

HMCS Athabaskan Rescues the crew of SS Amphialos - The following appear in the Crowsnest Magazine Vol 16 No.3-4, March-April 1964.

The ship's company of HMCS Athabaskan (DDE 219) was mustered in the forward seamen's messdeck for divine service on Sunday, March 1, 1964. The Commanding Officer read an appropriate lesson, the officers and men solemnly said the naval prayer. As the divine service ended, the officer of the watch, Lt.-Cdr. John Huxtable, reported that a vessel on the port bow five miles distant was stopped and its appearance seemed unusual.

The Athabaskan's commanding officer, Cdr. Peter R. Hinton, (I was embarked as commander of the task unit) was proceeding to rendezvous with HMCS Crescent (Cdr. Vincent Murphy) and HM submarine Auriga (Lt.-Cdr. K. A. Bromback) for anti-submarine exercises. Course was immediately altered to close this vessel and speed was increased. As the Athabaskan neared the scene an Argus aircraft dropped a smoke bomb near a lifeboat, drawing attention to its presence. Throughout the entire operation, the support of the RCAF aircraft was of considerable importance. All arrangements were smoothly and quietly made to effect rescue if it soon became apparent, that such would be necessary. Scramble nets were rigged over the side, the sea boat was turned out and the sick bay readied for any emergency.

On closing, what was observed was the stern section of the Liberian registered SS Amphialos. Two lifeboats were sighted with personnel on board. All available lookouts scanned the water for lone survivors. Although it was a bright, brisk day, the wind gusted to 35 knots and the height of swell was approximately 12 feet. The Athabaskan closed the wreck and it was seen that a good number of the crew were still on board. There were no life rafts or lifeboats left and the deck was inclined at an angle of over 30 degrees, the forward upper works being well under water. The seas broke over the stricken vessel and the stern hung helplessly with propeller and rudder high in the air.

The Athabaskan closed and recovered one boat load of eight survivors and dispatched her own sea boat to stand by the stern of the stricken vessel. Two of the survivors from this lifeboat were unable to cope with the scramble net as the lifeboat reared and plunged in the heavy swell. Men from the Athabaskan went over the side into the lifeboat to assist and the two injured men were removed by stretcher. Unfortunately one of these men, aged 69 and apparently suffering from a weak heart, although alive on recovery, died about one hour later. Meanwhile, the Commander of the Task Unit ordered HMCS Crescent to surface HM Submarine Auriga and proceed with all dispatch to the scene as USS Searcher closed the area. At the height of the operation, two Argus aircraft and a USCG aircraft orbited the area searching for possible lone survivors. USS Searcher, at the request of the commander of the task unit, launched a motor whaleboat. Due to the weather, the engine failed and her whaleboat was not able to close the wreck.

The Searcher remained nearby until final recovery was made to provide whatever aid may have been required. In the heavy sea, the Athabaskan's whaler broker her tiller and the crew resorted to steering by an oar over the stern. Because of the state of the sea and swell, rescue attempts by the whaler became futile. The whaler did, however, spot a survivor who had jumped from the ship in an endeavour to swim to the whaler and, with the aid of signals between boat and ship, the Athabaskan quickly maneuvered toward this man. AB Donald Patterson, one of the divers

who had dressed for duty, was ordered to go to the assistance of the survivor. Within minutes, the survivor and diver were both safely on board. The second lifeboat was closed and eight more survivors were quickly embarked. The survivors said that they did not think the ship, with a number of men still on board, would last another hour. (At 1800 on Feb. 29, with no warning whatsoever, the forward section of their ship had broken away and attempts to transmit a distress signal became impossible.) The Athabaskan stood to windward of the wreck and endeavoured to swim a 20-man life raft to the stern section of the Amphialos, edging perilously near to the submerged section of the vessel.

However, the divers, due to the extensive oil on the surface, were soon exhausted and had to be recovered. There was nothing left but to get near enough to pass a line to her stern section. The ship was maneuvered to within 100 feet and after several attempts eventually succeeded in passing a Coston gun line to the wreck. To this a messenger, then a heavier line and eventually a 20-man life raft were secured and the raft was pulled under the stern. Eighteen men, including the ship's captain, lowered themselves one by one into the life raft from the stern 60 feet above. Due to the drift of the wreck, they were unable to get clear of the ship and the Athabaskan a second time, this time edging even closer, fired a well-aimed Coston gun line over the raft and towed the last survivors clear of the wreck. The final recovery was conducted without any difficulty and the 20-man life raft was taken on board.

