



Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome to the spring issue of *Sìl Eòlais*. Since the coronavirus lockdown came into force in March, *An Iodhlann* has been closed to the public, the first Easter since we opened in 1996 that we have not been able to welcome visitors. However, Janet has been able to continue her work managing the archive, and we are very much open for virtual business. Please do keep in touch!

This issue has a wartime feel to it. We look at a major new accession about the McLeans of Kenovay, generously gifted to *An Iodhlann* by Fiona Wilson. A significant part of this is a collection of letters and photographs that belonged to Pilot Officer Charles McLean, Fiona's uncle. These give a vivid picture of his life under training and then as an RAF navigator in Coastal Command during the Second World War. Tragically, Charles lost his life over the English Channel in 1941. We only have space for a brief summary here, but we hope to publish the entire collection in due course both in a book and on our website. Some of the collection can be found in our archive with accession numbers starting with 2020.1.

Virtue Mine Honour: Charles McLean's War

Charles McLean was born in Linlithgow in 1917. His father, Donald Archie, a son of *Lachainn a' Mharsanta* 'Lachlan the merchant' from Kenovay, had left the family croft on Tìree around 1910 to join the West Lothian police.

Charles went to Linlithgow Academy. His father being, at the time, a middle-ranking police officer, the opportunity to go to university did not arise. He went to work, instead, for the Commercial Bank of Scotland in his home town, and joined the Edinburgh branch of the RAF Volunteer Reserve before the war.



RAF Pilot Officer Charles McLean (1917-1941),
grandson of Lachlan McLean, Kenovay.

The twenty-two-year-old Charles was therefore called up two days before Neville Chamberlain's fateful declaration of war against Germany on 3 September 1939. But it was not until late December that he was called for training. This was in Hastings on the south coast of England, where Charles's first billet was an unfinished art deco hotel called Marine Court: *'We live in a huge hotel ... It's a dashed cold place too, inside, tho' it looks fine outside. It's all cement and steel, no wallpapers, no tables or chairs, no carpets no linoleum. But it has both [hot and cold water] and the beds aren't bad.'* Mattresses were basic, though: *'Yesterday we emptied our paliasses [sacks on which they slept] and filled them with fresh straw. The Bedroom smells like a stable now.'*

Food was an important topic: *'Here the grub isn't so bad on the whole. Sausages are always left. They're tuff [sic] and peppery. We get a lot of liver, steak pie, unsweetened tea, curry (I never touch it), lots of rice, custard and fruit (prunes etc.), Porridge (with sugar, no salt, no milk, it's B. awful). Always a big heap of spuds and veg and plenty bread and marg. Jam at tea and something like Welsh rarebit.*

500 to dinner at once, we file up the stair, round the hall, past two tables. At one we collect a mug and fill it out of a tea urn. Then we pick up a plate, and one man claps meat in it, the next cabbage, next potato, next greens, next man pours over gravy. Then we pick another plate on which another man claps pudding. Finally, we balance two plates and a mug (over 1 pint) round to a place at table, and polish it off in about 10 minutes, to rush outside for a coffee and a smoke (off course I don't smoke).'

Having left school at sixteen, Charles seems to have grabbed the chance for further study with both hands: *'We get an exam in Maths on Tuesday, and everybody who gets 80% or more goes onto Navigation and gets a week's leave. Surely I'll get that much. Besides Maths, up to now we get Drill (Plenty), Signals (Morse), Law, Hygiene, PT, Games and Route Marches.'*

The mass call up at the start of the war meant young men from all parts of Britain were thrown together. Marine Court was no exception: *'There are six in our room: one Bo'ness [a town on the Firth of Forth], one Falkirk, two Edin[burgh], one London and me. The London one is best ... I've also chummed up with a Devonshire lad two floors down. He was Mounted Police in Palestine. Sometimes I've a job making myself understood. Afraid my Scots accent isn't getting improved on any.'*

