



—Gordon Sedawie photo.

CAPT. DAN MACDONALD ... "none better at knots and splices."

Ancient mariners still needed to make modern gadgets work

By **NORMAN HACKING**

Progress has caught up with the ancient mariners. Now they apply traditional skills to making nylon helicopter nets which are dropped with two-ton loads of supplies at remote camps.

Down at the Ancient Mariner Rope Works on Vancouver waterfront old seadogs gather at the net racks, for none is better at knots and splices than a shellback of the days of sail.

Few have more right to the description than Capt. Dan Macdonald, who first sailed before the mast in 1894. He doesn't have to make nets for a living, but he likes to keep his gnarled hands nimble at a sailor's trade.

Captain Dan is one of the few still living who recall the great days of sail in the Maritimes. As a boy he sailed out of his native town of Cardigan, PEI, and he has a fund of stories about his days in square riggers and fore-and-afters.

About 60 years ago he tried out steam for a voyage in one of the Lamport and Holt ships, but he didn't like it and returned to the clean salty decks of the wind ships.

A yellowed newspaper clipping tells of his thrilling

escape from a German submarine in March 1918. He was then in command of the three-masted schooner John T. Walters of Saint John, N.B., bound from Le Havre to Cardiff for coal.

Not far off Lundy Island in Bristol Channel a German U-boat surfaced and began to shell his defenceless schooner. Capt. Macdonald was wounded by shrapnel in the leg. His crew abandoned ship and he was taken prisoner aboard the submarine.

"When I was taken on board of this bloody pirate ship," recalls Captain Dan, "I told the German captain we were Canadian register, so then he spat in my face and ordered me below deck.

"The sub was now about to submerge, so I had to get away quick or go below. So I took the chance, gave the captain a poke in his dirty mug and then I jumped over the side of his pirate ship.

"It was March and the water was good and cold, and I was bleeding a lot. I managed to get hold of one of the hatches and that kept me afloat. There was hell to pay aboard the sub. The commander was bellowing orders to get me and everybody was running round with rifles trying to get a shot at me.

"I swam under water as long as I could. Of course, they'd have potted me in the end, but the smoke of a British destroyer showed on the horizon and Fritz had to submerge.

"I was in the water for two and a half hours until a British patrol boat picked me up. I had my leg dressed, got dry clothes and had a good peg of rum and I felt a lot better."

His first experience with a hurricane goes back to September 1905, when he was mate of the schooner Gertrude Bartlett, Mobile for Buenos Aires with a deckload of lumber.

"Five days out we ran into a hurricane and the vessel was a total wreck in five minutes," he recalls.

"The sea carried away our three masts and took our deck load, spare sails and everything on deck.

"The storm lasted four hours and there wasn't much left of the schooner. There was about 10 feet of the mizzen mast, and the crew were all lashed to that stump. We were a pitiful bunch at daylight. No ship, no water, no grub, no clothes. We kept afloat only because of the lumber cargo."

The crew of the Gertrude Bartlett were adrift in their water-logged vessel for 17 days in the hot Caribbean, suffering terrible privations.

Eventually the crew were rescued by the Standard Oil barque Acme and landed at Philadelphia, "a little weak but otherwise in good health."

One of his most exciting voyages was when he was a young bosun in the British four-masted barque Savalla, bound from Calcutta for London. Just off the Cape of Good Hope, the captain took sick and died. The chief officer then took command, and three weeks later he also died with the fever. The second officer also died and the ship was without an officer.

"There were older and more experienced men aboard than I," recalls Captain Macdonald, "but I was elected to carry on until we arrived home in London. I did the best I could and we arrived safely 32 days after the second officer was buried at sea."

Captain Dan's salty recollections are legion. He is a living proof of his own indestructibility, as his powerful gnarled hands work on the helicopter nets.