



SMALL BUT

FIERCE

INVASION OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND WAS A REAL POSSIBILITY DURING WORLD WAR TWO. **PETER LONDON** DESCRIBES IRELAND'S AIR CORPS DURING 'THE EMERGENCY'

Above
Hurricane I 93 was previously P5178 of 79 Squadron RAF, which force-landed on September 29, 1940 in County Wexford.

There was a gap in the clouds and Fg Off David Banks dropped the flying-boat through it. During a sortie from Pembroke Dock in Wales to Stranraer in Scotland, Saunders-Roe Lerwick L7252 had encountered bad weather and a position check was advisable.

The Lerwick emerged over Dun Laoghaire, the port of Dublin, and

alighted. Banks presented himself to the harbourmaster and he was allowed to buy provisions at a local shop and then was sent on his way. Similar treatment was given to the crew of the first production Short Sunderland, L2158, which had also strayed because of the conditions.

If the harbourmaster's treatment seemed curt the British airmen were lucky not to be arrested and

interned. It was the afternoon of September 3, 1939 and Britain and Germany had been at war since the morning. As Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain addressed Britain, the Republic of Ireland confirmed its neutrality.

Despite the non-aligned status, an attack was always possible, but Ireland's military was ill-prepared to protect the country. In particular,



the Irish Air Corps (IAC) lacked equipment, its funding having been parsimonious with procurements delayed or trimmed. The Corps' commanding officer was Col Patrick Anthony Mulcahy, a former artillery staff officer who knew little of aviation.

Ireland referred to the war as 'The Emergency'. In September 1939 the IAC constituted just three squadrons, all based at Baldonnel, southwest of Dublin. Some 30 pilots were available, half the notional peacetime number required, while serious shortages also existed across the ground trades.

FRONTLINE FORCE

Formed in April 1937, the IAC's Reconnaissance and Medium Bomber Squadron flew nine Avro Anson Is; four delivered new and five ex-RAF. The Anson had been selected after Ireland's Department of Defence had approached British



Above
Aircrew of Fighter Squadron pose for the camera in front of a Gladiator.

Left
Three Ansons in the camouflage scheme adopted for 'The Emergency'. The fuselage orange-and-green Celtic boss was set within a white square and there were bold tricolour orange, white and green stripes on the wings.

Bottom left
Camouflaged Gladiators at rest at Baldonnel. In the foreground is 25. Below its cockpit is a cartoon figure (possibly 'Sneezy' of 'Seven Dwarfs' fame) playing the concertina.

Gaelic its motto was 'Small But Fierce'.

The Gladiators entered service in March 1938. Throughout this period, IAC aircraft had simple two- or three-digit serials, for example the Gladiators were 23, 24, 25 and 26.

In June 1938 Gladiator 26 nosed over on Baldonnel's grass and repairs took months. A second accident in October 20 put 23 out of action permanently; pilot Lt Higgins escaped with minor injuries. By autumn 1939 the three remaining examples were serviceable.

The Lysanders had been allocated to Fighter Squadron in July 1939; the last IAC aircraft received before the onset of The Emergency. They were used mainly for army co-operation duties and two were later converted to target-tugs by Short and Harland, across the border in Belfast.

SHANNON PATROL

Immediately prior to the outbreak of war three Ansons and two Walruses relocated from Baldonnel to Ireland's southwest coast. To create the detachment, the two donor squadrons pooled some of their limited resources. With a handful of pilots and ground personnel, a base was established at Rineanna, an isolated spot on the Shannon estuary.



and German manufacturers seeking a twin-engined, general reconnaissance type; Germany had declined to quote.

The first two Ansons arrived on March 20, 1937 and the other seven were delivered on February 2, 1939. Seven additional examples were ordered and by September 1939 were ready for dispatch, but were retained by Britain.

The Ansons were the first monoplanes and the first aircraft with retractable undercarriage acquired by the Corps.

The Coastal Patrol Squadron, established in May 1939, operated three Supermarine Walrus Is

and also acted as a training unit. All three were delivered direct from Supermarine at Woolston, Southampton, on March 3, 1939.

