

The Norway Failure

Part II: The Trondheim Operation

By Maj Carl W. Hoffman

☛ IN THE SPRING OF 1940, GAMBLER ADOLF HITLER placed a surprise wager on the spinning roulette of World War II. This was his bet: that Germany, a relatively weak sea power, could successfully occupy and defend Norway. These were his odds: the seizure would have to be made through the very teeth of the greatly superior British Fleet. But Der Führer was not afraid of high stakes; his entire rise to fame had been a series of calculated risks. There was no cause to quail at a side-bet.

On 11 April 1940, two days after the invasion, Mr Winston S. Churchill characterized Hitler's move as "extraordinary and reckless gambling," but since the bet paid off, we must conclude that the stroke showed more finesse than abandon. Striking by sea and air transport at six key Norwegian cities¹ the Germans fanned out like a swelling flood and, within 48 hours, occupied all the main ports.

¹These were: Oslo, Kristiansand, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim, and Narvik.

Why had Hitler seen fit to undertake this daring move? The reason is basic: Germany needed to maintain sea traffic with Norway in order that the important shipments of iron ore could continue to reach her industrial plants. This traffic was becoming more and more strained; the Allies were tightening the blockade and it was conceivable that it would get worse before it got better. This, then, was the immediate cause.² In addition, however, there were two secondary considerations: first, Norway would provide excellent submarine and air bases; and second, possession of Norway would be a prime essential to a successful German invasion of Great Britain.

Britain immediately reacted to the Nazi occupation with a series of naval actions in the waters surrounding Norway, but it was clear from the outset that landing operations would have to be conducted if the Germans were to be expelled. The War Cabinet quickly directed the

²More detail on the iron ore situation may be found in *The Norway Failure, Part I*, MARINE CORPS GAZETTE, September, 1949.

Possession of Trondheim would give the British several fighter strips, block German reinforcement of Narvik, and provide the English with one of the greatest rail terminals in Norway. The question was could Trondheim be taken in time?

Chiefs of Staff to initiate planning for the capture of Narvik, Trondheim, and Bergen. Plans for Bergen were later dropped, however, mainly because that port was already occupied in strength and also because it was close to the main German forces in southern Norway. The other two objectives, Trondheim in central Norway and Narvik to the north, provided better chances for success. (See map.)

Of these two, the need for speed was much greater at Trondheim. Possession of this port would effectively block German reinforcement of Narvik and other points to the north, and in addition would provide a safe harbor with adequate docks and facilities to land and supply an army of 50,000 men. Also, valuable in the Trondheim area was an airfield, which would provide room for several fighter squadrons. Still further, Trondheim represented one of the greatest rail terminals in Norway; from here, a rail line ran to Oslo and another across the mountains to Sweden.

Positioned as it was at the head of the two main valleys (Gudbrandsdal and Osterdal) leading north from Oslo, the city was admirably located for defense purposes. With these two valleys blocked, German movement to the north would be extremely difficult, involving cross-country advance through a veritable nightmare of snow, ice, and mountains. But could Trondheim be taken in time? Hitler's lieutenants were no doubt aware of its importance and would lose little time in sending reinforcements there.

This port was in all respects the key to the great sprawling country, and practiced military eyes were not required to recognize it as such. On 21 April 1940, William L. Shirer entered in his *Berlin Diary*:

"A friend of mine in the High (German) Command tells me that the whole issue in Norway now hangs on the battle for Trondheim. If the Allies take it they save Norway, or at least the northern half of it. What the Germans fear most, I gather, is that the British Navy will get into Trondheim Fiord and wipe out the garrison in the city, before the Nazi Forces in Oslo can possibly get there. If it does, the German gamble is lost."

To seize Trondheim in the least time, a frontal assault on the city was indicated. Chief advocate of this plan was a retired Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Roger Keyes, who pleaded with the Admiralty to allow him to command the venture. While the top naval command generally agreed as to the desirability of the move, the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet, Adm Sir Charles Forbes, presented what he believed to be the chief obstacle to the plan: how would troop ships be protected from heavy

German air attack during the 30 miles approach through the narrow confines of the Trondheim fiord? (See map.) In addition, Adm Forbes questioned the feasibility of executing an opposed landing, since there was no hope of achieving surprise.

