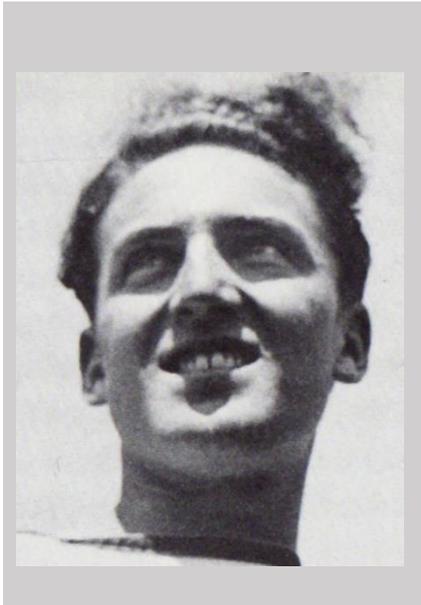


Signalman William George Stewart V-8866



Signalman William Stewart. Photo:
Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Hamilton ON, 11 December 1921**
- **Enlisted: Hamilton Division RCNVR, 25 June 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Retoucher, Standard Engravers**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12; HMCS *Star* Memorial and Stewart Lake in Eastern ON is named in his honour**

William George Stewart came into this world in the city of Hamilton, Ontario on the 11th of December 1921. The first son of his recently married parents, George and Hilda Stewart, he grew up near the industrial Hamilton Waterfront - less than one kilometer away from the current location of the city's Naval Reserve Division, HMCS *Star*. The fair-haired William attended Bennetto High School for three years and was a member of the local Calvin Presbyterian Church. Finishing his public education at the age of sixteen, William enrolled at Wentworth County Technical school in 1937 to become a skilled tradesman. After graduation, he apprenticed at a Hamilton firm, Standard Engravers, to learn the trade of engraving and electro-typing. Upon the successful completion of his apprenticeship, William was hired by Standard Engravers, a Toronto based firm.

On the twelfth of September 1939, Canada declared war against the German Third Reich. However, William did not immediately enlist for military service at the commencement of the war. Only seventeen years old, he did not meet the legal age requirements for enlistment. During the early period of the conflict, many in Britain and its Commonwealth were far from certain that hostilities would rise to the infamous brutality of the Great War two decades earlier. However, after the subsequent dark and desperate years, Canada heightened its commitment to the Allied war effort. Now 19, William enrolled in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve through HMCS *Star* on the 23rd of June 1941. His two younger brothers, James and David later followed him into naval service. William was given a formal promise by his employer, one Mr. Northgrave, that he would have his position back once the Second World War was won. Tragically, this guarantee never had a chance of being granted.

Now an Ordinary Seaman, William gave his oath of allegiance two days later on the 25 June 1941. According to his attestation papers, at the time William was sworn into naval service, he was five feet eleven inches tall, weighed 145 pounds, and was marked as possessing perfect eyesight.

Recruited as a visual signaler, William left Hamilton to begin training for his new role. Also known as a Signaller, this position was critical for ship-to-ship communication, as wireless technology hadn't reached the level of dominance that would become evident in later years. William became one of the first students to attend HMCS *St. Hyacinthe*, which had become Canada's principal Signal School. Based in Quebec, this recently established facility was instrumental in training thousands of operators during World War Two. William was taught flag hoist protocols, semaphore technique, directional and non-directional flashing light, as well as pyrotechnics. As few of the sailors on course at *St. Hyacinthe* had actual experience at sea, great efforts were made to simulate real-world conditions. Model ships' bridges were built on the roofs at the signal school, and the signallers carried out mock ship-to-ship exercises with the equipment they'd use while onboard an actual warship. During this training, in a performance report, William was positively described as "an earnest student, who applies himself constantly."

