

An extract from the memoirs of Mr Philip Pfaff, RAF Machrins 1941-42. [Sent 2006]

After enlisting in 1940, I was trained as a wireless operator [ground] at Blackpool and Compton Bassett and then did a special course in direction finding. It was now the spring of 1941. I think we were given a week's leave and then told to report to Oban. There were two other airmen with me, Paul West and Darryl Underhill. Angela, my wife, had the choice of returning to my parents in Ripon or taking a chance by coming with me, which she decided to do.

We arrived in Glasgow on a Saturday night. It was after dark and there seemed to be a lot of people about, some the worse for drink, but we were collected by a very pleasant woman belonging to some voluntary organisation who found us a bed and breakfast in someone's house. After breakfast we caught the train for Oban and wound our way through some really breath-taking scenery including Loch Awe where the cliffs came sheer down into the water, and eventually got out at Oban Station on the quayside of Oban Bay which was also spectacular. Here we reported to a large house being used as the RAF HQ to be interviewed and told that in fact we were being posted to the island of Colonsay to man the equipment there. We were taken in separately to the Flight Sergeant and one of the other two boys came out and had overheard the Corporal telling him that a flat had become vacant just behind the house. Angela nipped out and secured it immediately – a stroke of luck.

Meanwhile I made enquiries as to whether I could take my wife with me onto the island but was at first told that this was not possible as it was a restricted area. She reluctantly decided that she would have to return to Ripon, but then I discovered that the Sergeant in charge of the small unit on Colonsay had his wife with him and after pressing the point, it was decided that Angela could go with me. To digress for a moment I must mention that Angela had been given a Singer hand sewing machine in a mottled grey wooden case as a wedding present from her aunt. I cost £5 and was a very handsome present, the equivalent of perhaps £150 or £200 at today's values. Wherever we went the machine went with us packed with smalls, as well as our suitcases. Now we can hardly lift it, let alone carry it around. It is still going strong after sixty years and we are told that they don't make them like that now.

To return to my story – we were faced with several days in Oban until a boat arrived to take us to out to Colonsay. The Dunara Castle plied between Glasgow and Oban calling at various islands coming and/or going and took about 10 or 14 days to make the round trip. It was a fair sized passenger and cargo vessel with a loading hatch which opened in the side. In due course it steamed into the harbour and moored and we went aboard with all our luggage [machine included] and were told that it would not be sailing until after midnight, so we might as well go to the pictures [cinema] right on the quayside to pass the time away. This we did. Emerging at 10pm we discovered that the boat had gone. Why it was the others got back on board we never knew. What we did know was that we had been left behind with only the clothes we stood up in. At that moment a 'jolly-boat' arrived from a corvette in the bay to take back on board members of the crew who had been given shore leave. We explained our predicament to the officer in charge and he said to jump on board and they would try to find our vessel.

They were very decent to us and took us down into the ward room for a sherry, but could find no trace of the Dunara Castle. Back on shore I reported what had happened to the guard room but

received little sympathy and the threat of being put on a charge. We just didn't know what to do but as luck would have it we were hailed by a sailor in a small rowing boat who wanted to know whether we had come across his mate, probably the worse for wear, but we had seen nothing of him. However, we explained our problem to him and he said he would be able to find the ship as he knew the harbour like the back of his hand. So we climbed into his tiny dingy and off we rowed – after quite a time he said that there was only one possible left and if she wasn't there she must have sailed. We eventually saw a dark shape loom up [it was a really inky night] and on hailing her, a ladder was let down and we quickly climbed aboard. I've forgotten what we did to reward the sailor but remain everlastingly grateful to him.

This was only the beginning of one of the most horrible 24 hours of my life. In the early hours of the morning the ship got underway and our first port of call was Mull, where we arrived in the early morning. We were all most intrigued by a large cloud of dust which seemed to be travelling along the hill top, but it descended and turned out to be the factor arriving in his car to supervise unloading and the loading of a number of cattle destined for Islay.

We then set off for Colonsay in what rapidly became horrendous seas with waves 10 or 12 feet high. The ship was pitching and tossing in all directions and we were all horribly seasick, just lying on the deck feeling terrible. After several hours we approached the northern tip of Colonsay where there was a kind of harbour but no jetty or breakwater. I received a sharp lesson in the difference between theory and practice. An airman came down and started flashing a message to the ship by lantern. We had done a course on semaphore and light signalling but I couldn't make anything of his signals.

