



remembrance ni

In arctic waters

Part 1 - Narvik in a nutshell



**Northern Ireland's service in
the Battle of Narvik and the Russian convoys
by Houston McKelvey**

Part 1 -

Narvik in a nutshell



Narvik is an iron ore port in the north of Norway and it was one of the key reasons why Germany invaded the country. This did not escape Britain and the waters off Narvik became bitterly contested between the Royal Navy and the Kriegsmarine in the early phases of WW II.

APRIL 1940

3rd - The first German troop transports sailed for Norway.

7th - German covering and troop-carrying warships headed for Norway.

8th - Operation 'Wilfred'

Royal Navy destroyers laid minefields, simulated and real at three points off the Norwegian coast, including near Bodo. Battlecruiser Renown and other destroyers provided cover. One of the screen, HMS Glowworm (Lt-Cdr Roope) was detached to search for a man overboard just as the 8in-gunned cruiser Admiral Hipper headed into Trondheim. They met to the northwest of the port and the destroyer was soon sunk, but not before she rammed and damaged Hipper. Lt-Cdr Gerard Roope was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

7th-8th - In response to reported German movements, units of the Home Fleet including Rodney, Valiant, Repulse, four cruisers and 14 destroyers sailed from Scapa Flow and Rosyth. Accompanying them was a French cruiser and two destroyers. Two more British

cruisers and nine destroyers left other duties and headed for Norwegian waters. Next day, on the 8th, they were joined by the four troop-carrying cruisers of Operation R4, but after the soldiers had been disembarked back in Britain. More than 20 submarines, including three French and one Polish took up positions.

9th April - Germany invades Denmark and Norway

Germany invaded Denmark and Norway (Operation 'Weserubung'): Copenhagen was soon occupied and Denmark surrendered. In Norway, seaborne troops landed at Oslo, Kristiansand, Egersund and Bergen in the south, Trondheim in the centre and Narvik in the north. The southern forces and those from Trondheim pushed inland and joined up by the end of the month. They then moved north to relieve Narvik, which was isolated by the Allies soon after the first German landings. German Navy forces included a pocket battleship, six cruisers, 14 destroyers, torpedo boats and minesweepers for the landings at the six Norwegian ports, with battlecruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau covering the two most northerly landings. Thirty U-boats patrolled off Norway and British bases, but throughout the campaign suffered from major torpedo defects.



Wartime colour photograph of the Scharnhorst

Early in the morning of the 9th, battlecruiser Renown was in action with the two German battlecruisers to the west of Vestfiord. Gneisenau was damaged and Renown was slightly. The Germans withdrew. As Renown was in action, German occupation forces heading for Oslo came under heavy fire from Norwegian coastal

defences. Shore-sited guns and torpedoes in Oslo Fiord sank the heavy cruiser Blucher.

A Home Fleet cruiser force was detached to attack the German warships in Bergen, but ordered to withdraw. They came under continuous air attack and the destroyer Gurkha was bombed and sunk southwest of Bergen. That evening, the German cruiser Karlsruhe left Kristiansand and was torpedoed by the submarine Truant. She was scuttled the next day.

10th April - The first Battle of Narvik begins

The first Battle of Narvik commenced on April 10. The 2nd Destroyer Flotilla under command of Capt. Warburton-Lee, with HM Ships Hardy, Havock, Hostile, Hotspur and Hunter, entered Ofotfiord to attack the German ships assigned to the occupation of Narvik. These included 10 large destroyers.

Several transports were sunk together with destroyers Anton Schmitt and Wilhelm Heidkamp in Narvik Bay. Wilhelm Heidkamp was the flagship of Kommodore Bonte, Senior Officer Narvik Destroyer Force. The stern was blown into the air, killing Bonte and eighty of his men. In the ensuing battle the Dieter Von Roeder launched eight torpedoes, none of which scored a hit, but she sustained many hits herself, and later caught fire, as did the Hans Luderman. Whilst all this was going on the Hotspur, which had been guarding the harbour entrance, came alone into the harbour and torpedoed two merchant ships.

Derry officer's action recognised

Sub Lieutenant John Tillie, a son of the famous shirt-manufacturing family in Londonderry, was awarded a DSC for his action in HMS Hotspur. The citation states, "Though himself wounded, he rallied the survivors from his two guns' crews and opened rapid and accurate fire on the enemy, causing them to keep their distance until HMS Hostile and HMS Havock could return to cover HMS Hotspur's withdrawal".

He was later awarded a bar to his DSC for action in the Mediterranean. however sadly he was later killed in September 1942.

Since no German warships had been seen outside the harbour, Warburton-Lee thought he had all the Germans in the bag. He didn't realise that there were another five Destroyers nearby. He turned his vessels at high speed and came back into the harbour to have another go at the merchant ships, blazing away with his guns, sinking and damaging six vessels.

Up to now he had been incredibly lucky with only Hotspur suffering any hits, but as Warburton-Lee gathered his forces to depart his luck started to change for the worse.

