

**Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog  
St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society**

**Sunderlands of Pembroke Dock (Flying Boat Utopia!)**

**John Evans**



Just 9 years after the Wright brothers' first flight the earliest flying boats appeared around Dale until WWI stopped the trials but by the 1930s the RAF inherited a largely derelict Victorian dockyard and constructed slipways, fuel tanks and hangers to accommodate the new breeds of flying boats – along with their aircrews and ground crews. Pembroke Dock was the largest flying boat station in the world at the height of its operational force – the Battle of the Atlantic saw 99 flying boats based in Pembroke Dock in 1943 ... for training, in transit to West Africa/ Far East, damaged or returned for servicing as well as operational aircraft. There was round-the-clock activity with

aircraft brought to Pembroke Dock from bases all over the world as well as the operational squadrons based there.

The first Sunderland arrived for Empire Day 1938 – then 1938-9 saw frenetic activity as crews underwent rapid testing and familiarisation ... and transforming the silver body to camouflaged green-and-brown! The Sunderland's main role was Convoy Patrols – helping protect the Atlantic convoys, supporting the naval vessels in the struggle to maintain maritime trade, by providing air protection once the convoys were within range from the coastal bases. U-boats would patrol the coastal waters in order to attack the convoys as they reached the end of their voyage across the Atlantic and Sunderlands would attack but also provided search-and-rescue when possible.

During the lifetime of the station saw many distinguished flyers – including Bob Leckie, Donald Bennett and Arthur Travers Harris (progressing from Coastal Command to Bomber Command 'Pathfinders') and shortly after the start of the war came the 'Girls in Blue' – the WAAF – in essential support roles (mainly Met and Admin).

It became a prime target for the Luftwaffe and during the Battle of Britain few fighter aircraft were available Pembroke Dock suffered badly as the town was bombed and strafed as well as the RAF installations. 19<sup>th</sup> August 1940 saw the oil tanks hit – destroying 11 of the 17 tanks and millions of gallons of oil .

Pembroke Dock provided 'home' for many nations:

- Australians appeared at the end of 1939 and from 1943 Squadron 461 was formed and remained in Pembroke Dock until the end of the war.
- Dutch Air Force – 1940 - after the fall of Holland their float plane squadron was briefly based in the Haven.
- Americans arrived in 1943 with their Catalinas – coining the term 'Blitzville' after the damage 1940-41!
- French squadrons were based briefly here – training on Sunderlands before moving on to West Africa
- Canadians arrived in 1944 – complete with their mascot Straddle (black cocker spaniel – flew operations, complete with his own log-book!



The base continued to operate at a reduced level after the war until it eventually closed in 1959 – as it was no longer needed. In 1999 divers untangling lobster pots found parts of Sunderland and with the help of TV Channel 4's "Wreck Detectives" one Pegasus engine was recovered which, with the help of volunteers led to the building up the Heritage Museum ... and the Sunderland Trust came into existence. Families of RAF crew and the colonial forces have contributed log-books, medals, photographs and other mementos to bring the stories to life. 2014 saw the Queen officially opening of the Heritage Centre in the restored Royal Dockyard Chapel (only Georgian military chapel in Wales) and now 60 volunteers each week help out across the centre and it has become a major visitor attraction – celebrating the work, lives and tragedies of wartime Pembroke Dock.

**Summary courtesy of Sally Martyn**