

## Able Seaman Kenneth Verdun Hopfe V-32591



Able Seaman Kenneth Hopfe. Photo:  
Red Deer Advocate, 13 December 1944  
at the Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Red Deer, AB 14 March 1926**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Discovery*, 12 January 1944**
- **Civilian Occupation: Truck Driver, Shurly, Dietrich, Atkins Company**
- **Death: Killed when SS *Cornwallis* was torpedoed and sunk on 3 December 1944**
- **Commemorated: Vancouver (Mountain View) Cemetery, Abray. Block 3. Plot 22. Lot 16; and HMCS *Discovery* Memorial Plaque**

Kenneth Verdun Hopfe was born on 14 March 1926 in Red Deer, AB. He was the middle child of Orlando (Orlie) and Clara Marie Hopfe (nee Halvorsen, born in Chevilin, Minnesota, USA). He had an older sister, Hazel Marion, and a younger brother, John Douglas.

His father Orlie was a Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) brakeman and was killed in the yard at Kerrobert, Saskatchewan in September 1935 when he was only 38. At the time of his death, the children were 11, 10 and 8, respectively. The family received a settlement from CPR of \$10,000 distributed to his family as follows: \$5,000 to his widow; \$1,500 to Hazel; \$1,500 to Kenneth; and \$2,000 to John. Starting from 1 May 36, \$40/month was paid to Clara to support the family.

Kenneth Verdun Hopfe had completed nine years of school when he wrote to the Navy in 1941 stating that he understood he could join at 15 as a Bugler. He noted in his letter that he had two years in instrumental music and one-year vocal music training, but nothing came of this inquiry.

Kenneth was intent on joining the military in 1941. To achieve his goal, he used a false birthdate of 14 March 1922, and his 5'10" size to successfully enlist in the Militia on 19 November 1941. He was posted to the general reinforcement depot on 19 November 1941 but was discharged in Calgary on 17 March 1942 when the Government of Alberta Bureau of Vital Statistics confirmed his date of birth was 14 March 1926 and he was only 15 years old. Undeterred by his discharge from the Army for being underage, Kenneth successfully enlisted at HMCS *Tecumseh* in Calgary on 14 March 1942 – three days before his discharge from the Militia – using the same fake birth date. The 16-year-old Kenneth was released 10 days later.

Kenneth's mother remarried, became Clara Marie Dosman and moved the family to Vancouver, BC. Kenneth found work at Shurly, Dietrich, Atkins Company in Vancouver as a truck driver for one year until he was old enough to enlist as an Ordinary Seaman in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) on 12 January 1944. In his Occupational History form he stated that

he was with the United Church faith. He had light brown hair, blue eyes, a fair complexion, and an appendectomy scar.

Ordinary Seaman Hopfe was under training at *Discovery* from 12 January until 7 April 1944 before he was posted to HMCS *Cornwallis* in Nova Scotia for his basic seamanship course, along with his best friend, Aldon Roderick Brewer, also from Vancouver, from 8 April to 15 July 1944. During this time, Hopfe was rated "Average intelligence, fairly keen and interested, good reliable worker, fair appearance and manners" according to his *Cornwallis* Divisional Officer, who also indicated that Hopfe should develop into a good seaman.

On completion of his basic training at *Cornwallis*, he was drafted to HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax from 16 to 29 July 1944 to attend the Defence Equipped Merchant Ship (DEMS) gunner course. On completion of the DEMS course, Ordinary Seaman Hopfe was posted to his first and only ship, SS *Cornwallis*.



DEMS personnel were a unique group of sailors. Mostly young and recruited to the RCNVR, these sailors were trained to work side-by-side with merchant ship crews to protect those ships. During the Second World War nearly all Canadian open-ocean and coastal ships were armed, including the coastal ferry services. This armament and the crew to operate these guns were provided by the Navy. Over the course of the war, there were over 1,100 DEMS sailors trained as gunners.

Like all DEMS personnel, Ordinary Seaman (DEMS) Hopfe would have been "signed on" the merchant ship as a Deckhand and he would have received one dollar a week from the shipping company. The remainder of his pay came from the Navy, including a 15-cents-a-day DEMS allowance.

SS *Cornwallis* was a 400 (122m) foot-long steam merchant ship built in 1921 for the Canadian Government. She was initially named *Canadian Transporter* and in 1932 she was transferred to Canadian National Steamships Ltd. and renamed SS *Cornwallis*. She had a crew of 48.

Ordinary Seaman Hopfe served just over four months in SS *Cornwallis* before his death. On 27 November 1944 – six days before his death – Hopfe was rated Able Seaman.

On 3 December 1944, the unescorted SS *Cornwallis* (Master Emerson Horace Robinson), carrying a cargo of sugar and molasses, was proceeding from Bridgetown, Barbados to Saint John, NB. At 1000, the ship was torpedoed and sunk by a GNAT (German Navy Acoustic Torpedo) fired from U-1230. The attack occurred 10 miles southwest of Mount Desert Rock in the Gulf of Maine. There were seven RCNVRs on that ship, and 43 merchant marine sailors. The Master, 35 crew members



and the seven gunners were lost. Five survivors were picked up by the fishing vessel *Notre Dame* and landed at Rockland, Maine. Able Seaman Hopfe died of exposure to the elements (hypothermia). Able Seaman Kenneth Hopfe was 18 years old when he died.

In a letter dated 7 December 1944 sent to his mother, Mrs. Dosman, the Naval Secretary advised that her son was killed in action, his body had been recovered and was being sent to Vancouver at public expense. The Commanding Officer of HMCS *Discovery* at 408 Marine building, would be available to arrange a military funeral, if desired. Kenneth Verdun Hopfe was interred in Mountain View Cemetery in Vancouver.

At the time of his death Able Seaman Hopfe had served a total 301 days in naval uniform with 128 days of overseas service. Although he had never set-up a pay allotment, Hopfe regularly sent a portion of his pay to his mother. In calculating his gratuity service pay, his mother requested that it be assigned to his estate as his Will bequeathed all his possessions and entitlements to his mother. Kenneth Hopfe also had an insurance policy worth \$1,700 but it was not paid out due to the fact he was in active war time service.

For his service, Able Seaman Kenneth Verdun Hopfe was awarded: the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother Clara received the Memorial Cross.

Able Seaman Kenneth Verdun Hopfe is commemorated at the Red Deer Memorial Centre; on the HMCS *Discovery* Memorial Plaque; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 338 at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

#### Prepared By:

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#### Sources:

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