

CHURCHILL ON NARVIK

BY PIERS MACKESY

ON 14th April 1940 the cruiser *Southampton* was racing through the northern seas towards the little Arctic port of Harstad in the Lofoten Islands. On board was the advance party of a military force whose mission was to eject the Germans who had seized Narvik five days earlier. Its commander was my father, Pat Mackesy; and the contentious story of his operations was made public eight years later in the first volume of Sir Winston Churchill's war memoirs. Churchill's theme was that Mackesy should have taken Narvik in the first days by an amphibious *coup de main*; and that as a result of his failure to make the assault, a small German force held the allies at bay for six weeks and robbed them of a much needed moral and political success.¹

The whole complex story of the expedition is full of interest and lessons. But if Churchill was right, the first hours and days off Narvik might have decided the operation by a single stroke. And the soldier, trained to seize the fleeting instant and give his enemy no pause to recover and prepare, is bound to ask: was the moment lost? In a limited compass it is on this central issue that I will concentrate.

The origins of the British expedition are curious. Over the course of several months Mackesy had been working with Admiral Sir Edward Evans on a scheme to relieve the Finns under Russian attack and occupy the ore-fields of northern Sweden from which the Germans drew important supplies of iron-ore. These vast objects were to be accomplished by occupying the Norwegian port of Narvik and advancing across the roadless and snow-bound mountains into Sweden, using instead of roads a single-track mountain railway powered by Swedish electricity and with rolling stock consisting almost entirely of tipper-trucks. This wild scheme collapsed when the Finns made peace with Russia; but at the beginning of April it took shape again. At dawn on 8th April British destroyers mined the neutral waters to Norway to close the iron-ore route to enemy shipping; and to guard against a

German reaction four small forces, amounting in all to six battalions, were to occupy bridgeheads in the western ports of Norway.

On the morning of 9th April the British destinations were seized by the *Wehrmacht*. The Home Fleet had not been alerted at once; and slamming the door too late, the Admiralty now rushed every available ship to sea. Troops embarked in cruisers were pushed ashore, the transports were deprived of their escorts, and Mackesy's colleague Admiral Evans was snatched away by Churchill and despatched on a special mission to the King of Norway. The expeditions were thus dismantled; and from their ruins Mackesy emerged several days later in the *Southampton*, crashing through the stormy seas at 25 knots for a rendezvous with some admiral as yet unknown to reverse the tide of disaster in the Arctic.

The *Southampton* carried two companies of the 1st Scots Guards, whose role in the original scheme had been to rush ashore when the cruiser berthed at the quayside at Narvik, hoping to settle any reluctance on the part of the natives with parley or rifle-butts. This initial rush was the only action for which the force had been ready. For obvious political reasons the Chiefs of Staff had not foreseen or planned for a landing in face of serious opposition; and they had therefore ordered the force to embark for a peaceful landing at an organised port. The transports were loaded economically instead of tactically, so that men were separated from weapons, and weapons from ammunition. And the whole was entangled with a mass of base details who were to prepare for the build-up of a much larger force, not without an eventual eye to the Swedish ore-fields.

Following the *Southampton* at convoy speed was the remainder of the 24th Guards Brigade and the territorial 146th Brigade; and a demi-brigade of the Chasseurs Alpins had sailed from Brest to give the force a degree of mobility in the snow. Mackesy's instructions were to land his force at Harstad, reassemble his equipment and ammunition, and make a plan to eject the Germans from Narvik. "It is not intended that you should land in the face of opposition," he was told. But in addition he had received a personal letter from the CIGS which added; "You may have a chance of taking advantage of naval action and you should do so if you can. Boldness is required." It is not clear in the context whether this referred to Narvik or to Harstad. But the phrase was repeated in Mackesy's orders to the senior officer in the convoy which followed him: "Whatever course is adopted, the utmost boldness is required."

