

G2, the Coastwatching Service and the Battle of the Atlantic: 1939-41

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On the evening of 14 June 1940 volunteers McFadden and Greer of the Marine and Coast Watching Service (M&CWS) were on duty at Horn Head Look Out Post (LOP), 700 foot over the Atlantic on the north Donegal coast. At 9.15 they sighted an armed cruiser of unknown nationality four miles to the north-east. It was steaming west towards a stationary vessel of the Irish marine service. The volunteers recorded that the cruiser ‘came along side [the] Eire patrol vessel and brought 5 men on board and proceeded west.’¹ The Irish patrol craft was the ageing fisheries protection vessel, the *Muirchú*, or the deep-sea trawler the *Fort Rannoch*, hastily converted for military use in the winter of 1939. The cruiser was British and the five men were British merchant seamen.

The Horn Head logbook shows that earlier on 14 June the Irish patrol vessel had sailed from Port na Blagh and patrolled north through Sheep Haven, around Horn Head and west towards Errarooey Strand where a British cargo ship, the *Eros*, had beached. The *Eros*, en-route from Montreal to Liverpool without an escort, had been torpedoed by U-48 one hundred miles off the Donegal coast. She was met by a tug, and escorted by two battleships towards neutral Irish territory, where, at Errarooey the damaged ship was beached.² From this point the Horn Head logbook shows continuous military activity in the vicinity of Errarooey. Irish soldiers dug in on the beach guarding the *Eros* while the two British battleships kept watch just outside Ireland’s three-mile territorial water limit.³ Aircraft from the Irish army air corps patrolled over these vessels.

The cargo carried by the *Eros* reveals why the ship received such attention. She carried vital raw materials for the war effort, but also a potentially more lethal cargo; one neither the British nor the Irish authorities wanted to fall into the wrong hands: 200 tons of small arms. The weapons were now all the more valuable given British losses at Dunkirk. Following the IRA raid on the Phoenix Park Magazine Fort, the Irish authorities could not afford to leave a cargo of arms unguarded. For neutral and belligerent alike it was essential that the *Eros* be guarded.

The treatment afforded the *Eros* has a number of intriguing aspects to it. With the *Eros* beached at Errarooey, a belligerent was using neutral Irish territory and the Irish troops beside the ship were a sign of support to Britain. However this was an act of mercy by the Irish and Irish authorities could say they did not know that the *Eros* carried arms. The rendezvous to transfer the five men took place on the limits of Irish territorial waters. The

Irish should have interned the five stranded merchant seamen from the *Eros*, not to mention the 62-strong crew of the ship, which was, after all carrying weapons of war. The operation surrounding the *Eros* fell into a grey area in the operation of neutrality. The Irish could turn a blind eye to the ship's cargo: they were simply helping a stranded merchant ship in an act of mercy.

The events following the beaching of the *Eros* reveal Irish attitudes towards Britain and the Allies during the Second World War. Rather than being seized by the Irish state, the vessel was guarded, repaired and re-floated. This was a partisan action in favour of Britain. At 3.00pm on 15 June accompanied by three vessels, one of which was an Irish patrol vessel, the *Eros*, with its cargo of war materiel, steamed east around Horn Head and out of sight of the LOP on the headland. This sighting is the last mention of the *Eros* in the LOP logbook.

The Coastwatching Service

Horn Head was one of 83 LOPs placed from September 1939 at ten to twenty mile intervals along the Irish coastline from Ballagan Head in Louth to Inishowen Head in Donegal. Their locations ensured that no stretch of the Irish coastline was left unguarded during the second world war. The volunteers kept a six-year watch on the skies and the seas around Ireland to June 1945 using their eyes and ears, augmented by telescopes, binoculars and, most importantly, local knowledge. Through the Coastwatchers, G2 could find out at a moment's notice by telephone the situation along all sections of the Irish coast on land, sea and in the air. They were a primitive early warning system.

In the episode at Errarooey Strand and with the transfer of the five men on the limits of Irish territory, we see, through the reports of the M&CWS at first hand the manner of Ireland's non-belligerent support for the Allies during the Second World War. In recent years historians have revealed the secret high level contacts that brought this non-belligerent support into being. An analysis of the M&CWS, a force almost forgotten in the history of the Emergency, illustrates the practicalities of Irish 'non-belligerence'.

As the example of the *Eros* shows, the reports of the Coast Watching Service recount the Second World War from a day-to-day level as it occurred in Irish coastal waters and skies. Historians have undervalued these highly useful and detailed reports. The logbooks of the Coastwatching Service are a five-year war diary of Ireland's involvement in the Second World War. They provide a contemporary account of the conflict that took place in Irish skies and on the margins of Irish territorial waters during the Second World War. G2 knew just how important a chain of coastal listening posts would be to building up a picture of enemy operations in the vicinity of Irish coastal waters and skies. Without regular reports from LOPs, G2 would have been blind to events around the Irish coastline.

