

Aird Uig and Gallan Head

Aird Uig is a village of two halves: the old crofting village and the former R.A.F. base. The base was constructed in 1954 to cover the North Atlantic Gap during the Cold War, the defences consisting of 24 substantial buildings which were abandoned in 1963 and replaced by satellite surveillance equipment and the R.A.F./N.A.T.O presence at Stornoway Airport.

History of the camp

The 12 acre domestic camp was sited immediately to the north of Aird Uig village to the south of Gallan Head. There was a guardroom on the village side and the first building was the Station Headquarters. Other buildings included a medical block (Aird Uig did not have an MO, medical affairs were attended to by an orderly. Anything he could not attend to had to be sent by RAF ambulance to Stornoway hospital), stores and the NAFFI shop.



The domestic site in 1958. The CO's bungalow is the black building in the foreground.

Photo by David Lister

The four houses standing to the left of the road running between the camp and the operations site were married quarters for AMWD (Air Ministry works dept), the civil staff that maintain fabric of site. The only married quarters was a bungalow for the commanding officer on the east side of the domestic camp just above the cliff; this has now been demolished.

The domestic camp was sold to a private individual in March 1973 and since then has changed hands several times. Some of the accommodation blocks have been converted into housing and incorporated into the village, other blocks remain empty and disused.

One of the blocks has been converted into a restaurant and hotel and the fire station has been converted into a house.

Domestic Site in 1958.

Photo by David Lister



The old fire station, now converted into a house



Aird Uig village and the domestic Site in 1958. You may recognise the road you drove in on!

Photo by David Lister



Memoirs by Sam Webb

"...a posting arrived for me. It was to RAF Aird Uig. No one knew where it was and all I was given was a travel pass to RAF Bishopbriggs in Glasgow. I'd never been to Glasgow, never been further north than Heysham. I have no idea what happened to the armourer. Maybe he won the Queen's Cup or maybe they posted him to somewhere like Aden. I never found out. I took all my mates for a grand going away party at the Fireman's Ball in Eastbourne.

Off to the Hebrides

On the 11.30 pm train from Euston to Glasgow I found a number of other airmen. There was Ralph Broad from Eastbourne who I knew, Mick Facey an electrician from Croydon, Brian Winser also from south London and another guy who ran a launderette. None of us had been to Scotland. No one knew what to expect. We spent the day mooching around Glasgow and then made our way to Bishopbriggs where we met up with a whole load of others. We had no idea where we were going. Ralph said his dad had said it was, "That place on the weather forecast where they have all the gales."

At about 4am we were woken, had breakfast in the dark and were taken in a 3-ton truck to Queen Street Station, put on a train and told to get some sleep. Two to a compartment we pulled the blinds down and the train pulled out. Some hours later someone ran along the corridor banging on the doors, "Look out of the windows!" My first sight of Scotland that day is something that has lived with me forever. The train was passing up through Gareloch, there were mountains, hills, water, down below rusting battleships being taken apart like toys. It was the most breathtaking scenery any of us had ever seen.

No one did much except gaze out of the windows. We didn't realise at first but we were on one of the world's most beautiful railway journeys. The line had been built by MacAlpine and his Fusiliers. We passed signs, which read Rannoch Moor, and the romantic sounding Soldier's Fields. In the distance snow glinted on the hills. The heather was bright orange. There was not a person or a building to be seen. We passed over a high viaduct and as we looked back we could see the end of the train as it curled round the bend. In the valley below stood a statue on a column. Someone said it was Bonny Prince Charlie. The train, which we joined in Glasgow, had come all the way from King's Cross, but as it wound through the Highlands it became like the local bus. School kids got on and off. Women came on with shopping bags. Newspapers were thrown off here and there. Water was put down in churns. We went for breakfast and gazed in wonder at the view.

