

1940 - BRITAIN AT WAR

Hitler Strikes North

Whatever doubts remained of the efficiency of the German war machine after the Polish campaign they were quickly dispelled by its attack on Scandinavia. Norway and Denmark, both pacifist and neutral had done nothing to provoke aggression – but their geographical position involving their respective coastlines in the strategy of the North Sea and access to Swedish iron ore inevitably dragged them in to the conflict. In 1939 Germany imported about 10 million tons of iron ore from Sweden much of this was shipped through the ice free North Sea port of Narvik. To Churchill and other warlike minds however, it was clear that the war could not be won by inaction. Britain was much inferior to Germany on land and in the air but had great superiority at sea and so he proposed mining the Norwegian coast line in order to stop Norwegian shipments of iron ore. When, on November 30 Russia invaded Finland there was deep sympathy and moral pressure to assist her. The only practical route for Britain to send forces was via the far north of Norway which in turn offered the temptation to secure Narvik and also stop the iron ore traffic.

In February 1940 the *Altmark* supply ship to the *Graf Spee* which had scuttled in the River Plate the previous December was returning to Germany with a large number of British seaman prisoners from ships sunk by the pocket battleship. On February 16 she was intercepted by a British Destroyer Flotilla in Norwegian waters and the 299 prisoners were released. In Germany there was a great outcry, Hitler was furious and the incident ended his hesitation over whether to invade Norway. Meanwhile in London Churchill had persuaded

Chamberlain to permit the mining of Norwegian waters, this began on April 5. The German plans for the invasion of Norway under the code name *Weserübung Nord* aimed to seize Oslo, the coastal cities and Narvik; thrusting out from Oslo and linking up by land. On April 7 British aircraft found the German fleet steaming north and bombed it without effect. The same evening British destroyers and the invasion fleet clashed and the British destroyer *Glowworm* was lost; her captain Lieutenant-Commander Roope was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. The Home Fleet was late in leaving Scapa Flow and it was not until April 9 that the British realised the Germans were about to land troops in coastal cities. At this point efforts were made to intercept. With the bad weather clearing the Luftwaffe now showed up and was able to carry out its task of protecting the German landings from the British Fleet. A total of 88 German aircraft attacked but neither their bombing nor the anti-aircraft fire that met them was effective and the action ended with one destroyer sunk and 4 German aircraft shot down. The British ships however had expended much of their ammunition and the C-in-C of the fleet became convinced that he could no longer risk his ships and so turned north out of range of the Luftwaffe. Elsewhere the British naval action had better results and Fleet Air Arm aircraft bombed and sank the German cruiser *Konigsberg*. The same morning 6 destroyers surprised 10 German destroyers and sank two off Narvik. The following day the battleship *Warspite* supported by the destroyer fleet overwhelmed the remaining German ships in Ofotfjord.

Meanwhile the Norwegian army was slow to mobilize and woefully inadequate for the struggle ahead and with more German troops arriving by air and sea the pressure began to tell. By employing delaying tactics the Norwegians hoped to hold out until British and

French troops landing in the north at Lillehammer could advance south and try to re-take Oslo. News of the extent and success of the German landings came as a shattering surprise to the British cabinet. Despite this it was decided to make Narvik the immediate objective and utilize the smaller ports in the area to land troops. Hardly had this decision been made than the strategic and political importance of Trondheim began to make itself felt. A new plan was drawn up to land French troops in Trondheimsfjord together with two Canadian battalions. Despite delays and opposition the planning went ahead until on April 19 the chiefs of staff turned against it. Instead on April 17 and 18 troops were landed approximately 100 miles to the north and south of Trondheim. The British were mentally and materially unprepared to undertake amphibious landings and ill equipped, particularly lacking field artillery so that the Germans were able to bring up their own guns out of range of the Allies small arms fire.

Although the British were able to slow the German advances with the Luftwaffe dominating the skies daylight movement was hazardous and costly. Worse still this meant they rendered the ports unusable thus preventing the Allies from bringing in heavier forces to support those already ashore. Some attempts were made by the British to provide fighter cover using a squadron of Gladiators on a frozen lake but even this was mismanaged and most of these fighters were lost on the ground in one day while refuelling. By late April all of south and central Norway was lost leaving Narvik and the north as the sole theatre of operations. Throughout late April and into May the Allies continued to hold territory around Narvik, the French in particular landed troops and tanks as late as May 13. However by this time, the disastrous events in France and the Low Countries were making themselves felt. Faced with the extreme seriousness of this situation the British Cabinet reluctantly decided to abandon its

commitments to Norway. Withdrawal began on May 31 and on June 9 King Haakon and members of the Norwegian government embarked on the cruiser Devonshire. The last British and French troops to leave embarked at Harstad on June 8 and a preliminary armistice came in to effect on June 9.

The Norwegian campaign initiated in London by Churchill was primarily a clash of sea and air power. The Germans successfully staked on surprise and the strength of its air power to hold off the British Fleet. Churchill looking for ways to exploit British command of the seas miscalculated the effectiveness of this strategy and when the inevitable clash came, the Home fleet was ill prepared and turned away leaving central and southern Norway to its fate.