

## OPERATION WESERÜBUNG

# Inter-service Cooperation And Use of Combined Arms Led to German Success in Norway

*“Not only bold, but one of the sauciest undertakings in the history of modern warfare.”<sup>1</sup>*

- Adolf Hitler

by Major Michael A. Boden

During the first three months of 1940, when the Second World War on other fronts was relatively quiet, German Chancellor and Führer Adolf Hitler ordered planning to begin for an invasion of Norway, Operation *Weserübung*. He came to this decision based on three overriding considerations: the German need to guarantee access to natural resources found in Scandinavia, the necessity of protection for Germany's "northern flank" during any future operations in the north, and the desire to continue the "siege of Britain," closing British access to the North Sea.<sup>2</sup> These operations offer many unique insights concerning military operations on both sides. This campaign was the first truly "joint" operation of the war, for both Germany and Great Britain. The Germans, in particular, relied on close cooperation between naval, air, and land forces in order to achieve their objectives. The sometimes strained relationship between these three elements led to a number of crises in command. Fortunately for the Germans, however, energetic leadership at all levels overcame these problems. Combat in the far north provided a new arena for military operations, which few had seen before. Finally, the nature of the terrain and sea lines of communications challenged the German logistical tail in ways foreseen but never practiced.

Of particular interest in the campaign was the Germans' use of combined arms warfare in their conduct of tactical maneuvers in the far north. This campaign represents an interesting window to glimpse the early methodology of fighting with small units — seldom larger than battalion size and often in an *ad hoc* constituency — to achieve limited objectives. By examining and evaluating the application and devel-

opment of combined arms operations during Operation *Weserübung*, the military professional gains insight into a fascinating but little-studied campaign in World War II, where soldiers found solutions to unique problems seldom faced during mechanized warfare in the years prior to 1940.

Although a lesser-known campaign, the German invasion of Norway saw the first use of paratroopers in combat, the first sinking of a warship by aircraft, and the loss of enough German warships to cripple its fleet for the rest of the war. The paratroopers were used to seize critical airfields around Oslo and Stavanger while 10,000 German troops hidden in merchant ships landed at Oslo, Bergen, Kristiansand, Trondheim, and Narvik. The German successes on the first day were tempered by the loss of the cruisers *Blucher* and *Karlsruhe*, and another cruiser, the *Konigsberg*, fell victim the following day to British naval aircraft. At the strategic level, this loss of three of the German Navy's eight cruisers (along with the loss of ten of her twenty destroyers) during the Norwegian campaign prevented Germany's fleet from interfering with the evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk two months later.

The Norwegian campaign itself consisted of four different realms of activity. On April 9, 1940, Germany began the actual conquest of Denmark and Norway, and by the 13th had occupied all of its initial objectives. In response to the invasion, the Allied powers, primarily Britain and France, with a small Polish contingent, countered this German move by conducting landings in Norway to oppose the German effort. By the 3rd of May, however, German

forces had defeated all of these landings, except for the one farthest north, at Narvik. From April 24 until May 26, the Allies conducted a slow, methodical effort to dislodge the Germans from this position. In the end, this effort failed, not so much because of German resistance (the Allies had a six-to-one advantage in manpower by the end of May) but rather because of the German invasion of France, which had occurred on May 10. From that point on, the Allied effort needed to be shifted to the fight in France. The final aspect of the campaign was the naval campaign, which saw the Germans achieve a Pyrrhic victory. The Germans retained the ability to position forces where needed, and to maintain logistical supply by sea until the necessary air bases were established, but at the cost of over half of Germany's overall surface fleet.

There were three particular instances where the German advantage in the application of combined arms proved of unique interest in the campaign. First, during the preparations for the campaign in general, when German commander General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst made a conscious effort to dedicate the necessary troops and equipment to the campaign, while the Allies took no such action. Second, during the German link-up effort between Trondheim and Oslo when German efforts proved superior, both qualitatively and practically, to their counterparts. It was here where the German preponderance in available combined arms units proved decisive for their ultimate success in the campaign. And third, during the fighting above the Arctic Circle at Narvik, where the Allies employed armor of their own against the German defenses with mixed results.

