



United States Coast Guard
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Coast Guard Aviation History

CAP'M MAC AND FLYING COFFINS

Captain Donald B. MacDiarmid, USCG

By

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Donald B. MacDiarmid, USCG

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The U.S. Coast Guard Air Station at Port Angeles is constantly in view across the bay from the city. It has been since the station was built in 1934 and commissioned in August, 1935. Even as exposed as it is, it still is an enigma with local residence generally being restricted by its location at the end of the spit. But the people, who work there, live in and are a part of the Port Angeles community. Few in the past have been well known local leaders; others have contributed in many ways as responsible members of the community but few locals recognize these service members, as a part of the isolated community at the end of the spit.

Today's story is of one member of the Port Angeles community for nearly five years. He like other nearly anonymous service personnel went on to change the future of aviation with a backward sort of contribution. All his efforts to prove a positive did just the opposite. Captain Donald B. MacDiarmid spent his life proving the value of the seaplane.

At the outbreak of World War II, the Port Angeles Air Station was an important outpost for the defense of the Pacific Northwest region. It also served as a Navy gunnery school. Like in today's national crises, the Coast Guard turned instantly to homeland defense just after the attack on Pearl Harbor and by the summer of 1942 some airplanes at the station were searching for enemy submarines and escorting ships through offshore waters. Other planes towed practice targets for the gunnery school. The base was also busy with Navy planes using the runways to practicing special techniques, preparing pilots for landings aboard aircraft carriers. The Air Station also had the country's only Land Rescue Team, with specially trained dogs, to search for naval aircrews who crashed in the mountains throughout this region.

Local residences over the past sixty-five years likely saw an unusual collection of airplanes; most were seaplanes or amphibians flying from the runways and the harbor's waters. Some notable Coast Guard aircraft included the very rare Douglas RD-I Dolphin, and the even rarer bi-winged seaplane, Hall Aluminum Company's PH-2 (despite the company's name it had fabric wings). The famous Grumman series of amphibians were represented with the JF-2 Duck, JRF-2 Goose and HU-16E Albatross. And there was the ever present PBY Catalina amphibian during and following the War years. The largest seaplane to operate from the harbor was the Martin PBM, a twin engine patrol bomber from World War II. Some older residences may remember that one crashed in the harbor killing the crew. The seaplane ramp for trundling these behemoths into and out of the water is still adjacent to the original 1935 hanger on the harbor side of the spit.

Two famous landplanes flew from the short runway that ends at the present-day gate. One was the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress called by the Navy and Coast Guard a PB-1G. Another familiar airplane was the Douglas R4D-5 Skytrain better known as the infamous DC-3.

The first Coast Guard helicopter in Port Angeles (and on the west coast) arrived on 3 April 1949 after an un-escorted 3,900 mile trip from Elizabeth City, NC. Port Angeles was the terminus of the first ever transcontinental flight by a helicopter. Helicopters were little used in favor of the amphibian airplanes and their use was soon abandoned.

The HU-16E amphibian airplane arrived in the early 1960's and continued serving the area until the last one departed in 1973 making Port Angeles a helicopter only air station since. The seaplanes were gone after thirty-seven years and a new era of aviation took over. The helicopter. (1)

The seaplane, once the dream of the future for Cap'm Mac, vanished.

"Captain Mac" had that clean-cut next-door nice-lad look except for the ever present cigar with its sometimes-burning tip thrust upward. This vision of arrogance he carried rudely exposed his personality. The image was complete down to a movie-star's bold-dimpled chin. Donald Bartram MacDiarmid's hubris and the success it achieved led both his admirers and rivals to elevate "Cap'm Mac"—if it was a friend speaking to him—or "Mac Dee"—if he was spoken about—to nearly a fictional character within the ranks of the Coast Guard and the Navy in his lifetime.

"Cap'm Mac was cool and unflappable." According to a onetime co-pilot, "Once, when we were tearing down the runway at Lindbergh Field (San Diego) in a PBY-5A, [amphibian] he dropped his cigar. He let go of the controls and started looking for the cigar under the seat. I completed the takeoff and had the gear up before he assumed command, with the cigar in its proper location." (2)

This semblance has diminished little in the swirl of controversial gossip since. A contemporary, who at one time flew with MacDiarmid wrote, "The colorful and charismatic MacDiarmid was a true 'legend in his own time,' and better known to the aviation troops than the [Coast Guard] commandants of those years."(3) "Like many pioneers, he was not only a dedicated man, but one of single purpose." (4) And that single purpose was the seaplane for the Coast Guard.

