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Airfields Around the Firths:

RAF Invergordon / Alness / Cromarty Firth Flying Boat Base

By Donnie Hendry

The sheltered waters of the Cromarty Firth, was the cradle of military aviation. In the north of Scotland in 1913 with the new naval base being built at Invergordon, a seaplane base was established at Cromarty by the Royal Navy Air Service. Many young naval officer pilots trained there, among them, 3 future air marshalls of the RAF. Sir A. Longmore, then C.O. at Cromarty, Sir John Salmond and Sir Fredrick Bowhill. Winston Churchill took his first flying lessons there when visiting the new naval base as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1913. The Cromarty air station moved to Fort George in 1914 and there was also a grass landing ground nearby for land planes.

Shortly after WW1 during the fleet's visits to the Cromarty Firth, the aircraft carriers flew off their aircraft to a flat grass airfield at Delny and then moved to Novar (Evanton) in 1922, using this airfield until 1948.

Between the wars, seaplanes from the warships in the Firth carried out catapulting and recovery exercises and detachments of flying boats, coming north from their bases in southern England, would arrive for fleet exercises. A little known RAF unit, based at Evanton and using the Admiralty Pier at Invergordon, had radio-controlled Tiger-Moth float planes controlled by a launch. They were used by the fleet for anti-aircraft practice in the Moray Firth. The navy called them "Queen Bees".

During the summer of 1938, after mooring buoys were laid at 2 anchorages at Invergordon, detachments of flying boats of 201, 209 and 240 squadrons arrived from their bases in southern England and shortly afterwards a floating dock arrived enabling limited repairs and servicing to be carried out. The west pier was allocated to the RAF by the Admiralty. The flying boats at that time were Singapores, Londons and Stranraers. Later, these would be replaced by Sunderlands and Catalinas, the older aircraft then were used for training purposes.

The flying boat squadrons made a splendid sight, arriving in formation and touching down one by one on the calm waters of the Firth. They were soon secured to their allotted buoys and attended to by the dingies of the marine craft section.

A tented camp in the town park had been set up and the officers were accommodated in local hotels and at RAF Evanton. In August 1939 the squadrons on exercise at Invergordon returned south to their home bases for major servicing, etc, while the ground crews remained at Invergordon. 240 and 209 squadrons arrived back to their war station in late September and 209 had with them the first Catalina in the RAF, which had been on trials.

Immediately, war patrols over the North Sea and around Iceland began to search for German shipping and U-boats. 2 flying boats were lost during this period, one crew being saved. Around this time the base had a visit from the Duke of Kent and shortly afterwards, King George VI.

At the start of hostilities in September 1939, the Academy, halls, stores, garages and empty houses in the town were taken over by the RAF to accommodate the various sections required for an air base, radio, armament transport etc. They had to compete with the navy and army both of whom had a presence in the town which was still a naval base. The RAF headquarters was a large house on the High Street called, "Oakes Villa" which had a pigeon loft nearby as at that time flying boats, on long patrols, carried a couple of pigeons in case of a forced landing in the sea. Before the winter of 1939-40 the airmen in the tented camps were accommodated in private houses and halls in the town and some had to make do with the Granary of Inverbreakie farm. In early 1940 two "Empire" flying boats, together with their crews from Imperial Airways, joined the base for training purposes. They were the "Cabot" and "Caribou". Both were lost later in the Norwegian campaign on special operations.

During the early occupation of Norway by the Germans there was much activity at the base and many of the Sunderlands took part in operations in conjunction with the Expeditionary Force and the Norwegian army. They were also engaged on constant patrolling of the Norwegian coastline reporting German shipping movements, etc. A Norwegian Heinkel seaplane, which had escaped from the Germans, landed at the base and I believe one landed at Meikle Ferry. Many fishing boats from Norway and Denmark which had been fishing in the North Sea arrived in the Firth around this time. Many of the Sunderlands assisted in the evacuation of Norway by the British, French and Polish forces, as at this time the Germans had invaded the low countries and all of Norway was under German occupation.

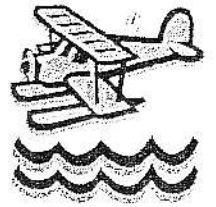
In June 1941 No. 4 (C) Operational Training Unit moved to Invergordon from Stranraer, with their Sunderlands and Lerwicks, the latter being a twin-engined flying boat used for training.

Dalmore House at Alness was used as an officers' mess and a Dutch ex-cross-channel ferry S.S. "Batavier" was used to accommodate air crews and, being berthed at the Admiralty Pier, was convenient for the marine craft to take the air crews to their allotted flying boats. In a few months the O.T.U. was training ten crews on a course, using the Beaulie Firth and Loch Ness for take-offs and landings, as well as the Cromarty Firth.

In July 1941 a Catalina of 209 and one of 240 squadron departed to Archangel in Russia with the foreign secretary, Sir Stafford Cripps and other government officials and returned a few days later with the Russian military mission. There were also other missions by the Catalinas, to Russia, in connection with the British naval and airforce presence there.

Sunderlands from many squadrons at

Oban, Sullum Voe and elsewhere used the base for operations over the years, anti-u boat patrols and convoy escort work etc. The Sunderland was one of the few planes which flew from the first day until the last day of WW2.



In August 1942 the Duke of Kent who had arrived at Invergordon by train embarked on a Sunderland from an Oban squadron bound for Iceland. Shortly after take-off, the aircraft crashed into a hill, near Dunbeath, on the Caithness coast, in thick fog. All aboard were killed except the tail gunner.

During 1942 slipways, hangars and buildings were constructed at Alness Point, about 3 miles west of Invergordon and the old American pier, which had been used by the US navy in WW1, was extended for use by the marine craft section. Later, many sites would be built around Alness to relieve the pressure at Invergordon.

In February 1943 both bases were officially named RAF Alness. Training continued until 1944 except in October, when 9 Sunderlands of the O.T.U were used to ferry time-expired airmen from Keflavik in Iceland to the UK.

For several years after the war, Sunderlands used the base for exercises with the fleet. Alness flying boat base closed in 1957 when the last of the Sunderland squadrons were disbanded, but RAF Alness continued as No. 1100 marine craft unit with air-sea rescue launches and target tugs, these being used in the Moray Firth to serve RAF Kinloss and RAF Lossiemouth. This unit continued until the 80's when the marine craft were sold or leased to a private company, the service in the Moray Firth continuing with civilian crews.

The unit at Alness closed down, not long after a new purpose built accommodation block was built at Alness and a new large store and office building built for the unit at Invergordon dockyard. The base had served its purpose over many years in peace and war and like other bases, airmen from many countries trained there, British, Canadian, Australian and free French. Many aircrews and flying boats had been lost on operations, flying accidents and some swamped in storms at their moorings. One particularly bad accident happened on 22 November 1944 when a Sunderland crashed near Saltburn, after an engine caught fire. All the Canadian crew were killed.

Earlier in the war a Sunderland came in to land on a pitch dark night at a farm near Cromarty, bringing it down in a field and skidding down a slope into a farm. All the crew escaped but unfortunately the farm and farm house caught fire. The farmer and his wife were badly burned and sadly their young nephew who had been staying with them was killed.

At Alness Point a monument to all who served at the base, was erected a few years ago and it is a fitting tribute to those that served their country more than half a century ago. Many did not return home and are buried at Rosskeen cemetery by the shores of the Firth.

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