The Army Reorganisation Scheme of January 1939 approved the establishment of the Coastwatching Service. In late April 1939 Minister for Defence Frank Aiken approved posters calling for 800 volunteers to join the new service. Volunteers were to be aged between 17 and 50 years, residing in 'Maritime Districts' and 'willing to serve in this arm of the National Defences', a suitably neutral term given the difficult position of naming the armed forces in Ireland.⁴ It was hoped that volunteers would be fishermen, boatmen, those with farms by the seashore, in short, any suitable candidates who as part of their day-to-day business were involved in seafaring.

Training the Coastwatchers

The basic training of coastwatchers is seen in the notes of Volunteer 208352 John Burns of Ballina. Burns was drilled on the importance of the post logbook. It provided the raw intelligence material analysed by Command Intelligence Officers. Of course these are only as reliable as the accuracy of those who kept them and there are considerable variations in skills of record keeping between posts. The logbooks have become the most important historical legacy of the M&CWS.

During basic training first aid, signalling, maritime practices and the identification of types of ships were taught, as was basic meteorology and hydrography. Volunteer Burns served at LOP No. 63 on Benwee Head above Portacloy and his notes show that he had consulted Admiralty charts to work out depths in the vicinity of his post. The water in Portacloy Bay, to the right of the LOP was 4 fathoms, beneath the LOP, which was sited 200 foot above sea level, the sea was 12 fathoms. The trade route out to sea was 30 fathoms.

The most intricate drawings and notes in Burns' notebooks concern mines. As numerous accidents during the war were to show, mines would prove the most dangerous hazard along the Irish coastline to military and civilians. Burns noted the exterior and variations in type due to nationality. He was drilled in how mines were detonated, how some floated free and others were anchored in a fixed position. Mines broke free and drifted away from their intended position and a daily task of LOPS was to report the presence of mines on their stretch of the coastline to command ordnance officers.

Coastwatchers were initially poorly drilled in recognition of aircraft. Training made up for this deficiency in other ways as generic aircraft identification techniques were discussed. Burns noted how an 'aircraft flies at 5 miles a minute' and a 'bomber at 4 miles a minute'; in addition 'bombers [had a] heavy volume tone [and] fighters [a] sharp tone.' He was to note four physical characteristics of any aircraft passing his post, which he summarised as 'WEFT', or Wings, Engines, Fuselage and Tail.

If an aircraft crashed in the vicinity of the LOP the Coastwatchers were instructed to first 'call [a] priest or other such clergyman [and] treat survivors kindly.'⁵ They were to

‘inform survivors that they are in *Eire*.’⁶ This hearts and minds approach had its tougher side. The senior officer who searched the plane was to ensure that ‘all maps and documents are to be collected [and] also pay books[,] identity disks etc’,⁷ ensuring, if it had not been destroyed by the crew, a useful supply of raw intelligence material. This important role of the Coastwatcher in intelligence gathering was taught detail. They were guarding the extremities of Ireland’s territory in the land, on the sea and in the air. As a non-combatant force they were to gather information about the enemy, record it and ‘distribute it to the formation on the right, left and rear.’ They would ‘know where the enemy is both strong and weak’ and to ‘assist in preventing [the] enemy from gaining information.’

Taking up positions: August-September 1939

On 29 August 1939, anticipating that a European war about to break out, teams from the Volunteer Force took up positions along Ireland’s south-eastern and southern coastline. By 1 September posts had been established between Cahore Point in Wexford and Dursey Head in west Cork. This gave extended coverage to the Waterford–Dungarvan coastline, the area most likely for a sea-borne invasion of Ireland and the landfall point for any bomber force seeking to attack Dublin. These posts also covered the zone in which submarine and anti-submarine warfare was expected. It was little, but it showed that Ireland was serious about its neutrality. The Irish High Commissioner in London emphasised to the Dominions Office that de Valera had informed the German Minister in Dublin that ‘he must not think that [the] Irish shore could be used for any German purposes – propaganda – espionage – etc.’⁸ The coast would be under 24-hour observation.

Thus began a 24-hour watch along the entire Irish coastline lasting until June 1945. Willie Whelan, based at the western end of the likely invasion zone at LOP 20 at Ram Head, Ardmore, County Waterford recalled that ‘The war started on Sunday and ... We went on, at 12pm on Monday night. We had no real orders at the time, only to walk along the coast and watch it.’⁹ Corporal Ted Sweeney who commanded LOP 60 at Termon Hill overlooking Blacksod Bay recalled that ‘we started from scratch. We had no barracks, no hut or anything. We worked an old British outpost that had been burned down, just a water tank left there, a cement water tank, no shelter at all.’¹⁰ Eventually the Army distributed tents. The construction of new accommodation became a matter of ‘extreme urgency’¹¹ and, aware of ‘the approach of colder weather’, the OPW and the Department of Defence arranged for fifty-five huts to be built immediately, with abandoned coastguard stations, Napoleonic Signal Towers and in one case a disused lighthouse, being reconditioned for coastwatching purposes.¹²