The Admiral may well have wondered about the question of German air attack; Britain's Fleet air arm was woefully weak. At the beginning of the war it was possessed of but 260 planes, and these obsolescent types. The fact that there was such a paucity was partially a result of the prevailing opinion among naval and military men that enemy air attack did not represent a serious threat to British men-of-war and that anti-aircraft guns aboard the ships would be adequate to deal with enemy raiders. In this connection, Mr Winston S. Churchill had written before the war:

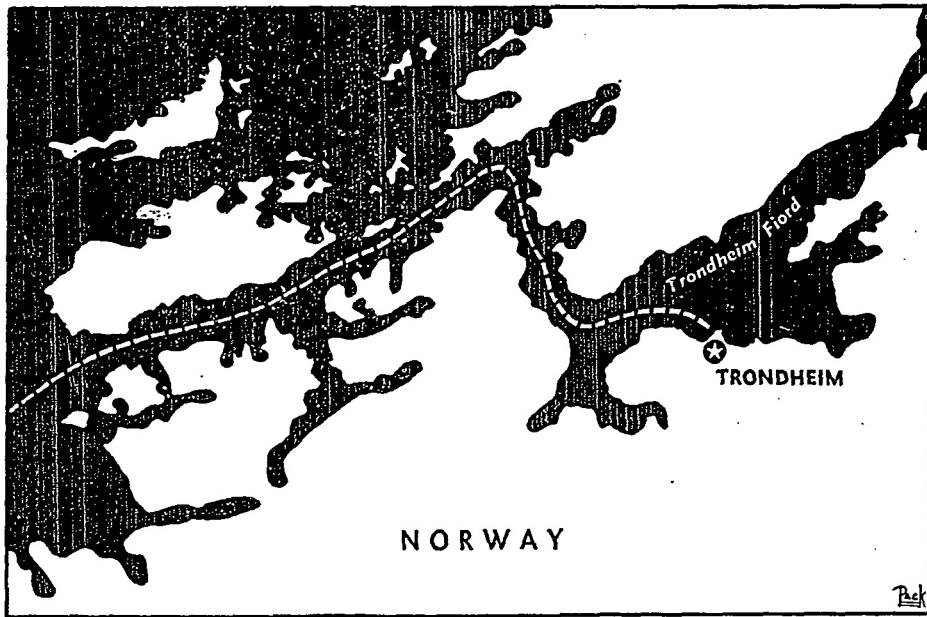
"In my opinion, . . . an air attack upon British warships, armed and protected as they now are, will not prevent full exercise of their superior sea power."

Adm Forbes' other objection to making an opposed frontal assault hearkened back to another prevailing British belief before the war: namely, that such landings were virtually impossible to execute. No one questioned, on the other hand, that German shore batteries could be destroyed or neutralized sufficiently to permit ships to enter Trondheim fiord, providing that adequate 15-inch high explosive shells could be furnished the battleships.

On 15 April 1940 the Naval Staff tightened the pressure on Adm Forbes:

"We still think that the operation described should be further studied. It could not take place for seven days, which would be devoted to careful preparation. Danger from air not appreciably less wherever these large troop ships are brought into the danger zone. Our idea would be that in addition to RAF bombing of Stavanger aerodrome, *Suffolk* [warship] should bombard with high-explosive at dawn, hoping thereby to put the aerodrome out of business. The aerodrome at Trondheim would be dealt with by Fleet air-arm bombers and subsequently by bombardment. . . . Pray, therefore, consider this important project further."

ADM FORBES, though still not convinced that the move was a wise one, started detailed planning for the Trondheim frontal assault. In the meantime, while discussion and argument over the main frontal assault was ensuing, two unopposed subsidiary landings were made on either side of Trondheim. The first of these was at Namsos, 100 miles to the north, on 14 April, and the second at Andalsnes, 150 miles to the south, on 17 April. At each of these ports the initial landings had been made by about



Dotted line indicates difficult 30-mile route through narrow landlocked stretch of water leading to Trondheim, involving two right-angle turns.

300 Royal Marines. The marines at Namsos were followed at two days by about 3,000 Army troops under MajGen Carton de Wiart. About the same number under Brig Frederick Morgan followed the Andalsnes contingent on 18 April. Although the first marines ashore were not bombed, the Germans soon got word of the situation and directed heavy bombings at subsequent groups coming ashore.

