

Able Seaman Joseph McGrath V-11616



Able Seaman Joe McGrath

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Kindersley SK, 31 May 1919**
- **Enlisted: Saskatoon Division RCNVR, 2 January 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Automotive Mechanic, Early Motors**
- **Death: Died of wounds from glide bomb attack while serving in HMCS Athabaskan on 28 August 1943. Age: 24**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial & McGrath Lake (Lat 59° 52'N Long 108°09' W) in Northern Saskatchewan**

Joseph, nicknamed Joe, was the fourth of six children born to Margaret McGrath and Michael McGrath on 31 May 1919 in Kindersley, Saskatchewan. Sisters Teresa, Pearl and Margaret were born in 1913, 1914 and 1927 respectively; brothers James and Francis in 1915 and 1925. Parents Margaret and Michael were married in 1912 and established a farm near Kindersley. The children first attended Mylrea School, a quintessential one room country school house near their farm, and later McKenzie School in the town of Kindersley. In 1935, Joe left school on completion of grade 8 to work with the family on the farm as they struggled through the drought and the Great Depression. Sadly, just as both climatic and economic conditions improved, Joe's father died. As a result, his mother, Margaret, moved to Saskatoon with Joe and his three youngest siblings. Joe quickly found work as an automotive mechanic at J.H. Early Motors, a large Chrysler dealership, where he worked for about two years. From 9 October to 7 November 1940, he was a member of the 2nd Battalion Saskatoon Light Infantry.

On 2 January 1941 Joe enrolled in the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). Brother James soon followed. Joe was single, 5 feet 6 ¼ inches tall and weighed 128 pounds. He had black hair, brown eyes and a dark complexion.

Joe remained in Saskatoon taking training until 12 August 1941 when he was drafted to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, British Columbia. There he took two months of gunnery training before being drafted to HMCS *Sans Peur* which had been a substantial yacht before being converted into an armed patrol vessel. He left *Sans Peur* in March 1942 after 136 days patrolling the British Columbian coast. While onboard, he was promoted to Able Seaman on 28 January. After a few weeks back in Esquimalt he journeyed east by train to Halifax, Nova Scotia for New Entry training at HMCS *Cornwallis* until 3 July 1942. Then he was assigned to a manning pool for general duties. On 22 August he commenced still more gunnery training at HMCS *Stadacona* until 27 October 1942.

On 28 October Joe 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. Under the authority of HMCS *Niobe*, he received further training specific to Tribal Class destroyers before actually joining *Athabaskan* still being fitted out. 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.

After the commissioning ceremony on 3 February 1943, *Athabaskan* was assigned to the British Home Fleet 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 at 1300 *Athabaskan* was attacked by eighteen Dornier-217 bombers and hit by a glide bomb. The glide bomb was a precursor of a modern-day air-to-surface missile. Launched from an aircraft they were powered by a rocket engine, carried a 650-pound warhead and were capable of a speed of 400 mph. They were steered using radio signals by an aircrew member. The bomb pierced the ship before the warhead exploded a few feet beyond the starboard side. The blast buckled and perforated *Athabaskan's* hull plates and superstructure. The B gun's crew suffered two killed with the remainder suffering burns; the crew of A gun also suffered burns; while two officers on the bridge suffered severe wounds and one man was lost overboard. Joe, who was the starboard lookout, was gravely wounded. In spite of all this *Athabaskan* 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 fought tenaciously in chest deep in a mixture of seawater and fuel oil to correct a severe list caused by the bomb damage, and extinguished fires.



Surgeon-Lieutenant William Wallace and his Sick Bay Attendant Eric Mengoni worked feverishly to save lives assisted by Surgeon-Lieutenant Charles Drew who had been one of the survivors of the sinking of HMS *Egert*. In spite of their best efforts Joe McGrath died overnight and was buried at sea at 0820 on 28 April. On the night of 28-29 April one more man died, and another needed both legs amputated below the knees. The others responded well to their treatment. *Athabaskan* reached the safety of Devonport at 2031 on 30 August 1943.

After extensive repairs and upgrades, *Athabaskan* returned to the fray only to be lost off the northwest coast of France when she was torpedoed at 0300 on 29 April 1944 by a German torpedo boat. 128 men were lost, 44 were rescued by HMCS *Haida*, and 6 by *Haida's* motor work boat. At dawn, after

Haida had departed from the scene of the sinking, 83 men were later taken prisoner by three German minesweepers.

For his service, Able Seaman Joseph McGrath was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Margaret McGrath, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Joe was buried at sea at 0820 on 28 April 1943. HMCS *Athabaskan*'s position was Lat 43°28'N Long 12°46'W about 150 nautical miles off the northwest coast of Spain. He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 10. Additionally, McGrath Lake (Lat 59° 52'N Long 108°09' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

Prepared By:

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Sources:

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- Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial -Profile page for Able Seaman Joseph McGrath
- Notes of a conversation between Lcdr David J. Freeman (Retired) and Capt. J. Dalzell (Retired), December 2021
- For Posterity's Sake. *HMCS Athabaskan G07*. Retrieved December 9, 2021 from http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS_ATHABASKAN_G07.htm
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