

CHURCHILL AS CHRONICLER:

An aerial view of the town and harbour of Narvik looking south.



THE NARVIK EPISODE

In his actions and writings, Churchill made General Mackesy the scapegoat for the allied failure to recapture Norway in 1940. Was this a fair assessment? And why did Churchill pursue the cause with such bitterness? Mackesy's son explains . . .

Piers Mackesy

IN THE SUMMER OF 1941 THE patience of the War Office was being sorely tried by Winston Churchill's jubilation over the relief of Tobruk, the Libyan port which had been under

siege by Rommel's Afrika Korps. Churchill was deriding the folly of those who had doubted the wisdom of holding the port. The Director of Military Operations, Major-General

J.N. Kennedy, regarded the success as an ill-deserved stroke of luck, attributable not to the military intuition of Churchill but to the diversion of German resources for the invasion of Russia.

Kennedy guessed, however, that Churchill's version of events would prevail. 'He has a very keen eye to the records of this war', Kennedy wrote in his diary, 'and perhaps unconsciously he puts himself and his actions in the most favourable light even at the cost of being unfair to others'.

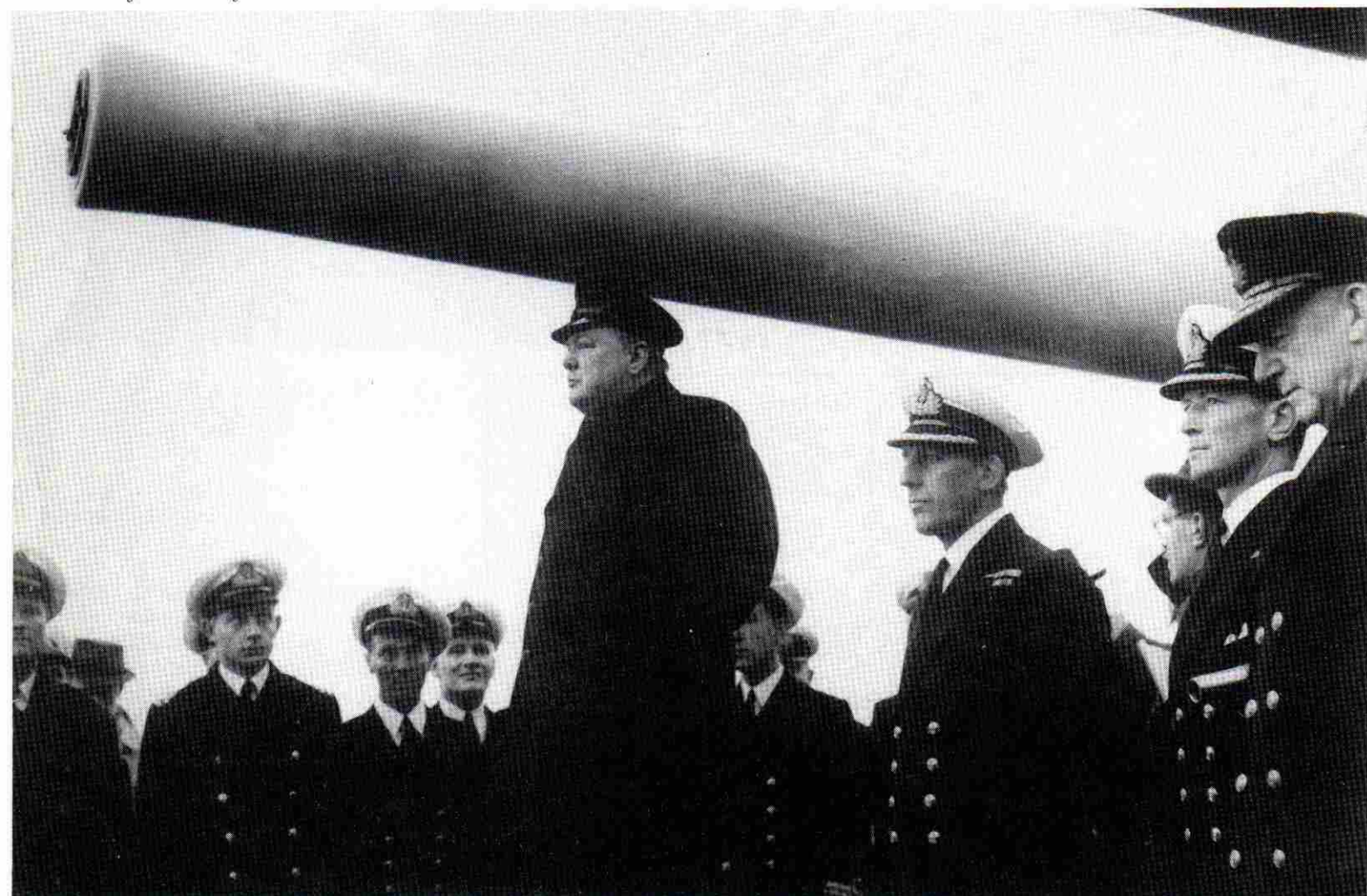
As Kennedy knew, Churchill had done it before. His account of the First World War, *The World Crisis*, was an apologia for his own reverses, and has been described by an historian as a 'skilfully fabricated myth': a myth which had been subjected to heated criticism between the wars. No sooner was Churchill's role in the Second

