

Leading Coder James Crawford Irving V-17668



James Crawford Irving
Photo Credit: Canadian Virtual Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Montreal, QC, 13 July 1921**
- **Enlisted: London Division RCNVR, 16 July 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Clerk, Loblaws Groceries**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Alberni* was torpedoed and sunk on 21 August 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12 and the HMCS *Alberni* Museum in Courtney, BC**

James Crawford Irving was born on 13 July 1921 in Montreal, Quebec. He had one older brother, Henry. In 1941, the two boys and their parents, Henry Irving and Mildred Irving, resided at 164 Bruce Street in London, Ontario. The family identified as members of the Church of England. Irving attended London's Central Collegiate Institute for five years. He left school at the age of 19 and worked as a clerk at Loblaws Ltd. until his enlistment. He indicated on his enlistment documentation that he wanted to return to school after the war. Irving remained single throughout his life.

At age 20, Irving enrolled in the London Division of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) on 16 July 1941, marking the beginning of his military service. Standing at 5'7" with blond hair, blue eyes, and a medium complexion, Irving had a few distinguishing features: a scar on his right groin and another on his right forehead. His brother, Captain Henry Irving, was serving in the Canadian Army, reflecting a shared commitment to their country. Henry Irving survived the war.

Irving's first stop in his naval career was HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, NS, where he completed New Entry Training. This training familiarized him with military discipline, naval routines and structure, seamanship and weapons handling. Afterwards, the Navy sent Irving to Communications School – HMCS *St. Hyacinthe* – for his training as a Coder. Coders worked both ashore and at sea. Their job involved encoding and decoding all ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore communications in support of communication security.

Irving's dedication and proficiency in his role became evident as he achieved the qualification for Ordinary Coder on 7 November 1941 and subsequently earned the qualification for Leading Coder on 7 July 1943. Irving had shown exceptional dedication and had even passed The Educational Test I on 4 November 1941, demonstrating his potential for advancement to Petty

Officer. In late 1941, after completing his training, Irving served in HMCS *Niagara* for seven months.

Niagara was a destroyer transferred from the United States Navy to the Royal Canadian Navy in 1940. The ship spent most of 1941 conducting convoy escort operations in the North Atlantic. Irving joined the ship while it sailed with the Newfoundland Escort Force. He served in *Niagara* during an eventful period. In January of 1942, it escorted a merchant ship to Belfast, Ireland, after the ship had been severely damaged in a storm. In March, they rescued survivors from a merchant ship that ran aground off Sable Island, NS and in April, they rescued survivors from a merchant ship that was torpedoed off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. These events would have provided ample opportunity for Irving to hone his skills as a Coder.

In April of 1942, the Navy promoted Irving to Coder, and in June of 1942, he was posted to HMCS *Chicoutimi*, a Flower-class Corvette. *Chicoutimi* was a small ship with a complement of 85 officers and sailors, whereas *Niagara* had a ship's company of more than 120. In the summer of 1942, *Chicoutimi* operated with the Newfoundland Escort Force, which assigned it to escort duties in the approaches to North America's eastern seaboard.

In the year that Irving served in *Chicoutimi*, the ship completed 41 convoy escort assignments, protecting shipping between the ports of New York City, Boston, and Halifax, and the mid-Atlantic Ocean meeting point where another group of escorts would "Shepherd" the convoys across the Atlantic to destinations in the United Kingdom.

Before his last at-sea posting, Irving was transferred ashore in late June of 1943 to HMCS *Stadacona* to write the Leading Coder exam. He succeeded and was promoted to Acting Leading Coder on 15 July 1943.



James Irving's last posting was to HMCS *Alberni*, another Flower-class Corvette. As a Leading Coder, he was the senior Coder in the ship and responsible for two junior Coders. When Irving joined *Alberni*, the ship was assigned to escort duties for convoys between Quebec and Labrador. *Alberni* underwent maintenance, repair, and upgrades - also known as a refit - in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, from November 1943 to February 1944. This period represented Irving's first break from winter sailing in the North Atlantic since joining the RCNVR in 1941. It can be assumed that the break was appreciated.

After the ship's refit, *Alberni* sailed for the UK. In April 1944, the ship was assigned to Operation *Neptune*, the naval component of the D-day landings in Normandy that began on 6 June 1944. In July, the corvette took part in landings and in escorting support vessels across the English Channel. A well-documented highlight of this period occurred on 26 July, when the ship shot down a German Junkers Ju 88 aircraft. The Ju 88 struck the water 91 meters from the ship.

In August, the Navy reassigned *Alberni* to conduct anti-submarine patrols in the English Channel. Tragically, the ship was sunk by U-480 on 21 August 1944. Fifty-nine members of the ship's company died. Leading Coder James Crawford Irving, aged 23, who had planned to return home to London, Ontario, was reported Missing Presumed Dead.

Leading Coder Irving made a lasting impression on his comrades and superiors during his service. *Alberni's* Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Commander Ian Bell, described him as:

"an excellent leading coder and was both reliable and efficient. He was very well liked by all the officers and men, and as we had been together for such a long time, we have become more friends than officer and rating."

Irving's military service, marked by his achievements and the respect he garnered from his peers, reflects his commitment to duty, professionalism, and the lasting impact he had on those he served alongside.

For his service, Leading Coder James Irving was awarded the 1939-1943 Star, the Atlantic Star & Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. The Memorial Cross was awarded to his mother, Mildred Irvine. Leading Coder Irving will forever be remembered for his bravery and dedication to his country.

Leading Coder James Crawford Irving is Commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Nova Scotia, Canada, Panel 12, and in the HMCS *Alberni* museum in Courtney, BC.

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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 record for James Crawford Irving
- Library and Archives Canada Service file for Leading Coder James Crawford Irving
- The Canadian Virtual War Memorial (CVWM)
- For Posterity Sake website
- Wikipedia entries for HMC Ships Niagara, Chicoutimi and Alberni
- The HMCS *Alberni* Project website
- The Convoy Web: Arnold Hague's convoy database