Kriegsgefangenenlager: A POW’s Account of the Loss of Athabaskan in 1944

Pat Jessup

Kriegsgefangenenlager, roughly translated, is German for ‘English prisoner of war.’ And this is the story of Able Seaman Harry Liznick and fellow shipmates who served in HMCS Athabaskan, lost to enemy action in 1944. This is also the story of the short life of Athabaskan, a powerful British-built Tribal-class destroyer which, along with sister ships Haida, Huron and Iroquois, played a pivotal role in the English Channel, engaging and wearing down enemy naval forces, in the days leading up to the D-Day invasion.

Liznick, a thoughtful and observant man, articulated his wartime experience in a series of articles titled “Kriegsgefangenenlager,” published in his hometown newspaper, The Iroquois Falls Enterprise. This article is a shorter version of a paper recounting the highlights of the stories of both Liznick and Athabaskan, supported by the commentary of other shipmates as well as official scholarship.

First generation Ukrainian-Canadian Harry Liznick was 15 when Hitler’s army invaded Poland. His European parents had witnessed German aggression first hand in 1914 while working in Germany before immigrating to Canada. They listened to the 1939 news with trepidation. Harry couldn’t wait to sign up and bided his time farming, working in logging camps and mining in nearby Timmins until of age. As he wrote, “[b]y March 1942, the war was getting pretty bad as Hitler had taken quite a few countries and had bombed the hell out of England, and was well into Russia and thoughts were going on in my young mind that we would all be enslaved and I had better join up and help fight that Bastard.”

A handsome, affable and a strapping young man, who could unload two box cars of logs in six hours during an eight hour shift, Liznick followed three older brothers to war. He liked the look of his brother Bill’s blue uniform so he put an application into the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and was accepted. Along with Jimmy Campbell from his hometown of Iroquois Falls, Ontario, Liznick soon found himself “marching up and down the streets in Ottawa” in his bell bottom trousers, jumper, singlet and traditional flat hat – the object of admiring glances from “all the girls.”

Following basic naval training at HMCS Cornwallis, Harry was “drafted” to sentry duty at the Dartmouth refinery and French Cable Wharf in Halifax. Bored, he wrote: “I hated it. What a way to spend the war.” His complaints were short lived as he was soon posted to HMCS Athabaskan then under repair in England following a German glider bomb attack on a Canadian-British support group near Gibraltar.

By November 1943 Athabaskan, was “ready to sail and fight,” and she deployed to the Mediterranean to escort the British battlecruiser HMS Renown carrying Prime Minister Winston Churchill back from the Cairo Conference. Upon her return to England, Athabaskan sailed immediately to escort convoy JW 5A out of Scotland to Murmansk in the Soviet Union on 12 December. The convoy’s track would have brought it dangerously close to occupied Norway and German-infested waters, and especially close to the German battlecruiser Scharnhorst. Underway, Athabaskan intercepted a radio transmission with a German U-boat that was shadowing the convoy in the vicinity of Bear Island south of Spitsbergen. Giving chase, Athabaskan “dropped a pattern of depth charges” but abandoned the search to return and protect the convoy “when our Asdic lost contact.” Athabaskan’s captain, Lieutenant-Commander John Stubbs said that “the next time we would ram her at all cost.”

The war was becoming quite interesting for Able Seaman Liznick.

Caught in a major blizzard outbound from Murmansk Athabaskan was part of the ‘home fleet’ flotilla that participated in action that would change the course of
the war in the Arctic. Passing in the storm and heading north to Murmansk were 14 destroyers including sister ships *Haida*, *Huron* and *Iroquois* escorting a convoy of 19 heavily laden merchant ships. Providing close cover were the British cruisers *Belfast*, *Sheffield*, *Norfolk* and the battleship HMS *Duke of York*. On Christmas Day, the German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* and escort of five destroyers departed Altenfjord, Norway, to attack the convoy. As Liznick recalled, “[w]e were oblivious to what was going on in the land of the midnight sun and terrific stormy weather with ice forming two to six inches thick on the shrouds, guys and deck and making our ship top heavy. We plodded on ... just another hazardous working day for us... At 06:15 hrs, Dec. 26th, alarm bells clanged” and *Athabaskan* went to Action Stations. As he said, “[t]he Scharnhorst [was] attacking the convoy! It was bad news because we knew we were no match for a Battlecruiser.

