



In 1936, a school group from south London went on a hike in the Black Forest. Despite the heroic rescue attempts of German villagers, five boys died. Eighty years on, locals are still asking how it happened

by

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**T**he lilac was in full bloom when a group of boys from the Strand school in Brixton and Kenneth Keast, their 27-year-old master, left Freiburg for the opening hike of their 10-day Easter trekking tour in the southern Black Forest. It was the morning of 17 April 1936, as they set off for the village of Todtnauberg, over 15 miles away, across the summit of the Schauinsland mountain. By the time they emerged from a wood about three hours later, snow was falling steadily but they were full of spring-time optimism. The boys broke ranks to throw snowballs.

Keast noted that some of his boys - who wore shorts, mackintoshes, and even sandals, rather than appropriate gear for hiking through snowy mountains - were

beginning to find the going tough. With the snowfall worsening, he put a stop to their skylarking and urged them to concentrate on the path ahead.

When they had set out from their youth hostel that morning, Keast had been warned that the snow would make his planned route hazardous. Even without snow, the locals considered it a challenge. The weather map for 17 April that hung in the hostel gave clear indication that conditions were going to turn. The previous day, the tourist office had warned Keast about the approaching storm, to which his response was: "The English are used to sudden changes in the weather." The 13-year-old Ken Osborne, who had already written his first postcard home, wrote in his small black notebook: "Had breakfast. Left Freiburg about nine o'clock. It was snowing and we lost our way."

With snow now falling heavily, and having lost the path and circled back on themselves, they were soon behind schedule. Keast stopped at an inn to ask for directions. The landlady advised him that the paths and signposts would be buried in snow, at which the schoolmaster shrugged and said they would "brush it off".

By now they were forced to kick their way through the snow. On an open hillside, they met two woodcutters heading home because they could not continue their work. They advised Keast to take a path to the left of the valley. At around 3.15pm, they passed the local postman, Otto Steiert, who urgently warned Keast against continuing the ascent. Steiert offered to help the party return to Freiburg, or to bring them to the shelter of the miners' hostel, where they would have found beds and food. Keast declined.

He had not yet started to panic, but the slippery, slow-going conditions prompted the teacher to stop and question each boy as to how he felt. Some complained of cold. But Keast decided that to go back would be more perilous than continuing towards the nearby village of Hofgrund, where he hoped to find shelter in a hotel or peasant's house. Unfortunately, the map Keast had received from the School Travel Service in London, which had organised the trip, had a scale of 1:100,000, meaning major routes were shown, but not the gradients or the small pathways. This meant he failed to realise that between them and the village rose the steepest and most dramatic ridge of the Schauinsland. As a result the boys, now weary, cold and wet, took a gruelling route up the Kappler Wand, a 600-metre, 70% gradient face.

The first boy to collapse was Jack Alexander Eaton, the school's 14-year-old boxing champion. He was given an orange and a piece of cake and told to "buck up".

When they left the protection of the rock and came out on to the ridge, the bedraggled group was exposed to the force of the wind. Had they moved eastwards into the wind, they would have arrived at the safety of the summit station within less than a mile. Instead they were pushed westwards and they quickly became disoriented. By now Eaton and two of the youngest boys had to be carried. Three more boys were in great difficulty.

Hofgrund was a typical Black Forest village of just 300 inhabitants, consisting of one inn, a church and a scattering of farmhouses with steeply pitched slate roofs, where animals and humans shared living quarters over the long winters. On that bleak April

evening, the 7pm chimes of Hofsgrund's church bells were carried on the wind. Keast sent two of the older boys to follow the direction of the bells down the hill, leaving most of the others on the slopes trying desperately to revive those who had collapsed.

It took about an hour for the two boys to reach a farmstead on the outskirts of Hofsgrund. Like most villagers, Eugen Schweizer had spent the day at home, and was bracing himself to go out to meet the weekly bread delivery when two boys, bareheaded and dressed in short trousers, knocked on the door, and spluttered in broken German: "*Zwei Mann, krank am Berg*" (Two men sick on the mountain).

