



THE 1940 NORWAY CAMPAIGN SHOWED HOW MODERN WARFARE
WOULD REQUIRE AIRPOWER AND JOINT OPERATIONS.

War Over the FJORDS

By Phillip S. Meilinger

German paratroopers near Narvik, Norway, during the invasion.



AP photo

The 1940 campaign in Norway was an important proving ground for both Germany and the Allies. Although the Germans had been blooded against the Poles, it was in Norway that they would fight against Britain and France, as well as the Norwegians.

For their part, the Allies had done little since declaring war in September 1939 except sit on the defensive in France and drop leaflets over Germany. Norway would be their first real test.

This campaign in the north illustrated the importance of two key military concepts—jointness and air superiority—that would become increasingly necessary as the war progressed.

Jointness is a modern pillar of effective military action, but this was not always the case. In centuries past, it was possible to wage war with soldiers and sailors having virtually no contact with one another; coordination was only necessary at the highest levels of government. In those rare instances when armies and navies had to work together, decisions could be made as the situation arose.

This attitude changed dramatically during World War II. Not only were armies and navies working together more closely than they had before—amphibious operations became commonplace—but jointness was forced on the services because of airpower. Even the most die-hard ground or sea warfare zealots realized by 1941 that the airplane had become essential to the conduct of operations. Scarce air assets had to be apportioned between numerous commanders to avoid waste and duplication. Aircraft could fly from land bases to attack targets at sea—and vice versa. The air, and airmen, could not be ignored. As a result, all the services were drawn more closely together.

In wartime, the stakes are usually too high to permit parochialism among soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Even so, disagreements and tensions occur. Soldiers, sailors, and airmen have different views on the nature of war—on battle, strategy, and doctrine—and these differing viewpoints would clash in the Norwegian campaign.

Though Britain and France declared war on Germany in September 1939 after the Nazi invasion of Poland, they were loath to strike the enemy head-on. Instead, they looked for an easier venue, and Norway was it.

Germany was heavily dependent on high-quality Swedish iron ore; it had twice the iron content of German ore.



Troops train in the use of mortars. Germany's joint planning was more effective in Norway, but the Allies learned their lessons well. In the near future it was the Allies who would excel in exploiting the advantages of joint operations.

This material, which came largely from the north, was then usually shipped by rail through Norway to its ice-free port of Narvik. From there it traveled south by freighter to Germany.

In 1938, more than 40 percent of Germany's iron ore imports came from this source. Although Sweden and Norway were declared neutrals, the Allies nonetheless wanted to deny this resource to Germany.

Secure the Ports

Two weeks after the outbreak of war, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, suggested mining Norwegian territorial waters in order to force German ore freighters onto the open sea, where they could be found and destroyed by the Royal Navy. As months passed, this option, and even the thought of occupying parts of Norway, shifted from an idea to the planning stage.

Britain feared Germany might act first and simply invade Sweden and Norway to ensure access to the iron ore and protect its supply lines for shipment. On April 8, 1940, the Royal Navy began laying mines in Norwegian territorial waters. This was a clear violation of

international law, but Britain thought it necessary for her survival.

The Germans were indeed concerned about their access to Swedish ore and the Norwegian ports. In February 1940 the Royal Navy had violated Norwegian waters to intercept and capture the German transport *Altmark*. This, along with memories of the Allied "starvation blockade" of World War I that killed hundreds of thousands of German civilians, persuaded Hitler that access to neutral trade couldn't be guaranteed, regardless of the law. In addition, German planners thought Norway could serve as a valuable submarine site and also provide air bases that would outflank the Allied blockade of Germany and allow powerful strikes on Britain's lines of communication.

On March 1, 1940, Hitler ordered plans drawn up to occupy Denmark and Norway to protect Nazi access to the Baltic Sea and also ensure the ore lines remained intact. The invasion of Denmark and Norway was set for April 9—coincidentally, the day following the Allied mining operation.

Since Napoleonic times, Prussia/Germany had enjoyed a reputation for meticulous and effective military planning, with its General Staff serving as the model for the military staffs of most major powers. Germany was not yet adept, however, in planning major joint operations. Nonetheless, things started auspiciously. A small working group headed by senior officers from the navy, army, and air force began writing plans.

Almost immediately, however, problems arose over the issue of command and control. The planning group posited a theater command with one officer—a soldier—having control over all the forces in his theater. Hermann Goering, head of the Luftwaffe, protested: He would not allow air units to come under the operational control of another service.

It was the German navy that had ignored all attempts at joint training, exercises, or doctrine formulation during the interwar period; the army and air force had developed a close and effective relationship. Now, Goering disavowed it. During the Norwegian campaign the commanders of air, land, and sea forces would receive their orders separately from Germany.

