

## Bleak Christmas at MAEE

Written by Donald Fullarton - Last Updated Saturday, 11 December 2010 17:19

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MAEE Helensburgh was dreading the prospect of a white Christmas in 1941.

The Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishment secretly moved to the Helensburgh area from Felixstowe when war broke out in 1939, with work being carried out at Rhu Hangers.

MAEE Helensburgh was one of the best kept secrets of World War Two, and it is only recently that tales of what happened at the establishment and to the men who worked there have started to come to light.

It was under intense pressure from the Ministry of Aircraft Production to devise and test weapons to sink the U-Boats that threatened to defeat Britain.

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Snow, ice and freezing fog made flying conditions dangerous and often prevented aircraft from taking off on the Gareloch. Even during flight, seaplane engines could freeze and splutter to a halt, with fatal consequences for MAEE aircrew.

The winter of 1941-42 was one of the coldest on record in Scotland, says Robin Bird, author of a book about MAEE.



His father, Bob Bird, wore RAF issue flying jacket and trousers for his duties as an airborne photographer with MAEE.

It was so cold that once, when flying in a Walrus seaplane, Bob took off a glove to change the lens on the K20 camera.

His fingers immediately stuck to the metal camera case because of the extreme cold, causing frost bite. Bob was in hospital for a couple of days and given a week's leave to convalesce.

Bob's wartime diary tells of a bitterly cold 1942 New Year, but he also tells of the warm hospitality extended by residents of Helensburgh.

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Bob was billeted in digs in William Street, just off the seafront, and within walking distance of the MAEE headquarters at what is now the Royal Northern and Clyde Yacht Club.

He became friendly with the Drake family in Helensburgh, who welcomed the young photographer into their home on January 9 1942, for a slap up meal including soup, lobster and jelly. "It was the first decent meal since I arrived here," Bob wrote.

At a New Year's Dance in Helensburgh on January 15, Bob met two friendly twin sisters and danced with them. Who were the Drakes? Who were the twin sisters?

Whoever they were, the kindness of the people of Helensburgh was much appreciated by the 20 year-old bachelor a long way from his London home.



The weather caused several aircraft to crash, but such incidents were hush hush and subject to the Official Secrets Act, which Bob had signed.

Highlights in Bob's diary for 1942 including his 21st birthday and marriage to childhood sweetheart Thea, and they spent their honeymoon on Loch Lomondside. The couple are

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pictured (*right*).

In the spring of 1943 Bob was posted to an airfield at Sherburn-in-Elmet, Yorkshire, to photograph rehearsals for the largest airborne invasion ever staged — D-Day.

Robin says: “My father never returned to Helensburgh, but he always remembered both the bitter cold and the warm hospitality he experienced there.”

Another tragedy took place in December 1945, when townsfolk would have been looking forward to the first peaceful festive season since the war began. By then the move back to Felixstowe was almost completed.

The flying boats had gone, but low level bomb and depth charge testing continued. MAEE operated bombers and fighter bombers from Helensburgh until the end of the year.

On December 6 Douglas Boston bomber B2332 was conducting bomb fuse trials flying just 30ft above sea level in the Firth of Clyde to drop 250 pound bombs. One explosion wrecked the aircraft, killing its crew.

Similar low level flights claimed other MAEE lives that winter at Helensburgh with the added irony that war had ended.



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