

STAMP COPY – GIBRALTAR 75 YEAR CAMPAIGN

To mark the 75th Anniversary of the explicit instruction to evacuate much of its population, following the outbreak of the Second World War, Gibraltar has created a special commemorative stamp issue to honour the valour of these women, elderly, infirm and children – as well as the sacrifice of the men who stayed behind to fight.

The evacuation was necessary in order to accommodate a mass deployment of military to defend the strategic gateway to the Mediterranean, crucial for the Allies' North Africa Campaign.

Almost 70% of the population was displaced to French Morocco before being shipped to Blitz-ridden London in conditions of extreme danger and hardship.

And yet their ordeal didn't end there; many of those that were fortunate enough to survive the almost nightly bombings by the Luftwaffe were then shipped further afield to specially constructed camps in Jamaica and Northern Ireland – once again, braving the German U-Boat 'wolf packs'.

Few of the local inhabitants had any idea where Gibraltar was – but nonetheless overwhelmingly welcomed this smiley, friendly people from 'somewhere in the Mediterranean' who were more than willing to assimilate themselves into society. Many enduring friendships were forged during the war years, while the impact and contribution of Gibraltar's *Evacuation Generation*, as they became known, is still fondly remembered to this day.

The unexpectedly sweltering weather in Jamaica and the coldest winter for many years in Northern Ireland did little to dampen the spirit of the Gibraltarians. And yet, for some, their ultimate return to Gibraltar didn't take place until 1951. While tragically, others never made it home.

The story of Gibraltar's Evacuation is one of the few untold sagas of the Second World War. But for those who endured that tumultuous journey, their lives and their homeland would be fundamentally changed.

In peacetime, it's easy to overlook the fact that the Rock of Gibraltar's primary function, historically, has been that of a highly defensible fortress, with its civilian population settling around it. However, in times of conflict this true identity has become inescapable, as it did in 1940, soon after the start of the Second World War.

As the encroaching storm clouds of the Second World War gathered above Europe, the implications for the people of Gibraltar become clear. Within weeks of entering Downing Street, Winston Churchill would press the Governor of Gibraltar to 'proceed immediately' with the evacuation of all the Rock's non-combatant civilians.

13,000 women, children and elderly people were sent out of Gibraltar across the Mediterranean to be sheltered in refugee camps scattered around French Morocco. The standard of living in these camps varied; some were unprepared for both the volume of

evacuees and the speed with which they arrived. Less than two months later, before the Gibraltarians would have a chance to settle into their new homes, they would find evicted.

In June of 1940, France became the latest country to surrender to the overwhelming force of the German Blitzkrieg. Britain lost a vital ally and, worse still, the Germans could now bolster their own defences with the use of the French arsenal, not least of which was France's mighty naval fleet. Left with no alternative, Churchill gave the order for British destroyers in the Mediterranean to sail to Algeria and to attack the French ships docked at Mers El Kebir. The French fleet was decimated and 1279 of their naval personnel were killed.

EXPOSED, EXHAUSTED AND TERRIBLY AFRAID

As British subjects, the Gibraltarians in Morocco were suddenly no longer welcome there. The French authorities demanded their removal from the territory within the week. With only what they could carry, the Gibraltarian evacuees fled their accommodation and made their way, mostly on foot, to the port at Casablanca. There they waited in the searing heat, without food or water, exposed, exhausted and terribly afraid.

At the same time, 15 British freighter ships were approaching Casablanca to repatriate some 15,000 French soldiers that had fled Dunkirk across the channel to England. In charge of these ships, Commodore Creighton would find his vessels held hostage until they agreed to transport all of the Gibraltarian evacuees from French soil. The Commodore was given no chance to clean or resupply his ships, and the evacuees were forced aboard at gunpoint by Moroccan soldiers. Against the specific orders of his superiors, Commodore Creighton returned to Gibraltar with the evacuees. Once they arrived, after a lengthy wait on board, the women, children and elderly were permitted to land, to be temporarily reunited with their families.

By now, Italy and France (under the Germany-sympathetic Vichy government) had begun bombing Gibraltar. The need to re-evacuate the non-military personnel on the Rock was paramount. In order to accommodate the considerable number of civilians the Governor wished to evacuate – an eventual total of 16,000 – they would now be split between far-flung destinations.

CHARITY BEGINS IN MADEIRA

The first group to leave, approximately 2,000, would be transported to the Portuguese island of Madeira. During their stay, a group of ladies organised themselves into a Women's Guild, initially with the intention of helping and supporting the poorer classes of Gibraltarian evacuees. Their charity was soon extended to the local population in Madeira. Later, they would send vitally needed clothing out to British soldiers, prisoners of war and victims of air raids in London.

As many of the evacuees were teenagers or younger children, there was a pressing concern among their parents that their educational needs were not being met in Madeira. To tackle this, the Gibraltarians created their own schools on the island that in time were also attended by the locals.

The Gibraltarian people generally had a positive impact on the locals' way of life. Their outgoing behaviour, initially contrasted with the Madeiran calm temperament, but eventually the locals would adopt their ways and they soon began socialising. At a time when war had decimated the island's vital tourist industry, the presence of the Gibraltarian evacuees, utilising shops and services, also proved crucial to Madeira's economy.

