

Able Seaman Sydney Alexander Cottrell V-18362



Able Seaman Sydney Cottrell. Source: Doug Cottrell Collection

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Trenton ON, 11 October 1920**
- **Enlisted: Kingston Division RCNVR, 17 May 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Textile Weaver, Downs & Coulter Company**
- **Death: Killed while serving in HMCS *Athabaskan* on 29 April 1944**
- **Buried: Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Row B. Grave 41**
- **Commemorated: War Memorial, Trenton, ON**

Sydney Alexander Cottrell was born in Trenton, Ontario, on 11 October 1920 to parents Sydney Chas Cottrell, born in England, and Ellis Douglas of Trenton. Sydney Sr. had a sash and window manufacturing business in Trenton. The family were members of the Church of England. Sydney grew up with three brothers: Stanley, who served with the RCAF in the Second World War, Robert and Raymond. A fourth brother had died in 1914. His father abandoned the family at some point in Sydney's childhood.

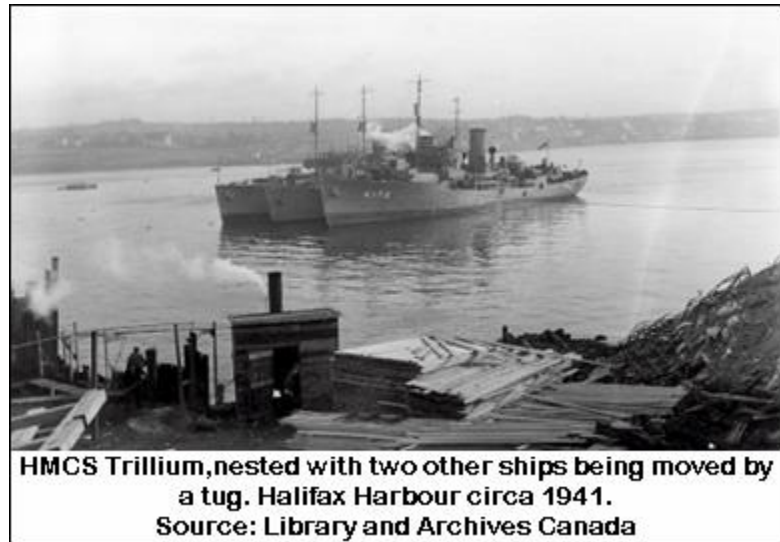
Sydney attended school in Trenton and completed the first form of high school before leaving at age 16. He spent five years as an apprentice and weaver for J. Uttley Textiles of Trenton. Sydney continued living at home and, as of 1938, was contributing \$32 monthly to his mother. On enlistment, Sydney's mother - Ellis - was recorded as his dependent, suffering from 'heart troubles.'

Sydney enlisted at Kingston Division RCNVR on 17 May 1941, aged 20, '*for duration of hostilities*'. His Certificate of Service showed him as 5 feet 9 1/2 inches tall, 167 pounds, with brown hair and eyes and a clear complexion. The physical exam indicated a historic fracture of the pelvis and jaw occurring in 1940 but leaving 'no apparent disability.' Sydney entered as an Ordinary Seaman and entered Active Service on 12 June 1941. On his "Offer for Service (Hostilities Only)", Sydney noted he required glasses "for fine work," and he wished to specialize as a "seaman torpedo man".

Sydney indicated an ambition to become an electrician after the war on his occupational history form.

On August 12, 1941, Sydney arrived at HMCS *Stadacona*, the Navy's operational and training base in Halifax, Nova Scotia. During his time there, he completed his new entry training, which aimed to introduce new sailors to military discipline, seamanship, weapons training, and naval routines that would make them valuable members of the Navy. After eight weeks of training, Sydney's next assignment took him to HMCS *Avalon* in St John's, Newfoundland, which was a separate British colony and not a part of Canada. *Avalon* was a Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) base established in June 1941. The Canadian Navy operated some of its Atlantic and East Coast operations from *Avalon*. On 13 October 1941, Ordinary Seaman Cottrell was assigned to one of the corvettes stationed in St John's: HMCS *Trillium*.

HMCS *Trillium* was an 'original' flower class corvette built at Canadian Vickers Shipyard in Montreal and commissioned into the Royal Navy on 31 October 1940. On 15 May 1941, *Trillium* was loaned to the RCN and commissioned with Pennant number K172. During Sydney's tour of duty, from late June 1941 until July 1942, *Trillium* escorted nine convoys out of Newfoundland, seven as far as Iceland and back, and two to and from Northern Ireland (Derry).