Inexplicably, Hitler—who was notorious for meddling in military affairs—chose not to intervene and impose unity of command on the Norwegian operation.



Deutsches Bundesarchiv photo via Wikipedia

L-r: Norwegian politician Vidkun Quisling, who seized power in his own country after the Nazi invasion; Heinrich Himmler, Hitler's right-hand man; Josef Terboven, the Nazi reich's commissar of Norway during the war; and Gen. Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, the commander of German forces in Norway.

The German plan called for a series of quick, powerful, and wide-ranging attacks. Denmark would be seized and its two major airfields at Aalborg immediately put to use by the Luftwaffe, ferrying troops and supplies into Norway and serving as a base for long-range strike aircraft. Some 30,000 German troops were airlifted into Norway—the first major airlift of the war. The five major port cities of Norway would be attacked simultaneously: Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Kristiansand, and Narvik, as well as the major airfield at Stavanger. These attacks would employ most of the German surface fleet, six army divisions and a paratroop battalion, and about 1,000 aircraft.

The plan succeeded despite bad weather and the determined resistance of Norwegian units. By the end of the first day the situation was clearly under German control. Denmark surrendered in a nearly bloodless assault, and the five major Norwegian cities fell, as did the main airfields near Oslo and Stavanger.

Airpower was crucial in all of these actions. Besides the operations in Denmark and Stavanger, airlifted troops secured the airfield near Oslo without a fight; *Luftwaffe* bombers suppressed Norwegian air defenses at Kristiansand, allowing an easy capture. The next day Allied help arrived, but it would prove to be too little and too late.

Allied joint planning was similarly in its infancy. Although a joint planning group was established in March 1940 to draw up a scheme for a preemptive landing in Norway, it wasn't effective. For example, it was thought air units wouldn't even be necessary for the initial stages of the operation—an incredible oversight. Indeed, historian John Terraine stated that the joint planning staff "displayed an amateurishness and feebleness which to this day can make the reader alternatively blush and shiver."

To make matters worse, relations were strained between the British navy and air force over the issue of the Fleet Air Arm (FAA). When the Royal Air Force was established in 1918 it was given control over the navy's aviation assets. For the next two decades the Admiralty bitterly protested this arrangement. In 1937 the British government returned the FAA to the navy, but the matter still rankled. Caught between the warring sides for 20 years, the Fleet Air Arm was an unlucky stepchild that suffered in the crossfire. In 1940 it was armed with obsolete aircraft such as the Fairey Swordfish—an open-cockpit biplane—and the Skua,



which was totally outclassed by modern fighters of the day.

Like the Germans, the Allies did not institute a joint theater command for Norway, although British doctrine called for such a headquarters. Instead, in the Narvik area, for example, Admiral Lord Cork commanded naval forces and Maj. Gen. P. J. Mackesy headed the ground troops. Both, however, received orders from London that were sometimes contradictory. Moreover, the two seldom saw eye-to-eye.

Control of the Skies

Cork, for example, thought the army should assault Narvik forthwith, but Mackesy considered that "sheer bloody murder" and refused. Instead, he landed 45 miles away on an undefended island and approached Narvik in a systematic land operation, all the while Cork chafing at the "delay." Such problems were aggravated when Mackesy established his headquarters on land, while Cork remained afloat. Mackesy was eventually relieved in the hope joint operations would improve, but by then the campaign was practically over.

The other Allied task force was directed to liberate Trondheim. This port, however, was well within range of Luftwaffe aircraft and Allied operations there were a disaster. The Royal Navy's cruiser *Suffolk* was so badly mauled by German bombers, it barely limped back to port. This event convinced the Admiralty that a direct assault on Trondheim was impossible in the face of enemy air superiority. Instead, landings were made

B-17s, part of the Allied air defense of Norway, fly high above the fjords on a mission during World War II. It became clear for the first time that airpower, desperately needed for both land and sea operations, meant that modern warfare would of necessity be joint.

north and south of the city, and it was hoped these two independent pincers would be able to march on Trondheim and retake it. This was soon seen to be impossible, again due to Luftwaffe controlling the skies. Maj. Gen. Carton de Wiart, commander of the northern pincer, signaled London: "I see little chance of carrying out decisive, or indeed, any operations unless enemy air activity is considerably restricted."

The following day he was even more emphatic: There was "no alternative to evacuation" unless he could gain air superiority. With its nearest air base more than 600 miles distant, the RAF could not intervene, and the FAA was simply outmatched. The Royal Navy moved two aircraft carriers toward the area, *Ark Royal* and *Glorious*, but the Luftwaffe drove them off. Soon after, the ground forces were evacuated.