MacDiarmid, the "second son" of a Methodist minister graduated from the Coast Guard Academy in 1929, according to his own statement, "through the Grace of God and somebody's mistake." He admitted later, his cadet honors at the Coast Guard Academy were "meager." Prior to attending the Academy he served as a Navy enlisted man in battleships USS Texas and USS New York.(5)

Following a year at sea as a newly commissioned Coast Guard officer, MacDiarmid entered Navy flight training and almost completed a year later. He failed on his final flight. Speculation years later among colleagues believed it was his belligerence rather than flight performance that returned him to sea once again.

Following duty aboard two Coast Guard cutters, MacDiarmid took command of a 125-foot Coast Guard patrol boat in Seward, Alaska. His daring-do there nearly cost him his life. Through his aggressiveness, MacDiarmid received four commendations. But, according to his account, he left "feet first due to physical collapse" resulting from "spilling an ice laden surfboat in the surf on a midwinter night in Shelikof Straits." His physical recovery, again by his own revelation, took three months in "various Indian and whitefolks hospitals" before he transferred back to his ship.(6) But he was soon relieved of this command because of a near mutiny by the crew over his aggressive behavior according to one admiral.(7)

This time MacDiarmid shipped aboard a 165-foot Coast Guard patrol boat as the executive officer. Two months later he was acting commanding officer. Another unexplained quick transfer came four months later. These orders put him aboard a cutter on the North Atlantic wintertime ice patrol in 1937 as engineering officer. His keen interest in flying, however, continued. MacDiarmid bought an airplane to practice with anytime his ship was in port.

Shortly after this assignment, in the summer of 1937—through some undocumented efforts—he once again obtained orders to Navy flight training. It is unheard of for anyone once terminated from this program to ever get the opportunity to return. Somehow the tenacious Mac Dee did. This time MacDiarmid completed the syllabus in April 1938 but only through an intervention by the Coast Guard liaison officer, preventing his being dropped from the program a second time.(8)

Throughout his career MacDiarmid was guilty for quoting vague authorities extensively in his reports to superiors—always un-cited. The conclusions from these enigmatic references invariably provided weighty support to his conclusions. In one instance, one un-documented study he quoted showed "this station [Port Angeles] to be continually first or second in the number of lives saved in general Coast Guard work." Then followed his words with a sentence, hinting of cynicism when he wondered, "During all that time and now, this station seems constantly last to get equipment."(9)

He served his first year at Port Angeles, immediately following flight training, of nearly five at the Coast Guard Air Station, as aircraft engineering officer. He once observed, in a not too kindly manner, that Port Angeles was "the 8-ball station." His actions later seemed to instigate and perpetuate his own observation. Not one with a career for starting at the bottom, Mac Dee filled

out the remaining tour as commanding officer. This is a person who had less flying experience than current junior officers now flying helicopters at Port Angeles. When the war manpower level bloomed, he commanded thirty officers and six hundred enlisted men—as a senior lieutenant—very junior by today's standards.

MacDiarmid frequently recorded a lack of aggression by his officers. Of several pilots in his command, he wrote, "The pilot assigned, if he prove inadequate, will either (a) fumble the mission through over-timidity and caution or (b) lose his ship and crew through a lack of ability or lack of horse sense."(10) This from a person that failed flight training twice!

Even with the opportunities MacDiarmid enjoyed, he had greater ambitions. Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor he started a flood of letters, official and unofficial, requesting "combat duty of any kind." MacDiarmid's wartime experience in part followed that of the fictional "Mister Roberts" where he waged fruitless battles openly with equally irascible superiors. This only led, at Port Angeles so far from the war, to his inglorious contribution to the war-effort: trying to feed, quarter, and train men. He sought even obsolete airplanes, scarce supplies, and a few trained officers in the frantic scrambling in the backwash away from the real war. In his unceasing effort, Cap'm Mac devoted himself to the chance that he might receive a transfer to combat, any combat.

