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ALLIED FAILURE IN THE NORWEGIAN LITTORAL, 1940-
OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR LESSONS FOR TODAY

by

Carradean L. Brown

Captain, U.S. Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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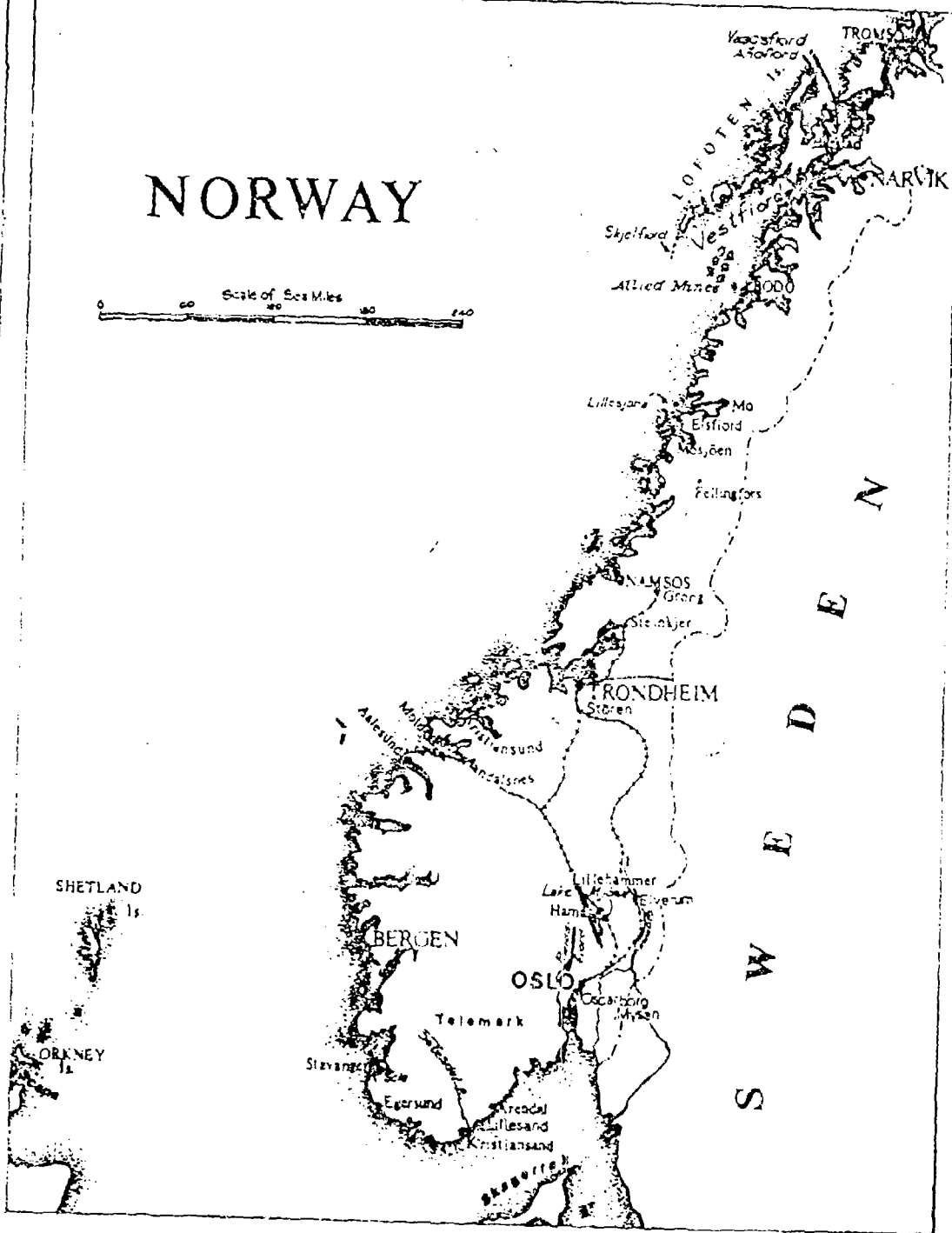
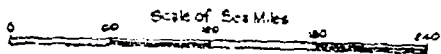
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NORWAY