The naval action at which Ironside had hinted took place on 13th April, the day before the *Southampton's* arrival at Harstad. Admiral Whitworth in the battleship *Warspite* led a force up the fjords, and annihilated the German destroyer flotilla which had brought the

¹ The first-hand account of the operation which was published in the following year by Lord Cork and Orrery's former Chief of Staff, Rear-Admiral L. E. H. Maund's "Assault from the Sea", Chapter II (1949) should have warned subsequent writers to handle the Churchill version with care. The official historian did so, and his book is a mine of accurate and detailed information, though the present writer would put a different stress and interpretation on certain details and episodes (T. K. Dery, "The Campaign in Norway" (1952)). Captain John Creswell's "Generals and Admirals" (1952) places the command arrangements in a wider historical setting. Later writers have taken a more Churchillian line, extravagantly so in the case of Bernard Ash's "Norway 1940" (1964). Major-General J. L. Moulton's "The Norwegian Campaign of 1940" (1966), though careful and reflective, has a didactic purpose (as did the JSSC's annual replay of the Narvik operations) which I believe makes for unfairness in places. For the following account I have drawn on private papers and on interviews and correspondence with numerous participants.



troops to Narvik. Whitworth reported that the garrison of the town was demoralised, and a landing would not be opposed. Churchill and others concluded that Narvik was virtually ours. The 146th Brigade was diverted from the Narvik convoy to Namsos, and on the following day the Chasseurs Alpins were also diverted southwards. But the *Southampton* was allowed to proceed to Harstad and Mackesy was not informed of the naval victory; and thus, when he learnt of the opportunity at Narvik 24 hours later, he was many miles away and his two companies of guardsmen were partially disembarked. The news came in the form of a signal from the new Flag Officer of the Expedition, who was still at sea with the convoy, offering to land a military force at Narvik at daylight on the following morning, supported by 100 seamen and marines. But since the guardsmen would have to be re-embarked from small boats, and the navy would not use the direct channel to Narvik until it had been buoyed, there was no possibility of reaching Narvik in time to land on the following day. No attack could be made before the 16th, three days after the *Warspite's* attack. And even the most optimistic doubted a tame surrender to two companies of infantry so long after the naval victory.

Thus the first moment passed; whether it was a real opportunity I shall consider later. The Flag Officer

now proceeded at the head of the convoy to Harstad with the remainder of the Guards Brigade, and Mackesy boarded the *Aurora* to confront, not his old colleague Sir Edward Evans, but a stranger whose identity he had barely learnt, Admiral of the Fleet the Earl of Cork and Orrery. And now began the real conflict over the military plan.

Lord Cork's hasty appointment had not been accompanied by written orders or a formal briefing. He had attended a meeting of Churchill's Military Co-ordination Committee followed by a desultory discussion in the First Sea Lord's room; and he had driven down Whitehall with Churchill to the House of Commons, though the First Lord had been too busy returning the greetings of the crowd to give him much attention. From these encounters Lord Cork had carried off a strong impression that the troops should run desperate risks to conquer Narvik. But he was not informed of Mackesy's orders, nor that the troops in the convoy had not been loaded for immediate battle.

Attack from the sea

To Lord Cork, therefore, the position seemed clear. He accepted Admiral Whitworth's view that the Germans in Narvik were already shaken, and believed that under the cover of a naval bombardment the army could row ashore and round them up. This view he pressed on the General: the troops should make an immediate assault from the sea against Narvik itself.

This plan had one supreme advantage. For the whole country lay under four feet of snow, and no operations on land were possible for troops untrained in snow warfare. If Narvik could not be taken from the sea, its capture would be a protracted business. But to Mackesy the situation looked less simple. Already on the evening of the 14th, information was coming in which showed that the enemy's demoralisation had been exaggerated. The harbour was now said to be strongly held by machine-guns, and a destroyer had suffered 11 casualties from a machine-gun which it had not been able to silence.

If the enemy did not intend to fight, the half-organised British infantry could row ashore and accept the surrender. But if there was to be fighting, tactical considerations came into play; and as Lord Cork's Chief of Staff was to remark later in the war, a military operation is a more complex thing than a naval one. If this was to be a battle and not a take-over, the circumstances of terrain and resources had to be weighed.