World War ended than he threw his talent for rapid composition and his skill at using other people to shorten his labours into the production of his war memoirs. Slashing through the Official Secrets Act, he published his own version of history years ahead of

Churchill in his role as First Lord of the Admiralty in February 1940.

worth in the battleship *Warspite* had penetrated the Ofotfjord and annihilated the German destroyer force which had brought the German army to Narvik. But instead of seizing the opportunity and assaulting the demoralised garrison under cover of the warship's mighty guns, Mackesy had settled down in the little port of

destined for the highest posts in the army. His career came to an abrupt end in the operations at Narvik'. Mackesy had earned a reputation as a brilliant general staff officer with an original mind, and his political and strategic grasp made him a natural choice for the extraordinary Scandinavian expedition.



his competitors and a generation before the opening of the archives. *The Second World War* marked its indelible stamp on subsequent interpretation of the period.

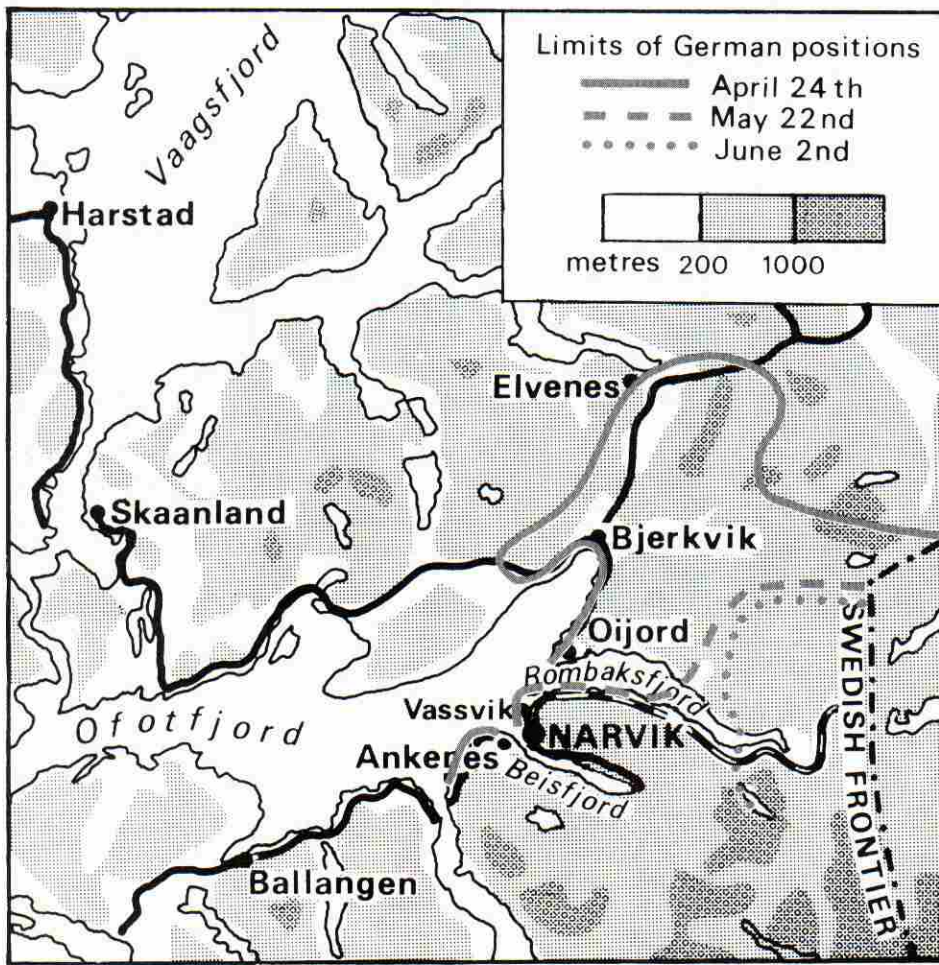
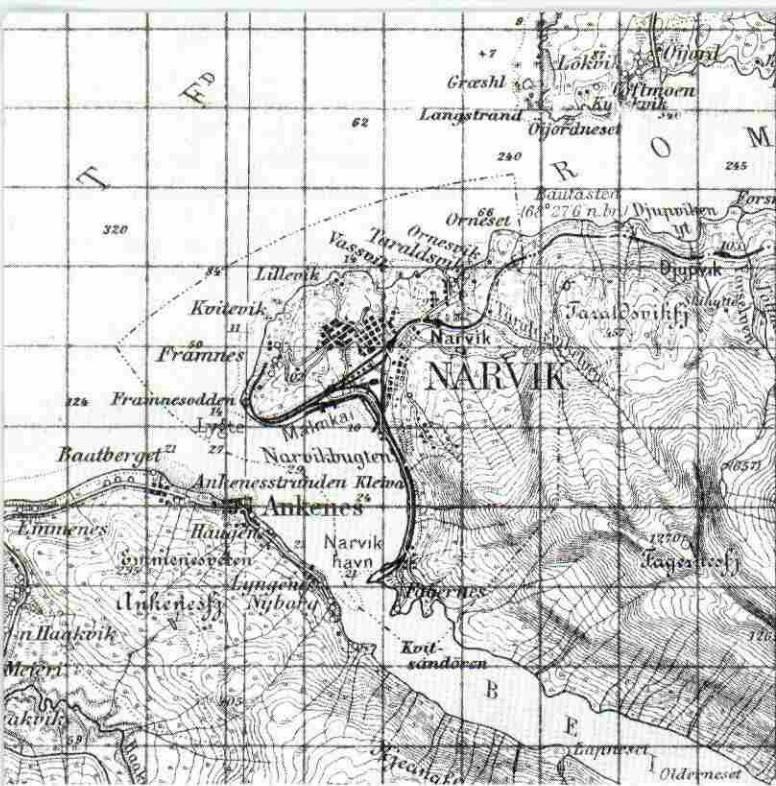
General Kennedy's prediction of unfairness proved to be right; and an example of this was the brutal manipulation of facts over the Narvik operations of April-June 1940, a period when Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty and Chairman of the Military Co-ordination Committee had directed the Norwegian campaign. When the first volume, *The Gathering Storm*, burst on an expectant world in 1948, one of its sensations was the conduct of the attack on Narvik by Kennedy's old friend, my father 'Pat' Mackesy.

Mackesy, it appeared, had arrived on the scene with a military force at the moment when Admiral Whit-

