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Novel Arrangement: The Belgian National Branch of the Royal Navy 1940 – 1946

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ABSTRACT

After Germany occupied Belgium in 1940, Belgian mariners interested in continuing the war at sea joined a specially formed Belgian national branch of the British navy, the Royal Navy (Section Belge) or RNSB. The article reviews Belgian naval forces before the Second World War, explains the reasons for the creation of this unusual force, details the ships and personnel involved, and argues that the British decision to incorporate Belgians into the Royal Navy benefitted both Britain and Belgium.

Introduction & Literature Review

Multinational naval operations today are a commonplace occurrence for Western countries, especially those that are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or have a defence agreement with the United States. The successful operation of multinational naval forces is an important legacy of the Second World War. The Royal Navy (RN) and United States Navy provided the greatest numbers of ships to the combined Allied fleets, with the Royal Canadian Navy and Royal Australian Navy making important contributions once their shipbuilding and personnel training programmes reached maturity. It should also be recognised that the Allied naval effort was aided by European countries whose governments and armed forces took refuge in Britain upon defeat by Germany between 1939 and 1941. The so-called Allied navies in exile were quite small upon arrival in British ports but soon grew to become significant individually and collectively. Ships from the Polish, Norwegian, Netherlands, Free French, Yugoslav, and Greek navies were operationally integrated into the RN and provided valuable reinforcements to the Allied fleet.

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In addition to these independent navies, two other European countries had small numbers of naval personnel operating from Britain. Belgium and Denmark are generally not thought of as being contributors to the Allied fleet as their personnel did not form part of an independent national navy serving alongside the RN. Instead, for different and somewhat unusual reasons, both countries had small numbers of its citizens volunteer to serve in specially created national branches of the RN.

The purpose of this paper is to explain and document the Belgian national branch of the RN during and immediately following the Second World War and thus fill a small gap in the naval history literature. It argues that the British made the logical decision to create a Belgian naval force. After a short literature review, the paper considers the British approach to incorporating the European navies in exile into the Allied fleet. The paper continues with a concise account of the evolution of Belgian naval forces before and during the war. It concludes with an assessment of the British decision to create a special branch for Belgian volunteers.

The RN's operations during the war have been thoroughly analysed in naval history literature but not surprisingly, the tiny Belgian component is omitted from the coverage. Prominent studies such as Stephen Roskill's multivolume series *The War at Sea* does not mention the Belgian naval volunteers nor does Corelli Barnett's *Engage the Enemy More Closely*.¹ Books with good coverage of the Battle of the Atlantic might mention by name the two 'Flower' class corvettes that were manned by Belgian crews, but those ships could just be listed as RN ships without indicating the nationality of the crews.² Reference books that describe warships during a time period or by class of ship typically list the Belgian corvettes as being Belgian-manned but without providing much if any context for why Belgians were aboard British warships.³

The one source that goes beyond just mentioning ships and addresses the broader circumstances of the Belgian volunteers is *Navies in Exile*. However, the book mentions the Belgians in general terms only due to wartime security concerns and comprises just two pages of text.⁴

¹Stephen W. Roskill, *The War at Sea*, 4 vols., (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954-1961); Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, (London: W.W. Norton, 1991).

²Jürgen Rohwer, *Chronology of the War at Sea 1939-1945*, (London: Chatham Publishing, 2005).

³Robert Gardiner, ed., *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1922-1946*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980). The Belgian corvettes are not listed as Belgian-manned.

⁴A.D. Divine, *Navies in Exile*, (New York: Dutton, 1944), pp. 212-213.

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Several studies have examined the Belgian exile population in Britain during the war, and these books contain a chapter about the Belgian armed forces.⁵ Since the Belgians in the RN were technically not part of the Belgian armed forces, and were much smaller than the army, treatment of Belgian naval personnel in these sources is brief.⁶

Taken together, these English-language sources about the RN and the Belgian exile community in Britain during the war years say little about the Belgian naval volunteers. Even sources on this topic published in Belgium in the French or Dutch languages are few. Essentially, the story of the Belgian volunteers in the RN has not yet been documented in English beyond the briefest of references.

The British Approach to Working with the Exile Navies

Following Germany's invasion of Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. Poland's navy was very small and was not expected to survive for long in the face of overwhelming German air and naval forces. Britain and its Commonwealth partners expected to fight at sea with only French support. However, remnants of the Polish Navy did reach Britain: three destroyers sent out of the Baltic Sea days before the German invasion; and two submarines that evaded German patrols to reach Scotland after further resistance in the Baltic was futile. Polish naval commanders and other personnel who escaped Poland via bordering neutral countries also arrived in Britain. The RN assigned a liaison officer to the Polish naval headquarters in London and sent small liaison staffs to individual Polish warships to evaluate the ships and ensure effective communications.

The German campaign of 1940 overran Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, and ended with France's capitulation in June 1940. Britain's harbours subsequently filled with foreign ships seeking refuge. Instead of having a handful of Polish warships fighting alongside the RN that could be managed on an improvised

⁵Robert W. Allen, Jr., *Churchill's Guests: Britain and the Belgian Exiles During World War II*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003); Hubert Baete (ed.), *Belgian Forces in United Kingdom 1940-1945*, (Brussels: FNAC Brigade Piron, 1994); Luc De Vos, 'The Reconstruction of the Belgian Military Forces in Britain 1940-1945' in Martin Conway and José Gotovitch (eds.), *Europe in Exile: European Exile Communities in Britain, 1940-1945*, (New York: Berghahn, 2001), pp. 81-97; Chantal Kesteloot, 'Belgium in Exile: The Experience of the Second World War,' in Vit Smetana and Kathleen Geaney (eds.), *Exile in London: The Experience of Czechoslovakia and the Other Occupied Nations, 1939-1945*, (Prague: Karolinum, 2017), pp. 20-31.

