

Sub-Lieutenant Robert Ivan Loucks Annett O-2450



Sub-Lieutenant Annett. Photo: Canadian Virtual War Memorial

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Edmonton AB, 17 July 1924**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Tecumseh*, 17 August 1943**
- **Civilian Occupation: Student**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Row B. Grave 16; the Memorial Cairn at Royal Roads University, BC; Consort High School Honour; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 238 at the Centre Block Houses of Parliament, Ottawa**

Robert Ivan Loucks Annett was born on 17 July 1924 in Edmonton, AB. He was the eldest of four children of Canadian-born Ronald Ross Annett and US-born Lenora (nee Thomas) Annett. His family soon moved to the US, living initially in Seattle, Washington, then Salt Lake City, Utah (his mother's hometown), and finally the family moved to New Jersey where his father's parents lived. In the early 1930s, they returned to Canada and settled in Consort, AB. Consort is a small farming community two-and-a-half hours east of Red Deer. Robert's father was the principal at the local high school for a time and then found success as a full-time author of a book and numerous short stories that were published in the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine and other publications. The family were United Church members.

Robert lived in Consort during his elementary and high school years. He was an honour student in high school. Robert enjoyed reading, but also sports including rugby, football, baseball, and tennis. His intentions after high school were to enrol in medical school at university; however, as it was wartime, he decided he would serve in the military first.

Enrolment documents describe Robert as 5' 6" tall, 146 lbs with brown hair and brown/hazel eyes, and of fair complexion with a scar on his left shoulder.

He joined the Calgary Tanks Regiment (Reserve) 25 June 1941 and underwent training for a year at Calgary's Camp Sarcee. It was the same Regiment in which his father had served as part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the First World War. His father, a Lieutenant, was wounded in France. He recovered and transferred into the Royal Air Force as a pilot.

When Robert saw an advertisement for the newly formed Royal Naval College of Canada opening at Royal Roads in BC, he applied. He was accepted into the first draft of 50 Naval Cadets for an intensive, year-long program beginning in September 1942 as a member of the Royal Canadian

Naval Volunteer Reserve. He graduated with Honours and was promoted to Midshipman. In August 1943, he left for Halifax, NS and onward to England to join his first ship, the newly commissioned Tribal-class destroyer HMCS *Athabaskan*.

In the six months before he joined the ship, *Athabaskan* patrolled the Iceland-Faeroes Island Gap, and resupplied the Norwegian Garrison on Spitsbergen Island in the high arctic. Severe weather during that tasking caused significant damage that necessitated repairs. A few months later, while serving in the Bay of Biscay off the coast of Spain, *Athabaskan* was attacked by 18 Dornier-217 bombers and was hit by a glide bomb (in reality an air-launched radio-controlled missile with a rocket engine and a speed of 400 mph). There were fatalities and casualties, along with extensive damage. The ship managed to reach His Majesty's Base *Devonport* in Plymouth, England, which was a major naval port and drydock. Repairs took until November 1943 to complete. It was in *Devonport* that Midshipman Annett joined *Athabaskan*.

In December 1943, *Athabaskan* escorted a convoy through bitter winter storms to Archangel in the Soviet Arctic. Then in February 1944, *Athabaskan* re-joined Plymouth command and was assigned to the newly formed 10th Destroyer Flotilla tasked with Operation HOSTILE (Minelaying) and Operation TUNNEL (Patrol) missions off the coast of France. It was also in February 1944 that Midshipman Annett was promoted to Sub-Lieutenant.

On 29 April 1944, at approximately 0300, *Athabaskan* 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 German ships T-24 and T-27. These German ships were large Elbing-class Torpedo Boats. 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 ship's last position only to find that she had sunk. One hundred and twenty-eight men including Sub-Lieutenant Annett 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. Sub-Lieutenant Robert Annett was 19 years old.

"Sub-Lieutenant Annett was the most junior officer in the ship. He was last seen alive by Lieutenant William Clark who shared a Carley float with him. Carley floats were wooden platforms that looked much like today's wooden shipping pallets, only much larger. They served as life rafts. There was room for perhaps a dozen men on the raft with others clinging to the side of the raft while in the water. Clark and Annett left the raft to try to swim to the rescuing ship HMCS *Haida*. They realized that they couldn't make it and turned back to the Carley float. When Clark managed to grab on to a broken cork net that floated nearby, he turned around and realized his companion had disappeared." (CFB Esquimalt Naval Museum)

It was not until over a year later that Sub-Lieutenant Annett's family had some understanding of his death. A letter sent to the family by the Naval Secretary stated:

"From various reports received, it has been learned that along the coast of Finistere, France at Brignogan, Plouescat, Santec and L'Aberwrach, shortly after the tragic sinking of HMCS *Athabaskan*, bodies from this ship were recovered and buried. Of approximately seventy bodies known to have been recovered in this region, only two, however, were positively identified. In many cases all positive means of identification were surreptitiously taken from the bodies by the Germans, who are known to have later used the date contained in documents obtained, in the interrogation of prisoners of war from the ship.

It is understood that the citizens of these French towns looked after the burials and held funeral services, even against the wishes of the Germans."

Sub-Lieutenant Annett's parents were very determined to find the whereabouts of their son. They wrote often and made their own search and enquiries and eventually helped identify their son's grave. The unofficial wartime cemetery became the Plouescat Communal Cemetery, an official Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery. It is located 40 km north of Brest, France. Twenty of the 59 sailors buried there are still unidentified. The inscription on his grave reads:



GOOD-NIGHT, SWEET PRINCE, AND FLIGHTS
OF ANGELS SING THEE TO THY REST!

For his service, Sub-Lieutenant Robert Ivan Loucks Annett was awarded: the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother Lenore was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Sub-Lieutenant Robert Ivan Loucks Annett is remembered on the Memorial Cairn at Royal Roads University, BC; Consort High School Honour Roll; and the Second World War Book of Remembrance, Page 238 at the Centre Block

Houses of Parliament, Ottawa

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Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – profile for Robert Ivan Loucks Annett
- Second World War Book of Remembrance, p. 238
- Library and Archives Canada - Service file for Sub Lieutenant Robert Ivan Loucks Annett
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- <http://www.forposterityssake.ca/CTB-BIO/MEM000047.htm>. Retrieved 15 May 22
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- <http://www.inmemories.com/Cemeteries/plouescat.htm>. Retrieved 15 May 22

- <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/33942/plouescat-communal-cemetery/>. Retrieved 15 May 22