In one report he complained about three PBY Catalinas allotted to his station already a month overdue and not expected for a year. In it, MacDiarmid mentioned "the officers at this station read the impressive aircraft production figures with considerable interest." Then with cynicism boiling in his words writes:

Our failure to get new decent equipment is surely not due to shipping difficulties. The popular explanation is that the new equipment goes to the new pilots [of the nearby Navy commands] who promptly smash it. [He goes on to say] It is estimated that there has been enough beautiful equipment smashed through clumsiness or stupidity in this area alone in the last six months to have equipped this station with fine equipment five times over.(11)

MacDiarmid fought with wartime bureaucratic bumbling getting new men trained. Then soon saw them leave for more heroic roles in the Great War, only to be replaced by more, in his terms, "boots." He felt left behind. In a plea exposing more of his feelings—again using a broad anonymous population for his voice—he wrote, "The pilots of this station generally feel that they have been pushed in a corner and forgotten or that their potential fighting value is held in very low regard."(12)

Typically, he trapped himself writing contradicting statements in different letters. Earlier, in a series of reports he declared most of his pilots are new and inexperienced, and most of the experienced were transferred after only a short stay.

MacDiarmid was the only one left behind.

Letters he wrote, frequently were in conflict. It depended on the point he wished to make at that moment. For example, in the following excerpt, in a letter to his commander, he might be the only "flyer" meeting the description except in this instance he did not have "thousands of hours," at the time, no one did. MacDiarmid pleaded:

There are flyers available here with many years of sea service and experience as engineers and navigators and thousands of hours of experience in the air who are flying small obsolete ships ["ships," one term then used for airplanes] on local escort missions—sometimes difficult enough considering the weather but offering no possibility of earning credit or promotion—while young Army Air Corps and Navy pilots some of whom are practically boys [MacDiarmid was thirty-five at this writing], are flying long range attack missions on the enemy.(13)

In frustration to the indefatigability of these demands for war duty, and perhaps the supercilious tone of MacDiarmid's monthly chiding's disguised as official reports, one admiral reportedly offered him a spot promotion if he would withdraw his requests for transfer to the war zone and combat. In character, MacDiarmid refused this offer.

Stories about Mac Dee are frequently told with a sense of esteem, though most are about his outrageous conduct. Some convey a uniform aura of respect for the man and his leadership qualities as they remembered him from the veil of four decades. Some, however, who held him in low regard then, still do—with vehemence.(14)

One mission at the CGAS Port Angeles, shortly after the War began, was patrolling the eastern regions of the North Pacific seeking Japanese submarines and offering protections for shipping. Unhappy, (not the word to describe MacDiarmid's displeasure) with the patrol planes' coverage of the area, he is claimed to have taken a pilot on a mission to show the hesitant airman what he meant by a long range mission!

Alarmed local citizens frequently reported numerous submarine sightings to the military authorities. Most, however, were "dead heads," derelict logs from the timber industry bobbing at the water's surface. In the war panic at the time sweeping through the coastal regions of the West, almost anything might be cited as Japanese invaders. (A series of slash fires toward Forks once was reported as burning arrows to direct Japanese bombers to Seattle.) When MacDiarmid was churning for combat duty, chasing dead heads was just a further irritant.

On this day's patrol—to demonstrate his maximum range—after take-off with a twin engine JRF amphibian airplane, MacDiarmid switched both engines to run off one of two equal tanks of gasoline then proceeded toward Japan away from the coast in a straight line out over the Pacific Ocean. Later when the engines, starved for fuel coughed, he switched both over the remaining tank and started back to base proclaiming, "That's what I mean about max range!"(15)

If the anecdote is true, and it probably has some bases in fact, it demonstrates his dynamic action without regard to unforeseen circumstances. As a senior aviator, Mac Dee still had only about three year's flight experience; about the same amount as a modern pilot before being allowed to take command of an aircraft for the first time. MacDiarmid, being relatively high ranking, would always command the aircraft regardless of his sagacity, or lack of it, as long as he met the minimum requirements for operating an airplane. In his case, since he was also the approving authority, there was no question of an instant certification. He signed them himself. Thus, he did not serve the long apprenticeships gaining wisdom normally experienced by junior officers under the supervision of accomplished senior aviators.

