

# Operation Paul – the Fleet Air Arm attack on Luleå in 1940



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Had Operation Paul, the Royal Navy's plan for an attack on Luleå, taken place as it was intended in 1940, it might have brought Sweden into the Second World War against the Allies.

## Histories

The **British Naval Staff History Naval Operations of the Campaign in Norway (1946)** sets out the aims of the campaign in April to June 1940 as:

- stopping the export of Swedish iron ore from Narvik to Germany
- denying use of the Norwegian coast to the German navy

yet it makes no mention of Operation Paul, the Royal Navy's plan to attack the port of Luleå in neutral Sweden.

The **British official history The Campaign in Norway (1952)**, in discussing the strategic context of the campaign, highlights three concerns:

- the perceived dependence of the German war machine on Swedish iron ore;
  - British uncertainty whether Russia or Germany (who in 1940 were allies) would drive on from their respective advances in Norway and Finland to Luleå;
  - and doubts about the efficacy of Swedish neutrality
- makes no mention of Operation Paul.

The **Campaign in Norway** does not mention Operation Paul by name but refers in passing to a plan by Churchill to "bottle up Luleå".

Captain S. W. Roskill's official history, **War At Sea (1960)**, is silent.

The subject is dealt with in passing in Peter C. Smith's book on the Royal Navy's first fighter-divebomber, **the Sea Skua**.

The only lengthy treatment of Operation Paul is contained within Thomas Munch-Petersen's **The Strategy of the Phoney War (1981)**, which is regrettably not well-known in Britain or Sweden.

Discovery of further papers about Operation Paul, including some signals (which are rare survivors from wartime years) in the National Archives at Kew, and of a copy of the operation order for 'Paul' in the Admiralty Library in Portsmouth.

## **British war planning in 1940**

The interdiction of Swedish iron ore exports to Germany was first addressed by the British War Cabinet on Saturday 16 December 1939.

It thereafter dominated British strategic and political policy towards Norway and Sweden.

The Joint Planning Sub Committee (JPSC) of the British Chiefs of Staff agreed that sabotage was the method to be used to halt iron ore exports, but that if sabotage failed, then naval action should be considered.

## **Overview of Norwegian campaign**

Following the Germany invasion of Poland in September 1939, there was no significant land offensive until the German invasion of Denmark and Norway 9 April 1940. These early months were known by the British as the Phoney War, Britain and France sent an expeditionary force to help the Norwegians. However, Germany's Blitzkrieg in the west and the Battle for France in May and June 1940 compelled the Allies to withdraw from Norway, and the Norwegian government to seek exile in London. The Norwegian Campaign subsequently ended with the occupation of all of Norway by Germany. The campaign lasted 62 days from 9 April to 10 June 1940, making Norway the western nation which withstood a German invasion for the longest time

## **Churchill's aggressive attitude**

Winston Churchill was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty, i.e. political head of the Royal Navy, at the beginning of the Second World War, just as he had been at the start of the First World War. This news was announced to the Fleet by a signal, which simply said, "Winston is back".

One of the schemes which the ever-aggressive Churchill advocated was Operation Wilfred, the mining of Norwegian waters to stop iron ore shipments from Narvik, but this was forestalled by the German invasion of Norway.

In one note dated 6 June, written to Major General Hastings Ismay, a note which Hastings tabled for the Chiefs of Staff, Churchill wrote: *"I look to the Joint Chiefs of Staff to propose me measures for a vigorous, enterprising and ceaseless offensive against the whole German occupied coastline."* The whole note was couched in Churchillian prose and called for *"a trail of dead Germans"*.



## Planning

The next reference to Swedish iron ore and the first reference to Operation Paul by name came on **12 May 1940**, when the Chiefs of Staff gave the JPSC terms of reference to consider *“the strategic implications of carrying out Operation Paul in the present conditions”*.

However, also on **14 May**, Churchill gave instructions for Operation Paul to be **put into effect within three weeks**. Four days later **18 May** Captain C. S. Daniel RN, the Navy’s Director of Plans, reported that the detailed plan for Operation Paul had not yet been completed by the naval staff though a number of amendments had been received from the War Office and the Air Ministry. The plan was also given a number, JP (40)164.14 89

## Effect

Meanwhile on **21 and 22 May** 1940, the JPSC and the Chiefs of Staff reviewed the military implications of complete withdrawal from Norway, and the objectives of operations at Narvik. These were,

- first, the denial of iron ore exports via Norway to Germany, and,
- second, interference with the export of iron ore from Luleå, in neutral Sweden, to Germany.
- The first objective would be obtained by the fighting around Narvik,
- while the second depended *“upon the active co-operation of the Swedes, a condition which is unlikely to be fulfilled”*.

