

# The Norwegian Connection — Part II <sup>91</sup>

16 – 14 June 1995 ————— BUDGE ADAMS

The gods wee kind, all arrangements slotted neatly into place and at 16.30 Norwegian time on Tuesday 6 June we landed – my daughter Linda was with me – at Oslo (Fornebu). My dream had come true and we were in Norway to present the certificates of Life Membership of the Dover Society to the survivors of the 52nd (Norwegian) M.L. Flotilla who were here in Dover during the 1939-45 war.

A meticulous action plan had to be aborted because a little earlier the gods had been *un*-kind and had flooded the area north-east and south-east of Oslo, including Skarnes where we originally intended to stay for the first three days, to a depth of almost a metre. The floods were caused by high temperature, heavy rain and an unusually fast snow-melt. Many cited global warming as the culprit. Dried mud on walls, hedges and trees confirmed the height of the flooding.

The re-vamped plan meant we stayed one night in Oslo instead of three in Skarnes and we took the train next morning for Bergen, the furthest reach of our journey, where it had always been intended the certificates would be presented. What an experience! – 305 miles over the “roof” of southern Norway in eight and a half hours. The track is infinitely tortuous, following the shore-lines of lakes and the floors of deep valleys and sometimes it runs on ledges carved out of the usually steeply-sloping sides of these rocky valleys whose six- to seven-hundred metre walls rise to well above the tree-line. Of course I couldn’t count them but there are said to be 300 bridges, 200 tunnels and 17 miles of ‘snow sheds’ and when I spoke of the ‘difficult’ conditions under which the railway had to operate the reply, given with a dismissive shrug of the shoulders and a disarming smile, was “Well, we don’t have the wrong kind of snow, as you do in England, we just have snow!” Such is the fame of British railways!

If you multiply all space measurements of a good British Rail coach by 1.5 you will have a fair representation of the dimensions of a good Norwegian rail coach – so spacious, in fact, that I would think, though I did not check, there are no more seats than in the British kind. (There are, of course, some poor out-of-date coaches, just as there are in England.) Once the downhill ride from Voss to Bergen is begun the movement is so unbelievably smooth and quiet that all thought of being on a train disappears. But what wonderful platelayers! Almost at the first sign of Bergen the train dives into a tunnel and some miles later debouches from utter darkness straight into the stasjon.

A happy deputation of three, Karsten Moldjord and Henrietta, his lady and Arthur Johnsen (quite a wag!) met us – they both live in the western outskirts of Bergen – and we were very efficiently transferred (almost as if rehearsed – but I know it was not), with all our luggage, into two waiting cars. Here was proof of my conviction that we would be among friends. No introduction was necessary, we knew each other – hand shaking, hugging, embracing, cheek pressing and moist eyes said it all. It was the same in Oslo when “Scottie” met us on landing but here the welcome was multiplied by three. We drove off to Lille Briggen, an hotel/hostel/club for serving and time-expired naval personnel and their families. Supported and run by the Norwegian Navy in a manner that only a navy so similar in outlook to our own could accomplish, it was unalloyed joy to be in its care. Amongst his other duties in the naval establishment nearby, Briggen is under the control of contradmiral\* Reino Taus and to my amazement I later discovered that he was monitoring all our coming and goings and through his staff ensured that, without stint, all doors were open and all facilities available to us. I felt I was on cloud nine!

\* Equivalent to Rear Admiral. R.N.

92 Lille Briggen is less than two years old and is superbly equipped. There are 217 single rooms each of about 16m<sup>2</sup> with a further 12m<sup>2</sup> of bathroom and storage space. All superbly furnished with equipment obviously designed to fit and of no little artistic merit. There is a desk in each room and a superb television unit for those who hanker after such things. (I do not). There are twelve sumptuously furnished – and much larger – double rooms, eight ditto VIP single rooms and four even more sumptuous VIP Suites. What luxury! The type and scale of the accommodation reflects the high regard in which the Norwegian navy holds its serving and time-expired personnel. (I do not imply that the same is not the case in the R.N.).

Food: impossible to describe, but it can be said that little of it (in Bergen, at least, where the sea provides much) would have its counterpart on an English table. Even the soft drinks were different: I did see advertisements for Coco-Cola but I saw none bought or sold or consumed. Beers are rather thin and relatively expensive and spirits are generally unobtainable. Wines with a low alcohol content are sold at reasonable prices in state operated shops, but for good wines and spirits one must, and many do, go to Sweden. Fortunately Sweden is only twenty minutes away by car from Skarnes, our base for the last few days. (Interpret that as you may – you will probably not be far wrong!)

Back to Bergen: day three, Thursday. Collected by Karsten and Henrietta we walked around the centre of the city and were truly fascinated. I think there must be more water than dry land. Almost wherever one turns there are ships; huge ferries and nifty smaller ones, sailing craft and pleasure boats, very efficient looking cargo ships and the inevitable smallish motor boats with just one man aboard, that one sees in ports world wide busily scuttling to and fro. And magnificent old houses and waterside warehouses, reminding one that Bergen was one of the more important of the Hanseatic ports. Though Oslo, a not particularly attractive place, is the capital city, my friends tell me that the heart of Norway, if not in the mountains and the snow and the Alpine meadows, lies in Bergen. And I can quite believe it. Oslo is cosmopoli-

tan but Bergen is demonstrably Norwegian.

