

## Lieutenant David Allison Killam, DSC, O-38960



Lieutenant David Killam. Photo:  
1<http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/MTB460.htm>

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Vancouver BC, 8 November 1917**
- **Enlisted: Vancouver Division RCNVR, 18 March 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Clerk, BC Pulp and Paper Company**
- **Death: Died when HMC MTB 460 hit a mine and sank on 2 July 1944**
- **Honours: Distinguished Service Cross**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; Mount Killam on Gambier Island in Howe Sound was named in his honour.**

David Allison Killam was born in Vancouver B.C. on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1917 to a wealthy and prominent Vancouver family. His parents were Lawrence and Edith (née Humphrey) Killam. His father was the manager and president of the British Columbia Pulp and Paper Company which owned mills in Port Alice, Woodfibre and Swanson Bay. At the time of his enlistment in the Vancouver Division he was single, but on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1943 he married Elizabeth (Hebb) Kinnersley. He had three older brothers Frank (aged 32), Lawrence (aged 31) and Ralph (aged 30) and one married sister Margaret Wilson (aged 33) who lived in Barrie, Ontario. While he was overseas serving with the Royal Navy he became father to a son, David Hebb Killam, born 29 December 1943. David Allison Killam and his brothers were all employees of the B.C. Pulp and Paper Company. He indicated his occupation as "clerk." His religion was stated as United Church.

As might be expected coming from such a wealthy family he lived at 1696 Laurier Avenue in the upscale Shaughnessy District of Vancouver. This grand house was built in 1914 and boasted 7 bedrooms. It was built for William Whalen the original owner of B.C. Pulp and Paper but "taken over" by Lawrence Killam the father of David Allison Killam.

David Killam's attestation form was dated 18 March 1940 and he was described as 5' 11 ½" in height with light brown hair and blue eyes. His complexion was fair. He was enrolled in the Vancouver Division RCNVR as a Temporary Acting Sub Lieutenant and was immediately posted to HMCS *Stadacona* for passage to the United Kingdom and service with the Royal Navy. The *UK and Ireland Incoming Passenger Lists* show that he sailed from Saint John, New Brunswick in the Canadian Pacific Liner *Duchess of Atholl* and arrived in Liverpool on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1940.

One of his travelling companions was Cornelius Burke who was also to serve in Motor Torpedo Boats and won a Distinguished Service Cross in 1944. David Killam was taken on strength in HMS *King Alfred*, prior to his arrival, effective 30 March 1940 and remained there until 23 May 1940. *King Alfred* was the primary training establishment for all reserve officers joining the wartime Royal Navy. He briefly appeared on the books of HMS *Pembroke* in late May and early June but most likely for accounting purposes as he was back in *King Alfred* on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June where he remained for two weeks before being appointed to HMS *Victory* additional for Motor Launch Coastal service. This was once again for accounting purposes while he was being trained for service in coastal forces. He was confirmed in rank as a Temporary Sub Lieutenant on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1940 with seniority 18 March 1940.

The evacuation of Dunkirk took place between 27 May 1940 and 4 June 1940. David Killam indicated in a letter written to Admiral Nelles dated 10 October 1941 requesting leave and that from April of 1940 he was part of an evacuation and demolition party serving in France. Killam received the Distinguished Service Cross on 2 August 1940 for his actions during the evacuation of British forces from the shores Dunkirk, France.

The related report states that “He won his Distinguished Service Cross at Dunkirk for his valour in attempting three times to land a tiny power boat on the fire-swept beach to take off British officers. His boat was finally overturned by near direct shell hits. Twice he swam back to the destroyer for another small boat, but the third time there were none left.”

He went on in his letter to Admiral Nelles to say that he had served in Motor Launches in the English Channel and on the North Coast of Africa and had not had any leave since Christmas of 1940.

Meanwhile it appeared as if the RCNVR had lost track of him according to a news clipping from the Vancouver Sun dated 14 December 1940 which indicated that his application to join the RCNVR had been received and was receiving consideration. He was asked to get in touch with local naval authorities for a medical examination if he was still interested. David's father Lawrence Killam wrote a very sharp letter to RCN Barracks in Esquimalt pointing out that his son was on active service in England. This prompted a memorandum from the office of the Minister of National Defence requiring a complete investigation into the circumstances related to the news item from the Vancouver Sun. There followed a lengthy report which attempted to explain the circumstances that led to this apparent gaffe on the part of Naval authorities.

