

Letters To The Editor

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When George Came Back

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Dear Sir, — Recently I stood on the top of Ben Hough and gazed at the crofts dotting the landscape of the Isle of Tiree. Spread out in the early summer sunlight, their varied coloured roofs, widely spaced, vied with each other to catch the eye. Climbing the hill, I had difficulty in avoiding trampling underfoot, small pink orchids. I could discern geese on nearby Loch Basapol and from the air above came the constant song of the numerous, ever-cheerful skylarks.

I found myself standing amongst the 50-year-old decaying brickwork and concrete of the war-time RAF radar station. Four enormous concrete blocks holding large and rusted bolts indicated the position of the earlier mast. In the distance the startlingly-white golf ball of the present air traffic control radar on Ben Hyman was a stark contrast. But within these now windowless and sheep-stained walls could still be seen the remains of earlier cables, electrical trunking and an assortment of numerous switches now derelict and forlorn.

Standing there, I could not fail to recall the month of May in 1993 when my wife and I had made a previous visit to this lovely island. I remembered our encounter with an elderly New Zealander who had made a long journey for a very short visit to search for and encapsulate his war-time memories. He was alone for his wife was in ill health and unfit to join him upon this pilgrimage.

As an ex-serviceman myself, I thought that I had understood his desire to have one last glimpse of the island and the people amongst whom he had served throughout the war years. I fear I was greatly mistaken and underestimated him. I could not possibly have known of the affection he felt for his islander friends or the fading recall of a young man who now felt himself growing old. He was but one of many thousands of such men from around the world for whom this island had once been part of the Atlantic rim of the world war battlefield.

George Hambling travelled light. He

carried a fawn raincoat and a small holdall. Without transport other than the post bus he was able to remember. As a consequence I became a willing chauffeur for his last two evenings. We searched for former inhabitants who might still remember him. Most had died or had moved to the mainland over the intervening 50 or so years.

Then to his ill-concealed delight we discovered a lady of almost pensionable age who as a child had lived in a small croft alongside the Nissen hut in which George had been billeted. She was one of several children who had climbed over the wall and been given sweets by George and the other airmen. She remembered him in person and he was able to visit her and exchange memories. She was able to tell him of the whereabouts of others he had known. He tried to obtain a souvenir photograph but this she would not permit and I recall his disappointment.

His greatest joy was, however, yet to come. The site of his former Nissen hut was now almost covered with sheep-cropped grass with the outline of only a concrete base barely discernible. On first examination, nothing of detail remained but, while searching around, his foot encountered a small piece of circular cast iron upon which he could make out a repetitive shieldlike pattern. He held in his hand a tiny segment of the iron stove around which he and his colleagues had gathered on so many raw winter nights they were to spend on this island so well known for its winds. Few treasures could have given my new-found friend so much pleasure.

Shortly before the ferry left the following morning, I watched this elderly visitor whom I hardly knew walk slowly down the jetty to begin his long journey, first to London and then home to Auckland. His departure brought a hint of tears to my eyes for he appeared to have assumed an unbelievable frailty and to have suddenly aged. But I knew that carefully stowed in his blue holdall he carried back to the world from which he had come, an *aide de memoire*, a precious and quite priceless souvenir.

Malcolm Till.