ALLIED FAILURE IN THE NORWEGIAN LITTORAL, 1940-
OPERATIONAL LEVEL LESSONS OF WAR FOR TODAY

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem. With the end of the cold war global face off between the two great superpowers, the United States began a dramatic restructuring and downsizing of its military force. In conjunction with the significant budget constraints the focus of future U.S. operations increasingly is on joint/combined forces projecting power into regional conflicts. In recent Navy and Marine Corps parlance this "...From the Sea" response into the littoral regions of the world will require many elements to ensure success.¹ Wise national leadership choices on which political situations merit expeditionary force, the military objectives and composition of that force, and the correct employment of the joint (possibly combined) arms are all difficult issues. Historical analysis of this type of campaign can enhance the chances of future success of the American military at the operational level of war.* The failed Allied operations in Norway during 1940 present just such a case in the modern

* Joint Pub 1-02 , "Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms", defines the operational level of war as, "the level of war at which campaigns are planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters or areas of operations. Activities at this level link tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives needed to accomplish the strategic objectives, sequencing events to achieve the operational objectives, initiating actions and applying resources to bring about and sustain these events.", 1 December 1989, p.264.

such a case in the modern history of warfare.

Norwegian Campaign Outline. Once World War II began in September 1939 with Germany's attack on Poland, the long neglected Scandanavian peninsula assumed ever greater importance to the British government, military and public. To the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, interest in Norway was already keen. "The Thousand-mile-long peninsula stretching from the mouth of the Baltic to the Arctic Circle had an immense strategic significance." ² Churchill was concerned about denying Germany access to open sea communications through the territorial waters of the Leads of Norway. He also wanted to prevent the winter transportatin of vital Swedish iron ore shipments through Norway to Germany. He tirelessly encouraged the government to intervene in Norway until a mining operation was finally scheduled in early April 1940. Troops and naval forces were designated to respond with a landing at Narvik depending on German reaction to the mining.

Hitler's lightening execution of Operation WESERUEBUNG beginning 9 April pre-empted the British plans and stunned an ill prepared Norwegian military. Despite some significant German Navy losses in the fjords, their joint naval landings and parachute deployment of troops quickly seized southern Norway, key points in the central region and obtained a lodgement in northern Norway at Narvik. "So when dawn came on that fateful April 9 the position was all the German groups had evaded Home Fleet units and had invested Narvik, Trondheim, Stavanger,

Bergen, Kristiansand and Oslo."3 The presence of the German sponsored Fifth Columnist Vidkun Lauritz Quisling and inept Norwegian government reaction helped hamstring the response of their markedly inferior military.

Allied (British and French) planners and government officials alike scrambled to develop objectives and plans to recover the lost initiative in Norway. A major landing at Narvik, dual landings at Narvik and Trondheim and finally three landings (Harstad, Namsos and Andalsnes) were ordered in rapid succession. After numerous troop reallocations, equipment mix ups, order changes and command disagreements Allied landings finally took place. Between 14 April and 4 May forces were landed at Harstad (near Narvik), Mo, Bodo and Mosjoen in northern Norway as well as Namsos and Andalsnes in central Norway.

Despite gallant British naval support, Norwegian assistance and brave fighting on the part of the British, French and Polish troops, the Allies were beaten. Outflanked and demoralized they were withdrawn everywhere except Bodo and Narvik by 5 May. Even at Narvik where the Germans were ousted, an evacuation of all the Allies was required in early June. By 8 June the King of Norway had fled To England with his key government officials. No Allied troops remained in Norway. The country would remain under Hitler's domination until the end of World War II supplying vital war materials to Germany and providing the base for cruelly punishing Allied shipping to Russia from 1941 to 1943.

