



St Kilda – One side of the story

Our appreciation to Chris Hebbon

'OPERATION HARDROCK' CAIRNRYAN - REFLECTIONS

These are my reflections of the six months I spent 'detached' to 5004 Airfield Construction Squadron at Cairnryan, some seven miles North of Stranraer, then in Wigtownshire, but now in Dumfries & Galloway. We were based at No.2 Military Port, built about 1942, which had an extensive military railway system extending from Stranraer to a little North of the port jetties.

Operation Hardrock was the building of a rocket tracking station, for the army, on the remote, uninhabited, island of St. Kilda (Hirta), some 40 miles west of the Outer Hebrides. The work was carried out by 5004 Squadron over the two Summers of 1957 and 1958, with a skeleton staff over-wintering on St. Kilda for security purposes. The army provided sea transport support for the RAF in the form of LCT's (Landing Craft Tank) which were based at Marchwood Military Port in Southampton Water, a long sea voyage away for such craft.

I joined the RAF for three years (instead of doing my National Service) when I was 18 and was trained as a Clerk EA (Equipment Accounting). However, I was then posted to 16MU Stafford where no such clerks were employed! So we did Clerk (Provisioning) work instead. When it came to our LAC promotion exams, understandably, we all failed and it was necessary to send an instructor from RAF Creden Hill to top-up our knowledge.....and again when we were due to take our SAC exams.

Some two years into my service, I was detached to 5004 Squadron, spending a few days at RAF Wellesbourne Mountford. It was not an operational station then, but had a runway. The only plane I ever saw take off or land during my service was here when an Anson (I think) took off. I then took the ferry train from Euston to Stranraer, which stopped more and more the further into Scotland we went. I shall always recall one coach stopping at a short halt made of railway sleepers with a slope at each end. People got on and off, many in kilts and started striding away into the distance and there was not one house in sight to the horizon! Food for thought for a London lad who used the always readily available London Transport to get anywhere!

We were billeted at Quarry Camp 13 Coy Royal Pioneer Corps, in typical concrete billets. The Pioneers were seriously hard men, seemingly coming from all the hard cities of that time, such as Glasgow and Liverpool. Their job was to unload surplus and unstable World War II ammunition from wherever, load it into a small landing craft (I recall one was called Arnhem) and take it out into the Irish Sea, then drop it overboard. I recall reading a few years ago that some phosphorous shells were being washed up on the beaches in Scotland and Northern Ireland and the public were being warned not to touch them.

When there were calls for the MoD to identify what had been dumped where, it was eventually revealed that the files had been destroyed! Much of the ammunition arrived by rail in wagons with labels addressed to “Davy Jones' Locker, Cairnryan”. On a couple of occasions, a Liberty Ship docked full of explosives. Loch Ryan, a sea loch, could get very choppy at times and I well recall these elderly heavily-laden landing craft pulling away from the quayside in the most inclement weather and quickly disappearing out of sight. If it was rough in the loch, God knows how rough it was out in the open sea. We often thought we'd never see the boat again, yet, hours later, these Pioneers would be back as if nothing had happened. They were better sailors in their flat-bottomed tubs than proper sailors in their superior ships!

The food was nothing special, and our first experience of the cookhouse was seeing one of the cooks spit on the floor. A couple of days later, we were eating quietly when a fracas broke out and plates of food were thrown about. We dropped to the floor under the tables until things died down. It was not directed at us, but we were in the thick of it. A word in the right place and we then ate in the twin dining hall on the other side of the the building, which was never used, being 'bulled up' for inspections only. We promised to keep it spotless and, true our word, did so.

There was a REME workshop on the site and the army vehicles were well-maintained and spotless. One lorry would go into Stranraer every morning to get the mail and other items. It was always immaculate, even under the wings, but, on its return, it would be washed down and meticulously polished once more. Our, working, vehicles were, by contrast, not visually pleasing in looks, battered or only painted in weathered undercoat, and it was with some mischief, that we'd sometimes insert one or two of our very tattiest vehicles into parking spaces which were next to their 'pride and joys'!

