

## Able Seaman John Watt Sutherland V-12533



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Edmonton AB, 7 August 1922**
- **Enlisted: Edmonton Division RCNVR, 19 December 1940**
- **Civilian Occupation: Shoe salesman, T. Eaton Company**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; Naval Museum of Alberta Memorial Plaque; and HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial Plaque**

Able Seaman John Sutherland. Photo:  
*Edmonton Journal* 1944.

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John Watt Sutherland was born in Edmonton, AB on 7 August 1922. His parents were John James Sutherland (1883-1959) and Margaret Emily (Watt) Sutherland (1896-1985). John James, his father, was born in Simcoe, ON and moved to Edmonton in about 1905. He worked as a train brakeman and conductor for the Northern Alberta Railway. In addition to Edmonton, he and his family lived in Edson, AB and McLennan, AB. Margaret, his mother, was from Parry Sound, ON. She moved to Edmonton and married John James in 1921. The Sutherlands also had a daughter, Lois Jean Sutherland (1925-2000), who served in the Canadian Army during the Second World War. The family lived at 9702 102A Avenue in Edmonton.

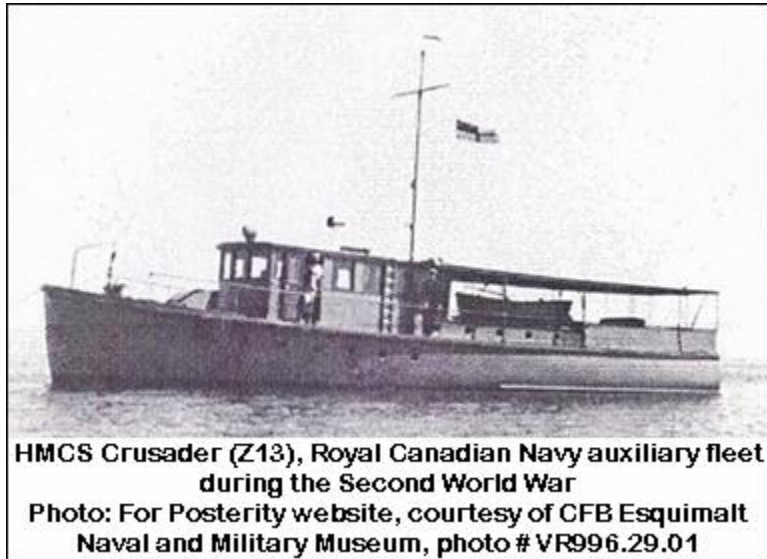
John completed nine years of public school and four years of technical school in Edmonton. He left school in 1939 when he was 17. He worked "fairly regularly" after leaving school and was employed as an accountant for a time. He later worked as a shoe salesman for Eaton's.

John enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) at the Edmonton Division, later known as HMCS *Nonsuch*, on 19 December 1940. He continued working at his civilian job until he went on active service in April 1941. He trained and worked in Edmonton until August 1941, when he was sent to HMCS *Naden* and HMCS *Givenchy*, both of which were training bases in Esquimalt, BC. He underwent seamanship and gunnery training and worked on

the West Coast until July 1942. This included five months of service in HMCS *Crusader* (Z13), a converted yacht employed as an examination vessel and a tender.

John was promoted to Able Seaman in April 1942.

In July 1942, John was sent to HMCS *Cornwallis* and HMCS *Stadacona*, the primary training and operational bases in Halifax, NS. In Halifax, he received gunnery training and qualified as a Layer Rating III. A Layer Rating was the sailor who moved the gun as it was brought to bear upon the target. He worked with Quarters Ratings (who were responsible for the ammunition) and Control Ratings (who were responsible for operating range-finders). With this qualification, John was sent overseas to HMCS *Niobe*.



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HMCS *Niobe* was the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) manning and administration depot in Greenock, Scotland. Sailors would be sent there to await being assigned to their ships. Able Seaman Sutherland worked ashore from November 1942 to 3 February 1943, possibly in the dockyard where HMCS *Athabaskan* was being completed. After what must have seemed like an inordinately long wait, Able Seaman Sutherland was posted to HMCS *Athabaskan* on the day the ship was commissioned on 4 February 1943.

