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THAT WAS LENABO—THAT WAS!

(By a Correspondent)

Rome was not built in a day. And neither was Lenabo. The Romans took decades; in a comparative jiffy Lenabo arose from a desolate and hitherto back o' beyond peat bog, flanked by the parishes of Longside and Cruden. The creation of "Metropolitan Lenabo" was quite a feat.

Fifty years ago the hamlet of Kirmundy witnessed a gigantic earthquake on its doorstep. The moss was alive with toiling humanity, with all the paraphernalia of mechanical excavation belching smoke. Indeed, it is said that a pall still hovers over the district at certain seasons. The scene, viewed from a distance in the twilight, was almost reminiscent of what Dante's Inferno must have ~~looked like~~ *been*. An army of navvies—Irish and Scotch—was digging, digging, digging—under the grey skies of winter and in the flickering light of naphtha flares. Thousands of tons of dank peat went into wagons to be dumped, and hundreds more helped to feed the boilers of steam scoops, bucket cranes, and locomotives, which ran hither and thither on rails, uphill and downdale, across a site where several smallholdings formerly pursued a precarious livelihood. To house the influx of navvies, huts were erected for sleeping and eating, and there was a "wet" canteen, with extra police at Longside in case of contingencies.

In the cold, bleak winter of 1915, it was a hard day's night at Lenabo. "Blood, sweat and tears" would not too strongly sum it up. Messrs Tawse, of Aberdeen, to whom the transformation of Lenabo was entrusted, had a tearing, wearing, helter-skelter race against time, for the Government, with the U-boat menace in mind, was insistent that the "gasbags" of Lenabo R.N.A.S. should be operational by the autumn. This meant that the site had to be ready for building to begin by the early summer at least. It was a tribute to the firm's organisation, deployment of labour, and the equipment then available, that they were able to complete the task to schedule.

To transport people and material ~~to~~ the scene of operations required the services of a charioteer. Who else but Jimmy Sutherland? With Longside as the railhead for Lenabo, the intervening three or four miles, over a narrow water-bound road, had to be bridged. To do so Jimmy considerably augmented his fleet of horse-drawn carts and lorries, and there was a constant stream of laden and unladen vehicles between the two points from dawn to dusk. Supplies from Peterhead, rather longer in mileage than the Longside route, were conveyed by steam wagons. It was not until later that the G.N.S.R. constructed the branch railway from Longside to Lenabo.

With the site prepared, water and drainage installed, roads constructed, foundations laid for the two giant hangers, ancillary buildings and living quarters, the steel riggers and bricklayers went into action. There was to be nothing shoddy or flimsy about Lenabo. Only the best was good enough. After all, it was costing a fabulous amount then. Some said £500,000, which would mean a million sterling today. Amidst the forest of trees you can still spot (if you have permission) the remains of neat brickwork and the massive depth of the concrete foundations.

So up they went, brick upon brick, to emerge in trim avenues, leading from a main entrance, adorned with pseudo-classical pillars, encrusted in concrete. A powerhouse, a gasworks (to provide helium buoyancy for the airships), a waterworks, steam generators for the hangers, engineering shops, wireless station, canteens, church, cinema, messes, living quarters, garages, fire station. Nearly all solid stuff of Cruden brick, calculated to survive until eternity, and the whole surrounded by a high spiked steel fence, like an ancient monument. Across the road, on the Kimmundy estate, was a tiny general store and Post Office, which managed to cope with unprecedented custom by service through the window and the installation of an outside letter box.

When complete, Lenabo was a sizeable township, with a population of 500 or so, mainly ratings, engineers, and riggers. The operational crews came later. But first to build the "gasbags". The framework for these was delivered in prefabricated sections and put together in the hangers. An overcoat of silver grey rubber fabric protected the frame and the gasbag inside. Gondolas were attached, motors (of French manufacture) installed, as well as guns, wireless, various instruments, an anchor, and ballast (this was important). These ships were of

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the S.S. and N.S. types and each hanger accommodated two. The operational distance was limited, and they were tricky to handle even in calm weather, a nightmare in a moderate wind. Because ~~the~~ the buoyancy upthrust was so strong, it took over a hundred ratings, grasping ropes, to hold a ship to the ground in normal conditions.