At about 12 o'clock the train, pulled by two engines, arrived in Mallaig. We got off and boarded the Loch Seaforth. It slowly steamed up between Skye and the Mainland until we got to the Kyle of Localsh. Some miles up the coast just off from a small village called Applecross the Loch Seaforth hove to. Rowing out from the shore was a whaler, it was as if we were being paid a visit by Ernest Shackleton. A group of stern faced men, all dressed in black stood bolt upright in the bow. The rowers hoisted their oars to a vertical position and a rope ladder was let down from a hole in the side of the ship. "Who are they," asked someone. "Och, that's just the Wee Frees." In those days Applecross had no road to it and the only way to get anywhere was to go by whaler.

If the scenery before had been wonderful this more than matched it. At the Kyle we met the train from Inverness with yet more airmen going to their new posting. Then we put out into the Minch. I had been on rough crossings before from Liverpool to the Isle of Man. This was in another league.

The Western Isles

Eventually we reached Stornoway. It was pitch dark, cold and raining. We climbed into a three-ton truck. The first person I spoke to as I got off the ferry was a boy I had sat next at school in London during the war. We sat in the back as it pulled out bumping along past the cinema, which carried across its frontage a sign, which said, "Just arrived!! See this years Grand National!!" It was the 16th October 1957. Ralph and I thought we could do better than that.

The three-ton truck wound its way through an inky black night. Not a house could be seen after we passed the outskirts of Stornoway. Somewhere in the middle of the Island stood a lone GPO phone box with a 40-watt bulb grimly burning inside. It was the only sign of civilisation. The lorry bumped and ground its way, screaming through the gears. Inside the truck it was cold and wet. Water dripped from the tarpaulin cover and as the lorry turned with the back facing the wind, rain lashed in soaking everyone. Eventually after about two hours we arrived and were taken with our kit to a hut. Thick mist shrouded everything.

We had met up with a sergeant and flight sergeant in Glasgow, both radar operators, both as mystified as we were as to where we were all going. The hut we were shown into had water lying 2" deep over the floor. We found another and slept the sleep of the truly exhausted. I had been travelling for over two days. The next morning we woke. Everywhere was shrouded in mist. It was like living in the clouds. The mist was to remain until November and then one morning it lifted to a cold clear day with a brilliant blue sky. In the night it had snowed, there was a light dusting on the ground. In the distance far out to sea were snow covered humps. "Icebergs!" said someone. But they were only the Flannan Islands, subject of a poem, a Scottish mystery to rival that of the Marie Celeste. One night the light had not come on. Days passed before a boat could get out and when it did no one was to be found. There was no sign of the lighthouse keeper or his two assistants. All that was to be found was a table laid for a meal and a kettle boiled dry. They had been swept away by a freak wave.

Freak waves were fairly regular off Gallan Head. One afternoon between watches Ralph Broad and I went for a walk, climbing down the cliffs and sitting in a cleft in the rocks. "They say," said Ralph, "that the waves come in sevens. The seventh is always the biggest." So we sat, counting, smoking and watching, passing the time of day, talking about what we would do when we finished national service. Suddenly without warning a wave appeared to grow, and grow until the top was level with us. It was about to crash over us. Bracing our backs and feet against the rocks we took deep breaths. There wasn't time to be frightened. The water crashed over us. Tens of thousands of tons of the cold green Atlantic fell down over our heads. We were fortunate if a little wet. Not so a couple of airmen who went walking along the cliffs near RAF Buchan around that time. They were never seen again.

Christmas 1957

Christmas Eve 1957 was a bright warm sunny day. A group of us went out for a walk, taking our shirts off in the sunshine as we sat in a hollow, sheltered from the wind. Far out to sea on the horizon we could see big cumulus nimbus clouds. They looked grey and ominous. As we watched they grew bigger and bigger, taking up more and more of the sky. At the front of the clouds we could see the first flurries of snow. Flakes etched white against the by now inky black sky. We hurriedly dressed as the wind picked up. By the time we reached camp the snow lay about 3" deep and was drifting in the wind piling up against sheep huddled together for shelter.

By the next morning we couldn't see out of the windows on the unprotected side of the hut. Snow lay ten feet deep, blown up against the unprotected sides of all the buildings. More snow was forecast. We were cut off for a week and it was Christmas.

