"The Wind That Shook The Barley"

An exhibition of Tiree during World War II

Tiree and Coll Gaelic Partnership, Summer 1999

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RAF Tiree

World War I had a devastating impact on Tiree. The Roll of Honour lists 290 who served in that conflict and the Scarinish War Memorial records the names of 66 men who died.

But apart from the occasional fighting ship seen on the skyline, and the attack by a U-boat on the *Plover* north of Coll, the Great War was predominantly a distant conflict, fought in the trenches of Europe.

1. World War I battleships off Tiree. *(Courtesy of Jean Lindsay)*

World War II was quite different. With the Battle of the Atlantic raging and a German landing on the west coast of Scotland a distinct possibility, Tiree suddenly found itself in the front line.

A major Airforce base was built in months, the island became a Protected Area and over 2,000 airmen and workers from all over the world were stationed here.

This exhibition charts the building and work of RAF Tiree during World War II, what it was like to live here and the effect of the base on the community.

(Cover photograph: De Havilland Rapide over Sandaig. *Courtesy of Donald MacKinnon)*

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"Noses like pigs' snouts"

Many features of both World Wars were foreseen by John MacLean, Tiree's most famous seer.

Iain MacEachainn Bhàin, great grandfather of Mary and Flora MacArthur (*Mairi agus Floraidh Alasdair*), Sandaig, was born in Ruaig in the early 19th century. Most of his life was spent as a shepherd at Hough when it was a large farm.

Concerning the coming wars he said the following:

"Listen to me and give ear to what I say. There is a great war coming soon, such as the world has never seen. There will be a great battle and thousands will fall in one day.

"In addition to that, many soldiers will be injured and wounded when a white smoke will come down. 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. On sea and land the losses will be heavy and in a land which is unknown to me, the ground will be soaked in blood. Millions will go to their eternal rest in the soil of this land and beautiful red flowers will grow over them.

"These dark days will pass over for a time with new devices pouring arrows of death from the sky. Millions will perish during this disaster. Tiree will undergo many great changes. Many armed forces will come to the island. They will live in strange houses 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."

Thanks to Neil Brownlie for this information

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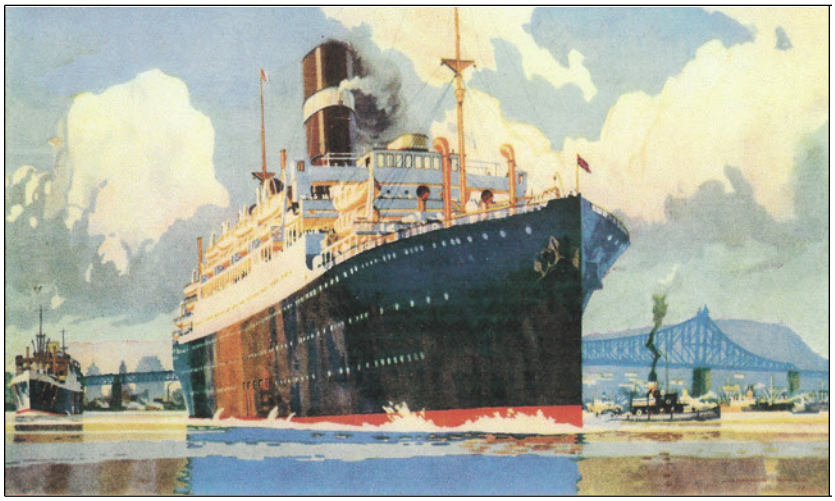
"I've never seen rain like it"

"I remember the day the war started as well as today. And I'll tell you, I was coming from Kennavara and do you know the bridge that's down there? Well, it poured with rain and I've never seen rain like it, before or after. And it was a Sunday and every place got dark with rain. They were at church down at Balemartine and nobody was in the house when I came back. When they came back they got word that the war had started and they were talking about that at that certain time . . .

"People were terrible frightened, especially old folk, and young folk as well, although they weren't showing it the way the old folk were showing it, because they were talking about the old war, the 1914 war, that's what it was."
David MacClounnan, Balephuil

SS *Athenia*

It didn't take long for the islanders' worst fears to be realised. Within hours of the war starting, a passenger liner with three Tiree men on board was sunk in clear violation of naval conventions.



2. Postcard of the SS *Athenia.* *Courtesy of Alasdair Sinclair)*

"The following morning my stepmother went into the room where I was sleeping and she said 'I've just heard from Hugh MacKinnon (the fellow that lived down in a cottage down here near the loch) that the Athenia *has been torpedoed after leaving Belfast last night.' That was one of the Donaldson liners. I remember that well. My God! I knew that boat. I wonder if there was anyone there I knew. I was very worried about it and we didn't have a radio."*
Hugh MacLean, Barrapol.

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The *Athenia* was the first naval casualty of the war. Struck by a torpedo from U-boat U-30 at 7.45pm on Sunday, the first day of the war, the liner sank slowly, finally going under the next morning. Of the 1,418 passengers and crew on board, mainly women and children bound for Canada, 112 were drowned.

The attack was in clear breach of the 1936 London Naval Treaty outlawing attacks on passenger vessels, although the U-boat commander claimed he thought the liner, blacked out and zig-zagging, was an armed merchant ship. He was later cleared at an inquiry, although the submarine log book details had been mysteriously lost.

James Downie, from Ruaig, sailing as first mate, and deckhands John MacDonald and Neil MacLean from Tiree, survived the tragedy.

Interestingly, the U-boat commander, Kapitain Leutnant Lemp, was in charge of U-110 in 1941 when it was attacked and disabled by a naval frigate. He scuttled her but she failed to sink quickly enough and the submarine was captured. Inside was the Enigma Cypher machine and German code book which allowed the Allies to decode U-boat radio messages. This proved to be one of the turning points in the Battle of the Atlantic.

