

Stoker First Class John Thomas Heatherington V-31647



Stoker First Class John T Heatherington.
Credit: www.forposteritysake.ca

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Regina SK, 21 October 1922**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Queen*, 27 March 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Sheet Metal Apprentice, Western Steel Products Ltd**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sunk on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12; Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial; Heatherington Lake (59° 25' N 105° 48'W) in Northern Saskatchewan**

John was the first of two sons born to Martha and Thomas Heatherington on 21 October 1922 in Regina. Brother William was born a few years later. Father Thomas was born in 1897 in England and emigrated to Canada in 1902. The 1921 census records him as single and working as a fireman with the Canadian National Railway. He also married Martha later the same year. In 1922 they moved to Regina where Thomas continued to work as a fireman and eventually as a locomotive engineer. His steady employment allowed the family to move several times within the city as they climbed the real estate ladder and led comfortable lives. John attended Kitchener and Herchmer Public Schools (Grade 1-8) and Scott Collegiate (Grades 9-10) before finally leaving school in 1940 at the age of 17. Shortly after leaving school, he became a sheet metal worker apprentice at Western Steel Products, a large steel fabricator, a position he held for one year before enrolling in the Navy.

On 27 March 1942 John enrolled in the Regina Division (HMCS *Queen*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve as a Stoker Second Class. He was single, 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighed 140 pounds. He had brown hair, green eyes and a medium complexion.

John's personnel file indicates that he followed a busy and convoluted path. One is able to read the personnel files of Second World War "war dead" at various websites and under certain conditions. Among other documents, naval personnel files contain a Certificate of Service. The Certificate lists the ships, establishments, and periods in which the individual served. All naval personnel needed to be borne on the books of a 'ship' or shore establishment in commission for two reasons - discipline and pay - a tradition originating in the Royal Navy. The shore establishments are often referred to as 'Stone Frigates.' *Queen*, *Star*, *Stadacona*, and *Niobe* are examples. As well, it is not uncommon to see a double entry, e.g., *Niobe (Athabaskan)*: indicating

that the individual was assigned to the ship in parentheses but as she was, say, still under construction, her crew remained under the administrative authority of the Stone Frigate.

NAVAL TRAINING and ACTIVE SERVICE						
Year	SHIP OR ESTABLISHMENT	SERVICE Type	RATINGS	FROM	TO	CAUSE OF DISCHARGE
<i>ACTIVE SERVICE</i>						
1942	H.M.C.S. "Gullon"		Sea II	27 Feb 42	27 Feb 42	
	<i>Divisional Lt</i>					
1942	H.M.C.S. "Star"		Sto II	24 Apr 42	4 Apr 43	
	<i>Active Service</i>					
1942	H.M.C.S. "Nonsuch"		Sto II	5 Sept 42	25 Nov 42	
	<i>Nonsuch</i>		Sto 2/c	26 Nov 42	5 Apr 43	
	<i>Stadacona</i>		Sto 2/c	5 Sept 43	18 Aug 43	
	<i>St. Hyacinthe</i>			11 Aug 43	7 Oct 43	
	<i>Stadacona</i>		Sto 1/c	7 Sept 43	7 Oct 43	
	<i>Nonsuch</i>			5 Oct 43	20 Jan 44	
	<i>Nonsuch</i>			20 Jan 44	7 Apr 44	
	<i>Stadacona</i>			5 Apr 44	27 Apr 44	<i>referred to as (Stadacona)</i>
	<i>Nonsuch</i>					<i>promoted (Sto 1/c)</i>
	<i>Nonsuch</i>					<i>referred to as (Stadacona)</i>

JT Heatherington Service File.
Source: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca>

With the Stone Frigate process in mind, let's continue... The very next day after being sworn in, John was on a train bound for HMCS *Star* in Hamilton where he was employed until 4 September 1942. Other than being attached to "Galt T.E." there is no information available about what he actually did there. The naval facilities in Galt (now referred to as Cambridge) became the center of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) training. They did, however, have male personnel such as stokers and shipwrights engaged in maintenance. The subsequent entry indicates that he was again drafted to HMCS *Star* from 5

September to 25 November. It is likely that he underwent basic training during that period. Before leaving basic training, John successfully passed the Radio Artificer's entrance exam. A Radio Artificer was paid more than a Stoker, but the training was more technical. From 26 November 1942 until 4 April 1943, Stoker Heatherington served in HMCS *Nonsuch* in Edmonton. There he completed RCN Technical Training at the University of Alberta campus in March 1943. He was paid \$1.30 per day plus \$70 per month to cover board and room provided by a nearby family.