Our 4.7 inch guns could fire nine miles while their 11 inch guns could fire 20 miles.”

In the raging storm, Commander Harry DeWolf, *Haida*’s captain, had the onerous task of marshalling the escorts to ward off *Scharnhorst* as she approached the merchant ships at the rear of the convoy. In response, the guns of the Home Fleet pounded *Scharnhorst* and after a fierce eight-hour battle the German ship was sunk by HMS *Duke of York*.

With *Scharnhorst* gone, and the threat to the Arctic convoys now much reduced, *Athabaskan*, *Haida*, *Huron* and *Iroquois* with British Tribal HMS *Ashanti* and cruiser HMS *Black Prince*, joined the 10th Destroyer Squadron known as “the Fighting Tenth,” operating out of Plymouth, England. The strike force conducted night sorties in the English Channel, grinding away at enemy shipping and their naval escorts prior to the invasion of Europe.

April 1944 was a busy month for *Athabaskan*. In addition to her sorties she was also participating in pre-invasion exercises. During the night of 24 April, participating in Operation Tiger, *Athabaskan* provided close escort for “hundreds of ships and thousands of our troops conducting landing drills ... at Slapton Sands, near Cornwall.... The practice was quite successful ... except two ‘E’ boats sneaked in among our ships undetected and killed over 800 American troops with torpedoes fired into landing craft.”

The next evening the *Black Prince*, *Ashanti*, *Huron*, *Haida* and *Athabaskan* set out in the direction of St. Malo hoping to engage three T-22 class *Elbing* destroyers that had been spotted during an earlier reconnaissance flight over the French port. As luck would have it, the German ships were detected by British land-based radar, underway and making a dash at speed for Brest. The *Tribals* intercepted the ships and during the battle sank T-29 and shelled both T-24 and T-27 before they could retreat to safe haven. In the heat of battle, *Huron* and *Ashanti* collided putting them out of action until repairs could be made.

The sinking of T-29 by Canadian naval forces was considered a significant feat and brought a great sense of accomplishment to the ships’ companies and the Commander-in-Chief Plymouth. The action won both Stubbs and DeWolf the Distinguished Service Order.

Three nights later, *Haida* and *Athabaskan* went out alone to cover mine-laying operations near the tip of the Brittany peninsula. At 0238 *Athabaskan*’s radar picked up “two small objects traveling at high speed” near the Isle of Ushant. At the same time, Plymouth radioed “to intercept...
at full speed.” *Haida* fired starshell, illuminating T-24 and T-27, 7,300 yards away. The two *Elbings*, sheltering in Morlaix for repairs, were making a run for their home base of Brest under the cover of darkness. Despite taking evasive action, turning 30 degrees to present a reduced target, a German torpedo found *Athabaskan*, blowing off her stern and killing her after gun crews. With her propulsion destroyed, *Athabaskan* was dead in the water.

Stubbs reported, “I’m hit and losing power,” and ordered the crew to stand by to abandon ship. *Athabaskan*, on fire, was taking on more water than her pumps could manage. Before continuing the chase *Haida* laid a smokescreen to protect *Athabaskan* from further attacks.

Ten minutes later a massive explosion amidships ripped through the ship and slammed AB Liznick from his position on the starboard forward Oerlikon anti-aircraft gun mounting into the bulkhead. Many of the crew, including the captain, were catapulted over the side. Those remaining took to the cold Channel waters. Liznick remembers the scene, “I could see fire for what seemed a hundred feet above me. I lay there looking up and saw pipes, irons, huge chunks of steel, away up in the air.... I thought to myself that all this steel would kill me when it came down.” His face burned, and fearing for his life, Liznick jumped over the side.