The Battle of the Atlantic Begins

In the Atlantic Ocean the second world war began 250 miles north-west of Malin Head on the evening of 3 September 1939. The *Athenia*, bound for Montreal with 1,418 passengers and crew, was torpedoed without warning by U-30. One hundred and twelve of the *Athenia*'s passengers and crew were killed in the attack. The survivors were rescued by British destroyers and landed at Galway. An emergency plan for the city was put into operation and over 100 of the survivors were offered refuge at Coláiste Éinde in the city.¹³

At the Admiralty Winston Churchill decided that 'in this first phase ... the prime attack appears to fall on the approaches to Great Britain from the Atlantic.' In the middle of 'the approaches to Great Britain from the Atlantic', at the point where convoys to and from Britain converged, lay neutral and defenceless Ireland.¹⁴

'They went up like mushrooms': Building the Coastwatching Network

LOP huts were built to an identical OPW design from 137 pre-cast blocks and assembled on site. This was a considerable logistical task. While Defence Forces lorries could transport the blocks to the vicinity of the post, local labour with horses and carts and in some cases, such as Erris Head in County Mayo or Carrigan Point in County Donegal, donkeys carrying single blocks, were required to slowly move the blocks over difficult ground to the construction area. These were not unique occurrences; posts were often 'located in places peculiarly difficult of access.'¹⁵

Though the posts were small in size, thirteen foot by nine foot, the operation to build seventy-six posts and recondition eight posts around the coastline of Ireland was one of the most widely spread engineering exercises undertaken by the Defence Forces during the Second World War. It involved planning and constructing posts at strategic locations at ten to fifteen mile intervals along the 1970 mile-long Irish coast.

A photograph of Aughris Head LOP (No. 54) from March 1940 shows the newly build hut set on a barren landscape under a flat spring sky with a drystone wall running behind the site. The prefabricated structure of the LOP is clearly visible as the exterior walls have not been cemented over. A lone soldier standing to the left of the post, cigarette in hand and grinning, his greatcoat fully buttoned up with collar raised against the cold, is testimony to the wretched conditions along the Irish coast in which the LOPs were constructed.

A series of photographs from February 1945 of the LOP at Dunbrattin Head (No. 18) in County Waterford shows the impact of wartime construction and five years of constant occupation. The single chimneystack has cracked its entire length, it has been repaired with tar and the cowl is missing. The heavy tarring on the roof to keep out the rain is evident, as are the repeated cracks along the join between the roof and the walls. The windowsills of the

LOP are marked by the steady dripping of water from the roof overhang and the window hinges show heavy rust.

Viewed from Dublin, Ireland's frontline forces perched in their cliff-top and headland posts were able to provide an almost immediate and eventually highly detailed picture of events on the sea and in the air off the coasts of Ireland. On a good day the Coastwatchers on Erris head could see over twelve nautical miles to the horizon, while their colleagues 700 foot up on Moyteoge Head on Achill Island at LOP 59 could see almost 30 nautical miles. Faced with such vast expanses of the grey North Atlantic to monitor, Coastwatchers were warned to

be alert and attentive and [to] guard against the feeling that nothing is likely to happen. Bear in mind always that you are the outpost of the Country's defences and on your alertness, powers of observation and quickness in sending information to the proper message centre depends the success of the defensive measures taken to defeat enemy activities.¹⁶

Reports from LOPs, now the nerve endings of Ireland's front line defence, were channelled to a central command in Dublin and as plots were built up a picture emerged of Allied and Axis strategy in the Battle of the Atlantic. The intelligence picture built up indicated that the routes of certain craft could be regarded as routine, where infringements were most likely to take place and the impact of weather and the changing seasons on traffic. A state of alert that could be regarded as normal was also developed. The human eye assisted by basic optics and paper charts provided the Irish Defence Forces with their range and direction finding system and with a low-tech early warning network that when its raw data were assessed achieved highly reliable results.

The first ten months of the M&CWS: September 1939 to June 1940

The primary duty of the Coast Watching Service was passive defence. It was to keep a constant watch along the coastline for naval activity, enemy forces poised to invade Ireland and potential fifth columnists, who could be 'any unusual assembly of men, lorries or cars in the vicinity of the coast', who sought to assist invaders.¹⁷ The early-warning reports from the Coast Watchers would give the ill-equipped Irish Army valuable extra time to ensure that 'suitable defensive action may be taken.'¹⁸ When in operation the eight man team at each LOP was equipped with a telescope, binoculars, silhouettes of aircraft and ships, a logbook, signal flags and lamps and a bicycle. A fixed point compass card was added in the autumn of 1940 as the Battle of the Atlantic intensified to allow accurate bearings to be taken by posts of 'attacks on vessels in the vicinity of our shores.'¹⁹

The Phoney War was a godsend for the Coastwatching Service as it allowed it to properly organise itself and train its personnel. Early reports to G2 show that the waters and skies around Ireland were relatively quiet. The main theatre of operations in was of the

Atlantic coasts of Ireland where U-boats sank roughly 200 allied vessels between September 1939 and March 1940.