"Fine Figure of a Man"

"Willie Bunting . . . he was driving for Johnny Brown at the time, driving taxis and doing things for Johnny Brown and he called on us later that day [September 3rd 1939] *and I remember it like it was yesterday. He told us that day that he had volunteered and was going away into the army and he was away within a week or ten days. He had a successful career in the army and survived all through the war and I can proudly tell you . . . the first man to join the army in Tiree was Willie Bunting.*

"And then Norrie Thompson, he was a farm worker with Jake Munn, he also volunteered and went away into the army. I remember him back, and even I as a 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.

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Building the Base

The origins of the RAF base go back to 1934. Midland and Scottish Airways had selected a grass landing site on the Reef, although a rental dispute delayed the start of air services until 1937. This civilian service continued to operate spasmodically during the war.

3. RAF Headquarters on the Reef in 1942. *(Courtesy of Archie MacKinnon)*

As the need grew to provide air cover for the convoys increasingly routed from the North Sea to the Irish Channel, the Reef was requisitioned by the Ministry of War in 1940. Contractors, Melville, Dundas & Whitson, and Tawse of Aberdeen were among those involved in building the airstrip, roads and living quarters for the base. Labourers were brought in from Ireland and the mainland, including prisoners from several Scottish jails.

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Conditions at first were rough, with protests over living conditions culminating in the 'Battle of the Plates'. Soon after the Battle of the River Plate in December 1939, labourers unhappy with the food at their canteen (opposite MacLeod's store at Crossapol) smashed all the crockery in the kitchen in protest.

Large amounts of hardcore were needed. Quarries at Baugh and Balephetrish were blasted out and the ruins of the Glassary chemical factory in Sandaig and storehouse on Scarinish jetty were demolished and used. 31 Embarkation Unit RAF arrived in April 1941.

A Protected Area

As early as September 1939, a D notice had been slapped on Tiree making it an offence to publish information about the island without prior authorisation. For this reason there is little in the *Oban Times* about the island during the war. Tiree became a Restricted Area. Permission had to be sought to travel here, only being granted to those who could prove they came from the island.

"We had to get a pass, a military pass. We had difficulty at the time. My mother was born on Tiree in 1875 and I wrote to Tiree to the registrar Neil MacPhail and seemingly at the time of my mother's birth, the records of people at that time had been burned . . . so we had a wee bit of difficulty getting my mother's pass. It had to go to Edinburgh. You had to go and get your photos taken and when you came off the train at Oban there was a military hut on the North Pier and you had to go in there and have your pass examined before you were allowed onto the boat for Tiree."
Janet Wilson, Scarinish.

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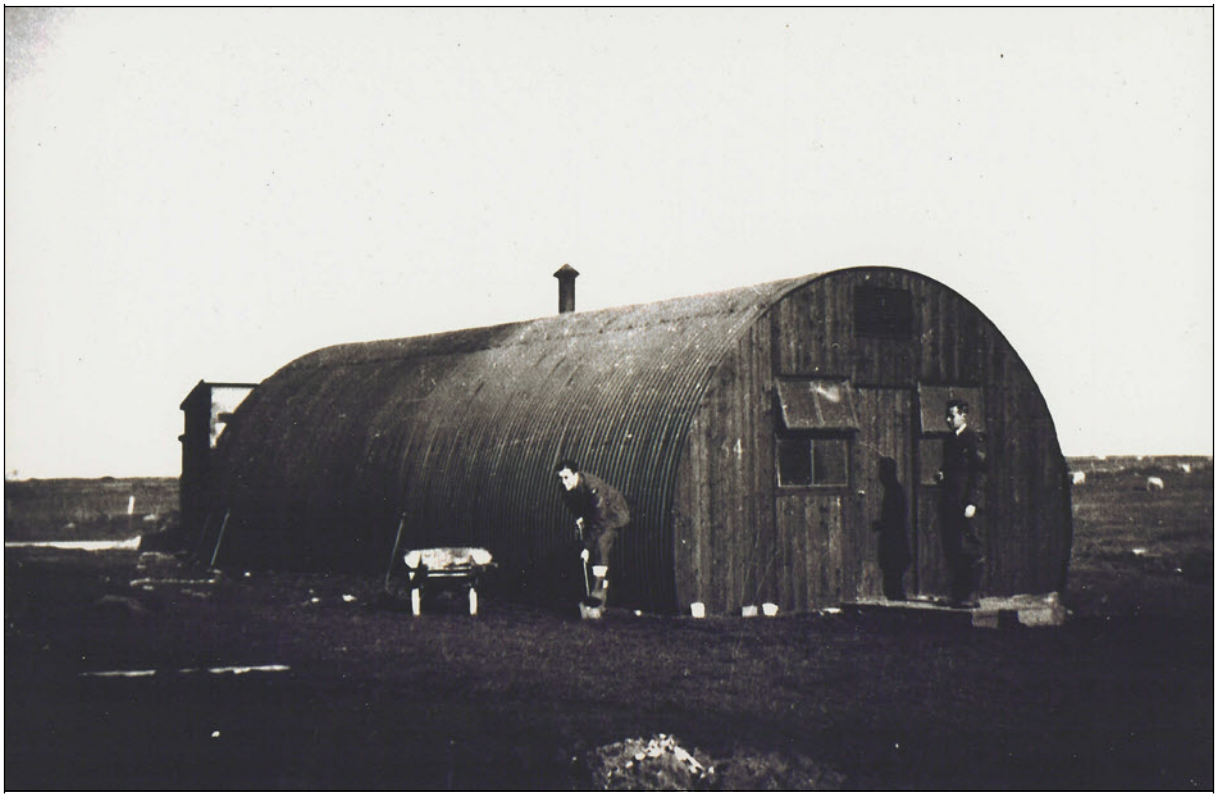
Conditions at the Base

RAF Tiree was sometimes seen as an unpopular 'foreign' posting and it was said to have the highest suicide rate of any RAF base. Certainly living conditions at the start were rudimentary.