Schweizer summoned a party of rescuers, hammering on the window of the Gasthaus zum Hof, the village inn where he had seen that lanterns were burning and people were playing cards. They put on skis and headed out towards the road. By now the trekking group was strewn across a wide stretch of terrain. Some of those who had collapsed were almost completely covered in snow. Some of the boys were making their way down the hill, and Schweizer stumbled across two lying motionless in the snow. Hermann Lorenz, the grocer, brought one unconscious boy into his shop, while a farmer, Reinhold Gutmann, carried the other on his back to a nearby farmhouse. The men had planned to use their skis like stretchers and lie the exhausted boys on them, but the snow proved too deep and powdery. Instead they fetched a sledge on which to drag them down. Stanley Lyons, who had collapsed about 10 yards from the inn, was probably already dead, but the rescuers tried to revive him.

Schweizer, along with four other local farmers, headed further up the mountain, carrying one carbide lamp between them. They found the schoolmaster Keast next to two other unconscious boys. In German, Keast told them the size of the group. After climbing alone up the mountain for a full 45 minutes, Hubert Wissler, one of the first to have heeded the cries for help, found three boys suffering from exposure. The rescue effort lasted until well after 11pm. The rescuers' clothes were soaked from the snow, their bodies drenched in sweat.

A doctor holidaying nearby was summoned to attend to the most serious cases. The rest of the boys were beaten with brooms to shake off the snow and get their circulation going, before being allowed anywhere near the huge woodburning stove. They were wrapped in blankets and given food and coffee before being put to bed. In spite of these efforts, by the end of the evening, four of the boys were dead: Francis Bourdillon, 12, Peter Ellercamp, 13, Lyons, 14, and Eaton, who was two months away from his 15th birthday. Arthur Roberts and Roy Witham, both 14, were still dangerously ill.

Roberts and Witham were taken to the university hospital in Freiburg the next day, but Witham died without regaining consciousness. The bodies of the dead boys were placed in the cellar of the Hofsgrund village hall, and later transported to Freiburg and laid in the chapel of rest at the main cemetery. The survivors were taken by sledge to a nearby village, where the road was clear enough for them to travel by omnibus to Freiburg, where they had medical checks. So dazed were the survivors, none of them had taken in the gravity of what had happened. They didn't understand until two days later that five of their school friends were dead, and one was fighting

for his life. Nor could they have known that they would become embroiled in a Nazi propaganda coup of spectacular proportions.

**M**ost Britons learned of the deaths on Schauinsland from the lunchtime editions of the next day's papers. The press called it the "Black Forest tragedy", and over the following days the papers were full of accounts of "boys' blizzard battle", and how they had been "saved by the church bells", the "master's efforts to save his boys", and the Hofsgrunder skiers' "rescue dash".

The boys were instructed to write to their parents and reassure them. Ken Osborne sent a postcard home to Tooting, depicting a snow-covered landscape, on which he wrote: "Dear Mum ... as we got lost, it might be in the papers and so we have been told to write and say I am quite safe."

Relations between Britain and Germany had become increasingly tense in the three years since Hitler's rise to power. Just days before, Britain had held a ceremonial funeral procession for Leopold von Hoesch, the German ambassador to Britain, who had been viewed as one of the best hopes of maintaining peaceful Anglo-German relations. His coffin, draped in a swastika, was taken down the Mall accompanied by British guardsmen and onlookers giving the Nazi salute. A piper played a lament as it was loaded on to a warship at Dover.

It was quickly perceived in Germany that political capital could be made from the Black Forest tragedy. Baldur von Schirach, the leader of the Hitler Youth movement, telegraphed Britain's ambassador to Germany, informing him that a wreath from the "German Youth" would be placed on each of the boys' coffins to signal their "heartfelt and deep sympathy", and that a sentinel of Hitler Youth from the region would stand guard over them until transport to their homeland could be arranged.

Newspapers in Germany and Britain carried photographs on their front pages of uniformed Freiburg Hitler Youth members keeping a vigil over the coffins at the city's main cemetery, against a backdrop of swastikas alongside union jacks. Thousands of Freiburgers came to pay their respects, in the presence of Keast, seven of the older boys, and British diplomats. Friedhelm Kemper, the local Hitler Youth leader, gave a speech in which he talked of the "will of understanding and peace" between the German and English "comrades". Fifteen of the younger boys had, meanwhile, been left in the care of older Hitler Youth members who entertained them with a game of football and took them for a ride on an omnibus.

The Monday was Hitler's birthday, offering another opportunity for a procession. Local dignitaries paraded to the main railway station. A guard of honour, hundreds-strong, was formed by the various units of the Hitler Youth, its female equivalent, the Union of German Girls, as well as hundreds of Freiburg schoolchildren, who lined the route and watched as the coffins were loaded on to a train. The surviving boys who clambered on board two separate trains were accompanied by 20 members of the Hitler Youth as it made its way through Germany and up to the border at Aachen.

