

Ordinary Telegraphist Melvin Ross Harper V-81200



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Edmonton, AB, 25 August 1925**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Nonsuch*, 8 March 1944**
- **Civilian Occupation: Civilian file clerk, US Army contingent in Edmonton**
- **Death: Killed when five MTBs of the 29th MTB Flotilla exploded in a fire on 14 February 1945**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 13; the Naval Museum of Alberta plaque, the HMCS *Nonsuch* memorial plaque, and the Oostende Naval Memorial to the victims of the 29th MTB Flotilla.**

Melvin Ross Harper was born in Edmonton on 25 August 1925. His father was Frank Hartley Harper (1895-1974), and his mother was Edna Elsie (Wiggins) Harper (1894-1987). Melvin had two older sisters: Blanche (1916-2006, married to Allan Kilburn) and Alma (1919-2011, married to Bruce F MacDonald). Both Frank and Edna were from the Neepawa, Manitoba area. They married in September 1915.

Melvin's father, Frank, began working as a locomotive fireman for the Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR) in about 1913. He enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in August 1915, just before he married Edna. The Army sent him overseas, where he was seriously injured with two gunshot wounds at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. He was unable to raise his arms to put on a backpack and was returned back to Canada. He went back to work for the CNoR as a locomotive fireman. He was transferred to Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) from 1918 to 1922 and then transferred to Edmonton later in 1922. The CNoR promoted him to locomotive engineer in about 1940. He was active with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineer's Union.

The Harper family lived in Edmonton for many years at 10710 107 St. The Edmonton Bulletin reported that in 1936, while attending MacDougall School, Melvin won first place in both the 50-yard dash and the wheelbarrow race. No word on which part of the wheelbarrow Melvin played.

Melvin attended high school at Edmonton's Victoria School. In December 1942, he was selected to be on the Edmonton Boy's Parliament team. His team was organized by his church, Central United Church. Melvin was also appointed to the parliament's Standing Committee for Intellectual Affairs. Other activities that Melvin took part in included hockey, baseball, basketball, and the piano.

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Melvin left school in 1943 when he was part-way through grade 12. He worked for the US Army Alaska Highway Project as a file clerk in the regulating station in Edmonton. Next, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at HMCS *Nonsuch* in Edmonton on 8 March 1944. He was described as 5 foot 8 with fair hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. He expressed interest in becoming a wireless telegrapher.



**Five Edmonton youths have been chosen for seats in the Tuxis Boys' Parliament of Alberta that begins its 23rd annual sessions on Dec. 27. From left to right, seated are: Jack Huget and Melvin Harper. Standing left to right, are: Lorne Calhoun, Larry Mallett and Harold E. Williams.
Photo: Edmonton Journal**

Ordinary Seaman Harper was placed on active service a few weeks later and, on 9 April 1944, was sent to HMCS *Chippawa*, the naval reserve division in Winnipeg. He did the Navy's six-week new entry training there.

After this training, the Navy sent him to HMCS *St. Hyacinthe*, which was the training base for the Royal Canadian Navy's communications specialists – including Visual Signalers and Wireless Telegraphers (W/T). On 29 July 1944, Harper passed the first part of his W/T Telegrapher course and was then transferred to the Communications branch as an Ordinary Telegrapher. In the portrait at the top of this document, you can see his Telegrapher badge. His training at *St. Hyacinthe* continued, and in October

1944, he qualified academically for Telegrapher. Telegrapher was equivalent to Able Seaman, but Harper had not yet been promoted. He needed to gain some experience first and was set to be rated as a Telegrapher in April 1945.

Harper did have a small disagreement with the Navy one evening in September 1944 when he missed evening quarters. The Executive Officer gave him three days of extra duty. This must have done the trick as his Conduct Sheet always showed him as being of 'Very Good' character and Satisfactory efficiency.

The Navy then sent Harper overseas to HMCS *Niobe* in Greenock, Scotland, where he arrived in November 1944. This was the Royal Canadian Navy's (RCN) manning and administration base for the UK. After a couple of weeks, he joined the 29th Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) Flotilla in Felixstowe, on the southeast coast of England.

The 29th Flotilla had been fighting in the English Channel for most of 1944. They lured German destroyers into weapons' range of Canadian Tribal-Class destroyers, dueled with E-boats, R-boats, and Flak-ships, and attacked enemy escort and merchant ships. They protected part of the naval assault zone on and after D-Day.

By the time Harper joined the 29th Flotilla, the Germans had been driven back to a point where they were out of range of the MTBs. In January 1945, the flotilla was ordered to join the Coastal Forces Mobile Unit 1 (CFMU) stationed in Oostende, Belgium. The patrols conducted from Oostende still did not bring them into contact with the enemy.

Nowhere in his Navy records or in any of the stories about the 29th Flotilla is there any indication of which MTB(s) Harper served aboard. It's possible that he was employed ashore at a radio station or perhaps substituted for other telegraphers.

Tragedy struck on 14 February 1945. The flotilla was docked with British MTB units at the home



base in Oostende, in Belgium. One of the Canadian MTB crews believed that their fuel was contaminated with water and inadvertently pumped out some of their fuel directly into the harbour, forming a gasoline slick around the docked boats. At 1600, a fire started, and two

MTBs disintegrated in a massive explosion. More explosions followed as fuel, torpedoes, and ammunition detonated. The explosions continued for 90 minutes.

The casualties were very heavy. There were 26 Canadian RCNVR deaths, plus another 35 in the British MTBs. Another 19 Canadians were injured. Five boats were destroyed. Harper was among those killed, and his body was not recovered. He was 19 years old.

For his service, Ordinary Telegraphist Harper was awarded the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp and the War Medal. His mother was presented with the Memorial Cross medal. In 1950, a note was added to Melvin's Navy file to say that the medals were undelivered and were being returned to stock.

Ordinary Telegraphist Melvin Ross Harper is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 13, in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, p.522, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa, the Naval Museum of Alberta plaque, the HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial plaque, and the Oostende Naval Memorial to the victims of the 29th MTB Flotilla.

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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 Melvin Ross Harper
- Library and Archives Canada Service via Ancestry.com – record for military service

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- Ancestry.com for family information
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Edmonton Journal and Edmonton Bulletin
- Wikipedia website
- Forposterity.com website
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial website
- [Canadians and Coastal Forces During World War II, Friends of Canadian War Museum](#) -
- [Naval Museum of Manitoba](#)
- [Operational History of the 29 and 65 RCN MTB/MGB Flotillas 1944-1945](#) – Stephen Bagnell –