



*Down  
to the sea  
in ships:*

**The wartime experiences of  
Sub Lt. John Monaghan RNZN**





*Anzac Day 2021. John Monaghan (left) and Tony Goodwin*

## **Foreword**

Selwyn Village has an entertainment group. Twice a month they have outside people, very talented, come and perform for the residents on a Sunday afternoon.

In late September 2019, we had the Waitakere Voices Choir. I looked forward to hearing them, so wandered up to the Theatre, and found a seat next to Valerie Monaghan. We didn't know each other, but it's easy to talk in this atmosphere of musical enjoyment. How the conversation came around to her husband John, I don't know. But what she said led me to ask, "Could I meet John, his life sounds remarkable."

And so to this article.

**Tony Goodwin**  
**July 2020**

## **Early Years. Joining the Navy**

Ian John Archibald Monaghan was born at Glasgow on the 4<sup>th</sup> December 1922, one of six children. Nearly seven years later, the Monaghans decided to emigrate to New Zealand, and landed at Wellington on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1929.

*“My father was a policeman in Glasgow and was surprised to find in New Zealand, no police dogs. He was used to them in Glasgow.”*

The New Zealand police dog section wasn't established until 1956.

Following schooling at St Patrick's College, John began his studies at Victoria University. By 1940 however he became restless at studies while so many young men were preparing for war. So in January 1941 he joined the 1st Wellington Infantry Regiment.

Yet, his love for the sea led him to want to enter naval service.

*“I wanted to join the Navy but you needed your parents’ permission to join if you were under 21 because if you were assigned to a ship, you could be sent away at any time. My parents would not agree. Instead, in late 1941, I was conscripted into the NZ Army and was based at Moa Point with the Vickers Machine Gunners for my basic training. There were 18 of us in one house and we slept on thin straw mattresses (pallias) but it was a good life for a young man.*

*“We spent Christmas 1941 there but we still got to see our families when we had leave. A memorable event occurred one night while I was on guard duty; I almost shot my foot off with my own rifle.*

*“I joined the NZ Navy in August 1942. This was not easy, my Mother was against it, and the Army refused me permission to attend an interview. So I contacted the Navy to say I could not get permission to attend the interview, and the next morning I was granted leave! Strings had been pulled.”*

## **From basic training, to the front lines of war**

On 13<sup>th</sup> August 1942, John entered HMNZS *Tamaki*, as a hostilities only [HO] rating under 27th Intake Ordinary Seamen “Scheme B” (officer material) for his three months basic training.

*“Life at Tamaki was dictated by the routine of the 15 year old seaman boy entrants – we HOs had to conform to their routine. The day started with P.T. at 6 30am and ended at 9 30 pm with lights out. Only one long weekend leave was granted over this period.”*

HMNZS *Tamaki* (known as The Rock – motto: “Ake Ake Kia Kaha,” “Forever Be Strong”) was established in December 1940 at the old Government quarantine station on Motuhie Island. Both regular force and hostilities only ratings were trained here before being sent to their various drafts. By the end of the war,



