DOING OUR BIT

RESEARCH REPORT

JOHN ROBERT CROOK

June 17, 2025

Timeline for John Robert Crook			
1941	July	4	Enlisted with 19th Alberta Dragoons in Edmonton, AB
	July	12	Posted from "B" Squadron RHA
1942	May	12	TOS 2nd Battalion, Edmonton Regiment
	August	27	Discharged to RCNVR
	August	28	TOS HMCS Nonsuch (Edmonton) as Ordinary Coder
1943	March	1	Placed on Active Service
	March	16	Passed Educational Test 1 RCN
	May	10	TOS HMCS St. Hyacinthe
	July	7	Passed Swim Test
	July	22	Passed Ordinary Coder examination
	July	28	TOS HMCS Stadacona
	August	3	On Anti-Gas course
	September	3	TOS HMCS Chilliwack
	November	11	Convoy HX.265 (until November 20)
	December	1	Convoy ONS.24 (until December 13)
	December	20	Convoy HX.271 (until December 29)
1944	January	18	Convoy ON.220 (unitl January 19)
	January	25	Convoy ON.221 (until February 6)
	February	2	Convoy ON.222 (until February 5)
	February	22	Convoy HX.279 (until February 24)
	March	1	Promoted to rating Coder
	March	2	Convoy HX.280 (until March 5)
	March	5	HMCS Chilliwack takes part in hunting and sinking of U-744 (until March 6)
	March	31	Convoy ON.230 (until April 9)
	April	17	Convoy HX.287 (until April 25)
	May	5	Convoy ON.235 (until May 14)
	May	24	Convoy HX.292 (until June 2)
	June	11	Convoy ON.240 (until June 22)
	June	30	Convoy HX.297 (until July 10)
	July	19	Convoy ON.245 (until July 28)
	August	8	Convoy HX.302 (until August 16)
	August	25	Convoy ON.250 (until September 4)
	October	17	Granted 28 days annual leave
1945	February	26	Convoy BX.147 (until February 28)
	March	6	Convoy ON.826 (one day only)
	March	15	Convoy ONS.43 (until March 16)
	April	7	Convoy BX.155 (until April 9)
	April	11	Convoy ON.293 (until April 12)
	April	17	Convoy BX.157 (until April 19)
	April	27	Convoy BX.159 (until April 29)
	May	2	Convoy BX.160 (until May 4)
	May	8	Victory in Europe Day
	May	11	Convoy HX.355 (until May 17)
	June	22	TOS HMCS Stadacona
	July	17	TOS HMCS Stettler
	September	21	TOS HMCS St. Hyacinthe
	September	26	TOS HMCS Nonsuch
	October	15	Received Good Conduct Badge
	November	23	Discharged
1953	October	6	TOS HMCS Nonsuch, RCN (Reserves) as Able Seaman
1954	April	16	Promoted to Leading Seaman
1957	July	23	TOS HMCS Malahat (Emergency List)
1958	October	5	Honourably released from RCN (Reserves)
1960	March	10	TOS 5(BC) Independent Medium Battery (Militia) Band for 2 years
1962	March	10	Awarded 1st Service Chevron and reengaged for 2 years
1964	June	3	Struck off Strength
			TOS = Taken On Strength (attached to)
			SOS = Struck Off Strength (released from)

John Robert Crook

Attested Army: July 4, 1941 at Edmonton, AB
Attested Navy: August 28, 1942 at Naval Barracks, Edmonton, AB
Demobilized: November 23, 1945 at Edmonton, AB
Released from Reserves: October 5, 1958 at Victoria, BC; June 3, 1960 at Victoria, BC
Served with: 19th Alberta Dragoons; 2nd Battalion, Edmonton Regiment; Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, Royal Canadian Navy (Reserves), 5th (BC) Independent Medium Battery
Ranks/Rating held: Private, Ordinary Coder, Coder, Able Seaman, Leading Seaman, Gunner
Regimental Number: M536823, V47812, R14516, K805075
Medals and Awards: Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp, 1939-45 Star, Atlantic Star, War Medal 1939-1945

1. Joining the Active Militia (Reserves)

John Robert Crook enlisted with the **19th Alberta Dragoons** in Edmonton on July 4, 1941, still two months shy of his 16th birthday. The 19th Alberta Dragoons were a cavalry regiment that would serve as a Reserve regiment throughout the Second World War, and in 1946 become the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion, The Edmonton Fusiliers.

