

The story of Dauntless No. 19 and the attack on coastal traffic from Bodø and southwards.

Whitsun 1990: The restoration work at BLHF was still taking place in Moloveien close to the Marina. The weather was fine and some of the members sat in the workshop and discussed what such a fine day could be used for. Ketil Lunde had a small boat in which he had installed an echo sounder. Could it be used to locate an aircraft wreck on the seabed? The echo sounder had not been properly tested, perhaps the time had come to make a test??

Knut Støre, local war historian, had collected some photos and information about the air attack that took place against naval targets in the area from Bodø and south to Myken in October 1943. Another group attacked targets in the area from Myken and south down towards Sandnesjøen. In the northern attack, a Dauntless with # 19 was shot down and crashed into the sea in Skagleia just south of Bodø. On board were pilot Clyde A. Tucker and gunner Stephen D. Bakran.

From the other planes which took part in the attack pictures were taken of the down shooting of # 19. From Knut Støres pictures one could find the approximate location where the aircraft hit the sea. It was decided that they should take Ketil Lunde's boat and another boat in addition, and sail to Skagleia and from the pictures find out where the wreck was most likely to be found. Ketil Lunde and Rune Klepp was in the boat with the echo sounder; in the other boat was Birger Larsen and Espen Skar and his girlfriend Elisabeth.

The echo sounder did not have a screen but printed an image on paper. After a while of searching a shadow appeared on the paper which could indicate that it was a plane-like object at the bottom. The depth was approx. 50 meters.

The next step was for Birger to make a waterproof box that could withstand the pressure at a depth of more than 50 meters and install a video camera in the box. This homemade rig was lowered down to the bottom where they started shooting a film. The pictures were transmitted via a cable up to a screen in the boat. To make it dark enough to see the picture

on the screen clearly, they sat under a blanket. The pictures showed that there was a wreck of a plane that was identified as a Dauntless. Success so far!

Vebjørn Karlsen from diving club "Sjøstjerna", about the diving in phase 1:

"We did the diving in phase 1, but this was under the auspices of "Bodø aviation history association".

The collaboration with Birger and his group was very good. There was a lot of media coverage around this. We pretty much did what we were told to do, as long as we thought it was within the limits of safely. Diving to 50 meters is not something you can take easy on, nor do without a through planning. At such depths there is a lot that can go wrong, and then there will be no new opportunities, the consequences are brutal. Even the navy divers had to obtain a dispensation from their own regulations for this diving."

The depth meant that they had to have three decompression breaks during the ascent. The first at 9 meters, the second at 6 meters and the last at 3 meters. The first indication that there could be remains down there came in phase 1. Two shoe soles were found.

Early in phase 1, the rear hull of the plane, that means almost everything behind the cockpit, which was lying over the cockpit area was lifted off the center section and transported to the opposite side of the strait.

Vebjørn Karlsen's answer to the question about who moved the rear body:

We did that quite early in phase 1, long before the navy entered the project.

The rear body was raised a bit and then moved to the opposite side of the strait. Bodø aviation history association was not interested to bring it up to restore it. And that I understand because the whole hull was soft like soaked bread. It was unbelievable that we could move it in one piece.

Divers from the navy were sent to Bodø from the Ramsund navy base to examine the site more closely. The search they did was not very thorough. They reported that the wreck contained nothing of interest. Without not having checked the mud in the wreckage, they concluded that the pilots were "Lost at sea".

The navy divers raised the engine in the autumn of 1991. Most of what had been made of aluminum was corroded by the seawater. The propeller, a part of the crankcase and some cylinders are today on display at the Norwegian Aviation Museum. The conservation work was done by Oddmund Bjørnåli, Olav Aanesen and Rune Klepp.

Bodø port authority now introduced a diving ban on the wreck, and the traffic officers in control tower of the airport nearby who had a good view of the

crash site was requested to keep an eye on the area to ensure that the ban was complied with. The reason for the ban is a bit unclear, but maybe mostly for safety reasons. The accident site was in the middle of the ship lane leading to Bodø port. Therefore the diving activity could come into conflict with the marine traffic.

Vegard Karlsen says about phase 2:

Phase 2 for us was a tiring period of "secret" diving in an area with diving ban. We only picked up a few items that convinced us that the two crew members had to be there. Then we contacted the embassy and the police.

The civilian divers were not satisfied with the conclusion of the navy divers.

They had a suspicion that the search that had been carried out was somewhat superficial. They decided to continue their investigations. Because the diving ban still was effective, they had to dive at night in order not to be detected.