*HMNZS Tamaki, road to the top.*

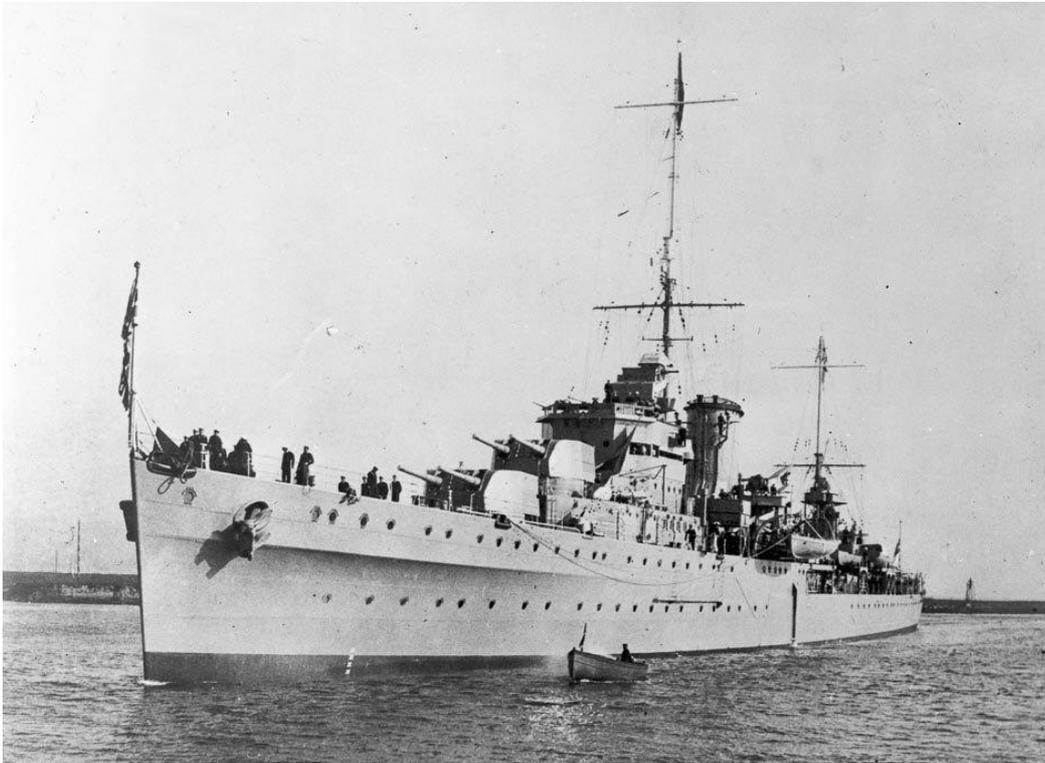
6000 trainees had been through the establishment. The Motuihe site remained in service following the end of hostilities, and was instrumental in the naval aspect of the Compulsory Military Training Act, Compulsory Naval Reservists (CNRs). The site was closed down in 1958, and HMNZS *Tamaki* moved to Narrow Neck on the North shore.

Following basic training, John moved to HMNZS *Philomel* for 6 weeks torpedo and gunnery courses.

*"We had the night life of Auckland at our disposal. Leave was overnight, so our first move was to secure a bed for the night – the "Sallies" were always a good bet. Next call would be to the "Albion" Hotel where we also booked a [non existent] bed for the night. That kept the police happy when they checked for any after hours trading [6pm closing for liquor sales]. The rest of the evening was well catered for by a number of service clubs around the CBD."*

HMNZS *Philomel* was a "Pearl Class" Light Cruiser, constructed in 1890. In 1914 she was loaned to the NZ Division RN and took part in convoy escort duties with the transport of troops of the 1st NZEF before seeing further service in the Mediterranean. In 1921 she became the training and accommodation ship for trainees at the Devonport Naval Base, where her name lives on. She was scuttled at sea in 1949.

*" While awaiting draft to HMNZS Achilles, my working day was spent painting Philomel."*



HMNZS Achilles.

### **Drafted to HMNZS Achilles**

Following his time at Philomel, the 7<sup>th</sup> February 1943 saw John drafted to HMNZS Achilles for her return to the UK for major repairs.

*Achilles* was attached to US Task Force 67, Guadalcanal, and on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1943 was involved in shore bombardment of Munda Island, when she came under attack from Japanese bombers. One bomb struck X Turret, destroying it and killing 13 men outright (one being a seaman boy). The ship received temporary repairs before returning to Auckland and taking on replacement crew (including John) before departing for Portsmouth, via the Panama canal, for repairs and modernisation. In June an explosion in the double bottom tanks killed 14 dockyard workers and put back the repairs for a number of months. She eventually re-commissioned in May 1944 and returned to New Zealand to join the British Pacific Fleet.