⁶For a brief account of the Belgian units that served within the Royal Air Force, see Alan Brown, *Airmen in Exile: The Allied Air Forces in the Second World War*, (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), chapter 6.

basis, the RN now had to deal with the more numerous remnants from the Norwegian, Netherlands, and French navies. The German push into the Balkans in 1941 brought additional ships from the Yugoslav and Greek navies to British-controlled ports.

The RN, rather than create an ad hoc arrangement with each exile navy involving the existing naval attachés, instead established a new entity to oversee its formal relationship with these exiles.⁷ Initially known by the title Naval Assistant (Foreign) to the Second Sea Lord, a retired Admiral, Gerald Dickens, assumed responsibility for these navies in July 1940. His office provided an advisory and communications channel between the RN and the leadership of each independent exile navy. In March 1942 Dickens' title was changed to Principal Liaison Officer, Allied Navies (PNLO). Dickens was relieved as PNLO in January 1943 by Vice Admiral, later Admiral E.L.S. King, who remained in the role until the early postwar period.

Each one of the six exile navies was an independent service fighting under their national governments, which were based in London. Operational control of the exile warships was exercised by the RN, and the British supply system provided fuel, ammunition, spare parts, and provisions. The individual navies handled personnel assignments, promotion, discipline, pay, and other internal matters. During the early years of the war the British signed broadly similar defence agreements with most of the exile governments that defined the terms of this bilateral military cooperation.

The RN sought to expand and modernise the exile navies. This began with the ships that reached Britain in 1940, many of which were obsolete, in need of repair and anti-aircraft weapons, and modern electronics including radar and sonar. As the Allied navies proved themselves and recruited more personnel, and British shipyards expanded production, the RN transferred destroyers, escort vessels and submarines to the exile navies. Some of these ships were transferred upon completion while others had previously served in the RN. Additional ships loaned by the United States to the RN or seized from French forces that had refused to join the Free French movement were also transferred temporarily. Patrol boats and minesweepers were obtained in the short term by the requisitioning of civilian small craft used for fishing and whaling and then converting them to warships.

The RN liaison system with the exile navies expanded beyond the PNLO office to include the placement of a small number of RN liaison staff to each warship of

⁷Mark C. Jones, 'Friend and Advisor to the Allies Navies: The Royal Navy's Principal Liaison Officer and Multinational Naval Operations in World War II,' *Journal of Military History* 77, 3 (2013), pp. 991-1023.

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minesweeper size or larger.⁸ Each one was headed by a junior officer and consisted of signalmen, radio operators, and coders to ensure the vessel could communicate effectively and securely with British forces. The RN officer was the ship's British Naval Liaison Officer (BNLO). In some instances, the RN also temporarily transferred additional enlisted men to these ships when the exile navies were short of electronics specialists: radar and sonar; key engine room personnel; and on minesweepers a wireman to handle the specialised sweep equipment.

The RN system of working with small but independent national navies using senior liaison officers attached to British and Allied headquarters plus liaison staff placed aboard individual warships was suitable for those European exile governments that arrived in London with a functioning navy. In the case of Belgium which had no true navy before the war, the British would have to come up with another approach.

The Evolution of Belgium's Naval Forces 1830-1940

Between the country's independence from the Netherlands in 1830 and the end of the Second World War, Belgium did not have a true navy for decades at a time. Perhaps this was a function of its rather short coastline, about 65 kilometres or 40 miles. Belgium's independence and neutrality was recognised and guaranteed by the 1839 Treaty of London whose major power signatories included Britain, which with the USA possessed the world's largest navies before the Second World War. With such a short coastline, a nearly landlocked colonial empire in Africa, and a guarantee of its independence by a neighbouring state with a large navy, it is understandable that Belgians demonstrated little sustained interest in possessing a navy.

An 1861 decision by the Belgian parliament not to fund the country's Royal Navy (*Marine Royale*) resulted in 1862 in the government abolishing the navy and replacing it with a maritime force called the State Marine (*Marine d'État*). Its role was to police the Schelde River. During the First World War Belgium created a naval force called the Detachment of Torpedo Boats and Marines (*Détachement de Torpilleurs et Marins*). Renamed the Corps of Torpedo Boats and Marines (*Corps de Torpilleurs et Marins*) in 1923, this body was dissolved on 31 March 1927 as a cost-saving measure.⁹

⁸Mark C. Jones, 'Not Just Along for the Ride: The Role of Royal Navy Liaison Personnel in Multinational Naval Operations during World War II,' *Journal of Military History* 76, 1 (2012), pp. 127-58.

⁹Pascal Deloge and Jean-Marc Sterkendries, 'Une histoire de braves marins et de petits navires: la marine Belge en Europe,' *Revue Historique des Armées* 206 (1997), pp. 111-22.

Belgium's maritime force now consisted only of several disarmed First World War naval vessels of British and German origin, manned by civilian crews of the State Marine and used for fisheries protection duties. As geopolitical tensions worsened in the 1930s, Belgium created a new entity called the *Corps de Marine*, or *Marinekorps* in Dutch, to be activated in time of war. This force was part of the Belgian Army and its officers were mostly army reservists with civilian maritime professions. In 1939 Belgium declared neutrality and on 15 September 1939 partially mobilised the *Corps de Marine* to enforce that neutrality. The *Corps de Marine* now included several pilot vessels on loan from the State Marine, trawlers requisitioned from civilian owners, and miscellaneous harbour craft. Most of its ships were stationed at Ostend.

Germany attacked Belgium, the Netherlands, and France on 10 May 1940. German forces advanced so rapidly that the Netherlands surrendered on 14 May and Belgium on 28 May. Before Belgian forces surrendered, the government took steps that later proved valuable in allowing a Belgian naval force to be created. The day after the German invasion, the Belgian Shipping Advisory Committee (BSAC) was created at the Belgian embassy in London.¹⁰ This entity had oversight of all Belgian vessels that remained outside German control.

