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The Formation and Activities of
Missing Research and Enquiry Service
In Norway.

The following report is designed to be a diary of M.R.&E.S. in Norway. It includes certain notable dates taken from the section records, and contains, also, various points that are thought to be of interest.

Three camps in England, Church Fenton, West Maling and Wittering, were being used as resettlement centres for Ex-Prisoners of War. In August 1945 a letter was passed round from Air Ministry asking for volunteers, from these camps, for work on the continent. The nature of work was not made known, at the time, to the volunteers.

The volunteers reported to Air Ministry, Casualty Branch, for selection. They were interviewed by Group Captain Burgess who told them the work to be done undertaken, whether they objected to performing exhumations and whether they had any special knowledge in languages. They were given a choice, should they be selected, of three countries, Germany, Denmark or Norway and then returned to their respective camps to await the result of the board.

Those who had been selected went again to Air Ministry, P.H.Cas., on 26th August for two days' instruction lectures on details of the work. It was also decided to attach them to M.R.&E.S. sections already in operation for 'field training'. They were given time to arrange personal matters in England and told to report to St. James House, London, on 30th August for Air passage to the continent.

The sections were to be comprised of a commanding officer and six other officers known as 'search officers', the Norwegian section to be commanded by S/Ldr. H. Scott, D.F.C., who had previously been liaison officer to the Airborne Division in Norway.

The six search officers were the following:-

R/Lt. H.P.T. Barthropp.
R/Lt. J. Willis-Richards.
R/Lt. E.L. Houghton.
R/Lt. E. Dowling.
R/Lt. Fairbanks.
R/Lt. J.L.N. Canham.

For field training the dispersal was:- the Commanding Officer and the first two search officers to No. 1 section in Paris, the next two search officers to No. 5 section in The Hague, and the last two search officers to No. 2 section in Brussels.

The field training lasted about a week during which the search officers accompanied on investigation being carried out by the sections on which they were.

All the Norwegian section, except R/Lt. Canham who flew straight to Norway, returned to England before proceeding to Norway to form as a section.

R/Lt. Canham arrived in Norway on 9th September and was joined by the rest on 10th September.

The Norwegian section, to be No. 6, was now formed but not as a self-contained unit, being attached to 88 Group Head Quarters Unit, R.A.F. Oslo. It was this Group that retarded our progress so much in the initial stages of settlement in Norway. The first instance of inefficiency was noticed when we discovered that no arrangements had been made for office accommodation for us although 88 Group had been advised to make such arrangements before our arrival.

Eventually offices were found on the fourth floor of Friedhof Nansens Flase 5, sufficient in size but completely lacking furniture. By raiding other empty offices, desks and chairs were found and also a certain amount of stationary. The Americans gave us some old German file covers, and we 'acquired' a typewriter. After some hunting a key was found for one of the doors, this being in the form of a removable door-handle, complete security being obtained by locking the other doors on the inside. The rooms we had comprised a C.O.'s office, search officers' office, clerk's office, visitors' room and a store room, into which we threw certain articles of furniture as it saw its last days. Office hours were arranged to comply with those of other British units in Oslo.

The section was now ready to start taking an interest in its proper work. Before our arrival in Norway, 88 Group had been instructed to collect, through its Intelligence Officers, any information relating to our work. The results of this had

been collected at 88 Group H.Q. The S.I.O.'s file was taken over, perused, and broken into our own files. Each incident, date, location or aircraft crash, was the subject of a file. It was inevitable, of course, that at a later stage many of these files would become amalgamated.

It is interesting to note here that we had no clerks and none of us used to office work. However the only point that really puzzled us was sort of reference number we should have for our files. Bearing in mind the apparently vast accumulation of figures and letters contained in reference numbers that we had met we decided to include our service, our work, our section number, file number and year of opening the file. And so, for file No. 1 we arrived at:-

RAF/MRES/6/1/45.

