

# Life Story: Haddon Donald, who spent his life providing for others

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Haddon Donald rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and received many decorations for his role in WWII.

**Haddon Donald, soldier, businessman, politician: b March 20, 1917, Masterton; m Ana Beetham, 2d, 2s; d April 23, 2018, Masterton, aged 101.**

To provide. Whether that was for his family, his neighbourhood or his country, it was Haddon Donald's greatest motivation. And triumph.

At home in Masterton there was the food from his large vegetable garden, or the spoils of his latest fishing trip on Lake Taupō, to be shared with family, friends and neighbours; in the deserts of Africa and craggy hills of Crete, his fellow soldiers revelled in his calm but effective leadership.



Haddon Donald was the National Party MP for Wairarapa for six years, between 1963 and 1969.

"His love language involved acts of service," says daughter Fiona Donald, as the family prepares for today's public memorial to her much-loved and decorated father.

Theirs was a very traditional family, one that would seem antiquated and anachronistic today: "He did all the outside work and Mum did all the inside work, which included children," says Fiona.

Love was unsaid but certainly felt, expressed more in the act of providing for that family and sharing in the bounty of hard work.

"We had an enormous vegetable garden the size of a tennis court, so everything he did, he did meticulously well," she says. "He just had that gift."

Also a gift for delegation. "He was a task master; we used to try to sneak away, and if we were caught anywhere near where he was working we were seconded to do jobs; and if we had friends they would be seconded to do jobs as well.

"He thought that working was the most important part of your daily existence."

But it wasn't all hard work and no play.

"Dad loved poetry; at the dinner table he'd come out with a ditty, sometimes a rude one, which he loved."

He also loved a party. "He didn't like drinking hugely," says Fiona, "so it was mostly entertaining people and it would have a theme, so for the Melbourne Cup everyone would dress up in hats and silly things like that."

Any guests would leave with something from the garden; at the bach in Taupō, the whole street would be invited to celebrate New Year's with the Donalds, and feed on Haddon's latest catch.

Traditional the family may have been, but Fiona and sister Robyn were expected to be able to chop wood, tie a fly and shoot a gun as well, if not better, than brothers Rhodes and Andrew, while the brothers were expected to be just as adept at baking a cake.

"I appreciated learning that," says Fiona. "As women we are certainly independent and, both of us growing up, we've probably done our fair share of marching in various causes like the Springbok tour, GE Free, things that probably matters to us in unfairness."

They were "poles-apart" politically – "he was very right-wing National and we were very left-wing liberal".

That might have led to some fascinating debate around the dinner table, but Haddon's exploits during World War II had robbed him of his hearing – "both his ears had been blown, he received holes in both ears in the desert" – so there was not a great deal of discussion.

Just a great deal of respect for the right of others to hold those opinions and indulge in the debate that emboldened democracy.

Which was one of the reasons Haddon, barely older than 20, signed up to take on Hitler.

He'd been fighting bullies since his older brother helped point them out on his first day of school, and this "tough, little bit of a battler" could sense another in the rise of the German leader.

"My parents had a very strong sense of fair play and freedom and the rights of people to live how they should live. That irked him most about Hitler."

Haddon joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in 1939.

He saw action in North Africa, Crete and Italy as part of 22nd Battalion and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. Before his death he had been the highest ranking New Zealand WWII army officer still living.

He was tough, resourceful and resilient. Unlike many others, he seemed built for the battle, made for the mayhem. In an interview long after the war, he even admitted that some of it was "fun".

"I think because he did everything so well as a task, I think he did the war quite well," says Fiona. "He saw it in terms of a task and strategy, and outwitting."

"He said in his book [*In Peace and War: A Civilian Soldier's Story*] that he looked back on his ancestors and there were a few of them that were warriors, so he thinks he had the warrior gene in his family."

Haddon drew on that combative lineage during the brave but ultimately futile defence of Maleme airfield in the Battle of Crete; during that skirmish he and barely two dozen others held 200 German soldiers at bay.

In Italy, Haddon led several successful attacks to reclaim and then hold a number of key villages.

The citation for his Distinguished Service Order said "his personal courage, energy, and resourcefulness were all of the highest order. His personal presence, his optimism and his leadership were an inspiration to all those under his command, contributing in a large measure to the unflagging momentum of the advance."

Fiona suspects that his fellow soldiers, like his family, responded to her father's work ethic, calmness under pressure and ability to find fun, even in adversity.

Haddon was injured four times, including the blast that so badly damaged his hearing, and he would go on to receive numerous other medals, including the Military Cross, Efficiency Decoration and the Officer of the Legion of Merit from the United States.

Others returned home from the war scarred and broken; for Haddon it was like "life as usual", says Fiona.

The garden needed tending, there was the regular Sunday trip to Trentham for competitive rifle shooting (he was a life member of the National Rifle Association and led the New Zealand team five times), and there was the family woolpressing firm, Donald & Sons Ltd, for which he was company chairman for 16 years.

But his country would come calling again, drawing once more on Haddon's drive for duty, his innate ability to see the task done, and well.

The National Party member became its MP for Wairarapa in 1963. He held that electorate for two terms before being narrowly defeated by Labour's Jack Williams in 1969.

Fiona believes he was tapped by the party "because he was so capable. He just oozed capability ... he knew how to organise, and he was a successful businessmen."

Haddon had led from the front during the war. In Wellington he was happy in the background. It was more about promoting innovation and ideas in business than ideology.

"He wasn't a career politician, he was doing it for duty," says Fiona. "Dad had enough nous to be interested in politics because it helped business."

Later he would say that he had "given 12 years of my life to my country; six years to risking my life and six years to risking my reputation".

Highlights included tours of South America and Asia to promote New Zealand agriculture.

But it was tough on the family, particularly a young Fiona. "It was lonely," she says. "I basically didn't see my father for six years. He would come home at the weekend, do the gardening and shooting the next day."

She was just six.

"I was young enough to say, when they rang the house one day and said where is your father, I said he's gone to an erection meeting. That was a big joke for a long time. And he loved that kind of thing."

It's a moment of levity tinged with a little sadness. But also pride for a life well lived, and love expressed and felt through the act of giving.

Today the family shares their patriarch with the public one last time. Today the great provider will receive. – *By Rob Mitchell*

**- Dominion Post**