*“Bob Halcrow and I had been friends in the Army and he had been called into the Navy a class ahead of me. He was drafted to Achilles and was killed when X turret was hit. With a heavy heart, I became his replacement. His mother was a WWI widow [John Halcrow aged 44, Stoker 1<sup>st</sup> class. KIA serving in HMS Invincible at Jutland]. We left Auckland 18<sup>th</sup> February 1944, sailing to BoraBora, a beautiful Tahitian Island, and the only other European presence was a fleet oiler. Later in the war it became a major American supply base. We then sailed on through the Panama Canal, Bermuda, crossed the Atlantic to Portsmouth. We arrived at night; the next morning I recall looking out and seeing we were alongside HMS Victory. “*

*“I spent the next month at Portsmouth chipping paint from the hull (as the saying goes, if it moves grease it, if it doesn't, paint it). The paint was so thick it came off in small slabs, filling the basin where we were moored. You couldn't get away with that nowadays.”*

## With the Royal Navy HMS *Trent*

John was transferred to the Royal Navy on loan and drafted to HMS *Trent* on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 1943. From the beginning of 1941, New Zealand officers and ratings were on transfer or loan to the RN and by war's end in 1945, a total of 7000 saw service in all theatres of war. Altogether 561 RNZN personnel lost their lives during World War 2.

HMS *Trent* [K243] was a river class frigate commissioned for service in February 1943, and entered Tobermory, Isle of Mull for working up. Tobermory was home to the training base HMS Western Isles under the command of the legendary Vice Admiral Sir Gilbert Stephenson, the so-called "Terror of Tobermory".

*Trent* had an eventful war. On the 16<sup>th</sup> April she joined Western Approaches command, where she began escort duty with Atlantic and Mediterranean convoy defence. In June she was escort for troop ships as part of "Operation Husky," the Allied landings at Sicily. Following service on the East Indies station, she was transferred to the Royal Indian Navy in 1946 and was broken up in 1975.

John served on *Trent* from her first commission as an Ordinary Seaman, then promoted to Able Seaman 3rd July 1943.

*"I was the Navigator's yeoman on the Trent during the "Husky" operation. This mostly consisted of altering minefields on the ship's charts. The rest of my watches I spent on the wheel or engine telegraphs. My action station was on the ship's open bridge as observer for the Captain and gunnery officer. This meant I had an unobstructed view of all that was happening. My function was to draw the officers' attention to*



*A River-class frigate.*

*things they might not have noticed. On a convoy to Gibraltar in mid June 1943, Trent was detailed to escort 10 ships up to the Portuguese coast to Lisbon. It was a pleasant journey until we were close to Lisbon when we spotted German Condor bombers. A Wellington Coastal Command bomber was also in the area. We signalled an alert to him and he signalled "good luck" and headed for Gibraltar and reported us sunk. What he had witnessed was a number of near misses! When we opened fire, the First Lieutenant crumbled under the pressure, and ordered the gunners to cease fire before he was violently escorted off the bridge. The attack lasted about half an hour. We were badly shaken but still afloat. We spent the rest of the day searching for BOAC Flight 777. It had been shot down by enemy aircraft on 1st June 1943. The famous British actor, Leslie Howard, was among the passengers on this flight. The search was unsuccessful and we headed for Gibraltar. We later found a propeller bracket had been damaged in the attack and headed for home for repairs."*

*"Our next convoy was escorting a number of Atlantic liners loaded with troops headed for "Operation Husky". We had no idea where we were going, but one morning I was delivering a message from the bridge to the Captain's cabin. I could hear him having a shower, he told me to leave the message on his desk and there in front of me was a chart of Sicily with landing beaches clearly marked. The mess deck speculations from then on were hard to take, seeing I was privy to the truth!*

*"The voyage was uneventful until the night before the landing when we were attacked by German bombers.*