The coastwatchers were willing, as Second Lieutenant Wren noted when he inspected Brandon Point LOP the ‘four men on duty [were] keeping a good watch’ however, their ‘knowledge of orders and instructions [was] poor.’²⁰ In addition to difficulties with equipment, the Coastwatchers at Brandon Point, in common with many others along the coast, simply lacked training. This had led to a virtual rebellion at Dunany Point LOP (No. 2) in County Louth in late September 1939 which was averted only by the men being given a severe lecturing from their District Officer, Sergeant Thornton, who reported with evident pride after the incident that ‘I have definitely cleaned up Dunany now and I am sure that whoever comes after me will have no further trouble.’²¹ Lieutenant Wren also sorted out the difficulties at Brandon Point, noting that at a later inspection ‘everything in order. Men alert and acquainted with their orders.’²² Though this situation was not achieved until one unsuitable volunteer had been removed from his post.

Nevertheless the Coastwatchers, some of whom had by October 1939 been to special training courses at Collins Barracks in Dublin, were forwarding to G2 an accurate picture of local shipping and signalling between ships. To Colonel Liam Archer ‘the collation and scrutiny of these reports [was] yielding valuable information.’²³ The east coast north of Dublin was generally quiet, coastal trade continued unmolested, but there was a feeling that submarine activity existed on the Dún Laoghaire–Holyhead Mail Boat route and south towards Bray and Wicklow. However there was greater activity in the three remaining command areas.

The Curragh Command, which was responsible for the strategically significant area from Wexford to Waterford, reported few significant infringements of neutrality, though the activities of the crew of a trawler who landed at Dunmore East on 14 October and made inquiries about the number of troops in the area and the sympathies of the locals were referred to the Gardaí.²⁴ Otherwise they could only report occasional infringements of Irish airspace by seaplanes from RAF Coastal Command, solitary cruisers and warships on patrol and the dark silhouettes of escorted convoys hugging the distant horizon. By the beginning of 1940 a new trend was evident in the Wexford-Rosslare-Kilmore Quay region. The post at Greenore was becoming one of the most important for the observation of convoys entering the Irish Sea from George’s Channel bound for Liverpool. The Corporal in command of Greenore LOP, Ibar Murphy emigrated to Britain after the war and in discussions with men who served on coastal defence in England and Scotland formed the opinion that ‘we saw more aerial and naval action at Greenore Point No. 13 off Rosslare Harbour and at Carnsore No. 14 ... than many of those chaps did.’²⁵ British aircraft were using this easily identifiable peninsula as a rendezvous point for their patrols into George’s Channel. Further violations of sovereignty

were expected in this area, which was already high in minds of Irish defence planners as the probable location for a sea borne invasion of Ireland. Though the suggestion, following the example of the United States Naval Air Service during World War One, of constructing an air corps base in the Wexford area was not followed up, the pier at Rosslare Harbour was laid with explosives. Pillboxes, machine gun nests and anti-aircraft positions were constructed in the cliffs overlooking the harbour.

There was greater activity along the south west coast with weekly sightings of submarines along the coast from Cork to the Blasket Islands, in particular of partially surfaced submarines passing through the Blasket Sound. In one isolated case a submarine was spotted one mile south of the Blasket Islands and External Affairs urgently phoned its presence to the British Representative's Office. The news came through to London so quickly that the Dominions Office had to 'reassure [the Admiralty] three times that it was true.'²⁶ Regular flights of reconnaissance flights by British Coastal Command seaplanes were also noted. Most of the activity was outside territorial waters, convoys estimated at ten to twelve miles off the coast, and so not of immediate concern to the Coast Watching Service.

Following the opening of the French Atlantic bases to Admiral Dönitz's U-Boat force after the fall of France in June 1940 the nature of the war around the Irish coasts changed dramatically. Germany now commanded the entire European Atlantic coastline. Britain was isolated on all sides except the west. By a decisive U-boat campaign in the western approaches Germany aimed to close Britain's remaining flank. Ireland's neutrality counted for little as, through the summer and autumn of 1940, the British Admiralty prepared to retake Berehaven and the RAF drew up sites for fighter command to operate from captured Irish airbases.²⁷ Britain would use Irish bases to extend her reach out into the Atlantic and to deny Ireland to the Germans.

From June 1940 to October 1941 the Battle of the Atlantic was waged at longitudes of 10 to 15 degrees west of Greenwich, directly off the western coast of Ireland. Convoys were re-routed away from the southern portion of the western approaches off the Cork and Kerry coast and a minefield was laid from Milford Haven up to Irish territorial waters of the Waterford and Wexford coast. Shipping crowded around Bloody Foreland and Malin Head. The area became a hunting ground for U-Boats during what, due to the mounting successes, their crews dubbed 'the Happy Time.' Churchill was extremely frightened by the successes of Dönitz's U-Boats, and the Defence Committee of the Cabinet considered re-occupying the Irish ports on 21 and 31 October. For the second half of 1940 Ireland was on the front line of the Battle of the Atlantic. From 1941 on the conflict moved further beyond 20 degrees and even 30 degrees west, making it more remote from the Irish coast watchers.

