

Island Life during WW2

During World War Two the north west Highlands played a vital part in the longest battle of the war: the Battle of the Atlantic.

A Hebridean way of life

Hebridean life during World War II was a simple one. Small thatched housing was still common in some rural areas and was an unusual sight for travelling servicemen, as was the Highland culture. Gaelic was the predominant language and many islanders didn't speak a word of English. Transport was limited and many locals had never even visited the mainland before being sent to their military training. The notorious blackouts were never too much of an upheaval on the islands as electricity had not been introduced - electricity only arrived on the Isle of Skye in 1954. During wartime, hurricane lamps were the only source of lighting.

Nearly every Gael ran a small croft at this time, and self-sufficiency was universal. The rationing of sugar, fruit and butter were hard felt on the islands, but most families had their own hens and livestock, and fish was common on the daily menu. Strict wartime regulations on slaughtering livestock had been introduced, but most people didn't adhere to them. The main source of fuel for heating was peat, and peat cutting was traditionally a village affair. As the number of men called to service increased, women had to take over the hard labour and could be seen walking miles with large baskets of peat on their backs. Women also weaved tweed for clothing and bedding, and to this day the industry is one of the main incomes for the Western Isles.

Due to their northerly location, permission to get on and off the islands was not easily granted. Indeed, the Highlands and Islands were classed as a 'prohibited area', because it was seen as an ideal landing place for German spies. Photo ID cards were issued to everyone, and traffic was strictly monitored.

Culturally, the Hebrides always managed some lively entertainment even during wartime. The traditional ceilidh dancing usually lifted beleaguered spirits. Many servicemen stationed in Barra remember being at local dances with the whole community participating and locals offering 'politician' whisky for refreshment.

Military movements

From 1940-3, several military bases were established throughout the Outer Hebrides. Airstrips were based in Benbecula and Stornoway to enable substantial air coverage of the Atlantic. Smaller units were based in Barra and Loch Boisdale in South Uist.

The Western Isles were vital in overcoming German attacks, and no fewer than six U-boats were sunk in inland waters off the coast of the Outer Hebrides in the last year of the war. Submarines were known to patrol the deep waters in the Sound of Rona just off the coast of the Isle of Skye, which was regarded as a secret hiding place.

RAF Benbecula

The first RAF personnel arrived at RAF Benbecula in late 1941. At this time the base was still very basic. As it became bigger, Balivanich School was taken over as accommodation quarters for serving officers. A WT/DF signals section was located nearby on the Island of Suneval. The RAF base in Benbecula was instrumental in destroying German U-boats in the Atlantic, and in its first two years achieved brilliant results.

The camp at RAF Benbecula had a cinema that screened films once a week - a completely novel experience for the islanders. This cinema once held a 'world premiere' when the camp was sent an early copy of the film Henry V. It arrived on the mail plane and was screened almost an hour before the official premiere in Leicester Square, London.

RAF Stornoway

Stornoway's northerly location was ideal for observation and radar purposes, so the golf course was turned into an RAF airstrip. The officers' mess was shared with the Royal Navy at Lews Castle. The base here was once again vital in the Allied attacks on German U-boats. The airfield at Stornoway also acted as a staging post for US aircraft coming to the UK via Iceland. Small outstations, controlled by the base in Stornoway, were located slightly further north in the Butt of Lewis and in Barvas.

Post-War Hebridean life

The inhabitants of the Hebridean Islands inevitably encountered disruption and sorrow throughout the war - many local men died in battle and their losses were deeply felt in the close-knit communities. Nevertheless, the war also brought a new prosperity and enhanced the local way of life. The traditional values and culture remained, but the traditional tools and trades evolved. The war left new roads and airstrips, and better access to the mainland.

Reminiscences of World War II recorded by Marlene Gillies who was born and brought up on the Isle of Skye.