A frame was made which was placed on the bottom of the cockpit, and what was inside the frame, mud and other things, were dug up and put in empty onion sacks which were placed in a net and later brought to the surface by using a balloon. When the content inside the frame had been examined, the frame was moved to the next area and in this way the divers continued to work systematically until they were sure that everything had been searched.

Relatively early in this investigation, a skull was found. Now it was no longer any doubt, there were remains left in the wreck. The findings were reported to The American Embassy in Oslo which sent the navy attaché to Bodø to be informed about the operation and learn about the situation. At the same time, the police were notified. The first thing the naval attaché did when he arrived at Bodø, was to get the diving ban removed. He wanted to ensure that the wreck was properly searched. He should also be the contact person at the embassy.

Vegard Karlsen about phase 3:

Now we dived with permission from the American Embassy, no one objected. We raised everything we could find that could belong to the crew. When there was nothing more for us to do down there, these nets were raised. This was done under the supervision of personnel from the embassy and police from Bodø. As well as the press.

I think I remember that there also was someone from Bodø aviation history association out there.

I think the navy was back after this for a thorough search, where they found some more bones.

The divers continued their work. Some objects from the wreck were taken up, among the things was the the gunner's machine gun.

The embassy had a female press attache who probably got involved in the case in Bodø. The story says that this press attache and President Bush Sr., wife Laura, were acquaintances and were in contact from time to time. Mrs. Bush heard from her what was going on in Bodø and passed it on to her husband. As a former naval pilot, flying the Grumman TBM Avenger in the Pacific during WW2, the president became more than interested in the Bodø case. He asked the embassy for fresh updates on how the case in Skagenleia developed. He also pointed out that he had a personal interest in getting this crew home and buried in American soil.

In Hawaii, the Americans had set up a "burial commission". Its task was to find dead soldiers from the wars the United States had participated in, the war in the Pacific and Korean war for incant, make identifications and get the remains home. Two of the commission's members were sent to Bodø to take care of the findings there. They arrived together with people from the embassy. They were briefed on the story from A to Z. When the search for remains was over, the sacks were taken up and handed over to the Americans. They took the findings with them and went back to the United States where the work continued.

Two gold rings with names were found, and "Dog Tags" which are identification badges that all soldiers have to wear in a lanyard around their necks. This made the identification more easy.

After the identification, it was decided that Clyde A. Tucker should be buried at Arlington Honors Cemetery. Stephen Donald Bakran was buried at the Gardens of Rest Cemetery, Wells, Delta County, Michigan, USA.

From Bodø, the following were invited to the ceremony at Arlington:

- Jon Erik Pettersen, chairman of the Bodø aviation history association
- Ole Bjørn Jensen, Bodø aviation history association.
- Vebjørn Karlsen, representative of the divers.
- Knut Støre, aviation history.
- Svein Snefjellå, journalist Nordlands Framtid

Svein Snefjellå is the son of secret agent, later intelligence officer Ole Snefjellå. Operation "Leader" was mostly based on information collected by Ole Snefjellå.

Vegard Karlsen says:

Knut and I traveled, as you say above, to represent the divers and the historical part. But we were also asked (ordered) to represent Bodø Main Air Base. Therefore we showed up in uniform at the funeral of Clyde A. Tucker at Arlington. So there Knut and I sat alone in ¼ of an otherwise packed church. "Our part of the church" were reserved for personnel who were still in service. And it was just the two of us. The rest were retirees and veterans from many years ago.

At a reception in connection with the commemoration at Arlington, Vegard met the press attaché who was previously at the embassy in Oslo. She had then received one high position linked to the helicopter rescue services at the east coast.

When it was all over, a letter arrived addressed to Bodø aviation history association signed by President Buch, where he thanked everyone involved for their efforts.

Where that letter is today is not known, but it should be traceable.

The Browning machine gun of gunner Stephen D. Bakran had been taken up from the wreck. It was both rusty and overgrown with seaweed. Rune Klepp preserved it as good as possible.

When later a memorial to Bakran was to be erected in his hometown, there was a request from the family if there was anything that had been taken from the plane which could be included in the memorial. The machine gun was suggested, and the family agreed. They thought it was a good idea. However, it all was stopped by the US authorities because they did not allow importation of weapons, regardless age and condition. It was a great disappointment to both us and the family. The weapon is probably still stored in Hangar 9.

If anyone reading this has any comments or additional information, I would like to hear from you.

I mainly got the material for this "report" from Rune Klepp and Vegard Karlsen. I also had conversations with Birger Larsen and Ketil Lunde.

I will try to get some pictures that will beef up the story.

Greetings from
Arvid Martinussen
Secretary BLHF