

HERO

by

LEON A. CARROW



THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

7 March 1997

COPYRIGHT © 1997 BY LEON A. CARROW
(All rights reserved)



Hero

Halfway between the shipping port of Kristiansand to the east and Stavanger to the northwest, on the southern coast of Norway, lies the much smaller town of Flekkefjord. Here, the canal, which to the south leads to the open sea, terminates in the opposite direction at the center of town, a spot on the map which has changed little in the past fifty to sixty years. A small hotel borders the canal on its east bank, and busy, yet unpretentious shops occupy the opposite side. Nearby, just outside the grounds of the large, imposing, white wooden Lutheran church, on a small grassy knoll, across the street from the farmer's market, stands a simple granite monument some eight-feet high, embossed in its upper portion by the bust of a man dressed in the uniform of a lieutenant in the Royal Norwegian Army. At its base, fresh flowers adorn the earth in the configuration of a grave, continuously replenished by the women of the town.

On May 21, 1941, as reported by Per Hansson in his book *The Greatest Gamble*, Viggo Axelssen, a member of the Norwegian Resistance whose cover was his occupation as a

Hero

ship's chandler in the port of Kristiansand (which allowed him easy access to the port and harbor master's office), was walking along the shore with friends on a clear calm evening, permitting them a view far out to sea. He noted a group of ships steaming westward at high speed, and with the use of an old-fashioned spyglass he identified two big, camouflaged warships, which he took to be German, escorted by other naval ships as well as aircraft. Making some excuse, he returned to his office where he coded the following twelve-word message: "Battleship, probably German, has passed Kristiansand heading west escorted by three destroyers." This was passed on to Arne Moen, the local bus driver, who hid it in a pocket in the casing of his engine, and drove in his usual slow, deliberate pace on the twisting main highway to Flekkefjord, some sixty miles away. The next person to receive the paper was the man behind the counter in a grocer's shop who in turn passed it on to the final courier, Sofie Rorvik, also known as "Fie," who worked in the local dairy. She tucked the paper inside her stocking, smoothed it against her skin, and proceeded to slowly walk, so as not to arouse suspicion, up the hills north of town one and a half miles to the farm called Helle. The final recipient of the document was the farm's owner, Gunvald Tomstad. After reading the coded message, he and another Resistance fighter moved quickly to a small room in the attic of the modest two-storied frame farmhouse, and retrieved a hidden compact transmitter. Ignoring the danger of the patrolling Germans who were constantly tracking their signals and honing in on their base of operations, one stood at

Hero

the top of the stairs with automatic pistol drawn while the other tapped his Morse key precisely, sending the message to Home Station in London which would result in the mobilization of forty-two naval ships plus a large number of shore-based aircraft in search for and finally pursuit of the *Bismarck*, the most powerful man-of-war sailing the seas.

On May 18, the *Bismarck* and the cruiser *Prince Eugen* with its supporting ships left Germany, initiating the Rheinübung, or the Rhine Exercise, intent on completing a three-month cruise which would destroy British shipping, wiping out the merchant ships and their convoys. Sailing north of Iceland, its first encounter with British naval forces occurred in the Denmark Straits. There, on May 24, the *Hood*, largest of the British battle-cruisers and pride of its fleet, was sunk in six minutes by shells from the *Bismarck* which caused the disastrous explosion claiming all of the complement of the *Hood's* 1,400 seamen with the exception of three survivors. In turn, one day later, the most significant damage to the *Bismarck* was inflicted by an obsolete Swordfish monoplane, off the carrier *Victorious*, carrying a single 18-inch torpedo which damaged the battleship's rudder to such an extent that her speed was severely compromised as she headed south-eastward in the Atlantic toward France. She was found by British warships and finally sunk on May 27, only six days after being sighted off Kristiansand. There were just 107 survivors from a crew of over 2,000. The fate of the *Bismarck* is chronicled in the book *Pursuit*, by Ludovic Kennedy.

