

Free Wales Army (FWA) — Byddin Rhyddid Cymru

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Also known as: FWA, Byddin Rhyddid Cymru **Leader:** Julian Cayo-Evans **Deputy:** Dennis Coslett
Dates active: 1964 – 1 July 1969 **Headquarters:** Lampeter, Ceredigion **Active regions:** Wales
Ideology: Welsh nationalism, Welsh republicanism **Motto:** *Fe godwn ni eto* ("We shall rise again")
Emblem: Yr Eryr Wen (the White Eagle of Snowdonia) **Preceded by:** Welsh Freedom Army,
National Patriotic Front, Welsh Republican Army

Overview

The Free Wales Army (FWA) was a Welsh nationalist paramilitary organisation formed in Lampeter, Ceredigion by Julian Cayo-Evans in 1964. Its objective was to establish an independent Welsh republic through direct action and militant agitation. Though more bravado than bomb-maker, the group captured the imagination — and concern — of 1960s Britain, playing a significant role in the wider Welsh nationalist movement's turn toward direct action.

The FWA first appeared in public at the 1965 protest against the construction of the Llyn Celyn reservoir (Tryweryn), and gained national attention through a 1967 interview with David Frost. The group's leader and deputy were imprisoned in 1969 following a 53-day trial that concluded on the day of Prince Charles's investiture.

Origins & Predecessors

Welsh Freedom Army (1959)

The first organisation resembling the FWA appeared in 1959 as the **Welsh Freedom Army (WFA)**, distributing cards in Llangollen bearing the slogan "Resist English Rule in Wales: WFA". Cards were placed under beer mats, in phone kiosks, libraries and bookshops. Supporters daubed the acronym alongside nationalist slogans, building momentum for the shadowy organisation.

Harri Webb & the Eryr Wen

The poet and republican socialist **Harri Webb** (a former member of the Welsh Republican Movement) together with Meic Stephens evoked the idea of a "Free Wales Army" in poetry and song. In 1952, Webb designed the **White Eagle of Snowdonia (Yr Eryr Wen)** — a symbol derived from Welsh legend that later became the emblem displayed on FWA flags and uniforms.

The Spark: Tryweryn

Throughout the early 1960s, many within Plaid Cymru had become radicalised by the party's failure to prevent Liverpool Corporation's flooding of the Tryweryn Valley. Young members in particular grew frustrated with what they saw as "so-called constitutional means of asking, bowing, scraping and grovelling" (Owain Williams, founding member of MAC). This disillusionment created the conditions for militant nationalist organisations to emerge.

Key Figures

Julian Cayo-Evans (Leader)

The public face and commanding officer of the FWA. A former British Army soldier who handcrafted his own uniform from his Army Service Dress using a cauldron of green dye in Lampeter. A charismatic figure described by one associate as "a Robin Hood character of the late 1960s" — an accordion player, horse lover, and "wonderful company late at night". He was first drawn to the movement after noticing an Eryr Wen painted on a wall in Aberystwyth. Served 15 months' imprisonment.

Dennis Coslett (Deputy / Second-in-Command)

Formed the Welsh Republican Army (WRA) in Llangennech in 1965 before joining forces with Cayo-Evans. A former miner and committed Welsh speaker who refused to speak English throughout the trial. Described his intervention in the Aberfan compensation dispute as his "proudest achievement in life". Served 15 months.

Gethin ap Gruffydd

Became active in the mid-1960s, establishing similar organisations in South Wales including the **Anti-Sais Front** (Anti-English Front), which later merged with other groups to form the **National Patriotic Front (NPF)**. Convicted and served 9 months. Was later arrested again in the 1980 **Palm Sunday** raids targeting suspected Meibion Glyndŵr sympathisers (released without charge).

Toni Lewis

A former RAF serviceman who similarly dyed his uniform green and formed an independent FWA breakaway in Cwmbran. A skilled metalworker who adapted the Eryr Wen into metal cap insignia for the organisation. Convicted at trial.

Dai Bonar Thomas ("Dai Bomber")

A foundational member who introduced Dennis Coslett to Cayo-Evans. Satirically referred to by the media as "Dai Bomber". Acquitted at trial.

