

Joiner 4th Class Frederick (Freddie) William Charles JACOBS

Service number D/MX 70501
Royal Navy
HMS Hecla
Killed in action on 12 November 1942, aged 24

Born in Wells, Freddie was a carpenter by trade and played in the Wells City Band. He joined the Royal Navy in 1940 and served as a carpenter. He joined HMS Hecla and went to Iceland. Returning to the UK, he got married in March 1942. He sailed again in the Hecla, this time down to the tip of South Africa, where it hit a mine. When it was repaired it went to support the ships taking part in the Invasion of North Africa but was torpedoed by a German U-boat about 200 miles west of Gibraltar. Freddie died when the ship sank.



“HMS Hecla Sinking off the West Coast of Morocco: 11th November 1942”

Painting by Herbert Hastings McWilliams, image © IWM Art.IWM ART LD 2611

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/18827>

Freddie was born in Wells on 29 July 1918 to Ferdinand E. Jacobs and Bessie née James. He was their only son and had an elder sister, Kathleen. His father was a carter and the family lived on Tor Street.

After leaving school he served his apprenticeship as a carpenter with Mr J. Pope, and afterwards worked for Messrs W. & H. Paul. In his spare time he was a member of the Wells City Band and he is still remembered by them on Remembrance Sunday.

In September 1939, he was living at 10, Tor Street, Wells with his parents and three lodgers. Frederick was working as a carpenter and his father was a museum attendant, presumably at the Wells & Mendip Museum.

Freddie joined the Navy in August 1940, and continued in his trade of carpenter. On 1 November 1940, the *Wells Journal* printed a letter that he had sent from HMS Rayleigh, the RN Training Establishment at Torpoint in Cornwall, to say that the old Crimean War cannon in Wells Market Place should be scrapped for “shells for our Navy”.

HMS Hecla¹ was built on the Clyde as a destroyer depot ship and after being commissioned on 6 January 1941, was based at Haveljford in Iceland as the mother ship for the destroyers escorting the Atlantic convoys. It seems likely that Freddie was with the Hecla right from her commissioning, as the *Wells Journal* of 11 December 1942 states that he had served for a number of months in Iceland.

In the autumn of 1941 HMS Hecla returned to the Clyde for a refit. On 25 March 1942, at St Thomas' Church, Frederick married Lilian May Talbot from Haybridge. Lilian was in the ATS, and a sergeant and six of Lilian's comrades formed a guard of honour for the newlyweds as they left the church. The reception was held at the Fountain Inn.

On 15 April 1942, HMS Hecla headed south to join the fleet being assembled to protect Singapore against the Japanese. On 15 May she struck a mine off the South African coast and limped into Simonstown where she spent several months under repair. On 20 October, Hecla left Cape Town and arrived at Freetown on 2 November. There she joined another destroyer depot ship, HMS Vindictive, and together they left on 4 November in a convoy bound for Liverpool.

Four days later, near the Canaries, the two destroyer depot ships, were joined by the destroyers HMS Venomous and HMS Marne, and together they were detached for Gibraltar to support the ships taking part in Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa. On the night of 11-12 November, about 200 miles west of Gibraltar, HMS Hecla was hit by five torpedoes fired from a German U-boat, and sank at about 02:00.

HMS Marne rescued 64 of Hecla's crew before a torpedo blew off her stern and 493 were saved by HMS Venomous despite her having to break off the rescue to attack the U-boat. According to the Admiralty, nine of Hecla's crew died and another 273 were "missing presumed killed". Freddie was one of the missing.

On 6 August 1943, the *Wells Journal* reported that:

Mrs. F. Jacobs, of the Bungalow, Haybridge [his wife] ... has received a message from the King, stating "The Queen and I offer you our heartfelt sympathy in your great loss. We pray that your country's gratitude for a life so nobly given in its service may bring you some measure of consolation. George R.I."

It continued:

This is the third bereavement suffered by Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs of Tor Street [his parents], during the past eight months. A nephew, Leading Writer Griffin died in the Royal Naval Barracks, Chatham last December, and another nephew, William Rowland (Tom) James, who after his mother's death lived with Mrs. Jacobs, his aunt, is presumed to have lost his life while serving in a submarine.

Freddie has no known grave other than the wreck of HMS Hecla, but is remembered on the Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 71, Column 1. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. Both of Freddie's cousins are on the Wells War Memorial.

Freddie's wife, Lilian, married Thomas Lansdown in 1958.

The picture used above to illustrate Freddie's story was painted by Herbert Hastings McWilliams, who was a Lieutenant serving on the Hecla when it was sunk. It is based on sketches that he made after he had been rescued by HMS Venomous. The notes in the corner say, "The explosion in the stem of the destroyer and the burning ammunition lit up the sinking 'Hecla' vividly, and showed the enormous hole in her port side made by the third torpedo".

¹ The story of HMS Hecla is taken from Bill Foster's webpage [A Hard Fought Ship: The story of HMS Venomous](http://www.holywellhousepublishing.co.uk/HMS_Hecla.html) (http://www.holywellhousepublishing.co.uk/HMS_Hecla.html).