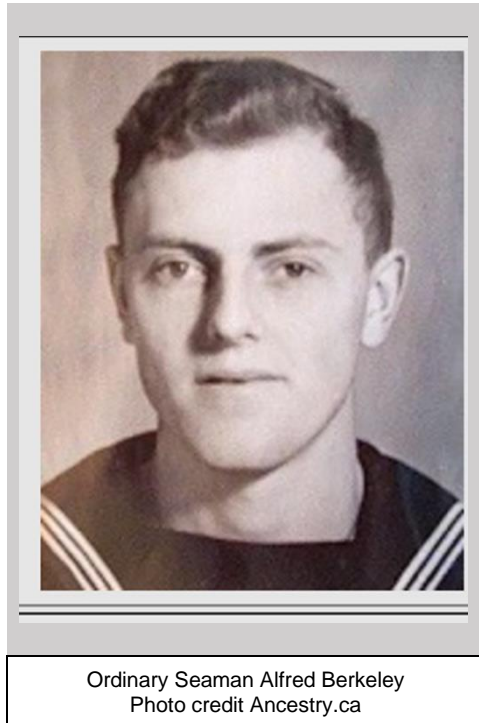


## Ordinary Seaman Alfred George Berkeley V-54498



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Edmonton AB, 1 July 1924**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Nonsuch*, 11 February 1943**
- **Civilian Occupation: Junior Clerk, Weiller & Williams Company Limited**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; Naval Museum of Alberta plaque, and the HMCS *Nonsuch* plaque.**

Alfred George Berkeley was born in Edmonton in July 1924. His parents were Martin Berkeley and Maria (Semmler) Berkeley. Martin, the father, was born in the Volhynia area of Eastern Europe in 1875. This region was part of Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine at different times. On most records, he was listed as being born in Russia. Maria Semmler, Alfred's mother, was also from the Volhynia region, born in 1886. Martin and Maria were married in 1903. Their first child, Reynold, was born in 1905 in Volhynia. The Berkeley family name was originally Budzinski. The Budzinski family's mother tongue was German, and they were of German ethnicity.

Martin, Maria, and Reynold immigrated to Canada in 1906 and settled in Edmonton. Martin applied for a homestead near Edmonton, but there is no record of it being granted. Martin, Marie, and Reynold became naturalized British subjects and Canadian residents in 1909. Martin was a cabinet maker who worked for Haywood Lumber.

The Budzinski's had eight children before Alfred was born:

- Reynold (1905-1995)
- Ben (1908-2000)
- Doris (1909-1969)
- Adele (1911-2007)
- Arthur (1914-2008) (RCAF in WW2)
- Adeline (1916-2010)
- Elsie (1918-2006)

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- Violet (1920-1991)

All except Reynold were born in Edmonton. Alfred was born in 1924, making him 19 years younger than his oldest sibling.

The family anglicized their last name shortly before Alfred was born, choosing Berkeley.

Alfred grew up in Edmonton; the family lived at 11730 94 Street. He went to Parkdale School for his elementary schooling and then to Eastwood High School. He delivered papers for the Edmonton Journal and was a Scout. He left school after Grade 11 when he was seventeen, having earned his Junior Matriculation. During his school years, he was active in many sports, including baseball, rugby, badminton, skating, and swimming (although – ironically – he never passed the Navy swim test).

He apprenticed as a butcher for nine months, not completing the program. He then went to work as a junior clerk for Weiller and Williams Company, a Livestock Commission firm. He worked there for about 18 months before he started the Navy enlistment process.

Alfred enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at HMCS *Nonsuch* in Edmonton on 11 February 1943. He was described as 5 foot 6, with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. He stated his religion as the Church of England. He did not mention speaking German but declared his parents' original nationality as German.

Being from an ethnically German family meant that the Navy had to ask the RCMP for a background check. Constable Leyland reported that Alfred's employer rated him as being of splendid character, very trustworthy, an excellent worker, and loyal and that a "better boy could not be found". The constable also reported that Alfred's parents were well thought of in the Edmonton district.

Ordinary Seaman Berkeley began active service in March 1943. He remained assigned to HMCS *Nonsuch* for seven months. There, he completed New Entry Training and likely took technical courses from the University of Alberta as he later became a radar operator. Additionally, during his time at HMCS *Nonsuch*, he was considered for an officer candidate. He passed the written tests, and the review board found him to be "smart and intelligent, trustworthy and responsible. Good power of command and initiative". But the board thought him – at the age of 18 – as not being mature enough for a commission.

