

## CHAPTER I

# Not Your Typical Summer Holiday

**I grew up** going on monster-hunting expeditions. Many of my school summer holidays were spent in a variety of caravans, guest houses or boats at the loch-side, and one thing I remember is that it seemed to be nearly always raining. Scotland is not the place to go if you're looking for good weather, even in the summer. But then sunshine and sand were not our holiday goal—monster hunting was!

Nevertheless, my brother and sisters and I were in our element and had tremendous fun spending our summers doing something totally unique. Our dad was off all day monster hunting, doing all sorts of exciting experiments, meeting interesting people from all parts of the world, being interviewed for French TV, helping an American group by towing their side scan sonar from his boat, *Water Horse*. He even assisted with the laying of hormone baits in the hope of recording an amorous Nessie via hydrophone. But best of all, we often got to go along. And so there I was, a cheeky kid with a killer grin, monster hunting, driving *Water Horse* across the loch while my sister Dawn was on watch with a camera at the ready (someone was always on watch) and Dad was inside the cabin fixing some gadget or other, mumbling and blaming the Loch Ness gremlins when it wouldn't work—for the umpteenth time.

For us kids it was an endless round of pure adventure meeting characters from all around the globe. There was Wing Commander Ken Wallis, a Second World War bomber pilot who'd designed and built a tiny one-man autogyro contraption. It was an amazing piece of machinery powered by a Rolls Royce Continental 0-200-B 100 hp engine which to a young boy didn't look all that much bigger than that of a

standard garden lawnmower. Ken would tow it behind his Austin Mini, find a convenient farmer's field, start the motor by hand flipping the prop, climb aboard, and off he'd go racing across the grass until, quite quickly, he'd be airborne, buzzing around the skies skimming the tops of trees. I think the idea was to do some low-level flying across the loch in the hope of sneaking up and catching an aerial glimpse of the ever-elusive Nessie. I remember the autogyro causing quite a stir with locals and tourists alike, as it hadn't been all that long since Ken and his flying machine had featured in the 1967 James Bond movie, *You Only Live Twice*.

There was also Ivor Newby, a pleasant gentleman and an accomplished scuba diver. Ivor became known as "Ivor the Diver," not just because of his skills under the water, which were considerable—anyone who dives in Loch Ness has my respect—but also due to the fact that he made a habit of falling into the loch. Slipping off his boat was almost a common occurrence, but walking off the end of a pier gained the biggest cheer and stood him quite a few pints at the local tavern.

Many who came to the loch in search of the monster were inspired by Tim's 1960 film. Verification of the film's authenticity by the Royal Air Force's world-renowned Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC)<sup>1</sup> in 1966 helped to heighten interest worldwide—not to mention the boost it gave to the film's credibility and Tim's reputation. JARIC reported the object filmed was neither a surface boat nor a submarine and so was probably animate. In 1972, Tim also sent the film to NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratories in Pasadena with similar results.

In the intervening fifty years since Tim took the now legendary sixty-five-second sequence, all sorts of people—professional bodies, universities, TV networks, and so on—have tried their luck at finding that one piece of evidence strong enough to convince not only the world's scientific establishment but also a sceptical public that Nessie is alive and well, enjoying herself in Scotland's very own Jurassic Park. Many have arrived at the loch full of enthusiasm, convinced their particular experiment or method of research will be the one to solve this timeless legend, only to have their hopes dashed, leaving empty handed—and, more often than not, rather damp. Results from these innumerable experiments, scientific studies and thousands of hours of shore watching

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<sup>1</sup> Now known as the Defence Geospatial Intelligence Fusion Centre (DGIFC) as part of the Joint Forces Intelligence Group (JFIG)

can only be described as intermittent; many were sketchy—meaning “nothing.” But, on very odd occasions, there have been stunning and quite literally take-your-breath-away moments, leaving you scratching your head in wonderment: What exactly is down there lurking in those murky depths?

What is remarkable is that after years of effort and the massive advances in technology, and some very intriguing results (such as Rines’ 1972 underwater flipper picture backed up with a sonar trace of a thirty-foot-long target showing projections or humps), Tim’s film remains arguably the most convincing piece of evidence of a large aquatic animal inhabiting the loch.

In 1993, six years after Tim’s untimely death, a TV company in the UK doing a story on Loch Ness took a copy of the film and did its own investigation. One of the technical operators noticed something and switched the film over to view it in negative. He then laid a number of the same frames over one another to reveal a shadow underwater. This shadow is unmistakable in its shape, clearly showing a large diamond-shaped fin, a body, and what appears to be a tail, just under the surface. For someone who’s literally had a lifetime of the monster, and viewed my father’s film from all angles, it was startling to see. I was—and still am—amazed by that image.



So there we were, an unassuming family living in a modest 1950s-style semi-detached house in a quite ordinary cul-de-sac just on the outskirts of Reading (sounds like the opening to a Harry Potter story) suddenly thrust into the limelight due to an extraordinary subject getting worldwide attention—creating, of course, quite a stir on our street. Because of the unusual nature of monster hunting, some folks thought it was cool and were curious, wanting to know more, while others politely smiled and said nothing. Then there was the third group, the “take the mickey”<sup>2</sup> brigade. You would expect your mates to “have a go” about hunting monsters, but it didn’t stop there; adults were also quite okay with having a dig about it, even to the point where one of my school-teachers belittled the subject in front of the rest of my class. My reaction was of course to defend both my father and the subject, but play-

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2 To tease or ridicule.

ground taunts can be harsh. However, in my school friends' defence, it was tough for other kids to understand what we did for our summer holidays. Remember, this was long before mass-market package tour holidays to Spain, Portugal, and Greece of which the British are so fond nowadays; most families at that time would take their summer breaks somewhere in the UK—a fortnight in Devon, a week at Butlins or, if you were really lucky, a trip to one of the Channel Islands. Few of my school friends, if any, went to Scotland—and certainly *none* went monster hunting. So while other kids talked about what they got up to during the six-week summer break, and spoke about getting a fancy flavoured ice cream in Swanage or building sand castles on Bournemouth beach, I would regale them with stories of being on watch, spending hours keeping my eyes peeled just in case Nessie (a prehistoric monster!) popped her head up while I was there, ready and waiting with a camera to capture the moment. My audience was rather sceptical and somewhat cynical. I guess it all seemed a little dramatic, and so un-Reading like.

