**‘War in a small boat – the story of Lieutenant Commander James Macdonald DSO, DSC and Two Bars, MID (2), RNZNVR’[SLIDE 1]**

**Early years and before the small boats**

Born in Wellington on 30 September 1921, Jim Macdonald, known to his Navy colleagues as ‘Mac’, was the most decorated New Zealand naval officer of the Second World War and went on, after the War, to become a successful city engineer in Wellington. Of medium height with dark hair, a fair complexion and strong physique, he was the son of Amy Grace Anderson and her husband, John William Macdonald, a public servant and later government insurance commissioner.

After attending Thorndon School and Wellington College, he was apprenticed as an optician, from 1937 to 1938, before joining the Bank of New Zealand as a clerk in August 1938. He built and sailed his own Tauranga-class yacht and was a member of the Lyall Bay Surf and Life-saving Club. A strong swimmer, he was the Wellington College champion and represented his club at junior level in the New Zealand championships.

Macdonald’s naval career began in 1938 when he joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (New Zealand Division) as an Ordinary Seaman. On the outbreak of war, the following year and by then an Able Seaman, he was mobilised and saw service as a gunner aboard the defensively equipped merchant ships *Trienza* and *Fordsdale*, trading between Australia and Nauru. In February 1941 he went to Britain to train for a commission as an officer, passing out top of his course in May that year – and shortly thereafter joined the ‘small boats’.

**Small boats at war**

Royal Navy Coastal Forces craft operated mainly in the English Channel and North Sea waters, especially in the build up to the Normandy invasion of 1944. They were also used in the Mediterranean and off the Norwegian coastline. They were involved in the raids against St. Nazaire and Dieppe. There principal purposes though were to attack German convoys and their Schnell-boat escorts, and to lay anti-shipping mines off the French, Belgian and Dutch coasts. These craft, Motor Gun Boats(MGBs). Motor Torpedo Boats(MTBs) and Motor Launches(MLs) were manned by various Allied nationalities including Dutch, Norwegian, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand men.

The Coastal Forces Heritage Trust has this description of Motor Boats in the Second World War:

*The MGBs, MTBs and MLs developed in the Second World War performed a wide range of tasks, frequently operating close to enemy occupied coasts, attacking enemy shipping in the Channel and protecting our own convoys on their passage around our coasts. When they did meet the enemy, engagements were fought at very close quarters in conditions which are very difficult to envisage in our modern day Navy. They were small wooden craft, heavily laden with high-octane fuel, carrying a large quantity of ammunition and invariably operating at night without radar and with very few navigational aids. The average age of the crews in Coastal Forces was barely 20 years and these people were to conduct nearly 1000 close fought engagements and to gain a high concentration of bravery and distinguished service awards throughout the war.*

**The British boats**

At the outbreak of World War II there were three flotillas of Motor Torpedo "short boats", between 60 ft (18 m) and 72 feet long. These could typically maintain 40 knots and were armed with two torpedo tubes. They were built mainly by the British Power Boat Company, Vospers, and Thornycroft. In 1940 a modified craft, the Motor Gun Boat, was introduced. These were armed with weapons such as the 0.5 in Vickers machine gun, 2 pounder "pom pom", a single or twin 20 mm Oerlikon and ultimately the autoloader fitted 6-pounder gun.

It became apparent that larger craft were needed as the operational availability of the short boats was too restricted by sea conditions. Fairmile designed a series of larger coastal craft, up to 120 feet long. The Fairmile A Type and B Type were motor launches and the C Type was a motor gun boat.

**[SLIDE 2]**

In 1943 the Fairmile D Type appeared. It was a motor torpedo boat – nicknamed the "Dog Boat". It could be fitted as either a gun or a torpedo boat, so the designation "MGB" disappeared and all the craft were labelled MTBs. It was a good sea boat and could maintain 30 knots at full load. The later D types carried four 18-inch torpedo tubes.**[SLIDE 3]**

The Vosper Type I MTB appeared in 1943. This was a 73-foot craft with four 18-inch torpedo tubes and was capable of a maximum speed of 40 knots.**[SLIDE 4]**

By 1944 Coastal Forces numbered 3,000 officers and 22,000 ratings. Altogether there were 2,000 British Coastal Forces craft.