With the landings at Namsos and Andalsnes successful, plans called for a double envelopment of Trondheim, Carton de Wiart striking from the north and Morgan from the south. While the jaws of the pincer were closing, the main landing was to be made against Trondheim itself. Forces available for this numbered about 4,500. High planners felt that this strength was sufficient, since only about 3,000 Germans were thought to be in Trondheim. The operation would be supported by full strength of the Fleet, including two carriers mothering a total of about 100 planes, 45 of which were fighters. After the main landings, set for 22 April, reinforcements would be rapidly poured ashore.

This plan, as late as 17 April, was whole-heartedly embraced by the Chiefs of Staff, Prime Minister, and War Cabinet, but on the 18th came an abrupt about face. Suddenly, opposition to the plan was heard from all sides. Boiled down, it amounted to this: first, the risk of losing some of Britain's best ships was involved, and second, an opposed landing would be too costly. Principally feared was the bitter sting of German air power. Instead, the new thinking ran, why not exploit the successes of the landing forces at Namsos and Andalsnes by pushing more troops ashore at those points, while at the same time executing

a demonstration against Trondheim itself? This appeared to be much less of a gamble. In fact, it was.

The cardinal disadvantage of the new plan may be stated in four words: *it would take longer!*

Sir Roger Keyes, the most vehement proponent of the frontal assault from the outset, was greatly disappointed by the turn of events and again asked for permission to lead the assault. This time he volunteered to take only a few older ships and the necessary transports and storm the city before German defenses got any stronger. This, however, involved a delicate matter of command relations which Mr Churchill,

First Lord of the Admiralty, did not care to disturb. "For me to take Roger Keyes' advice," he wrote, "against [Adm Pound's] would have entailed his resignation, and Adm Forbes might well have asked to be relieved of his command."³

Those few who still favored a direct assault on Trondheim (including Winston Churchill) were in the minority by the afternoon of 18 April, however, and the plan was shelved.

While appearing to present a *safer* means of pushing the assault against Trondheim, the double envelopment scheme presented major difficulties which were pointed out by MajGen H. L. Ismay, Senior Staff Officer in charge of the Central Staff, in a paper prepared on 21 April:

"The operations in Central Norway which are now being undertaken are of an extremely hazardous nature, and we are confronted with serious difficulties. Among these, the chief are:

"First, that the urgent need of coming to the assistance of the Norwegians without delay has forced us to throw ashore hastily improvised forces — making use of whatever was available.

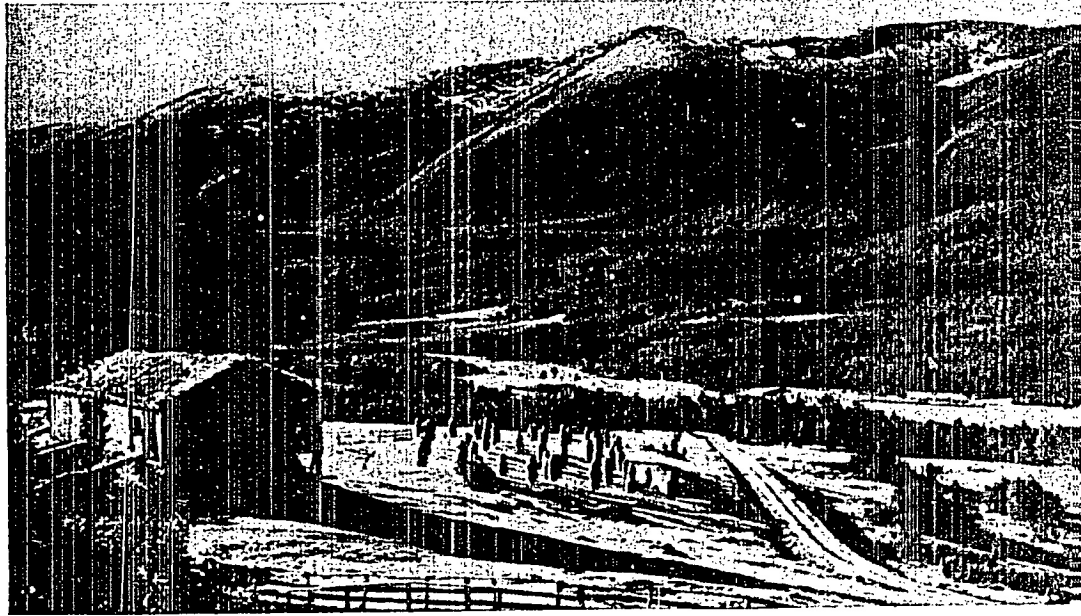
"Secondly, that our entry into Norway is perforce through bases which are inadequate for the maintenance of big formations.