On 17 May 1940, the entire Belgian fishing fleet (507 vessels) had been requisitioned by the Belgian government and ordered to evacuate the coast. The old fleet had been seized and destroyed by the Germans in 1914, but by 1940 a new one had come into being, up to date, well equipped and motorised. Fifty percent of the ships arrived at British shores, from which one half were assigned to the fishing trade, and the remainder taken into service by the Royal Navy.¹¹

As German troops occupied Belgium, *Corps de Marine* vessels sailed to France, arriving at the naval port of Lorient by 13 June. As the situation deteriorated in France, the *Corps de Marine* ships moved farther south along the French Atlantic coast, to Le Verdon and then St Jean de Luz, keeping ahead of German forces.¹² Once France surrendered, the Belgian ships sailed for Portugalete, Spain (near Bilbao) and were

¹⁰Georges Billet, 'La Royal Navy (Section Belge): l'écho de l'Amirauté Britannique (1),' *Neptunus* 55, 303 (2012), pp. 69-75. This article is an excellent chronological overview of the RNSB 1940-1943. Complete issues of *Neptunus* can be downloaded as PDF files from the catalogue of the Vlaams Instituut voor de Zee, www.vliz.be/en/catalogue. Accessed 5 October 2024.

¹¹Kesteloot, 'Belgium in Exile,' p. 23.

¹²Jasper Van Raemdonck, *Het Belgisch Marinekorps 1939-1940*, (Erpe: De Krijger, 2000).

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interned there on 26 June. One ship, the pilot vessel *MLB16*, also referred to as *Pilote 16* or *PI6*, reached Britain as it had different orders than the rest of the Belgian ships. This ship was taken over by the RN as *HMS Kernot*. The *Corps de Marine* had ceased to exist with the Belgian surrender and the internment of most of its ships in Spain.

The government of Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot initially turned down a 20 June 1940 British offer to evacuate to London. Instead, it chose to remain in France where it focused on repatriating displaced Belgians. One minister who had reached London, the Minister of Public Health, Marcel-Henri Jaspar, made a radio address on 23 June urging Belgians to continue the fight.¹³ The Belgian government eventually changed its mind about evacuating to Britain, and once it did arrive in October 1940, it showed only moderate interest in developing a navy. The Belgian government was prompted to act by the interest of Belgian mariners who reached Britain as well as the desire of the RN to create a Belgian naval force.

Belgians Join the Royal Navy

One Belgian in Britain who decided to fight on was Victor Billet (Figure 1), an officer of the State Marine whose ferry boat *Prince Philippe* was at Southampton in July 1940.¹⁴ Billet believed that Belgium should create a naval force and approached the Belgian government with the proposal. Since the Belgian government was still in France, Billet contacted the Pierlot government's representative in London, René Boël of the BSAC. Initially Boël proposed the reestablishment of the *Corps de Marine* but was generally in favour of creating a new Belgian naval force. Billet, frustrated with the Belgian government's limited interest in creating a Belgian navy, approached the RN about Belgians serving in that force.

With no Belgian navy in British waters, the British government could have directed Billet and the 350 men who had already expressed a desire to serve in the RN to join the Belgian merchant marine, army, or air force.¹⁵ Instead, the British government demonstrated creativity and flexibility by permitting the Admiralty to devise an alternate solution to the absence of a Belgian Navy.

¹³De Vos, 'The Reconstruction of the Belgian Military Forces in Britain 1940-1945,' p. 83.

¹⁴Georges Billet, *Le Combat du Lieutenant Victor BILLET: Fondateur (méconnu) de la Marine militaire belge*, (Middelkerke: J.M.P.-Trends, 1999). The author is the son of Victor Billet.

¹⁵Deloge and Sterkendries, 'Une histoire de braves marins et de petits navires,' p. 113.



Figure 1: Lieutenant Victor Billet, RNVR. The photograph was taken between 21 October and 5 December 1940 while he was the liaison officer for the first contingent of enlisted volunteers training at HMS Royal Arthur at Skegness, England¹⁶

Admiral Dickens, the British officer in charge of liaison with the exile navies, accepted a proposal from Billet in late July 1940. Dickens favoured the establishment of a Belgian naval force, to be created by Belgians joining a special Belgian section of the RN. He sent a proposal to this effect to Boël in early September 1940. In early October 1940, Boël shared the Dickens proposal with key Belgian government officials including Camille Gutt, whose cabinet portfolios included the ministries of finance and communications, and Gutt's chief of staff, André Van Campenhout. Gutt was the important decision maker as before the war, the *Corps de Marine* was part of the Ministry of Communications and not the Ministry of National Defence. Whatever form the Belgian naval force took, it would be administratively part of Communications.¹⁷ Since Gutt held several cabinet portfolios, his chief of staff Van Campenhout was the person to whom British officials regularly turned to regarding naval matters.¹⁸

¹⁶Courtesy Nicole Billet.

¹⁷An overview of the administrative structure of Belgian maritime activities, both military and civilian, in the United Kingdom is found in War Heritage Institute (hereinafter WHI), Brussels, Belgium, inventory VI/155, *Régie de la Marine, Activité des Services en Grande-Bretagne, 1940-1944*.

