

The Busko Affair

by Ray Batvinis (1972-1997)

I wonder if any *Grapevine* reader has ever smelled two hundred rotting polar bear-skins? Somehow, I doubt it. But this was the malodorous situation faced by a handful of FBI Agents at the Commonwealth Pier in the port of Boston — just three months before America entered the Second World War.

Our story opens one day in September 1941 along the frigid northeast coast of Greenland. Five months earlier President Franklin Roosevelt had ordered Admiral Harold Stark, the chief of naval operations, to begin “informal” patrols in the arctic waters surrounding the vast and icy island. For 18 months, a constant stream of convoys had been losing the Battle of the Atlantic — the momentous struggle to keep Britain alive in the face of German submarines lurking in the mid-Atlantic well out of range of shore-based defenses. Since the start of the Second World War in September 1939, British merchant ships were being torpedoed at a staggering rate. The cold reality was that the Germans, in the words of one historian, were “sinking more ships than Britain and the United States were building.” And losses were accelerating —

from 126,000 tons in total shipping losses in January 1941 to 249,000 in April.

The U.S. Coast Guard, which had been subordinated to the Navy, was assigned to the Greenland mission. Starting in the summer of 1941, there were three Coast Guard cutters, the *North Star*, *Bear* and *Northland*, under the command of Captain Edward H. “Iceberg” Smith, who began hunting for German weather ships and land-based weather stations posing as innocent fishing vessels and trapping camps. As part of the assignment, specially selected Coastguardsmen were trained as “Sledge Team” leaders, consisting of a sled driver leading a team of dogs over miles of ice and snow, looking for suspicious activity in harsh Arctic conditions.

Germany hungered for weather data. Such information was vital for their naval activities in the eastern Atlantic, air operations over England and, since June 1941, her ground and air forces in Russia. As weather moves west to east, a seriously disadvantaged Germany had little choice but to venture into U.S. and British-controlled arctic waters to collect and report vital information on weather conditions that days later would drift over the British Isles and the European continent.

The ship Busko



One day a sledge team spotted what it thought was a strange vessel landing men on the coast. Wasting no time, Smith ordered the *Northland*, commanded by Captain Carl C. von Paulsen, to put an armed team aboard and search it. The ship was the *Busko*, a sixty-one-ton freighter, which carried a crew of 17 Norwegian men and one woman. Under questioning, crew members acknowledged putting a party ashore which led Smith to order von Paulsen to place the *Busko* in the custody of the *Northland* and start searching for the mysterious camp. Two days later, armed sledge teams surprised the Norwegians without incident and took them into custody. Still suspicious of the ship's unusual array and the conflicting crew accounts, "Iceberg" ordered the *Bear* to escort the *Busko* and its crew back to Boston for further investigation.

Dick Millen was in his seventh floor office in the Justice Department building when he got a call to report to Inspector E.P. Coffey's office. Millen, an Indiana University graduate with an advanced degree in physics, a former college professor and an FBI Agent since 1938, had spent most of his short career thus far handling radio engineering work in the Laboratory Division. With little explanation, Coffey told him to check out photographic equipment and get up to Boston the quickest way possible. Weighted down with film packs, flash bulbs and a Speed Graphic camera, Millen flew to Boston, where together

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with local Agents he began searching and inventorying anything they could find on the ship.

What Millen learned upon arriving at the pier was interesting. The official report concluded that the ship and its crew were taken into custody without incident. In a summary of the case, Millen offered a slightly different version. As small boats were being lowered from the *Northland* the crew came under rifle fire from the mystery people on the shore. As Millen later wrote "this was not a smart move." Captain Paulsen responded with machine gun and 40 mm cannon shells which silenced the fire, burned the tents and ignited an inferno fueled by a cluster of gasoline cans destroying the entire site. Three bodies were also recovered.

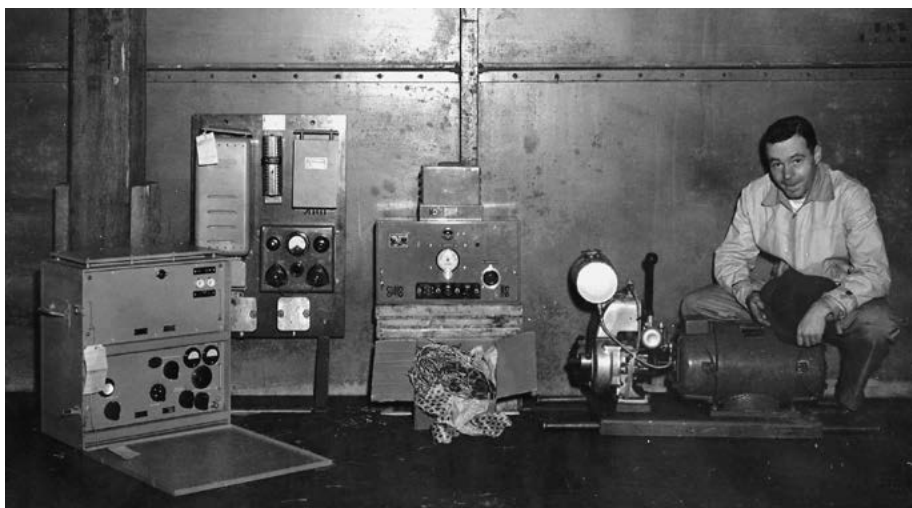
Millen's first order of business was to remove the 18 men and one woman from the *Busko* and haul them off to immigration authorities for processing. With the ship clear of danger, Millen

and an Agent named Leonard quickly recovered the ship's log and other papers and made notes while all the time taking a steady stream of photographs.