The CO on the camp was a Polish Squadron Leader with the AFC and DFC. He had flown Spitfires in the Battle of Britain. He dressed in roll necked sweaters, Wellington boots, and said his door was always open. He made us welcome. Shortly after we arrived he went down to Stornoway and bought up every available copy of Reveille Magazine. There was a special issue from which could be assembled a full size photo of Brigitte Bardot. Everyone had at least a couple which were stuck with Bostik behind doors, in cupboards, on walls and ceilings. He offered a prize for the best decorated billet and the best Christmas tree. Everyone seemed to win a prize.

The Uig Bioscope

Ralph and I went to see him. "Yes certainly," he said, "I will see about getting a projector and films." He had ordered our sheets, we had slept in blankets since we arrived, and there was a bus coming he said. We had found Ron, a cook who had worked a projector in the Odeon Tottenham High Road. The projector duly arrived complete with a film in three spools. We advertised in Stornoway with the Grand Opening night on a Sunday in November in the deserted NAAFI. There was to be a bar and we bought four bottles of whiskey and urged people to bring their own glasses.

People were put to making a screen, sewing two sheets together weighted down at the bottom with broom handles. Seats were put out and we waited on the first evening for the audience to turn up. Outside it was blowing a gale, it was almost impossible to stand up. Rain lashed the windows as we saw first one, then two, then a line of car lights coming over the hills towards us. Men came in, in little knots, hats pulled well down, collars turned up, "Och it's you Murdo, you Hamish...." The locals had arrived. Very quickly glasses were placed on the counter and the whiskey was downed, out came their bottles and when it was all finished we put the film on.

No one seemed to mind by then that we had been sent, "The Dam Busters," perhaps the most unpopular film to show a bunch of national service airmen on a windswept cliff. We showed it twice taking £5 at 6d a seat and as much again on the whiskey. We went to see the CO again. Could we use our profit to open the NAAFI and use one of the huts as a proper cinema? The answer was a resounding yes.

The Uig Echo

From that point on we never looked back, until that is nemesis in the shape of a new CO arrived, but that was some way off. A rudimentary Gestetner printer was found. You typed stencils, put them on a drum and hey presto we had a newspaper called the Uig Echo. Someone had the bright idea of going round local shops in Stornoway and getting them to finance adverts which could be traded in for so much off the bill. Given more time we could have invented BOGOF.

Driftwood was collected from the shore and Sandy, a joiner from Glasgow, put it all together to build tiered seating. The cinema moved into its new hut with a projection room. The screen could be converted to Cinemascope and instead of getting bigger got narrower but wider. It was amazing what could be done with some pulleys, wire and painted hardboard. Special weeks were advertised, Musicals with "Oklahoma!" Big Band Weeks with "The Benny Goodman Story" and "The Glenn Miller Story." We showed Humphrey Bogart classics, "The Big Sleep" and "Casablanca." Then we had French weeks with Monsieur Hulo films and French Thrillers like "The Fiends," "The Wages of Fear," and "Riffi".

"Riffi" was Ron's downfall. He had gone to the NAAFI after he put the first reel on, then he came back put on the next reel and went back to resume his drinking. People sat waiting for the famous scene where the umbrella is lowered through the hole in the bank vault roof to catch the pieces of falling concrete as the hole is made bigger so the crooks can be lowered head first to collect the gold. It never came. FIN said the credits. "Where's Ron?" said the audience. Then he came back and put the second reel on. We decided to train as projectionists ourselves after that.

The NAAFI

The NAAFI went from strength to strength. We would go out in a boat in Loch Roag and catch fish from lines left overnight. Thunderflashes would be removed from who knows where, thrown into lochs and everyone ate poached salmon. All the canteens were run by our small group. Ralph and I worked out a five watch system for radar operators which operated alongside the officer's three watch system. No one ever knew where we were supposed to be. Then one day came nemesis.

