

Duen's Clandestine Past



By Charity Hume

"Meet me at the pier in Sidney, the Sea Quest Adventure dock, the one near the fish market."

I'm talking to Michael Hobbis, captain and owner of the Duen, the Peninsula's very own "tall ship." When I get there, Michael Hobbis is tightening a cleat on the dock. He's going to be a minute so he tells me to go on board and have a look.

Duen, "the dove," is a sight to behold, a traditional Norwegian-designed Galeas, a 22-meter gaff-rigged ketch. On board,

I'm impressed by the distinct character of a wooden boat built to withstand the harsh moods of the North Sea, sixty-six years of world sailing behind her, and as far as I can tell, few signs of wear and tear. Antique brass fixtures like the compass and the ship's clocks still guide the boat.

There's a little window box on the cabin, and it occurs to me, its plot of blooms might provide comfort when there's no land on the horizon. Duen is someone's home.

"When was it built?" I ask Christine Kerr, a young woman who crews for the Hobbis family.

"1939, in Norway."

"Was it used during the war?" I ask.

"Oh, yes. It transported spies."

Busy working, Christine glances at a faded newspaper clipping tacked up on the wall of the pilot house. When I look at the photograph, the caption is in Norwegian, so I'm left with the image and the date, Oct. 22, 1941.

Facing me, standing on the boat some sixty-four years ago, I encounter the stares of the men on board. I'm struck by their youth, intelligence and strength. To me, there's nothing furtive about them. They seem confident. Unbowed. Who were these men? What was their mission?

Back on the dock, Hobbis describes his first sight of Duen with a nostalgic passion some might reserve for a spouse, looking back after twenty-eight years of marriage. He met her in an isolated lagoon on the uninhabited island of Suvarov in 1978, and from the first, Hobbis was entranced. At the age of 18, out on his first major voyage, Hobbis had no way of knowing then that he and Duen were destined for a future together.

Only six years later, after numerous ocean voyages, and working on Duen for the Fletcher family, Hobbis explains that he and his

wife Manon made the decision to buy the ship when they had a chance to do a sail training program for disadvantaged kids on the East Coast.

"For the kids who've come aboard, it gives them the taste of responsibility," Hobbis says. "For them, I imagine the night watches are hardest. Thoughts of good and bad come up out there."

When I ask Hobbis about the photograph, he spreads out a chart before me. I'm looking at the North Sea, an array of red and blue arrows between Norway and the Shetland Islands.

"The code name for the operation was 'The Shetland Bus,'" he says. "Each arrow was a mission; the red were the big boats, and the blue arrows were the smaller ones."

In another document, Hobbis points to Duen's voyage, registered on Oct. 22, 1941.

As I walk away from our conversation, I'm left with questions. Why did the boat sail with 38 people aboard? I want to know more about the men in the photograph. Who had unlocked their secret, and why did they have to flee for their lives?

So I go home and I begin to read.

During World War II, the Norwegian Norsk Hydro plant was the world's major source of heavy water. In 1940, the Germans occupied Norway in an effort to gain control of the essential ingredient they needed to develop the atomic bomb.

