

Electrical Artificer Donald Irving Metcalfe V-11603



Electrical Artificer Donald Metcalfe.
Credit: www.forposteritysake.ca

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Delisle SK, 9 March 1912**
- **Enlisted: Saskatoon Division RCNVR, 10 December 1939**
- **Civilian Occupation: A/Service manager, J H Early Motors**
- **Death: Died when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sunk on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12; Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial; Kelvingrove Cemetery, Kelvington, Sask; City of Saskatoon Honour Book; Metcalfe Lake (Lat 56°48' N Long 103° 58' W) in Northern Saskatchewan**

Donald was the third of four children born to Isabella and Peter Metcalfe on 9 March 1912 in Delisle, Saskatchewan. Sister Margaret was born in 1908. Brothers David and Earl were born in 1910 and 1924 respectively. Parents Peter and Isabella were born in 1877 and 1882 in Scotland. Peter served in the British Army and saw action in the Boer War. They emigrated to Canada in 1904 and homesteaded 160 acres five miles north of Rosetown, Saskatchewan. They reached their assigned homestead by travelling by horse or oxen drawn wagon for about 70 miles from Saskatoon along the Old Bone Trail named after the buffalo bones which were traditionally gathered and taken to Saskatoon or Regina (first known as Pile-of-Bones) for shipment to Minnesota to be made into fertilizer.

Homesteaders' initial homes in the area were commonly built of sod before the railway, opened in 1908, brought lumber to the area. The Metcalfes proved the land sufficiently by March 1909 to be granted title. As the children came of school age, they attended a one-room school near the village. It is not clear why Donald was born in Delisle some 50 miles away although the villages were connected by rail, and a physician, Dr. A.K. Cameron, had arrived in Delisle by bicycle in 1908 and set up a practice.

The family continued to farm until 1922 when Peter found work as a grain buyer in the village of Kelvington, Saskatchewan, about 120 miles east of Saskatoon. There the children were able to attend a school located in the village itself. Donald left school at the age of 17 on completion of Grade 10 and moved to Yorkton, Saskatchewan, about 100 miles southeast of Kelvington. Yorkton, with a population of about 1500 at the time, was the major marketing center in the area. There Donald found steady employment and became certified as both an electrician and an auto mechanic. He also enlisted in the Yorkton Regiment, a Non Permanent Army Militia (NPAM) unit

on 28 June 1928, an affiliation he maintained until 4 April 1940 – although the last three years were on a largely inactive basis.

In 1937 Donald moved to Saskatoon and quickly found work with JH Early Motors, a large Chrysler dealership - briefly as a mechanic and then as the assistant service manager. He again became active as a soldier by transferring to the 2nd Battalion Saskatoon Light Infantry on 19 July 1940. Upon transferring he was appointed to one of the Company Sergeant Major positions. He remained in the battalion until 9 December 1940.

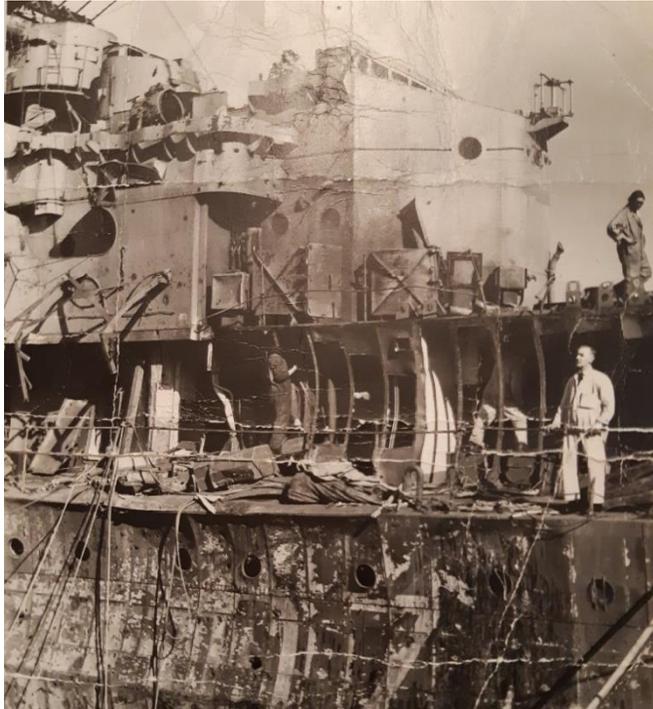
On 10 December 1940 Donald enrolled in the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve. He was almost 29 years old, was single, 5 feet 8 ¾ inches tall and weighed 132 pounds. He had brown hair, hazel eyes and a dark complexion.

