

## Able Seaman William Henry Shelley V-35255

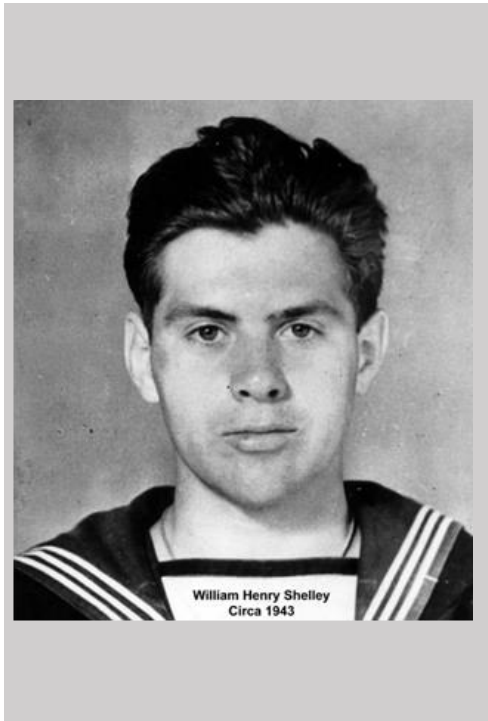


Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Calgary AB, 23 May 1923**
- **Enlisted: Calgary Division RCNVR, 6 February 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Meter Repairman, Calgary Gas Company**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Weyburn* struck a mine and sank on 22 February 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; Memorial Plaque HMCS *Tecumseh*; Memorial Plaque Naval Museum of Alberta in Calgary; and Field of Crosses in Calgary**

William Henry Shelley was born on 23 May 1923 in Calgary, AB. William was the seventh of ten children born to John Thomas Shelley and Ellen Shelley (nee Holbostad). His father was born in Hagersville, ON in 1885. In 1887, John moved with his family to Calgary in the territory that would soon be named Alberta. In 1901, John's family established a homestead farm near Innisfail in Knee Hill County. John returned to Calgary in 1905 and worked as a Steam Fitter while serving with the Calgary Volunteer Fire Department. He became one of the original members of the Calgary Fire Department when it was formed in 1909.

William's mother, Ellen Holbostad, was of Norwegian descent and was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 20 October 1889. Her mother died when she was very young and she immigrated to Canada with the remainder of her family in 1905. Many Norwegians, in search of good farmland, had emigrated from Minnesota to the Camrose area of Alberta around this time. Ellen's family settled near Strome, AB, but her father died in 1906 and she moved to Calgary, where she met John Shelley. John and Ellen were married in Calgary on 1 December 1910 and lived in the Connaught area of Calgary, first at 1228 14 Avenue SW, and then moving to 1115 11 Avenue SW, where they lived for many years. This was an excellent location for the Shelley family. They attended the Grace Presbyterian Church located at 1009 15 Avenue SW and their children attended the Connaught School at 1121 12 Avenue SW, which was only a block away from their home. From 1912 to 1932 John and Ellen Shelley had ten 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).

William attended the Connaught School; he also worked as a farm labourer and eventually finished eight years of school at age 17. He then got a job with the Calgary Gas Company as a Meter Repairman and was working at this job when he decided to enlist. On 6 February 1942, William enlisted at the Calgary Division Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR), later known as HMCS *Tecumseh*. William was 18 years old, and his attestation documents stated that he was 5 feet 2 inches tall and weighed 150 pounds. He had brown hair and hazel eyes, and his religion was listed as Church of England. William liked his job with the Gas Company and planned to return to it after the hostilities.

William followed the example set by his three older brothers, Henry, Robert, and Ralph, who had also enlisted in the RCNVR. This may have been a difficult decision because his brother Ralph Thomas Shelley had been lost at sea on 21 December 1940 while serving in HMCS *Vison*. A fourth brother, Richard, was serving overseas in the Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps (Tank Division) when William enlisted.

