

## Engine Room Artificer John Stewart Johnston V-43818



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Glasgow Scotland, 14 March 1909**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Discovery*, 27 July 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Steam Engineer, Powell River Paper Company**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Valleyfield* was torpedoed and sank on 7 May 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12; HMCS *Discovery* Honour Roll, and Page 347 of the Second World War Book of Remembrance**

ERA John S. Johnston. Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

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John Stewart Johnston was born on 14 March, 1909, in Glasgow, Scotland. He was known as Stew to friends and family. His father died in 1917 when he was eight years old. Stew had two younger brothers and a half-brother. David Alexander was three years younger; James Robertson was eight years younger, and half-brother Charles was 15 years younger. Prior to joining the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) Stew Johnston completed grade 10 and worked as a steam engineer for the Powell River Paper Company for 7 years. He was a member of Pulp & Paper Makers Union Local 76. While working and living in Powell River, John Stewart Johnston married Hazel Bream on 18 September 1940.

Stew enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve on 27 July, 1942 at HMCS *Discovery*. Stew's enrolment was somewhat unusual, based on his credentials he was offered a position in either the seamanship branch of the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve as an Able Seaman, or in the engineering branch of the RCNVR. He chose to enter the RCNVR as a Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> Class (Temp). The following day he was rated Acting Stoker Petty Officer. His assigned service number was V43818, and his medical file showed that his height was 5'6 ½" and his left thumb – first joint had been amputated. He reported on his attestation form that he was of the United Church faith.

A/Stoker PO Johnston began his naval training in HMCS *Cornwallis* in Halifax Nova Scotia. He completed his New Entry Course on 24 Aug 1942. This was followed by Stoker technical training that involved both classroom training and periods at sea in a warship. His performance on this course was assessed as superior. The *Cornwallis* training staff noted that he was "Superior rating, anxious to get ahead"

A/Stoker PO Johnston completed the sea phase of his technical training in HMCS *Grandmère*, a Bangor-class minesweeper. *Grandmère* was smaller than the preceding Halcyon-class minesweepers in British service, but larger than the Canadian Fundy class in service. They also came in two versions powered by different engines; those with a diesel engines and those with vertical triple-expansion steam engines. *Grandmère* was of the latter design and was larger than her diesel-engine cousins. Stew Johnston was a steam engineer before he enrolled into the navy thus, he was suited to work on the *Grandmère* fitted with this type of engine.



HMCS *Grandmère*. Photo: [www.forposteritysake.ca](http://www.forposteritysake.ca)

During his time on the *Grandmère*, Johnston got his first taste of combat. The ship was assigned to the Western Local Escort Force as a convoy escort followed by an assignment with Sydney Force, the local patrol and escort unit operating out of Sydney, Nova Scotia. The job of a convoy escort was to protect merchant ships from German U-boats hunting in the area. On 14 October 1942 while with the Sydney Force, *Grandmère* was escorting the Newfoundland Railway ferry SS *Caribou* on its weekly passage in the Cabot Strait from North Sydney to Port-aux-Basques, Newfoundland. The two vessels were spotted by the German U-boat U-69 with the minesweeper steaming 2,500 yards (2,300 m) off the starboard quarter of the ferry. The submarine fired one torpedo at the ferry which caused the boilers aboard *Caribou* to explode. The vessel sank in minutes.



S.S. *Caribou* sinking in the Cabot Strait. Photo: [stampaday.wordpress.com](http://stampaday.wordpress.com)

The minesweeper closed with the sinking ship and spotted the U-boat 350 yards (320 m) away. *Grandmère* attempted to ram U-69, but the submarine dived beneath the site of the sinking, expecting the minesweeper to not drop depth charges among the survivors. The minesweeper continued hunting the German submarine for two hours before returning to the site of the sinking and picking up survivors. *Caribou* was carrying 237 people when she sank: 101 passengers and crew of the ferry survived and were recovered by *Grandmère*.

Among the 136 who perished were seven RCNVR and RCNR sailors. Two of those sailors, AB Skinner and AB Tapper, were traveling with their families: both wives and five children perished in the sinking.

