

Able Seaman Arthur Edwin Barrett V-12346



AB Arthur Barrett,
Photo Credit: Unlucky Lady: The Life and Death
of HMCS Athabaskan

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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Lloydminster, SK, 10 May 1917**
- **Enlisted: Edmonton Division RCNVR, 10 May 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Painter, M.J. Smith Decorator**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Buried: Plouescat Communal Cemetery, France. Row B. Grave 37**
- **Commemorated: HMCS *Nonsuch* memorial plaque and Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque, Calgary**

Arthur Barrett was born in 1917 in Lloydminster, SK. Lloydminster straddles the border between Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Barrett's father was Charles Barrett (1871-1942). Originally from England, Charles fought in the Boer War in South Africa and was farming when he emigrated to Canada in 1903. Charles joined the Barr Colonists, a group of 2,000 English would-be pioneers. The group was all-English, temperate, and seeking a utopian agrarian existence. They crossed the Atlantic on the SS *Lake Manitoba* and then travelled to Saskatoon, SK, by rail. From there, they travelled by wagon to what is now the Lloydminster area and their homesteads. Stories of the bickering within the homogenous colonist group are legendary.

Arthur's mother was Annie Barstow (1887-1974). She, too, was born in England and followed the Barr Colonists to Canada in 1904. Charles and Annie were married in about 1905. Their first child was Charles Fredrick, born in 1906. Frank Stanley was born in 1908, and Dortha Gertrude in 1912. Arthur Edwin was born in 1917, followed by Irene Verna in 1919. The family's homestead was on the Alberta side of Lloydminster. They farmed on the homestead until sometime after 1916. In 1921, the family was living in Edmonton. Arthur's parents separated soon after, and his father returned to Lloydminster.

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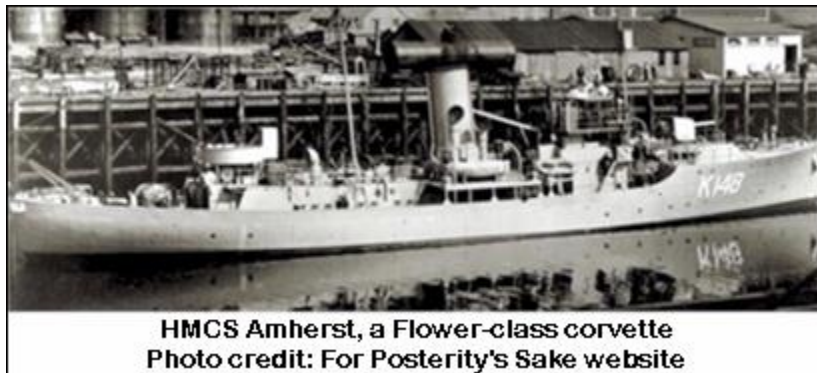
Arthur went to school in Edmonton. He completed Grade 9 but left school when he was 16. He went to work as a painter for MJ Smith Decorating, completed a painter's apprenticeship, and stayed with the company for seven years. During this time, he seemed to be active socially – his name was in the local newspapers for attending various birthday parties.

Arthur enlisted in the Navy in May 1940 at the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve Division (RCNVR) in Edmonton (later known as HMCS *Nonsuch*). He had light brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. It was the day before his 23rd birthday, and he was single. He stated his religion as Presbyterian.

Ordinary Seaman Barrett was called to active duty in August of 1940. In September, the Navy sent him to HMCS *Naden*, the primary training base on Canada's west coast. He took his basic seamanship training at *Naden*, and then he trained as a Submarine Detector (SD), otherwise known as an ASDIC operator (ASDIC being the early name for sonar, the antisubmarine echolocation system). This training also took place at *Naden* and onboard HMCS *Sans Peur*. *Sans Peur* was a steel-hulled yacht that the Navy requisitioned during the war. It was armed with a 4-inch naval gun, anti-aircraft guns, and depth charges. *Sans Peur* also gained a radar and a Type 123 ASDIC, the same rudimentary ASDIC that Canada's corvettes used.

Barrett qualified as Acting SD in February 1941. He continued training and working on the West Coast until April of 1941 when he was transferred to HMCS *Stadacona*, the Navy's major training and operational base in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In May 1941, for reasons that are unclear, Arthur relinquished his Submarine Detector qualification (and the 10 cents/day pay increase). He trained – likely as a gunner – and worked in the Halifax area for the next year, and the Navy promoted him to Able Seaman in August of 1941.

Barrett enjoyed a period of leave at home in Edmonton in November of 1941. He dutifully attended some events with his mother, which represented part of her work to support sailors away from home for extended periods.



In July of 1942, Barrett was posted to HMCS *Amherst*, a Flower-class corvette. The ship was a member of Escort Group C4 of the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) based in St. John's, Newfoundland. EG C4 escorted convoys between the UK and North America. The group usually sailed between Londonderry, in Northern Ireland, and St. John's. Local

escorts would protect the ships from a mid-ocean meeting point to or from port.

In August of 1942, the Navy granted Barrett leave, and he travelled home to Edmonton. He married Cleo MacPhail on 19 August 1942.

