

Virtue Mine Honour

Charles McLean's War

It was Christmas Day 1940 at RAF Kingstown, near Carlisle. A young airman from Tiree described the mess dinner in a letter to his parents: *'We had quite a good Xmas down here. I enclose a Menu to show you. The officers waited on us that day, which was a strange experience. The dinner was superb – free beer and cigarettes as you see. That same night, we (four of us) went to a party, and had quite a merry time, getting back at 4 am. It's a good job we didn't start till noon the next day.'* On another menu, the entire mess signed their names, as was the custom. Wittily subverting the RAF's motto *Per Ardua ad Astra* 'through adversity to the stars', the airman wrote beside his name *'Per Ardua ad Disaster'*. It was, at the same time, grimly prophetic.



That young airman was Charles McLean. Although born in Linlithgow, Charles' family was firmly rooted in Kenovay where they had farmed for generations, his great grandfather being known as *Dòmhnall a' Mharsanta* 'Donald the merchant'. Charles returned to the island every summer and learned to swim in the clear waters of Balephetrish Bay.



As an existing member of Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, the twenty-two-year-old Charles was called up two days before the declaration of war in 1939. During his time in the armed forces, Charles wrote regularly to his family describing the new world in which he found himself. Thirty-six of these letters survive, as well as correspondence with the many friends that he made during his service in the RAF. They are preserved here at *An Iodhlann*. These letters paint a vivid picture of daily life as a recruit at the start of the Second World War.

He was posted to Hastings on the south coast of England, where his first billet was Marine Court.

He wrote: *'It's a dashed cold place inside, tho' it looks fine outside. It's all cement and steel, no wallpapers, no tables or chairs, no carpets no linoleum ... Yesterday we emptied our paliasses and filled them with fresh straw. The Bedroom smells like a stable now.'*

TOP LEFT Charles McLean. TOP RIGHT The McLean family at home in Linlithgow in 1941 when Charles was home on leave (left to right): back row, Charles and his father Donald Archie; middle row, Mary, Effie and their mother Euphemia; front row Alistair. MIDDLE Charles in midair. Gymnastics training prepared airmen for team working and the disorientation of flying. LOWER Marine Court, Hastings in the 1950s (Courtesy of Hastings Museum and Art Gallery).

He described a typical day in the life of a recruit: *'Up at 7, wash, shave, polish buttons and boots (if these haven't been done the previous night), make beds (everything has to be folded up just so), Breakfast 7.30-8, Inspection Parade (Did you shave? Put your cap straight. Clean these buttons and so on. I was ordered for a haircut). Then we drill till 11 o'clock. We're getting good. It's a sight worth seeing: a thousand men or so in perfect time.'* Sport was also encouraged and he writes, *'I did a cross country run (7 miles) a few days ago. There's also swimming, boxing, netball, hockey and so on.'*