Donald was not the typical 18-year-old recruit with limited education and work experience. He had two tradesman certifications, about twelve years related employment, and over ten years military experience. Upon enrolment in *Unicorn*, he was classified as an Electrician and awarded two Good Conduct Badges in recognition of his military service. He took part in naval training in *Unicorn* and attended to various administration processes as well. In March 1941 he successfully challenged electrical artificer examinations over a two-day period.

On 11 May 1941 he was drafted to HMCS *Stadacona* to attend the Torpedo School. At the same time, he was reclassified as an Acting Electrical Artificer 4th Class. There were several artificer classifications in addition to Electrical Artificer - including Engine Room Artificers and Radio Artificer. Artificers were highly skilled technicians who had received extensive training usually within the Navy. For example, an Engine Room Artificer spent nine months at a civilian technical college and then one year in a naval engineering training facility before qualifying. Upon graduation artificers changed from the square rig of ratings to the round rig uniforms of petty officers. They enjoyed the pay and privileges of petty officers although they were not actually petty officers. Their pay and status compensated them for what they knew not where they were in the chain of command. Only the most senior artificers exercised authority over junior artificers and ratings - a Chief Engine Room Artificer of a ship for example.

John attended the Torpedo School until 27 May 1942 and was confirmed as an Electrical Artificer 4th Class. (*While at Torpedo School he was granted leave to travel to Regina where he was married on 3 September 1941. As well, his mother died in June 1942*). In August, after carrying out various duties in *Stadacona* he was drafted to HMCS *Niobe* in Scotland and, under *Niobe*'s authority was seconded to HMS *Vernon* in Portsmouth. *Vernon* housed the Royal Navy's torpedo school and, to use a present-day term, was the center of excellence for research and development for mining, mine countermeasures, torpedoes, degaussing, and specialized naval electrical equipment as well as training.

Donald was next drafted to HMCS *Athabaskan* on 7 May 1943. Prior to Donald's arrival *Athabaskan* was severely damaged by heavy seas during her maiden operation. This necessitated her undergoing five weeks of repair in the dockyard in South Shields on the Tyne. On completion, she 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.



Damage to HMCS *Athabaskan* caused by glider bomb 27 Aug 1943. Photo credit: From the collection of Joseph W. (Jim) L'Esperance, LS, RCNVR (www.forposteritysake.ca)

Once repaired she was based in Plymouth to conduct anti-submarine patrols in the Bay of Biscay.

On 27 August 1943 *Athabaskan* and her consorts were attacked by eighteen Dornier-217 bombers and hit by a glide bomb (in reality, this was 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. The B gun's crew suffered two killed with the remainder suffering burns; the crew of A gun also suffered burns; the bridge lookout, Able Seaman Joe McGrath, from Saskatoon and also an employee of JH Early Motors, died the next day; and two officers on the bridge suffered severe wounds. Donald, as a member of the Forward Section Damage Control team, also received serious injuries to his ears caused by the blast.

Despite the chaos the stunned Forward Section Damage Control Team and their colleagues in the After Damage Control Team fought tenaciously chest deep in a mixture of cold sea water and fuel oil to correct a severe list caused by the bomb damage. At the same time *Athabaskan* also managed to rescue 35 survivors from HMS *Egret* which had been sunk by another glide bomb. *Athabaskan* then detached from the Group and proceeded to 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 where she conducted 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 Electrical Artificer Metcalfe 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.

Donald and most of the others killed have no known graves. However, in 2002 the wreckage of their ship was located 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, Electrical Artificer Donald Metcalfe was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal.

He has no known grave and is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 12, and the Kelvingrove Cemetery, Kelvington, Saskatchewan. Additionally, Metcalfe Lake (Lat 56°48' N Long 103° 58' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

Prepared By:

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