There were inoculations to face: *'Talking of illness, we were all inoculated again, and here's the funny bit. An orderly asked us all to wait if our vaccinations hadn't taken effect. We waited, and, when the innocs were finished, I being first in the queue got another vac. Then the MO [Medical Officer] said, "Here, didn't I do you 8 days ago?" "Yes," we said, "but it didn't work." Oh," said he, laughing, "that shows you were immune. I didn't want to do you again." Of course the orderly denied all knowledge of it. Result, I got two doses of vaccination to everyone's great amusement – "McLean the greedy b– wants two helpings of everything", and so on.*



Charles and RAF friends off duty.

There were new opportunities: *'Today (Sunday) I have been out at the gliding club and saw quite a lot of good flying. It was sunny with a wind on, and I've got a bit red in the face. I was also shoving gliders about – fairly hard work. There were more big shots flying about too. All this was near Eastbourne.'* There were films and concerts, too, but the recruits also entertained themselves: *'We don't hear much good Scots music down this way, except what we do ourselves, which isn't so good. (My mouth organ is worn out now). One lad in the building has a set of bagpipes and occasionally is out with the Squadron on route marches, but he isn't really very good. Just now there's high hopes of getting a week's leave very soon. I hope so. There's a whole lot of junk I want to bring home and a few things I want to get. I think I'll bring the chanter, seeing as I have so much leisure.'*

In his weekly letters home, he often added a postscript for his younger siblings: *'How's young McLean's Arithmetic? If he comes out top (or in the top five) in it next term, I'll give him a model Spitfire, tell him. It's about the most important thing he'll ever get a[t] school, and its a set back later if you don't know your "times tables" perfectly, as I found out sometimes.'*

There were gifts from home: *'The birthday [1st October 1940] went off quietly enough. I came in after work and found a box of shortbread wrapped up on the bed. I was a bit mystified, but thought it was [his friend] Gunnis who had left it. He came in then, and I asked him. He said straight away he had left it, so I gave him a bit, and also two other blokes, when a lad came in wanting to know where the shortbread he was taking to his wife had gone. All this took some explaining.'*

The final months of the summer of 1940 was spent at the Elementary Flying Training School at RAF Kingstown, two miles north of Carlisle. Charles's head for figures is likely to have encouraged the Flying School to suggest that he continued his training as a navigator rather than as a pilot.

The autumn, therefore, found him starting a twelve-week course at the No.1 Air Observer Navigation School at RAF Prestwick. His final training was an eight-week spell at the Bombing and Gunnery School at RAF Stormy Down Aerodrome near Bridgend, Glamorgan.

His seventeen months training finally at an end, Charles's war was just starting. In May 1941, he joined 217 Squadron, Coastal Command, flying out of RAF St Eval on the coast of north Cornwall: *'I like the work a lot. We do all sorts of different jobs as we're Coastal and not Bomber Command – Patrols, Searches, Convoys, Bombing, Sea mines, Landmines, Torpedoes and so on.'* Censorship meant he could include few details of his missions, but if the operation had been reported in the press, he could be more frank: *'I think I told you we'd visited Nantes. Well, this is from the Mail of the 25th. "According to Vichy radio last night a tremendous fire at Nantes destroyed valuable stocks of mineral oil in a warehouse." That was us.'*

Charles had loved swimming since his childhood summers in Balephetrish. He was much taken by the new sport of surfing, which had been introduced to Newquay from Australia in 1929: *'Several blokes were surf-riding today, on boards on top of the breakers. I'll have to try soon. I hope I can manage to get a bathing suit. I forgot what happened to the old one. I don't suppose you've seen it? I'm afraid the water is still pretty cold, however.'* Within weeks he could report: *'Things are going OK with me, the weather has been somewhat better of late and I've been doing a bit of swimming. I'm just getting the idea of surf-riding. The breakers down here are even bigger than at Tiree at times.'*

His social life improved too, including an evening escorting Mary Churchill, Winston Churchill's youngest daughter.



