

Able Seaman William Donald McCrindle V-1854



Able Seaman Donald McCrindle. Photo: For
Posterity Sake

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Codette SK, 7 July 1920**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 26 February 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Farmer, family farm**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; the wreckage of HMCS *Athabaskan* is under the protection of the French Heritage Code, and McCrindle Lake (56°26'N 102°50'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory**

William Donald McCrindle, known as Donald, was the second of four children born to Cora Evelyn (Reed) McCrindle and William James McCrindle on 7 July 1919 near Codette, Saskatchewan. His sisters Cora Muriel and Jessie Lorraine were born in 1916 and 1926 respectively and his brother Barry was born in 1937. William Sr was born in Scotland in 1894 and emigrated to Canada in 1902 with his parents, Andrew and Annie, and sisters Mary and Jeanie. They eventually settled on a quarter section of land (160 acres) about one mile west of the hamlet of Codette and five miles south of Nipawin, Saskatchewan—the principal community in the area. Cora was born in Manitoba in 1899. She and William were married in nearby Melfort, Saskatchewan in 1916. According to the 1921 Census, Donald, his sister Lorraine, his parents and his grandparents were living together on the farm.

The Nipawin area is about 155 miles northeast of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on present-day roads where the Great Plains end, and the Boreal Forest begins. Its name comes from the Northern Cree word “nipâwin” meaning “a place to sleep” and has been the site of human activity for thousands of years. Located on the Saskatchewan River, it was the site of a fur trading post established in 1748. In 1906, the first homestead was filed in the area. In addition to farms, lumber mills dotted the forest. Each spring large log booms were floated down the Carrot and Saskatchewan Rivers to The Pas, Manitoba for milling, a distance of about 200 miles. The area was spared the drought of the Dirty Thirties which devastated agriculture in southern Saskatchewan. Consequently, with the encouragement of the Saskatchewan provincial government between 1930 and 1938, some 36,000 individuals—almost 7,000 farm families—moved from southern Saskatchewan to northern Crown Lands and settled on a 1.5 million acre swath of territory that extended across the province from east to west. In addition, the Canadian Pacific Railway arrived in the area in 1924. Donald’s family eventually operated three farms at

different times—the last being near Choiceland about 25 miles northwest of Nipawin. Donald left school at age 15 after completing grade 6 and worked both on the family farm and for logging operators. Unfortunately, during this period his father's health began to deteriorate.

On 26 February 1942, Donald enlisted in the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCVNR) as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). He was single, 5 feet 10 ½ inches tall, and weighed 154 pounds. He had brown hair, hazel eyes, and a ruddy complexion.

After a few weeks of attending to administrative details, he began basic training in earnest in *Unicorn*. Meanwhile, his father's health deteriorated to the point of hospitalization and he was diagnosed with diabetes. On that basis, Donald applied for a dependents allowance to be paid directly to his mother. It was approved in the amount of \$25.00 per month on 1 July 1942. Given that his total monthly pay as an ordinary seaman was \$82.50, the addition of the dependents' allowance was significant.

In December Donald was drafted to HMCS *Naden*, the large naval training base in Esquimalt, British Columbia. There he was loaded onto a New Entry course which he completed on 8 March 1943. The course syllabus covered naval discipline, leadership, seamanship, and damage control—topics that made the graduate a safe and useful member of the ship's company of a warship.

On 15 April he was promoted to Able Seaman and drafted to HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Navy's other large training base. There, transportation was arranged for Donald to travel by sea to HMCS *Niobe* located in Greenock, Inverclyde, Scotland. *Niobe* was the headquarters of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) in Britain and fulfilled a wide range of functions, including the provision of a hospital for wounded Canadian servicemen, and a transit camp for RCN members between postings in the United Kingdom (UK). It also maintained listings of ships' companies and next of kin for all RCN personnel based in the UK. Donald remained under *Niobe's* authority until 10 August 1943 when he was drafted to the Tribal class destroyer, HMCS *Athabaskan* (G07).