There were several incidents in which Lenabo "gasbags" got out of control. One particularly comes to mind. It was in 1917, when an N.S. ship, passing over Peterhead, experienced motor failure. In attempting to lose height, by expelling gas, and land on the Smith Embankment, the ship was slightly damaged by contact with the weathercock on the Town House spire. The landing was achieved with the aid of spectators, who thronged the Embankment and clutched the trailing ropes until lorryloads of ratings arrived from Lenabo.

Lenabo's first commandant was a Royal Marines officer, Colonel Robinson, and his operational crews were nearly all pioneer aviators of the Royal Navy. Their task was to patrol the near waters of the North Sea as U-boat spotting auxiliaries to the fleet at Peterhead. In the light of history, Lenabo's contribution to U-boat destruction seems to have been negligible, and indeed it lost one ship (its salvaged propellor is in St John's Church, Longside) in a showdown with a U-boat.

However unspectacular its contribution to the war effort, Lenabo did scintillate as a social asset in a rather moribund hinterland of Buchan. On the station there was abundant talent, and it found an outlet in theatricals, concerts and garden fetes in aid of worthy charities. The station sports day saw Buchan in gala mood, with hospitality and every conceivable amenity laid on, and a hearty welcome for all comers. That there was also some literary distinction at Lenabo was apparent in the columns of "The Gasbag", the station's monthly magazine, printed by Peter Scrogie, Peterhead, though it is doubtful if any copies survive.

The branch railway was not completed until 1916, and was used for passengers and goods until 1920. There were two unattended level crossings—across the Peterhead-Banff turnpike and across the Kinnundy road. The turnpike crossing was the scene of a fatality, when one of the very few Peterhead motorists—a business man—was killed in collision with a locomotive. The track and earthworks of the branch can still

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he traced, though now intersected by fences and ditches. Major Hutchison of Cairngall, proprietor of the land through which the line meandered, was paid £2,500 compensation for the wayleave, and he often told the story of how, a few months after receiving the cheque, he had a further one for the same amount, ~~the same~~ with an identical covering letter. When he returned the second cheque and explained the situation, his honesty received a jolt—there was stony silence!

Until the Armistice Lenabo was in full sail, and on 11th November, 1918, it was a dispatch rider from thence who brought the official wireless news to the "Buchan Observer" office, for publication in the Special Armistice Edition of that paper. In the following year, when the coal strike suspended many rail services, Lenabo helped to maintain postal traffic between Peterhead and Aberdeen with Crossley motor wagons. It was in that year, too, that the R.A.F. came into being and succeeded the R.N.A.S. at Lenabo. With the war at an end, there was nothing to do except continue essential services and spit and polish. The station served no useful purpose and was unsuitable for winged aircraft training. Demobilisation reduced its complement to skeleton proportions and, in 1920, the Air Ministry withdrew and wiped Lenabo off its map. It was relegated to the Disposals Board.

Visionaries hereabouts saw in Lenabo a magnificent, ready-made industrial potential. One proposal was to use it for large-scale peat processing; another was a canning factory, with Messrs Ritchie mass-producing their prime ox-tongues and a canned vegetable sideline; yet another was to create a pastoral precinct, and call it "New Kimmundy". The visionaries (who, by the way, nearly all sported silver grey waterproof coats, made from dismantled airship fabric) received no official support. There were no "takers", and a shortsighted County Council was no more interested then than it was when such admirable assets as Pitfour and the Cruden Bay Hotel came crashing down. So Lenabo was sold to demolition contractors for a song. But not the site. It had belonged to the old Keith domain of Ludquharn which, in turn, was part of the Aden estate, and it was said that Aden received £5,000 for the freehold of Lenabo. For long the site lay derelict, until it was offered to the Forestry Commission, which has restored to a petrified forest a bountiful and fairyland garland of sylvan beauty.