Sydney was rated Able Seaman on 12 March 1942 and remained in *Trillium* until 21 July 1942.

Able Seaman Cottrell returned to *Stadacona* on 22 July 1942 and reported to HMCS *Cornwallis* the next day to commence Submarine Detection (SD) training. Earlier in the story, you will recall that Sydney wanted to become a torpedo man. The torpedo-men loaded, aimed and fired torpedoes towards the enemy. Instead, Sydney was assigned to submarine detector training. The SD uses specialized equipment and tactics to locate submarines. The course was several months long; a qualified SD required a knowledge of seamanship, a grasp of underwater tactics and sea conditions, and, most importantly, an acute sense of hearing.

On 27 October 1942, Sydney was posted back to *Stadacona* for a month, including crossing the Atlantic Ocean and transferring to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) command in the United Kingdom, HMCS *Niobe*, located near Greenock, Scotland. From late October 1942 through to early February 1943, Sydney undertook training at HMS *Osprey* – the Royal Navy's Anti-Submarine warfare school, and he was posted to HMCS *Athabaskan* as a member of the ship's commissioning crew.

HMCS *Athabaskan* was the second of four Tribal Class destroyers built for the RCN in England; 27 were built. When they entered service, the Tribals were considered modern, fast, well-armed, state-of-the-art destroyers. *Athabaskan* was launched in November 1941 and commissioned into the Canadian Navy in February 1943. She suffered damage from heavy seas in the Iceland - Faroes Passage shortly after commissioning. This damage required several months of repairs.

Then, on 27 August 1943, *Athabaskan* suffered significant damage when a glider bomb from a



Damage to HMCS ATHABASKAN G07 caused by a glider bomb attack on August 27, 1943. Source: From the collection of Joseph W. (Jim) L'Esperance, LS, RCNVR, For Posterity's Sake website.

German KG100 aircraft passed through the ship before detonating beyond the vessel. This occurred off the Spanish coast near Cape Ortegal in the Bay of Biscay. Five members of the ship's company were killed, and the ship again required extensive repair. It is easy to imagine that the noise of that bomb detonating would have been amplified for any submarine detector working on the ASDIC equipment.

The ship was back in service in November 1943. One notable deployment that month was a trip from Plymouth, with the UK Prime Minister embarked, for meetings in Cairo with allied leaders.

In December, the ship was assigned to escort two Russian convoys sailing between Loch Ewe, Scotland and Kola Inlet, Russia. In January 1944, the ship was again assigned escort duties for the UK Prime Minister, this time for meetings in the Azores.

February through April saw *Athabaskan* either engaged in intercept patrol or preparing for Operation NEPTUNE – the naval portion of the D-Day landings in Normandy.

On 26 April 1944, *Athabaskan* and five other ships were under fire from shore batteries

during a patrol off the French coast. They intercepted three German destroyers, T24, T27 and T29 and engaged the enemy ships with surface gunfire after initial radar detection. The Germans fired torpedoes, but they failed to hit any ship. T29 was sunk by Allied gunfire north of Ile de Bas, and the other two enemy ships withdrew. *Athabaskan* returned to port, flying her Battle Ensign.

On 29 April 1944, after 451 days of service, Able Seaman Cottrell's luck ran out.

Athabaskan was escorting a British minelayer, along with HMCS *Haida*, off the coast of France near the Morlaix River. During a night engagement with German coastal defence vessels and aircraft, *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank. Of her crew, 128 men were lost, 83 taken prisoner, and 44 rescued.