Whilst mentioning vehicles, one tale is worth telling. The army had a Bedford QL fire engine which was kept in immaculate condition throughout, even under the bonnet, with certain parts painted in red. It was a joy to behold. As was to be expected, it rarely moved, but its petrol engine was started up once a week religiously. On one occasion, there was a fire, and the fire engine's moment had come. Sadly, it would not start, despite everyone's best endeavours. Finally, it was coaxed into life and arrived at the fire just a few moments after the civilian fire appliance had arrived from Stranraer, some seven miles away! C'est la vie!

I recall that a considerable number and proportion of the Pioneers did guard duty every night, about 16 to guard a very small perimeter. There would always be a 'stick man' added to the roster to total 17. All 17 would bull themselves up to the n'th degree and present themselves for inspection prior to going on duty. The best-presented one became 'stick man' and was excused duty but stayed on reserve pending any problems with sickness etc. It never seemed to us that it was worth the effort in trying to become 'stick man' for the sort of odds which presented themselves. Typical RAF thinking!

I passed my car driving test there. I already held a motorbike licence and knew the principles of driving. All I had to do was to brush up these skills on a four-wheeler. Miles from town and with only a two-hourly bus service, it was not easy to have lessons on an ad hoc basis. The nearest driving instructor lived in Ayr and only came to Stranraer once a week on a Wednesday afternoon, handy as it was sports afternoon and we had it off towards the end of our sojourn in Cairnryan. So what to do? Of course, use the dumper trucks we had. They only had three gears and limited speed, but were entirely standard in driving setup and were ideal. I put in for some lessons (primarily to have access to a car to take the test in) had just three lessons in the Morris Minor and passed the test first time!

I was amazed at how Wigtownshire vehicle registrations lagged behind those in other parts of the UK – this was, of course, because of the small population and low vehicle numbers in the county. While I was up there, the two letters and four figure (OS XXXX) registrations changed to three and three (AOS XXX), something which London, for example, had changed to in the early 'thirties! The nation only went to the 'A' suffice system in 1963.

Some of our RAF compatriots were lorry drivers and they brought much of the paint up on trailers towed by AEC Matador lorries – wonderful vehicles. On one occasion, I managed to hitch a lift to Wellesbourne en-route to going home to a funeral – normal leave being forbidden for the duration. The Matador was towing a trailer with a Catapillar D8 bulldozer on it. When, on the old A6, we passed Shap Summit, the driver put the Matador into neutral and we reached 55mph with that trailer on the back swaying somewhat! I think that they would only do about 40 in gear normally. Even then, I thought what a long, tedious journey it was through so many towns long bypassed by the M6! Later on, back in Cairnryan, I practised driving a Matador – it had a crash gearbox and one needed to double declutch when changing gear. Blipping the throttle did nothing for the sturdy but sluggish diesel engine. One had to floor the throttle for several seconds to produce enough revs to declutch. But what wonderful breasts they were!

On occasion, we were criticised for not marching to and from the camp site from our offices, but, as individuals, it was impossible to look smart, for we'd been issued with boots cold/wet, brown khaki shirts (no tie) and bulky ill-fitting duffle coats which did not really match the RAF blue-grey very well. We were also issued with old wartime-pattern working blues, subtly off-shade, that someone had found (the ones which buttoned up to the neck, had flaps on the chest pockets which hid the black buttons underneath and had a visible buckle and tab at the bottom of the tunic), but, by the time they got around to me, these had run out and I got a new contemporary pattern one. This enabled me to carry on wearing my original working blue, handing it in at the end of my detachment, and subsequently start wearing the brand-new one. The added bonus was that it avoided me digging into my 2.25p per day clothing allowance!

The water for the camp came from streams on the peaty ground hill which was behind the camp. The water was quite coloured and the brown in it discoloured all the toilets and baths on the site. They were quite clean, but never looked pristine!

