

Wren Imelda Stever W-3419



- **Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service**
- **Born: Bathurst NB, 15 September 1924**
- **Enlisted: NOIC Toronto (located within HMCS York), 25 June 1943**
- **Civilian Occupation: domestic work for Mrs. Ross; hotel in Kirkland Lake**
- **Death: accidental drowning while serving in HMCS Protector on 24 July 1944**
- **Commemorated: The Quebec Memorial - the Pointe-Claire Field of Honour, Montreal and St. Guillaume De Granada Cemetery, Grave 1.**

Mary Imelda Stever was the daughter of Vincent and Mary Louise Stever (nee Vienneau). Both parents were born in New Brunswick and had Acadian roots. They were married in Bathurst, NB on 22 Feb 1922. Church records show that the original family name was Stevor. Vincent Stever earned a living as a miner and Mary Stever was a homemaker. Before Imelda was born on 15 Sept 1924, Mrs. Stever had already lost two of her young children. Imelda had 6 siblings at the time she enlisted: 4 brothers (Joseph Ernest, Elmer, Herman, Vincent Jr) and 2 sisters (Evangeline and Martha). The Stever family were Roman Catholic and lived at 45 Second Street in Kirkland Lake, ON. Mary left school at the age of 14, after completing Grade 6. She was employed by Mrs. Ross for housekeeping duties and worked at a hotel in Kirkland Lake as a waitress and housekeeper. She also had some cooking skills before she enlisted.

It was on her first trip to Toronto that Imelda was recruited into the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) on 25 June 1943, at the age of 18. Her enlistment, initial administration and medical were completed at NOIC Toronto which was housed within HMCS York. She was accepted despite having only completed Grade 6. Enlistment documents described Imelda as 5' 2 1/2", with black hair, hazel eyes, and a 'brunette' complexion. She had a scar on her left eyelid and another on her right knee. Imelda believed that her previous work experience qualified her for work as a cook or steward.

The interviewer described her as an 'attractive French type' and noted that she was alert, willing and keen to serve. She was bilingual, although her English was not as strong as her French. She could read and write in French a little. The interviewer noted that Imelda hadn't had many advantages in life but considered her a very bright candidate who would learn easily and make a good steward. That said, the interviewer doubted that Imelda would be able to understand all the

lectures at HMCS *Conestoga*. Imelda Stever enlisted as a Probationary Wren and was posted to HMCS *Conestoga* in Galt, Ontario where she commenced basic and occupational training on 12 August 1943. She was promoted to Wren on 11 September 1943 and subsequently qualified 'General Duties' on 20 September 1943. Wren Messwoman Stever was deployed to HMCS *Protector II* at Sydney, NS on 21 September 1943.

Historical Context

The Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) was established for the duration of the hostilities and separate from the Volunteer Reserve. Its objective was to enlist women to assume important non-combat roles to free up men for the fighting. WRCNS recruiters selected women between the ages of 18 and 45, typically with a minimum Grade 8 education. New recruits completed 3 weeks of training at HMCS *Conestoga* before being deployed to a naval base. HMCS *Conestoga* was a 'stone frigate' in Galt, Ontario that served as the basic training establishment for the WRCNS. Basic training included physical training, personal hygiene, etiquette, drill, naval customs, protocol, and traditions and was designed to enable a rapid transition from civilian to military life. The WRCNS made a significant contribution to Canada's war effort. Wrens did the same work as men but did not serve on warships at sea. In 1943, Wrens received 4/5 the salary of a man in the same position. Canadian Wrens were paid well - better than both their civilian and British (WRNS) counterparts. By 1945 more than 6,500 women had enlisted, and 39 trades had been opened to women.



**Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service
drilling on the parade square during
initial training at HMCS Conestoga, Galt,
Ontario, Dec 1943.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada
MIKAN No. 3224709**

HMC Naval Base Sydney

HMCS *Protector I* / HMCS *Protector II* / HMCS *Protector III*

"Royal Canadian Navy base HMCS *Protector*, also known as the Point Edward Naval Base, was located next to Sydney Harbour, on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island. It was stood up on 22 Jul 1940 and used by the navy during the Second World War. It was mainly used to provision, protect, and repair the various merchant marine convoys to Quebec, Halifax, and the United Kingdom. HMCS *Protector* was initially located on the Sydney waterfront and used commercial wharves and buildings along Esplanade Street, where the present armouries and marine terminal are located. On 15 March 1943, a new custom-built shore facility and extensive piers were opened at Point Edward on the opposite western shore of the harbour and was named HMCS *Protector II*, while the original was then renamed HMCS *Protector I*." (For Posterity's Sake)

Wren Messwoman Imelda Stever's Divisional Officer at HMCS *Protector* rated her character as Very Good. Her Efficiency was rated initially as Moderate but improved to Satisfactory by the time of her death. During this period, Imelda's brother Joseph Ernest was serving overseas, although there is no record of his unit affiliation.