"*My Nissen hut had water from end to end for a short while. We had to step straight into wellington boots when rising . . . we had no electricity supply and we received paraffin for lamps about every four weeks, but that only lasted for about a week."*
Hugh Hunter quoted by Mike Hughes in *The Hebrides at War*.



4. Nissen hut. *(Courtesy of George Holleyman)*

Many servicemen however came to love the beauty of the island and its people.

The work of the 518 (Meteorological Reconnaissance) Squadron was unsung but invaluable. Twice a day flights *Bismuth* and *Mercer* left Tiree for a ten hour triangular trip out into the Atlantic either at 20,000 or 50 feet.

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Pressure to fly was relentless and in 1944 518 Squadron flew every day but two. Often icing and enormous waves made this dangerous and 518 Squadron lost 12 aircraft during their spell on Tiree.

Every half hour, weather readings were sent back in code. The resulting forecasts played an important part in the timings of the many operations, including the D-Day landings, which had been delayed by fog.

5. Balephetrish pier. *(Courtesy of Hector MacPhail)*

Plans were also made to evacuate the Royal Family and Prime Minister, if necessary, through Tiree. If the Germans had invaded southern England, the Royals and PM were to be flown to Canada via Tiree and Iceland.

A steel pier was built at Balephetrish where barges could unload materials for the aerodrome.

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Other Centres

Apart from the main base around the Reef, there were installations at other parts of the island.

The Embarkation Unit was stationed down at Gott Bay pier. A radio station with three masts was sited opposite the present Police office in Scarinish, and in Gott Bay there was a manned boat moored permanently to relay the radio signals. In Balinoe at *Cromadh nan Creag* there was a radar screen and guarded check point, and another on the Middleton machair.

6. Radio masts in Scarinish. *(Courtesy of Angus Munn)*

The largest other centre was at Hough, confusingly called 'Kilkenneth' by the RAF. There was a forest of radar masts, some 200 feet tall, underground control rooms and a powers station on the machair west of Beinn Hough. The remains of this can still be seen.

To the east end of Beinn Hough was another small camp and NAAFI and to the south a small army base which guarded the complex. One rotating radar screen was reached by climbing the steps up Beinn Hough. Aircraft would show up on the screen at a range of 80 miles.

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7. Hough NAAFI in the snow. *(Courtesy of Chrissie MacKechnie)*

" . . . and the operator, on first sighting, could give the position by land line to the Wing Filter Room in Inverness . . . [which] *could identify it as hostile of friendly, and give it a code name. We would normally have about a dozen aircraft on the screen at the one time . . . This type of radar was called Chain Home Low. We were all issued with black heavy waterproof macs and sou'westers, because as you can imagine, the rain came at you horizontally. Occasionally in the fiercest gales the rotating aerials had to be stopped and lashed with ropes to prevent damage."*

Jim Fowler, Radar Section, Beinn Hough

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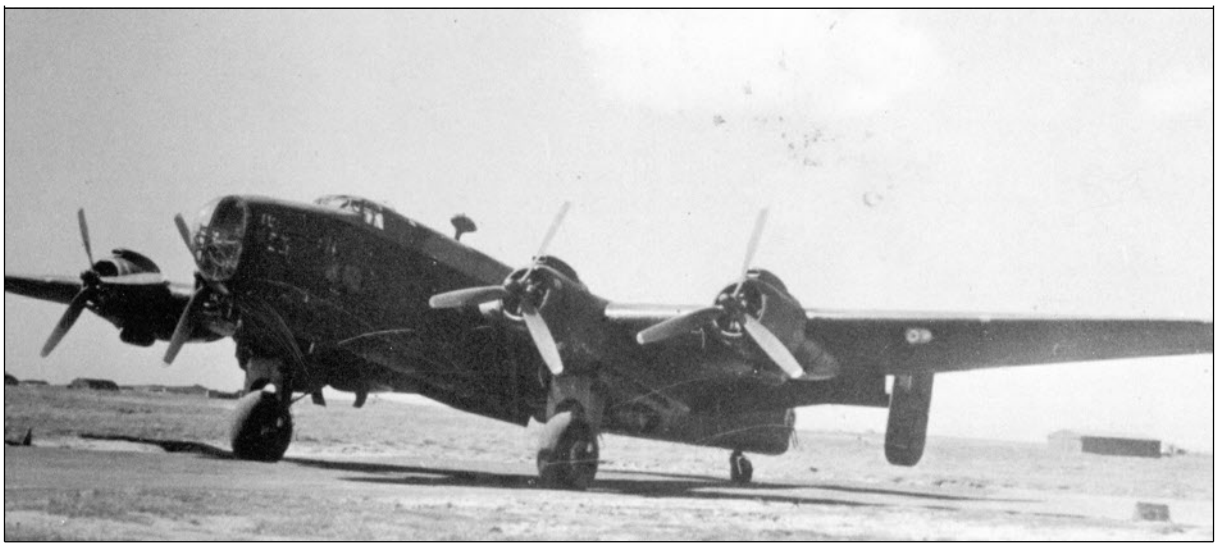
Chronology of RAF Tiree

1940
Radio station established at Scarinish. Radar unit built at *Port Mòr* where Donald MacArthur, Middleton has his sheds on the machair.

November 1941
Base formally opened as part of 15 Group, RAF Coastal Command.

April 1942
224 Squadron arrives flying Hudsons on anti-submarine patrol and air-sea rescue.



8. 518 Squadron Halifax. *(Courtesy of Neil Owen)*

May 1942
304 (Polish) Squadron arrives flying Wellingtons. Both these planes lacked the range to reach out sufficiently into the Atlantic Ocean.
304 Squadron soon moves to Wales.

July 1942
224 Squadron converts to Liberators with much greater range.

September 1942
224 Squadron move to Hampshire and RAF Tiree reverts to 'care and maintenance' basis.