John's service file (*p6*) notes the former High School Cadet would serve as a "*Boy Trumpeter*". His enlistment with the 19th Alberta Dragoons was the first of four such engagements, a record of military service that would span three decades.

Although specific dates aren't recorded it is known John spent time at **Camp Sarcee** near Calgary in July, having been posted from "*B Squadron*" of the **Royal Canadian Horse Artillery** (RCHA). There are no details on when he was attached to the RCHA although another document (*p20*) implies John served in the Reserves as early as May 1941.

John was taken on strength by the **2nd Battalion, Edmonton Regiment**, another Reserve regiment, on May 12, 1942. However, his army days were numbered.

2. Ready Aye Ready

On August 28, 1942 John enlisted in the **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve** (RCNVR) and was taken on strength at **HMCS Nonsuch**, a "*stone frigate*" based in Edmonton, one of several shore establishments he would serve with before going to sea.

John was to become a **Coder**, coding and decoding messages sent to and from ocean-going vessels and shore establishments. While he learned his trade, John held the rating of "*Ordinary Coder*" but in March 1944 he was promoted to "*Coder*".

He would work as part of a communications team that included a Signalman and Wireless Telegraphist. Douglas E. Murch, who also served as a coder during the war, provides an excellent description of a Coder's duties in his book "*Hostilities Only: A Story of Canada's Navy During World War II*":

"*The Sig's location was on the bridge. The Tel. and Coder, however worked side by side in a small W/T office located at the rear of the wheel-house.*

The function of the Tel. was to monitor all signal transmissions and copy down those applicable to that particular convoy and escort group as well as general messages of interest to all ships at sea. Thus the Tel. stood his watch with earphones on at all times. These messages arrived in a coding formula known as "Naval Code", a two-stage encoding procedure of numbers and letters, the second stage of which was changed daily to ensure no breakdown of the code by the enemy. Messages (in code) were therefore intercepted by the Tel. and passed to the Coder who was seated next to the Tel. with the necessary code books and decoding tables. After decoding, the message was immediately handed to the Captain for appropriate action. This type of signal traffic was of a long-range nature usually originating from shore authorities, and did not usually require a reply. [1]"

John was placed on Active Service on March 1, 1943 and two weeks later passed "The *Educational Test, 1, Royal Canadian Navy*", having also concluded eight weeks of Basic Training.

On May 10 John was taken on strength at **HMCS St. Hyacinthe** in Quebec, established in 1941 to serve as the new naval Signals school. Here he was enrolled in a six-week Coder's course, passing his exam with flying colours on July 22. He obtained a final grade of **84%** in Coding Instruction, **88%** in Coding Practical and **98%** in Buzzer Receiving (*p85*).

3. HMCS Chilliwack

On July 28, 1943 John was taken on strength at **HMCS Stadacona** in Halifax where he attended an anti-submarine course before receiving his first assignment aboard **HMCS Chilliwack**.

HMCS Chilliwack. Source: Government of Canada (Royal Canadian Navy History)

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[1] "Hostilities Only: A Story of Canada's Navy During World War II" by Douglas E. Murch, p10
http://www.forposterityssake.ca/RCN-DOCS/RCND0161.pdf

A Flower-class corvette, HMCS Chilliwack (K-131) was constructed at the Burrard Dry Dock in North Vancouver in 1940 and arrived in Halifax in June 1941. As one of 123 corvettes to serve in the RCN it spent the war escorting convoys, initially to Iceland and then, in February 1942, across the Atlantic. She took part in several battles to defend the merchant ships she guarded, including with convoy **ON-154** when, on December 27 1942, she assisted in sinking **U-356**.