His nickname was "Space" and real name Roland. He had come up with us from RAF Bawdsey. Sitting in the radar room in front of the screen he became aware of a man standing in the gloom. "Hi", said Space. "Hi", said the man who then proceeded to ask all manner of questions to which Space provided all the necessary answers. He told him all about the cinema, how we ran the NAAFI and the paper with its money saving offers. Meanwhile another man was walking up the corridor towards the guardroom at the end. "Hi" said that man. "Hi", said the RAF policeman who was sitting with his boots off, feet on the desk, smoking a fag and listening to Radio Luxemburg.

The Polish CO broke the news. "You've got to get rid of all the money otherwise the NAAFI will take it. They are opening up here. You must stop advertising in your paper and locals can't come to the cinema anymore. And I'm being posted." We had been visited by the RAF Provost Police. Rumour had it they had scaled the cliffs in the dark. Probably they had just gone round the end of the wire just like the shepherd. We had to act and act fast. We wrote off all debts, wiped the slate clean as it were, and shared all the money out. Everyone had enough to buy at least three bottles of whiskey and Stornoway saw a party to rival even that of Hogmany. Space was sick into the harbour and was seen asking a small boy if he could fish his false teeth out with his rod. Ray a Geordie passed out in the toilets at the YMCA Dance. He got left behind and woke in the middle of the night in the pitch dark not knowing where he was and thinking he had gone blind.

Under new management

The Polish CO who had brought us so much went, and a new one came from RAF St Athan, a boy entrant camp in Wales. His first task was to make us scrape the lino floors all over the camp with razor blades and then polish them. He then got us to gather all the rocks, especially around his house, and throw them in the sea. Then we planted a lawn. The CO's house was a wooden prefabricated structure painted green and standing on concrete blocks. There was short flight of steps to the door and a couple of small windows front and rear.

He lived in the house with his wife who drank copious amounts of gin. They both behaved to everyone rather as I imagine slave owners behaved in the West Indies at the turn of the nineteenth century. One night the CO's wife fell over a wire hawser that stopped the house blowing away. There were two of these at each end of the house fixed to four large rocks. We had put them there the previous winter after the other wooden houses; homes for the Mullard Technicians had blown over. We were ordered to remove them even after we gave dire warnings of the consequences. Well we weren't living in there and if the CO and his wife were thinking it was always warm and sunny with 24 hours of daylight they were in for something of a rude surprise.

The previous autumn in November 1957 the wind was so high that the radar aerial stopped working. We watched in amazement as the trace went into reverse on the screens. So a group of intrepid airmen, roped together like nineteenth century mountaineers about to scale the Matterhorn, went out into the dark, dark and very windswept night to sort it out. The next week the Air Ministry sent a group of engineers to erect a steel structure with anemometers. It all swung round in the wind. To my eyes it looked like it would all end in tears.

Schadenfreude

In the next gale about a week later, first the anemometers blew away as the wind speed went off the scale at 120mph, torn from their structure and then the whole contraption keeled over in the wind. With this in mind we waited with a great deal of curiosity to see what would happen to the CO's house now the hawsers had been removed at his orders and thrown off the cliffs into the sea. The Germans have a word for this feeling. They call it Schadenfreude. It means delight in another's misfortune.

This man's behaviour endeared him to no one. Everyone became united against him. Sometime later after one of the usual storms with 100mph winds he may have rued his actions though I doubt it. As we walked up to relieve the midnight to eight o'clock watch we saw the hut lying on its side. Sticking out of the top through a window was the head of the CO's wife. We carried on walking telling her we would phone. Somehow we forgot. The CO was still inside; maybe she was standing on his shoulders.

They were a thoroughly unpleasant couple who were no doubt posted to such a remote place as a means of getting rid of them from someone else's hair. They were an example of absolute power going to the head. I could now understand why my grandfather had said that officers got shot by their own side on the Western Front.

Another example of power going to the head was Ossie. He was a Geordie, in charge of the sick bay, still an LAC aged about 40 and the only man in the RAF to have two lots of long services stripes. We said to the first CO and others that Ossie, who was always bemoaning his lot, should be promoted to corporal. He was married. So Ossie got his stripes and the first thing he did was to charge six airmen with throwing tea dregs on the ground outside the mess.

