



## *Narvik: The Struggle of Battle Group Dietl in the Spring of 1940*

by Alex Buchner.

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In 1958, Alex Buchner—a teenage volunteer in the German mountain troops at the start of World War II and a company commander by the end—published a book on the fighting at Narvik, Norway (April–May 1940). He drew on memories, memoirs, and military records in a straightforward, slightly romanticized tale of perseverance in an eight-week battle pitting German mountain troops, beached naval personnel, and airborne infantry against an enemy that outnumbered them almost five to one. Now available to Anglophone readers in a fine translation by Janice Ancker, *Narvik: The Struggle of Battle Group Dietl in the Spring of 1940* may answer a question that dogged Great Britain and the United States at the time: did the Germans succeed at Narvik because of their mountain troops?

Buchner begins with the embarkation of the 139th Mountain Infantry Regiment (reinforced) and the 3rd Mountain Division Staff under Gen. Eduard Dietl, the Battle Group Dietl of the title, aboard ten destroyers (6 Apr. 1940):

The long Columbus Pier thundered with the sound of spiked mountain boots, as company after company of mountain infantry soldiers clambered aboard the ships, weighed down by heavy rucksacks, dangling with gear, with machine guns shouldered. These were men who had come from the Alps, the Dolomites, and the Karawanks—destination unknown. (1)

After a rough sea voyage, the battle group, using a storm front for cover, seized Narvik in a surprise landing on 9 April. But a British naval counterattack wrecked all the German destroyers over the next several days, leaving the Germans stranded. Two thousand mountain troops and 2,600 sailors were short of all supplies and support weapons, forced to rely upon seized Norwegian stocks and irregular aerial resupply. They established a defensive perimeter north and south of the port of Narvik and took positions along the strategic ore railroad to Sweden, twenty kilometers to the east.

From mid-April, the battle group held off Norwegian and then French attacks from the north and British, Polish, and French attacks from the south. On 12 May, after a month of fighting, an amphibious landing by French mountain troops flanked the northern German detachments, forcing them to pull back and then give up Narvik altogether. A trickle of airborne infantry and mountain troops, rapidly trained as parachutists, began to arrive in the last weeks of May. By June, Battle Group Dietl had its backs along the Swedish border. But, on 8 June, the Allies, reacting to German successes in the Battle of France, withdrew their forces and left the Norwegians with no choice but surrender. The Germans had held out, barely, for two months, and returned to Narvik.

Once more, the men had to complete a final forced march lasting 15 to 20 hours, with their last ounce of strength, struggling to reach their destination. From the storm-swept rocks, and deserted mountain terrain, where even on 9 June it had snowed; from the cold, the wet, and eternal fog and

then down into the valleys, where the late spring sun warmed them as they entered. Now there were houses, friendly meadows, and light green birch trees. And humans, who did not threaten one's life .... (167)

Both the British and Americans wondered how barely five thousand Germans had held off some twenty-five thousand Allied forces. They concluded that mountain troops had made the difference. The British official history, citing contemporary reports, noted that the "Field Service Regulations contained a section on Mountain Warfare, derived from experience on the North West Frontier, but the very different problem of operating at a high altitude (or in high latitudes) in snow was nowhere considered."<sup>1</sup> US Army Maj. Albert Wedemeyer, writing the Ultimate Requirements Study or "Victory Plan" in August 1941, specifically cited the German mountain troops in the Norwegian campaign as evidence that the US Army would need its own mountain divisions, upwards of ten by his calculations.<sup>2</sup> A US military intelligence assessment in September 1942 stated that "new methods of winter combat in mountainous country were tested and proven sound" in the German invasion and "units sent to Norway included mountain divisions containing trained skiers."<sup>3</sup>

Buchner describes Narvik as "an alpine environment in winter" with elevations running from sea level to peaks over 1,400 meters (4,600 feet), tree line at 600 meters (2,000 feet), and covered with 1 to 2 meters (3 to 6 feet) of snow (23). "As mountain soldiers, the troops looked upon the massive arctic mountains and immediately felt at home" (26). And while the slightly more numerous sailors did not have the "training, and experience for mountain fighting," they were able to serve in critical defensive positions and support roles (32). Yet the mountain troops had not deployed with any of the equipment they had trained to use in the mountains in winter. They had no winter clothing, beyond old fashioned greatcoats, and no white camouflage to blend into the snow. They had no tents or sleeping bags to survive in the open, no skis or snow shoes for mobility, no ice axes or ropes to cross the glaciers, no snow goggles to prevent snow blindness. All they had were mountain boots with nailed soles to ensure grip on the rocks.

