



# Gardner Man Foils Nazi War Machine

By John Weis

One Sunday morning during WWII, Gardner, Illinois resident, Rev. Christian Christiansen picked up the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper and learned that the Nazis were building an atomic war plant near his childhood town of Sandos, Norway. (The facility produced heavy-water; an element essential in the manufacture of the atomic bomb.)

Christiansen knew the area well. As a youth, he had explored the mountainous terrain, and as a sailor he navigated the Fjords and rivers below. The production facility was located under a mountain shelf that bombers couldn't reach. The mountain overlooked a long narrow arm of the sea, bordered by cliffs, making it virtually impossible for warships to navigate in the area, in an attempt to shell the location.

The reverend contacted U.S. Navy officials. And it wasn't long before Intelligence officers arrived at his home on North Jackson street in Gardner. Norwegian maps were rolled out, and the site of the plant was pinpointed. This vital information regarding the area was given to the British military. In February 1943, a group of commandos - code name "Operation Gunnerside", successfully destroyed the plant.

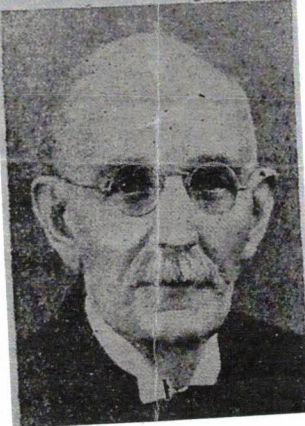
Rev. Christiansen took his secret to the grave. He died before the war ended and was buried

in a small Norwegian cemetery near Gardner.

During September 1946, in a letter from the Norwegian Embassy in Washington, D.C. advised Christiansen's family of his valuable service to the war effort. It read, in part:

## Rev. Christiansen Honored by the King of Norway

Our only regret in the following account, is that the man about whom it is written, is not alive to read it still, somehow, somewhere, he knows.  
We received notice the other day from Roy, Christiansen, that



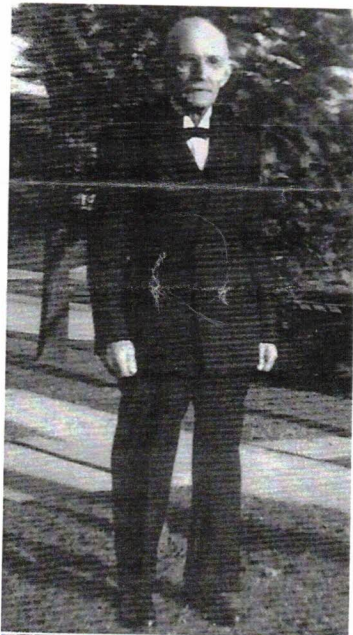
"It gives me great pleasure to inform you his Majesty the King of Norway has instructed me to present to you a Diploma in recognition of your valuable services for Norway during the last war... May I extend to you my heartiest congratulation upon this well merited award."

The letter was signed by the Ambassador of Norway.

The award, along with a certificate of thanks from the King of Norway, is reproduced on an 18" x 24" plaque, and was dedicated on August 2, 2004 by the Route 66 Association of Illinois. The plaque is located in Memorial Park, a few steps away from Rev. Christiansen's church. Valaida D'Alessio, a former resident of Joliet, was a child in the 1940's, but remembers vividly her grandfather working long hours into the night behind closed doors.

"My grandfather kept his secret to his death", she recalls. "No one in the family had any idea what he was doing. He had been working with the underground all through the war."

A movie, *The Heroes of Telemark*, roughly based on this event, was released in 1965. It was filmed on location in Norway with former members of the underground serving as technical advisors. The "VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever" rates the film with two-and-one-half bones.



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## REVEREND CHRISTIANSEN

*As the story goes...*

When he was a young man, Chris Christiansen was a sailor in Norway. Later he was ordained a Lutheran minister. In his senior years he returned to Gardner, Illinois. He couldn't explain why, but something possessed him to return where he had been the pastor many years before.

