

Able Seaman Leonard Clayton Irvine V-11886



Able Seaman Len Irvine. Do you have a better photo you can share? Please submit to CSV.CVMC@gmail.com

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Saskatoon SK, 31 May 1923**
- **Enlisted: Saskatoon Division RCNVR, 20 October 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Presser, Broadway Cleaners**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS Athabaskan was torpedoed and sank on 29 April 1944. Age: 20**
- **Commemorated: Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Row A. Grave 8 & Irvine Island (Lat 56°59' N Long 103° 42' W) in Northern Saskatchewan**

Leonard, known as Len, was the third of five children born to Margaret Irvine and Joseph Irvine on 31 May 1923 in Saskatoon. Brothers Percy, William and Lyle were born in 1914, 1920 and 1931 respectively. Sister Margaret Eileen was born in 1929. His parents, Margaret and Joseph were married in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan in 1912 and arrived in Saskatoon in 1917. Over the next twenty years Len's father, Joseph enjoyed steady well-paid employment primarily as a lineman with Saskatchewan Government Telephones, the precursor of SaskTel. The family lived in two houses in the same neighbourhood while Len was growing up which added to their stability. Unfortunately, Joseph died in October 1937 at the age of 50. Len was 14. His mother, Margaret found it necessary to find a less expensive house for the family resulting in another move. Two years later Len left high school after grade 10 and found work as a presser with Broadway Cleaners, a dry cleaner's shop. His older brothers were also working.

On 20 October 1941 Len enrolled in the Saskatoon Division (*HMCS Unicorn*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). Shortly after he enrolled, Len's older brothers joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. On enrollment, Len was single, 5 feet 7 ½ inches tall and, at 120 pounds, was considered underweight. He had black hair, brown eyes and a dark complexion.

Len remained in *Unicorn* for five months. For the first two months he spent his time waiting for appointments and undertaking various administrative steps. His active service began on 29 December 1941 when basic training began in earnest. On 21 April 1942 he was on a train bound for Esquimalt, British Columbia and *HMCS Naden*. There he underwent more training in seamanship, drill, and small arms as well as gunnery. In July he boarded another train for the



Naval ratings practising the loading and firing of a six-inch gun, Royal Canadian Navy Gunnery School, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 1940.

Photo: Library and Archives Canada Photo, MIKAN No. 3566927

transcontinental trip to Halifax, Nova Scotia. He underwent New Entry training at HMCS *Cornwallis* until 26 August then to HMCS *Stadacona* for more gunnery training as a Gunner Director Layer (DL) until 27 October.

On completion he was designated as a member of the ship's company of HMCS *Athabaskan*, then being built in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and travelled to the United Kingdom. There, under the authority of HMCS *Niobe*, he received further training specific to *Athabaskan* described as "Tribal II" from 28 October to 26 December 1942. He was promoted to Able Seaman on 29 December and employed in the dockyard and *Athabaskan* herself. There was 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. With living space unavailable under the circumstances, Joe and his shipmates were billeted ashore in private homes.

Athabaskan had a relatively short service life of about 14 months. During that period, she experienced several major mishaps and battle damage which required her being taken out of service for repairs for a total of about five months thus reducing her actual service life to about nine months.

After the commissioning ceremony on 3 February 1943, *Athabaskan* was assigned to the British Home Fleet. But first, the ship underwent trials, and her crew underwent work-ups. On 29 March *Athabaskan* sailed to patrol the Iceland-Faeroes Island Gap. The seas were so heavy that *Athabaskan's* hull was severely damaged necessitating her to undergo five weeks of repair in the dockyard in South Shields on the Tyne. Next, they joined the heavy cruiser, HMS *Cumberland*, the light cruiser, HMS *Bermuda*, and another destroyer, HMS *Eclipse*, to resupply the Norwegian garrison on Spitsbergen Island in the Arctic in early June. On their return the task force called at Scapa Flow where *Athabaskan* collided with the boom defence vessel on 18 June necessitating a month's repair job in Devonport. Once repaired she was based in Plymouth to carry out anti-submarine patrols in the Bay of Biscay.

On 27 August 1943 *Athabaskan* was attacked by eighteen Dornier-217 bombers and hit by a glide bomb (in reality an air-launched radio-controlled missile with a rocket engine and a speed of 400 mph) near B gun. The bomb pierced the ship before the 650-pound warhead exploded a few feet beyond the starboard side crushing and buckling *Athabaskan's* hull plates and damaging the superstructure. The B gun's crew suffered two killed with the remainder suffering burns; the crew of A gun also suffered burns; the bridge lookout died the next day and two officers on the bridge suffered severe wounds. In spite of this her crew managed to rescue 35 survivors from HMS *Egert* which had been sunk by another glide bomb. At the same time *Athabaskan's* damage control parties, working chest deep in seawater and fuel oil, fought tenaciously to correct a severe

list caused by the bomb damage. They managed to reach Devonport again for repairs which took until November to complete. Returning to Scapa Flow in December 1943 she escorted a convoy through bitter winter storms to Archangel in the Soviet Arctic.

In February 1944, *Athabaskan* returned to Plymouth to join the newly formed 10th Destroyer Flotilla and 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 flash-less 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 AB Irvine were lost, 44 were rescued by *Haida*, and 6 by *Haida*'s motor work boat.



Ship's Company HMCS Athabaskan, Plymouth, England, April 1944. AB Gordon would be in this picture. (LAC photo)

At dawn, after the departure of *Haida*, 83 men were taken prisoner by three German minesweepers.

Unlike most of his lost ship mates Len has a known grave. His remains and those of thirty-four others from *Athabaskan* were recovered and are buried in Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Finistere, France. As well, the wreckage of their ship 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, Able Seaman Leonard Clayton Irvine was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Margaret Irvine, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Len is buried in Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Finistere, France. Row A, Grave 8. Additionally, Irvine Island (Lat 56°59' N Long 103° 42' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

Len served in *HMCS Athabaskan* for the entire 451 days of *Athabaskan*'s service career. His service was arduous, fraught with danger and, in the end, fatal.

Prepared By:

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Sources:

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