

Lough Neagh: the heady war years

Jim McGarry

This article was written last year by Jim McGarry, of Ardmore Boatyard on Lough Neagh. Jim died suddenly and unexpectedly on 22 May 2001. The article appears now as part of our flying-boats series but more importantly as a tribute to Jim's memory: it displays his deep knowledge, his devotion to Lough Neagh — and his sense of humour. Thanks to Neil McGarry for permitting publication. Ed.



Gloster Gladiator of the Meteorological Flight, RAF Aldergrove, Sydenham, Belfast 1942. (Ernie Cromie)

Lough Neagh always had the potential to be a boat owner's paradise with its uncluttered waters almost without islands or mid-Lough shoals. Large enough indeed to lose all sight of land in hazy conditions, thus allowing the budding navigator scope to practise his expertise, arriving at the chosen harbour by the use of instruments only. However, due to the depression years of the 1920s and 1930s, plus the decline and closing of the various feeder canals, the Lough remained very scarce of private boating activity, although the professional fishing boats would have numbered around 200 at any time and still remain so today.

The early years

Due to the fact that it was an uncluttered waterway and with few users, great use was made of it during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, when it became a very concentrated practice range for fighter and bomber aircraft for air-to-ground and air-to-air gunnery exercises. The bulk of the aircraft using the ranges were stationed at Aldergrove aerodrome, which had been established in 1918. The writer's father Henry, an experienced professional net fisherman and boatbuilder

with similar ancestry reaching back into the mists of time, had just moved to Ardmore (in the Crumlin district), where his house and quay were in almost direct line with the main East/West runway at Aldergrove. He was asked to lay the first targets and service same as and when required in 1929.

During the early 1930s, bombing and gunnery practice was slow and leisurely, a kind of gentleman's pastime, a large proportion of the range time being taken up by the local No 502 (Ulster) Squadron, RAF Special Reserve, formed at Aldergrove on 15 May 1925. Between 1929 and 1936 the memory conjures up pictures of great lumbering bombers such as the Vickers Vimy, Vickers Virginia, Handley Page Heyford (which we christened "The Flying Hayshed"), Avro Ansons and Oxfords and, of course, the famous Gloster Gladiators of Malta fame. On the fighter front, the outstanding performers were the Hawker Fury and Hawker Hind biplanes: the latter had their forward-firing machine-guns synchronised to fire through the propeller. How we watched them each day to catch the moment when the system might fail and give us the glory of racing to rescue the pilot from the Lough in the flat-bottomed cot which we used for schoolboy eel fishing, and thereby become famous heroes! (What did you expect from 10 and 12 year olds living in wonderland?)

Bicycles racing bombers

The Vimys and Heyfords seemed so slow that my brother and I tried to race them on our bicycles along the shore road parallel to their route, whilst the stand-up gunner in his open cockpit complete with leather helmet and goggles waved us on. It was not unusual in those halcyon days to have pilots and gunners visit us in their open sports cars at weekends to meet their young bicycle-mounted rivals, and to discuss with our father the design and positioning of targets.

Biplanes such as the Fury and Hind were still widely used as trainers up until 1939. Early during this period the air gunnery targets were used by a squadron of Short Stranraer flyingboats. The floating targets were fitted with hessian screens and, after each gunnery mission, the flyingboat would land, taxi up to the target, tie up and count its own gunnery score! The whole thing seemed so natural.

New aeroplanes

This temporary piecemeal arrangement lasted until 1936, when the various governments and defence chiefs throughout Europe finally realised that their airforces would be no match for the rising war machine in the centre of Europe. They speeded up aircraft and armaments production and subsequently upgraded the range and number of targets required. RAF high-speed rescue launches were also introduced to Lough Neagh about this time. From 1936 to the late 1950s Lough Neagh became one of the most important air gunnery and bombing schools in the province.

Of great interest to our family and those who worked with us (many of whom were of local fishing stock) was the excitement and variety of every waking day! Who else was privy to the very latest developments in armaments and aircraft, displayed daily flying low over our heads when circling to dive once again on the row of eight air-gunnery targets just off our yard? They flew low enough for us to wave to the pilots and to be able to count every rivet and stitch on the underbelly of such new and exotic fighters and fighter bombers as the Hurricanes, Spitfires, Lysanders, Beauforts, Blenheims, Skuas, Mosquitos, Fairey Battles and Bostons, plus a few Thunderbolts and P38 Lightnings from the local USAF airbase established in 1941 at Langford Lodge.

