

## Leading Writer William Albert McCutcheon V-14727



Leading Writer William Albert McCutcheon, March 25, 1945, Missing, The Province, page 5, Retrieved from Newspapers.com

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Humboldt SK, 28 November 1920**
- **Enlisted: Vancouver Division RCNVR, 14 April 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Ship's Steward, Canadian Pacific Railway**
- **Death: Lost at sea while serving in HMCS *Guysborough* on 18 March 1945**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 13; and Memorial Plaque at HMCS *Discovery***

William Albert McCutcheon was born in Humboldt, SK on 28 November 1920. His father was Dr. Robert Hunter McCutcheon, born in Ontario. William's mother was Amelia Gertrude Richter, born in Hamilton, ON. William was seven years old when she died on 4 June 1928. William had three older brothers, Robert Carl McCutcheon; Private Frederick Hunter McCutcheon, Canadian Army; and Sergeant Lorne David McCutcheon, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps.

After six years of Elementary School in Burnaby, BC and two years of Junior Matriculation at North Burnaby High School, William was employed in various positions in the service industry, including Bell Boy, Elevator Boy, Ship's Steward with Canadian Pacific Railway ships, and as an administrative clerk for his father. He attended the Vancouver Business School in 1939 and early 1940.

William enrolled in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) as a Clerk on 13 June 1940. On 14 March 1941, when offered the options of remustering to Steward General Duties or discharge, he chose the latter. In his Letter of Reference, the Chief Supervisory Officer of the RCAF Elementary Flying Training School at Sea Island, Erbe, BC, stated William was ". . . conscientious, hardworking, well behaved at all times, and his character was very good." The 275 days served in the RCAF counted towards his first Good Conduct Badge in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR).

One month after his discharge from the RCAF, William was living at 1889 Haro Street, Vancouver, BC. On 14 April 1941, he joined the Vancouver Division RCNVR, later known as HMCS *Discovery*. He was 20 years old, and his enlistment documents stated William was 5 feet 9 inches tall, weighed 130 pounds, with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. He had engaged moderately with badminton, baseball, and tennis. William enlisted as a Probationary Writer, and since he had been a Clerk with the RCAF, he was immediately employed in that capacity at the Vancouver District Headquarters of the RCNVR. He was promoted to Writer on 14 July 1941.

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Writers were initially part of the Seaman Branch of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), but as the war progressed, they formed part of the Accountant Branch along with cooks, stewards, and supply assistants.

After several additional months working as a Writer in Vancouver, William was transferred to the naval base HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, NS, on 5 October 1941 and then to HMCS *Bytown* in Ottawa, ON, on 10 December 1941. *Bytown* was established in the Spring of 1941 to alleviate pressure at the Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa. *Bytown* was responsible for paying all Naval personnel on the books at Headquarters.

William passed a Professional Examination to become qualified for the rating of Leading Writer on 19 May 1942, and he was promoted to Leading Writer on 1 June 1942. William also participated in the Professional Examination for Writers conducted by HMCS *Cornwallis* on 17 May 1943, but unfortunately, he was unable to meet the Petty Officer Writer rating standard. After this attempt, he did not pursue any formal career training during his remaining service with the RCNVR. He served at *Bytown* for 21 months until 28 September 1943.



William's next posting was to the Gaspé, QC naval base HMCS *Fort Ramsay* on 29 September 1943. Gaspé Bay was a strategically important location near the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. It was considered an ideal spot for merchant and allied warships, including the British fleet, in case of an invasion. The bay's depth and shape made it easily accessible and defensible. William worked in the Ship's Office at *Fort Ramsay* for only three months before he was transferred to HMCS *Stadacona* on 20 January 1944.

William joined an operational ship, HMCS *Guysborough*, on 20 February 1944, the day before the ship sailed to Plymouth, England.

HMCS *Guysborough*, a Bangor-class minesweeper, was assigned to the 14th Minesweeping Flotilla of the Royal Navy (RN). She was present on D-Day. On the night of 5-6 June 1944, the 14th Flotilla swept mines in Channel 2 of the American sector for the Allied landing in Normandy. HMCS *Guysborough* returned to Canada in December 1944 for a refit at Lunenburg, NS. After her refit, she sailed with a group of ships to the Azores en route to Plymouth, England. After the ship arrived in the Azores on 8 March 1945, her Captain chose to sail alone from the Azores to Plymouth.

On 17 March 1945, off Ushant Island in the English Channel, the German submarine U-878 torpedoed HMCS *Guysborough* at 17:50. The German Naval Acoustic Torpedo (GNAT) was not fooled by the Canadian Anti-Acoustic Torpedo decoy (CAT gear) that was streamed astern of *Guysborough*. When the ship did not sink, U-878 torpedoed her again at 19:35. The second torpedo hit the starboard side amidships. Ninety members of the crew who survived the two explosions abandoned the ship as it sank. All were exposed to the icy waters of the Atlantic Ocean for 19 hours until the RN frigates HMS *Inglis* and HMS *Loring* arrived to rescue them. Forty-one survived the ordeal, and forty-nine succumbed to exposure or injuries. William was not one of the survivors. Leading Writer William Albert McCutcheon was 24 years old when he died.

A telegram from the Minister of National Defence Naval Services and a letter from the Secretary of the Naval Board were sent on 21 March 1945 to Dr. Robert McCutcheon to inform him and confirm that “. . . your son is missing at sea as the result of enemy action. The position of the action is such that there is little possibility of him being a prisoner of war and slight hope can be held for his survival.”

A second letter sent by the Secretary of the Naval Board on 23 April 1945 included:



*"The following is an excerpt from the report of a Canadian Naval Press Relations Officer who was in contact with survivors of the ill-fated ship. While there is no official confirmation of these statements, they are believed to be authentic, considering their source:*

*Only one death occurred from the explosion, but many died during the 19 hours the men who had survived the explosion spent in the water clinging to five Carley floats. Only six men of forty-two on one overcrowded float lived until the rescue ship, a Royal Navy frigate, arrived.*

*'Both the air and water were cold,' said one of the survivors. 'Most of the men who died died smiling. If they suffered any, you'd never know it.'*

*With the whaler overturned and the ship's motorboat holed by the explosion, only the Carley floats remained for the survivors.... Four of the five floats were lashed together and from these the majority of the survivors were picked up. Seven hours after the men abandoned ship only ten remained alive on the one overcrowded Carley float. Four others died before rescue came.*

*Exposure accounted for the largest number of deaths.... Survivors were unanimous in saying that those who died did so quietly and with little apparent suffering."*

For his service, Leading Writer William Albert McCutcheon was awarded the 1939-1945 Star, the France and Germany Star & Clasp (the Clasp was in place of the Atlantic Star), the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal.

Leading Writer William Albert McCutcheon is commemorated on Panel 13 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the HMCS *Discovery* Memorial Plaque; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 542, at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

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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:**

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- <https://www.canada.ca/en/navy/services/history/ships-histories/guysborough.html>
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