During the ferry flight, one of the amphibians later given the serial number 18 force-landed with engine trouble off Ballytrent. Rescued by local boats, its upper wing damaged, the Walrus completed the journey to Baldonnel by road.

Formed in March 1939, 1 Fighter Squadron flew four Gloster Gladiator Is and six Westland Lysander IIs. There being no similar units, it was often referred to just as Fighter Squadron. Translated from



Above
An instructor imparts knowledge to attentive pupils, using an IAC Lysander to demonstrate his craft.

Above right
Hector 88 suffered an accident and was withdrawn from use in September 1942, after only nine months' service.

Below right
Air Corps Miles Master II 98 - still wearing its RAF serial W9028 - with the five others at Baldonnel soon after delivery in February 1943.

Rineanna was situated near the Foynes civil flying-boat station developed during the late 1930s and later provided the basis for today's Shannon International Airport. The base received its first movement on May 18, 1939 when Anson 43 visited. Facilities were primitive; there were no hangars, no direction-finding station and no wireless. For major maintenance or repairs, aircraft had to return to Baldonnel.

Patrols began on September 1. At first two each day, typically of three hours' duration, watched over a vast number of inlets, stretching from Donegal to the north around to Wexford harbour in the southeast. It was feared the coastline could provide hideaways for German vessels engaged in spying or attacks against shipping. The possibility of an arriving invasion force was also considered.

As well as looking out for suspicious or damaged vessels, Rineanna's flyers searched for survivors of sinkings, investigated straying foreign aircraft and reported details of incoming weather. On the morning of September 4 an Anson left Rineanna to help spot survivors from the

British passenger liner *Athenia*, sunk off Donegal the previous evening by German submarine U-30.

UNEQUAL STRUGGLE

Less than a week into The Emergency, on September 8, Anson 45 suffered engine failure and was smashed beyond repair in a forced landing near Dingle. On October 10, Anson 44 came down in heavy rain at Nenagh. It was moved to Baldonnel but didn't fly again until 1945.

On December 19 both engines packed in on 43 and it ditched in Galway Bay off Barna. The crew were rescued but their sodden aircraft was later struck off charge.

Always unequal to covering so great an area, with fewer aircraft Rineanna's patrols declined. To an extent maritime observation became possible from a network of lookout posts established by the newly formed Coast Watching Service and at some Garda (police) stations.

Spares became another problem; by the spring of 1940, of the six remaining Ansons three were unserviceable with engine defects. Pleas to Britain for support fell on deaf

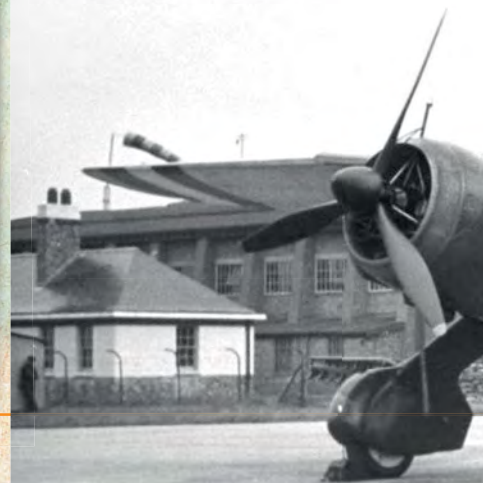
ears, a paradoxical situation if, as has been speculated, the flights' purpose was partly to provide the British with information. As the Air Corps' flying hours decreased so too did the morale at lonely Rineanna.

By mid-1940 patrols had been suspended and the Ansons returned to Baldonnel. The Walruses stayed on, but still only two were operational. Eventually 18 was repaired by 1941, fitted with the wings of 19. The latter had crashed on September 18, 1940 and 20 was written off on September 3, 1942. The first example soldiered on, but the lack of spare watertight floats prevented seaborne operations.

DIVERSE COLLECTION

With heightened fear of invasion in the summer of 1940 Dublin's airspace was declared a prohibited zone and warnings issued that unauthorised aircraft entering the area would be fired on. Ireland's Air Defence Command was based at Dublin Castle, with local air defence run by 1 Anti-Aircraft Brigade. A small number of anti-aircraft guns and searchlights were assembled around the capital, while Fighter Squadron prepared as best it could.

