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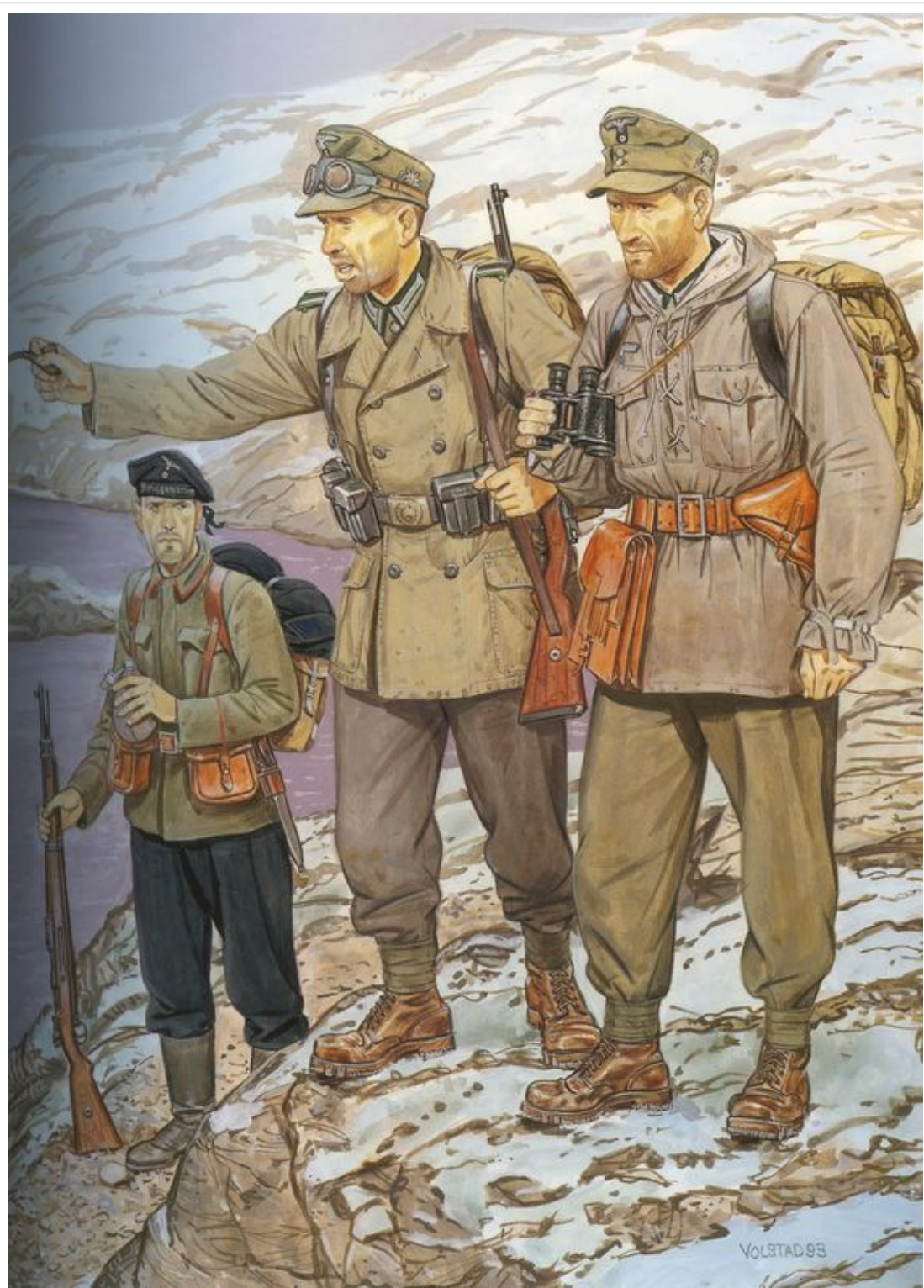
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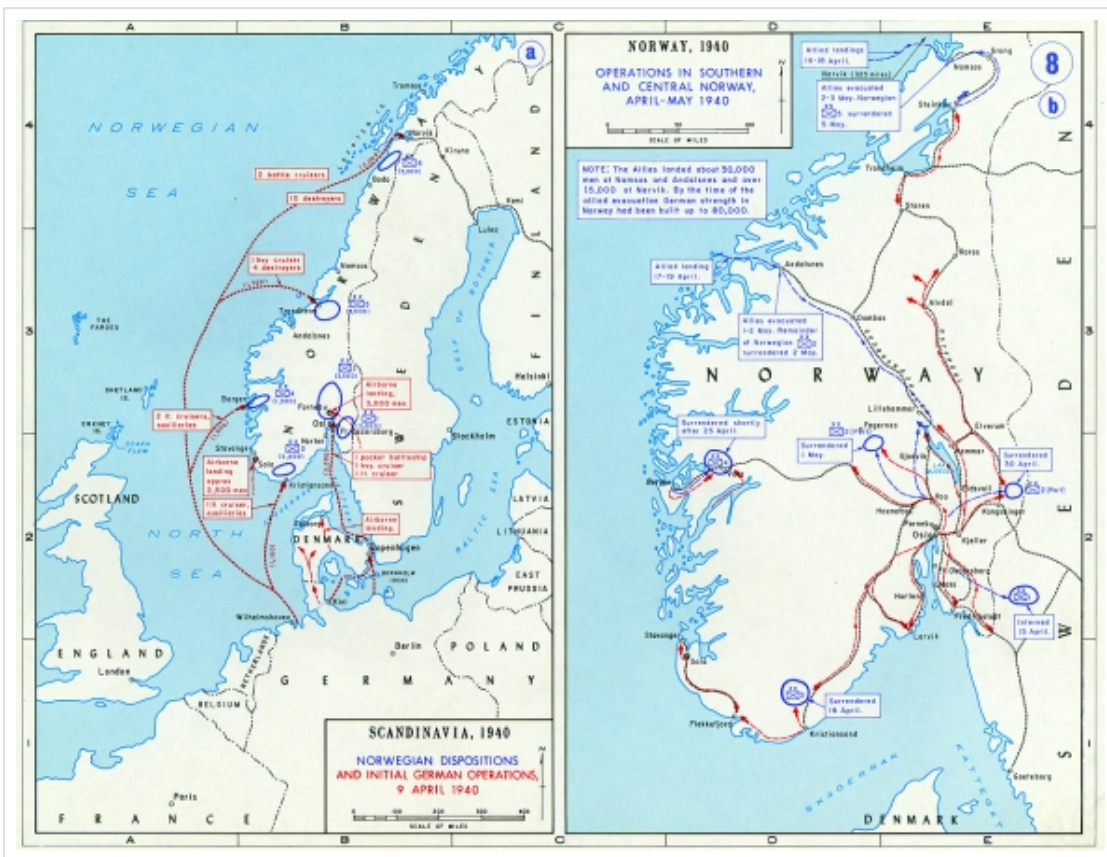
Weapons and Warfare