Barrett re-joined his ship in September of 1942 and sailed from St. John's to Londonderry, escorting convoy SC-101. One ship was lost to a U-boat after it fell behind the convoy. *Amherst* returned to North America, escorting convoy ON-137. On this trip, they were spotted by German

U-boats, but the convoy altered course and avoided the wolfpacks, completing the crossing without loss.

The next convoy for Escort Group C4 and *Amherst* was SC-107. The convoy had 39 merchant ships, plus the escort of two destroyers and four corvettes. Two wolfpacks of U-boats intercepted the convoy after the German Navy was able to intercept and decipher radio message traffic outlining its route. Eight U-boats attacked on the night of 1 November 1942. The escorts attempted to drive them off, but the submarines slipped into the convoy to attack the merchant ships. On the night of 2 November, nine more U-boats gained contact with convoy SC-107. They attacked again on 3 November. German forces claimed a total of 15 merchant ships in the battle, but they lost three U-boats—two by RCAF bombers and one when an ammunition ship exploded and capsized the nearby submarine.

Escort Group C4, with *Amherst*, did four more trans-Atlantic convoys (ON-147, SC-112, ON-158, and HX-224). Following these convoys, the Escort Group did two more from the UK to the Mediterranean in support of Operation TORCH, the Allied landings in North Africa. *Amherst* arrived back in the UK in March of 1943, and the Navy posted Barrett to HMCS *Niobe*.

Niobe was the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) manning depot in Greenock, Scotland. Sailors would be sent here to await being assigned to their ships. After what must have seemed like an inordinately long wait, on 3 July 1943, the Navy posted Barrett to HMCS *Athabaskan*. Shortly after that, he was awarded his Good Conduct Badge.

Athabaskan was one of four Improved Tribal-Class Destroyers that the RCN had ordered from British shipyards. The RCN ordered another four from Halifax Shipyards, but these were not completed in time for war service. The Royal Navy (RN) had ordered 16



HMCS Athabaskan, Canadian Tribal-class Destroyer.
Photo: Canada.ca website

Tribal-Class destroyers before the start of the war and lost 12 of them during the war. They were the most modern and powerful destroyers available. *Athabaskan* was commissioned in February of 1943.

When Barrett joined the ship, *Athabaskan* was stationed at Plymouth, England. It was assigned to a group carrying out anti-submarine patrols in the Bay of Biscay. On 27 August 1943, *Athabaskan* was hit by a Luftwaffe HS 293, a precision-guided glide bomb. The bomb hit the port side, passed through the width of the destroyer, and exploded after it exited the starboard side. The late detonation may have been due to the Luftwaffe crew mistaking *Athabaskan* as a much larger ship and incorrectly setting the detonator. This saved the ship from what would likely have been complete destruction, but it was heavily damaged, and five sailors died in the blast. A few minutes earlier, another glide bomb had hit HMS *Egret*, which sank in minutes with a loss of 194 RN sailors. *Athabaskan's* crew sailed their damaged ship back to Plymouth despite a serious list. It took two months to repair the ship. The repairs were completed by November 1943, and the ship's next assignment was to escort the RN battlecruiser HMS *Renown* from Egypt to the UK. The British ship carried Winston Churchill back from the Cairo Conference.

In December of 1943, *Athabaskan* was ordered to join the 3 Destroyer Flotilla at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. Convoys to the Soviet Union (USSR) were starting up again, and *Athabaskan* was assigned to Convoy JW-55A, sailing from Loch Ewe to an Arctic Ocean port on the Kola Inlet, USSR. During the transit, *Athabaskan* detected and attacked a U-boat, but it dove, and contact was lost. The convoy arrived intact.



**War Service 1942-1944 Arctic Convoys:
Able Seaman Thomas B Day standing
against the ice-encrusted turret onboard
HMS Belfast, in Nov 1943.
Photo: Imperial War Museum**

It isn't hard to imagine that working as an Able Seaman – on the open upper deck of the ship – would have been unpleasant and dangerous. The ship's metal decks and superstructure would have been ice-coated from the cold spray of the Arctic Ocean, and the biting wind would have chilled even the most warmly dressed sailor.

