

# “THE FIRST AMERICAN OFFICIAL KILLED IN THIS WAR”

ARMY CAPTAIN ROBERT M. LOSEY, AMERICA’S FIRST MILITARY CASUALTY IN  
WORLD WAR II, WOULD NOT BE ITS LAST.

BY J. MICHAEL CLEVERLEY

For many in Europe, the eight quiet winter months following Britain’s and France’s declaration of war against Germany may have seemed like a “phony war.” But there was nothing phony about it in Northern Europe. At the end of November 1939, less than three months after the German invasion of Poland, Stalin invaded Finland. The ensuing 90-day Winter War was a debacle for the invading Soviet columns, as their armor bogged down in the snow and ice of Finland’s deep sub-Arctic forests and the Red Army’s ill-prepared troops died or were killed by the hundreds of thousands. Khrushchev numbered Soviet casualties at a million. Eventually, the two sides agreed to a cease-fire, in March 1940.

But that was just the beginning of World War II in the north as the fighting moved from Finland’s eastern borders to the other edge of Scandinavia. Two weeks before the Finnish-Soviet truce took force at noon on March 13, 1940, Hitler began preparations for the invasion of Norway. On April 5, a German armada carrying 10,000 men quietly moved out of Germany’s northern ports to conquer Finland’s neighbor.

That same day, officials from the Norwegian Foreign Office received an engraved invitation from the German legation to see a “peace film.” The invitation read, “full dress and orders to be worn.” Most of the ministry’s bureau chiefs attended in white tie attire, curious to see what the Germans had to show. Instead of a peace film, however, they watched a terrifying documentary on the bombing of Warsaw. Shocked, the audience listened while the German minister (chief of mission)

explained that the film was intended to illustrate what might happen to any country resisting Nazi attempts “to defend Germany from England.”

Four days later, on April 9, 1940, German troops simultaneously took Denmark and seized the Norwegian centers of Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Narvik. That night, both the French and British ministers called the U.S. chief of mission in Oslo, Florence Harriman, urgently requesting her to take responsibility for their facilities as they rushed to escape.

The 69-year-old Florence Jaffray Harriman had been head of the American Mission to Norway since 1937. She was only the second woman in American diplomatic history to be appointed to ministerial rank, after Ruth Bryan Rohde. “Daisy,” as Florence Harriman was known to her friends, was the widow of New York banker J. Borden Harriman and had been active in Democratic Party politics since the presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

Being a “woman diplomat,” as *Newsweek* titled its June 2, 1941, profile of her, was still very much a novelty, but it was hardly intimidating to Harriman. When Norwegian Queen Maud asked her, “How does it feel to be a minister, when you are a woman?” Florence Harriman responded, “Very nice, indeed, when I remember that I am a minister.”

Characteristically, Harriman responded swiftly to the crisis. When her attempts to get through to Washington were blocked by local telephone operators who spoke with “more German than Norwegian accents,” as she put it, she agreed to the requests on her own authority.

Overnight, embassy families began to congregate at her residence. Harriman



*Captain Losey and Amb.  
Harriman the day before he  
was killed.*

described the situation in her 1941 memoir, *Mission to the North*, as follows: "Wives and children of the staff had been arriving so thick and fast that between five and six o'clock, 25 of us had sat down to breakfast." Finally, instructions arrived from Washington that an evacuation of the entire American legation was to proceed immediately.

### **The Journey to Stockholm**

Nearly simultaneously with the German attack on Norway, orders from Washington arrived in the defense attaché's office at the American Mission in Helsinki that Army Major Frank Hayne and Army Captain Robert Losey, his assistant, were to leave immediately for Stockholm. They were designated "attachés to Norway and Sweden" to keep watch on the war in Scandinavia. With the Defense Attaché office in Oslo literally under siege, they were to cover both countries from Stockholm.

Hayne had been in Helsinki for some time, reporting back to Washington on the ebbs and flows of the Winter War. Losey had arrived in Finland directly from Washington in the middle of February. A young and brilliant officer, Losey had taken two master's degrees from the California Institute of Technology while serving as a meteorological officer at March Field in California. The Iowa-born son of a traveling preacher, he had lived in several parts of the U.S. before attending West Point, where he fulfilled his dream to become a commissioned army flyer.

Both officers hurriedly departed for Sweden. When they arrived in Stockholm, Hayne went to work in the defense attaché's office at the embassy. Losey, however, was ordered at once to Norway to assist Ambassador Harriman as she managed the evacuation of American staff and dependents from Embassy Oslo. Because Washington had also instructed her to keep close contact with the Norwegian royal family, Harriman divided the party so that she would be near the

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*This article is excerpted from his book, Lauri Törni, Syntynyt Sotilas, a biography of Finnish and American war hero Larry Thorne, which was published by Finnish publisher Otava in October. The book will come out in English under the title A Scent of Glory this month.*

Norwegian government and royal family. Under the guidance of the Oslo legation's naval attaché, Lt. Commander Ole Hagen, 17 family members, wives and children, had already departed Oslo for the Swedish frontier to the northeast on April 9, the first day of the invasion.