Even with more experience, he demonstrated scant regard for mature thinking. A few years later, as Commanding officer at San Diego and in command of a PBM seaplane returning from Mexico, the co-pilot expressed concern about insufficient fuel. As Mac dozed, the co-pilot reduced power for maximum range: (The co-pilot stated)

He'd awake with a start, look at the instruments and reset power for normal cruise again....I objected, saying his power settings would run us out of fuel before reaching San Diego. It was a struggle, but I finally convinced him there was a difference between maximum endurance and maximum range. The story ends with a safe landing in San Diego [Bay] with both engines quitting as we taxied to the ramp.(16)

The story of the Japanese bombing his command in Port Angeles six months following the attack on Pearl Harbor is still remembered by some—vividly:

The Coast Guard Air Station on the narrow strip of rock and silt (barely one hundred yards wide at its widest) forms the north side to the bowl shaped harbor. The Coast Guard base consisted of a concrete building with offices and quarters for the crews. (This building built by the WPA is still the main headquarters office for the base. Art deco associated with WPA projects can still be seen on the building's front.) Additionally, there was a hangar, seaplane ramp, docks, and two runways. The main east-west runway runs along the north beach and was then defended from air or sea attack by six machine-gun emplacements, four at the corners and one along each side the near the middle. Sheltered in each pit were two .30 caliber Lewis Machine-guns. The main building sits about the midpoint of the long runway on the south or harbor side.

Demolition charges were placed at each end of this building. These were the standard Navy 325 pound depth-charges fused with an electrical detonator for use in destroying the building in the event of an enemy landing. Early in World War II, the military on the US West Coast was preparing for a Japanese invasion. And Captain Mac was not pleased with the preparation for war by his unit.

Despite repeated rebukes to his executive officer for his junior's seemingly lack of energies dedicated to defense preparations, MacDiarmid deemed his station not ready for an attack. Therefore, he resorted to his typical bold actions to remedy this problem.

MacDiarmid took William Morgan, Ordnanceman 3/c, (a resident of Sequim until he died a couple years ago) and "Red" Merril, Boatswains mate 1/c into his confidence. Morgan was directed to sneak around the barracks the night of MacDiarmid's planned drill and gather up all the rifle ammunition. (Each man had a Springfield rifle slung to his bedpost.) Also, during the night the bos'un created shallow puddles of oil scattered about the station. Then early in the morning Morgan crouched in the machine-gun nest across the runway from the crews' building holding five sticks of dynamite. The drill was about to begin.

MacDiarmid took off from the Port Angeles municipal airport (located about five miles away) where he had parked an airplane the previous afternoon. Shortly he was screaming in at low altitude over the base in pre-dawn darkness on a mock attack.

The roar of the airplane passing low overhead the base was the signal for Morgan to start flinging his sticks of dynamite out into the water off the north beach, then fire the machine gun at a smoke float in the water dropped from the airplane. Meanwhile, Merril set the oil puddles ablaze creating a realistic scene.

Men tumbled out of the building through doors and windows—carrying with them empty rifles—dashing to the air raid trenches. One sensible sailor, like the fictional television character, deputy sheriff Barney Fife, kept a bullet in his pocket—just in case. He was ready for the invasion. But his rifle accidentally fired as he fell into an air raid ditch. The lone bullet to defend the country passed harmlessly between the legs of an Ensign scurrying just ahead of him.

Meanwhile, tracer bullets from the machine gun trained by Morgan into the empty dark-sky were ricocheting off the water and making a fiery display just to the north of the harbor in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Behind him and across the narrow spit a Navy ship lay peacefully at anchor in the quiet harbor.

The slumbering Navy crew alerted by the noises of war went immediately to general quarters. The ship's gun crew was ready instantly; Pearl Harbor was not going to be repeated for this Navy ship. They fired their 20mm machine-guns at the only obvious target in the darkness, the circling U.S. Coast Guard JRF Goose.

MacDiarmid immediately abandoned his offensive role seeing the tracers arcing his way. In defense, he hurriedly retreated north across the strait into Canada.

Meanwhile, MacDiarmid's crew at the air station was a little more prepared than he assumed. One junior officer, before abandoning his post for the safety of the air raid trench, got a message off to headquarters in Seattle indicating the air station was under enemy attack. An immediate wartime alert of a Japanese invasion spread down the entire west coast of United States.

The crew was now better prepared for war. MacDiarmid was partly correct in his assessment of his unit's preparedness; no one remembered to detonate the charges to destroy the building—the white building you can still see today out on the spit now, ironically it is now named for MacDiarmid. However, Mac Dee succeeded where the Japanese failed, by attacking the United States continent.(17)

It still took one more year frustratingly preparing his command in Port Angeles for combat before MacDiarmid got his wish to go to war. In July 1943 he took command of VP-6, a Navy patrol plane squadron located in Greenland, manned almost entirely by Coast Guard crews. It was responsible for arctic anti-submarine patrols. His squadron did not get any submarine kills, however. But he recounts "during this period this squadron and air group pursued a vigorous submarine campaign in waters where many ships had been struck by enemy torpedoes--nearly fifty of them within thirty days before this Coast Guard Squadron VP-6 took station."(18) Unknown to him at the time: the new navy "jeep" aircraft carriers with TBM Avenger torpedo bombers had all but eliminated the German submarine threat in the Atlantic by June 1943.

