

An Cogadh

The Wind That Shook the Barley

On the very edge of the Atlantic Ocean, Tiree became a pivotal RAF base during the Second World War, changing the island profoundly in the process.

Iain mac Eachainn Bhàin, John MacLean, a shepherd in Hough during the 19th century, was famous as a seer, someone who could see into the future. One of his prophecies appears to predict the Second World War and the building of the RAF base on the island, 'There is a great war coming soon...In the Atlantic Ocean narrow iron vessels will travel underwater, letting loose narrow silver fish that will blow the large vessels to the bed of the ocean...Many armed forces will come to the island. They will live in strange houses [Nissen huts] and large birds will rise up and lie down on the plain of the Reef. Steering these strange birds will be people with noses like pigs' snouts'. NIALL BROWNLIE



Tiree Airfield. The three runways can be seen

World War One had a terrible impact on Tiree. Of the 290 islanders who served in the conflict, 66 died. But the Great War was, for most islanders, a distant battle fought in the trenches of Europe. In contrast, the Second World War brought Tiree right into the front line as Britain struggled to defend its supply lines across the Atlantic from attack by German U-boats.

'I remember the day the war started as well as today. And I'll tell you...it poured with rain, and I've never seen rain like it, before or after. And it was Sunday, and every place got dark with rain...People were terrible frightened, especially old folk, and young folk as well, although they weren't showing it the same way the old folk were showing it, because they were talking about the old war, the 1914 war, that's what it was.' DAVID MCCLOUNNAN, BALEPHUIL.

Background picture: A Halifax from 518 Squadron over Tiree during the Second World War



Many islanders volunteered to join up.

'Norrie Thomson, he was a farm worker with Teac Munn [in Baugh]. He volunteered and went away into the army. I remember him [when he came] back, and even I as a young boy was amazed. You know, he was a slow-walking, typical farm labourer, and he arrived home in uniform after his square-bashing training about three or four months later. And, oh man! You should have seen him walking along the road going to Scarinish in his uniform. Shoulders back, stomach in, chest out! He went through the war successfully too.' ANGUS MUNN, HEANISH.

In 1940 the Ministry of War took over the grass landing strip on the Reef and three large runways were built. The RAF base opened in November 1941, its aircraft supporting the Atlantic convoys by hunting submarines and dropping supplies for ships in trouble.

For some, Tiree was a posting to the end of the world. But many servicemen came to love the island and are still in touch with us. George Holleyman was a military policeman here. He had been a distinguished archaeologist before the war and found an amazing number of flints and pottery pieces, which he left to An Iodhlann when he died.



Polish airmen from 304 Squadron on Tiree in 1942 standing in front of a Wellington. After the fall of Poland a number of airmen escaped to fly with the RAF

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