

## I Was There!... Eye Witness Stories of the War

### We Went to Vaagso with the Commando Men

On December 27, 1941, for the first time British soldiers, sailors and airmen combined in an assault on the Nazi-occupied European coastline. Their raid on the Norwegian island of Vaagso is here described by Reuter's correspondents who accompanied the expedition.

**W**E left our base with Christmas decorations still hanging up in the ward-room, and early on the morning of December 27 were off the entrance to Vaagso Fjord waiting for dawn—the zero hour for the attack to begin.

The ship's crews had been closed up at their action stations for an hour or more and there was not a sound as, in line ahead, we gently slipped round the headland and steamed down the fjord towards the town. Everything was ready for the first step—the bombardment of the two coastal batteries which the warships had to carry out first to enable the soldiers to make a safe landing.

Once inside the fjord assault craft with soldiers veered out of line and the warships went ahead to take up their positions. No attempt was made to interfere with this, and it seems that the first knowledge the German gunners had of our arrival was a hail of high explosive shells which rained relentlessly down upon them, reducing their gun emplacements to piles of shattered masonry and their guns to twisted pieces of metal. Only one gun of the two batteries answered our fire, and this was immediately silenced by our accurate shooting.

Beneath this cannonade a thin snakelike line of Commando barges drove straight to the islet, and within half an hour the men in them had climbed its rocky slopes, stormed the guns as in days of cutlass and pistol, shot many Germans and taken 20 prisoners. Later the gun emplacements and stores were blown sky high. Simultaneously with this assault, led by a major who serenaded his men across the smooth water to the strains of his bagpipes, the main landing—which I made in the leading barge with members of the Army film unit—took place.

As the naval bombardment died down the Hampdens swept over the head of the tiny bay in which Vaagso Port lay nestled thickly against the towering cliffs.

The Commandos chose a rocky foreshore on which to lower their ramps, and as they landed smoke bombs dropped from 50 feet up. This screen, through which a German machine-gun fired a few rounds ineffectually, gave the landing-party complete cover. It was perhaps a little too close, but it could

not have been better timed. The R.A.F. had scored an early bull's eye.

I waded ashore with the rest, knee-deep through rocky pools and acrid fumes, on to ledges of snow. It was a weird and confusing experience, through which the Commando troops, led by dashing young officers and hard-bitten sergeants, emerged to begin a series of assaults through and around the narrow town from west to east.

It was then that the fun—Commando fun 1942 style—really started. The officers of the troops concerned gathered up their forces for the most desperate of all the tasks that short swift day. They had to advance down the main street.

#### A Troop Without An Officer

One officer had slipped on getting out of the boat and jammed his leg between it and the rocks, but he struggled on, limping badly. Another encountered immediate machine-gun fire, and with his men engaged and killed five of the enemy before setting fire to an ammunition dump. Later, he was killed trying with a corporal to storm a hotel from which a number of German officers were firing. A third officer was sniped in the back soon afterwards. At one time the entire troop was without an officer in command.

Despite casualties, all ranks pursued their task with great gallantry, both before and after they were reinforced by a floating reserve. One man I saw fought brilliantly. He was the corporal who went with his captain to storm the hotel. After the officer had been shot he managed to chuck a grenade into the building, which then caught fire.

Many Germans were roasted to death in houses they made into strong points, and from which they doggedly refused to emerge, even when grenades or a fusillade of shots had set the rooms about them on fire. Resistance was particularly stubborn in the centre of the town which, as the morning grew older, began to blaze as more and more houses holding snipers and small parties of the enemy came under heavy fire, including 2-inch and 3-inch mortar shells.

While we were still dodging behind boulders and slinking over the first half-mile, and whilst the fire of the Norwegian



In charge of the Commando troops in the Vaagso raid on December 27, 1941, was Brig. J. C. Haydon, D.S.O. (left). The naval forces which cooperated in the raid were led by Rear-Adm. H. M. Burrough, C.B. (right).

Photos, Universal and Lafayette.

men, women and children, anxious to go to England, were running back to our barges—some in tears, some laughing and all rather scared—two warships rode majestically past the town sending a wash ashore for four miles or more of Nazi inland waterway space.

Heavy gunfire reverberated down the fjord to add to the clamour of explosions. Another German coastal battery four miles away over the hills tried to get the range of our warships, but their fire was ineffective.

Deprived of reinforcements, the nearest neighbouring garrison was over the water 25 miles away. The Germans got little help from their air force, although the aerodromes at Trondheim, Stavanger, Lista, Aalborg and Herdla are all within striking distance.

The land operations, carried out in the extreme confusion of close hand-to-hand fighting, smoke and flame, tested the Commandos' communication system to the hilt, and as the battle progressed many messages could only be got through by word of mouth.

The lieutenant-colonel commanding the battle on shore showed an inspiring disregard of danger in his anxiety to keep it under control. He escaped unscathed, although he had at least one narrow escape. A German opening a door threw a stick grenade in his path, but he jumped clear. Then the Nazi walked out. He was immediately shot.

