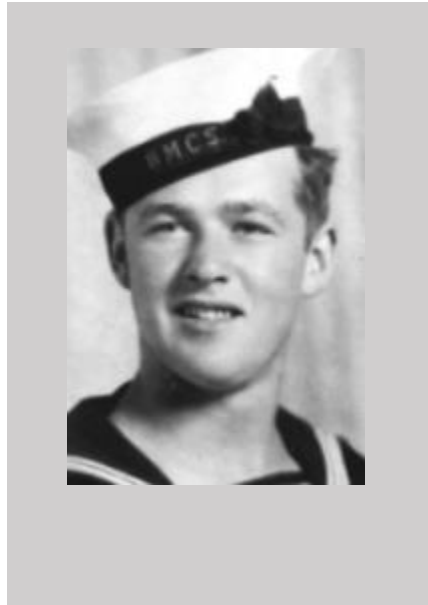


Able Seaman Joseph René Celestin Guilbault V-55803



Able Seaman René Guilbault. Photo:
Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Kelvington SK, 28 August 1925**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 4 March 1943**
- **Civilian Occupation: Helper, Searle Grain Company Ltd. Kelvington Elevator**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Valleyfield* was torpedoed and sank on 7 May 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; Kelvington Cenotaph & Guilbault Lake (Lat 55° 51'N Long 108° 06' W) in Northern Saskatchewan**

Joseph René Celestin Guilbault, known as René, was the fifth of ten children born to Gabrielle and (Joseph) Edgar Guilbault on 28 August 1925 in Kelvington, Saskatchewan. Brothers Lucien, Henri, Maxime, Nicholas, Ovide, Adolphe, and Fernand were born in 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1930, 1932 and 1933 respectively. Sisters Yvonne and Imelda were born in 1935 and 1938 respectively. Edgar and Gabriella were both born in southwest Manitoba in 1887 and 1898 respectively and married there in 1920. In 1921, the family, now including baby Lucien, moved first to Wadena, Saskatchewan and then to nearby Kelvington in southeast Saskatchewan to establish themselves. The village had a population of about 370 in 1926 and served a rural municipality of another 750. They purchased property in Kelvington and built a house and a shop in which Edgar established a metal fabrication and repair business while Gabrielle taught piano lessons. As the children became capable, they worked in the family's large vegetable garden and assisted Edgar in the shop. René left Kelvington School at age 15 upon completion of grade 8 in 1941. He then worked with his father until May 1942 when he found work as a labourer in the local creamery until November. In January 1943 he was employed as a grain buyer's helper with Seale Grain Company Ltd. at their grain elevator located in Kelvington. This was the career path that René hoped to pursue after the War as indicated on the Occupational History Form that he completed upon enrollment.

On 8 February 1943, at the age of 17, René arrived in Saskatoon and made his first contact the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) regarding enrollment. He was attested three weeks later 4 March 1943 as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary) and designated for gunnery training. His two oldest brothers had already enlisted and were serving in Britain - Lucien in the Royal Canadian Air Force and Henri in the Canadian Army. Maxime, who had joined the RCNVR, was serving at sea.

Upon enrollment René was single, 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighed 141 pounds. He had brown hair, green eyes and a ruddy complexion.

René completed basic training at *Unicorn* on 9 May and was then drafted to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, British Columbia where he completed four months of gunnery training on 16 September. He was then drafted to the various “stone frigates” – HMCS *Givenchy* in Esquimalt; HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, Nova Scotia and HMCS *Hochelaga II* in Quebec City for travel and administrative purposes until 8 December 1943 when he joined HMCS *Valleyfield* upon her commissioning in Quebec City.



HMCS Valleyfield.

Photo Credit: Bob Fenton Collection www.forposteritysake.ca

Valleyfield was a River class frigate named for Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, Quebec, situated on Grande-Île in the St. Lawrence River. The ship was built at Quebec City by Morton Engineering and Dry Dock Co. and commissioned on 7 December 1943. After arriving in Halifax on 20 December her ship's company underwent work ups in St. Margaret's Bay, Nova Scotia and off Bermuda until February 1944 when she joined Escort Group C-1 as a convoy escort. *Valleyfield's* second convoy, which left Halifax on 28

February, was eventful. She was detached to escort a tug and tow to the Azores and then escort another tug and tow from the Azores to Scotland. Upon completion *Valleyfield* proceeded to Londonderry, Northern Ireland to await her next assignment. While in Londonderry, René was promoted to Able Seaman on 23 March. After her third and uneventful return trip, HMCS *Valleyfield* left Londonderry on 27 April 1944 with convoy ONM 234.



HMCS Valleyfield's unofficial badge.
Source: Badges of Distinction

In the early hours of 7 May 1944, as was standard practice, the Mid-Ocean Escort Force of which *Valleyfield* was a member handed the convoy over to the Local Escort Force, parted company with the convoy south of Newfoundland at the Western Ocean Meeting Point and set course for St. John's.

At 0432, *U-548* fired two GNAT torpedoes at the five ships of Escort Group C1. *Valleyfield* was hit by one torpedo on the port side of the boiler room, broke in two and sank within four minutes about 50 miles south of Cape Race. She had been astern of the other ships of the group. Consequently, it took some time for her sinking to be noticed. Then while three ships of the Group conducted an unsuccessful search for *U-548*, HMCS *Giffard*, dispatched to search for survivors, approached the area cautiously thus unavoidably delaying rescue. Including Able Seaman René Guilbault, 120 members of *Valleyfield's*

ship' company perished in the sinking plus five more who later died of exposure onboard *Giffard*. Only 38 were rescued and survived

René like most of the others killed has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 11 and on the Kelvington Cenotaph. Additionally, Guilbault Lake (Lat 55° 51'N Long 108° 06' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory

For his service, Able Seaman René Guilbault was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Gabrielle Guilbault, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Prepared By:

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