It turned out that the message was that it was too rough for the ferry boat to come out to us to take us and our luggage ashore and we were to proceed to Islay to offload the cattle and return later if the weather calmed down. So off we set for Islay, offloaded the cattle and got back to Colonsay at about 7pm. We had taken about 13 hours so far to do a journey which normally took 3.

This time Sandy the ferryman came out to us. The seas were still running very high and the ferry boat was lifting up and down about six feet on each wave. As it swung into the side you had to jump – so jump we did – and eventually everything was transferred and we headed for shore. Angela was very upset because she was sick again in the cabin but the ferryman was very good about it and said not to worry. Then we all walked up the road for about a quarter of a mile to the Colonsay Hotel and so to bed. Colonsay is only a small island, longer from north to south and attached to it [at low tide] a still smaller island, Oronsay. At the time it was owned by Lord Strathcona who was private secretary to Anthony Eden and he had a small mansion at Kiloran. The island was completely unsophisticated, no mechanical transport allowed, and limited sources of food such as rabbits, milk when the cow had calved, and agricultural produce.

There was a village store down by the harbour and also a post office with, I think, a telephone to the mainland. This was run by an old lady on strictly 'Head Office' lines. It opened and shut precisely on time and no liberties were allowed. The D/F station we had come to man was several miles from the hotel on the west shore looking out into the Atlantic. There were two small huts quite some way apart and joined by a land line. The nearer one was a maintenance hut where batteries were charged etc. and the other one was the receiving and transmitting hut complete with its Marconi/Adcock aerial and a black paraffin stove [calibrated] to provide some warmth, and after several hours sufficient to boil a kettle and brew up in the night watches. Of course we felt rather

important as we were the first trained D/F operators sent to relieve comparatively old hands. We were soon deflated – on my first supervised session I was sitting quite happily waiting for a call when the operator sitting outside said “wake up, why aren’t you answering?”

To be technical for a moment - our call sign was ... .. [FA7]. What I was hearing was ... .. [UU7] a slight rhythmic corruption, but it often came through like that and we got used to it. There were only about ten men on the island and Paul, Darryl and I had the job of maintaining watch, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week and this we did for over a year. I think the roster ran something like – Day 1; 4pm to midnight: Day 2; midnight to 8am: Day 3; 8am to 4pm then 24 hours off. Life was really rather uneventful as we rarely had visitors. It was interesting that although to begin with buttons were green and trousers un-pressed etc. after a few weeks we seemed to return to parade ground standards with buttons and boots polished and trousers pressed under the mattress.

Our job was to give a homing course to the Catalinas flying on Atlantic patrol from Oban and so, up to a point, the safety of the crews depended on the information provided. The aircraft would triangulate the bearings from us and other D/F stations on other islands and this would enable them to pin point their position pretty accurately as well as giving them a course for home. Flying above water with no land marks must have been nerve wracking.

One notable event happened very early one morning when I picked up a very faint signal which when decoded [there was a different decode sheet for each day] informed me that they were shadowing one of the German pocket battleships. No-one else seemed to have picked this message up, and I had to recode and send it to HQ in Liverpool.

We seemed to manage to be happy leading such a primitive existence. The island had become partly depopulated and this had meant that one of the two schools had been closed. This building was opposite the hotel run by Mary Clarke and consisted of a house for the teacher attached to two school rooms with a small room sandwiched in between them probably used as the Head-teacher’s study. This had been used as an overflow for summer visitors but now the house part was occupied by an elderly Miss Morag Macphee, the aunt of the hotelier, and the school section was empty. Discussing accommodation the morning after our arrival we were offered the premises for a rent of ten shillings [50p] a week including potatoes. I don’t remember what furniture was there but there was certainly a bed for us, and we set off to scrounge whatever we could. I fitted up an oven from an old valor stove over a primus stove and by putting a metal plate over the primus we could also toast. There was a washbasin and wc in the small room and a fire in the living room. The minister lent us a hanging oil lamp from the church hall and chairs of some sort appeared. We had plenty of fuel as there were many pit props thrown up on the shore from wrecks and I was able to strap one along the cross bar of my bike when coming off watch and then saw it up for logs.