"The only recognized base in the area is Trondheim, which is in the hands of the enemy. We are making use of Namsos and Andalsnes, which are only minor ports possessing few, if any, facilities for unloading military stores, and served by poor communications with the interior. Consequently, the landing of mechanical transport, artillery, supplies, and petrol . . . is a matter which, even if we were not hampered in

³Adm Pound was the First Sea Lord and Adm Forbes was Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet. Sir Roger Keyes, technically, was senior to both of them.

other ways, would present considerable difficulty. Thus, until we succeed in capturing Trondheim, the size of the forces which we can maintain in Norway is strictly limited."

The airport near Trondheim, meanwhile, remained in German hands, though they could not use it. This was true because a fort, manned by a small force of about 175 Norwegians, overlooked the field and surrounding area. Though all of the other permanent installations had long since fallen to the Germans, this single fort held out for three weeks. Repeated German attempts to assault the tiny garrison were frustrated by deep snow and unusually accurate fire, and German casualties ran very high. Finally, the shortage of ammunition and near-starvation conditions forced the Norwegian garrison to surrender. But even this was not until 6 May, after the departure of Allied troops. One may only surmise as to the effect that British possession of the airfield would have had on the campaign. Perhaps it was as Admiral of the Fleet Keyes later wrote: "The aerodrome was the key to the whole situation in Norway."



One of the gentler ravines which carve the country near Trondheim. Nearly all movement in Norway is through these corridors, seldom across them.

☛ ONE SPIRITED EFFORT to render land-based air support to British troops in Norway ended in failure. On 24 April one squadron of RAF Gladiators, flown from the carrier *Glorious*, landed on a frozen lake about 40 miles from Andalsnes. German aircraft immediately attacked. Such planes of the Fleet as were available attempted to fight off the ubiquitous enemy, but to no avail. The RAF squadron struggled at its task of providing air support for two expeditions 200 miles apart and, at the same time, protecting its frozen airfield. By 26 April, only two days after its arrival, the squadron had no planes left to fly. Several long-range efforts by bombers based in Britain were also unsuccessful.

Ashore at Namsos and Andalsnes the situation deteriorated from unknown, to fair, to bad, to worse. Reinforcements had been landed at both points, so that the Allied investment in men alone was about 13,000 and this total was to be greatly expanded. The problem was not one of a shortage of reinforcements, but rather, one of getting them ashore and maintaining them once there. The soldiers and marines were ill-equipped to carry out the task that had been cut out for them. Possessing nei-

ther combat aviation nor even anti-aircraft guns, they became a favorite target for German aircraft, and daylight movements became very difficult. Artillery and tanks were also wanting, and individual equipment, for the most part, was pitifully inadequate.⁴