The team then went below deck. Upon opening the forward deck hatch, Millen was immediately "smitten with a strong odor which permeated the air." Groping in the dark below deck, they stumbled into the claustrophobic-like crew quarters containing tiny bunks, only accessible through some type of hole in the wall of the ship. "Loose moldy straw" covered the floor. The foul odor in the crew quarters — probably from weeks of human beings' living at sea without baths — differed from the original stench they encountered when they opened the hatch. But put together, the two odors remained in Millen's words "difficult to contend with."

Next came the cargo holds. With the help of two portable lights, they found the source of the mysterious reek that had met them when they first opened the deck hatch — hundreds of polar bear skins stacked six to seven feet in height against a far wall. For the next several hours, two Agents (author's note: probably first office agents) methodically moved and restacked the skins to see if anything was concealed underneath them.

At the bottom of the pile, they hit pay dirt. There in the darkest recesses of the ship sat "several sturdy, fitted boxes resembling 'steamer' trunks" along with radio communications gear needed for the construction of a sending and receiving station. After carefully removing the crates to a make-shift dock-side command post, the team began photographing, inventorying and logging each item for future reference. What they found was the most advanced radio communications equipment in the German arsenal — a treasure trove of inestimable value to American and British intelligence specialists. It was a spectacular cache of cables, wires, several crystal headphones, meteorology manuals and a complete set of logs and charts. Two specially-fitted cases held operating manuals for radio transmitting and



Unidentified Agent with confiscated communication elements: transmitter, receiver, power plant, control panel and antennas

receiving, electric meters and rugged adjustable mounts for monitoring wind speed and direction in harsh weather conditions. In another protective case, Agents found the all-important power distribution control panel, a special voltage control panel, “a very heavy” motor-driven electric power generator and several tarps filled with pre-assembled radio directional antennas with pre-fabricated support metal masts and a collection of antenna feed lines.

Millen returned to Washington with the entire shipment of radio equipment following shortly after him. Tearing into every piece of evidence, engineers produced valuable insights that would later prove crucial for FBI wartime counterintelligence operations and Allied intelligence in general. For instance, a careful study of the vacuum tubes showed no evidence of any heating which normally occurs when used for any period of time — a fact that suggested to FBI laboratory experts that the transmitter was state of the art and “very high grade.”

Six months before the capture of the *Busko* the British had made a major cryptographic break-through with the capture of the German trawler *Krebs* off Norway, complete with two Enigma machines and the naval Enigma settings list for the previous month. This coup allowed the now famous code-breaking wizards working on German naval Enigma at Bletchley Park to temporarily break into enciphered naval messages.

Around this same time, Harry Hinsley, a Bletchley Park codebreaker, suggested that German weather and supply ships, as well as war ships, probably carried naval Enigma details. His idea was proved correct when, in May 1941, a successful British attack on the German weather ship *München* found Enigma code-books for June on board.

Millen and his team had no idea that their search of the *Busko* that September would contribute to Bletchley Park’s battle against the German navy. Among the items they retrieved



Unidentified Agent with the contents of the cases which were found buried under 200 polar bear skins — a complete meteorology station

was a large manual with an eagle carrying a Nazi swastika in its talons embossed on the cover. It was inscribed “Wetter sclossel 1B” which translates to “Weather Cipher 1B” in English. Millen left no record of the priceless cipher code book’s disposition but the FBI undoubtedly turned it over to the British for use by the legendary codebreaker, Alan Turing, in solving Enigma messages.

With the “crime scene” cleared and the radio gear undergoing examination in Washington, FBI attention turned to the crew. The interrogations quickly fingered the ship’s forty-two-year-old captain, Hallvard Ophuus Devold, and his twenty-six year old radio operator, Jacob Rytter Bradley. Both were Norwegian and both were German agents. The remainder of the crew, made up of fifteen trappers and a female nurse, had no involvement.

