

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 87

D-DAY LOG BOOK

This copy of the June 1944 RAF logbook came to us from the family archives of Warrant Officer John Bristow, a navigator in 518 Squadron. The record of the patrol in the early hours of 6 June has been underlined in red and 'D.Day' added. It is a reminder, as the 75th anniversary of the Normandy landings approaches, of the vital role RAF Tiree played at this pivotal moment in the Second World War.

The tide of war may have turned, but June 1944 saw German forces in control of continental Europe except southern Italy. For what they hoped would be their final push from the north, the Allies made preparations for the largest seaborne invasion in history, with 700 warships, 4,000 landing craft and over 150,000 troops prepared for a beach landing. There were also elaborate dummy plans, codenamed Operation Bodyguard, to fool the German high command into believing that an invasion would take place in the autumn or at other points along the coastline.

Commanders argued over the timing. A pre-dawn landing was a given, but naval top brass pushed for low water so that captains could see the sunken beach defences laid by the Germans, while army generals preferred high tide to reduce the distance their troops must run under gunfire. The RAF wanted clear skies and a full moon to help pilots hit their targets and to release 24,000 airborne troops over the correct drop zones. They settled on a window between the 5th and 7th of June, when the moon and tides were suitable. General Dwight Eisenhower, commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, chose 5 June.

One thing they could not predict was the weather. On 4 June, a fierce storm battered the French coast. But by this stage in the war, the Allies controlled the North Atlantic giving them the advantage of being able to gather meteorological readings from as far afield as Iceland. The Germans, pushed back as they were, had limited weather information; in fact, their forecasters predicted a fortnight of rough weather, meaning many German troops were deployed inland on exercise.

518 Squadron had transferred to Tiree from Lewis in September 1943, and immediately began a relentless round of long flights deep into the Atlantic to make weather readings. Before each flight, each Halifax was taken on a short air test, which included a fly-past of the 148-foot-high Skerryvore Lighthouse to calibrate its

altimeter. In 1944 the squadron flew every day but two, when the runways vanished under a thick covering of snow. The main foes were plane failure and the weather; no fewer than ten aircraft were lost that year.

A new centre of low pressure was detected off Iceland on 1 June, and extra efforts were made to track its progress. Oscar Gill described his flight as met observer the next day: 'On 2 June 1944 we encountered some of the worst possible weather and I was buffeted about in the nose of the Halifax for about ten hours, gathering quite a few bruises in the process. Wilf the pilot had to hang on in person for the whole trip as the autopilot could not cope. The state of the sea in that depression is very hard to describe and I can liken it to a large pan of jam at full rolling boil on the stove. The waves were some fifty to sixty feet high and going in no particular direction, just bouncing up and down. The wind was lifting spray hundreds of feet into the air and the Perspex nose was splattered all over with salt water. When we got back, we were so relieved we carried Wilf shoulder high onto the crew bus. I got back to my bunk and slept for 24 hours.' Coded weather reports were sent back to Tiree during the flights.

Data about this area of low pressure was fed to Eisenhower's headquarters, where it was analysed by a team of British and American meteorologists. Their leader was Group Captain James Stagg, who predicted that the weather would improve slightly the following day. Eisenhower gave the command to delay the invasion by one day. Commanders in the field were notified by telegram: 'SECRET HAND MESSAGE. D DAY POSTPONED ONE DAY. ACKNOWLEDGE BY LIGHT.'

The logbook entry for 6 June marked a flight by the squadron's elite crew, expertly piloted by Freddie Green. The nine-hour sortie, which took off just as the troops were landing on the beaches of northern France, was essential to monitor the development of the weather systems. It was later described vividly by Wireless Operator G Wilkes. Buffeted by dreadful weather, their readings were so extreme with wind speeds of 150 mph that they were at first not accepted as accurate at Tiree HQ. Ice built up on the aircraft, it was hit by St Elmo's fire and one of the four engines packed up.

A crucial installation that allowed pilots to navigate home safely at night and in low cloud was the High Frequency Direction Finding station (known officially as HF/DF, 'huff-duff' to the servicemen), set up in a 'bullet and blast proof hut' behind *Cnoc Gorm* in Kenovay. This 'secret' building was completely demolished soon after the war, leading some to speculate what special equipment it had contained.

After the war 518 Squadron was awarded its crest, the only one in the RAF to be in Gaelic. A hand holds aloft a key with the motto '*Tha An Iuchair Againn-Ne*' [We Hold the Key]. Although there were a number of other RAF meteorological bases – including 517 Squadron in Brawdy, Wales, 519 in Skitten, Caithness, 520 in Gibraltar, 521 in Docking, Norfolk – it was the crews of 518, located in the Atlantic Ocean itself, that provided the most crucial weather readings in the week before D-day. So much so that Churchill took the unusual step (in wartime) of sending a telegram of thanks to Wing Commander Morris, the squadron's commanding officer, for his help in the operation.

Not that this was the only contribution the island may have made to the Normandy landings. A pier was built around 1940 on *Cladach a' Chrògain* at the boundary of Balephetrish and Kenovay. Ostensibly it had been designed to unload material for the runways on The Reef, and a railway track to the aerodrome was even planned. But its piles were planted on the soft sand with no foundations, and it was suggested later that in fact the whole construction was a hoax to fool the Germans into thinking that this was a prototype for the eventual invasion of Europe. It crumpled within weeks as the first boat tied up.

Postscript: An Iodhlann has just acquired James Stagg's account of this dramatic episode: *Forecast for Overlord*.

Dr John Holliday