Charles McLean (right) and fellow crew members beside an Avro Anson aircraft during his training.

In October 1941, Charles and his crew were moved to RAF Manston in Kent to trial new equipment. It was to be his final posting. On 15 November 1941, he took off with the experienced thirty-two-year-old Squadron Leader George Halley at the controls. Their mission was to attack enemy shipping off the coast of France using new Air-to-Surface Vessel radar. The plane was never seen again; the bodies of two crewmembers were washed up on the coast of Holland. Indeed, only one in five of Charles's initial training group in Hastings survived the war.

Pilot Officer Charles McLean's name was engraved onto the Tiree War Memorial that stands over Gott Bay and the Linlithgow War Memorial. His name was also inscribed on Panel 33 of the Runnymede Memorial overlooking the River Thames.

Archivist's Choice

Letter from Hector McDonald, Lochgilphead, to Lachlan McLean, Kenovay, 1883

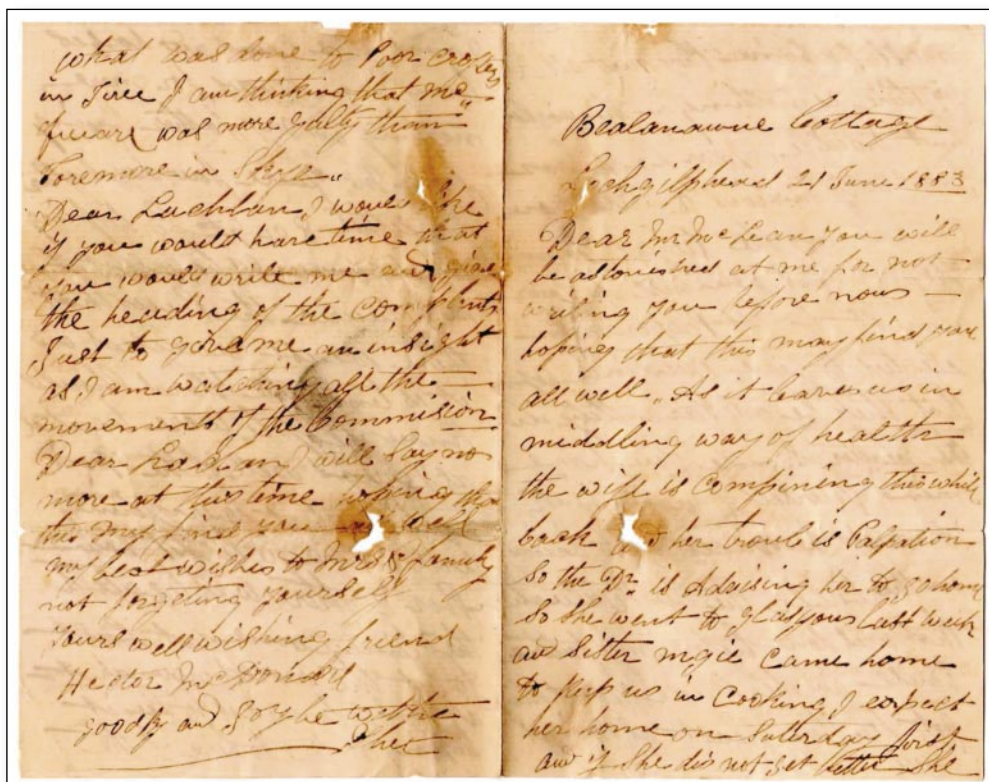
While I was sorting through our recently donated collection regarding the family of Donald Archibald McLean, Kenovay and Linlithgow (1890-1981), I came across this small, fragile, insignificant-looking letter tucked in with hundreds of other items. Initially, it was its age that made it stand out – it is older than most of the collection, but look at this direct transcript of a section:

'... it is time the world should know people were treated as I mind well of the spoil[?] trusting that everything will come to light how poor crofters was treated the time come at last to let the world know what it was I longed to see it hoping to live to here of the what was done to poor crofters in Tiree.'