The situation at Narvik was not quite as dismal for the Allies—despite the disagreements between Cork and Mackesy—simply because it was so far north the Luftwaffe had difficulty covering the area. The RAF, through Herculean efforts, managed to carve three airstrips out of the snow and ice and deploy some Gladiators and Hurricanes that had been transported by aircraft carrier.



German destroyers at Narvik after the capture of the port there. The Allies hoped that landing at Narvik would allow them to establish a foothold and build air bases.

The German garrison had been resupplied by seaplane and flying boat, but the RAF quickly drove these off. As a result, Allied ground forces were able to make some headway. Then, on May 10, the Battle of France began and Norway became a sideshow.

Before the Allies had even retaken Narvik they were planning its evacuation. It finally fell on May 28, but the Allies returned to their ships and departed two weeks later. The Germans quickly moved back in, and the campaign was over.

Norway would remain in Nazi hands until the end of the war.

Two aspects of the Norway campaign are worth noting. First, modern warfare would forever after be joint warfare. The days when admirals and generals could blithely ignore each other while fighting their separate campaigns were over. The arrival of airpower—necessary for both land and sea operations—made joint planning and joint command absolutely essential.

The lack of jointness in the Norwegian campaign—on both sides—manifested itself in numerous ways. There was no unity of command, and conflicting orders were often sent to the component commanders, who generally maintained separate headquarters. Intelligence was poorly shared, so numbers, quality, and location of enemy aircraft, vessels, and shore batteries were often unknown

to the key parties. Doctrines between the services were seldom compatible, and the lack of joint exercises during peacetime became painfully obvious.

This was especially apparent in the poor results gained by naval gunfire in support of troops ashore and in the poor results obtained from close air support. Germany's joint planning, command and control, and operations were more effective than those of the Allies. However, it was the Allies who took the lessons of Norway more to heart. In the future, they would excel in the area of joint operations.

Slow To Learn

Second, air superiority was shown to be essential for successful joint operations. The RAF's bases were too distant for it to intervene effectively, and the FAA's outmoded aircraft were of limited utility. As a consequence, the Luftwaffe controlled the air, and the Royal Navy could not maintain a presence in the face of that control. The Royal Navy's official historian later concluded: "If effective air cover was lacking, warships could not be maintained overseas." It was a startling admission. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Lord Alanbrooke, concurred with this assessment, writing that Norway demonstrated "the undermining of sea power by airpower."

The sole bright spot for the Allies was at Narvik, but this was so only because the Luftwaffe was unable to intervene

effectively and the RAF gained local air superiority. As planners phrased it: "The crux of the Narvik operations would be our ability to establish the necessary anti-aircraft defenses and to operate fighters from a shore aerodrome." However, the Allied hope that a landing at Narvik would allow them to establish a foothold, build air bases, and then use land-based airpower to both interdict the ore rail line to Sweden and gradually push their forces farther south to reconquer Norway never came close to fruition.

Prior to the Norway campaign, it had been a major tenet of naval theorists that one of sea power's great strengths was its ability to prevent an enemy from conducting a major amphibious operation. If such an operation were successfully initiated, so the conventional wisdom held, the Royal Navy would be able to strangle it by preventing resupply to the troops ashore.

This concept was a serious miscalculation that didn't take account of the emerging importance of airpower. The British Cabinet initially believed sea power could dispose of German forces in Norway in "a week or two."

Instead, the tone of the campaign was set on the first day when a portion of the British fleet was intercepted far out at sea by the Luftwaffe. Without air cover, one destroyer was sunk and the battleship *Rodney* was damaged. The fleet withdrew and moved north, out of range of German aircraft. The Luftwaffe had achieved air superiority over the littoral. In short, control of the air determined who would control the surface.

The Royal Navy was slow to learn these lessons. On Dec. 10, 1941—more than 18 months after the events in Norway and just three days after the Japanese attack on the US fleet in Pearl Harbor—Adm. Thomas Phillips rejected the need for air cover over his flotilla. His force was attacked by land-based Japanese bombers and torpedo airplanes; two hours later, the attackers had sunk his flagship—the battleship *Prince of Wales*—and the battlecruiser *Repulse* off the coast of Malaya.

These were the only two British capital ships in the region and they were lost because the naval commander refused to recognize the fundamental change in warfare. ■

Phillip S. Meilinger is a retired Air Force pilot with 30 years of service and a doctorate in military history. This article was adapted from his book Airwar: Theory and Practice. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "Fratricide," appeared in January.