

Supply Assistant William Clarence Burton V-36182



Supply Assistant William Burton. Photo:
Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: New Richmond QC, 11 August 1917**
- **Enlisted: Vancouver Division RCNVR, 8 September 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Clerk, Safeway Stores Limited**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Valleyfield* was torpedoed and sunk on 7 May 1944**
- **Buried: St. John's (Mount Pleasant) Cemetery, Newfoundland, Sec. A. Plot 1. Grave G**
- **Commemorated: Memorial Plaque HMCS *Discovery*; and HMCS *Valleyfield* Monument at Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, QC**

William Clarence Burton was born to William Clarence and Claudia Burton on 11 August 1917 in New Richmond, QC. New Richmond is situated on the southern coast of the Gaspé Peninsula. His father died in November of 1919, and his mother, who identified herself as Claudia Burton at the time of his enlistment, was living in Steveston, BC. William was the youngest child of a very large family of 11 children that consisted of four brothers aged 6 to 24 years older than William and six sisters aged 8 to 23 years older than him. Most of his siblings lived in Ontario and Quebec, with two residing in the United States. William lived with one of his sisters at 1905 Edinburgh Street in New Westminster, BC, when he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR), Vancouver Division. It was noted that he had been a resident of New Westminster for ten years. At the time of his enlistment, William was unmarried.

William Burton enrolled in the 2nd Battalion New Westminster Regiment ("the Westies") on 22 November 1940. On his enrollment document, it stated that he had a preference for military service in the Air Force. In 1936, the "Westies" had amalgamated with C Company of the 11th Machine Gun Battalion, CMGC and been redesignated The Westminster Regiment (Machine Gun). With the German invasion of Poland, the regiment's 1st Battalion was mobilized on 2 September 1939 as a machine gun battalion.

William transferred from the army to the navy and was taken on strength in the Vancouver Division of the RCNVR on 8 September 1941. His service as a Private with the New Westminster Regiment was terminated on 6 September 1941.

William's civilian employment as a grocery clerk for Safeway Stores Limited suggested that he



would best serve the RCNVR in one of the supply trades. He had an excellent letter of reference, dated 15 July 1941, from Mr. W.J. McCann, the Personnel Manager at the Cambie Street Store, where William had worked for nine years. On the strength of this letter, the Commanding Officer of the Vancouver Division recommended to the Naval Secretary that he be enrolled as a Victualling Assistant even though he had only two years of high school education. William Burton was rated as a Probationary Victualling Assistant on 8 September 1941.

At the time of his attestation, he was described as 5' 9" tall with brown hair and blue eyes. His religion was listed as the Church of England. When he joined the Vancouver Division, his mother was still in Steveston, BC, but by 1944, she had remarried and was now Mrs. Claudia McKenzie and had moved to 177 Gibbon Street, Oshawa, ON.

William remained in the Vancouver Division on Active Service until 14 October 1941, when he was posted to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, BC, for training as a Victualing Assistant. This was followed by further training in HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, NS,

from 15 December 1941 to 6 March 1942. On completion of training, he was rated as a Supply Assistant. The distinction between the two trades was related to the specific nature of the task. The Victualing Assistant was responsible for food products delivered to the ship's galley. The Supply Assistant had more general responsibilities. His Examinations, Notations and Qualifications record indicated that he had passed the Victualling Assistant Tech Course on 5 December 1941, so why he did not continue in that trade designation is unclear.

During his time in *Stadacona*, he briefly served in HMCS *Venture*, a three-masted schooner employed as an accommodation vessel and guard ship. On 2 April 1942, Supply Assistant Burton was transferred to HMCS *Hochelaga*, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) manning depot in Montreal, QC. Initially, he served for a week aboard HMCS *Woodstock*, possibly provisioning the ship before her commissioning. After this, he worked in HMCS *Hochelaga* for four months, likely in the Naval Stores.

In August 1942, Supply Assistant Burton returned to Halifax and joined HMCS *Kenogami*, a Flower-class corvette assigned to convoy escort duties. Burton served on *Kenogami* continuously from 21 August 1942 until 18 August 1943, escorting 16 convoys, including transatlantic voyages and shorter trips between the mid-Atlantic and North American ports. As a Supply Assistant, one of Burton's responsibilities was ensuring that the ship was well-provisioned during the very brief periods when *Kenogami* was alongside. Documents in his service file show that Burton challenged but failed the Leading Supply Assistant exam in November 1942.



On 26 July 1943, Supply Assistant William Burton was charged and found guilty of an act “to the prejudice of good order and naval discipline in that he did mail a letter ashore in contravention of Naval Order 2431 which communicated information that might be useful to the enemy, to a person to whom he was not authorized to communicate it.” According to the records, the conviction resulted in a 28-day sentence at Debert

Military Detention Barracks in Nova Scotia. Debert was mainly utilized as a Royal Canadian Air Force training establishment during the war, and information regarding its use as a military prison is scarce.

The offence occurred while HMCS *Kenogami* was in refit at an outpost. Given the previous good conduct of Supply Assistant William Burton, the sentence seemed excessive. On 31 December 1942, his character had been assessed as “Very Good” and his conduct “Superior.” He had little to offer in his own defence, and Lieutenant Godfrey Harry Hayes, DSC, RCNR, introduced the letter as evidence. It is unclear from the Naval Training and Active Service record that this sentence was ever served. It is, however, worth noting that Burton was sent ashore.

