

MORE than 40 years after the end of the Second World War one of Scotland's darker military secrets is emerging at Cairnryan in the south of Scotland.

In 1941 it was a sleepy Wigtownshire village. War Department officials in London, alarmed at the prospect of Liverpool and Glasgow being bombed out of existence as ports, decided there had to be options.

The result was that an army of Engineers and Pioneers descended on Faslane, which became Britain's Military Port Number One and Cairnryan, which was designated Military Port Number Two.

Half the village was bulldozed, including the little schoolhouse, and a huge fence erected to screen military activities from prying eyes. Locals who joined the 5000

service personnel within the port area were all sworn in to the Official Secrets Act not to talk of their work.

From 1943, when the £12 million port was ready, until 1959 when work stopped, a veil of secrecy was thrown round its operations. Local newspapers hardly ever reported its existence, even when eight men died in a jetty explosion.

It is becoming clear that decisions taken at Cairnryan were of international importance. So much so that wartime leader, Winston Churchill had secret summits at nearby Knockinaam Lodge at Portpatrick with then General (later President) Dwight D. Eisenhower and his chiefs of staff and also senior Russian army officials.

Only now do workers feel they can talk about those days, cutting through rumours that have swarmed round the place ever since. Today all a driver on the A77 will see at the "ghost" port is a rusting pile of scrap, the remains of HMS Bulwark, a commando carrier vessel.

Glasgow Herald inquiries can now reveal that in a 13-year post-war period "several million tons" of bombs, depth-charges, mines, shells and countless cases of ammunition were dumped in the half-mile deep Beaufort's Dyke, only 12 miles off in the North Channel.

The top level "summits" at Knockinaam decided the fate of no less than 110 Nazi U-boats, that were lined up in Loch Ryan in groups of five. The Russians, Americans and British took eight each and the rest were consigned to a watery grave in the Atlantic trench 80 miles west of Bloody Foreland off Donegal.

Much more secret was the similar fate that befell the German stockpiles of lethal VX nerve gas. It was taken in barges to North Wales then brought in wagons to Cairnryan where it was unloaded amid remarkable precautions.

The huge bombs were unloaded, singly and in special net harnesses and stacked on three vessels — the British ship Clairtee, Yugoslavian Kokta and the German Vogtland. Even the decks were stacked and the three ships followed the route of "Operation Deadlight" and were scuttled in the Atlantic.

The village was not evacuated during the operation despite gas bomb leaks and remarkably, coaling on coasters involved in the explosives dumping operation was done by captured Afrika Corps prisoners-of-war.

Our inquiries also revealed that the dumping crews, who were not paid danger money, to save

journey time often pushed loads into the sea soon after they rounded Corsewell Point and short of the dumping ground. With the scouring action of tides and storms this explains the constant finds of military hardware in fishing nets in the Firth of Clyde in recent years.

"Over the years we dumped millions of tons of explosives into Beaufort's Dyke," confirmed Mr Jimmy Thomson of Stranraer, who with his brother-in-law, Mr Ronald Kennedy, of Cheadle, Cheshire, both worked in the port.

Mr Thomson, who started as a 15-year-old, also crewed on the dumping barges at 2/6d an hour.

He added: "We put everything into the trench from the biggest blockbuster bombs to the smallest calibre bullets, 1000 in each box. They arrived non-stop until 1959, even from Trincomalee (British naval base, Ceylon), Hong Kong and Singapore.

"An army team from Beith had the job of sorting out the trainloads and as far as I know the detonators were removed from the bombs and mines."

Both men and other workers on the North and South deep jetties and the Lighterage said that the deadly cargoes were taken out daily, except Sundays, on coasters — Sir Noel Birch, Sir Evelyn Wood, Sir Malcolm Campbell and Marquis of Hartington, on T-class trawlers, Foxtrot and Poacher and on 20 landing craft.

His brother, Ralph, who still lives in Cairnryan, a crane-man, at the South deep jetty, said it was common knowledge that the Saturday shift of Pioneers from Glasgow dumped short of the trench.

He said: "They were only interested in getting back up the road to Glasgow on a Saturday. If they got within even a few hundred yards of the Dyke then that would be close enough."

