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The Fortification of the Firth of Forth 1880–1977

‘The most powerful naval fortress in the British Empire’

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Chapter 8

GROWING IRRELEVANCE, 1945–77

As Maurice-Jones has written, during the Second World War, the 'British Coast Artillery had reached its highest eminence just before it was to become extinct', its role being usurped by rocket-driven ballistic and guided missiles. It took, however, a decade to die.¹

After the end of the war, the Coast Artillery Investigation Committee considered the level of protection required for future coastal artillery emplacements, in the light of the design of German coastal artillery emplacements, and the effect of Allied bombing and shelling on them. In the end, the committee recommended that any future guns should be turreted, with the cupola as small and low as possible, and all battery structures underground.² The likely effectiveness of heavy bombs developed in the later years of the war, and likely future developments, meant that the levels of protection necessary on fixed defence guns would be prohibitively expensive. The discussion seems to have faded away, and no modern coast defence guns on this kind were built in Britain.³

By October 1946, the number of Regulars in Coast Defence had been reduced to a total of 1,589, officers and men, of whom 95 were in the mainland part of Scottish Command.⁴

By 1950, the post-war organisation of Coast Defence had been settled, with the naval bases provided with their necessary defences, in care and maintenance, manned by 18 Territorial coast artillery regiments and six Regular maintenance units, but by the middle of the decade, modern aeroplane and missile technology had made the guns obsolete. On 17 February 1956, the Minister of Defence announced in the House of Commons that coast artillery was to be disbanded, and on 31 December it ceased to exist.⁵

Preparations for the Navy's defence of its bases did not, however, end in 1956. In 1951, the Admiralty was considering possible improvements to the boom defences of Loch Ewe and the Firth of Forth. An Admiralty file contains a chart of the Forth boom that would be erected when needed, very much following the line of the 1939–45 Cramond–Inchcolm–Charles Hill boom, with the position of the gate clearly marked.⁶ A file concerning the defence of Granton and

Leith in a future war, dated 1954, noted that a Forth boom was to run near Oxcars; Seaward Defence HQ would be at Pettycur; the secondary Seaward Defence HQ was planned for the May Island. Inner guard loops were already laid across the Forth in the vicinity of Inchkeith. Outer guard loops and HDAs would be laid across the Forth near the May Island ('one outer guard loop is laid at present; December 1953'). The PWSS would be on Inchkeith, with a WSS on May Island. There would be a Seaward Defence Radar capacity at Pettycur, Inchkeith and May Island. The Convoy Anchorage would be in Methil Roads/Largo Bay, with a 'Night Convoy Arrival Anchorage' in Largo Bay. Six examination vessels were to be stationed across the Forth between Inchkeith and the May Island. The file included a map of the anti-aircraft 'Gun Defended Area', which included Rosyth, the river and the city of Edinburgh as far east as Musselburgh.⁷

In October 1961, an exercise titled 'Drum Flats II' was held on those tidal sands in the Forth to test the capacity to erect the A/T net defence, which was planned, in time of war, for Loch Ewe, Milford Haven and the Forth (the A/S nets were to be held in store). The exercise was designed to see how quickly the nets could be deployed. Three specialist boom defence ships of the 'Bar' class and launches were used, in collaboration with the Boom Defence Depot at Rosyth. The ships were active from 9 a.m. on the 11th, working right through the night, completing their tasks in just under 26 hours, 35 minutes.⁸

The boom was intended to provide A/T and A/B capacity, but the arrangements on the surface would mimic the full suite of A/S defence, although the A/T nets were only 50ft (c 15m) deep. It was described as 'a very satisfactory trial', showing clearly the desirability of fairly frequent exercises to maintain the necessary skills.⁹

The capacity to erect a boom across the Forth was given up only in 1977, when the Admiralty wrote to the Scottish Development Department (then the custodians of Inchcolm Abbey) giving up the boom anchors on the island.¹⁰ Thus ended the use of traditional forms of defence of the estuary as an actual or potential naval base.

FORTIFICATION OF THE FIRTH OF FORTH

Notes

1 Maurice-Jones 1959: 275.
2 WO 32/11674.
3 WO 32/11674.
4 WO 33/2577.
5 Maurice-Jones 1959: 276-7.

6 ADM 1/22932.
7 ADM 1/25641.
8 ADM 1/28103.
9 ADM 1/28103.
10 DD 27/3715.