

The Zeebrugge Raid Veteran George McKnight

George McKnight was born in Dunedin on 6th April 1887, the fourth child of George McKnight and Helen nee McDougall. His father, who emigrated from Edinburgh in 1874, worked as an engineer for pioneer chemical manufacturer Thomas Kempthorne.



George b 1887(seated) with his brother William, photo circa 1896 Dunedin

Young George received his early education at Caversham School. He joined the Caversham Harrier Club at its inception in 1905 and discovered he had more than a little talent as a distance runner. At a time when athletics held a high profile George McKnight was in the top rank. In his first season at age 18 he won the three-mile vice-presidents handicap and the five-mile Caversham Championship.

This was the start of an extremely successful running career. In 1908 he won the Otago Cross country championships and gained several other places. The Otago Witness, August 26th 1908 had this to say "G. McKnight is a young runner although he has been competing with more or less success for three years. This season has so far proved his best and he has practically carried everything before himhis action and style are very easy and he has a nice stride and runs equally well on the track as he does over country, a thing which very few of our harriers can do."

In the 1909 track season, after finishing second in the New Zealand three-mile championship, and bettering the N.Z. standard he represented N.Z. in the Australasian games, in Brisbane achieving a fourth place in the three-mile championship. In that year, in which he served his third term as club captain for the harriers he won the club championship, the Edmond Cup and was a member of the winning Otago team at the N.Z. Championships in Timaru.



George McKnight first on left back row , Reverse reads-Caversham Harriers, George McKnight Champion Long Distance Runner of Otago.1908



The team that went to Brisbane. Geo. McKnight far left in row of five.

After again winning the club championships in 1910 and finishing sixth in the Otago Championship he went on to take out the individual gold medal at the National Championships run over five-miles, held that year in Invercargill. According to the Southland Times "about a thousand spectators were on the grounds when starter McLean despatched the

seventeen starters McKnight took to the front at just past the two-mile stage and established a long lead. G. McKnight as first man past the post became Individual Cross Country Champion of New Zealand."



The New Zealand Cross Country gold medal

The visitors were entertained at a dinner at the Railway Hotel.



Railway Hotel Leven Street Invercargill

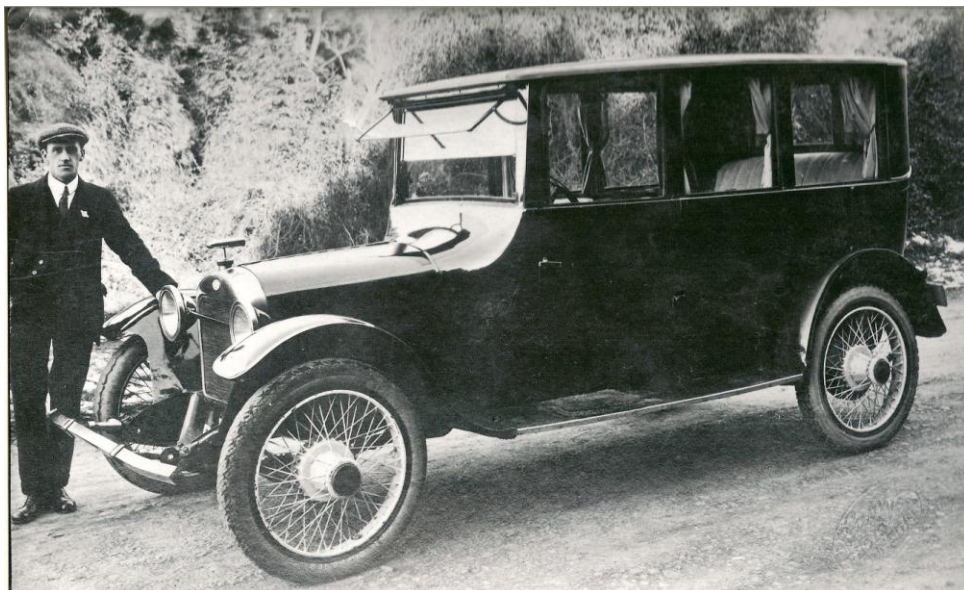
In 1911, on taking employment at the Hillside Workshops, George joined the Civil Service Harriers and in 1912 he ran third in the New Zealand Championships at Wellington.

