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THE BATTLE OF LUMSÅS

HOW THE DANISH NAVY SANK FOUR COTTAGES

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During their 27 years of service in the Danish Navy, the two Danish frigates of the Peder Skram class – the PEDER SKRAM and HERLUF TROLLE - only twice fired their main weapon, the Harpoon-surface-to-surface-missile. The first launch was in 1977, when the Harpoon-system was first made operational in the Danish Navy. This launch, of a so-called Blast Test Vehicle, proved successful and is regarded as the Danish Navy's entry into the missile age.

The second launch was, however, not planned. It happened on 6 September 1982 due to a technical glitch in the Harpoon-system and could have resulted in a catastrophe, since it meant that the PEDER SKRAM launched a fully armed missile on a flightpath, which would have brought it close to the Danish capital of Copenhagen. Luckily, the missile did not make it that far and detonated in an area of summer cottages on the northeastern part of Zealand.

The 6th of September 1982 was a quiet Monday. The PEDER SKRAM was on its way from Aarhus to a NATO-exercise in the Baltic. On board the frigate were, in addition to the crew, one of the fleet's leading missile experts, the 54-year-old Commander H. G. Olsen from the Danish Naval Material Command. His task was to conduct a routine test of the Harpoon-system while the ship transited from Aarhus to the Sound at a speed of 20 knots. A few parts had been replaced in the launcher and Olsen was tasked with

testing if everything worked as it was supposed to. The trial was a purely technical test of the system, one that Olsen had made many times during the last five years. As prescribed in the manual, Olsen concluded the test by pressing the "fire" button on the firing console. Pressing this button would normally launch a missile, but according to the manual, no launch was possible without the missile key, used to activate

the system, and the key was laying in the safe in the captain's cabin.

On this voyage, the PEDER SKRAM was only armed with four Harpoons and Olsen was running the test on one of the empty canisters, and as a further safety move he had removed the cables linking it to the computer in the Operations room. He was therefore quite surprised (if not shocked) when on pressing the fire button the action was followed by a "boom" – described as the sound of a freight train leaving the station – signaling the launch of a 628 kg missile. The time was 1128 local time.

Everybody aboard the PEDER SKRAM immediately knew what had happened. Most of the officers were in the officer's mess, preparing for lunch, and since the mess was located just a few metres from the launcher, everybody immediately knew what had happened. Why a missile had been launched was at first not important. First and foremost the captain of the frigate needed to make sure that none of his crew had been injured or killed. Luckily the two men working near the launcher had just decided to take a short break and left the area only moments before the missile took off.

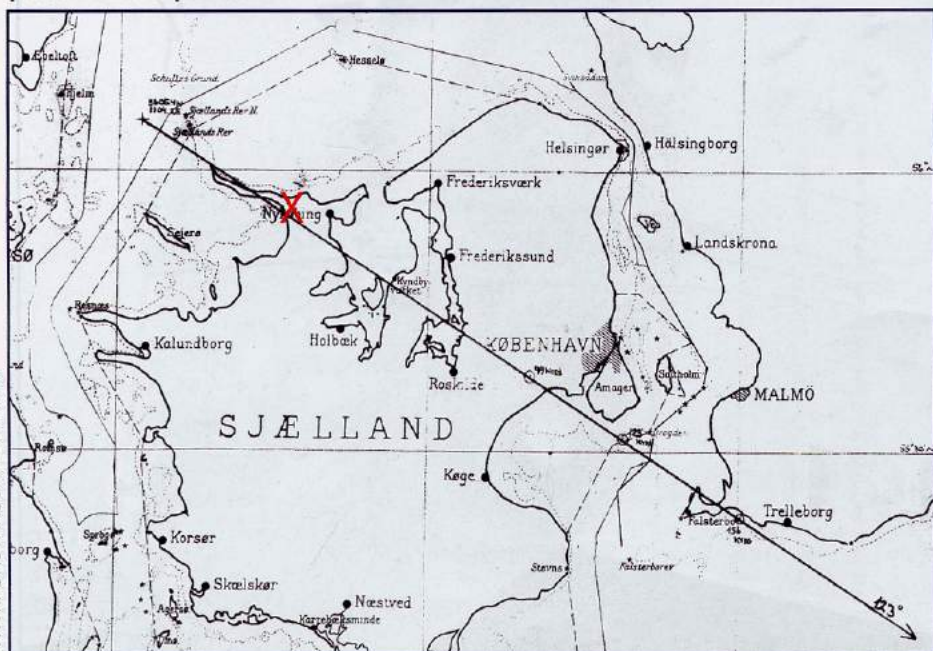
The next step was to alert the navy high command. A signal was quickly sent, telling of the launch and that the missile was now most likely on its way across Zealand. When, during the test, Olsen had been asked by the computer for the course for the missile, he had just hit the numbers 1-2-3. That meant that the missile was now on a course, which would take it all the way across Zealand towards the Køge Bay.

