

## Able Seaman Robert Edwin White V-16866



AB. ROBERT E. WHITE  
... from Calgary

Able Seaman White. Photo: Canadian  
Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Youngstown AB, 7 June 1920**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 22 April 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Florist, A.M. Terrill Greenhouses**
- **Death: Died when HMCS *St Croix* was torpedoed and sank on 20 September 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial, Western Canada High School WW 2 Memorial, Field of Crosses Calgary**

Robert Edwin White was born in Youngstown Alberta on 7 June 1920; he was the son of George and Elsie White. George White was born in Ryton Durham England in 1889; he immigrated to Canada in 1906 and moved to Calgary Alberta. He was living in the Hillhurst area and employed as a farm labourer. Elsie Barraclough was born in Halifax, West Yorkshire, England in July 1889. In 1907 she immigrated to Canada with her family and also lived in the Hillhurst area of Calgary. They were married in Calgary early in 1910 and lived at 310 10st N.W. It was at this address that their first child Alberta May White was born in December of 1910. In the spring of 1911, the family moved to a homestead farm located north east of Youngstown. For several years they lived in a sod shack until a wooden house was built. They had three more children while living on the farm in Youngstown, Mabel Estelle in 1917, Robert Edwin in 1920 and George Frederick in 1925.

In 1927, they moved back to Calgary and lived at 333 13st NW. Robert's father George was employed as the caretaker of the King George Masonic Lodge located at 1126 Kensington Rd. N.W. At the time of Robert's enlistment in the navy this was given as the families' residence. The family also became active members of the Hillhurst Baptist Church which was located on Kensington Close.

Robert started school at Grand Trunk School, 2416 5 Ave. NW, then went on to Hillhurst Public School until 1935 when he went to Western Canada High School. Western Canada High School located at 614 17 Ave. SW was both an academic and vocational school. Robert learned cabinet making but quit school after grade 10. At the time of his enlistment Robert was working as a "Florist". He was actually growing roses in a greenhouse for A.M. Terrill Greenhouses located at

604 1<sup>st</sup> West; he had been doing this job for 3 years. On his enlistment application he stated that he planned to become a farmer after his service.

Robert had enlisted with the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC) at Sarcee Training Base Calgary on 15 August 1940. He was discharged upon his enlistment in The Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR).

Robert enlisted in the RCNVR at HMCS *Tecumseh* in Calgary on 22 April 1942. His medical documents show him to be 5'7" tall, 134 pounds with brown hair and hazel eyes. He listed his religion as Baptist. He enlisted for the length of the hostilities. He was on divisional strength until 8 July 1942 when he was put on active duty. He received basic training at *Tecumseh* until 8 September 1942 when he was dispatched to the west coast for training at HMCS *Naden*. *Naden* was the training shore base at Esquimalt; here he took courses in Radar operation. On 9 December 1942 he was dispatched to HMCS *Canso*, a Bangor-class minesweeper that was engaged on the "Western Patrol". *Canso's* specific duty was to patrol the west coast of Vancouver Island as far north as the Queen Charlotte Strait. They checked all inlets and sounds for enemy activity.

Robert served aboard HMCS *Canso* for 140 days and was then dispatched to the east coast of Canada on 28 April 1943. He was assigned more training at HMCS *Stadacona* and then at HMCS *Cornwallis*. These were shore-based training facilities in Halifax. Some of this training was in leadership and he passed his first required course to become a Petty Officer. He was rated as an Able Seaman on 8 July 1943. On 28 July 1943 he was dispatched to HMCS *St. Croix*.

HMCS *St. Croix* was a Town-class destroyer that had been acquired from the United States Navy. *St. Croix* had been active on the Newfoundland-Londonderry (known as Newfy-Derry) convoy escorts run since the early part of 1941. These were convoys that the Royal Canadian Navy would escort from St. John's Newfoundland to Iceland where the Royal Navy would take over and escort to Londonderry Ireland. By the time that Able Seaman Robert White joined the crew this had been renamed the Mid-Ocean-Escort-Group and they were escorting merchant ships all the way to Londonderry, Ireland.

HMCS *St. Croix* had been very successful as an escort ship and had participated in the sinking of 2 U-Boats. The allies were beginning to get the upper hand in the Battle of The Atlantic, but in 1943 the German navy had equipped some of its submarines with acoustic torpedoes. These torpedoes could be launched from a distance of 5000 meters at a speed of 24 knots (44km/hr) and were guided by an acoustic homing device that homed in on the noise of a ship's propeller. The allies named these GNATS (German Naval Acoustic Torpedoes).

On 16 September 1943, *St. Croix* and 2 Royal Navy ships, the frigate HMS *Itchen* and the corvette HMS *Polyanthus* were dispatched north from their position in the Bay of Biscay to assist a very large convoy that was headed west. It was actually a combined convoy of ON 202 and ONS 18 and was at the mercy of several German submarines (U boats).

On 20 September 1943 HMCS *St. Croix* was the first vessel to be hit. At 2150 a GNAT struck near the stern, quickly followed by a second torpedo. The ship did not sink immediately, and the crew prepared to abandon ship. Less than an hour later a third GNAT fired by U-305 hit the *St. Croix* and she sank within 3 minutes. Both British ships fell back to attempt rescue operations. *Itchen* looked for survivors while *Polyanthus* hunted for the U boats. The rescue attempt was aborted when the *Polyanthus* was also sunk. HMS *Itchen* was forced to leave the area and was not able to return until later the next day when they were successful in picking up 1 survivor from HMS *Polyanthus* and 81 survivors of HMCS *St. Croix*. The survivors had been in the water for 13 hours by this time. Unfortunately, a day later at 0200 on 23 September 1943 a GNAT fired by U-

666 sank the HMS *Itchen*. There were only 3 survivors from this attack, 2 from *Itchen* and a lone survivor of HMCS *St. Croix*.

HMS *Polyanthus* lost 86 men, HMS *Itchen* lost 230 men and HMCS *St. Croix* lost 146 Canadian sailors. Five of the lost sailors were men that had enlisted at HMCS *Tecumseh* in Calgary. The lone survivor was also from *Tecumseh*, Petty Officer William Fisher from Turner Valley, AB.

For his service Able Seaman Robert Edwin White was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp and the War Medal. He was 23 years old at the time of his death.

Able Seaman White is remembered on the Halifax Memorial Panel 9, Second World War Book of Remembrance page 226, HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque, Western Canada High School WWII Memorial and The Field of Crosses in Calgary.

**Prepared By:**

Prepared by: Ross Anderson 3 years' service RCNR and Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Research Team



**Sources:**

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – profile for Robert Edwin White
- Naval Museum of Manitoba/Battle of the Atlantic/HMCS *St. Croix*
- Library and Archives Canada-Service file for Able Seaman Robert White
- [www.legacy.com/obituary/Alberta/McIlveen](http://www.legacy.com/obituary/Alberta/McIlveen)
- Calgary Herald 1 October 1943 page 24
- Lest We Forget/Casualty List sinking of HMCS *St. Croix*
- Trident Navy Newspaper 11 March 2022
- [http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS \*St. Croix\*](http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS%20St.%20Croix)

Able Seaman Robert Edwin White



Ordinary Seaman Robert Edwin White in 1941. Photo taken at the rear of 1126 Kensington Rd N.W. Calgary. Source: Ancestry.ca/ documents/ Robert Edwin White



Ordinary Seaman Robert White. Photo taken in downtown Calgary in 1941. Source: Ancestry.ca/documents /Robert Edwin White