Gunvald Tomstad, the man who sent the message which was instrumental in saving the merchant fleet and its con-

Hero

voys in the bleak years when Britain was fighting the vast German war machine virtually on its own, was a simple farmer and typographer at the outset of the war. Left fatherless as an infant, he was raised by his grandparents after his mother emigrated to the United States. At the age of eighteen his grandfather died, transforming Gunvald to master of Helle with full responsibility for the house and farm, which consisted of some six acres of arable land and eighty acres of grey upland, heather, moors, and woods. The young farmer had read avidly of electricity and the wireless; in 1939 he had by himself built a wireless transmitter, but he never registered his set or applied for a license so that his name was not included on the official register when the Germans invaded Norway on May 9, 1940.

His mother had returned prior to the occupation, remarried, settled again in Flekkefjord, and the two quickly rekindled an unusually close relationship considering their long separation. He had been recruited into the Resistance by the shopkeeper of the grocery store early in 1941, and soon thereafter Fie, the faithful, true, yet simple shop assistant, became the link between the "post office" at the grocer's and the transmitter at Helle. The Tomstad farm at the head of the valley was soon a vital center of intelligence work, and for a time the transmitter working from there was the only wireless link between Underground Norway and the free world. Tomstad and his associates were well aware that the Germans were making significant increasing use of signal-tracking equipment in Flekkefjord and its surroundings but the extent of their enemy's intelligence remained an

Hero

unknown. So these amateurs devised a plan to pierce this armor: one of theirs was to become a Nazi sympathizer, to enter the camp of the despised, to learn what the Germans knew of the Resistance, to warn those in immediate danger, to spy out the quislings, but first and foremost to provide Helle with effective camouflage. Gunvald Tomstad was the one to assume this role; he who had always felt anxious lest anyone should dislike him, who retreated from any quarreling, would now have to act the role of the traitor.

One morning in the early spring of 1941 he walked from Helle toward town, first stopping outside his mother's house prior to continuing on his way to join the "Najonal Samling" or N.S., the Norwegian Nazi party. He was accepted immediately and signed up on the spot by the district leader of the N.S. and the mayor, who were constantly seeking such recruits, and became one of perhaps twelve such turncoats in the entire town. As he walked from that office up the road toward his farm, the full impact of what he had to face fell upon him: within twenty-four hours all of the local people would be aware of his new existence; he would be considered mean and contemptible, loathed, and hated by all; none would greet him, but instead he would be frozen in the stare of his countrymen. His thoughts went to his mother whom he knew could accept his death easier than his becoming one who betrayed his country, but in order for him to succeed in his dual role he must exploit her despair and shame as part of his cover. He realized that the more he was despised, detested, and even spat upon, the safer would be his transmitter.

Hero

In the days, weeks and months that followed, he played his role well, being regarded by the district leader as well as by the Gestapo as a fanatical admirer of Hitler and the Third Reich. He learned that the Germans had pinpointed the transmitter to a relatively small area outside of Flekkefjord, sending a large contingent of men to systematically search the houses and other buildings in the area, but never the farmhouse at Helle. To further confuse them, Tomstad crawled five or more kilometers to other farm houses in the dead of night, attached his transmitter to low-tension wires and sent meaningless messages to Home Office, then packed up, walked and crawled back to Helle. At the times when he became aware of the imminent arrest of a Resistance fighter, that patriot was so informed, and at times hidden at Helle while plans for his escape were made. Throughout, however, he strutted about town in his Nazi uniform, mingled with and even housed members of the despised occupation forces.

His mother became a victim of her son's traitorous behavior, personally tormented and scorned by virtually all of the townspeople. She was universally met by silence since it was known that she still had contact with her son, being frequently seen trudging up to Helle where she continued to perform the necessary housekeeping chores; and her friends, being in the throes of conquest, were frightened to even speak to her. At Helle her anguish was unabated, constantly being intensified by the portrait of Quisling prominently displayed in the main room. She no longer confronted her son, remembering his repeated tirades as he

Hero

rattled off the words of Hitler and Quisling in defense of his position. Still, she continued to have doubts as to whether her son was truly as he appeared for things at Helle did not look right to her. At times there were several Germans present leading political discussions, but at other times when the house was empty she heard sounds from the attic like a clock which had gone wrong, clicking, then stopping, clicking, then stopping, and at still other times she heard quick footsteps as she entered. Finally, one day as she was cleaning the empty house, Gunvald entered, took her hands, and according to Per Hansson, softly uttered the following words: "No matter what evil you hear spoken of me, no matter what contemptible things you see me do, you and you alone, are to know that I am serving my country, and the mean things I do and am, I am and do because someone must pay the price of freedom."