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September 1943
518 Squadron arrive flying Halifaxes out into the Atlantic making weather measurement.

9. 518 Squadron. *(Courtesy of Willie Dickie)*

February 1944
281 Squadron arrives flying Warwicks carrying airborne lifeboats for air-sea rescue missions.

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An Archaeologist in Uniform

George Holleyman was an RAF policeman stationed at Hough in 1941. He had been involved in archaeological research in his native Sussex before the war, and soon became interested in the island.

With a bicycle he explored far and wide and taught himself to read and write Gaelic, although he admitted, *"I was never a fluent Gaelic speaker."*

10. George Holleyman. *(Courtesy of George Holleyman)*

He made friends with several families and wrote a fascinating record of his two years on the island as well as a series of photographs. He also found an astonishing number of prehistoric pins, pottery and other artefacts.

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Prisoners of War

Italian prisoners of war lived in wooden huts where the Tiree Business Centre is today. They were unguarded and were free to move almost at will. They were popular for making exquisite things with their hands, like belts and lighters, out of odd materials.

"Quite a lot of the locals got on well with them. They made lovely belts . . . out of papers you get out of cigarette packets. They used to make lighters too out of bullets. They used to get a brass nut with a button on either side of it and they made a lighter out of that . . . But I never met any of them at all."
John George MacLean, Scarinish.

"They started digging there (a water pipe at Loch a'Phuill) . . . it was prisoners, and you couldn't see right along the place, they were so near to each other. I would say about three feet apart . . . There were about four of five hundred of them. There used to be a wee plane coming in with their letters and stuff. I remember when I was shepherding out there at Hugh MacLean's. I used to take the cattle down from there and this [POW] *bloke came . . . I had a watch on a chain, and he was talking to me in Italian and I was talking to him in Gaelic. Eventually he gestured that he also had a watch on a chain and the watch wasn't wound. I knew then that he wanted to know the time."*
David MacClounnan, Balephuil

Commander Preston-Potts

One colourful character about whom islanders still tell stories is Squadron Leader Preston-Potts, the Station Commander from 1943-45. A fighter pilot who had been injured in the Battle of Britain, he was left with a burned face and had to travel regularly to the mainland. He was quite fearless and won a pilots' bet as to who could fly lowest over the Officers' Mess. He flew so low he cut the telegraph wires with the wheels of his plane. He once swam out to defuse a mine bobbing off shore. A great lover of speed, he would career along the narrow roads in an open-top jeep offering lifts to locals, who were left shaking in their shoes at the end of the journey.

He often went fishing with Angus Munn's father, Neila, and in return took him for several trips in his plane.

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"He took my father this day to of all places, Scapa Flow [in the Orkneys]. *I don't know if he was kidding on or not, but he had filed a flight plan of some kind and said he was going to Scapa Flow for some imaginary reason. Apparently when they got there they couldn't contact ground control, and I think there was a problem over it. I think half the ships in Scapa Flow had their guns trained on this bloody Anson plane . . . before he managed to get through on the radio. Even in these days, if the military people knew that a 70 year old crofter from Tiree was flying kitted out as an RAF officer in a plane, there would have been hell to pay."*
Angus Munn, Heanish.

Accidents

Although Tiree never came under enemy attack during the war, it could still be a dangerous place to live and work.

"*They were working at that time on the frame of the hangar when one of these blokes fell from the top of this concrete. They were high and he was just pure dead."*
David MacClounnan, Balephuil

Flying out of RAF Tiree was also difficult, although the enemy was the weather rather than the Germans.

On Wednesday 16 August 1944, Halifaxes *M* and *S* were allowed off together for air tests before their usual night runs. The aircraft were lost in patchy cloud and collided, killing all on board.

"I was on top of Ben Hynish and it was a lovely day and one got up off the 'drome there and the other one was coming in and they were straight in bee-line. I was seeing them before they crashed and they seemed to come so close to each other that they tipped wings . . . and the next thing the two of them went up in flames and you could see the wheels with the tyres burning and falling right to the ground . . . one of the engines fell at the pillar box at Island House."
David MacClounnan, Balephuil

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"*I wasn't outside seeing them* [he was in the NAAFI] *it was just a big flash and in came the Flight Sergeant, I was supposed to be off in the afternoon . . . they took us over and we just started hunting around for bits and pieces . . . I remember somebody with a fishing net fishing out a hand."*
Willie Dickie, Caoles

11. Mrs Revilliod at her son's grave in Soroby. *(Courtesy of Grace Campbell)*

Flt. Lt. Len Revilliod was one of those killed in this terrible accident. He was a grandson of the Czechoslovakian Prime Minister Jan Masyrak who flew to Tiree for the funeral.

"I vividly remember the stretchers stained with blood, even after scrubbing, put out to dry outside the Sick Bay."
Georgie Porazka, Met WAAF.

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Max Bacon

Another trip which ended in disaster was recalled by Flying Officer Pete Bridgewater:

"I was lucky to be assigned to Flt. Lt. Max Bacon's crew. He was the most experienced and respected Captain on the 518 Squadron, and his crew, with the obvious exception of myself, had been with him a long time and were as good as they get. I did about twenty operational trips as second pilot with that crew. One thing about the Met flights was that you always went out, even if you knew that everywhere would be closed in when you got back you still took off.

