

Able Seaman Ian Anderson Robertson V-33909



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- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Kirkaldy Fife, Scotland, 23 March 1924**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Unicorn*, 6 April 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Office Clerk, Saskatoon Cartage Co.**
- **Death: Killed when HMCS *Athabaskan* was torpedoed and sunk on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Row B. Grave 43; Book of Remembrance-City of Saskatoon; Saskatchewan Virtual War Memorial; Robertson Islands (56° 50' N 103°38'W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory**

Ian Anderson Robertson, known as Ian, was born to Wendela and John Singer Robertson on 23 March 1924 in Kirkaldy, Fife, Scotland. Although both Wendela and John were Scottish they were married in the Free City of Danzig in 1921. John's middle name, Singers, may indicate that he had German, Jewish or Polish roots which contributed to the choice of marrying there. (Danzig became a semi-autonomous city-state in 1920 but was absorbed into the Third Reich in 1939. Persecution of Poles and Jews, whom the Nazis considered "sub-human", followed). At any rate, John and Wendela soon returned to Scotland where Ian was born. John died on 30 October 1926 leading Wendela, then 25, to emigrate to Canada shortly after and she settled in rapidly growing Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (The population of the city in 1921 was 25,739; in 1926 37,234; and by 1931 43,291). There she quickly found work as a bookkeeper and settled into the pleasant neighbourhood of City Park. In 1929 Wendela married Walter Dibb, a bricklayer. Eventually they had a son, Alfred, a half brother to Ian.

Ian attended Wilson Public School (grades 1-8) and City Park Collegiate (grade 9) before leaving school at the age of 17 in 1941. Ian quickly found work as an accounts receivable clerk with Saskatoon Cartage Co., a large trucking firm based in Saskatoon – a job he held until enrolling in the Navy.

On 5 April 1942 Ian was sworn in at the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). Upon enrollment Ian was single, 5 feet 9 ¾ inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. He had brown hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion.

Ian remained in *Unicorn* until 15 June 1942 taking basic training and attending to various administrative matters. He was promoted to Acting Able Seaman as well. 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 14 November he was drafted to HMCS *Stadacona* 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 12 October 1942 he was rated as an Acting Leading Gunner. One month later he was drafted to HMCS *Niobe* in Scotland. Under the administrative authority of *Niobe* Ian underwent advanced gunnery training at the Royal Navy Gunnery School in HMS *Pembroke*, Chatham. On completion of his gunnery training in January 1943 he arrived in Newcastle on Tyne and joined HMCS *Athabaskan*.



HMCS *Unicorn* naval personnel undergoing inspection by Governor General of Canada, 1942.
Photo: Canadian Military Heritage Museum (Saskatoon) Saskatoon, Saskatchewan



Naval gunners loading 4-inch shells.
Photo: Library and Archives Canada Photo, MIKAN No. 3598672

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. While in Newcastle Ray was convicted of being absent over leave and reduced to the rank of Able Seaman on 29 May 1943. Back in service *Athabaskan* next 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 ships called at Scapa Flow where *Athabaskan* collided with the boom defence vessel on 18 June necessitating a month-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 *Unicorn*, 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 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 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 Robertson 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.



Unlike most of his lost ship mates Ian 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 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, Able Seaman Ian Anderson Robertson was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Wendela Dibb, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

Ian is buried in Plouescat Communal Cemetery, Finistere, France. Row B, Grave 42. Additionally, Robertson Islands (Lat 56°50' N Long 105° 38' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

Ian served in HMCS *Athabaskan* for the entire 451 days of *Athabaskan's* service career. His service was fraught with the dangers of the sea and the violence of the enemy.

Prepared By:

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