The simple explanation offered by the recruiting officer in Esquimalt was the failure of Sub Lieutenant Killam to inform his office that he had been selected for special training with the Royal Navy and had therefore joined another service. It was considered to be an “understandable” mistake, but not one to be repeated. David Killam's father indicated that he had not been responsible for the newspaper article and was prepared to overlook the incident.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1941 David Killam was appointed to HMS *St Christopher* a shore establishment located in Fort William Scotland. HMS *St Christopher* was commissioned in October of 1940 and in service for only four years. The base existed to train the crews of a variety of different inshore patrol craft. Most of the courses lasted several weeks and it was the primary training establishment for Motor Torpedo Boats. The base was estimated to have trained around 55,000 personnel from several different allied countries during its years in commission. By April 1942 there were around 80 to 90 boats at the training base, comprising a number of different flotillas.

David Killam next appeared on the books of HMS *Drake IV* located in Devonport, England. It was the practice for crews of coastal vessels to be administered through shore establishments and

billeted ashore in hotels or sometimes temporary base accommodation. He was the spare 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant of the 7<sup>th</sup> Motor Launch Flotilla. By 26 May 1941 he was part of the crew of *Motor Launch 272* where he served for 606 days much of it on the coast of North Africa. During this time, he was carried on the books of HMS *Pembroke*. He was promoted Lieutenant on 18 March 1942.

The leave requested in the letter written in 1941 did not allow a return to Vancouver until January of 1943. During the period from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 1943 until the 22 of March 1943 he was held on the books of HMCS *Stadacona* with the additional note that he was to be returned to the Royal Navy. He was transferred to HMCS *Niobe* for HMS *Attack* on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1943. The records for both *Stadacona* and *Niobe* make it clear that he is RCNVR and on loan to the Royal Navy. HMS *Attack* was yet another administrative unit for Royal Navy coastal forces. It was located in Portland, England but later moved to London. While attached to HMS *Attack* on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1944 he was appointed in command of *Motor Torpedo Boat 460*. He remained in command of MTB 460 for 130 days until her loss on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1944.

MTB 460 was listed as a tender to HMCS *Stadacona* and part of the 29<sup>th</sup> Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla. The 29<sup>th</sup> Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla was manned and crewed by Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) reservists in service with the Coastal Forces of the Royal Navy.

The flotilla was formed in March 1944 under the command of Lieutenant Commander Anthony Law (RCNVR) and equipped with eight British built 71 ft 6ins (Mk.VI) Type 'G' MTBs with a displacement of 44 tons. The complement consisted of 2 officers and 14 men. "G" MTBs were armed with 1-6pdr, 2-20mm and 4-18in torpedoes. These vessels were originally designed as motor gun boats (MGBs) but were modified and re-designated as MTBs. They were driven by three Rolls Royce or Packard V-12 Supercharged 1250 H.P. engines, each with a 2,500-gallon capacity of 100 octane gas. These vessels had an operational radius of about 140 miles while cruising at 25 knots, and a top speed of some 40 knots.

The first task assigned to the 29<sup>th</sup> MTB Flotilla was given to MTBs 460, 462, 464 and 465. They were ordered to escort a clandestine mine gathering expedition to the German controlled Normandy coast. On 16 May 1944 the Canadian MTBs proceeded to the French Coast along with two British MTBs assigned to protect them while allowing volunteers to land ashore by small craft to acquire sample mines from the German beach defence. They accomplished their mission undetected, and the captured mines provided much needed intelligence prior to the Allied D-Day landings.



Between 20 and 22 May 1944, the 29th MTB Flotilla joined RCN Tribal-class destroyers and the Canadian 65th MTB Flotilla to intercept enemy coastal convoys in the English Channel. Targeting German schnellboote (E-boats), escort ships, merchant vessels; the MTBs lured German destroyers

within the gun range of the accompanying heavier warships. Following this success, on 27 May 1944 the 29th MTB Flotilla moved to HMS *Hornet* Coastal Forces Base at Gosport (Portsmouth), in preparation for Operation NEPTUNE, the naval phase of Operation OVERLORD, in June 1944.

