

Able Seaman Elswood Svein Johnson V-16839



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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Saskatoon, SK, 26 May 1924**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Nonsuch*, 29 April 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Messenger Boy, Northern Alberta Railways**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial Plaque, Edmonton, AB; and Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque, Calgary, AB**

Elswood Svein Johnson's middle name came from his father, Sveinn Johnson [1887-1956], who was of Icelandic descent and born in Winnipeg. His mother, Mathilda Johnson [nee Larsen, 1892-1966], was of Danish heritage. Elswood was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in 1924 and moved with the family to Edmonton, where his father found work as a salesman in 1932. By then, his younger brother Halldor [1926-2015] had joined the family. The stated religion of the Johnsons was the United Church.

In Edmonton, the family lived at 11930-94th Street. Rich oil discoveries in nearby Leduc had yet to happen, and the small city was the Provincial capital, home to the province's only university. Edmonton was a major railway center and hub for local agriculture and the meat packing industry, and it also represented a jumping-off point for bush pilot flights into the North. The instigation of hostilities in 1939 significantly stimulated economic activity in Edmonton, including construction and support to the nearby Commonwealth Air Training Plan Center, the construction of the Alaska Highway and the construction of the Canol pipeline. The latter was built from 1942-45 and connected Norman Wells, Northwest Territories, to Whitehorse in the Yukon: 1000 kilometres.

The local paper reported on some of his activities when Johnson was still in public school. He entered the Third Annual Edmonton Journal Soap Box Derby and, at age 14, won the day on 16 July 1938. He went on to complete Grade 10 and part of Grade 11 in night school. He left school at the age of 16 to work.

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Johnson immediately found employment at Champion's Parcel Delivery, where he worked for one year. In the RCMP background check, his manager reported that Johnson "was a good worker and never said anything to indicate (he was) anything but loyal." His job before enlisting was with North Alberta Railways [NAR] as a messenger. He worked there for seven months and was highly regarded and considered thoroughly loyal to Canada.

On 29 April 1942, Johnson enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at HMCS *Nonsuch*. He joined for the duration of hostilities, and the NAR indicated they would employ him after his discharge. Johnson wanted to become a telegraph operator.

Johnson's father had served as a private in the 1st Depot Battalion Manitoba Regiment, which provided reinforcements for the 11th and 18th Canadian Reserve Battalions in World War I. His younger brother Halldor joined the RCNVR and he was serving as an Able Seaman in HMCS *Rockcliffe*, a Halifax-based minesweeper, during Johnson's posting to HMCS *Athabaskan*.

The medical exam required before enlistment described Johnson as 5' 10 ½ "tall, 128 pounds, with light brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. There was a mole on his upper left arm and two little birthmarks on his upper right leg. His general development was recorded as "asthenic" [slight], but the Navy deemed him medically fit. A later medical in HMCS *Naden* on 21 October 1942 indicated that his mother had a history of asthma. Johnson had been hospitalized in 1933 for a tonsillectomy, but by 1942, he merely had some acne that did not require treatment.

Johnson was rated as an Ordinary Seaman and placed on active service on 7 May 1942. He remained at *Nonsuch* for basic training until 19 October 1942. His character was rated as very good with satisfactory efficiency. He was transferred to HMCS *Naden*, the main naval training base in Esquimalt, British Columbia, until 15 February 1943, when he began seamanship training, including a three-day anti-gas course. During this time his yearly evaluation reported that he was of very good character and satisfactory efficiency.

After spending several days attached to the accommodation vessel HMCS *Givenchy*, Johnson reported to HMCS *Chatham* on 16 February 1943. This shore establishment in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, served as a Routing Centre for convoys and patrols along the northern BC coast. It was here, on 7 May 1943, that he was promoted to Acting Able Seaman.

With the promotion, it was time for more training, and the Navy transferred Johnson back to *Naden* on 10 July 1943, where he trained as a submarine detector (S.D.). He received his Probationary/S.D. qualification on 14 August. Like most Navy training courses, Johnson needed on-the-job training as an ASDIC operator before becoming fully-trade-qualified. At the end of this training, the Navy sent him to the Royal Canadian Navy base in Halifax, HMCS *Stadacona*. Johnson's stay at *Stadacona* was



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brief, and from the available records, it does not appear that he completed any additional SD training.

On 6 Nov 1943, Johnson joined HMCS *York* in Toronto, Ontario, which may have initially seemed strange but had interesting reasoning. The United States Navy was building ships for Britain, and the Redfern Construction Company in Toronto had just finished the AM334, a 225-foot-long Algerine Class Minesweeper commissioned as HMS *Persian*.

