

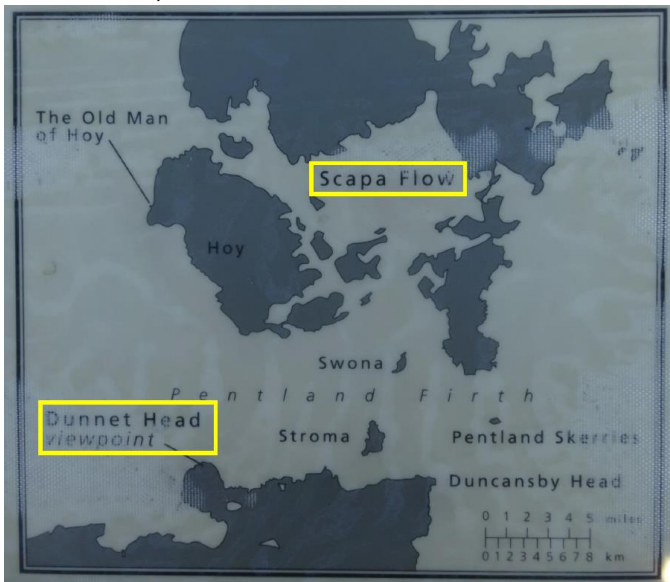


Reopening Scotland



As Scotland's very draconian Covid lockdown restrictions began to ease, in April, our government's guidance changed from "stay at home" to "stay local." Thus, rather than restricting my walks to the local windfarm (which is not a bad place at all, with lots of paths and very peaceful and scenic), I was able to expand my walks to some broader explorations, across our home county of Caithness. Specifically, I went looking for the remains of some World War 2 installations.

During WW2, the British Navy was based on the body of water which is at the center of the Orkney Islands, and is known as Scapa Flow. You may recall from previous newsletters, that we can see the Orkney Islands, from our kitchen window. Between us and the islands, you can see the most northerly promontory of Great Britain, Dunnet Head.



I should add that those of you who think that John O'Groats is the most northerly point in mainland Scotland, have been misled. Dunnet Head is actually farther north, but it is mostly barren and has no PR department. So, John O'Groats gets all the press. At any rate, the head is only about a half hour drive from home, so it was an easy place to expand my walks once lockdown eased.

Because of its location, Dunnet was the home for two British military bases during the war. At the top of Burifa Hill was an impressive radio communications center. From the only road up the peninsula, you do not see any trace of this, so I decided to go looking to see what I could find hidden in the golden gorse.



What I found at the top of the hill blew my mind: the remains of over 50 structures. This base was one of several that were used to assist with radio communication and navigational signals for the planes of Bomber Command as they flew missions to the European mainland. It housed hundreds of personnel from the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). As I climbed the hill, I passed the bare foundations where Nissen huts once stood. The half-cylindrical metal tubes that formed what served as walls and roof are long gone. But the concrete floors can still be found spread all around the lower parts of the hill. Not much of interest here, except for two aspects: 1.) the latrines, where broken white porcelain from the toilets and holes leading down to the cesspits can still be seen.





And 2.) The brick structures that served to hold the fires that generated the heat to keep the structures warm.



And outside of the building were 4 unusually shaped concrete pyramids, which upon closer inspection, contained the remains of steel; beams cast into the concrete.



As I continued up the hill, I found a more intact structure. It was roofless, but the three-brick-thick walls had survived the best attempts of time, wind and vandals to knock them down.





That made it clear that these pads had been the base of a steel-truss radio tower, and the building must have housed the operational equipment for that tower. As I walked the circumference of the hill, I found four of these building and tower pairs. So back in those days, four tall radio towers must have stabbed their way into the northern sky.

There was one additional building that had me briefly confused. It was also three bricks thick, but had provisions for tables inside. At first, I thought it might have been the commissary where meals were served. But with a bit of research, I uncovered the fact that it was more likely what was referred to as the “engine room” where motor-generator sets were attached to metal tables attached to the top of the concrete bases. This is where the power to run the station would have come from.



