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Jersey Evening Post



AT THE HEART OF ISLAND LIFE

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Feature

Cheering crowds greet the Bailiff

VE Day brought thousands of Islanders to the streets of St Helier, eagerly anticipating liberation. Following the broadcast of Winston Churchill's speech, the Bailiff, Alexander Coutanche, addressed the crowds. In his new book, *Liberated by Force 135*, **Mark Lamerton** describes the scenes



■ Charlie Bisson hands out Union and Jersey flags outside the Old Soldier (Le Vier Soudard) shop in New Street while his daughter-in-law, Laura Bisson, throws them to the crowd from the balcony. Picture: MARK LAMERTON COLLECTION

IMMEDIATELY the excitement had died down, the Bailiff spoke from the balcony of the Royal Court witness room and the Union Flag and the Stars and Stripes were hoisted at the flagstaves amidst more ringing cheers.

The sheds erected for the Royal Square repair work proved excellent vantage points for people to hear the speeches, as did the roofs round about.

The Bailiff, who was most heartily received, addressing the people, said it was nearly five years since he last spoke to them from that building. On that occasion, he offered a form of solemn prayer that the blessing of Almighty God might rest upon them in their days of trial.

During those five years we had suffered in mind, body and estate.

Today his first words must still be a prayer, and he would ask them all to join him in offering thanks to Almighty God for the deliverance of this dear Island of ours. At this, the crowd cheered loudly.

Continuing, the Bailiff went on to make certain announcements regarding the special services to be held, referring particularly to that in Westminster Abbey at which the Archbishop of Canterbury was the preacher.

He also reminded his hearers that His Majesty the King was to speak to the world

at 9pm and he wanted to tell them that, from henceforth, there would be no restriction in the use of wireless in their homes. The crowd greeted this with more loud cheers.

'Last night,' continued the Bailiff, 'about six o'clock, accompanied by Major J F Gifford (Honorary Secretary for the Prison Board) and the Rev H W Quarrie (Prison Chaplain), I went to the Public Prison, when some 30 political prisoners were liberated from gaol. About ten minutes ago I received the assurance that another batch of prisoners were to be liberated forthwith by the order of the Commandant of the German Forces. At two o'clock I visited the American and British prisoners in their camps and I hope we shall see them at liberty in a very few hours. When they are liberated they will be the guests of the people of Jersey as long as they remain on our shores.'

The assembled crowd gave more cheers and applauding.

'As soon as the present broadcast is over I am going, together with Dr E A C Drecourt (representative of the French Red Cross) to speak to the French prisoners of war in the Island. Dr Drecourt is taking all the necessary steps to ensure their future comfort and will see that they receive that respect and honour which is their due.'

Continuing, Mr Coutanche said he had had an interview with the officer commanding the German troops in Jersey and had been told that a British Commission was on its way, but the greatest cheer was raised when it was learned that units of the Royal Navy were approaching the Channel Islands.

The Bailiff went on to explain that for five years the invaders had stood between him and his people, and therefore he had been unable to mix with them. Now he wished to come down into the Square and be amongst them – which he did.

And, standing on a chair in front of the States buildings, surrounded by his fellow Jerseymen, he finished his speech and finally led them in singing the National Anthem, but emotion stifled many a voice.

Then there came such a tumult of cheering, so many hands outstretched in thanks and friendliness, that the Bailiff knew his work for five years had not been in vain. He mixed freely with the Islanders once again in their great excitement and enthusiasm.

The Bailiff went off in his car to visit the French North African prisoners of war at their camp situated in the former Military Hospital of the pre-war British garrison at the top of Pier Road.

The crowds, after hearing the Royal Navy was on its way, rushed straight from the Royal Square and made their way down Mulcaster Street towards St Helier Harbour and West Park in expectation of their imminent arrival, where they waited in vain.

Instead, they watched their good friend, the Red Cross ship, SS Vega, which had just arrived, being unloaded. This was her fifth visit and was unloaded by members of the School of Physical Culture under the supervision of the St John Ambulance Brigade.

The recently released political prisoners soon joined fellow Islanders in the victory celebrations, swapping stories, news and catching up with recent events. Some of the ex-political prisoners (Joe Mière, John Dingle, Vic Webb, Alan Costard and Berni Hassall) described their act of defiance against the German authorities whilst incarcerated in the Newgate Street Prison some five weeks prior to their release.

Part of the prison had been taken over by the German Occupation Forces for housing civilians arrested by the German Secret Field Police (Geheimfeldpolizei) and German Naval Police (Kriegsmarinapolizei).

Although imprisoned for acts against the German authorities, these civilians



were kept under lock and key by the local warders. They were not treated like common criminals. The prison staff smuggled letters in and out and kept them up to date with the news, making their 'stay' more bearable.

When initially arrested by the Germans, Joe Mière, political prisoner no 12503, had in his coat pocket a small Union flag, which his grandmother had given to him. After showing their disapproval of the flag, it was duly confiscated along with other personal papers and effects. On being handed over to the civilian warders at the prison, some of Joe's effects were returned and, to his surprise, he was also handed back his cherished flag.

Fellow inmate Jack Dingle suggested that the flag should be displayed over their room's doorway – not before Bernie Hassall, PP No 12504, had painted 'Political prisoners Jersey 1945' in white paint onto their trophy.

The warders turned a blind eye, until the Governor, Mr Briard, and the Chief Warden inspected the cell area prior to the visit of a high-ranking German officer.

The Governor requested that the flag be taken down and hidden until after the inspection to prevent any retaliation by the Germans, a request the political prisoners declined to obey. The Governor decided further intervention was futile and would only exacerbate matters, and left the cell area shaking his head amidst cheers from the prisoners.

● Copies of the book are available from force135je or by emailing the author at liberationlamerton@gmail.com.

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