The town of Narvik lies across the neck of a peninsula which juts into the Ofotfjord, backed by a towering mass of mountain. From the fjord the town was screened by high ground which rises several hundred feet in steep wooden bluffs from the water. The town was therefore immune from fire by flat-trajectory naval guns, except from the harbour in the enclosed entrance to the Beisfjord. The harbour, choked with wrecks and mines and commanded from flank positions, was impracticable for warships or landing operations; and along the steep northern face of the peninsula the beaches where boats could

land were few and restricted, the most hopeful one at Vassvik offering no more than a platoon front to the attackers. Further east towards the Rombaksfjord, the shore and approaches were flanked by machine guns on the Öyjord peninsula. As far as could be discovered, Narvik and the neighbouring peninsulas were held by about 2,000 Germans, with some advantage from prepared Norwegian positions.

Judged therefore as a normal landing operation Narvik was a serious proposition; and this was not a normal landing. None of the conditions which were to be regarded later in the war as necessary for an assault landing were present. There were no landing craft: the troops would have to tranship from warships to open boats and fishing craft and make their run in to the beach in full view of the enemy. Nor could the concentration or run-in be covered by darkness, for the Arctic summer was approaching, and already the night had been reduced to a short interval of twilight. The only fire-support must be provided by naval guns, for the troops had no artillery to support them from across the fjords, and the special support craft which were evolved in later years were as yet unborn. Though the navy had enormous confidence in its power to smother the shore defences, it was a confidence not securely founded. At this stage of the war naval officers knew little about observing fire on land, and as experience at Bjerkvik and Narvik was later to prove, even machine-guns under direct observation from the sea could keep on firing till they were actually mopped up by troops. Nor was much H.E. ammunition available.

Prospects for a beach-head

It was thus by no means certain that a beach-head could be established, though Mackesy was inclined to agree with Lord Cork that it might be done at a price. But reaching the shore is not the only problem of an amphibious operation, and Mackesy was more concerned with what might follow. The build-up on the beach would be so slow as to invite an immediate counter-attack, and the high ground fronting the sea gave the enemy cover where he could form up in perfect security from naval gunfire. The three battalions of the 24th Guards Brigade, though new to each other and to their brigadier, were the best trained British troops in Norway. But two of them were fresh from guard-mounting in London, none of them had been equipped or trained to fight in snow, and in the soft deep snow of Narvik they were virtually incapable of movement. In their brigadier's view a single machine-gun firing down the glacis of the re-entrants would pin them down. Their clothes, wet from landing, would freeze on them after sunset (a fortnight later even the Chasseurs Alpins were to suffer catastrophically from frostbite). And if they struggled through the snow to the crest beyond, they would wade into a storm of small arms and mortar fire to which they had no reply. They could not manoeuvre in the snow. The ships' guns would be of no avail. As for support weapons of their own, there were none: no medium machine-guns, no H.E. bombs for the 2 in. mortars, no means of moving the 3 in. mortars.

"Later in this war," wrote Churchill, "scores of such assaults were made and often succeeded." This is untrue. No assaults were made in the adverse conditions of climate and equipment which existed at Narvik; and the lesson learnt so painfully later in the war was that assault landings could never succeed without the most careful planning and rehearsal; nor without proper landing craft and adequate supporting fire.

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Never? What if the enemy was weak or his will was sapped? What of the enemy in Narvik on whose response so much depended?