It was odd to imagine that so many people had once lived here, in the midst of this barren peninsula. They must have thought that they had been sent to a vast northern wasteland at the end of the earth. Sometimes it feels that way here. But it is beautiful when you come to know it.



I did find a few WW2 souvenirs amongst the rubble.



After Burifa Hill, I headed off to the tip of Dunnet Head where another base existed during the war. This one was a radar and observation station tasked with trying to detect German U-Boats trying to sneak through the gaps in the Orkney Islands to reach Scapa Flow where they could have caused unimaginable damage to the British Fleet.

Things at this site are a bit more intact, as the buildings that remain are all still under-roof, and several are obviously used for storage by the local inhabitants.



One Structure that is not in use by locals, is the underground bunker that would have been used in the event of a German bomb attack.



All around the Caithness coastline, you stumble upon WW2 observation posts of various shapes and sizes, as during that period, watchers were posted to keep an eye open for German ships or airplanes trying to reach British shores.



There were also defensive installations built to defend against invasions of the Caithness coast. There were large concrete blocks installed to make it difficult for enemy boats to come ashore.



Here is an overview of the entire beach and the yellow arrow points to a pillbox built for gunners to cover the beach with defensive fire in the event of an enemy landing. The next few pictures show it from various views.



Including a photo with a look inside. It would appear that a few of the locals have used it for some impromptu beer parties.



The second site was east of the village of Reay and after the war it became the site of the Dounreay nuclear power plant, which in the fifties and sixties was one of the most advanced nuclear facilities in the free world. Some of the runways and access roads are still in use, even as the site is being decommissioned now.

The third site, east of Castletown, is now in use as a farm, with crumbled runways in the fields, and a few of its structures slowly falling down.



There were also three air bases in Caithness. The largest of them was just north of the town of Wick and today has been converted into the island's most northern commercial airport. However, there are still a few signs of its military beginnings. Along the boundary the munitions storage bunker and the remains of some Nissen huts can still be seen.



Early in the war, Wick fell victim to some of the first German bombs to be dropped on Britain. These bombs demolished a number of buildings along Bank Street. Eighteen people were killed, mostly children who were playing along the street. Because it was early in the war, warning systems for incoming bombers were not in place, so the town was taken by surprise. Today, Memorial Garden, on Bank Street, commemorates this event.



In order to try to protect the operations at Wick Airport, a fake airport was constructed on a hill south of the village of Sarclet. It included buildings, and fake runways, fake airplanes and vehicles, and real personnel, in order to make it appear to be an operational base. While the real base at Wick would be under blackout conditions at night, the Sarclet site would keep enough lights on to draw the attention of incoming enemy aircraft in an attempt to draw the bombs away from the real facility at Wick.



As you travel across the county, periodically you can see structures remaining from the war. Usually, they are just standing in the middle of fields.



But occasionally, they have been converted for use as part of farms, like this next photo shows.



One of the more interesting WW2 stories that I have heard is the “Secret Army” that existed across the far north. One must understand that the country truly believed that the Germans would inevitably invade Britain. And the far north was one of the most likely sites for such an invasion, because of its sparse population.

So, in preparation for fighting a guerilla war against the invaders of an occupied Britain, men who were not subject to going into the armed forces, were formed into small, secret groups. These men, mostly WW1 veterans, did not even know who the members of other neighboring groups were. Each small team had access to a secret bunker in a hidden location, in which were stored the essential weapons needed to conduct such activities.

While I have yet to actually locate one of these bunkers in Caithness, I believe that I found one on one of my hikes a bit further afield. Of course, the end with the door would have been obscured by brush.



Apparently a surviving member of the one of the small teams once told of practicing how to attack a tank using a clapped out Austin 7 sports car to simulate the tank.

A number of the local museums and heritage centers have displays of World War 2 artifacts such as gas masks, weapons, instruments, and other things a soldier might carry.



In previous newsletters, I have included photos of the World War memorials in various villages throughout the Highlands. Well, it wasn't just towns and villages. The two shown here are memorials erected on two of the estates which existed here a hundred years ago in memory of those who lived on the estate and died in battles of either WW1 or WW2.