¹⁸The regular correspondence in English between Van Campenhout and Dickens or his staff member H.S. Moss-Blundell can be found in the WHI inventory VI/58-144. This untitled inventory of about 200 pages contains correspondence of the

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While the Belgian government slowly came to support a Belgian naval force, the British were moving faster with their creation of a special Belgian section of the RN. The establishment of an entire administrative division within the RN for foreign volunteers was without precedent and was a novel arrangement.¹⁹ Victor Billet had been given approval to recruit a small number of Belgians for naval training, and these men were sent to the RN's basic training unit HMS Royal Arthur at Skegness, England.²⁰ The first group started their training in October 1940 and was quickly followed by two more. The authorisation to recruit was limited in that crew members of Belgian merchant ships were not permitted to join and so keep the Belgian merchant marine at full strength. Since few personnel of the *Corps de Marine* had reached Britain, that left fishermen as the nucleus of a new Belgian naval force. Another source of volunteers was the State Marine.²¹ Some fishermen initially served aboard civilian Belgian vessels contracted to maintain barrage balloons or carry out other harbour duties but then gradually were recruited into naval service.²²

Belgians wishing to serve as officers joined the RN with professional mariners receiving a commission in the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) and other volunteers commissioning into the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.²³ The original Belgian officers of the RNSB

Administration of Marine of the Ministry of Communications between August 1940 and June 1944. Most of the documents concern the RNSB but some relate to the State Marine, merchant marine, and fishing fleet. There is an overwhelming emphasis on personnel matters, typically the shortage of men and British requests to transfer men to the RNSB.

¹⁹The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) ADM 1/29379 *Award of Belgian Medaille Maritime to Belgian personnel in Section Belge of Royal Navy*. Admiral Dickens' successor as PNLO, Vice Admiral E.L.S. King, was involved with decision making about whether to permit the Belgian government to award a good conduct decoration to eligible Belgian sailors. In the docket on this topic that circulated among Admiralty offices, he wrote on 13 January 1944 that '... there never has been within the Royal Navy, a Section composed entirely of foreigners.'

²⁰J.-C. Liénart, "La 'Belgian Top Division' de la Royal Navy en 1940," *Neptunus* 45, 267 (2002), pp. 126-28.

²¹Naval Historical Branch (hereinafter NHB) S. 6751 Belgium. This fact sheet is a reprint of S.4151 of March 1965.

²²Georges Billet, 'La Royal Navy (Section Belge): Les rapports R.N.S.B. (II),' *Neptunus* 55, 304 (2012), pp. 144-49.

²³TNA ADM 1/17298, *Details and appointments of foreign personnel serving with the Royal Navy during World War II*. This file contains biographical information and reasons for offering or declining to make appointments for officer candidates. Most of the applicants were Belgian or Danish.

were commissioned into the RNVR in late 1940 and then, because they were all professional mariners, transferred on 30 September 1941 to the RNR. Enlisted men belonged to the newly established Royal Navy Section Belge (RNSB). The name chosen was done to avoid using Belgian Section, which when abbreviated to RNBS, could be confused with the Royal Naval Patrol Service (RNPS) that also had some Belgians within it.



Figure 2: The first Belgian contingent at HMS Royal Arthur. Victor Billet is the fourth man from the right in the bottom row. The two way stripes on his uniform sleeve indicate he is a lieutenant in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. Note the Belgian flag behind the top row of sailors and the twin flags within the life ring.²⁴

While the RNSB's enlisted personnel could be recruited from fishermen whose trawlers were taken over by the RN, officers were a different challenge. Some officers were available from the personnel of the State Marine after several of the ferry boats of the Ostend to Dover line were requisitioned by the RN for use as troop carriers for amphibious operations. A large group of officer candidates came from the State Marine's sail training ship *Mercator*. Forty cadets were on the ship in May 1940 while it was in Brazil on a training voyage. These men were sent to British officer training programmes and were eventually commissioned into the RNR.

²⁴Courtesy Nicole Billet.

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The RN released an Admiralty Fleet Order on 3 April 1941 that announced the creation of the RNSB and explained how the force would be recruited, trained, promoted, assigned to units, and paid. All Belgian enlisted men were formally assigned to the Devonport Port Division though they lacked their own depot.²⁵ Belgian enlisted men also had an official number that included the letters SB (e.g., D/SB/...). The RNSB was a small force at the start and it lacked men with true naval experience as well as lacking enlisted men with vital skills in gunnery, signals, radar, and sonar. The lack of trained men required that vessels manned by the RNSB have a mixed British-Belgian crew until such time as Belgians could be trained to replace British personnel. On the first ships loaned to the RNSB, the commanding officer was British with the other officers being British or Belgian.

Since the RNSB was part of the Royal Navy, the senior leadership of Belgian naval personnel was provided by British officers in command of various shore bases, flotillas, and ships. Prime Minister Pierlot appointed Georges Timmermans as Senior Officer of the RNSB. Timmermans had been captain of the State Marine ferry *Prinses Astrid* during the German invasion. As Timmermans held various appointments on British ships and shore stations rather than commanding the RNSB, his position was more symbolic than substantive. Timmermans served as the senior officer of the RNSB for the remainder of the war.

Operations of Belgian Naval Ships and Personnel 1941-1945

The first vessel with a primarily Belgian crew was the ex-French submarine chaser HMS *Quentin Roosevelt* which began training in early 1941. In January 1942 the ship reverted to British manning so the crew could be assigned to other Belgian manned ships. Belgians also crewed the small patrol boats HMS *Electra II*, *Phrontis*, *Raetia*, and *Sheldon* that had been British fishing trawlers before being requisitioned by the RN.²⁶ The last vessel was HMS *Kernot*, the former pilot vessel *MLB16* that escaped from Belgium to Britain in 1940. *Kernot* served as an examination service vessel for ships entering Liverpool harbour. The patrol vessels were assigned to ports scattered around Britain but most were assigned to Liverpool at some point.

²⁵TNA, ADM 182/106, *Admiralty Fleet Order (AFO) 1379/41 – Royal Navy (Section Belge) Reports*.

²⁶R. Planchar, 'Shipslist 177 Royal Navy - Belgian Section 1941-1946,' *The Belgian Shiplover* 69 (1959), pp. 178-79.