The Navy awarded MacDiarmid the Navy Air Medal for "aggressive Arctic Operations," following his ten month's duty in Greenland.(19)

MacDiarmid moved to San Diego in the spring of 1944. And once again he served as a commanding officer, this time of the CG Air Station there and its newly formed Search and Rescue Unit under the new national SAR plan.

Everlastingly the whip, MacDiarmid insisted on speedy responses to rescue alerts. When the alarm sounded to launch the "ready aircraft," his men ran or used bicycles to reach the airplane fast. He expected even the cumbersome seaplanes rolled down the ramp into the bay

and the "beaching gear" removed with the plane in the air in five minutes. [Beaching gear is large wheels mounted on floating boxes. The boxes with wheels below attach to either side of the seaplane to allow it to be moved and stored on land. These wheel/box assemblies are easily detachable once the aircraft is afloat.] If pilots were a little slow in reaching the airplane, they could expect to find their commanding officer, MacDiarmid sitting in the pilot's seat. Frequently, he scrambled with the assigned crew to the airplane, taking pleasure in beating a "ready" pilot out of his seat. On one occasion all the crew beat him to the airplane and locked the doors preventing him from entering. He ran down the launching ramp with the seaplane pounding on the side, unsuccessful, abandoning his attempt when he reached the water's edge. Then there was the time he flew into a rage when someone stole his bicycle.

His lack of enthusiasm in areas of administration had staffs moaning over his disrespect for paperwork, and the language he used in official communications he did do was often inflammatory. MacDiarmid's files overflowed with dunning notices from his superiors of late or missing reports and his subordinates lived in mortal frustration trying to get his action on paper work.

MacDiarmid was a cockpit man. His mission, as he saw it, was to save lives and, moreover, prove the seaplane capable of that task. On this charge, he proceeded with a vengeance; he was nonpareil.

MacDiarmid, simultaneously, held the newly emerging helicopter in open disdain. To one of his junior officers leaving for helicopter training, he said you will be "no good for the Coast Guard. The only thing you'll be good for is county fairs and hauling Santa Claus."(20)

With victory in 1945 and a large inventory of modern seaplanes available, the Coast Guard returned to the task of rescuing victims of sea disasters. This meant attempting seaplane landings offshore well beyond the sheltered waters for which the seaplane was designed. The reliable PBY amphibian of World War II fame was giving away to the larger more powerful Martin Company's twin engine PBM Mariner seaplane, itself a design of the late 1930s.

MacDiarmid believed the Mariner offered a far better service "if" it, using its long range ability, could land at sea anywhere to retrieve downed aviators and shipping disaster victims. He set out to prove his contention.(21)

Captain Frank A. Erickson, the Coast Guard's first helicopter pilot, original developer of the helicopter and longtime critic of seaplanes—though a seaplane pilot himself—wrote, "There were many aviators who still insisted that the Coast Guard's future in aviation required the operation of seaplanes from the open seas." His remarks were based on his observation that the modern

seaplanes were tough but heavy and required speeds much higher for take-off and landings than the Coast Guard's previous aircraft. Furthermore, rough water operation was not a design criterion for the Mariner.(22)

The Coast Guard had no fleet of proven aircraft for their new responsibility of oceanic search and rescue, officially placed on them for the first time as the war ended. Even their ability to undertake this SAR role was open to question, at least in the eyes of MacDiarmid. In a memorandum from San Diego after the war ended, and the day the Coast Guard began its transition to the Department of the Treasury, MacDiarmid pleaded:

that we maintain our Air Sea Rescue setup here because if we let it drop the Navy is simply going to accept that gesture as an admission that the Coast Guard is unable to adjust itself to solve problems and are consequently unreliable or undependable. There are, as you know, quite a few people in the Navy who are watching Coast Guard operations critically, hoping that we will stumble.(23)

The Navy provided MacDiarmid with a modified PBM, instrumented to measure structural loads, assigned to his off-shore landing test project. For the next three years MacDiarmid tested the airplane against the sea. He approached the task first by "studying open sea conditions," not the airplane. MacDiarmid consulted with experts from University of California, Berkeley and Scripps Institute. He concluded after making tests by landing and taking off in all directions from a given spot, "the practice of taking off and landing parallel to the crest of the swells was" the safest course.(24) Further experiments revealed reversible pitch propellers shortened the landing run and Jet Assisted Take Offs (JATOs)(25) reduced the take-off run, however the airplane still had to endure the impact pressures at speeds over eighty knots on the water.

