

Norway 1976 – the Hallingdal Valley

The trip to The Hallingdal Valley by members of 19 and 22 Squadron followed on from previous trips to the Voss area of Norway. I was surprised to find no mention of it in the Squadron history but even I'm pretty sure that a trip that long (10 weeks) can't be a figment of my imagination, plus, I have photos!

It was my first trip to Norway and even before we left I knew it wasn't going to be like any other exercise I'd been involved in. I still remember the surreal experience of sitting in Block 10 in early June of the hottest year on record trying to estimate how much I needed to order from the NAAFI to keep me going for 10 weeks. The list at the end of the exercise looked horrific but paled in comparison to some of the others I saw later.

The trip to Torpo went very smoothly although it felt very strange when we stayed overnight en route (I think it was at Catterick) to find that the barrack block was identical to those at Chepstow – spooky.

We were under canvas having hijacked the local campsite. Rows of 180 pounders set up in the meadow sloping down to the river. The only downside to this was that somebody had decided that because it doesn't get dark in Norway in the summer we wouldn't need lighting. In hindsight this was not a good decision as I'm sure this contributed to everybody spending the evening in the bar which was the campsite's log cabin.

The exercise lived up to all expectations. It was hard work but great fun. Some highlights that stick in my mind are:

- Flying around the Norwegian countryside in the Gazelle helicopters, two of which were with us for the whole time, and landing alongside roadside cafes for lunch
- Taking the Landrovers where no wheeled vehicles had been before. I can remember meeting up with another team at the cafe at the top of the Geilo ski lift. When the staff heard that we'd arrived by car, one from the plateau the other from the valley, they were pretty surprised
- Playing the locals at football on a gravel pitch. We did OK but some people couldn't resist slide tackles and paid the price. I think we lost but not too badly.
- Being part of the Geilo carnival. We were asked if we could fly in the guest of honour, a Norwegian comedian, and also agreed to include a couple of Landrovers in the parade. All I can remember is not seeing much else in the parade – it was pretty much us!
- Walking paths when all of the main mapping had been done. We were taken by helicopter and dropped off at a point on one of the long distance paths, walked for a day and then were picked up at a prearranged spot. Needless to say we started at a high point and made sure the day's work was downhill – no fools us. One day we had reached the pickup point early and were brewing up on the hexie burner when a party of walkers came along. We gave them a cuppa and could see they were intrigued as to what we were up to as we had one small pack and no visible means of shelter. The look on their faces when we pulled out a smoke flair and were picked up was brilliant.

All in all it was a fantastic time. We missed the scorching summer back home but I wouldn't have traded it for any price. The trip back was a bit stormy and coming off the ferry to a grey Newcastle day was a reminder that we were back to reality.