There was little sun that day, the very day it was decreed we should, by means of a funicular, go to the top of one of the many hills that Bergen is built around, on, in, under or beside. So the promised photography, of the lakes, the fiords, the North Sea in the distance, the wharves and warehouses, the intricate but very efficient road system laid out as on a map below, eluded us.

But we bought some very nice postcards. Odd that there appeared to be more little orientals on the hilltop than Europeans.



BERGEN

Antique (for want of a better word) shops were numerous in the streets close to the funicular. No pieces of "tarted-up" old furniture, but artefacts in daily use in houses, on farms, on boats and ships, in warehouses and stores a hundred or more years ago. Trugs and measures, balances, joiner's tools, braces entirely wooden with a wedge to hold the bit in place, wooden shovels and hay forks, early navigating instruments and very ancient and primitive sewing machines, German probably. Shuttles, spinning wheels and tiny ancient looms. Think of almost anything and early examples would be there. Fascinating is not a strong enough word, I was mesmerized.

As we moved on and I came back to earth we realised that it was now 1540 and that at the Briggen mealtimes are radically different from ours. For five days of the week breakfast is from 0645 - 0800, lunch is from 1100 - 1230 and dinner from 1615 - 1715. On Saturdays and Sundays there is no breakfast

but brunch from 0900 - 1200 and dinner as on other days. So, swiftly into the car and back to Briggen just in time.

At about 1800 there was a television showing, possibly a repeat, on a screen at least 2m<sup>2</sup> and projected by their own "hook-up", of the football match which Norway won against Germany. There is evidence that the Norwegians do not forget the war and there were cries of encouragement and enthusiasm throughout the game and exaltation at the result. There was much playing and singing of the song that won the Eurovision song contest and the sailors and the guests were beside themselves with happiness. All this was good to see and listen to and I was entranced. Half a litre of beer was all I could manage (though some easily coped with much more) and I went happily off to bed, worn out by the day's exertions.

The next day Henrietta stayed at home and our two companions for the day were Karsten Moldjord and the risible Arthur Johnsen. We laughed our way through everything – whether wandering around in the big general market, gazing in wonder at the weird (and normal) varieties of fish on sale, sipping a coffee whilst sitting in shirt-sleeve order in the warm sun outside a coffee shop conveniently on the Zacharias Bryggen. Here, later, we embarked for a long cruise around the enormous harbour in an ex-German "sightseers' boat" called, inexplicably, "The White Lady". There was hardly a moment when a quip did not fall from Arthur Johnsen's lips, whilst we were, in fact, happily engaged in "doing damn all in a long time." (one of my family's more pointed expressions).

I was most interested to see the modern, and somewhat controversial monument (both in design and content), erected only a few weeks earlier and commemorating the skippers and crews of the little boats that maintained the "Shetland Bus" run between those islands and Bergen throughout the last war. There were forty-three skippers so engaged and it is a bone of contention that only one is portrayed or mentioned. The plinth itself is a slim column four or five metres high and it is surmounted by a figure in oilskins at the wheel of his boat, cast in bronze. The plinth is of local stone with all the appearance

of very highly polished dark granite. (Maybe it is granite; I am not sure – it was of a very deep "chocolate" colour.)

This day was Friday and nearing the middle of the afternoon and we had to be back at Lille Briggen to welcome the remainder of the "presentation party" who would be arriving at intervals from 1600 onwards. On the way we diverted to Arthur Johnsen's home at Ytre Laksevåg and spent a happy hour in the sunshine on his verandah, drinking cups of excellent tea that had none of the weird, but usual, continental lack of flavour. But then to Briggen. Our friends came by train, by air, by boat, by bus, by car and all had arrived by 1700 except Finn-Christian who would come up from Oslo on



IN THE LOUNGE, the evening before the Presentation

the night train and would be with us at 0700 next day. A late meal was provided for us all and the evening was spent in happy recollection and in making ourselves known to the wives, sons and daughters (and an especially lovely granddaughter – I regretted my age!) who were there for the occasion. There was music and the sailors were still happy in the aura of the win over Germany. But none so happy as we all were in the newly found friendship that seemed to wrap itself so cosily around us. And so, eventually, to bed, with thoughts of the big day the morrow would bring.

Finn-Christian arrived punctually at 0730 but with the sad news that Odd Fossum was unwell and unable to make the journey from Trondheim. We were sorry to be without him but we proceeded with the pre-arranged plan.

94 An hour and a half soon passed by and by and 0900 we were ready for a leisurely brunch which occupied us for almost two hours.