The first CO took him on one side. No one had ever been charged on his camp, there wasn't much point and if Ossie didn't cure his ways he would take Ossie's stripes away and send him to Christmas Island.

Never volunteer

Christmas Island was the sort of posting you didn't want. There was nothing to do and the last lot of airmen at Aird Uig who had signed on for an extra year to their national service two, found themselves unceremoniously shipped out on the next available transport plane. Those that did go and witnessed a nuclear test are now suing the Air Ministry. Those that survived, that is.

We received scary airmails from a couple that went out. One of them was a brilliant jazz pianist. He wrote of an A-bomb test where everyone stood with their backs to the mushroom cloud with their hands over their eyes. As the bomb exploded people could see the bones in their hands, "just like an x-ray." Then they were ordered to turn and face the cloud.

The RAF wants me for a Sunbeam

In the summer of 1958 we had a NATO exercise called "Sunbeam" or some such name. It was then I realised that RAF Aird Uig would be the first target of any attacking force. We would not be safe in our hollow block buildings made more prominent by the CO's lawn. We were just like those dispensable men sent to forward positions in shell holes in No Man's Land on the Western Front.

Russian ships anchored in the bay just outside the 3 mile limit. Airmen were told to sit on the roof and watch the ships, particularly the "Mother" ship through binoculars. One lunchtime during the exercise we were coming out of the mess when the guy on the roof started waving and shouting to us. "Come up here. Look at this."

As we looked through the binoculars we could see a line of Russian sailors standing, waiting to look through their binoculars and watch us. Someone waved. Soon everyone on our roof was waving and shouting at the Russians. The CO saw and heard and went predictably berserk. We were confined to the radar site for the duration. So like ants we transported beds, chairs, dartboards, armchairs etc up the hill. He could not enter the site, as he didn't have security clearance.

The radar room had been constructed to have a camera under the floor which took a picture, developed it, and relayed it 45 seconds later onto a table on the floor above. When invented in the days of planes with propellers it no doubt served its purpose but in the era of supersonic planes which moved 12 miles a minute this was back in the Stone Age. So were left with a huge room under the floor where the camera had been planned to go. Hardly anyone apart from us knew about it. All the furniture went down below. The CO had made a rod for his own back. We lived down there out of his gaze.

The five-day watch we worked meant no one except us knew where we were or where we were supposed to be. Life was pretty casual for radar operators. Virtually everyone was national service and everyone would invent stories to cover everyone else's absence.

We still managed to run the canteen on the radar site without the CO or NAAFI knowing. Mick, who had a girlfriend in Stornoway lived with her, taking up a job in the town. Pay Parades were arranged in the County Hotel. Although everyone knew what was going on the CO never found out. It was better that way.

Pilot Officer Henderson, the Hebrides' own Lieutenant Kijé

We used to constantly chat on the RT lines, something that was punishable, if caught, by a fate worse than death. At about three in the morning, shortly after we moved to Uig, we heard some girls talking on the line. They were at Stanmore, HQ of RAF Fighter Command. Slowly but surely people opened up. Christmas 1957 saw an airman return from leave with a £15 Decca record player. Someone knew how to operate the lines so we could link with signal stations outside the UK. Soon we were in Germany, then Cyprus, from there it was but a simple step to Singapore.

A voice like cut glass came on the line. The squawk box in the corner started to ring, something that had never happened before. "Go and answer it!" someone said. But they were all Geordies and Scots. "You," said someone pointing at me, "You can do a posh voice. You answer." "Who shall I say I am?" "Henderson-Pilot Officer Henderson." So a completely imaginary person was created to cover all ills. "No Wing Commander, certainly not Wing Commander, no one on my watch would dare to talk down the lines....."

We invented a whole persona for Henderson, family, girl friend, wedding bells, the works. He became so real, people phoned him up for a chat. He used to phone the army in St Kilda and ask them if seagulls were flying around as he could see echos on the screen. They would go outside, have a look and come back and chat. Sometimes people would want to meet up on leave with Henderson and go for a drink. He always declined. We had invented our own version of Prokofiev's Lieutenant Kijé, the imaginary Russian Hussar who had sprung fully formed from the brain of the Czar in one of those royal, misheard, misunderstood mistakes. Nobody dared correct him. But our Henderson was a real deliberate creation. Even the NCOs and officers were let in on the act.