As typically happens, both men tried to minimize their involvement by resorting to victimhood. Devold claimed that for more than 20 years, he had been engaged in unspecified “scientific work,” having previously conducted experiments in Greenland in 1926. In April 1941, the Norwegian Ministry of Commerce commissioned him to lead an expedition to Greenland to once again conduct a variety of unspecified experiments. As the ship was preparing to depart, German authorities ordered Devold to take Bradley on as a radio operator. As for Bradley, his equally fuzzy story differed in the facts, but remained consistent with Devold’s victim tale. He was a member of the Norwegian Nazi party and was once a group leader. He told FBI Agents that in October 1940, he lost his leadership role to a subordinate who was “easier for the authorities to handle.” A campaign of false rumors that he may have been a British Agent, which led to the jailing of some party members, also contributed to his demotion. A month before the ill-fated voyage, Bradley was unexpectedly contacted by a “Gestapo Agent” who made him an offer after casually



Hallvard Ophuus Devold, Captain



Jacob Rytter Bradley, radio operator

recalling his past transgressions. He was to join the crew of the *Busko* for a voyage to Greenland, where he would set up a meteorology station and transmit weather reports back to Germany for the next two years. With no other options available, Bradley soon began intensive meteorology and telemetry training in Oslo by two German tutors. Throughout these meetings, he recalled that his instructors warned him to always keep his mission and his relationship with the Germans confidential for fear that the British might intercept the vessel. As for the Americans, they assured him, there was little to worry about. It was too late in the year for U.S. warships to venture as far north as the site in Greenland where the radio was to be set up.

Whatever the truth, it made little difference in the end. All eighteen members of the *Busko* expedition remained jailed as “illegal immigrants” until the end of the war, when

they were repatriated back to Norway.

In a brief account of the *Busko* affair prepared shortly after his return to Washington, Millen concluded that the finished report on the case would be “placed in State Department hands immediately.” In fact, two comprehensive FBI reports along with photos of the ship, the crew, and the radio gear arrived on the desk of President Franklin Roosevelt just weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor. With this in mind, I wonder what Dick Millen and his team would think today if they knew of the role that they played in the first American wartime capture of a German military vessel.

Society Historian Ray Batvinis coordinates *the Grapevine* history columns. If you have a subject you’d like to write about, please email him at rbatvinis@aol.com.

Photos courtesy of FDR Library National Archive

What follows is a brief record of Dick Millen’s trip to Alaska, which he prepared shortly after his return to Washington. Dick probably departed on his Juneau adventure shortly after his Busko assignment; finally arriving home a week after America entered the war.

The Grapevine staff wishes to thank Jim Millen (SA/FBI 1969-2001) for sharing his father’s remarkable story and photos with the Society. We also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the research staff of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, New York for supplying presidential records that helped us tell the story of the “Busko Affair.” — Ray Batvinis (1972-1997)

Dick Millen’s journal entry

Began late September 1941 to fly to Alaska to install the radio station. American flight to Seattle was a converted DC3 Pullman (sleeper experiment which failed) was a nightmare in that the stewardess failed to awake Papa, resulting in eardrum damage from the sudden change in cabin pressure in landing. The next day, the trip was resumed as the only passenger, along with the captain, first officer, steward and radio operator eight mail bags. The aircraft was a hot Lockheed Lodestar. Half way up the Canadian Rockies, with 80 feet of snow between the peaks, the Morse Code signals came through from Whitehorse, Juneau, Anchorage and Fairbanks with the bad news that all places to land this aircraft were under a “white out” zero visibility condition, blowing snow. The navigator announced that we did not have fuel enough to even think about trying to return to Seattle. The sun was shining, where we were above the Canadian Rockies. We began to turn in large circles, while trying to conserve fuel and hoping one of the places ahead would open up. In the meantime, looking out to our right, we spotted two Army planes who had joined us in the circle. They said they were on a mission to photograph the west coastline of Canada, supposedly to identify possible landing sites which the Japanese might use for an invasion. Learned later that both had crashed. The navigator announced that we had to decide within a certain period of time where we could set the plane down and still, hopefully get back in the air. The captain did not waste any time. He reviewed the map, located about where we were and told us that

we were west of a burg of Prince George, which was not a landing possibility. He was going to check about 60 miles west of there, where the Frazier River narrows for a wide beach in that the Frazier was low at that time. We buzzed the river, gained altitude again and came down in a hurry to level off and land on a beach of river stones, rolling to a stop after a barrage of smooth rocks banged the bottom of the plane. The Lodestar was checked and no damage was found. Turns out, all suffered ear drum damage, which we evaluated as minor when compared with smacking into a mountain. We secured the plane and began walking west over the river stones in search of an Indian village, which the navigator swore was within walking distance.

Not dressed for the occasion, we finally made it to the village about dark. There were log cabins, mud sidewalks, a large community meeting house with board floor and a retired steam locomotive for heat. There were 82 adults and many little ones. The little ones were happily running around barefoot in the snow. The chief had placed us in the largest vacant cabin. They were friendly. Each day, our radio man checked the white-out and each day we were not able to try the next leg. After nine days, the white-out cleared up and Juneau had unlimited visibility. The Captain became sick. We loaded him onto the plane. The first officer did a great job taking off and getting the Lodestar to Juneau.

I worked alone building the station on Douglas Island in the Gastineau Channel. I completed the station and made it back just before Tom Millen was born on December 2, 1941.