

# Seamen Recognised at Last

Hundreds of Irish merchant seamen captured and illegally imprisoned by Germany during World War II, were eligible for compensation from a fund totalling £4 billion set-up by the German government several years ago. The man who discovered this and who led the campaign for public awareness of the issue last year for the remaining survivors and their children is Peter Mulvany, a driver with Dublin Bus.

While the date for applications from Irish seamen expired at the end of last year, thanks to Peter's efforts, it has been established that British Merchant Navy seaman captured by the Germans and illegally made to work are also eligible for compensation. The possibility now exists that the British government will seek to have the deadline extended by Germany, which would also allow many Irish seamen to apply for compensation in the future.

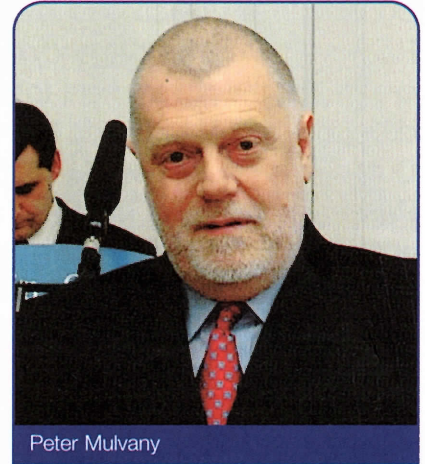
Any Irish seamen captured by the Germans should have been automatically repatriated due to the Republic's neutral status during the war but thousands were imprisoned in German work camps where they endured horrific conditions working for the German war machine.

Many of these Irish merchant seamen testified against their captors following the end of the war and the commandant of one particular camp which housed many Irish sailors, Milag Nord, is still wanted for war crimes. This particular camp was located near Bremen in northern Germany and was involved in the construction of U-Boat pens and fuel depots.

This research came out of a request from Peter's mother to look into the family's Argentinian connections. "We had always heard about our

Argentinian connection so in 1986 I began to do some research. I discovered that my great grandfather, John McCarthy from Mallow, had emigrated with his wife to Argentina. But for some reason, which I don't yet know, he had reappeared in Dublin in 1906 and left his two sons, Timiteo and Patricio, in the Sacred Heart Home in Drumcondra. Timiteo was my grandfather and Patricio my uncle," says Peter.

Peter does not know what became of John McCarthy or his wife who was a



Peter Mulvany

Callaghan from Mallow except to say that he was well travelled and had been a dairy farmer in a place called Balcarce 20 kilometres west of Mar del Plata in Argentina. The wandering genes are obviously strong in the McCarthy family as Peter's grandfather in buried in Alexandria, Egypt, having died in 1960 while working as a chief steward on a merchant ship.

Peter's research led him to discover that his uncle Patricio had gone down with the steam trawler Leukos, sunk by German U-Boat in March 1940 off Tory Island in Donegal. It was one of two trawlers and 13 merchant ships from the neutral Republic sunk during World War II. His research into the loss of the Leukos created a legal precedent in Irish Maritime law when the relatives of seamen lost on Irish vessels could from 1988 register these deaths.

Another research project located the wreck in 1998 of another vessel, the SS Ardmore, missing since November of 1940. This find changed Irish Government policy in relation to the presentation of awards. From





This is a group photograph of Merchant Seamen of several nationalities including Irish who were imprisoned by the Germans. It was taken prior to March 1943 in Milag Nord Internierten Lager (internment camp) located near Bremen. Prisoners were grouped at random for these photographs which were then given to each prisoner to send home to give the impression of normality.

April 1998 a Minister would in future personally present awards to relatives of missing merchant seamen in Dublin Castle. Previously, these medals would have been sent by post.

Peter received the medal in honour of his own uncle and the significance of having a ceremony cannot be underestimated. "I think being present at some of these ceremonies has been one of the highlights of my life," says Peter. "It has meant so much to see what these presentations mean to the surviving relatives who have come from all over this island, both north and south and from Britain. It meant so much to me to receive the medal for my uncle Patricio."

Peter has also sponsored the Irish Seamens Memorial Plaque and Plinth in the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas in Staffordshire. The tricolour now flies at the site.

His research has also uncovered the fate of many Irish farm workers caught by the Germans in the Channel Islands. Most of these men were sent to Germany and forced to work in agriculture and other war industries.

These individuals and their relatives, believes Peter, have the right to be compensated and recognised for the suffering they had to endure.

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Much of Peter's research in recent years has been conducted using the Internet and the extensive contacts he has made in almost 20 years of serious archival work but his initial research involved working closely with original documents and getting the authorities to give him access to files not opened since the end of the war.

And this work has made a huge difference to his life. When he began looking into his own family history, he

had not finished the Leaving Certificate. In the late 1980's he decided to sit the exam in order to be able to do a degree in university. In part because of his research work on Irish merchant seamen in World War II, he was accepted as a full-time mature student in UCD where he completed an honours law degree in 1995. He followed this up with a HDip.

He has worked for Dublin Bus for the last two and a half years and enjoys the job immensely considering it well paid and recognising the flexibility the company has given him with regard to his efforts to publicise the fund for merchant seaman last year. Peter is married and has three children. His mother who set him on the path that dramatically changed his life is now dead leaving him as the only heir to wandering John McCarthy. His uncle Patricio never married.

He says his next research project will be to find out what exactly happened to his great grandfather after that day in 1906 when he left his two sons to the care of the Sisters of Mercy in Drumcondra. 🐾