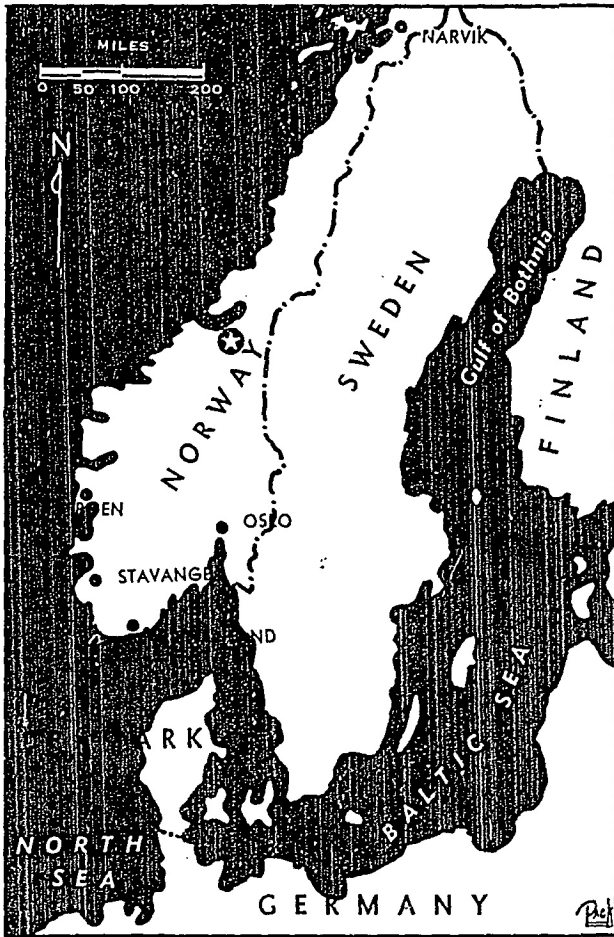
Probably the only Allied unit that had gear well suited to fighting in the ice and snow of Norway was a French expeditionary force of Chasseurs Alpins which reinforced Gen Carton de Wiart's command at Namsos on 19 April. This force, especially trained for mountain fighting, was equipped with skis, short fur coats, windbreaker jackets, white camouflage cloaks, and white helmets.

Since the activities of the two forces were independent of one another (and indeed, of British higher command in some cases) the narrative of their failures will be covered separately. First, the Namsos prong:

Gen Carton de Wiart's force, as noted previously, was landed 100 miles north of Trondheim. Because of the difficult terrain inland, the General was forced to select a route of approach along the shores of the fiord. This, unfortunately, placed him at the mercy of any German ships operating in adjacent waters, and more than any other factor, doomed the Namsos envelopment to failure.

☛ GERMAN NAVAL STRENGTH in the fiord was not great, being only two small torpedo craft. But inasmuch as these were unchallenged by British naval units, and since Gen de Wiart had no weapons capable of dueling with them, the Nazi vessels plastered the British flank with

⁴An American observer saw the British marines of the Andalsnes force on 20 April and reported that though warmly clad for the cold climate that their only other equipment was rifles.



leisurely impudence. The British higher command reasoned that "it would not have been justifiable to undertake to force Trondheim fiord for the purpose of cleaning up that very small item." Nevertheless, "that very small item" threatened or stopped movement by de Wiart's force along the shore. In addition to the flanking fires, the craft periodically landed troops behind the British to cut communication lines and harass supply installations.

☛ ONE OTHER IMPORTANT factor which contributed prominently to the ultimate reverse of the Namsos thrust was that Gen Carton de Wiart was not informed of the cancellation of the original plan for a frontal assault on Trondheim. As he drove his force toward Trondheim under the handicap of frequent attacks by aircraft and flanking fires from the torpedo craft in the fiord, he was ever under the impression that the main landing was still to be executed. Spurred on by this belief, he moved as fast as the bad conditions would allow. If he had been informed of this critical change, he no doubt would have proceeded more methodically and perhaps would have awaited reinforcements before executing his thrust. Failure to inform the General was not intentional, but as is

the case in all such mistakes, this did not alter the tragic course of events. The demonstration, which had figured so prominently in the decision to scrap the direct assault plan, was never carried out. This, at least, would have temporarily relieved the pressure on de Wiart's troops.

By 19 April, a slender salient had been pushed to Verdal, 50 miles from Trondheim. Carton de Wiart's neck was way out and the German commander decided to chop it. Embarking troops at Trondheim, the Nazis moved to the flank and rear of the British spearhead, landed, and executed a strong attack. Austrian ski troops enveloped and defeated the advance guard and the main body was pushed back towards Namsos with heavy casualties. Persistent attacks by German aircraft and the thawing snow made the withdrawal towards Namsos difficult. Roads became sloughs of mud and the retreating troops were forced to abandon most of their small amount of motorized equipment.