David John Underhill ("Dafydd y Dug" / Dafydd Burns)

A former Army sergeant in the Royal Engineers who later studied at Coleg Harlech and Aberystwyth University. Acquitted at trial after being kept in solitary confinement for two months. Later conducted research into Welsh chapel architecture for a Christian organisation in America.

Timeline of Events

1964

- Cayo-Evans joins and takes leadership of the emerging FWA movement in Lampeter, Ceredigion

1965

- **21 October** — FWA's first public appearance at the Llyn Celyn (Tryweryn) opening ceremony protest. Cayo-Evans arrives in Bala with two uniformed associates. Five hundred protesters assemble. FWA members cut the sound system wires, attempt to burn the Union Jack, and the protest escalates into a riot. Rocks and fireworks are thrown at Liverpool Corporation dignitaries. The event ends far sooner than planned

1966

- **March** — MAC attacks the Clywedog Reservoir construction site, causing £30,000 of damage and six months' delay. An FWA patrol cap bearing the Eyr Wen is left at the scene as a deliberate misdirection
- **April** — FWA accepts invitation from Sinn Féin to participate in unofficial celebrations of the Easter Rising semicentennial in Dublin. On the return ferry, members tear down the Union Jack and raise the Welsh flag, with one member announcing over the ship's loudspeaker that the FWA had seized the vessel and was sailing it to the Welsh colony in Patagonia
- **September** — The Severn Bridge opens under tight security after repeated FWA threats. Cayo-Evans claims the FWA possessed an atom bomb and a pilot named "Griffiths" had been instructed to drop it on the bridge

1967

- **February** — The **Crossgates pipeline bombing** (see below) — the FWA's only direct militant action, which failed
- **September** — FWA intervenes in the **Aberfan compensation dispute**, issuing an ultimatum threatening to blow up council buildings and government offices. The Charity Commission agrees the following week to pay £5,000 to each bereaved family

1968

- **January** — DPP memorandum advises against prosecuting FWA, warning it "would give it an unmerited importance and publicity which its leaders are plainly seeking"
- **April** — FWA participates in Irish celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising
- **8 September** — Bomb detonates at RAF Pembrey control tower, seriously injuring Warrant Officer William Hougham. Cayo-Evans distances the FWA from the attack. Within days, an alleged deal is struck with Special Branch: FWA discloses its weapons cache in return for being cleared of the Pembrey bombing. Police frogmen recover guns and munitions from Maes-llyn lake near Tregaron

1969

- **26 February** — Nine FWA members arrested in dawn raids and charged with public order, firearms and explosives offences
- **April-July** — Trial at Swansea Crown Court, lasting 53 days. All nine defendants held in solitary confinement for two months before trial, under continuous exposure to artificial light — David Underhill claimed this caused permanent visual impairment
- **1 July** — Trial concludes on the day of Prince Charles's investiture. Convictions: Julian Cayo-Evans (15 months), Dennis Coslett (15 months), Gethin ap Gruffydd (9 months), Toni

Lewis, Vivian Davies, Vernon Griffiths (suspended sentences). Acquitted: Dai Bonar Thomas, Glyn Rowlands, David John Underhill. All except Gethin ap Gruffydd signed assurances renouncing future violence in return for reduced sentences. Defence counsel John Mortimer QC (later creator of *Rumpole of the Bailey*): "They had done no acts of violence or sabotage"

Key Actions

The Crossgates Pipeline Bombing (February 1967)

The FWA's only direct militant action. MAC supplied the FWA with a gelignite device through a chain of contacts. The FWA unit under Dennis Coslett identified a vulnerable section of the Elan Valley to Birmingham water pipeline at Crossgates, near Llandrindod Wells, where it crossed a river via the Fron Aqueduct.

The bomb — an inflated car inner tube with 40 sticks of gelignite and a detonator — was lowered into an access manhole, where flowing water pulled it toward the pipe's interior. Primed to detonate at 3 a.m., it failed to go off. Coslett called the *Western Mail* to announce the attack, but editor John Humphries dismissed him, assuming it was another hoax. Weeks later, a local sheep farmer discovered the device. British Army bomb disposal units safely detonated it in a nearby forest. The failure was attributed to a priming error made in haste.

