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Operations & Codenames of WWII

17–22 Minuten

'Scissors' (i) was a British programme of small-scale raids by the Independent Companies on the west coast of the German-occupied part of Norway in an attempt to halt the German advance on Narvik (4/31 May 1940).

The 1,900 men of the *139th Gebirgsjägerregiment* of Generalleutnant Eduard Dietl's *3rd Gebirgsjägerdivision*, who had been delivered to Narvik by the ships of *Gruppe I* in the 'Naumburg' component of 'Weserübung', had been left isolated by the British naval victories in the 1st and 2nd Battle of Narvik. It was now a priority for the other German forces in Norway to supply and reinforce this garrison, which was holding the town that was the primary objective of 'Weserübung', namely the ice-free port from which Swedish iron ore could be shipped to Germany in the months when the primary route through the Baltic Sea was closed by ice. Given that shipborne resupply and reinforcement was now impossible, the Germans pinned their hopes on a speedy overland advance along the line of the road (and in part railway) to the north from Trondheim via Namsos.

The importance and possible vulnerability of this long and exposed line of communications was as evident to the Allies as to the Germans, and on 2 May small French party of 100 men of the Chasseurs Alpins

mountain troops had been delivered by the British destroyer *Janus* to Mosjøen, 100 miles (160 km) farther to the north and the terminus of Norway's railway to its northern reaches. *Janus* had departed Namsos with this party on 29 April. At the same time Admiral the Lord Cork and Orrery, the British naval force commander, had been instructed to send a small force to Bodø, just to the north of the Arctic Circle. This is the port near the entrance of the Vestfjord, just to the south-west of the main maritime approach to Narvik from the Norwegian Sea, and is also on the main road to the north. The object was to prevent this key location being seized by a German airborne landing, and one company of the 1/Scots Guards was therefore landed there.

The need to cut the German axis of advance to the north had also been considered in the UK at this time, as a result a large group known as 'Scissors' Force had been assembled under the command of Lieutenant Colonel C. McV. Gubbins. The experience gained at Namsos in 'Maurice' had proved that a conventionally based force could not be maintained in any area over which German air power was unchallenged, and the 'Scissors' Force was therefore based on five Independent Companies, each of about 20 officers and 270 men, designed for independent (i.e. self-contained) operations. The British hoped that these five companies, totalling just fewer than 1,500 men, would receive support from the Norwegian population and Norwegian troops in the area, and thus be able to harass and delay the German advance up the solitary road to the north. The first to arrive was No. 1 Independent Company, which reached the small port of Mo i Rana at the head of the Ranfjord, some 54 miles (87 km) by road to the north of Mosjøen and therefore about two-thirds of the way from Trondheim to Narvik. Nos 2 and 3 Independent Companies went to Bodø and established themselves in the village of Hopen some 11 miles (18 km) to the east of

that town. Gubbins himself took the remaining two companies to Mosjøen on 8 May to replace the French troops: Gubbins left No. 4 Independent Company to protect Mosjøen from the sea and headed down the road with No. 5 Independent Company to join the Norwegian forces about 25 miles (40 km) to the south of the town. There were only 400 of these Norwegian troops and it was not long before German forces streaming up the road had forced British and Norwegians to retreat first to Mosjøen and then to its north.

It had been appreciated even before the launch of 'Scissors' (i) that the Independent Companies lacked both the equipment and training to handle combat with a larger force possessing the advantages of heavier weapons, but it had nonetheless been expected that the Independent Companies' skills in irregular warfare and demolition would make it possible for them to harass and slow the German advance. Now, however, the 'Scissors' Force was outflanked by a nicely conceived and well executed German seaborne *coup*: men of the German destroyers at Trondheim had manned the Norwegian coasting steamer *Nord-Norge*, and with 300 German troops on board had departed up the coast through the Leads.