The Tribals were a class of destroyers built for the Royal Navy, the Royal Canadian Navy, and the Royal Australian Navy. Conceived as light fleet cruisers, the Tribals evolved into fast, powerful destroyers with a greater emphasis on guns over torpedoes than previous destroyers. *Athabaskan* was named for the Indigenous people of northwestern Canada who speak the Athabaskan language. Built by Vickers Armstrong at Newcastle-on-Tyne, *Athabaskan* was commissioned on 3 February 1943 and had a relatively short service life of about 14 months. During that period, she experienced several major mishaps and battle damage which required her to be taken out of service for repairs for a total of about five months thus reducing her actual service life to about nine months.

Before Able Seaman McCrindle joined the crew, *Athabaskan* suffered two mishaps. After the commissioning ceremony, *Athabaskan* was assigned to the British Home Fleet and her crew underwent work-ups. On 29 March she sailed to patrol the Iceland-Faeroes Island Gap. The seas were so heavy that *Athabaskan's* hull was severely damaged necessitating her to undergo five weeks of repair in the dockyard in South Shields on the Tyne. Next, they joined the heavy cruiser, HMS *Cumberland*, the light cruiser, HMS *Bermuda*, and another destroyer, HMS *Eclipse*, to resupply the Norwegian garrison on Spitsbergen Island in the Arctic in early June. On their return, the task force called at Scapa Flow where *Athabaskan* collided with the boom defense vessel on 18 June necessitating a month's repair job in Devonport. Able Seaman McCrindle joined the ship when she was fully repaired and based in Plymouth where *Athabaskan* was assigned anti-submarine patrols in the Bay of Biscay.

At 1300 on 27 Aug 1943, seventeen days into his posting to the ship, *Athabaskan* was attacked by eighteen Dornier-217 bombers and hit by a glide bomb. The glide bomb was a precursor of a modern-day air-to-surface missile. Launched from an aircraft they were powered by a rocket engine, carried a 650-pound warhead, and were capable of a speed of 400 mph. They were steered using radio signals by an aircrew member. The bomb pierced the ship before the warhead exploded a few feet beyond the starboard side. The blast buckled and perforated *Athabaskan's* hull plates and superstructure. The B gun's crew suffered two killed with the remainder suffering burns; the crew of A gun also suffered burns; while two officers on the bridge suffered severe wounds and one man was lost overboard. Able Seaman Joe McGrath another RCNVR sailor from Saskatoon, who was the starboard lookout, was gravely wounded. As a member of one of the gun crews, Donald suffered burns.

Despite all this *Athabaskan* managed to rescue 35 survivors from HMS *Egert* which had been sunk by another glide bomb. At the same time, *Athabaskan's* damage control parties fought tenaciously chest-deep in a mixture of seawater and fuel oil to correct a severe list caused by the bomb damage and extinguish fires.



**Battle Damage Damage to HMCS
Athabaskan caused by glider bomb 27 Aug
1943.**

**Photo: From the collection of Joseph W.
(Jim) L'Esperance, Leading Seaman,
RCNVR (www.forposteritysake.ca)**

Surgeon-Lieutenant William Wallace and his Sick Bay Attendant Eric Mengoni worked feverishly to save lives assisted by Surgeon-Lieutenant Charles Drew who had been one of the survivors of the sinking of HMS *Egert*. Despite their best efforts, Able Seaman Joe McGrath of Saskatoon died overnight and was buried at sea at 0820 on 28 August 1943. On the night of 28-29 August one more man died, and another needed both legs amputated below the knees. The others, including Donald, responded well to their treatment. *Athabaskan* reached the safety of Devonport at 2031 on 30 August 1943. Donald was granted thirty days leave plus travel time, returned home, and eventually was recalled to *Athabaskan* early.

