

THE VERY RARE SECOND WAR 'ARAKAN COAST' D.S.C. TO A LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER, ROYAL INDIAN NAVY, WHO WAS DECORATED FOR HIS COMMAND OF 55TH MOTOR LAUNCH FLOTILLA OFF THE ARAKAN COAST, 1944-45 AND IN PARTICULAR FOR THE AMPHIBIOUS ACTIONS AT RAMREE ISLAND JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1945, PREVIOUS TO WHICH HE HAD CONDUCTED RECONNAISSANCE OPERATIONS TO THE ISLAND WITH THE S.B.S. THIS ONE OF JUST EIGHT AWARDS OF THE D.S.C. TO THE ROYAL INDIAN NAVY IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS, G.V.I.R., THE REVERSE OFFICIALLY DATED '1945'; 1939-45 STAR; BURMA STAR; WAR MEDAL 1939-45

D.S.C. London Gazette 10 July 1945:

'For courage, tenacity and devotion to duty whilst serving in Light Coastal Forces, in operations lasting four months, frequently performed under rapidly changing conditions and with difficult lines of communications, on the Arakan Coast.'

The original recommendation states:

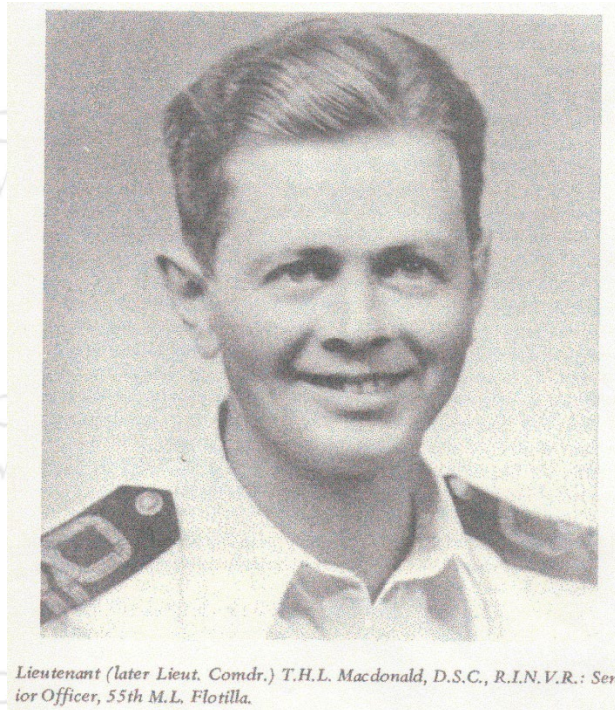
'These awards are for the amphibious operations during the early part of the year in Burma and recognise many acts of gallantry on the approaches to landing beaches and among the Chaungs (waterways). Lieutenant-Commander T. H. L. MacDonald led a M.L. Flotilla that accounted for many Japanese craft trying to escape from Ramree Island.'

One of only eight awards of the D.S.C. to the Royal Indian Navy in the Second World War.

Thomas Henry Lewin MacDonald was born on 25 February 1908 and was educated at Loretto School

in Musselburgh and at Cambridge University. Employed as a senior agricultural assistant by Begg Sutherland & Co. in India in the 1930s, he was also a member of the Bihar Light Horse.

In the summer of 1941, on applying for a commission in the Royal Indian Naval Volunteer Reserve, he reported to Fort William in Calcutta, and on passing his medical he was appointed a Temporary Lieutenant in July. A swathe of specialist courses ensued, from seamanship to signals, and gunnery to navigation, following which he appears to have been employed as a staff officer. Hence his appointment to a staff role in the Royal Indian Navy's Coastal Forces in August 1942.



Lieutenant (later Lieut. Comdr.) T.H.L. Macdonald, D.S.C., R.I.N.V.R.: Senior Officer, 55th M.L. Flotilla.

By February 1944, he was serving as a Naval Liaison Officer to XV Corps on the Arakan front, a role in which he did '*extremely well*' and for which he was recommended for promotion. And that advancement arrived in the following month, when he was appointed an Acting Lieutenant-Commander and senior officer of the 55th Motor Launch Flotilla, equipped with 8 Fairmile 'B' type Motor Launches (M.L.'s). Commencing active service off the Arakan coast, especially in the period November 1944 to March 1945, the 55th earned their nickname the '*Nip Nippers*'. This was largely on account of the unit's motor launches ramming numerous small craft which were supporting and supplying the Japanese.

In his capacity as a Flotilla C.O., MacDonald was regularly in action, 'The Royal Indian Navy 1612-1950', by Commander D. J. Hastings, R.I.N.V.R., referring to his part in all manner of operations. Based at Chittagong from October 1944, the 55th's motor launches regularly patrolled off the Arakan coast, mounting hit and run attacks against enemy held harbours, the same tactics used by members of the S.B.S. who were embarked - and disembarked - for like operations.