By 27 April the exhausted, forlorn force had returned to Namsos, where it found that German bombing attacks had completely destroyed the meager port facilities. Efforts to land reinforcements and supplies by pontons were unsuccessful and the situation was grim. After a quick survey of the sorry state of affairs, Carton de Wiart requested that his force be evacuated. Recognizing the sad plight of the Namsos force, the Admiralty concurred and immediately started preparations. On the night of 3 May the main force was evacuated, leaving a rear guard as protection. Throughout most of the next day the convoy was under attack from German aircraft, but though wave after wave swept over the ships, no transports were hit. This was amazing, since no British aircraft were available to cover the convoy. The two destroyers carrying the rear guard were not so fortunate, however; both were sunk. Thus crumpled the upper claw of the pincers.

☛ FOR THE LOWER CLAW the pattern had been different, but the results similar. After landing at Andalsnes, Brig Frederick Morgan had pushed inland and seized the important rail junction at Dombas. This move had been hampered only by a group of about 200 parachutists who had dropped near Dombas. Morgan's force quickly killed or captured this enemy contingent. Since he was awaiting reinforcements before commencing the envelopment of Trondheim, Morgan decided to hold his lines at Dombas. The ship carrying the vehicles, artillery and mortars had been sunk, so that Morgan's force was armed only with rifles and machine guns. At this stage in the proceedings, Morgan received an urgent request which he felt that he could not turn down. The Norwegian Commander-in-Chief, Gen Ruge, conveyed the information that elements of the 2d Norwegian Division were attempting to stem the German tide from the south but that they desperately needed help. Since this Nazi surge was a potential threat to operations around Trondheim, and because of sym-

pathy for the outnumbered and outgunned Norwegians, Morgan decided to send two battalions of his command to the south to join them, while the remainder pressed toward Trondheim. This in effect, was dividing his force and sending the two elements off at right angles to one another.

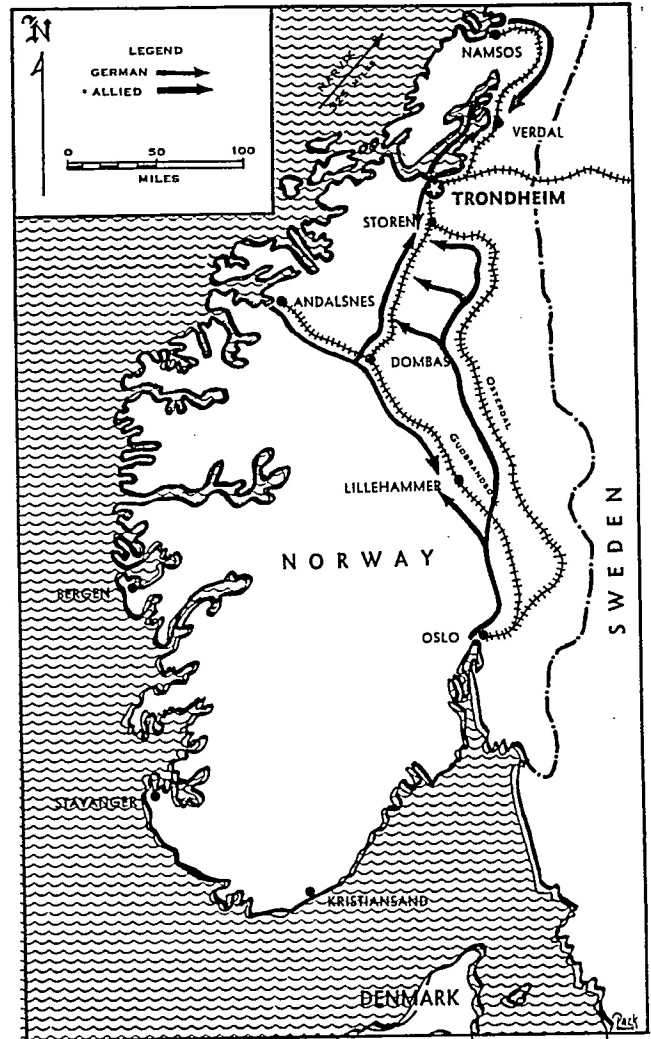
☛ **RESULTS WERE DISCOURAGING.** The two battalions moving to the south joined the Norwegians south of Lillehammer and almost immediately were embroiled in a fierce battle. The Germans, pressing up the Gudbrandsdal astride the railroad track, were three divisions strong, supported by combat aviation. Despite British reinforcements in this area, the Nazis pushed steadily to the north. Though heavy casualties were inflicted on the Germans, this thrust rolled on. Allied troops stubbornly gave ground and retreated towards Dombas, which they were determined to hold at all costs.

