

## Engine Room Artificer 4th Class Joseph Frank Helis V-35121



ERA 4<sup>th</sup> Class Joe Helis. Photo:  
Canadian Virtual War Memorial

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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Canmore AB, 27 August 1919**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 29 August 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Machinist, Canmore Mines Ltd**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS Regina was torpedoed and sank on 8 August 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12**

Joseph Frank Helis, known as Joe, was the first of two children born to Theresa and Joseph Helis on 27 August 1919 in Canmore, Alberta. His sister Emma was born in 1925. Theresa was born in Czechoslovakia in 1889 and married Frank Kozak there before emigrating to Indiana in 1902. There she gave birth to two sons – Frank (1907) and Paul (1910) before emigrating to Canmore, Alberta. In Canmore she had two more children with Frank Sr. – Mary (1912) and Annie (1913). Sadly Frank Sr. died the same year, 1913, leaving Theresa a widow with four children, the youngest being an infant.

The 1916 Census recorded that Theresa was married to Joseph. He was born in Czechoslovakia in 1886, emigrated to Canada in 1906 and worked as a miner. Together they had two children, Joe and Emma (1925). Tragedy struck the family again when half-brother Frank Jr, died in 1922. Half-brother Paul eventually left home and found work in the Sullivan mine in Kimberley, British Columbia where he became a shift boss. He was a prominent junior hockey player for the Kimberley Dynamiters. He died of acute coronary disease at the age of 43. The disease has a major genetic component which may explain the deaths of his father and brother.

Canmore is about 60 miles west of Calgary in the Bow River Valley adjacent to Banff National Park in the Rocky Mountains. It was founded in the mid-1880s on the site of a rich coal seam. By the time the Kozak family arrived there the town of about 750 people was booming and its economy dominated by Canmore Mines Ltd. Growing up, Joe became fluent in English, Czech and Polish. He attended school in Canmore and completed Grade 9 before leaving in 1937. He then found work as a machinist's helper at Canmore Mines, a position he held until he enlisted in the Navy. While continuing his employment at the mine he first served as a Private in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Calgary Highlanders (Reserve) from July 1940 to August 1941.

Two days after his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, on 29 August 1941, Joe was sworn in at the Calgary Division (HMCS *Tecumseh*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve as a Stoker 1st Class. He was single, 6 feet ¾ inches tall, weighed 166 pounds and was considered to be in good condition. He had brown hair, grey eyes and a “fresh” complexion.

He remained in Calgary taking rudimentary naval training and attending to administrative duties and appointments. On 14 October 1941 he was drafted to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, British Columbia where he undertook new entry training and trades training until 20 January 1942. He was then drafted to HMCS *Prince David*, one of three Canadian National Steamships passenger ships which was converted first to an armed merchant cruiser, and later to an infantry landing ship. While Joe was serving onboard, *Prince David* was undergoing a major refit.

On 12 June 1942 Joe was selected for Engine Room Artificer (ERA) training and returned to HMCS *Naden*. There were a number of artificer classifications in addition to Engine Room Artificer - including Radio Artificer and Electrical Artificer. Artificers were highly skilled technicians who received extensive training usually within the Navy. Their selection was usually based on the training and experience candidates had gained outside the Navy. Others were selected from “efficient” stokers. In Joe’s case it is likely that his work experience at Canmore Mines Ltd. and his performance in *Prince David* contributed to his selection.

Artificers enjoyed the pay and privileges of leading seamen, and chiefs and petty officers although they were not actually either. Their pay and status compensated them for what they knew not where they were in the chain of command. Engine Room Artificer Class 5 was the lowest and equated to a Leading Seaman; Classes 3 and 4 equated to Petty Officers, while Classes 1 and 2 equated to Chief Petty Officers. Only the most senior artificers exercised authority over junior artificers and ratings - a Chief Engine Room Artificer of a ship for example. Joe was promoted to ERA 5<sup>th</sup> Class on 23 September 1942. From 1 October 1942 to 27 November 1943, Joe for the most part underwent intensive training at the prestigious Windsor-Walkerville Technical School in Windsor, Ontario. The school had been established to train skilled workers for employment in Ontario’s burgeoning manufacturing sector in 1921. Naval personnel attending the school were administered by HMCS *Hunter* in Windsor. Some of the components of the course were taught at HMCS *Cornwallis* then located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. On 14 August 1943 Joe was promoted to ERA 4<sup>th</sup> Class.



HMCS Regina  
Photo National Defence  
([www.forposteritysake.ca](http://www.forposteritysake.ca))

On 25 October 1943 Joe was drafted to the corvette, HMCS *Regina*, which had been in refit in Sydney and Pictou, Nova Scotia since June 1943. By December the refit was complete, and *Regina* commenced work-ups before joining Escort Group C-1 in February 1944. After an eventful Atlantic crossing she arrived in Londonderry toward the end of March and was assigned to Western

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and through a swept channel to Normandy arriving there in the early morning hours of 7 June. Upon completion of this task, *Regina* returned to the United Kingdom to be dispatched repeatedly to escort other ships and convoys until 8 August 1944.

On 8 August 1944, at about 1955, Joe went below to the engine room to commence his watch. *Regina* was the sole escort of a ten-ship convoy proceeding southwest from Milford Haven along the north Cornwall coast off Trevoze Head bound for Normandy.

At about 2130, a Liberty ship, the *Ezra Weston*, experienced an explosion which was mistakenly thought to have been the result of the ship striking a mine. *Regina* closed her and stopped to render assistance. After remaining stopped for about forty-five minutes, a second explosion erupted in *Regina* sinking her in less than 30 seconds. The second explosion, as was the first, were caused by torpedoes fired by the German U-boat, *U-667*. Joe and twenty-nine other members of *Regina*'s ship's company perished. Joe was 24 years old at the time of his death

For his service, Engine Room Artificer 4<sup>th</sup> Class Joseph Frank Helis was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star and Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Theresa Helis received the Memorial Cross.

He has no known grave and is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 12.

#### Prepared By:

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#### Sources:

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