There were suggestions for including other information such as 'N' for Norway, the location of the accident etc. but that would have been trespassing on the ridiculous and was firmly discouraged. At a later stage, of course, we were given proper reference numbers by P.H. Cas.

The opening of files progressed at an astounding rate, the first two hundred or so being done by S/Ldr. Scott and P/Lt. Canham, it being a two man job. It was this continuous association with the files that enabled S/Ldr. Scott to have the basic knowledge that proved to be of such value to him in the magnificent work he did for the section at a later stage.

It was in October that some clerks arrived. This much needed aid speeded up the typing and brought some sort of order into the correspondence. A system of name cards for each casualty was started, and was helped, by a file in date order of accidents, to form a cross reference system.

Accommodation in Oslo was in the various flats and hotels requisitioned by the British, and was comfortable.

Transport was a problem. 88 Group would give us no help, and our own transport was on its way out from England, we thought. We somehow managed to obtain some antiquated vehicles which survived the journey, a few times, from the hotels to the office and back. Immobilisation was effected by the removal of the gear lever, and the back seat usually seen to contain 'Jerry' cans full of water, this being far more in demand than petrol.

Group Captain Burgess visited the section and was pleased with the formation, as far as it had gone. He said that he would hurry the arrival of the transport as it was necessary to cover as much ground as possible before winter set in, it being thought that during the winter months travel would be impossible and the section would be moved, temporarily, to Germany to help with the work there.

With the transport we had, a few local enquiries were carried out. Soon, however, an arrangement was made whereby our own transport would be sent back to England, without being unloaded from the ships, and we were to have six Chevrolet Utilities from 88 Group. This exchange was not made official till August 1946.

A plan of operation was now made out. It was started by search officers being given an area each to cover, as much as they could. It was considered that, until the roads became impassable, there would be enough work on the coastal areas from Oslo, through Kristiansand and Stavanger to Bergen, to keep us employed. There was. The stretch from Kristiansand to Bergen proved, owing to the vast amount of shipping strikes carried out on convoys, to be the most profitable area in Norway.

Except in the vicinity of Oslo, trips had to be of a week, or more, duration, at least two days being spent in travelling, it being impossible to average more than 22 m.p.h. on the Norwegian roads. Local bases had to be arranged by the search officers at their destinations, where also they made their own arrangements for M.T. repairs and accommodation. Petrol was drawn from any British Unit that might still be in the district, or, failing that, from a Norwegian unit.

Before leaving Oslo search officers would make notes of the cases that they were to investigate, the files being retained in the office. If immediate contact with the office became necessary, telephone was used, it being possible to telephone from practically anywhere in Norway.

Winter became a hindrance about the end of November. Long distance road travel was thought unwise and slow, a simpler method of reaching a place being to send the transport by rail, the search officer following by rail also. Only short runs could be made from the temporary base.

On top of the information taken over from 88 Group we were now receiving answers to a circular letter that had been passed round to authorities such as the police, Lensmenn (the equivalent of a sheriff or mayor of a town or village), and the Milorg (a name derived from Military Organisation, the Norwegian underground movement). Also, some answers were being received to advertisements in the papers and on the radio. The response was not great but it was something in which to start. However when this information was followed search officers came across lots of other incidents. It became apparent that we had arrived in the country too late as most of the enquiries led to some German or Quisling who had been removed. Some of these informants were traced and interrogated, but the results were not, on the whole, of any great help. Some cases were solved purely by sifting the collective reports held in the office.

Where it was necessary to do an exhumation, German labour proved to be the best, it being, in the true German style, thorough.

It is interesting, at this point, to mention an incident that occurred in the office in Oslo.