During the initial planning for the campaign, the Germans proved far more adept at using their available resources and units to prepare for the coming campaign. True, the German planning figures were constantly revised by the senior leadership of the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH, the German Army High Command) and the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW, the German Armed Forces High Command). But in all of these revisions, one constant factor remained the idea that the forces would consist of different types of units that would effectively operate together. For instance, during the first attempt to create the force structure for the operation, in early February, 1940, naval Captain Theodor Kranke proposed an effort consisting of one airborne division, one mountain division, one motorized rifle brigade, and six infantry regiments. On top of this, the effort would be aided by significant bomber and fighter support.<sup>3</sup>

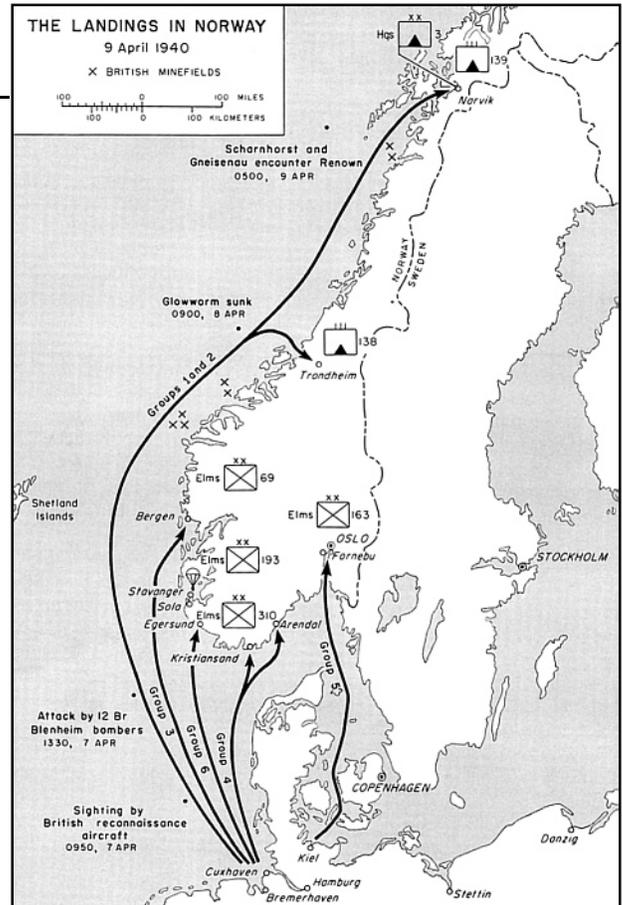
Four weeks later, when Hitler's directive finalized the troop dispositions, the force structure had changed somewhat, but still contained substantial elements of the major ground branches of service. The operation would include five infantry divisions, one mountain division, four batteries of 10 cm and two batteries of 15 cm guns, one tank detachment (*Panzerabteilung 40*) consisting of between 40 and 50 Mark I and II tanks, two companies of railway troops, a communications battalion, and three parachute companies.<sup>4</sup> For the simultaneous invasion of Denmark, the Germans employed two infantry divisions, one motorized rifle brigade, and two separate companies of tanks.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the operation called for the early seizure of different airfields in the country in order to provide land-based air support to German operations, emphasizing the importance of air power in this operation.<sup>6</sup>

To counter this, the Allies projected very little in the way of mechanized forces. Even though the British began their planning for the operation later than the Germans, their plans reflected very modest consideration to the necessary force structure that could prove successful against the German contingent. The British expeditionary force for Norway contained no anti-aircraft or anti-tank guns. No British aircraft accompanied the troops to Scandinavia.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Norway's standing army was also short of such equipment, with no anti-aircraft guns or armored

vehicles. The Norwegian air force was minuscule, including little more than one hundred planes, many of them caught on the ground without fuel in the surprise of the invasion.<sup>8</sup>

The Germans initiated the fighting with the objective of taking as many of Norway's main population centers as possible during the first days of the operation, then linking their forces in the following weeks.<sup>9</sup> In the first few days of the operation, this approach proved very successful. German forces seized all of the main centers of resistance within the first few days of *Weserübung*. In Denmark, resistance to the German advance lasted less than three hours, subdued primarily by the actions of the armored and airborne troops.<sup>10</sup> In many of the early airborne landings in Norway itself, such as at Stavanger and Oslo, German paratroop units backed up by air power and infantry battalions brought in by the *Luftwaffe* achieved early success.<sup>11</sup>

