Déja vu: Looking Back at the Story of the Wartime Wreck of HMCS *Athabaskan*

By Brian McCullough

On the 80th anniversary of the loss of a Canadian Tribal-class destroyer to enemy action in the English Channel on April 29, 1944, the CNTHA invites readers to revisit a story that ran in the Summer 2006 edition of the *Maritime Engineering Journal* (MEJ 60): "Exploring the Wartime Wreck of HMCS *Athabaskan* — A Naval Architect's Adventure in Underwater Archaeology."

https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/mdn-dnd/D12-21-60-eng.pdf

https://www.cntha.ca/static/documents/mej/mej-60.pdf

Written by **LCdr Jocelyn Turgeon**, a serving naval officer from 1986 to 2008, and a continuing member of the RCN's Naval Technical support community with DND until 2022, the story documents two dive expeditions that took place in 2003 and 2005 to examine the Second World War wreckage of HMCS *Athabaskan* (G07). Barely a year after being commissioned into service at Newcastle-on-Tyne, UK, the ship was attacked off the coast of Brittany by a German Elbing-class torpedo boat, and sent to the bottom in 90 metres of water.

The search for the missing stern section to determine what caused the mysterious second explosion that killed the ship known as the "Unlucky Lady" was unsuccessful, but the enterprise achieved its other goals of relocating, imaging, and mapping the wreckage, and placing a commemorative plaque at the site to honour the 128 officers and men who were lost. Of the survivors, 44 were rescued by sister ship HMCS *Haida* (G63), and 83 were taken prisoner.

The story describes a poignant moment as expedition diver Mark Ward and his father Peter—the grandson and son of *Athabaskan* crewmember Lt. Leslie Ward who was lost with the ship—were "united" for the first time at the wreck site:
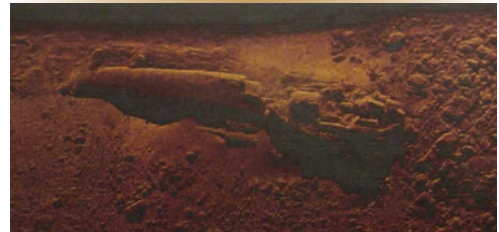

Side-scan sonar image of the *Athabaskan* wreck in 2004.

Image courtesy: French naval hydrographic service GESMA

As Mark Ward...placed the memorial plaque onto *Athabaskan*'s remains on the sea bottom, his own father Peter sat in a boat nearly 90 metres overhead. It was the closest that the three Wards—father Peter, and the son and grandfather who had never known one another—would ever come to being together.

In 2014, through the initiative of Merchant Navy veteran, **Captain Paul Bender**, the wreck was declared a maritime cultural asset by the French government, and formally placed under the protection of the Republic of France. The Government of Canada will be consulted before any archaeological projects are ever given authorization to work at the site.

People looking for a closer connection to the *Athabaskan* story on this side of the Atlantic can visit the HMCS *Haida* National Historic Site in Hamilton, ON (haida.info@pc.gc.ca). The Parks Canada museum ship is the only surviving Tribal-class destroyer in existence.

For more information about HMCS *Athabaskan* (G07), go to: http://www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS_ATHABASKAN_G07.htm

See also, "Looking Back: Memories of an *Athabaskan* Bride," by Iolanda (Vi) Connolly (MEJ 73):

https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2014/mdn-dnd/D12-21-73-eng.pdf

https://www.cntha.ca/static/documents/mej/mej-73.pdf

Athabaskan image courtesy DND Directorate of History and Heritage