

## ODIN Archive Of The Month April 2011

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### The Post Office Went to War

This month's archive is a new item which we received in September 2010. It is a booklet entitled, "The Post Office Went to War" by Ian Hay, published in 1946 by HMSO. In his foreword in the book, the author states that he was requested by the Postmaster General to compile "this little record of Post Office service during the years of the war" in order to highlight the wonderful work done by the Post Office in hard times. He goes on to say that "I rise from my task a confirmed Post Office fan".

The chapter I have copied to you describes Orkney's contribution to this task. Other chapters in this 94 page booklet cover London, General Post, Military Mail, Wires and Wireless, Engineers and Calais View.

If you would like to see the rest of the booklet, please pop by and ask for reference D1/1094

Other archives we have relating to the Post Office in wartime are:

D87/3            Post Office Records    1913-1947  
                  Decisions, Instructions, Orders, Kirkwall Office

D87/4            Post Office Records    1926-1947  
                  Decisions, Instructions, Orders, Kirkwall Area

D87/6            Post Office Records    1940-1945  
                  Post Office daily diary

D31/20/3/46   Ernest Walker Marwick Collection    19 Jun 1969  
                  Award of British Empire Medal to Isaac Moar, Post Office, Hoy

OSA/373        Orkney Sound Archive        c.1980-1993  
                  ROSIE, Alan Topics: Demob, journey home, restless, finding work, post office telephones, Suez crises, pulling a flanker, borrowed feathers, gunnery changes, Suez crises, hailstones, sunburn, malaria.

Audio cassette: Summary of contents and transcription available.

Mr Rosie was born in 8 High Street, Kirkwall in 1919 youngest of 10 children, father belonged to St.Margaret's Hope, mother Foubister, East Breckan, Holm. Father a tailor to trade. During WWII he worked on several wartime projects before joining the 226 HAA Battery at Rysa, Lyness.

# THE POST OFFICE

ECONOMY  
LABEL

*Wm. Peter Skayton*  
*Post*

DI/1094

FROM  
(Name  
and  
Address)

Fold along the dotted line. Affix label so as to seal envelope and cover the old address, postmarks, etc.

TO OPEN LETTER SLIT  
ALONG THE TOP EDGE

*D. J. Mackie*

TO

*Dear Sir*  
*May 67.*

*Please return this*  
*I have others*  
*@m*

the current  
of a vast  
ey centers  
The  
ken by the  
vice.

Allied Ex-  
to thru my  
n and for  
e excellent  
ness.

*W. Peter Skayton*

M.P.,

1/3  
NET

# WENT TO WAR

ORKNEY ARCHIVES: REFERENCE DI/1094

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## Chapter 8



### FARTHEST NORTH

NOW FOR ONE final visit, and our tale is told.

Time brings its revenges, especially in a period of total war. From 1940 to 1945 Orkney and Shetland, dismissed to oblivion in ancient times as Ultima Thule, or "Back of Beyond," found themselves very much in the picture—even though that picture was kept shrouded, for security reasons, in the northern mists.

It is with Orkney that this closing chapter is concerned. Few of the inhabitants of the adjacent island of Great Britain have ever penetrated to that distant region or made the acquaintance of its sturdy, kindly, independent folk. Its shores in peace-time were reached from London only after an interminable land journey, followed by the crossing of a particularly inhospitable arm of the sea known as the Pentland Firth. So the English holiday-maker (Scottish, too, for that matter) went to Blackpool or Dunoon instead.

As a matter of fact, Orkney first became real "news" during what was once known as the Great War, when its strategic importance, from 1914 to 1918, was summed up for most of us in the mystic words, "Scapa Flow." Nobody quite knew where Scapa Flow was, or where it flowed to; but it was generally understood that it was some sort of haven in which the Grand Fleet could repose during its off-hours, secure against

that new and previously underrated terror of ocean warfare, the submarine.

Once, in the summer of 1917 I had occasion to visit Orkney for myself, and there was revealed to me an archipelago of undulating green islands, where ever the wind blew strongly but where there were compensating days of calm and heavenly sunshine.

The islands all had names—fascinating Norse-sounding names like Hoy and Ronaldshay and Flotta and Shapinsay, and, best of all, Papa Stronsay. Certain of these had been so disposed by Nature as to enclose a sheet of water some ten miles square, providing a safe and roomy anchorage for shipping of every kind. And that was Scapa Flow.

The most considerable of the islands, Mainland (or Pomona), furnished the northern and eastern edges of the Flow. On the west lay Hoy, loftier than the rest and buttressed against the Atlantic rollers on its outer flank by red cliffs 1,200 feet high. South Ronaldshay and Flotta filled the southern gap. The net result was an almost landlocked harbour pierced here and there by narrow entrances, any of which could be sealed at will.

The difference between the Orkney of that day and this lay in the circumstance that Orkney in 1917 was purely a naval stronghold, from which the Grand Fleet could exercise general supervision over the North Sea and the Jutland coast, together with the sea-lanes that led, between Shetland and Ireland, to the North Atlantic and the American trade routes.

