

Ordinary Seaman William Richard Deeks V-47243



Ordinary Seaman William R. Deeks. Image courtesy of Vernon Museum and Archives - Photo No. 15672

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Vernon BC, 27 April 1925**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Discovery*, 28 August 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Student**
- **Death: Died when HMCS *St Croix* was torpedoed and sunk on 20 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; Memorial Plaque HMCS *Discovery*, and the Vernon Cenotaph in Vernon, BC**

William Deeks was born in Vernon Jubilee Hospital, Vernon BC on the 27th of April 1925. His father was William Henry Deeks, born in London, England and his mother, Elizabeth Alfreda Rogers, born in Pittsburg, PA, USA. He had one younger brother, Victor Howard Deeks and one younger sister, Drucilla Deeks.

At the age of 16 in May 1941, William received word that his application into the Telegraphist Branch of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) had been rejected because he had only completed one year of high school and therefore did not meet the educational requirements. A letter signed by the Assistant Naval Secretary on 6 May 1941 suggested that he apply for entry as a “Boy Seaman” on verification of his education at Vernon Junior High School. William consulted with his parents, and they agreed to his application to join RCN as a Boy Seaman. William was hopeful that he could eventually take a telegraphy course. This desire related to his experience in Boy Scouts and in the High School cadet corps. While he awaited an answer from the RCN, he completed a second year of high school and then he worked for a Vernon Construction Company - Bennett and White Construction for one month in the summer of 1942.

It is unclear why William did not wait to be called by the RCN, but on 14 August 1942 he enrolled in the local militia regiment – the BC Dragoons - using a birthdate of 15 Sep 1924. It should be noted that this birthdate made him immediately eligible for Active Service. On 28 Aug 1942, he was transferred from the Dragoons to HMCS *Discovery*. The false birth date was corrected at *Discovery* and he was not placed on Active Service until 29 Oct 1942 when he was 17 ½ years old.

William Richard Deeks enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman. His attestation record describes him as 5 feet 8 ½ inches in height, 121 pounds with a fair complexion. His hair was light brown and his eyes blue. He had a small scar on his left leg behind the knee.

William completed his initial training at *Discovery* and he reported to HMCS *York* in Toronto on 3 Jan 1943 for advanced training. In Toronto, he was recommended for the Visual Signaling (V/S) course, so on 22 Jan 1943 he reported to HMCS *St Hyacinthe*, Quebec, for naval communications training. His time at *St Hyacinthe* was relatively brief. His records suggest that was not suitable for the Communications Branch and he was transferred to the Seaman Branch. William found himself back on a train heading east. This time he reported to HMCS *Cornwallis* in Nova Scotia for Seamanship training. The seamanship course involved 10 weeks of instruction in gunnery, seamanship training, and torpedo-work followed by one-week on a training ship. Ordinary Seaman Deeks completed his training on 23 May 1943.



New Entry ratings learning how to rig a collision mat aboard a training ship, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 3 March 1943.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada Photo, MIKAN No. 3567254

William was drafted to HMCS *St Croix* which was based in St John's Newfoundland. After more train, ferry and bus travel, William finally arrived at the gangway of his first and only ship on 27 May 1943.

St. Croix was one of the ships acquired via the Anglo-American "destroyers for bases" agreement and was the former USS *McCook*. Outdated, but she was still fast and with good endurance. She had a stellar record of having sunk two German submarines.

HMCS *St Croix* was employed as an escort for trans-Atlantic convoys of merchant ships. The escorts had two jobs: protect the merchant ships and attack U-boats when they were located. The life of an Ordinary Seaman serving in a convoy escort was rigorous and exhausting. His duties included serving as lookout, helmsman, bridge and signals messenger and gun loader. Ordinary Seamen also worked anchors and cables, fought fires, and served as members of boarding parties.

In Aug 1943, *St Croix* was assigned to an escort support group (SG 9) for an offensive against U-boats crossing the Bay of Biscay, but the group was diverted to provide aid to two convoys that were under U-boat attack in the North Atlantic. The five warships of SG 9 intercepted the two convoys consisting of 65 merchant ships and 14 escorts. Together they faced 21 German U-boats. The U-boat offensive began on 19 September, and it would continue until 23 September. A total of three warships, six merchant ships and three U-boats sank before the convoys reached the relative safety of the North American coast.

On 20 Sep 1943, *St Croix* was torpedoed and sunk by U-305 south of Iceland. Five officers and 76 men were rescued by HMS *Itchen*, but only one of these survived after HMS *Itchen* was torpedoed and sunk on 23 Sep 1943. William's body was not recovered.

William Richard Deeks was 18 years of age at the time of his death. His service in the RCNVR was from 29 October 1942 to September 1943; a total of 327 days.

William Deeks was posthumously awarded the 1939-45 Star and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and clasp and War Medal. His mother was awarded the Canadian Memorial Cross. She also received a War Service Gratuity of \$111.15.

His brother, Victor Deeks, was a pilot and was killed in an accident on 22 May 1956.

William Deeks is commemorated on Page 152 of the Second World War Book of Remembrance. His name is listed on Panel 10 of the Halifax Memorial in Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and he is remembered on the Vernon War Memorial, Vernon, BC.

Prepared By:

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Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – profile page for William Richard Deeks
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial:
<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/2557947?William%20Richard%20Deeks>
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- For Posterity's Sake:
http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS_ST_CROIX_I81.htm#Photos
- Library and Archives Canada, Service Files of the Second World War – War Dead, 1939-1947, Item Number 8707, William Richard Deeks, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/second-world-war/second-world-war-dead-1939-1947/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=8707&>
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- Military History Library: <https://valourcanada.ca/military-history-library/hmcs-st-croix/>
- TUCKER, G.N (1952). *The Naval Service of Canada; Its Official History. Volume 2: Activities on Shore during the Second World War.* The Minister of National Defence, King's Printer.