

Able Seaman Harold Louis Fleming V-12849



Able Seaman Harold Fleming. Photo courtesy of nephew Glen Power

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Edmonton AB, 7 November 1915**
- **Enlisted: Edmonton Division RCNVR, 6 October 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Labourer, Swift Canada Company**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; HMCS *Nonsuch* Honour Roll, Naval Museum of Alberta Honour Roll**

Harold Louis Fleming was the fourth of six children born to William Clifton ("Cliff") Fleming and Mary Ann ("Mayme") Fleming (nee Brady). Both of their families were of Irish stock, having come to Nebraska, USA, via Ontario. Cliff and Mayme were both born in Nebraska and immigrated to Canada in the early 1900s. They were married in Ponoka, Alberta, in 1908 and homesteaded in that area before relocating to Edmonton, where Cliff worked for the Canadian National Railway (CNR). He had mail service responsibilities on the Edmonton-Calgary line and lived in Calgary several days per week. Harold's siblings were Eilene, Lawrence, Phyllis, Gerald, and Isabel. His mother died in 1935. The family were members of St. Alphonsus Roman Catholic Parish in Edmonton.

Harold grew up in Edmonton. His family lived on 79 Street, just north of 118 Avenue. The rich oil discoveries in nearby Leduc had yet to happen. The small city was the Provincial capital. It was a major railway centre and hub for local agriculture, including the meat packing industry. Additionally, it was the jumping-off point for bush pilot flights into the North. The Declaration of War meant a significant uptick in economic activity in Edmonton. This included the construction and support of the nearby Commonwealth Air Training Plan centre, the construction of the Alaska Highway, and the Conol pipeline.

Harold went to school in Edmonton, where he completed two years of high school commercial studies. Like his older brother Lawrence, he subsequently went to work for Swift Canada Meat Packer as a labourer. He enrolled in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) for the duration of hostilities. Enrolment was on 6 October 1941 at the Edmonton Division (which a

month later was renamed HMCS *Nonsuch*). His enrolment documents describe the newly enrolled Ordinary Seaman Fleming as having brown hair, blue eyes, and a medium complexion.

In March 1942, after basic training in HMCS *Nonsuch*, Fleming was sent to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, BC, for seamanship and gunnery training. *Naden* was the Navy's west coast training base. Harold was consistently rated as being of Very Good Character and Satisfactory. Harold left *Naden* qualified for the rank of Able Seaman, and he would spend about nine months consolidating his training at sea before he would be promoted.

At *Naden*, Harold was assigned to become a gunnery specialist. Naval guns were crewed by sailors known as control (C.R.), layer (L.R.), and quarters (Q.R.) ratings - first, second, and third class. The control rating was concerned with the operation of range-finders, the layer rating was responsible for the movements of the gun as it was brought to bear upon the target, and the quarters rating was in charge of the stowage of all ammunition and its supply to the guns in action. There was also a fourth specialty for anti-aircraft (A.A.) gunners. During his training, it was determined the Ordinary Seaman Fleming did not have the correct vision for either A.A. or L.R., so he was assigned to train as a Q.R. His quarters rating training would happen on the East Coast.

RECORD OF VISION TESTS										
To be filled in by Medical Officer after each Test.										
NOTE:—Date of issue of astigmatic lens is to be noted in this space.										
Ship	Gunnery Rating	Date	Hospital or Ship	Vision		Initial Test for	Re-qualifying Test for	Passed or Failed	Remarks	Initials of Medical Officer
				R.	L.					
NADEN		28/5/42		20	20	A.A.S		F	Hypermetropic	W.H.
NADEN		28/5/42		20	20	L.R.S		F	Astigmat. 1.5m R + L 0.4 I.D. 6.3mm	W.H.

Ordinary Seaman Harold Fleming's vision tests for gunnery specialties Anti-Aircraft (A.A.) and Layer Rating (L.R.). Source: Service File for Harold Louis Fleming V-12849, Library and Archives Canada.

In June 1942, Ordinary Seaman Fleming was sent to the Navy's main east coast training establishment, HMCS *Cornwallis*, in Halifax, NS (in 1943, *Cornwallis* would move to Deep Brook, NS on the Bay of Fundy). Here, Ordinary Seaman Fleming underwent training that included weapons training with the Lewis machine gun, section leader training, fire control, and director and sighting training. He left *Cornwallis* in early September 1942 with the Acting Quarters Rating 3 qualification and a 10-cent/day pay raise.