And the flotilla was also called upon to assist in wider operations, the assault on Akyab in early January 1945 being a case in point. On that occasion, the onerous responsibility of laying buoys to guide the Allied armada assembled on the Mayu River fell to MacDonald's motor launch, a task successfully accomplished; his motor launch operated to within half a mile of the Japanese batteries but managed to avoid detection. Later in the month, in support of the landings at Myebon, the surrounding waterways were dominated by the presence of his flotilla's marauding motor launches which had plenty of exciting encounters with enemy supply-carrying launches. Indeed, according to Hastings, the eastern night sky was often lit up by a massive pillar of flame and smoke as the motor launches claimed another victim.



A FAIRMILE 'B' TYPE MOTOR LAUNCH

But all such major assaults demanded prior reconnaissance work, the proposed attack on Kyaukpyu (Ramree Island) - being no exception. Hence MacDonald embarking a party of S.B.S. men under Major Livingstone, in order to carry out a recce. of the island's main harbour and the surrounding area. The S.B.S. party returned safely to a pre-arranged rendezvous four nights later, their mission accomplished.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Ramree_Island

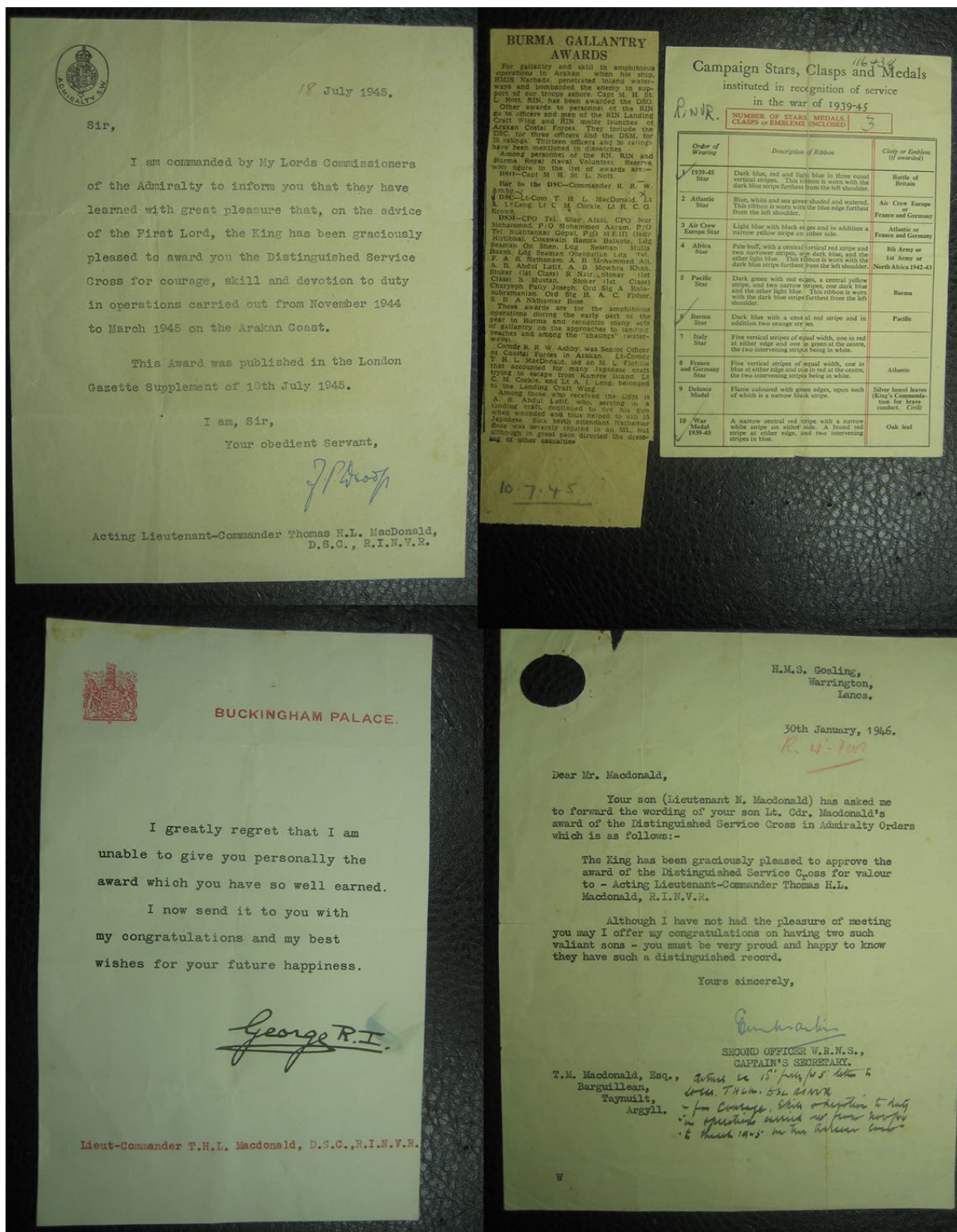
MacDonald appears to have continued in command of 55th Flotilla until the conclusion of the Arakan campaign and for the rest of the war served back in India. He subsequently wrote a personal account of his wartime experiences, an account that resides in the British Library's Asian and African studies centre. He was demobilised at Bombay in December 1945 and died in Cuckfield, Sussex in January 1976.

