



Holy Loch, Scotland: Land of the Horizontal Rain

From 1977 to 1979 I was stationed aboard the USS *Holland* (AS-32), homeported in Holy Loch, Scotland. My young family lived in a rented home on the quaintly named Kirn Brae, just up the hill from the waterfront overlooking the Firth of Clyde. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the coldest winter I ever spent was the first summer I spent in Scotland.

During the coldest years of the Cold War, Holy Loch was home to the U.S. Navy's fleet ballistic missile submarine refit facility. The loch itself is a deep inlet branching from the Firth of Clyde on Scotland's rugged west coast. Navy personnel stationed there measured the passing seasons by long work shifts, short winter days, and an endless procession of cold rain and gray skies.

Scotland's miserable weather and abbreviated winter daylight—sunrise around 9:00 a.m. and sunset before 4:30 p.m.—gave rise to some wonderfully dry Scottish humor.

"If Ye Canna See..."

Holy Loch averages between three and four-and-a-half inches of rain each month. The local Scots loved to joke over their pints of McEwan's Ale:

*"If ye canna see across the loch, it's rainin'. If ye **can** see across the loch, it's gaun tae rain."*

It didn't take us Americans long to appreciate the wisdom behind that observation.

The Nine-to-Three Ratio

The Navy families living around Dunoon had a favorite saying of their own:

"Scotland has nine months of winter and three months of bad weather."

The joke was only a slight exaggeration. Even during the relatively pleasant months from May through August, average daytime temperatures struggled to reach the mid-60s, and rain remained a regular visitor.

Land of the Horizontal Rain

Winter was especially hard on those of us assigned to the submarine tender and floating dry dock. The submarines moored alongside the tender anchored in the loch, about a five-minute boat ride from Ardnadam Pier.

I vividly remember those winter mornings walking down the pier as fierce winds funneled through the mountain pass, driving the rain almost horizontally. Those of us heading for work arrived at the ship soaked only on our **left** sides. After a ten- or twelve-hour workday repairing and provisioning submarines, we made the return trip after dark and somehow managed to get soaked only on our **right** sides.

It became just another part of life in Holy Loch.

Glorious—but Brief—Summers

When the rain finally relented, Holy Loch became one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. Purple heather blanketed the hillsides, wildflowers covered the valleys, and the normally choppy waters of the loch often became eerily calm, reflecting the surrounding mountains like polished glass.

The famous Scottish midges—tiny gnat-like insects—also emerged in force and seemed determined to fly into everyone's eyes, ears, and nose.

The days grew wonderfully long. By midsummer the sun rose before 6:00 a.m. and lingered until after 8:30 in the evening. Yet even then the weather remained unpredictable. Rain still arrived every few days, often accompanied by chilly temperatures. In fact, our Fourth of July picnic in 1978 had to be canceled because it was simply too cold and wet.

Living Inside a Postcard

After a little more than two years, my family and I returned to the warmer climate of California. During our stay, my two preteen children attended the local Scottish school, while my wife became friends with many of the local residents. The people of Dunoon were welcoming despite

the tremendous impact hundreds of American sailors and civilian technicians had on their quiet community.

My daughter later described our time there as "living inside a picture postcard." I have never heard Scotland described more perfectly.

Holy Loch Today

The Navy closed its fleet ballistic missile submarine facility in 1992 as the Cold War came to an end. The submarines, submarine tender, and floating dry dock disappeared, and Holy Loch returned to being a peaceful Scottish loch. Dunoon remains a popular summer resort, although visitors from England are still well advised to bring their "brollies."

Ah, Memories!

When I think back on Holy Loch, I remember it as a busy waypoint where fleet ballistic missile submarines exchanged crews, replenished supplies, and prepared for months beneath the sea. Those of us serving aboard the submarine tender and floating dry dock worked long hours repairing complex systems, loading everything from Polaris missiles to cartons of milk, and even offloading radioactive waste associated with the submarines' nuclear propulsion systems. During the Cold War, no expense was spared to keep America's nuclear deterrent ready.

But more than anything else, I remember those long walks along Ardnadam Pier, arriving at work wet on one side of my uniform and going home wet on the other.

And I remember looking across one of the most beautiful landscapes I have ever seen—at least on those rare days when you could actually see across the loch.