

A new mission for the hero of Telemark

Aged 90, Joachim Rønneberg, who lead a daring raid on a heavy water plant in Telemark, preventing the Nazis building the atomic bomb, now feels a duty to talk about the mission. Paul Kendall reports

By Paul Kendall

Published: 7:00AM BST 02 May 2010 Permission granted to reprint this article by the Telegraph.co.uk

'Sit down please, sit down,' says Joachim Rønneberg, ushering me towards a table laid with china cups and saucers, a silver sugar bowl and a plate of perfectly made sandwiches. 'Take that one, please,' he says, waving a hand at a low, blue armchair. Everything in the room – from the neat bookcases to the photographs that fill the walls – has been arranged with a soldier's attention to detail.

Outside, nature has been similarly meticulous. A verdant bank of evergreens leads down to a stunning estuary. Fishing boats and motor cruisers bob about in a small harbour while, behind them, in the near distance, lies a wall of spectacular snow-capped mountains.

It is the perfect backdrop to our conversation, for mountains do not just dominate Rønneberg's view, they have dominated his entire life. In February 1943, in one of the most audacious raids of the Second World War, the Norwegian, along with eight fellow resistance fighters, slid down a wild, windswept mountainside in southern Norway, broke into an isolated power plant, and sabotaged Nazi efforts to build an atomic bomb.

The mission, organised by Churchill's covert Special Operations Executive (SOE), was one of the greatest coups of the war, and so daring it was later recreated by Hollywood in the 1965 film *The Heroes of Telemark*, starring Kirk Douglas and Richard Harris. (Rønneberg, however, dismisses it as a "hopeless" portrayal. "They took a true story and spun their own idea around it. It should never have been allowed.")

Rønneberg, the leader of the team, was hailed a hero, thanked personally by Churchill, and awarded the Distinguished Service Order. But for years, he refused to talk publicly about his involvement. Naturally self-effacing and suffused with a deep sense of loyalty, he was loath to take any of the glory for himself. The march of time, however, has caused him to reconsider. Now aged 90, Rønneberg is one of only two members of the team still alive; the other is 99, and was recently hospitalised. He feels it is his duty to tell the story of the raid while he still can. Next week, he will be a guest of honour at the Windsor Castle Royal Tattoo, the annual celebration of our Forces' heroic efforts.

"A few years ago, I realised that I am part of history," he says, sitting stiffly in his chair. Despite his age, he still cuts an imposing figure; tall, with broad-shoulders, a square jaw and an air of quiet self-control. "Having been more or less silent for years, now I realise it

is important and quite natural for people to ask about the past so they can plan for the future. People must realise that peace and freedom have to be fought for every day."

It was this clear moral compass that guided him to Britain during the war. Still living with his parents in Ålesund, a shipbuilding town in northwestern Norway, Rønneberg was 20 years old and working for a fish export company when, almost exactly 70 years ago, Germany invaded Norway.

Like everyone in the town, he soon came to resent the oppressive German rule and, 10 months later, under the noses of the Nazis, he and eight friends escaped on a fishing boat. Rønneberg was desperate to join the war effort and as soon as he arrived in Britain, he contacted a friend of his from Norway who was recruiting people for the SOE – a secret organisation that Churchill had set up to conduct sabotage missions behind enemy lines.

After a rigorous selection procedure, he was signed up and, over the following weeks, Rønneberg was trained to shoot, lay explosives and throw grenades. He was also taught close combat, how to survive in hostile conditions and how to kill with his bare hands. Rønneberg excelled at it all, so much so, that he was promoted and put in charge of training.

Then, in December 1942, he was summoned to London for a briefing. Having waited impatiently for more than a year, he was about to see some action. His target: the Norsk Hydro plant in Telemark, southern Norway. And, although the precise reason for the operation was kept from Rønneberg – the factory was building up stores of "heavy water" or deuterium oxide, a substance vital to the production of nuclear weapons – the stakes could not have been higher. If Hitler was to be defeated, the cylinders of heavy water at the plant had to be destroyed.

Rønneberg's orders were straightforward: he was told to select five men. Under the cover of darkness, they were to parachute into the mountains in the region above the power plant. Then, travelling on skis, they would meet up with a "reception committee" – four locals who knew the topography of the area and would guide them to the plant. The team – minus one radio operator – would then steal into the plant, attach explosives to the heavy water cylinders and make good their escape.

