honour of Oliver's friend Hector.

Twenty-one-year-old Hector Le Gare is buried in Barrow-in-Furness Cemetery, Lancashire, United Kingdom, Sec. 7. R.C. Grave 2439. On his headstone are inscribed the words, HIS WARFARE O'ER HIS BATTLE FOUGHT HIS VICTORY WON SO DEARLY BOUGHT. On the Sarnia cenotaph, his name is inscribed as H. Legarrie.

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