When John arrived in September, HMCS Chilliwack was in Dartmouth, in the final stages of a seven-month refit that began in April. Her armament and detection systems were modernized and her fo'c'sle (forecastle) extended. The work done on HMCS Chilliwack was similar to the work completed on **HMCS Sackville** earlier that year:

"*The bridge wings were heavily reinforced to carry 20mm secondary armament, and the bridge itself was extended forward to fit a second magnetic compass binnacle. The latter modification would allow the ship to be fought by the captain from the bridge.*[2]"

With the refit complete in October, Chilliwack spent a month conducting operational readiness training in Bermuda, before joining **escort group W-8** of the **Western Escort Force** in December. They would provide anti-submarine protection for trans-Atlantic convoys as they made their way from New York City, via Halifax, to Liverpool and back.

Escort vessels would attach and detach from the convoy at various points along the route and Chilliwack provided coverage between Newfoundland and Northern Ireland. While not on escort duties the ship often conducted anti-submarine exercises with other vessels off Lough Foyle in Northern Ireland.

The timeline in this report includes the names and dates of the twenty-six convoys HMCS Chilliwack escorted, including 17 with escort group W-8 (four were abbreviated assignments and not trans-Atlantic), and 9 while with the **Western Local Escort Force**.

This information was gathered from an excellent online resource, *Convoy Web*, which includes data compiled by former RN Lieutenant Commander and naval historian Arnold Hague. I have provided more details on this resource in Appendix I.

4. <u>The Hunting of U-744</u>

Their most notable assignment with escort group W-8 took place in early March 1944 while protecting 64 merchant ships in **Convoy HX.280**. The convoy originated in New York City and had embarked from Halifax on February 22. HMCS Chilliwack joined the escort fleet off Newfoundland on March 2.

On March 5 the destroyer **HMCS Gatineau** was monitoring its ASDIC (Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee), an early form of sonar, when it detected **U-744**, a German Type VII C U-boat.

A total of seven ships began the hunt for U-744. Charles Gaal aboard **HMCS Chaudière**, a River-class destroyer, described his experience:

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[2] "HMCS Sackville 1941-1945" by Mark Milner, p35.

"*I was on depth charges. They had what they called a creeping attack. They'd steam very slowly…and drop a depth charge…One ship directed you with their sonar, or asdic as we called it then. But U-744 was down around 900 feet and it took us 32 hours to get him up.*"[3].

The persistent depth charge attack forced U-744 to surface on the afternoon of March 6 and HMCS Chilliwack's Able Seaman Ralph Chartrand recounts what happened next:

"*When the sub started to surface, everything that could shoot went into action and we fired all we could. While the crew of U-744 was jumping out of the conning tower, St. Catharines was closing in, but our captain (Lieut. Cdr. Clifton R. Coughlin) manoeuvred Chilliwack in front to make sure that this was our sub. He gave the order, 'Prepare to ram!' but soon the sub was empty, so we didn't ram. We lowered a lifeboat with a boarding party and they proceeded to U-744. While the lifeboat was tied to the sub, some members boarded the sub. Then a big wave hit our lifeboat and flipped the crew in the water with the Germans sailors. We took 17 prisoners on board and made them as comfortable as possible. We even shared our blankets.*[4]"

HMCS Chilliwack boarding party alongside U-744. Source: Library and Archives Canada Photo, PA-112996

Code books and a cypher machine were retrieved from U-744 however most of them were lost when the lifeboats carrying them were swamped while transferring them to surface vessels. An attempt was made to tow U-744 to shore however rough seas hindered this operation and so a torpedo fired from the British I-class destroyer **HMS Icarus** sent the U-boat to the bottom of the sea.