When Losey caught up with Harriman, a few days later, she was in central Sweden, just over the Norwegian-Swedish border. She later wrote, "I ran into Captain Losey on the way to breakfast. I find I have noted in my diary, 'The new military attaché is a nice, spare young man in a flying corps uniform, and seems in every way acceptable.'" (See photo on p. 66.) They spent the day driving across the frigid mountains and by 9 p.m. reached Särna, where they linked up with the French and British legations from Oslo.

By Sunday, April 14, Harriman had still made no contact with the convoy carrying the remainder of the legation families. Fearing they were lost, Capt. Losey told her over lunch that he wanted to press on back to Norway to locate the Hagen party. Harriman agreed and sent him with her own vehicle and driver. They draped the car with a large American flag strung across the top in hopes that prowling German planes would spare the vehicle of a still neutral power. A cable from Stockholm reached the State Department on April 16, 1940, stating that Harriman "... now knows whereabouts of Norwegian government across Swedish border. The roads are open and when Losey returns to her at Salen she will proceed with him to [the] government."

Losey returned that very day, having unsuccessfully tried to locate the missing party. Harriman sent him driving all night to Stockholm to make a personal report to the embassy there. He returned to Salen the following night. Harriman and Losey discussed making a second trip to locate the remaining members of the legation staff, and initially disagreed over whether Harriman should accompany the search mission or Losey should go alone. "You might be bombed," he argued; "the Germans are strafing the roads."

"But so might you," Harriman replied, "and that would be the worse for you are young and have your life before you, while I have had a wonderful life and nearly all of it behind me."

Losey would have none of it. "I certainly don't want to be killed," he said lightly, "but your death would be the more serious as it might involve our country in all kinds of trouble, where with a military attaché ..." he went on, and finally convinced her. Harriman recalled, "I hated to see him go,

## ***Losey traveled from Finland to Norway to assist Harriman as she managed the evacuation of American staff and dependents from Embassy Oslo.***

AN INVITATION FOR  
**SUMMER  
FICTION**

Once again the *Foreign Service Journal* is seeking works of fiction of up to 3,000 words for its annual summer fiction issue. Story lines or characters involving the Foreign Service are preferred, but not required. The top stories, selected by the *Journal's* Editorial Board, will be published in the July/August issue and on the *Journal's* Web site. The writer of each story will receive an honorarium of \$250.

All stories must be previously unpublished. Submissions should be unsigned and accompanied by a cover sheet with author's name, address, telephone numbers and e-mail address.

**Deadline is April 1.  
No fooling.**

Please send submissions to the attention of Mikkela Thompson, Business Manager, preferably by e-mail at [thompsonm@afsa.org](mailto:thompsonm@afsa.org). Stories will also be accepted by fax at (202) 338-8244, or by mail: *Foreign Service Journal*, 2101 E St., NW, Washington, D.C., 20037

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*A young and brilliant officer, Losey earned two master's degrees at the California Institute of Technology and attended West Point.*

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but when he impressed on me that 'our first job now must be getting those women out,' I knew he was right." She wrote in her diary, "I will cheer when they return."

While Losey drove west over a mountain road from Sweden back into Norway, the Hagen party moved from the Norwegian coast into the barren, snow-covered Dovre Mountains by car, bus and sled. They eventually traveled through a rail intersection, named Dombas, before reaching safety in Fjällnäs, Sweden. When Losey reached Dombas the party had already passed through.

**"Cut Off — and For What?"**

Dombas, a strategic intersection along Norway's roads and rail network, was high on the German Luftwaffe's list of targets. On Sunday, April 21, while Losey was still in Dombas, the Luftwaffe attacked. He and Amb. Harriman's chauffeur had loaded the flag-draped car onto a train, and as the bombers arrived overhead, the passengers all ran for a railway tunnel to escape the strafing and bombing. Swooping down on the junction, German bombers dropped their deadly payloads, aiming to destroy the rail facilities. Losey, too, rushed to shelter. But as an air officer he lingered about 30 feet inside the entrance to the rail

tunnel, making observations on the air battle above him. Suddenly, a bomb exploded into the earth close by, showering everything around with deadly fragments. One piece shot into the tunnel straight for Losey. It sank deeply into his chest, penetrating his heart.

That same day an urgent telegram arrived at the American legation in Stockholm. It read: "American Military Attaché Captain Losey was killed by German bomber plane at Dombas today. Inform Mrs. Harriman. He will be sent tomorrow, Monday, via Roros to Fjällnäs where instructions from legation are awaited." Harriman received a phone call from an aide telling her the news. "Cut off — and for what?" she sadly wrote. Instructions were sent to Lt. Commander Hagen to take delivery of the body in Fjällnäs.

Following a memorial service in Sweden for Losey, Florence Harriman wrote, "All our hearts ached for the young wife in California who must go on without him. She would be hearing [war correspondent Arthur] Menken on the radio to America, telling of the service; she would read the beautiful tributes to him in the American press; she would not have the picture of the friends of his last winter, who mourned him in the north." Captain Robert Losey's wife, Kay, collapsed when news of his death reached her at her home in Hollywood, California.

"The death of Captain Losey, who is the first American official to be killed in this war, was reported today to Frederick A. Sterling, United States Minister to Stockholm," recorded the *New York Times* on its front page on April 23, 1940. Captain Robert M. Losey, America's first military casualty in World War II, would not be its last.

The citizens of Dombas, Norway erected a monument in Losey's honor in 1987. ■