By then it was time to check on the final arrangements for the presentation and my daughter cast her beady eye over the disposition of the chairs and table in the large room at our disposal. She decided it was too formal and with the help of two of the staff who she dragooned into giving a hand, immediately set about a complete re-arrangement. We took our seats/places and within seconds of the appointed time contradmiral Reino Taus came smilingly through the door. I had seen him before but was then formally introduced



ALL TOGETHER FOR BREAKFAST/BRUNCH ON THE DAY OF THE THE PRESENTATION

and had a longish conversation with him, principally on the conception and fulfilment of the idea behind the "ceremony" – a term by this time used by all concerned.

The Admiral then suggested we should begin – and we did. I first described the thought processes that led up to the idea and as I went on I realised that to all the recipients of the certificates and their relatives this was a highly sentimental occasion. There were tears in some eyes and I have to admit that mine were rather more than moist. To the Norwegian sailors amongst the party, and to a very great extent to their relatives as well there was a close bond with this Englishman who had come to Norway as a representative of the town where many Norwegians spent three years of the war, and where they were not treated as "foreigners". (It is only fair to

say that the Norwegians have an equal love and affection for the Shetlands, and for the same reasons.) That bond was brought about by the fact that both of their nations stood together, with one common purpose, throughout the war. They believed that as both nations suffered adversity in common measure and lost friends and comrades in the same way, and for the same reasons *knew* that the two countyies wee tied together by bonds of friendship that would never be broken. Their demonstration of love and affection for this country embarrassed me not a little, but I felt – I knew – it was genuine.

So that the order of presentation (barring one patricula case) should not be pre-ordained I asked for them to be laid on the table face down and I then made a pile at random, turned them over and presented them in the order in which they came to hand. There was a Dover Society badge for each and every one and I had the happy privilege of fixing the badge to each individual's lapel. One badge I took with me was of the brooch type and this was for Mrs Edith Sjøstrand who was widowed a few weeks before and who received her late husband's certificate. Edith is a Scot and retains much of her Scottish accent and hers is the only one of the marriages with English girls, within this particular naval group, that has stood the test of time. She was a delight to sit beside and talk to.

I am happy to record the names of those who are now my friends and to whom the presentations were made:

Odd Fossum of Trondheim (in his absence collected by Finn-Christian), Per Louis Rønes of Vestnes, Karl O. Bergsvik of Austrheim, Ragnvald Haugen of Byrknesøy (who, sadly, died on 10th July), Mrs Olav Sjøstrand (Edith) of Manger, Arthur Johnsen of Ytre Laksevåg, Karsten O. Moldjord of Varåsgrenda and purposely last of all, Finn-Christian Mosgaard Stumoen of Skarnes who, aided and abetted by his wife "Scottie", was my co-conspirator in making all the arrangements.

Leaving Finn-Christian to last gave me the opportunity I needed to say "Thank you" for the splendid hospitality shown to my daughter and to me and for the sense of

'occasion' that permeated all that had happened since we arrived in Norway: and to say that without Finn-Christian's enthusiastic help I doubt if the whole project would ever have come to such a delightful conclusion. I also included contradmiral Reino Taus in my grateful thanks – his interest did much to set the tone of the whole proceedings. The remainder of the day was taken up by a final 'get-together' in the lounge. Some drinking, much photography, even more reminiscing, sitting close together and feeling the warmth of the war-time comradeship that had overflowed into 1995. All, except two, would have a longish journey on the morrow and all needed some rest. So we retired to our beds, knowing that we would have the opportunity to say our farewells during a final early breakfast.

By 1000 on the Sunday morning all were gone, except Per Louis Rønes and his wife Sigrid who decided to spend another day in Bergen, and Finn-Christian, my daughter and me, who would have to scramble to catch the 1040 train to Oslo!

The return journey was more interesting than the outward trip. This time we had a guide with us who knew all the interesting places and things to point out to us, and there were many. The day was warm and sunny and we drank a dozen or more of quite delightful fruit drinks (a cold beer, however, would

have gone down very well!). As we neared Oslo, where the ever solicitous "Scottie" was waiting for us, the skies darkened and as we left the station rain like thin steel rods came bucketing down. I was quickly bundled into the car, but in loading the luggage and attending to the return of the wheel chair that I needed to cover the distance, the others were soon soaking wet. I seemed to be the only one concerned, the others just brushed it off. We all had a shower and a change of clothes on arrival at Stumoen gård and the very house seemed to welcome us. We spent three happy days there before coming home and in that time Anders Petterøe came up from Frederikstad to see us and to discuss his forthcoming book and we had dinner one evening with the British Naval Attache, George Pearson and his wife Kay, who, I feel sure, were curious to see this 'ancient Briton' who had come to Norway on an unusual errand. They were both soon satisfied and we became good friends and I think that, mutually, we enjoyed each others company - Fay and I had a common interest in sophisticated computers and between us there was much 'nattering' about their operation and their peccadilloes. The time spent at Skarnes had all the flavour of a holiday in a delightful and very interesting country. I learnt a very few words of Norwegian, but at least I could say 'tak, tak' for all that had been done for us.

Two commercial photographs: Posed in the FISHMARKET and SKARNES from the air

The white dots roughly mark out Stumoen gård at Skarnes

