

## Motor Mechanic Ian William Hunter V-12919



Ian William Hunter

Photo Credit: For Posterity Sake Website

Do you have a better photo you can share?  
Please submit to [CSVC.CVMC@gmail.com](mailto:CSVC.CVMC@gmail.com)

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Miniota, MB, 24 January 1915**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Nonsuch*, 10 January 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Partner/Manager, General Tractor Parts Supply**
- **Death: Killed when explosions and fire destroyed the 29th MTB Flotilla on 14 February 1945**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 13; Calgary Field of Crosses, the Naval Museum of Alberta plaque, the HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial plaque, the Western Canada High School Memorial and the Oostende Naval Memorial, Belgium**

Ian William Hunter was born in Miniota, Manitoba, in 1915. Miniota is a small farming community near the Saskatchewan border. His father was William McKinlay Hunter (1883-1977), who was born in Scotland and came to Canada in 1902. He farmed in the Miniota area and then moved his family to Shoal Lake, Manitoba, where he operated a garage. His mother was Sarah Spence (McKay) Miller (1890-1965). She was born in Rapid City, Manitoba, in the same area in western Manitoba. William and Sarah wed in 1909. Ian was the oldest child (1915-1945). He had two younger sisters, Thelma (Harry Campbell) (1923-2011) and Phyllis (Ronald Hart) (1926-2010).

In 1927, the family moved to British Columbia. Around 1930, they moved to Calgary, in Alberta. The family lived at 310 36 Ave SW and later at 1307 13 Ave SW. Ian attended Haultain and King Edward schools for elementary and junior high. In 1933, he completed grade 12 at Western Canada High School. He took motor mechanics, diesel mechanics, and commercial courses.

After graduating, Ian worked at International Harvester as a repairman for a year and then worked for an International Harvester Agent as a repair clerk for two years. He then went into the family-run business at General Tractor Supply in Calgary, working as a repairman and clerk.

Ian married Verdun Elizabeth McPherson (1916-1999) in 1937 in Calgary. General Tractor Supply transferred Ian to Edmonton in 1939, appointing him as the manager of their branch there. Ian

and Verdun's daughter – Sandra Jeanne Hunter – was born in 1941. The family lived at 12311 108 Ave in Edmonton.

Ian joined the 19 Alberta Dragoons in July of 1940. This was a Canadian Army Militia Armoured unit. He served with the Dragoons part-time until 1942, when he was released to join the Edmonton Division of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) on 10 January 1942. The Division still exists today as HMCS *Nonsuch*. Given his education and experience, Ian was enrolled directly as a Leading Stoker (M), the M indicating a specialization in motor mechanics. He was immediately deployed on active duty, which was uncommon. However, Ian's military background from his time with the Dragoons and his much-needed skills made him a valuable addition to the Navy.

Leading Stoker Hunter was sent to HMCS *Stadacona* – Halifax's major operations and training base. There, he attended Naval New Entry training and Stoker courses. In March of 1942, Ian ran into trouble when he fell asleep while on sentry duty at 0115. This type of offence was taken very seriously, and he was disgraced (demoted) from Leading Stoker (M) to Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> Class. At every evaluation after this incident, his superiors rated him as "Very Good" in character.

Verdun and Sandra – Ian's wife and daughter – moved back to Calgary after Ian left Edmonton. Verdun declined a chance to move to Halifax to join Ian.

In April 1942, the Navy assigned Hunter to his first ship, HMCS *French*. This was a former RCMP vessel acquired by the Navy to be used as an examination vessel. An examination vessel was responsible for examining and verifying all merchant ships and sometimes small craft entering or departing a port. *French* berthed in the Straits of Canso at Mulgrave, Nova Scotia. For Hunter, this time likely represented a period of training consolidation and equipment familiarization.

From May to September of 1942, Hunter undertook more technical training at both HMCS *Stadacona* and HMCS *Cornwallis*. *Cornwallis* was a training base that was also – at the time – in Halifax. After these courses, the Navy promoted Ian back to Leading Stoker (M).