**The German boats**

The E-boat(from Enemy Boat) was the Western Allies' designation for the fast attack craft known in the German Navy as Schnellboot, or S-Boot, meaning "fast boat". The most popular, the S-100 class, were very seaworthy, heavily armed and capable of sustaining 43.5 knots, briefly being able to accelerate to 48 knots.

These craft were around 115 feet long and had a beam of just under 17 feet. Their diesel engines provided a range of 700 to 750 nautical miles substantially greater than the gasoline-fuelled British vessels. **[SLIDE 5]**

E-boats were primarily employed to patrol the Baltic Sea and the English Channel in order to intercept shipping heading for the English ports in the south and east. Always less noisy than their British counterparts, they also had a profile which was difficult to spot without radar.

During the Second World War over 200 S-boats were built. About half of them made it through to the end of the war. **[SLIDE 6]**

A Royal Navy Veteran recalling his Second World War service, recounted that:

*I was posted to Portland naval base for training on motor torpedo boats which are high speed wooden craft with deck torpedoes and an Oerlikon gun on the stern. They ran on aviation fuel with no self-sealing fuel tanks; just double skin mahogany hulls with armour only round the bridge. The engines were Rolls Merlin super-charged or the American copy Packard Merlin engines which were identical being built under license in America.*

*After training I moved to Lowestoft and we fought against the German e-boats. These were better designed fighting craft as the crew lived ashore and the boats were made narrower and faster than the MTBs, so they had the edge on us.*

**The small boat area of operations[SLIDE 7]**

Coastal Forces bases in the United Kingdom that have some relevance to this story, included:

**South coast**

HMS Attack, Portland(on the south coast of Dorset)

HMS Bee then HMS Grasshopper, Weymouth(north of the Portland Bill in Dorset)

HMS Bee, Weymouth 1942-43

HMS Bee, Holyhead 1943-1945(on the Welsh coast to the west of Liverpool)

HMS Black Bat, Plymouth(at the ankle of Britain’s foot)

HMS Hornet Haslar, Gosport

HMS Wasp, Dover Coastal Forces

**East Coast**

HMS Badger, Harwich(on the south side of the entrance of the River Stout)

HMS Beehive, Felixstowe(on the north side of the entrance of the River Stout)

HMS Midge, Great Yarmouth(on the apex of the Norfolk coast and north of Felixstowe)

HMS Minos II then HMS Mantis, Lowestoft(just to the south of Yarmouth)

HMS Sandfly, Peterhead(north of Aberdeen)

The English Channel had a defensive set-up as follows:

A series of minefields located in front of a line of buoys – the Z-line.**[SLIDE 8]**

Behind this line up to twenty MGBs and MTBs would patrol.

Ships would drift using hydrophones to pick up approaching German E-boats. This was carried out in the cold and dark

In 1942 Britain built towers at sea to protect the coastal convoys by intercepting German aircraft and E-boats.**[SLIDE 9]**

This was all to protect coastal convoys travelling at 6-12 knots escorted by armed trawlers.

**1941 - Macdonald goes to war in small boats**

On completion of his commissioning course, Macdonald had wanted to serve with other New Zealanders aboard the cruiser HMS *Neptune*. This was refused; fortunately for him because the ship was sunk in a German minefield off the coast of Tripoli with the loss of all but one of her Ship's company of 757 on the night of 19 December 1941. Of those lost in *Neptune*, 150 were New Zealanders.

His next choice was Coastal Forces and started his small boat journey with a six-week course followed at HMS St. Christopher in Scotland in seamanship in small boats, handling, and gunnery. At the completion of the course Macdonald wanted to serve aboard an MGB but was posted instead to an MTB. He was promoted to Temporary Acting Sub-Lieutenant. He would have to serve for twelve months before he would be confirmed in the rank.

After completing the six-week course he was posted to the Coastal Forces base HMS Beehive

**[SLIDE 10]** at Felixstowe to join MTB14 on Monday 14 July 1941 as the first lieutenant. It was a posting of just two weeks to consolidate the training he had received at St Christopher. MTB 14 had petrol engines, a wooden hull, was capable of 33knots and was armed with two torpedoes with no reloads and two twin mount machineguns. The torpedoes did not have a launcher they were dropped off the back of the MTB. This type of vessel had a complement of two officers and eight ratings.