*"We had been told that none of our aircraft would fly over the invasion fleet. Early in the morning, aircraft were overhead, and once again the convoy was lit up with anti-aircraft fire. As daylight came we were approaching the beaches and I recall the awful sight of sailing through floating bodies of khaki clad soldiers from the Airborne Division, whose gliders had come down in the sea. Now we knew why no bombs had been dropped. The American towing planes were out of position and unfortunately passed over the convoy, and were shot out of the sky by mistake. It was a terrible error. We did see a hand waving and pulled out a survivor, only to find he was a German Stuka pilot, he didn't get a good reception I can tell you!*

Both the British and American airborne forces suffered disastrously at Sicily. Of the 34 British "Waco" gliders, each holding 14 men, half came down in the sea. The American airborne forces also suffered. Through a navigational error, the gliders were shot down by friendly fire as they passed over the landing beaches killing hundreds.

*"We were all at the end of our tether having been under constant action stations for days on end." (John was on Trent for 92 days, and most of that time at sea.)*

## **A new draft**

From Trent John was drafted to HMS *Charybdis* in mid August 1943. *"My friend and I missed our train back from leave. When we arrived at base the guard duty had to report us as being AWOL and phoned the duty officer accordingly. He turned to us and asked, 'Are you New Zealanders?'*

*'Yes we are,' we replied".*

*"On informing the officer as such, he turned to us: 'You are bloody lucky, get turned in."*

*"I had missed my draft. Next morning I watched Charybdis leaving harbour from the Hove without me."*

HMS *Charybdis* was a Dido-class cruiser that entered service in December 1941. She had a short but frenetic war, attached first to the Home Fleet, then as an escort to the hard fought convoys to supply both Malta and Gibraltar, followed by service in the Atlantic. Then back to Devonport for refit and once more attached to the Home Fleet. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1943, she put to sea as part of "Operation Tunnel," an ill-conceived attempt to interrupt German blockade runners carrying valuable supplies of essential materials for the war effort.

These ships were heavily escorted by German naval torpedo boats who successfully protected their ship without any damage to themselves, by sinking *Charybdis* with the loss of 400 lives and causing so much damage to the accompanying HMS *Limbourne* that, after towing efforts failed, the *Limbourne* was scuttled.

### **Commissioned and training Tank Landing Craft**

Following this episode, John entered HMS *King Alfred* at Hove for officer training where he became a temporary acting probationary Sub/Lieutenant. His initial choice was to enter the submarine service, but instead he followed his friend Freddy Barnes into the Tank Landing Craft training establishment, HMS Dinosaur.

Freddy Barnes was a long- time friend of John's and went on after the war to establish *Country Calendar* in 1966. The programme is still running today.



HMS *King Alfred*



(Top) British LCTs line the Normandy shore, each with a barrage balloon designed to discourage enemy air attack. Photo by US Coast Guard. (Right) The ensign from LCT 902.

The HMS *King Alfred* Shore Establishment was based on the Sussex division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR), whose motor launch, ML 1649, was HMS *King Alfred*. The name was carried over to the shore establishments in 1940 as a wartime measure to train up naval reservists, some of whom had little or no sea going experience. A number of Dominion or Empire reservists also received their training here, and more than 22,000 men and women passed through *King Alfred* before it was disestablished in December 1945. HMS *Dinosaur I* and *II* at Troon, a town in south Ayrshire on the Scottish West coast, were the Headquarters for training and the base for working up at sea for all Tank Landing Craft crews, also disbanded in 1945 following hostilities.

## D-Day, and after

The British designed Landing Craft Tank (LCT) passed through a series of marks during the war, the largest number being the Mk IV of which more than 800 were built. They were 185 ft. long by 41ft beam with a gross weight of 580 tons, powered by two Paxman or Gray marine diesels of 460 HP. They were manned by two officers and 12 crew members, and were capable of carrying four Churchill or nine M4 Sherman tanks, along with their ancillary maintenance crews. The Mk 4 had an inauspicious beginning at the disastrous attack on Dieppe, following of which some modifications to the Mk were initiated.