The 'Happy Time' lasted to October 1940. Convoy battles and losses of up to two ships a day in the operational area of the U-Boats and their aerial reconnaissance partners in

the Luftwaffe with its FW 200 Condors made the roughly 250 square miles off Bloody Foreland a killing ground matching the cemetery of shipping off the south west of Ireland during the first world war. On 24 April 1940 Ballagan Point LOP sighted a Focke-Wulf 200 Condor flying over Carlingford Lough, two miles north of the post, flying north-east along the Northern Ireland coastline at an altitude of 500 foot. The previous day the medium anti-aircraft guns at Blackrock and the heavy anti-aircraft guns at Ringsend in Dublin fired on a Condor which had first been spotted thirty minutes previously over Carlow heading towards Dublin. At between ten and fifteen thousand feet the Condor flew in a north-easterly direction over Dublin in patchy cloud and poor visibility and 'it was noted that height and speed' of the aircraft 'was increased as a result of [the] action taken by [the] defences.'²⁸ The ten rounds fired did not hit the aircraft, but the change of speed and height indicated that the crew knew that they were being fired on. Four of the rounds were 'reliably reported as bursting close to the aircraft', a suggestion that this was not simply a warning to the intruder to leave Irish territory. It was only the limited visibility that prevented the guns from opening greater fire.²⁹

Examining the reports from the MCWS to G2 in the seven months from June to December 1940 is a good operational test of the efficiency of the chain of LOPs and also of the level of knowledge they provided G2 with of the conflict to the west of Ireland. The changing nature of the war off the Irish coasts was immediately reflected in the observations of the Coastwatchers. Firstly the increase of incidents was noted. The Western Command intelligence report for July 1940 noted that the 1479 reports received was a 'huge increase on the June total which was in itself much in excess of any previous month.'³⁰ August saw 'more or less continuous aerial reconnaissance in this area, but greatly more activity is noticeable where convoys are about to pass'.³¹

Between sixty and eighty percent of the reports sent to the Western Command between June and December 1940 were from the posts situated between Horn Head and Inishowen Head; these were the most north-westerly points in Ireland. These posts noted large convoys escorted by surface craft. Posts further down the coast as far as Achill observed and heard both German and British reconnaissance aircraft passing overhead. The aircraft were also observed by the LOPs in the Southern Command area, Colonel M.J. Costello reporting to Liam Archer that during September 1940 'much of the activity ... reported indicates the passage of aircraft apparently going to and from definite objectives to the North East and North West of the command area.'³² The sighting of 'a four engined German bomber' on 4 September and regular reports of 'large and heavy' types or 'bomber or bomber type'³³ of aircraft passing over Ireland at night proved that Condors were taking short cuts over Ireland on their way to the North Atlantic convoy routes. At first these aircraft operated almost to timetable on routine reconnaissance patrols and on hunts for shipping, but later they

appeared 'to be losing the semblance of timetable regularity ... this may indicate that German aircraft activity is now being operated at least to some extent, on information concerning traffic on the North Atlantic shipping routes.'³⁴

The Condors, in addition to the ambling reconnaissance flights of RAF Coastal Command which made regular tours of the southern Irish coast, were a sign that from September 1940 'the infringement of our neutrality ... has become much more prevalent, and appears to be deliberate rather than accidental.'³⁵ There was now, Costello wrote, 'a progressively increasing disregard for our neutrality by both belligerents.'³⁶ However the frequency of overflights violating neutrality declined in November 1940, indicating that the conflict 200 miles off the Irish coast was decreasing. Not all flights went unchallenged. In December 1940 anti-aircraft defences at Fort Lenan and Buncrana opened fire on a patrolling British Hudson as it passed for the second time over Irish territory. The Officer Commanding 'stated that the fire was effective as the plane appeared to be in difficulties', though it continued out to sea.³⁷ On 12 July 1941 the ground defences at Finner Camp opened fire on 'a British Bomber which was flying east over the Camp.' The defences hit their target as it was reported that 'the plane appeared to be hit as it shook in mid-air, and altered its course.'³⁸ Unconfirmed reports from a separate source suggested that this aircraft crash-landed in Northern Ireland and the pilot was killed.

The human cost of war at sea was also becoming evident. In August twelve ships were torpedoed off the Irish coast and 41 lifeboats and 13 rafts put ashore on Irish territory with 132 survivors being rescued. Slowly too the less fortunate arrived. Silently 43 bodies arrived on Irish beaches to be found by the Coast Watchers, the LDF and local inhabitants. From the end of July to the end of December 1940, 220 bodies were washed up along the Irish coast, hauled into currachs by local fishermen and on occasion recovered from the base of cliff faces by Gardáí and Coastwatchers descending on ropes to retrieve bodies. Corporal Ted Sweeney of Blacksod recalled how 'eventually we started to have rafts washed ashore and there were some dead bodies, there were rafts and old lifeboats coming, and, not many came ashore here, but there were quite a lot of bodies.'³⁹

The first recorded body to be washed up on the Irish coast, was, according to Department of External Affairs files, that of 28 year old Hans Moller. Moller was a German citizen who had been interned in Britain and who was one of the 743 Italian and German internees, guards and ships crew who lost their lives when the Blue Star line's *Arandora Star*, sailing without an escort, was torpedoed 75 miles west of Bloody Foreland at 7.05 on the morning of 2 July 1940 by U-47. It was not until the end of August that last of the dead from the *Arandora Star* were washed up on Irish beaches.