The atmosphere of war was thus confined to the Flow itself. Ashore, Orkney remained as Arcadian as ever, a land of green fields

and purple heather, dotted with grazing cattle and sheep and the scratching-ground of innumerable domestic fowls. There was little or no danger of invasion, and the menace of the air was negligible.

But Time Marches On, especially where the invention of new engines of war is concerned. In 1940, after Dunkirk, the strategic situation so far as Orkney was concerned reversed itself completely. The Hun now occupied the whole western coast of Europe from the North Cape to Bordeaux, and Orkney, lying less than 300 miles from Norway, offered an obvious and convenient springboard for the invasion of Britain itself. Plainly there was no time to lose. An adequate military garrison must be installed, aerodromes laid out, and the anti-aircraft defences reinforced, especially in the neighbourhood of the Flow.

In other words, Orkney must be converted without delay into a strongly fortified naval, military and air base, equal only in scope and importance to Malta.

And it was so, though not all at once.

## II

This brings us to the part, the quite indispensable part, played in the organisation of the Orcadian defence scheme by the Post Office. But before going into routine details, let us consider the effect of the sudden and tremendous upheaval of 1940 upon the life of Orkney itself.

There was a population of about 23,000, destined in the course of two years to be almost trebled. An immediate and increasing strain was thus thrown upon its existing postal services. The islands possessed but two towns, Kirkwall and Stromness, each equipped with a full-scale post office, post-master, and modest staff; but throughout the other islands were scattered numerous sub-post offices, most of them housed in a small shop of some kind, where postal business was handled as a sideline.

Collection and delivery of mail presented a difficult problem at the best of times, for

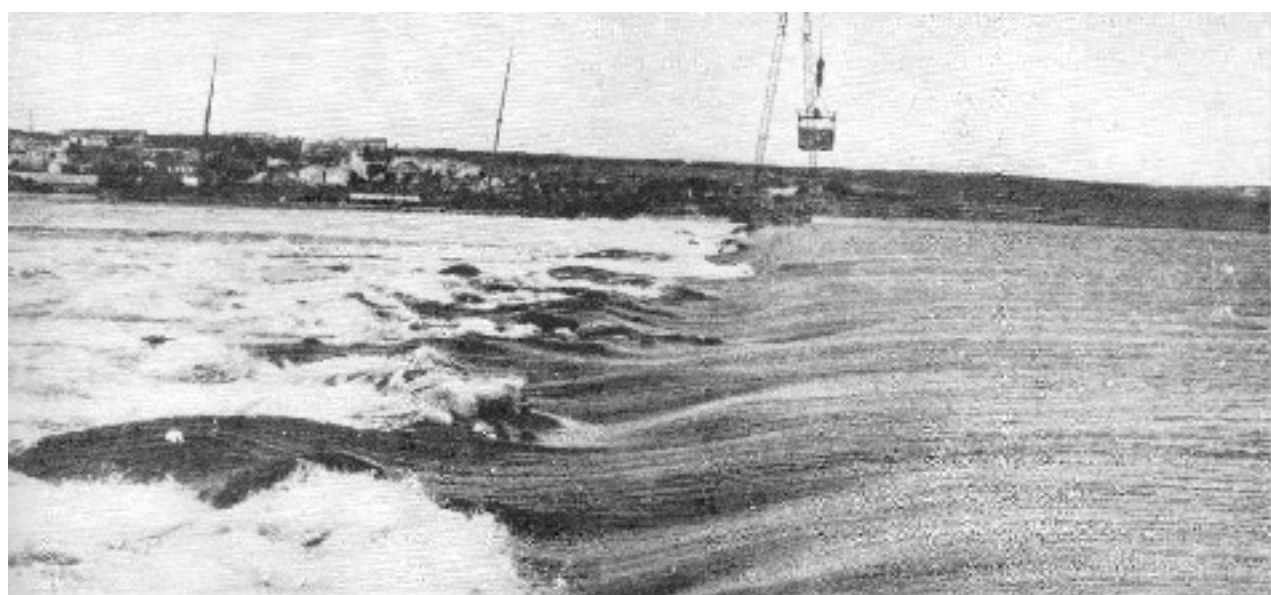
Orkney was so cut up by the sea that the most direct route to many outlying postal districts was by ferry or rowing-boat. Some of these obstacles in 1939 had already been surmounted by the use of aircraft: indeed, Orkney can boast of being the first postal area in Great Britain to establish a regular internal air-mail service.

Upon this remote and widely scattered community there descended in 1940 a motley host of infantry soldiers, Ack-Ack gunners, searchlight units, dock labourers, and contractor's gangs constructing aerodromes and erecting huts. The Navy, of course, were there already, for the Flow had long been the headquarters of the Home Fleet.