What led to the Allies' resounding operational level of war failure in Norway? An analysis of wartime strategies, selection of objectives, operational planning, force composition, logistics capabilities, command and control, the role of intelligence, impact of surprise and unity of command will be conducted.

Conclusions. Widespread and persistent problems in the Allied concept of, planning for and execution of the Norwegian littoral campaign of 1940 occurred. As one historian, Jack Adams, summarized it the disaster essentially stemmed from the "failure to understand the requirements of a three dimensional land, sea and air strategy."⁴

Today, Americans face the likelihood of operating in the littoral environment in regional conflicts of varying size. American planners, both military and civilian, unaccustomed to decreased force sizes will need to construct their campaigns and major operations carefully. It can be valuable to examine this WWII campaign for lessons for the present.

CHAPTER II

LITTORAL CAMPAIGN ANALYSIS

Searching for a Strategy. From the beginning of the war the appropriate strategy for Norway was a matter of great indecision for the Allies. Displaying the vacillation and distaste for bold action so common to democratic governments in all times, a variety of courses of action were considered but not taken. The basic strategic value of Norway was soon recognized by the Allies and Germany. Norway faced Britain, provided an opening to the North Atlantic and sea approaches to both the Baltic and Russia. Norway was also the winter route for half the 9,000,000 tons of Swedish iron ore Germany imported out of a total annual industrial requirement of 11,000,000 tons.¹

The country was "strategically vital and militarily defenseless."² This situation existed because of Norway's tenacious reliance on to neutrality and deliberate military unpreparedness in the face of war. The government expected shipping impacts during the war and some violations of territorial seas. They felt British sea power would keep them immune from German pressure. Ineffective and weak as their policy might have been, the government had "a burning desire to remain at peace with other nations, and they were supported by an overwhelming majority of the Norwegian people."³ Norway thus occupied a geostrategic position somewhat akin to the Gulf oil states today.

Allied diplomatic overtures to the Scandanavian governments to permit mining and to land troops for overland transit to Finland's aid were rebuffed. Churchill was incredulous that a government with the temerity to ask for such an expansive compromise of neutrality would not "commit even a technical infringement of Norwegian territorial waters by laying mines in the Leads...."⁴ The First Lord felt the preponderance of right and humanity resided in opposing German aggression at the expense of Norway's neutrality. "I pleaded th case to the best of my ability. I could not obtain any decision for action."⁵

Mirroring the difficulty of settling on a policy involving risk, the Allied War Cabinet, Military Co-ordinating Committee and individual services endlessly debated the issue. On 8 April caution was finally overcome. Approval for mining operations with follow on troop landings at Narvik, Stavanger, Bergen and Trondheim was obtained. Churchill noted:

"Nothing relevant had altered . . . The moral and technical objections on the score of neutrality, the possibility of German retaliation against Norway, the importance of stopping the flow of iron ore from Narvik to Germany, the effect on neutral and world-wide opinion - all were exactly the same We had at last reached the simple point on which action had been demanded seven months before."⁶

Opportunities do not last forever. Before British troops could depart from England, the Germans successfully landed in Norway on 9 April. This completely changed the Allied operational planning. The Allies now faced military opposition in their intervention strategy. New objectives were required.

Operational Objective Revisions. Delays settling on a strategy for Norway had impacts on the military campaign objectives as the situation changed. While Finland and Russia were fighting the objective was a cross country push from Narvik to aid Finland, occupying the Swedish ore fields enroute. When the Russo-Finnish conflict ended in mid-March the military objective shifted.

The next iteration envisioned a large landing at Narvik to move east and seize the Swedish ore fields. Meanwhile, a small force would occupy several blocking positions in central Norway to prevent German landings and a drive north to Narvik. Another revision planned for a large Allied Force to go ashore in southern Norway to forestall German pressure on Sweden. The British lacked troops to execute this plan had it received government approval. Scaled down objectives were required.