29/4/69 + 20th May 1969

A SALUTE TO LENABO

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From
WILLIAM L. MORGAN
Old Oxonian and Former Naval Person at Sheerness, Barrow-in-Furness, and Lenabo Airship Station, 1916-1920

Fifty years on! The drone of the "Silver Sausage" has long ago faded away over Buchan. But Lenabo remains a vivid and ever-fascinating memory, not only in the dwindling ranks of those who served there, and have survived the whirligig of time, but within the bounds of Buchan, where the very name of this Royal Naval Airship Station of the first world war continues to have a magic ring. A name which signalises the transformation of a bleak peat moss, the Carse of Balloch, into a bustling township and air strike base in the North Sea battle against the U-boat.

True, there was also Strathbeg. But Strathbeg was merely a fussy seaplane base, and a tiny entity in contrast to Lenabo's sprawling perimeter and majestic "gasbags". In 1939-45 Buchan was again allotted a strategic role on the war map, with the RNAS at Crimond and RAF Coastal Command at Tortochton, Inverallochy, and elsewhere. In the post-war period, the rattle of the Iron Curtain brought NATO into being, and RAF Buchan, located at Boddam, emerged, and continues to fulfil a vital link in a great radar chain.

The several successors to Lenabo, spread throughout Buchan, made their impact on the community and left behind a host of memories. Since RAF Buchan ~~continues to~~ reflects the association which 1915-20 created in Lenabo, it is with no sense of disrespect to compatriots of 1969 that an old "Gasbagger" takes the stage, looks back with pride, and hoists the flag to bugle blast, to acclaim, in these random jottings, that ~~was~~ stately ship of the air in the heart of Buchan—RNAS Lenabo!

There is a land, a treeless land,
Where all the bravest go;
It raineth every day and night,
We call it "Lenabo".

There everlasting springs abide,
 As very well we know;
 They flood the wretched countryside,
 As well as Lenabo.

The bogs beyond the site are where
 The famous rushes grow;
 They found poor Moses lying there,
 In dear old Lenabo.

The airships are within the shed,
 The wind's begun to blow
 The poet has a bad fat head,
 It's due to Lenabo!

It could well be said of those who opted for the then almost rudimentary Royal Naval Air Service and arrived at Longside, in perishing weather, fifty-three years ago, that "They came, they saw, and they conquered". For the embryo station, to a young man from Oxford, looked like a primeval swamp, with only timber cabins, lit with oil lamps, and equipped with earth closets, to accommodate the men. It took months of unremitting toil, by R.N. artisans and an outside contractor (Tawse, of Aberdeen) before adequate buildings were erected and services laid on.

On joining the RNAS in 1915, I was posted from Sheerness to the airship yard at Barrow-in-Furness, where Vickers were building ship R 9, having already finished construction of No. 4, the "Silver Queen". Work on R 9 was discontinued when urgent orders came to turn out SS coastal craft, which had the highly dangerous aeroplane fuselage as gondolas.

[Farewell Bogend]

In March, 1916, I was among those who volunteered for Lenabo, where the SS ships were to be stationed. When we arrived at Longside, we found a small advance party ensconced, and having a jolly time, in the Bruce Arms Hotel, the officer-in-charge, Sub-Lieut. Cormaney, being billeted at the railway company's Cruden Bay Hotel. There was one telephone at Lenabo then, in the office of the Admiralty Civil Engineer, Mr. W.R. Watson, who remained at Lenabo throughout its active history. Gradually, under his supervision, the station took shape, the first task being the demolition of Bogend Farm to make way for one of the three large rigid sheds and workshops, of steel and corrugated iron. Torhendry was yet another farming casualty.

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Waterworks and reservoir, sewerage, hydrogen gasworks, living quarters, sick quarters, chapel, theatre, garages, "Met" office, and various other utilities (including the once-imposing entrance gateway, designed by Petty Officer Yorke) were erected with remarkable speed, some of them in Cruden brick. A road network was tarred (public roads in the area were earth and gravel surfaced then), and the railway from Longside came as an afterthought.