All this exiled throng received letters and parcels from home, and sent even more letters and parcels in return. (Eggs, it appears, became a most prominent article of export.) Between 1938 and 1942 the number of parcels delivered annually grew from 30,000 to 164,000, with letter-mail increases in proportion. This conferred upon Stromness Post Office the dubious distinction of being the office which showed the greatest increase of business in all Scotland. At one time no less than fifty different Service units were sending an orderly each morning to call for mail. So great was the congestion created by these emissaries at the counter that their visitations had to be "staggered."

The chief difficulty, as usual, was to gather sufficient staff, for in war-time, as most of us have good cause to know, help is hard to get and easy to lose. The first defection from the ranks had already occurred, for at the outbreak of war one of the postal clerks at Stromness had joined up and disappeared overseas. (He has since gained the Military Medal for conspicuous gallantry, thus conferring distinction upon his former profession; but his departure at that time reduced the available staff at Stromness by 33½ per cent.)

As the work grew it was found possible for a time to make shift with boys and part-timers. But the boys achieved military age and vanished into the blue, while the part-



*The tidal race at Scapa*

timers became whole-timers, at rates far beyond anything that the Post Office could offer, in the dockyard or with the contractors' gangs. In the end the bulk of the work was taken over, as elsewhere, by women, and carried out with remarkable efficiency and grit. Soldiers' wives did particularly good service here.

Emphasis should be laid on the grit, for the work was arduous and unceasing. Overtime, as such, ceased to exist. Everybody just went on until a mail was cleared, it might be towards breakfast-time next morning. Upon a single night during the Christmas season of 1940 no less than 600 sacks of mail were handled in Stromness Post Office alone.

Another and resulting problem was the provision of accommodation for the bags. Every spare corner was utilised both for sorting and storing—cyclo-sheds, garages, even retiring-rooms. (You cannot leave His Majesty's Mails lying about in the open.) Party-walls were torn down, pier-shed accommodation begged or borrowed.

Transport was a further difficulty. Letters could travel by air, but parcels had to be conveyed across the Pentland Firth by the passenger and mail drifter *St. Ola*, and some-

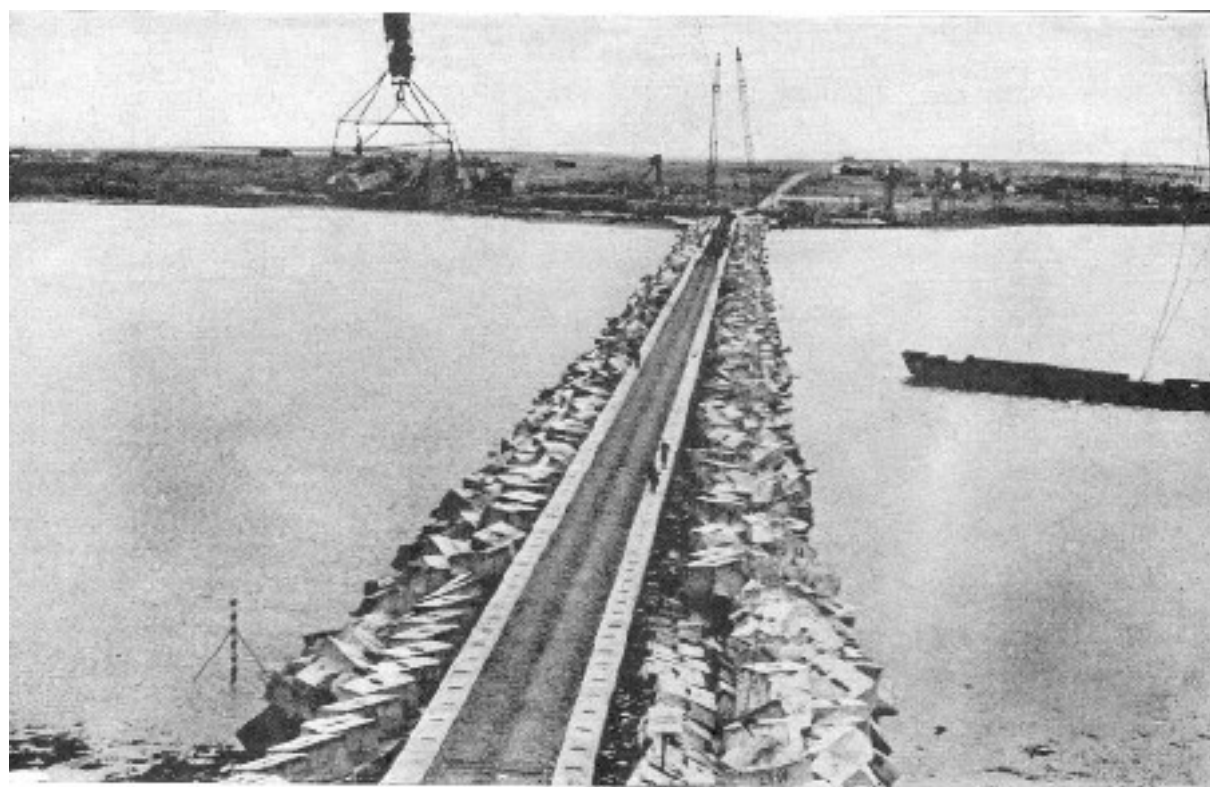
times the little ship could not accommodate all the mail. Here the Services were helpful, as well they might be. An appeal to a benevolent Movement Officer was usually sufficient to procure space for surplus mail-bags in the official ferry-steamers which plied daily between Stromness and Scrabster, the railhead in Caithness. Indeed, friendly co-operation was the order of the day, and the secret of success, in Orkney, from first to last.

