

Engine Room Artificer John Clark Roberts V-41049



ERA 4th Class John Roberts. Date and location unkn. Photo credit: the Roberts family collection

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Stratford ON, 31 May 1921**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Prevost*, 2 July 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Machinist Apprentice, Canadian National Railway**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sunk on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 12, and the Stratford War Memorial in Stratford, Ontario**

John Clark Roberts was born 31 July 1921, in Stratford, Ontario to James and Elizabeth Roberts, a year after the Roberts family emigrated from Paisley, Scotland. He had an older sister of 4 years Anna, and a sister, 5 years older, Anne Forsyth, who was adopted upon the death of her already widowed mother who was Elizabeth's sister.

John had severe asthma as a child which required him to be in an oxygen tent and spend months at a time absent from attending Falstaff Public school. It was during these times that he developed his talent for drawing sailing ships. His father had served in the Merchant Marine in WW1 on a minesweeper. He also had 2 maternal uncles who fought in WW1, William Forsyth who fought at Ypres and Archibald Forsyth who served as a medic in the Dardanelles.

Fortunately, with the onset of new medications, John eventually outgrew the asthma to become a strong 6'1" natural athlete and distance swimmer with blonde hair and a beautiful smile. After graduating from the Stratford Collegiate and Vocational Institute he entered the machinist apprentice program at the Canadian National Railway.



John's sketch of a sailing ship at age 9.
Credit: Roberts family collection

With so many of his peers signing up for active duty, John decided to join, and he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve on 2 Jul 1942 at HMCS *Prevost* in London, ON at the age of 21.

John entered the RCNVR as an Acting Engine Room Artificer (ERA). Artificers were highly skilled technicians who had received extensive training usually within the Navy. For example, an Engine Room Artificer often 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.



ERA 4th Class John Roberts & his mother Elizabeth. On leave in Mar 1943.
Photo: Roberts family collection

By mid-August 1942, John found himself at HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, BC for training. This was followed by Engine Room Artificer training at University of Edmonton, and the final shore-based ERA training at HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax, NS. At one point during his travels, his train made a re-fueling stop in Kamloops where his sister lived. She was able to visit him at the station for a few minutes and her last memory of him was waving good-bye on the train...with his wonderful smile and last words, "Don't worry Sis, I'll be fine."

On 15 March 1943, John was drafted to his first ship, the newly commissioned HMCS *Iroquois*. There he completed the practical elements of his training. John served in *Iroquois* during interesting times: sea trials that resulted in a bent keel from storm damage, two separate attacks by German aircraft, the rescue of 628 survivors of the SS *Duchess of York* in the Bay of Biscay and escorting Arctic convoys to Murmansk, Soviet Union. John was successful in his training and

was granted his Stokehold Watchkeeping Certificate on 31 Dec 1943.

John was confirmed as an ERA 4th Class on 18 Feb 1944, and he joined HMCS *Athabaskan* the next day. It was there that he was informed by Captain Stubbs that his mother had died from a tragic fall. The only blessing was that his mother never lived to know of her son's death.

Athabaskan had recently 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 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*. *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. One hundred and twenty-eight (128) men including ERA John Roberts 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. John was 22 years old

John 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, John Clark Roberts was posthumously awarded the 1939-45 Star, Atlantic Star, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp and War medal 1939-45. He was recently granted the Arctic Star medal from the United Kingdom (Veterans Affairs Canada Ref: 3738)

John is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 12 and on the Stratford War Memorial in Stratford, Ontario.

Post-script: While stationed in England, John had a buddy nicknamed “Blackie” who had a hot date with the daughter of a Commander. John loaned his newly issued greatcoat to wear in place of Blackie’s well-worn version. At war’s end, Blackie visited John’s family home in Stratford to tell them the story and return the coat to John ‘s father.

Prepared By:

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Sources:

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- Roberts’ family documents and photos. Provided by Elizabeth Annis

