



World Heritage Battlefields

NARVIK 1940 – AUDIO #5

[Brisk, elevated music]

NARRATOR

This programme is brought to you by the museum of the Second World War in Gdansk as part of the World Battlefield Museums Forum.

[Sombre music; G. Holst “Mars, the Bringer of War”]

Welcome. Courage, sacrifice and heritage are values crucial to understanding battlefields and reflecting on the fate of man and his historic struggles. As places of remembrance and focal points to pay our respects, battlefields bring back images of the past we can explore and research. Preserving and conserving battlegrounds, artefacts and infrastructure for future generations should be our major goal. Only when this goal is achieved can we think of battlefields as open-air museums and commercial tourism destinations. After all, battlefields are guardians of memory, shaping our collective, historical identity.

[Energetic intro music]

In early 1940, when fighting was continuing in Finland after it had been attacked by the Soviet Union in what is known as the Winter War, the Allies considered helping the Finns through Narvik and the Swedish mining basin.

But when Finland and the USSR negotiated peace in March, the plan was abandoned. At the same time, Germany, seeing a risk of having its influence in Scandinavia limited, decided to seize Denmark and Norway, which were neutral countries, to secure its supply of iron ore and gain important naval bases necessary for waging an effective war against Great Britain. Adolf Hitler ordered the invasion of Norway. The operation was codenamed *Weserübung*. The German attack began on April 9th, 1940.

Denmark hardly resists. Norway however, fights to defend itself.

SPEECH BY KING HAAKON 7TH OF NORWAY

[In the background Norwegian national anthem: "Ja, vi elsker dette landet", English: *Yes, we love this country*]

It is Germany that has dictated this; it is Germany that for no reason has invaded our small country, as it has since invaded other small, neutral countries. I might try to characterize Germany's attack on Norway, but today I will not make any attempt at such a terrible task. I leave it to the judgment of history, and I have no doubt that it will be an eternal shame for Germany. Germany said it came to protect us. The protection has consisted of bombing other cities and defenseless, small homes in the countryside. And Germany has done this without any reason on our part...

NARRATOR

[Dynamic orchestral music; cymbals heard]

NICK HEWITT FROM THE ROYAL NAVY MUSEUM IN PORTSMOUTH AND

WOJCIECH ŁUKASZUN FROM MUSEUM OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN GDANSK

NICK HEWITT

[Atmospheric music in the background]

Norway's tradition at the start of the Second World War is very simple, Norway is neutral. Really, very nervous sitting on the fence, trying not to offend or overly favour either side, very aware that they are stuck in the middle of this confrontation that's going on. So nervously neutral is Norway's safest.

Norway is in a very difficult place to fight the war, unless you use the sea, it's virtually impossible to campaign in it, because the internal communications, the land communications are very difficult. Very small number of single railway lines, small number of roads and generally quite poor quality, incredibly difficult terrain to traverse, if you are not using the roads. So control of the sea is absolutely paramount, if you are going to do anything in Norway.

The British are very aware of the strategic significance of Norway generally, and Narvik in particular, because in the run-up to April 1940 British are relaying sea mines in Norwegian territorial waters, to kind of force the German shipping out to sea, where the British can then attack it.

At the same time, the Germans are developing a plan for fully fledged invasion of Norway. The Germans deploy almost their entire navy, which is much smaller than the British navy, to insert troops into all of the principal Norwegian ports. Merchant ships and transport carrying soldiers, supported by war ships, appear off the Norwegian coast simultaneously in the morning, in the dark. They arrive off Oslo, they arrive off Bergen and other ports, and they arrive off Narvik.

The Germans insert their troops into Narvik with a force of destroyers that take the German troops in, but it uses almost all their fuel and endurance to get to Narvik, because it's so far away. They successfully land their invasion force; there is a fairly nasty little action with two Norwegian coast defending battleships, the *Norge* and the *Eidsvold*, which have both sunk with heavy losses; bear in

mind that they are attacking a neutral country, that at daybreak the Germans are in possession of Narvik.

WOJCIECH ŁUKASZUN

The Polish Navy also took part in sea operations during the Norwegian campaign. One of the first successes was the sinking of the German cargo ship *Rio de Janerio* by the Polish submarine *ORP Orzeł*. The news of this event was one of the first broadcasts by the Germans announcing the start of their Norwegian campaign.