12. Flt. Lt. Max Bacon, 1918-1945.
(Courtesy of Mike Hughes)

"The twenty-first trip that I was doing with Max was on 21 January 1945. We were doing Bismuth *and Flt. Lt. 'Archie' Archibald was doing* Mercer. *It was not a nice night. Wing Commander Morris, the CO, decided to come with our crew. The Chief Met Officer, Flt. Lt. Beutell also joined Max's crew for the trip. We got to the end of the runway, with Archie's aircraft just behind us, and were halfway through the take-off check when Archie called Max on the radio. He was very worried about being able to get safely through ten or eleven hours of this horrific weather with a second pilot who had never been on an operational flight before. Since I had done quite a few trips by then, would Max let the two second pilots change aircraft? After all, Max did have the Wing Commander to act as second pilot. Max and the Wing Co saw the sense of it and said 'yes' and I passed the new boy in the way across to change planes.*

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"We did have a hell of a trip. We had radio-altimeters, and they helped, but you could get 100 foot high waves in the Atlantic, and you couldn't see them coming at night. When we neared home, we were told that Tiree was closed in, and we diverted to Turnberry. When we landed we were told that Max and his crew had disappeared without trace. It was never known whether it was icing (January in that part of the Atlantic was very cold) or a large wave or some other problem."

The Loss of the *Sylvia Scarlet*

In July 1943, Hugh MacLean, Barrapol was the last person to see the plane dubbed *Sylvia Scarlet* before it plunged into the sea.

The plane was in fact a Dutch Fokker previously owned by KLM Royal Dutch Airlines and impressed into the RAF at the start of the war. She was a frequent visitor up and down the west coast and on one occasion landed on the machair at The Land, Barrapol with a cargo of grass seed for the Reef aerodrome.

Her last trip was Glasgow - Tiree - Benbecula - Stornoway and then home. After leaving Tiree for the second time with a party of airmen going home on leave, Hugh saw the plane as she banked heading for Glasgow.
"Although I knew nothing about engines at the time, I noticed there was something not very correct about her performance. You would hear the odd cough and little plume of smoke from one of the engines on the starboard side. I watched her saying to myself that that man should land again . . . but he carried on towards Iona."

There is still some uncertainty as to the cause of the tragedy, but she fell into West Loch Tarbet killing all 20 men on board.

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Shipwrecks

Four boats foundered on Tiree during the war.

Of these the most famous was the destroyer HMS *Sturdy*. In darkness and in a strong south westerly gale, the warship on convoy protection duty, captained by Lt. Comm G. T. Cooper ran onto *Sgeir nan Latharnaich* off *A' Dhorlainn Bheag*, Sandaig on October 30 1940.

13. HMS *Sturdy*. *(Courtesy of Hugh MacLean*

A small group had tried to abandon ship and five seamen were drowned in the surf. A second party who did scramble ashore made their way to the house of *Mairi Mhoireasdan*. She alerted Captain Donald Sinclair (*Domhnall an ban*) who was home on leave from the Merchant Navy. He used a torch to flash a Morse code message to the ship to remain on board until dawn, and thus prevented any further loss of life.

The crew abandoned ship at day break and most were picked up that evening by another destroyer. A small detachment were left to guard the wreck and supervise the dismantling of the explosives.

The tanker SS *Lariston* struck rocks off *Port na Muice*, Craignish. No one was hurt and the ship was towed away several months later.

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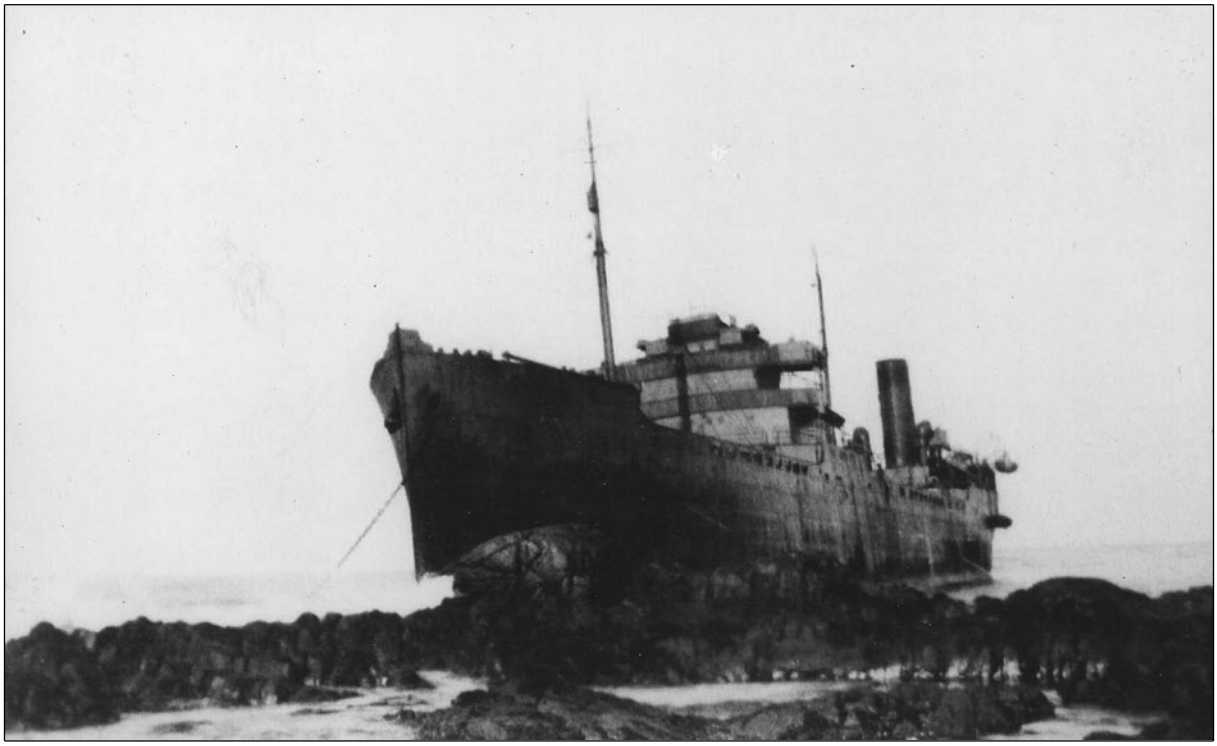

14. SS *Lariston* aground off Craignish. *(Courtesy of George Holleyman)*

The SS *Ingrid* struck rocks off Cornaig. Again all the crew were safe.