The mountain soldiers did have combat experience from the Polish Campaign. They also had good officers and non-commissioned officers, particularly General Dietl (ignoring his fervent Nazism). And they had been raised and trained in the high Austrian Alps for many years, since the Germans formed the 3rd Mountain Division in 1938 from mountain troops taken over from the Austrian Army.<sup>4</sup> In short, they were "at home" in the mountains. They took or purchased what warm clothing and equipment they could from the Norwegians, particularly white material and enough skis to mount several platoons for reconnaissance or rapid counterattacks. The mountain soldiers made shelters of tarps and stones or dug snow caves, perhaps the best shelter possible in the exposed heights, and they used porters, often sailors, to move supplies forward. Aware of how sensitive units are to their flanks in the mountains, where it is very easy to be outflanked, the battle group arranged its defenses in echelon where possible. As it ran short of men, the group ar-

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1. T.K. Derry, *The Campaign in Norway* (London: HMSO, 1952) 241.

2. See Charles E. Kirkpatrick, *An Unknown Future and Doubtful Present: Writing the Victory Plan of 1941* (Washington: US Army Ctr. of Mil. Hist., 1992), 131, 134-47. While a US Mountain Corps of three divisions was proposed in 1942, ultimately only the 10th Light Division (Alpine) was activated in 1943, redesignated the 10th Mountain Division in November 1944.

3. Military Intelligence Service, *The German Campaign in Norway* (30 Sept. 1942) v, 21.

4. Roland Kaltenecker, *Die Geschichte der deutschen Gebirgstruppe 1915 bis heute* (Stuttgart: Motorbuch-Verl., 1980) 100-101.

ranged its defenses into lines of small groups of five or six men several hundred meters apart, hindering Allied penetrations. Used to seeing mountains as the means to maneuver rather than as obstacles, the mountain troops launched counterattacks along the heights and in the valleys simultaneously, forcing their enemies to fall back.

Buchner also makes it clear that the Germans were assisted by their enemies' lack of abilities: while "the Norwegians were extremely mobile on the tough mountain terrain," able to mount multiple company attacks on skis, they lacked "decisive leadership and combat experience" (60). The Allies included a Polish *Podhalian* (mountain) Rifle Brigade, but they were mountain troops in name only, having been recruited from prewar émigrés to France.<sup>5</sup> Buchner notes that the Poles conducted frontal attacks in the mountains, but failed to organize them in a "wide sweeping movement" against the flanks (48). The British and French fared little better as they "lacked offensive spirit" (93). Three battalions of French mountain troops were deployed with full winter kit, but constituted only a small fraction of the twenty-four battalions confronting the Germans. Ultimately, Buchner held, the Allied commanders never coordinated their forces with those of the Norwegians and, with no mountain warfare experience and too few mountain troops, failed to conduct "a pincer movement" north and south of Narvik through the mountains to "cut off the German combat units from the rear" (43).

Buchner does imply that the German mountain troops played a key role in the Battle for Narvik. The experiences of the German 3rd Mountain Division's sister division, the 2nd (also formed from Austrian mountain troops), in Norway suggests that employing mountain troops in mountain terrain could give an operational edge. In early May, the division was three hundred miles south of Narvik, but ordered to go relieve the defenders. Initially advancing ninety miles in four days across mountains the British considered impassible, the division fought its way north through Norwegian and British delaying forces. The end of May found the 2nd Mountain Division separated from Narvik by eighty-five miles of trackless wilderness. The division dispatched 2,500 of its best mountaineers who, supplied by air, covered the mountainous terrain in two weeks, arriving days after the fighting ended, but still fit for combat.<sup>6</sup>

Buchner's combat narrative provides evidence from the history of mountain warfare that military organizations trained to operate in a specific environment stand a better chance of success in that environment than untrained units.<sup>7</sup> While this strikes us as common sense, history is replete with armies trying to operate in conditions for which they were completely unprepared. And as militaries are once again considering military operations in extreme environments—high mountains, the Arctic, megacities—the experiences of Battle Group Dietl teach us pointed lessons in training, preparation, perseverance, and leadership.

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5. Evan McGilvray, *Narvik and the Allies: The Polish Brigade at Narvik 1940* (Solihull, UK: Helion, 2017) 87.

6. Earl F. Ziemke, *The German Northern Theater of Operations, 1940-1945* (Washington: Dept. of the Army, 1959) 95-99, 102-3.

7. Alexander Statiev, *War's Summit: The Red Army and the Struggle for the Caucasus Mountains in World War II* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2018), shows that the success of the German 49th Mountain Corps with the 1st and 4th Mountain Divisions in crossing the Caucasus Mountains in 1942 was due to their possessing far greater mountain warfare capabilities than the Soviet defenders.