### III

One of the severest mass headaches incurred by the postal authorities at this time arose from a suggestion disseminated by a benevolent devotee of Army Welfare that soldiers should register all their letters and parcels, "as I always do."

As a direct consequence the number of registered letters posted in Orkney in a year jumped from about 3,000 to 38,000, and of parcels from 676 to over 60,000, with corresponding increases upon the inward route.

As explained elsewhere, every letter and parcel sent by registered post has to be separately handled and entered in a book; so the extra strain imposed upon post-office workers by this well-meaning but catastrophic



*Сопри сопосеау*

counsel can be imagined. There was a night upon which the special annexe in Stromness Post Office set aside for registered letters and parcels was filled thrice from a single mail, and the work went on until daylight. One woman member of the staff came on duty at two o'clock that afternoon and toiled until seven o'clock next morning. She confessed afterwards that she retained no recollection whatever as to how she got home. But she was back on duty again at 2 p.m.

Another and unforeseen complication was furnished by a phenomenal rise in the number of telegraph money-orders despatched, especially from one district—the newly jumped-up port and base of Lyness.

In 1933 Lyness was a solitary, snipe-haunted spit of land projecting into the Flow from the island of Hoy, opposite Flotta. By the end of 1942 it was entirely covered by a sprawling "Boom-town" of Nissen huts, shacks, derricks and oil tanks, together with a church, a cinema, various welfare establish-

ments, and, of course, a post office. It was peopled by soldiers, Royal Marines, Wrens, dockyard workers, and contractors' gangs engaged in erecting huts and laying out aerodromes—a total running into several thousands.

All were expatriates, cut off for an indefinite period from their kith and kin; and they soon contracted the habit of sending home a considerable portion of their weekly pay. The most convenient way of putting this commendable practice into effect was by telegraph money-order.

Each and all of these emergencies were dealt with as they arose, and by the end of 1942 had been duly transferred from the region of hasty improvisation to the beaten path of regular routine.

But there was one emergency for which, though it never arose, most careful provision had to be made, and that was the possible invasion and occupation of Orkney itself.

Orkney and Shetland, it should be noted,



were under the supreme control of the Royal Navy, the Army and Air Force submitting themselves to the authority of "Acas," the Admiral Commanding Orkney and Shetland; and that authority had laid it down that in the event of enemy occupation of the Orkney group as many of the civil population as possible were to be evacuated to some of the more distant islands.

Here was another and almost final straw for the broad back of the Head Postmaster, for a transference of population to fresh fields involves the transference *in toto* of that population's postal amenities, and all that the term implies.

So a Provisional Evacuation Form was issued to each household concerned, in which prospective evacuees were invited to state their age, calling, and preference for this island of refuge or that. They were told what to take with them in the way of essential documents and clothing: they were even asked if they wished to be accompanied by dogs, cats, or other pet animals. Finally, they were reminded to turn off the gas, water, and electricity before locking up and assembling on Kirkwall Pier.

In due course the forms were filled in and returned, and the whole scheme, duly cut and dried, was laid by against ultimate emergency. Provision was also made by the Post Office for a large supply of shilling and sixpenny postal orders, in case (as might very well happen) the supply of change should run short.

This particular emergency, as it happened, never arose.

#### IV

Mention has been made more than once of the completeness of liaison maintained at all times between the Post Office and the Services. And this brings us to the particular relationship existing in Orkney between the Post Office and the Royal Navy.

The home of the sailor is on the water, and his frequent goings and comings make it

difficult to arrange for any regular delivery or collection of his mail. So special provision had to be made for this floating population.

Mail destined for the land-dwellers at Lyness and elsewhere was disembarked at Stromness (which lay outside the boom which guards the Flow) and distributed from the Stromness Post Office. But the Naval post office lay within the Flow itself, upon the former Capelinier *Dunlace Castle*, the Fleet Mail-ship, so called, and from her you could buy a stamp, send a telegram, or even telephone, as easily as on shore.

Observe her now as she lies at anchor a mile or so out from Lyness, with launches and picket-boats clustered round her like chickens round a hen. It is three o'clock in the afternoon and a particularly busy moment, for the inward mail has recently arrived and the outward mail is ready for shipment.

Within the space upon her after-deck, specially enclosed for the purpose, lie the newly arrived mailbags, each clearly marked with the name of the ship to which it is consigned. (We first made the acquaintance of these, it will be remembered, at Mount Pleasant.) Some of them can and will be distributed forthwith; the rest must wait, for the various units of the vast Home Fleet are very seldom all at home together. To-day, for instance, no destroyers are to be seen: doubtless they are hunting U-boats somewhere, or throwing a party off the coast of Norway.