Hector is referring to the terrible conditions endured by crofters throughout the Highlands and Islands during the 1800s, their struggle for fair rents and security of tenure, and the Napier Commission, which was set up by the Government in 1883 to investigate and improve the situation. It was a tumultuous time for Tiree, and hugely influential in shaping crofting today. The donor of the collection had not realised the significance of the letter but, thanks to her, this previously overlooked gem has now come to light.

You can see the entire letter on our website <http://www.aniodhlann.org.uk/object/2020-1-52/> and/or type 'crofters war' or 'napier commission' into the website's Search box.

Janet Bowler, Archive Manager, An Iodhlann



Letter from Hector McDonald, Lochgilphead, to Lachlan McLean, Kenovay, 1883.

The Sunshine Island During the Cold War

The Cold War followed hard on the heels of the Second World War. For forty years the United States with its NATO allies and the Soviet Union with the Warsaw Pact faced off in a nuclear arms race, a series of proxy wars around the world in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan, and a space race. Tiree had been on the front line during the War of the Atlantic between 1939 and 1945, leading to a significant RAF presence on the island. Although the new threat was from the east, the island was chosen to host a nuclear monitoring post.

ROC Monitoring Post, Crossapol

Today, a jumble of stone walls and lumps of concrete lie around *Cnoc an Dealgain* north of *The Camp*. But when archaeologists of the future excavate a large concrete shell below ground, they might wonder what mysterious activities went on in this strange, underground structure.



Cnoc an Dealgain, possibly 'the hillock of thistles' looking west.

The Royal Observer Corps may have been formally established in 1925, but the organisation had its roots in the First World War. A network of some two hundred observation posts manned by volunteers had been put in place over southeast England to warn London of imminent attacks by German airships and bombers. This network was expanded during the Second World War, and an observation post was opened in Skye at Portree in 1941.

By 1945, however, the increasing speed and altitude of the new jet fighters, and an improvement in radar coverage, meant that human observers had less of a role. But ten years after the start of the Cold War in 1947, the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation was created to provide intelligence to the Home Office about the location and magnitude of any nuclear attack. Combined with Met Office data, it would then be possible to produce a forecast of how radioactive fallout might spread over the country. Over a thousand monitoring posts were therefore established around the country at roughly eight-mile intervals. Tìree may have been chosen because of the continuing presence on the island of the RAF (see below) and its important weather station.

The Tìree ROC Monitoring Post became operational in 1966. Designed to withstand a nuclear burst in the area, the site was dug by hand to a depth of twenty-five feet by Danny Gillespie and his team. The monitoring room was built within a concrete shell that was tanked or waterproofed with bitumen. John George MacLean, one of the work party, told me that a skeleton 'in a circle of stones' was found during the excavation. A ring was found beside the skull, leading to a belief that the body was that of a drowned sailor. It is more likely from the remaining stones, however, that the hillock had been the site of a Bronze Age cairn. This suits its magnificent site overlooking The Reef.

A shaft with a vertical ladder led to the whitewashed underground monitoring room 2.25 by 4.75 meters in size. This was not a job for anyone with claustrophobia. The post was equipped with a metal-framed bunk bed, canvas chairs and a folding table. Shelves were filled with a selection of tinned food. A side room contained a chemical toilet and the whole was powered by 12-volt electrical system topped up by a generator. It was designed so that three observers could survive here for three weeks.

The monitoring posts were fitted with three instruments to measure an atomic blast. A Bomb Power Indicator used a pressure gauge to detect the force of the explosion. A Ground Zero Indicator consisted of a metal cylinder with four tiny holes set to the points of the compass and lined with photosensitive paper. These pinhole cameras would photograph the fireball, and triangulation using readings from a cluster of three monitoring posts allowed an estimation of 'ground zero', the point underneath the explosion. Finally, a Fixed Survey Meter measured radiation levels outside the bunker. Posts were linked with telephone lines, with information being fed from clusters to regional and national headquarters.