RISK OF ATTACK

The largest group of evacuees to be sent from Gibraltar, a total of 13,000, were transferred to London, sailing from Gibraltar on 21st July 1940, a convoy of 24 ships set out for the United Kingdom. Aboard each overcrowded vessel, families huddled together in tiny allocated segments on the floor of the ship's cargo holds for up to 18 days. Perhaps the greatest torment the evacuees faced at sea would be the ever-present risk of attack from the German U-Boats 'wolf packs'. These notorious submarines were known to be lurking beneath the surface all over the Atlantic, sinking military, merchant and even passenger vessels alike. The convoys that carried the Gibraltarians had little in the way of armed escort and the transport vessels were visibly under-supplied with either lifeboats or lifebelts.

When the evacuees arrived at port in England they were in a sorry state – dirty, hungry, beset with lice and many of them unwell. They were cleaned and fed before their transfer to London. But they would not find the capital to be the safe haven they had hoped for. Upon their arrival in the city, they saw English children boarding the same trains they had just vacated. The young Londoners were being evacuated from the very place the Gibraltarians – women, children and all – had just arrived, seeking refuge.

In London, they were housed in a number of hotels around South Kensington, Fulham, Bayswater and Wembley. One group of evacuees was housed in the Empress Hall of Earl's Court; its decorative glass domed ceiling would become an especially terrifying feature when the bombs began to fall.

IN THE FIRING LINE

The evacuees would soon discover that their new homes were right in the firing line as the Luftwaffe began their Blitz of London; bombarding the capital relentlessly from 25th August 1940 to 16th May 1941. Like everybody else in the city, the Gibraltarians suffered casualties and fatalities. However, because they lost comparatively few, the locals came to consider the evacuees as good luck charms, even to the point that they would favour air raid shelters where the Gibraltarians were taking cover.

Traditionally an industrious and patriotic people, the displaced Gibraltarians in London were eager to find work and to make more significant contributions to the war effort than mere good fortune. Gibraltarian women volunteered for the Red Cross, working in hospitals, homes, schools and ambulance units to provide welfare and medical support to the people of London. They took up hard manual jobs in factories, producing arms and clothing for the soldiers as well as 'balloon barrages', networks of blimps that were floated above the city to frustrate and intercept the enemy aircraft.

The men put their lives on the line, joining London's fire wardens to tackle the incendiary bombs, they worked all through the nights, on rooftops during air raids armed with little more than helmets and fire blankets. They earned widespread admiration and became local heroes in the communities they protected. Others would join the fight directly, signing up for the RAF and taking airborne battle to the Luftwaffe.

FAR FROM HOME

Meanwhile, a separate and final contingent of 2,000 Gibraltarians was sent from the Rock, zigzagging across the perilous U-Boat infested waters of the Atlantic, without armed escort or means of defence, to the British territory of Jamaica. There they were accommodated in a specially built 'Gibraltar Camp'. Eventually Gibraltarians came to occupy all the working roles in the camp for fair salaries. Later, they were permitted to take on work outside the camp, and ladies so inclined were even allowed to begin or continue their medical training at the local college. Despite a drastic displacement to a country and culture far from their own, the Gibraltarians settled well into their new lives in Jamaica.

Back in Europe, the war raged on. The bombings in London continued and in 1944 the Germans introduced new weapons in their bombardment of the city. The famous V1 Doodlebugs, pilotless planes loaded with explosives, and later the terrifying V2 missiles which could be launched from across the British Channel and drastically increased the danger posed to those residing in the capital city.

The Gibraltarians still housed there were quickly re-evacuated to camps in Northern Ireland. Intended for military use, these camps were comprised of Nissen huts, which offered little shelter against the cold weather that followed. Initially the evacuees accepted this disappointing move quite contentedly; as Italy had surrendered and the Allies seemed to be turning the tide, Gibraltar itself was in far less danger. Naturally, Gibraltarians both at home and abroad thought that repatriation would quickly follow. But for many this was not the case. Some solace was found in the friendships forged between the evacuees and the local Northern Irish people, relationships that endured for decades after.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

The Gibraltarian authorities managing the repatriation operation faced many challenges and obstacles; there were a greater number of people returning to Gibraltar than had

originally left, with the addition of babies born during evacuation and some Spanish refugees. Fewer houses were available after so many had been damaged or destroyed in bombings; other homes were still occupied by soldiers and would be until 1945. The repatriation operation was to be staggered and so a priority-based system was introduced to organise in what order the evacuees would be returned. Those who had relatives on the Rock that could claim and house them would be favoured, along with those contingents in Madeira and Jamaica with the remainder following after. This operation began in August 1944 and took a further seven years to complete.

The fortunate evacuees that returned first would find the Rock that had been their home much changed. Evidence of war, soldiers, defences and general destruction were widespread.

The evacuees that remained in Northern Ireland faced the longest wait. In 1947, some would be re-evacuated once again back to Fulham Road in London. By now a new Governor had taken over in Gibraltar and some progress could be made with their return. By 1951, the very last of the Gibraltarian evacuees made their emotional homecoming.

ENDLESS RESILIENCE

The lengthy saga of the evacuation and repatriation of Gibraltar's civilians unquestionably left its mark on both the Rock and people who have occupied it. Out of necessity, many learned English with much greater fluency than they would have otherwise and they collectively experienced more of Europe and the wider world. The war also accelerated much needed changes in both housing and medical facilities as well as sparking political and constitutional progress.

The people of Gibraltar unquestionably endured a great deal for their part in the Second World War, with the loss of their homes, the segregation of families, the brutal assaults of enemy air raids and a seemingly endless conveyance from place to place for an entire decade. But throughout and since this time, the civilian population displayed bravery, maintained their dignity and showed endless resilience. Their boundless adaptability throughout these dark years allowed them to endure the harshest trials and emerge all the stronger for it.