

## **Douglas Maylin (1920-1960) - Merchant Navy Ynyshir/Cardiff**

West Wales Veterans' Archive

Researched and written in association with the family of Douglas Maylin, March 2021.

### **Description**

Born in 1920 in Ynyshir, to a mining family who suffered great loss and hardship, Douglas Maylin joined the Merchant Navy prior to the Second World War, serving initially as a 'Mess Room Boy'. He took part in both Atlantic and Arctic Convoys. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 1942 Douglas was serving on the Empire Ranger on an Arctic Convoy when the ship was subject to Luftwaffe air attack and sunk. Taking to the lifeboats, Douglas and other members of the ship's crew were captured and taken prisoner by a German Destroyer. After short spells in prisoner of war (PoW) camps in Norway and Finland, the crew were transported to a PoW camp in Northern Germany and sent to Wilhelmshaven for interrogation by the German Navy, before being returned to the Milag camp in Lower Saxony.

It appears to be here that Douglas was recruited as a potential volunteer for what eventually became known as the British Free Corps of the Waffen-SS. Douglas and a few other few prisoners were then taken under escort to Berlin. The extent of Doug's involvement and activities with the British Free Corps from July 1943 to his arrest on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1945 in Mecklenburg, Germany by the British Army, is not known. Post-war Douglas received all due awards of back payment for his time spent as a PoW and also medals of service.

Douglas choose not to return to the Merchant Navy and set up home in Cardiff with his new wife Phyllis. He became a fire-fighter, driver and salesman at various points over the next 15years. Sadly, the couple lost their first, infant son, but then brought up a young family during the 1950's. Douglas died aged just 39yrs in 1960.

This account of Douglas Maylin's short life has been prepared by his family in partnership with the West Wales Veterans' Archive.

### **Early years**

Douglas Maylin (Doug) was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1920 in the home of his parents at 14 Ynys Street, Ynyshir, a coal mining village in the Rhondda Valley, South Wales.

Doug was the youngest of 8 children, born to James and Edith Maylin (nee Bailey) between 1901 and 1920. James worked as a Rider in a coal mine whilst Edith took care of the children

and home. Life in the mines was tough and certainly took its toll on the family. On Doug's 5th birthday in 1925, his brother Arthur died in a mining accident whilst clearing coal. He was just 21 years old. Another brother, Lionel, also had a mining accident and although he survived, lost both legs and was bed bound for the rest of his life. In later life, Doug was to name one of his sons Lionel, and also included his name in a tattoo on his arm – suggesting that perhaps he was particularly close to this brother.

Records show Doug left school at 14 years old. The family moved around and changed address several times. At some point, the family moved to Mackintosh Place in Cardiff. It was whilst living here that Doug met Phyllis Kate Branch, who was later to become his wife. Phyllis was living with her family just a few houses away.

Records show the Maylin family as being active within the Christadelphian Church - Christadelphians describe themselves as "a lay community patterned after first century Christianity". The extent of Doug's personal beliefs and involvement in the church are unknown, particularly during his years in Cardiff when he would have been a teenager and young adult in the 1930s. Family members do however recall that he had some connection to the Christadelphian Church during the last few years of his life.

### **South Wales during the 1930s**

The 1930s were turbulent times in Britain, particularly in South Wales. Unemployment was high and there was a lack of opportunity and welfare. It was a time when people started to take an interest in how to better their lives and that of their families. Politics started to appeal to many. These ranged from mining trade unionism to communist party alignments with the Labour Party to Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. In South Wales, all were active in the 1930s. South Wales proportionately, when compared to the rest of the UK, also appeared to have the highest recruitment of men who volunteered to fight the war in Spain against Franco. Going by Doug's activities later in World War 2 (WW2), he appears to have had anti-communist views.

### **Merchant Navy**

Whilst the exact date that Doug joined the Merchant Navy is unknown, it was sometime prior to the outbreak of WW2. Official documents show that he likely lied about his age as he was recorded as aged 19 upon engagement with his first ship in May 1939, when he would have still been 18 years old. The town of Ferndale was recorded as his birthplace (rather than the village of Ynyshir), although this could have been as the birth records for a number of villages were known to often be held centrally within larger towns in the vicinity. The reason Doug chose to join the Merchant Navy is not known. It could be that the tragedies that befell his family from mining accidents or indeed the hardships that many

miners' families experienced pushed him away from that life. Perhaps he was drawn by what he saw as an opportunity to 'see the world'. It's possible he was courting Phyllis at this point so perhaps he saw it as a way of earning money for their future life together.