Twelve Germans were killed, including their Captain Heinz Blischke, however 40 survivors were picked up. Six of the Allied vessels that took part in the hunt returned to their home ports.

In early September HMCS Chilliwack concluded its service with escort group W-8 and on October 17 John was granted 28 days of annual leave (*p79*).

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[3] "Chasing U-744" Legion Magazine, March 6, 2019 https://legionmagazine.com/chasing-u-744/

[4] "Corvettes Canada" by Mac Johnston, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 2004, p236

5. **Coastal Duty**

In February 1945 HMCS Chilliwack was assigned to the **Western Local Escort Force** and over the next four months it escorted nine convoys. These shorter assignments, typically two days in length, were likely a welcome change after the gruelling 8 to 10-day trans-Atlantic voyages experienced in 1944.

From May 11 to 17, 1945 HMCS Chilliwack escorted their last convoy, **HX.355**, on part of its voyage from New York to Liverpool. Although the war in Europe had ended on May 8 there were still U-boats patrolling the seas, and convoy protection remained in effect until every U-boat was accounted for.

John returned to **HMCS Stadacona** on June 22 although one document in his service file (*p97*) suggests that by June 25 he may have been stationed at **HMCS Protector** in Sydney, Nova Scotia.
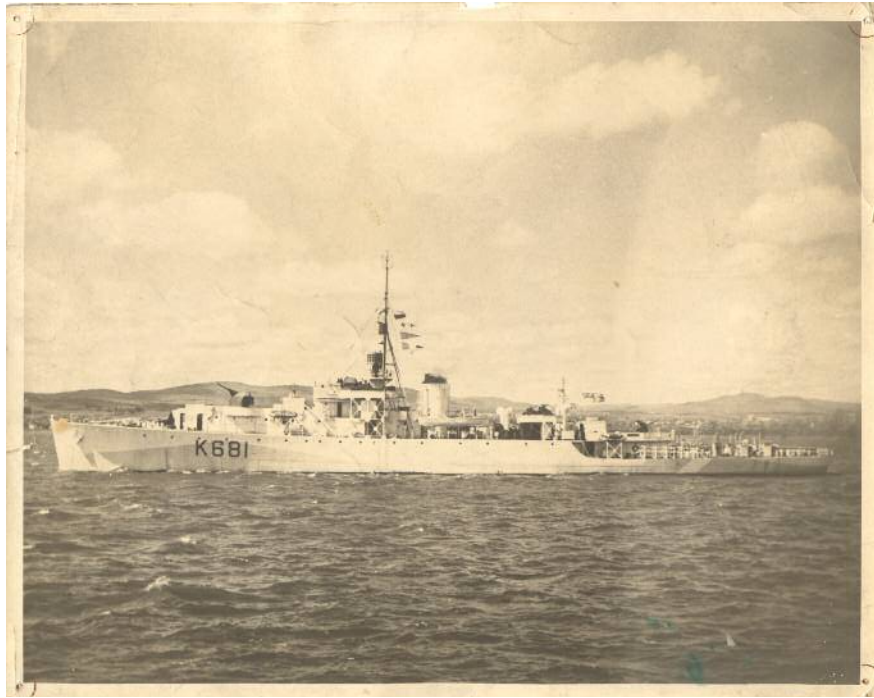
HMCS Stettler K681. Source: Somerville Family Collection

On July 17 John was assigned to **HMCS Stettler**, a new River-class frigate that had been commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy in May 1944. It had spent most of its time on local escort duty but in March 1945 it was sent to Londonderry, Northern Island where it took part in escort duties to Gibraltar and around the United Kingdom. HMCS Stettler returned to Canada in June 1945, the last Canadian warship to do so.

When John joined HMCS Stettler in July it was being refitted, in preparation for a voyage to the southern Pacific, however the assignment that was cancelled in August when Japan surrendered. It's unclear whether John spent any time at sea aboard HMCS Stettler before he was taken on strength at **HMCS St. Hyacinthe** on September 21.