His wife, Isobel, told how along with some village girls she had been taken in a small boat to see the line-up of U-boats.

She said: "We got in close to one of the U-boats and could hear the Germans. They had rigged up a wire and we watched one of

them walk it just like a circus act."

Each of the U-boats was valued at £400,000 at 1946 prices and in the destruction operation a carrier, Nairana, stood off the selected area out towards Rockall, in the Western Approaches.

The first five of the Mark 23 250-ton U-boats were towed out accompanied by a Polish destroyer Blyskawica (Lightning) and British destroyers Onslow and Southdown, frigates Cubit and Loch Shin and three tugs. Onslow and the Polish ship then sank them to test new shells and torpedoes.

Mr David Coid, also of Cairnryan, another jetty worker, recalled that the German nerve gas bombs were given extra special treatment.

He added: "They were taken one bomb at a time in net slings and we used monorails to stack them on the selected ships. Once they were all stacked the topsides were cemented and they sailed off to be scuttled."

His neighbour, James Davidson, a former deckboy, recalls the sheer range of the explosives that arrived (all ammunition for US bases in Britain also passed through).

He said: "We had the big RAF 10,000lb blockbusters, mines, depth-charges, smoke canisters, oerlixon shells and countless boxes of small stuff.

"God knows how many tons are out there in the Dyke but its got to be a million and then the rest. We know not all went in the deep, in fact when Townsend Thoresen built their terminal here they were bringing up whole cases of ammo."

The admission that considerable quantities — bombs and explosive charges were pushed off rollers at the rear of the landing craft — did not make the Dyke could provide a part answer to the Clyde fishermen's unwanted catches.

The German Luftwaffe also dropped large numbers of horn mines into the Firth of Clyde ar

many bomb-laden aircraft flying out of Turnberry are known to have crashed in the sea.

Girvan skipper Willie Rae, 33, and his brother, John, 23, only three weeks ago had a hair-raising experience when they "caught" a 1200lb air-dropped acoustic mine in their nets while prawn fishing off Ailsa Craig.

The brothers found the winches on their small steel-hulled trawler, Intrepid, could not cope with the load so they "dragged and bumped" it all the way to Girvan harbour.

Once there, a larger boat winched the huge torpedo-shaped mine to the surface. What then ensued was several hours of near high-farce as police and bomb disposal experts from Rosyth

suspended all fishing and planned to get rid of it.

"It was really frightening having a thing like that hanging off the rear of the boat," said skipper Rae. "The other skipper naturally didn't want to take it out so we volunteered.

"The disposal people followed behind in a dinghy and when we were one-and-a-half miles out we lowered it carefully onto the bottom in 10 fathoms.

"The bomb clanged against the side the whole way out and John sat at the prow. I told him it wouldn't do much good to be only 18 feet away if it went off.

"The divers went down and put plastic explosives on it and we went a mile off, until they destroyed it."

The bomb disposal people later declared the mine a "dud." The brothers affirm they felt the shock of the underwater explosion from the bomb (which had a sonic device to detonate on ship's screw pitch) a mile distant.

In recent years there had been frequent landings of mines and bombs by fishing boats. So far this summer there have been a horned German mine in the main channel at Loch Long and a Second World War torpedo off Ardrossan.

When fishermen pulled out nine mines in less than 20 months the Ministry of Defence stoutly maintained all were harmless practice mines.

The official attitude has been to play down such discoveries or their potential for disaster. But the MoD, the US Navy and the local coastal authorities have realised that the odds are that some day the unthinkable may happen.

Both British and US nuclear power submarines use the Firth to reach their Faslane and Holy Loch bases. Incredibly the submarine training area is clearly marked, as a warning to other shipping on navigation chart 2198, hard by the northern lip of Beaufort's Dyke.

Provision has been made to cope with the ecological disaster that would accompany any British or US submarine meeting disaster on the Clyde. There is one more chilling thought... Russian killer submarines are also known to encroach in these same waters.

Revelation by Scottish political correspondent
 IAN CLARK has revealed that the port of Cairnryan was used in the dumping of war-time explosives. Here they report on the extent of the secret disposal — and of a possible nuclear threat to south-west Scotland.