## Churchill pushes

There can be no doubt that the impetus behind Operation Paul was the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, who wrote to Ismay on **24 May**: *“Before Narvik is evacuated, it is essential that the largest possible number of mines should be laid in the approaches to Lulea (sic). Let a plan be prepared for laying mines by flights from aircraft carriers.”*

Ismay replied the same day with an advance copy of the JPSC's revised plan for the attack on Luleå. It was not until the next day, **24 May 1940**, that the plan, still in draft, was agreed by the JPSC and forwarded to the Chiefs of Staff for their approval.

## Dunkirk and the Battle for France

There was, however, a problem in the execution of Operation Paul – between **27 May and 4 June 1940** over 330 000 British, French and other Allied troops and civilians were evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk.

Nevertheless, Churchill grew impatient about the Norway situation and on **3 June 1940** demanded of Ismay: *“Is there any danger of the so-called Mowinkle (sic) plan preventing the planting of mines in the approaches to Lulea (sic)? This operation called Paul is indispensable. Make sure we do not find ourselves prevented by any neutrality agreement.”*

## Aircraft trials

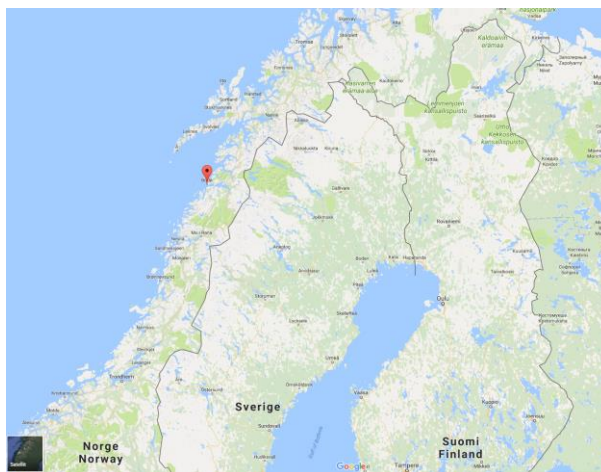
The First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, was determined to prove that 'Paul' was possible without land bases.

He told the Chiefs of Staff, also on **5 June**, that 60 Swordfish torpedo-bombers had been modified by fitting them with long range tanks. These long-range tanks should in theory have given a range of 600 miles, and six aircraft had taken part in a long range endurance trial, flying 520 miles from Hatston in the Orkney Islands to lay mines in the Stavanger area.



The surprising result was that lubricating oil, not fuel, was the limiting parameter: two aircraft, with old engines, had run dry, their engines seized, and crash-landed after five and six hours flight respectively, but the remaining four had returned safely to Hatston.

The First Sea Lord concluded that the maximum range at which they should be asked to lay their mines was 250 miles, and given this distance from Luleå, they could be launched and recovered from an aircraft carrier either off the Lofoten Islands or in the latitude of 65°50' North off the coast of Norway, i.e. somewhere near Bodø and Vestfjord



Clearly, the greatest risk was on the return flight, risking lubricating failure and headwinds in the face of an alerted enemy. As a second alternative, he suggested, the Chiefs of Staff should accept the loss of 15 aircraft: if they could do this, then he proposed sending 15 aircraft from a position on the Norwegian coast, and for the aircraft, after attacking Luleå, to intern themselves in Finland.

A third option would be to operate torpedo planes in flights of two and three from Petsamo to maintain patrols against ships at sea in the Gulf of Bothnia. There were two routes for the aircraft. One was to attack Luleå from the north-west, flying over the mountains and following the Gällivare-Luleå railway, the second was to launch in Porsangerfjord or Varangerfjord in northern Norway, “the latter being more suitable as there is more searoom”, and fly over Finnish territory to attack Luleå from seaward and out of the sun” Gällivare-Luleå railway.

**At full scale the attack on Luleå would involve three carriers, Ark Royal, Glorious and Furious and 78 Swordfish TSR carrying a mix of bombs, torpedoes and mines. Air cover would be provided by twelve Sea Gladiator30 fighters and 17 Skua fighter-bombers.**



## Foreign Office view

Amongst the political considerations were *"unfavourable reactions in the United States"*, but there was no mention of the effect upon Swedish public opinion.