EXTRACTS FROM 'THE ROYAL INDIAN NAVY 1939-45'

FORMATION OF FAIRMILE "B" TYPE MOTOR LAUNCH FLOTILLAS

The 55th and 56th Royal Indian Navy Motor Launch Flotillas were built and commissioned in India. By January 1943, the 55th Royal Indian Navy Motor Launch Flotilla was formed. After working up in Bombay, it was sent to the Arakan Coast to give flank support to the 14th Indian Division, which was then fighting on the Mayu Peninsula. Diversionary raids were carried out on Japanese strongpoints situated down the Burma coast, and an effective blockade of all enemy coastal traffic was maintained. Owing to the monsoon conditions prevailing on this coast from April to September, the 55th Flotilla was withdrawn to bases in India at the end of March 1943.

By September 1943, the 56th Royal Indian Navy Motor Launch Flotilla was formed. During the winter season 1943/1944 both flotillas (55th and 56th) were operated by the Captain Coastal Forces, Eastern Theatre on the Burma Coast. The Coastal Forces operational requirements on the Arakan Coast were then dealt with more thoroughly than they had been the year before. An Advanced Operational base was set up in the Naaf river and a Coastal Force repair and depot ship, H.M.I.S. Barracuda was stationed at Chittagong.



The operational work of 55th and 56th Flotillas was carried out in close co-operation with the army and a senior officer, Arakan Coastal Forces, was appointed from the staff of Captain Coastal Forces, Eastern Theatre to correlate the work of both the Flotillas.

In December 1944 Royal Indian Navy's most Advanced Base was set up on the Naaf river where India meets Burma. "This Base" wrote its Commanding Officer "had kept pace with the Naval pursuit of the Japs". As landing followed landing it moved south and east well down the Burma Coast in the course of three months.

It worked at top pressure to keep the "little ships with a big punch" fighting fit. At one time only three miles separated it from the Japanese forward positions. "But the wild animals were a bigger menace than the Japs", said the Commanding Officer, recalling the night when an uninvited elephant uprooted the bathroom of the senior officer, Arakan Coastal Forces.

Setting up a Naval Repair Base in the jungle was not easy. First the site had to be cleared, then workshops and living quarters prepared and jetties built, perhaps, under most difficult conditions on a soft, muddy shore. Many jobs which would normally fall to the army were carried out by R.I.N. ratings, sometimes working day and night to get the work completed. With its sea and land transport, the base had to be ready to strike camp and move forward at short notice. It "set up shop" on Ramree Island within a week of the first assault.

The season was very successful. With both flotillas operating at the same time, the Japanese coastal defences were kept in a constant state of tension. An important side of Coastal Force work during that season was the almost continuous raids carried out down the coast. These undoubtedly played an important part in the military successes in the Arakan.

During the winter season of 1944-45, the 55th and 56th M.L. Flotillas were strengthened by the addition of the 49th M.L. Flotilla. The 49th Flotilla which was manned by South African Naval Forces personnel, was handed over to the R.I.N. for manning and maintenance. The regular raids carried out by those three Flotillas on the Burma Coast during the last four months of 1944 were a vital factor in the successful landings which were carried out on Akyab, Myebon Peninsula, Ramree Island and Cheduba Island in 1945.

The Royal Indian Navy operated a total of 26 Fairmile "B" type Motor Launches. The 49th and 55th were both eight-boat Flotillas when M.L. 872, then under construction in Karachi, was completed. M.L. 420 was attached to H.M.I.S. Valsura for Torpedo training and M.L. 421 was used as an experimental and training boat.



Extract from STATESMAN (Calcutta) of 10th:July/45

BURMA GALLANTRY AWARDS

.....Other Awards to Personnel of the R.I.N. go to Officers & Men of the R.I.N. landing craft wing & R.I.N. Motor Launches of Arakan Coastal Forces. They include the D.S.O. for three Officers & D.S.M. for 18 Ratings. 13 Officers & 30 Ratings have been mentioned in Dispatches.....

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The other two D.S.O.'s were landing craft wing, and one R.I.N. Captain got the D.S.O.

O.H.M.S.



