

MYSTERY LAID TO REST. AFTER 6 DECADES, NORWEGIANS' GRAVES - NO LONGER UNMARKED

By JOANNE KIMBERLIN THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT May 18, 2004 Virginian-Pilot



Members of the Sons of Norway lay flowers at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Norfolk during a ceremony to mark the graves of Norwegians Ingvald Gjerstad and Arnfinn Siring, who were killed in an accident in Norfolk during World War II

A cold wind ripped across Forest Lawn cemetery. It was two days before last Christmas. Hunched over the grave of his uncle, Robert Hitchings strained to anchor a wreath in the frozen ground. Strange as it might seem, Hitchings loved this graveyard, even in bad weather. Its old tombstones held clues to a treasure trove of stories, all fascinating to a history buff like Hitchings.

On the amble back to his car, Hitchings scanned the passing tablets, stopping in front of two matching headstones. James Tudge and John Lewis . Both British Navy. Both died Jan. 30, 1943 .

Hmm. How odd that two foreigners wound up dead in Norfolk on the same day. Hitchings fished out a pen and scrawled their names on his palm.

The next day, at his job in the archive room of Norfolk's Kirm Memorial Library , Hitchings fired up the microfilm machine and scoured a Virginian-Pilot newspaper printed 61 years ago.

Wedge between news of World War II, food rationing and polio, he found a story about an accident that killed the two Englishmen. But there was something even more intriguing: Two Norwegian seamen died in the same accident, and were buried alongside the Brits.

Where were their tombstones?

Norway was in chaos in 1943. Invaded by the Germans, its king had fled to London, its people were hungry and its once-mighty merchant marine fleet roamed the high seas, unable to come home.

The Norwegian ships put their exile to use. Operating from adopted ports around the world, they ferried Allied supplies across the oceans. The British Navy stationed gunners on their decks to protect the important cargo.

Gunners James Tudge and John Lewis were assigned to the Vest . Ingvald Gjerstad and Arnfinn Siring were assigned to the same ship. Gjerstad, 44 , had gone to sea to support his wife and two children. Siring, 30 years old and single, had run off and signed on as a teen.

By the time they wound up in Norfolk, both men were seasoned hands. According to their crew mates, both had survived torpedo sinkings by German U-boats. Siring had been through it twice. Gjerstad had lost an arm.

On that January night in 1943 , the Vest was tied up at the naval base in Norfolk. A dozen of its crew members were out on the town, including Gjerstad, Siring, Tudge and Lewis. They drank beer and wine at a tavern, and got into a brawl with seamen from another ship. It was late when they started walking back to the Vest.

None of the seamen saw or heard the streetcar barreling toward them on Hampton Boulevard. It slammed into the group, scattering and crushing bodies. The newspaper described the accident as "one of the most gruesome to occur here in some time."

When a wrecking crew arrived to jack up the streetcar, Gjerstad, Siring and Tudge were dead underneath. Lewis died soon after. The four were buried with honors, their caskets carried by comrades and draped with the flags of their countries. A firing squad shot a volley. A bugler played taps. A woman sang a hymn.



Four foreign seamen, two Brits and two Norwegians killed in a Norfolk Streetcar accident were buried with honors in 1943. The graves of the two Norwegians, however, were never marked. Their families didn't know where they were buried.

At some point after the funeral, a pair of tombstones were set over the Brits.

But the Norwegians' graves remained bare. Word of their fate had trickled back to Norway, but the details were fuzzy. No one in their families knew their bodies lay in Norfolk.

Six decades passed.

Hitchings mentioned his find to a friend. The friend knew a fellow in the Sons of Norway , an international group with a Hampton Roads lodge. Hitchings' story bothered Ralph Peterson , a retired military man who serves as lodge president. Peterson's ancestors came from Norway, and so did his wife. But that had little to do with it.

Everyone deserves a tombstone, countrymen or not.

The hunt for the dead men's descendants began.

Working from his Saw Pen Point home in Virginia Beach, Peterson scoured the Internet, census records, death certificates and the Norwegian archives.

Siring, an unusual family name, was narrowed down to a half-dozen or so households in the Oslo area. Then Peterson's wife, Annegrete , used her fluent Norwegian to make the phone calls. Because Siring had died childless - and so long ago - they weren't even sure who they were looking for.

One call led to another, until the Petersons were finally talking to Siring's niece, Hilde Siring , a 47-year-old subway worker.

Her father, who died in 1985 , was Siring's brother.

"I never met my uncle," Hilde Siring said in a telephone interview, "but my father told me about him. He knew there was a tram accident, but he thought it happened in London. We thought he was buried somewhere there. How strange to think that, for all this time, my uncle has really been in Norfolk."

Gjerstad was a tougher case, and more rewarding. The name is a common one in Norway, but Peterson knew Gjerstad was born near a town called Bergen . For help, he turned to a Norwegian NATO officer stationed in Norfolk.

By coincidence, the officer's father lives in Bergen. The father contacted the Bergen newspaper. A reporter found Gjerstad's younger son, a 69-year-old retired schoolteacher still living in the area. Gjerstad's older son had died in 1994 . His wife had been gone since 1986 .

"I cannot believe this," said Majnar Gjerstad . "I am in shock." Majnar Gjerstad was only 4 years old when his father shipped out, but he grew up in a house of sadness.

"It was very hard on my mother and my older brother," he said. "The other seamen from our neighborhood came home after the war. Our father did not."

The family knew Gjerstad had died in Norfolk, but had no clue where he was buried or that his grave had gone unmarked all these years.

"This really upsets me," Majnar Gjerstad said. "I just assumed that wherever he was, there was some kind of stone. But you have to understand how it was back then. There was no money. No communication. We had no way to find out these things."

In 1998, Majnar's daughter, Ingunn, traveled to Washington, D.C., thinking Arlington National Cemetery would be the most likely place to find her grandfather.

"My grandmother died without knowing where her husband was buried," Ingunn Gjerstad said. "It was important me. To finally find his grave now is wonderful."

Now 40 years old and a secretary in Oslo, Ingunn Gjerstad marveled over yet another newly discovered link. She and Hilde Siring know each other. Their children attend the same Oslo school. They serve on the same parents committee.

"It's amazing to know now that we have this thing in common," Ingunn Gjerstad said. "That long ago, our relatives were together in Norfolk, and they died there together. It's a very strange coincidence."

On Monday - Norway's constitution day - Gjerstad and Siring got some of the attention they've gone without all these years. Some two dozen members of the Sons of Norway and a handful of NATO officers turned out to decorate the graves with flowers and flags. Plans are being laid for proper tombstones and a visit from the families.

Surrounded by women wearing the colorful dresses of their homeland, Peterson spoke to the men buried beneath the grass.

"We are of Norwegian blood who are gathered with you today," he said. "I am very sorry that it has taken so long for us to be here."