By now the Hitler Youth were being credited with helping in the rescue. Die Volksgugend, the Baden branch of the Hitler Youth's own newspaper, praised its

members for their participation. A press release issued by the Reich's Youth Press Service stated the dead had "fallen in battle so as to further the open, honest friendship between nations". The Lord Mayor of Freiburg, Franz Kerber, went so far as to write to the father of one of the deceased that the boys had been "sacrificed" so as to become "standard bearers for the important aspects of understanding between our two great nations".

Although not a Nazi stronghold, Freiburg had its own reasons for playing along with Berlin's propaganda offensive. Local officials were painfully aware that the disaster could harm the tourism industry in the Black Forest region, which was extremely popular with British tourists and, in particular, school parties.

The campaign certainly caught the attention of many ordinary Germans, thousands of whom lined the 330-mile stretch via Frankfurt to the Belgian border to pay their respects. Many threw sweets to the English boys, who leaned out of the train windows to marvel at the spectacle. Several of their parents wrote personal letters to Hitler, thanking him for the grand send-off, and for the German state railways' waiving of the £60 fee each family should have been charged for the conveyance of their sons' coffins.

**T**he families anxiously waiting in London were informed by telegram on 21 April that their boys would arrive at Victoria station at 4.20 that afternoon. "Great crowds to see us arrive," Ken Osborne wrote on the last page of his *Diary of a German Trip*, noting that he had been interviewed by a reporter from the tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Sketch*, on the train.

The day after the survivors' return, a special railway van that had been adapted to resemble a small chapel and attached to the mail train from Harwich, arrived in London at 8.21am. It contained the bodies of the dead boys, in coffins of Black Forest timber - "from the very woods in which they perished", as one reporter put it. They were met by relatives and schoolmates as well as officials from the education department, all of whom removed their hats and stood silent on the platform of Liverpool Street station. So many people gathered on the upper walkways overlooking the platform that extra police had to be called in to control the crowds.

When the van door was opened, the boys' parents stepped inside to see the coffins of their sons draped with union jacks, each bearing a white slip of paper on which their name was written. The platform was carpeted with floral tributes, including huge evergreen and pine cone wreaths from the Black Forest, tied with scarlet and white ribbons and bearing the swastika, with the inscription: "To our English comrades". There were wreaths from Adolf Hitler and the British ambassador.

Keast remained in Germany for several more days as a guest of the Hitler Youth. The *Daily Sketch* ran a photograph of him in an open-top car, dressed in a cloth cap and scarf, "out for a drive in Freiburg" with the local leader of the Hitler Youth and a representative of the Gestapo, the Nazi state police. He addressed his thanks to the Hofsgrunder in a letter, published in a German newspaper, stating: "We can never forget the superhuman efforts of the people of Hofsgrund who did everything to bring us to safety ... All this has brought nearer to us the country which previously had been estranged."

Once he finally returned to London, Keast escaped the scrum of reporters outside his parents' house, by heading to Bournemouth, where he met a fellow teacher, Mary Beaumont Medd, with whom he was evidently in love. In a letter to her on 24 April from the Solent Cliffs hotel, he complained of being unable to sleep but thanked her for restoring him "to whatever sanity I can hope to approach".

In a bizarre admission for a man to make less than a week after the deaths of the boys in his care, he added: "And after I lay down last night I could not help saying ... that in spite of everything, I had had the happiest day of my life."

One by one over the following days, the dead boys were buried in various London cemeteries, in Streatham, Woking and East Ham. Jack Alexander Eaton's funeral on the afternoon of Friday 1 May, in Streatham, was attended by a thousand mourners. The hearse was drawn by six horses, with boys from the school, including some of the survivors, forming a guard of honour. Floral tributes from the Hitler Youth and Adolf Hitler were on prominent display.

**J**ack Eaton described his 14-year-old son as being "all that I myself wanted to be". Eaton had built up a successful construction business in south London, and was proud of his status as a self-made man. The day after the disaster, he was already making his way to Freiburg to piece together what had led to the death of his only son.

Eaton flew to Cologne and took the train to Freiburg to trace the route the boys had taken, accompanied by a solicitor and an interpreter. He interviewed the rescuers, and spoke to other witnesses who told him they had repeatedly warned the party to turn back. He found the 1:100,000 map Keast had used - which was by now in the keeping of Freiburg's public prosecutor.