When the papers were taken over from 88 Group Intelligence, amongst other things was a tin box, sealed, measuring about 2ft. x 1ft. x 1ft. It had come to 88 Group under the label 'Personal effects of Group Captain Surplice', and had been sent by a Norwegian Officer. It was placed in the souvenir cupboard in our office until such time as a report on the accident came to be sent to London. The report had been written and, before despatching the box to P.4.Cas., it was decided to open it to extract any irrelevant papers and to list the contents. A tin opener was found and the contents inspected. The 'effects' proved to be very personal for we found a hand, a part of a pelvis and a portion of leg bone. An immediate signal was sent to London asking for any previous records of burial of this officer. The first reply stated that there was no record of a 'Group Captain Surplice'. A further signal was sent pointing out the correct name and when it was learned that he had not been buried anywhere previously, funeral was arranged. He was buried in Vestre Gravlund, Oslo, on 6th November.

Other British units in Norway were using requisitioned ex-German cars, and, as the Chevrolets were not too suitable for our task, we acquired some of these. From the Norwegian Air Force we borrowed interpreters, sergeants, and so set to tackle the job properly.

Unlike in any other country, the Norwegian roads are very tricky, being of poor surface, narrow, winding and steep. On one occasion a car was driven for three hours with the doors open to simplify the exit which was feared inevitably to come.

Work was delayed a little when we had to move to Torvgaten 17, fifth floor, as our offices were needed by the Norwegians. A little later again we were moved to the seventh floor in the same building. Both these locations were of adequate size, and sufficiently furnished.

Clerks never seemed to stay with us for very long, which was inconvenient as when one had just learnt the routine he disappeared. On 22nd November we had attached to us, from 88 Group, P/Sgt. Ledger, who proved to be a big asset.

P/Lt. Barthropp was offered a job as a test-pilot and he, together with P/Lt. Fairbanks who wanted to return to England, left the section on 27th November.

Christmas leave to England was taken by most of the section. P/Lt. Houghton took local leave in Norway, his wife being Norwegian, and P/Lt. Canham, being engaged on a big job in Stavanger, were the only two exceptions with regard to the officers.

P/Lt. Dowling married a Norwegian girl on 2nd January, and left the section for England on 15th January.

The section was now reduced to the O.C. and three search officers but as the new policy was to reduce all sections to only four search officers it only meant the arrival of one new man. This proved to be P/O L.H. Casserly who joined us on 12th March.

No. 6 section was now known as No. 14 section, and came under No. 3 Unit Headquarters which was situated at Bebjerg in Denmark. This did not affect our procedure as we had instructions to work direct with P.4.Cas.

S/Ldr. Scott travelled to No. 3 Unit on 6th March to attend a conference, and returned to Oslo on 18th with W/Odr. Alder. A dinner was arranged at the Bristol Hotel with all officers present.

On 5th April, S/Ldr. Brinsden, O.C. of one of the Denmark sections, visited Norway, staying for a few days.

Our next visit was from both G/Opt. Hawkins and W/Odr. Alder. They arrived on 15th April. Once again a dinner was arranged at the Bristol Hotel.

Following a letter requesting the names of two officers for promotion, P/Lts. Houghton and Willis-Richards were promoted and sent to Germany. They left us on 17th April.

Once again the strength had dropped below full, but it was brought up again by the arrival of P/Lts Kubiak, Marcher and Sercombe. The first two came from disbanded Danish section. P/Lt. Sercombe's position was rather vague and he fell into the roll of Imprest Holder.

Owing to the need to speed up the work in Norway, two sections that had finished in Denmark were sent to us. The country was to be divided into three parts, a Northern Zone, a Western Zone and the Southern Zone. Each zone was to have its own headquarters but all correspondence would come through Oslo. All the original files were kept in Oslo and copies were supplied to the new sections as they passed through.

The first of these sections, No. 17, arrived on 5th May, commanded by S/Ldr. Rideal. They travelled to Bergen, their H.Q., by rail and took up accommodation at Bergen Pass House, 13, liaising with L.K.V. (Luft Kommando Vest).

The arrival of the new sections saw a change in work areas for No. 14 section, who had headquarters at Oslo.