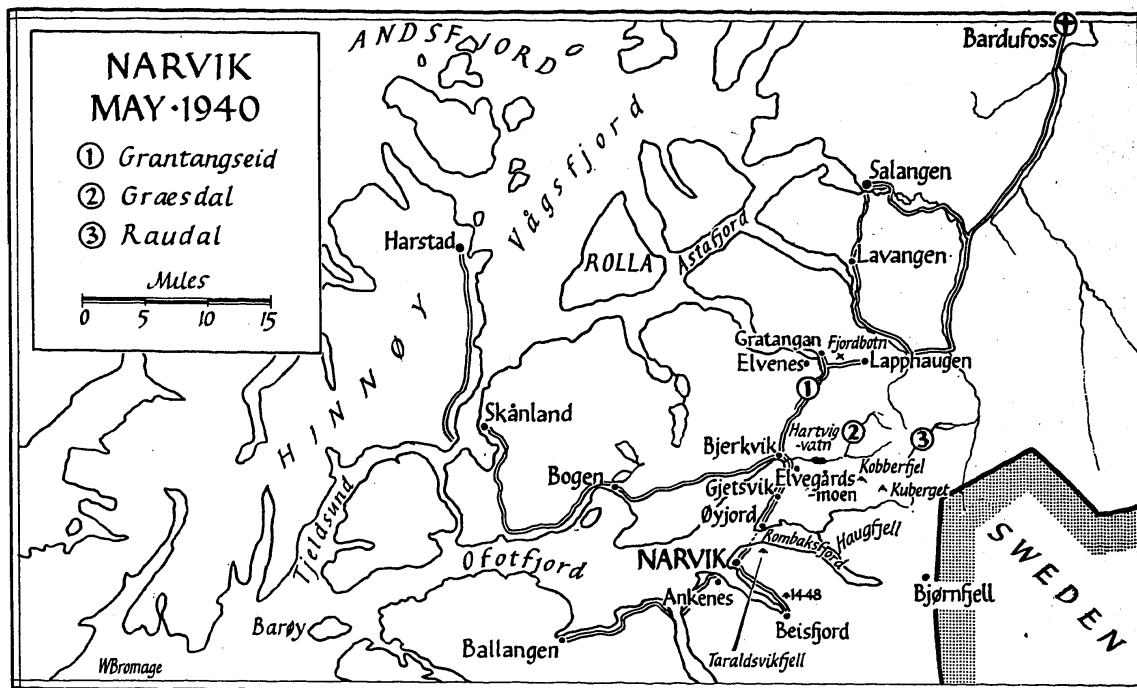
Their leader was General Dietl, an experienced mountain infantryman who later commanded on the Finnish front against the Russians. He had brought with him a small headquarters of the Third Mountain Division, and a picked force from his 139th (Carinthian) Mountain Regiment. Two of the 139th's rifle battalions, less one company, had been landed North of the Rombaksfjord, and after overrunning the Norwegian army's depot and stores had pushed the partially mobilised Norwegians back for many miles. One battalion, the 2nd, was in the Narvik area; and the detached company from the 1st battalion was pushing the Norwegian garrison back along the railway line.

Germans well dug in

The 2nd battalion had been fully prepared to repel an attack since 5 p.m. on 10th April, three days before the *Warspite's* attack and four days before the *Southampton's* arrival at Harstad. One of its companies was in counter-attack reserve above the town. The battalion had 10 heavy (*schwer*) machine-guns, 27 light machine-guns (belt-fed, and superior to the British Bren), six heavy and 18 light mortars, and two light mountain-guns. Its strength was 555 officers and men; and supporting arms brought the force immediately defending the town to 751 troops,² with the seamen in addition. On the 13th a mountain battery was flown in to a frozen lake north of the Rombaksfjord, and that evening a platoon of two 75-mm. guns was brought across to Narvik, where the gunners awaited them. The sole survivor of Dietl's staff, Colonel Herrmann, informs me that the 1st battalion north of the Rombaksfjord had been alerted, and he maintains that like the guns it could have been brought across to Narvik in the event of an attack despite the British destroyers.

Against this defence Colonel Herrmann believes that the British attack would have failed. The Germans reckoned that on normal terrain the attacker required a superiority of two to one, which (discounting the hypothetical intervention by the German 1st battalion from the north) would have required a landing strength of at least 1,500 men. But the conditions were far from normal. Even without the snow (in which the *Gebirgsjäger* were trained and equipped to

² Excluding divisional headquarters and medical and administrative personnel, amounting to 114.



move) the ground favoured the defence. Under the protection of the ships' guns he thinks it probable that the attackers would have reached the shore; "but then every approach, every slope and every hollow lay under the fire of German machine-guns and mortars from good overlooking and flanking positions." With limited landing strength and without landing craft or heavy weapons, he believes that Mackesy was right to postpone the attacks.