Five days later John was taken on strength at **HMCS Nonsuch** and on October 1 he was awarded a Good Conduct Badge. John was discharged from the RCNVR on November 23, 1945, however this was by no means the end of his military service.

6. <u>Royal Canadian Navy (Reserves)</u>

On October 6, 1953 John, now a bookbinder with the Atlas Book Bindery in Edmonton, enlisted for a 5-year term with the **Royal Canadian Navy (Reserves)** as a Bandsman at **HMCS Nonsuch**. He was assigned service number R14516 and held the rating of Able Seaman (Bandsman).

In February 1954 he auditioned to become a military bandsman. The report documenting the audition (*p69*) states that he played the Baritone (trombone) and he played it well. The Band Officer noted: "*new chap but shows great possibilities*". John's progress was excellent, as recorded in reports covering the period from 1954 to 1956 (*p170-171*). On April 16, 1954 he was promoted to Leading Seaman (Bandsman).

John remained in Edmonton until 1957 when he and his family moved to Victoria, BC where he began work at the Victoria Press (Commercial Printers) on Douglas Street. At that time, he requested a transfer to **HMCS Malahat** however there were no bandsman openings on their "Active" list and so he was assigned to their "Emergency" list (*p194*). It is unclear as to whether this was entirely an administrative adjustment or if it affected his opportunity to play in the band.

John was honourably released from his 5-year commitment on October 5, 1958.

7. <u>5th (BC) Independent Medium Battery, RCA</u>

On March 10, 1960 John enrolled as a bandsman with the **5th (BC) Independent Medium Battery Band**, **Royal Canadian Artillery** in Victoria. He was assigned regimental number K805075 and held the rank of Gunner. He committed to two years of service, however on completion of his term he reengaged for a further two years.

John Robert Crook was released from service for the final time on June 3, 1964 after having served over three decades in the Canadian Army, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, Royal Canadian Navy (Reserves) and Royal Canadian Artillery.

Appendix I – Recommended Reading and Links

Several books were referenced in the preparation of this report and you may find these of interest.

There is an excellent account of a Navy Coder in the Second World War. Although he didn't serve on HMCS Chilliwack he does provide a great deal of information on his experience and the training he received. Douglas E. Murch's book has been made available in digital form on the "For Posterity's Sake" website:

- **Hostilities Only: A Story of Canada's Navy During World War II** by Douglas E. Murch, Coder, V-40131, RCNVR
  http://www.forposterityssake.ca/RCN-DOCS/RCND0161.pdf

Other books that may be of interest:

- **HMCS Sackville 1941-1945** by Mark Milner, The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust, 1998

- **Corvettes Canada** by Mac Johnston, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 2004

There is also a magazine article (available online) detailing the hunt for U-744:

- **Chasing U-744** Legion Magazine, March 6, 2019
  https://legionmagazine.com/chasing-u-744/

There are several websites that you may find of interest, first and foremost *Convoy Web*.

- **Convoy Web** (Arnold Hague Convoy Database)
  https://www.convoyweb.org.uk/hague/index.html

  This is an excellent resource compiled from data collected by former RN Lieutenant Commander and naval historian Arnold Hague. By using the "Ship Search" feature you can find a listing of all the convoys a ship took part in, for both escort and merchant vessels. This database was used to determine the dates (recorded in the timeline) that HMCS Chilliwack was on escort duty. Note: the website's disclaimer (in red in the lower left corner) states that the data is not perfect, however we are lucky to have access to a resource such as this.

- **For Posterity's Sake** webpage on HMCS Chilliwack
  http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS_CHILLIWACK_K131.htm

- *HMCS Chilliwack***, and the Sinking of** *U-744*
  https://www.rcnhistory.org/history-macmillan-chilliwack.htm

- **Hamilton Naval Association** on HMCS Chilliwack's mast at HMCS Star
  https://hamiltonnaval.ca/hmcs-chilliwack/