During the Second World War it became public news that Hitler was way ahead of us at developing the atomic bomb. The facility was located in Norway in the side of a cliff. Our military could not destroy it with conventional weapons. The Reverend felt he knew the specific territory well enough to provide valuable information that could help in destroying this threat to mankind. The military came to Gardner and on the kitchen floor of the Reverend's home, the territory maps were unrolled and discussed. Burt Parkinson, the editor of the Gardner Chronicle, was there and witnessed this entire event.

Several months later, some specialty trained British commandos successfully infiltrated the facility and destroyed forever Hitler's chances of world domination. The raid took place in February of 1943 and was called Operation Gunnerside.

In Gardner, all of this was kept quiet for it was top secret. Even the Reverend's family did not know what part he had played in this development.

In 1947 the Reverend died. In 1948 the family received letters from the British and King of Norway thanking him for his valuable assistance. Only then did the family learn what had happened five years earlier. And Burt Parkinson could now tell the story.

No one will ever know just how valuable the information from Reverend Christiansen was. But the letters of thanks certainly means the Reverend was at least helpful in saving the world.

Gardner now has a small memorial dedicated to Rev. Christiansen. It contains the full story and a copy of the official papers sent from the King of Norway. You can view it on the grounds of the historic two cell jail.

## THE NEWSPAPER

*As the story goes...*

Some of the old timers in Gardner remembered the Rev. Christiansen. He was the pastor of the Lutheran Church in Gardner. The story of his heroics was remembered, but some facts were foggy with time.

The story of this interesting man became public in 1948. This was a year after his death. A newspaper headline supposedly read: "He saved the world! Gardner man should be remembered." However, no copy of this paper could be found. Then one day someone remembered the story of a parishioner of the Lutheran church who had varnished a copy of this story onto the back of a plaque at the church. It was preserved to honor and remember, with pride, the pastor who was so loved and respected by his parishioners.

Was this some old folklore story, or did this newspaper clipping really exist? Lenore and I went to the church and met with the current pastor. Together we investigated the backs of the few items hanging on the walls. Much to our surprise, there it was, the preserved copy of the news story. We took it to the copy machine and made a couple of prints. We then rehung it, as it was, where it still hangs today.

(See Rev. Christiansen story)

### He saved the world! Gardner man should be remembered

Hitler was on the verge of conquering the world. France had fallen to the Blitzkrieg of German might. All Europe was under Nazi power.

England was all that stood between the Nazi's and the United States and the U.S. was not prepared militarily to stand against the might of an atomic bomb, for Hitler was ready to introduce the world to the atomic age. They had all the makings of a bomb and the U.S. was over a year away from making one.

The Nazis had selected Norway for their heavy water plant, for the heavy water is the heart of the bomb. Without it one could not be made. They built their production facility up under a mountain shelf way back among the Norwegian Fjords so they were protected from bombing by air and shelling from below. Battleships could not navigate the Norwegian Fjords.

The Nazis were now ready to conquer the world. In a little country town in northern Illinois, Gardner, surrounded by cornfields and mostly Scandinavian farmers, lived a Norwegian pastor of the local Lutheran Churches. He was in his 80's. He came to America when he was a young man, as a sailor on a sailing ship. He gave up the life of a sailor and gave his life to the Lord.

He was a Circuit rider in LaSalle, Grundy and Kendall Counties in the 1800s, riding horseback from town to town in all kinds of weather attending his flock.

After serving a pastorage in Ashland, WI for many years, he was called back to Gardner.

One Sunday morning he picked up the Chicago Tribune and read the article about Hitler and the Atomic bomb production in Norway. This was his home town. He spent his boyhood sailing these very fjords.

He knew how the warships could navigate the reefs and get close enough to bomb the Germans.

He contacted the U.S. Navy Department, who in turn notified the British. The Rev. drew them maps of the Fjords and with this information the British went in and demolished the heavy water plant and forever destroyed Hitler's chances of ever producing an atomic bomb.

The Reverend never told anyone about this, for we were now at war and this was top secret.

Unfortunately he passed away before the war was over, and his family never knew until a posthumous award was given him by the governments of the United States and Great Britain for meritorious duty in saving the world from destruction.

A statue should be erected in the Village of Gardner to Rev. Chris Christiansen, former pastor of the Gardner Lutheran and Gardner Prairie Lutheran Church, Grundy County and State of Illinois.