But what of the German morale? Here lies the crux of the argument: if naval bombardment could break the German will to resist, difficulties of equipment and terrain were nothing. Yet no one who has met the *Wehrmacht* in the field, whether in triumph or adversity, will readily believe that its discipline or courage were easy to break, least of all under the weight of bombardment which the ships could put down. When plans for a general bombardment were discussed on 19th April, it was found that the warships could put one shell into every 400 square yards of the target area, with a total of only 3,500 rounds. The *Warspite* had twenty rounds of H.E. for each 15 in. gun, or one shell for every 6,000 square yards of her allotted target area.

Yet the contrary has been asserted. Whitworth's officers had reported a flight from the town at the mere sight of the naval disaster; and Norwegians in the town later asserted that 13th April had seen a hasty retreat of the German troops into the mountains. But a closer scrutiny of the evidence shows that the reality was different. The infantry had moved out early from their billets to their battle positions round the town, leaving details to man the communications system and defend the harbour. Under the mantle of snow these positions were invisible both to the warships and to the Mayor of Narvik, who stood for

some time on the apparently deserted and defenceless quay only to find when he turned back that he had been covered by a German pistol.

The moral collapse—the dark figures straggling across the snow, the Germans laughing and singing in the streets—was not among the *Gebirgsjäger*, but among the shaken seamen who had survived the destruction of the destroyers, soaked, half-drowned and homeless.³ It needed four or five days to rest them, and re-equip them with Norwegian uniforms and weapons. Thereafter the 2,500 seamen formed a useful part of Dietl's force. Except for a small battalion of skiers they were of limited fighting value in the snow, but they took over the whole of the rearward services of the army and kept open the long communications with the northern front. Of their initial defeat and demoralisation the soldiers in their battle positions had seen little.

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Dietl saw little to fear in the next few weeks from a direct assault without powerful and methodical preparation. But he was uneasy about his flanks: on the east, the Öyjord peninsula and the communications along the railway line, on the west the heights above Ankenes which overlooked the whole of the Narvik position. For fear that the British would establish observation posts for field artillery above Ankenes he posted first one and then two companies to hold the heights.

³ Mr. Bernard Ash transforms the sailors of a Norwegian account into soldiers, and fails to notice that the "soldiers" straggling up from the shore were described as wet and exhausted.

Mackesy's own appreciation was much the same. His own reconnaissance had convinced him that before Narvik could be assaulted he must clear the Ankenes and Öyjord peninsulas of the enfilading machine-guns, establish field-guns there to cover the landing, and have some landing craft available. The first phase of his plan therefore involved the occupation of the Ankenes peninsula, and a southward or eastward advance on Bjerkvik at the head of the Herjangs fjord, with a view to securing Öyjord. The final phase would depend on how the situation developed, and on the arrival of field-guns and landing-craft, and would involve either a move round the head of the Rombaksfjord or a direct crossing to the eastern end of the Narvik peninsula.

The start of this plan depended on troops who could move in the snow, or on the coming of the thaw. It was put into operation when the Chasseurs Alpains returned to the Narvik command at the end of April, and was approved and continued by General Auchinleck when he superseded Mackesy on 13th May. The French Foreign Legion had landed at Bjerkvik that day and Narvik was duly assaulted and captured from Öyjord on 28th May.

Concealed embarkation

The successful assault was launched under very different conditions from those of the earlier plan. The snow had gone, field-guns and landing-craft were available, and the possession of the Öyjord peninsula transformed the tactical problem. Instead of an embarkation from warships in full view of the enemy, there was a concealed embarkation behind Öyjord and a short approach run. Instead of assaulting the main enemy position on the bluffs of Narvik, the landing was made on his eastern flank, where the defence were weaker and the landing point and flank positions could be brought under fire from warships and the three field batteries at Öyjord.

