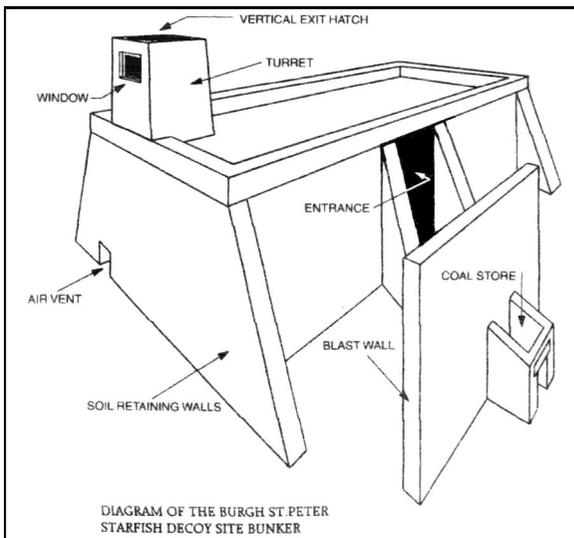


# Balnakilly and Rhubodach Decoy sites: Operation Starfish

The forest contains evidence of a decoy site built in World War II. Decoy sites were built to fool German bombers into attacking a place which had no civilians and were of no military value instead of their real targets. The concrete bunker below is one of three in the forest which would have controlled lights and set off trails of fire throughout the area. This would have looked from the air like an airfield or other important military base. It was unsuccessful on Bute and the forest was never bombed.



At the outbreak of World War II, British high command feared a German bombing campaign on the UK. In September 1939, Colonel John Turner, an engineer and retired Air Ministry officer, established a broad range of day and night decoys to mislead enemy bombers. His first work was with dummy aircraft, airfields and factories - these decoys were dubbed 'K' Sites. Turner also implemented night decoys; dubbed 'Q' Sites, they consisted of lights mounted on poles (QL) to simulate an airfield or other base.

In response to the German's use of incendiary bombs, Turner added fires to the 'Q' Sites - calling them Q-Fire (QF). The fires were controlled from a nearby concrete bunker. The idea was that after a first wave of bombers dropped on the real target, the decoy would light fires to draw for further waves to home in on.

Following the night bombing of Coventry, in early November 1940, the decoy programme was expanded to include towns and cities as well as all kinds of military installations and industrial areas. These new "Special Fire" (Starfish) decoys were set up to simulate the bomb drops of German pathfinder squadrons. By January 1941 the programme had been increased to 43 sites protecting 13 towns and cities and by March operational sites numbered over 100. By the end of the war there were 237 Starfish sites protecting 81 locations.

The sites were located around 4 miles from the town they protected and at least 1 mile from any other settlement. Various types of fire were used - from quick burning felt to creosote - to simulate a recently-bombed town. Each site was controlled locally from a concrete bunker.

Glasgow was protected by various Starfish sites located on its surrounding hillsides. Decoy sites existed at Long Wood outside Eaglesham, in the Old Kilpatrick Hills above Clydebank and on the Craigmaddie Muir above Torrance and also above Kilsyth.

There are three known bunkers connected with this QF / QL site. This one was a field bunker, controlling a group of fires and lights. A generator was run inside the bunker to power the lights and an escape hatch can be seen at the other end. The operators would receive a field telephone call from the command bunker behind Rhubodach House, then power up the lights and fire the detonators to start the fires.

This site was operated by the Royal Navy and was almost certainly located to protect the naval installations and bases around Rothesay and Port Bannatyne. Clusters of impressions where basket fires once stood are typical, bounded by fire-break trenches, but these have not yet been found here.

Tanks containing paraffin, creosote or diesel were placed on top of 20ft towers, arranged to resemble rows of buildings or industrial complexes. A valve that operated like a toilet flush was opened to release the fuel on to smouldering coal or charcoal, creating an instant blaze and engulfing the area in black smoke. Then the fire was flushed with water from a second tank to send up a fireball and a column of steam into the night sky. Result: a rather convincing mock-up of a bombing raid that hit its target.