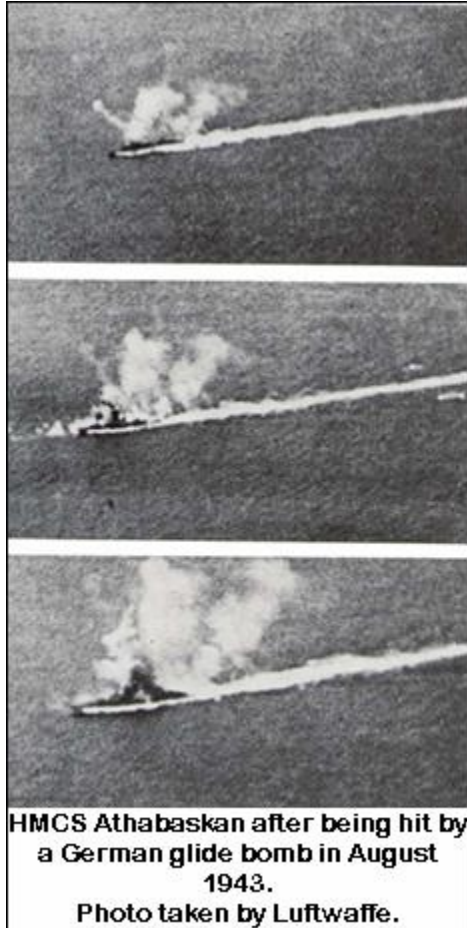


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HMCS *Athabaskan* was one of four Improved Tribal-class Destroyers that the RCN had ordered from British shipyards. Another four were ordered from

Halifax Shipyards, but these were not completed in time for war service. The Royal Navy (RN) had 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 at that time.

In the summer of 1943, HMCS *Athabaskan* was stationed at Plymouth, England. She was assigned to a group conducting anti-submarine patrols in the Bay of Biscay. On 27 August 1943, HMCS *Athabaskan* was hit by a Luftwaffe HS 293 precision-guided glide bomb. The bomb hit the port side, passed through the width of the destroyer, and exploded after it exited the starboard side. The late detonation may have been due to the Luftwaffe crew mistaking HMCS *Athabaskan* for a much larger ship and incorrectly setting the detonator. This delayed explosion saved the ship from what would likely have been complete destruction, but HMCS *Athabaskan* was heavily



damaged, and five of her sailors were killed. A few minutes earlier, another glide bomb had hit HMS *Egret*. She sank in minutes, with a loss of about 200 RN sailors. The crew of HMCS *Athabaskan* were able to sail their damaged ship back to Plymouth despite a serious list. It took two months to repair the ship.

The repairs were completed by November 1943, and the ship's next assignment was to escort the RN battlecruiser HMS *Renown* from Egypt to the UK. The British ship was carrying British Prime Minister Winston Churchill back from the Cairo Conference.

In December 1943, HMCS *Athabaskan* was ordered to join the 3 Destroyer Flotilla at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. Convoys to the Soviet Union were recommencing and HMCS *Athabaskan* was assigned to Convoy JW-55A, sailing from the RN base at Loch Ewe, Scotland to an Arctic Ocean port on the Kola Inlet, USSR. During this operation, HMCS *Athabaskan* detected and attacked a U-boat, but the submarine dove and contact was lost. The convoy arrived intact.

In addition to the threat from U-boats, the convoys to and from the Arctic were also in danger from German aircraft and ships like the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst*. When HMCS *Athabaskan* was escorting Convoy RW-55A, the German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* sailed with five destroyers with the intention of attacking convoys. Another force of eight U-boats formed a patrol line. Convoy RW-55A altered course

to avoid the Germans. An RN force comprised of a battleship, cruisers and destroyers engaged the *Scharnhorst*, eventually sinking her. Convoy RW-55A arrived safely at Loch Ewe.

In January 1944, *Athabaskan* was again ordered to be part of an escort for Winston Churchill. This time, he was returning to the UK from a vacation in Gibraltar on the battleship HMS *King George V*. In late January 1944, 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. The Channel operations were put on hold when the three Canadian destroyers were assigned to an 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 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; however, during March and part of April 1944, 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 when three enemy destroyers were spotted in the Saint-Malo area on the northwest coast of France. They engaged the German destroyers T24, T27, and T29, with T29 being sunk by gunfire.

Four days later, 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 RCN 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 fight. The aft ammunition magazine exploded, causing flames that were 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 to conceal the stricken ship's position, and continued her attack on T27. HMCS *Haida* scored more gunfire hits on T27 and drove the enemy destroyer aground.

HMCS *Athabaskan* sank quickly stern first. Most of her crew leapt into the water. HMCS *Haida* 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 *Athabaskan*'s deceased sailors 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. John Sutherland's body was either one of those not found or not identified. Able Seaman John Watt Sutherland was 21 years old when he died.

For his service, Able Seaman John Watt Sutherland was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother was awarded the Canadian Memorial Cross.

Able Seaman John Watt Sutherland is commemorated on Panel 11 of the Halifax Memorial at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS; the HMCS *Nonsuch* Memorial Plaque; the Naval Museum of Alberta Plaque; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 456, at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

#### 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 Database profile for John Watt Sutherland
- Library and Archives Canada Service via Ancestry.com – record for military service
- Ancestry.com for family information
- Newspapers.com – *Edmonton Journal* and *Edmonton Bulletin*
- Henderson's Directory

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- Fooling Around on the French Coast – *Defence Quarterly* December 1989 Page 59