Demolition work was sometimes unavoidably risky owing to the closeness of the canning and oil factories to the fighting. I and several others had to duck rather hastily



HERDLA AERODROME, about 100 miles down the coast from Vaagso Is., was heavily attacked by Blenheims of Bomber Command during the combined operations of December 27 to prevent enemy aircraft from assisting the German garrison attacked by the British raiding-party. The photograph was taken from one of the attacking Blenheims, and shows bombs bursting on the airfield. The Me 109 on the extreme left, taxiing on the airfield, was destroyed.

Photo, British Official: Crown Copyright



I WAS THERE!  
gotavapen Courtesy of van Ratingen



The remarkable photographs in this page were taken during the combined raid on the occupied islands of Vaagso and Maaloy on December 27, 1941. Left, four German prisoners, one of whom carries a white flag of surrender, being escorted to a British transport. Right, one of the few British wounded being evacuated on one of the landing craft. At least 120 Germans were killed during the raid.

when the biggest of them was blown up, and a little later, when the only German tank in town, a small light model, was demolished in its garage. Pieces of the burning metal whistled past me up the street and wounded two of our men 200 yards away.

The Germans, though outnumbered, fought to the last and were good physical types. By skilful use of cover and by using almost flashless and smokeless cordite they showed that they have mastered one of the ugliest features of modern war—street-fighting. Some German troops, including a small unit spending Christmas at Vaagso and who were out early on a route march, made for high ground, and one soldier was

still sniping when, all tasks completed, the last of the Commandos were re-embarked.

It was just three in the afternoon as we steamed out of Vaagso Fjord. Almost the entire German garrison of upwards of 200 men had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner; all the industrial plant was dynamited, and the coastal guns spiked. The Navy destroyed 16,000 tons of merchant shipping, two armed trawlers and an armed tug. R.A.F. and Naval cooperation was of first-class vigour, and, as one Commando sergeant described it, "so comforting." No soldier, sailor or airman who took part failed to realize their complete interdependence in modern warfare.

in his area, and the appropriate indicator was triumphantly placed on the plotting map. These young Indians, many of them evidently scarcely out of school, did their job with superb efficiency which could only be attained by their own keenness coupled with skilful training.

The great air defence exercises entered their second phase with aircraft representing enemy air forces attacking various local targets. Hostile aircraft flew at a great height over the cantonment area of Peshawar. The alarm was sounded and full defence precautions were immediately taken by the civil and military authorities. No bombs were dropped and presumably the enemy's object was merely to spy out the land.

Later in the day a short but sharp attack by enemy dive-bombing was made on a post in the Khyber Pass, but this was repulsed without any serious damage being caused.

Soon after dark some "bombs" fell unexpectedly in the Noshera area, evidently dropped by enemy aircraft operating at a very great height in the sub-stratosphere. The umpires of the directing staff ruled that these bombs, if real, would have caused a certain amount of damage to a main road and railway in the vicinity. Arrangements were at once made to effect the necessary repairs.

All civil and military A.R.P. and P.A.D. (preparation for air defence) services are in a constant state of readiness. Black-out and other defence measures have been strictly enforced and everyone is waiting with keen interest for further developments in these realistic and instructive exercises.

### I Watched a Practice Alert in India

Formed only 18 months ago, the Indian Observer Corps has thousands of keen-eyed and keen-eared watchers who cover all the areas vulnerable to air attack. Reuter's special correspondent sends this account of the air defence exercises he witnessed in Northern India.

COLUMNS of armoured vehicles, taking part in the week's air defence exercises, passed me roaring their way north as I went to visit the secret headquarters of the India Observer Corps somewhere in Northern India. They were followed by heavy guns.

In the headquarters I found a large table with a map of the surrounding districts so arranged that the path of the approaching aircraft reported by the observation posts by means of direct telephone connexions could be plotted with complete accuracy.

Two mock air raids were taking place when I arrived. With quiet efficiency young Indians received telephone reports and

marked the position of the raiders on the map, while at the desk above them others reported to fighter aircraft command, A.R.P. authorities and anti-parachutist detachments. On the first day, I was told, these keen youngsters dealt successfully with no less than nine simultaneous raids.

The mock air raids took a realistic turn when the sirens sounded and the warplanes, whose path I had been watching plotted, appeared overhead. Detonations in the vicinity indicated that they had succeeded in dropping a few bombs. But a few minutes later one of the outlying observers reported that at least two raiders had been shot down

Courtesy of van Ratingen



ON VAAGSO ISLAND an oil factory burns fiercely after demolition by the British Commandos. British soldiers are seen guarding against snipers or surprise counter-attacks. Right, British troops after street fighting in the main street of Vaagso, where they attacked and captured the German H.Q. The German military commander was taken prisoner as was the naval officer in charge of the convoy control port. Photos, British Official