In February 1944, *Athabaskan* returned to Plymouth to join the newly formed 10th Destroyer Flotilla and conduct operations off the coast of France. On 25-26 April, she assisted in the destruction of the German Type 39 torpedo boat T-29.

Then on 29 April 1944 at about 0300 she was patrolling with her sister Tribal-class destroyer HMCS *Haida*. Responding to orders to intercept German warships near Ile de Bas, the Canadian ships engaged T-24 and T-27. During the engagement, *Athabaskan*, unlike *Haida*, was not

using flashless powder in her shells. Thus, the flashes associated with firing her guns made her an easy target for a torpedo fired by T-24. *Haida* drove off T-24 in flames and then drove T-27 ashore before returning to her sister's last position only to find that she had sunk.

One hundred and twenty-eight men including Able Seaman McCrindle were lost, 44 were rescued by *Haida*, and six by *Haida's* motor work boat. At dawn, after the departure of *Haida*, 83 men were later taken prisoner by three German minesweepers.

After the War, Cook (S) Thomas Newlove of Star City, Saskatchewan (about 50 miles south of Choiceland), told Donald's family that he and Donald were working together in the galley when *Athabaskan* went to Action Stations. As a member of a gun's crew, Donald rushed to man his station. Newlove never saw Donald again.

For his service, Able Seaman William Donald McCrindle was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mrs. Cora Evelyn McCrindle, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Donald and most of the others killed have no known grave. However, the wreckage of their ship was located in 2002 in 50 fathoms of water. She and those who may be entombed in her are under the protection of the French Heritage Code. Donald is also commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; and in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 383, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa. McCrindle Lake (56°26'N 102°50'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.



Postscript:

Donald wrote many letters home which are still kept and treasured by his family. He wrote of such a longing of settling down "after the war is over", getting married, keeping and training horses, working on the farm, and helping his family.

When he was home on leave recovering from his burns, he expressed his pride in his naval service. At the same time, it was evident that his thoughts were often with his comrades and his ship.

Prepared By:

David (nephew of Able Seaman McCrindle) and wife Lorraine Lokken, and John Dalzell, Capt(N) (retired), Commanding Officer HMCS UNICORN 1983-88 & Citizen Sailors Virtual Cenotaph Research Team.



Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission record for Able Seaman William Donald McCrindle
- Library and Archives Canada Service Record for Able Seaman William Donald McCrindle
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial – Profile page for Able Seaman William Donald McCrindle

- Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial -Profile page for Able Seaman William Donald McCrindle
- Library and Archives Canada 1916. 1921, 1926 Census
- Saskatchewan History Album. *The Town of Nipawin*. Retrieved December 14, 2022, from <https://www.saskhistory.ca/nipawin-town-of/>
- Marchildon, Gregory P. *The Heavy Hand of History: Interpreting Saskatchewan's Past*. Regina, Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press. 2005
- Secret Scotland. HMCS *Niobe*. Retrieved December 16, 2022, from <https://www.secretscotland.org.uk/index.php/Secrets/HMCSNiobe#:~:text=Operating%20between%201941%20and%201946,between%20postings%20in%20the%20UK.>
- Burrows & Beaudoin. *Unlucky Lady The Life & Death of HMCS Athabaskan*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart. 1987
- Milner, Marc. *Canada's Navy The First Century*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press. 1999
- McKee & Darlington, *The Canadian Naval Chronicle 1939-1945*. St. Catharine's, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited. 1996
- Wikipedia. Tribal-class destroyer (1936). Retrieved December 16, 2022, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribal-class_destroyer_\(1936\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribal-class_destroyer_(1936))
- For Posterity's Sake. HMCS *Athabaskan* G07, Retrieved December 9, 2021, from http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS_ATHABASKAN_G07.htm
- Wikipedia (December 6, 2021). HMCS *Athabaskan* G07. Retrieved December 12, 2021, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMCS_Athabaskan_\(G07\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMCS_Athabaskan_(G07))