Eaton vowed he would not rest until the authorities launched a public inquiry into the disaster. In a 10-page report of his own investigation entitled *Black Forest Tragedy - The Truth*, which he distributed to newspapers, politicians and every family involved, he wrote: "I am determined to fight on to the bitter end" on behalf of his boy who "was everything to me" as well as for the other "little heroes who should have been with us today and for many years to come." The report was illustrated with a photograph of Jack in his cricket whites and poised with a bat, a quiff framing his smiling face.

Eaton's detailed reconstruction of the school trip noted that, had it not been for the church bells of Hofsgrund, "they would probably all have perished". He concluded that Keast - a popular teacher of German and sport, who had been head boy at the Strand school before going on to Cambridge - was "certainly not fit to take 27 boys from the school to Clapham Common, let alone on such a journey to a foreign country". He claimed it was Keast's "open dislike" of Germans that had probably led him to feel it would have been "degrading for him to accept a German's word of advice".

The idea of erecting a memorial to the events of 17 April were first raised publicly around a month later in the official Nazi newspaper the *Alemannen*, as well as in the British press. The people of Hofsgrund had mooted the idea early on, communicating

to Freiburg's tourism director their desire for an inscription carved into the rock, which would have recalled the incident and acknowledged that without the locals' help, many more would have died. After much vacillating, the Hitler Youth took over management of the project.

Von Schirach, head of the local Hitler Youth, was fully behind the idea. But he had far grander plans, and commissioned a renowned professor of art, Hermann Alker, to come up with an ambitious design. Schirach stressed it was something in which the Führer himself was taking a personal interest.

The Engländerdenkmal - a towering gateway made up of two huge upright stones of Black Forest granite inscribed with the names of the boys, and a third stone linking them on top and decked with the Nazi eagle and a swastika, was finally completed in the summer of 1938. It stood on the mountainside, 800m above the village of Hofsgrund.

The memorial was due to be inaugurated on 12 October, in the presence of a member of the British royal family, the head of the Scout movement, Sir Robert Baden-Powell, and the British ambassador, in a ceremony which once again was supposed to affirm the German-British friendship. The inscription concluded: "The youth of Adolf Hitler honours the memory of these English sporting comrades with this memorial."

Yet any political interest there had been in the memorial promptly evaporated in the wake of the Munich Agreement of September 1938, which controversially gave Hitler control of the Sudetenland. After Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, there were repeated initiatives to tear it down. While that did not happen, it was never inaugurated.

By the first anniversary of his son's death, Jack Eaton had commissioned a Freiburg sculptor to make a separate memorial to his son, which in itself expressed the divide that by now existed between him and the other bereaved parents and the school, over who was to blame.

That memorial - a simple, grey Black Forest granite cross resembling a gravestone, and paid for by the villagers - was unveiled by Eaton on Whit Sunday 1937, in the presence of the locals. It sits on the hillside on the very spot where Jack, Ellercamp and Lyons died. The sculpture is around 500 metres away from the main monument, and just a fraction of its size, but in its simplicity and the way it is positioned on the slope towards the village, it captures the drama of that day, and the boys' agonising final journey.

Eaton had wanted the inscription to conclude with the line: "Their teacher failed them in the hour of trial." But the German authorities forbade the last sentence. A blank space shows where it would have been inserted. In the entrance to the village church, the parents also erected their own memorial, the only one in which the villagers are thanked for coming to the schoolboys' aid.

he correspondence that passed between the Foreign Office in London and authorities and prosecutors in Germany in the days immediately after the accident reflects how neither side had any interest, in the

**T** context of such a delicate political climate, in damaging amicable relations. This meant that misgivings expressed by Eaton and by Freiburg's public prosecutor were ignored.

Keast, described as being in mental and physical shock, had been questioned on 20 April by Dr Weiss, Freiburg's state prosecutor, in an interview that Weiss himself later admitted had been inadequate. Although Keast admitted the weather had been poor when the party set out, and told of how he had stopped to ask people the way, he made no mention whatsoever of the several warnings they had given him.

On 27 April, 10 days after the disaster, Robert Smallbones, the British consulate general in Frankfurt, wrote to the Foreign Office to say that certain misgivings about Keast's conduct on the tour deserved to be raised. The disaster, he said, would "probably have been avoided" had Keast been in touch in advance with the Hitler Youth who, he had been assured, would have been happy to accompany the group and could have helped lead them safely out of the blizzard. He recommended that any future British school trips to the Black Forest should reach out to the movement. Smallbones also condemned the inadequate way the boys had been dressed.