1913 was his last competitive year when he was placed third in both the provincial and national championships. On the street the talk was of the escalation of tension in the Balkans and what the implications might mean be for Britain and her colonies. Possibly the greatest race of his career took place on September 5th 1908 when G. McKnight, “the Caversham Harriers’ crack” won the Port Chalmers to Dunedin road race in the remarkable time of 41min 45 sec reducing the previous best time by 1min 36 sec, a time beaten only once since by Jim Barnes, later Mayor of Dunedin.



Some of George’s running medals

George began his working life in 1903 as an engineer at A. and T. Burt. He always had a passion for motor cars, a passion he later turned into a career. In 1920 he operated a taxi business from his home in Pacific Street and owned the first sedan taxi in Dunedin



George McKnight with his taxi circa 1920

A few years later he opened his own garage at 28 Stafford Street Dunedin, operating as a motor engineer, cycle dealer and new car salesman. George held the agency for the "Chalmers' car and the curiously named "Alldays and Onions"

1910 was a big year for George McKnight. In addition to holding the National cross-country title he was married on 13 April 1910 to Alma Isobel Wheeler the eldest daughter of John and Isabella Wheeler nee Gillies.

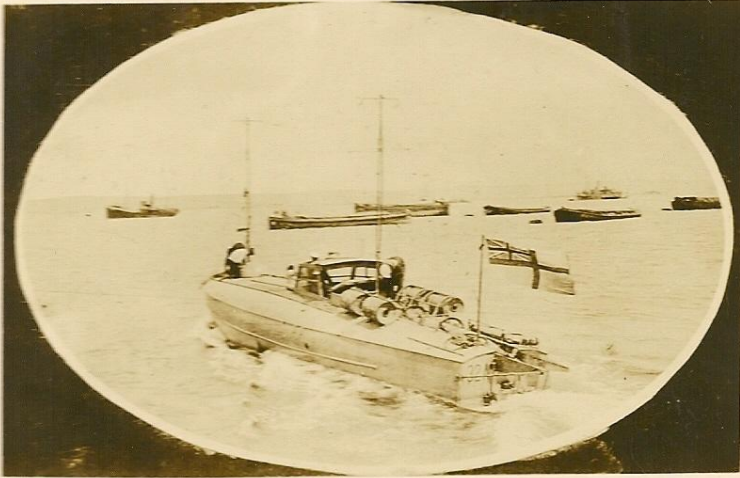
The couples' first son George was born on 1st June 1910 and a second son Ian Ernest on 12th January 1914. However, married life for the McKnights was about to undergo a drastic change as New Zealand called up its young men to fight for the Empire in the Great War.

George McKnight travelled to England where he enlisted as a naval Petty Officer with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserves (R.N.V.R.) on the Dover patrol .He would later take part in the famous 1918 "Zeebrugge Raid" one of the most gallant actions of the Great War. When the RNVR were formed, their random assortment of small vessels was looked down upon by the regular British Navy, who facetiously referred to the reservists as Harry Tate's Navy,* the inference being this miscellaneous collection of men & vessels was not to be taken seriously. Events would demonstrate how wrong they were.

*Harry Tate was the stage name of English comedian Ronald Macdonald Hutchison (1872-1940) who performed both in music halls and in film.

At the time of the Raid George was serving as Chief Motor Mechanic McKnight on "Coastal motor boat, C.M.B. 15. These small boats carried a crew of four and were capable of speeds up to 40 knots.

They were known ironically as "hush boats' due to the fact you could hear them coming from miles away.