MacDiarmid discovered even landing in line with wave crests it was difficult to keep wing tip floats from submerging in a wave before the hull was buoyant and slowed. This condition led to a near disaster and concluded the program when MacDiarmid was teaching new pilots his techniques for offshore landings five miles southwest of Point Loma, California. The aircraft, being piloted by a young co-pilot, skipped back into the air after its first contact with the ocean, lost airspeed and the right wing stalled. The plane struck the water hard on its nose and right wing tip. The right wing tip float submerged ripping off the entire wing. The airplane plowed on ahead uncontrollable still at high speed with MacDiarmid hanging onto his armrest yelling, "Whoa, Whoa, Goddamit whoa!" The left wing then dropped and dug its float into the swell ripping off the float and swerving the plane around ninety degrees. Extra pilots on board and some of the crew tried vainly to keep the left wing elevated by clambering out on the stub of what was left of the right wing. The plane slowly rolled over and sank. The crew escaped.(26)

"Some of Cap'm Mac's senior officers did not share his enthusiasm for seaplanes and open-sea landings." MacDiarmid reportedly told this tale on himself: Open sea landings required the approval of an admiral. "Once, when MacDiarmid thought some lives were unnecessarily lost, he went to the senior officer with a plea that the admiral consider the hundreds of times that he had landed in the open sea and leave the decision to land to his own judgment. The admiral grinned easily, and after a short pause said, 'Mac, I don't think a man who would take an airplane into the sea hundreds of times has very good judgment.'"(27)

MacDiarmid, for his research, received the Navy's Distinguished Flying Cross (D.F.C.) and not immodestly (in his own words) said, "Believe self, second most experienced rescue pilot in the Coast Guard, after Captain [Richard L.] Burke (CG aviator #15)." Burke was the first to do successful open sea landings rescuing people in the early 1930's.

MacDiarmid began a second series of tests in 1949 carrying on through 1951 with the PBM, the even larger and more powerful Navy Martin P5M Marlin, and the then new Grumman HU-16 Albatross. From these tests he, according to his statements, "planned to meet all known ocean conditions up to limits of aircraft strength and sea capability."(28) For this research correlating effects of waves on seaplanes, he received the Institute of Aeronautical Sciences, Octave Chanute Award in 1950.

Despite a career long dedication, MacDiarmid never proved that the modern seaplane could land successfully at sea.

MacDiarmid, despite the setbacks proving off-shore capabilities of seaplanes, still thumped his theses. In a 1951 paper to the Society of Automotive Engineers, (S.A.E.) he reported the "seaplane excels the surface ship today in speed and search efficiency." Then he conceded in one brief sentence, that it does not have the "ability to do a job on the scene of action." He did point out that the helicopter's one ability "is excelling at the scene despite rough seas, or shoals or surf, all conditions unfavorable to seaplanes." MacDiarmid then acceded, "the records [of helicopter rescues] show occasional brilliant rescues accomplished under average command competence." Then MacDiarmid quickly pointed out, "Partisans for this or that gear will quote such examples as proof of what the equipment used can do." MacDiarmid, then taking a direct attack, ignoring a steady accumulation of remarkable rescues by the helicopter, bringing it more notoriety with each case, defended his lifetime devotion to a single cause, struck out with, "This is not realistic thinking."(29)

The Coast Guard stopped using seaplanes in 1960.

MacDiarmid, seeing the changes ahead and ever the opportunist for rescue action, recognized helicopter pilots were now beginning to get the important SAR missions with the accompanying notoriety. The airplanes searched but it was the helicopter crews that picked up the survivors. The helicopter pilot was becoming the publics' hero. In June 1953 he wrote, "So many boys have been busting these mechanized Pogo sticks—and a few killing themselves in the operation that I decided inasmuch as I have to order people out in these things I'd better learn to fly them myself."