Bombing and gunnery practice

A late evening pastime for us youngsters was collecting the day's spent cartridges from along the shoreline. Bombing targets formed a solid basis for concentrated use both from a low level (500ft) and also high level (around 10,000ft) aspect. These were harmless practice bombs which emitted a muffled sound and whitish smoke only. Special high-rise observation towers were constructed at several locations from Langford Lodge point to Ballyginniff to observe and record hits and misses. Records show that as many as 196 bombs were dropped in a single day. A short period of bombing, using live 1000lb bombs on a target in the centre of the Lough, had to be scrapped due to broken windows and shattered nerves on shore! Night bombing on to the Lough targets also developed and for this purpose the targets had to be fitted with dim lighting.

Due to the introduction of air-to-air gunnery from fighters firing on a drogue target towed by another aircraft, it was found necessary to lay out a rectangular area of approximately 15 miles by 5 miles bounded by 52 danger area mark buoys. This was a drastic measure which inconvenienced the professional fishermen who were producing much-needed food during the war, and no doubt there was friction at times between the fast RAF patrol boats and themselves, but from memory it seemed to resolve itself in that both sides learnt that sensible reading of the rules allowed both activities to survive side by side.

The towed target silk drogues mentioned above were often jettisoned by the towing aircraft well outside the aerodrome boundaries. These were worth five shillings each when returned to the operations hangar: good eyesight and a super bicycle were the tools of success and riches in this field.

Whilst servicing the above ring of danger area buoys the writer, along with six other crew members aboard the usual mooring-barge/towboat rig, were shelled by an artillery practice unit who possibly had no proper lookout on shore. Even ten minutes crouched behind a steel winch on the open deck of a slow-moving wooden barge is memorable!

Flying-boats

Another exciting activity on Lough Neagh was added in the formation of a flying-boat base in Sandy Bay in the shelter of Rams Island. We surveyed the entire bay before laying down twelve flying-boat moorings with special rubber buoys and pick-up harness, also a number of marine craft moorings for attendant vessels and refuellers, plus four flying-boat moorings east of Rams Island (sheltered from westerlies). In order to guide the flying-boats and marine craft out into the open Lough, a number of navigation buoys (gas-lit, flashing) were laid out, tracking to the north of Rams Island and also to the south. Sunderland flying boats used these moorings and service facilities for the remainder of the war.

Do I hear someone mention Foynes? Did Foynes ever reach the dizzy heights of having eleven flying-boat movements in one day? Yessir: we had as high as that during the year 1944 when there were US Coronado seaplanes supplying the large maintenance airfield at Langford Lodge and these seaplanes were flying between New York and Sandy Bay on a daily basis (daily log records of these movements are available). Deduction: Lough Neagh was the **first inland lake flying-boat base** in Ireland for use by **transatlantic seaplanes** on a daily basis! (Tongue in cheek!!) Most of these flights were in connection with D-day landings in Europe.

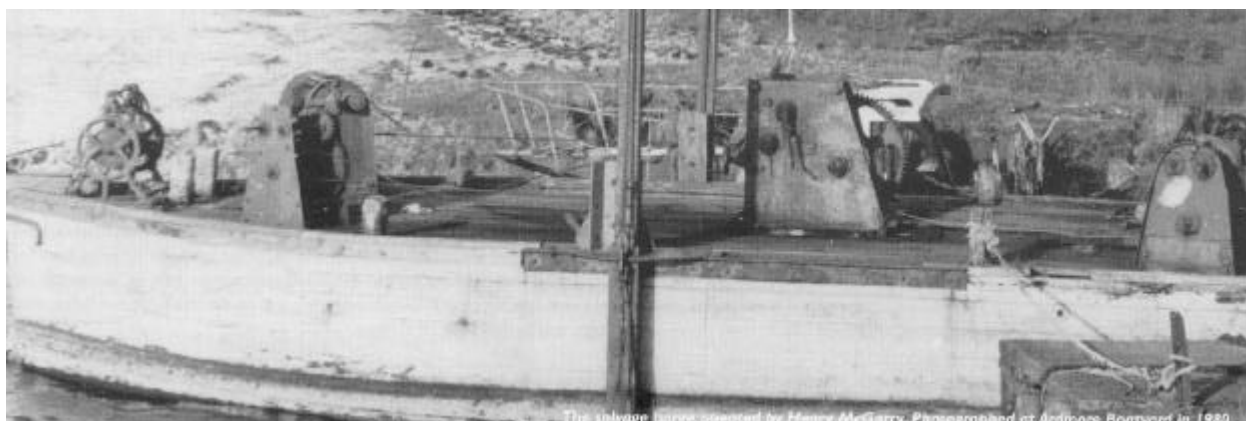
To complete the moorings story on Lough Neagh, mention must be made of the circular ring of buoys laid offshore at both Clontoe Airfield and Toome Airfield to assist aircraft find the main runways after dark. These lighted buoys were gas cylinder operated. In all there were seven military airfields closely surrounding Lough Neagh during the war: Aldergrove, Nutts Corner est 1941, Langford Lodge 1941; Clontoe 1941, Toomebridge 1942 and the military airfields of

Longkesh and Magabery in the Lisburn and Moira districts, which also used the target ranges on Lough Neagh.

