SECRET FLOTILLAS

BROOKS RICHARDS

Volume I:
Clandestine Sea Operations to Brittany
1940–1944

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Volume I: Clandestine Sea Operations to Brittany 1940–1944
The artist, M. Sebastien Briec Junior, was serving as a 14-year-old cabin-boy under his father’s command when the fishing vessel *Veach-Vad* carried Robert Alaterre of the JOHNHY network, Jean Lavalou, Paul Vourc’h and Roland Hascoc’t to an offshore rendezvous with the British submarine *Sea Lion*, commanded by the future Admiral Ben Bryant. The operation, which took place on 18 November 1942 off Penmarch, had been arranged through the W/T set operated at Rennes by Jean Le Roux.

*Frontispiece:*
SECRET FLOTILLAS

Volume I: Clandestine Sea Operations to Brittany 1940–1944

BROOKS RICHARDS

FOREWORD BY M.R.D.FOOT

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This second edition of Secret Flotillas differs from its predecessor in two respects:

1. Whereas the 1996 book covered only the clandestine sea lines to France and what was in 1940–44 French North Africa, the present one includes operations to and from Italy in 1943–45.

2. Though written in two parts, covering missions from United Kingdom ports and those from Gibraltar and other bases in the Western Mediterranean, respectively, these were published as a single volume. This has now been divided into two.

The reasons for these changes are that the ships and crews operating to the south of France in 1943 and 1944 from Corsica were working at the same time to the west coast of Italy and the adjacent islands, and that the same flotillas operated in the Adriatic and the Tyrrhenian.

To have included all this in a single volume would have made an already large and expensive book unmanageable and too costly. The division will also provide visitors to the coasts of the West Country and Brittany with a conveniently sized account of the part of this epic likely to be of the most interest to them.

A further consideration which weighed heavily with the author in deciding to include Italy in this edition is that more than half of the 390 operations in Italian and adjacent waters were carried out by Italian vessels with Italian crews. It was a contribution to the Allied war effort that, like the shelter and the succour of the contadini to Allied ex-prisoners after the Armistice of 1943, ought not to be forgotten.
Sir Brooks Richards wrote most of this book in the early 1990s—that is, half a century or so after the events described in it took place; but he had the enormous advantage of having been present in person at many of the crucial occasions he discussed. In an age when not many military historians have had a chance to hear shots fired in anger, it is an extra delight to find a participant who thinks so clearly and writes so well.

He took part in running agents to and fro across the Channel between Cornwall and Brittany, and earned the first of his two DSCs for gallantry under fire while doing so. The second of them was awarded for operations behind the German right flank in the Tunisian campaign. He could still, when he wrote this book, recall precisely the difficulties that in the pre-satellite age attended on navigation close to shore, when Breton rocks and tidal streams, or Moroccan surf and indistinguishable dunes, not to speak of enemy land, sea and air patrols, presented incessant dangers. Every sortie had to be most precisely timed, to fit in with the known perils; for the unexpected, one could do nothing but improvise and hope.

He moved on in 1943 from his seaborne career to land-based work for SOE, running agents into southern France from Algiers, and next year began a long and distinguished diplomatic career, which culminated in his own embassy in Athens from 1974 to 1978. Retirement from the diplomatic service, on reaching the age of sixty, did not mean for him retiring from public life: he had held several responsible posts in Whitehall already, and became the Crown’s adviser on security in Northern Ireland.

Sir Brooks Richards never forgot those who had served with him in the war. He was long one of the pillars of the Special Forces Club. In this book, he recaptures with wonderful vividness the minute details of secret sea operations; and in this second edition, which alas he did not live to see in print, he expands it beyond the Tunisian campaign to cover small boat work on to the coasts of Italy, both before and after the Italian change of sides. Some of this was conducted by his friend Andrew Croft, from bases in Corsica, with exceptional daring. Over and over again, he uses his knowledge of the personalities involved to illuminate what went on.

This is one of the books that brings out the horror, the exultation and the chanciness of war, by one who knew what he wrote about from inside, and used the most secret
surviving archives, sealed off from me forty years ago. This is not a piece of history that will need writing again: it is conclusive.

M.R.D.Foot
Acknowledgements to the First Edition

This book grew out of a chance encounter with Professor Guy Vourc’h in Paris in 1979. It was a name that awoke echoes: we had met soon after the Liberation. I knew that he and his three younger brothers had escaped in turn from Brittany to England during the Occupation and that he had been one of the first Frenchmen to fight their way ashore on D-Day. I told him that I had been involved in contacts with Brittany in 1941 and 1942: he knew more of the Breton side of my first operation than I did. And he sent me Roger Huguen’s *Par les Nuits les plus Longues*.

The book was a professionally researched account of wartime escapes from Brittany, which I found fascinating. It covered a number of British-organised evacuations by sea and he had had help from various British sources. But most naval and paranaval operations to Brittany did not concern evacuation of escapers and evaders and fell outside the scope of M.Huguen’s researches. I knew too that Brittany was not the only part of France to which sea lines had operated. I found myself regretting the lack of a comprehensive record of clandestine sea transport into and out of French territory during the war years. This lacuna seemed anomalous since Hugh Verity, who commanded the Lysander and Hudson Flight of 161 Special Duties Squadron in 1943 when it was at the peak of its activity, had long since published a history of the corresponding air operations. This had been translated and published also in France, where it evoked much interest. Unless a maritime counterpart were produced promptly, it would be too late to draw on the testimony of surviving participants to amplify any surviving official records. Since no-one seemed better placed to tackle the job, I decided to set about it myself.