HMCS Crescent appeared, was assigned commander of the scene and ordered to stand by. The Athabaskan was ordered to proceed to Halifax with all dispatch. Cdr. Hinton praised AB Donald Patterson and Ldg. Sea. Frank Edgar, both of whom fought their way through the oil-covered sea in attempts to manhandle the two lifeboats closer to the hulk. Both detached their lifelines so they could maneuver the rafts in the 15-foot swells. Most of the survivors were too weak to climb scramble nets hung over the Athabaskan's side. Sailors from the destroyer escort climbed down and helped them on board. Cdr. Hinton also praised the Athabaskan's boatswain's mate, PO Sidney McNevin, who supervised and participated in so much of the seamanship that was displayed during the operation. Throughout this operation I was greatly impressed by the high standard of seamanship displayed by the commanding officer, officers and men of the Athabaskan and by the cheerfulness and bravery displayed by the officers and men of the SS Amphialos.

Following the rescue operation, messages of congratulation poured in to the Athabaskan and Crescent. The Athabaskan, incidentally, had shared in the search for survivors of a Flying Tiger airliner, downed in the North Atlantic, in September 1962. The Athabaskan received praise from many sources, including the owners of the SS Amphialos, the Commander Eastern Sea Frontier, Naval Headquarters and the Minister of National Defence. Mr. Hellyer's message was as follows: "I note with approval the excellent display of seamanship on the part of HMCS Athabaskan in rescuing the crew of SS Amphialos. Congratulations to all who took part in the rescue on the resolute and heroic manner in which it was so swiftly done." Mr. Hellyer also sent a message of congratulations to the crew of the RCAF Argus that first sighted and reported the stricken ship. A letter received by Rear-Admiral Jeffrey V. Brock, Flag Officer Atlantic Coast, from His Honour Henry P. MacKeen, Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Nova Scotia, reads: "Through you I would like to congratulate Cdr. Hinton and the ship's company of HMCS Athabaskan on their outstanding achievement in rescuing the crew of the tanker Amphialos. I

had an opportunity of discussing the episode with the master and mate of Amphialos yesterday and I can tell you they were loud in their praise of the seamanship, courage and kindness of those in the Athabaskan. As far as I could learn every incident during the rescue reflects the highest credit to the training, efficiency and personnel of the Royal Canadian Navy."

Other messages included the following: "Commander 1st Coast Guard District extremely pleased and most appreciative of your outstanding seamanship in rescuing the crew of the tanker Amphialos. Your excellent performance has exemplified the finest traditions of the sea." - Rear-Admiral C. L. Harding USCG. To Athabaskan and Crescent: "Your fine example of seamanship in rescuing crew of SS Amphialos reflects great credit on your ship. Congratulations to all officers and men who took part in the rescue on an excellent job well done." - Chief of the Naval Staff Ottawa. "The officers and men of the Pacific Command join me in congratulations for your fine rescue work." - Flag Officer Pacific Coast. "On behalf owners and master steam tanker Amphialos, may we express our gratitude to the officers and men of the Royal Canadian Navy whose heroism and gallantry saved the lives of 34 crew members of our vessel. The prompt and efficient rescue was performed under most difficult conditions in a manner which reflects credit on your entire service. Please convey our most sincere thanks and admiration to all concerned"- United Operations Shipping Agencies, Corp., 660 Madison Ave., New York City". "My heartiest 'congratulations' and 'well done' to HMCS Athabaskan for outstanding performance in rescue of crew of SS Amphialos' Vice-Admiral H. T. Deutermann, USNS COMEAST- SEAFRON. (end of article from the Crowsnest)

On 01 Mar 1964 during the rescue of 35 crew members of "SS AMPHIALOS" from their sinking ship, AB Donald Victor Patterson, RCN, in his capacity as ship's diver, dived overboard to the aid of a survivor in the water about 70 ft from the ship, & by his efforts, was largely responsible for bringing the man safety aboard. The survivor had been floating in his life-jacket in heavy & oil-infested seas & by the time Patterson reached him was thoroughly exhausted, covered with oil, & helpless. The sea at the time was running 10 to 14 ft. A short time later, Patterson, despite the difficult sea conditions & oil, was again in the water for about 25 minutes attempting to guide a life-raft down to the wreck. PO 2 Eric Robert Jensen RCN attempted to lay the ship's whaler to within a few feet of the plunging stern section of the wreck. His tiller broke but he still was able to maneuver clear of the ship. He later spotted a man in the water & was able to direct Athabaskan to his rescue. LS William Sterling Bunch, RCN, was the first man over the side of Athabaskan to help men from the stricken ship up the scramble nets. He directed the hoistman on deck to pull up the stretchers with the injured & exhausted seamen, generally taking charge of that part of the operation. (Source: RCN News Magazine)