Yet Smallbones's misgivings got short shrift from the Foreign Office. A letter from Sir Geoffrey Allchin, the head of its consular department, to his superiors, outlined the extreme German sensitivities over the case. A French radio station had already erroneously accused the German authorities of being "to blame for the disaster" and the German government, he said, was keen to ensure no official or citizen was held in any way culpable. In a decision that effectively put the lid on any further investigation, Allchin added that Anthony Eden, the foreign minister - who had already written to the citizens of Hofsgrund and Freiburg to express the "gratitude of the people of London" - was of the opinion that "in these circumstances ... no great importance, if any, should be attached to the present allegations against Mr Keast".

And with that, for the Foreign Office at least, apart from a brief exchange over the costs and details of a memorial, the case was effectively closed.

Not that an inquiry was energetically sought by anyone apart from Jack Eaton. It would have put both the Strand school and the London County council (LCC) in the awkward position of having to defend themselves over how inadequately planned the trip was, including why approval had been given to one teacher taking charge of 27 boys. Publicly at least, Keast's school and the LCC appeared to support him. At a special two-day meeting held by the education committee at County Hall in May 1936, Eaton had railed at Keast and the Strand school's headmaster, Leonard Dawe, as well as the older boys, who he accused of failing to help the younger ones: "Damn you! ... and a thousand times damn the pair of you cowards and those you are sheltering."

But the committee concluded that "any charges of ... any impropriety" against Keast were withdrawn. It offered only the vaguest recommendations that the arrangements for future tours "should be most carefully and exhaustively reviewed" in the hope of "rendering impossible, so far as lies in human power, any recurrence of such a tragedy".

But Keast's life would continue to be haunted for years to come by Jack Eaton. Nor did the education authorities let him off the hook quite so lightly as had at first appeared.

In letters written to Mary Beaumont Medd, Keast relayed details of his subsequent dispute with the LCC's education officer, EM Rich, which would suggest that behind closed doors, Keast's actions were viewed far more critically than anyone ever admitted either to the parents or to the public. Keast wrote of how Rich had "summoned" him and "quite bluntly" told him that he should not attempt to go ahead with a school skiing trip to Austria that he was planning eight months on from the Black Forest incident. The decision followed threats made to the school by Eaton, who had confronted Keast at the school gates and told him he would not allow the Austria trip to go ahead. Keast was forced to write to all the parents whose children were due to accompany him, to tell them the trip was off.

The defeat left him feeling "utterly finished and aimless ... It makes me wonder how I shall stand up to the next war, if it does come," Keast confided in Medd. "I feel that I, and the school, and the LCC are completely governed by the man [Eaton], just as the national government ... seemed under the thralldom of Mussolini's gangsterdom a year ago."

In addition to stalking Keast at the school, Eaton had begun hounding him at his parents' house, where he lived, and Keast was close to making a criminal complaint. "If I should be accosted by Eaton this weekend ... I shall almost certainly assault him, and I believe if I murdered him it really would be the best end to this miserable business," he wrote.

Eaton's rage was even felt by those unrelated to the Black Forest incident. Peter Tyreman, a former pupil of the Strand school, now resident in Canada, vividly recalled almost 80 years later, how Eaton approached him on a street near the school "and asked me how I dared to wear the uniform of the school which killed his son".

Eaton also wrote a postcard in red ink to his local MP, stating "as one army war veteran to another I implore you to see that Justice is Done. Keast is a criminal and should be tried as such." Outside his own business, Eaton erected a plaque stating: "I charge Keast with my son's death."

On what would have been his son's 16th birthday, 16 June 1937, Eaton, wearing a black armband, appeared at the south western police court where he was bound over for abusive words and behaviour, including leaving wreaths on Keast's doorstep, and standing outside it shouting: "My son has been murdered!"

The court heard how the Eatons had moved from their Clapham Park house after their son's death because it was too full of memories. They also wanted to be closer to Streatham Park cemetery where their boy was buried, a marble carving of his head and shoulders standing on a 5ft 4in tall headstone - the same height as Jack - marking his grave. Their new home in Crown Lane Gardens was turned into a shrine to their son, full of his schoolboy trophies and pictures of him in his cricket gear and boxing kit.