After chasing T-27 onto the rocks and setting her ablaze with gunfire, *Haida* returned to recover *Athabaskan* survivors. Launching her boats, Carley floats and scramble-nets, *Haida*’s crew managed to save 42 “dazed and exhausted” oil-soaked men. Too far away to reach safety, Harry Liznick joined the chorus of men in the water hollering for help. It was to no avail and after lying stopped for 18 minutes, *Haida* had to abandon the rescue. Stubbs yelled from the water: “Get away Haida! Get clear.” According to an account by Joseph Schull in *Far Distant Ships*, “[h]ands clutching at her scramble-nets lost their grip. Two of her own crew who had gone down the net were washed off by the backrush and remained in the water with the survivors they had not been able to reach.” Dawn was approaching and *Haida*, close to the enemy coast, was in great peril from aerial attack and from nearby shore batteries. Miraculously *Haida*’s motor cutter, after picking up six survivors sputtered across the English Channel, arriving in Penzance, Cornwall, 30 hours later.

Last seen clinging to a Carley float was Lieutenant-Commander Stubbs, trying to buoy his crew’s spirits by leading them in a sing-a-long and encouraging them to move their arms and legs to keep their circulation going.

Covered in thick black bunker oil, the survivors fumbled in the water trying to attach themselves to anything that floated. “The oil seemed at least two inches thick. It covered everything and we had a hard time to hang on to anything. We swallowed a lot of water along with bunker oil and our mouths were thick with grease,” Harry Liznick recalled.
We gagged and coughed continually... For those of us that were left behind our ordeal was just beginning... I could hear many of the seamen yelling, moaning and crying for help. As time went on... things became quieter as the survivors dozed off or were succumbing to exposure... The cold water was sapping our strength and made us extremely drowsy... I knew that if I let myself sleep, I would die.

At dawn German ships, including T-24 and several minesweepers, set out to rescue survivors. Eighty-six were recovered with T-24 picking up 47. Liznick recalled being well-treated by the German sailors. While still at sea, the survivors were given a shower and "slightly warm gruel" to eat. "It was tasteless and... looked like the paste we used in primer school." Stripped of their oily clothing, the Athabaskans were issued French navy uniforms that had been confiscated when the Germans took France in 1939. The prisoners were herded below decks and confined in the hold. On the way to Brest, "there was a very loud explosion and we all looked startled and helpless as the hatch above us was sealed tight. We could hear gunfire above decks and did not know what it was. We heard later that we were attacked by our planes."5

Landing in Brest to a gathering crowd of French onlookers and German officials, the Athabaskans were taken to a makeshift hospital that had once been a convent. In the same hospital were the wounded from T-29. "They stared at us and we stared back." Within days, the survivors who had recovered from their ordeal were crammed onto trains for the four-day journey to Marlag und Milag Nord, a prisoner of war (POW) camp for naval (Marlag) and merchant (Milag) seamen, outside of Bremen, Germany.6

When news of Athabaskan’s loss reached Canada the fate of her crew was still unclear. Harry Liznick’s mother fell to the floor when she learned of the sinking. Iris Johnson, the young wife of Chief Petty Officer (CPO) Ira Johnson,
dreamt for months of her husband appearing at the foot of their bed in Saint John, New Brunswick. He would tell her not to worry, “I’m all right.” CPO Johnson survived. While the 42 onboard *Haida* and the six in her launch were accounted for, it would take months to reconcile the whereabouts of the 213 still missing. It was known, however, that in the following days, scores of dead Athabaskans washed ashore on the coast of Brittany near Plouescat. By 7 July 1944, the International Red Cross was able to confirm to the Royal Canadian Navy that 29 Athabaskan officers and ratings had been taken as prisoners of war. Three months after becoming a Kriegsgefangenenlager, Harry Liznick’s family received news in a postcard saying that he was alive.

Upon reaching camp, the POWs spent the next six weeks in solitary confinement, interrogated regularly by the Gestapo. Liznick passed his time counting nails and spaces between boards, pacing back and forth in his cell, three-and-a-half steps each way, and weaving strings used for stuffing his mattress. Talking was forbidden and whistling resulted in being pistol-whipped with a Luger. “It’s easy to be tough with a guy when you have a gun in your hands,” he recalled.

Food was sparse and consisted of two slices of schwartzbrot (black bread), a pat of margarine and a cup of ersatz tea. Later the bread was scaled back to one slice per day, with the prisoners expected to save half the slice for supper. Liznick was especially challenged by the new ration and said “[w]hat a laugh it is today. How could a starving man keep anything that was edible for any length of time.”

