

## **The Mount**

My period at Dounby ended when I was called back to Stromness to undertake inspection duties alongside Bill Thom. We were based in an extended Jane hut which contained also the Colonel's office, the Registry and various other services. I was billeted in the RAOC HQ mess, in a large house - The Mount - overlooking Stromness bay.



*Revisiting The Mount (named in Japanese and English on the gateposts) in 1984*

The RAOC commander, Colonel Goodsir - an Orcadian himself - lived there, and also most of the RAOC officers from the main Vote 9 Depot at Nafferton (Vote 9 covered all the army's 'housekeeping' stores - the huge miscellany that remained after the hiving off of the engineering responsibilities of the old RAOC into REME).

The feeding at The Mount was rather special, attributable on the one hand to the presence of the RAOC top brass and on the other to the work of an excellent ATS staff. It came to pass that I spent both Christmas and Hogmanay in Stromness, participating in a round of uninhibited parties and a rowdy first-footing expedition that took the inhabitants of The Mount over fences and gardens in the dark through a substantial part of the town. My other memories of The Mount are coloured by various RAOC characters who were billeted there. Among those one recalls was a Captain 'Horsey' Brown, who had served in India and liked to commemorate the fact by wearing Jodhpurs; Horsey was reputed to be running a nice side-line selling toothbrushes at threepence each from a surplus he accumulated by over-ordering at the depot. There was also one Captain Robinson, of somewhat mature years, who had actually graduated in agriculture from Armstrong College in Newcastle and had known my father. He recalled from the 1920s the legendary occasion when a well-liquored, bucolic student of his class had broken away from a Rag Day procession to ride a horse up the steps into the main Agriculture Building.

The inspection job involved visiting all of the radar sites in the islands in turn according to a schedule drawn up, I believe, by Bill Thom, checking the state of the equipment by running through a series of tests, dealing with any deficiencies that had escaped local attention, checking the tool kit and spares - and of course filling in and signing the report forms. The opportunity this gave for getting to know the islands was ideal, although greatly limited during the 1941/42 winter by hardness of the weather. I had a lively little Austin 8 to get around the mainland with (in the way these things stick, I remember its number - 221865). On South Ronaldsay I had a Norton 500, and on Hoy, a 30-cwt van, borrowed from the satellite workshop there.

The circuit included not only the radars deployed on the heavy gunsites, but also those in outlying observation posts (OPs) where the armoury ran only to Lewis guns, and to searchlight sites equipped with searchlight control radar (SLC). For the sites without resident radio officers we ran an emergency service to deal with any malfunctions, if such was within our power. I recall receiving a call for assistance from one unit: 'Fower six ayut sorchleet batturry heeya.' said the caller, to which I replied, '...and wot part of the Tyneside de yay come frae?'; the answer came, 'Jarrah, and where are yay frae?'; 'Bortley', I said (it turned out that the 'bluidy Elsie' had gone on the blink). Four sixty-

eight Battery operated all the searchlights in the island group, and a more soul-destroying penance for those manning the tiny isolated units, each under a sergeant, could hardly be imagined. On the more remote sites visitors like myself were welcomed warmly and plied immediately with large enamelled mugs brimming with boiling hot tea made from the standard issue of tea leaves mixed with sweetened condensed milk. Accepting the offering was obligatory; but at the end of a few visits tea had begun to lose its attractions.

The mainland-Burray-South Ronaldsay causeway was not completed until after the war, so getting to South Ronaldsay meant taking a drifter from St Mary's on the mainland and chugging over to St Margaret's Hope, past the block ships that had been scuttled to close off the eastern entrance of Scapa Flow after the torpedoing of the Royal Oak, and also skirting the Italian prisoner of war camp on Burray. Delightful in the summer, in the winter this was no pleasure cruise. Two AA gunsites, R2 and R3, lay in the north-west corner of the island, towards the main entrance of the Flow between South Ronaldsay and Flotta, where the main Naval Base was. Further west, overlooking the Flow, were the massive coastal defence batteries. I was based for a while in one of the AA sites, R3, from which I saw on May 1st the procedure for the departure of the big ships. Much of the main North Sea battle fleet was in the Flow on the day in question, including the Duke of York, Rodney, distinctive with all of the main armament forward of the control tower, the consequence of the disastrous pre-war treaty limiting the size of the Royal Navy; Warspite, perhaps the most famous battleship in the wartime navy; an aircraft carrier and a number of cruisers and destroyers. The AA units had a well-rehearsed drill for the departure of the fleet, beginning with a move onto a red-alert ('Prep-X') state of readiness with the guns manned. The Prep-X signal reached R3 around midday, and the company moved to action stations. As a kind of interloper I had nothing to do, so I went up to the Command Post to observe events. The entrance to the Flow between South Ronaldsay and Flotta was closed off most of the time by a massive boom, and this the attendant dedgers swung away together with its pendant submarine nets to open the passage. The process was a slow one, for the boom consisted of huge iron-bound timber stacks linked with massive chains. Then the procession began, in this case led by a small flotilla of destroyers and a cruiser, preceding the Duke of York and an aircraft carrier followed by a cruiser with further destroyers following.