Meanwhile, the other portion of Morgan's force had set out to the north towards Trondheim. After covering almost two-thirds of the distance without opposition, the force suddenly ran head-on into a German force marching south from Trondheim. A meeting engagement ensued at Storen on 25 April, and by the next day the British began their retreat towards Dombas. In addition to pressure from the direction of Trondheim, another German group undertook a difficult mountain crossing operation from the Osterdal and struck the Allied east flank. This surprise march, executed over practically impossible terrain, was characteristic of the German campaign in Norway. No terrain obstacle was considered too great if a tactical advantage would result.

The two Allied columns joined again at Dombas, determined to hold that important rail junction. But lack of air support made the cause a hopeless one. Troops at Dombas were unmercifully bombed and strafed, while German ground forces struck from three directions: north, south and east. Only one direction was open, and that was towards the port of Andalsnes. By 30 April the retirement to Andalsnes began. The tiny port was in the same shape as Namsos: battered flat, with all dock facilities destroyed. The evacuation was successfully executed on the night of 1 May, however, the force escaping under the covering rear guard action of Gen Ruge's beleaguered Norwegians. After the evacuation had been completed, there was no other course but for Gen Ruge's troops to surrender. This they did.

Thus the Trondheim operation ended.

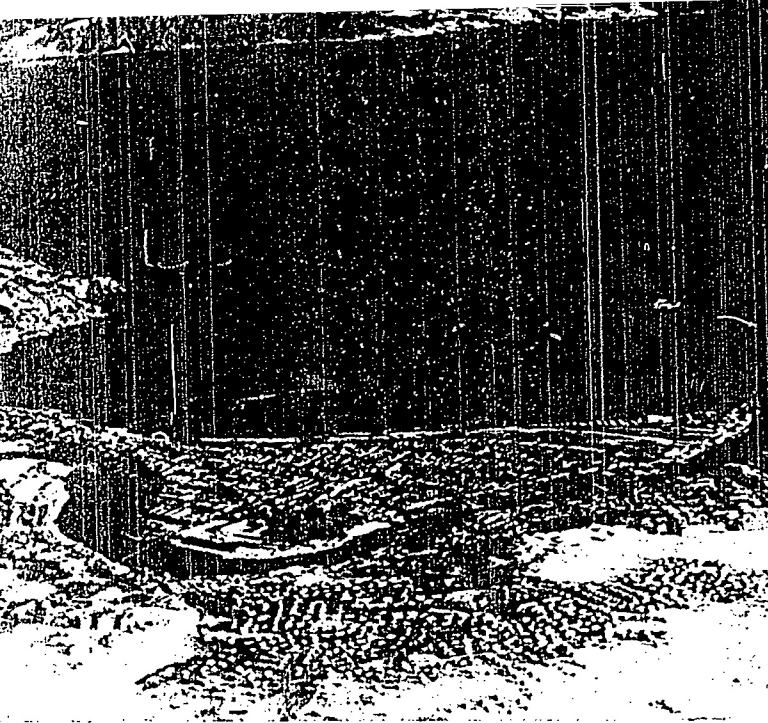
☛ **CRITICAL ANALYSIS** of this abortive undertaking may easily fall into the unsavory sphere of "second-guessing" or "Monday-morning quarterbacking," but on the other hand, there are important lessons which should not be ignored. The tactics employed by MajGen Carton de Wiart and Brig Frederick Morgan will not be criticized, since both of these officers were admittedly operating at



distinct handicaps. Neither will more than this mention be made of apparent violations of three principles of war: mass, economy of force, and simplicity. Rather we may look to the factors which imposed severe obstacles on planning and execution.

First and foremost of these factors was Britain's unbalanced fleet. A balanced fleet, as we know it, contains properly proportioned surface, subsurface, air and landing force components. That Britain's fleet was lacking two of these components is apparent. Here was a great fleet, in terms of international ratings, which in Admiral of the Fleet Keyes' words was "... utterly inadequate to fulfil the vast responsibilities [it] was called upon to undertake." The tools for successful prosecution of a naval campaign simply *were not available*.