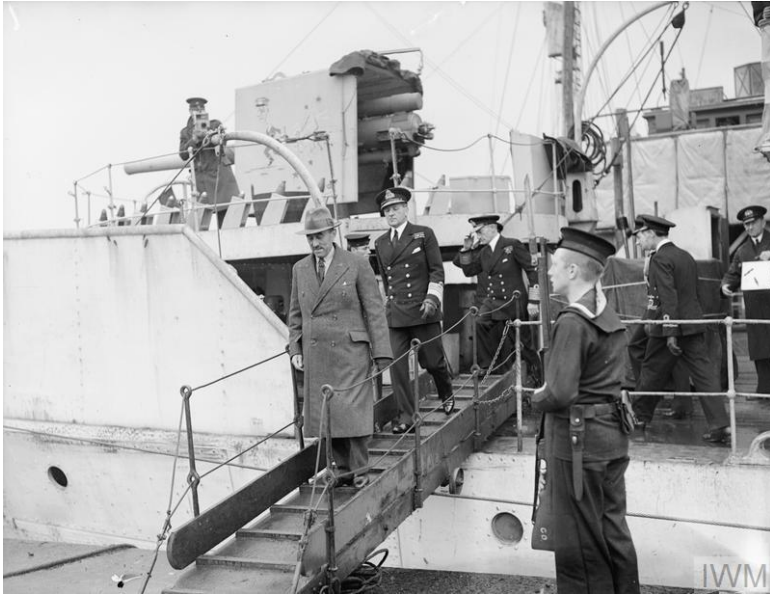


Figure 3: HMS *Kernot* – Liverpool – 4 April 1942. The Belgian Minister of Communications Camille Gutt and Admiral Percy Noble, Commander in Chief, Western Approaches are shown disembarking from the examination service vessel HMS *Kernot*. The officer about to step on the ramp is thought to be Admiral Gerald Dickens, the PNLO.²⁷

While the RNSB fell under the administrative purview of the Belgian Ministry of Communications, within the RN it was overseen by the PNLO, Admiral Dickens, who worked actively to encourage the Belgian government to create a naval force of its own. Dickens wrote:

Particular attention is drawn to the very satisfactory development of the Section Belge, built up out of somewhat crude material. Reports received are full of praise of the men. The officers, who have not yet commanded their men, are still an unknown quantity, but it is believed they will be adequate, especially the junior officers late of the Belgian sailing Training ship 'MERCATOR,' who are completing training at Dartmouth and Greenwich and who will then do Gunnery courses.²⁸

²⁷©IWM A8287.

²⁸TNA ADM 199/779/M 0217/42, quarterly report on Allied navies dated 12 January 1942.

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In addition to the RNSB, there was another Belgian military force operating at sea. While some of the Allied navies including the Dutch and Norwegians provided gun crews for their merchant ships, the Belgians in November 1940 chose to create a separate force called the Belgian Marine. The Belgian Army loaned men to the Belgian Marine who were trained at the RN's Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS) facility in Liverpool.²⁹ Belgian Marine personnel wore British naval uniforms with a cap tally marked 'Belgian Marine' and they wore 'BELGIUM' shoulder tabs. The Belgian Marine was disbanded at the end of the war.



Figure 4: Belgian Marine sailors, Liverpool 30 April 1943, DEMS Training. Note the sailors' caps on the table with the ribbon 'Belgian Marine' although they are not all wearing the 'Belgium' shoulder tabs.³⁰

As recruiting efforts gathered momentum and officer candidates completed their training, the RNSB possessed more officers and men than were needed to man the few ships crewed by the RNSB. Belgians serving in the RN were assigned to various ships and shore commands.³¹ A few Belgians even served in the aviation and submarine

²⁹The "Belgian Marine" Detachments 1940-1945. www.be4046.eu/BELMAR.htm. Accessed 11 August 2024.

³⁰©IWM A 16377.

³¹Henri Anrys, *Congé pour mourir: Les Belges dans la Royal Navy*, (Brussels: Pierre de Méyère, 1975). See p. 462 for a list of Belgian ratings assigned to British ships up to September 1944. This source also has two lists of personnel who joined the RNSB: before and after the liberation of Belgium.

branches of the RN.³² The dispersion of Belgians within the RN became a challenge for the Belgian government when it tried to distribute newspapers, cigarettes, and other morale-boosting items to its sailors. The Belgian government had to ask for British assistance in locating Belgian personnel.³³

Victor Billet, who pushed vigorously for a Belgian naval service and in the process antagonised his government, served as a Lieutenant RNR with various British naval units including the destroyer *HMS Brilliant* and motor torpedo boats. After transfer to Combined Operations, he took part in the disastrous amphibious raid at Dieppe on 19 August 1942. Billet was assigned as a naval liaison officer to a Canadian army unit aboard Landing Craft Tank (LCT) 159 and was reported as missing in action.

One aspect of Belgian society that could have been a problem for the RNSB was the cultural divide between the Dutch speaking Flemish population and the French speaking Walloon population. One source indicates that deck sailors were often Flemish ex-fishermen while sailors filling skilled rating positions such as coders and signalmen were often Walloons. This source indicates the trend for sailors of certain ratings to be from the same language community was not a problem.³⁴ Since the RNSB was part of the RN, officially it was an English-speaking service and the presence of British officers and enlisted men on board ships necessitated that English be used for all orders.

While Belgian personnel serving in the RN were technically not members of the Belgian government's armed forces, they did not lose their Belgian identity. In January 1942 ships manned by the RNSB were authorised to fly both the Belgian national flag and the British naval ensign.³⁵ This was a most unusual accommodation granted by the British government. The uniform worn by Belgian ratings and petty officers had a tab reading "BELGIUM" on both shoulders. Officer uniforms for Belgians did not include this tab or any other indicator of nationality.

³²Details of the appointments of Belgians serving as officers in the RN can be found in the RN's Navy List. Volumes for the years of both world wars are searchable by name or ship and can be found on the website of the National Library of Scotland: <https://digital.nls.uk/british-military-lists/archive/93506066>. Accessed 5 October 2024.

