

# Composer visits Esquimalt to research wartime sinking

By Andrea Lavigne  
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**Scott Macmillan and his son Ian (left) check out a photo of HMCS Esquimalt at the Maritime Museum of B.C.**

Sharon Tiffin/News staff

Scott Macmillan's father, Robert, commanded ill-fated HMCS Esquimalt

Renowned composer Scott Macmillan's quest not only took him clear across the country – it took him back in time.

He traveled more than 6,000 kilometres from his home in Halifax to Esquimalt in search of information about his father. Lieut. Robert Macmillan was the commanding officer of HMCS Esquimalt – the last Canadian warship lost to German torpedoes in the Second World War.

“It was a very painful experience for my father. He didn't talk about it much,” Scott MacMillan said.

HMCS Esquimalt was ordered to patrol the approaches to Halifax on April 16, 1945. According to reports, the Canadian minesweeper circled over a U-boat two or three times that morning, but failed to detect it.

The Germans fired an acoustic homing torpedo at HMCS Esquimalt, tearing a hole in its starboard side. Within four minutes, the warship sank. Only 27 of the 71 crewmen survived the frigid waters.

Robert Macmillan was rescued, but he didn't talk about the incident. He died in 1977,

leaving his son with many unanswered questions. It wasn't until his mother died – 50 years to the day after that horrific event – that Macmillan started to think about commemorating the sinking through music.

“It's my way of giving my respect to my father,” said MacMillan, who has been Symphony Nova Scotia's host conductor of the Maritime Pop Series since 1995.

To capture the sinking of the HMCS Esquimalt in music, Macmillan needed more information. His research led him to the Esquimalt Memorial Association. He timed his visit to coincide with the association's annual memorial service that commemorates HMCS Esquimalt's sacrifice.

“It was very emotional for me,” he said. “But it's a healthy pain.”

Macmillan was also able to connect with Greater Victoria resident Joe Wilson – one of only two remaining survivors of the tragedy – and local resident Morris Shonfield, the crew member of HMCS Sarnia who helped pull Scott's father to safety. He also spoke with Dorothy Smith, the widow of Esquimalt crew member Frank Smith.

“It was always in my imagination,” Macmillan said of the music. “So this (research) is bringing it a little closer to reality.”

Macmillan wanted to fill in the moments from the ship's sinking to the six hours the men spent clinging to small life-rafts waiting for rescue.

“I want to come up with a creation that will reflect the courage and that determination to live,” he said.

Before their rescue, the men fought exposure by singing. A hymn book found in his father's pocket at the time of his rescue was opened to “Rock of Ages” – music that will be featured in Macmillan's piece.

His historical quest and creative process is being documented by his 22-year-old son, Ian, who accompanied him to Victoria.

“I've always been curious about (my grandfather's) time in the war, but I never had a chance to meet him,” Ian said.

Scott Macmillan is hoping to complete the composition by July and premiere the piece next week on the anniversary of the ship's sinking, possibly in conjunction with Ian's documentary. Scott is also considering writing the piece so it could be reorchestrated by the Esquimalt Naden Band.

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