Flagship Hardy targetted

The British Destroyers laid down a thick smoke screen to hide their departure, but as they headed out across the Fjord they ran into the five other German Destroyers as they charged into the Ofotfjord. The Georg Thiele and Bernard Von Armin came from Ballanger, and the Erich Giese, Erick Koellner and the Wolfgang Zenker sailed in from the Herjangfjord, surrounding the British Force in a pincer movement. In a fierce battle the five German destroyers fought the five British destroyers with sustained and rapid gunfire. Most of the German gunfire targeted the British Flagship Hardy, which came under fire from two ships, most notably the George Thiele. The Hardy sustained several direct hits and soon burst into flames. When the bridge took a direct



HMS Hardy

hit, Warburton-Lee was severely injured, but before he collapsed he ordered his Flotilla to 'keep on engaging the enemy'.

Other than Warburton-Lee, nearly everybody on the bridge had been killed except for Paymaster Lt. Geoffrey Standing, the Captain's Secertary. He awoke from the fearful blast to find his foot wounded, the ship out of control and heading for the shore at thirty knots. Since the wheel house was below him and nobody was answering his increasingly desperate orders to put the wheel over, he managed to hop down a ladder to the wheel house and alter course, enough to stop hitting the shore. When he regained the bridge helped by some seamen, he saw that they were now heading for two German destroyers. Since he could not slow down he decided to ram one of them. Luckily for all those left alive on board, whilst he was deciding which one to have a go at, one of the boilers was hit and the engines ground to a halt.

Capt Bernard Warburton-Lee RN was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

Tubby Cox taking the parade of survivors. Even after all that they had been through their humour was still high



Carrickfergus survivor of Hardy

Robert McAtamney from Carrickfergus served in HMS Hardy at the first Battle of Narvik in April 1940. He survived ship wreck. With his fellow survivors, he met Winston Churchill and was recognised by a presentation in his home town. Robert, known as Bobby, was one of six boys from the same family who fought in the war.

They became known as the fighting McAtamney's as they represented the Army, Navy and Airforce. Although three of them were wounded, all came home safe after the war.

Bobby, an Able Seaman at the time of the Battle of Narvik, was only twenty years old at the time. Bobby had a lucky escape when he was hit by shrapnel. It took his top lip off but, it could just as easily been his head. He plunged in to the icy waters and as he



Bobby McAtamney at a presentation in Carrickfergus Town Hall

swam ashore he noticed another ship mate 'Tubby' Cox floating unconscious in the water and dragged him to safety. They had a laugh about it afterwards, as Bobby said that Tubby only floated because of his size. After the ship had blown up and he and the rest of the survivors were led to safety, he was given a ski suit, and that's what he wore to come home.

The McAtamney's were a well liked family in Carickfergus, and when news of the Battle of Narvik became known, everybody was worried for Bobby and kept asking his parents for any news. When he finally came home, the town was decorated with flags and bunting and all the town's people lined the streets to welcome him



Winston Churchill inspecting the survivors of the HMS Hardy on 19 April 1940 at the Horse Guard Parade at Whitehall. Robert McAtamney from Carrickfergus is third from right

home. At a ceremony at the Town Hall he was presented with a watch and a ring. When asked how he felt, he said" that he would look back on this day with pride". Bobby Mc Atamney stayed in the Navy until 1960, and rose to the rank of Petty Officer.

13th April -

The Second Battle of Narvik begins

The Second Battle of Narvik commenced on April 13. The battleship Warspite and nine destroyers were sent into the Narvik fiords to finish off the remaining German ships. Submarine U-64 was surprised and sunk by Warspite's Swordfish catapult aircraft as it scouted ahead. The eight surviving German destroyers were all destroyed or scuttled. The British "Eskimo" and "Cossack" were damaged. By the 13th, the first British troop convoys had left the Scottish Clyde for Narvik, but some ships were diverted to Namsos.

German forces were well-established in the south and centre of Norway and had control of the air.

The first Allied landings took place between the 14th and 16th. In the north, British troops occupied Harstad in preparation for an attack on Narvik. They were reinforced by French and Polish units. They managed to recapture the town in May 1940 – a success that is regarded as the first defeat of German forces on land in WWII. It was not to last, though. Royal Marines led British and French troops into Namsos ready for an attack south towards Trondheim. The British went ashore in the Andalsnes area to try to hold central Norway with the Norwegian Army. Neither of these operations proved possible and on the 27th April the decision was taken to pull out of central Norway.

By May the war had started raging the heaviest in France rather than in Scandinavia. It had got closer to Britain's doorstep; and the evacuation from Dunkirk was imminent.

So the British withdrew from Narvik again shortly afterwards, on 8 June, just leaving a cache of rifles and ammunition for the Norwegians to fend for themselves with.

On 10 June, Norway had to surrender Narvik to Germany again.

Remembrance

On 01/03/2008 HMS Hunter was located by HNOMS Tyr of the Royal Norwegian Navy, after a 14-hour search of the fjord using some experimental equipment, whilst taking part in an exercise

with ships of the Royal Navy. A memorial service was held on Saturday 8th March in the waters above the wreck.

The memorial service consisted of synchronised ceremonies on the deck of each ship present and wreath laying over the site of the wreck. After the ceremony, the ships, HMS Albion, HMS Bulwark, HMS Cornwall, RFA Mounts Bay and NOCGV Andenes, all turned in formation and steamed over the wreck, toasting the crew who perished with a tot of rum poured over the side. As they sailed away, they signalled back by Morse: "Farewell, we'll meet again."

Other posts in this series:

Part 2

Loss of Glorious, Hunter and Acasta

Part 3

The Murmansk run

Part 4

Roll of Honour

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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