From April to August 1943, he served in HMCS *Stadacona* likely in a manning pool while he awaited a training position on the Radio Artificer course. From 11 August to 7 October, he underwent Radio Artificer training at HMCS *St. Hyacinthe* in the Province of Quebec before returning to *Stadacona*. During his time at *St. Hyacinthe*, John did not complete the Radio Artificer course: He remained in the engineering branch, and he was promoted to Stoker First Class. Later in the fall of 1943 John was drafted to his first seagoing ship, HMS *Seymour*. HMS *Seymour* was one of 76 Buckley Class destroyers ordered by the United States Navy. These ships were acquired by the Royal Navy right out of the builders' yards. *Seymour* was under construction in the Bethlehem-Hingham Shipyards immediately across the harbour from Boston.

Remarkably, *Seymour* was laid down on 1 September 1943, launched a month later, and commissioned on 23 December 1943. As the commissioning crew, John and his shipmates had plenty to do as the ship was cluttered with mountains of equipment waiting to be unpacked and installed by both the ship's company and the builder's workers. After commissioning, acceptance trials were conducted on the ship and the crew underwent work-ups. They then proceeded to Pollock Dock, Belfast, Northern Ireland where ninety-four additions and alterations (A&As) were performed to make *Seymour* more closely match Admiralty requirements. The range of A&As ran from the installation of a crow's nest to a camouflage paint pattern.

John was next drafted to HMCS *Athabaskan* on 8 April 1944. Prior to John joining her *Athabaskan* had had an eventful career. Commissioned in February 1943 her hull had been seriously damaged by heavy seas on her first operation; she had been involved in a collision; and she had been severely damaged by a glide bomb. In total, repairs had taken about five months. Now based in Plymouth *Athabaskan* was a unit of the newly formed 10th Destroyer Flotilla and whose mission was to carry out operations off the coast of France. On 25-26 April, she assisted in the destruction of the German Type 39 torpedo boat *T-29*. Then on 29 April 1944 at about 0300 she 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 *T-24* and *T-27*. 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's last position only to find that she had sunk. 128 men including Stoker First Class Heatherington were lost, 44 were rescued by *Haida*, and 6 by *Haida*'s motor work boat. At dawn, after the departure of *Haida*, 83 men were later taken prisoner by three German minesweepers.

John served in HMCS *Athabaskan* for only three eventful weeks before her fatal engagement. He has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 12. Additionally, Heatherington Lake (Lat 59° 25'N Long 108°48' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory. As well, the wreckage of *Athabaskan* was located in 2002 in 50 fathoms of water. She and those who may be entombed in her are under the protection of the French Heritage Code.

For his service, Stoker First Class John Heatherington was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Martha Heatherington, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Prepared By:

John Dalzell, Capt(N) (retired), Commanding Officer HMCS *UNICORN* 1983-88 & Citizen Sailor Virtual Cenotaph Research Team



Sources:

- Burrows/Beaudoin. *Unlucky Lady The Life & Death of HMCS Athabaskan*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart. 1987
- Milner, Marc. *Canada's Navy The First Century*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press. 1999
- Commonwealth War Graves Commission record for Stoker 1 John Heatherington
- Library and Archives Canada Service Record for Stoker 1 John Heatherington
- Canadian Virtual War Memorial – Profile page for Stoker 1 John Heatherington
- Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial - Profile page for Stoker 1 John Heatheringtonh
- Notes of a conversation between Lcdr David J. Freeman (Retired) and Capt. J. Dalzell (Retired), January 2022

- For Posterity's Sake. HMCS *Athabaskan* G07, Retrieved December 9, 2021 from http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS_Athabaskan_G07.htm
- Wikipedia (December 6, 2021). HMCS *Athabaskan* G07. Retrieved December 12, 2021 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMCS_Athabaskan_\(G07\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMCS_Athabaskan_(G07))
- Military Wiki. HMS *Seymour* (K563). Retrieved January 14, 2022 from [https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/HMS_Seymour_\(K563\)](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/HMS_Seymour_(K563))
- Library and Archives Canada. *1921 Census*. Retrieved January 14, 2022 from <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1921/Pages/search.aspx>
- Henderson's Greater Regina Directory, Retrieved January 14, 2022 from <https://archive.org/details/P003592-4-6>