History and Hardware of Warfare

German 2nd Mountain Division at Narvik Part I

Posted on [December 16, 2016](#)





The British had considered it extremely improbable that the Germans would advance from Namsos to Narvik, and consequently they were presented with a situation for which they had not planned. However, by the end of April, some in the Allied camp

understood that the evacuation of Namsos gave the Germans an opportunity to advance north to relieve their hard-pressed forces in Narvik. Both Paris and London urged that part of the forces evacuated should do so overland while some should proceed to Mosjøen by sea.

The news that Carton de Wiart did not plan to leave forces in the area north of Namsos apparently came as a surprise to General Ironside. After a midnight call on April 29 from a French admiral, a hurried meeting with the French Military Attaché, and a visit to General Massy's home before 0300 hours, Ironside discovered that his "orders issued about the occupation of various points on the fiords to the north of Namsos had not been obeyed." A message from Massy to Carton de Wiart stressed the importance of holding Mosjøen and suggested that part of the force in Namsos be moved there by sea while other forces were used to delay the Germans along the road from Grong.

Generals Carton de Wiart and Audet argued that they did not have sufficient ski troops to cover the evacuation, that the road north was impassable because of the thaw, and that the troops would be exposed to heavy German air attacks. If the Allies had adequate liaison with Norwegian forces they would have learned that the railroad bed across the mountains had been cleared of snow prior to April 19 and that as of April 26, the 5th Brigade was supplied from Mosjøen by using both the railroad and road. At the time that local Allied commanders declared the route impassable, the 1/14th Inf was withdrawing over it.