The trawler *Ocean Tide* from Leith was wrecked off Mannal. The crew were saved and they donated a box of fish to the officers' mess. Her remains can still be seen at low tide. You can read George Holleyman's account of these wrecks in the folder provided.

The *Nevada* was wrecked off Coll, so close you jump on board. She was full of domestic items and similar to the SS *Politician*, made famous in *Whisky Galore* she was a happy hunting ground for people from both islands for several months.

"Do you want a smoke?" It was in a flat tin of State Express 333 cigarettes.
"No thanks. I don't smoke" I stammered out.
"Everyone on Coll does. Even Mhairi Mhòr, and she's over ninety and didn't start until after the Nevada. I get through about ten a day, but my big brother's on nearly fifty."
Iain Clark from *Shipwreck*, quoted with the author's permission.

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15. The trawler *Ocean Tide* on the rocks at Mannal. *(Courtesy of George Holleyman)*

Flotsam

"Long before they started sending personnel here the driftwood started coming ashore, pit props, tons and tons of them . . . I remember one evening going down to the shore there, maybe about 1941. . . do you know this, I'm not exaggerating now, I could have walked thirty paces out over the ocean dry shod on timber . . . and young and silly as I was I thought 'what in the name of God is this all about, this waste'.

"That was not all of it, the lives that were lost . . . what was the idea of it all and it sort of changed my life.

"There were two or three rafts that I know of came ashore and they were intended to be out at sea if survivors in lifeboats came that way . . . some of these rafts held provisions, wax. I was one of those who made quite a few candles out of it, yes . . . casks of turpentine . . . ether in big casks . . . chocolate and tobacco.

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"I remember the first body that came ashore on this shore of ours . . . it was near Christmas time and Archie Sinclair and I were fishing off the rocks for saithe and we noticed the gulls wheeling round out at sea . . . later on a body was washed ashore there. He was dressed in civilian clothes and it was established that he must have been Italian . . . well dressed and all. It was said at the time he was either from the City of Benares *or the* Andorra Star *. . . There was another one . . . a young lad, he was buried in the cemetery but shortly after the cessation of hostilities he was taken away. He was supposed to have come off a German submarine that was sunk . . . his name was Fogue Vurlaub . . . I remember it well."*
Hugh MacLean, Barrapol

Mines

Mines were a regular hazard. One came in below Colin (*Cailean Lachainn*) MacPhail's house in Crossapol, damaging it extensively.

"It was a day of SE wind. These mines were treated with terrible complacency on Tiree and it was a miracle no one was killed with them. This one came floating in . . . coming closer and closer and then ultimately it arrived . . . and it was getting tossed about, banging about on the rocks . . . There was traffic on the road. The RAF drove past. Nobody bothered their shirt and then bang, away it went."
Angus Munn, Heanish

The most memorable mine came in below the Banker's House in Scarinish. It was inspected and the children at Scarinish School were told by Johnny Brown from the Hotel that is was safe.

"That's all we needed, 'cause on the way home we were like mice on top of a lump of cheese! I remember myself bending the prongs we wanted to take as trophies and we had big boulders hammering away at these pins on the mine - trying to bend them, break them so we could break one off. We never managed to get one off but did give it a good sized dent.
"A few weeks later a gale refloated the mine and it crashed against the rocks below the Banker's House, exploding violently. All the windows were smashed. A piece was recovered from Beinn Gott and the key fell out of the door at Adavale, half a mile away. I shouldn't be sitting here today!"
Hugh MacKinnon, Baugh.

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Tiree Servicemen

Over 204 men and women from Tiree served in the armed forces and Merchant Navy during World War II. Many were already at sea in the Merchant Navy and chose to stay in one of the most dangerous theatres of war. Thirty-two Tiree men who lost their lives are recorded on the War Memorial, half of whom were serving in the Merchant Navy. That was 2.2% of the Tiree's population, three times as many deaths proportionally as in Britain as a whole.

Stories of hardship and bravery are too numerous to mention and we can only pick out here a few to give a taste of life at the time.

16. **Captain Neil MacFadyen.** *(Courtesy of Fiona Maxwell)*

Captain Neil MacFadyen, father of Fiona Maxwell, Kenovay brought his ship, the *Ocean Viceroy*, home to Glasgow after it had been hit by a U-boat.

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Lachie MacFadyen (uncle of Lachie MacFadyen, Coales) was in the Army in Italy. While on patrol he was badly injured in the leg and his companion went for help. While waiting, Lachie saw what he had assumed to be haystacks, moving. They were in fact camouflaged enemy tanks. Unable to walk, he managed to crawl back to his own lines and warn his company of the danger. He recovered in hospital but was killed in action soon after.

Hugh MacLeod (*Eòghann Beag*), Master Mariner from Ruaig went through the rigours of both World Wars at sea. In World War Two he was Captain of a large deep sea cargo ships on the worst of the Atlantic and Murmansk convoys. On one occasion whilst a large number of British vessels were berthed at Murmansk fearing a German air raid, he overrode the Russian Harbour Authorities by taking his vessel away from the quayside to the relative safety of nearby cliffs. Other captains who respected Hugh MacLeod did likewise. His actions saved his and other vessels, as the Germans did indeed launch an air attack which devastated every ship still at the quayside.

17. Iain MacLeod in training in North America.
(Courtesy of Anneen Black)

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"My brother Iain MacLeod had one year at university and then joined the Air Force and went to America to his wings along with two Tiree lads, Hugh Campbell, Tullymet and his cousin Hector Campbell from Crossapol.

"They were in America for a year, trained and got their wings, came back and sadly my brother was killed in 1943."

Aneen Black, Ruaig

These three young Tiree men were in the first group of 50 RAF pilots sent to North America to be trained.