But wherever they are and whatever they are doing, one thing is certain. When they return (exhibiting possibly some honourable scars), the first thing they will clamour for is mail. So the Post Office always endeavours to be ready, yea, more than ready, for these importunate clients. As often as not the first sight which greets a returning flotilla is the Fleet Mail drifter chugging out to meet it, loaded to capacity with mailbags.

And, of course, the *Dunlace Castle* has to deal with the outgoing mails too. These are even now being stowed in the hold of the *St. Ninian*, the Fleet ferry-ship, lying along-



*Christmas Mail for the Fleet on H.M.S. "Dunluce Castle"*

side and all set to go. The last mailbag is being lowered and the leave-party are on board. (The *St. Ninian* combines the offices of leave-ship and mail carrier.)

Presently the hatches are closed. The crowded little ship casts loose and moves slowly off towards the submarine gateway which guards Hoxa Sound, on her short but not always tranquil voyage to Scrabster. Here the leave-party will be transferred to *Jellicoe*—or rather *H.M.S. Jellicoe*, the express train which runs daily from Thurso to London, on the longest through journey in Great Britain.

With them will travel the mailbags, conveying messages of comfort and cheer to countless sweethearts and wives.

## V

One other enterprise should here be mentioned in which Navy and Post Office

operated in close accord—the interception of contraband.

Throughout the war, and in particular in the days prior to Pearl Harbour and its historic sequel, an unending gulf-stream of contraband articles—material, that is, of value to enemy war effort—flowed stealthily across the North Atlantic in neutral vessels bound for neutral ports, there to be redirected to Germany. These articles came not only in parcels and packets, but even by letter post. Many, of a bulkier nature, were smuggled across under faked manifests and bills of lading.

Sometimes the contraband took human shape. Many a stoker or foc'sle hand with a Swedish name and no papers contrived by this route to convey himself to his native Germany, there to add himself to the forces of Hitlerism.

So the British Naval Contraband Control Service got to work, with headquarters at Kirkwall, conveniently situated on the





*The Admiral inspects the mail*

eastern side of Mainland. In their quest for contraband conveyed by mail they naturally required and received the aid of the Post Office.

The procedure was simple and uniform. A naval officer, with a guard of ten men or so, would intercept and board a ship from which mail was to be moved for examination. Hatches were taken off and the mail transferred, in the presence of the ship's officers, to the drifter which served as tender. The British officers checked the bags as they left the hold—there might be as many as a thousand of these—and handed a receipt to the chief officer of the ship.

At Kirkwall the tender was met by Post Office lorries. The bags were then re-checked, this time by the officer and the Post Office official jointly. The postal official then signed a receipt, and the responsibility of the Navy ended until time came for reshipment.

But though the procedure was simple its

implications were not. Search for contraband is intensely irritating to neutrals, especially to well-disposed neutrals carrying innocent cargoes. Insistence on the Right of Search at sea has precipitated serious wars before now. It was largely responsible for the bitter but indecisive Anglo-American War of 1812, and it strained Anglo-American relations almost to breaking-point in 1915-16—a fact of which British visitors to the United States during that period were made painfully aware.

But it has to be done, and the men who do it must be endowed with certain conspicuous qualities. The two essentials are patience and good humour in handling the general situation, and the utmost expedition in the examination of the mail itself. And so efficiently and tactfully did the Navy and Post Office work together that they contrived from first to last to discharge their responsible and thankless task with the minimum of friction or delay.

## VI

There are no trees in Orkney, but to-day there is a wealth of telegraph-poles, and their presence is symbolic of the scientific miracle which has been achieved.

In 1939 Orkney had, of course, long been connected with Scotland and Shetland by cable, though it was not a cable that could accommodate a rush of traffic; and there was an adequate internal telegraph and telephone service within the Orkney group itself. The number of telephone instruments then installed worked out at about seven to each ten square miles. To control this service in 1939 a staff of four sufficed. In 1944 130 engineers, electricians and linemen were required; to whom must be added some forty Italian prisoners of war employed as labourers. The number of telephone instruments in operation now averaged about 500 to each ten square miles.

One of the earliest and most laborious tasks to be undertaken in 1939 as a preliminary to this vast scheme of expansion was that of laying a continuous underground cable right round Scapa Flow, a perimeter of about a hundred miles. To unwind a stiff cable from its drum and lay it down evenly and lastingly calls for skilled craftsmanship and considerable technical equipment, including a powerful motor-tractor. An earthenware duct is also desirable, through which to thread the cable.

But few of these refinements were available in 1939, for they were more urgently needed elsewhere; so the first lengths of cable were buried roughly underground, the unrolling drum being pushed by hand or even towed by oxen.