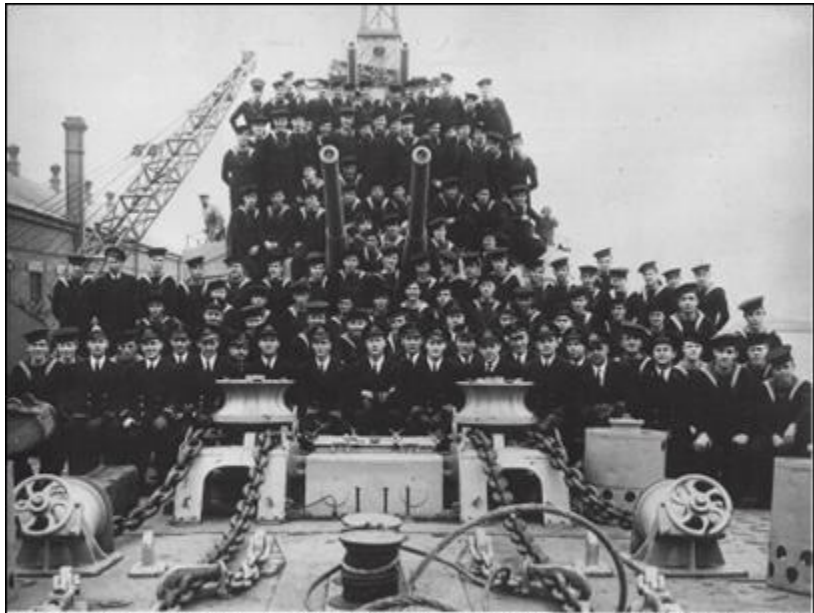
The Toronto Daily Star Monday, May 1, 1944 edition headline read, "*Guns Blazed to Last as Athabaskan Went Down*". The leading article, "*131 of Destroyer Crew of 200 Believed Safe*", began,

"HMCS Athabaskan, a new, powerful 1,900-ton destroyer of the Tribal class, was split in two by an enemy torpedo and sank early Saturday. As the burning and battered Canadian vessel suffered her death blow, she was still firing at two German destroyers that struck her in the haze of a starlit night. One enemy vessel was driven ashore in flames."

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Syd Cottrell was initially reported missing in the action following *Athabaskan's* sinking. A letter to his mother, Ellis, from the Naval Secretary on 15 January 1945 confirmed him as Missing Presumed Dead. More than four years later, Sydney's mother, Ellis, received a letter dated June 26, 1949, reading, in part, "...your son's body has been accepted as positively identified... Able Seaman Cottrell's grave is located in the Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Plouescat, Finisterre, in plot 1, Row B, Grave 41." Plouescat, France, is northeast of Brest.

Doug Cottrell, a nephew of Sydney, recalls the recounting of his grandmother, "... telling us that her son had made it onto the deck, after his ship, the HMCS *Athabaskan*, had been torpedoed, but went back to help a shipmate. He was never seen again." These recollections remain unverified.



AB Cottrell in likely in this photo of HMCS ATHABASKAN Ship's Company in Plymouth, England, April 1944. Credit: Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada / PA-131800/MIKAN 3399936. For Posterity Sake website.



Sydney Cottrell (right) with an unknown mate. Possibly taken in the Winter of 1942 when HMCS Trillium was doing workups in Bermuda. Source: Cottrell family collection

Further family recollections noted by Doug Cottrell include, "He went on 28-day embarkation leave and then over to Scotland to HMCS *Niobe* (if I'm reading this [record] correctly) on Oct 28th to shore barracks. While waiting for the completion of the *Athabaskan*, he was sent on various training courses. One of these was at Shearness for a firefighting course (10 days) and on the *Osprey* (for two weeks) for further training. Information I gathered indicated that on the day of his death, Syd was assisting at the ammunition supply at "Y" gun. This is where the first torpedo allegedly hit, and he may have been blown off. There was only one survivor from that gun, and the Germans picked him up."

I have a picture showing Sydney (right in photo) with a mate (unknown), dressed in their dress whites, which may indicate he was on this ship while she was doing workups in the South Atlantic."

For his service, Sydney Cottrell was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal, and Clasp and the War Medal. The Memorial Cross was awarded to his mother.

Able Seaman Sydney Cottrell is buried in Plouescat Communal Cemetery, plot 1, Row B, Grave 41. He is remembered on the War Memorial in Trenton, Ontario. The epitaph on this headstone reads:

Father in thy gracious keeping leave now thy servant sleeping.

Prepared By*:

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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 profile for Sydney Alexander Cottrell
- Library and Archives Canada Service file – Sydney Alexander Cottrell
- ancestry.ca
- Toronto Daily Star
- For forposteritysake.ca
- Wikipedia
- Discussion and emails with Douglas Cottrell, nephew of AB Cottrell
- Quinte West Public Library



War Memorial, Trenton, ON.
Source: Doug Cottrell Collection



Able Seaman Cottrell's headstone in Plouacast, France. Source: Doug Cottrell Collection