*Grandmère* continued with its convoy escort duties of the east coast of Canada. Stoker PO Johnston continued serving in the engine room and on 19 June 1943 he earned the Stokehold Watchkeeping Certificate.

In July 1943, *Grandmère* underwent a refit at Louisburg, Nova Scotia that took seven weeks to complete. Stoker PO Johnston returned to *Stadacona* 20 Oct – 5 Nov 1943 and then he was attached to HMCS *Chaleur* for a week (6 – 11 November 1943). HMCS *Chaleur* was a former

RCMP patrol vessel transferred to the RCN and stationed at Saint Jean on Île-d'Orléans to inspect ships in the St. Lawrence River heading to Quebec City. After this one-week deployment, he was drafted to HMCS *Valleyfield* as Acting Engine Room Artificer 4th Class on 12 November 1943. This promotion to ERA brought new duties and responsibilities; besides running machinery and overseeing the running and maintenance of that machinery, they were expected to manufacture certain replacement parts that were not available to keep the ship operational.



HMCS *Valleyfield*. Photo: Naval Museum of Manitoba)

HMCS *Valleyfield* was a River-class frigate that served primarily as a convoy escort in the Battle of the Atlantic. *Valleyfield* was a new ship being built in Quebec City. A/ERA 4<sup>th</sup> Class Johnston joined the ship as she was preparing for her Commissioning on 7 December 1943. The ship arrived at Halifax on 20 December 1943. The ship's company started work ups in St. Margaret's Bay, completing the process in Bermuda.

With the ship and crew ready for combat, *Valleyfield* left Halifax at the end of February 1944, to join Escort

Group C-1 and sailed for the U.K. with slow convoy SC 154. It was an eventful assignment. *Valleyfield* was detached from the convoy to escort a tug and the convoy's rescue ship *Dundee* to Horta, Azores. Her next assignment was to escort the damaged HMCS *Mulgrave*, in tow, from Horta, Azores to the river Clyde. *Valleyfield* made one more round-trip before her sinking.

On 07 May 1944, after parting company with the ships they had just escorted from the UK, HMCS *Valleyfield* was steaming with four sister escort ships when U-548 fired two acoustic torpedoes at the five warships. It was early in the morning (0435) and they were approximately 50 nautical miles south east of Cape Race, Newfoundland. One torpedo found *Valleyfield*'s port side boiler room, the ship split in two and sank quickly. HMCS *Valleyfield* sank so quickly that other ships in the group did not immediately realize what had happened. A combination of the ship's quick sinking, the delay in rescue efforts, and the cold water resulted in only 43 survivors being picked up by HMCS *Giffard*. Five of the survivors died of exposure so in total 125 of her crew including her Commanding Officer went down with the ship. She was the only RCN ship of her class to be lost.

A letter sent by the Naval Board to John Stewart Johnston's wife on 11 May 1944 described:

"Further to my letter of 8th May 1944, particulars respecting the loss of HMCS *Valleyfield*, from which your husband has been reported 'missing', are being released to the press, and I am accordingly passing them on for your information.

HMCS *Valleyfield* was torpedoed and sunk by enemy action while on convoy escort duty in the North Atlantic, Details of the action are not being released beyond the fact that ship sank almost immediately after being hit.

Thirty-eight members of her complement are listed as survivors; five were killed in action; the remaining one hundred and twenty-one ... are missing.

May I again express the sincere sympathy of the Department in your sad loss.”

His wife, Hazel, gave birth to their son in June 1944, just over a month after him being reported missing in action and presumed dead. She received her husband's war gratuity of \$409.32 for his 21 months of naval service. When big brother Stew died in May 1944, his brother David was living in North Vancouver, brother James was out of the country working for Bahrain Petroleum, and his brother Charles was in active service as a Private in the Canadian Dental Corps.

For his service, ERA John Stewart Johnston was awarded the 1939-45 Star, Atlantic Star, CVSM & Clasp and the War Medal. The Memorial Cross was awarded to his widow, Hazel Johnston and his mother Helen Johnston.

ERA 4th Class John Stewart Johnston is remembered on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 12, on the Memorial Plaque at HMCS *Discovery* and he is commemorated on Page 347 of the Second World War Book of Remembrance.

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**Sources:**

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