How well did the coastwatching service perform in this first important stage of the Battle of the Atlantic? Do their reports suggest that G2 had a reliable and indeed correct, so

far as the later historical record shows, picture of events in the North Atlantic off Ireland's coast? Liam Archer and Dan Bryan were interested in broad brush strokes 'pointing out tendencies' to provide 'a general picture of the situation rather than a record of all happenings.'⁴⁰ The Coast Watchers were proud of their abilities; Michael Brick, one of the team who manned the LOP on Brandon Point, recalled that 'we would be right above any craft that entered our vicinity. A gannet could not land on the water unknown to us.'⁴¹

In considering this point some caveats are necessary. The duties of the CWS related to matters within the three-mile limit of Irish seas and overflights through Irish airspace. Secondly, since coastwatchers were physically limited by day-to-day visibility and by the limit of the horizon, the course of events more than thirty miles off the Irish coast had to be extrapolated from the data reported to G2. Finally, information from coast watching reports was augmented by other sources such as details of shipping sunk transmitted by Lloyds, radio messages picked up by Fort Dunree on Lough Swilly, information from survivors from lifeboats, Garda reports and reports from lighthouse keepers.

As shown above, the M&CWS had little difficulty providing information that showed to G2 that the Battle of the Atlantic had intensified following the fall of France. The Coastwatchers also had little difficulty indicating that the conflict had moved from the southern to the northern cones of approach to the Western Approaches in the autumn of 1940. They identified the killing ground of the German U-Boats extending 500 miles off the Donegal coast and the 'ceaseless patrol on the Northern shipping routes' kept up by RAF Coastal Command.⁴² Though the action had moved north, ships were also being torpedoed in the winter of 1940 in the area off the Fastnet Rock and by September 1941 convoys were again operating off the south coast of Ireland. G2 was also aware that the east coast from Carlingford Lough in Louth to Greenore Point in Wexford was relatively quiet on the seas, but was the location of a considerable aerial presence, details of which were passed on to Air Defence Command in Dublin Castle.

Also clear is that reliable reports of submarines in Irish territorial water were rare. On investigation reports received were fantasy, porpoises or bull seals. The legend of German submarines operating in Irish coastal waters grew, overshadowing the actual attacks off the coast outside territorial waters which involved the machine gunning of ships by aircraft and the torpedoing of ships by submarines. It is possible to see suggest and origin for this myth. Two days after the outbreak of the war, based on an extrapolation from the IRA bombings in London in 1938 rather than on concrete evidence, Churchill asked 'what does Intelligence say about possible succouring of U-boats by Irish malcontents in west of Ireland inlets? If they throw bombs in London, why should they not supply petrol to U-boats.'⁴³ He asked Admiral John Godfrey, the Director of Naval Intelligence to find out from Sir Hugh Sinclair, the Head of the Intelligence Services, otherwise known as 'C', whether there were

‘any signs of succouring U-boats in Irish creeks or inlets?’⁴⁴ In a move that would be immediately noticed in the close knit communities of the west of Ireland seaboard, Churchill continued in his *Boy’s Own* manner to suggest that ‘money should be spent to secure a trustworthy body of Irish agents to keep [a] most vigilant watch.’⁴⁵ When prisoners from a German submarine said that they had been ashore in Ireland and were found to have in their possession Irish cigarettes, Churchill’s beliefs were confirmed, at least to himself.⁴⁶ There were verified sightings of submarines but they were more usually British submarines operating in and out of Derry than German craft.

Through the reports of the Coastwatching service the weekly disposition of British and German forces around the Irish coasts and their activities as regards violations of Irish neutrality could be estimated with some degree of accuracy. Convoy routes, strengths and marine and air escorts were known to G2. For example in his report for December 1940 the IO of the Western Command put the sighting of only six convoys in the Inishowen area through the month down to the fact that ‘convoys are taking a course farther North in an effort to elude the numerous submarines of whose presence around our coast the list of shipping attacks ... affords ample confirmation.’⁴⁷ Also known were the intentions of the aircraft of RAF Coastal Command and the Condors of the Luftwaffe. The information gathered following the fall of France did give a relatively accurate, if geographically limited, view of the general trends of the progress of the Battle of the Atlantic.

As 1941 began G2 could see the growing importance of Derry as a naval base to the British with the arrival of destroyers given to the British by the United States. The use of the Derry base and the seas around the north-west coasts as training areas for anti-submarine operations was also apparent. The increased use of Limavady aerodrome as an RAF coastal command air base was apparent, its aircraft mounting daytime reconnaissance flights into the North Atlantic as weather permitted. Large amounts of aerial activity were now taken as a sign that convoys, now observed to be much larger and more heavily escorted than previously, were expected along the Northern trade routes. Co-ordinated attacks on German submarines by Coastal Command aircraft working with destroyers and armed trawlers were also noted as were daily occurrences of gunfire and explosions apparently directed at U-Boats. Regular patterns had been established by G2 and though Irish neutrality was being violated, in no case had aircraft and ships been doing anything other than crossing through undefended Irish airspace and waters.