With reference to the attached map, the blue bordered area was that covered by No. 14 section. This was again sub-divided into areas for each search officer. Rogaland and part of Vest-Agder for F/Lt. Kubiak, the other part of Vest-Agder, Aust-Agder and Telemark for F/O Casserly, the Southern halves of Oppland and Hedmark with the Northern half of Akershus for F/Lt. Marcher, and the Southern half of Akershus, Vestfold, Østfold and Buskerud for F/Lt. Canham.

F/Lt. Kubiak operated from Stavanger, F/O Casserly from Kristiansand and the other two from Oslo.

W/Cdr. Alder once again visited Norway on 30th May, bringing with him Miss Heilbuth, an interpreter, from Denmark. She became officially attached to us on 22nd May.

29th May saw a change in the command of the section for S/Ldr. Scott was leaving for demobilisation. The section was sorry to see him go. He had built the section up from the start, and was liked by all. However, on 1st June we were commanded by an officer who knew the type of work to be done and had a knowledge of the country, for S/Ldr. Houghton returned from Germany to take over.

The second of the two new sections, No. 13, commanded by S/Ldr. Young, arrived on 3rd June. He took his section straight through to Trondhjem where they found offices at Kughaten 4 and liaised with L.K.T. (Luft Kommando Trondelag).

G/Cpt. Hawkins, once again accompanied by W/Cdr. Alder paid his second visit to the section on 21st June. An informal evening was held in the Hotel Continental, which was now the British Forces Officers' Mess.

Although Southern Norway had, and was being, covered there was still a very large area to be done. This was the part from about Narvik round the North of the country through Pimmark to the Russian border. It was decided that this area should be covered by two men. One of these was S/Ldr. Rideal, whose section at Bergen had moved out on 28th June, and the other man was F/Lt. Brooks from the Trondhjem section. The two started off on 5th July.

F/O Casserly left for demobilisation in England on 12th July. Replacements were no longer to be sent to us as the new policy was to reduce the numbers in Norway to a bare minimum. W/Cdr. Brinsden, who had taken over No. 3 unit from W/Cdr. Alder, came to Norway on 22nd July to make arrangements for the closing down process. It was decided to leave those of No. 14 section who were still there, F/Lt. Sercombe being due to leave on 3rd September, and a few clerks. Surplus transport was to be sent to Denmark when no longer required.

No. 13 section left Norway on 28th July and were followed on 30th July by four of our Chevrolet's, which were sent by sea to Copenhagen. The drivers and F.M.T.s followed on 1st August meeting the vehicles at the other end. The same day F/Lts Kubiak and Marcher left for Denmark.

W/Cdr. Morgan from No. 4 Unit Hamburg came to Norway on a brief visit on 15th August.

The far north trip had been completed and S/Ldr. Rideal arrived in Oslo on 27th August.

3rd September saw the departure of F/Lt. Sercombe and Miss Heilbuth. Soon after, on 7th September, F/Lt. Brooks arrived in Oslo after having completed his work by following a trail into Trondhjem. Two days later he was sent to R.4.Cas. to peruse the files there and try to clear up our outstanding cases.

The remainder and our other ranks left for Utersen, near Hamburg, where the unit had now moved on 23rd September. Arrangements were made so that they could drive the two remaining Chevrolet's through Sweden and Denmark.

F/Lt. Brooks returned from London on 19th September and left for No. 3 unit on 30th September.

F/Lt. Canham left for No. 3 unit on 2nd October, and the last remaining member of the section, S/Ldr. Houghton, who was returning to New Zealand, left on 9th October.

The close of the section saw a cabinet of 537 files involving 2074 personnel. As a foot note to the above history there are one or two points of interest.

Firstly, we had a very close liaison with the G.R.U. section in Norway, No. 38. Their offices were a few doors from ours and we pooled a lot of information.

All our hotel bills etc. were paid by a Norwegian authority known as District Kommando Østfold, or D.K.Ø.

In the later stage 'sweeps' were made rather than follow specific enquiries. An average 'sweep' would involve about 2,000 mls.

The normal Norwegian working hours are from 9 a.m. till 3 p.m. This peculiarity hindered us a great deal at times.