His mother's quiet and proud reply was: "It is no burden to be your mother, Gunvald." Thereafter, she ceased her visits to the farm. To those townspeople who risked speaking to her so that they could express their disgust regarding her dangerous and traitorous son, she finally brought herself to say: "Gunvald Tomstad is no longer my son. If you talk to me about that man, we are both talking about a stranger."

The activities of the Resistance continued with Tomstad leading his hazardous life under greater and greater physical and emotional danger as the Gestapo increased its efforts to unearth their formidable foe who persisted in sending coded messages to London. The many subsequent perilous incidents that this patriot endured are detailed in

Hero

Hansson's book. Finally, in January of 1943, the third winter of the occupation, Tomstad was convinced that the Gestapo had, at long last, concluded that he had been playing a double game. The two highest Gestapo officers called from Kristiansand asking him to meet them at Helle. He did go there, but only to hide the transmitter and say goodbye to his dedicated housekeeper whom he realized would very likely be subjected to Gestapo torture. Leaving Helle, he observed with a familiar chill a detachment of German forces heading toward the farmhouse. He instinctively reached into a pocket of his trousers and handled the comforting cyanide capsule which had been on his person since his first days in the Resistance, then hurried off the road and continued undetected down to his mother's house, where he stayed just long enough to explain to her what was happening. A serious laceration of his leg caused by a passing auto as he dove off the road to escape detection combined with a subsequent feverish illness that was probably the result of his repeatedly jumping off the road into icy slush increased the weighty risk of his capture with torture and/or death. However, due to the bravery of several Resistance families he remained hidden and undetected until he reached the home of Fie's parents outside of town. After he recuperated there for several weeks, he was smuggled by train, ambulance, and boat to Sweden via Oslo, and then finally, to London.

Those of his friends who saw him there were shocked at his physical state; though only twenty-five, he was thin, sunken, pale, and looked like an old man. Depressed

Hero

because of his inaction, he repeatedly sought approval to return to Norway, but his government wisely refused, knowing that he was too much of a marked man in his homeland, and also that Tomstad's nerves had suffered far more than he cared to admit. His spirits at least were buoyed by two facts: a long private audience with King Haakon, and, more important, the information that Fie had escaped to Sweden. After the Germans were driven from Norway, Tomstad was one of the first to return, landing on a troopship at Stavanger wearing the uniform of a lieutenant in the Royal Norwegian Army. On arrival in Flekkefjord, he was lifted onto the shoulders of his neighbors and carried through the town. Soon thereafter, Fie returned from Stockholm, and in September 1945 the secret agent married his courier and took her home to Helle. There they raised three children as Tomstad resumed his work as a farmer and typographer at the local newspaper, which the owner and editor had defiantly closed from June 1940 to May 1945. But neither his family's love nor his work could erase the activities of the war from Gunvald's mind. He exhibited a restlessness and anxiety which was exacerbated by any unusual noise, and on more than one occasion his nervousness required hospitalization. The reverence in which this man was held was exemplified by a statement of his doctor: "Whenever you need help, the door at my hospital always will stand open for you."

In 1961, the large wooden building housing the newspaper was destroyed by fire. After that night Gunvald could not manage to go back to work again. Some suggested that

Hero

this event may have been interpreted by him as the reappearing of another war. At this time he started on the road of alcohol abuse, terminating in his death at the early age of fifty-two. This patriot became a casualty of the war, stricken as if felled by bullet, bomb, or shell.

On the monument outside the church grounds, these words are inscribed:

Gunvald Tomstad

1918-1970

For his participation in the Resistance

1940-1945

Raised in his honor by the City of Flekkefjord

This paper was written for The Chicago Literary Club
and read before a joint meeting of the Club and
The Fortnightly of Chicago on Friday evening,
the seventh of March, Nineteen Hundred and
Ninety-Seven. This edition of three hundred copies
was printed for the Club in the month of August,
Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Eight.

PRINTED
IN U.S.A.