To-day everything is in place. The cable, comfortably cradled and long ago duplicated, extends right round the Flow, taking to the water when it comes to a ferry-crossing, and maintaining an unbroken circuit. It forms the nucleus of a vast network of telecommunication through which every Ack-Ack battery, every searchlight site, every naval

and military operations room, every radio-location station or cable hut, even warships at anchor in the Flow, can communicate with one another and, indeed, with stations far beyond the bounds of Orkney, both by telephone and telegraph.

Let us conclude with a brief tour of inspection.

We will begin with a short visit to one of the Post Office cable huts, set in a quiet corner of Mainland. Within this hut the shore-ends of the cables are attached to the submarine cables proper. Along these, telephone and telegraph messages can be transmitted to Scotland, Shetland, and tiny Fair Isle, lying midway between Orkney and Shetland. To Scotland fifty speech-channels and thirty-five telegraph-channels are available; to Shetland sixteen and fifteen respectively, and to Fair Isle three and three. Only four of these, all told, were in existence before the war.

The vital importance of this unpretentious building lies in the fact that it constitutes a bottleneck. A skilful saboteur given a free hand here for five minutes could isolate Orkney from the outside world pretty thoroughly, so it is guarded all round the clock by a detail of Military Police, assisted by watchdogs.

Next, following the land-cable backwards towards its source, we come to the Scapa circle and the Flow itself.

On the way we will pay a visit to a substantial camouflaged building known as the Communications Centre—or less respectfully, "Gaumont British." The upper part is occupied by a large hall, similar in appearance and layout to one of the Fighter Control Stations established throughout Britain at the beginning of the war to deal with visits from hostile aircraft. (There is a similar but much larger centre in the underground fortress which we visited at Dover.)

Waafs in their blue shirt-sleeves sit round a huge table whose top is a large-scale map of the Orkney area, plotting the course of any aircraft in the neighbourhood. Each girl

wears earphones which keep her in touch with various sources of outside information; and whenever she receives warning of an enemy (or for that matter friendly) visitation, she places a numbered coloured chip or pointer on the map to indicate the position, altitude and number of the visitants, moving it about from time to time, with a sort of croupier's rake, in accordance with the promptings of Radar.

The scene rather resembles that in the Operations Room of the Coastal Control Station at the bottom of the Ninety-Eight Steps—with this important difference.

In "Gaumont British" we are dealing not with ships but aeroplanes, and a placard saying "Situation at 11 a.m." would be hopelessly inadequate; for the situation here has to be re-appreciated not from hour to hour but from minute to minute. This duty is performed by an ingenious system of colour changes, thus:—

Upon the wall is a large clock, its face divided into twenty sectors covering three minutes each. Each sector is distinguished from the next by being coloured in a different hue, which gives the clock-face a pleasantly harlequin expression. While the minute hand is passing through (say) a red sector, all the chips on the map have to carry a red tag or label. The moment it passes into the next sector—blue, perhaps—the girls round the table immediately exchange the red tags for blue; and so on all round the clock. Thus the picture can never become "stale," for no situation can ever be more than three minutes old.

The Group Captain, looking down from the gallery above, is furnished with a complete visual reproduction of the state of the heavens at any given moment, and can take appropriate action. This he does either by sending up fighters or by passing the word to the Gun Operations Room next door, where Royal Artillery personnel stand waiting, in direct telephonic communication with the Ack-Ack batteries. To these batteries the Artillery commander can pass the necessary

directions, and a series of coloured flashes from an electric chart of the gun sites shows when and how often they are fired.

One last word should be added here about that uncanny device which enables a defending force to detect the proximity of hostile aircraft or submarines—or, for that matter, icebergs. In other words, Radiolocation, or Radar. The Post Office assisted with the development of Radar, fitted much special subsidiary equipment at Radar stations, and installed large numbers of telephone lines between these stations and the various control centres utilising their services. In addition to this, the Post Office engineers developed and installed equipment for calculating the position and height of aircraft from the data given by the Radar receiver; designed and fitted the aerial switching mechanism; and even devised equipment which enabled the "calculator," without human intervention, to transmit its results to distant points by teleprinter.

## VII

Now we come to the Flow itself. Let us embark upon H.M. Drifter *Ocean Pearl*, and take a short cruise among the shipping, great and small.

Upon the forward deck of most of the larger warships you may behold a coloured buoy, from which a slim, snake-like length of cable descends over the side into the water. This is the ship's telecommunication link. As soon as she arrives in the Flow the buoy is hoisted on board and contact established with the outside world. Post Office officials still relate with pride how the first American ship-of-war to anchor in the Flow was put into direct telephonic communication with the Navy Department at Washington in exactly six minutes.

The summit of achievement, however, in the matter of naval telecommunication is to be found, naturally, on board the flagship, *King George the Fifth* (this was in 1944)—or

more familiarly, *KG5*. In her Signals room you will be shown a switchboard from which the Commander-in-Chief and his staff can communicate by telegraph or telephone with any other station on ship or shore. There is even a teleprinter in direct communication with the Admiralty in Whitehall, over which the C.-in-C. can transact the business of the Home Fleet at length for as long as the buoy lies upon his foredeck—and so long as the Post Office can maintain the cable in working order.