Records show that Doug served on the following cargo ships between 23rd May 1939 and 28th March 1942:

- 23rd May 1939 – 17th July 1939: served as Mess Room Boy on Trecarrell  
His ability and conduct were both noted as "Very Good"
- 18th March 1940 – 20th June 1940: served as Mess Room Boy on Trevarrack  
His ability and conduct were both noted as "Very Good"
- 9th January 1941 – 11th July 1941: served as Assistant Cook on Trekieve  
His ability and conduct were both noted as "Very Good"
- 24th September 1941 – 7th October 1941: served as Cook on Longtow  
His ability and conduct were both noted as "Very Good"
- 29th January 1942 – 28th March 1942: served as Assistant Cook on the Empire Ranger  
His ability and conduct were both noted as "Very Good"

### **28th March 1942**

The Empire Ranger was a 7,008 GRT cargo ship built by Lithgows Ltd in Glasgow. It had only been in service a few months when, as a member of Convoy PQ13, it was attacked and sunk by German aircraft on 28th March 1942.

Convoy PQ 13 was a British Arctic convoy that delivered war supplies from the Western Allies to the USSR during WW2. During the attack on 28th March 1942, the convoy suffered the loss of five ships, including the Empire Ranger, plus one escort vessel. 15 ships arrived safely.

According to the statement of Alfred Minchin (dated 8th June 1945), a fellow crew member on the Empire Ranger, the crew took to the (life) boats and were subsequently captured by a German destroyer.

### **Prisoner of War**

Official records show that Doug became a prisoner of war on 28th March 1942.

Alfred Minchin's statement went on to state they were taken to Kirkeness in Norway, stayed about a month and were then moved to Rovahieme in Finland. After three or four days, they travelled by train to Helsinki. From there, they were taken by troopship to Stettin and then by train to Bremen, arriving around 5th May 1942.

Doug and the rest of the crew were detained in Milag Civilian Internment Camp. (Milag Civilian Internment Camp, located 300 meters to the east of Marlag, Lower Saxony, was specifically for merchant seamen and was on the site of a former Luftwaffe training camp. It had 36 wooden huts and was split into two for officers and seamen).

After about a month, it is noted in Alfred Minchin's statement, the whole of the ship's company – which would have included Doug - was taken to Wilhelmshaven for interrogation by German Naval Officers, staying there for about a fortnight and then returned to the Milag Camp.

Alfred Minchin's statement then names Doug as one of about six prisoners asked by fellow merchant seaman and prisoner, Frederic Lewis, if they wanted to go to a "Holiday Camp" (described as D.3.). Details around the conversations held and the nature of Doug's relationship with Frederic Lewis are not available. It is known that Frederic Lewis was a member of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) before the war and that prisoner of war camps were used by the Germans to recruit British prisoners into a newly formed unit.

On 22nd July 1943, Minchin and these other few prisoners were taken under escort to Berlin, Stalag IIID, 517S at Genshagen. This camp is known to have been associated with what was to become the British Free Corps.

### **British Free Corps**

The British Free Corps was originally known as the Legion of St George – the brainchild of John Amery, son of Leo Amery who served in Winston Churchill's Government (Minister for India). Whilst in Germany in 1942 / 1943, John Amery had proposed the formation of a British volunteer force made up from former prisoners of war as part of the German military. It was set up as an anti-communist group.

On 1st January 1944, the Legion of St George officially became the British Free Corps of the Waffen-SS (Britisches Freikorps of the Waffen-SS). This meant that a resolution had been drawn up and sent to Adolf Hitler requesting a change in unit status and title. It read as follows: We the true soldiers of Britain, wish to swear allegiance to the Fuehrer of the German Reich. We volunteer to fight side by side with Germans to beat the enemies of Europe. For this purpose, we the under signed make the application for the Corps to be called the British Free Corps.

Adolf Hitler accepted the proposal and the Waffen-SS then took full responsibility for the British volunteers. Thereafter, the British Free Corps was assigned its own uniform. (Prior to that, volunteers had worn their own uniforms with insignia sewn onto them).

British Free Corps uniforms consisted of: British Union Jack armshield; Waffen-SS pattern cuff title bearing the words 'Britisches Freikorps' and; collar patch displaying the three lions of the British crest.

In February 1944, British Free Corps members were dispatched to various POW camps for recruiting. There are no records as to the names of those involved in these specific activities. The British Free Corps also had its own flag: a black banner with a small union jack in the upper left corner, with the initials BFC in gold thread in the lower right corner. Most of this insignia came into being during the Spring of 1944.