Next, Hunter reported to HMCS *Hochelaga*, a shore base in Montreal, where he was assigned to DMS Unit #9. One of the activities carried out at *Hochelaga* was the degaussing of ships. This was a process of removing as much of a ship's magnetic field as possible to make it less susceptible to German magnetic mines.



In November of 1942, Hunter travelled to Gravenhurst, Ontario, to join a newly built Fairmile Motor Launch Q-090. The Fairmile B's had wooden hulls and two 650 horsepower gasoline engines. Known as Q-boats or Little Fighting Ships, the Navy mainly employed these vessels for coastal escorts in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and between Newfoundland and Canada. Q-090 was part of the Halifax Force until June of 1943 and was then transferred to the Motor Launch Flotilla based in Sydney, Nova Scotia. While in Sydney, the Navy promoted Ian to Motor Mechanic (MM), the equivalent of a Petty Officer.

In October of 1943, Hunter travelled overseas to report at HMCS *Niobe*, the Royal Canadian Navy's (RCN) manning and administration depot in the United Kingdom. From there, he reported to HMS *Attack*, the Royal Navy's (RN) Coastal Forces base in Portland, UK, on the south coast of England. There, he took the RN Coastal Forces training course on Motor Torpedo Boats (MTB) and Motor Gun Boats (MGB).

In December of 1943, Hunter reported to the Canadian 29<sup>th</sup> MTB Flotilla, an all-Canadian group of nine MTBs. The crews were almost exclusively appointed from the RCNVR. The vessels were Scott-Payne G-types built by British Power Boats. They were 71 feet long, had a range of 140 miles and had a top speed of 40 nautical miles an hour. They carried 2500 gallons of 100-octane gasoline.

The power for these boats came from three 1250 horsepower V-12 Packard engines, with another two Ford V-8s connected with clutches to the outboard shafts for quieter operations. Later versions had 1500 hp engines from either Packard or Rolls-Royce. Talk about Motor Mechanic heaven!

The MTBs were armed with torpedoes, a 40mm cannon, 20mm twin cannons and machine guns. During the preparation for the D-Day invasion of Normandy, the torpedoes were removed and replaced with depth charges, much to the dismay of the Canadian MTB crews.



**Motor torpedo boats of the Canadian-manned 29th MTB Flotilla.  
Photo: Library and Archives Canada Photo, MIKAN No. 3204516**

The flotilla started to train in February of 1944. They were shifted to HMS *Bee* in Holyhead, Wales, for workups for the boats and for the flotilla itself. MTBs only operated at night, so their crews had to be very skilled at station keeping, tactics, communications, and concentrating maximum firepower on a target. The flotilla moved again to HMS *Fervent* – a Coastal Forces operational

base near Ramsgate, England, across the channel from Calais and Dunkirk.

Nowhere in his Navy records or any stories about the 29th Flotilla is there any indication of which MTB(s) Hunter served aboard. It's possible he was employed ashore repairing the boats and perhaps substituting for other Motor Mechanics.

The first operational mission for the 29th Flotilla was on 16 May 1944. It escorted a group of British Army engineers tasked to gather up some samples of German mines on the fortified beaches on

the coast of France. For the rest of May of 1944, the flotilla worked in the English Channel doing their best to deny those waters to German forces. They lured German destroyers into the range of Canadian Tribal-Class destroyers, dueled with E-boats and R-boats, and attacked enemy escort ships. E-boats were German fast attack craft. They were a formidable adversary to a Canadian MTB – the German crafts were larger, faster, better armed, and had a considerably longer range than MTBs. R-boats were smaller versions used for coastal convoy escort and minesweeping.