Thus surprise was achieved. Though the first wave of 290 men had to maintain itself for an hour or more before it was reinforced, the counter-stroke feared by Auchinleck and General Béthouart did not come. Four hours after the first landing 1,250 men were ashore. Yet even then the danger was not past. The German reserves needed time to work their way round to the heights above the landing place, but even there their blow eventually came. A determined counter-attack from the slopes of the Taraldsvikfjell bundled the French and Norwegians back almost to the beach, which came under machine-gun fire and forced the following wave to use a different landing place. For half an hour the situation was critical; but with the help of a destroyer and the field batteries on Öyjord the position was restored.

It needed 11 hours from the first landing to get three battalions ashore. The German reserves were now exhausted, and they could do no more than resist obstinately from position to position through the scrub and rocks. But though the allied force was great and conditions favourable, it was 17 hours after the landing when the vanguard entered the town of Narvik.

Thus Narvik was won at last, at a cost of 150 casualties. "From the comparative ease with which this success has been won," wrote Admiral Maund, "it might appear that this operation could have been carried out some weeks earlier. But a walk along the shore of the Narvik promontory after its capture fully confirmed the difficulties of a landing. The few beaches shelved gently so that troops would have had to wade a considerable distance ashore, and all beaches were well covered by machine-gun posts that could not have been neutralised by fire from the sea. . . ." General Auchinleck agreed. "Reconnaissance after the capture of the town revealed the full difficulties of landing on the beaches close to the town, and the wisdom of the plan finally adopted." "It is my considered opinion", he went on, "that the operation was carried out with the barest margin of safety. . . . It is unfair to expect any troops to undertake such hazardous operations with such inadequate means."

Missed opportunity

Lord Cork dissented. In his view the success of the landing showed that a landing under the bluffs of Narvik three weeks earlier would have succeeded. "Nothing that I witnessed at Bjerkvik or Narvik has caused me to alter my opinion that the landing projected for 8th May would have been a complete success, always supposing that the same leadership and resolution as the French troops displayed would have been forthcoming. . . ."

Thus to the last the Narvik assault remained a field of controversy; and with Lord Cork's reflection I must leave the tactical problem to the reader, hoping only that it will not again be viewed as a closed and determined issue.

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Whatever decision Mackesy had taken, his career as a commander was doomed from the outset of the expedition: it was a common saying in the General Staff before the war that to command the first expedition would be fatal. It was ironical that Mackesy, whose horizons were wide, should have been ruined by a brigade attack in a remote corner of the Arctic. But this was the common chance of war. The greater tragedy was that in another aspect than tactics the operation was one to which his temperament was ill adapted.

What was required at Narvik was not only to be right, but to persuade his naval colleague and make the position clear to Whitehall. Mackesy was not a conciliatory man, and he did not gladly accommodate himself to those in high places with whom he disagreed. He had sailed for Narvik already convinced that the plan was inept and the expedition badly mounted. And at Harstad he was confronted by a total stranger sent by the statesman whom he knew to be chiefly responsible for the Scandinavian adventure and its disastrous organisation. Many witnesses of that first encounter in the *Aurora* were to recall the instant antagonism of the two commanders. Mackesy's intellectual intolerance confronted the impetuous judgment and masterful temper of an Admiral of the

Fleet of immense and anomalous seniority, who outranked the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet. This extraordinary encounter, devised by Churchill in defiance of all the principles of combined operations, was worsened by the fact that neither commander had chosen or was in full sympathy with his Chief of Staff. For this none of the parties was to blame. Both Captain Maund and Colonel Dowler⁴ were able and conciliatory men, but their tastes and temperaments did not match those of their respective chiefs. Dowler felt that Mackesy should have done more to bridge his differences with Lord Cork. But in later years he was to wonder whether others might have helped to build the bridge.

Inaccuracy and innuendo

Mackesy was retired from the army as soon as he returned to England; and eight years later when Churchill's memoirs appeared, Mackesy found that his conduct was criticised in a manner unparalleled elsewhere in the work. The narrative of the events at Narvik was cast in a framework of factual inaccuracy, of careful innuendo, and of inconsistencies which can only be explained by the author's profound emotional involvement in the operation.