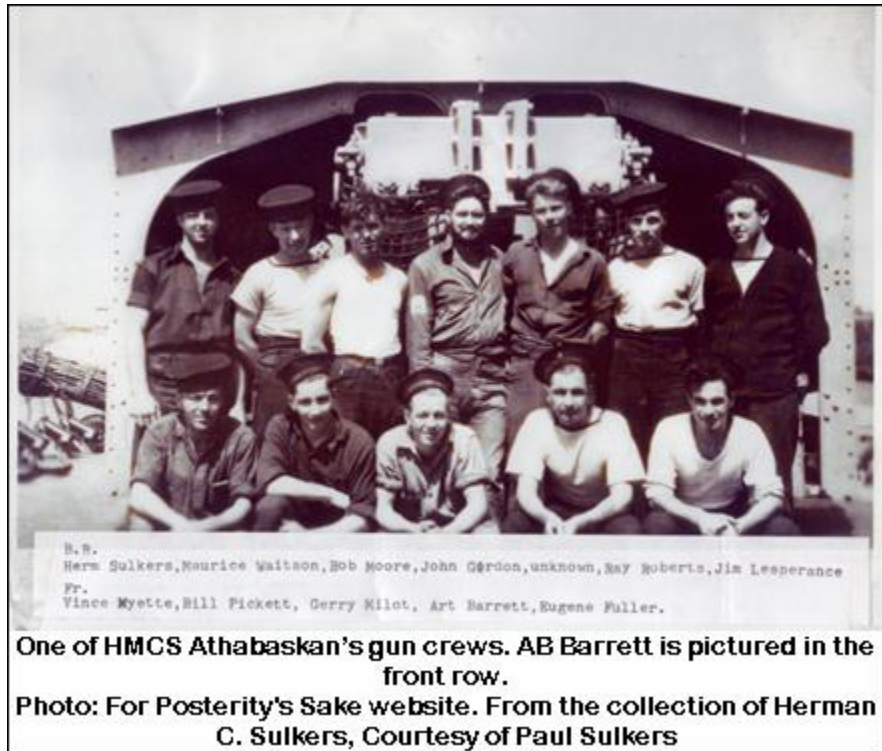
In addition to the threat from U-boats, the convoys to and from the Soviet Union were also in danger from German aircraft and heavy surface units like the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst*. When *Athabaskan* was escorting Convoy RW-55A, the legendary *Scharnhorst* sailed along with five destroyers with the intention of attacking convoys. Another force of eight U-boats formed a patrol line. RW-55A altered course to avoid the Germans. An RN force of a battleship, cruisers and destroyers engaged the *Scharnhorst*, eventually sinking it during the famous Battle of the North Cape. Convoy RW-55A arrived safely at Loch Ewe.

In January 1944, *Athabaskan* was again ordered to be part of an escort for Winston Churchill. This time, he was returning to the UK from a vacation in Gibraltar, Morocco, on the battleship HMS *King George V*. Later in January, the ship was assigned

to Operation TUNNEL – a series of operations intended to diminish German sea power in the Channel before D-Day. Two other Canadian Tribal-Class destroyers, HMCS *Iroquois* and HMCS *Haida*, were also part of the flotilla of Allied ships. The Channel operations were put on hold when the three Canadian destroyers were assigned to an RN carrier and battleship force tasked to attack German shipping off the Norwegian coast.

Athabaskan and the other Canadian Tribal-Class destroyers returned to Plymouth to join the 10th Destroyer Flotilla. This force included three RN Tribal-Class destroyers, several other Allied destroyers and two RN light cruisers. *Iroquois* left for a refit in Canada and was replaced by the other Canadian Tribal, HMCS *Huron*. The tempo of exercises, coastal escorts and patrol operations increased as preparations for D-Day continued. But during March and part of April of 1944, there was little contact with enemy forces. The Canadians referred to this period as FAFC – politely known as Fooling Around on the French Coast. On 25 April 1944, they sailed after three enemy destroyers had been spotted in the Saint-Malo area on the northwest coast of France. They engaged the German destroyers T24, T27, and T29, with T29 being sunk by gunfire.

On 29 April 1944, *Athabaskan* and *Haida* sailed again. This operation was to provide an escort for a coastal force of ten boats laying a minefield near the tip of the Brittany peninsula. The surviving German destroyers T24 and T27 had been repaired and were in the area trying to reach their home port of Brest. The Canadian ships engaged the Germans with gunfire. The German ships returned fire and launched torpedoes. A torpedo from T24 hit *Athabaskan*, resulting in a large fire that the crew struggled to deal with. The aft ammunition magazine then exploded, causing flames seen 30 miles away. The ship was without power or steering, and the Commanding Officer gave the order to abandon ship. *Haida* returned to *Athabaskan*, laid a smokescreen to conceal the stricken ship's position, and then continued the attack on T27. *Haida* scored more gunfire hits on T27 and drove the enemy destroyer ashore.



Athabaskan sank quickly, stern first. Most of the crew leaped into the water. *Haida* also returned and – staying as long as it could – rescued 45 sailors. Two RN Motor Torpedo Boats travelled to the rescue site but were recalled by the RN, who thought the rescue operation would be too dangerous. Later, a group of German Navy ships led by T24 arrived in daylight and rescued another 86 sailors. These sailors became Prisoners of War.

Many of the deceased sailors' bodies washed up on the French shore and were buried in nine local cemeteries. About half of those washed ashore were eventually identified. Another 37 sailors were never found.

Able Seaman Arthur Edwin Barrett was among those whose bodies were washed ashore. He was 26 years old. His body was identified after the war by a Canadian Army forensics unit using dental records. He is buried at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Plouescat, France, with 58 of his shipmates. His gravestone reads:

"Always Loved and Ever Remembered by Mother, Sisters and Brothers".

Barrett was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal 1939-45. A note in his Navy records from 1950 indicates that his medals had been twice returned undelivered. His mother and widow were awarded the Canadian Memorial Crosses.

In Canada, Arthur is commemorated on the Naval Museum of Alberta plaque and the HMCS *Nonsuch* plaque.

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Prepared By*:

David Mitchell, former Able 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.



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