Typically, MacDiarmid overstated. At the time he wrote this, the Coast Guard had only one helicopter accident where two died. In a sense to depreciate his acceptance he continued, writing facetiously, "I actually employ these monstrosities only to get across the [aircraft parking] apron to a real flying machine without burning my delicate feet on the hot cement."(30)

MacDiarmid qualified in helicopters in 1953.(31) As a result, he was also the target of attacks by contemporaries who lived many years with his visceral scorn over the machine. "I hear by via the grapevine," Capt. John Waters wrote MacDiarmid in a flippant note, "that you are now a helicrapper (sic) pilot, and have conceded that [Capt. Frank] Erickson [Coast Guard proponent for the helicopter] was right all along. We have heard rumors that the 'ready spot' [alert aircraft] at the ramp is now occupied by a HO4S [helicopter] instead of a PBM."(32)

MacDiarmid, even as commanding officer yet at one more air station, a forty-seven year old Captain, volunteered to stand the search and rescue alert duty with the junior pilots, still racing them to the pilot's seat when the SAR alarm sounded. In the end, the type of plane did not matter to MacDiarmid. It was also during this time that he carried a briefcase with him containing papers he claimed proved the commandant stopped him from making admiral. A former Coast Guard commandant said, "He'd show it to anyone."(33)

MacDiarmid wrote in a report when he was still Commanding officer at Port Angeles that "this station recently learned that COMINCH [Adm. Ernest J. King on 15 February 1943] has designated the Coast Guard to develop Helicopters for the use with convoys. Rumors of terrible losses suffered by some convoys offers a challenge to any belligerent spirit. All senior pilots on this station have volunteered for this duty," which might seem to indicate even he was an early volunteer for flying helicopters or it was just one more ruse for him to go to war.(34)

In the end the breed of the steed was irrelevant. Cap'm Mac would ride anything into the fray.

NOTES:

- (1) http://www.uscg.mil/history/STATIONS/CGAIRST_Port_Angeles.html
- (2) Ken Bilderback, "Cigars and Rough Water," *Naval Aviation News* (Nov-Dec 1994), p. 18.
- (3) John M. Waters, "Finally the Twain Did Meet," *Foundation* 12, No. 1 (Spring 1991), p. 99.
- (4) Waters, *Rescue at Sea* 2nd Edition, p. 113.
- (5) Donald B. MacDiarmid, memorandum to Commander S.F. Gray, 4 January 1946 (US Coast Guard Academy Library). MacDairmid, "Biography of Capt. D.B. MacDIARMID (sic) for SAE." No date, however, possibly prepared by MacDairmid for upcoming paper presentation to Society of Automotive Engineers meeting in October 1958 or another in 1961. MacDiarmid nearly always typed his name "MacDIARMID" in letters and other correspondence, (USCGA).

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- (6) MacDiarmid, memorandum to Gray. MacDiarmid, "Biography." The Coast Guard, in 1930, had qualified only thirteen aviators since they started training officers fifteen years before.
- (7) Willard J. Smith interview by Dennis L. Noble, 28 August 1998.
- (8) Arthur Hesford, author telephone interviews, May and June 1995. MacDiarmid might have nearly been dropped from flight training the second time except for the intervention of Hesford, then the Coast Guard's liaison officer at Pensacola.
- (9) MacDiarmid, "War Diary," 2 May 1943. Copies of the War Diary are in the history archives, Coast Guard Air Station Port Angeles, Washington, and CG Historian, hereafter, ("[Author] War Diary," date), the diary had different writers and was addressed to Commander, Northwest Sea Frontier, Commandant, Coast Guard Headquarters, Naval Air Center, Seattle, District Coast Guard Officer, Seattle, 13th Naval District. MacDiarmid reported directly to three commands noted except the Commandant.
- (10) MacDiarmid, "War Diary," 19 April 1943.
- (11) MacDiarmid, "War Diary," 19 June 1943.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Author interviews with MacDiarmid shipmates, officer and enlisted, 1989 to 1995.
- (15) Waters, "Finally the Twain Did Meet," p. 93. Author interviews at annual reunions of the Pterodyctals, an association of Coast Guard aviators.