Iain MacLeod was on patrol with a colleague in two Mustangs. They were surprised by four Messerschmitts. His friend dived and escaped, but Iain turned to face up to his attackers and was shot down.

The war of Donald Kennedy (*Dòmhnall Eachainn*), Balevullin was quite different. At sea before the war, he volunteered to rejoin his tanker, British Petrol, aged 23. His boat was sunk in June 1940 by a German Q ship, a warship disguised as a merchantman flying a Swedish flag, 300 miles from Trinidad. Picked up in a lifeboat, he was held prisoner on board, until he landed in Brest in November. He was treated well at sea.

"They were civilised. It was the other crowd once you got ashore, the Gestapo, they were a different kettle of fish." Put on a train as they passed through Berlin, *"the frauleins, they were lovely girls . . . they were spitting at us."*

He was kept in a prisoner-of-war camp at Thorn on the Vistula until 1945. He found it was best to keep a low profile and keep out of he hands of the Gestapo. *"I jumped when they said jump."*

Lachie MacKinnon, Hillcrest was a prisoner-of-war held by the Japanese during the war.

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18. Andrew Young. *(Courtesy of Mabel Kennedy)*

Andrew Young had an unlucky war. The brother of Mabel Kennedy, Sandaig, he was brought up in Balephuil. As an RAF mechanic he was stationed in Burma and India, where he contracted malaria and typhoid. The troopship in which he was sent home was sunk off the African coast and he was in an open lifeboat for ten days. He was then picked up by a German U-boat and spent the rest of the war in a POW camp in Casablanca. After the war he died on Kennavara while shooting.

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The Home Guard

Crofting was a reserved occupation.

"*I got the papers to join up at the war as well, but I got an exemption as I was shepherding, but I was to be ready at any time, any word would come . . . I never got any word after that, but I had to stay in the one place all the time."*
David MacClounnan, Balephuil

19. Tiree Home Guard. *(Courtesy of Dorothy MacKinnon)*

Those men living on Tiree could volunteer for the Home Guard. Organised under the factor MacLaren and the gamekeeper Graham, they drilled weekly with parade ground work, sentry duty and shooting practice. There were lookouts posted at various vantage points around the island, Beinn Hough, the Hynish Signalling Tower, *Tur Mhic Chaluim* in Moss, *Dùn Eibrig* at Baugh and *Dùn Mòr a' Chaolais*.

"Every night there were a couple told off to take their shotguns and go there - they wouldn't do much if there was an invasion! . . . if you got caught with a shotgun before that, you'd be fined!"

Marching was sometimes less than perfect. One instructor, as another group shambled past him on the way to Hynish, said wearily, *"Nelson wouldn't put a drill on these folk."*

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So when the RAF challenged the Home Guard to a shooting match on the range behind Paterson's they must have expected an easy time. However as Hugh MacLean recalls:

"We gave them beans . . . I tell you it was a great day. Among the team of fourteen was myself, Donald MacLean, Sandaig and Neil MacLean, Caoles. We hammered them soft.

"'I'm not surprised', said Jock Graham. 'You buggers were born with guns in your hands, you know . . . poaching.'"

Hugh MacLean, Barrapol.

Sport and Leisure

Away from the rigours of airforce duty there was a busy social life around the base. Films were shown twice weekly at the Crossapol and Kilkenneth NAAFIs. For many islanders, these were the first times they had been to a cinema.

20. Wartime play. *(Courtesy of Angus MacLean)*

ENSA (Every Night Something Awful) brought in regular shows and the base itself produced plays and revues.

"Apart from long hours on duty, [we] *had a music club (classical), a leather work class, dress making and play reading. ENSA came and Perth Repertory Company too. We had cinema two evenings a week."*

Georgie Porazka, WAAF

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Regular dances were extremely popular, with RAF trucks offering free lifts for those (particularly girls) wanting to go. Freddie Holmes, a successful musician with the '*Radio Revellers'* was in the RAF band. This was usually in the more modern popular style with quicksteps and foxtrots replacing the quadrilles and eightsome reels.

"If we were going to a concert, dance or film, the RAF sent a truck around all the places where someone was going out and got a lift. Nobody walked . . . There was a building at the pier [the Church Hall] *and they used to have dances in there . . . There were dances everywhere, it was marvellous . . . That dance at the hall in Scarinish, I remember getting up (well, I went to a lot of dances in Renfrew) and it was the tango and this RAF bloke lifted me for the tango. He was really good . . . They could do things like that . . . They were more 'sophisticated' . . . Oh yes! Some of them were! But on the whole, I must say that the RAF of Tiree were very law-abiding.*

"James [an RAF serviceman friend] *and some others came and met me at the pier. I had about six of them carrying my cases. I was never so popular in my life!"*

Janet Wilson, Scarinish

21. The victorious Scotland team. *(Courtesy of Willie Dickie)*

Sport was encouraged and the present day football pitch at the Reef was laid out in 1944. Willie Dickie played in the first match there 'Scotland' beat 'England' 2 - 1.

Rescue boats raced in the powerboat section of the Summer Regatta.

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A Tale of Two NAAFIs

The two NAAFIs, at Crossapol and 'Kilkenneth', were the hub of many people's social life, open all day for tea, snacks, beer and cigarettes. Servicemen and those in the Merchant Navy were allowed in, but civilians were often let in too. In Kilkenneth, hut K2, 'the booze shop' was a popular meeting point for locals and servicemen.

22. 'Kilkenneth' NAAFI at Hough. *(Courtesy of Chrissie MacKechnie)*

Several local women worked there, among them Cathie Morrison, Flora MacArthur, Effie Dickie and Isobel Johnston, and several came too from Barra, Lewis and the Uists.

"The NAAFI had the usual billiard room, tatty old library and housey sessions. The local Home Guard started to monopolise the beer bar on Sunday lunch times but were finally banned, as later were the Italian POWs who came to replace the pioneers.