The landings approved 8 April had as one objective cutting off the overland ore route from Sweden through Narvik. Significant mining operations and the simultaneous capture of Stavanger, Bergen and Trondheim were planned with the objective of preventing German landings in central/southern Norway. These objectives were swept away by the seven divisions of German invaders beginning 9 April.

Debate on new objectives raged within the Allied civilian and military leadership for days after the German invasion. Hard pressed staffs pored over charts and intelligence reports

trying to develop plans for feasible alternate objectives. Churchill feared diffusion of effort could be disastrous everywhere. He pressed for immediate landings at Narvik and mining at Bergen.⁷ Serious damage to the German surface combatants and support ships was inflicted by the Royal Navy on 9 and 13 April. This left their small force at Narvik especially ill supported.⁸

Britain's Chiefs of Staff wanted troops in central Norway to forestall German movement. Prime Minister Chamberlain became enamored with the objective of bolstering the Norwegian government and military. He now advocated sending strong forces to Trondheim. Churchill was afraid more indecision would delay any action. He therefore supported the Prime Minister's idea to downsize the Narvik force and land significant forces at Trondheim. Orders were accordingly given 13 April to pursue twin operational objectives of gaining control of the iron ore transshipment point and supporting the Norwegian government.

The inconsistency in operational objectives which had lasted for months continued to the very eve of troop landings on 14 April. It weakened the focus of the British national command authority and senior military planners. Execution of the campaign would suffer because of the British waffling on objectives.

Unity of Command Breakdowns. No better example of the importance of unity of command in joint/combined operations exists than the abject failure to provide it in Norway. Problems

began within the highest levels of government. An amorphous chain of command for decision making began with the Prime Minister's War Cabinet. It contained the full range of government ministerial representation.

Below the War Cabinet was the Military Co-ordination Committee normally chaired by the Prime Minister in whom all directive authority resided. The First Lord of the Admiralty was Deputy. He could conduct meetings in the PM's absence. Committee membership also included the Ministers of War, Air and Supply, the three military Service Chiefs of Staff and their Deputies.⁹ It was an unwieldy group.

No dedicated staff served the Military Co-ordination Committee until the beginning of April 1940. At that point General Ismay was added as Minister of Co-ordination of Defense with an administrative staff for the committee. Churchill bemoaned the lack of authority over the Committee when the PM did not attend, describing the arrangement as a "fluid, friendly, but unfocused circle."¹⁰ The formlessness of the command system had tangible consequences in the Norwegian campaign. Disciplined adherence to Committee decisions did not exist. The individual services exercised sweeping authority over their own forces and often gave conflicting orders to operational commands.

Numerous examples of Service interference with Military Co-ordination Committee decisions exist. Without consultation the First Sea Lord, Admiral Pound, diverted a naval force of seven cruisers and four destroyers on 9 April as they sailed

for Bergen after hearing fragmentary reports of Germans presence.¹¹ Unity of command was completely lacking in the crucial landing at Narvik. The army appointed General Mackesy as commander of the ground force while the Royal Navy commander-in-chief was the venerable Admiral Lord Cork. The men were unknown to each other, held no conferences, traveled in separate ships and had received conflicting orders.

General Mackesy had written orders to eject the Germans from Narvik. They were substantially diluted by direction to co-operate with the Norwegian and the statements, "It is not intended that you should land in the face of opposition. . . The decision whether to land or not will be taken by the senior naval officer in consultation with you."¹²

Incredibly, Admiral Cork was given no written orders. He was verbally briefed by the First Sea Lord who "urged him not to hesitate to run risks but to strike hard to seize Narvik."¹³ To complicate matters the Commander-In-Chief of the Home Fleet was junior in seniority to the aged Lord Cork, his nominal subordinate.

