

## Ordinary Seaman Robert Redhead Phillips V-54643



Ordinary Seaman Robert Redhead Phillips.  
Photo: For Posterity Sake website.

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Calgary AB, 3 May 1924**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 17 February 1943**
- **Civilian Occupation: Timekeeper, U.S. Public Roads Administration, Fort Nelson, BC**
- **Death: Lost at sea when he was swept overboard from HMCS *Wentworth* during severe weather on 4 January 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12; HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; Naval Museum of Alberta Plaque; Crescent Heights High School Memorial Plaque; and the Calgary Field of Crosses**

Robert Redhead Phillips (Bob) was born on 3 May 1924 in Calgary, AB. His Canadian-born parents were Morris Lloyd Phillips and Mabel Phillips. They were of English and Irish ancestry. He had an older brother, David Lloyd Carrick Phillips, and a younger sister, Kathleen Joan Phillips. Records indicate that the family were members of the Church of England and lived at 828 4th Ave. NW in Calgary.

Bob attended Crescent Heights High School up to Grade 11. By all accounts, Bob was a go-getter, having delivered the *Calgary Albertan* newspaper and he worked in a garage after school as a helper.

Following high school, he was attracted to Fort Nelson, BC to work on the Alcan Project, later known as the Alaska Highway. He served as a checker-timekeeper where he kept track of workers' hours so that project managers could properly allocate labour resources. In 1942, the US Army sent troops to build the highway, a project that only took nine months to complete the 1,500-mile stretch.

Fort Nelson, the site of this project, was originally a fur trading post and was later named for famed Royal Navy Admiral Horatio Nelson. Interestingly, Bob joined the Navy after working in a town named for the storied Battle of Trafalgar hero.

Bob enrolled as an Ordinary Seaman on 17 February 1943, at the Calgary Division (later HMCS *Tecumseh*) of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR). According to his enrolment documents, Bob was initially rejected for service because of hernia scars. His

This material may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes, provided it includes the statement that it has been prepared by the Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph project of the Naval Reserve Association of Canada from interviews and publicly accessible sources.

enlistment records indicate he was 5 feet 7½ inches tall, considered underweight, had red hair, green eyes, and a fair complexion. Despite being rejected earlier for his hernia, Bob was eventually deemed fit for service.

After completing New Entry Training in Calgary, Bob was deployed for gunnery training to HMCS *Naden*, Canada's west coast training and operations base in Esquimalt, BC. Throughout his training, he was rated as "very good" and "satisfactory" in efficiency and conduct. In September 1943, Bob qualified as a Layer Rating (L.R.) 3<sup>rd</sup> Class. Layer Ratings were responsible for the movement of the guns, while Quarter Ratings (Q.R.) were responsible for ammunition, and Control Ratings (C.R.) were responsible for range finding. It took an entire team of gunnery ratings and supervisors to choreograph the firing of a naval gun. On completion of his training, Ordinary Seaman Phillips was billeted and worked at HMCS *Givenchy* for two-and-a-half months before



**Image of HMCS Wentworth [3 January 1944],  
Department of National Defence in Ken MacPherson Collection, NMAS,  
The Military Museum Library and Archive, University of Calgary, Alberta**

he was drafted on 12 December 1943 to his first and only operational ship, the newly launched HMCS *Wentworth*.

Originally named HMCS *Dartmouth* in honour of Dartmouth, NS, she was one of 70 River-class frigates built in Canada. Her name was changed to HMCS *Wentworth* in order to avoid confusion with the Royal Navy's HMS *Dartmouth*. HMCS *Wentworth* was built at Yarrows Shipyard at Esquimalt, BC and was

commissioned on 7 December 1943. The River-class ships were far more capable than corvettes as they were larger, had more firepower, and had improved radar detection and active sonar capabilities.

During the Second World War, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) escorted convoys from North America to Great Britain. Life aboard convoy escort ships was dangerous, both from the German Navy and the relentless North Atlantic weather. In addition to the persistent threat of U-boats, crews endured pitching or rolling swells, or "greenies" crashing over the forepeak. Frigid, blustery weather, ice-encrusted decks and equipment were constant hazards. Creature comforts were non-existent. There were no bunks and the men slept in canvas hammocks lashed to stanchions or pipes in their messes. Hot meals were not practical, so the men ate sandwiches and drank coffee for sustenance. Below decks, stokers worked around the clock maintaining the generators, pumps, and other critical equipment. The upper deck watches had the daunting task of maintaining their footing on very slick decks while battling crashing waves, wind and ice. This was the daily routine of all RCN convoy escort crews.

Bob joined *Wentworth* shortly after her commissioning. For a newly trained Ordinary Seaman, with 10 months ashore, we can imagine this seemed like the start of a fantastic adventure for Bob. Sadly, on 4 January 1944, while *Wentworth* was transiting down the west coast of North America bound for Halifax, NS, Bob and two other ratings were swept overboard during high seas and severe weather. Despite a two-hour search in extremely rough waters, none of the men was recovered. Bob was deemed to be missing and presumed drowned. *Wentworth* continued its transit and arrived in Halifax on 25 January 1944.

A Board of Inquiry was convened on 18 February 1944 aboard HMCS *Skeena* at Shelburne, NS. Although the loss was not attributed directly to the captain and officers, it was recorded that, “. . . it feels that certain errors in judgment both before and after the incident were in evidence.” The Board concluded that the officer of the watch, Lieutenant H.B. Scully, had erroneously detailed no one to keep sight of the men in the water after the first sighting on the starboard quarter. The bridge lookout was ordered to the crow’s nest and was the only rating to see them. Additionally, the Board also concluded that Lt. Scully erroneously failed to drop any lifebuoys or floats immediately after the man overboard cry was made. It was further determined that the ship’s routine was not correctly conducted in that the Watch on Deck crew members were not wearing life belts in accordance with Standing Orders.

Interestingly, the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Commander S.W. Howell, was criticized for not ordering ratings to keep clear of the quarterdeck. The method and time spent on the search were also reviewed by the Board:

*“The Board considers that as the ship had no operational duties to perform, the search should not have been discontinued after only two hours and eleven minutes when it might have been continued to advantage for a longer period.”*

*The search as conducted does not appear to have been methodical and it is suggested that a ‘to and fro’ search of the area might well have been more advantageous than the circling method adopted.”*

The Board also considered that *Wentworth* was a new ship with a new crew. In addition, the Board “. . . concurs that it was not practicable to lower a whaler under existing conditions without undue risk of additional lives.” No disciplinary action was taken against the officers and the death of the three sailors “was due to service”. Ordinary Seaman Robert Redhead Phillips was 19 years old when he died.

For his service, Ordinary Seaman Robert Redhead Phillips was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Canadian Voluntary Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mabel Phillips, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Ordinary Seaman Robert Redhead Phillips is commemorated on Panel 12 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta Plaque; the Crescent Heights High School Memorial Plaque; the Calgary Field of Crosses; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 417, at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

**Prepared By\*:**

Patrick Nichol, former Leading 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 – record for Robert Redhead Phillips
- Library and Archives Canada Service Records for Robert Redhead Phillips
- Ancestry.Com for family information
- For Posterity's Sake website for Robert Redhead Phillips' photograph
- Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 417, Centre Block, Houses of Parliament
- Obituary in the *Calgary Herald*, 25 January 1944
- Royal Canadian Navy website. For HMCS *Wentworth* background.
- Sarty, Roger. Canada and the Battle of the Atlantic. Art Global, 1998