During the Normandy invasion on June 6, 1944, the 29th Flotilla was assigned to guard the eastern edge of the invasion fleets, while the 65th Flotilla was assigned to protect the western edge. Following the invasion, the MTBs of the 29th Flotilla patrolled the 15 km distance between the eastern flank of the assault area and the German naval base at Le Havre. Each night three or four Canadian MTBs waited until larger Allied ships tracked the German surface ships. The German vessels attempted to either attack the allied assault area or to transport supplies into Le Havre. These forays often resulted in short, sharp engagements with the Germans turning back to safety once they realized that heavier Allied surface forces were in the area. The 29th Flotilla continuously carried out this task through August 1944.

A press report stated, "In the early darkness of D-Day the flotilla of four torpedo boats spotted a pack of German R-boats heading toward the convoy route off Le Havre and quickly gave chase, driving them away after 20 minutes exchange of gunfire. The following night the experience was repeated except that on this occasion it was German destroyers that were met and chased away." For this action, Lieutenant Killam and his crew were congratulated by Rear Admiral Philip Vian, commander of British naval forces.

The words of the flotilla commander Lieutenant Commander Anthony Law, RCNVR best describe the difficulty of continuous operations by MTBs off the coast of France in 1944.

The officers and men were beginning to show the strain caused by months of these nerve-wracking operations, and this combined with irregular meals was responsible for many of us losing weight. The 29th was battle-weary, and we were beginning to feel that we could not last much longer under the severe conditions: mines going off, shore batteries pounding on us; and dive bombers, like vicious bats, roaring out of the night

and putting the fear of God into us...the personnel of the 29th were falling victim to horrible, haunting fears, and the boats, whose arduous task of defending the anchorage had almost burned them out, were badly in need of repair.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July MTB 460 struck a mine with the loss of ten lives. MTBs 460 and 465 were returning from a patrol when 460 suddenly disintegrated. A sheet of flame lifted skyward, followed by a column of water and debris which rose two hundred feet in the air, and showered back upon MTB 465 sailing a hundred yards astern. Only six men of the crew were recovered, the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant David Killam, and nine of his men being lost. Killam survived the explosion and was heard shouting to rescuers in the misty conditions, "carry on, don't worry about me." He was 26 years and 8 months of age and left a wife and a nine-month-old son at his time of death.

Mrs. Elizabeth Killam received the official Telegram reporting that her husband was missing on war service dated the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1944. This was followed by a letter dated the same day which also used the word "missing." The letter confirming his death appeared to have been dated 19 December 1944 but appeared to have been altered by pen and ink. The other dates stamped on the letter confirmed that it was sent at some date between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 29<sup>th</sup> of December. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 1945 David's father, Lawrence Killam, wrote the Naval Secretary a long letter in which he stated in no uncertain terms that he had considerable difficulty with the tone and timing of the 19<sup>th</sup> of December letter from the Naval Secretary.

I fully understand that for official purposes all missing members of defence forces must be presumed dead at the end of specified periods. In view, however, of the very great number of wives or mothers who still keep hoping and who many of these men will eventually return, I wish to respectfully record my very strong opinion that your board takes the trouble to unconsciously produce unnecessary unhappiness."

In the case of missing men, you could very well leave out of communications the use of the word "late" and other references indicative of there being no hope. In particular, a letter sent to arrive on Christmas Day expressing appreciation for the sacrifice of lives was certainly sent in a spirit of kindness (but) resulted in making certain that the recipients would find it difficult to enjoy the day.

This prompted two letters of response from the Naval Secretary both, oddly, written on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January expressing regret for the timing of the letter and confirming that David Killam was dead. One of these letters was considerably more detailed than the other and at some length detailed the loss of MTB 460 and attempted to explain the use of the terms "missing", "dead" and "late." There was in addition a paragraph that indicated that many casualty letters had been held back so that they would not arrive on Christmas Day.

The family of David Killam were not prepared to accept at face value his death without exploring the possibility that he might be "missing" and possibly a prisoner of war.