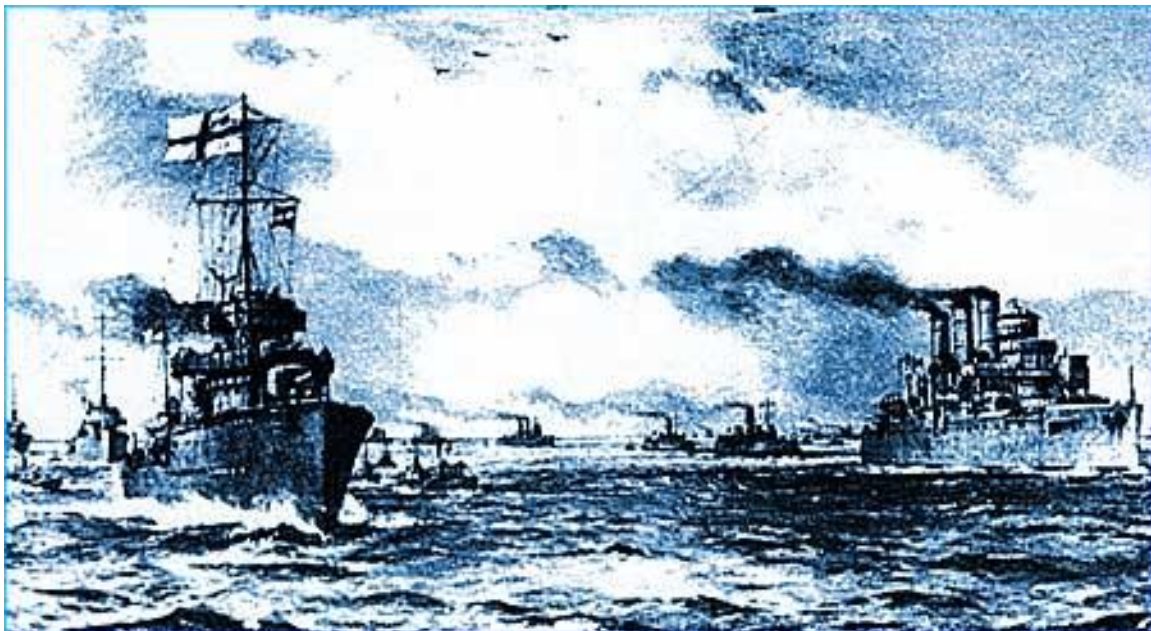
Above, George McKnight onboard at Dover (photo McKnight Collection)

The spring of 1918 saw the German offensive at its height. In the air the German raiders droned over London night after night. At sea the U-boat campaign was eating into neutral and allied shipping alike. The Zeebrugge Raid, which took place on St. George's Day, April 23rd 1918, was an attempt by the British Royal Navy to neutralise the key Belgian port of Bruges-Zeebrugge. The port was used by the German navy as a base for their U-boats and light shipping and was a serious threat to Allied shipping especially in the English Channel.

A force of seventy five volunteer ships, 1700 regulars, plus volunteers was amassed for an assault on the enemy port.

The Raid

The British, commanded by Vice-Admiral Roger Keyes planned to sink three old cruisers, their hulls filled with 1500 tons of concrete and rubble, in the channel of the canal to block it. These would have to pass a long harbour mole (causeway) with a battery at the end, before they were scuttled. It was decided therefore to storm the mole using another old cruiser HMS Vindictive, and two old Mersey ferries, Daffodil and Iris, modified as assault vessels. Eighteen motor boats and thirty three launches were to be used during the raid, weaving in and out of the large ships, laying smoke screens and standing by to pick up survivors. Large smoke screens were to play a crucial role in the plan .A new method of producing smoke had recently been developed by Commander Brock, son of the commander of the Brocks firework Company. It involved injecting chemical into the exhaust fumes of the motor boats. Operational documents show that C.M.B.15 was the sole craft in Unit B given the task of laying smoke screen along the Western approaches of the attacking flotilla- by dropping smoke floats (versus laying it from the boat itself) George always referred to 15 as his “lucky” number. In an interview given to the Southland Times Mr McKnight remembers- “the man who organised the laying of the smoke screen was one of the Brock brothers famous for their pyrotechnics .He accompanied the ships and was killed in action .When another of the brothers came to Dunedin for a pyrotechnic display I met him and mentioned knowing his brother from the Zeebrugge Raid.”



The fleet leave for the offensive

As the fleet approached the Belgian coast, the huge smokescreen was initially successful at hiding the British ships but at the last minute a wind change dispersed their cover. The

marines, whose objective was to destroy German gun positions came under heavy fire and suffered numerous casualties. HMS Vindictive, spotted by the German gun positions was forced to land in the wrong location, resulting in the loss of the marines' heavy gun support.

Eventually Submarine HMS C3 ran the gauntlet of fire and destroyed the iron viaduct forming part of the mole. Submarine Commander Sanford was awarded the V.C. for this action.

The difficulties experienced in storming the mole resulted in heavy German fire on the blocking ships. One did not make it to the canal entrance and was scuttled prematurely. The other two were sunk at the narrowest point of the canal.