My especial thanks are due to Gervase Cowell, SOE Adviser to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for his help in enabling me to gain access to the essential records on the terms applied to Official Historians. He later helped me to surmount pitfalls on the way to publication. I am grateful to Professor M.R.D.Foot and John Debenham Taylor for helpful advice and briefing.

The records provided an indispensable armature of fact and chronology, but they contained important gaps and were too lacking in detail to yield a satisfactory narrative on their own. I have had help from many quarters in redressing these deficiencies.
Operations to the west coast of Brittany had to be carried out by fishing boats or a combination of submarines and fishing boats as the distances involved were beyond the reach of high-speed vessels such as motor gunboats. In dealing with the sea lines to this area I have received invaluable help from Daniel Lomenech, Steven Mackenzie, Patrick Whinney, Richard Townsend, Jean Le Roux, Roger Huguen, René Pichavent and Capitaine de Vaisseau Jean Pillet. Daniel Lomenech’s assistance extended beyond his own remarkable involvement to that of Hubert Moreau, his precursor, the first man to return to France on an intelligence mission. He found copies of an incomplete series of articles by Moreau published in the 1950s. Lt-Col. Moreau, Hubert’s son, who was approached on my behalf by Claude Huan, produced a most interesting unpublished article in which his father carries forward his account of the three missions he undertook in July, August and September 1940.

I am most grateful to Steven Mackenzie for allowing me to reprint his scintillating account of the MARIE-LOUISE operations, which appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* not long after the end of the war.

Operations on the north coast of Brittany by motor gunboats from Dartmouth or Falmouth enjoyed spectacular success from October 1943 onwards. In this field, papers in the possession of the late David Birkin, longest-serving of the specialist navigating officers attached to the 15th MGB Flotilla, are by far the most important supplementary source. Not only did he keep copies of 33 official reports of operations in which he was involved, but he and his widow, Judy, have allowed me to make use of two unpublished articles by David, track charts, diagrams and photographs from his collection. I am much indebted to them for their help.

I am also most grateful to Peter Williams, Charles Martin, Lloyd Bott, Tom Long, Michel Guillot and Derek Carter for help with this section of the book.

When I arrived in Gibraltar at the end of October 1942, a brilliantly successful run of operations by Polish-manned feluccas was just coming to an end. Little has appeared in print about them, but, on the advice of Professor M.R.D.Foot, I approached Dr Josef Garlicki, who remembered seeing records of the Polish Naval Mission at Gibraltar in the Sikorski Institute. I am most grateful for that tip; the Institute possessed an almost complete set of operational reports and related correspondence in Polish, which I was able to sample thanks to the kindness of Dr Andrzej Suchcitz, who is in charge of the collection and who most helpfully summarised their contents. Full translations of all the key documents were needed, so I enlisted the help of Dr Keith Sword of the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Languages. I am most grateful for his translations, researches and background advice. I hope that we have between us rescued a small-scale epic from oblivion. Captain Marian Kadulski has added valuable personal details to the narrative represented by reports and correspondence that he wrote, under very great pressure, at the time. I am most grateful to the Sikorski Institute for permission to publish material of which they hold the copyright.
In relation to operations to and from Corsica, I am much indebted to Pat Whinney and Andrew Croft and Michael Lumby.

Throughout my researches, I received much help and advice from Capitaine de Vasseau Claude Huan, the well-known French naval historian. His knowledge of the French naval archives and his energy and skill in extracting information from them and other documentary and human sources only accessible in Paris helped my project forward very greatly. I am particularly grateful to him for compiling a list of the special operations undertaken by French submarines from Algiers in 1943 and 1944 for the French clandestine services and for obtaining from Capitaine Paul Paillole the names of more than 100 of the 150 passengers who travelled to or from France by this route.

The subject of operations by British submarines for SOE and SIS also required basic research. I am grateful to David Brown, Head of the Naval Historical Branch at the Ministry of Defence; to Commodore Bob Garson; to Commander Compton-Hall and Commander Jeff Tall, successively Directors of the RN Submarine Museum; to Gus Britten; and to Charles Beatty for their help in this connection. It was the last-named who kindly lent me Jean L'Herminier’s book.

I am much indebted to Roger Huguen for generous advice and help and allowing me to make use of maps prepared for his book; to Daniel Lomenech, Richard Townsend, Derek Carter, Pat Whinney, Judy Birkin, Andrew Croft, Charles Martin, Lloyd Bott, Mary Holdsworth, Hilary Rust, the Musée de la Marine and the Etablissement Cinématographique et Photographique des Armées (ECPA) in Paris for help over photographs. My thanks are due to Mrs E.A.G Davis for permission to use a painting of MGB 318 on the dust jacket; and to my brother Robin for resolving various problems of chart-work and nomenclature. It is to him and to Mrs. Honer that I owe the drawing of Seawolf by the late Eric Honer. My brother and his wife, Kate, kindly photographed and transcribed the panels in the museum on the Ile-de-Sein recording escapes by Breton vessels during the Occupation.

While the project was still trying to make its way, the Imperial War Museum gave it unconditional backing, whether publication ensued or not. On the strength of this the Leverhulme Foundation gave it an invaluable two-year grant. Without their generous help it could never have come to maturity.

At a critical stage, the interest of Admiral Sir Julian Oswald, the First Sea Lord, and of Kenneth Carlisle MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, were a great encouragement, as was that of Amiral Emile Chaline, historian of the Free French naval forces.

I owe an immense debt to Patricia Andrews, Head of the Historical and Records Section of the Cabinet Office; without her support the book would never have been published. I am most grateful to Margaret Russell, who undertook the task of putting the text on to word processor and seeing it through many revisions of detail.