As a teenager, I'd needed orthodontic teeth treatment to straighten them out and was so heartily sick of seeing a dentist between the ages of 11 and 13, never visited one again until I had toothache one morning which progressively got worse. Being a small forces enclave, there was no service dentist, so I had to go into Stranraer for treatment from a civilian dentist and had several fillings done over a few weeks. So I never went to an RAF dentist, which others told me was fortunate!

We worked hard when we first arrive there, a 6-day week for much of the time. Us clerks would help the storemen unload the railway wagons, I recall hundreds of duckboards if little else, and then we clerks would then have to go into the office and do the paperwork! This was where my lack of Clerk EA experience showed up, for I could recall little of the duties I was originally trained for, by that stage and, since someone else could do most of it better, he did it with me helping him with the simpler jobs where needed, but spent most of my time sending signals ordering stores that were urgently needed. As you'd expect, the RAF was geared up to a priority ordering system related to aircraft, and the signal would be marked, according to urgency, VOG (V Bomber on Ground) or AOG (Aircraft on Ground) although nothing we needed was ever aircraft related! O might add that much of what I ordered was the towbars for Hands trailers, which had a high attrition rate due to the acute angles reached as the trailer came off the ship downwards whilst the prime mover was climbing up the beach!

The military railway was fascinating. Most of the WD steam locomotives were shunters, but there were a couple of 2-8-0 heavy freight locos, but the driving wheels were quite small in order to give the locos plenty of power, but not speed. This meant that one would hear an engine approaching, seemingly, at around 80mph but, in reality, it would pass doing about 35mph!

In the early days, we never had much free time for socialising, but later on, four of us took advantage of it for touring Scotland. On two occasions, we took the Stranraer-Glasgow 'Western SMT' double-deck bus which ran every two hours and took four hours to do the 80-mile journey. Fast! Later, a corporal who had an Austin A30 took the four of us on some wonderful tours of Scotland. I recall that one evening, having toured Sunderland and the North Coast, passing close to Cape Wrath, we stopped at a croft and knocked at the door for bed and breakfast. The man who answered spoke in halting English and later we realised that the family's first language was Gaelic as we heard them speaking it among themselves. They had no radio. They were very nice people and cooked us a memorable full Scottish breakfast with oat cakes which lasted us until the evening.

We did go into Stranraer for dances and the cinema – the one film I recall seeing there was, 'The Pajama Game'.

On one occasion, towards the end, when the pressures were off, I managed to hitch a ride on the boat over to Benbecula and St. Kilda, which was an interesting experience. These boats were, of course, designed for seaborne landings in the war, not for open sea work, and were also elderly, being designed for a short life. They did not all have radar and those which didn't were not supposed to have been sent up. However, their unreliability, despite superhuman work on the part of the engineers, meant that, on one occasion, a non-radar fitted one came up. On this occasion, the usual Scots mist came up overnight and we had to bob about on the open sea for some hours until daylight came, the mist thinned and we could get a fix and see where we were going. At St. Kilda, I've never known such a feeling of remoteness and wondered about the inhabitants of this island who lived there for centuries until forcibly removed in 1930 because the island was not self-sustaining and nobody was willing to sail to and from the island any more with supplies. The rather overstated High Street was there, together with the ruins of their stone cottages. It harbours unique wildlife, sheep, wren and mice. It's now a wildlife sanctuary.

The rocket tracking station closed in about 2000, the military port in the early 1960's and Cairnryan is now the port for Stena and P&O ferries to Northern Ireland, rather than Stranraer. As a village, Cairnryan itself has hardly altered. Quarry Camp is long gone, but its next-door neighbour, the Cairnryan House Hotel is still there, a hostelry where we used to drink Tennant's lager copiously!

However, I have put online some photos I took during my stay and they can be found at:- <http://public.fotki.com/crossleydd42/> and hopefully a link has been provided for you to access them. Happy days!!