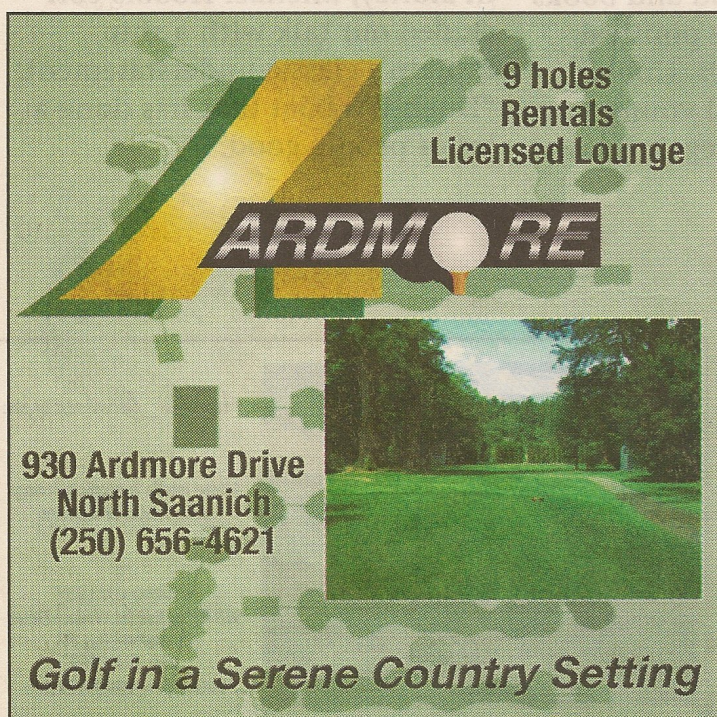
Hindered by the Norwegian resistance, the Gestapo

intensified its efforts in 1941, and successfully located two hundred members of the Stein group, who were arrested and submitted to hard torture. Many were executed.

When I learn that Duen's passengers included members of the Stein group, the meaning of that picture in the pilot house sharpens. German authorities had shot the passengers and crew of the "Viggo," after two informers infiltrated the ship's crew in a typical incident. Duen's passengers were fleeing a similar fate.

Though Duen escaped the Germans that day, it met with two storms, and ran

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aground on Sumburgh Head. All 38 passengers survived.

It's possible the young men were among those in the operation who chose to return to Norway and continued to fight in the resistance until the end of the war. The combined efforts of the Allies and Norwegian saboteurs finally convinced the Germans to abandon the Norsk Hydro plant in 1944. The resistance successfully defended the world's supply of heavy water, and prevented the Germans from developing the atomic bomb.

After repairs, the Duen lived to sail another day. Since her early days, she has continued her humanitarian missions, sailing to Fiji after a typhoon to help repair boats needed to deliver supplies to remote islands, and to Haiti to deliver medicine, food and books to a school cut off by political violence. In the 1990s, Hobbis and the Duen trained young mariners in Pearson College's Coastal Watch program.

Currently the vessel of Hobbis's business, the Natural Coast, Duen now reveals the nature of British Columbia to its passengers, in adventures based on the belief that people will protect what they love.

I think of Duen's past, her present and future. Her first days were of wartime heroism, but since that time she has carried food to the poor and the hungry. She's trained several generations of "rookies" in the primeval lessons of the sea.

Her destiny has been shaped by the care and the moral direction of her owners, from its builders, to the Fletchers, and the Hobbis family. Mysterious to consider whether Duen's character had a hand in shaping theirs.

In Sidney, Michael Hobbis concluded our talk with a ship captain's classic understatement: "Duen is a boat that has done a lot of people good."