Ordinary Seaman William Henry Shelley was placed on Active Service on 23 March 1942. He completed New Entry training in Calgary before being sent for seamanship training to HMCS *Naden*, Canada's west coast training and operations base in Esquimalt, BC. The three-month training course prepared William in all aspects of seamanship, including boat work, rigging, damage control, lookout and quartermaster duties, and gunnery. On completion, William was sent for more specialized training in gunnery to HMCS *Stadacona*, the main Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) training and operations base on the east coast in Halifax, NS. William was a fast learner and on 15 October 1942, he earned his Quarters Rating III in Anti-Aircraft gunnery.

Ordinary Seaman Shelley was dispatched to the United Kingdom within two weeks of qualification. His first stop in the United Kingdom was the RCN's shore base, HMCS *Niobe*. HMCS *Niobe* was located near Greenock, Scotland and served as a supply, administration, and accommodation base for RCN ships in the UK. William was only at *Niobe* until 8 November 1942, when he became a member of the crew of HMCS *Weyburn*.



**HMCS Weyburn**  
Photo: Department of National Defence / Library and Archives  
Canada. Item # 4950903

HMCS *Weyburn* was a Flower-class Corvette built in Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay), ON. She was 210' long and 33' across the beam and usually had a crew of 87 men. HMCS *Weyburn* was commissioned in Halifax in December 1941 and was initially assigned escort duties as part of the Halifax Force.

In November 1942, *Weyburn* was reassigned to UK-Gibraltar Convoy escorts for the Allied invasion of North Africa, known as Operation

TORCH. Ordinary Seaman William Shelley probably joined the crew in Londonderry while the ship was being armed with anti-aircraft armaments. UK to Gibraltar convoys left Londonderry or Liverpool and travelled through the Bay of Biscay, then through the Strait of Gibraltar to Gibraltar.

On 22 February 1943, *Weyburn* took a position on the port side of a slow convoy, MKS 8, which was headed back to the United Kingdom. Approximately seven miles off Cape Spartel, Morocco, *Weyburn* struck a submerged magnetic mine in a minefield that had been laid by a German U-boat earlier that month. The huge explosion blew a hole in the port side, and the ship began taking on water and settled by the stern but did not sink. The Royal Navy Destroyer HMS *Wivern* came alongside and picked up survivors. It was standard safety procedure, whenever possible, to remove the primers from the depth charges of a damaged ship to prevent them from exploding if the ship sank. This was done, but two depth charges were inaccessible due to damage to the ship. After about 20 minutes, HMCS *Weyburn* took on more water and sank stern first. As the ship sank, there were two more explosions when the armed depth charges exploded. This explosion killed several men in the water and damaged HMS *Wivern*. Of the crew of 83 men, 71 survived; 12 died, including William Shelley. Ordinary William Henry Shelley was 19 years old when he died.

On 14 July 1943, one of the survivors, another Calgary RCNVR sailor named Coder Tommy Hind, returned to Calgary on a convalescence leave. He was interviewed by the *Calgary Herald* and told of how he was on watch in the signal room when the first explosion blew him onto the upper deck. Dazed at first, he then proceeded aft and dove into the water. He began swimming away from the ship and joined William Shelley. They both stopped and watched as the *Weyburn* sank. The following explosions hit them both hard and Tommy was badly injured but survived; the blast killed William Shelley. William Henry Shelley was rated to Able Seaman posthumously.

For his service, Able Seaman William Henry Shelley was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Africa Star & Clasp, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Ellen Shelley, was awarded her second Memorial Cross.

The first Memorial Cross that was awarded to Ellen Shelley was in memory of another son, Able Seaman Ralph Thomas Shelley, who was lost at sea when he was swept overboard from HMCS *Vison* on 21 December 1940.

Able Seaman William Henry Shelley is commemorated on Panel 10 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 212, 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:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database profile for William Shelley

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- Canadian Virtual War Memorial page for William Shelley
- For Posterity's Sake website: HMCS *Weyburn* K173
- For Posterity's Sake website: William Henry Shelley
- Johnson, Mac. [Corvettes Canada: Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their Stories](#), Wiley, 2008
- Library and Archives Canada: military service file for William Henry Shelley
- Ancestry.ca: History of the Shelley Family
- *Calgary Herald* Obituaries for John and Ellen Shelley
- *Calgary Herald* Article 14 July 1943: interview of Coder Tommy Hind