General Gamelin, surprised by both the evacuation and the fact that forces were not left behind to hinder the German northward advance, sent instructions directly to General Audet on May 2, directing French forces to take up positions near Grong.¹⁵ While this led to a hurried meeting between Audet and Carton de Wiart, it came too late and was not sufficient to convince the two commanders. They argued that the force would be trapped since it could not withdraw overland.

It was unfortunate that the decision on how to withdraw from Namsos was left to the local commanders since it had a direct effect on the operations in Narvik over which neither they nor General Massy had any authority. Allowing the two battalions of 5th Demi-Brigade CA to fight a rearguard action along the Grong-Mosjøen road and railroad may have been to Allied benefit. It is quite possible that Getz, encouraged by the fact that some Allies were still at his side, would have withdrawn his remaining two battalions by the same route and the presence of French forces may have prevented the demoralization of the 1/14th Inf. The Allies did send a small French force of about 100 men with two British light anti-aircraft guns by sea to secure Mosjøen against airborne attack.

By a quick decision and decisive action it should have been possible to keep the forces fighting north of Grong supplied through the small port of Mosjøen. The German air threat mentioned by Derry did not present greater problems for the delaying force than it later posed to the piecemeal and ineffectual British attempts to insert troops along the coastline to stem the German advance. In fact, as the Allies were wrangling

about how to withdraw their forces from Namsos, on April 29, General Mackesy was directed to send forces from the Narvik front to Nordland Province.

Generals Gamelin and Ironside insisted that part of the evacuating force conduct an effective delaying action between Grong and Mosjøen. The authors of Ironside's diaries write:

Now that Namsos was on the point of being lost, it was imperative to stop the Germans moving up the coast and relieving their garrison at Narvik before we had captured it ourselves. Ironside [and Gamelin] accordingly wanted his only ski-troops, the Chasseurs Alpins, to retire, not by sea, but slowly up the road to the north, via Grong and Mosjøen, being supplied from the several small ports on the Norwegian coast, delaying the enemy as long as possible and eventually joining the British at Narvik.

Gamelin's and Ironside's views are confirmed by the message Gamelin sent to the French commander in Namsos on May 2 and General Massy's message to Carton de Wiart on April 29 after what Ironside describes as a stormy meeting in the early morning hours. Hovland places the blame on the British, more specifically on Churchill. Churchill, however, writes:

The Germans wasted no time in exploiting the vacuum left by the Allied evacuation and the surrender of the 5th Brigade. They entered the ruins of Namsos on May 4 and General von Falkenhorst issued orders that same day for the 2nd Mountain Division, commanded by Lieutenant General Valentin Feurstein, to begin its overland drive to establish contact with Dietl's forces in Narvik.

The 2nd Mountain Division was not part of the forces originally earmarked for the invasion of Norway. This elite unit was added when Hitler became concerned in late April about the situation in Norway and particularly about a link-up with Dietl in Narvik. The 2nd Mountain Division was located in the Eifel area when it was ordered to Oslo via Denmark. There were several difficulties and mishaps during its deployment.

Since the division had not been part of the original invasion force and therefore not part of the movement plans, there was a scramble to find transport and much of the heavy equipment was left behind. In addition, there were serious losses in equipment during the transport from Denmark to Norway. Finally, Group XXI detached the division's engineer battalion for service in southern Norway.

The 2/137th Inf, reinforced by one mountain artillery battery and one engineer company, moved by air to Værnes Airfield on May 2. Lieutenant Colonel August Sorko commanded this group. While the bulk of the division was underway to Trondheim on foot or by railroad, Sorko's forces were rushed to Grong to begin the advance towards Narvik.

General Feurstein and his staff ran into some of the same problems that plagued other Germans in Norway. For example, they could not put their hands on adequate maps and were forced, like the pilots over Narvik, to rely on maps on a scale of 1:1,000,000

or road maps. Feuerstein met with General von Falkenhorst and his chief-of-staff, Colonel von Buschenhagen, in Trondheim on May 4 and received his marching order.