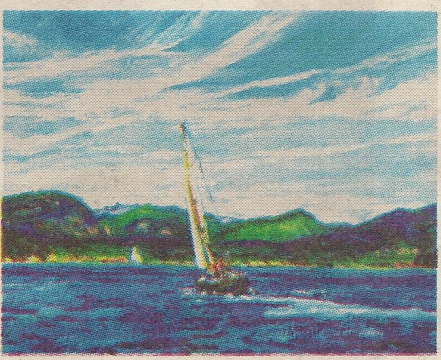
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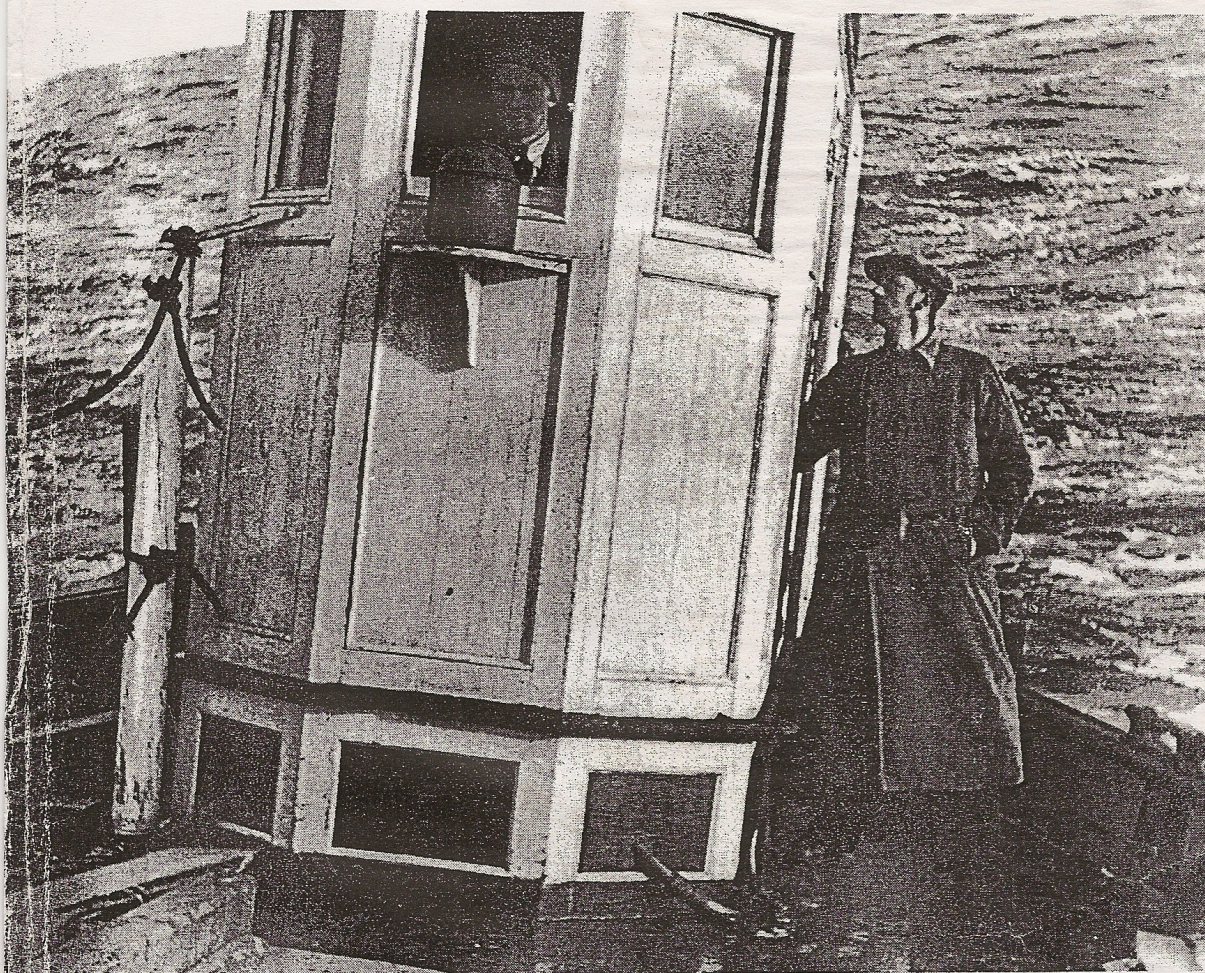
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Var det fotoapparat med, kom det gjerne fram når land var i sikte og spenninga over. Biletet viser ei gruppe om bord i «DUEN» som gjekk frå Øklandsvågen, Bømlo, den 22. oktober 1941 med 38 personar. Ekspedisjonen var organisert frå Bergen og Bømlo, og mange av passasjerane var ettersøkte.



«DUEN» var ikkje stor, og 38 passasjerar var i meste laget. Mannen til høgre, politibetjent og styrmann Petter Drægebø, var skipper på overfarten. «DUEN» fekk tungt ver under overfarten, og to gonger maskinstopp. Kom inn til sørspissen av Shetland.