Once out of solitary confinement the prisoners were interned 16 to a room in a 16-room unheated, un-insulated barrack. Apart from mustering for rollcall or ‘Appell’ three times a day, life in the camp was relatively relaxed but boredom took its toll. As in the modern military, the arrival of mail was much anticipated. Cigarettes were a particularly hot commodity and were used in bartering. Inmates kept up with the progress of the war by an electrically operated radio acquired from the German guards by trading cigarettes. The cost – one radio, 5,000 cigarettes! Red Cross food parcels, containing hard tack soda biscuits, canned Klik, corned beef, cheese, chocolate bars, tea and coffee, raisins and prunes were especially welcome. The POWs would heat their food using the recycled Klik containers over fires of scrap wood. Once a month the prisoners “got
a block of dehydrated sauerkraut” about 2½ inches square. As Liznick described it, it was “hard as a rock! If you put this in a pail of water, it swelled up and we’d have a whole pail of sauerkraut.”

After 11 months of captivity, the mood in the camp changed as radio broadcasts indicated that the Allies were approaching. Hearing artillery fire in the distance and the occasional stray bullet in the camp caused “quite a few prisoners to dig trenches as a safety precaution.” On 25 April 1945, on the anniversary of the sinking of T-29, the POWs awoke to find the British Second Army had liberated the camp, and that the ‘Kommandant’ had surrendered. The guards had scattered to the winds. The Canadian POWs were flown by Lancaster to Horsham, England, to recuperate and then returned home in the Aquitania through New York City. Harry Liznick arrived in Iroquois Falls on 31 May 1945, one month and one year after being torpedoed and just in time to help his dad plant for the summer.

**Closing Remarks**

“Kriegsgefangenenlager” offers a glimpse of the short career of Athabaskan, through the memoirs of a handful of her crew. Most did not take the time to document their story, preferring instead to put their experience behind them or perhaps discount their importance in the war. Those who did, Harry Liznick among them, have left us with an insight into life aboard and as prisoners of war as an alternative to official historical records.

As tragic as the loss of HMCS Athabaskan was, the Germans could ill afford to lose T-29 and T-27, on top of three earlier losses to Allied action. Fuel shortages, an increased tempo in Allied aerial attacks, and the mounting strength of Allied naval forces on the southern coast of England, hemmed in the German naval forces. German naval forces in the area were reduced to three large Narvik-type destroyers and two smaller Elbins, providing insufficient firepower to challenge the invasion of Normandy – indeed, these German ships did not show their noses. On D-Day, the entire Fighting Tenth was waiting for them when they ventured out of Brest. The Germans were sorely outnumbered and the threat to the invading forces was eliminated in a matter of a few hours.

Harry Liznick passed away at his home in Iroquois Falls, in November 2005 after a long and healthy life living off the land. Harry Liznick and the 255 crew members of Athabaskan, 128 of whom paid the ultimate price, contributed much to ending the Second World War through their efforts in the Arctic and English Channel. The surviving Athabaskans continue to meet on the anniversary of the loss of their ship onboard HMCS Haida in Hamilton Ontario. The wreckage of HMCS Athabaskan has been located near the island of Batz in the English Channel. She was found by Jacques Ouchakoff, a French marine historian in 2002 in 90 metres of water.

**Notes**

3. Douglas, Sarty and Whiby, A Blue Water Navy, p. 229. DeWolf apparently did not hear Stubbs call from the water. It is believed that Stubbs may have been telling Haida to get clear of the minefield that she was about to set upon.
5. It would have been unlikely for Allied planes to have attacked the German rescuers. More likely T-24 set off a mine when she returned to harbour. See Robert A. Darlington and Fraser M. McKee, The Canadian Navy Chronicle, 1939-1945, The Successes and Losses of the Canadian Navy in World War II (St. Catherines, Ontario: Vanwell, 1996), p. 145.
6. See Liznick, “Kriegsgefangenenlager,” for an account of this.
8. Len Burrow and Emile Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady: The Life and Death of HMCS Athabaskan (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), p. 149. Ninety-one bodies washed ashore in Brittany and are buried in nine cemeteries along the coast; 42 of the bodies have been identified.
10. Liznick, “Kriegsgefangenenlager.”