After another short period in HMCS *Stadacona*, Burton was drafted to HMCS *Protector II* on 28 August 1943. 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 established in 1940 and used by the navy during the Second World War mainly to provision, protect and repair the various merchant ship convoys to Quebec, Halifax, and the United Kingdom. Burton remained ashore, and probably very happily, until 24 February 1944. It was then back to sea on 25 February 1944 in HMCS *Valleyfield*.

HMCS *Valleyfield* was a River-class frigate, which was far more habitable than the smaller corvettes. The River-class frigates were also faster and had twice the endurance of the corvettes. The Royal Navy (RN) frigates were named for rivers and hence known as the River-class, and the RCN ships were named for towns and cities. Commissioned on 7 December 1943 at Quebec City, QC, HMCS *Valleyfield* arrived at Halifax, NS, on 20 December 1943



and commenced work-ups in St. Margaret's Bay, completing the process in Bermuda. She left Halifax at the end of February 1944, with Supply Assistant Burton embarked, to join Escort Group C-1 and sailed for the United Kingdom with convoy SC.154. However, en route, she was detached to Horta, Azores, to escort the rescue ship *Dundee* with the corvette HMCS *Regina* in tow, the latter having fouled her screw while fueling.

The next assignment for *Valleyfield* was to escort an RN salvage tug with the disabled HMCS *Mulgrave* in tow from Horta to the Clyde. The three ships left the Azores on 14 March 1944 and joined convoy SL.151 (from Sierra Leone) three days later. *Valleyfield* later made one uneventful return trip to Canada with a 50-ship convoy.

During her final mission, *Valleyfield* safely escorted a convoy of 73 ships that departed from Londonderry on 27 April 1944. After separating from convoy ONM 234 on 7 May 1944, the escort ships of EG C-1 were en route to St. John's and were approximately 50 miles southeast of Cape Race. Even though the conditions were favourable for a submarine attack, the escort group had not been zigzagging for several hours.

The Officer of the Watch had just called for the middle watch when the ASDIC operator suddenly warned of the presence of a submarine. Just as Action Stations were called, at 0435, submarine U-548 fired two GNATs (acoustic torpedoes), one of which ripped into the port side boiler room of *Valleyfield*. The tremendous explosion broke the ship in two and she quickly settled into the water and sank in less than four minutes; she was the only RCN ship of her class to be lost.

As *Valleyfield* was travelling astern of the group, it took some time for the other escorts to realize that the ship had been attacked and sunk. As the ship was sinking, most of the ship's crew entered the ice-cold North Atlantic water, which registered a temperature of 32 degrees Fahrenheit (0 Celsius) when measured during the last watch. In addition, oily water choked the survivors as they huddled together, helping each other to survive. Some clambered on top of wreckage or clung to Carley floats. Others remained in the water, buoyed by their life jackets.

Now that the ship had sunk entirely, the crew found themselves alone with the other escorts, unaware of the deadly occurrence astern. Finally, HMCS *Giffard*, realizing that *Valleyfield* was missing, came to rescue survivors. However, as was the doctrine at the time, the rescue did not begin until she had spent valuable time searching for the U-boat that had caused the tragedy. By this time, many men had surrendered their hold on Carley floats or wreckage and sank from sight. A total of 125 men perished that night, all within the coastal shores of Newfoundland. Supply Assistant William Clarence Burton was 26 years old when he died.

Mrs. Claudia McKenzie, William's mother, was informed of her son's loss by telegram on 8 May 1944. In a letter of the same date, she was informed that her son's body had been recovered and was in St John's, Newfoundland and that a funeral with full naval honours would occur. The details would be sent to her once arrangements had been made. A subsequent letter dated 18 May 1944 stated that a funeral occurred on 10 May 1944. The letter further noted, "*Your son's grave is being cared for and will be temporarily marked with a specially designed wooden cross bearing his official particulars.*"

The Imperial War Graves Commission later arranged a permanent grave marker. Supply Assistant William Burton's grave is located in St. John's (Mount Pleasant) Cemetery, Newfoundland, Canada, Grave Reference: Sec. A. Plot 1. Grave G. The epitaph reads:

"The Dead in Christ Shall Rise First - 1 Thess 3:1" (sic)



Temporary grave marker for the final resting place of Supply Assistant William Clarence Burton
Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

For his service, Supply Assistant William Clarence Burton was awarded the 1939-1945 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, and the War Medal. His mother, Claudia, was awarded the Canadian Memorial Cross on 26 May 1944.

Supply Assistant William Burton is commemorated on the Honour Roll plaque at HMCS *Discovery* and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 264, at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa. A monument and plaque commemorating the loss of HMCS Valleyfield is located in Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, QC. The memorial number is 24006-025 and consists of an anchor and plaque at 240 Victoria Street on Vieux-Canal Promenade in Delpha-Sauvé Park.

Prepared By*:

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* All stories are edited by the project crew and sometimes altered to conform to the Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph format, length and content parameters.

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- Find a Grave, database and images
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/105999511/william-clarence-burton>: accessed 16

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[March 2022](#)), memorial page for Supply Assistant William Clarence Burton (11 Aug 1917–7 May 1944), Find a Grave Memorial ID 105999511, citing Mount Pleasant Cemetery, St. John's, Avalon Peninsula Census Division, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada; Maintained by SJB Hearn (contributor 46864594).

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