

THE OPERATION FRESHMAN PROJECT

The successful attack on the Heavy Water facility at Vemork in Norway in February 1943 is rightly regarded as one of the most daring special forces raids of WWII. Over the years many books have been written about this raid, Operation Gunnerside, and it has been portrayed in films (The Heroes of Telemark, starring Kirk Douglas), television series (The Heavy Water War) and numerous documentaries. However, what is less well known is that there was an earlier attempt to destroy this target. This raid, Operation Freshman, which was launched on the 19th November 1942, ended in tragedy with 41 of the 48 soldiers and airmen involved losing their lives.

Several books have been published in which Operation Freshman is described, e.g., by Richard Wiggan (1986) and Jostein Berglyd (2005). In 2011, Ion Drew et al. published Silent Heroes which, in addition to the details of the raid, also provided a unique insight into the personal lives of the individual servicemen and their families, and contained information based on interviews, correspondence, and meetings with surviving relatives and ex-servicemen who had connections to the operation. At the time of publication, however, details of only some of the men were available. Efforts are now being made to address this gap and to publish a new book on Operation Freshman which includes information on all of the men who took part in the mission.

With this in mind, The Operation Freshman Project is trying to trace any surviving relatives or people who have stories or anecdotes concerning the servicemen who participated in the raid, or who were involved in the planning, training and support roles, and who may have photographs, letters or other documentary information relating to the servicemen. The idea is to tell the story of these incredibly courageous young men through their lives, and lives of their families, rather than more conventional histories which focus primarily on the events themselves.

Since the start of 2020, the project has managed to establish contact with relatives of 40 of the 48 soldiers and aircrew who took part in Operation Freshman, as well as families of other related Allied servicemen from the War Crimes Investigation Branch, War Crimes Trials, and some of the Norwegians involved. This effort is ongoing.

Dr. Bruce A. Tocher – Mini Bio

Dr Bruce A Tocher was born in Forfar, Scotland and is a graduate of Aberdeen University. Bruce has a PhD in Geology and was a lecturer at Plymouth Polytechnic and Aberystwyth University for 10 years before moving to Norway to join their largest oil & gas company, Statoil. He spent 20 years there working in their Research & Development Division before taking early retirement in 2016. He then spent two years as an International Trade & Investment Senior Executive with Scottish Enterprise before deciding to focus full time on military history, in particular Operation Freshman. Bruce, who is based in Stavanger, Norway has lectured extensively on the subject in the UK and Norway, and recently appeared on the WW2TV Channel. He has spent six years researching this topic with the aim of publishing a new book on the raid.

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OPERATION FRESHMAN

In July 1942, the British War Cabinet decided to try to destroy the heavy water production facilities at the Norsk Hydro facility near Vemork, Norway. The reason was the concern that the heavy water was being used as part of Nazi Germany's program to develop a nuclear bomb. After much discussion, it was decided to use specially trained Royal Engineers, all volunteers, to carry out the task. Twenty men came from the 9th (Airborne) Field Company and ten from the 261 (Airborne) Field Park Company.

On the evening of November 19th, 1942, despite some misgivings regarding the weather over the objective, two Halifax bombers, each towing a Horsa Glider took off from RAF Skitten, near Wick in NE Scotland. On board each glider were 15 Royal Engineers, and two pilots. Their top-secret mission was code-named Operation Freshman.

Waiting near the target zone were a group of four Norwegians from the Special Operations Executive (Grouse Team) who had parachuted into the area some weeks earlier. Their primary mission was to light flares to mark the landing zone on the Hardanger Plateau, then guide the engineers to the target – the Norsk Hydro heavy water facility.

Tragically, due to failures in the navigation and guidance systems, and poor weather, the aircraft failed to identify the landing zones and were forced to turn back. On the return journey, ice formed on the tow ropes and the increased weight began to seriously affect the flight performance, causing the aircraft to lose altitude. At a point over southwest Norway, the tow rope between Halifax A and its glider snapped and the glider crash-landed in Fylgjedalen, a steep mountain valley near Lysefjord. The tug aircraft, Halifax A, made it back safely to Scotland, despite being extremely low on fuel.