Ordinary Seaman Berkeley was sent to HMCS *Cornwallis* in November 1943 for his seamanship training course. His course included two weeks on HMCS *Beaver*, a training ship attached to the base.

His next stop was at HMCS *Stadacona*, Halifax's major operations and training base. In January 1944, just three weeks after completing his Seamanship training, Alfred's records show he qualified as a radar operator (Radar III). This would be an unusual qualification. At this point in the war, radar training was being conducted at HMCS *St Hyacinthe*, the Navy's communications school in Quebec. Additionally, Alfred was in the Seaman's Branch, not the Communications Branch, and finally, a qualification – like Radar III – would typically come with a 5-10 cents per day pay raise, which would have been noted on the pay record. Unfortunately, nothing in Alfred's service file or his pay record clarifies this qualification.

But there is one possibility that might make sense.

The qualification of Radar III is supported (perhaps incorrectly) by a document in his records titled Radio Direction Finding (RDF) History Sheet. It shows him as having passed an exam for RDF III. Earlier in the war, the term RDF was sometimes used interchangeably with radar. This training may have been for a secret program where key allied warships operating in the English Channel were equipped with radios that could intercept German Navy and Air Force voice channels. They could learn the enemy's intentions and even broadcast misleading information. Alfred was intelligent and spoke German, so he could have been an ideal candidate for this role. These radios were sometimes known as Headache Radios.

In February 1944, Ordinary Seaman Berkeley was sent overseas. His first stop was HMCS *Niobe*, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) manning and administration depot in Greenock, Scotland. Sailors would be sent here to await being assigned to their ships. Alfred did not wait long; a few days later, he joined his first ship, HMCS *Athabaskan*.

HMCS *Athabaskan* was one of four Improved Tribal Destroyers that the RCN had ordered from British shipyards. Another four were ordered from Halifax Shipyards, but these were not completed in time for war service. The Royal Navy ordered 16 Tribals before the start of the war and lost 12 of them during the war. The Tribals were the most modern and powerful destroyers available. HMCS *Athabaskan* was commissioned in February 1943.

When Ordinary Seaman Berkeley joined her, HMCS *Athabaskan* was stationed in Plymouth, England. HMCS *Athabaskan* 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 destroyers, HMCS *Iroquois* and HMCS *Haida*, were part of the flotilla of Allied ships. Operation TUNNEL was put on hold when the three Canadian Tribals were assigned to a Royal Navy (RN) carrier and battleship force tasked to attack German shipping off the Norwegian coast.

HMCS *Athabaskan* and the other Canadian Tribals returned to Plymouth to join the 10 Destroyer Flotilla. This force included three RN Tribals, several other allied destroyers



HMCS Athabaskan. Photo: Government of Canada (Canada.ca)

and two RN light cruisers. HMCS *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, 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 spotted in the St Malo area of France. They engaged the German destroyers T24, T27, and T29, with T29 being sunk by gunfire.

On 29 April 1944, HMCS *Athabaskan* and HMCS *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 HMCS *Athabaskan* near her aft superstructure. A large fire ensued, which the crew struggled to deal with. The aft ammunition magazine exploded, causing flames seen 30 miles away. The ship was without power or steering, and the order to abandon ship was given. HMCS *Haida* returned to HMCS *Athabaskan*'s position, laid a smokescreen in an attempt to conceal the stricken ship's position, and then continued her attack on T27. HMCS *Haida* scored more gunfire hits on T27 and drove the enemy destroyer ashore.

HMCS *Athabaskan* sank quickly stern first. Most of her crew leaped into the water. HMCS *Haida*



**"The rescue of HMCS Athabaskan: We fight as one" painting by William McDowell.**

**Photo Credit: CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM**

returned and – staying as long as she could – rescued 45 sailors. Two RN Motor Torpedo Boats were sent 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. Alfred's body was either not found or not identified. Ordinary Seaman Alfred George Berkeley was 19 years old when he died.

Ordinary Seaman Alfred George Berkeley was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal 1939-45. His mother was awarded the Canadian Memorial Cross.

He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, panel 11, the Naval Museum of Alberta plaque, and the HMCS *Nonsuch* plaque.

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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.

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