Following this initial seizure, the German units developed their plans to link up. The one location where particularly hard fighting occurred was the mountainous terrain between Trondheim, on the North Sea, and Oslo. It was in this vicinity that the British expeditionary 148th and 15th Brigades and Norwegian 2nd Division (between 5,000 and 6,000 men) operated against a German advance of two divisions (roughly twice as large as the Allied force). Here, the Germans developed loose tactical procedures that proved quite effective at using all available assets in order to defeat the Allied detachments. The British realized they were outnumbered and out-equipped by their adversaries, and therefore decided against a pitched battle. Instead, they attempted to delay the advance as much as possible and tie the Germans down in the mountains until an Allied effort could be brought against Trondheim, or even Oslo.<sup>12</sup> The fighting in such conditions developed into a very consistent pattern:



"...the Norwegians based their defense on a series of roadblocks and barricades supported by flanking fire from the heights. The German answer, which proved highly effective, was to employ reinforced infantry spearheads organized in order of march as follows: one or two tanks, two trucks carrying engineers and equipment, an infantry company with heavy weapons organized into assault detachments, a platoon of artillery, a relief infantry company, relief engineers and artillery. In action the technique was to bring a roadblock under heavy frontal fire while ski troops attempted to work their way around the defenders' flanks."<sup>13</sup>

For the most part, these tactics worked successfully. The Germans, recognizing this success, made a determined effort to push their assets into this drive as it progressed, mostly to the north out of Oslo.<sup>14</sup> They also discovered that Norwegian and British anti-tank defenses were ineffective against armor. At Tretten, on April 23, the British established a viable defensive position, but could man it with no more than two infantry companies armed with nothing heavier than four medium machine guns and one mortar. When the German tanks appeared, the British had nothing that could penetrate their ar-



German armor employed in Norway was similar to these tanks photographed during the earlier invasion of Poland. Here, a Pzkw I, foreground, acts as a command tank for the Pzkw IIs in the background. Both light tanks, they were armed with machine guns and in the case of the Pzkw II, a 20mm automatic cannon.

mor, and the position quickly fell.<sup>15</sup> The terrain certainly did not support swift, mounted operations, but even in battles where the British were able to knock out a German tank or two, the proper German application of the other combined arms proved overwhelming. Two days later, at Kvam, after the Germans lost two tanks and an armored car in an assault, the combined effects of aircraft strafing and bombing attacks, artillery bombardment, and machine-gun fire again caused the position to fall.<sup>16</sup> The British battalion commander, Major Cass, commented on the engagement after the campaign:

*“First came three tanks and about 50 lightly-equipped infantry. Behind came more infantry on foot, motorcyclists, machine guns mounted in sidecars and towed guns. Behind again came motor vehicle after motor vehicle — lorries [trucks] full of infantry, wireless trucks, tanks, tracked carriers, guns, and many others. It was a target that gunners would dream about — three-quarters of a mile of confined road, crammed with troops and vehicles, all clearly visible from the observation post. Just one battery of 25-pounders could have blown the enemy off the road, but the nearest approach to artillery was the little anti-tank guns. All that could be done was to wait until the enemy came within rifle-shot.”<sup>17</sup>*

The one small, tactical success the British attained during this fighting withdrawal occurred at Otta on the April 28, where German air and artillery attacks failed to dislodge the British defenders, at the cost of three tanks. But by that time, however, the final orders for retirement had been issued,

and the British retreated to the north unhindered.<sup>18</sup> On May 1, converging German forces established contact between advancing elements from Trondheim and Oslo. Fittingly, the unit effecting the link-up was one of the *ad hoc* combined arms formations, Group Fischer, consisting of three infantry battalions, two artillery battalions, one engineer battalion, two motorized companies, one motorized machine gun company, and two platoons of tanks.<sup>19</sup>

The conditions were reversed to some extent in the far north, at Narvik. The Narvik operation, however, demonstrated that while the possession of a proper force mix acts as a great combat multiplier, the proper understanding of how to use such a force is critical for maximum success. At the height of the fighting at Narvik, in late May, the Allies had a manpower advantage against the Germans by approximately a factor of six (24,000 to 4,000). As further combat multipliers, the Allies also possessed superior naval gunfire support and had a section of ten light French tanks. The Germans could counter this with a fair amount of air support, as well as one battery of artillery.<sup>20</sup>