There were several affairs worth recording about our life during this year. The first was my decision to give the villagers a carol service. A quartet was formed consisting of Angela, the Minister’s housekeeper, an airman who had been in a choir and myself, and we sang about five or six carols and I played some organ music on the harmonium. The chapel was only a few yards from the cottage so it was quite convenient – I don’t think they had ever heard an unaccompanied quartet before.

Another incident at the chapel was a wedding. The bride came right across the island on a cart preceded by a piper who was audible from a mile or so away and this was something we had never seen [or heard] before.

We used to cycle across the island on and off watch along narrow roads with a deep ditch on either side. In the summer it was still light at midnight and there were some spectacular displays of the Northern Lights, but in winter no lights were allowed and sometimes a bike would fly past in the opposite direction with no previous warning. One night there was another hazard as a large white bull had somehow got onto the road.

The bicycles were kept in an outhouse at the hotel and were responsible for a plague of fleas which got into the seams of clothes. We could not make out where they were coming from until I noticed that the storage room was shimmering for about two feet off the floor with millions of insects jumping! The hotel dogs lived in this room and were probably responsible.

The island was a hotbed of gossip with rumours of affairs between girls and airmen etc. and we unknowingly contributed our share. We had somehow acquired a small battery receiver and airmen would come in to listen to news etc. Also Angela acted as barber for some of them and kept their hair tidy. The Minister who was a pleasant young man in his 30's used to come in quite often to hear the news when I was on watch and when Angela became pregnant with our eldest Malcolm, he discovered that it was being rumoured that he was the father, so the poor man had to stop his visits.

In due course we heard that we were to have a visit from the trade board which would give us the chance to rise from AC1 to LCA with a consequent rise in pay. On the day in question I was on the morning watch and as I passed Paul coming back, he shouted "Shunt wound motor" so over lunch I was able to do a thorough check up on the circuit and in due course my LAC came through. [At some time during that year I spent a week in military hospital in Edinburgh having my tonsils removed. I can't remember when it was but I found that after the no longer sing falsetto successfully.]

It was now early 1942 and by now an RAF pinnace was bringing down rations and stores every fortnight and they were very good as long-life milk was sent down for my wife [there was often no fresh milk available] and she was cared for by the island doctor, an elderly woman who some years before had announced that she was no longer going to deliver babies, but expectant mothers had to go across to a nursing home in Islay.

We made the necessary arrangements but for about a month before the birth was due we were told that the nursing home was closing and we would have to make other arrangements.

This led to a ghastly journey for Angela which she had to make on her own as I was refused leave to accompany her. First of all there was the trip back to Oban in a rough sea with a crew of young airmen, then a climb up an iron ladder on the quayside at Oban where she was put on the train – the airmen looked after her well. Then followed a long and very trying rail trip to Glasgow and then Leeds. Here she had to change onto a train for Ripon where my father picked her up at about 6.30am the following morning – completely exhausted and feeling terrible. She had only managed to get a seat on the main journey because a soldier gave up his seat for her. Our son Malcolm was eventually born on May 16<sup>th</sup> in a nursing home in Ripon.

Meanwhile things had been on the move for me. Some months earlier I had been sent for by the Commanding Officer at Oban because I happened to be there when he had a complaint that we had been shooting pheasants on the island. I knew that airmen went out ostensibly to shoot rabbits, but told him that I had no knowledge of shooting rather higher up. This amused him and he began asking about life on the island and so I was emboldened to raise the subject of my commission. When he discovered that I was a double graduate of Cambridge he decided to push the matter and in due course I was called for interview to be commissioned as a Technical Signals Officer. There was still trouble over colour blindness but after sorting out a bunch of coloured wires they decided that I would be suitable.

I was posted to Cranwell to be one of the first course using officer cadets who became full Pilot Officers if successful whereas previously they had taken the course as acting Pilot Officers.

So ended the first part of our service life in Scotland but not, as it turned out, the last. The climate on Colonsay was surprisingly mild because of the gulf-stream. They seldom had snow and the sea was reasonably warm in the summers. We left the island in May 1942 with a feeling of affection which, after many years, led us to return there for a holiday. Meanwhile a further phase of my military service began.