³³WHI, inventory VI/58-144, letter of 16 July 1942 from H.R. Rueff to H.S. Moss-Blundell.

³⁴Allen, Jr. 'Churchill's Guests,' p. 136.

³⁵ TNA, ADM 182/109, AFO 99/42 Royal Navy (Section Belge) – Flag.



Figure 5: A Belgian radio operator with 'BELGIUM' shoulder tab³⁶

The RNSB manned, either partially or fully, five patrol vessels during 1941. While each vessel crewed by another navy, no matter how small, helped the RN carry out its many and varied responsibilities, the RNSB small craft were unlikely to encounter the enemy often. To take the fight to the Germans, the Belgians needed bigger ships designed for active service. As was done for most of the exile navies, the British provided 'Flower' class corvettes to the Belgians. These ships were ideal because of their small size, simple construction, and similarity to commercial fishing or whaling vessels.

³⁶Museum aan de Stroom (MAS)/KBMA-ARMB, Antwerp, Belgium, AS.1970.059.016.



Figure 6: Crew members on a corvette standing atop the depth charge racks with the British naval ensign and the Belgian national flag in the background.³⁷

The RN allocated two corvettes to the RNSB in early 1942. HMS *Godetia* was manned by the RNSB in early February 1942 upon completion. HMS *Buttercup* followed in April 1942. The two vessels had similar careers, spending much of their time in the North Atlantic escorting convoys. Both had a British commanding officer at first with Belgians taking command in 1943.

³⁷ Museum aan de Stroom (MAS)/KBMA-ARMB, Antwerp, Belgium, AS.1970.059.013.



Figure 7: Lieutenant Commander M.A.F. Larose, RNR, served as the commanding officer of HMS *Godetia* from February 1943 – December 1944.³⁸

A detailed operational history of HMS *Buttercup* shows that the ship was assigned with *Godetia* to operate in the Caribbean from June to December 1942.³⁹ *Buttercup* protected convoys from Trinidad to Key West and was then moved to the Guantanamo to New York route. Beginning in January 1943, *Buttercup* operated between Newfoundland, either Argentia or St. John's, and Liverpool. With occasional refit periods, this North Atlantic duty lasted until March 1944 when the ship was withdrawn to prepare it for use during the 1944 Normandy invasion. *Buttercup* returned to North Atlantic convoy duty from September to November 1944. The Belgian crew left the ship in December 1944 as the crew was needed to help clear the coast of newly liberated Belgium of mines and operate the country's ports.⁴⁰

³⁸©IWM ART LD 4976. *Portrait of Lieutenant-Commander M A F Larose* by Stephen Bone. Medium: chalk.

³⁹P.M.J. van Schoonbeek, 'Korvet (III),' *Neptunus* 32, 214 (1987), pp. 21-41. The author was an officer on HMS *Buttercup* 1943-1944.

⁴⁰NHB HMS *Buttercup*: *Summary of service 1942-1945*. Ship's history (S7969) prepared July 1970. Imperial War Museum LBY [X]SH.93.



Figure 8: Flower Class corvette HMS *Godetia*. The absence of a background suggests the image of the corvette was altered by a censor to remove clues about the ship's location. Note also the ship's pennant number and the false bow wave painted on the hull to mislead an enemy about the ship's speed.⁴¹

HMS *Godetia* (Figure 8 above) served in the Caribbean between June and December 1942. Switching to the main trans-Atlantic routes in January 1943, *Godetia* was part of the escort for convoy SC-122 in March 1943. *Godetia* was involved in the scuttling of another escort vessel protecting SC-122 when the minesweeping trawler HMS *Campobello* sprang a leak during bad weather. *Godetia* provided the depth charge needed and took off the crew. In September 1943 while escorting a convoy from Gibraltar to Britain, the ship was attacked by German aircraft but without damage incurred. *Godetia* also participated in the Normandy invasion of June 1944 and reverted to British manning in December 1944 for the same reasons as did *Buttercup*.⁴²

In June 1942 and a few months after the corvettes were transferred to the RNSB, the Belgian and British governments signed an agreement regarding their military cooperation. The Belgian armed forces were defined as consisting of the army and air

⁴¹©IWM FL 6058.

⁴²NHB HMS *Godetia*: Summary of service 1942-1945. Ship's history (S9624, revision of S6750) prepared December 1979. Imperial War Museum LBY [X]SH.202.

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force. Article 4 concerning the RNSB mentions in a few sentences the Belgian volunteers joining the RN and the vessels loaned to the RNSB.⁴³

The RN also sought to expand the RNSB beyond its original patrol vessels and corvettes. At one point it envisioned the RNSB manning four corvettes, four patrol boats, four motor gunboats, and an examination vessel.⁴⁴ This plan was not realised because of the chronic shortage of personnel. Admiral Dickens regularly sought to persuade the Belgian government to allocate more men to the RNSB. The Belgian government made the occasional small transfer, most notably in December 1942 when it agreed to release all seamen serving in the army. This affected about 100 men with merchant mariners returning to that service while fishermen were sent to the RNSB.⁴⁵ This was supplemented by small numbers of men who escaped from occupied Europe.⁴⁶

One area in which the RN needed assistance from the exile navies was in minesweeping and keeping British coastal waters clear of German mines laid by surface ships, submarines, and aircraft. The RNSB was well suited to add minesweeping to its portfolio of tasks in that many of its personnel were former fishermen experienced in operating small craft in coastal waters. Admiral Dickens, in a letter to Van Campenhout, characterised the British decision to substitute minesweepers for motor gunboats by saying, 'This arrangement would seem very suitable as your fishermen would take to minesweeping splendidly and also the Engineers are better with Diesel engines than with steam.'⁴⁷

In May 1942 RNSB personnel manned its first motor minesweeper, *MMS-188*.⁴⁸ This was a 255-ton, 119-foot vessel with a crew of two officers and sixteen other ranks. While the commanding officer was Belgian from the start, the crew was mixed. This

⁴³TNA, ADM 199/615/M 07753/42 *Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Belgian Government concerning the Organisation and Employment of the Belgian Armed Forces in the United Kingdom, London, June 4, 1942.*

⁴⁴WHI inventory VI/58-144, letter of 10 February 1942 from Van Campenhout to Dickens.