The French operations with tanks met with mixed success. In their first employment, at the landing at Bjerkvik, on May 12, five of the French tanks made it ashore and began “frisking around like young puppies, firing all the time.”<sup>21</sup> With the aid of the tanks, the French advanced and captured the towns of Bjerkvik and Elvegaard, destroyed a number of machine gun positions, and captured a significant quantity of supplies and material. This marked the high point of Allied com-

bined arms during the campaign, as the tanks specifically were cited for their effectiveness against the German positions. Additionally, the operation uncovered a number of challenges in the way that tanks, as well as other combat units, conducted amphibious operations. Depending on the type of ship that carried the tanks, and the subsequent offloading capabilities, some of the tanks were unloaded quickly, while others were unloaded far behind schedule.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of some of these problems, however, the fact remained that the Allies achieved success in the first landing of troops under fire in the war.<sup>23</sup>

The next attempt, the landings at Narvik on May 28, was far less noteworthy and did not achieve as clear a victory. While the Allies certainly did achieve success, little of it can be credited to a balance of forces. The Allied landing, conducted against a tremendously outnumbered defending force, had the support of large amounts of French and Norwegian artillery and naval gunfire, which proved effective. The two tanks involved in the landing never got off the beach (whether put out of action by mines or by the terrain is uncertain) and played no role in the fight.<sup>24</sup> Ten days later the Allied forces left Narvik, failing to defeat the German defenders. The German success in France made the operations in the far north obsolete and not worth the effort.

The employment of combined arms and structuring of forces in the Norwegian campaign had some impact on the future development of both German and Allied forces during the remainder of the war. On the German side, Operation *Weserübung* represented the first time that all branches of the military participated in a single operation; an operation of this type had not been contemplated previously.<sup>25</sup> While at the higher levels of command, this led to problems of coordination, German leaders at the tactical level proved adept at being able to shape the force structure in order to achieve the best possible results, through the use not only of army forces, but also of *Luftwaffe* and naval assets. The German army used similar *ad hoc* unit tailoring frequently and with much success throughout the war.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the campaign demonstrated to the Germans, as well as to the British, that under certain conditions superior air power could defeat superior naval power.<sup>27</sup>

On the Allied side, many other lessons from the Norwegian campaign figured prominently in future operations. The campaign, consisting mainly of small unit actions such as those discussed above, demonstrated a number of shortcomings that sobered the attitude of the British high command. These shortcomings included deficiencies in armor, artillery, automatic weapons, signaling equipment, maps, arctic training, and amphibious operations.<sup>28</sup>

When the British, in particular, went into battle given these deficiencies, there were frequent cases of improper employment and ineffective troop organization, leading to dispersion of forces in the face of a far stronger enemy. As one observer commented, the campaign demonstrated to the British the “folly of sending [a] purely infantry force to fight against a force of all arms.”<sup>29</sup>

Taken together, these observations well support Hitler’s claim, cited above, that this was a campaign that was “not only bold, but one of the sauciest undertakings in the history of modern warfare.”<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Earl F. Ziemke, *The German Northern Theater of Operations, 1940-1945*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army Pamphlet, 1959), 109.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 4-7.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>4</sup>J.L. Moulton, *A Study of Warfare in Three Dimensions: The Norwegian Campaign of 1940*, (Athens, Ohio: The Ohio University Press, 1967), 62; and Ziemke, 33. The 3d Mountain Division had seen combat in Poland, all others were new to combat.

<sup>5</sup>Ziemke, 35. The tanks were Mark I and Mark II.

<sup>6</sup>Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World At Arms: A Global History of World War II*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117.

<sup>7</sup>Carl Joachim Hambro, *I Saw It Happen in Norway*, (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940), 80.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 161, 173.

<sup>9</sup>Ziemke, 27.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 52, 49.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 72-3.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>15</sup>T.K. Derry, *The Campaign in Norway*, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1952), 112.

<sup>16</sup>Moulton, 195-6; Derry, 121.

<sup>17</sup>Moulton, 195.

<sup>18</sup>Derry, 127-8.

<sup>19</sup>Ziemke, 74-5.

<sup>20</sup>Derry, 197-8; Ziemke, 88, 92, 46. Much of the German heavy weaponry was lost on the seaward passage.

<sup>21</sup>Moulton, 199.

<sup>22</sup>Derry, 198-9.

<sup>23</sup>Moulton, 225.

<sup>24</sup>Moulton, 225-8; Derry, 210-1.

<sup>25</sup>Ziemke, 14.

<sup>26</sup>See the German defense of Sicily, particularly the activities of *Kampfgruppen Schmalz*, and the German defense of Berlin for later examples of this force tailoring.

<sup>27</sup>Ziemke, 111.

<sup>28</sup>Derry, 240-2.

<sup>29</sup>Moulton, 201.

<sup>30</sup>Ziemke, 109.

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