Johnson became one of the 85-man crew to sail the new ship to HMCS *Niobe* in Greenock, Scotland, staying onboard until 25 January 1944. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the winter is not pleasant. Johnson was a member of the Seaman's branch, so he worked outdoors on the ship's upper deck. It is easy to imagine that he was wet, cold and tired throughout that trip.

Niobe was the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) shore establishment in the United Kingdom. It was the manning depot and administrative headquarters for all RCN personnel serving overseas. By 1940, nearly all RCN destroyers were based in Britain on loan to the Royal Navy, and later, the number of ships swelled with the addition of corvettes. Johnson lived at *Niobe* until he joined his next ship, HMCS *Athabaskan*, a Tribal Class destroyer named after one of the indigenous peoples from the northwestern part of Canada.

Athabaskan was no stranger to combat and heavy weather. It patrolled the Iceland-Faeroes Island Gap for blockade runners and resupplied the Norwegian Garrison on Spitsbergen Island in the high Arctic. Severe weather sometimes caused significant damage, necessitating repairs. Once, while serving in the Bay of Biscay off the coast of Spain, *Athabaskan* eighteen Dornier-217 bombers attacked *Athabaskan* and hit it with glide bombs (an air-launched radio-controlled missile with a rocket engine and a speed of 400 miles per hour). There were casualties and deaths along with extensive damage, but the glide bomb travelled through the ship and exploded outside of it, lessening the impact of the attack. The ship managed to reach HMS *Devonport* in Plymouth, England, a major naval port and drydock. Repairs took until November 1943 to complete.

In December 1943, the ship escorted a convoy through bitter winter storms to Archangel in the Soviet Arctic. Johnson joined the ship in February of 1944 when it re-joined Plymouth command and the newly formed 10th Destroyer Flotilla. The flotilla's task was twofold: Operation *Hostile* (Minelaying) and Operation *Tunnel* (Patrol) off the coast of France. Johnson would have seen action on 26 April 1944, when *Athabaskan* assisted in the destruction of the German torpedo boat T-29 off Ushant, a French island off the southwestern end of the English Channel.



On 29 April 1944, at about 0300, *Athabaskan* was on a night patrol with her sister Tribal-class destroyer HMCS *Haida*. Responding to orders to intercept German warships near Ile de Bas, the Canadian ships engaged German light destroyers T-24 and T-27. These German ships had escaped from Allied forces three days earlier. During the engagement on 29 April, *Athabaskan*, unlike *Haida*, did not use flashless powder in its shells, making the flashes associated with firing its guns an easy target for a spread of torpedoes fired by T-24. One torpedo hit the port side aft, forcing *Athabaskan* to stop, making it the best target for the Germans. *Haida* ran between the ships and laid down smoke to protect its sister ship, then chased off the flaming T-24 and drove T-27 ashore before returning. By this time, *Athabaskan* had suffered an internal explosion and had already sunk. *Haida* eased into the area of the ocean where survivors were, and so as not to injure the men, she stopped her engines. The tide drifted *Haida* away faster than the floating men, and in danger, *Haida's* captain made the heart-wrenching decision to depart. One hundred and twenty-eight men, including Acting Able Seaman Johnson, were lost. *Haida* rescued 44 men and six were rescued by *Haida's* motor work boat. At dawn, after the departure of *Haida*, 83 men were later taken prisoner by three German minesweepers and T-24, which had battled the Canadian ships earlier that day.

Approximately seventy bodies washed up on the shores of southern France in the next few days, and the French buried them at Brignogan, Santec and L'Aberwrach but mostly at Plouescat.

The unofficial cemetery became the Plouescat Communal Cemetery, an official Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery. It is located 40 kilometres north of Brest, France. As of 2024, thirty-five of the fifty-nine sailors buried there have been identified.

Johnson was not one of the 35 identified sailors from the *Athabaskan*. He was 19 years old.

Mark Ward, grandson of Leslie Ward, who was an officer lost when the *Athabaskan* was sunk, dove 285 feet down on the wreck on 22 July 2003 to deploy a 30-pound brass plaque presented by the RCN as a permanent memorial to all *Athabaskan's* sailors. It reads, "*At this site, the people of Canada honour the 128 sailors who gave their lives in HMCS Athabaskan, sunk in action with the enemy on 29 April 1944. Protect them whereso'er they go.*"

For his service, Able Seaman Elswood Svein Johnson was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp and the War Medal. His mother, Mathilda, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Prepared By*:

Lieutenant-Commander (Retired) Steven Perron CD (HMCS *Tecumseh* 1971-85), 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.



Sources:

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