What followed were some very tense minutes. The Harpoon was a "fire and forget" missile, and there was therefore no way the PEDER SKRAM could stop or



The frigate PEDER SKRAM. Launched in 1965 as a part of the Danish-American arms agreement of May 1959. The ship was originally armed with 2 x 2 5-inch guns, but one of the two turrets was removed in 1977-79 and replaced with eight Harpoon-missiles. It had a crew of 178, a maximum speed of 30 knots and a displacement of 2400 tons.

Map showing the path the Harpoon-missile would have taken, had it not hit a tree near Lumsås. At the time of the firing, PEDER SKRAMS position was 56° 05'4" N - 11° 4'2" E, which was approximately 10 nautical miles (18½ km) from the tip of Sjællands Odde. Its speed was about 20 knots, and the course was 075°. The missile's course of 123° shown here meant that the missile could have made it all the way to the Køge Bay, had it not hit a treetop near Lumsås. The X shows the place of the explosion.





One of the destroyed summer cottages at Lumsås, 6. September 1982. Had the accident happened during a weekend in the summer, the houses would have been full of people on vacation. On a Monday in September 1982, most of the summer cottages were, luckily, empty.

alter the missiles path after the launch. All the crew and officers aboard the frigate could do was wait for news that the missile had hit something or run out of fuel and crashed somewhere.

The 1982-version of the Harpoon-missile was a sea skimming missile and was not meant for flying over land. That proved to be lucky for the Danish Navy, for after approximately 34 kilometres and four minutes of flying the missile reached land, where - unable to adjust for the hills and trees - it grazed a high tree, which made its 220 kilo warhead go off. The time was 1132Z.

The missile had detonated at a height of five metres in the middle of a summer cottage area. Here it completely destroyed four summer cottages, while more than 130 were damaged. Being a Monday out of the summer season, most of the cottages were unoccupied. An elderly couple, living in their summer cottage just 100 metres from the blast site, were hit by glass and debris, but suffered only minor cuts and shock. Other than that a small fire broke out at the blast site, but it was soon extinguished.

Initially people in the area thought that a passenger plane had crashed, but soon the navy told the police and fire fighters that the mess was of their making.

HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?