Now fully trained, Harold worked in Halifax while he awaited a draft to an operational ship. The call came in late October 1942 when he was posted overseas to HMCS *Niobe* in Greenock, Scotland. *Niobe* functioned as an accounting base, manning pool, and hospitalization centre for all Canadian Navy personnel in the UK. Most Canadian sailors were initially assigned to *Niobe* while awaiting deployment to ships.

On 1 December 1943, Harold was promoted to Able Seaman, and he was assigned to one of Canada's most storied wartime ships, HMCS *Athabaskan*. The ship was large and well-armed, an exciting first posting for a young Able Seaman gunner.

Athabaskan was a newly commissioned ship that saw extensive wartime action. She was one of the Tribal Class Destroyers, each ship named for a Canadian Indigenous tribe. With Able Seaman Fleming on board, HMCS *Athabaskan* was first sent to patrol the Iceland-Faroes gap, looking for

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German blockade runners. This was winter at its worst in the North Atlantic. The ship suffered severe weather damage and needed weeks of repair on returning to the UK. She was sent north again in Operation GEARBOX to relieve the Garrison at Spitsbergen Island in the high arctic north of Norway.

In July and August of 1943, HMCS *Athabaskan* was reassigned to patrol in the Bay of Biscay off the French and Spanish coasts. It proved warmer in more ways than one. *Athabaskan* saw heavy action. She was struck by an enemy glide bomb, suffering extensive damage and numerous injuries, including the loss of one sailor. Fleming survived, and the ship wallowed its way back to HMS Devonport, the main shipyard in Plymouth, England, where she underwent months of repair.



HMCS Athabaskan.
Photo courtesy of Ken McPherson Collection University of
Calgary and the Naval Museum of Alberta

Athabaskan was sent North in December 1943 to again be based at Scapa Flow off the northern coast of Scotland. From here, she escorted convoys as part of the “Murmansk Run” to Murmansk (Kola Inlet) and Archangel, Russia.

In February 1944, HMCS *Athabaskan* returned to Plymouth to join the newly formed 10th Destroyer Flotilla, where she conducted operations off the coast of France that were a prelude to the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944. On 25-26 April 1944, she assisted in the destruction of the German torpedo ship *T-29*. The T class of torpedo ships was equivalent to destroyers in the Allies Navies.

On 29 April, at about 3:00 AM she was patrolling with her sister ship HMCS *Haida*. Responding to orders to intercept German warships near Ile de Bas, the Canadian ships engaged *T-24* and *T-27*. During the engagement, *Athabaskan*, unlike *Haida*, was not using flashless powder in her shells thus the flashes associated with firing her guns made her an easy target for a torpedo fired by *T-24*. *Haida* drove off *T-24* in flames and then drove *T-27* ashore before returning to her sister’s last position, only to find that she had sunk. One hundred and twenty-eight (128) sailors, including Able Seaman Fleming, were lost. Forty-four were rescued by *Haida*, and six by *Haida*’s motor work boat. At dawn, after the departure of *Haida*, 83 men were later taken prisoner by three German minesweepers. Able Seaman Fleming was 28 years old.

Fleming and most of the others killed have no known graves. However, in 2002, the wreckage of their ship was located in 50 fathoms of water. She and those who may be entombed in her are under the protection of the French Heritage Code.

For his service, Able Seaman Fleming was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal.

Able Seaman Harold Louis Fleming is remembered on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 305, at the Centre Block, Houses of Parliament, Ottawa; the HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial Plaque, and the Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque. In addition, Able Seaman Fleming is remembered by his nephew, retired Captain(N) Glen Power, who is a former Commanding Officer of HMCS *Nonsuch* (1985 to 1988).

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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:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission profile for Harold Louis Fleming
- Second World War Book of Remembrance, p.305.
- Library and Archives Canada-Service file for Ordinary Seaman Harold Louis Fleming
- Calgary Herald, May 9, 1944 p. 7
- Calgary Herald, January 26, 1945 p. 9
- http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS_ATHABASKAN_G07.htm
- Discussion with CSVC Researcher Captain(N) (Ret'd) John Dalzell
- Discussion with Nephew Captain(N) (Ret'd) Glen Power, (CO HMCS *Nonsuch* 1985-88)