This odd command arrangement was detrimental to the operation conducted by Cork and Mackesy. "Each had been separately briefed. This was in breach of the principles of joint command and was to lead to a clash of personalities..."¹⁴ Instant antagonism between the commanders blossomed under the strain of the campaign. An opportunity to land against weak opposition at Narvik was lost over Mackesy's insistence on

landing unopposed at the distant port of Harstad. A single theater commander was not created until later. He was based in London and often could not communicate with his subordinates.

Operational Planning. Operational planning is a related issue to that of unity of command. A military campaign requires the co-operation and co-ordination of multiple services. Staff work in a wide variety of issues should be completed in a timely fashion before the campaign begins. Operational planning acquires even more importance if a combined arms campaign of Allied nations is contemplated. Substantial weaknesses in operational planning existed in the Norwegian campaign.

The halting approach to decisions and last minute changes in destinations ensured poor operational planning. Staffs had inadequate time to prepare plans and orders.

The mid-April landings in central Norway to support Norway's government serve as an example. The original means to achieve this new objective was going to be the capture of Trondheim with its good harbor and railroad facilities. Once taken by the Germans on 9 April, the British C.I.G.S. vehemently argued against an opposed landing. Churchill agreed since "there had not been time for the detailed and meticulous preparation which should have been given to an operation of this character."¹⁵ Instead, with less than a week's planning time, a hurried pincer move was substituted with landings at Namsos and Andalsnes. These tiny ports lacked harbor facilities, adequate roads to Trondheim and were distant from their objective.¹⁶

The 146th Territorial Brigade was diverted to the Trondheim operation while enroute to Narvik. As a result they landed with maps of areas hundreds of miles away. Prior to departing Britain they had been embarked and disembarked several times losing equipment and order in the process.¹⁷

Close co-ordination among allies is key to multinational military operations. In the Norwegian littoral campaign there was generally good high level co-operation between France and Britain. A War Council existed for the two powers to arrange mutual force assignments. The Polish government-in-exile provided a small number of soldiers and naval forces in the campaign as did the Canadians. France favored a major effort in Norway. They were forthcoming with ground forces largely as a confidence building measure for their own public. At the same time, the French pressed for greater British army and air force strength on the continent. Relations with the French government were strained in late May by British delays in revealing their decision to evacuate Norway.

At the field level, the practical problem of language differences often made British, French, Polish and Norwegian co-operation difficult. Exacerbating the language barrier was an inherent distrust of the Norwegians.¹⁸ The distrust arose from the reluctant manner in which Norway entered the war and the perceived threat of information leaks via "Quislings". The ill armed Norwegians fought gallantly alongside the Allies and provided much needed local knowledge. Nevertheless, the

Allied national command authorities consistently ordered force commanders in theater to keep Norwegians uninformed of troop movements, including the evacuation of Norway itself, until the last possible moment. The British on-scene commanders in both central and northern Norway disregarded these directives to obtain Norwegian help and out of respect for their ally.¹⁹

The lack of operational planning was summarized by campaign participant and historian, T.K. Derry, who wrote:

"The entry into Scandanavia was thought of as the concern of the Army, to which the Navy contributed mainly a service of convoy protection and the Royal Air Force a token support of which it could ill afford to spare. That in the sequel this proved to be the first campaign in European history requiring the full combination of all three Services took us by surprise."²⁰

Force Composition (Mass). An enduring principle of war is the requirement to bring adequate forces to bear at the point of attack. Insufficient mass endangers the people involved and threatens the objectives of the campaign.

The Allied efforts in Norway suffered throughout the campaign from insufficiencies in the number, mix and quality of forces. In early 1940 the Chiefs-of-Staff looked at intervention in March 1940 and postulated requirements for two divisions each to Narvik and southern Norway. Five battalions were needed for central Norway. These troops were to land unopposed. At the time less than two divisions existed in all of Britain so no forces were earmarked for Norway. All other troops had been sent to France as part of the 10 division B.E.F.

