

LUCAS, William Eldon (#V/19180)

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill would say that “The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril.” Sarnia’s William Lucas was one of many who lost his life at the hands of the dreaded U-boats. He gave his life for the Allied cause in the protection of vital shipping lanes between the Caribbean Sea and England.

He was born in Sarnia on October 29, 1918, the youngest son of Thomas Henry (born in Camlachie, Ontario) and Lillian Mae (nee Martin, born in Sarnia) Lucas, of 368 Shepherd Street, Sarnia. Thomas and Lillian Lucas were married on June 28, 1905 in Sarnia, and they had four children together: Helena Mae (born 1906, later becoming Mrs. Edmund Mackey); James Wesley (born 1912); William; and Shirley Catherine (born 1924, later becoming Mrs. Charles Demars). William attended Sarnia Collegiate, completing school at the age of seventeen. A former scoutmaster, prior to enlisting William worked a variety of jobs in Sarnia: on a farm for three summers; as a gas station attendant; as a labourer (grinder) at Muellers Foundry; and then as a chauffeur employed by W.H. Kenney until he enlisted.

Twenty-two-year-old William Lucas enlisted with the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve on November 18, 1940, in Windsor, Ontario. He stood five feet ten inches tall, had blue eyes and brown hair, was single, and lived at home with his parents on Shepherd Street at the time. He began his training at the Royal Canadian Naval Division Headquarters in Windsor. One month later, Ordinary Seaman William Lucas, still in training, returned to Sarnia from the barracks at Windsor to assist two recruiting officers of the Windsor depot in the interviewing of recruits for the Royal Canadian Navy. Recruiting in Sarnia for only one day, William explained to the young men that if they were accepted, they would be given a medical examination before going to Windsor; they would undergo training for a six-week period at the Windsor barracks; and then would be transferred to one of the coastal naval bases. At that one-day recruitment, more than one hundred young men from Sarnia, Petrolia, Wyoming and Courtright presented themselves at the armory for enlistment in the Royal Canadian Naval detachment. The average age of those accepted was 18 to 20 years, many of high school age.

In April 1941, William was transferred to Halifax base *Stadacona*, with the rank of Steward Probationary. His training continued in Halifax at *HMCS Kings* (King’s College), where he attained full Steward in November 1941. William returned to Sarnia on leave during Christmas and New Year’s 1941 until January 1942. He then returned to *Stadacona* in Halifax on January 9, 1942. According to his official Service Files, three days later, on January 12, 1942, his ship/establishment was recorded as “*Gaspe (Vison)*”, with the rank of Steward. Also recorded on that date was that he “*was borne for passage in SS Lady Hawkins bound for Trinidad*”.

The *HMCS Vison* (S11/Z30), formerly the *Avalon*, was launched in 1931.* In June 1940, it left Halifax for Pictou where she was converted to an armed yacht of 181 feet in length and a displacement of 422 tonnes. In early October 1940 she was commissioned by the RCN in Halifax and assigned to the base at Gaspe. In December 1940, the ship was sent southward operating out of Trinidad and Bermuda until her return to Halifax in May 1941. In July 1941 she became a member of Gaspé Force, proceeding from Halifax for passage to Trinidad again in December 1941. William Lucas was bound for his posting on the *Vison*. He would not make it.

*Note: His Service File records the name of ship as *Vison*. Some sources record the name as *Vision*.

The **Battle of the Caribbean** was part of the Battle of the Atlantic. German U-boats and Italian submarines attempted to disrupt the Allied supply of oil and other material by attacking shipping in the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico. The Royal Canadian Navy played a vital role in this theatre, protecting ships carrying the vital supplies of fuel and resources.

HMCS Vison rejoined the Halifax Local Defence Force in April 1942 and was transferred to Sydney Force in July 1942. In February 1943, *Vison* returned to Halifax as a training ship attached to *HMCS Cornwallis* and moved with the establishment to Digby in April 1943. She remained there until the end of the war as a seamen's training ship, exercising with RN submarines in the Bay of Fundy.



