

KETTLE, Alfred Smedley (#A/2382)

Alfred Smedley Kettle was 31 years old, much older than the average soldier's age, and had a 10-year-old son at home when he made the decision to serve his country. In February 1942, he was aboard one of the "backbone" warships of the Canadian navy when he lost his life during an escort operation during the longest continuous campaign of the war to what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said was "... the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war..."

He was born in Petrolia, Ontario on May 14, 1909, the son of Alfred Smedley Sr. and Edith May (nee Collier) Kettle, of R.R. #2 Mandaumin, Plympton Township, Lambton County, Ontario. Alfred Sr. (born in Blackpool, England) and Edith May (born in Oxford, Ontario) Kettle were married on October 19, 1896 in Petrolia, Ontario. At the time of Alfred Jr.'s birth, his father worked as a horse buyer. Alfred Jr. had numerous brothers and two sisters. His brothers included: twins Earl and Harold (born 1900, although Harold died ten days after birth); Richard Selvenia (born 1910, who would serve in Canadian Army); Harold Alexander (born 1912); James Ernest (born 1905); Malcolm Benjamin (born 1914); Robert Gerald (born 1927, who would serve in WWII and Korea); William Henry (born 1903, deceased 1926); and Thomas Harrison (born 1908, deceased at age 9 months). His sisters were Annie May (born 1897, deceased 1918), and Verna Maude (born 1904).

Alfred served in the Lambton Regiment, with the rank of corporal from November 1934 to November 1935. Alfred was married for a time to Louise Kettle in Sarnia, but she left him approximately eight years before he enlisted. They had one child together, Alfred Wayne Kettle, born July 31, 1930, who lived with Alfred and his parents at R.R. #2 Mandaumin, Ontario. Prior to enlisting, Alfred was employed as a quartermaster for Canadian Steamship Lines (he had sailed on the lakes since 1927).

Thirty-one-year-old Alfred Kettle enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve on July 29, 1940 in London, Ontario. He stood five feet eight and a half inches tall, had hazel eyes and dark hair, and was single. He recorded his marital status as "widower". From London Division Headquarters, Able Seaman Alfred Kettle was posted to the *HMCS Stadacona* from August 8 to June 27, 1940, where he rose in rank to Leading Seaman, then Petty Officer. Beginning on June 28, 1941, Alfred was posted to the *HMCS Spikenard*, where he attained the rank of Chief Petty Officer.



Chief Petty Officer Alfred Smedley Kettle



Flower Class Corvette *HMCS Spikenard* K198

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 Spikenard* (K 198) was a corvette of the Flower Class, commissioned by the Royal Canadian Navy in December of 1940. In early February of 1942, the *Spikenard* was part of convoy SC-67, sailing for the

British Isles, part of an RCN escort to make the first “Newfie-to-Derry” run that would continue for the next four years (St. John’s, Newfoundland and Londonderry, Northern Ireland).

At about 9:30 pm on the night of February 10, 1942, the *Spikenard* was approximately 465 nautical miles west of Malin Head Ireland, following a zigzag pattern ahead of the convoy in rough seas. Two torpedoes fired by German U-boat *U-136* struck the port side in the bow near the bridge. Almost simultaneously, a torpedo smashed into the nearby tanker *Heina*. A nearby corvette, *Dauphin*, saw one explosion and moved toward the position where the *Heina* was on fire. It took two hours to rescue the *Heina* survivors from the oily water.

Aboard the *Spikenard*, fire had broken out, destroying the bridge, the wireless room and one of her lifeboats. Flames then spread to fuel drums aft of the mast, and fire raced up the superstructure and down into the belly of the ship. Men on the mess decks had to fight their way to the forecabin through a curtain of flames. Many of them, groping forward, stumbled into the gaping hole blasted in the deck plates. After a second explosion, with the ship’s whistle set off by the blast, blowing constantly with an eerie shriek, waves engulfed the vessel. The *Spikenard* sank within five minutes. As the men struggled in the water on the black, windy night, they shouted in vain and had no flares to attract attention. The other escorts in the group had been caught up chasing contacts and had not known the *Spikenard* was gone until she had not answered repeated radio calls. By dawn, there was no sign of the missing *Spikenard*. The commander, four officers and fifty-two of the crew were lost.

Incredibly, eight survivors were picked up clinging to a raft by *HMS Gentian* about 19 hours after the sinking. The eight survivors, many suffering burns, had picked up two other survivors after the second explosion, but both were so badly injured that they died shortly after being taken aboard. Alfred Kettle was one of the 57 crew members who were lost in the sinking of the *HMCS Spikenard*.

On February 18, 1942, Edith Kettle of R.R.#2 Mandaumin, received a telegram from the Minister of National Defence informing her that her son, Chief Petty Officer Alfred Smedley Kettle, was missing and presumed lost at sea. In late February 1942, Edith received the following letter from the Secretary, Naval Board:
Dear Madam:

It is with deep regret that I must confirm the telegram of the 18th February 1942 from the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services informing you that your son, Alfred Smedley Kettle, Chief Petty Officer, R.C.N.R., O.N. A.2382, is missing and must be presumed lost on Active Service.

Your son was serving in H.M.C.S. “SPIKENARD” which was torpedoed and sunk by enemy action on the 10th February 1942. Details of the action are not, however, available at this time. The possibility of your son having been rescued by other ships cannot be estimated but it has been established that he was not among the survivors landed at a United Kingdom port and very little hope is held out for the survival of the remainder. You will be informed immediately should any further information be received.

I wish to express the sincere sympathy of the Chief of the Naval Staff, Officers and men of the Royal Canadian Navy the high traditions of which your son has helped to maintain.

Alfred Kettle’s death certificate simply states the cause of death as, *Loss of H.M.C.S. Spikenard, at sea*. In April 1947, Edith Kettle received a War Service Gratuity of \$237.54 for the loss of her son Alfred. Thirty-one-year-old Alfred Smedley Kettle has no known grave. His name is inscribed on the Halifax Memorial, Nova Scotia, Canada, Panel 6. Alfred Kettle’s name is also inscribed on the Petrolia cenotaph in the Town of Petrolia.

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