

## Able Seaman Ralph Thomas Shelley V-13261



Ralph Thomas Shelley pictured as a Sea Cadet (1936). Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Calgary AB, 17 July 1919**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 20 June 1938**
- **Civilian Occupation: Deliveryman, Connaught Grocery**
- **Death: Lost at sea when he was swept overboard from HMCS *Vison* on 21 December 1940**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 7; HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque; and the Calgary Field of Crosses**

Ralph Thomas Shelley was born on 17 July 1919 in Calgary, AB. He was the fourth child born to John Thomas and Ellen (nee Holbostad) Shelley. His father was born in Hagersville, ON in 1885. John moved with his family to Calgary in 1887. Then, in 1902, his family established a homestead farm near Innisfail in Knee Hill County. In 1905, John moved back to Calgary, the same year that Alberta became a province. John worked as a Steam Fitter and was a member of the Volunteer Fire Department until actually joining the Calgary Fire Department. Ellen Holbostad was of Norwegian descent and was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 20 October 1889. Ellen's mother died when she was young, and Ellen immigrated to Alberta with her family in 1905. They lived in Strome, Alberta, but her father died in 1906 and she moved to Calgary.

John and Ellen met in Calgary and were married on 1 December 1910. They lived at 1228 14 Avenue SW and then relocated to 1115 11 Avenue SW, where they lived for many years. From 1912 to 1932, they had a total of 10 children: John (1912-2006), Henry (1914-1995), Robert (1916-1980), Rachel (1917-1991), Ralph (1919-1940), Richard (1921-1955), William (1923-1943), Edward (1926-2006), George (1930-1950), and Roy (1932-2017).

Ralph began public school when he was six years old. His family lived in the Connaught area of Calgary and were fortunate to live near the Connaught School. The Connaught School was the first of the famous sandstone schools to be built in Calgary; it is located at 1121 12 Avenue SW.

Ralph attended Connaught School for grades one to nine and Central High School for two years. Ralph was interested in the Navy long before the Second World War. He had been in the Sea Cadets from April 1935 until April 1938, when he decided to enlist. Ralph had been working as a

delivery man for the Connaught Grocery Store since leaving school, and he had also started going out with Lorraine Esther Roberts, a lady from the neighbourhood.

On 20 June 1938, Ralph enlisted at the Calgary Division of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) (later HMCS *Tecumseh*). His attestation documents stated he was 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighed 128 pounds. He had blue eyes and brown hair and stated his religion as Presbyterian.



RCNVR CALGARY, September 1938. Reading Left to Right: Row One: C. Street, C. Mawer, R. Jackson, J. Rowlands, C. Lowe, J. Abercrombie. Row Two: L. Smith, J. Hancock, J. Levy, G. Gammie, J. Bicknell, T. Angus, R. Hancock, C. Kent, J. Monteath, J. Pym. Row Three: W. Martin, R. Shelley, A. Boden, R. Dean, Ed Harris, C. Drew, A. Cannell. Row Four: J. Peakman, T. Anderson, D. Bateman, P. Skirrow, A. Carrington, F. Andrews. Row Five: T. Toogood, J. Mathews, A. Baker, S. Smith. Row Six: W. Nielsen, J. Deal, C. Tucker, F. Peakman. Row Seven: R. McLaughlin, W. Kirk, J. McDonald, M. McDonald, M. Soltice, M. Laak

**Ralph Shelley is in 3rd row, second from the left. Photo: For Posterity's Sake**

Ralph's career can be divided into two distinct periods: pre-war and hostilities.

As a pre-war sailor in the RCNVR, Ralph's training was not unlike that of Naval Reservists today. He had to commit to attending 30 drill sessions per year and complete a minimum of two weeks of full-time training with the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) each year. The drill sessions would have been scheduled in the evenings or on weekends so that these part-time sailors would not miss school or work.

In August 1938, Ralph was sent for two weeks of first-year Naval Training to HMCS *Naden*, Canada's west coast training and operations base in Esquimalt, BC. His training report noted that Ralph was "Keen and Smart." On return to Calgary, he would have trained on a part-time basis at the Naval Division over the winter before his next training period, also in HMCS *Naden*, in the

summer of 1939. Ralph spent August 1939 completing additional seamanship training. His training report noted that Ralph was "Superior in Gunnery" and he was rated as an Able Seaman on 25 August 1939. Ralph did not head home after this training. The RCNVR was activated for war service ten days before the declaration of war, and Able Seaman Shelley was drafted to HMCS *Nootka* on 1 September 1939.