G2 would at times see new patterns emerge and draw what can now be shown to be incorrect deductions. When Inishowen Head noticed aircraft carrying large searchlights, the so-called ‘Leigh Light’, they concluded that this was ‘an attempt to solve the problem of the night bomber.’⁴⁸ In fact the Leigh Light was to be used for fixing on enemy submarines. At other times the presence of ships connected with wider events were noted. An example being

that in late April 1941, following the sinking of the Bismarck, nine British destroyers and two battleships one of which was thought to be either HMS Nelson or HMS Rodney, were observed heading north along the Donegal coast. An emerging pattern was observed with regard to ferry flights, it being noted that 'a much greater number fly East than West. This would lead one to believe that a large number of planes are being flown across the Atlantic and landing in Northern Ireland.'⁴⁹ What began as a one-off incident would, following repeated occurrences, be put into a pattern and finally be identified. G2 could extrapolate from these command area reports what was expected to be the normal state of events off the Irish coast and so unusual activity became all the more obvious. Flights from Castle Archdale and Limavady were normal and the use of the Erne Corridor was unremarkable by the autumn of 1941. British aircraft were 'observed almost daily off the coast of Mayo, Sligo and Donegal and crossing our territory between Ballyshannon and Finner when moving to and from their base in Lough Erne.'⁵⁰

From the individual log-books of the network of LOPs and the detailed reports submitted to G2 we can gauge in detail how the second world war, in particular the Battle of the Atlantic, raged around Ireland's coasts. Such an analysis helps integrate Ireland's wartime position with the wider conflict in the seas Northern Europe. In addition by comparing the reports to the history of the wider battles in the Atlantic Ocean we can see that for the portion of the battle fought around the coasts of Ireland the volunteers of the Coastwatch provided accurate information from which correct inferences on the wider state of the conflict were generally drawn by G2.

Regular forces maligned the Coastwatchers as an unarmed, poor quality, semi-civilian volunteer force not subject to the life of the regular soldier. The Coastwatchers underwent considerable hardship to keep their watch on the coast. Watchers from Benwee Head told stories 'of the hardships endured there. Climbing hand over hand along a rail with howling gales bashing their faces with rain or sleet as well, climbing up to their post.'⁵¹ In the winter LOPs were cold and wet, with the fires in their tiny grates providing little warmth.

The truth was, that by selecting local mariners, fishermen, beachcombers and those with farms along the coast, the military acquired a specialist group with a pre-existing 'detailed knowledge of a given section of the coastline.'⁵² This was the sort of knowledge that only a lifetime of sea faring could give and which barrack training could not easily provide. G2 appreciated the skills of their volunteers along the coast, as one memorandum put it, these men combined 'an extensive knowledge of the peculiarities of the coast in the vicinity of their posts with a reasonably good appreciation of the different types of seagoing craft.'⁵³ Living locally, the men of the Coast Watch knew what craft were expected to operate in the vicinity of their posts and once in operation the Coast Watching Service ensured that 'under normal conditions of visibility no surface craft can approach our coast unobserved at

any intermediate point between LOPs.’⁵⁴ By the end of the Second World War the opinion in the Department of Defence was that the Coast-Watching service, formed ‘an integral part of the defences of the State.’⁵⁵

What made Coastwatch work was its very simplicity, it was a local information gathering network where each link in the chain covered a small specific area and had a limited number of tasks to perform. Thus a standard format of information could be logged and relayed to Dublin. A routine everyday information flow, even of relatively low-grade data, to G2 and Air Defence HQ enabled them to build up an elaborate picture of the conflict around and over Ireland during the Second World War. Liam Archer made a point of telling Colonel A.T. Lawlor the Marine Service that he attached ‘the greatest importance to this information from this end.’⁵⁶

Here is one great significance of Coastwatch to the historian. A grave flaw in Irish historiography is the tendency to assume Irish exceptionalism to the course of world history. This is magnified in the case of the Second World War. The term ‘The Emergency’, Seán O Faolain’s ‘green curtain’ and F.S.L. Lyons’ ‘Plato’s Cave’ analogies have led us to forget what contemporaries knew and feared, that the global conflict, neutrality notwithstanding, was going on around and over Ireland and Ireland could be drawn in by a move from either side. Ireland might not be a belligerent, but neutrality was a state of involvement in the conflict at hand and the records of the Coastwatch log books show just how close that conflict was.

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¹ Military Archives, Cathal Brugha Barracks, Dublin (hereafter MA), Horn Head Logbook, report serial number 443, 14 June 1940.

² MA, Horn Head Logbook, report serial numbers 363-5, 8 June 1940.

³ MA, Horn Head Logbook, report serial numbers 377, 379, 9 June 1940 and 425, 13 June 1940.

⁴ MA 2/55390, draft recruiting notice ‘approved by Minister’, no date.

⁵ MA Owen Quinn Papers, training notes of Volunteer J.P. Burns.

