

Able Seaman Raymond Leslie Roberts V-10880



Able Seaman Ray Roberts. Credit:
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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Moose Jaw SK, 18 February 1922**
- **Enlisted: 10 December 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Delivery Boy, Grocer, North Hill Grocery**
- **Death: Died when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sunk on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Row B. Grave 18; Saskatchewan Virtual War Museum; Roberts Lake (56° 56' N 105°33'W) in Northern Saskatchewan**

Raymond Roberts, known as Ray, and his twin brother, Kenneth, were the third and fourth children born to Myrtle and Thomas Roberts on 18 February 1922 in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Brother Orville was born in 1915 and sister Grace was born in 1918. Half-brother Percy Roberts was born in 1902 and lived in eastern Canada. Ray's father Thomas was born in 1877 in New Brunswick and Myrtle was born in 1890 in Ontario. They met in Moose Jaw and were married there in 1912.

Ray's father Thomas was employed as a switchman with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Moose Jaw was a major rail divisional point and enjoyed very rapid growth between 1911 and 1921 as cereal agriculture expanded. (Moose Jaw's population in 1906 was 6,249. By 1926 it was 19,039). The family lived in two houses in sequence. They moved into the second home in 1924. It was situated in a very pleasant neighbourhood with an unobstructed view of the picturesque valley created by the confluence of the Moose Jaw River and Thunder Creek.

In 1930, Thomas, at the age of 53, was disabled and retired from the CPR although he occasionally worked for the City of Moose Jaw as a carpenter or as a watchman. Ray attended nearby Prince Arthur Public School (grades 1-8) and then Moose Jaw Technical High School leaving there after partially completing grade 10 in 1939 at the age of seventeen. He then quickly found a job delivering groceries for North Hill Grocery Ltd. On 8 July 1940 Ray and Kenneth enlisted in the King's Own Rifles of Canada (Non-Permanent-Army-Militia) as Privates. Ray remained a member until 9 December 1941. Ray wrote a letter to the Naval Secretary on 19 September 1941 expressing concern that his application dated 23 September 1940 to enroll in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve at HMCS *Queen* in Regina had apparently stalled.

In the letter he also expressed his desire to make the Navy his career. Shortly after he was invited by *Queen* to finalize his enrolment.

On 10 December 1941 Ray was sworn in at the Regina Division (HMCS *Queen*) of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary) while Kenneth remained in the Army. Brother Orville was married and worked for the CPR. All three sons contributed to their parents' living expenses and supported Grace who was a student. In a document contained in Ray's naval personnel file dated 27 January 1945 Orville was described as "overseas" without further explanation.

Upon enrollment Ray was single, 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighed 137 pounds. He had brown hair, blue eyes and a medium complexion.



Ray remained in *Queen* until 22 March 1942 taking basic training and attending to various administrative matters. Then he was drafted to HMCS *Naden* in Esquimalt, British Columbia where he took "Field Training" consisting of seamanship, drill and small arms training. Selected to be a Gunner he began his gunnery training in section leadership, Lewis and machine guns, ammunition, and fire control. On 21 June he was drafted to HMCS *Cornwallis* then located in Halifax, Nova Scotia where he took more of the same but at a higher level plus hydraulics, and high angle shooting associated with anti-aircraft weapons together

with plenty of live firing. On completion, he was drafted to HMCS *Stadacona* and placed in the manning pool until being posted to HMCS *Athabaskan* which was being built in Newcastle-on-Tyne. Upon arrival in the United Kingdom, he was sent to the Royal Navy Gunnery School in HMS *Pembroke*, Chatham for more advanced gunnery training. On 15 December he was promoted to Able Seaman. On completion of his gunnery training in January 1943 he arrived in Newcastle to join his first and only ship, HMCS *Athabaskan*.

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, 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 long 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, Able Seaman McGrath also from Saskatchewan, 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 *Egret* which had been sunk by another glide bomb. At the same time *Athabaskan's* damage control parties, working chest deep in cold 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 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 both gun fire from German shore batteries and 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 Able Seaman Roberts 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.

Ray's naval personnel file contains a document drawn up by the Directorate of Censorship on 21 December 1944. The document quotes a letter written earlier by Able Seaman Arthur Burgess of *Athabaskan* who was a prisoner of war held in Marlag Nord near Hamburg. Burgess wrote to his father in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan:

In regard to RAY, Dad, I know that he didn't get away. Although only about 10 yards separated our gun positions, the first hit wiped the crew of RAY'S gun out. We were lucky as we were on a higher level. There are two of us here out of my gun crew of eight..."

Unlike most of his lost ship mates Ray 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, in 2020 the wreckage of their ship was located in 50 fathoms of water. *Athabaskan* and those who may be entombed in her are under the protection of the French Heritage Code.

For his service, Able Seaman Raymond Leslie Roberts was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Myrtle Roberts, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Ray is buried in Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Finistere, France. Row B, Grave 18. Additionally, Lake Roberts (Lat 56°56' N Long 105° 33' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

Ray served in HMCS *Athabaskan* for the entire 451 days of *Athabaskan's* service career. His service was harsh, dangerous and, in the end, tragic.

Prepared By:

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