"We didn't think about whether it was dangerous or not," says Rønneberg, sipping a cup of bitter coffee. "We didn't think about our retreat. The most important decision you made during the whole war was the day you decided to leave Norway to report for duty. You concentrated on the job and not on the risks."

The curt economy of their instructions belied the complexity and danger of the task. Just one month earlier, 24 British commandos travelling to meet the reception committee had perished on the very same mountainside when the two gliders in which they were flying iced up and crashed. The six remaining survivors were arrested, tortured and executed by the Gestapo.

The reception committee, who were still in hiding, had almost died in the fierce winter conditions. Even if they were still alive when Rønneberg and his men landed, the attack would be fraught with difficulties. The power plant was on a shelf of rock, half way up an "unscaleable" gorge and accessed by a single-lane suspension bridge. The bridge was patrolled, the hills above extensively mined and booby-trapped and the plant defended by a machine gun turret and floodlights.

Even if they managed to get in and blow up the cylinders, they still had to get out again and escape from the area.

But Rønneberg and his men were well prepared. Professor Lief Tronstad, an escapee from Norway who had worked at the plant, had provided invaluable intelligence and helped construct a full-scale model, which was erected at the SOE's Station 17, at Brickendonbury Manor in Hertfordshire. The demolition team had practised on this prior to the mission for several weeks.

After two aborted drops, the men landed in Norway just after midnight on February 17, 1943. Eighteen miles off target, they found themselves in the middle of a storm and in temperatures of -20°C . For hours they struggled through swirling snow, carrying rucksacks and dragging two heavy toboggans of equipment before coming across a hut where they took cover.

They stayed there for five days. When the storm at last abated, they skied on, and after a day came over a ridge and caught sight of two skiers. It was their reception committee.

"After that we had to decide on a plan of attack," says Rønneberg. He looks out the window towards the mountains, and for a moment falls silent, lost in contemplation. Then he continues.

"We moved into our starting position and Claus Helberg [a member of the reception committee] was ordered to go to a certain bend in the road, find a way down to the river, and see if there was a way to climb up the other side. He came back three or four hours later and said: 'It's possible.'"

They set off at eight o'clock that night. It was incredibly steep. The snow was so deep the men had to take off their skis and half-walk, half-stagger down the gorge. Once at the bottom, they hid their equipment, crossed the frozen river and tackled the almost-vertical climb up the other side. They arrived, exhausted and drenched in sweat, at 11.45pm.

"We knew we had to be just outside the factory when they changed guards down on the suspension bridge at midnight, because then we could follow the two guards being released when they came into their barracks," explains Rønneberg. "Once they went into their hut, we knew that was our moment."

As the Germans presumed that nobody would be able to reach the plant by climbing the gorge, there were only guards on the bridge – none inside the actual site. Using bolt-

cutters, the men snapped the chain on the gate and moved along the fence. Then, as five of them took up positions around the German barracks, Rønneberg and three others headed for the cellar where the cylinders of heavy water were kept.

It was locked – but Rønneberg remembered Prof Tronstad telling him that there was another way in, via a narrow cables shaft. He and another commando opened it and crawled through on their hands and knees.

"From the open hole, we could look into the heavy concentration room and saw there was only one man, a Norwegian caretaker," says Rønneberg. "So we climbed down without being spotted, rushed the door open and shouted: 'Hands in the air!'" A gun was trained on the man while Rønneberg and his fellow explosives expert, Birger Stromsheim, laid their charges.

"I don't know how long we were there, but it was very easy," recalls Rønneberg. "The charges fitted like a hand in a glove." Once they'd set the 30-second fuse, the caretaker opened the main door and they all ran. Because of the wind and the noise of the power station, none of the German guards heard the explosion. By the time it was discovered, the men were out of the gorge, back up in the mountains and on their way to safety.

The sun came up at 6am. "It was a mackerel sky," says Rønneberg, looking out at the mountains again. "It was a marvellous sunrise. We sat there very tired, very happy. Nobody said anything. That was a very special moment."

He grins. It is late now and we have been talking for more than three hours, but he hasn't complained once. After years of silence, he is determined to see through his new mission: to tell as many people as possible about what the heroes of Telemark achieved.