Felixstowe was in a high state of war alert. Martial law prevailed. A number of merchant ships and trawlers had been sunk nearby by mines and E-boats. Nearly every night German bombers were laying mines along the shipping channels – and very day minesweepers were at sea clearing mines. Alec Kelloway who served in Coastal Forces at Beehive as a mechanic recalled:

*HMS Beehive, our base, was a very large establishment that catered for about thirty-two boats consisting of Motor Torpedo boats, Motor Gun boats and us MLs, who were a pain in the neck for the German shipping. Many a night would see anything up to thirty boats out on operations over the Dutch Coast. The torpedo and gun boats were a nuisance to the residents of Felixstowe in the winter, as the water-cooling system was fresh water the fresh water being cooled by sea water, this meant that the boats engines had to be started up every so many hours to ensure that the fresh water did not freeze. This was not so bad during the daytime, but at night the starting up of many engines caused quite a din.*

For the next six months Macdonald was available at the base as ‘a spare hand’ and he enthusiastically sought every opportunity to get to sea. This informal and frustrating time finally ended on 12 January 1942 when he joined MTB 31 as the first lieutenant. He was 20 – his commanding officer was 24. MTB 31 was 71 feet long, had a top speed of 40 knots and was armed with two 21-inch torpedoes and twin 0.5 inch machines guns in a turret amidships aft of the bridge. The crew numbered ten.

**1942 and MTB 241**

In early 1942 a newspaper article described what is was like to go out in an MTB searching for E-boats:

*‘Thirteen hours is the regular routine for a ‘flog’ – an extended sweep up the enemy coast. The captain is standing on the bridge the whole night. The strain is terrific. His eyes are raw and red…The spray comes over like bullets…Although he is in oilskins and wears a waterproof hood, the saltwater permeates everything…’*

Macdonald’s first operation in MTB 31 was on 18 January 1942 – when the boat was among five craft deployed to the enemy coast to lay mines. In February, MTB 31 along with five other boats was deployed south to Ramsgate – 20 miles north of Dover – returning to Felixstowe later that month.

And on 1 March the MTB Flotilla returned south – this time to Dover.

A combined three MTB/two MGB group sailed at 8.15pm on 3 March to attack a German convoy, accompanied by eight escorts, detected off the French coast. MTB 31 emerged from the chaos and confusion of the violent night action, that had lasted about an hour, badly damaged and with one of the crew killed, and all of its engines out of action. Some 40 minutes later, his ship on fire and ammunition in the magazine beginning to explode the Commanding Officer ordered the crew to ‘abandon ship.’ The fit members lowered the injured into a Carley Float. Macdonald, had dived over the side in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue the Chief Motor Mechanic, then climbed back onboard MTB 31. An hour after the boat had stopped, things onboard were slowly but surely being brought under control and they improved even further with the arrival of MGBs 330 and 332. MGB 322 took MTB 31 under tow and at 3.30am, more submerged than afloat, the MTB was towed into Dover Harbour – of its 11 crew one man was dead, two missing presumed drowned and two wounded.

Macdonald was awarded his first DSC for his gallantry in this action.**[SLIDE 11]**

On 12 March, Macdonald took command of the brand-new MTB 241 – and at 20, he would be the youngest man to command one of His Majesty’s warships.**[SLIDE 12]**

His first lieutenant, who was 19 at the time, was to comment 30 years later of Macdonald:

*‘Man of very few words. Loved swimming. But apart from rugby we got on well together; after all we were within nine months in age, and we both wanted to get at the enemy.’*

On 30 March, he sailed to HMS Bee in Weymouth, 70 miles west of Southampton. Then followed several weeks of ‘work up’ training. On completion of this, in late May, he moved to Gosport in Portsmouth – and on 4 June he was back in Felixstone to rejoin the 4th MTB flotilla.