⁴⁵WHI inventory VI/58-144, letter of 10 December 1942 from Van Campenhout to Dickens.

⁴⁶Bernard Wilkin and Bob Moore, *Escaping Nazi Europe: Understanding the Experiences of Belgian Soldiers and Civilians in World War II*, (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 34-35, 112.

⁴⁷WHI inventory VI/58-144, letter of 4 February 1942 from Dickens to Van Campenhout.

⁴⁸Louis Petitjean, '118e Flottille,' *Neptunus* 15, 2/3 (1968), pp. 8-25. The author was the senior officer of the flotilla.

ship was joined in July 1942 by *MMS-191* and both served in the 118th Minesweeping Flotilla at Aberdeen and then at Harwich. In March 1943 the commanding officer of *MMS-188*, Lieutenant L.F.R.E. Petitjean, was appointed senior officer of the flotilla. Another pair of ships, *MMS-187* and *MMS-193*, became Belgian manned on 1 October 1943, and was joined by a third pair, *MMS-43* and *MMS-77*, on 1 February 1944. In September 1944 with Belgium partially liberated, the flotilla moved from Harwich to Ostend. The 118th Minesweeping Flotilla was active clearing Belgian waters throughout 1944 and into 1945, also spending time off the coast of the Netherlands. On 1 August 1945 the RNSB gained four more motor minesweepers, *75*, *89*, *189* and another of the larger 126-foot variant, *1020*.

In the first week of September 1944 Allied troops liberated some of Belgium's key cities including Brussels, Antwerp, and Ostend. With the arrival of the 118th Minesweeping Flotilla at Ostend, the RNSB began to establish a presence in its homeland. With the two corvettes reverting to British manning, the former crew members of those ships could be used to man additional minesweepers and operate the liberated ports. Belgium was declared liberated on 2 November 1944. Later that month Belgian personnel moved from the Devonport barracks to a new shore base, HMS Royal Edmund II at Ostend.⁴⁹ Once Antwerp was liberated, the RN established a base there, HMS Royal Athelstan. Now concentrated in Belgium, the RNSB was busy clearing the region's coastal waters of mines. Ports were filled with wrecks that needed to be raised or demolished, and mines and unexploded ordnance had to be neutralised. Naval personnel helped run the ports and provided security at a time when it was vital to bring in material to continue the war in northwest Europe.⁵⁰

The Belgian contribution to the Royal Navy during the war was recognised by the Admiralty in a 9 May 1945 signal sent to the major commands in which Belgian personnel were then serving.

Following for Belgians serving with the Royal Navy. Now that the end of organised resistance in Europe has denoted the triumph of Allied Arms, the Board of Admiralty desire to express their deep admiration of the heroic

⁴⁹TNA, ADM 182/124, AFO 7011/45 *Section Belge – Transfer of Responsibility*.

⁵⁰For personal accounts of service in the RNSB and numerous photos, see Johnny Geldhof, *De strijd op zee in 1940-1945 verteld door de Royal Navy Section Belge*, (Oostrozebeke: Groeninghe, 2000). The text is in Dutch only. See also Johnny Geldhof, *Royal Navy – Section Belge 1940-1945 in Focus*, (Oostrozebeke: Verraes, 2002). This book contains many photos of sailors of the RNSB contributed by veterans or their families. The text is in French, Dutch, and English.

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services to the Allied Cause which have been rendered by Belgian Officers and Ratings serving with the Royal Navy.⁵¹

The wartime maximum number of RNSB personnel was 90 officers and 400 enlisted men.⁵² Deaths while on active duty with the RNSB totalled just six men between 1942 and 1944. These included Victor Billet plus another officer, one warrant officer, and three enlisted men. Some of the men lost were serving afloat while others were killed in Belgium by enemy fire.

In November 1945 the Belgian government decided to recruit an additional 1,200 men for the RNSB, and they were sent to Britain for basic training.⁵³ The expansion of the RNSB in 1945 encountered difficulties. While there were more enlisted personnel, the lack of officers and senior enlisted men prevented more ships from being transferred to the RNSB. Additional ships could have included motor minesweepers but the RN also considered destroyers and sloops.⁵⁴ At the same time as these new recruits were under training, the Belgian government assumed financial responsibility for RNSB enlisted men on 1 October 1945 and officers on 9 November 1945.⁵⁵

The liberation of Belgium and the return of RNSB personnel to their homeland raised questions as to both the future of the RNSB and Belgium's need for a navy. It was a matter that had already emerged during the war. Admiral Dickens had asked Van Campenhout as early as 1941 for an indication of the Belgian government's position regarding an independent navy.⁵⁶ By September 1945 a proposal had been made to the Belgian government to establish a navy to be called the *Marine Royale*.⁵⁷ At this time the RNSB had about 70 officers and 1,400 enlisted men of whom 200 were vehicle drivers. In late January 1946 the Belgian Council of Ministers approved a decree law establishing a Belgian navy. This new force was officially established on 1 February 1946 as the *Force Navale*. Personnel immediately transferring from the RNSB to the *Force*

⁵¹WHI, inventory VI/145-154, *HMS Buttercup*, image 146.

⁵²NHB, S. 6751 Belgium.

⁵³Baete, *Belgian Forces in United Kingdom*, p. 192.