This is not always easy, for the life of a Scapa cable is subject to certain hazards. Big ships dragging anchor in heavy weather—and the weather in the Flow can be very heavy indeed—are apt to fetch up short upon what is first thought to be a good holding bottom, but which turns out to be a length of Post Office property, suffering from displacement, undue tension, and occasional abrasion.

That accounts for the "puffer" anchored out there in the Flow, flying a signal which indicates that she is "Not under proper control." As a matter of fact she is under perfect control, and the signal merely means, "Busy: please keep clear"; for she is the Post Office Cable Repair Ship, *Gleadow*, engaged upon one of her everlasting first-aid jobs. She has fished up a damaged section of cable, and is busy healing its wounds and correcting "faults" engendered by too intimate contact with the flukes of somebody else's sheet anchor.

Now we land at Lyness Pier again, for we have one final call to make, on the massive flat-roofed building halfway up the hillside above the port, which attracted our attention when first we set eyes on it and has excited our curiosity ever since.

The building is windowless, and as far as one can see, doorless, except for what looks like a row of portholes along the upper floor. In point of fact they light the eye and headquarters of "Acos" himself, the Admiral Commanding Orkney and Shetland—the opposite number, as it were, of the C.-in-C.,

Home Fleet, whose Flagship we have just visited.

The lower part of the building is a Home of Hush. As usual, it is artificially lit, ventilated and heated, and its inmates live and work in complete seclusion from the outside world in a fastness rendered secure, so far as is humanly possible, from bombs and shell-fire; for herein is contained the brain and nerve-centre of the whole Orkney Defence Scheme. Its most prominent feature is a telephone switchboard, operated by Wrens this time. There is also a teleprinter exchange to which units wishing to telegraph at length can apply for the next free wire.

Finally, on ascending to the flat roof, which commands a glorious view of Scapa Flow and the surrounding islands, you will find the Radio Station supplemented by a sort of deckhouse equipped to transmit, from a gigantic Morse flash-lamp, signals visible for miles in clear weather.

"In other words," remarks the Signals Officer in charge, "we can communicate from here by telephone, teleprinter, wireless, buzzer or visual, with almost anywhere."

## VIII

Such is the history of the great self-contained, Orkney Defence Scheme built up between 1940 and 1942; and of its unique telecommunications system. Thus equipped, the Orcadian fortress, even if cut off by the enemy from all contact with Great Britain, could have continued to function and operate, like Malta, *ad infinitum*.

The Post Office staff which contributed so notably to the perfection of the scheme was housed in its own Hostel—a pleasant little quadrangle of white one-storey buildings, complete with sleeping quarters, dining-halls and recreation-rooms for about a hundred workers of various grades—sixteen Engineering Supervisors, twenty postal staff, and some seventy skilled engineering workmen.

Lastly, if you pay a visit to the little telephone exchange of adjacent Kirkwall, you