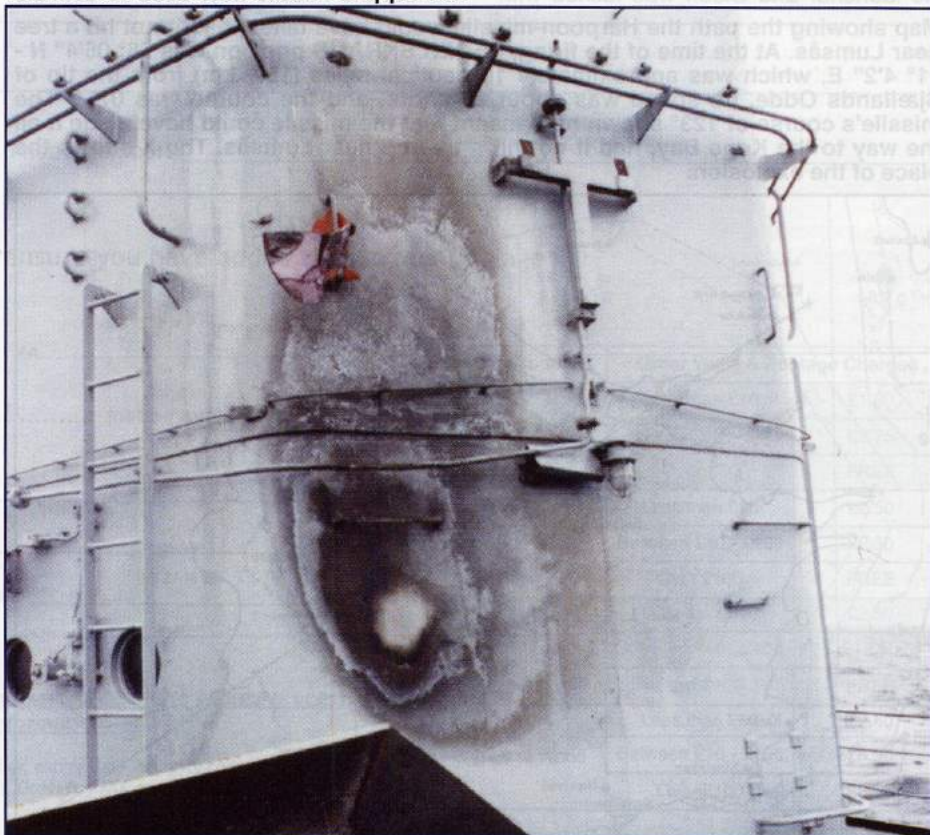
Having made sure that nobody had suffered serious injury, the navy soon began the task of figuring out how the launch - which was not supposed to be possible - had happened. When PEDER SKRAM, that same afternoon, arrived at Copenhagen Roads, the navy's judge advocate came aboard and while the frigate continued towards the NATO-exercise in the Baltic, he completed a number of interviews with the officers and crew. Already the next day he concluded that the accident was due to a technical problem with the Harpoon-system; even though the missile key was not turned, the system still had enough power to facilitate a launch. As mentioned, Olsen had told the computer that the missile was to fly on

a course of 123 degrees. What he had not noticed during the test was, that the frigate had made a turn, and the computer had then automatically changed from the empty launcher to another launcher that was better situated for a launch on course 123 degrees. The new launcher was, however, one containing a live missile. Olsen had not seen this but even if he had, it should not have been a problem, since the launch-key was still in the safe in the captain's cabin.

POLITICS

The judge advocate's conclusion was,

The launch left a clear mark on the bridge of the PEDER SKRAM. Luckily nobody was on deck when the launch happened.



however, soon attacked by the Danish naval material command, which on 16 September issued a statement that placed the responsibility for the launch squarely on Commander Olsens shoulders. What followed was two years of "politics" where the opposition in the Danish parliament used the case of Olsens mistake as a weapon against the sitting government. At the same time the tabloids ran a nasty campaign against Olsen, ridiculing him and the navy for the accident.

It would take almost two years and two parliamentary commissions before the case was closed. The first commission concluded that it was in fact Commander Olsen who was to blame while McDonnell Douglas was not responsible, and while the second commission agreed that Olsen had not done his job properly, the commission concluded that his punishment was only to be a reprimand. But by that time he felt betrayed by the navy and left the naval material command soon after.

Even though the Danish government had concluded that the responsibility was all Olsens, the Danish government subsequently filed an action for damages against McDonnell Douglas. The case was settled out of court, where McDonnell Douglas agreed to pay the Danish government a so-called goodwill compensation, which corresponded to the amount that the navy had used cleaning the crash site and damages to the owners of the summer cottages.

The PEDER SKRAM remained in commission in the Danish Navy until January 1988, and is today a popular museum in Copenhagen.

For more about this see <http://www.pederskram.dk>. For more pictures of PEDER SKRAM and this episode visit www.forsvarsgalleriet.dk.