Of the 17 men onboard Glider A, eight were killed on impact. The dead were initially buried near the site of the crash. At the end of the war, their bodies were recovered and reinterred in the Commonwealth Grave at Eiganes Cemetery, Stavanger.



Original burial site of the 8 men killed when Glider A crashed in Fyljesdalen, Lysebotn, Norway. Photograph by Dr. Bruce A. Tocher

Of the nine survivors, four were brutally murdered by the Gestapo in Stavanger sometime between the 23/24th of November. Their bodies were then weighted down with rocks and dumped at sea off the coast of Stavanger, Norway. In 1985, a special memorial was unveiled in Stavanger to these four men with no known grave.



Memorial to the four Freshman soldiers with no known grave, Eiganes Cemetery, Stavanger, Norway. Photograph by Dr. Bruce A. Tocher

The five remaining survivors were held in the Gestapo Prison in Lagårdsveien in Stavanger for a number of days before being transported to the concentration camp at Grini, near Oslo. The Grini records indicate that they entered the camp on the 29th November. According to statements made at the War Crimes Trials, the men were interrogated at both Grini and the Gestapo Headquarters in Oslo during the period of time they were held in captivity. On the 19th January, 1943, they were taken out of Grini by the German Security Services, transported to Trandum Wood, north of Oslo, and executed at dawn by a firing squad, together with Able Seaman "Bob" Evans who had been captured after a failed attempt to sink the Tirpitz (Operation Title)

The bodies were initially buried in an unmarked grave but were recovered by the Norwegian authorities in 1945 and reburied in the Commonwealth War Grave section at Oslo West Cemetery.



Grave 9, Trandum Wood, near Oslo, where Sapper Blackburn was originally buried before reburial in the Commonwealth Grave in Oslo West Cemetery. Photograph by Dr. Bruce A. Tocher

The fate of Combination B was almost certainly similar to Combination A, in that at some point the tug aircraft and its glider became separated. However, in this case, both glider and tug crashed near Helleland in southwest Norway. The seven-man crew of the Halifax were killed instantly on impact. They were initially buried in a shallow grave close to the crash site on Hestafjellet but after the war, they were reinterred, with full military honours, in the Commonwealth War Graves plot in Helleland Churchyard, Rogaland.



Commonwealth Graves for Halifax B aircrew, Helleland Churchyard, Norway. Photograph by Dr. Bruce A. Tocher

Glider B crashed on the other side of the valley, on the slopes of Benkja Mountain. Three men were killed in the crash and the fourteen survivors, surrendered to the German Army. Later that same day, the 20th November 1942, they were taken to the local German Army

Camp at Slettebø, and after interrogation, led one by one to an area just outside the main camp and executed by firing squad.



Execution site of 14 British soldiers from Operation Freshman at Slettebø Camp, near Egersund, Norway.
Photograph by Dr. Bruce A. Tocher

The bodies of the men were buried that evening in an unmarked grave in the sand dunes by the coast at Brusand. However, a local Norwegian civilian secretly observed the burial and was later able to alert the Allied Authorities to the location. At the end of the war, the remains of most of the soldiers and glider pilots were reinterred at the Commonwealth Grave section in Eiganes Cemetery in Stavanger where remembrance ceremonies are still held each year to honour their sacrifice.



Remembrance Sunday 2020, Commonwealth Grave Section, Eiganes Cemetery, Stavanger, Norway.
Photograph by Dr. Bruce A. Tocher

Due to the secrecy surrounding the mission, very little information was provided to the families of the servicemen at the time, other than that they were missing. A short news article was released by the Germans shortly after the raid saying that a number of aircraft had landed in Norway and that all of the soldiers on board had been engaged and killed to the last man. However, it was not until after the war that true horror of the story emerged!