

Mr John Adam

War Office Wireless Operator, Beaumanor and Thurso

I was a civilian wireless operator with the War Office "Y" Group, under the command of [Cdr Ellingworth](#), RN (Retd). I spent most of my time at Beaumanor Park and an outstation known as Angus 2, near Thurso.

Recruitment and Training

Before the war I worked for the American Express Co. I wanted to go into the Merchant Navy as a wireless operator. To this end I studied in Glasgow and got my seagoing certificate (PMG)¹. Unfortunately I became very seriously ill with pleurisy and pneumonia and when it came to my medical I was classed as deferred. (I think that was what it was called). However, in June 1941, a further medical classed me Grade IV and that ruled me out of all the services as well as the Merchant Navy. I was then sent to a Clyde shipyard for clerical duties. This didn't please me at all as I felt I could do something better.

I had a relation who worked in government laboratories at Teddington and I think he knew about the "Y" Group and put my name forward. An interview at Beaumanor Park followed and although I can't remember all the details of it I am quite sure I wasn't asked about mathematics, foreign languages or crosswords. After acceptance I was sent to Fort Bridgewoods, Chatham for specialist training. The instructors there were Mr Blundell, Mr Adams and Mr Blenkinsop. I returned to Beaumanor for a short time before being assigned to the outstation Angus 2 at Thurso. There were two short wave stations known as Angus 1 and Angus 2. No 1 was a few miles south of Thurso and No 2 about two miles to the east. There was also a medium wave station situated beside Angus 1. The overall supervisor was Fred Chapelle. Angus 2 also had a supervisor – Andy Plowman. Both were ex-Navy operators.

Work

We were told very little about the work we would be asked to do – just that we would be taking Morse at very high speeds and sometimes under very difficult conditions. We must not talk to anyone about it – not even family. Our equipment was mainly the wireless set with goniometers, an oscilloscope and headphones which had to be worn constantly. One earpiece was connected to the set and the other was connected constantly to Beaumanor Control. There was never any feedback on what we had done –

¹ Postmaster General's Examination of Radio Proficiency

although on one occasion we were told in advance how important the task was. It was a transmission from a German or Italian HQ and it couldn't be heard in England but was quite audible in the north of Scotland. Sometimes it was the other way round. You could have a German station working from the west coast of Norway, perfectly audible in England and couldn't be picked up in Scotland. Something to do with skip distance I think. Angus 2 was chosen to have an oscilloscope which was a tremendous help in taking bearings, especially if the station transmitted for only a few seconds. "Ted 2" at Lands End also had an oscilloscope and there may have been one at "Bill" near Maidstone. All our tasks came through Beaumanor Control and were returned there except for a time when we were under the control of the Royal Navy, I think from Scarborough.

The operators at Angus 1 were John Clarkson (from Wishaw), Charles Foreman and (first name forgotten) Watt, Eric MacPherson (from Kirkintilloch), Garry from Stirling and Hugh from England. At Angus 2 there was myself, Bill Smith (Glasgow), Ken Adam (Dundee area) and Eric Wilkes (England). These were shuffled around a bit at times. We covered three shifts a day, morning 9 am till 4 pm, late shift 4 pm till midnight and night shift from midnight till 9 am. It is difficult to remember specific events during the war. We were usually aware of anything big going on such as the landings in Normandy.

Social and Domestic Life

At Beaumanor and Chatham I was billeted privately but at Thurso we were almost all together in small hotels – the Strathbeg and the St Clair. I can't remember exactly how much we were paid. At the Strathbeg Hotel we paid £2 per week for full board. The food was reasonably good at the hotel but at work we had to provide for ourselves. In the station we had a kettle and a bucket which the day shift had to fill with water from a well across the field. That had to do us for 24 hours. The only way to work was cycling. On occasions when the weather was very bad and a howling gale from the west we just had to bed down on the floor. Earlier on at Chatham and Beaumanor we were able to travel by bus. Our spare time was spent cycling, playing cards (we learned to play bridge – of a sort), collecting eggs from different farms to send home and playing tennis. The local club was very good to us and allowed us to play at any time. Leave was something like a week every four months. We were allowed the concession of travelling on the Jellicoe – a troop train which left Thurso at 7 or 8 pm every night. It was originally a troop train started during the First World War and named after Admiral Jellicoe, carrying huge numbers of Navy personnel from Scapa Flow. It started up again during the Second World War.

Post-war

I worked on at Thurso for a time before going to Moulton and Croft Spa. When my mother died in 1947 I was able to get my discharge. I think it was towards the end of 1949 that I got the chance of doing law accountancy work with a legal firm in Glasgow. I married Vera in 1950 and in 1954 we moved north to Inverness where I continued doing my law accountancy work until I retired in 1983. Vera and I had been married for 62 ½ years when sadly she died in 2011.

A good number of years ago I heard some talk on the radio which convinced me that there was no longer a great secrecy about it all. A group of "Y Group operators" was shown on television at the annual Remembrance Day service from the Albert Hall.