

Living Cornwall

Odour of secrecy and espionage enveloped Newlyn during the war

Today marks an important anniversary in Anglo-French history.

John McWilliams reports on the part played in the liberation of France by the neighbouring Celtic countries of Brittany and Cornwall

Seventy years ago today, most of France was occupied by the Nazi army. Hundreds of French people, unwilling to accept German occupation, escaped to the UK, many of them to Cornwall.

On June 15, 1940 General de Gaulle left France and three days later he made his famous radio broadcast from London to the French people. He told them: "We have lost the battle but we have not lost the war." He asked them to join him in fighting for a Free France. This was the beginning of the Free French movement which was to grow into a major force fighting alongside the Allies.

itania, West Africa, set sail from Douarnenez with 108 young pilots from the French Air Force school near Morlaix. Many of these young flyers were to give their lives fighting for a Free France. They are honoured by a monument on Douarnenez's Rosmeur harbour.

Many others escaped from Brittany in fishing boats. Among the best known was Jules Mevel, known in Cornwall as Captain Jules, who sailed from Camaret in his crabber Louis Jules Cm 2436 and fished from Padstow throughout the war. When he later built a new boat she was called the Padstow.

The Ma Gondole D3377 arrived at Newlyn from Douarnenez on June 20. Andre Bouguen recalled: "I landed at Newlyn on June 20 and went to the Seamen's Mission where we had cups of tea and sandwiches and then we went straight to Falmouth."

Most of Newlyn's bigger boats were called up for Royal Navy service as



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French fishermen from Brittany had been fishing around Cornwall since 1902. Newlyn, St Ives and Scilly were almost second homes for them and many friendships were made. They were the first to respond to General de Gaulle's appeal. At a time when much of Europe was occupied and Britain was fighting alone, many people thought this a hopeless cause. Not the people of the tiny island of Sein off Brittany's Land's End, the Pointe du Raz. The local lighthouse keeper had a radio and listened to General de Gaulle's message. He told the islanders about it and they held a meeting to decide what to do. In an act of extraordinary faith and courage, they decided that practically all the men of the island would leave and sail to Newlyn to join the Free French.

The first wave set sail from the Ile de Sein and headed for Newlyn on June 24, 1940 in the local lighthouse tender Valleda and Prosper Couillandre's sloop crabber, Ruanez ar Mor (Queen of the Sea). The second wave of volunteers sailed for Newlyn two days later in three crabbers, Martin Guilcher's Maris Stella Au 1703 (Star of the Sea), Francois Fouquet's Ruanez ar Peoc'h (Queen of Peace) and Pierre Coillandre's Corbeau des Mers Au 1684 (Sea Raven).

Meanwhile, in nearby Audierne, a group of young volunteers boarded the Ile de Sein mail boat Ar Zenith and were soon joined by Lieutenant Dupont and his 15 soldiers of the Chasseurs Alpins regiment. The Ar Zenith headed for Plymouth with her volunteers. She served as an ammunition carrier at Falmouth docks during the war and is now preserved as a French national monument at St Servan near St Malo.

On June 19, the large crawfish boat Trebouliste, which had spent her peacetime voyages fishing off Maur-

auxiliaries and their place was taken by a large fleet of modern and efficient Belgian trawlers which kept the port afloat during the war years. Many Belgian families lived in Newlyn and had their own Anglo-Belgian club.

Several French boats also fished from Newlyn throughout the war. Prosper Couillandre's Ruanez ar Mor had a successful lining career and was known as the Turbot King. There were also the Lorient trawler Entente Cordiale, the Boulogne-registered long-liner Esperance from nearby Le Portel, Skipper Delafosse's Marcel Pierre F747 from Fecamp, the large Morgat long-liner Reder ar Moriou (which escaped by accident in April 1941 when a compass error brought her into Plymouth) the trawlers Aliete Jacqui and Appel de la Mer, the netter Reine Astrid from Gravelines, the famous Douarnenez mackerel drifter La Brise D3378 and the Joporo from Concarneau whose crew lived in Penzance's Clarence Street.

Madame Pourre, who lives in the Pas de Calais, remembers her voyage as a three-year-old aboard the Esperance. When they landed at Newlyn her shoes were forgotten and her father had to ask a stern policeman, guarding the boat for permission to go back aboard and find them. All escapers were checked by the security services at what became known as The Patriotic School in London.

The Germans soon tightened up their control of the occupied coast and escapes became more difficult and dangerous. On December 16, 1940 the crabber Emigrant CM2212 left Camaret with 14 escapees, including two RAF pilots, nailed into a secret compartment. The crabber was searched by the Germans with their dogs. They went ashore, wishing

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The Corbeau des Mers Au 1684 left the Ile de Sein with volunteers for the Free French on 26th June 1940



Breton fishermen in Cornwall in the 1940s

them "bon voyach". This escape was led by French Air Force pilot Jacques Andrieux and the legendary Daniel Lomenech, who became a leader in secret operations. Among the crew was Jean Louis le Breton, who later married a local girl and settled in Penzance.

Colonel Andrieux wrote of their arrival off Cornwall: "The skipper shouted 'Cornwall straight ahead!' Everyone was delirious. The boat rushed on through a heavy swell. Cornwall was there, a dark line on the horizon. The skipper unrolled the Tricolour, which was wrapped around his body. In an instant our colours were flapping at the masthead."

On October 3, 1942 the Le Guilvinec crabber Audacieux GV5167 was es-

corted into Newlyn by the Belgian trawler Zeemeermin H56. The Audacieux had been involved in landing arms to the French Resistance and her crew escaped from the Gestapo in the nick of time. They spent the rest of the war living safely at Gwavas Quay in Newlyn and working for J & F Pool of Hayle.

Cornwall was also deeply involved in secret operations, sending agents into occupied France aboard French fishing boats. Agents sailed from Newlyn, Falmouth, the Helford and the Isles of Scilly. Franck Bauer, who served as Free French officer at Newlyn wrote: "In effect there reigned at Newlyn an odour of secrecy and espionage. I met, without always identifying them, many of the actors in this silent war."

Not all secret operations were successful. Starting in October 1940 the Camaret crabber Marie Louise made five secret voyages from Newlyn to the little coves of Cap Sizun for the Free French which ended with her entrapment and capture on February 14, 1941. The Emigrant was also sent on secret operations and was captured on her second voyage on April 19, 1941.

The most successful operation was led by Lieutenant Stephen Mackenzie and Daniel Lomenech in the ex-Concarneau trawler Le Dinan in April 1942.

They sailed from the Isles of Scilly, made a rendezvous with the courageous crew of the little Concarneau sailing boat Les Deux Anges and rescued resistance hero Colonel Remy and his family. They also brought back plans of the German Atlantic Wall coastal defences.

Perhaps few Cornish people realise the role of Cornwall in these dramatic and dangerous times, leading eventually to the Liberation of France and the defeat of Nazism.

A flotilla of traditional Breton boats will depart from Ile de Sein on Saturday, June 26, and is expected to reach Newlyn on Monday, June 28. It is hoped that the boats will include the Belle Etoile from Camaret, the Cap Sizun from Audierne and the Corbeau des Mers, one of the original four Ile de Sein crabbers which brought those courageous volunteers to carry on the struggle against Nazi tyranny 70 years ago.

The crews will be hosted by Penzance Town Council for three days before they continue their voyage to Mylor and Fowey.