Accidents

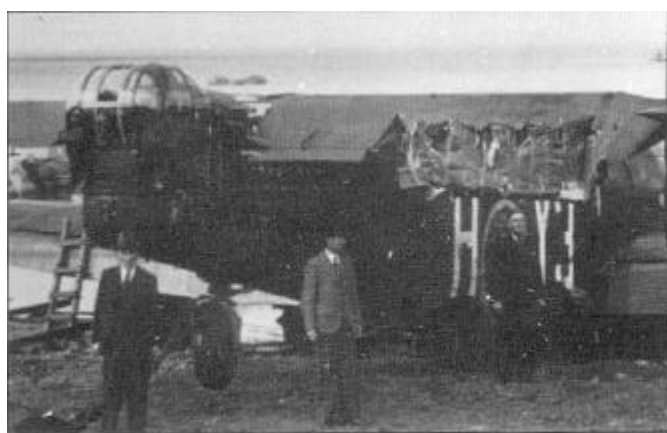
So much frantic flying activity, with often very new and scarcely tried out and tested aircraft and equipment, did naturally result in mishaps. Some accidents were as a result of very calm mirror-like conditions on the Lough surface, causing miscalculation of height above water, particularly when pulling out of a dive manoeuvre during imitation dog-fight exercises. One of these instances happened within 500 yards of where we were salvaging a Sunderland flyingboat near Rams Island in May 1943. A small Tiger Moth aircraft, on its way to a distant airfield with some tools, came down to have a closer look at our operation on this hot and dead calm day — and gently flew straight into the Lough, having lost concentration above the mirror surface.

A dash by our crew in an attendant boat secured the two crew members, who were taken ashore immediately. The salvage barge was released from the Sunderland and taken over to the new crash site where Charlie MaGee, the resident diver (who still lives locally), donned his heavy canvas suit, copper helmet and lead weighted boots and secured the lifting crane sling to the propeller boss in 30ft of water. When the Moth was winched to well above water, the barge proceeded ashore carrying the Tiger Moth like a tiger carries its cub. After leaving the Moth on shore, there was sufficient daylight left to return to the Sunderland salvage job and carry on working. Such was the trend during those war years: the job in hand had to be completed in good weather conditions regardless of hours worked, and 36 hours at a stretch was not uncommon.



The salvage barge operated by Henry McGarry. Photographed at Ardmore Boatyard in 1980.

We salvaged ten aircraft altogether in Lough Neagh up until 1948. Unfortunately most incidents were not of the comic variety as described above, but involved loss of life, intensified in some instances by salvage delays due to strong winds, and so these will not be discussed further in this article. Suffice it to say, however, that the divers and salvage crews (mostly from local fishing family stock) should receive the highest possible accolade for what they had to witness and endure during these operations.



Handley Page Halifax bomber which ditched and sank in Lough Neagh in 1948

Other activities

Lough Neagh also supported a torpedo firing range near Antrim, built and operated by the Navy (the old structure still stands). For many years the Navy operated a torpedo maintenance depot in Antrim, the finished product being tested by firing out into the Lough from the concrete structure sited some distance off shore.

Much commercial barge traffic also traversed the Lower Bann river and Lough Neagh bringing ammunition from Coleraine dockside to Lord O'Neills Shane's Castle estate, where it was stored in army type bunkers. One of the writer's most vivid memories is standing beside a cannon gun detachment just outside Crumlin village during the war years and watching whilst they bombarded a small island called Duck Island at the northern end of Rams Island. Hardly a conservation exercise as we know it today but, as they say, there was a war on!

Looking out on Lough Neagh today it is hard to visualise this amount of daily activity having been commonplace. For many of us who are old enough to have experienced those purposeful days, there will always be a nostalgia and wistfulness: not that warlike activities should be cherished or admired or hankered after, but there was an atmosphere of excitement, bustle and purpose which we hope will be rekindled shortly in another sense, through an influx of more peaceful and less aggressive citizens who will, we hope, with their diversity of craft and sheer numbers create something of lasting and memorable value in the minds of the Lough's youth of today.

Thanks to Ernie Cromie, Chairman of the Ulster Aviation Society, for the photographs used in this article and for the short article, below, about the Society.

I would like to finish this series with an article about the various seaplane tenders and related vessels, civil or military, that are still to be found on the Irish waterways. I would be grateful for information on any of the extant vessels, their histories and their current ownership, and for photographs. Ed.

