

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 21

518 SQUADRON BREVET

This tiny piece of embroidery tells quite a story. It's an RAF brevet worn by Meteorological Air Observers of Tiree's 518 Squadron. The word 'brevet' has an interesting history in itself. It comes from an old French word *brievet* 'a little letter' and means a military rank given to someone in wartime without paying him the promoted pay. You might speak of a "brevet major". But the word also came to mean a small badge sewn onto uniforms, such as the classic 'wings' worn by pilots. This badge was worn with pride above the left breast pocket of the uniform, above any medal ribbons, and shows a single wing with the letter M.

518 was the most famous squadron of RAF Tiree. Formed in Stornoway in 1943, they flew deep into the Atlantic in a relentless hunt for weather information in the pre-satellite age. Within two months the squadron was on the move from the Western Isles to Tiree's new air base, where they were stationed for the rest of the war. The island's three huge runways allowed takeoff and landing in most weathers, the island's position on the fringe of the Atlantic was ideal, and the open spaces of the aerodrome allowed room for the huge hangars housing their Halifax aircraft.

The squadron had twenty-eight aircrews. Bernard Jamieson remembered one. 'I was a Flight Lieutenant pilot on 518 Squadron. We had eight-man crews, consisting of captain, second pilot, navigator, engineer, three wireless operator/air gunners and a specialist Met Observer. These flights were made whatever the weather and were almost never cancelled. These crews had to make arduous flights at specific heights, keeping to pre-arranged routes. They ensured that the constantly varying weather patterns were recorded and notified by code at set half-hourly intervals throughout the nine, ten or eleven hour sorties. In their specially adapted Halifax aircraft they gathered vital data on matters such as wind strength and direction, cloud, temperature and humidity readings. The meteorological information obtained from these trips [codenamed 'Bismuth' and 'Mercer'] was relayed back in code by a wireless operator'.

Winston Dimond, an Australian member of 518, gave this detailed account. 'During the morning of the sortie, we did a half hour air test of our plane, reporting anything amiss. During the afternoon we tried to sleep. Awoken about 9pm, a transport truck would take us to the Mess where the traditional pre-flight meal of ham and eggs would be served. We'd be given flight rations and then a truck would take us for a briefing and the latest weather. Take off was about midnight. We'd fly west for 700

nautical miles at 1,500 feet - about half way to Canada - on oxygen with no heating, only thick underwear and padded flying suits to try and keep warm in. Weather readings were taken every fifty nautical miles. Descent was then made to sea level to take weather readings every 100 miles. After 700 miles a descent to sea level was made, then a climb to 20,000 feet. Weather readings were taken every 50 miles. On our return trip we flew due east for 500 miles at 20,000 feet. After a further 500 miles we made another descent to sea level, then returned to base at 1,500 feet, arriving home at about 10.30 am (roughly a 10 ½ hour trip). By the end of the war, over 16,000 Met sorties had been flown from various airfields and fifty-two aircraft had failed to return.' The squadron's meteorological reports are credited with a crucial delay in the D-Day landing plans. 518 left Tiree just ten days after Victory in Europe Day in 1945.

Dr John Holliday

See *The Barley and the Brine* by Mike Hughes and John Holliday, Islands Book Trust, for more details.