Due to poor weather conditions, and the unreliability of the boats, only a few patrols were conducted in June and July – and those resulted in only the briefest contact with the enemy. However, on 6 August, three MTBs and four MGBs sailed from Gosport to intercept a large German tug – escorted by six vessels. There was a brief chaotic encounter – which Macdonald and his group were lucky to survive relatively unscathed. Later that month, MTB 241 entered the Vicker’s boatyard in Gosport to be fitted with an engine silencing device designed by Macdonald. The fitting and testing of the new silencer was completed by late September – and, on the 30th of that month Macdonald celebrated his 21st birthday. He returned with his boat to Felixstowe and by October was, once again, ready for action.

And so, 1942 ended. The future was beginning to look a little brighter. The technical problems experienced by the Vosper boats were being overcome. The torpedo boats had proven their worth and new tactics and equipment were coming on stream. But, the optimistic end of 1942, was not to be carried through into the results of 1943.

**1943 – a frustrating year**

On 18 January 1943, five MTBs, including MTB 241, sailed from Felixstowe to do a sweep of the Dutch coast. They encountered a group of German ships and managed to sink two. However, for half the time of January and February operational sorties were cancelled because of bad weather. March proved frustrating too – few patrols and no contact with the enemy. In April, with spring weather, the boats were able to get out more often – sorties on nine occasions to the Dutch coast – but sighting enemy vessels only five times. In an action on 28/29 April, Macdonald used for the first time a torpedo aiming device he had designed – successfully sinking a German trawler. It was quickly fitted into every one of the Felixstowe boats. The Admiralty soon had the sight mass produced and fitted to all Coastal Command torpedo boats at home and abroad.

On 13 July Macdonald was awarded a second DSC, recognising his performance in nine actions over the previous four months. In September, he was promoted to temporary acting Lieutenant, and appointed as temporary senior officer of the 21st MTB Flotilla – he was a week short of his 22nd birthday.

In the second half of 1943, Coastal Forces were involved in 40 actions against the enemy – with 21 enemy vessels sunk for the loss of only nine own craft, of which four were due to enemy action.

**1944 – a year of action**

In January – the 21st Flotilla operated the Z–line on eight nights – but had no contact with the enemy. On Sunday evening 5 March, Macdonald took MTB 241 and five other boats to intercept a German merchant vessel moving through the English Channel to the North Sea. They engaged an enemy force and sunk a large enemy armed trawler. **[SLIDE 12]**

Macdonald was recommended for his third DSC. As March neared its end, the Flotilla’s record for the month was two sweeps off the Dutch Coast, manned the Z-line twice and successfully carried out three minelaying operations off the Dutch and Belgian coasts. On the penultimate day of the month, Macdonald took MTB 241 and another four boats to sea for an intelligence initiated anti-shipping sweep. An hour before midnight an enemy convoy, including two 4,000-ton merchant vessels with six escorting minesweepers and eight E-boats, was sighted and engaged. Macdonald’s MTB 241 was sunk during the action and he moved on to take command of MTB 234.

**[SLIDE 13]**

In July, Macdonald was formally awarded a second bar to his DSC – making him one of only seven Coastal Forces officers to be awarded three DSC’s.

On 4 July, in MTB 234 he led another four 21st Flotilla boats out of Felixstowe for an anti-shipping sweep off the Dutch coast. By 1am they were in their designated position and soon afterwards obtained a radar contact seven miles to the northeast. 15 hours later they returned to harbour after a series of engagements with the Germans, having sunk two ships, left one in flames and damaged several others. For this action, Macdonald was awarded the DSO. **[SLIDE 14]**

The DSO citation stated:

*AS SENIOR OFFICER OF THE 21ST MTB FLOTILLA, TEMPORARY LIEUTENANT G.J. MACDONALD HANDLED MOTOR TORPEDO BOATS 225, 234, AND 224 WITH GREAT COURAGE AND SKILL ON THE NIGHT OF 4-5 JULY 1944 IN THREE GALLANT ATTEMPTS TO ATTACK AN HEAVILY ESCORTED ENEMY TRANSPORT UNTIL IT TOOK REFUGE IN PORT. ON TURNING HOMEWARD THE MTBS MET A CONVOY OF SIX SHIPS AND, THOUGH DAY HAD BROKEN, IN THE FACE OF INTENSE FIRE SANK TWO BY TORPEDOES AND DAMAGED TWO OTHERS BY GUNFIRE.*