Lawrence Killam wrote again on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1945 to the Officer in Charge of Records.

A press notice dated Paris April 19<sup>th</sup> stated that the United States 3rd Army had obtained Germany's complete roster of prisoners-of-war.

I am anxious to learn if the name of Lt David A Killam, DSC, RCNVR, reported missing in the English Channel off the French coast on or about July 3, 1944, was included in this list.

Once again, he got a prompt response from the Naval Secretary dated 21 May 1945 which stated that German Casualty Records had been captured intact and that they would be searched for any record that indicated David Killam might have been captured. "Every effort would be made to expedite this inquiry." It was not, however, until the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1945 that a final letter was sent making it clear that "German Casualty Records (had) failed to reveal any information regarding the fate of your son..."

It was very clear that prominent families of men like David Killam caught the attention of the Naval Establishment when they were prepared to write letters.

David Killam had a Will which named his wife, Elizabeth Killam, as the sole beneficiary. A joint account held with his wife at the Bank of Toronto had \$1,937.25 on deposit. In addition, there was a Sun Life insurance policy in the amount of \$1,000 which named his wife as the beneficiary. Two amounts were paid by the Department of National Defence, the first for back pay and allowances in the amount of \$171.07, and the second the War Service Gratuity for \$1,346.33.

In "Other Particulars" relating to his estate it was noted that he had lost "two full service (dress) and equipment" at Dunkirk and lost "all belongings in London bombing – complete new equipment and watch." The note implied that he was in debt for replacing these items.

Officers and men serving in the MTBs and other small craft did not carry with them many of their personal possessions. A complete inventory of David Killam's personal effects was sent to the family dated 14 August 1946. This included all his clothing, books and miscellaneous other items. Of particular interest were membership cards for the various clubs David Killam belonged to in London and other English cities. These included the Woolley Lamb Club, Frisco's, The Clausentum Club, The Sixty-Six Grosvenor St. Club, The Chalet Dance Club, Maxim's, The Veymouth Services Club, Haymarket Club, The Jokers Club and the RN and RM Junior Officers Club. These would have all been wartime clubs and not one of them still exists, but time spent ashore was obviously put to good use.

For his service Lieutenant David Killam was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star and Clasp the Africa Star, the Defence Medal and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp. The record indicated that these were "despatched" on the 7th of October 1944, but not specifically to which member of the family.

The Distinguished Service Cross was awarded, as per London Gazette dated 2 August 1940, 'For courage and resource in withdrawal of troops in neighbourhood of Le Havre'.

Memorial Crosses were sent to Mrs. E. H. Killam on 8 January 1945 and Mrs. L. Killam on 17 March 1945. It was noted in the file that by the 31st of October 1951 Elizabeth Killam had remarried and she was now Mrs. E. H. Craig and living at 4763 West 2nd Avenue.

A footnote to the Memorial Crosses awarded to David Killam's widow and mother was located in a Vancouver Sun article written by David Carigg on 20 January 2020:

Two memorial crosses linked to a Vancouver-born Second World War hero, naval Lieut. David Allison Killam, are back in family hands after being spotted for sale on eBay. The small crosses — that are copies of memorial crosses issued to Killam's widow and mother after he drowned on July 2, 1944 — were spotted by Ontario-based Dave Thomson. Thomson spends his spare time reuniting families with military medals, work for which he has received a commendation from the Department of Veteran's Affairs... On Tuesday, Postmedia News reported the medals were for sale, and soon after the Killam family were notified... The family has purchased the medals from the Ontario-based dealer but are at a loss to explain how they got there. Maud

Killam said it was “not our family behaviour” to let anything of historical interest go. The original memorial crosses and his other medals are kept by David Killam’s grandson.

Lieutenant David Killam is commemorated on Page 352 of the Second World War Book of Remembrance. His name appears on Panel 10 of the Halifax Memorial in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His name also appears on the Motor Torpedo Boat Memorial in the Naval Museum of Manitoba. Mount Killam on Gambier Island in Howe Sound was named after him.

**Prepared By:**

Lieutenant Commander (Ret’d) Robert W. White (HMCS Discovery 1960 – 1989) Citizen Sailor Virtual Cenotaph Research Team.



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