"On the odd occasion in winter when we had a bit of a session in the NAAFI, we would sit round the stove plunging a red-hot poker into our pints of beer. I don't think that it made it taste any better but it couldn't have made it much worse. Pianos did not last long. One evening I saw a tray loaded with plates of mince and potatoes emptied into the top of the piano. The plates were retrieved but their contents were not.

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23. Crossapol NAAFI. *(Courtesy of Donald MacKinnon)*

"The RAF Embarkation Unit at Scarinish had created their own little pub from a Nissen hut which they called the Pier Arms. It had a proper bar and a few chairs and tables and was cosy and warm. The beer was no better than ours, but the surroundings were a lot nicer. On Christmas Night 1943 several of us walked the few miles from the airfield to the Pier Arms only to be turned away as the place was crowded."
Joe Sylvester.

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News

Newspapers were seen less frequently, but many people had access to radios.

"I'll tell you the kind of radio we had at the time . . . They were wooden . . . some were as big as a tea chest . . . they had an accumulator. They were getting charged down by the pier, there was a man down there, he was a soldier himself, he only had the one leg and they called him Sam . . . you would have to go with the battery yourself and then take it back . . . he charged about a shilling . . . it would last about a fortnight. We would listen to Lord Haw-Haw (German propaganda) *. . . and it was 'English pigs and my Scottish friends' . ."*
David MacClounnan, Balephuil

Sam Stevenson had lost a leg in the Great War. From the mainland, he came to live in a converted shop at the pier after holidaying in Brock. He charged radio accumulators using a wind-driven generator, which also lit his house. He also ran the petrol pump and, with his wife, the telephone exchange.

"We had a radio in the Nissen hut and we used to listen to that every evening, Haw-Haw as well . . . it was passed off as just a joke . . . and then of course when it got near the end of the war we listened very intently."
Willie Dickie, Caoles

Life on Tiree

Before the war, Tiree had been a traditional, virtually unmechanised, crofting community. The war suddenly changed the pace of life. Proper roads were built and lorries thundered their way backwards and forwards with loads of troops or materials. Planes swooped low over the airfield.

"During the war it was busy because there were a lot of lorries on the road. RAF and the Army were up."
Janet Wilson, Scarinish

But Tiree was safer than most parts of Europe. The island was never under attack and food, although strictly rationed, was in reasonable supply.

"Everybody had hens and everybody had milk . . . we had a cow [at Creag Mhòr], *'Nancy'."*
Janet Wilson, Scarinish

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"*We were short of meat sometimes, but we had guns, and there were thousands of pheasants on the island at the time. I'm sure I shot a thousand pheasants during these years . . . quite a few geese and brown hares. It was difficult to get ammunition, but these boys were good to us too . . . 'Maybe I wish I could get a brown hare or a goose for Christmas, going home on leave?'. . . They paid us in ammunition. They had plenty of it over there. There was no hunger* [during the war]. *Mind you, the food we had was really good food . . . There weren't so many dishes then that we have nowadays . . . It was more plain."*
Hugh MacLean, Barrapol

24. An t-Sraid Ruadh in Balevullin during World War II. *(Courtesy of Margaret Campbell)*

Eggs were always popular and were very much sought after by the servicemen, or the 'Royal Egg Force' as they were christened here.

"*We used to go across to Balemartine and we would buy eggs from the MacKinnons (Iain beag an Tuathanaich). We would buy maybe a dozen. I don't know we got the bread from . . . and we would have poached eggs on toast on a cold winter's night and maybe sit and play cards."*
Willie Dickie, Caoles

There was also a small RAF piggery next to the NAAFI and a much larger one at Paterson's in Crossapol.

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"The long wet winter nights were a different matter. Many of the lads never left their huts after tea, preferring to play cards, read or write letters or just retiring to their 'pits' early in the hope that their sodden gum-boots and socks had dried out before morning. In the coldest weather, bricks were heated up on the stove to be used as bed warmers. Re-lighting the hut stoves was a problem, as we had no newspapers except for the few sent from home, but we overcame this problem by discovering a large stock of toilet rolls in a store on the old contractor's site."

Joe Sylvester

VE Day

Victory in Europe day, May 8 1945, was marked on Tiree by parties, bonfires on the hills and a flypast.

"There was about eight or nine planes, you know, the Red Arrows as they call them on television . . . They were like a 'V' and a 'D' in the sky the way that they were circling the island . . . I don't know if it was by smoke or what it was working . . . The old folk were trying the ground to see if it was shaking . . . I remember that! Everybody was in their glory . . . There wasn't a hill here, up on top of Kennavara, up to the top of Cnoc Griand [in Balephuil]*, they gathered stuff and carried it up to the top of these hills and there were bonfires right round the island . . . I remember an old lady who stayed at the corner there . . . There was a gate out there, and she put out a big tray with a big dumpling on it and everybody who was passing* [taking wood up the hill] *took a slice."*

David MacClounnan, Balephuil.

After the war, most of the camp was dismantled. In some cases, crofters were allowed to relocate Nissen huts at no cost. Much was dumped at the shore, and good equipment was wilfully damaged by the RAF so it could not be re-used. For example, pots were deliberately holed.

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Epilogue

Nowhere in Europe was untouched by the war. But Tiree with its traditional horse-powered way of life, its small crofts, its predominantly Gaelic speaking people and its relative isolation was jerked suddenly into the twentieth century.

The war's legacy was in many ways beneficial. Tiree was left with enormous runways and new roads for example.

Many friendships were made as Tiree touched the hearts of the thousands who had come and gone.

And yet there were sadnesses too.

25. Last journey to Soroby. *(Courtesy of Mike Hughes)*

"*Not many of the families who came pre-war came back after the war . . . Some we knew had been killed in action. Others just seemed to disappear and contact was lost with most of them. That seems very sad because it would have been nice to have had these families coming back with families of their own. But that's the sort of thing that war does."*
Anneen Black, Ruaig

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