

## Lieutenant (SB) Leslie Ward O-76040



Lieutenant Leslie Ward. Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Leeds, England, 14 July 1907**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *York*, 30 July 1943**
- **Civilian Occupation: Journalist and Assistant Editor, *Toronto Evening Telegram***
- **Death: Lost at Sea when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11; Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 471, at the Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa; and the Lieutenant Leslie Ward Bench Plaque, All Saints Anglican Church, Westboro, Ottawa, ON:**

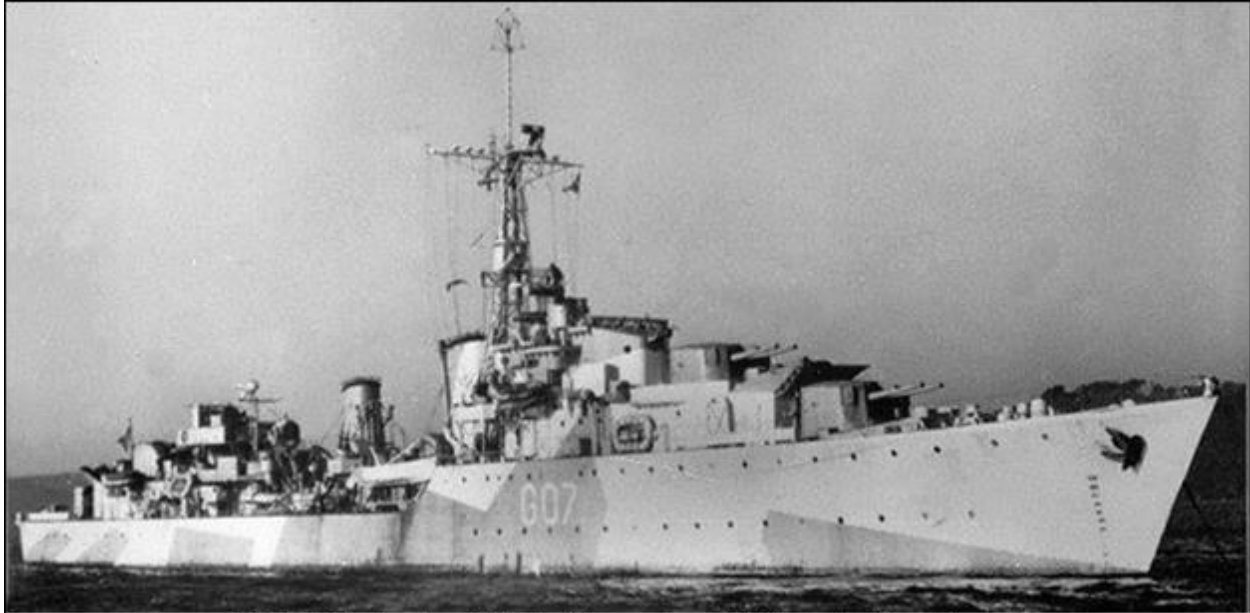
Leslie Ward was born in Leeds, England, on 14 July 1907 to Robert and Elsie May Ward. The Ward family moved to Toronto in 1919. He worked as a journalist for fifteen years with the *Toronto Evening Telegram* before joining the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) on 30 July 1943 at HMCS *York*, in Toronto. The 36-year-old father of two listed skiing, golf, sailing, tennis, bridge and chess as his favourite sports and hobbies. The Navy enrolled Leslie as a Lieutenant (SB) and assigned him as a naval information officer. Special Branch (SB) enrolments were used in instances where the candidate possessed specialist civilian skills – in this case, journalism.

Three days after his enrolment, Leslie left his wife, Margaret, and two young sons, Peter and John Michael, to serve at sea. The Navy promptly posted him to HMCS *Bytown* in Ottawa to serve in the Director of Naval Information Office. In September of 1943, he underwent a five-week naval indoctrination course at HMCS *Cornwallis* in Halifax, NS.

In October of 1943, Leslie returned to *Bytown* and worked for the Director Naval Information Office once again. He worked there until 5 April 1944, when they posted him to the staff of the Senior Canadian Naval Officer in London, England as a Public Relations Officer. He took passage to the UK and arrived on 26 April.

Upon arriving at his new post in London, Leslie learned that his duties would require him to stay there during the upcoming D-Day operations. This news did not sit well with him, and he vigorously petitioned his superior officer for the chance to support combat operations. In response, he was given the opportunity to cover naval operations in the English Channel in preparation for D-Day (Operation *Overlord*). Canadian Tribal class destroyers were engaged with Axis forces off the

northern coast of France in night actions code-named *Operation Tunnel*. These operations aimed to disrupt enemy coastal convoys and destroy any shipping that they encountered. During the evening of 25-26 April 1944, the Tenth Destroyer Flotilla consisting of the cruiser HMS *Black Prince*, the destroyer HMS *Ashanti*, and the Canadian destroyers HMCS *Huron*, HMCS *Haida* and HMCS *Athabaskan*, had engaged enemy Fleet Torpedo Boats (destroyers) of the Elbing class. They damaged T24 and T27, and they sank T29 in a furiously fought action.



HMCS Athabaskan. Photo: Government of Canada (Canada.ca)

On 28 April 1944, towards the end of the day, orders were given for *Athabaskan* and *Haida* to provide assistance in a hostile minelaying operation off the coast of Brittany, in France. The ships sailed at 2000. Leslie joined *Athabaskan* shortly before the ship left port that evening, while another Public Information and Photographic Officer joined *Haida*. In subsequent action against German naval units, *Athabaskan* was sunk, and the thirty-six-year-old Leslie was among those killed. Tragically, he had only served for nine months and died within three days of his arrival overseas.

Listed as Missing Presumed Killed (MPK), Leslie's body was never recovered. He is commemorated on Panel 11 of the Halifax Memorial. A memorial bench is also dedicated to his memory at All Saints Anglican Church in Westboro, Ottawa, with the dedication that reads:

*To the glory of God and in loving memory of Lieutenant Leslie Ward RCNVR lost  
in the sinking of HMCS Athabaskan April 29, 1944*

For his service, Lieutenant Leslie Ward was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp and the War Medal. Leslie's wife, Margaret, and his mother, Elsie May, were awarded the Memorial Cross

#### **Postscript:**

Leslie's son Peter followed his father's footsteps into journalism and also worked with the *Toronto Evening Telegram* and the Royal Canadian Navy as a Public Affairs Officer at HMCS *York*. He was awarded the Naval Association of Canada's Admiral's Medal in 2021 in recognition of his role

as a founding member of HMCS HAIDA Inc., the foundation that saved the historic warship and acted as a vehicle to turn it into a memorial and museum ship.

Leslie's grandson, Mark, an experienced diver, joined a multinational diving expedition in July of 2002 and descended 285 feet to the wreck of *Athabaskan* on the sea floor near the French coast to lay a memorial plaque on the ship honouring those lost - including his grandfather. The plaque 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, 29 April 1944. Protect them whereso'er they go".*

### 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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