On 14 September, Macdonald again led five other MTBs on another anti-shipping sweep off Holland and shortly after 1am they observed starshell and gunfire. As they closed the action, two contacts were detected on radar. Notwithstanding a number of vigorous attacks, there were no significant casualties on either side. Nevertheless, in recognition of his leadership in this action, Macdonald was Mentioned in Dispatches.**[SLIDE 15]**

On 8 October, he was out again, leading eight boats for operations off the Dutch coast. En route to their area of operations three boats retired early with various defects. At 1.30am three ships, German minesweepers, were sighted approaching the group from astern. During attacks on these, four E-boats appeared and as he was now facing a far superior force, Macdonald wisely decided to retire. For his leadership, in what would turn out to be his final successful engagement, he was once more Mentioned in Dispatches.

On 3 December posted to HMS Mantis in Lowestoft for command of MTB 393 a new 73-foot boat under construction by Vosper at Portchester near Portsmouth. It was commissioned on 22December 1944. This boat was equipped with radar and he remained in command of the 21st Flotilla until the end of the war in Europe.**[SLIDE 16]**

**1945/1946 – out of the Navy and into civilian life**

On 19 February, Macdonald was promoted to Temporary, Acting Lieutenant Commander, RNZNVR – after only 15 months as a Lieutenant. In May, he was part of the MTB fleet that took the surrender of the German E-Boats. Three months later, on 12 September 1945, his career in the Royal Navy came to an end. He was appointed to HMNZS Cook, an administrative base in Wellington, for his passage home. He arrived back in New Zealand on 6 February 1946 and on 18 May his Navy service ended – and he had not reached his 25th birthday. His War service was officially recorded as 66 days in New Zealand and

2,336 days overseas.

He took up a position in the drainage and waterworks division of the Wellington City Council. Juggling full-time employment and family commitments, he studied civil engineering part time at Wellington Technical College and Victoria University College. He became deputy city engineer in 1971 and seven years later was appointed city engineer. He took a particular interest in roadworks, quarrying, and refuse collection and disposal, and chaired the council’s airport planning committee. He designed a water operated hedge cutter, a prefabricated concrete garage, and the vehicle turn table in Woodward Street, Wellington. His major achievement was the design of a stone crushing machine which won him and a colleague the 1979 UDC Finance Inventor’s Award. And he became a Fellow of the New Zealand Institution of Engineers.

He died in Wellington, after a short illness, on 22 January 1982. He was only 61 years old.

Much of this presentation has been based on Gerry Wright’s biography of Macdonald titled, *‘North Sea Warrior’*. It recounts the triumphs, frustrations and tragedies of Jim Macdonald’s War service – and of some of what happened to him before and after the War. Among those many stories, I found this to be the saddest:

*‘In November 1946 he was invited by the Navy League to be present at the presentation by the Governor General of flags to two schools. An application was made by the Navy League to the Navy for Jim to be able to attend in uniform. The application was declined.’*

In *‘The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–1945’*, the author S.D. Waters records:

Of all the New Zealanders in the Royal Navy none served with greater distinction than those in Coastal Forces, the modern counterpart of the small, fast sailing craft that sortied from English ports to harry the enemy in wars of earlier centuries. No fewer than 1560 coastal craft — harbour-defence launches, motor torpedo-boats, motor gunboats, and motor minesweepers — were built during the war. At the peak period of 1944 some 3000 officers and 22,000 ratings were serving in Coastal Forces, which were almost entirely a preserve of RNVR ‘hostilities only’ personnel. A higher proportion of newly commissioned New Zealand Reserve officers from HMS King Alfred chose service in Coastal Forces than in any other branch of the Royal Navy.

Lieutenant Commander ‘Jim’ Macdonald DSO DSC & 2 Bars and twice Mentioned in Despatches, was the most highly decorated New Zealand Sailor of the Second World War- and indisputably the bravest.**[SLIDE 17]**

His medals are displayed in the Macdonald Room at Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand at Trentham.