

The Shetland Bus

John & Fiona Earle

This year, 2009, is the 69th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Norway. This invasion stirred up a hornets' nest of hatred. Norwegians wanted to inflict as much harm on the Germans as they possibly could almost regardless of risk to themselves. The agents in Norway were supplied from Shetland by fishermen who had escaped from Norway in small fishing boats.



Their base was in a remote corner of Shetland and their story is told in two complementary books. "The Shetland Bus" essentially describes the management of the base and was written by David Howarth. "Shetland Bus Man" written by a Norwegian called

Kaare Iversen (pictured above) describes what some of the voyages were like. Both are published by The Shetland Times in Lerwick.

The base of 100 men in Shetland was an essential link in a chain that held down 284,000 German soldiers during the course of the war. 30,000 troops were in Norway at the time of the Allied invasion of Europe.

Two English officers were in charge of the Shetland base. David Howarth was a naval Sub-Lieutenant who enjoyed sailing and had visited Norway. He specifically asked for the posting to Shetland and was ideally suited for the job. He had an inventive mind and designed a mounting for an anti-aircraft machine gun that could be concealed in an oil drum and brought into action in three seconds. He devised an alteration to a fishing boat that enabled it to lay mines. He thought of towing torpedoes behind a fishing boat that would enable the crew to attack a German battleship, the Tirpitz that was in a Norwegian fjord. Subsequently his idea was modified to towing two two-man submarines called Chariots. Howarth then

conjured an almost invisible space in a fishing boat so that the four charioteers and their "dressers" could hide and be undetected when the boat came to a Nazi checkpoint. The fishing boat had forged documents and the charioteers could hear the skipper talking to the German inspector as if all was perfectly in order!

Major Mitchell, the other officer, was an incredibly wise man. Some Army officers use their rank to hide their personality, but he kept his rank in his pocket, and when the day's work was done, he and David Howarth were good companions in a most unusual situation.

Together they chose their operational HQ in a remote part of Shetland where their existence was most unlikely to be known. However, this meant that it was difficult to get supplies to them and difficult to provide entertainment for the young fishermen when they were in Shetland.

The officers were responsible for getting saboteurs and wireless operators to Norway, together with the kit that they needed. Wireless sets, explosives, fuses, maps, Norwegian money and clothes, benzedrine tablets and knuckledusters were all on the shopping list. Once, a suitcase was left under Howarth's bed. When he came to open it, he found several bottles of chloroform and some detonators.

Normally junior officers share the dangers of the men they command. Mitchell and Howarth were totally forbidden to sail with the fishermen. The officers knew too much. If they had been captured, they would almost certainly have been tortured and forced to reveal information that would lead to the arrest and execution of Norwegians.

Learning the job.

Mitchell and Howarth learnt as they went along. Boats were delayed or they might be asked to pick up extra passengers who were

escaping from the Gestapo, so they must take extra iron rations and extra water.

The sailors themselves knew nothing of discipline as it is known in the forces. They were very determined, very skilled young individuals who elected their own skipper and disagreed with him very firmly if they thought he was wrong.

Various high-ranking officers visited the base. Mitchell explained the rather unusual state of affairs and the Royal Navy officers accepted it. Certainly the local senior officers in the R.A.F. thought very highly of the outfit.

The Norwegian Navy wanted to take them over and a crazy dual control system was set up that looked bound to fail. A Norwegian naval officer came to the base. He was a strict disciplinarian who expected to be saluted. The sailors, who were civilian volunteers after all, completely ignored him. So he did not stay long. Then another Norwegian naval officer came. Everyone liked him so life returned to its normal unconventional effective state.



Later the base was moved to Scalloway, then a large village of a thousand people. Here there was an excellent shipyard where the boats could be repaired to the standard required. In the winter, the North

Sea is one of the stormiest seas in the world and it would have been impossible to rescue sailors from a damaged boat that could not reach port under its own power.

The Anholdmen, the last of the boats that operated in the Shetland Bus service, was recently found on a salmon farm. She has been refurbished and we saw her in Scalloway harbour last summer, all seventy five feet of her. She is made of pine wood and has two hulls one inside another. This is a design that dates back to Nelson's time but not used nowadays.

Extracts from "Shetland Bus Man."

When reading these, please remember that there would only be daylight between about eleven a.m. and three p.m. in mid-winter when the fishermen were sailing between Shetland and Norway, and the sea would be rough or stormy most of the time.

"At 5.30 p.m. the engine stopped running. A fuel pipe was fractured. I had a spare pipe, but that had to be softened before I could put it on."

"I saw a German flying boat coming straight for us. I let the sails drop on deck and the Germans continued shooting at us for 20 minutes. They holed the boat just above the water line."

"It was dangerous to go on deck because there were heavy seas breaking across it"

"The skipper of the Solveig asked if we had plenty of drinking water, so we passed over a barrel so our neighbours could make some coffee. Out came two guitars and an accordion. On the Solveig were five or six young girls and the boat's deck was big enough to have a dance, while we watched for enemy aircraft."

"After five days of sailing, there was only 20 litres of fuel left in the tank, representing about another hour of sailing. Still, we got home"

"None of the crew had had a right sleep since Sunday and it was now Saturday. It took us quite a bit before we were okay again."

"All our clothes were completely wet and we had no way of drying them."

"We steamed toward our destination and it started snowing. The wind was blowing a gale from the north-west. Very poor visibility."

"We noticed we had two different registration numbers. M 190 B was on one side and H 190 B was on the other."

"There was a big mine ahead. We steamed slowly towards it and pushed it off the ship's side with boat hooks. It was a few exciting moments before we could breathe again."

Last thoughts.

The fishermen were a small group and the death of any member affected all of them. David Howarth concludes the epilogue to his book with these words. "To ascribe glory to the violent death of any young man loving life is only to add further folly to the failure of human wisdom which is the cause of war."