Due to the dire need for more trained sea-going personnel, most training serials were graduating classes in approximately three months. After the conclusion of his training and an official RCN Signaller, William traveled to Halifax's HMCS *Stadacona*, Canada's primary naval base on the country's eastern coast. He then journeyed across the Atlantic and was briefly attached to the RCN's U.K. Headquarters in London. During the winter of 1943, William became one of the original members of the recently commissioned HMCS *Athabaskan* and would spend the rest of his war crewing the Tribal-class Destroyer. This 1850-ton vessel could reach a top speed of thirty-six knots and was heavily armed with a suite of anti-submarine and anti-air weaponry.



Damage to HMCS Athabaskan caused by glider bomb 27 Aug 1943
Photo credit: From the collection of Joseph W. (Jim) L'Esperance, LS, RCNVR (www.forposteritysake.ca)

During the early months of his time aboard, William is credited with designing the ship's impressive badge. The two Destroyers who would subsequently bear her name would honour his excellent work by chiefly incorporating William's design into each new iteration of the Athabaskan badge.

This warship spent 1943 laying minefields, patrolling the English Channel, and escorting arctic convoys enroute to the Soviet Union on the infamous Murmansk run. *Athabaskan* was almost sunk that summer by a Henschel Hs 293 glider explosive during an anti-submarine pursuit. While the anti-ship 500 kg bomb passed through *Athabaskan* and exploded outside of the ship's hull, William was wounded during the attack. On duty, located on the ship's

starboard flag deck, his station stood dangerously out in the open. Needing ready access alongside the signal projectors, the lack of the protection provided by the warship's armour resulted in severe hearing damage. According to the associated medical report, the detonation of the enemy bomb resulted in "acute right otitis media with middle ear deafness, due to explosion/blast." However, William was fortunate to come out of the encounter alive. Regrettably, several of his shipmates weren't so fortunate.

On the morning of 29 April 1944, the *Athabaskan* was patrolling with her sister destroyer HMCS *Haida*. Responding to orders to intercept German warships operating in the English Channel, the Canadian ships engaged two enemy torpedo boats. *Haida* successfully drove off the attacking vessels. However, as she returned to her sister ship's last known location, she discovered *Athabaskan* sunk. One hundred and twenty-eight men were lost after the destroyer was fatally struck with a well-aimed torpedo. Of those who survived, forty-four were rescued by *Haida*, and six by small boat. Though she tried to recover as many sailors as possible, *Haida*'s Captain was unwilling to risk the loss of his own ship. With profound regret, *Haida* was forced to leave the area of the sinking. However, eighty-three surviving sailors were rescued by the German Kriegsmarine, and became German prisoners of war for the remainder of the conflict. William was not so lucky. Originally reported missing, the Canadian government was notified that he was not amongst those rescued by the German Navy. Likely on the upper decks when *Athabaskan* was fatally struck, it is probable that William managed to get off the warship before she went under. After fourteen months and twenty-six days aboard the *Athabaskan*, he was fated to share her end in the cold dark of that tragic night.

Signalman Stewart's body was never recovered. He was 22 years old at the time of his death. William is remembered on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 12, on the HMCS *Star* Memorial, on a memorial plaque in the village of Brignogan, France, and Stewart Lake in Eastern ON is named in his honour.

For his service, Signalman William George Stewart was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service medal and Clasp, and the War medal. His mother, Hilda Stewart, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Prepared By:

Acting Sub-Lieutenant Simon Gonsalves, Waterloo Ontario, Public Affairs Officer HMCS *Star* & Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Project Researcher



Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database profile for William George Stewart
- Canada, World War II Records and Service Files of War Dead, 1939-1947 – profile page for William George Stewart
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial – Signalman William George Stewart
- For Posterity's Sake www.forposteritysake.ca HMCS *ATHABASKAN* G07 Retrieved 24 May 2022
- Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) 1931-1949: HMCS *Athabaskan* G07

- Hamilton Naval Heritage – “H.M.C.S. *STAR*”
- “VISUAL SIGNALLING in the RCN” - <http://www.jproc.ca/rrp/rrp2/visual.html>
- “For Posterity’s Sake” - <http://www.forposterityssake.ca/SE/SE0010.htm>
- “HMCS *St. Hyacinthe*” - <https://www.canada.ca/en/navy/services/history/ships-histories/st-hyacinthe.html>