

Able Seaman Samuel Whitney Sommerfeld V-32952



- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Saskatoon SK, 1 December 1923**
- **Enlisted: HMCS Unicorn, 26 March 1942**
- **Civilian Occupation: Farmer, Herbert Sommerfeld**
- **Death: Died when HMCS Athabaskan sank on 29 April 1944**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 11, City of Saskatoon Book of Remembrance; Sommerfeld Lake (56° 21' N 105°45'W) in Northern Saskatchewan**

Samuel, known as Sam, was the second of four sons born to Mary Spicer Sommerfeld and Herbert Herman Sommerfeld on 1 December 1923 in Saskatoon. Brother Hector was born in 1912; Hartley in 1929; and Burnell in 1934. Grandparents Ludwig and Louise Sommerfeld emigrated to Canada from Wisconsin in 1901 and established a farm on the edge of the village of Nutana which would become part of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Ludwig served on the City Council from 1911 to 1913 and established a real estate business, a lumber yard, and a construction company as well. In 1908 Ludwig transferred the farm to Sam's father, Herbert. Herbert met and married Mary (born in Nova Scotia) in Saskatoon. By the time Sam enrolled in the Navy, the farm was primarily operated by his older brother Hector who lived on the farm while the rest of the family lived a short distance away in the city and contributed to the farm's operation as well as the other family businesses.

Sam attended Victoria Public School (to Grade 8) and Saskatoon Technical Collegiate Institute (Grades 9 and 10). He left school for a time before returning to complete Grade 9 and partially complete Grade 10 before he finally left at the age of 18. The farm was eventually incorporated into Saskatoon and subdivided. Sommerfeld Avenue is named after Grandfather Ludwig and Louise Avenue after Grandmother Louise.

On 27 March 1942 Sam enrolled in the Saskatoon Division (HMCS *Unicorn*) of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman (Temporary). He was single, 5 feet 7 ½ inches tall and weighed 137 pounds. He had black hair, brown eyes and a fair complexion. After a few weeks he was drafted to HMCS *Naden* where he spent three months training as a Gunner Director Layer (DL). In July and August 1942, he completed New Entry training in HMCS *Cornwallis* before two more months of gunnery training in HMCS *Stadacona*. On completion he was designated as a member of the ship's company of HMCS *Athabaskan*, then being built in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and he travelled to the United Kingdom. There, under the authority of HMCS *Niobe*, he received further training specific to *Athabaskan* described as "Tribal II" from 28

October to 26 December 1942. He was promoted to Acting Able Seaman on 31 December and employed in the dockyard in Sheerness Kent, before joining HMCS *Athabaskan* for her commissioning in Newcastle on 3 February 1943.

Athabaskan had a relatively short service of about 14 months. During that period, she experienced several major mishaps and battle damage which required her being taken out of service for repairs for a total of about five months thus reducing her actual service life to about nine months.

After the commissioning ceremony, *Athabaskan* was assigned to the British Home Fleet and her crew underwent work-ups. Sam was promoted to Able Seaman on 23 March. On 29 March *Athabaskan* sailed to patrol the Iceland-Faeroes Island Gap. There they had their first encounter with the dangers of the sea. 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 and *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 conduct anti-submarine patrols in the Bay of Biscay.



Glide bomb damage to *Athabaskan*.
Photo: From the collection of Joseph W. L'Esperance, LS,
RCNVR (forposteritysake.ca)

On 27 August 1943 *Athabaskan* experienced the violence of the enemy when she was 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 died the next day and two officers on the bridge suffered severe wounds. Despite this her crew managed to rescue 35 survivors from HMS *Egert* which had been sunk by another glide bomb. At the same time, *Athabaskan's* crew 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 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 she again encountered the violence of the enemy. 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 AB Sommerfeld 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.



Sam and most of the others killed have no known graves. However, the wreckage of their ship was located in 2002 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 Samuel Whitney Sommerfeld was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and the War Medal. His mother, Mary Sommerfeld, was awarded the Memorial Cross.

He is commemorated on the Halifax Memorial, Panel 11. Additionally, Sommerfeld Lake (Lat 56°21' N Long 105° 27' W) in Northern Saskatchewan is named in his memory.

Sam served in HMCS *Athabaskan* for the entire 451 days of *Athabaskan's* service career. During that period, as recited in the Naval Prayer, he faced the "dangers of the sea and the violence of the enemy" in full measure.

Prepared By:

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1983-88 & Citizen Sailor Virtual Cenotaph Research Team



Sources:

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