

RAF Killadeas and Lough Erne Yacht Club

Mid-winter 1940/41 brought flying boats to Fermanagh. RAF Stranraer had been set up in August, but Lough Erne was over a hundred miles closer to the mid-Atlantic, where air cover was urgently needed by convoys under attack from U-boats. Two boats from Stranraer surveyed the Lough from the air at Christmas. In January, the Free State Government secretly allowed flying straight to the Atlantic via the Donegal Corridor. In February, RAF Stranraer's 209 and 240 Squadrons were re-equipping and training with Catalinas, and began to use Lough Erne. These handy aircraft carried a full service kit so their crews could set up a first base quickly on any sheltered beach. Thus did RAF Killadeas begin along the sheltered north shore of Gublusk Bay, nowadays the home of Lough Erne Yacht Club.



This aerial photograph shows Catalinas on Gublusk shore in mid-winter 1941, engines under corrugated iron canopies for servicing, a hospital under construction on land north to the Manor House, and a big shed, half built – today called the Hangar. A hatched line marks the edge of the planned concrete hard standing. The work was done by US servicemen under Ivan Bicklehaupt USN, in civilian clothing. A couple of years later, some used Killadeas experiences as US Navy Catalina forward bases were set up in the same way on Pacific island beaches in the Japanese war.

On 12 March, first casualties were all of a 240 squadron crew in a Catalina out of RAF Killadeas that hit a hill and burnt in Leitrim. On 27 March, 209 and 240 transferred from Stranraer to RAF Killadeas. Another 240 crew were all lost on 7 May when a Catalina from RAF Killadeas crashed in flames mistaking a landing onto mirror-calm water near Gay Island. They are remembered today by one of Joe O'Loughlin's memorial stones nearby at the Marina beacon.

Training was rewarded three weeks later on 26 May, when a Catalina from 209 found the Bismarck on her way to France after sinking the Hood, and handed over to another from 240 to follow this dangerous battleship. She was sunk next day. Thereafter, for the crews of the Catalinas, and the Sunderlands from Castle Archdale, their war was rarely so glamorous, but often dangerous, uncomfortable and boring. They flew whatever the weather. Landing in summer sunshine from clear air to calm water was a puzzling danger. Navigation, hundreds of miles off-shore was another dangerous puzzle, particularly in the dark, freezing, blinding fury of winter Atlantic gales and driving snow storms.

A few planes were shot down. Many flew out and did not return. Perhaps fifty crashed on coastal headlands, in the lough or on inland hilltops. Joe O'Loughlin recorded 330 casualties onto Rolls of Honour by Catalina, Sunderland and land plane, and presented these on Remembrance Sunday 2005 for display at LEYC, Castle Archdale and St Angelo.

RAF Killadeas expanded in mid-1942 to include OTU 131, an Operational Training Unit, where individual pilots, navigators, gunners and radio operators, trained in Galloway and elsewhere, became crews and learned to operate together patrolling the Atlantic hunting submarines in Catalinas, and later in Sunderlands. RAF Killadeas became a big place, with accommodation for 2,800 RAF personnel, and a new Catalina slipway on the east shore of Gublusk Bay.



Most from OTU 131 were posted elsewhere. Canadian pilot, Bud Crooks, who unveiled Joe O'Loughlin's OTU 131 memorial stone at LEYC Flagstaff in 2000, remembered flying his Sunderland to the Far East after training. When the war ended, and its longest running battle, the Battle of the Atlantic, RAF Killadeas closed down, leaving surplus buildings and scrap aircraft, boats, tools and equipment. A plan to make the site into a Butlin's Holiday Camp did not happen. Corrugated iron scrap from buildings was sold to Belfast, and some used for Casement Park GAA stadium.



LEYC has been on the site since 1950. Likewise, Stranraer Sailing Club is on the old RAF slipway there. The historic Fairy keelboats have wintered in the Hangar for 50 years past, a major reason for their survival and centenary in 2006. In summer, they launch down a WW2 slipway to lie on flying boat moorings, while hoisting their 1906 gunter mainsails. Catalina service bays now hold the RNLI Station, LEYC's BBQ and children's dinghy racks. Rings that held Catalinas down in gales now secure catamarans. The refuelling jetty snugly berths a barge. Peace now, where once was war.

The top picture on this page show Catalinas over RAF Killadeas about 1943/44, left foreground, the Catalina slipway under construction, boats and aircraft moored in Gublusk Bay and around, with Devenish in the distance. The picture on the left shows the Fairy Doreen, crew raising her gunter lug mainsail, while she rests in Gublusk Bay moored by a chain to a clump on the bottom made for flying boats.