

Kerlogue Rescue

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The broadcast may be heard at <https://www.rte.ie/culture/2024/0905/1467947-sunday-miscellany-the-kerlogue-by-fran-orourke/>

Not long ago, a German lady named Beatrice Karsch, who was very dear to me and my family, died, aged 98. The story of my connection with Beatrice and her husband Hans-Helmut goes back to the Bay of Biscay, at the height of the Second World War, and a major international incident that has gone down in Irish naval history.

On the 29th of December, 1943, a small Irish merchant vessel named the Kerlogue, owned by the Wexford Steamship Company, was returning from Lisbon with a cargo of oranges, when a German plane flew overhead signalling “SOS”, and indicating the boat should follow it in a southeasterly direction. After two hours, captain Tom Donoghue and his men came upon the appalling aftermath of a naval battle 500 miles NW of Finistere. A German destroyer and two torpedo boats had been sunk, with most of their 700-crew drowned. The sea was littered with corpses in life jackets and men desperately clinging to wreckage.

For ten hours, in rough seas until after dark, the exhausted crew of the Kerlogue hauled men onto the small 140-foot craft. They rescued an incredible 168 men until Captain Donoghue issued the stark order, “No more, or we’ll sink”. The crew distributed their spare clothes and gave what first aid they could. The cargo of oranges saved the survivors from dehydration.

A crew member later wrote: “Cabins, storerooms and alleyways were soon packed with shivering, soaked and sodden men; others were placed in the engine room where it became so crowded that the engineer could not attend to his machinery, and so by signs – as none spoke English – he got the survivors to move the instruments he could not reach.”

Lieutenant-Commander Quedenfelt, the highest-ranking German rescued, requested that the ship sail for France but Captain Donoghue refused. The Germans could have easily commandeered the ship, but respected his authority. Donoghue also ignored orders from the British naval authorities to return to Fishguard and headed instead for Cork where the survivors could be cared for. He sent the following message to Valentia Radio Station: “Proceeding Cobh expect arrive two am tomorrow morning. Have on board 164 seamen survivors seven men seriously injured one man dead. Please instruct Port Control Cobh that I request urgent medical assistance. Have no food water or clothing. Thomas Donoghue Master.” Valentia acknowledged the message and signed off: ‘Well done, Kerlogue’. Intercepting the message, the British authorities in Cornwall sent the following message: “Proceed Direct to Fishguard

in accordance with Navicert” The order was ignored by Captain Donoghue, who acted in the tradition of Admiral Nelson’s ‘blind eye’ and switched off his radio receiver.

The Kerlogue berthed at Cobh on 1 January 1944. The rescued Germans were interned in the Curragh military camp where they enjoyed relative freedom until the end of the war. Conditions were comfortable. One internee wrote home: “The food here is beyond all praise. I don’t exaggerate when I say that we get twice as much to eat as on board, meat in large portions, white bread and good butter, fresh milk and five cigarettes daily.”

Fast forward nearly 25 years, and this is where the Karsch family I mentioned earlier comes into the story. In 1968 my German lecturer at University College Galway wrote to his hometown newspaper, looking for families to host his students during the summer vacation. As a gesture of gratitude to Ireland, as it were, Hans-Helmut Karsch, who’d been one of those German sailors rescued by the Kerlogue, replied.

And so began a wonderful friendship between his family and mine, which continues over half a century later. I spent my holidays in the northern German city of Nordhorn, where I attended the local Gymnasium or secondary school.

Hans told me about his time in the Curragh. He was a gifted artist and had painted water colours of the rescue in the Bay of Biscay, and the Curragh Camp. He showed me with pride the identity card which allowed him travel within a radius of thirty miles. Internees visited Dublin and went to the Curragh races where they sold doughnuts baked on a turf fire at the camp. Some internees worked for local farmers, thinning beet, cutting turf and saving hay. They gained a reputation for repairing bicycles, clocks and radios. They reared and sold rabbits and dogs. Some registered for courses at University College Dublin and attended the graduation ball in the Gresham.

Fifty years after the rescue, twenty of the survivors and two of the British navy officers who’d fought against them visited Dun Laoghaire for a commemoration ceremony in the National Maritime Museum.

A presentation was made to the last surviving member of the crew, Tom O’Neill. It was an emotional reunion with tearful embraces. The survivors visited the site of their old internment camp in the Curragh. They held a service at the grave of Captain Donoghue in Dungarvan.

Tom visited Germany on many occasions as an honoured guest of some of the men rescued by the “Kerlogue”. The last time he was there was to attend the launch of a yacht, owned by one of his hosts. She was named “Kerlogue”.