Though the vessel was reported to the British naval headquarters at Harstad, on the island of Hinnøya, off the mouth of the Ofotfjord leading to Narvik, the delay in dispatching the only ships available (the light anti-aircraft cruiser *Carlisle* escorting a convoy 50 miles/80 km to seaward and the destroyer *Zulu* at Skelfjord) made it possible for *Nord-Norge* to enter the Ranfjord without being intercepted. By the time the two British warships arrived, the troops had been put ashore at Hemnesberget on the Hemnes peninsula. Two Dornier seaplanes had first bombed the little town and then landed to disembark about 40 soldiers and numbers of mortars and machine guns. *Nord-Norge* was sunk before her stores

could be landed, but the Germans were in sufficient strength to drive out the platoon of No. 1 Independent Company which had been holding Hemnesberget. By the next day seaplanes were flying in replacements for the stores lost with *Nord-Norge*.

With his line of retreat thus severed, Gubbins was compelled to abandon Mosjøen and embark his men in local craft to pull back to the north.

Gubbins took his men down the Vefsenfjord, at whose head Mosjøen lies, and on to Sandnessjøen, a hamlet on the seaward side of the large island at the mouth of the fjord. Four days earlier, on 7 May, Cork had been given command of all these outlying forces, so that his very limited and already fully occupied naval strength now had to assume the additional burden of supporting another forlorn military operation.

Furthermore, it was already apparent that the 'Scissors' Force was quite incapable of checking the German advance to the north.

The 'Scissors' Force clearly needed reinforcement, and the 24th (Guards) Brigade, under the temporary command of Lieutenant Colonel T. B. Trappes-Lomax and then, from 11 May, by Lieutenant Colonel W. D. Faulkner, began to send detachments, beginning with a company of the 1/Scots Guards, from Narvik to Bodø. Soon after this Cork decided to rely on the French contingent to carry out the long-delayed assault on Narvik, and to employ the whole of the 24th (Guards) Brigade, commanded from 23 May by Gubbins after his promotion to brigadier, for an attempt to hold the southern approaches to Narvik. The remainder of the 1/Scots Guards was now despatched to Mo i Rana in the light cruiser *Enterprise*, light anti-aircraft cruiser *Cairo*, anti-aircraft sloop *Fleetwood* and destroyer *Hesperus*, together with four field guns and a light anti-aircraft battery in *Margot*, which was a small stores ship.

The chances of the combined 24th (Guards) Brigade and the 'Scissors'

Force been able to halt the German advance, now by the equivalent of a complete mountain division with a full complement of artillery, may have seemed good from a detached examination of the difficult terrain revealed by maps. But the reality of the tactical situation was completely altered to the benefit of the Germans by the availability of powerful air support from Junkers Ju 87 dive-bombers that could be opposed, and then only marginally, by occasional patrols of Fleet Air Arm Blackburn Skua two-seat fighters from the fleet carrier *Ark Royal* operating to seaward.

In the early hours of 12 May the reinforcement convoy steamed up the 40 miles (65 km) of the Ranfjord, which is narrow and hemmed on each side by steep mountains, and reached Mo i Rana without coming under attack. Then, however, the dive-bombers appeared in strength. The experiences of 'Maurice' at Namsos and 'Sickle' at Åndalsnes were now repeated; the British warships were chased up and down the fjord as they tried to manoeuvre against the air attacks even as working parties worked to unload *Margot* at a time of the year in which there was no night darkness and therefore a few hours of respite from air attack. It was the evening before *Margot* had been unloaded and, somehow still undamaged, the British ships departed on their return journey. Though for long stretches the fjord was too narrow to allow manoeuvre, the guns of *Cairo* and *Fleetwood* were able to keep the German aircraft at bay and the ships all reached the open sea without suffering serious damage.

The escape of the ships, however, allowed the dive-bombers now to concentrate their efforts on the Norwegian town and the British troops. The weight of the German air attacks meant that it was not long before Mo i Rana had to be abandoned as the men of the 24th (Guards) Brigade, No. 1 Independent Company, and the local Norwegian forces retreated to the north.