On 28 May 1944, the 29<sup>th</sup> Flotilla moved to Portsmouth in preparation for its role in the D-Day invasion. They worked with the British 55 MTB Flotilla and 17<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla to protect the British D-Day assault area by attacking enemy vessels and keeping the enemy inside its naval base at La Havre, France. On the night of 6 June 1944, they were assigned to patrol an area outside of La Havre to prevent any German vessels from breaking through the Allied defences and attacking the vulnerable anchorage off the D-Day beaches. After 0430, the flotilla engaged six German R-boats. The Canadians opened fire at the line of R-boats, engaging each. One R-boat exploded, and the rest retreated to their base in La Havre.

On 2 July 1944, one of the 29<sup>th</sup> Flotilla's boats - MTB 460 - hit a mine and disintegrated. The blast killed ten sailors, while six survived.

The 29<sup>th</sup> Flotilla continued with the constant night fighting of this assignment until mid-August of 1944. The MTBs had done their job to keep German vessels out of the Allied anchorage. By then, the flotilla had lost 37% of its sailors and four boats.

The last part of August was much quieter. The Navy replaced two of the lost boats, and a Canadian Paymaster Lieutenant was able to get the men of the flotilla onto Canadian rations. To keep their own perspective, whenever they came across an RCN ship, the flotilla leader would transmit a signal saying, "Hello, big Canada, this is little Canada." They kept patrolling with little enemy contact until early September. The Germans were withdrawing from France, often using well-defended convoys. Allied forces created new tactics, combining MTBs with RAF planes and coastal batteries. The boats had their torpedoes back, making them even more effective.

In September of 1944, the 1 Canadian Army Brigade advanced along the French coast, re-taking Calais, Boulogne, and the Belgian port of Oostende. Operations slowed considerably in October for the MTBs as they were now out of range of German forces. They were ordered to move to HMS *Beehive*, a base in Felixstowe, on the southeast coast of England, across the Channel from Oostende, Belgium. The flotilla spent its time conducting training exercises and patrolling.

On the night of 1 November 1944, they sighted a German convoy near the Hook of Holland. They tried to sneak closer to the convoy, but the Germans opened fire. One of the MTBs managed to hit a freighter with a torpedo. The flotilla then searched for more targets, but they were illuminated by four flak ships. Flak ships were converted landing craft with 20mm, 40mm and 88mm guns. The accurate fire forced the MTBs to withdraw. This would be the last major engagement of the 29<sup>th</sup> Flotilla. In January of 1945, they were ordered to join the Coastal Forces Mobile Unit 1 (CFMU) stationed in Oostende, Belgium. The night patrols from Oostende did not bring them into contact with the enemy.

Hunter wrote home on 10 February 1945 to tell his family about celebrating his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in the coastal Belgian town. Sadly, Tragedy struck on 14 February 1945. The flotilla was docked at Oostende with British units. One of the MTBs believed that their fuel was contaminated with water and inadvertently pumped some of it directly into the harbour, creating a gasoline slick that formed 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 units. Another 19 Canadians were injured. Five boats were destroyed. Hunter was among those killed, and his body was not recovered. He had just turned 30 years old.

For his service, Motor Mechanic Ian William Hunter was awarded the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, the 1939-1945 Star, the Atlantic Star and Clasp, the Defence Medal, and the War Medal. His mother, Sarah, and his wife, Verdun, were presented with the Memorial Cross. The medals were sent to his widow in June of 1945 but were returned to Ottawa. In 1950, a note was added to Ian's Navy file to say that the medals were undeliverable and were being returned to stock.

Hunter is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, panel 13, the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 526, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa, the Calgary Field of Crosses, the Naval Museum of Alberta plaque, the HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial plaque, the Western Canada High School Memorial and the Naval Memorial in Oostende, Belgium.

### Prepared By\*:

David Mitchell, former Able Seaman, HMCS *Tecumseh*, Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Research team

\*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 Ian William Hunter
- Library and Archives Canada Service via Ancestry.com – record for military service
- Ancestry.com for family information
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Calgary Herald
- Wikipedia website
- Forposteritysake.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 -