

# Athabasca Insurance & Travel Agency

(A DIVISION OF R. E. ARMSTRONG HOLDINGS LTD.)

BOX 960  
ATHABASCA, ALBERTA  
T0G 0B0

October 21, 1983.

Mrs. Betty Pickett,  
Librarian,  
Athabasca Public Library,  
Athabasca, Alberta.

Dear Mrs. Pickett:

During World War II, I had the privilege of serving for 2 years in the Canadian Tribal Class Destroyer, H.M.C.S. Haida, (January 1944 - 1946.) Most of our time was spent on patrols in the English Channel, Bay of Biscay, North Sea, North Atlantic and the Arctic. We were part of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla of the British Navy stationed at Plymouth, England, along with our sister ships H.M.C.S. Iroquois, Athabaskan and Huron, the British destroyers H.M.S. Tartar, Ashanti and Eskimo, and the Polish destroyers Blyskawica and Piorin.

On April 26, 1944, while on patrol in the English Channel along the French Coast, we engaged four German destroyers and sank ~~one~~ of them. H.M.C.S. Athabaskan and Haida were in that action. Three days later, in the early morning of April 29th, 1944, the Haida and Athabaskan were on patrol in the western regions of the Channel near the island of Ushant, along the northwest tip of France, when we encountered two German Elbing class destroyers which were also on patrol. We engaged them and drove one of them ashore in flames on the French coast. During the course of this action, H.M.C.S. Athabaskan was lost, having been hit by gunfire and a torpedo. There was a considerable loss of life, although some were picked up by the Haida and her motorboat, while others were taken prisoners of war.

I am pleased to present to you the enclosed book "Unlucky Lady", depicting the life and death of H.M.C.S. Athabaskan, since I was serving in the Haida when the Athabaskan was sunk. I am also enclosing a poem I wrote about this action, entitled "Loss and Revenge".

We must realize that the enemy too lost many fine young men and women. Think what they might have done to improve world conditions, had they lived. To those who served in the Navy or the Merchant Marine this book will bring back many memories. It is my hope and prayer that all who read this book will realize how terrible war is, and that no war is ever won. It is the duty of everyone to strive for permanent peace.

Yours very truly,

  
Robert E. Armstrong.

Encl.

LOSS AND REVENGE


ATHABASCA MUNICIPAL LIBRARY

1. 'Twas early eve of April twenty-eight  
When the destroyers passed through the  
harbour gates,  
Two Canadian destroyers of the Tribal Class  
Were given the signal and allowed to pass.
2. The air was warm the stars were bright  
As we steamed along through the silent night,  
Our course now took us south-west by west  
It would bring us close to the port of Brest.
3. Our Radar screen showed three little "pips"  
We knew for certain they were German ships,  
Whether a Narvik, Elbing or an M.T.B.,  
They were booked for the Haida and the Atha-B.
4. We increased our speed and began the chase  
And closed the range to win the race.  
Our guns opened fire as we sped  
While before us the enemy made smoke and fled.
5. From out of Brest they had emerged  
And were engaged by us off Ile de Vierge,  
Then out of the darkness came an M.T.B.  
And scored a hit on the Atha-B.
6. Her skipper signalled "We're sinking fast,  
But we'll do all we can to make her last,  
Keep after them Haida, do not stay,  
We cannot let them get away."
7. We continued on at thirty knots  
Giving chase to those two black dots.  
Haida took revenge on the fleeing Huns  
And scored several hits with her forward guns.
8. The first Jerry ship began to turn  
And, thinking we were right astern,  
Opened fire like some defending fort  
But instead it was her own consort.
9. Left alone to a dreadful plight,  
Her consort gone through the still, black  
night,  
Through fire and smoke and crazed with fear  
They saw the Haida drawing near.
10. She was doomed this Nazi ship  
As flames o'er her spread with every hit.  
Then out of control, to fight no more,  
She headed for the rock-bound shore.
11. Weird shadows danced on the rocky coast  
As flames rose and fell from our fated host  
But we left her there and back we steamed  
Where lights from the new life-jackets gleamed.
12. They clung to rafts and carley floats  
Or swam around in search of boats,  
While the thick brown oil spread o'er the Sea  
Like the outer bark of a cedar tree.
13. All spare hands then lined the rails  
With ladders, ropes, and encouraging hails  
Commander DeWolf on the bridge now cried  
"Come on lads, swim for the ship's side."

14. The Whaler was dropped, the port motor boat too  
With definite orders of "negative crew"  
But a stoker and two seamen, one with a leading  
rate  
Jumped into the launch, not fearing their fate.
15. Danger was imminent, dawn drawing near,  
When Stubbs cried out from a raft "Get away  
Harry, get clear".  
We reluctantly left, 'twas a sorrowful sight  
But forty-six survived the perils of that  
night.
16. All hope now lost, with the Haida gone  
And left to meet a cold, unfriendly dawn,  
Brave lads all these but they displayed  
All that, which our Canadian youth is made.
17. As we gathered up speed to quickly depart  
The crew in the boat got the engine to start.  
They rounded up any too far from a float  
And hauled their oil-covered bodies inside  
the boat.
18. Two of the eight they picked up had been swept  
from a net  
As they helped the oil-soaked survivors all  
dripping and wet.  
As the ship increased speed they had been caught  
by a swell  
One an "O.A." the other a "Tel."
19. They found no food in the boat nor one drop  
of neatens  
But they saw rounding a point three German  
minesweepers.  
Two went to pick up survivors, the third went for  
the boat  
But soon gave up the chase as they didn't give  
them much hope.
20. Two hours past noonday and all going fine  
When two planes came into view, each an Me 109.  
Just skimming the water close to their right,  
They quickly passed by and disappeared out of  
sight.
21. As the miles passed by and they neared English  
shores  
Our own Allied aircraft appeared by the score,  
There were fighters, and bombers and flying boats  
too  
Who had spotted the launch with the survivors and  
crew.
22. The planes sent a message to their bases on land  
To send out a crash boat to give them a hand  
Soon came the crash boats which took them away  
To the care of doctors and nurses in an Army Sick  
Bay
23. In the meantime the Haida had returned to her port  
Her crew all worn out from this new type of sport  
Our spirits were low at thoughts of friends we  
might never again meet  
But our crew had done well and revenge had been  
sweet.

24. High on the yard-arm the battle flag waved  
In honour of those gallant lives lost and the  
forty-six saved  
The memory will linger of those we once met  
As the years pass on by and many suns rise and  
set

25. Many a time we lifted our head  
With a fervent prayer on our lips for the  
living and dead  
We spoke prayers of thanks to our Lord in the  
sky  
Who had kept us afloat and the white ensign  
flying high.

  
--R. E. Armstrong

Petty Officer  
Royal Canadian Navy