

Part 6: The Flying Boats at War

Narrator: The civilian airlines of the Allies continued to fly, though perhaps the nature of the passengers had changed.

Frank Buckley: I never flew in any of those flying boats because they were all commercial for the Army. Everybody that came into Foynes, we knew they were high up in the Army or the Air Force or the Navy, but they all had to come in civilian clothes. They couldn't wear a uniform - even though we were a civilian airline; the government were subsidising and paying for everything. But it was a very essential service, because, you can picture, when they were coming in say, from America, and there was an attack or bombing raid in England, they were caught! So what happened? They diverted into Foynes. They might stay there for 12 hours, maybe 24 hours, until everything was clear again.

Narrator: Foynes became the link point in BOAC's Eastern route during the Desert War, and after Field Marshall Rommel's defeat continued to service Gibraltar, Cairo and the Near East. By 1943, BOAC had 14 'demilitarised' Sunderland's operating through Foynes harbour. One BOAC Flight Engineer based at Foynes at this time summed the whole thing up when he remarked "Sometimes I wonder what the hell we would have done without Foynes".

Frank Buckley: These were seconded over from the RAF - the Royal Air Force - over to BOAC.

Interviewer: I heard that Churchill landed in Foynes...

Frank Buckley: ...that's right, Churchill. As far as I can recall he didn't land at all. He was due into Foynes one morning, and news leaked out. You see he came in and the plane only had about an hour and a half to go to Southampton from here. So they took off from where ever they were coming from and so they decided, in case the news leaked out, well, the IRA or the equivalent might be around you see... so, never landed in Foynes.

The night operation, even though I was working there, was as exciting after 5 years as it was the first night.

First and foremost, one special launch would throw out 6 small boats that were water-tight. Each boat had an area of about 10 feet by 4 feet wide. And inside in that, there were 8 powerful lights. Each one had its own anchor. They would decide what way the wind was - if it was from the west, they'd form a straight line - they'd drop one here, another one 200 yards away, another one 200 yards beyond that, so there'd be about 1200 feet or more of a guide. It was perfectly dark at night - completely dark.

The special launch that I was driving was a very powerful launch, in the event of the aircraft getting into difficulties; my job would be to take the plane in tow. The six small boats would be towed out into the river - the anchor was dropped, and "Down she goes!" So, eventually anyway, in my launch, there was a special gun about 4 ½ to 5 inches in diameter and there were two of those in the actual boat. And... it was completely pitch - you had hills on the left, on the Clare side and hills on our side as well. So the control launch would be down at the end, the plane would be at the beginning of the runway - we'll call it a

runway - and he would indicate to me - flash a signal to me - "I am ready for takeoff." And at that point I would fire a rocket 2,000 feet up into the sky - now you can picture that it was twelve o'clock at night - complete darkness.

This powerful light lit up the whole countryside; Foynes Island, the mainland, so the captain of the plane would have a complete, clear view of where he was going ...it was really amazing.

Narrator: Allied surveillance planes like the Catalina also used Foynes.

Frank Buckley: Actually, it was one those that found the *Bismarck*, the famous German battleship, which was causing an amount of trouble to the Allied shipping. So, when a plane would take off it would have to come back for fuel and they'd lose her again. But the Catalina flying boat, she could stay in the air for 20 hours without refuelling. She could only carry about six passengers, but she was mainly used for surveying and things like that.