A Polish destroyer force composed of *ORP Blyskawica*, *ORP Burza*, and *ORP Grom* vessels, provided protection for the Allied convoys and artillery support for the troops on land. On the 3rd of May, *ORP Grom* was sunk with a bomb from a German aircraft. Cruise ships *Sobieski*, *Chrobry* and *Batory* were pressed into service as well and took part in the Norwegian Campaign to ship cargo and military personnel.

NICK HEWITT

The German used almost their entire navy. Any notion that the Germans could have mounted an invasion of England is completely ridiculous and that's because their fleet has been eviscerated in Norway.

NARRATOR

[Overlay of calm music with sounds of industry working in the background]

Narvik is where mountains meet the Atlantic. It is as far north from Oslo, as Italy is to the south. This Viking settlement, that goes back to the Bronze Age, became a strategic port for the Gallivare and Kiruna iron-ore mines, as it was the only accessible ice-free port and could handle ships 25 metres deep and 200 metres in length. This led to the construction of a railway line to the mines.

The start of World War two created an insatiable appetite for iron-ore for the German war machine. This key component to produce steel was available in Sweden - but in winter it was only accessible via this ice-free Atlantic port. Allied command spotted this opportunity as a way to seriously hinder the German war effort. Hitler's army had other ideas. April 1940 saw the start of a series of events that led to this heroic showdown.

EYSTEIN MARKUSSON OF THE NARVIKSENTERET IN NORWAY

[Elevated, rhythmic music]

In the early on hours of the morning the 9th of April 1940, Nazi Germany attacked Norway in six different harbours. Narvik was the northernmost of those, well above the Arctic circle. The immediate attack meant the sinking of *Eidsvold* and *Norge*, killing 282 Norwegian sailors immediately. Over 2000 German soldiers took the city. In the following days, two major sea battles occurred with also three Polish ships participating under Allied command, sinking several German destroyers, and on the 13th of April, they sunk the remaining ones. A total of 10 Germans destroyers sunk.

[Dramatic music continues]

NARRATOR

The Norwegians were fighting courageously at various locations to save their country from an unprovoked attack from an oppressive dictatorship.

EYSTEIN MARKUSSON

In the aftermath of that, the Norwegian forces gathered in the north, to retaliate. Allied forces came in with Polish, French, and British forces.

ANNE CHRISTIAN CHRISTIANSEN OF THE NARVIKSENERET IN NORWAY

Between 11,000 and 12,000 thousand of the Allied forces, where about 3,000 of them were Polish soldiers. If you look at the descriptions from the German side, they are most fearful of the Polish soldiers.

EYSTEIN MARKUSSON

The Polish drove there, the southern flank of the land battle, of the mountain war that was done, that's an outstanding effort. At that point, the German forces were almost forced over the boarder to Sweden. On 28th of May town of Narvik was recaptured by the Allied forces, French foreign legionnaires and legion forces were the first ones in. A total of 8,500 people were killed during the battle of Narvik. 64 or 65 ships, it's debated, were sunk making it one of the greatest battles of the Atlantic during the Second World War and also the city of Narvik was almost totally destroyed.

NARRATOR

[Tense music building up]

Although this campaign demonstrated the need for land and air battles to be coordinated, another key feature was the involvement of various international allies who were able to work together both at sea and on land. This became a founding principle for modern military alliances. The Norwegians were supported by a motivated, international coalition of forces: the British, the French, and many Poles.

GENERAL BOHUSZ-SZYSZKO, COMMANDER OF THE POLISH INDEPENDENT HIGHLAND BRIGADE

[Original recording with an overlay of English translation; Polish military tune "Szara Piechota" heard in the background]

We moved out from the coastal area and after crossing high, snow-covered peaks with the support of Norwegian skiers, we moved very quickly through very difficult conditions. This surprised the Germans, who fled in disarray. This was our first successful action against the Germans, not just of our fighting

abilities but also our tactics, of the more heavy fighting. Our Polish units overrun the German positions one by one, forcing them out of their mountain nests.

GENERAL BOHUSZ-SZYSZKO (WITH ENGLISH OVERLAY)

[Another Polish military melody in the background “Wojenko, Wojenko!”]

By late evening, we moved down into the valleys and we took the hamlet of Basefield. This village was behind German lines, so we were able to take control of the only supply and retreat route the Germans had.