After a spell of "watchkeeping" on the telephone, I was detailed (being an engineer) to help with the installation of the power plant. There was actually no covered building (it came later), only concrete foundations, and the first oil engine and direct-current dynamo were put in position and connected by temporary cabling on top of the ground to existing buildings. Eventually there were four engines and dynamos and many miles of cable, which gives an idea of the station's extent and facilities. I remained power-house watchkeeper and maintenance engineer until demobilised in 1920, when I joined the Air Ministry Works Directorate, and one of my first tasks was to return to Lenabo and dismantle the plant I had helped to install and maintain.

Of my comrades at Lenabo, memory holds the door on ~~faces~~ faces, and I wonder if any are remembered in Buchan today? There was M/C Dispatch-Rider Percy Codd, who streaked along the Kinnundry road with signals for the Admiral at Peterhead. He took the official news of the Armistice to the "Buchan Observer" office, for the special edition they published. Percy was a boxing fan and donated the Lenabo Cup.

["The Gasbags"]

There was burly Petty Officer (later Sergeant) Bishop, whose melliferous voice charmed Buchan when he led the famous Lenabo pierrot troupe—"The Gasbags"—at functions on behalf of local and war charities. Others of the troupe were Brown, Caborn, Hunt, Kelly, Park and Southgate. The "hit-the-deck" event of Lenabo theatricals was the revue, "Hullo, Longside!". It was a real professional job, devised and furnished with typical Royal Navy do-it-yourself expertise. The printed programme was a lavish affair, bound in a cover, and printed by P. Scrogie, Peterhead—the only job Lenabo couldn't do! Artistes included the Misses Chrissie and Meg Cannon and Bella Summers, all of Peterhead, and the orchestra of fourteen was assisted by Messrs George Duncan and John May, of Peterhead.

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I often recall the Buchaners who took us into their homes and their hearts, and how much we enjoyed a spell of domestic bliss after station life. Lenabo Farm (from which the station took its name and its milk), across the Kinnundy road, was one bolt-hole, and there the "guid wife" whetted my appetite with tea and bakes. It was really due to her that I came to understand the Buchan lingo, which was not easy on the ear of the stranger. I remember the baker at Peterhead (Rennie) where we "downed", with much relish, hot mutton pies at 2d each (those were the days!); the Naval Club; the Electric Theatre, which had stage turns and "flicks"; and the almost unsprung and certainly seatless motor lorries which conveyed us, cattletruckwise, to Peterhead and back on town leave. Robertson's Garage was the muster station.

Until 1918 Lenabo was purely a Royal Navy show, geared to battleship routine and discipline, and commanded by a Royal Marine, Colonel Robinson, who was quartered at Kinnundy House. Although we didn't sport "Jack Tar" outfits, we were attired in sober blue and peak cap. With the advent of the RAF, a strange assortment of uniforms began to appear. It was almost ludicrous to see a Petty Officer in khaki breeches, an RN tunic and a Royal Flying Corps forage cap. But these and other make-shift "togs" were a feature of the transition period, and the now traditional ~~sky-blue~~ RAF sky-blue only began to be issued towards the end of the war.

[Lenabo's Satellite]

Lenabo's "secret" satellite in Forfarshire ~~afterthought~~ was another afterthought. Sister stations along the east coast were at East Fortune (East Lothian), Howden (Yorkshire), Cardington (Bedfordshire), Pulham (Norfolk), Kingsnorth (Kent) and Capel (Surrey). Auldbar, near Brechin, was chosen as a base with limited facilities to enable ships patrolling south of Aberdeen to replenish fuel and gas and undertake running repairs. Thus "High Speed Gas" (in tubes) was transported from Lenabo to Auldbar, and the base took its orders, by wireless and telephone, from Lenabo.

The formation of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, in 1918, saw the first official invasion of the fair sex in an all-male preserve. When a small contingent, recruited in Buchan, made its appearance, the chaps felt a little embarrassed, but speedily came to terms with these "ministering angels", who fulfilled office and domestic duties, and brought ~~xxxxxx~~ some charm into station life.