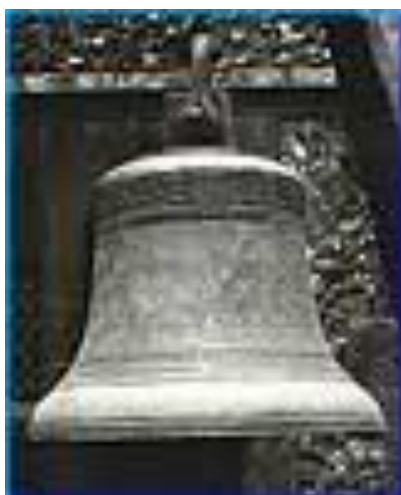
When the siren sounded for withdrawal the embarkation of survivors was completed in twenty minutes. The Iris was hit twelve times as she made her departure with heavy loss of life amongst those packed on board. Battered virtually beyond recognition the Vindictive limped back to Dover. The cost of the action was 214 men killed and 383 wounded. Two hundred decorations were earned that night including eight Victoria Crosses. Commodore Keyes received a knighthood.

George McKnight was awarded the Victory Medal, the British War Medal and the 1914-15 Star for his contribution.(National Archive London WW1 Medal Rolls)

The Zeebrugge raid was promoted by the Allies as a key British victory and certainly it provided a huge morale boost at a pivotal period of the war. However casualties were high and as one of the block ships had been sunk before reaching the canal the Germans were quick to create a new channel around the obstruction.

The outcome of the offensive may have been ultimately indecisive but the courage of those that volunteered is without question.

After the war the people of Zeebrugge presented Dover with the Zeebrugge Bell which had hung on the end of the mole and was rung by the Germans to warn of a British attack. The bell is housed on the front of the Old Town Hall, where it is rung every year on St. George's Day, 23rd April, in honour of the Dover patrol.



GALLANT NEW ZEALANDERS.

(PRESS ASSOCIATION TELEGRAM.)

WELLINGTON, May 4.

The New Zealanders who took part in the Zeebrugge raid were:—

- G. McKnight (Mrs A. J. McKnight, Calder street, Dunedin, m.)
- C. D. Pulsford (Mrs J. Canning, Eastbourne, Wellington, m.)
- J. McLoughlin (Mrs A. M. McLoughlin, Yule street, Kilbirnie, Wellington, w.)
- L. E. McQueen (Mrs A. E. McQueen, St. Albans road, Auckland, m.)
- J. H. Payne (Mrs E. Payne, Hobson street, Auckland, m.)
- R. McGinley (Mrs M. McGinley, Jervois road, Ponsonby, Auckland, m.)

(SPECIAL TO "THE PRESS.")

DUNEDIN, May 4.

George McKnight, who took part in the Zeebrugge raid, is an old Caversham schoolboy and a well-known local runner. Up till the time of his departure to serve in the Motor Patrol Service he was a taxi-driver in Dunedin.

(PRESS ASSOCIATION TELEGRAM.)

Zeebrugge Raid Veteran Lives In Invercargill

Living in Invercargill at present is a veteran of the famous Zeebrugge raid, one of the Royal Navy's most famous exploits during World War I. He is Mr George McKnight, formerly of Dunedin, who has lived in Invercargill for the past 17 years.

The Zeebrugge raid was the first of a mighty dual attack by the British Navy to bottle-up two German-held ports on the Belgian coast, Zeebrugge and Ostend. Although accompanied by heavy loss of life, the attacks were so successful that enemy submarine activity was severely hampered, and a disconcerting blow to German morale was delivered.

Mr McKnight served on one of the Navy motor-boats which laid the smoke screen for the main attack, and subsequently rescue the crews of the "block ships" which were sunk in the entrance to the harbour as a block to enemy shipping.

"Harry Tate's Navy"

The motor-launches, useful as they were, were not generally appreciated by the men of the Royal Navy, and were often referred to as "Harry Tate's Navy," after a popular comedian of the day. But all that was changed after the attacks on Zeebrugge and Ostend, and Harry Tate sponsored them no more.

The attack on Zeebrugge was made in April, 1918. Mr McKnight well remembers how the force of ships steamed from Dover for an unknown destination, and after reaching Zeebrugge had to turn back because the wind was off the land and unsuitable for laying a smoke screen. Another attempt was made later, but rough seas forced the small ships to turn back, and it was on April 18 that the operation finally began.

The man who organized the laying of the smoke screen was one of the Brock brothers, famous for their pyrotechnics. He accompanied the ships, and was killed in action. When another of the brothers came to Dunedin for a pyrotechnic display, Mr McKnight met him and mentioned that he knew his brother in the Zeebrugge raid.