January 1944 saw John as second officer on board HMLCT 902 of 51st Flotilla, D squadron stationed at Portsmouth. A month before D Day, we handed Portland over to the Americans and transferred to Portsmouth.

*"A week before the landing, we were inspected by the King. Later a dress rehearsal of our landing was watched by Winston Churchill. We loaded six Sherman Mk 4s and their crews of the 8th Armoured Brigade, and sailed to the Solent waiting for D-Day. The weather was bad (very bad) but on the afternoon of the 5th June we sailed for Spithead. That evening, at a slow pace in heavy seas, we sailed with the invasion armada towards our landing at "Gold Beach". Our landing was timed for 8 am on the morning of June the 6<sup>th</sup> when, in theory, we would be at half-tide and sappers could clear mines and beach obstacles prior to our arrival. We sailed on the Monday. It was slow sailing across the Channel. I had become used to my guts being in a knot. The soldiers on board were seasoned warriors. The blokes were all writing letters home. It was quite an atmosphere. Our movements were dictated by the tide.*

*"Unfortunately, the rough weather forestalled this operation, so as we headed for the beach, our craft was surfing, and we hit a mine followed by another, and shell fire, killing a number of our soldiers. It was a terrible experience riding over men in the water, but we could not get out of their way, that was very sad. The LCTs were fitted with a kedge anchor at the stern that could be dropped on the way in so you could pull the craft off after landing. Our skipper was against this and ran the craft hard up onto the beach, and our tanks cleared the vessel, which was now hard aground for the day. Still we had work to do. Our skipper commandeered an Infantry Landing Craft [ILC] to shuttle wounded soldiers out to HMS Belfast laying off shore. As the tide turned late in the afternoon, he commandeered another LCT to tow us off the beach and back to Portsmouth stern first.*

*"Following repairs we were involved in a 'Ferry Service' to the American beach heads. The worst storm in 50 years had destroyed the American "Mulberry Harbour" thus necessitating a continual supply over the beach that kept us going 24/7 in all weathers without let up.*

*"Our Flotilla Leader was a hard case Aussie who arrived at the beach with a German staff car, a khaki coloured Mercedes, and asked if I would take it back to England for him. Well that's up to the skipper who said ok, and so he arrived in England with his German staff car, attached a RN number so he could get petrol, and off he went to London!*

*"As we were ferrying American supplies or equipment, they victualled us for 3 days prior to sailing. How many crew have you got? We had so much food, the crew could take it ashore, and what they got for it was none of our business!*

*"Altogether we lost 20% of our craft. The thing we feared most was the German acoustic mine. German aircraft would drop them in the swept channels. They were detonated by the propeller noise, and as all the working parts and crews quarters of a LCT were aft over the propeller, they were blown to smithereens!"*

## **The end of the war**

Then the day came, September 1944, when John collapsed on the bridge and was carted off to RNAH Minterne Magna with life-threatening complications relating to glandular fever. Minterne Magna is a small village in Dorset and Minterne House, the famous residence of the Churchill and Digby families was taken over by the RN as a hospital.



*“Being an officer more than likely saved my life due to the treatment I received. The doctor was trying out a new product called penicillin. It was very early days in the use of this drug. Sister Smith would be heard coming down the corridor with her syringe, with a needle the size of a bayonet, and the penicillin dissolved in peanut oil, straight out of the fridge. I was given 40 injections over 5 days. It hurt like hell but saved my life.”*

Following convalescence, in November 1944, John was at Osborne House, Isle of Wight for a month, then HMS Westcliff on the Thames on light duties with combined Ops. HMS Westcliff Southend, was a training base for combined Ops. Landing craft.

*“ I finally sailed out of Liverpool on 1<sup>st</sup> November and arrived home on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1945, just in time for Christmas. For me, there were some great times during the war, like the camaraderie, though this was not the case for those who ended up in a desolate place. My war years were the most significant period of my life in shaping me into the person I am today.”*