First, the inaccuracies. It is stated that the military commander was chosen on 5th April, though Mackesy had been the commander since the plans were born and Churchill had met him many weeks earlier. This may be a mere carelessness, but it conveys an impression that the Narvik expedition was a sudden improvisation, rather than a long-considered operation for whose deficiencies Churchill himself bore much of the responsibility, and which he had thrown out of gear by the hasty removal of the naval element. He states that in the crucial early days at Harstad 4,000 troops were available for the assault, outnumbering the Germans by two to one, when in fact (and setting aside the question of how many of them could be put on shore and how fast) the number available was about 1,800. He claims that the Germans held up for six weeks "some 20,000 allied troops", which was indeed the number in the area at the end, though most of them were not fighting units and had been sent out to create and administer a permanent base. He says that the final assault was easy, a belief which is contradicted by Auchinleck's dispatch and takes no account of changed circumstances which resulted from the preliminary operations.

More damaging than errors of fact were the insinuations: that Narvik was evacuated in the end because of the delay in taking it and not, as was the case, because France was being overrun and the whole Norwegian adventure was derelict; that Mackesy took refuge in his instructions rather than assessed the situation; that the base at Harstad was 120 miles from Narvik—false in itself and containing the innuendo that it had been chosen by an error of judgment, and chosen by Mackesy.

Startling to the trained historian are the inconsisten-

cies. On one page H.E. shells are available, on another they are not. The strength of the Germans is recklessly varied. The assault on Narvik features at one moment as a "fair proposition", at another as a "desperate risk". A general impression is created that the troops were ready for immediate battle on their arrival; it is then revealed that they lacked even their reserves of small arms ammunition. The British infantry's helplessness in the snow is admitted, to be followed by a criticism of their commander's alleged intention to wait for it to melt.

An inconsistency on a higher plane is the contrasting treatment of the proposed assault on Narvik and a similar one which was planned against Trondheim. At Trondheim, a senior admiral burned to attack, and the army successfully resisted. But there was one decisive difference. The military commander for Trondheim was in England, with access to the War Office and the Chiefs of Staff. The Narvik commander was in the Arctic, and after the first week was denied communication with the War Office. The Narvik operation lay wholly in the hands of Churchill, and the commander's judgment could be ignored.

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How can one explain the bitterness with which Churchill pursued the little Narvik operation in later years? The key, I believe, lies in a sentence of his own which reviews the Norwegian catastrophe: "It is a marvel that I survived and maintained my position in public esteem and Parliamentary confidence."

The ominous word Gallipoli

In the week before the fall of the Chamberlain government on 10th May, Churchill was being criticised in Press and Parliament. In the correspondence columns of *The Times* and in the House of Commons there were comments on the boasting with which the campaign had opened. Churchill had described Hitler's invasion of Norway as a blunder comparable with Napoleon's invasion of Spain; had claimed that the allies had all the advantages of communications; had promised to sink every ship in the Skagerrak. All this was remembered; and more alarming, the ominous word Gallipoli was being heard. Narvik itself had several features of a small-scale Dardanelles. The navy had been sent in before troops were at hand; the troops were not embarked in tactical order, and had to be diverted to a friendly port before they could be used.

Yet all this could be redeemed by a quick success. And Whitworth's report on 13th April suggested that all was well. In a burst of optimism two-thirds of Mackesy's infantry and all his snow-trained troops were diverted elsewhere. And Churchill waited expectantly for news that Narvik had fallen to the gutted remnant of the force. There was, as he admits in his memoirs, no compelling strategic reason to desire a quick success at Narvik. But there were political ones; and Churchill himself had a compelling personal reason to desire one.

Maps by permission of Eyre & Spottiswoode, Ltd. (Major-General J. L. Moulton: *The Norwegian Campaign of 1940*. 1966.)

⁴ The late Rear-Admiral L. E. S. Maund and Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Dowler.