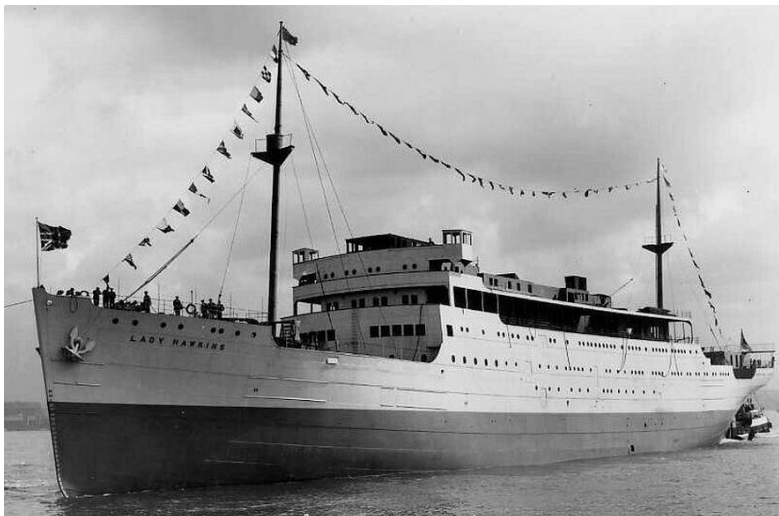
Steward William Eldon Lucas



Armed Yacht *HMCS Vison S11/Z30*

On January 12, 1942, William Lucas boarded the steamship *SS Lady Hawkins* in Halifax that had departed Montreal on its way to Bermuda (where the *Vison* was located at that time). The *Lady Hawkins*, a Canadian luxury liner, was part of Canada's merchant navy fleet designed for the Canada-West Indies service. Prior to the war, Canadian National Steamships operated a fleet of five luxury liners that sailed from eastern Canadian ports to Bermuda, the West Indies, British Honduras and British Guyana carrying passengers and freight. Known affectionately as the "Lady Boats", they were named after the wives of British admirals with a connection to the West Indies – *Lady Somers*, *Lady Rodney*, *Lady Nelson*, *Lady Drake* and *Lady Hawkins*. When war broke out, they were pressed into war service. Their sparkling white hulls were repainted with drab grey paint, and each had a four-inch gun mounted aft for protection against surface raiders and U-boats.

In January 1942, after leaving Montreal, then Halifax and Boston, the *Lady Hawkins* had 109 crew and 212 passengers, mostly civilian, on board. At least 50 of the passengers were Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve personnel (including William Lucas). The ship had no escort and only a small gun for defence, so it travelled in a zig-zag pattern and was blacked out for defence.



S.S. Lady Hawkins

On January 19, 1942, at about 2:00 a.m., the unescorted *Lady Hawkins* was sailing in the darkness when it was hit by two stern torpedoes from German *U-66*. The ship sank in less than 30 minutes, approximately 150 miles from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The ship's wireless sets were destroyed and no SOS was sent out, so there would be no quick rescue. Five of the ship's six lifeboats were smashed to bits and sank. One nine-metre lifeboat, built for 63, escaped the scene with 76 cold, wet survivors on board. One of those who survived later said, *There were no lights, no stars, no moon at that time of the morning. We could hear people in the water, but we couldn't actually see them. There were people shouting, but we couldn't take any more aboard. It was a horrible thing.*

Chief Officer Percy Kelly, in charge of the lifeboat, later reported that, (he gave) *the agonizing order to pull away... there was nothing else we could do. The cries of the people in the water rang in my ears for years.*

For five days the survivors drifted west under sail and by paddle, bailing out their lifeboat constantly, staying alive on meagre rations. Breakfast and supper consisted of half a biscuit and a dipper of water each. Lunch was a mouthful of condensed milk. After five days, the U.S. passenger steamship *Coamo* happened upon the lifeboat and picked up seventy-one survivors. Five of the 76 unfortunately had fallen into comas and died during the five days at sea. The *Coamo* landed at Puerto Rico on January 28. Two hundred fifty crew and passengers were lost in the sinking of the *Lady Hawkins*, including Sarnia's William Lucas.

Steward William Lucas' death was later officially recorded as, *Missing, believed lost at sea on war service.* On October 29, 1944, two and a half years after William Lucas was reported missing, the Remembrance Book at Devine Street Church was opened at the photograph of William Lucas in honour of his 26th birthday. Twenty-three-year-old William Lucas has no known grave. His name is inscribed on the Halifax Memorial, Nova Scotia, Canada, Panel 9.

From: *The Sarnia War Remembrance Project*, by Tom Slater