

Operation Freshman - Sapper Howell Bevan

Hi, I am writing to you to ask whether the Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum might be interested in a WWII project I am working on which involved a Welsh soldier from your area.

Sapper Howell Bevan, Service No. 2074196; Age 22; Royal Engineers, 9 (Airborne) Field Company, lost his life while taking part in a special forces raid, OPERATION FRESHMAN, in Norway in November 1942

Very few people have heard of **Operation Freshman** (see separate pdf document for more details and photographs) but at the time it was regarded as of the highest priority by the British Military authorities and was personally sanctioned by Prime Minister Churchill and Lord Mountbatten, Head of Combined Operations. It was also the first time that gliders were used in action by the British Army.

The aim of the operation was to destroy the Heavy Water facility at the Norsk Hydro factory in Rjukan, Norway, which the allies regarded as a key component in Nazi Germany's plans to develop a nuclear bomb.

The raid, which was initiated on the 19th November 1942 involved two Halifax bombers, each towing a Horsa Glider. On board the gliders were 30 specially trained Royal Engineers. Of the 48 men involved, only 7 returned safely to Scotland (the crew of Halifax A). The other participants were either killed when their aircraft crashed or were executed afterwards by the Germans as saboteurs.

Over the years there have been several publications describing the events of Operation Freshman, and the subsequent successful sabotage of the Vemork facility by British-trained Norwegian special forces soldiers (Operation Gunnerside). This action was immortalised in the Hollywood film *The Heroes of Telemark*, starring Kirk Douglas.

I am working on a new book about the raid and organising a series of commemorative events and site visits to mark the 80th Anniversary in 2022. One of the key aims is to invite the families of as many of the 48 servicemen as possible to the memorial events and I have been actively tracing and contacting relatives for just over a year. This has been done through articles published in local and regional newspapers, contact with local historical societies, local museums, and genealogical sites, e.g., [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). At this point in time, I have traced relatives of 31 of the 48 servicemen and would like to enlist your help to try to increase this number.

There were actually two Welsh soldiers involved in the raid, Sapper Howell Bevan and Sapper Thomas William White (from Gilfach Goch), but it is the former I am particularly hoping you can help with. I originally believed that Sapper Bevan came from the Crickhowell area and enlisted the help of the local historical society there. The results of their research are included in italics below.

Crickhowell District Archive Centre (CDAR) has made some enquiries drawing on the Ancestry website.

The 1911 Census shows that Howell's father lived at Cwmnantgam adjacent to Llanelly Hill near Brynmawr about 8 miles from Crickhowell. In 1913 the father married Elizabeth Morgan. At some

stage the family moved and the 1939 UK National Register shows the family resident at The Hill in Beaufort, their oldest son, a coal miner, was living at home.

CDAR has not found any evidence that the family had any direct connection with Crickhowell other than information on the births of the children referred to Crickhowell. This was because at the relevant time Crickhowell was an enumeration area and recorded births for several surrounding parishes including the areas covered by Brynmawr and Beaufort.

Since we believe the family connections were in the Brynmawr and Beaufort areas rather than Crickhowell there are two other organisations who may be able to assist with your enquiries. They are:-

-Brynmawr Historical Society www.brynmawrhistoricalsociety.org.uk

-Gwent Family History Society gwentfhs.org.uk

With regard to newspapers currently serving the Brynmawr/ Beaufort areas is covered by the South Wales Argus.

From this it appears that Sapper Bevan's family lived in the Brynmawr/Beaufort area. Therefore, I wondered whether anyone in the Historical Society knows anything more about the Bevan family, other than the basic details I have uncovered below. It would be wonderful if you are able to help in any way to help trace Howell's family so that any surviving relatives have the opportunity to be involved in the project and the 2022 commemoration events.

If the story is of interest, I am happy to freely share additional information, photographs and documents related to Operation Freshman with your members.

Sapper Howell Bevan, Service No. 2074196; Age 22; Royal Engineers, 9 (Airborne) Field Company. Son of Lewis & Elizabeth Bevan, Howell was born in 1920.

Howell's birth is registered in the Crickhowell District, Brecknockshire, Wales

Howell had four siblings: Glyn Bevan (1914-1992), Irvine Bevan (1921-1995), Elvira Bevan (1924-1994) and Roy Bevan (1928-1977).

In early 1941, Howell married Violet Irene Chapman, of Bermondsey, London. The marriage was registered in Bedwellty District, Monmouthshire, Wales.

Sapper Thomas William White; Service No. 1875800; Age 23, Royal Engineers, 9 (Airborne) Field Company.

Thomas was born on 24th March 1919, the 4th child of ten to Thomas and Ruth White (nee Morgan), of Gilfach Goch, Glamorgan, Wales.

I very much hope that the project may be of interest to your society and look forward to hearing from you.

Very best regards

Bruce

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