No account of Lenabo would be complete without mention of its monthly magazine, "The Battlebag". The copy before me, in a blue cover, is the final number (Volume 3, No. 7; 27 pages; price 4d). It is dated January, 1919, ~~although it contains~~ subsequent news and was printed at a later date. Although it did not bear an imprint, the magazine was printed, like ~~all~~ all the others, by P. Scrogie, Peterhead, Mr William Hackett, the then manager, taking a very keen interest in its production. I am fortunate in having a complete file of "The Battlebag", perhaps the only one to survive. The first editor was Flight-Lieut. Chetwode Browne, who was succeeded by Capt. Jelliffe, and he by Lieut. Alistair Lee, M.B.E. Sub-editors were Messrs W.R. Watson and J. Bradley; sports editor, Lieut. T.V. Beatty, and business manager, Mr C.R. Sheldon-Catcheside.

Turning the pages, one alights upon the Editor's Notes, which tell of the record flight by Capt. Warneford and his crew in Lenabo airship NS 11, which remained airborne for 101 hours, breaking a previous record of 61 hours. Numerous "pomes", grave and gay, proclaim the sentiments of Lenabo bards. "The Chiel's" jaunty notes have a bullseyes flavour. There are reports from St John's, Longside, of the C 25 memorial service; from Auldbar, and even one from France, where an airship took part in reconnaissance. Sport embraced boxing for RAF and other awards, Rear Admiral Kennedy being referee; road-racing, rugby, and soccer, in which 3rd Gordons beat Lenabo 4 - 1.

[Renowned Medico]

Of the valedictory articles, some touched literary distinction. I dare say there are a few who remember Dr Lawrence, Longside, whom "Battlebag" greets as "an Aesculapian of credit and renown", and goes on to eulogise "the gracious and warm welcome accorded to all visitors to that hospitable home, presided over by a lady of whom all think with sincere regard and profound respect".

Continuing, the magazine recalls: "At Longside frequent drafts were made for foreign service of officers and men, many of whom laid down their lives for their country. Nor did the station escape from the shadow of death . . . and the grey North Sea swallowed up evidences of a tragedy". This was a reference to C 25.

For the broadlands of Buchan there was this swan-song: "Strenuous work did not preclude the possibilities of play, and from Peterhead to Aberdeen, from Cruden Bay to Maud, the local

inhabitants welcomed and fraternised with the boys from Lenabo. Under no other conceivable conditions could an understanding so mutual and complete have arisen between the rugged and self-contained folk of Buchan and the more facile and irresponsible youthful sojourners from the milder south. The simple sincerity of purpose, the industry, the frugality, combined with a generous hospitality and the true kindness of the people, will not be forgotten".

To those of the "Boys" whom age hath not withered, Lenabo and Buchan are unforgettable, unforget, and some of us have kept in touch and from time to time made pilgrimages to the "Old Ship". She looms out of the mists as stately as ever, a phantom enshrined in a sylvan bower, and we might still say, as "Battlebag" presciently said half-a-century ago: "What the ultimate use of the buildings and colony at Lenabo may be, lies still hid in the shady leaves of Destiny!".

Nov. 1918.

The Lenabo Gateway.

Somewhere in Aberdeen, it wots not where,
A noble monument is soon to be unveiled—
An edifice that like the works of Wren
Shall win immortal praise from lips of men.

As every Cockney knows his Marble Arch
So every Lenabite will ever ken
The noble monument erected by "Our York",
That genial soul, so loved by all the men.

You hero of a thousand fights (bar one?)
'Tis fitting that your crowning work should stand
To be the admiration of posterity
Right here, where you have proved your cunning hand.

If I a poet's license could obtain,
The Marble Arch, Hell's Gate and Appian Way
Should ever more be classed with Old York's monument
Though yours will stand when they have passed away.

In years to come I'll bring my boys to see
The spot where I such glorious (?) days have spent,
And proudly will I show your noble work—
They no doubt with my words will be content.

The 10.A. men of whom you were so proud,
The drains you dug and roads you so well made,
Shall in future years forgotten be,
But Old York's Gateway from the eye shall never fade.

Build on, nor from your labours rest
Till Babel-like your edifice to Heaven shall rise,
And future pilots shall their bearings take
From Old York's monument, whilst floating in the skies.

Nick O'Teen.

A.C. H.E. Hares R.N.A.S.
 Lenabo,
 Longside,
 Aberdeenshire.