The aerial force was woefully weak. True, Britain supplied a few more





Above
Walrus 20 at rest.

Below left
Lysander 61, the first delivered to the IAC, at Baldonnel.

aeroplanes but not modern fighting types, and at that time there was deep distrust in Ireland of its formidable neighbour.

Six Hawker Hinds, three with dual control, and five Miles Magisters arrived in June 1940, the latter bringing the IAC total to 15. Hind 70 had a very short career, crashing at Laytown on July 27 killing both crewmen.

Over the summer, Ireland's observer network spotted hundreds of foreign military aircraft, particularly along the eastern coast. By then Fighter Squadron's Gladiators and Lysanders had been supplemented by two Avro 636 biplane trainers (four had been delivered in October 1935), a de Havilland Dragon, two Hinds and a Magister. The Dragon, accepted in March 1937, had been converted as a target-tug and was also fitted with small underwing bomb racks.

This diverse collection represented no operational improvement. Six types in a single unit, some elderly, worsened an already challenging maintenance situation.

GROWING CO-OPERATION

It was impossible to tackle the numbers of foreign aerial sightings reported, or organise standing patrols. With so few defenders, news of single

intruders was routinely disregarded. In conflict with the warnings put out regarding unauthorised Dublin overflights, for fear of breaching neutrality Fighter Squadron was ordered not to fire on alien types.

On April 13, 1940 the IAC investigated a large group of aircraft off the east coast. These turned out to be a convoy escort, patrolling outside territorial waters.

Two Gladiators were sent to tackle a Junkers Ju 88 flying over Dublin on December 29. Not only were the biplanes unable to catch up with the German, they succeeded in hampering Irish anti-aircraft fire.

Ireland's military had drawn up plans in case of attack either by Britain from Northern Ireland, to occupy the south for its own security, or by Germany along the southeast coast. (Britain invaded Iceland in May 1940 to prevent Germany gaining a mid-Atlantic foothold - ED.)

Should the need to evacuate Baldonnel arise, over the summer of 1940 dispersed fields, mainly in the east and southwest, were identified to act as temporary airstrips for the IAC. Difficulties with maintenance, repairs and fuel supply would have made such operations short-lived.

Fear of a British attack diminished somewhat after confidential talks held in early 1941 between the two

countries' military staffs. As discreet contact grew between British and Irish agencies, so did co-operation.

On the night of May 30/31, 1941 tragedy struck. The Luftwaffe accidentally bombed Dublin's North Strand district, the most serious of several such incidents during The Emergency. Anti-aircraft fire opened up, but the bombs killed at least 28 people, injured 90 and damaged or destroyed some 300 houses.

To help counter possible German attacks the construction of new airfields on Irish soil for RAF use was considered. Rathduff was selected and building work began in the autumn of 1941 but the base was never occupied by the British.

Offensive actions by the IAC were confined to the destruction of wayward barrage balloons. As early as October 4, 1939, Lysander 64 shot down a balloon near Foynes, while on June 20, 1940 the same aircraft dispatched another over the Irish Sea off Waterford. The following May a third 'blimp' was brought down near Carlow.

'WINDFALLS'

Inevitably, aircraft from the warring nations crashed in Ireland due to adverse weather, navigational error, low fuel or combat damage. Recovery of crashed types became an Air Corps' responsibility. If they were too damaged to warrant recovery, useful parts and weapons were salvaged. Several RAF aircraft were repaired and pressed into IAC service.

Hawker Hurricane I P5178 of 79 Squadron landed on September 29, 1940 at Ballyvadden. On December 21, Miles Master I N8009 of 307 Squadron crash-landed at Dungooley following navigational error. Short of fuel, 233 Squadron's Lockheed Hudson I P5123 arrived on January 24, 1941 at Skreen, while Fairey Battle T.T.I V1222 came down





Below
Line-up of Hurricanes at Baldonnel. Second from the front, 105 wears Fighter Squadron's badge, the head of a black panther. ALL VIA AUTHOR

near Waterford on April 24.