⁵⁴TNA ADM 1/18274 *Section Belge Royal Navy: future employment, disposal & financial arrangements, conference held 27.07.45 at PNLO Office, Devonport.*

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶WHI inventory VI/58-144, letter of 14 May 1941 from Dickens to Van Campenhout. Dickens sought an unofficial indication of Belgian intentions so that if the Admiralty asked Dickens about this, he would not be caught off guard.

⁵⁷Anrys, *Congé pour mourir*, p. 23.

Navale totalled 160.⁵⁸ Senior officer of the RNSB Georges Timmermans was appointed Commodore of the *Force Navale* on 19 February 1946.⁵⁹

Belgian personnel of the RN were expected to become the nucleus of the new Belgian navy. Recruitment was slow at first with under 200 men and 25 officers having volunteered for the *Force Navale* by mid-February 1946.⁶⁰ Most Belgians serving in the RN were already stationed in Belgium, the exceptions being men under training. Those men were to be sent to HMS Royal Edmund II at Ostend upon completion of their courses. By late March 1946 the RNSB had been disbanded but close ties between British and Belgian naval personnel continued into the early postwar era.

Conclusion

The RNSB overcame the near total absence of a Belgian prewar navy upon which to draw for senior leaders, personnel, and a sense of tradition. Initially tepid Belgian government support for the idea of a Belgian naval force was overcome by the energetic campaign of Victor Billet who sought Belgian and then British support for his cause. The assistance of Admiral Gerald Dickens as PNLO was vital in creating a Belgian branch within the RN in 1940. Belgian personnel of the RNSB began by manning five small patrol vessels in 1941 before exchanging them for two corvettes in 1942. The value of the RNSB crewed corvettes was shown in late 1944 in the reluctance of the Western Approaches Command to release the crews, even though they were badly needed in Belgium for minesweeping and other duties. The Admiralty had to make it clear to Western Approaches Command that they would not reconsider the order to decommission *Buttercup* and *Godetia*, as valuable as they were to the North Atlantic escort force.⁶¹ Belgian motor minesweepers helped keep the Harwich area free from mines before moving to Ostend upon that city's liberation. In 1944-1945 other RNSB personnel reopened the country's ports including Antwerp which was badly needed to support the flow of supplies to the Allied armies then pushing into Germany.

Without an existing Belgian navy in 1940 to act as the nucleus of an expanded force as was the case for the other European Allies, the RN could have told the early Belgian volunteers to join their country's merchant marine, army, or air force. Instead, the RN demonstrated administrative flexibility and a willingness to depart from tradition by establishing a national branch for Belgians within the Royal Navy. The second officer

⁵⁸J.-B. Dreesen, 'Beknopte chronologie van 50 jaar Zeemacht,' *Neptunus* 39, 245 (1996), pp. 149-56.

⁵⁹Section Classified Archives, Belgian General Information and Security Service, Brussels. *Curriculum Vitae Commodore Georges Timmermans*.

⁶⁰TNA, FO 371/59878 *Formation of a Belgian naval force*.

⁶¹Fold3.com, *Admiralty War Diary*, 17 November 1944, image 301317628.

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to serve as PNLO, Admiral E.L.S. King, characterised the RNSB as an entity in 1944 in an inter-office docket.

[T]here is no Belgian National Navy which Belgian subjects in this country could join and no National Naval organisation which could have administered them, and apart from technicalities, the Belgian Section is really a Belgian National force which, it is contemplated, may in the future form the nucleus of a Belgian Navy...⁶²

In response to Admiral King, the Admiralty civilian administrator A. Offé wrote, 'The Section Belge is in a quite special position as a separate section of the Royal Navy, and represents as nearly as possible in the circumstances the Belgian Royal Navy.'⁶³

The RN made a logical decision to offer support to the Belgian effort to create a naval force. First, though the RNSB did not exceed 500 men and a handful of ships during the war, it became an effective reinforcement for the RN and was worth the British effort to establish it. The RNSB also furthered the British objective of making the war effort a truly multinational endeavour.

A second advantage of the creation of the RNSB was that it gave the British far more control over the Belgian naval effort than would have been possible if an independent Belgian navy had already existed. While the Admiralty acted as the Allied decision maker for operational purposes, the European exile navies could request that their ships and aircraft be deployed, or not deployed, to certain areas. British objectives could differ from those of any one European ally, so a degree of compromise was necessary for both parties. In the case of the Belgians, the RNSB was part of the RN and the British had greater flexibility in assigning ships or individual personnel as the RN desired.

The third major benefit of the British decision to create the RNSB was that it allowed the Belgian government to postpone the creation of its own navy until after the war when circumstances were more favourable. For the duration of the war, the RNSB was a very small force with an unbalanced distribution of officers and enlisted men by both rank and specialty. There were far more officers available than needed in proportion to the enlisted men. Personnel were largely veteran mariners but all lacked true naval experience until the inception of the RNSB. Only a few RNSB officers were promoted to the relatively junior rank of lieutenant commander by the end of the war. Of the enlisted men, most were former fishermen who lacked essential naval skills

⁶²TNA, ADM 1/29379 *Award of Belgian Medaille Maritime to Belgian personnel in Section Belge of Royal Navy*, comment on minute sheet dated 13 January 1944.

⁶³Ibid.

such as signals, radios, coding, gunnery, radar, sonar, and even marine engineering until trained by the RN. With Belgium under German occupation and no sizeable population of Belgian citizens outside the country, the Belgian naval service had no ability to easily replace losses or expand substantially. In short, there could not have been the establishment of a balanced, properly configured Belgian navy under the circumstances. Once the war ended, these limiting factors could gradually be overcome. Creating an independent Belgian navy from veterans of the RNSB was less of a challenge than having to start from scratch.

The British decision to permit Belgian volunteers to join the RN during the Second World War was certainly a novel arrangement and was one that had substantial benefits for Britain and Belgium. The RNSB was the nucleus of a new Belgian navy established in 1946 that despite name changes exists today and has an important role to play in NATO's defence of the English Channel and North Sea.