*Nootka* was a Fundy-class minesweeper. Fundy-class minesweepers were the first warships to be built in Canada in the Second World War; however, only four were built because they were coal-powered and lacked the endurance for convoy work. When Able Seaman Shelley joined the crew, *Nootka* was on local patrol duty based out of Esquimalt Harbour near Victoria, BC.

Ralph and Lorraine were married on 11 January 1940. Lorraine continued to live with her parents at 1106 14 Street SW in Calgary.

In March of 1940, *Nootka* and her sister ship *Comox* were reassigned to the east coast. Ralph and his shipmates sailed their ships south, through the Panama Canal, and then north to Halifax, NS. The ships reached Halifax in April 1940 and became part of the Halifax Local Defence Force. Their primary function was to patrol the harbour entrance and approaches.

Ralph was landed ashore on 30 May 1940 for a Submarine Detection course at HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax. Anti-submarine warfare was in its infancy and a very early form of sonar, called ASDIC, was introduced into Canadian ships. It consisted of using sound waves to detect underwater objects. On 29 June 1940, Ralph received his submarine detector qualification. This also meant a 15 cent/day pay raise. Since it looked like Ralph would be stationed out of Halifax for quite some time, his wife Lorraine moved to Nova Scotia and lived in Dartmouth.

On 27 July 1940, Ralph was drafted to HMCS *French*, a former RCMP investigation ship that examined merchant vessels entering Halifax Harbour. Ralph only served in *French* for about six weeks until September 1940; it is possible that this was "consolidation training" after his submarine detector training ashore.

Able Seaman Shelley joined his last ship, HMCS *Vison* on 29 September 1940. The *Vison* was an Armed Yacht built in Delaware in 1931 and purchased by the RCN at the start of the Second World War. She had a crew of five officers and 35 ratings and was used for convoy escorts in the St. Lawrence River. When the St. Lawrence River started to freeze in December 1940, HMCS *Vison* was dispatched south to escort convoys between Bermuda and Trinidad.

On 21 December 1940, *Vison* was close to Bermuda. At 0840, in heavy weather with low visibility, Able Seaman Anderson was sent to the ship's forecastle to secure the Jack staff (a vertical pole on the bow from which the Jack is flown). Able Seaman Shelley was off-watch but decided to assist his shipmate. There were no witnesses to what happened, but somehow Able Seaman Shelley was washed overboard. Able Seaman Anderson saw him in the water and gave the man overboard alarm. The ship immediately came about, but they could not locate him, and he was classified as "Lost at Sea." Able Seaman Ralph Thomas Shelley was 21 years old when he died.

For his service, Able Seaman Ralph Thomas Shelley was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star & Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Ellen, and wife, Lorraine, were awarded the Memorial Cross.

It would be the first of two Memorial Crosses awarded to Ellen Shelley. The Shelley family suffered further hardship when Ralph's younger brother, Able Seaman William Henry Shelley, was killed on 22 February 1943 when HMCS *Weyburn* struck a mine and sank just east of Gibraltar.

Able Seaman Ralph Thomas Shelley is commemorated on Panel 7 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta Plaque; the Calgary Field of Crosses; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 18, at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

**Prepared By\*:**

Sub Lieutenant (Retired) Ross Anderson HMCS *Tecumseh* 1971-74 Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Researcher

\*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 Ralph Thomas Shelley
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial Page for Able Seaman Ralph Thomas Shelley
- For Posterity's Sake: ships histories: HMCS *Nootka*, *French* and *Vison*
- For Posterity's Sake: Ralph Thomas Shelley
- Library and Archives Canada – military service file for Ralph Thomas Shelley
- Ancestry.ca. early history of the Shelley family
- *Calgary Herald* Obituaries for John Thomas and Ellen Shelley
- *Calgary Herald* Article: Able Seaman Ralph Shelley: 8 January 1941