⁶ MA Owen Quinn Papers, training notes of Volunteer J.P. Burns.

⁷ MA Owen Quinn Papers, training notes of Volunteer J.P. Burns.

⁸ TNA PRO DO 35/1107/9 WX1/78, minute by Eden, 1 September 1939.

⁹ Siobhan Lincoln, T. Mooney, Fritz Hirsch & Erwin Strunz, ‘Ardmore memory and story: troubled times’ Published online 3 February 2003 at <http://www.dungarvanmuseum.org/exhibit/web/Display/article/124/> . Accessed 19 February 2004.

¹⁰ MA, Owen Quinn papers, typescript ‘Interview with Ted Sweeney’.

¹¹ NAI OPW A115/7/3/1939, Hyland (for MacMahon) to Secretary, OPW, undated.

¹² NAI DF S7/2/40, MacMahon to McElligott, 8 September 1939.

¹³ 75 years of Coláiste Éinde’s history, *Galway Advertiser*, 6 November 2003. Available at www.galwayadvertiser.ie/homepage/fdownloads/06_November_OldGalway.pdf accessed 10 August 2004.

¹⁴ Martin Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers, Volume I: At the Admiralty September 1939-May 1940* (London, 1993), ‘Winston S. Churchill: Notes of a Meeting’, 4 September 1939, p. 24.

¹⁵ MA 2/55390, memorandum entitled ‘Coast Watching Service, undated, probably February 1939.

¹⁶ MA G2/X/318, ‘Instructions for Personnel Manning Coast Watching Posts’, September 1939.

¹⁷ MA G2/X/318, extract form report of visit of Major Flynn and Commandant Powell to Western Command Posts. Athlone, Galway and Castlebar, during period January 17th – January 19th, 1940.’

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- ¹⁸ MA G2/X/318, 'Instructions for Personnel Manning Coast Watching Posts', September 1939.
- ¹⁹ MA G2/X/318, Archer to Lawlor, 20 August 1940.
- ²⁰ MA Coast Watching Service LOP Logbooks, Brandon Point, Log book for 7 February 1940 to 29 June 1941.
- ²¹ MA G2/X/315 part 1, Report by District Officer, 29 September 1939.
- ²² MA Coast Watching Service LOP Logbooks, Brandon Point, Log book for 7 February 1940 to 29 June 1941.
Report serial number 18, 10 April 1940.
- ²³ MA G2/X/318, Archer to Lawlor, 29 September 1939.
- ²⁴ MA G2/X/315 part 1, Report by Mackey, 23 October 1939.
- ²⁵ MA Owen Quinn Papers, Murphy to Quinn, 5 April 1990.
- ²⁶ TNA PRO DO 35/548/25 E70/17, Machtig to Maffey, 9 October 1939.
- ²⁷ See TNA: PRO CAB 84/111 and AIR 2/7233 respectively.
- ²⁸ MA ADC 43, Commandant McCarthy to Director of Artillery, 23 April 1941.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Report on M&CWS for July 1940, Togher to Archer, 1 August 1940.
- ³¹ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Report on M&CWS for August 1940, Togher to Archer.
- ³² MA G2/X/315 part 2, Coastal intelligence report of September 1940, Costello to Archer, 1 October 1940.
- ³³ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Coastal intelligence report of September 1940, Costello to Archer, 1 October 1940.
- ³⁴ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Coastal intelligence report of October 1940, Costello to Archer, 1 November 1940.
- ³⁵ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Coastal intelligence report of September 1940, Costello to Archer, 1 October 1940.
- ³⁶ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Coastal intelligence report of October 1940, Costello to Archer, 1 November 1940.
- ³⁷ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Western Command Monthly Report, December 1940.
- ³⁸ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Western Command IO Monthly report, July 1941.
- ³⁹ MA, Owen Quinn papers, typescript 'Interview with Ted Sweeney'.
- ⁴⁰ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Archer to Intelligence Officers, all Commands, 10 July 1940.
- ⁴¹ MA, Owen Quinn Papers, Brick to Quinn, 10 July 1994.
- ⁴² MA G2/X/315 part 2, Togher to Archer, Western Command report for November 1940.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., Churchill to Godfrey, 6 September 1939.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., War Cabinet minutes, 15 September 1939.
- ⁴⁷ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Western Command Monthly Report, December 1940.
- ⁴⁸ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Western Command Monthly Report, April 1940.
- ⁴⁹ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Western Command Monthly Report, July 1941.
- ⁵⁰ MA G2/X/315 part 2, Western Command Monthly Report, November 1941.
- ⁵¹ MA, Owen Quinn papers, Murphy to Quinn, 5 April 1990.
- ⁵² NAI DF S4/84/38, MacMahon to McElligott, 11 February 1939.
- ⁵³ MA G2/X/318, 'Memorandum on Coastal Observation', no date.
- ⁵⁴ MA G2/X/318, 'Memorandum on Coastal Observation', no date.
- ⁵⁵ NAI OPW A115/21/1/1939, Industry and Commerce to OPW, 23 April 1956.
- ⁵⁶ MA G2/X/318, Archer to Lawlor, 29 September 1939.