As the fleet steamed away into the dusk, speculation began as to what was on foot. Majority opinion had it that this could be no exercise, but was possibly a move to square up to the Tirpitz, known to be at Trondheim with the Gneisenau. The subsequent events cast the deepest gloom I can recall during my period in the Orkneys. Some three days later, while I was still at R3, a Prep-X was sounded again, and the ritual of opening the Flow was repeated. But this time the ships were coming in. Destroyers led, then a Suffolk class cruiser - and then, slowly, the Duke of York - *but with no bows*. Of the aircraft carrier there was no sign. For those not privy to naval intelligence the conclusion was inevitable: there had been an engagement, and the British fleet had had the worst of it. A deeply depressing month was to pass before we learned what had happened. Off the Norwegian coast the destroyer Punjabi, executing its standard zig-zag mine-detecting manoeuvres forward of the rapidly steaming Duke of York, had miscalculated its clearance, and had been cut in two by the bows of the battleship. The tragedy was magnified by the explosion of the destroyer's mines; she was sunk with all hands, and the bow section of the Duke of York back to the main armoured belt was torn away. Reconstruction in a Clyde shipyard restored the ship to service, but only after the deprivation of the North Sea fleet of one of its most important units during a critical period of the war.

The most remote outpost on South Ronaldsay was OP9, at the southern tip of the island, overlooking the Pentland Firth. I spent a period there with another radio officer, J W Jones ('Doc', because he had PhD). The site was under the command of another Jones - Captain Lawrence Evelyn of that tribe. As at Dounby, the main problem for the RA personnel was boredom, for in this site, stunning in the beauty of its surroundings, nothing much ever happened during the winter months except gales and rain. L E Jones dealt with the situation by organising frequent dances and other entertainments, while never losing sight of the main task of keeping his men and equipment at the peak of condition. He had a friendly liaison with the neighbouring farmer, and arranged for the swill from the messes to be supplied to the farm for the pigs in return for eggs and other produce. One consequence was the development of an attachment by two of the piglets for the camp, around which they were wont to gallop, joyously appreciating the petting of the troops. Their friendliness did, however, bring them to a premature end. The Brigade commander responsible for the South Ronaldsay area kept a close eye on all his sites, including the most remote, and never stinted on personal inspections. One day he arrived

at OP9 with his ADC and one or two other hangers-on. He was met by L E Jones, two of his officers and an NCO or two, with me tagging along should I be needed. Rounding the first Lewis gun pit, the procession was joined by the piglets, who romped along at the end of the line. Frantic gesturing by one of the sergeants failed to persuade them to leave, nor did tick-tacking to the cookhouse provide help. The episode reached its most farcical when the Brigadier demanded to see the radar. Under the mat we went, crouching along, with the pigs getting lost under the wire and racing here and there. They even escorted the Brigadier back to his staff car, with ADC speechless but glowering threateningly at L E Jones. The sequel was a brief teleprint from Brigade HQ, drawing the site commander's attention to an ACI, which turned out to be concerned with the rules for pets and other livestock on active sites. The pigs had in fact activated their own death warrants. They were duly despatched, and L E Jones was able to send a nil return for on-site livestock. Pork supplemented the standard rations for some considerable time thereafter.

My only job of any potential operational significance on South Ronaldsay was to supervise the installation of a new radar for the detection of low-flying aircraft. The Chain Home system, which had proved its worth so dramatically during the Battle of Britain, performed well enough for the detection of aircraft at long range provided that they were flying at a reasonable height, but had no competence when it came to dealing with low-flying targets. The enemy early realised that high-flying photographic reconnaissance flights over Scapa were not profitable, given the concentration of AA batteries and the proximity of fighter squadrons. The threat was the Focke-Wolff, with its fine BMW radial engine, which could skim over the waves from Bergen undetected, climb steeply over the Flow for photography and speed back to Norway before guns could be manned or fighters scrambled. Our poor old GLs were of no use for detecting or tracking this kind of target, and the army at that time had nothing suitable for the task in the islands. Effective long-range centimetric radar with the capacity of detecting low-flying aircraft had been developed by early 1942, and forty sets of Type 271 had been ordered for the navy and installed in the principal ships, the first in the world to have such a facility. However, for ships in the Flow the surrounding hills masked all the main directions of approach, including the critical one from the North Sea. So at some high inter-service level it was agreed that one of the precious naval sets should be housed in a suitable cabin and installed in a land site where it could survey the seas to the east. The highest cliff on the east side of the islands was Stews Head on South Ronaldsay, and it