WOJCIECH ŁUKASZUN OF THE MUSEUM OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN GDANSK (POLISH MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN THE BATTLE)

[Polish military flute music in the background]

On April 24th, 1940 the Polish Independent Highland Brigade set off from France by sea. The brigade was a part of French-British units that were dispatched to fight in Norway. The brigade was commanded by General Zygmunt Bohusz-Szyszko. The brigade's organization was modelled on the French army; also uniforms and weapons were from the French supplies. Initially, Polish soldiers guarded the harbour and the city of Narvik, which was an important supply base for the allied troops.

From the 12th May the brigade, divided into single battalions, took part in the Allied attack on Gratangen-Bjerkvik. From the 17th May the Poles took part in the battle for the Ankenes peninsula, south of Narvik. During the attack on Narvik by the French and Norwegian troops, the Polish soldiers on the other side of the fjord captured the German-held towns of Ankenes, Nyborg and Beisfjord. In the final phase of the battle, the Poles reached the road connecting Narvik with the Norwegian-Swedish border, cutting off the German retreat route.

The operation of the Polish troops allowed the French Foreign Legion to take Narvik. Between June 4th and June 6th, the brigade left their positions and was evacuated from Norway together with the rest of the Allied units.

NARRATOR

This peaceful town in the far north of Norway suddenly became the centre of a major, world-wide conflict. Sadly, as is often the case, it is not just the military that made sacrifices as is clear from this authentic radio interview, conducted on June the 1st, 1940 by a Radio Norway reporter with Borghild Waalen, a housewife from Narvik.

FEMALE VOICE - SURVIVOR'S ACCOUNT

[Norwegian with English overlay; dramatic music with war related noises in the background, including air-raid sirens, airplanes, bombing, and screams]

Yes, it is dangerous. Many houses are damaged. Very damaged. In the first days, many people tried to get away. There was complete panic. Then it was quiet for a while. Now evacuation has started again in the last few days.

Since many family members were evacuated, we moved in together with friends, acquaintances and so on, to manage as best as we can. We shared a home and thought it was lovely to come together in this terrible time.

When the electrical plant was destroyed, all the power was gone. It was difficult with cooking and such. Many households only had an electric stove, so they had to use camping equipment for cooking.

We have tried to manage as best as we can - but there are terrible shortages. I even heard from the head-nurse at the hospital, that they only have three litres of milk left.

After the British arrived and the German bombing began, we were told that we had to move again, because that part of the city was considered dangerous. So, we moved to another part of the city. Closer to the Red Cross at "Bolagstunnelen".

My children, Stasius and Sverre got away to Drammen and... I just hope that they are going to be all right...

NARRATOR

As Norway was falling under the shadow of occupation, Nordahl Grieg wrote his famous poem which he himself read over the airways from the last free radio station in May 1940 to help people remember... and give hope.

[Male voice; emotional music in the background]

POEM - NORDAHL GRIEG

Translated by Henrietta Koren Naeseth

Today, the flagpole stands naked

Among Eidsvoll's green trees.
But precisely in this hour
we know what freedom is.
There rises a song over the land,
triumphant in its language,
though whispered with closed lips
under the yoke of strangers.

Worse than burning cities
is the war that no one can see
that puts a toxic veil
of slime on birches and soil and snow.

With anxiety and terror
they defiled our homes.
We had other dreams
and we cannot forget them.

Here we will remember the dead
who gave their lives for our peace, the
soldier in blood on the snow, the
sailor who went down.
We are so few in this country,
each fall is brother and friend.
We have the dead with us
the day we come again.

NARRATOR

The guns around Narvik have fallen silent but it is our responsibility to tell the story for future generations.

[Atmospheric instrumental music]

ANNE CHRISTIAN CHRISTIANSEN

The foundations have worked to promote knowledge about and understanding for peace and the rules of war, international conventions and human rights, through research, documentation and dissemination, with a particular geographic focus on the High North. The foundation should base its work on the values of the Red Cross, as presented in the fundamental principles, humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. The mission of the foundation is of an common, ideal character.

EYSTEIN MARKUSSON

And of course being founded on the battle of Narvik in 1940, the battle of Narvik in the region here is central to the work of our institution, and we also are being funded by the Ministry of Education in Norway. We have a particular task to educate young people and schools about the events during the war, but also how these affected the civilian population.

ANNE CHRISTIAN CHRISTIANSEN

It's also important for us to not only talk about the Second World War, but also demonstrate some of the lines from Second World War and up until today, in relation to human rights, human values, maybe especially with the youngsters, how you treat people.