MAC leader John Jenkins resolved never to entrust the FWA with another device: "They made a mess of it."

The Aberfan Intervention (September 1967)

The organisation advocated for families of victims of the **Aberfan disaster**, whose compensation claims were being blocked by the Charity Commission. The FWA issued an ultimatum at a press conference in Merthyr Tydfil, threatening to blow up the Town Hall, Fund Committee Rooms, County Government Offices, and Government Offices in Cardiff if £5,000 was not paid within a week to each bereaved family.

The Commission agreed the following Friday. Dennis Coslett described this as his "proudest achievement in life", though defence counsel at trial dismissed the narrative that threats had secured the money as "undiluted rubbish".

The Horlicks Bomb & Other Investiture Plots

In the run-up to the 1969 investiture, the FWA tested a bomb made from a **Horlicks tube** by a member dubbed "the Barnes Wallis of Wales". When tested in a remote area, it produced only "a cloud of smoke" and failed to dislodge any stone. Cayo-Evans: "F**k it, boys — back to the drawing board!"

Other bizarre plots included:

- **Kamikaze dogs** trained to carry gelignite under military vehicles (triggered hundreds of angry letters from dog-lovers)
 - A helicopter hired to drop **farmyard manure** on the investiture ceremony
 - A plan to move members to safe houses in Scotland before returning to disrupt the investiture (foiled by the dawn arrests)
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International Links

Irish Republican Army

Cayo-Evans claimed the FWA had established links with the IRA as early as November 1965. The FWA was rumoured to have received arms from the **Official IRA (OIRA)**, though this was denied by Cayo-Evans. A rumour used against the OIRA by republican rivals was that it had given or sold most of its weapons to FWA, leaving it defenceless when the Northern Ireland conflict erupted in August 1969.

Police took IRA links seriously. A raid on Cayo-Evans' Glandenys estate on 20 October 1966 found two known IRA members, Eamon O'Higgins and Rory O'Scanlon. Garda intelligence confirmed Cayo-Evans had been observed entering a Dublin hotel with O'Scanlon two months earlier.

FWA members were reported to have trained in Ireland, though no large-scale arms transfer took place.

Police Surveillance & Informants

John Summers

The journalist John Summers, who extensively covered the FWA, was later revealed by National Archives papers to be a **police informant**. He had been supplying the No. 8 Regional Crime Squad with detailed reports of his meetings with the group, including names, addresses, photographs, and a spent 9mm cartridge.

One of Summers' reports described a meeting at the Stag and Pheasant Inn in Pontarsais where members discussed using explosives to destroy the newly constructed Severn Bridge. Despite this, Summers was never called to give evidence at the trial. Defence counsel described him as a "shadow hanging over the proceedings", leaving "a nasty smell" over the trial.

Symbolism & Legacy

Yr Eryr Wen

The white eagle symbol has outlived the organisation itself. It was later adopted by **Meibion Glyndŵr** (Sons of Glyndŵr) during their arson campaign in the 1980s and 1990s, often daubed on the walls of burnt-out holiday homes. It appears on the iconic **Cofiwch Dryweryn** mural near Llanrhystud, Ceredigion.

In the 2020s, the symbol was revived by **Mudiad Eryr Wen** (MEW), a socialist republican youth movement that adopted both the name and the white eagle. MEW members paint the symbol on English road signs they deface and carry it on flags at independence marches.

In Popular Culture

- The **Cayo Arms** pub in Cardiff was named after Julian Cayo-Evans (2000–2018), drawing criticism from Conservative politicians but defended by brewers who described Cayo-Evans as "a Robin Hood character"
 - The group was satirically depicted in an episode of the American animated series **Archer** (2015), which referenced the flooding of Tryweryn
 - Frontline/ITN published archived FWA footage to YouTube in 2025
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Trial Costs & Aftermath

The 53-day trial cost taxpayers **£130,000** — £70,000 less than the investiture ceremony itself. Present at the trial was **Saunders Lewis**, a founding member of Plaid Cymru who had himself been convicted for arson during the Tân yn Llŷn protest in 1936. Lewis reportedly "never forgave" Gwynfor Evans for refusing to attend the trial or show support for the FWA men.

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