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From the Admiralty a letter to Tommy said :-
"I am commanded by my lords commissioners of the Admiralty to inform you that they have learned with great pleasure that on the advice of the Lord, the King has been graciously pleased to Award you the D.S.O. for courage, skill & devotion."
P.T.O.

ACTIVITIES OF MOTOR LAUNCH FLOTILLAS

The activities of 55th M.L. Flotilla are noted many times in the following pages link with all relating to Lt Commander Macdonald's commanded noted in operations from late 1944. He is only noted my name a couple of times but others as just commander of 55th M.L. Flotilla. Some of the activities of his Flotilla, as well as the M.L. numbers of boats in his flotilla are of equal use. The following M.L's appear to be those of 55th Flotilla under Lt Commander Macdonald's commanded: M.L.390, 441, 438, 439, 474, 476, 477, 844, 843. Macdonald himself is listed in 439 and with 440 and 447 in the history but his diaries held in the British Library should reveal more details.

<https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/India/RIN/RIN-13.html>

"...Assault on Kyaukpyu (Ramree Island)

The assault on Kyaukpyu was timed to take place at 0930 on 21 January at the same time as the Narbada and the Jumna with the Garhwal Rifles embarked were attacking Kangaw. A week previously on 14 January Lt. Cdr T.H.L. Macdonald, D.S.C., R.I.N.V.R. in M.L. 440 with M.L. 447 in company embarked a Special Boat Section under the command of Major Livingstone, and proceeded from Akyab south to Katherine Bluff, which bounds Kyaukpyu harbour on the northern side. The party were landed successfully, and for four successive nights the two M.Ls returned to Kyaukpyu to wait at a predetermined rendezvous for their return. On the 17th night, Major Livingstone returned safely, having carried out a complete reconnaissance of Kyaukpyu inner harbour.

On the evening of the 20th, M.Ls 440, 438, 476, 477, 474 and 441 proceeded to the convoy assembly position outside Akyab harbour off Savage Island. On leaving the harbour, considerable enthusiasm was evidenced when the battleship H.M.S. Queen Elizabeth, appeared silhouetted against the sunset. The convoy was a formidable sight; landing craft of every description had to be shepherded into position, and the convoy finally moved off after dark. Six landing Craft Assault at a time were towed in two lines by B.Y.M.S. (British Yard Mine Sweeper) and one Landing Craft Personnel was attached to each Landing Craft Mechanized. Considerable difficulty was experienced in keeping the landing craft on the right course, and the motor launches spent the whole night chasing lost ships and stragglers. At dawn, however, the convoy was in reasonable shape, having been joined during the night by a number of troop transports, the cruiser H.M.S. Phoebe, the destroyers H.M. Ships Pathfinder and Rapid, H.M.I. Sloop Kistna and H.M.I. Ships Konkan and Kathiawar.



A MOTOR LAUNCH FLOTILLA IN ACTION OF THE ARAKAN COAST

By 0830 two columns of assault craft had formed up. The starboard column was led by M.L. 440 with M.Ls 474 and 476 in support, and the port column by M.L. 438, supported by 477 and 441. A tremendous bombardment, considered to be the most ambitious assault, ensued as the force steamed towards the selected beachhead between Georgina point and Dalhousie point, 15" shells from the Queen Elizabeth screamed overhead, supported by the lesser armament of the Phoebe, the Destroyers, and of the Kistna. The Kistna discharged 857 4-inch shells between breakfast-time and midday. At 0915 with the selected beach still a mile distant, heavy bombers attacked the Japanese defences, followed by fighters who strafed Japanese trenches and beach obstructions.

At 0930, the motor launches in each column deployed to starboard and port, ready to engage any targets which might be observed, while the 64 landing craft roared on to the beaches; troops....."

As with the previous page link, further details can be found here:

<https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/India/RIN/RIN-14.html>

Sold with a quantity of original documentation, including:

- 1) Secretary of the Admiralty enclosure slip and named Second War Campaign Medals card box of issue, addressed to the recipient at Barguillieu Farm, Taynuilt, Argyllshire.
- 2) Lt Commander Macdonald named Buckingham Palace forwarding letter for the D.S.C
- 3) An Admiralty congratulatory letter for the award of the D.S.C., dated 18 July 1945
- 4) A letter from Captain, H.M.S. Gosling forwarding details of the award of the D.S.C to Macdonald's father, dated 30 January 1946
- 5) Two documents giving more details of the reason for Macdonald's award
- 6) A wartime newspaper cutting relating to the award of the D.S.C.

Copy research includes MacDonald's application for appointment to R.I.N.V.R. and his service record; these very detailed. LG, extracts from 'The Royal Indian Navy', a digital copy of the 'The Royal Indian Navy 1939-45'



Condition EF. A very rare award, with great research potential. This being one of just eight awards of the D.S.C. to the Royal Indian Navy during the Second World War.