While Von Falkenhorst may have expected that any resistance north of Namsos would be minimal after the Allied withdrawal and the surrender of the 5th Norwegian Brigade, he also wanted to light a fire under his subordinate. His order emphasized the need for haste and made light of any possible opposition. Feuerstein was less exuberant than his superior and answered, "We will do everything, but please do not expect the impossible." Feuerstein knew that there were still elements of the 14th Norwegian Regiment in the area north of Grong. Furthermore, he anticipated that the Allies would make every effort to impede his advance, an advance that threatened their stranglehold on Narvik and Dietl's forces.

Feuerstein and a small staff set out the following day from Trondheim in three taxis to make contact with Sorko. Group XXI's evening situation report for May 5 stated that Group Feuerstein was on its way from Grong to Mosjøen with all available motorized forces. Was this a sarcastic reference to the three taxis? The motorized transport for the two mountain divisions was still in southern Norway waiting for the opening of the road to Trondheim or in Denmark awaiting shipping to Norway. In his history of World War 2, General von Tippelskirch writes that an army corps consisting of one mountain division and one infantry division pressed forward into North Norway after the Allied evacuation of Namsos. Feuerstein notes sarcastically that his "army corps" consisted of six and a half companies of mountain troops, one artillery battery, and a staff of six. The 181st Division under General Woytasch had conducted the operations against the Allies and Norwegians north of Trondheim but this unit was only used to repair the lines of communications behind the 2nd Division, assist in the supply effort, and later help clear the offshore islands. The major forces eventually available to General Feuerstein for his mission consisted of the 136th and 137th Mountain Infantry Regiments, Colonel Weiss' 138th Mountain Infantry Regiment (belonging to the 3rd Mountain Division), 83rd Engineer Battalion from the 3rd Division, 1st and 2nd Bns of the 730th Artillery, and the 40th Anti-tank detachment.

The forces available to General Feuerstein for the first phase of his daunting task, the 200 kilometer advance from Grong to Mosjøen, consisted of only two mountain infantry battalions (2/137 and 3/138), a battery of mountain artillery and one engineer platoon. This is a far cry from General von Tippelskirch's claim that Feuerstein began his advance with a mountain corps consisting of what amounted to two reinforced divisions.

Loss of Mosjøen

The British expected the nearest Germans to be at least 160 kilometers from Mosjøen when they landed. One can imagine Colonel Gubbins' surprise and dismay when he learned that the Norwegians had been fighting the Germans since May 7 only 40 kilometers from Mosjøen. Lieutenant Colonel Sorko and his men had lived up to von Falkenhorst's demands and covered 160 kilometers in two days, through terrain that

Generals Carton de Wiart and Audet had declared impassable for their own mountain troops.

Nummedal planned to establish a delaying position with the retreating 1/14th Inf and the reserve battalion of the same regiment in the Vefsa area near Fjellingfors. After a conference with Major Sundlo and his company commanders in the evening of May 4, it was realized that the 1/14th was demoralized and needed rest and reorganization. The battalion was moved to a reserve position near Mosjøen. It appears from Nummedal's reports that the demoralized condition of the 1/14th had also infected the reserve battalion.

Nummedal gave Sundlo command of the Norwegian forces in the Mosjøen area. He also ordered Sundlo to send one company to Korgen to cover the eastern approach. Company 1 of the battalion was still shaken from the railroad accident a few days earlier and Co 2's strength had fallen to 120 men. It was decided to send both companies north since they needed rest and reorganization. These detachments left Major Sundlo with only one rifle company, a reduced strength machinegun company, and the mortar platoon. These forces occupied defensive positions in a defile south of Mosjøen.

The reserve battalion of the 14th Inf, commanded by Captain Sundby, occupied positions about 40 kilometers south of Mosjøen. The British planned to send one of their companies to reinforce the under-strength Norwegian battalion. It caused some bitterness among the Norwegians when the British decided to join this company with the Norwegians located in the defile further to the rear.