Wren Messwoman Imelda Stever's service came to a tragic end when she drowned accidentally while on shore leave from HMCS *Protector*. On 24 July 1944, she joined a party of shipmates headed to a local quarry to swim. Three Seamen and six Wrens walked approximately 1.5 miles to the abandoned quarry at Point Edward which was often used for recreational swimming. An RCMP report provided details of the accident. Eyewitnesses reported that Imelda and two of her friends (Wren Mary Rech and Wren Lillian Penteliuk) ran ahead of the rest of the party, excited to arrive at the quarry. Wren Lillian Penteliuk reported that the three friends walked into the water together 'holding hands' when Wren Stever 'fell into a hole'. The investigator concluded that the women were unfamiliar with the structure of the quarry and unaware that the gradual slope would abruptly drop off to a depth of 60 feet. None of the women was able to swim and the remainder of the party was approximately 15 minutes behind them. When they arrived at the quarry, they found Wren Stever and Wren Penteliuk in distress, clinging together approximately 10 feet from shore. The women were pulled from the water by Ordinary Seaman F.J. Hampson and artificial respiration was performed until the base Medical Officer arrived. Unfortunately, Wren Stever could not be resuscitated.

Their shipmates were initially unaware that Wren Rech was also in the water and had disappeared below the surface. Her body was recovered the following day by Navy divers from Boom Defence Depot. Imelda and her friend Mary were both 19 years old. Wren Lillian Penteliuk (W-3792) survived the accident, and her testimony forms an important part of the RCMP report and subsequent Inquiry. The Commissioners concluded that Wren Messwoman Stever's *death was incurred during service in Canada, but did not arise out of, nor was it, directly connected with military service.*

For her service, Wren Stever was awarded the War Medal and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal. The Canadian Memorial Cross was awarded to her mother, Mary L. Stever.



**Wren Imelda Stever is one of 92 Quebecers remembered on The QUEBEC MEMORIAL located in the Pointe-Claire Field of Honour, Montreal, QC.
Photo: Commonwealth War Graves Commission**

Wren Messwoman Stever's body was returned to her family in Rouyn-Noranda, in Abitibi-Temiscamingue, Quebec for burial. Vincent Stever had moved his family to that region to enable him to work at the McWatters Gold Mine. Wren Imelda Stever is buried in Saint Guillaume de Granada Cemetery, in Granada, Quebec. (Grave 1). Imelda is also commemorated in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 452 at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa; and on The Quebec Memorial located in the Pointe-Claire Field of Honour, Montreal. The

Commonwealth War Graves Commission built the Quebec Memorial in the Montreal Pointe Claire National Field of Honour to commemorate the Commonwealth war burials in the Province of

Quebec whose graves can no longer be marked or maintained. The Memorial consists of two large blocks of granite, as well as a walkway from Currie Circle.

Prepared By:

Lieutenant-Commander (Retired) Elizabeth Woodliffe, Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Research Team



Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – Imelda Stever
- Library and Archives Canada - Service file for Wren Imelda Stever
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial – Newspaper articles
- <http://www.ancestrylibrary.com> (Stever family records)
- <http://www.veterans.gc.ca> (National Inventory Canadian Memorials Database)
- <http://cwgc.org> (Commonwealth War Graves Commission Archives)
- <http://www.forposterityssake.ca> (HMCS *Protector*, HMCS *Conestoga*)
- <http://www.forposterityssake.ca> (The Development of the WRCNS and their Role in Communications and Intelligence; Julie Anne Redstone-Lewis)
- <https://navalandmilitarymuseum.org> (“Wrens Lost in Service”, Chris Perry, Command Historian, Royal Canadian Navy)
- <http://www.journal-forces.ca> (“Serving their Country: The Story of the Wrens, 1942-1946”; Emilie Anne Plows)