Harstad in the Lofoten Islands to unload his force and prepare for a slow and protracted siege, rejecting later opportunities for decisive action. For six weeks a scratch German force, with a nucleus of only 2,000 regular infantry, had held at bay 20,000 allied troops, and denied the allies a much needed success.

Who was this apparently inept and slothful general? If Churchill's was a fair account of the matter, Mackesy fell far short of what the army had expected of him. General Kennedy had served under him twice at the War Office, and described him as an officer of outstanding ability. 'I owe him a debt of gratitude', he wrote in a memoir after the war, 'for he did more to educate me than had been done for me in two years at the Staff College. He had supremely good qualities, and at the time was regarded as being

Mackesy was not only a staff officer, however, but a man of action with considerable experience of command. As a young officer he had adventured alone in the unexplored African bush, and when war broke out in 1914 he had journeyed for many weeks from up-country Nigeria to fight in the German Cameroons. Three years' service followed in France in the line and on the staff, and in 1919-20 he served in north and south Russia, commanding a rearguard throughout a retreat of six hundred miles in the Murmansk expedition. He emerged from the war thrice decorated and with two mentions in despatches. In the late thirties he commanded a brigade in Palestine, and he was a major-general training a territorial division in England when he was summoned in January 1940 to command an operation in Scandinavia.



(Above) Major-General P.J. (Pat) Mackesy, CB, DSO, MC. (Above left) Narvik: scale 1/100,000; (left) the Theatre of Operations.

the force had no artillery or other support weapons, and Mackesy pressed in vain for anti-aircraft guns and other modern equipment.

The peace between Finland and Russia in March 1940 checked the enterprise, but it was refurbished in a modified form when, on April 8th, British destroyers mined the territorial waters of Norway to cut the iron-ore route to Germany. To guard against a German reaction, four small forces amounting in all to six battalions of infantry were to occupy Norwegian ports. Mackesy was to proceed ahead in a cruiser with two companies of the Scots Guards. These were to rush ashore when the cruiser berthed at the quay at Narvik, and hope to quell any neutral Norwegian scruples with the fist and rifle-butt.

Happily, perhaps, the allied governments were saved from the political consequences of their plan by the Germans who, achieving complete surprise, seized all the ports of Norway including Narvik by seaborne expeditions. In British ports chaos ensued. Every available warship was rushed to sea. Troops in cruisers were pushed ashore; transports were deprived of their escorts; and Mackesy's naval colleague Sir Edward Evans, with whom he had been working for months, was snatched away by Churchill on a mission to the King of Norway. The British expeditions were thus thrown into disorganisation; and from their wreckage Mackesy emerged several days later in the cruiser *Southampton*, crashing

The expedition was the child of Churchill's lust for action and the French government's reluctance to fight on the Rhine. An allied force was to aid the Finnish army in its struggle against the Russians, combining this with a blow against Germany's supply of iron ore from northern Sweden. The plan might involve the coercion of two neutral powers. Mackesy's force was to occupy the Norwegian port of Narvik, at the head of the warm-water

route for iron ore to Germany, and from there push its way across roadless mountains into Sweden. In Sweden the force would wreck the iron mines and demolish the port of Lulea before the spring thaw opened the Baltic to shipping. The military plan was as unrealistic as the political concept. The force's only line of communication would be a vulnerable single-track mountain railway. Apart from the difficulties of topography,

through the stormy seas at twenty-five knots with two companies of guardsmen to reverse the tide of disaster in the Arctic. Following at convey speed were the 24th Guards Brigade and a territorial brigade; and, from Brest, a demi-brigade of *Chasseurs Alpins* had sailed to give the force a degree of mobility in the Arctic snow.

When the expedition was planned, the Chiefs of Staff had not foreseen a landing in the face of serious opposition, and in spite of Mackesy's remonstrances had ordered the force to embark for a peaceful landing. The transports were loaded economically instead of tactically, with men separated from weapons and weapons from ammunition. And the fighting force was entangled with a mass of administrative units which were intended to prepare a large permanent base, not without an eventual eye to the Swedish orefields. In view of the way his ships had been loaded, Mackesy's new instructions were to land his force at Harstad, a tiny port with one jetty and crane, and reassemble his weapons and ammunition for an attack on Narvik. 'It is not intended that you should land in the face of opposition', he was told. In addition, however, he received a personal letter from the CIGS, Sir Edmund Ironside, which added: 'You may have a chance of taking advantage of naval action and you should do so if you can. Boldness is required'.

The naval action at which Ironside hinted was Whitworth's attack on April 13th; and immediately after his victory he reported that the garrison of Narvik was too demoralised to oppose a landing. Churchill and others concluded that Narvik was virtually in British hands, and Mackesy's territorial brigade and the *Chasseurs Alpins* were diverted to central Norway. But wireless difficulties prevented Mackesy from hearing of the naval victory. The *Southampton* proceeded to Harstad, and his guardsmen disembarked. It was twenty-four hours later that he received his first hint of the changed situation, in a garbled wireless signal from the new Flag Officer of the expedition, offering to land a military force at Narvik on the following morning supported by 200 seamen and marines. But since the guardsmen would have to be re-embarked by small boats and the navy would not use the unbuoyed direct channel to Narvik, there was no possibility of the *Southampton* arriving in time. No attack could be made before the 16th, three days after the *Warspite's* victory. And few expected a tame German surrender so

long after the battle. Already a destroyer off Narvik harbour had suffered eleven casualties from a machine-gun which it had not been able to silence.

Thus the first moment of apparent opportunity passed. The Flag Officer proceeded with the Guards Brigade to Harstad, and Mackesy boarded the flagship *Aurora* to be confronted by his new colleague, a stranger whose identity he had barely discovered, Admiral of the Fleet the Earl of Cork and Orrery. And now began the conflict over the military plan.

Lord Cork, whose only instructions consisted of desultory chats with Churchill and the First Sea Lord, had formed the impression that the troops should run desperate risks to take Narvik, though he was not aware that the force had not been loaded for action. He proposed an immediate assault landing at Narvik.

The plan would have had one supreme advantage. For the land approaches to Narvik, much of them wild mountains and glaciers, lay under four feet of soft snow, and troops untrained in snow warfare would be unable to move. If a force could be put ashore on the quay at Narvik the whole business could be cut short. Otherwise there would have to be an overland advance, which would mean waiting for troops trained in snow warfare or for the thaw.

Yet the desirable and the possible are different things. In existing conditions an opposed landing was not feasible; on that point the senior army officers were in agreement, as were many of the navy, including Lord Cork's Chief of Staff. The harbour, choked with wrecks, was impracticable for shipping; and a landing could

only be made under the steep bluffs of the rocky northern shore of the peninsula, where the most hopeful beach at Vassvik offered no more than a platoon front to the attacker. No landing craft were available, and the assault would have to be made in open boats and fishing craft. These would have to make their approach in full view of the enemy and without the cover of darkness, for already the approach of the Arctic summer had reduced the night to a short interval of twilight. There was no land-based artillery to support them from across the fjord.

In these conditions it was by no means certain that a foothold could be won, though Mackesy was inclined to agree with Lord Cork that it might be done at a price, as it had been done in 1915 at Gallipoli. But Gallipoli had also demonstrated that reaching the shore is not the only problem of an amphibious operation. The build-up on the beach would be so slow as to invite an immediate counter-attack, and the crest of the bluffs fronting the fjord gave cover for the enemy to form up in perfect security. Mackesy, who knew more about Arctic warfare than anyone else in his force, knew that the British infantry would be virtually incapable of movement in the deep snow; and their clothes, wet from wading to the shore, would freeze on them after sunset (a fortnight later even the *Chasseurs Alpins* advancing by land were to suffer catastrophically from frostbite). The infantry brigadier believed that a single machine-gun firing down the re-entrants which led from the beach would pin them down. If they struggled through the snow to the crest beyond, they would wade into a storm of fire from small arms and mortars to which they had no reply.

Harstad, the Lofoten Islands, where Mackesy disembarked his forces — and waited.



They could not manoeuvre in the snow, and had no support weapons of their own: no medium machine guns, no high explosive bombs for their 2-inch mortars, no means of moving their heavy 3-inch mortars.

Churchill did not accept the soldiers' appreciation. 'Later in the war', he was to write, 'scores of such assaults were made and often succeeded'. This is untrue. No assaults were made in such adverse conditions of climate and equipment; and the lesson was painfully learned that assault landings could not succeed without the most careful planning and rehearsal, nor without special landing craft and adequate supporting fire.

Never? What if the enemy's will was broken by adversity and shock? The best evidence is that at Narvik it was not. The straggling figures seen as they fled across the snow after the naval battle were not German soldiers, but naval crews and merchant seamen from sunken ships; wet, shocked and homeless. Four or five days were needed to rest and re-equip them with captured Norwegian material: thereafter the 2,500 seamen formed a useful part of the German force.

As for the German troops, they were in their battle positions round the town, invisible from the fjord under their mantle of snow. These were *Gebirgsjäger* from the Third Mountain Division, and the Narvik peninsula was held by a battalion of the 139th (Carinthian) Mountain Regiment. They had their full complement of heavy weapons, including a platoon of two 75mm. mountain guns. Their leader was General Dietl, an experienced mountain infantryman who later commanded on the Finnish front against the Russians. A survivor of his staff, Colonel Herrmann, has recorded his conviction that a British attack would have failed. If the attackers reached the shore, 'then every approach, every slope and every hollow lay under the fire of German machine-guns and mortars from good overlooking positions'. He believed that with limited landing strength and without landing craft or heavy weapons Mackesy was right to postpone the attack.

Yet one factor, which weighed heavy in the imagination of the First Lord of the Admiralty, has been omitted from the balance. Churchill retained his youthful fascination with the might of large naval cannon: surely the defences could be overwhelmed by naval gunfire, dominated by the *Warspite's* colossal 15-



Admiral of the Fleet, the Earl of Cork and Orrery, who arrived at Narvik in April, bent on assault.

inchers? This was the only fire-support available for a landing; and Lord Cork's confidence in its ability to smother the defences was not securely founded. The whole area of the town was rendered immune to flat-trajectory naval gunfire by the bluffs which fronted the Ofotfjord. On the forward slopes the re-entrants commanding the beaches could not be reached by naval guns. And later bombardments round Narvik proved that at this stage of the war naval officers knew little about directing fire against targets on land. Even machine-guns under direct naval observation continued to fire till they were mopped up by troops.

Nor was enough suitable ammunition available. The standard naval projectile was an armour-piercing round, and when plans for a general bombardment were discussed on April 19th, it was found that the *Warspite* had only twenty rounds of high explosive shells for each gun, or one shell for every 6,000 square yards

of her target area. The whole bombarding force had only one shell for every 400 square yards, with a total of only 3,500 rounds. No one who has met the *Wehrmacht* in the field, whether in triumph or adversity, will believe that its discipline and courage would break under such a bombardment.

General Dietl's appreciation of the tactical situation was very similar to Mackesy's. He saw little to fear from a direct assault; but he was uneasy about his flanks. North of the Ofotfjord his other two battalions were pushing back the local Norwegian forces, and he occupied the neighbouring peninsulas of Oijord and Ankenes to deny to the allies the observation posts from which artillery fire might be directed onto his Narvik positions.

The British general's own reconnaissance had convinced him that before Narvik could be assaulted he must clear these positions at Oijord and Ankenes of enfilading machine-guns, and establish field artillery there when it arrived to cover the attack. The final phase would involve either a move round the head of the Rombaksfjord, or a short crossing from Oijord to the eastern flank of the Narvik peninsula. The plan was put into operation when the *Chasseurs Alpins* returned to the Narvik command at the end of April. In May came the belated thaw, and on the 13th the French Foreign Legion landed at Bjerkvik with light tanks and cleared the northern shore of the Ofotfjord.

On that day General Auchinleck arrived and, observing the bad spirit between the two commanders, superseded Mackesy who returned to England. But Auchinleck approved the existing Mackesy plans, and Narvik was duly assaulted and captured from Oijord a fortnight later.

The successful assault was launched under very different circumstances from those of the earlier plan. The snow had gone; field artillery and landing craft were available; and the possession of the Oijord peninsula transformed the tactical problem, providing a concealed embarkation and a short approach. Instead of assaulting the main enemy position on the Narvik bluffs, the landing could be made on his eastern flank, where the defences were weaker and the shelving shoreline could be brought under observed fire from warships and from three field batteries at Oijord.

Yet even with these advantages, the situation remained critical after the landing. Four hours were required to



(Top) German re-inforcement troops landing in Norway at the end of April, 1940. (Above left) General Dietl, Commander of the Mountain troops, whose division occupied and defended Narvik. (Above right) A contemporary painting of German machine gunners at Narvik.

land 1,250 men, and even then, when the German reserves had had time to work their way round the mountain crests from Narvik, a determined counter-attack bundled the French and Norwegian troops back almost to the beach. The position was only restored with the help of a destroyer and the Oijord field batteries. Eleven hours after the landing three battalions were ashore, and with his reserves exhausted General Dietl began his withdrawal, his men resisting obstinately through the rocks and scrub.

Thus Narvik was won at last, at a cost of 150 casualties. From the comparative ease of the success, it might have seemed that the operation could have been completed some weeks earlier. But a walk along the Narvik peninsula confirmed to the naval Chief of Staff the difficulties of an earlier landing. The few beaches, all

well covered by machine-guns posts that were invisible from the sea, shelved so gently that the troops would have had to wade a considerable distance to the shore. General Auchinleck agreed on the difficulties, and on the wisdom of the plan finally adopted. 'The operation was carried out with the barest margin of safety', he concluded. '... It is unfair to expect any troops to undertake such hazardous operations with such inadequate means'.

Mackesy was retired from the army on his return to England. It was ironical that a soldier whose horizons were wide should have been ruined by an obscure brigade operation in the Arctic. But such are the chances of war; and he had probably saved the army and Churchill himself from another Gallipoli massacre which might have prejudiced the development of combined operations in later years. His

personal tragedy was the clash of characters to which his temperament was ill-adapted.

What was required at Narvik was not only to be right, but to persuade his naval colleague. Mackesy was not a conciliatory man, and did not gladly accommodate himself to those in high places with whom he disagreed. His relations with his first naval colleague, Sir Edward Evans, seem to have been excellent; but at Harstad he was confronted by a stranger chosen by the statesman whom he knew to be chiefly responsible for the disastrous Scandinavian adventure. Many witnesses of that first encounter on the deck of the *Aurora* recognised the instant antagonism between the two commanders. Mackesy's intellectual intolerance confronted the impetuous judgment and masterful temper of an Admiral of the Fleet. Lord Cork was his senior by three ranks and ten



French troops cross a railway line behind the port of Narvik in May 1940.

years, and even outranked the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet within whose command he was operating. This extraordinary encounter, engineered by Churchill in defiance of the principles of combined operations, was compounded when Churchill placed Mackesy under Cork's command and severed his operational links with the War Office. From that moment the only permitted channel for the army's views was the admiral, who was in personal touch with Churchill by private cipher; a correspondence to which the Admiralty was not a party, and which Lord Cork was anxious to conceal from the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet. The fact that neither commander had chosen or was in full sympathy with his Chief of Staff did nothing to improve matters. Mackesy had been denied the officer for whom he had asked, and whose influence would certainly have helped to bridge the gap.

Churchill's anger over the delays at Narvik was unrelenting. Even Auchinleck fell under his suspicion; and Churchill urged that Mackesy should be subjected to 'severe and public punishment'. This was not to be; but eight years later Mackesy found that his conduct was pilloried in Churchill's memoirs with a harshness scarcely paralleled elsewhere in the work. Churchill's narrative was cast in a framework of inaccuracy, of innuendo, and of inconsistencies which can only be explained by the author's profound emotional involvement in the operation.

First the errors. Churchill states that the military commander was chosen on April 5th, though Mackesy had been the commander since the Scandinavian plans were born: Churchill had met him in Downing Street many weeks earlier and discussed him with General Ismay. This may be a mere carelessness, but it conveys an impres-

sion that the Narvik expedition was a sudden improvisation, rather than a long-considered operation for whose deficiencies Churchill himself bore much of the responsibility. 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 administrative base units. He states that the final assault was easy, an assertion which is contradicted by Auchinleck's dispatch and takes no account of advantages resulting from the preliminary operations.

More damaging than factual errors were the insinuations: that Narvik had to be 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 bankrupt; that Mackesy took refuge in his instructions rather than assessing 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 Mackesy.

Disconcerting to the historian are Churchill's inconsistencies. On one page high explosive shells are available, on another they are not. The strength of the Germans is recklessly varied. The assault on Narvik features as a 'fair proposition', then as a 'desperate risk'. An impression is created that the British troops were ready for battle when they arrived; it is then revealed that they lacked even their reserves of small arms ammunition. An admission of the infantry's immobility in the snow is 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 against Trondheim. At Trondheim one of Churchill's dug-out senior admirals burned to attack, and the army successfully resisted. But there was one decisive difference between the two operations. 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 had been captured by Churchill, and the commander's judgment could be ignored.

How can one explain the bitterness with which Churchill pursued the little Narvik operation through the years? The key may lie in a sentence which reviews the Norwegian catastrophe: 'It is a marvel that I survived and maintained my position in public esteem and Parliamentary confidence'.

In the week before the fall of the Chamberlain government on May 10th, Churchill was being criticised in press and Parliament for the boasting with which the campaign had opened. More alarming for Churchill, the ominous word Gallipoli was being heard – the dreaded name which had ruined him a quarter of a century earlier. The official naval historian has suggested that he may have seen in Mackesy a replica of General Stopford who had thrown away the opportunity at Suvla Bay in 1915. It must have seemed to Churchill that his glory and redemption were about to be snatched from him.

Yet all this could be redeemed by a quick success; and Admiral Whitworth's report on April 13th suggested that success was in his grasp. Churchill waited expectantly to announce that Narvik had fallen. There was, as Churchill admitted in his memoirs, no compelling strategic reason to demand a quick success at Narvik. But there were political reasons; and Churchill himself had a compelling personal reason to desire such a success.

FOR FURTHER READING:

The present account is based partly on private papers and interviews. Published accounts include: Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: I. The Gathering Storm* (Cassell, 1948); L.E.H. Maund, *Assault from the Sea* (Methuen, 1949), a first-hand account by Lord Cork's Chief of Staff; T.K. Derry, *The Campaign in Norway* (HMSO, 1952); S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea*, vol. I (HMSO, 1954); Stephen Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals* (esp. Appendix) (Collins, 1977).

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