The Norwegians fought two delaying actions in this area over the next three days but were unable to halt the German advance. They planned to occupy a third delaying position but before that could be carried out the battalion commander received orders from Nummedal to withdraw through the 1/14th Inf to Mosjøen where the battalion would embark on ships for Mo. The battalion's low morale was the primary reason for its withdrawal. Nummedal was dissatisfied with its performance, confirmed by reports that the withdrawal was carried out in stages. The withdrawing troops witnessed the hectic rear area activities involved in evacuating supply depots and this probably did not help their low morale.

Colonel Gubbins left Independent Co 4 for seaward protection of Mosjøen and for security of the road leading to Mo. He held a conference with Major Sundlo the following evening, May 9. Two platoons from Independent Co 5 were made available to secure the Norwegian flanks in the defile south of Mosjøen while a third platoon occupied a rear position.

The Germans attacked early in the morning of May 10. The lead German bicycle troops were caught in a deadly crossfire from the defenders and suffered a number of casualties. British reports place the German losses at about 50 killed and wounded. Major Sundlo, in his report, states that the British claim was exaggerated. The Germans soon mounted organized attacks along the railroad against the Norwegian right flank

and the British platoon in that area and frontally along the main road. The fighting lasted for about four hours but around noon, the Norwegians and British were forced from their positions and withdrew to Mosjøen.

There were no other suitable defensive positions south of Mosjøen. Gubbins and Sundlo decided to continue the retreat past Mosjøen to Mo and to delay the Germans as much as possible in the process. The British abandoned this plan when the Germans made an amphibious landing in their rear. Sandvik writes that the withdrawal order came from the War Office. Colonel Finne, the Norwegian liaison officer at the British headquarters in Harstad informed General Ruge on May 10 that Gubbins had received instructions from the War Office to leave Mosjøen. Ruge sent Minister of Defense Ljungberg (who was in London) a telegram the same day, stating that the British in Mosjøen had War Office orders to evacuate. It reads in part "A small English force in Mosjøen, which operates directly under the War Office, has received orders to evacuate Mosjøen under certain circumstances. Based on experience from the south, it is feared that the opportunity will be used."

Since all Allied forces south of Narvik were placed under Admiral Cork as of May 7, it is odd that part of that force came directly under the War Office. Both Derry and Moulton imply that Gubbins made the withdrawal decision without orders. However, the fact that Gubbins' forces were transported on destroyers indicates that the Admiralty agreed with his decision.

Other British writers, such as Adams, maintain that Gubbins had no alternative but to make his escape by sea. However, the Independent Cos were organized and equipped to operate in a guerilla environment behind enemy lines, if necessary. The 600 British troops along with Major Sundlo's forces had an opportunity to delay Sorko long enough for British and Norwegian forces in the Mo area to eliminate the German amphibious landing. This, in turn, would have opened the line of retreat from Mosjøen.

Colonel Gubbins withdrew his forces from Mosjøen by sea aboard Norwegian fishing vessels to waiting destroyers in the evening of May 10 and the morning of May 11 that took them to Bodø. The British destroyed their heavy weapons but a considerable amount of supplies and equipment fell into German hands.

The Norwegian troops were left to make their way north overland, knowing that a German force had landed in their rear. They viewed the British withdrawal as another example of treachery and were exceedingly bitter. Major Sundlo testified that he was not informed about the withdrawal and that some of his vehicles were confiscated by the British for use in their retreat. Most Norwegian supplies in Mosjøen were evacuated by fishing vessels, but the Germans captured some. Nummedal and his staff evacuated by sea while Sundlo and his troops began an exhaustive march to Elsfjord where they arrived in the evening of May 11. From there, the troops were transported by boats to Valla on May 12.

The Germans entered Mosjøen on May 11 but did not linger long in that town. They reached Elsfjord shortly after the Norwegians had departed, but found no means to cross the fjord. Most set out across the mountains to Korgen. While the lead elements of the 2nd Division had covered nearly 250 kilometers in six days, von Falkenhorst pressed for a continuation of the rapid pace. It appeared that the Germans were temporarily halted at Elsfjord and Korgen and he hinted that Feurstein, whose headquarters was in Mosjøen, should spend more time at the front to insure a relentless pursuit. This elicited a quick and sharp response from Feurstein, stating that he knew his place in battle.

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