

## Sick Berth Attendant Donald Cecil Eddy V-34597



SBA Donald Eddy. Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Provost AB, 20 April 1923**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Nonsuch*, 21 August 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Attendant, Ponoka Mental Hospital**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Guysborough* was torpedoed and sank on 18 March 1945**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 13; HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial Plaque; and the Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque**

Donald Cecil Eddy was born in Provost, AB (approx. 300 km SSE of Edmonton) on 20 April 1923, the oldest son and fifth child of six to Judson Cecil Eddy and Mabel Caroline Eddy (nee Thompson). His father, Judson, was born and raised near Brant, ON and moved to Alberta in 1908 to homestead a quarter section of land near Provost. His mother was born in South Dakota and moved to Alberta in 1911 at the age of 17. His parents were married in 1913.

In 1938, tragedy struck the family when Donald's younger brother, Robert Douglas, passed away at the age of 12. Additionally, at some point in time before Donald's enlistment, his father was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and hospitalized first in Ponoka, AB and then later in Vancouver, BC. Donald was able to complete Grade 9 but had to work thereafter, possibly due to his father's illness.

In 1942, one day after his 19th birthday, Donald enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at HMCS *Nonsuch* in Edmonton, AB. He listed his religion as the United Church at the time. Before his enlistment, Donald had worked for nine months as a Hospital Attendant at the Ponoka Mental Hospital and, therefore, had applied to do similar work in the Navy.

After new entry training at *Nonsuch* and two months working at HMCS *Discovery* in Vancouver, Donald was sent to HMCS *Naden*, Canada's west coast training and operations base in Esquimalt, BC. He trained there as a Probationary Sick Berth Attendant (Prob. SBA) until 6 November 1942, when he completed his training and was promoted to SBA. Larger warships in the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) usually had a doctor onboard, but corvettes and minesweepers typically only had a SBA. The SBA, called "Tiffany" in sailor's slang, was not only responsible for the

general health of the crew at sea but was also called on to provide medical treatment for combat casualties or survivors. If there was not a doctor present among the warships escorting a convoy, the SBA had to rely on his own training and resources to treat his patients.

In May 1942, while still at *Naden*, Donald requested support for his father through a Dependant's Allowance, which was granted. Later, in July 1943, Donald married Thelma June Eckardt in Saanich, BC. Donald remained working at *Naden* until 5 December 1943, when he was sent to HMCS *Stadacona*, Canada's east coast training and operations base in Halifax, NS. On 16 December 1943, he was posted to HMCS *Guysborough*.

HMCS *Guysborough* was a Bangor-class minesweeper but was used in a dual role as convoy escort and minesweeper. She was relatively small and cramped with a crew of 77 but designed for only 40. There was only one SBA for this entire crew. In February 1944, she was sent to the

United Kingdom as part of Canada's contribution to the invasion of Normandy. Upon arrival, she was assigned to the British 14th Minesweeping Flotilla. It was during this time that *Guysborough* was involved in a dramatic rescue of an American warship in March 1944 during a violent Atlantic storm. The ship had a damaged rudder, lost



HMCS GUYSBOROUGH J52. Photo: For Posterity Sake  
RCN Photo # L-5281 Courtesy of the Comox RCAF Museum

all communications, and had run out of fuel. The crew of HMCS *Guysborough* saw her safely into port. This event received widespread publicity, and Donald, along with fellow Albertans serving in the *Guysborough* crew, were pictured in the *Calgary Herald* and other Alberta newspapers.

HMCS *Guysborough* was employed in her principal warfare role in preparation for D-Day and swept the American sector of the invasion route during the night of 5/6 June 1944. The 14th Minesweeping Flotilla resumed minesweeping activities an hour after the assault began on 6 June. They swept Baie de la Seine off the Normandy coast until 13 June and continued minesweeping activities in the invasion area until 21 June.

Minesweeping is an exacting form of naval warfare and requires extremely precise navigation to ensure the minimum probability of ships following astern striking mines. Moreover, the beaches of Normandy were heavily defended by large guns ashore, any of which could have seriously damaged or sunk vessels of this size instantly. Finally, much of the work preparing for the invasion had to be done at night in what was reported as fairly rough seas. Yet, somehow, they managed, and very few ships in the massive fleet assembled for D-Day (Operation Neptune) encountered mines during or after the invasion. From SBA Eddy's perspective, *Guysborough* did not experience any fatalities during the intense operation. *Guysborough* remained in UK waters until December 1944, when she returned to Canada for another refit, this time at Lunenburg, NS.

In March 1945, following the completion of the refit, *Guysborough* was ordered back to the UK, and while en route, she was torpedoed at 1850 local time on 17 March 1945 about 210 miles north of Cape Finisterre in the Bay of Biscay. *Guysborough* was hit by a G7es torpedo, also known as a GNAT torpedo. This was the first acoustic homing torpedo ever deployed in combat by U-868. The minesweeper was sailing alone from Horta, in neutral Portugal, to Plymouth when she was hit.

The initial torpedo struck the stern, which caused significant damage and a slight list to port, but the ship refused to sink, and at this point no casualties were suffered. The first torpedo did, however, manage to damage or destroy the ship's boats, and all that remained were Carley floats. Carley floats are open, cork-based flotation devices that offer little shelter from the sea.

About 45 minutes later, U-868 fired a second torpedo that struck the ship amidships on the starboard side. She quickly sank, and of all the survivors who were in the water, most were able to get onto the Carley floats. All were exposed to the elements and the cold. When a ship sinks alone, there are usually no immediate reports of casualties or survivors. It was clear, however, that there was some delay in getting a rescue vessel to the scene. In his letter to the widow, dated 21 April 1945, the Secretary to the Naval Board, Commander J. Jeffery, RCN, wrote the following (in part):

*"I regret to inform you that in view of the length of time which has elapsed since your husband, Donald Cecil Eddy, Sick Berth Attendant, Official Number V-34597, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve was reported missing...the Canadian Naval Authorities have now presumed his death to have occurred on the 18th of March, 1945."*

The following is an excerpt from the report of the Canadian Naval Press Relations Officer who was in contact with survivors of the ill-fated ship:

*"Only one death occurred from the explosion [ed. from the second torpedo] but many died during the 19 hours the men who had survived the explosion spent clinging to five Carley floats... Both the air and water were cold, "said one of the survivors. Most of the men who died, died smiling. If they suffered any, you'd had never known it ..."*

*Please allow me to express sincere sympathy with you in your bereavement on behalf of the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services, the Chief of the Naval Staff, and the Officers and men of the Royal Canadian Navy, the high traditions of which your husband has helped us to maintain."*

Sick Berth Attendant Donald Cecil Eddy was 21 years old when he died.

For his service, Sick Berth Attendant Donald Cecil Eddy was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Germany-France Star & Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. The medals were sent to Donald's wife, Thelma. Donald's mother and Thelma each received a Memorial Cross in recognition of their loss.

Sick Berth Attendant Donald Cecil Eddy is commemorated on Panel 13 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial Plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 512, at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

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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.

**Sources:**

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- Library and Archives Canada – record for Donald Cecil Eddy
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- *In Peril on the Sea: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle of the Atlantic*, Donald E. Graves