During March 1945, the British Free Corps was known to have been sent to a Waffen-SS detachment situated near a small village named Schoeneberg, close to the west bank of the Oder river. The British volunteers were given the job of 'Field Defences' (i.e. digging trenches) although some were likely involved in the fierce pitched battle alongside the Germans against the communist Red Army that took place. They were initially overrun but the Waffen-SS soon re-grouped and drove the Russians back.

### **Arrested in Germany**

In early April 1945, 30 British Free Corps members were relocated to Bremen and then sent on to Steinhofel in north central Germany. On 14th April, the British Free Corps joined up with the 11th Waffen-SS division Nordland and were ordered to go to the defence of Berlin. However, their commander decided against going, so the unit remained in camp. The commander then ordered that members of the British Free Corps should wear Red Cross armbands and be assigned to non-combat status. Shortly afterwards, approx. 30 members of the British Free Corps were marched on foot to Neusterlitz in Mecklenburg. It is assumed that Doug was part of this group as records show that he was arrested on 3rd May 1945 in Mecklenburg, Germany by the British Army.

Details around the arrest are sketchy but it would seem that the British Army had been contacted by the Americans (8th Division) having been alerted to a group of British volunteers for the German army at a nearby camp. Doug was among 27 British arrested at the same time.

The extent of Doug's involvement and activities with the British Free Corps from July 1943 when he was first taken to Stalag IIIID to his arrest in May 1945 are not known. It may have

been for example, that he served as a Cook, with that having been his role in the Merchant Navy.

It is also recognised that not everyone involved with the British Free Corps was an official member. Doug was listed as a “British Waffen –SS volunteer” upon his arrest. At the very least, this would indicate that Doug had been through the political education and training programme within the British Free Corps, had a uniform and had been experiencing some of the recognised activities associated with it.

Evidence varies but it is generally accepted that the British Free Corps consisted of approx. 165 members – although not all at the same time. Of these, some were from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa; with roughly 50 being British. Whilst it is recognised that supporters of Sir Oswald Mosley’s BUF were involved with the British Free Corps, Mosley himself, both before and during the war, had said he would never support fighting for a foreign power against British interests.

Alfred Minchin, Doug’s fellow crew member from the Empire Ranger, claimed to be instrumental in the naming of the British Free Corps (changing its original name from Legion of St George). Minchin ultimately received a prison sentence for his involvement with the British Free Corps.

Frederic Lewis, who it is suggested first introduced Doug to the British Free Corps, served as a Camp Tailor, repairing uniforms and sewing on insignia to British Free Corps uniforms. He was later assigned to a “Work Commando” in Silesia (Northern Poland today).

John Amery, founder of the Legion of St George, was eventually arrested and tried for treason against England. He was found guilty and hung at Wandsworth Prison, London on 19th December 1945.

### **Returning home**

There are no records of Doug having received any criminal convictions, or indeed any form of punishment for involvement in the British Free Corps. This would suggest that whatever involvement he had, he was neither considered a leader nor influencer.

Not all of those interviewed were prosecuted of any crime. However, some were interviewed or convicted in secret so as not to compromise British military intelligence. In the case of Doug Maylin, it is unlikely we will ever know either way.

A Ministry of Pensions document dated 25<sup>th</sup> June 1945 shows that Doug had been awarded monies for the period of his ‘detention in enemy hands’, with varying amounts listed between 29<sup>th</sup> April 1942 and 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945.

His Certificate of Discharge from the Merchant Navy (dated 8<sup>th</sup> August 1945) included the words “Repatriated prisoner of war”.

He was awarded and received his service medals: War Medal, 1939-1945 Star, and the Atlantic Star – as well as possibly the Arctic Star.

### **Life after WW2**

Doug returned to South Wales and married Phyllis. They settled in Cardiff and had 7 children. Sadly, their first born, Malcolm Lionel Maylin, died aged 5 months on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1947 after suffering water on the brain.

Doug’s full work history after the war is not clear. It is known that in 1949 his occupation was ‘Motor Van Driver (Wine and Spirits Merchants)’, as this was listed on the birth certificate of one of his daughters: Sandra Iris Maylin was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> October that year, and so shares the same birthday as her father.

It is also known that for several years during the 1950s, Doug served as a firefighter in Cardiff.

At some point in mid / late 1950s, Doug changed jobs, possibly more than once. His family recall that he was a travelling salesman for Walls Ice Cream for some of that time.

Doug enjoyed life and was an active family man. His family recall he rarely talked about his experiences in WW2, and never spoke of his time as a POW or involvement in the British Free Corps.

Doug died on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1960, aged just 39 years. The cause of death was listed as Hodgkinson disease. He is buried with his service medals in Cathays Cemetery in Cardiff and shares a grave with his beloved wife Phyllis (who died on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1998, aged 75 years) and his infant son, Malcolm.