The Liberation of Norway

The final days of war

On 2 May 1945, General Miles Dempsey’s British 2nd Army reached Lübeck on the Danish–German border.¹ Dempsey’s troops were poised to enter Scandinavia. However, the liberation of Denmark did not require the force of British arms as a German delegation headed by Admiral Hans Geog von Friedeberg signed an instrument of surrender with Montgomery on 4 May. All German forces were surrendered to Eisenhower on 7 May, the terms coming into effect at midnight 8/9 May 1945. Norway, which the Allies estimated contained a quarter of a million undefeated German troops (in reality the number was well over 350,000), was not such an easy proposition, not least because the country did not have the might of the 21st Army Group sitting on her border.

As the war in Europe drew to its conclusion, General Sir Andrew Thorne, GOC-in-C Scottish Command and commander of Force 134 designated to liberate Norway, was unsure of the resources available to him for this task. The 52nd Division, long earmarked for service in Norway, was no longer available having been committed to the fighting in Holland in October 1944. They had been replaced by 1st Airborne Division in the order of battle for Apostle, the plan for the liberation of Norway. Yet Thorne, preparing Doomsday, the initial lodgement of Apostle, was told on 3 May that the Airborne Division too was unavailable. It is easy to imagine the chill that went through Thorne’s planners when they were informed of this by SHAEF, and that it was ‘now clear that units will have to come from your resources’.² Thorne’s resources were limited to say the least. His only available first-line troops were two Special Air Service (SAS) regiments still fighting in Germany. This was somewhat at variance with what Lieutenant-General Frederick Morgan, deputy Chief of Staff at SHAEF, had told him. Morgan had reassured Thorne that the question of forces for Norway was:

... constantly in our minds and we shall do our utmost to ensure that sufficient forces are always available in the United Kingdom for the

¹ C. Mann, British Policy and Strategy towards Norway, 1941–45
² © Christopher Mann 2012
implementation of Doomsday and further that as soon as conditions demand it action is taken to provide the forces for Apostle.³

The SAS, motoring back from Lübeck to Belgium, would probably be adequate for an initial lodgement when added to the Norwegian Parachute Company. Even so they would not reach Belgium until 9–10 May. SHAEF estimated it would, therefore, take 10–14 days to lay on Doomsday using the SAS. This was rather a long time given that German capitulation might take place at any moment. SHAEF told the War Office that ‘they are most anxious that the implications of accepting a delay of this order should be appreciated’.⁴ The unacceptable time lag aside, the SAS was hardly an appropriate or adequate force for the liberation and reoccupation of an entire country. Luckily for Thorne, Major General Jock Whiteley of SHAEF championed his cause with some vigour. Whiteley persuaded the War Office and the CIGS, Brooke, to reallocate 1st Airborne Division for operations in Norway.⁵ The Division was short of the 1st Parachute Brigade, which was earmarked for Denmark, and the War Office’s condition on its deployment was that it be available for withdrawal within 30 days of landing.⁶

On 6 May, SHAEF brought Doomsday to 24-hour notice.⁷ Major-General Roy Urquhart, GOC 1st Airborne Division, arrived at Thorne’s headquarters the same day. Thorne and his planners had been working on the assumption of a seaborne landing, using 52nd Division, for over a year-and-a-half. They were somewhat surprised that Urquhart’s answer to their question, as to when his troops could move, was ‘[i]n 48 hours’. The division had been preparing for a full-scale exercise and the necessary aircraft were assembled.⁸ In a stroke, the time lag problem that had dogged Rankin Case C and Apostle throughout had been solved by the employment of an airborne division. SHAEF estimated the necessary shipping would be available by 9 May and as for the RAF, preparations were well under way for the return of the 2nd Tactical Air Force’s two Norwegian fighter squadrons.⁹ The 38 Group RAF and 9th Troop Carrier Command USAAF were to be responsible for the transport of some 8,500 troops and 600 jeeps of 1st Airborne Division and the two SAS battalions. Ten aircraft would be available for 38 Group to fly the Norwegian parachutists assigned to seize Sola airfield in Stavanger and Gardermoen in Oslo by 8 May; they would be ready to transport the bulk of these forces by 9 May. This was a fairly impressive achievement, as the RAF had only discovered the revised details of Doomsday on 7 May.¹⁰

The attitude of the German command in Norway remained central to the peaceful and efficient entry of Allied forces into the country. There had been much Allied speculation in April about the Germans fighting on in a ‘Festung Norwegen’; it was a possibility even mentioned by the supreme commander, General Eisenhower to the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Reichkommissar Josef Terboven, an ardent Nazi, was in favour of continuing the war in Norway. Fortunately, it was the military that truly held power. Hitler’s successor, Grand