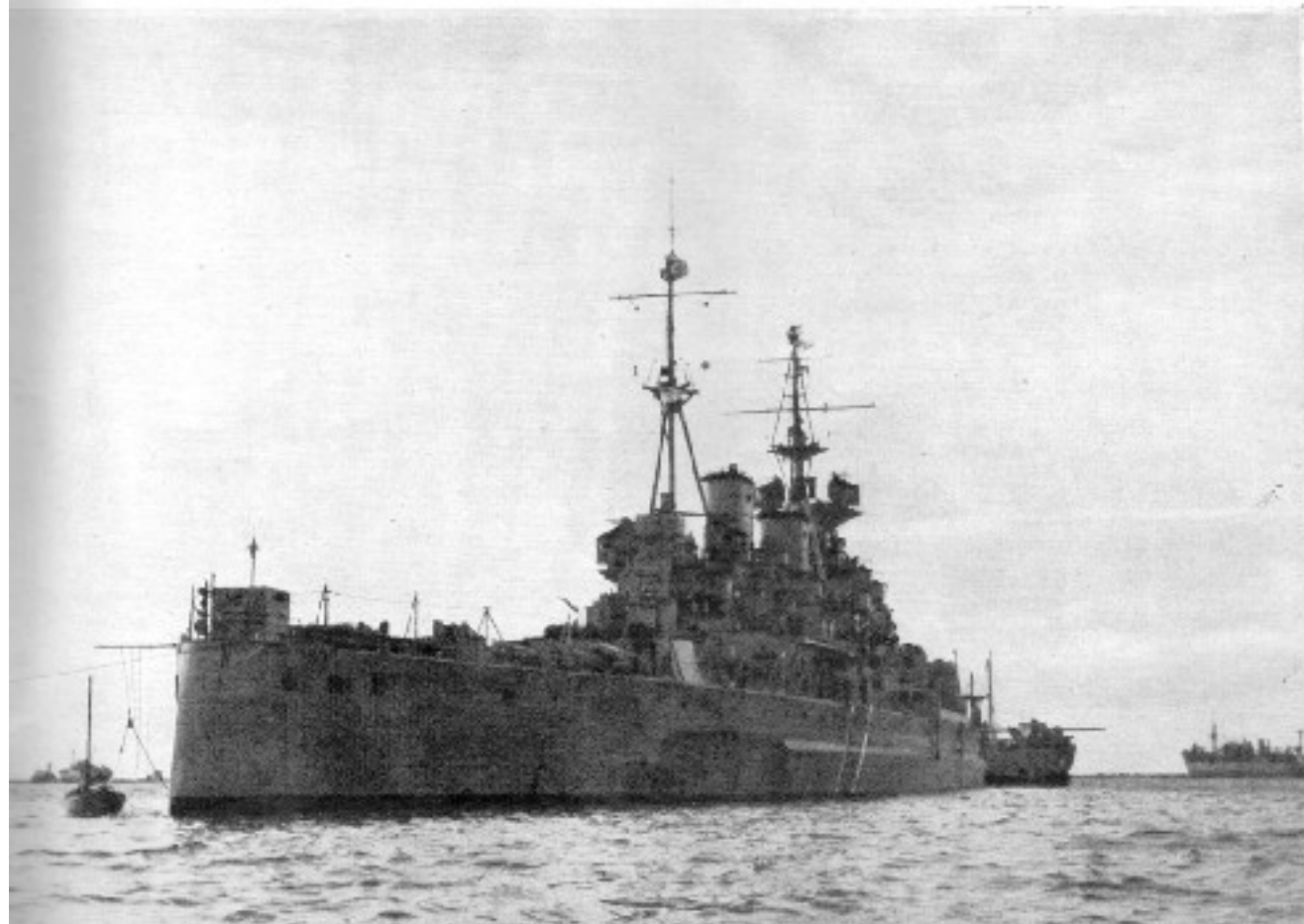
may meet a lady supervisor who was the first to receive a decoration for carrying on with Post Office routine unflinchingly during an air-raid—about the first air-raid in which bombs were dropped on British soil—on March 16th, 1940. Certain of her colleagues were also cited for bravery.

I have set down this Orkadian saga in considerable detail and of set purpose for two reasons. The first is that the tremendous concentration of effort, energy and force in

this area—so remote, yet so dangerously close—during the most critical years of the war has never, so far, been revealed to the British people; the second, that it furnishes a picture in miniature of Combined Operations by all three Services with the Post Office acting as a fourth, but by no means superfluous, wheel to the coach.

The glory of the Orkney Defence Scheme is departed now, let us hope for ever. But they were great days while they lasted.

*H.M.S. "King George V"*





# *The Summing Up*

SO ENDS our tale—the tale of how the Post Office went to War, by land, sea and air.

No attempt has been made to pick out any group or individual for special commendation: indeed, not a single name is mentioned in this narrative; but what has been said of the few goes for all. Teamwork has been the key-word—or, if you prefer it, Combined Operations.

As already noted, 73,000 men and women of the Post Office joined the Services on the outbreak of war, or soon after. Of these 3,800 will never return. Of those who remained in Post Office service upon the home front, perpetually exposed to what may be described as civilian war-risks, a further 413 gave their lives.

It should be added that in the course of the war over 700 decorations and awards were conferred upon Post Office workers of all grades.

The names of these will be perpetuated, no doubt, in a Roll of Honour. But the glory and the praise belong not to them alone but to all who served.

Here a special word must be said regarding the peculiar service and sacrifice of Post Office employees, in common with all other representatives of organised Labour, during the past six years—service, because all obeyed the call of national duty without question, and sacrifice because, in the course of that duty, they were called upon to surrender, for the time being, much personal freedom of action and certain hard-won rights and privileges.

Thousand of Trades Unionists were required, like the rest of us, to submit themselves to "direction" into duties which they

would not have chosen for themselves, and further, to abandon their cherished right to protect their own interests by the established principle of collective bargaining. And since human liberty was at stake they did not hesitate: they put their rights and privileges into cold storage for the duration and merged their whole energy in the common cause. The result was total victory, won by a united nation.

The Post Office workers went to work like the rest. How they quitted themselves is recorded in these pages. From first to last they did whatever was asked of them, and more, whether their station was up on the bridge or down below the waterline. The ship went forward, and that was all they cared about.

In one point only they adhered resolutely to union tradition—in making provision for the relief of distress within their own community. Throughout the war a generous fund was maintained from the regular contributions of all concerned, to provide aid and comfort for the dependants of Post Office servants who had lost their lives overseas or their homes through enemy action over Britain.

Their story is all of a piece with the general spirit of that time—of the epic of the Six Year War. Much of that epic will remain unsung. Still, Post Office workers—regular, temporary, part-time—will be well content to remember that throughout those testing years, despite shortage of staff all round, lack of experience among many, and enemy interference from first to last, they kept the wheels turning and the ship in commission until victory dawned on a stricken but thankful world.