Meanwhile, the destroyers *Janus* and *Javelin* had been sent to support Gubbins, who was at Sandnessjøen, where he was supervising the embarkation of about 350 of his men in a local coaster. Together with the final 100 of his men, Gubbins boarded *Janus* and, escorted by the two destroyers, the coaster reached Bodø. This little port on the Saltfjord near the entrance of the Vestfjord was to be held as an outpost of the operations round Narvik. It was for Bodø, therefore, that the 1/Irish Guards, together with the brigade headquarters, anti-aircraft guns and a troop of the 3rd Hussars with their light tanks, were embarked in the troopship *Chrobry* and sailed on 14 May. Escorted by the anti-aircraft sloop *Stork* and destroyer *Wolverine*, *Chrobry* had departed Tjeldsundet and rounded the Lofoten islands and, still in daylight at 24.00, was crossing the Vestfjord toward Bodø when the dive-bombers arrived overhead. At 11,400 tons, *Chobry* was a tempting and simple target. The converted liner was hit in the third attack on her, the bomb detonations setting the ship on fire and killing many of the 1/Irish Guards' officers. Stacked ammunition started to explode, and the fire spread uncontrollably. With many of *Chrobry*'s own boats destroyed, *Wolverine* came alongside and the men of the Irish Guards formed up on deck with their personal weapons and waited to transfer to the destroyer: 694 men trans-shipped in just 16 minutes, after which the vastly overloaded *Wolverine* pulled away and made for Harstad. After driving off more German air attacks, *Stork* embarked those left of *Chrobry*'s passengers and crew, and the burning hulk was later sunk by aircraft from *Ark Royal*.

The exigencies to which the British had perforce been driven in this part of the Norwegian campaign are revealed by the story of *Raven*, as the British unofficially named the Norwegian coaster *Ranen* after she had been taken over by Commander Sir Geoffrey Congreve, who had arrived in Norway in command of the grandly named 15th Anti-

Submarine Striking Force, a group of four adapted trawlers which had been severely handled. Crewed by a mix of sailors, Irish Guardsmen and South Wales Borderers, and carrying the concealed armament of one 40-mm Bofors anti-aircraft gun and one 20-mm Oerlikon cannon, this unlikely vessels operated in the Leads as a decoy ship, delivering surprise attacks on German positions and generally harassing the Germans wherever and whenever an opportunity could be found.

When it was decided to divert the whole of the 24th (Guards) Brigade to the Bodø area, the 2/South Wales Borderers, which had been replaced by the Polish battalions on the Ankenes peninsula near Narvik, was embarked in the heavy cruiser *Effingham* which, while attempting a short cut, ran aground at 20 kt and became a total loss: the troops were rescued but invaluable military equipment, including Bren Gun Carriers, was lost. The troops themselves had to return to Harstad to reform and re-equip, as indeed had the 1/Irish Guards, so it was 20 May before the first sections of these two battalions began to arrive at Bodø in destroyers and the ubiquitous local craft known as 'puffers'.

Meanwhile, the 1/Scots Guards and Norwegians had been steadily driven north from Mo i Rana as they were outnumbered, outflanked and bombed every time they tried to halt and create a sustainable defence position. After swinging inland and crossing desolate plateaux high enough to have a permanent covering of snow, the road descended to the head of the Saltfjord at Rognan, well inland from Bodø, where a ferry normally operated to the resumption of the road at Langset. The retreating British and Norwegians reached Rognan on 26 May and hoped that they could be rescued by ship. This came in the form of a flotilla of 'puffer' small coastal steamers led by Lieutenant Commander W. R. Fell, which had already adopted the nickname 'The Gubbins Flotilla'. Sent to Norway with a group of deep-water trawlers to operate

as required in the Leads and up the fjords, Fell quickly appreciated that his vessels had too deep a draught for successful use in the coastal role, and therefore laid them up and assembled a force of 10 puffers in the Harstad area. The Norwegian crews were retained, and a naval guard drawn from the trawlers and the crew of *Effingham* was allocated to each boat.

The first task given to the Gubbins Flotilla was the movement of the 2/ South Wales Borderers to Bodø. Embarking the 1,000 men at Borkenes, across the island of Hinnøya from Harstad, Fell delivered them safely. It was only then, as the troops were disembarking, that the puffer flotilla first came under air attack: the Norwegian crews at this juncture saw the opportunity, if the vessels were left unguarded, to decamp or sabotage the puffers' engines. Fell's command quickly declined from 10 to three vessels. Fell then gathered a fresh force of eight local puffers to replace those from Harstad.