[Special music effects]

NARRATOR

And how do we reach out to the younger generation?

ANNE CHRISTIAN CHRISTIANSEN

For the younger generation, we travel to schools for the whole of Northern Norway. We also have a lot of schools visiting us, mainly from Northern Norway, but also from northern parts of both Sweden and Finland. People travel with the younger generation to visit us but we also travel to visit the younger generations. We have specific educational programmes towards the younger generation, where we try to tell the story sort of more on their terms and especially focus on why is this war history relevant for the younger generation.

We also participate in a lot of debates, we hold seminars concerning Second World War history, we do a lot of documentations, also in terms of interviews of witnesses in regards of soldiers, but also lately a lot of interviews of people being children during Second World War, because naturally a lot of these people are getting a lot older. So it's very important for us to document what happened. Also in the local community and not only in the sort of larger picture but it's also important for us to document that sort of smaller history, what happened in the different parts of the city or in the different parts of the region that we work with.

EYSTEIN MARKUSSON

I might also add that when we were working in the new exhibitions for the museum, we took great care to make sure that the texts are suited and understandable for teenagers and also that the level of information that is available in the museum is understandable and interesting to teenagers and youngsters.

Our educational programmes are developed both for smaller children and also for teenagers and youngsters. So we try to level the information and the educational programmes in such a way that it's interesting and understandable to them all.

In the immediate aftermath after the Second World War in Norway it was very well known, it was written about and the story of the battle was upheld. However, that faded during the 70s and 80s, but lately there has been a renewed interest in the battle. We have new facilities here at our museum, the major feature film being produced as we speak, one of the largest productions in Norway.

On another level, which is also interesting in terms of collective memories that most of the Norwegian soldiers fighting here were local boys and they were mostly fishermen, farmers, clerks, who were used to the arctic conditions so the fighting goes on. It's been a matter of pride, particularly in the last 20 years that these not very military-educated guys were able to uphold that long; among them, the Norwegian army and the Norwegian armed forces.

The battle off Narvik is seen as Norway's finest hour in terms of battle. It also upholds several firsts in national military history. It's the first time Allied forces cooperate in a land, sea and air battle. It's the first time fighting in these kind of arctic conditions are done outside of railroad and road. There's many interesting aspects too, both military, because it's a really compact war theatre and it's also some firsts.

Anne Christian Christiansen

[Subtle music playing]

We have 62 days of war, 62 days of active battle which means that in Norway, it's Northern Norway who endured the longest. During the battles, there are fierce battles in the mountain areas surrounding Narvik and also close to the city areas and it's here – Hitler has his first strategic loss, which is quite remarkable and that also brings us the important role of telling this story. We have a responsibility for keeping this story alive, maybe especially towards youngsters.

Narrator

Narvik shows us how bravery and determination, against all odds, can be victorious.

Wojciech Łukaszun of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk

The capture of Narvik by the Allies only temporarily prevented the Germans from using the port to ship Swedish iron ore. In general, the Narvik victory was one of the few land-based successes for Allied troops during the Norwegian campaign. But the battle was significant in its own right. It was the first and only land victory of the Allied troops at the time of the worsening military situation in France. After the capture of Narvik, the allied troops had to evacuate from Norway, but the capture of the city enabled effective evacuation of the British, French and Polish troops.

For the Polish soldiers, the battle had special significance. It was the first armed clash with the German units fought since the Polish campaign of September 1939. The fact that the battle was won boosted the morale of the soldiers and the general public in occupied Poland. The successes of the Polish soldiers in the battle fought in forbidding and icy mountain conditions, earned them respect of the Allied commanders. In recognition of their merits in the battle, the Norwegian authorities in exile in Great Britain awarded Polish soldiers with a commemorative cord with a gold shield with the Norwegian coat of arms.

Narrator

The battles for Narvik were the first in many areas. Most importantly it proved that the invincible German army could be defeated.

[German national anthem in the background overtaken by solemn music]

The key lesson we can learn from Narvik is that successful campaigns, even if short lived – give hope for others to fight on. This was Hitler's first (major) defeat. Norway, together with France, Great Britain

and Poland demonstrated that working together; this dreadful scheme to enslave other nations could be stopped. And it was hope that gave people the will to fight on and end the deadliest conflict in history. History is there to help us remember and learn from the past. But whoever is unaware of history, is doomed to repeat it.

[Solemn atmospheric music continues]

Narrator

[Brisk closing music]

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