By February 1940 the joint War Council had identified only 2.5 brigades for Narvik (one U.K., one French mountain brigade and a half brigade of Poles) and five battalions for central Norway.²¹ In March 1940 the British ground commander, General Mackesy, was concerned that at D+45 he would have only one AAA battalion in theater.²² Naval forces were numerically superior to anticipated German levels. The old battleships of the Home Fleet, however, were not assigned due to their vulnerability to air attack.

During the actual event in April about 1,000 men were landed at Andalsnes south of Trondheim and approximately 5,000 men at Namsos, north of Trondheim. This represented an increase to the level of 3.5 brigades in central Norway.²³ Three French chasseur battalions were added later. These forces remained inferior to their German opponents through the evacuation by 5 May.

The reduced northern force initially landed at Harstad on 14 April. It was considered inadequate to attack the 4,000 Germans at Narvik. The Allies did not capture this objective until 28 May when their numbers finally had swelled to 30,000 U.K./French/Polish/Norwegian soldiers. This sole ground success of the campaign at Narvik also resulted from adequate Allied AAA guns, fighter airplanes and naval gunfire support.²⁴ The presence of two squadrons of land based fighters and over 100 AAA guns negated German air superiority. This was a unique circumstance in the rest of the campaign.

Eventually, the entire campaign in Norway had to be abandoned because inadequate forces were available for Norway once France collapsed. The small British army had been stretched too thin in all theaters.

Logistics. Operational level of war planning is very dependent on logistics. It is the responsibility of civilian leadership and senior commanders to provide the needed quantity/quality of war materials to the military. In turn the theater commanders must ensure the orchestrated flow of logistics to support their campaign.

Logistics support was yet another weak spot in Norway. Whitehall logistics planners were in over their heads as the following examples indicate: At Namsos the forces urgently requested skis and snowshoes to deal with six foot drifts. They were sent shovels and entrenching tools as substitutes.²⁵ The pier facilities were too small to handle the troopships assigned. Resupply efforts were impacted severely by German air attacks.

Last minute unit order changes sometimes resulted in equipment going to the wrong port or being left behind in Britain. The 148th Brigade whose "orders had undergone so many alterations as to be practically worthless" underwent just such an experience.²⁶ Most of their communications equipment was lost. Their AAA guns were degraded because the rangefinders were missing. No ammunition for their mortars arrived and they had no maps of Andalsnes.

At Harstad the logistics situation was equally chaotic.²⁷ The harbor facilities could handle two logistics ships in five days. Instead, 20 arrived from 14-19 April. They were emptied in random order. The 203rd Field Battery landed without guns. While no AAA guns, tanks, trucks or mortar shells were available there was office furniture for the 1,000 clerks who disembarked. Very little ammunition or other materials would have been landed without the voluntary, unplanned for efforts of many small Norwegian craft serving as lighters.

Shortages, disorder, losses and reactive planning dominated Allied logistics. The Allies held virtual complete control of the sea to within 50 nautical miles of the coast but German air attacks disrupted resupply efforts inshore.²⁸ Once supplies were landed the problem still was not solved. "Lack of transport was a major drawback for the Allies throughout every phase of the campaign. Lorries, trucks, load carriers . . . were never available in sufficient numbers to move men, stores and equipment . . ."²⁹ This made a difficult operation harder.

Intelligence and Surprise. Chances for success at the operational level of war can be greatly enhanced by good intelligence about the enemy and the theater. Operational surprise can also lead to success. The Allies had neither.

The Allies planned on conducting unopposed landings in Norway on 10 April. Instead they were unexpectedly beaten to the theater by the German invasion. General Ismay, C.I.G.S., awoke 9 April to this bad news. He "realized for the first time

in my life, the devastating and demoralizing effect of surprise."³⁰

Should British intelligence have known the German intentions? German operational security was tight throughout the planning process. Still, preparing over 30 warships/ transports and massing nearly seven divisions in German ports did not go unnoticed. William Shirer, WWII journalist and historian notes Denmark, Norway and Britain were "caught napping not because they were not warned of what was coming but because they did not believe the warnings in time."³¹

Alarming reports of military activity circulated from Norwegian, Dutch and Swedish diplomats in Germany the first week of April. The British government "was inclined to believe that the German build-up in the Baltic and North Sea ports was being done merely to enable Hitler to deliver a counterstroke" in case of British action.³² This was a curious assessment given Hitler's history of bold action and Britain's halting responses up to that point.