Pre-war opinion in Britain had relegated the fleet air arm to an inferior position, the concept being that the Royal Air Force could control the air over Britain and in the approaches to it. This, of course, was defensive thinking—the type which all too often lulls democratic peoples into a stupor of false security. The question of whether the fleet air arm should be under the Admiralty



Plans called for frontal assault in this area with ship-to-shore movement being executed in the fiord.

or the Air Ministry was one frequently and warmly argued in the years between World Wars I and II. In this connection, Mr Churchill wrote in 1936:

"It is impossible to resist an admiral's claim that he must have complete control of, and confidence in, the aircraft of the battle fleet, whether used for reconnaissance, gun-fire or air attack on a hostile fleet. . . .

"A division must . . . be made between the air force controlled by the Admiralty and that controlled by the Air Ministry. This division does not depend upon the type of undercarriage of the aircraft, nor necessarily the base from which it is flown. It depends upon the function. Is it predominantly a naval function or not?"

This reasoning sounds very solid and, as far as it goes, represents an incontrovertible truth. The sad part was that while the Admiralty considered that it had been victorious in this argument, the fact was that the fleet air arm was so reduced in strength that it made little difference to *whom* it belonged! The Air Ministry could well concede a point if there were but 260 obsolete airplanes. And so in its state of gaunt impotence the fleet air arm belonged to the Navy, for what it was worth. This was a shallow victory, like scoring more hits in a baseball game and fewer runs. It is significant that though there was a fleet air arm, there was no naval air service; pilots and tired aircraft were transferred from the RAF. That is not to say that the planes of the fleet did not perform heroically. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is rather meant that there were just too few planes (under naval control) to do the job.

How had this affected the naval campaign in Norway? It had foredoomed it to failure. German planes completely dominated the air over the entire North Sea and despite the Navy's best efforts, nothing could change it. This

weak air component, in itself, made Britain's fleet unbalanced.

What of the landing force component? Here we can but surmise on what a division of marines, trained in their amphibious specialty, could have accomplished in a direct assault on Trondheim. The primary reason that the frontal approach had been cancelled was the British view that opposed landings were virtually impossible to execute. That the United States did not fall into the same pattern of thinking is due to the activities of the U. S. Marine Corps between the two great wars. The techniques, doctrine, and equipment that were developed, mainly between 1922 and 1935,⁵ clearly indicated—many years prior to World War II—that amphibious operations were feasible. Our thinking thus conditioned, it is doubtful that our higher planners would have shied from a direct assault upon Trondheim.

During the period that the U. S. Marine Corps was busying itself with the development of amphibious techniques it was also making itself audible along another line: the constant need for a fleet marine force as part of the Navy's *balanced fleet*. By dint of great effort, this idea was sold to the U. S. and throughout World War II it proved a sound purchase.

Britain had not even been shopping. She had Royal Marines, true, but as is the case now, these were used to man a share of the guns of His Majesty's ships (as well as a number of less interesting jobs) and could not be considered a "ready" landing force. Thus, the decision to forge straight into Trondheim, assault the port directly, and pour in reinforcements, presented more imponderables than the British high commanders cared to face. Though they recognized it as a naval operation, they were also aware that the tools would have to come from two other sources: the Army and the Air Force. Like a carpenter attempting to make a rip saw do the work of a bench plane, his work is apt to have rough edges.

☛ VICIOUS CIRCLE NUMBER ONE may be stated: the frontal assault on Trondheim was cancelled *because* it would involve too much danger to ships, *because* there was insufficient naval air to protect the ships, *because* of the fleet's unbalanced condition. Entwined and interlaced is vicious circle number two: the frontal assault on Trondheim was cancelled *because* the British felt that an opposed landing was virtually impossible, *because* there was no ready landing force, *because* no one had pioneered the jungle of amphibious operations, *because* there was no fleet marine force, *because* of the fleets' unbalanced condition.

USMC

⁵In 1935, Marine Corps Schools published *Tentative Landing Operations Manual*. This was adopted verbatim in 1938 as *Landing Operations Doctrine*, U. S. Navy (FTP 167) and it was again copied in 1941 by the U. S. Army's initial amphibious warfare publication (FM 31-5).