At a conference with Gubbins at 02.00 on 20 May, Fell learned of the predicament of the 1/Scots Guards and the Norwegians at Rognan. Embarking crews and guards he departed, reaching Rognan that evening to find the retreat in full swing in every available craft. As the soldiers arrived they were taken aboard the puffers and the local ferry boat lying at the pier. Toward 24.00 most of the main body and their Bofors guns had been embarked, with only the rearguard still to come. As the last men arrived by truck, the Germans were hard on their heels and small arms fire soon mingled with the sputter of lit demolition charges. The last of the puffers to cast off was that skippered by Fell himself, and as the vessel moved out into the fiord to make way for the ferry, whose engine then refused to start, the fuse of one of the demolition charges which had been laid under the pier at which the ferry lay was seen to be burning, and an engineer sergeant leapt ashore and

cut the fuse in the nick of time. The other two demolition charges then exploded, covering the ferry and Fell's puffer in falling debris. The ferry had been set alight, but having slipped her berth she drifted off and grounded just off the pier. Getting his puffer alongside her, Fell towed her clear and finally her engine coughed and started and she was safely on her way. The puffer flotilla set off down the fjord and landed the troops on the far side at Finneid, where the road came down to the shore.

After this the puffers of the Gubbins Flotilla made their way back to Bodø, where the continuing spate of air raids made it clear they would soon be needed once more.

A makeshift airstrip, with a runway of wire-covered grass, had been created outside Bodø, and three Gloster Gladiator biplane fighters from the airfield at Bardufoss, to the north of Narvik, belatedly brought into service on 25 May, had landed there. Though one had crashed on trying to take off, the other two fighters had kept up a patrol for two days, and had an astonishing success in keeping German aircraft at bay. On the morning of 27 May, however, these two surviving fighters were caught on the ground, both pilots were wounded and the aircraft were destroyed. The following day the bombers arrived in force to destroy Bodø. The town's wooden quay was burning, but was saved from destruction and came to play a role of the greatest importance when the inevitable evacuation began.

Once again Fell's little flotilla had disintegrated, several vessels having been destroyed or put out of action and others dispersed. Orders now arrived to prepare for a complete evacuation. Destroyers would be coming to Bodø for the purpose, but Gubbins's headquarters and most of his men were at Hopen, some 10 miles (16 km) up the fjord and already under considerable German pressure. Their evacuation would be desperate difficult unless disengagement could be achieved by the

use of sea transport from Hopen. Yet another puffer flotilla was gathered and, throughout 29 and 30 May, operated a ferry service to lift men and matériel from Hopen and deliver them to Bodø in the intervals between bombing attacks. To augment the puffers a local coaster, *Bodin*, which had been bombed and damaged, was commandeered, restored to operability, and used until she ran aground under fire while embarking Norwegian troops. The vessel had to be abandoned, the soldiers being taken off in puffers.

By the evening of 30 May, Hopen had been completely evacuated. The destroyers had in the meantime been doing their share: 1,000 men were lifted to the repair ship *Vindictive*, which transported them straight to Scapa Flow; and 1,500 men were embarked on each of the next two days in destroyers which took them to Harstad to join the main evacuation which had by now been ordered. By the end of 31 May there were no Allied troops still in Bodø was cleared of all Allied troops.

'Scissors' (i) had thus gone the way presaged by 'Maurice' (ii) and 'Sickle' (i), at the very moment when the factor which had done most to bring about the Allied defeat, German air supremacy, seemed about to be countered. On 21 May the first RAF fighters, Gladiator biplane of the same unit, No. 263 Squadron which had been destroyed on Lake Lesjaskog, had landed at Bardufoss airfield, at long last cleared of its winter snow. On 26 May Hawker Hurricane monoplane fighters of No. 46 Squadron, flown off the fleet carrier *Glorious*, also arrived and at once began to make their presence felt, albeit temporarily before the final Allied withdrawal.