

Lieutenant (SB) John Daniel Mahoney O-45890



Lieutenant John (Jack) Daniel Mahoney. Photo: Richard Graham Arless, Library and Archives Canada.

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Toronto, ON, 3 March 1922**
- **Enlisted: Toronto Division RCNVR, 17 July 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Press Photographer, The Globe and Mail Newspaper**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Buried: Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Row B. Grave 30**
- **Commemorated: Western Technical School Memorial, Toronto; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 377, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa**

John “Jack” Daniel Mahoney was born in Toronto on 3 March 1922 to Daniel Joseph and Alice Katherine Mahoney. Jack had one older sister, Evelyn Marie. The family lived at 152 King St East. Educated at the Western Technical School, he enjoyed rowing as a member of the Toronto Argonauts Rowing Club, and documents in his service file note that he was the North American 140lb sculling champion at some point in his youth, and that in addition to English, he spoke “Southwestern American Indian.”

Jack completed two years of an arts program that included courses in photographic chemistry. He left school at 17 years of age and began working as a Press Photographer with Canadian High News in Toronto, but in 1940 he began working for *The Globe & Mail*. Jack was also one of *Life Magazine*’s correspondents in Canada.

In June 1942, Jack wrote to Canadian naval authorities with an outline of his experiences and a request to join the Navy as a photographer. On 17 July 1942, the Navy enrolled Jack as a Probationary Sub-Lieutenant (Special Branch) at the Toronto Division of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR), later known as HMCS *York*. Special Branch enrolments were

used in instances where the candidate possessed specialist civilian skills – in this case, professional News photography.

Within a week of his enrolment, Jack underwent naval indoctrination training at HMCS *Cornwallis* in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In late August of 1942, the Navy briefly assigned him to photographic duties at HMCS *Bytown* in Ottawa before transferring him again to HMCS *Avalon* in St. John's, Newfoundland, in October of 1942. Originally designated as a temporary ocean escort base during the early days of the Second World War, St. John's evolved to become one of the most important bases on the North American eastern seaboard, second only to Halifax.

Jack spent 14 months serving in *Avalon*, initially on the photographic staff and eventually as the Naval Officer in Charge (NOIC) Photographic Officer. While the majority of naval combat, sacrifice and sorrow occurred in warships at sea, Jack's service in *Avalon* coincided with two tragic events in Newfoundland that generated national media attention. The first event occurred on 14 Oct 1942 when the SS *Caribou* – a ferry that ran between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia - was torpedoed by a German U-boat and sunk. The casualties included 57 military personnel, 31 members of the *Caribou's* crew, and 49 civilians (including 16 women and 14 children). Many of the 34 bodies recovered were transported to St. John's for burial. The second event was the massive fire during a dance held for Service personnel at the Knights of Columbus Service Hostel in St. John's on 12 December 1942. Ninety-nine people were killed (including 80 military personnel), and another 109 were critically wounded. It is not hard to imagine that Sub-Lieutenant Mahoney may have been involved in the media coverage of both events.

In December of 1943, the Navy briefly transferred Jack back to Ottawa for duties with the Director of Naval Information Office. Following the Christmas leave period, which he spent at home in Toronto, Jack was promoted to Lieutenant and sailed from Halifax to join HMCS *Niobe* in Scotland for overseas duties. *Niobe* was the RCN manning depot in the United Kingdom, and all RCN personnel reported there for their next assignment.

In February 1944, the Navy assigned Jack to the RCN Office of Information in London. Next, in April of 1944, he was assigned to HMCS *Athabaskan*, along with fellow naval information officer Lieutenant Leslie Ward, to cover pre-D-Day naval operations off the occupied coast of northern France. Both men joined *Athabaskan* just prior to the ship's departure in support of mine-laying operations off the coast of Brittany on the evening of 28-29 April 1944.

