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“I’m hit and losing power”

By Len Canfield

Three Canadian warships have proudly carried the name HMCS ATHABASKAN. The sinking of the first ATHABASKAN (G07) during WW 11 and the heroic efforts of her captain to help save his crew recalls the destroyer’s short but significant career.

The first ATHABASKAN was one of four Tribal Class destroyers built in Britain for Canada during the early part of the war. She was commissioned in January, 1943 and lost in action April 29, 1944 off the coast of France. In 16 months of operations, ATHABASKAN’s service included Home Fleet duties, escort for a Russian convoy and interception patrols in the English Channel and Bay of Biscay.

But ATHABASKAN also had some bad luck including collision with a boom defence vessel and sustaining significant damage when struck by a German radio-controlled glider bomb. (See accompanying *Action Stations* article ‘Countering the Glider Bomb’). The ship’s history is ably chronicled in ‘Unlucky Lady: The Life and Death of HMCS ATHABASKAN 1940-44’ by Len Burrow and Emile Beaudoin.

LCdr John Stubbs, DSO assumed command of ATHABASKAN in October 1943 (having previously served as CO of HMCS ASSINIBOINE). Cdr Tony German in ‘The Sea is at Our Gates’ describes the captains of the four Tribals as ‘top hands.’ In addition to LCdr Stubbs, Cdr Harry DeWolf was in command of HMCS HAIDA, LCdr Herb Rayner HMCS HURON and Cdr Jimmy Hubbard HMCS IROQUOIS. Two of the captains would go on to serve as Chief of the Naval Staff, DeWolf (1956-60) and Rayner (1960-64).

In early 1944 in the lead up to D-Day June 6, the Tribals were attached to the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, Plymouth to clear the Channel of German vessels including Narvik and Elbing destroyers and high-speed E-boats and to disrupt enemy convoys along the French coast. On a night mission April 25 ATHABASKAN, HAIDA and HURON and two Royal Navy ships engaged several Elbings and sank one. The Canadian ships and their captains described by one senior RN officer as “highly efficient and full of aggressive spirit” returned triumphantly but briefly to Plymouth.

Shortly after 4 a.m. April 29 off the French coast, HAIDA and ATHABASKAN spotted two Elbings and opened fire. As the Elbings turned to run, one got off a torpedo and ATHABASKAN reports: “I’m hit and losing power.” HAIDA laid a protective smoke screen to cover her sister ship and continued to pursue and fire on the German ships. At the same time, a second explosion rocks the disabled ATHABASKAN and she starts to go under; the captain orders ‘Abandon Ship.’ After running one of the flaming Elbings ashore, HAIDA turns and heads back to rescue ATHABASKAN’s crew.

With dawn breaking, HAIDA stopped among ATHABASKAN's crew bobbing in lifejackets and clinging to Carley floats. Their captain, LCdr Stubbs was rallying his men as he swam among them. HAIDA dropped scramble nets over the side and lowered boats and floats for those in the water. But Cdr DeWolf knew he had only 15-20 minutes maximum for the rescue. Only five miles off the French coast and anticipating the arrival of enemy aircraft at any moment his first priority had to be the safety of his own ship and crew. As HAIDA's crew pulled 42 survivors from the water, one of the most poignant moments in the rescue occurred. Stubbs, declining to be rescued, called up to his fellow captain: "Get Away, Get Clear." DeWolf had no choice. As HAIDA moved out the ship's cutter was left behind, manned by three of her crew to continue the rescue; they would save eight more ATHABASKAN crewmembers plus pick up two of their own crew who had been swept off the scramble nets.

ATHABASKAN's captain and 127 of his crew perished. Several German vessels arrived on the scene shortly after and took 83 members of ATHABASKAN's crew as prisoners of war. All hands in HAIDA's cutter made it safely back to England.

Within three weeks of the sinking, another ATHABASKAN (219) was laid down in Halifax. The second ATHABASKAN was commissioned January 20, 1948 and in 1950 departed for her first deployment with United Nations forces during the Korean War. She served a second tour in Korea in 1951. ATHABASKAN transferred to Halifax in 1959; she was placed in reserve in 1965 and sold in 1969. The modern ATHABASKAN (282) was built in Lauzon, Que and commissioned in September, 1972. In August, 1990 she sailed for the Persian Gulf (in company with HMCS TERRA NOVA and PROTECTEUR) to support a multi-national naval blockade following Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and to serve as the flagship of Canada's naval task group. In 1991 she returned to Halifax and commenced her TRUMP conversion to prepare for modern day warfare.
