

Motor Mechanic John Arthur Watt V-36850



Motor Mechanic Watt. Photo: For
Posterity Sake

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Vancouver, BC, 2 August 1921**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Discovery*, 11 May 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Mechanic's Helper, Bowell McDonald Motor Co. Vancouver**
- **Killed when five MTBs of the 29th MTB flotilla were destroyed in a fire and explosion on 14 February 1945**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 13; Oostende Naval Memorial, Belgium; and HMCS *Discovery* memorial plaque.**

John Arthur Watt was born in Vancouver, British Columbia, on 2nd August 1921 to John Benjamin and Ethel Maude Watt, of Deep Cove, in North Vancouver. He married Kathleen Ann Watt, of White Rock, British Columbia. The couple had two children, Beverley Ann Watt, and Marilyn Rose Watt. Both daughters lived with their mother at 1525 Marine Drive, in White Rock when John enlisted in the Navy. He had two brothers who were already serving with the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR), James William Watt and George Nairn Watt. Both brothers survived the war and died in old age.

John's attestation record described him as 5' 7 ³/₄" tall with dark brown hair and blue eyes. He identified as belonging to the Baptist religion. After completing three years of high school at Vancouver Technical School, he pursued employment at Bowell McDonald Motor Company. He worked there for three and a half years, completing his apprenticeship. John gained valuable experience in machine shop, motor mechanics, welding, and drafting during his tenure. He officially enlisted in the Navy on 11 May 1942 at HMCS *Discovery* in Vancouver, where the Navy initially rated him as a Stoker 2nd Class. However, the following day the Navy promoted him to Leading Stoker because of his background in engineering.

He briefly stayed at *Discovery*; then on 15 May 1942, the Navy posted him to HMCS *Cornwallis* in Nova Scotia for basic training. Progression for a Leading Stoker could take several paths, including promotion to Stoker Petty Officer, acceptance as an Engine Room Artificer, or qualification as a motor mechanic. All training streams led to increased pay and responsibilities, and they were all Petty Officer equivalents. John completed lengthy training courses in various power plants and in different engine rooms in Halifax and *Cornwallis* from July 1942 to August 1943. His training culminated with his qualification as a Motor Mechanic on 30 Aug 1943. John achieved excellent results with a final score of 76.6%. As a Fitter, he was described as Superior. His course reports confirm his suitability for Chief Petty Officer was "Satisfactory" and his power of command "Excellent."

John had completed extensive training but needed to gain experience and consolidate his skills through sea time before his next promotion. On October 23, 1943, the Navy assigned him to HMCS *Niobe*, the RCN manning depot in Scotland. He was later sent to HMS *Attack* on December 17, 1943. This base was located at Portland on the south coast of the United Kingdom and served as a Coastal Forces base.



On March 24, 1944, John was posted to MTB 463, one of the nine Motor Torpedo Boats that formed the Canadian 29th MTB Flotilla. This flotilla was created in March 1944 and played a significant role in the lead-up to and during Operation Neptune, which was the naval component of the Normandy invasion. MTB 463 was a "G" Type Motor Torpedo Boat. It displaced 44 tons with a length of 71.75 feet and a beam of 20.6 feet. Its speed exceeded 39 knots, and it had a complement of three officers and 14 sailors. Its armament consisted of one 6-pound gun, two 20mm guns and four 18" torpedoes.

MTB 463 took part in the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944. The MTBs of the 29th continued to patrol the Normandy anchorages every night throughout that month. Early on 8 July 1944, 463 was setting off small mines without serious damage. After setting off twenty-six small mines, it struck the twenty-seventh and began to sink. The other boats closed the position and found 463 too seriously holed to be salvageable, but only four men of her crew and one officer were wounded in the blast. MTB 466 picked up the crew, all of whom survived. There was a notation in John's file that he had lost his clothing when MTB 463 sank, and he asked his wife to send him money which would be repaid when he received his survivor's clothing allowance. It was implied in this brief note that no money had been returned to his wife by the time of his death in February of 1945.

The Navy promoted John to Acting Motor Mechanic on 15 August 1944.

On 14 February 1945, the 29th Motor Torpedo Boat flotilla was alongside in Ostend, Belgium. It seems that somehow a significant fuel spill had occurred over the night, leaving a highly flammable slick on the water's surface, which ignited and rapidly engulfed many of the vessels and their ammunition and pyrotechnic stores. By the time authorities extinguished the blaze, twenty-six Canadians and thirty-five British sailors would perish, including John, who was 23 years old. In addition, twelve boats were lost in the fire, including five Canadian Motor Torpedo Boats.

In a letter written to John's wife, the following description of the memorial service was extracted from the official report.

"On the Sunday following the disaster, a memorial mass was said for the Canadian dead by Father Dodd in the church of St Peter and St Paul. This was followed by an impressive memorial service in the dockyard, conducted by Chaplain, E.R. Bowdler, (C of E) RNR, Ostend Naval Chaplain, and Command Chaplain Ernest G.B. Foote, (P) RCN. Officers and comrades of the men who lost their lives were drawn up on the decks of a group of Motor Torpedo Boats below the deck of the Control Tower where the service was conducted."

The report said that the 29th Canadian Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla had an outstanding service record. The Flotilla had been at sea for 11 months and fought in numerous engagements off the coasts of France, Belgium and Holland. The report specified, "In all its actions (the Flotilla) had established a fine record of courage, efficiency and seamanship."

John did not have a will, and his assets amounted to a \$50 bond registered in his name, which the Navy sent to his wife. His War Service Gratuity also went to his wife, which amounted to \$491.29. This was sent on 10 August 1945 and included a small additional \$39.95.

For his service, Motor Mechanic John Arthur Watt was awarded the 1939-45 Star, France and Germany Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp and the War Medal. In addition, his wife and mother were awarded the Canadian Memorial Cross.

Motor Mechanic John Watt is commemorated on Panel 13 of the Halifax Memorial; the Naval Monument in Oostende, Belgium; and in the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 574, Centre Block of the Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.

Prepared By:

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Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – profile for John Arthur Watt
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial:
<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/2641157>
- Find a Grave: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56173566/john-arthur-watt>

- For Posterity's Sake: <http://www.forposterityssake.ca/CREW/CREW0122.htm>
- For Posterity's Sake: <http://www.forposterityssake.ca/CTB-BIO/MEM001276.htm>
- Vancouver Province, 7 April 1945, p. 10
- Vancouver Sun, 3 April 1945, p. 5