Then one afternoon in the summer of 1958 came the moment of truth. The radar room was so dark as you entered you had to wait for your eyes to adjust. The door opened. A figure stood framed in the doorway. From his beret we could tell it was a national service sprog officer. "Hello chaps, I'm Pilot Officer Henderson." Everyone collapsed in fits of unstoppable laughter. We let him in on the secret.

But not all officers were like that. A dour Scot called PO Watson arrived with a propensity for chess and blasting his double barrelled shotgun out of the windows on the radar site. He would wake airmen up in the middle of the night while on watch and get them to play chess. One night he woke me. To my cost I found it was a great mistake to beat him.

Many of the wild animals and birds had no fear of people. Puffins inhabited the cliffs and would come quite close if you sat very still. There were wild rabbits on the radar site, which we all used to feed. Watson watched one from the officer's restroom window hop up for its bit food. There was a huge explosion as it disintegrated into a bloody mess. Then later he shot a puffin. Shortly after he too disappeared back from whence he came, no doubt making other people's lives a misery. He too would have been a suitable candidate on the Western Front.

Entertainment

Apart from the cinema and NAAFI there wasn't much to do on the camp. TV had not arrived in the Western Isles and the only receivable radio station was Radio Luxemburg, home to Horace Batchelor and his Fabulous Infra Draw Method. This was guaranteed to win the Pools for you. Horace Batchelor operated from, "Keynsham, spelt, K-E-Y-N-S-H-A-M, Keynsham, Bristol." He would repeat this after every advert like a mantra, each word, each syllable exaggerated for added emphasis.

We decided to do the Pools without Horace's method, arguing that if his method was so foolproof why would he need to advertise. So we just stuck in pins and chose birthday dates. As I had been deferred for two years I was older than the others and also most importantly over 21. I could sign the form. So while those from the south argued over the merits and demerits of whether Arsenal would draw with Wolves and the Scots argued over Hamilton Academicals beating Stirling Albion, the Pools Team blindly stuck pins in numbers.

The following Saturday we clustered around the radio. Reception was sometimes a bit hit and miss and we may have misheard the end of the announcement, but from the results we had made we had a second dividend. Someone said we were rich. There was nothing to do but go out and celebrate.

Money was passed over the counter of the County Hotel, whisky chasers were downed, and we went off, somewhat unsteadily, to the dance at the Town Hall. A few days later a postcard arrived announcing that our winnings would be at the nearest local post office. It would have been easier if they had said Stornoway 40 miles as the 3-ton truck drove, but it was lodged in valtos opened Weds to Thurs if it wasn't raining.

To get to valtos required a major expedition around the cliffs past the romantically named Gob Geodha nam Bradan and past Loch Mor. The first time the post office was closed, "Gone fishing," said the sign upon the door. Eventually the postal order was obtained. There was much excitement as the envelope was opened. We had misheard the announcement. We had won the second dividend in a week when about ten thousand other hopefuls had. There were twenty-two draws that week. We got 7/6- each.

There were flourishing card schools where some lost a great deal of money. One such was Ernie, a cook who stood in debt to the tune of over £100, an astronomic sum. Ernie worked out a solution. One night dressed in wellies with a battle dress top over his pyjamas and his greatcoat over that, Ernie walked out of the camp down the road to Uig turned right at Timsgarry towards Ardrol and just carried on walking.

The first anyone knew of his disappearance was his empty bed. But that was normal, he was always playing cards.

After a couple of days people began to go round asking, "Have you seen Ernie?" Then he was missed. People began to think he might have fallen off the cliffs. Search parties were sent out. Then the RAF air sea rescue sent a plane.

