

Ordinary Seaman Donald Oswald Hill V-34348



Ordinary Seaman Donald Hill. Photo: Calgary Herald 9 November 1942

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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Nanaimo BC, 3 March 1921**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 25 March 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Clerk, Crane Limited**
- **Death: Killed in an off-duty car accident while serving in HMCS *Tecumseh* on 8 November 1942**
- **Buried: Calgary (Burnsland) Cemetery, Lot 30. Block 8. Sec. G**
- **Commemorated: HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque, Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial in Calgary, and Field of Crosses in Calgary**

Donald Oswald Hill was born on 3 March 1921 in Nanaimo, BC. He was the oldest of two sons born to Joseph Dixon and Margaret Cowan Hill (nee Young). His brother Robert Dunsmore Hill was also born in Nanaimo in 1922.

Donald's mother, Margaret Cowan Young, was born in Larkhall, Scotland, in 1896 and immigrated to Canada with her family in 1912. Donald's father, Joseph Dixon, was born in Cumberland, England, in 1896 and immigrated to Canada with his family in 1907. Both families had settled in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. Large deposits of coal had been discovered in the Nanaimo area as early as 1852, which was the main reason for people choosing to settle in that location. These were the largest coal deposits on the West Coast of North America, and this type of coal was ideal for steam-driven engines.

Joseph and Margaret met and were married in Nanaimo on 1 September 1920. Joseph's occupation then was a "Track Layer" in the coal mines. Although coal was mined in and around Nanaimo until the last mine shut down in 1952, the demand for coal had dropped considerably in the 1920s due to the discovery of petroleum in western Canada. There was also a lot of labour unrest, and union strikes were common. There may also have been a shortage of affordable housing as a 1921 Census document shows Joseph and Margaret still living apart in their

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respective parents' homes even though they were married in 1920. This was possibly why Joseph and Margaret moved to Calgary, AB in 1923. The Hill family settled in the Balmoral area of Calgary at 313 17 Avenue NW in 1927. Donald started school at the Balmoral School located at 220 16 Avenue NW.

The Hill family could not be better situated to access this school as it was less than a 100-metre walk. The Balmoral School was the last of 19 sandstone schools constructed in Calgary and is still used today. Donald and Robert both attended this school for grades one to nine. When he was about 14 years of age, Donald had a *Calgary Herald* paper route near where he lived. He kept this paper route for many years until he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC) in 1940.

Donald enlisted with the RCASC Reserve as a Non-Permanent Active Militia (NPAM) member. This was a training program run by the Calgary Highlanders. Donald enlisted on 14 August 1940 and was discharged on 24 March 1942 when he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR). While in the RCASC, he would have received basic military training, and as he was in a transport unit, he was probably trained in the operation of military vehicles. Donald was able to find a civilian occupation while serving with the RCASC, and in February of 1942, he was employed as a clerk at Crane Plumbing Supply.

On 25 March 1942, Donald Oswald Hill enlisted in the RCNVR at HMCS *Tecumseh* in Calgary as an Ordinary Seaman. Crane Plumbing Supply gave him a leave of absence and assured him that his job would be available when his service was finished. He stated that he would serve for "the duration of the hostilities" and planned to return to his civilian occupation when his service was completed. He had no particular skills, so he did not ask to be trained in any specific trade.

Donald's attestation documents show he was 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighed 134 pounds. He had blue eyes and brown hair, and his religion was shown as Presbyterian. He was put on divisional strength from 25 March until 13 May 1942. On 13 May 1942, he was put on "Active Duty at HMCS *Tecumseh*. He would have started receiving New Entry Training and some basic seamanship training. His former military training probably helped, and he was scheduled to be drafted to HMCS *Naden*, Canada's west coast training and operations base in Esquimalt, BC on 9 November 1942.

On Saturday night, 7 November 1942, Donald attended a house party at the residence of Archie Kelly at 3618 3 Street SW. At this party, he met up with his girlfriend, Edith Mae Linley, and two other *Tecumseh* sailors. One of these sailors was Ordinary Seaman Frank Short, who was also scheduled to leave for HMCS *Naden* on 9 November. At approximately 0200 on Sunday, 8 November 1942, seven people climbed into one car to be driven home from the party. The vehicle's occupants were Frank Short, his brothers Jack and Alfred, Alfred's wife Mildred, Donald Hill, his girlfriend Edith Mae Linley, and Ruth Swift. The three Short brothers had discussed the drive home situation earlier, and it was decided that Jack Short would limit his alcohol intake to only one beer and he was the owner of the vehicle, so he was driving.

The exact details are unknown, but they were probably driving north on 2 Street SW or 4 Street SW and had intended to turn east onto 25 Avenue and use the 25 Avenue Bridge to cross the Elbow River. The driver made the mistake of turning into 24 Avenue, which dead-ended at the river. The vehicle drove through a single wire fence, a few willow bushes, down a steep embankment, and overturned in five feet of water in the Elbow River.

Ordinary Seaman Frank Short was able to kick out the front window and remove his brother Jack from the car, then helped Ruth Swift from the vehicle but he remembered nothing after that. Six

of the seven occupants died and only Frank Short survived. He would have also been in serious trouble if it were not for the resident at 105 24 Avenue who took him inside and treated him for hypothermia. Ordinary Seaman Donald Oswald Hill was 21 years old when he died.

It was the worst vehicle fatality accident in Calgary's history. An inquiry was conducted, and it was determined that alcohol was not a factor. The driver made an error and poor visibility and icy roads contributed to the accident. The resident of 105 24 Avenue SW testified that it was common for people to turn onto 24 Avenue by accident and have to turn around at the dead end.

Among the dead was Alfred Short, a corporal in the RCAF. Alfred Short, his wife, and brother Jack were buried together in Burnsland Cemetery. The Royal Canadian Air Force arranged for a Commonwealth War Graves Headstone. Ordinary Seaman Donald Oswald Hill was buried in the Burnsland Cemetery: Field of Honour. Block 8 Section G Plot 30. The inscription on his headstone reads:

"God took him home it was his will, but in our hearts he liveth still"

For his service, Ordinary Donald Oswald Hill was awarded: the War Medal. The Memorial Cross was awarded to his mother.

Ordinary Seaman Donald Oswald Hill is commemorated on the HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial in Calgary; the Field of Crosses in Calgary; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 81, at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.



Ordinary Seaman Donald Oswald Hill's headstone. Photo: Ross Anderson

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.



Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database profile for Donald Oswald Hill
- Library and Archives Canada>Military file for Donald Oswald Hill
- Ancestry.ca: information on Joseph Dixon and Margaret Cowan Hill
- *Calgary Herald* obituary Margaret Hill 12 February 1950

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- City of Nanaimo website: early history
- *Calgary Herald* Archives: 9 November 1942: Tragic vehicle accident article.
- *Calgary Herald* Archives: 12 November 1942: Accident Inquiry findings