

# A WARTIME CORRESPONDENCE

*FRANCES M DUNLOP*

At 2.15 pm on 30 April 1940, the town of Greenock was shaken by a massive explosion. The French destroyer *Maillé Brézé*, anchored at the Tail of the Bank, blew up and caught fire when there was a malfunction of her own torpedos. Those of the crew who were able abandoned ship, but many were trapped below decks, and went down with the ship, despite attempts at rescue.

Requiem Mass was celebrated in St Mary's, and the bodies which could be recovered were buried in Greenock cemetery. (Later, in August 1954, the bodies remaining on the ship were recovered with full military honours. Requiem Mass was celebrated in St Lawrence's Church, and the bodies repatriated to France.)



*St Mary's*



*Norah*

The survivors were taken to the Royal Infirmary, and afterwards billeted with local families, especially where there were French speakers. At that time my mother, Frances Donnelly, and her sister Norah, who were both teachers in St Lawrence's Boys' School, were living in Brisbane Street with their father. Marcel, Raymond and Pierre soon became part of the family.

My mother's French was quite good, thanks to years of corresponding with a friend in Belgium, and Auntie Norah did her best. The ice was broken when she informed the boys that the cat had just had chickens. They all had a good laugh, the first of many.

From their subsequent letters it is apparent that the matelots loved their time in Greenock, getting the chance to recover in some degree from the horrific experience they had been through as they jumped from their burning ship.

"I don't forget, and never shall forget your delightful and consoling welcome in 1940-41," wrote Raymond a few years later.

And Marcel wrote in 1945: "I don't have any photographs, but I can still picture all my Scottish friends. I have often spoken of your beautiful country. All the French who spent

time in Scotland are unanimous in paying tribute to the friendliness and great hospitality of the Scots.”



*Pierre, Marcel & Raymond*

There was a room in the basement where they could play billiards and table tennis, and apparently things sometimes got a bit rumbustious! Marcel wrote later: “How long before we have a game of ping-pong? Tell Norah that as soon as I get the chance I shall replace the ash tray which I broke in the games room where you and Frances had such brilliant games.”

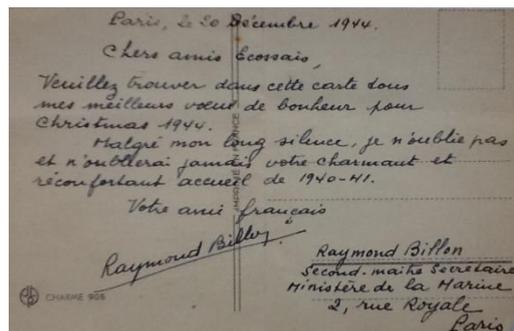
One of the boys was a good pianist, and they had many a singsong round the piano. There was a canteen at the Town Hall where they could meet with other servicemen.

In the meantime the War was continuing, with bad news coming from France. The conquering German army swept through the north of the country, and the British Expeditionary Force, with some of the French troops, were trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk. The evacuation took place between 26 May and 3 June 1940 by a “miracle”, as Churchill said.

France was facing imminent defeat. Marshall Philippe Pétain, the 84 year old First World War hero, was appointed premier. On 16 June he broadcast to the nation his intention to surrender.

There was one dissenting voice. Two days later General Charles de Gaulle broadcast from the BBC in London a stirring call to the French people to continue the struggle. De Gaulle was the most junior of the French generals. Not many had heard of him, and not many listened to his broadcast, which was repeated on 22 June, the day France signed the armistice with Germany.

“I call upon all Frenchmen who want to remain free to listen to my voice and follow me. Long live free France and independence!”



*Christmas card from Raymond, 1944*



*Pierre, Marcel and a friend at Arrowe Camp*

Our three “pompons rouges” and their comrades immediately headed for London to join de Gaulle. They were initially sent to a camp at Arrowe Park, near Birkenhead, to await deployment .

Northern France was now under German occupation, and the French Government, headed by Marshall Pétain, relocated to Vichy.

After the capitulation of France, the Royal Navy seized all French ships in British ports, and handed them over to the newly-formed Free French Navy. By February 1941 Raymond was in Plymouth, aboard one of these ships, the destroyer *La Melpomène*.

He wrote from on board: “Yesterday I received a letter from Frances, and unusually for these times, it was not censored; and it only took two days to arrive, instead of 10 or 12 days like some others.”

Frances must have told him that the cat was missing him, because he writes: “Poor cat! Try to make her understand that I hope to be playing with her again. Because life is not made up only of arrivals and departures: there is also the word ‘return’.”

He speaks of his anxiety at the progress of the war, hoping for an outcome favourable to the Allies.

Greenock was a major base for the Free French Navy, visited twice by General de Gaulle in 1942, but our three matelots never made it back to the town.

Communication was impossible during the following years, but in 1944 letters began to filter through once again.

Marcel wrote from Le Havre on 26 September, just after the Liberation of the town: “What a pleasure to be able to write to our Scottish friends after 4 years of silence. I have often thought about you, and wondered how you were. In 1940 I would see the *boche* bombers leaving for Britain, and I prayed that the bombs would spare you. Now things are different. It’s the Allied planes which are bombing Germany, as is only justice. It’s a shame that so many prisoners – my young brother is one – and displaced persons are liable to be killed in the bombing ...

“I have been fortunate to find all my family in excellent health ...