To warn the island community of a nuclear attack, the Crossapol post was also equipped with a hand-operated siren: for example, a rising and falling tone for a minute indicated a 'red warning' meaning the imminent arrival of fallout. In addition, if war appeared likely, the police issued observers with Fallout Warning Maroons, a powerful firework that could be seen and heard over a large area.



Carter hand operated siren (left), part of the equipment on Tiree during the Cold War. Household leaflet (right) illustrating survival techniques following a nuclear blast.

The observers were volunteers. The Tiree section at various times included Calum MacKinnon (*Calum Creagag*), Ruaig; Hugh MacKinnon, Ruaig (*Eòghann Ailig Eòghainn*); Stewart Langley; Hugh MacArthur (*Doodan*); Marion Campbell, Crossapol (who still has her Royal Observer Corps medal marking her twelve years' continuous service); and Anne MacLean, Millhouse. Their uniform until 1977 was an RAF battledress; later, a looser fitting uniform was issued. Every year there were a number of war simulation exercises, some involving an overnight stay in the Monitoring Post. However, with the breakup of the Soviet Union imminent in 1990, that year's defence spending review concluded that the ROC network was no longer needed. The Tiree post was decommissioned in 1991. All equipment, furniture and uniforms were recalled, the visible structures demolished and the underground chamber filled in.

Thanks to Marion Campbell, Anne Langley, Monica Smith, Iain Brown, Lachie Brown and John Donald MacLean for helping with the research for this.

One in Five Scheme

With the threat of nuclear attack during the Cold War very real, a campaign to teach survival skills to three million women (one in five of the population) began in 1955. Run through the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) and using accredited volunteer speakers, the One-in Five Scheme involved three talks - imaginatively called A, B and C – with practical tips for housewives on what to do in the aftermath of a nuclear bomb blast: for example, to 'remove inflammable material from attics'. By 1969, 1.5 million women had attended.

Caring for a Sick Person under Emergency Conditions

WVS ONE-IN-FIVE Issued by: Women's Voluntary Service for Civil Defence, 41, Tothill Street, London, S.W.1.

Suggested contents of Nursing Chest in the Refuge Room

Toilet requisites	Milk foods
Talc powder	Cough lozenges
Paper handkerchiefs	Aspirin
Toilet rolls	Sanitary towels
Torch	Roller bandages
Matches	Triangular bandages
Notebook and pencil	A roll each of:
Old sheets and towels	Cotton wool
Hotwater bottles and covers	White lint
Mackintosh or plastic material	Gauze
Sodium bicarbonate	Tow
Tin of table salt	Safety pins
Air purifier	Adhesive plaster
Antiseptic and disinfectant fluids	Scissors
Antiseptic cream	White string
	Surgical or methylated spirit
	Clinical thermometer

The following articles for use with the Nursing Chest should also be stored in the refuge room

Bedpan, chamber or flat dish. Urinal, jar or wide-necked bottle
Clean newspapers, brown paper and stout paper bags

Improved Methods of lessening FIRE RISK

Buildings could be protected at the first indication that danger was imminent, when householders would be asked to prevent fire by:

- whitewashing windows to keep out heat
- removing or flameproofing all materials that flame easily if exposed to great heat
- having simple means of fighting fire on each floor in the house

Materials can be flame proofed by dipping in a solution of

- 1½ lbs Borax
- 1 lb Boric Acid
- 2 gallons Water

Dry flat. Re-dip after each wash

Unpainted Woodwork can be rendered fire retardant by spraying with a solution of

- 3½ lbs Borax
- 3 lbs Boric Acid
- 4 gallons Water

Painted Woodwork can be made safer by painting with a solution of

- 4½ lbs Waterglass
- 6 lbs Kaolin
- 4 gallons Water

Prepared in consultation with the Ministry of Health, Queen's Institute of District Nursing, St. John Ambulance Brigade and British Red Cross Society.