- (16) Victor A. G. Schmidt, Letter to author, 18 July 1994.
- (17) William Morgan, interview, 30 December 1994. MacDiarmid, "War Diary," 14 June 1942. MacDiarmid's official report of the incident follows: "During the past week exercises in bombing have been continued for all pilots and the intensive drills have continued with the emphasis on the preparation for defense. During the week a very realistic simulated raid was staged on the spit to ascertain reactions of the personnel and the flexibility of the organization under what all hands thought were real conditions. A plane from another field zoomed the barracks in the night and simultaneously a machine gun was fire and several dynamite charges set off to simulate the explosion of falling bombs. As general quarters was sounding several staged oil fires were set off and the plane itself dropped a float light in the water near the beach to give the illusion of magnesium bombs. The blackout was very prompt and effective and the fires were smartly handled. The planes (parked on the ramp) were quickly dispersed and machine gun pits were manned very rapidly. The rifle detail were very slow getting into their trenches mainly due to the absence of the gunners mate who was operating stage props for the surprise show and the disappointing lack of initiative on the part of other petty officer who stood stupidly by looking at the rifles in their racks but not doing anything about it. Hoses which were connected and let out were not tested for water pressure nor were the emergency pumbers immediately tested. In general the drill was a very valuable and educational and the conduct of the crew was very heartening."
- (18) MacDiarmid, memorandum for Commander S.F. Gray, 4 January 1947, (USCGA).
- (19) MacDiarmid, "BIOGRAPHY of Capt. D. B. MacDiarmid."
- (20) Shrode, interview.
- (21) Waters, "Finally the Twain Did Meet," *Foundation*, 92.
- (22) Frank Erickson, "A Brief History of Coast Guard Aviation," United States Coast Guard Academy Alumni Association *The Bulletin* (Nov-Dec 1966), p. 424.
- (23) MacDiarmid, memorandum to W.L. Sinton, 14 January 1946 (USCGA).
- (24) MacDiarmid, memorandum to Sinton; Smith interview. This idea of landing along the major swells was passed to Admiral Smith by Pan Am Clipper pilots at San Francisco in 1942-43. Smith used this technique for two successful off-shore rescues in 1943.

(25) JATO were small rocket motors, both liquid and solid propellant, mounted on the side of the aircraft in multiples.

(26) Marion G. Shrode, author telephone interview, 28 May 1995.

(27) Ken Bilderback, "Cigars and Rough Water," *Naval Aviation News*, Nov-Dec 1994, p. 18.

(28) MacDiarmid, memorandum Gray; MacDiarmid, letter to Commandant, 29 June 1959 (USCGA). This letter is one where MacDiarmid seeks an award. His flight crew was recognized; he was not: "Subj: Award, earned beyond question; request for:

1. Reference (a) formally recognized an individual for flying as co-pilot of a Coast Guard PBM-3 through a difficult and dangerous flight. Captain D. B. MacDIARMID, then a Commander, was the pilot in command on that flight, make the take-off, the sea landing, the maneuver to recover 8 survivors and a dog from dinghies on the sea, the open sea take-off, sweated the long ride home almost out of fuel, made the landing in San Diego harbor and maneuvered to the buoy. This rescue was widely recognized by the press and wire services. John VUKIC richly earned the ribbon he received. MacDIARMID, the command pilot who flew the mission, certainly earned it as well.

2. This issue was not previously by the writer for fear it would jeopardize and prejudice chances of recognition of officers and men subsequently serving under the then Commander, later Captain MacDIARMID. Among the more than 370 assistance sorties the writer has personally flown, there were many more difficult and dangerous day flights and night flights in rain and fog and snow, searches in mountains when all other aircraft were grounded, landings in seas so rough the captain of the ship present refused to lower a boat, taxiing into a 13-foot surf, night sea operations, landing on a tiny mountain mesa where one mistake was death, flights in foul weather to the very limit of fuel, a helicopter landing and take-off in winds gusting to over 50 knots with the only possible touch-down crosswind, rescues and rescue attempts from beaches, mountain dry lakes, etc., etc. This incident is cited because it has been investigated and recognized.

3. The writer believes he was ignored in this rescue deliberately as a matter of palace politics. He is retiring in a few days. NO mediocre officer need fear his reputation now.

D.B. MacDIARMID

(29) MacDiarmid, Paper for S.A.E., "The Seaplane in the U.S. Coast Guard," presented at the SAE National Aeronautic Meeting, New York City, 16 April 1951 (USCGA).

(30) MacDiarmid, letter to John Bate and Carl F. Reupsch, 26 June 1953 (USCGA).

(31) MacDiarmid, letter from Commanding Officer, CGAS Elizabeth City (MacDiarmid) designating himself qualified in the "HO5S type helicopter," (USCGA).

(32) Waters, letter to MacDiarmid, undated (circa 1953), (USCGA).

(33) Smith interview.

(34) MacDiarmid, "War Diary," 7 March 1943.