At lower operational levels, British intelligence assessments were still faulty. Spotty British sub and air contact with the German forces enroute to Norway was interpreted as surface raiders making for the North Atlantic.³³ Powerful British naval combatants blocking some fjord approaches were actually drawn off to seaward. The Germans were better informed. The Germans were able to decipher most British naval wireless communications. They were "very precisely informed

concerning the distribution of the British Home Fleet."³⁴

British intelligence operations remained weak regarding matters ashore. As T.K. Derry noted, "...the information about Norway available for our own use once inside the country was hopelessly inferior " to that of the Germans."³⁵ "Our leaders and their troops were again and again handicapped by their ignorance...."³⁶

External Events. All campaigns are subject to external events regardless of the aptitude for the operational level of war displayed by either side. The Norwegian littoral campaign was no exception. A few examples will suffice.

Chance positioning of British submarines and poor visibility may have contributed to the erroneous assessment of German ship movements. Had British combatants caught the invading force at sea on 9 April the campaign may have ended differently.

The German preponderance in air power south of Narvik may have precluded any eventual Allied success in Norway. Churchill's opponents blamed him "for listening to incompetent advisers who, among other lapses, discounted the effects of the enemy's superiority in the air."³⁷

The disaster that befell the Allied armies in France in May 1940 was the single greatest outside event impacting the Norwegian campaign. The sudden, unforeseen collapse of the Western Front drew nearly all available Allied shipping to the Dunkirk evacuation. Fears of invasion in Britain drove the decision on 24 May to evacuate all forces from Norway four days

before their biggest success at Narvik. Writing of proposed troop buildups in central Norway, Churchill commented any success "would have been swept away by the results of the fearful battle in France which was now so near....Everything we had would have been drawn into the struggle for life."38

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSIONS

Lessons in the operational level of war can be drawn from many littoral campaigns beginning with World War II. The Norwegian campaign in 1940 is especially fertile ground.

The foremost lesson for today's planner is flawed operational planning flows directly from national command authority indecision. The failure of the government to settle on a strategy ensures diffuse operational objectives are considered by senior military decision makers. Effort, time and focus are all wasted. Allied co-operation cannot jell without a basic strategy to underpin planning.

When multiple objectives are under consideration the result is shortened planning cycles. Too many objectives leads to multiple priorities and excess direction being given to subordinate operational staffs. Forces easily become diluted at all points. Success at any decisive point is jeopardized. This is particularly crucial for the future as the U.S. military is reduced in size.

Joint operational staffs can become overwhelmed with taskings and too little time before their execution. Then a cycle of accelerating mistakes is created. The orderly sequencing of forces is lost. Logistics planners working under unreasonable deadlines make errors. Fighting forces pay for them on

the battlefield.

Intelligence estimates provide a crucial input to theater planning. Alternative assessments of fragmentary information should be developed and closely scrutinized. External events are beyond the control of military or civilian planners. A sound plan, stemming from clear, achievable objectives allows a flexible response to those events. When clear objectives do not exist the external event will disrupt the operational plan unduly.

In its most basic terms the Allied failure in the Norwegian littoral campaign of 1940 shows modern planners the requirement for steadfast decision making, clear objective selection and unity of command. If those elements are not present the remainder of the joint/combined operational planning process will also fail.

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32. Ibid., p. 695.
33. Kersaudy, pp. 64-66.
34. Bekker, p. 136.
35. Derry, p. 233.
36. Ibid., p. 233.
37. Adams, p. 169.
38. Churchill, p. 634.

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