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Information accompanying the One-in-Five Programme for women during the Cold War.

National Service on Tiree

Dennis Anderson was posted to Anstruther in 1956 for his National Service. His sergeant had threatened them for weeks: 'If you don't behave, you'll find yourself posted to Tiree.' He was not joking:

'I can't remember the Anson landing, but it must have been bumpy. The [Tiree] runway had been allowed to fall into disrepair ... When I was at RAF Scarinish, there was a lot of reconstruction work being undertaken by civilian contractors on the runway ... Scarinish operations room, as I remember it, was a large house above ground.'

'Tourism is big business on the Isle of Tiree nowadays. I've seen on television surfers from as far away as Hawaii battling with the big surf on the beaches of Tiree. But [in 1956] it was a totally different story. For a start there wasn't any television, and I don't remember there was even a picture house (cinema). I remember one evening there was a dance in a hall 'somewhere'. An RAF driver stationed at Scarinish used his lorry as a makeshift bus to go around the island picking up all and sundry to take people to the dance. I don't know if he got paid, was on commission, or even if he got free admission, but he was most enthusiastic about his job and all the locals were at the various pick up points looking for him. We were in our 'working blues' because we had not thought to pack any civvy clothing. The band consisted of an accordionist. There might have been a fiddler there too, but I'm not too sure. The Fifties were innocent times, I remember I plucked up courage to ask one wee girl to dance, her face went beetroot red, but she didn't refuse me – all these years later, I hope I did not embarrass her in front of her friends and relations.'

'There wasn't a NAAFI at RAF Scarinish, but there was a canteen of sorts. I don't know if it had a licence to sell liquor (possibly not!) but it sold beer. As the Commanding Officer of the station at the time was Fl Lt Bull, the canteen was called appropriately the 'Bull Inn'. We would go there for a beer. I remember some of the civilian workers would join us, also two American Air Force servicemen would turn up regularly, so the Americans must have been involved in bolting UK's 'back door' in the 1950s. At the 'Bull Inn', one of the locally stationed airmen played the piano. Now this guy could play. In fact, he reminded me of a British Victor Borge [a famous Danish-American pianist and comedian], he was that good ... While cracking jokes he could play anything requested without music. The Yanks loved him so much that I don't think the piano player ever put his hand in his pocket to buy a drink, and he usually finished the night blotto.'

'On National Service, we couldn't afford to go drinking every night. As the weather was lovely, some of us would go for a walk to the nearest beach. Now at or near the beach that was near the airfield [Crossapol] there was a rubbish dump. A very cheap form of entertainment was to go to the dump, set up some bottles and guess – yes, throw stones'.



RAF airmen (mostly National Servicemen) on detachment to Tiree from 351 Signals Unit, RAF Anstruther, Fife (now known as Scotland's Secret Bunker). L-R: ? from Manchester, Hugh Fairholm from Hawick (sitting on bed), ?, Dennis Anderson, ? & ? from Glasgow, ? from Wales.

'[Tiree was a] lovely place, completely unspoiled in 1956 ... With little employment that I could see, times must have been hard. So much so that we saw and had sympathy for a family of travelling people when we travelled from the domestic site to the operations site. A broken down caravan thing with a matching horse, and dear knows how many bairns. After a week our aerial taxi returned in the shape of the Avro Anson and flew us back to Turnhouse [Aerodrome, now Edinburgh Airport].'

Excerpts from *An Iodhlann* accession no. 2012.129.1.

Our thanks to Mike Hughes for encouraging Dennis to put his memories down on paper

Thank you for all your continued support for *An Iodhlann*.
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