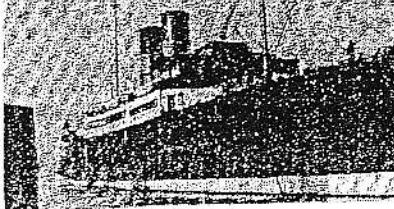


The Cromarty Firth in WW2



S.S. Prague arriving Parkstone Quay.

Although the Cromarty Firth was not the prominent naval base in WW2 as it was in the first war, probably due to being in range of German air attack, it was nevertheless a main oil storage and refuelling base, for the navy. Many tankers loaded and discharged at the Admiralty Pier and destroyers and other warships refuelled and replenished there throughout the war. The sheltered waters of the Firth also provided an important RAF flying boat base and many operations were carried out from Invergordon, and later, Alness Point. Due to war-time security little is known about the following occurrences, between 1939 and 1945.

Before the outbreak of war in September 1939 the Home Fleet was at anchor in the Firth and shortly before hostilities began, left for its war base at Scapa Flow. It did not return until 1946. A naval headquarters and base was established at Invergordon and the Cromlet School was taken over as a naval barracks. The County Hospital in the town was also taken over as a naval hospital.

The RAF had established a base at the town since before the war and the west pier was used, with a floating dock for the flying boats near-by. The Academy was taken over by the RAF as well as garage stores, empty shops etc for the various sections and there was even a pigeon section!

Convoy escorting and patrolling was carried out over the North Sea during the early part of the war by flying boats of 209 and 240 Squadron. 2 flying boats were lost on these operations, one crew being saved. The older type "London" and "Stranraer" flying boats were gradually replaced by "Sunderlands" and the American "Catalina". The Firth was also used as an operational training unit and many crews were trained there including Australians, Canadians and Free French.

A Dutch ship SS "Batavier" was used as an accommodation ship for officers. In early 1940 2 Empire flying boats "Cabot" and "Caribou" arrived at Invergordon with their crews from Imperial Airways. They were lost during the Norwegian Campaign on special duties. On the 25th August 1942 a Sunderland took off from the base, with the Duke of Kent on board, bound for Iceland. Shortly after leaving, it crashed into a hill near Dunbeath, killing all on board except rear gunner Foot Sergeant Jack, who later served at Tain Drome in the early 1950's. In July 1941 a Catalina flew to Archangel with Sir Stafford Cripps and other officials and returned with a Russian military mission. RAF Evanton was a training unit for air gunners and later it was taken over by the fleet air arm as an aircraft repair base.

Nigg Bay was used by the Fleet air arm at Fearn for dive bombing practise, using anchored targets. Some of the squadrons took part in the "Tirpitz" attack and other squadrons went to the Pacific and Far East, embarking on aircraft carriers. A small naval unit and a new pier was established as a base at Nigg for the preparation and loading of sea mines for North Sea mine-fields – many mine-layers used the base.

As in WW1, the seaward defence of the Firth was provided by the coastal defence guns at the Sutors, manned by The Royal Artillery. The air defence was provided by HMS "Curlew" an anti-aircraft cruiser which arrived in the Firth shortly after the fleet's departure, remaining at anchor, during the winter of 1939-40. She left in Spring 1940 for operations in Norway and was lost by bombing.

Ashore, as the war progressed, camps and emplacements were built for batteries of heavy 3.7 anti-aircraft guns, manned by Royal Artillery men and A.T.S. These were situated at Saltburn and Rosskeen. Invergordon was also ringed by light anti-aircraft guns of the Royal Artillery and RAF Regiment.

Together with the ships in the harbour, a formidable anti-aircraft barrage could have been put up. No guns however were fired in anger, not even in February 1941 when a German JV 88 bomber came in low, hitting No. 13 oil tank and machine-gunning some flying boats at anchor. Tons of thick black fuel oil spilled into a railway cutting nearby, flowing through the Railway Station into the Firth. One bomb failed to explode. Several mine sweeps converted trawlers operated in the Moray Firth from the base - "Marshona", "George Cousins" and "Star of the Wave" were some of them.

The naval hospital had its first casualties in late 1939 when a hospital ship arrived from Scapa Flow, with survivors from HMS "Royal Oak" who had been injured. Throughout the war casualties were landed from damaged warships and merchant ships in the Moray Firth.

After the occupation of Norway and Denmark by the Germans, several Danish fishing boats escaped and made their way to the Firth. As did a few seaplanes of the Norwegians.

King George VI made two trips from the Firth during the war to visit the fleet at Scapa Flow, arriving by Royal train at Invergordon and sailing on the cruiser, HMS Glasgow on one occasion.

During 1941 the assault-craft carriers HMS "Queen Emma" and HMS "Princess Beatrix" arrived to embark commando troops for raids on the Norwegian coast, returning afterwards for a greater part of the war. Several store ships sailed continually from the Firth to Scapa Flow to supply the fleet. Scores of railway wagons arrived at the admiralty pier and stores were loaded into these ships by men and women dockyard workers.

After the fall of France in 1940 and the threat of

invasion by the Germans was a possibility, large garrisons of troops were established in the Orkney Islands, Shetlands and Faroe Islands to serve these garrisons. There were 4 troop carriers S.S. "Prague", S.S. "Amsterdam", SS "Lady of Mann" and SS "Ben My Chree". They carried whole battalions of Scottish and English regiments, leave parties and replacements between the Cromarty Firth and these islands. Some of these ships had done sterling work at Dunkirk and other French ports, evacuating thousands of troops in 1940 and were bombed continuously. Later, in 1944, they would serve with distinction as hospital carriers ferrying wounded soldiers between Normandy and English ports.

They were usually escorted to the Northern Isles by the destroyers HMS "Chidding-Fold" or HMS "Reading". The Loyal Scouts were one regiment which arrived at Invergordon after doing their stint in the Faroes. They marched through the town early one morning to the Castle camp led by their pipe band.

I believe the ships officers' of the "Ben my Chree" were very impressed by the bearing of the quiet spoken Highlanders and could not understand how there was no loud shouting of orders or loud banter as they were used to with regiments from southern parts.

Sadly SS "Amsterdam", newly loaded with wounded soldiers from the Normandy battles struck a mine off Normandy coast, sinking within three minutes, with heavy loss of life, including nurses.

For several months before 'D'-Day, the piers and harbours were crowded with landing craft. They took part in practice landing at the beaches near Inver and Fort George area as they were similar to the beaches in Normandy. They departed for southern ports shortly before 'D'-Day and took part in the landings.

As mentioned in Churchill's biography "Road to Victory" there was to have been a big three meeting in the Cromarty Firth in September 1944. Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin were to have arrived by warships and use Balmoral Castle or a large residence in the north for the meeting. They were to be entertained by King George VI. Stalin, however, called off as he was very much involved with his generals in the huge battles to drive the Germans out of Russia.

At the end of the war several German u-boats which had surrendered were escorted into the Firth. Hundreds of servicemen in the area were demobilised and their camps dismantled or put in care and maintenance. They left behind many of their comrades, aircrews of the RAF and fleet air arm, who were killed in flying accidents during training, young men from the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand, mostly in their 20's. The many rows of war graves in Rosskeen cemetery close to the shores of the Firth are a poignant reminder of the sacrifice made by these young lads who came to the area, half a century ago.

DAH.