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## Warship's last hours described in film

**Ian Macmillan's Within Sight of Shore to be screened**

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN  
Sat, Apr 16 - 4:54 AM



Scott and Ian Macmillan: On Sunday at 7:30 p.m., Within Sight of Shore will be screened at the Maritime Museum in Halifax.

Sixty-six years ago, on April 16, 1945, Ian Macmillan's grandfather, Lt.-Cmdr. Robert Macmillan, dove into the frigid Atlantic waters to join members of his crew who had already hurled themselves off HMCS Esquimalt's horribly tilted deck.

The ship's entire quarterdeck, where the depth charges were stored, was destroyed by a direct hit from a German torpedo.

The ship, within sight of the ribbon-thin Nova Scotia shoreline, sank in less than five minutes. Only 27 of the 71 sailors aboard the Royal Canadian Navy minesweeper survived the catastrophe. Yet the crew managed to get four Carley floats — early life-rafts — into the water.

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HMCS Esquimalt was the last Canadian warship sunk by enemy action during the Second World War. The war itself ended about a month later.

"My grandfather survived into the 70s but he died before I was born," Macmillan recalled early this week.

"I always had an interest in his story. I did a five-minute project on him for my film arts program at Nova Scotia Community College. It was a short film about his tour in the Mediterranean in 1942, where he shot down five German airplanes."

Macmillan's father, musician-composer Scott Macmillan, wrote a suite for a small chamber ensemble depicting the last few hours of HMCS Esquimalt's crew as they struggled to keep their spirits up while awaiting rescue by HMCS Sarnia, which was patrolling nearby. It is called Within Sight of Shore and premiered in 2008.

Ian recently completed a documentary film on the sinking. He told his grandfather's story by merging archive material and interviews with his father's composition.

On Sunday at 7:30 p.m., Within Sight of Shore will be screened at the Maritime Museum in Halifax. Both music and film will be released in a single CD-DVD package under the same title.

"In the process of telling the story with the music, I used my dad's music as bait," Macmillan said. "The whole journey of the composition I kind of kept as my 'A story.' I did four or five interviews with him as he was writing the piece.

"When that finished, it was about trying to find a . . . way I could use the piece. . . . I would lay down the music, find the points where the lines of music would carry through, like maybe a minute of a part of the piece that really felt like the beginning and ending of a thought, (and) I would take that one part of the music and try to build a sequence inside that time.

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"The opening three minutes of the film, for example, was just music and lead-in . . . until it introduces that Bob was the captain of the ship. I limited myself to getting that information in that period of time so I could get the music to flow naturally and get the story to flow naturally with the music."

Canadian actor R. H. Thomson is the narrator.

The film gradually formed itself in the editing process, where a wall full of Post-it notes allowed Macmillan to move topics and different themes around as he built the film. He had assembled a pile of recordings and photographs from the National Archives in Ottawa — "everything that was in the public domain" — as well as filmed interviews and performance segments he mostly shot himself.

Macmillan also got lucky. Werner Hirschmann, an officer aboard U-190, the ship that sank Esquimalt, had moved to Canada and made himself available for interviews in Toronto and Halifax.

He also found a German propaganda film captured by the Canadian Forces that depicts a U-boat crew attacking a surface vessel.

Using that film, as well as footage of vessels blowing up and a graphic representation of a torpedo leaving a U-boat, animated for him by his cousin Marlee Macmillan, he simulated the attack on the Esquimalt.

With an almost non-existent budget, a lot of goodwill from the film industry and help travelling to the site of the sinking, thanks to retired Lt.-Cmdr. Pat Jessup, Macmillan took what time he could spare while working his day job as a cinematographer in Montreal to create the movie. He completed the 44-minute film last year.

The complete CD-DVD package being released Sunday in Halifax is being released a day earlier during East Coast Music Week in Charlottetown.

Admission is free and there will be a question period after the screening.

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