

Lt-Cdr Steven Mackenzie - obituary

Lieutenant-Commander Steven Mackenzie was a spy who smuggled de Gaulle's Intelligence chief out of Occupied France in a Breton trawler



Steven Mackenzie at his desk in 1943

Lieutenant-Commander Steven Mackenzie, who has died aged 95, played a notable part in the covert operations of the Inshore Patrol Flotilla for the Secret Intelligence Service and SOE; he subsequently served with MI6 in Europe, the Far East and Latin America.

In March 1942, at Falmouth, Mackenzie took command of *Le Dinan*, usually known by its registration number, N51, a 65ft Concarneau fishing trawler, with Lewis guns mounted amidships and a crew of eight. The mission (code-named “Marie Louise”) was to extricate Colonel Rémy and bring him and his wife and children back to England under the noses of the Gestapo who were hunting them.

Rémy was the field name of Col Gilbert Renault, head of the *Confrérie de Notre Dame*, which was to become one of the most important of all the Free French intelligence networks in enemy-occupied France.

At a secluded anchorage at New Grimsby in the Scilly Isles, the hull, bulwarks, deckhouse and masts of N51 forsook their naval grey and were repainted in shades of green and brown. A registration number, a Breton name and French flags on either bow were added. Sten guns, pistols and grenades were put aboard, and revolver and small arms practice shoots were held on the shore.

After several failed attempts, the party sailed in June 1942. Mackenzie's First Officer was Daniel Lomenech, a Frenchman who knew the Breton coastline well. They had an RAF escort until they

were half way across the Channel, but there followed three nerve-racking hours of unescorted sailing before dark, crossing an area forbidden to fishing vessels; a sighting by a German air patrol would mean an attack.

By 10am the next day they had infiltrated a crabbing fleet in the Baie d'Audierne, and narrowly avoided snagging their propeller on some nets. Heinkels crossed and recrossed overhead, and two convoys, escorted by armed trawlers and minesweepers, passed close by.

The rendezvous with Les Deux Anges, the sailing boat carrying the Rémy family, was fixed for 5pm; but six o'clock passed with no sign of it. Then, just as five German corvettes belching black smoke turned towards them, Mackenzie spotted the tiny white sail of a craft which was off Pont-Aven and making out to sea.

They feared a trap, for the skipper of the nearest corvette subjected them to a long examination through his binoculars before turning away, apparently satisfied. The sailing boat, which had survived an inspection by the Germans on leaving harbour, then drew alongside, and Rémy and his wife and four small children were transferred to N51.

On the return trip, every convoy escort seemed to be about to stop and examine them. Off Brest, the sight of three German destroyers provided some anxious moments. But at first light their escort from Coastal Command found them in the Western Approaches and accompanied them to New Grimsby.



Steven Mackenzie with his crew on the deck of the Finian during the war

Mackenzie signalled to the Admiralty the successful result of the expedition, and an MGB was sent to take his passengers to the mainland. "It appeared around the headland," he wrote afterwards, "pennants fluttering green and white, her bow wave creaming in the deep blue water, and from her loud-hailer came the martial sound of a Sousa march." Rémy brought with him a blueprint of the entire enemy fortifications that were being built along the north coast of France.

Stevenson Moir Mackenzie (always known as Steven) was born in Newcastle on February 15 1918 and educated at Eton before going up to Clare College, Cambridge, to read History. He joined the RNVR in March 1939 and, after basic training, was posted to the British Naval Liaison staff at Maintenon, near Chartres, the Admiralty HQ of Admiral Darlan. Ian Fleming, who was attached to the Director of Naval Intelligence, was a frequent visitor.

After the fall of France, Mackenzie spent several days in Bordeaux and

Saint Jean de Luz helping to evacuate refugees. Among them was King Zog of Albania with his wife and baby. The King had some £10 million in gold bars which were piled up on the jetty and guarded by his sisters, who were in battledress and armed with submachine guns.

On June 25 1940 Mackenzie got away on a Canadian destroyer. That night, in the Bay of Biscay, while he was asleep, he was thrown on to the cabin floor. The vessel had collided with a cruiser and been sliced in half. He managed to jump on to the deck of another destroyer as she came alongside, but there were a number of fatalities.

In London, an introduction by Ian Fleming led to a meeting with Commander Frank Slocum who, largely on his own initiative, had built up a clandestine system of transport both by air and by sea which in the next four years carried hundreds of agents to Occupied Europe, from Norway to the Mediterranean.

Mackenzie took over an MTB type boat and, in August, landed two agents at the mouth of the Orne. When the boat was sunk during a bombing raid on Portsmouth, he became a full-time staff officer in Slocum's London office. Slocum was given the Admiralty title of Deputy Director, Operations Division (Irregular), DDOD (I).

Their main "customers" were the Special Operations Executive and the Secret Intelligence Service. Mackenzie's job was to meet the sections concerned; select feasible dates for missions; pinpoint the "target" beaches; provide information on the string of German coastal radar stations and other enemy defences; and brief the commander of the motor gunboats at Dartmouth.

He once took over a fishing vessel for a reconnaissance trip down the west coast of Brittany. It was a disaster. The Scottish skipper got so drunk that he almost ran the craft aground on the rocks at Ushant. The man then went to the hold, grabbed a Mills hand-grenade and threatened to blow up the whole party. While climbing back on deck, he dropped the grenade, fell on it and was killed at once. The ship made it back to Falmouth, but Mackenzie had to attend a very awkward court of inquiry.



Lt-Cdr Steven Mackenzie in later life

Having laid the foundations of the Inshore Patrol Flotilla and personally commanded the first three operations to the Bay of Biscay, Mackenzie became senior staff officer at DDOD (I) in charge of home operations. But on occasions of exceptional importance he accompanied expeditions to sea and landed in enemy territory to pick up agents, Resistance fighters or escaping Allied aircrew.

In 1943 he was decorated by General Koenig with the Croix de Guerre, and in 1945 he was awarded a DSC.

In the winter of 1944-45 Mackenzie helped to write up the record of the Department's London-based operations to Norway, Holland, Belgium and France for a report to the Admiralty. He was demobilised in autumn 1945.

He then joined MI6, serving in Germany (1946-49), Holland (1949-51), Hong Kong (1954-57) and Argentina (1962-66). He was appointed CBE in 1958.

From 1969 to 1982 he was Director-General of the Hispanic and Luso Brazilian Council (also known as Canning House) and was then involved in consultancy work for Control Risks and the Inchcape Group.

In retirement in Sussex he enjoyed gardening, reading and travel; he went to Barbados every year until 2013.

Steven Mackenzie married first, in 1942, Angela Sykes-Wright, who predeceased him. He married secondly, in 1979, Dolores Vyner-Brooks, who survives him with a son and a daughter of his first marriage.

Lt-Cdr Steven Mackenzie, born February 15 1918, died December 31 2013