was ordained that here the set should be placed. I had no part in the planning of this or the determination of the site; nor do I suppose that anyone had surveyed the potential of Stews Head except from a map. All vehicle access tracks ended well before the base of the landward climb, after which rough pasture extended upwards until it finally gave place to peat hags and rocks. I looked over the whole area and worked out, dubiously, a possible approach to the summit, where indeed one did have a fine view over the North Sea. The equipment arrived at St Margaret's Hope with its own crew and a Lister generator (the latter a beastly weight, not at all suitable for transporting over peat). With a tractor and a RA detail we began the job, and finally struggled with the whole set-up to the cliff top. The crew got the set working, but whether or not it would pick anything up was another matter. I reported our success with the installation, and suggested that we ought now to have a test on some actual low-flying aeroplanes. Back came the intimation that on a designated day at 1100 hrs a flight would arrive from an RAF base in Caithness. Dead on time three Spitfires appeared, wave-hopping at a disturbingly low altitude. They shot at high speed towards the cliff, switched into an almost vertical climb almost at the base, did a quick circuit and disappeared back towards the Scottish mainland. We never detected a thing. My active participation in the project was terminated at this point, and in the way to become familiar with many of my army experiences, I never did hear whether the installation proved to be any good for its purpose. All that came through to me later was the rumour that the Spitfire pilots were probably Polish.

Back on the Orkney mainland the routine of site inspections continued, with every so often a break of one kind or another. I was happy to be sent on a course on GL Mk3, the first of all centimetric gun-laying radars. Designed around the magnetron, it was a compact single unit, and it did indeed surpass anything previously available. But the pressure on electronic factories in the UK during 1942/3 was such that it was never brought into production in a fully developed form nor on a sufficiently large scale. The secret of the magnetron was kept for a whole year, and was then divulged to the United States. When the productive capacity of America was brought to bear the supply problem disappeared, and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) put into massive production the RCA584, an advanced centrimetric set which later was the saviour of many thousands of lives when it was deployed against the flying bomb (V1) attack on London.

Much of the rest of our activity was concerned with trivialia, with occasional more enlivening episodes. Bill Thom and I shared a dramatic if absurd experience during the early summer, the indelible memory of which still keeps us entertained. One day the Colonel told us that he had been approached by the commander of the coastal batteries to the west of Stromness to ask if we could get their newly acquired radio- controlled target boats into action. Bill and I agreed to take on the job. There were two boats - Queen Gulls - each about 12 ft long, powered by Ford 10 engines. The decks had a low combing, but no place to sit because the engines occupied the wells. The radio control was simple. A carrier wave from a shore transmitter was modulated at three frequencies, a low audio frequency which, tuned by a circuit in the boat's receiver, operated a relay controlling the throttle in steps from low to full and then back; a higher frequency that in a similar manner activated a stepping motor to move the rudder one way, and a still higher frequency to move the rudder the other way. Once we had solved the basic principles we took one of the boats down to Stromness harbour and launched it from one of the low piers. There was no problem in starting the engine, but we had some doubts about setting the thing off by itself without any prior testing. There were overriding manual controls, so we decided one of us should take the boat out into the harbour to supervise its first excursion. The lot fell to me to act as skipper. Without a well to fit my legs in, I had to lie along the deck within the combing and lean through into the well to get at the controls. We organised a primitive set of signals, and I set off. There was no problem in getting the boat out into clear water, but once there the throttle opened up fully and we shot off at speed. The boat then entered a series of wild manoeuvres: hard port, then hard starboard, full throttle and then back again. I thought Bill was pushing it a bit, but I could see him on the shore waving, and waved back. A crisis came when we shot into the midst of the returning Stromness fishing fleet of small boats, when I received many loud reflections on my mental balance and parentage from the startled crews. When I saw Bill on the jetty waving a white handkerchief it was finally borne on me that all was not well with the controls. I thereupon took over the tiller and throttle again, and gingerly came back to the pier. A white-faced Thom then told me he had not even switched on the carrier wave. When we plugged in a set of headphones to find out exactly what the boat had been responding to, we heard a voice communicating with the fleet from the Naval Signal Station on Houton Head. One at least of the Queen Gulls eventually did get taken into its proper service, but only transiently, since the gunners managed to swamp it, notwithstanding the operational instructions which were to give

hard port or starboard rudder as soon as a round was fired so that the boat would jink immediately away in good time to avoid the fall of shot - that is, of course, if the guns were reasonably on target.

One engaging episode during the late spring of 1942 was the arrival in Orkney of a newly commissioned American officer, Lieutenant Buckland-Smith, for a short stay. Buckland-Smith, a physics graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had seemingly taken quick courses on radar immediately upon the entry of the US into the war, and had come to the UK to see operational sets. I was given the job of taking him around a few of the sites. His technical knowledge was excellent, but his practical experience minimal. So I believe he might well have gained something from seeing our ageing GLs on the gunsites and studying the communication system linking GL, predictor and guns.

In the course of my inspection work I was a fairly frequent visitor to the main REME workshop on the Orkney mainland. There was a radio shop on the site, but the overwhelming part of the activities were related to mechanical engineering in one form or another. I was therefore greatly surprised when the Colonel sent for me one day and asked me if I would like to take command of the whole workshop complex. It emerged that he had lost patience with the existing officer in charge, a regular whom he regarded as sluggish and incompetent, and had decided to make a radical change. Having scarcely any idea of what I was likely to be letting myself in for, I was innocently gratified by the suggestion, and accepted. So, with two more pips added to my existing one, I took on the job.