The first we knew what had happened was an article in a Scottish paper. "Lost airman turns up in shepherd's croft." Ernie had walked to Harris. He was promptly sent to a psychiatric sanatorium in Scotland and never seen by us again. Someone later met up with him in Glasgow. He was as right as rain. Ernie had worked his ticket in a most spectacular way, and besides he didn't have to pay off all his debts.

The Football Team

When we arrived at Aird Uig in 1957 we joined about 12 airmen who manned the site on a C&M basis. This had been going on since 1945. They always made a football team which played in the local league against Stornoway, Carloway and other local teams. With the influx of so many newcomers it was felt Aird Uig might actually start winning.

So after much training we set off to follow our team. The usual score for a match was 6-0. We never won as far as I can remember and like the Barmy Army we followed and cheered their exploits for match after match before going to the local dance. One memorable match was played at Ness with a 10.30pm kick off. I think we scored a goal that night. We finished at midnight, and then went to the dance before being carted off to a stone bothy to drink illicitly brewed hooch. Clear and straight from the milk bottle, it tasted like rocket fuel.

Life with the Green Goddesses

Towards the end of the year, when demob loomed, I received a posting that I was to report to RAF Moreton in Marsh Gloucestershire in December 1958. I was to train as a fireman in the event of a nuclear holocaust.

Who ever thought up the idea of sending about a thousand airmen who hadn't met since they were called up, onto a camp just outside a town with a pub on every corner, really didn't understand human psychology. We all met up on trains going from Paddington for a huge mass reunion at Stroud Station.

For the next few weeks we charged around the countryside in war time Green Goddesses, which didn't work then, and certainly don't work now. Each section had a GG towing an auxiliary pump. I was in charge of one section even though I couldn't drive. The bells had been removed in case we woke the locals. We were told under no circumstances were they to be driven at speed round corners as they could tip over. Then there was the landrover with its rubber dingy, a 3-ton truck with half a mile of 6" hose, all full of holes, and a motor cycle outrider whose job was to go ahead and report back on any blockages.

After some weeks we were called to a huge hangar and lectured on how good we were and told how we would be notified to report once we were in Civvi Street. We were asked if we had any questions after being told, in the event of an atomic bomb dropping on London, that we would be sent a pre-paid postcard in two halves which would tell us where to assemble. Told we had to fill this in and post it keeping the other half, I asked if we replied before, during, or after the four-minute warning. There was silence from the platform, though not from the hangar. Which was just as well as I was going home early the next day.

AWOL and demob

I went back late to the camp after New Year 1959, got charged with being AWOL for 14 days and was demobbed on 20 January 1959. The CO wanted to give me two weeks, but as he was going skiing and had to catch the ferry his deputy gave me seven days. The CO could not spare the time to take what he considered, "This most serious of charges". After six days everyone got tired of me marching back and forth to the guardroom for inspections every two hours. So a day early I was expelled from RAF Aird Uig to resume my life as an architectural student in London.

I went back once again two years later for New Year in 1960/61. Everyone I knew had left the camp. There was a new set of faces. I drove out towards Aird uig with a friend. We sat in the car watching the aerial high on the cliffs above Gallan Head turning in the winter sunlight. The scenery was as beautiful as ever and we turned and went back to Stornoway. I have never been back.

In Scotland and the Hebrides I saw sights, which I had only read about, mountains covered with snow, the Northern Lights, the midnight sun, puffins and golden eagles. But if one moment I spent there can be described as magical it came in the early summer of 1958. A small group of us were driving to Stornoway in the Landover, when far out to sea, coming into Lough Roag, we saw silvery flashes like quicksilver in the sunlight. First a few, then hundreds upon hundreds of flashes breaking on the waves. We were watching the salmon coming home to spawn. It was one of the most incredible sights I have ever seen.

In the 1980s I saw a film on late night TV. I had just turned on in the middle of the programme and suddenly there was that unforgettable light and scenery. The camera panned up a deserted road lined with concrete huts and went inside one. The commentator was talking about the national early warning radar system. Doors flapped in the wind. Suddenly I realised the cameraman was standing in one of the huts where I had spent part of my youth. Now it was just a part of history.