These aircraft were purchased from Britain and, except for the Master, were made airworthy. The Hudson joined the Reconnaissance and Medium Bombing Squadron. The Battle served as a target-tug until May 1946. The Hurricane joined Fighter Squadron, flying until August 1946.

On June 10, 1941 Hurricane IIa Z2832 of 32 Squadron ran out of fuel, landing at Whitestown. Hurricane IIb Z5070 came down at Athboy on August 21. Following talks with the British these were put to work with the Advanced Training Section.

Occasional windfall types didn't relieve the paucity of equipment. Col Mulcahy urgently sought new aircraft from Britain and developed an incognito friendship with the air attaché to Dublin, Wg Cdr R W G Lywood. Britain's resources were extremely hard-pressed and no doubt any transfer of aircraft was delayed while diplomatic talks took place regarding the extent of Irish support despite its neutrality.

DEFECTORS

During The Emergency, Ireland's assistance to Britain grew significantly. Following the creation of the Donegal Corridor, by early 1941 RAF overflights of Irish territory were permitted along a narrow strip connecting Northern Ireland and the Atlantic.

Many British, and later American, aircrews crashing in Ireland were spirited across the border into Northern Ireland, rather than being interned. Of those who did enter detention, most were released long before the war ended while downed German flyers were confined throughout hostilities.

Increasingly, British and US aircraft landing intact on Irish soil were refuelled and allowed to continue. These incidents were sympathetically interpreted as peaceful missions: air-sea rescues, ferry flights, air tests. Damaged Allied machines were sometimes returned across the border.

In May 1941 Britain supplied ten Hawker Hectors for IAC use, followed by three more the following January. Obsolete and worn, these were unpopular; the Irish had been angling for Hurricanes. In September Hectors 81 and 83 collided at Gormanston and were struck off charge.

Walrus 18 embarked on a bold flight in January 1942. The four servicemen aboard, restless with neutrality, had decided life would be more exciting with the Luftwaffe. They set course from Rineanna for France to volunteer.

The Walrus evaded a searching Lysander, but the adventurers became lost. Intercepted by RAF Spitfires, the amphibian was compelled to land at St Eval in Cornwall. The Irish authorities were contacted, the airmen detained and taken home under guard. Collected by IAC personnel, 18 returned to Baldonnel, complete with a gleaming new Lewis gun donated by St Eval's armourers.

HURRICANES AT LAST

During 1941 a top-level enquiry, ordered by the Army's Chief of Staff, Lt Gen Dan McKenna, took place. This arose from the IAC's miserable equipment level and inadequate training. Concluding in early 1942, unsurprisingly improvements in flying training were proposed, together with greater numbers of pilots and many more aircraft. Although additional pilots were trained, aircraft numbers

remained low.

Six Miles Masters were delivered to Baldonnel on February 2, 1943. By then an Air Corps' reorganisation was under way and the following month Maj William Percy Delamere, with the service since its earliest days and previously an RAF flyer, was appointed its commanding officer.

During April Fighter Squadron moved to Rineanna, where facilities had slowly improved, beginning coastal patrol work as resources allowed. The Reconnaissance and Medium Bomber Squadron and Coastal Patrol Squadron were both disbanded, their aircraft joining Baldonnel's Air Corps School, which became the only other flying unit.

At last, on July 7, 1943 four Hurricane Is arrived from Britain, though they were distinctly war-weary. At that time, the 'windfall' Mk.IIs were returned to the British. In November Ireland received three more Mk.Is, a single example during February 1944 and three in March. With the crash of the final Gladiator and the remaining Lysanders transferred, Fighter Squadron became all-Hurricane.

Six cannon-armed Hurricane IIs were supplied in March 1945, the last aircraft acquired during The Emergency. In May, Fighter Squadron transferred to Gormanston. Over that summer and autumn a military tattoo and exhibition was held at the Royal Dublin Society, IAC equipment including two Hurricanes, a Magister and a Link trainer.

Plagued by maintenance problems, the Hurricanes remained in service until November 1947 when the final example, Mk.IIc 120, was withdrawn. Small and diverse it may have been, but the Air Corps both defended and interpreted Ireland's neutrality. ●