**O**n the morning of the 80th anniversary of the Black Forest tragedy, on 17 April 2016, in the Gasthaus zum Hof, where the boys had spent the night after their rescue, a group of villagers sat around discussing the minutiae of the events of 1936. They pored over a map and retraced with their fingertips the route the English boys had taken. Over coffee they discussed everything from what time they had reached specific landmarks, to how thick the snow had been and where the snowball fight took place.

For years, said Michael Lorenz, an industrial chemist, and grandson of one of the brothers involved in the rescue operation, villagers had mulled over what happened. "To this day we're still amazed that those children were sent out so lightly clad. Nobody here sends their kids outside without anything on their heads in April," he said. Mariele Loy, the village poet laureate, who has retraced the boys' route herself many times, was flummoxed as to how Keast could have relied on such an inadequate map.

For Bernd Hainmüller, it was both his sense of responsibility as a teacher and his curiosity as a historian that gave him the urge to delve deeper for the truth. "As a teacher I would not have been able to live with myself if that had happened to me," he said, on a walk to the Engländerdenkmal, or Monument to the English, the bombastic stone structure that still overlooks Hofsgrund. Hail stones were bouncing off the granite and mountain streams bubbled close by. "I'd surely have thrown it in after that."

Hainmüller has spent more than a decade researching the disaster, popularly referred to locally as the *Engländer Unglück* (Englishmen's misadventure). A warm and cheerful 68-year-old, he was researching a book on the Hitler Youth movement in Freiburg when he stumbled across the monument, prompting him to ask questions about its origins. "I was struck by the fact there is only one version of this story that has been kept alive over the decades," he said. "And that is the legend of unavoidable death in a freak blizzard."

He was very moved by the Hofsgrunders' actions, and the fact they were largely missing from the history of the rescue. But the current refugee crisis has brought present-day concerns to his door. For the past 10 months, Hainmüller and his wife Hilltrud, also a retired teacher, have devoted their time to teaching German to classes full of Iraqi Kurds, Syrian Yazidis, Afghans and Eritreans. "In a way we were inspired by the Hofsgrunder who went out to help bring back those boys after hearing their cries for help," he said. "We have to help these people without expecting anything in return. That's essential if life is to mean anything."

On the afternoon of the anniversary, hundreds of villagers, joined by survivors' relatives, packed together under the sweet-smelling pine rafters of Hofsgrund's newly built village hall, to listen to Hainmüller share his findings in an illustrated lecture. Many of them were hearing the precise details for the first time.

Chris Clothier from Manchester, the 66-year-old daughter of Ken Osborne, thanked the villagers, without whom, she said, her father would not have survived. "My father told us little of his experience on the mountain," she told them, her voice breaking. "But he often told us of the kindness of the Hofsgrunder and the help they

gave without thought for their own safety. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.”

Later, talking to the locals over Black Forest gateau, Clothier’s sister Angela Warner spoke of the small details that had only very slowly emerged over the years, including the bicycle cape her father - at 4ft tall, one of the smallest in the group - had borrowed from his own father for the trekking tour. “It probably saved his life as it stopped him from getting soaked, and helped trap the warm air around him,” she said. There was also the curious lead model of a cathedral he had stubbornly kept until his death in 2010, which only on this trip had she recognised as Freiburg Minster, which the boys had climbed the day before the fatal hike. His entire life, the kitsch souvenir was a reminder to Osborne of how lucky he was to be alive.

Two years after losing Jack, the Eatons had another child, a girl called Jacqueline. But Eaton’s hopes of seeing a public inquiry into the incident were never fulfilled, and his pledge that he would “die fighting this” may have destroyed his mental health. He died in a psychiatric hospital.

Kenneth Keast eventually switched schools, moving to Bedales in 1939, and later to Frensham Heights, where he served as headmaster. All of his former schools say they have no record of him beyond his name and length of service. He died in 1971.

One of the boys, Stanley C Few, went on to serve in the army, although he informed his superiors as soon as he joined up that he could not be expected to fight the Germans, as they had saved his life. He was sent to fight in Asia instead. Writing to a local 55 years after the Black Forest tragedy, Few said that while it was hard to remember the boys’ names, their faces, personalities and the sense of friendship they had shared had always stayed with him. The memories of their ordeal were as fresh as on the day it had happened.

“At times we were walking in a trench of the deeply drifted snow laboriously made by whoever was leading us ... hour after hour ... with not one of us knowing exactly what lay in the future.”

*Additional research by Richard Nelsson*

*Main Image: Stadtarchiv Freiburg*

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