The canal leading to Bruges is protected by a semi-circular mole which was at that time heavily fortified. The plan was to breach the mole by blowing up a viaduct, and then block the entrance by sinking the block ships, old cruisers which had been filled with rubble and cement. The plan was carried out successfully, although casualties totalled 176 killed, 49 missing and 412 wounded.

New Zealand Volunteers

There was at least one New Zealander on every volunteer boat in both raids.

Mr McKnight, he was then Chief Motor Mechanic McKnight, a member of the R.N.V.R., was on a coastal motor-boat called C.M.B. 15. These small boats carried a crew of four, and were capable of speeds of up to 40 knots. To lay the artificial fog, or smoke screen, they patrolled up and down outside the mole for a distance of about six miles.

Mr McKnight has many recollections of that epic raid, and until recently he had a book describing the whole action. Unfortunately, like many other books, it was borrowed about four

At the conclusion of George's war service family life resumed for the McKnight's at 30 Pacific Street Dunedin. George did not return to his running career but retained always a keen interest in the sport. A daughter Runa Joy McKnight was born in 1921.

Alma McKnight's health was always delicate and in October 1931 she succumbed to a fatal bout of pneumonia.

While convalescing after an illness George met and married Invercargill woman Hazel Ruth Wesney. The couple lived initially in Cromwell where George worked as an engineer for the "Goldlights" company at Bendigo. For George, working on the gold dredge expanded into a lifelong passion He followed the gleam wherever it led him, which included many out of the way places where gold was found in the early days. Arrowtown, Cromwell, Skippers, the Galloway flats* are but a few of the places George worked with his pick and shovel sluice and pan .He never struck a "bonanza" but found more than enough to keep him searching. For him the real profit was not in the discovery and selling of gold but in the quest for it- the long tramps over hills and gullies, washing elusive gleaming specks from the gravel and silt by the edge of a gently flowing river, the days spent under sunny Central Otago skies the campfires, billy tea and long chats with other like- minded identities, he valued these more than the gold. George "those are the dividends that can't be measured in terms of money-that plus good health and a fit body."

- * For thousands of gold prospectors in the 1860s trekking the arduous Dunstan trail reaching Galloway flat meant they had finally conquered the last of four ranges separating Dunedin from Dunstan (Clyde)



Installing the engine for the "Goldlights" dredge. "Goldlights" dredge working at Bendigo Creek George McKnight on left




Sluicing at Bendigo, Geo McKnight on

right



**The Day's
Darg**



GEORGE THE FOSSICKER


One of the keenest of gold fossickers I have ever known is my old friend George McKnight, the Zeebrugge veteran. George has been interested in gold mining all his life and cheerfully admits that he has thrown more gold into holes in the ground than he has ever taken out.

But it is still an absorbing passion with him. Every holiday he loads up his old half-ton truck with pick, shovel and dish, cradle and other gear—and a bottle to carry the gold in. When the Roxburgh dam was officially opened—or rather closed—George was in the vanguard of the gold rush to fossick in the temporarily de-watered Clutha, and I was along with him. We found nothing on that occasion, but that little setback didn't deter George.

He now has a possie up near Alexandra to which he goes every opportunity, and only the other day he came back with an ounce of bright yellow gold that he and his mate had won between them in the short space of a week.

Maybe, when—or if—I ever get a few days off from the daily grind I will go with George to his Central possie and pursue the quest once again. The thrill is in the chase, especially when you really do see the gleam of yellow in the ground. But to all would-be gold fossickers, I would say that Mother Earth is hard to shift when you have to do the job a shovel full at a time after loosening up with a pick.

Funeral Notices



MEMBERS of the above association are requested to attend the Funeral of our late shipmate and life member 1928 George McKnight as intimated in this issue.

A. J. NOBLE
President
84876

In Invercargill George worked initially for H.E. Melhop Engineering then later for contractor Bert Crooks. Bert also bred and raced thoroughbreds and George was happy to pick up a few hot tips from Bert but still placed a couple of dollars on “lucky” number fifteen. Distance from the goldfields failed to deter him from his passion for prospecting and weekends and holidays would see him off to Central to follow up new leads. In addition to this activity George enjoyed various pursuits of a more social nature and was known for his fine singing voice. He was in his Dunedin days a member of the Caversham volunteer Fire Brigade, the Masonic Order, and he remained active in the ex Royal Naval Men’s Association where he was a lifetime member, and also the Orphans Club. George died on 31st March 1980 in Invercargill, at age 92.

George is buried at the Invercargill Eastern cemetery together with second wife Hazel who predeceased him.

