

Invergordon September 1939

Shortly after the outbreak of war on 3rd September 1939, the Home Fleet at anchor in the Cromarty Firth, made a hasty departure, along with its auxiliary vessels, to its war base at Scapa Flow leaving the anti-aircraft cruiser HMS 'Curlew' to provide for the air defence of the base with all its oil tanks, piers, etc. One of the crew of 'Curlew' was a local lad who had joined the navy some months before. At this time the underground oil storage facility under the hills at Invergordon was being built. The only anti-aircraft defence ashore was a 3 inch A. A. Gun of WW1 vintage manned by gunners from a T. A. Unit from Dingwall. At the piers the normal cargo boats came and went and some mine sweepers, converted fishing trawlers, arrived for operations in the Moray Firth. Although not much was happening afloat at that time there was certainly a hive of activity ashore. The Church Halls, Masonic Hall, some garages and all empty houses, shops and stores were taken over by the three services. It would seem that they were in competition with each other to acquire premises required for their immediate needs. Invergordon was in the process of becoming a naval base, RAF Flying Boat base and Army Depot all rolled into one. Armed soldiers patrolled the area of the oil storage tanks and dockyard. Everyone was advised to carry their gas masks which had been issued to them as at that time it was thought that the enemy would use poison gas.

The County Hospital near Saltburn was taken over as a naval hospital. It had originally been built as a naval hospital in WW1 and taken over by the County Council afterwards. It was soon up and running and it was not long before the first casualties would arrive from HMS Royal Oak which was torpedoed at anchor in Scapa Flow in October 1939. The casualties arrived at the Admiralty Pier by hospital ship. Several weeks later casualties would arrive from ships bombed and mined in the Moray Firth.

The Royal Hotel was taken over as a Contraband Control Head Quarters in connection with the warships of the navy intercepting contraband cargoes on foreign merchant ships bound for Germany and diverting them to British ports. The King's Harbour Master's large house and adjacent properties were also taken for Naval H. Q. and the Signal Station on the Admiralty Pier was now fully manned. Agricultural warehouses near to the dockyard were also acquired for naval stores and many local men and women were now employed by the Admiralty as at this time large amounts of stores were arriving by rail for onward shipping to the Fleet at Scapa Flow. Many store-ships were used for this purpose. A row of partly built Council houses were acquired for use by the WRNS and Nissen Huts were added to the rear of the property at the east end of the town. The Cromlet Primary School was taken as a naval barracks.

At this time the local Territorial lads of the 4th Bn. Seaforth Highlanders were stationed in Dingwall and would soon be departing for Al-

dershot and then to France. The 5th Bn. Territorials (Caithness and Sutherland) Seaforth Highlanders provided the guard for the oil storage tanks and dockyard and were billeted in the Drill Hall and local Church Halls. The large house beside the R.C. Church was used as a H.Q. Later, a large Nissen Hut transit camp would be built at the Castle grounds and many Gunners of the Royal Artillery would be stationed at the heavy A.A. gun batteries at Rosskeen and Saltburn.

The Flying Boat Squadrons of the RAF had used the Cromarty Firth and the facilities at Invergordon since 1938 and a marine craft unit of tenders was located at the west pier. A tented camp was set up in the town park and Dalmore House. Alness was used as an Officers' Mess. A floating dock was used by the Flying Boats. The large house "Oaks Villa" became the H.Q. of the base. It had a pigeon loft in the garden as at that time older Flying Boats, Londons and Stranraers carried a couple of pigeons in case of ditching at sea.

Part of the local Academy was taken over by the RAF. The Academy pupils now had to travel daily by train to Dingwall Academy. An Operations Squadron of flying boats from the south of England arrived shortly after the outbreak of war for operations in the North Sea. The ground crews were billeted in the Masonic Hall and YMCA Halls as well as in private houses. I believe two flying boats were missing in the North Sea at this time. It was a splendid sight to see a squadron of flying boats in formation and peeling off one by one to land on the sheltered waters of the Firth and taxi-ing to their moorings with their attendant marine craft.

The Naval Recreation Grounds with its ten football pitches, Fleet Canteen, Naval Tennis Courts and Officers' Club, all used by the fleet on their annual visits to the Firth, were now available for use by all service men in the area. A Forces canteen was set up in the local YMCA and staffed by lady volunteers of the town. The loss of the Battleship HMS "Royal Oak" at Scapa Flow and the aircraft carrier HMS "Courageous" in the first few weeks of the war came as a great shock to the town as both ships had been frequent visitors to the Firth. There was heavy loss of life on both ships. One local lad in the crew of HMS Royal Oak was lost as were several from the Seaboard Villages of Easter Ross. Another local lad survived the sinking of the battleship but his luck ran out when he was drafted to the destroyer HMS "Exmouth" which was torpedoed between Trabatness and Wick and lost with all hands. Both tragedies had occurred within 100 miles of his home and only a few weeks into the war.

In early 1940 there were heavy losses by mines and German U-boats. HMS Exmouth and HMS Baring, both destroyers, with heavy loss of life and the large HMS "Sphinx" fleet mine sweeper had her bows blown off and ended up on the rocky Caithness coast. The naval auxiliary "Durham Castle" was also sunk by a mine as were the tankers "Inverlane" and "San Taburcio"

both ships loaded with furnace oil for Invergordon. The tanker "Gretafield" was torpedoed off Wick, all tankers with loss of life.

The Germans were using their u-boats to lay the new magnetic mines at East coast estuaries. Many warships and merchant ships were damaged and lost at this time. A magnetic mine, dropped in error by a German aircraft on the mud flats of The Thames Estuary was soon recovered intact by naval bomb disposal personnel and was examined for its secrets and soon counter measures were put in place.

They were exciting times for a teenager and many of us volunteered for Civil Defence duties and when sixteen The Home Guard. In the winter the black-out made things very difficult for us all, especially vehicles. It was perhaps a good thing that we did not know that the war would last for nearly six long years and that most of us would be serving King and country in foreign parts in the latter years of the war. The only raid on the base was in 1941, when a JU 88 German bomber came in low from the east and dropped its bombs on Oil Tank No.13 and then machine-gunned the flying boats at anchor on the west side of the town. The huge oil tank collapsed, sending hundreds of tons of thick black fuel oil cascading into the adjacent railway, cutting below and then sweeping down through the nearby Railway Station and goods yard level with the railway platforms and over the old A9 road into the Firth. The local Air Defences were caught unawares. There were no casualties and a lot of the oil was salvaged. Afterwards all the huge oil storage tanks were protected with blast-proof brick walls, a huge undertaking with many bricklayers etc. involved.

The days of the large fleets of warships are long since gone due to new weapons, financial cuts over the years etc. The oil fuel tanks and the underground oil storage facility at Inchindown and even the piers have been sold off causing much unemployment locally. The RAF now has no Flying Boat Squadron or marine-craft units, probably due to the jet engine, financial cuts etc. The flying boats certainly proved their worth in WW2. If the teenagers of today saw a flying boat, they would probably report it as a UFO.

After an uneventful winter at anchor off Invergordon, the anti-aircraft cruiser HMS Curlew sailed to Norway on operational duties and was badly damaged by bombing. The defence of the base was taken over by Gunners of the Royal Artillery who manned the ring of light A.A. guns around the town and the heavy A. A. Batteries at Saltburn and Rosskeen. ATS girls were part of the crews of the latter.

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