My father suggested the mocking was likely due to a lack of understanding and knowledge on the subject, so to combat the naysayers he offered to give a talk to the entire school, kids and teachers et al, about “Nessie hunting.” I thought that was a splendid idea, and on the following day made an appointment to see the headmistress to explain why it would be in the school's interest to learn more about the Loch Ness monster. The headmistress agreed and a date was set for my father to come and address the school. I was ten years old!

I was never really sure whether it was my dad talking about a cool subject like monster hunting, or the fact that we got the afternoon out of classes to listen to him that made my school life different. Either way my kudos jumped tenfold with my peers, and my teachers were so enthralled with Nessie they gave us a project on the subject. Of course I was the main source of information and, as you can imagine, went from being the butt of everyone's jokes to the most popular kid in the class—for a few weeks anyway.

My first expedition to Loch Ness had been in the summer of 1967; I'd just turned seven and, being the youngest of the Dinsdale clan and full of energy, was pretty much kept on a tight leash. We stayed in the hotel at Foyers where my father had resided during his first visit to the loch in 1960. Sitting high on the south shore, the old hotel com-

manded a stunning panoramic view of Foyers Bay and the loch in both a westerly and easterly direction. Dad was camping on a small island at the mouth of the Foyers River. This was a favourite spot of his, as it was the area where he'd seen and filmed the beast seven years earlier; it also gave a great deal of privacy as no one knew he was there and the island was only accessible by boat. Simon, my eldest sibling, spent some days and nights with my father on the island; it helped to have a second person to break up the boredom and the loneliness of the endless hours of the monster hunter's vigil.

Mainly for safety reasons, Dad carried a pack of maritime distress flares. Being mostly alone on the island he needed to have a way of contacting the outside world if anything went awry. Firing a flare was also a secret message to the folks at the Loch Ness Investigation Bureau (the LNIB was a group of dedicated individuals who were also involved with studying and hunting Nessie, of which I'll explain more as the pages turn). Their headquarters was situated on the north shore about four or so miles in an easterly direction. If they saw a flare it would indicate that Tim had either filmed or sighted the monster.

One morning while on early watch—5:30 a.m. to be exact—Dad decided to show Simon how to use the flare gun, and test fired one of the new batch of flares. He was confident it was early enough in the morning not to be seen by any of the LNIB crew. A huge ball of fire filled the sky, illuminating the surface of Loch Ness and much of the surrounding mountains before slowly falling back to earth. However, unbeknown to Tim, the LNIB had a team out doing early morning boat drifting and had seen something they couldn't explain and so assumed it was the monster. They grew very excited when, just moments after their sighting, a flare shot into the sky from the vicinity of the island. Knowing full well that was the spot of Tim's camp, they rushed back to Fort Augustus at the westerly most point of the loch and called the LNIB HQ with the news. Then, in turn, the LNIB contacted the hotel at Foyers asking to talk with Wendy, my mother, to try and confirm the report. Of course Wendy knew nothing of this, but was thrilled that perhaps at last Tim had snared the monster. Amidst great excitement we all packed into the car and hurried down the road to Foyers Point where we rushed to the water's edge, calling and shouting over to the island trying to get Simon's and Dad's attention. On seeing us they quickly launched the small boat and paddled over to find out what the

hullabaloo was about. There ensued a comical moment with both my parents talking completely at cross purposes, Mum thinking Dad was playing coy pretending nothing had happened, and Dad bewildered by everyone's behaviour. Once the story was straightened out and we all realized nothing had been seen nor—worse—filmed, disappointment set in. Mum took me along to a nearby phone box where she made the call to the LNIB folks letting them know it was a false alarm. I remember they also needed convincing that nothing of interest had occurred. Leaving the phone box, both Mum and I were deflated and more than a bit saddened that the excitement of catching the monster had not been realized. As Dad would say many times in the coming years, “For a fleeting moment we thought we had Nessie by the tail and yet she slipped from our grasp.”

And that was it: I was part of a monster-hunting family. It sounds bizarre, but that was the way of things for many years to come. Dad would continue to go on expeditions at least once a year, and sometimes the family would go along and others times not. He would lecture at universities and schools across the UK, Europe and in the USA. A steady stream of strange and interesting folks would come to our home to meet him and discuss their own expeditions, experiments and ideas to gain evidence that Nessie existed. Some of these people were invited to stay for dinner; others were politely given an hour of his time and then shown the door. Back then, just as now, the subject had a habit of attracting some less than honest folk looking for an angle. Tim occasionally was guilty of being a little too trusting; however the less scrupulous met their match when confronted by Wendy!

Whenever Dad returned from a trip, whether it be near or far, long or short, he always had a dramatic story to tell: a tremendous storm blowing up on the loch in the middle of the night that nearly put himself and *Water Horse* on the rocks; interviewing a witness who actually had to fend off the monster with an oar, breaking it in the process; or simply a description of the next piece of “very important equipment.” Each subject was dealt an equal level of importance, seriousness, and, of course, humour. Ours was a household full of adventure.