“I have been obliged to leave Le Havre and take refuge in a small village 30 kilometres from the town, due to the bombing by the R.A.F. The final raid caused a lot of damage and there were many victims. The *boches* wouldn’t surrender, so extreme measures had to be taken ...

“*Bonjour* to the ladies of the Town Hall canteen.”

In fact, Le Havre took a terrible pounding from the Allied bombing raids in the preparatory stage of the Liberation of France. After the D-Day landings in Normandy in June, the Allied forces had to secure the major ports on that part of the coast. Le Havre had been heavily fortified by the occupying Germans, and the assault on the town was fierce.

The worst raids took place in September 1944, when the port was shelled and the town was flattened by Allied bombs, giving Le Havre the dubious distinction of being Europe’s worst damaged port. The German commandant requested that civilians should be allowed to leave, but the British officials refused. Altogether the town suffered well over 100 bombing raids, causing around 5 000 deaths, with many thousands injured. To avoid the bombings, many of the inhabitants had taken to moving out at night, by foot, waggon or bicycle, and coming back into the town during daylight hours. Those who were able, like Marcel and his family, fled to the countryside.

Although his hometown was virtually destroyed by British bombs, Marcel’s bitterness and anger were reserved for the German occupiers.

In January 1945 Marcel wrote to my mother and father, married by this time. He gives an insight into the suffering of the French people during the Occupation:

“Chers Frances & Jacky,

“What a pleasure to hear that you are both in good health, and to learn of your marriage ...

“Since 1940 terrible things have been happening in my country. With all my heart I hope that you will never know what it’s like to be occupied by the *boches*. In France we no longer have any weapons, but I would prefer – if they returned – to face them with a pitchfork, and risk death, rather than submit to them again. My poor country is destroyed! They have taken everything. We have no decent clothes left. Shoes – not even to be mentioned. We have a meagre ration of food. But still, I can’t complain because there are very many worse off than I am. It is beginning to snow and get cold, and we have no coal or firewood in the office – we work without a fire. I can hardly hold my pen.

“We mustn’t complain – everything will get back to normal, and then “We’ll get the *boches*”, as the BBC used to say during the occupation. We weren’t allowed to listen to

London, but the Germans weren't fly enough to stop us listening to British radio. The *boches* treated the French badly, but I assure you that they'll suffer if we occupy Germany ...

"I have never had any letters from Raymond. I last saw him in Arrowe Camp in 1940, and I have never had any news of him.

"Pierre has not been in touch with me for more than a year. I have written to him several times and had no reply. I am afraid something has happened to him. The bombings and shootings have claimed a lot of victims.

"The town of Le Havre is partly destroyed. I don't know when we shall see our great port as prosperous as it was before the war. The *boches* destroyed a lot of it, and the Allied planes did the rest.

"I am living about thirty kilometres from Le Havre, in a small house out in the country, as there is no chance of getting back to live in the town, because it's impossible to find a habitable house available. I hope to see you all again one day, and would like to be able to receive you fittingly. I would love to let you taste French cuisine. That day we'll have a 'blow-out'! ...

*"Your dear friend who thinks often to you. Marcel"*

(He wrote the last sentence in English.)

Most of us nowadays can only struggle to imagine how hard life was during the war, with rationing and shortages, and all sorts of restrictions, apart from fear of air raids, and the constant worry about loved ones serving in the Forces. But it was immeasurably harder for those living under occupation.

In 1946 my mother's Belgian friend, Richard, wrote (in English): "Today, third of September, second anniversary of our Liberation by the British troops: it's a well chosen day for writing to a British friend. When I remember all what happened before two years ago, the joy of all the population after five years of occupation by the Nazis, the kindness of your soldiers, the lucky end of the nightmare, the sweetness of the recovered Liberty, the souvenir (*memory*) of all gives me very much emotion: the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1944 was the most beautiful day of my life."

I never knew what became of our "pompons rouges" after the war, but their surviving letters testify to a precious friendship at a dark time in our history.

---

However, there's a sequel. In his letters Marcel spoke of his three little boys, Michel, Jacky and René. I began to wonder if it might be possible to make contact with them, and through the miracle of the internet, that is indeed what happened!

Eventually Google brought me to a French telephone directory, and there was a promising name in the right part of France, on the outskirts of Le Havre. "Go on, write to him!" everyone said. So I did. In my best French I wrote a short letter giving the outline of the story, and very soon I received an email from Michel: "Je suis bien le fils de Marcel ..." (*I am indeed the son of Marcel ...*)

Later, Michel wrote a long letter with information about his family. His father, he said, loved Scotland and the Scottish people ("... without them he perhaps would not have survived"). He always dreamed of paying another visit to Greenock, but unfortunately this had never been possible.

The second son of the family, Jacques, was nicknamed Jacky "in memory of Scotland where my father had a friend called Jacky – perhaps a member of your family?"



*Jackie and Frances,  
my father and mother*

Jackie, Marcel's Scottish friend, was my father, who died soon after I was born. So you can imagine how emotional it was for me to know that there is someone bearing his name and honouring his memory.

Michel too was very moved when I sent him a copy of his father's letters to my family.

Who could have dreamt that a wartime friendship could be rekindled in the next generation, after so many years?



*General de Gaulle's appeal*



*Free French monument, Lyle Hill, Greenock*