Canadian Tribal class destroyers had engaged Axis forces off the northern coast of France in night actions code-named Operation *Tunnel*. These offensive nocturnal sweeps were designed to disrupt enemy coastal convoys and operations and destroy shipping. During the evening of 25-26 April, the Tenth Destroyer Flotilla, made up of the cruiser HMS *Black Prince*, with the destroyer HMS *Ashanti* and the Canadian destroyers HMCS *Huron*, HMCS *Haida*, and *Athabaskan* engaged enemy Fleet Torpedo Boats (destroyers) of the Elbing class, damaging T24 and T27 and sinking T29 during a furiously fought action. Late in the day on the 28th, *Athabaskan* and *Haida* were ordered to sea in support of minelaying operations off the Brittany coast, sailing for that tasking at 2000. Lieutenants Mahoney and Ward joined *Athabaskan* shortly before the ship left port that evening, while another Public Information and Photographic Officer joined *Haida*. Lieutenant Mahoney was lost with Lieutenant Ward when *Athabaskan* was subsequently sunk in action with units of the Kriegsmarine in the early hours of 29 April 1944. One hundred and twenty-eight men were lost, 44 men were rescued by *Haida*, and 83 were taken prisoner by the Germans. Jack Mahoney was 22 years old.

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Jack is credited on photographs of RCN personnel during his service as a wartime photographer, as seen below:



LCdr Desmond Piers – CO HMCS *Restigouche*



LCdr George H. Stephen – CO HMCS *St. Laurent*



Lt A.D. Stabley - HMCS *Algonquin*



LS H.H. Nicolle – a survivor of a fire



40mm Bofors gun crew



HMCS *Chilliwack* Boarding Party

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Postscript: It wasn't until 1949 that Lieutenant Mahoney's grave was positively identified. In 1944, *Athabaskan* was operating in occupied territory when it sank, so no bodies could be recovered, and the Navy advised families that their loved ones were Missing and Presumed Dead. However, reports that some of the *Athabaskan's* crew were POWs gave families faint hope that their loved one might be alive. Mrs. Mahoney pursued these leads through inquiries via the Canadian Legion and Red Cross.



In 1947, Mrs. Mahoney received the first of several letters from a German soldier who claimed to have buried Jack Mahoney when his body washed ashore in a small fishing village in France (see a translation of the letter at the end of this story). He provided letters and personal items taken from Lieutenant Mahoney's body that raised questions as to the nature of his death in his mother's mind, as reported in a Toronto post-war newspaper report. The letters from the former German soldier were forwarded to the Director of Graves Registration and Enquiries for investigation. Initially, this "proof" was deemed inconclusive because it was possible that, in an emergency, a sailor could have grabbed someone else's jacket. Mrs. Mahoney persisted in her enquiries, and when the *Athabaskan's* crew was re-interred, Jack's ID card was found in his wallet. Lieutenant Jack Mahoney was buried at the Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Row B Grave 30 Finisterre (Brittany), France. The inscription on his grave reads:

WHILE HE LIES IN PEACEFUL SLEEP, HIS MEMORY I SHALL ALWAYS KEEP

For his Service, Lieutenant Jack Mahoney was awarded the 1939-1945 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, the Defence Medal, and the War Medal. His mother, Alice Katherine, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Prepared By:

Paul Seguna, CD, Lieutenant-Commander RCN (Ret'd) CSVC researcher, served in HMCS *Athabaskan* III as a naval reservist in 1976 and later as a Canadian Forces Public Affairs Officer and Combat Camera Team leader.



Sources:

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- Library and Archives Canada Service file -see: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/second-world-war/second-world-war-dead-1939-1947/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=22086&>
- Veterans Affairs Canadian Virtual War Memorial-see: <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/2813889>
- Veterans Affairs Second World War Book of Remembrance p 377-see: <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/books/page?page=377&book=2&sort=pageAsc>
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- Pringle, Sherry. J. *ALL THE SHIP'S MEN: HMCS Athabaskan's untold stories*, 2nd ed. Lammi Publishing, Coaldale, Alberta. 2020. P. 124
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Translated letter from Wilhelm Ehnes to Mrs. Mahoney:

