

OPERATION WESERÜBUNG

and the Origins of Joint Warfare

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Military history finds few examples of nations and armed forces that consistently excel in maneuver warfare based upon speed, focus, decentralized execution, high levels of initiative, and strong small-unit leadership. The German military in World War II was such an organization. It is credited, in particular, with mastering the operational level of war. But one brilliant operation, the invasion of Scandinavia in 1940, has almost been reduced to a historical footnote. That

campaign, recorded as an outstanding example of maneuver warfare at the operational level, is also the first joint operation that involved significant land, sea, and air forces fighting under unified command.

Because it preceded the better-known *Gelb* attack on the Low Countries by just one month, the invasion of Scandinavia (code-named Operation *Weserübung*) has received scant attention from most historians. Nevertheless, it is still worth studying by practitioners of the operational art since it is replete with examples of successfully implemented tenets of maneuver-based doctrine. It also demonstrates the importance of

Summary

The German military genius for maneuver warfare is well illustrated by an often overlooked operation of World War II, the invasion of Scandinavia in 1940. Operation *Weserübung* also warrants examination because it was joint in execution and demonstrates that the German army, navy, and air force—*Wehrmacht*, *Kriegsmarine*, and *Luftwaffe*—could fight as a team even if rivalry among the headquarters of the services made Hitler the operation's unified commander by fault. A combination of speed, surprise, and daring enabled the German armed forces to defy the Royal Navy by transporting troops directly to their objectives along the Norwegian coast. Furthermore, quickness and dash baffled the hapless Norwegians and beleaguered Allied forces. The lessons of this operation were not lost on the British for the balance of the war and remain relevant today as a case study in joint warfare and the operational art.

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the linkages between the operational art and strategy and between the various arms and services which typically cooperate in

the first joint operation that involved significant land, sea, and air forces

joint campaigns. Although more than five decades have passed, the problems and challenges inherent in modern joint operations stand clearly revealed in *Weserübung*.

In this operation, Germany employed a joint force of army, navy, and air force units in a centrally planned, simultaneous assault, along multiple avenues of approach and against numerous key objectives. Execution was highly decentralized, with a minimal need for excessive com-

mand and control structures that are the hallmark of modern military organizations. Furthermore, the assigned objectives accurately identified and exploited Allied centers of gravity. Pitting strength against weakness, the Germans crushed the Danes in one day and destroyed Norwegian resistance in less than two months, despite the arrival of a sizable number of British and French troops.

This stunning success was based on a few simple factors. First, the Germans had good intelligence that led to accurate appreciations of enemy strengths and weaknesses thereby enabling them to focus on critical enemy vulnerabilities. Second, they applied their strengths—including airpower, surprise, and well-led professional forces—against Allied weaknesses such as timid commanders, ineffective mobilization systems, and a vulnerable command and control network.

Third, the bold use of German warships to carry troops to their objectives in the teeth of the Royal Navy led directly to operational success in the campaign. Fourth, Norwegian regular forces were outnumbered, ill-equipped, poorly organized and led, and generally neglected. Simultaneous multiple blows aimed at key points throughout the country paralyzed the Norwegian decisionmaking structure, thus allowing early successes against unprepared defenders.

Finally, the German invasion of France

in May 1940 forced the Allies (British, French, and a smattering of Poles) to entirely pull out of Norway in an effort to stave off disaster on the Western Front. This final element, essentially based on good fortune, saved beleaguered German forces at Narvik and permitted the Germans to complete their conquest of Norway.

Strategic and Operational Planning

The German High Command turned its gaze toward Scandinavia soon after the successful invasion of Poland. While preferring to keep Scandinavia neutral, German planners feared that Britain and France might violate Norwegian neutrality in order to position forces for an attack on Germany's northern flank.¹ Hitler repeatedly argued with the Army High Command (*Oberkommando des Heeres* or OKH) that if he did not act first, the British would establish themselves in the neutral ports. German naval

commanders touted Norway's suitability as a staging area for surface, air, and submarine operations to gain control over the Norwegian Sea and support eventual operations against Britain, which in turn would facilitate access to the North Atlantic.² An important consideration was access to Swedish

iron ore, which supplied German war industries and which traveled overland from Kiruna in Sweden to Narvik in Norway and thence along the Norwegian coastline to German ports in the Baltic.

Hitler, who had exercised supreme military command since February 1938, was also influenced by the tentative steps taken by the French and British to reinforce Finland during the Winter War (which he interpreted as proof of their malicious intentions



German troops embarking for the invasion.



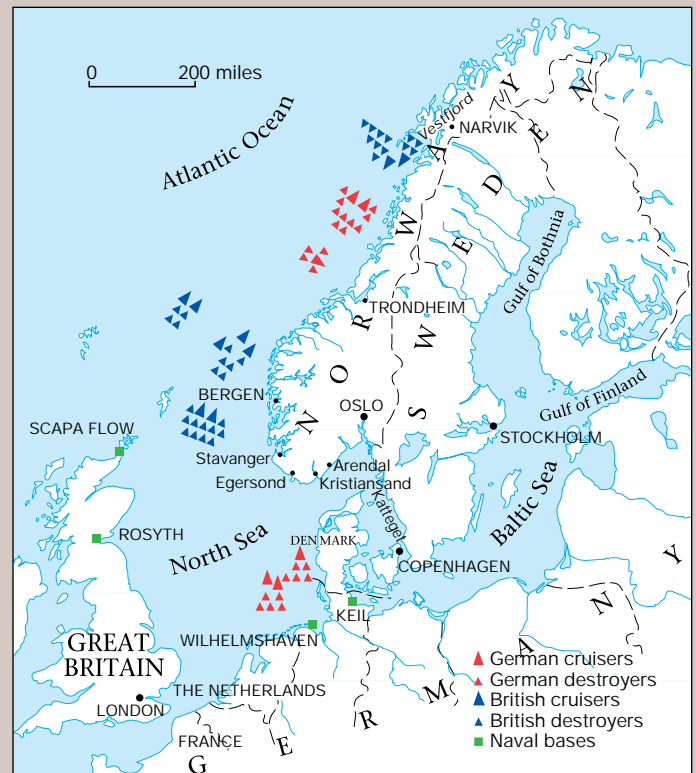
General-Admiral Saalwächter, the supreme commander of naval forces deployed to Norway.

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2000 hours, April 7



1200 hours, April 8



On April 7 German naval units were sailing at top speed toward Trondheim. At the British Admiralty, no one believed that Norway was the target: the German ships were expected to slip into the Atlantic in order to attack Allied convoys.

Source. Maps and narrative adapted from *Norway 1940* by François Kersaudy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

By noon on April 8 the Germans had already passed Trondheim. The British were still northwest and south of Bergen, whereas further south, unbeknown to the British, German naval groups were fast approaching the southern tip of Norway.

fast warships of the German fleet could be used as troop transports for part of the assault force

in Scandinavia) and later by the *Altmark* incident when British sailors boarded a German vessel in Norwegian territorial waters to free 300 British POWs.

On December 14, 1939, Hitler ordered the Armed Forces High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* or OKW) to conduct preliminary planning for the invasion of Norway. The plan, known as *Studie Nord*, included reports submitted by the staffs of each of the services. Given its keen interest in the matter, the navy's report was the most exhaustive. The dominance of naval planning derives in part from the involvement by the army and air force in the preparations for the upcoming invasion of France and the Low Countries, known as Plan *Gelb*.

The navy (*Kriegsmarine*) staff worked out an expanded version of *Studie Nord* between January 14 and 19, 1940, that reached two important conclusions. First, surprise would be absolutely essential to the success of the operation. If surprise could be achieved Norwegian resistance would be negligible, and the only significant threat would be British ships on patrol off the coast of Norway, originally believed to be one or two cruisers. Second, the planners concluded that fast warships of the German fleet could be used as troop transports for part of the assault force. This use of the surface fleet would overcome the range limitations on air transport and allow for the simultaneous occupation of

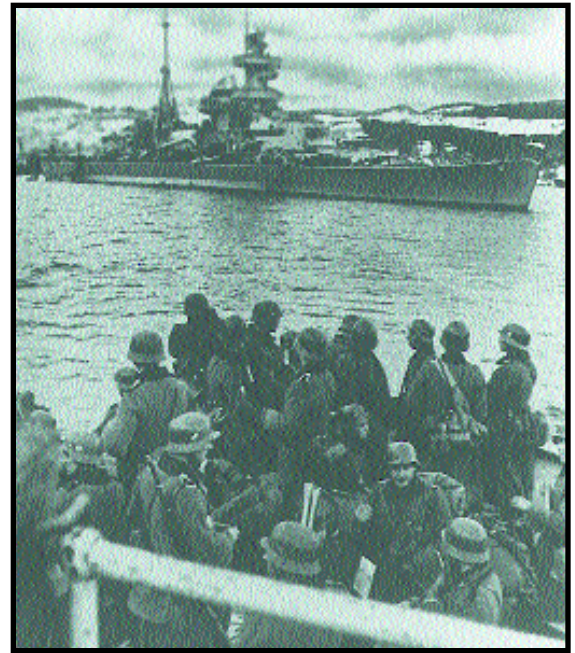
1400–1600 hours, April 8



In mid-afternoon on April 8 the Germans changed courses several times. A British plane spotted the German naval group heading west, and radioed the message back to base. As a result, British ships headed west, thus losing any chance of blocking the German landings.

numerous points on the Norwegian coast, including Narvik.³

These two conclusions revealed daring and a “bias for action” which permeated the German armed forces and had already been exhibited in the Polish invasion. The study called for landings along the entire Norwegian coast from Oslo to Tromsø. On January 20, 1940, the report was submitted to Hitler and the following day he ordered the creation of a special staff within the OKW dedicated to formulating operational plans for *Weserübung*.⁴ Hitler apparently had at least two reasons for bypassing the air force, which would play the dominant role in the actual operation, and taking personal control of *Weserübung*. First, he probably thought that the operation was too complex and ambitious for



German troops successfully land at all locations from Oslo to Narvik, a unique accomplishment in the history of naval warfare.

the junior and untested service to plan and control. Second, Hitler was venting his rage at the air force over an incident

earlier in the month when a *Luftwaffe* major carrying *Gelb* was forced down in Belgium thereby letting the invasion plan get into Allied hands.⁵

On February 5 a joint planning staff was assembled at OKW to prepare detailed plans for the invasion. Significantly, the operations staffs of the services were excluded from the planning process. The principal planner was Captain Theodor Krancke, commanding officer of the cruiser *Admiral Scheer*, assisted by a small number of army and air force officers.

Studie Nord had initially called for only one division of army troops.⁶ But Krancke's plan established a requirement for a corps of army troops consisting of an airborne division, a mountain division, a motorized rifle brigade, and six reinforced infantry regiments. Small parachute units were to seize selected airfields so that follow-on forces could arrive by air. Krancke identified six operational objectives which, if simultaneously

captured, would cripple the country militarily and politically and achieve the strategic goals established by Hitler, namely:⁷

- ▼ Oslo, the capital
- ▼ the populated southern coastal areas
- ▼ Bergen, a major southern port and likely British landing site in the event of counter-attack
- ▼ Trondheim, a major rail terminus and the key to control of central Norway
- ▼ Narvik, the chief city in northern Norway and the crucial rail link to Swedish ore fields
- ▼ Tromsø and Finnmark (northernmost areas of Norway)

The loss of ports and airfields in those areas was expected not only to crush Norwegian resistance at the outset but also to forestall intervention by the western powers until it was too late. Seeking security in boldness and enterprise, the Germans intended a large scale *coup de main* to dislocate their true opponents, the British and French, by preempting their intervention in Norway through the simultaneous attack and occupation of all the important points in the country.

To do this, Krancke's plan called for moving German troops by both air and sea. Only a sudden descent on the Norwegian coast and rapid buildup of forces by airlift and sealift (supported primarily by tactical aviation) offered the hope of success without interference by the Royal Navy. Both the large scale use of warships as assault troop transports and the strategic movement of large troop formations by air were innovations in modern warfare.

The German intent was to induce the Danes and Norwegians to surrender quickly without a fight. To ensure this Hitler ordered the immediate capture of the kings of Denmark and Norway.⁸ The Germans believed that seizing both monarchs would shatter resistance at the outset and lead to a bloodless occupation.

After the *Altmark* incident on February 14, 1940, Hitler appointed General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst to prepare forces for the *coup de main* to take the Norwegian ports.⁹ General der Infanterie von Falkenhorst was a mountain warfare expert who had acquired some experience in Nordic operations as a result of German operations in the Baltic in 1918.¹⁰ Falkenhorst quickly concluded that

Denmark should be occupied as a land bridge to Norway.¹¹ Although the size of the landing force was ultimately raised to six divisions, daring and surprise, not overwhelming force, remained the plan's basis. If resistance was encountered, landings were to be forced, beachheads secured, and nearby Norwegian army mobilization centers occupied.¹² The inability of the Norwegians to mobilize was their Achilles Heel—a critical vulnerability and obvious target for German military action.

The final plan assigned the 3^d Mountain Division and five untested infantry divisions—the 69th, 163^d, 181st, 196th, and 214th—to the conquest of Norway under command of XXI Group. Three divisions made up the initial assault echelon while the remainder were scheduled to reinforce thereafter (a seventh division, the 2^d Mountain, was added later).¹³ The air force contributed three companies of parachute troops to seize airfields (in the German military the air force, not the army, owned airborne forces).

The initial landing detachments were small, with the bulk of invasion forces slated to arrive by air and transport ship in subsequent echelons during the first week. In the south, the 170th and 198th Infantry Divisions, supported by the 11th Motorized Brigade, formed XXXI Corps for the assault on Denmark. X Air Corps, a very large organization of some 1,000 aircraft of all types, was tasked to keep the Royal Navy at bay and supply German forces by air.¹⁴

Lightning Strikes

Hitler's initial desire to place all *Weserübung* forces under a single army commander was not realized. Despite his status as Supreme Warlord, and the obvious operational advantages of unified command, Hitler was unable or unwilling to overrule the strong objections of the navy and air force, which rebelled at the idea of placing large naval and air forces under a land force officer. The operation remained under Hitler's personal command (exercised through the OKW operations staff). Falkenhorst was designated the senior commander, exercising no direct command authority over naval and air forces. In the official after action report, German commanders noted that the harmonious cooperation achieved



Generaloberst von Falkenhorst.

by the engaged forces was a compliment to the personalities and professionalism of the commanders involved, but not a result of command arrangements, which they recognized as unsatisfactory.¹⁵

Mindful of signs that the Allies were preparing to occupy Scandinavia first (British planning, code-named *Wilfred*, was far advanced and British forces did indeed lay mines in Norwegian waters on April 8), Hitler ordered *Weserübung* to begin early on the morning of April 9, 1940, with landings at Oslo, Bergen, Kristiansand, Trondheim, and Narvik. Supply ships camouflaged as merchant vessels actually preceded the assault ships and lay in wait in Norwegian harbors. Despite some intelligence indicators, British surface units were not deployed to detect large-scale German movements. The British fleet, with troops embarked to conduct their own landings in Norway, did sortie on April 7 from Scapa Flow, but the fleet did not intercept the fast-moving German ships or interrupt their landing operations. In a tragic

blunder, the Royal Navy marched off its soldiers and steamed away in search of German battlecruisers reported in the area, leaving Falkenhorst to carry out his landing operations unopposed.

The magnitude and speed of the Ger-

man landings completely paralyzed civilian and military leaders in both Denmark and Norway, as well as the Allies. Denmark was quickly overrun on the first day, allowing German close air support operations to be staged from landing fields in Jutland. Norwegian coastal defenders put up a sharp fight in the Oslo Fjord, sinking the cruiser *Blücher* (with the staff of 163^d Infantry division aboard) and delaying conquest of the capital by half a day. (Oslo fell that afternoon to a few companies of troops which flew into Fornebu airport.) Except at Narvik, the remaining landings met only minimal resistance. After clashing with landbased aircraft and small destroyer units on April 9, the Royal Navy drew off, permitting the remainder of the German assault echelons to land unimpeded. Except for the successful escape by the Norwegian Royal family, the day was one of breathtaking success for the German armed forces.

The ineptness of the Norwegian army was a significant factor in the planning and actual success of the campaign.¹⁶ General Laake, Norwegian army commander in chief, was selected for the post less for his military prowess than for a willingness to deeply cut the military budget.¹⁷ On the day of the invasion he was reluctant for many hours to grasp what was happening. When he finally did realize that his country was under attack he returned to headquarters to find it deserted. Among those who had departed was Laake's aide who had taken the general's uniforms with him. Lacking even a personal vehicle, Laake tried to catch up with his headquarters by public transport—a symbol of the debacle that afflicted the Norwegian army that day.¹⁸

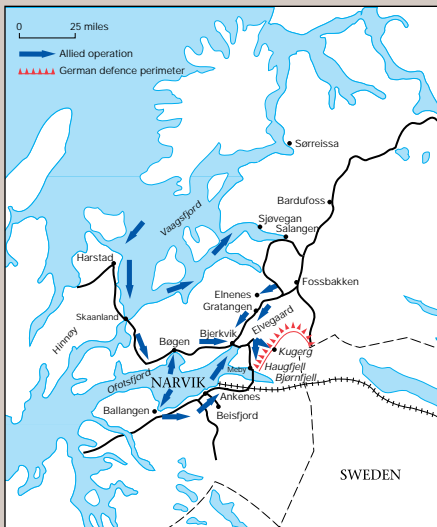
The mobilization centers were under constant assault, and weapons depots and mobilization lists fell into German hands before Norwegian reservists could assemble. However, hundreds of young men came streaming out of the cities and towns to join General Ruge, who was appointed commander in chief after the invasion. His highly improvised force was untrained and included make-shift battalions and companies with little equipment. The troops were unable to maneuver and deemed useless for of-

Troop transport aircraft enroute to Norway.



As the first Germans land at Oslo airport at 1000 hours on April 9, a cloud of smoke marks a downed British aircraft in the distance.





Operations in northern Norway until May 27, 1940 (above). Operations in central Norway, April 1940 (right).



ments and complete the occupation of Norway.

The first effective blow by the Allies came on the morning of April 13 and was a disaster for German naval fortunes. Following a failed air attack from the British carrier *Furious* against Trondheim the previous day, a British destroyer group commanded by Admiral Sir Charles Forbes encountered German surface units screening landing forces off Narvik. Supported by the battleship *Warspite*, British destroyers advanced into the fjords and engaged German ships sheltered there. Unable to reach the open sea the Germans ships fought until their fuel and ammunition were exhausted, and then were beached by their

Despite barriers blown from the rock German soldiers advance northward.



Field Marshal Milch, commander of the air fleet deployed to Norway.

commanders or sunk by British gunfire. The losses, combined with those of the previous days, deprived the German navy of half its destroyer force and dealt its surface fleet a blow from which Germany never recovered.

Some units would eventually get organized and fight effectively, but except for brief clashes here and there, Norwegian opposition at the outset was sporadic and ineffectual.¹⁹ In agony, Norway could only hope that the Allies would arrive soon.²⁰

The Allies Respond

Fear of German airpower and the rapidity with which the Germans manned Norwegian air and coastal defenses kept the Allies from striking back in the south. In both central and northern Norway, however, which were farther removed from German airbases, an Allied riposte seemed more feasible. In a race against time Allied planners strove to mount

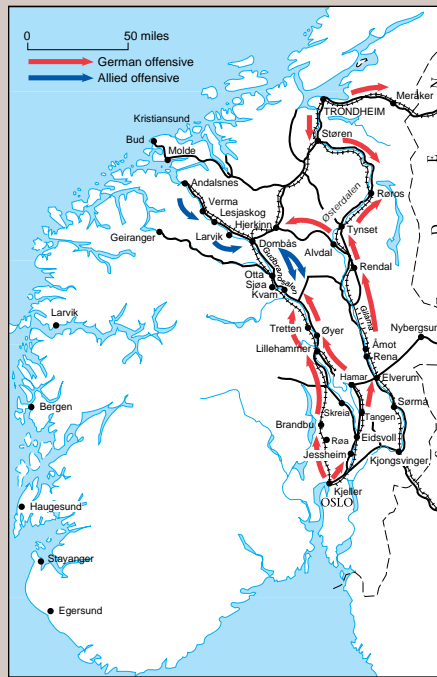
a relief expedition before German forces could organize for defense, even as German units raced north along the valleys and coastal roads to link up with isolated detach-

ments and complete the occupation of Norway.

Against these numerically superior forces the German commander in Trondheim, General Kurt Woytasch, could initially deploy only seven infantry battalions. Nevertheless, he responded vigorously by pushing out strong parties to the north and south to deny the Allies use of the limited road net. Calling for reinforcements and air support, Woytasch counterpunched aggressively at Steinkjer to the north, stopping the cautiously advancing Allied units in their tracks. Assisted by German forces pushing up from the south, which drew off the British threat



The capture of Narvik, May 28, 1940.



Operations in southern Norway during April 1940.



General Dietl.

to his rear, Woytasch easily dealt with the half-hearted thrusts of the French and British.

Although their losses were light, the combination of a pugnacious opponent and devastating air attacks on their bases at Andalsnes and Namsos convinced the Allied commanders that their situation was hopeless. On May 3 the last Allied troops sailed away from Namsos just ahead of the advancing German troops, precipitating the surrender of 2,000 Norwegian troops in the area. Outnumbered by more than six to one, the supremely confident Group Trondheim force and their able commander inflicted an embarrassing defeat, further eroding Allied confidence. Southern and central Norway now lay firmly in Hitler's grip.

Epic at Narvik

German airpower—demonstrating range, speed, and firepower unprecedented in modern warfare—had played a key role in the battles around Trondheim, but range and weather limitations greatly restricted the ability of the *Luftwaffe* to support German forces at Narvik far to the north. Even as the first troops went ashore at Andalsnes, British

cruisers and destroyers were massing off Narvik and the first detachments of British troops arrived to join the fleet.

The German situation in Narvik was tenuous from the outset. The loss of sea control had prevented German reinforcements from reaching the area. The 3^d Mountain Division, under the command of General Eduard Dietl (less its 138th Mountain Infantry Regiment which was attacking Trondheim to the south) found itself cut off from the rest of the country. Days after his successful seizure of Narvik, Dietl was only able to muster 2,000 mountain infantrymen together with 2,600 disembarked sailors. Fully 1,200 miles from Germany and cut off from weak German garrisons to the south, Dietl and his mountain troopers waited grimly for the counterblow to fall.

The British Imperial General Staff believed that an Allied success at Narvik would go far to restore their flagging fortunes. Aside from denying the German war machine the Swedish iron ore it so desperately needed, a convincing defeat of the isolated German forces in north Norway would boost Allied morale and prick the German aura of invincibility. Yet the reasoning of the General Staff was fundamentally misplaced. By dissipating precious naval and air forces in two separate efforts—the attempts to retake first Trondheim and then Narvik—they ensured the failure of both, while a resounding success by stronger forces at Trondheim would have established Allied forces ashore in possession of a good port, rendering the small German contingent in Narvik irrelevant.²¹

Allied ground operations in the north began in earnest on April 24 as four Norwegian battalions attacked Dietl's outposts at Gratangen, supported by a French brigade which landed four days later. In early May a second French brigade and a Polish brigade arrived; with the addition of British forces the Allies built their strength up to 24,500 troops.

throughout the campaign, planners and commanders ensured that tactical concerns were subordinated to strategic and operational requirements

British naval forces were further strengthened with a battleship and aircraft carrier.

Dietl's problems were mounting quickly. The Allies were building up their forces far faster than the Germans (on April 18 Hitler ordered that no new forces would be committed to Narvik). The German troops in Narvik were exposed to continuous shelling from destroyers lying offshore. Freezing temperatures, fog, and snow hampered mobility and sapped the morale even of the tough mountain soldiers. The naval companies were untrained in land warfare and armed only with captured Norwegian weapons. Moreover, food and ammunition stocks were dangerously low.

Despite these vulnerabilities Dietl resisted stubbornly, aided by a curious lack of energy and aggressiveness by the two British commanders, Admiral of the Fleet the Earl of Cork and Orrery and General P.J. Mackesy.



Narvik harbor.

Lacking the troops, artillery, and air support needed to conduct major engagements, the Germans fought delaying actions to maintain a precarious foothold in Narvik as well as control over the rail line leading eastward to Sweden. The Norwegian forces moving down from the north made slow but steady progress. Although the 2^d Mountain Division was pushing hard from Trondheim to relieve

Dietl (at one point marching 90 miles in four days over terrain determined to be impassable by British intelligence officers²²), distance, poor weather, and lack of roads were daunting obstacles.

On May 13, under attack from both north and south and suffering from constant bombardment from sea and continuous threat of landing, Dietl informed OKW through XXI Group that the situation at Narvik was critical. Dietl reported that his

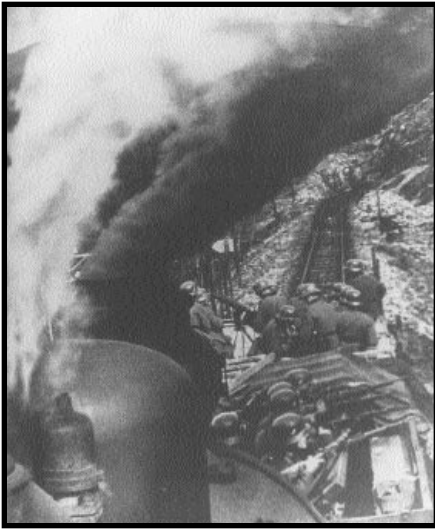
troops were too exhausted even to retreat southward towards the advancing relief columns. He planned to give up the city if the Allies persisted in their offensive and to hold a bridgehead on the railroad, but this would depend on speedy reinforcements, something the Germans had not anticipated. Otherwise, there was no alternative except to cross into Sweden and request internment. Group XXI requested permission for Dietl to do so should enemy action necessitate it. Hoping for a miracle, the 3^d Mountain Division (actually no more than a weak regiment by this time) prepared for the end.

Dietl got his miracle. With pressure from XXI Group and OKW, Hitler approved limited reinforcements (Plan *Gelb* was underway by then and diverting large formations to Norway would draw strong opposition from his commanders in France). On May 14, a token force of 66 paratroopers arrived. Over the next three weeks a parachute battalion and two companies of mountain infantry (hastily trained in parachute operations) were dropped into Narvik.

These forces enabled Dietl to hold on long enough for the full weight of the invasion of the Low Countries to make itself felt on the Allies. Although finally compelled to give up Narvik to vastly superior forces on May 28, the remnants of 3^d Mountain Division continued to fight astride the Kiruna rail line. On June 8, 1940, the Allies secretly evacuated the Narvik area. The next day the Norwegian Command signed an armistice ending the fighting and giving Germany total control of Norway.²³ The German reputation as an undefeated force remained intact and, in honor of their heroic stand, Dietl's mountain troopers were awarded a sleeve device commemorating their service at Narvik during the battle.

The Aftermath

The true strategic significance of the German conquest of Norway and Denmark remains in dispute. Possession of the entrance to the Baltic and effective control over the Scandinavian peninsula secured Germany against attack from the north until the end of the war. German submarine and air units gained bases for attacks against Britain and later Allied resupply convoys being run into Murmansk. Sweden was cowed into remaining neutral for the rest of



An armed German troop train moving to link up with forces in the north.

the war. Germany was also enabled to support Finland in its second war against the Soviets from 1941 to 1944 which tied up large numbers of Red army troops at minimal cost to the Germans.

These gains must be weighed against the loss of German surface shipping, the requirement to maintain large forces in Scandinavia, and the relative ineffectiveness of air and naval operations subsequently launched against the British Isles

from Norway. On balance, and given the fact that U.S. intervention and defeat in Russia lay in an uncertain future, it is difficult to be too critical of German strategy. Britain would have undoubtedly occupied Norway, and possibly Denmark, had Germany not done so, with clear implications for the invasion of France and the Low Countries.

As an illustration of mastery of the operational art, however, *Weserübung* has few historical rivals. Throughout the campaign German planners and commanders ensured that tactical concerns were subordinated to strategic and operational requirements. Early tactical engagements, widely separated in space and in some cases in time, were considered in light of the operational plan and not allowed to take on existences of their own; the decision not to sacrifice the campaign or disrupt *Gelb* to save a desperate situation in Narvik is only the most obvious example.

In planning and executing the campaign, Krancke and Falkenhorst showed an impressive ability to distinguish between risk and foolhardiness. Where the British dismissed the chances of landing large formations in the teeth of the Royal Navy,²⁴ German planners correctly surmised that speed, surprise, and airpower combined to give *Weserübung* a good chance of success. While the campaign is occasionally interpreted as a desperate gamble, the Germans undoubtedly saw it as a bold venture with better than even odds of victory. They had good reason to be confident.

Although few of the units employed in the campaign had served in Poland, commanders were sure of the tactical superiority of their leaders, soldiers, and doctrine. They had demonstrated this superiority in virtually every engagement with Allied troops. Where French, British, Polish, and Norwegian units displayed hesitation, indecision, and timidity, the Germans showed dash, aggressiveness, and tenacity under extremely adverse conditions. Particularly at Trondheim and Narvik, the Germans faced numerous obstacles: bad weather, naval inferiority, unfavorable force ratios, poor roads, and failing resupply. Their triumph was as much a victory over the hardships of northern warfare as it was a decisive strategic setback for the Allies.

A key lesson is that resolute leadership can keep the hope of victory alive when everything else indicates otherwise. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Germans continuously held because of their superior will. Certainly luck played a part in the outcome, but had Falkenhorst or Dietl succumbed to their fears, the outcome of the Norwegian campaign might have been different. Well-trained and well-led troops who were able to improvise when necessary, the effective use of sailors in service-support roles, and the capability to fall back smartly and shorten the line when required combined to give the Germans a marked advantage. Lesser commanders, unable to fight when cut off, who had limited reinforcements and whose logistics were always straining, who feared taking risks when necessary, and whose lines of communication were never secured would have quickly capitulated.

Dietl in particular, a strong product of the German military education, took all these disadvantages in stride. Even had the Allies not pulled out, significant overland, seaborne, and airborne reinforcements were on the verge of being committed to the defense of north Norway following the collapse of the West if only German commanders could induce their troops to hold out.²⁵ Here, a superior attitude and will to win, fundamentals of success in any endeavor, helped overcome a potentially disastrous situation.

The Significance of *Weserübung*

In what sense did *Weserübung* demonstrate maneuver warfare at the operational level of war? First and most importantly, the Nordic campaign reveals a characteristic preoccupation with achieving a rapid decision. Like *Gelb*, its more famous sibling, *Weserübung* shunned a systematic advance through the enemy's territory in favor of a series of lightning strikes designed to knock the enemy out of the fight at the start. This obsession with decisive battle, which obviates the need for protracted and costly campaigning, is perhaps the most defining feature of maneuver warfare.

In comparing German and Allied operational planning and command and control during the war, striking differences appear. The German decision-action cycle, which operated on the basis of brief mission orders, was crisper and faster. Whereas the British passion for detailed planning and ponderous execution revealed itself at every turn, the

Germans emphasized mobility, speed, and tempo—or in the words of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, they consistently got there “first with the most.” The German system granted maximum independence to subordinate commanders, requiring only that they remain faithful to the operational goals of the campaign.

While the Allies advanced cautiously and methodically, the Germans fought with greater fluidity, focusing more on the enemy and less on retention of specific terrain features.

One difference was the strong preference for methodical battle shown by the Allies and the absence of that approach on the part of the Germans. It is almost impossible to imagine the British tossing isolated detachments along 1,200 miles of coastline, hoping to link them up later, and in the face of a much stronger enemy navy, bad flying weather, and large amphibious counterattacks. The German planning relied on a sudden disruption of Norwegian mobilization and simultaneously seizing all likely landing sites suitable for Allied reinforcements, with little regard for secure flanks or a continuous front.

In so doing the Germans directed their strengths—that is, speed, shock, tempo, air-power, and superior tactical prowess—against the weaknesses of a less resolute adversary and crushed its will to fight. Falkenhorst and XXI Group neither fought nor planned to win a campaign of attrition. Though the casualties on both sides were roughly equivalent (with those of the German navy and air force significantly higher),²⁶ German morale remained steadfast throughout the campaign while the Allies showed little heart for the fight.

As a laboratory for future joint operations, the German invasion of Scandinavia broke new ground in the history of war. One lesson was that cooperation among the services was an absolute precondition for success. Unlike the major land battles of World War I and the Polish campaign, Operation *Weserübung* required the full integration of land, sea, and air forces, with each service responding aggressively. The *Wehrmacht* improved on its performance in Poland, demonstrating tactical superiority over its enemies and a willingness to cooperate with, and rely upon, the other services for its very survival. The surface fleet of the *Kriegsmarine*, grossly inferior to the British navy, suffered extraordinary losses but succeeded in getting its assault forces ashore and covering their deployment inland. The *Luftwaffe* conducted perhaps the most challenging air operations up to that time. Flying at extended ranges in miserable weather, with primitive refueling and ground control, German pilots provided much of the strategic mobility and most of the fire support for the army (which lacked heavy artillery). Their contribution was decisive.²⁷

As previously noted, Operation *Weserübung* command arrangements were unsatisfactory. Although the principle of unified operational command was sound, Hitler and the OKW staff could not effectively exercise command and control over theater operations from Germany, and no joint command structure existed on the ground in Norway. German commanders also did not have the benefit of comprehensive joint doctrine or training prior to the operation.

Nevertheless, Operation *Weserübung* was an outstanding success. As capable leaders

the German system granted maximum independence to subordinate commanders, requiring only that they remain faithful to the operational goals of the campaign

do, the German commanders worked together harmoniously to achieve the operational goals that they understood thoroughly. Individual service prerogatives were in the main consciously subordinated to joint considerations, the only real standard that counts. While later in the war Germany would pay dearly for lacking organizational and doctrinal frameworks for the conduct of joint warfare, in Norway the efforts to promote jointness among the services contributed to a shining victory.

Compared to many operations later in the war, *Weserübung* was minor. Despite Hitler's expectation that Britain would not abandon its strategic aim of cutting off access to raw materials,²⁸ German forces in Norway were not attacked save for commando raids. As an isolated operation, *Weserübung* was a resounding success for the German armed forces. The conquest was achieved without a material reduction of forces on the Western Front or interference with preparations for *Gelb*. Moreover, the operation was the first to be carried out under a unified command system.²⁸

The conquest of Norway and Denmark is an interesting and worthwhile case for students of joint warfare and the operational art. Many of the lessons from *Weserübung* remain valid today when complex joint operations mounted over great distances have become the norm. Although the technology base changes rapidly, campaigns and battles between comparable adversaries ultimately are a clash of wills. In that sense Operation *Weserübung* is still instructive. JFQ

For an appreciation of how the German army turned adversity into military advantage during the interwar years, see the review of *The Roots of Blitzkrieg* on pages 125–127 in this issue of JFQ.

NOTES

¹ B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), p. 52.

² B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: Quill, 1979), p. 37.

³ Matthew Cooper, *The German Army* (Chelsea, Mich.: Scarborough, 1991), p. 191.

⁴ François Kersaudy, *Norway 1940* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1991), p. 43.

⁵ Earl F. Ziemke, "The German Decision to Invade Norway and Denmark" in *Command Decisions* (Washington: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1960), p. 58.

⁶ Earl F. Ziemke, *The German Theater of Northern Operations* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1959), p. 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸ Kersaudy, *Norway 1940*, p. 49.

⁹ Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk*, p. 37.

¹⁰ Ziemke, *The German Theater of Northern Operations*, p. 16.

¹¹ John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Viking, 1990), pp. 50–51.

¹² Ziemke, *Command Decisions*, pp. 62–64.

¹³ Christopher Buckley, *Norway. The Commandos. Dieppe* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1951), p. 10.

¹⁴ In all the *Luftwaffe* lifted 29,280 troops and 2,376 tons of supplies during the first weeks of the invasion, an impressive feat given the bad flying weather and the small size of transport aircraft at that time. Ziemke, *The German Theater of Northern Operations*, p. 56.

¹⁵ Ziemke, *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁶ Kersaudy, *Norway 1940*, p. 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 68 and 72.

¹⁹ Bernard Ash, *Norway 1940* (London: Cassell, 1964), p. 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²¹ Ash, *Norway 1940*, p. 98.

²² Ziemke, *The German Theater of Northern Operations*, p. 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–104.

²⁴ J.L. Moulton, *The Norwegian Campaign of 1940* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1967), p. 60.

²⁵ Ziemke, *The German Theater of Northern Operations*, p. 104.

²⁶ The Germans lost 1,317 dead and 2,374 at sea; the *Luftwaffe* had 127 combat aircraft shot down while British attacks on the *Kriegsmarine* succeeded in the sinking of 1 heavy cruiser, 2 light cruisers, 10 destroyers, and 6 submarines. The British lost 1,896 troops and 2,500 sailors, as well as 1 aircraft carrier, 1 cruiser, 7 destroyers, and 4 submarines. The French and Poles combined suffered 530 dead while the Norwegians lost 1,335. A total of 87 Allied airplanes were shot down. See Ziemke, *The German Theater of Northern Operations*, p. 109.

²⁷ Williamson Murray, *German Military Effectiveness* (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company, 1992), p. 154.

²⁸ Cooper, *The German Army*, pp. 258, 267, 492; Ziemke, *Command Decisions*, p. 68.