Among the advantages listed were that the plan offered one of the few chances *"at the moment"* of striking an offensive blow at Germany and, rather perversely, the possibility of a German invasion of Sweden leading to Swedish resistance *"although we do not think this likely."*

The disadvantages were the political reaction in Finland, Russia, Sweden, and the USA which *"would probably be adverse"*. Torpedo attacks on ships in the Gulf of Bothnia were preferable to attacks on shipping alongside in Luleå and also preferable to mining in the waters off the port.

## Orders sent

At 10.30 am on **6 June** 1940 the Chiefs of Staff Committee was attended by the First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound. He told his fellow chiefs that Operation Paul as originally intended was now impracticable,

Pound did not tell the Chiefs of Staff that he had already given a preparatory order for Operation Paul. On **7 June** 1940, the Chiefs of Staff secretariat wrote to the Foreign Office, enclosing an advance copy of a post-dated memorandum by the First Sea Lord. In the memorandum he explained briefly the plan for **minelaying in the Gulf of Bothnia and, as a subsidiary operation, for torpedo attacks on ore-carrying ships.**

There were two questions which he would raise orally: first, whether the political implications could be accepted; and, second, whether the Gulf of Bothnia should be

declared a dangerous area? The intention was that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should come to the meeting with an informed opinion.

The noon meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on **8 June** 1940 opened with the grim news that the evacuation of Narvik had been completed at 11 am that morning.

When the Chiefs of Staff duly considered the report by the JPSC on Operation Paul, and their conclusion that they could not recommend it, the First Sea Lord retorted that they **were too late. Their report had been overtaken by events, and the preliminary order had been given to the Commander-in Chief Home Fleet.**

Pound had already given an executive order in the early hours of 8 June, saying that the operation would be carried on a reduced scale using one carrier, Ark Royal, and 18 Swordfish of 810 and 820 Naval Air Squadrons. The written operation order was signed into being on 8 June, though there was no way this could reach Vice Admiral (Air) or Ark Royal as they were at sea off Norway.

Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet was told that the greatest importance was attached to Operation Paul, but in view of the risk to any carriers

The carrier Glorious and her escorts, the destroyers Acasta and Ardent were sunk in an encounter with the German battle-cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau on the evening of **8 June** 1940, but this did not affect planning for Operation Paul.

At 5 pm on **9 June** 1940, the Chiefs of Staff again considered Operation Paul. The JPSC having already advised against it, Captain Daniel reminded the Chiefs that the order had already been given for Operation Paul.

At 7 pm **9 June** 1940, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the First Sea Lord and the Prime Minister met to discuss Operation Paul. The First Sea Lord put his questions (see 7 June) orally, explaining that it was normal practise to give notice before mining an area. Churchill was adamant: there should be no prior announcement, minelaying should be accompanied by torpedo attacks against iron ore ships, and *"if these attacks resulted in sinking neutral ships, we could express our regret in suitable terms."* **Operation Paul was now fully approved. The attack on Luleå is imminent Luleå in neutral Sweden could expect an air raid by aircraft launched from British ships in the Norwegian Sea at any moment.**

Nevertheless, Churchill was angry, and overnight on **10 June** 1940 he wrote: *"We have been ill-served over this and the operation is needlessly delayed. The best chances have been lost. The Illustrious is being wasted. I am very much grieved that the Admiralty have not taken care of this most important operation and tried to fit it in earlier. Now at last moment has come when the complete evacuation of Narvik is in sight, if not indeed already achieved, and when the situation at home is improved by the rescue of the BEF. I understood from the First Sea Lord that the operation would be carried out at once. What is the position about this? The sooner it is over the better."*





10, Downing Street,  
Whitehall.

General Ismay for COS is

*Handwritten notes:*  
C. S. O. -  
Disposal of  
L. S. O. -  
11/40  
11A  
9/11

We have been ill-served over this and the operation needlessly delayed. The best chances have been lost. The ILLUSTRIOUS is being wasted. I am very much grieved that the Admiralty have not taken care of this most important operation and tried to fit it in earlier. *✱*

*Handwritten notes:*  
PA  
11/

Now at last the moment has come when the complete evacuation of Narvik is in sight, if not indeed already achieved, and when the situation at home is improved by the rescue of the B.E.F. I understood from the First Sea Lord that the operation would be carried out at once. What is the position about this? The sooner it is over the better. Thereafter the aircraft carriers can go <sup>perhaps in rotation</sup> to America to pick up aeroplanes. I cannot approve the ILLUSTRIOUS being sent round the Cape to Alexandria. Pray let me have proposals for action together with time table.

*Handwritten initials:*  
W  
10-6

An early example of one of Winston Churchill's 'prayers' in which he urged the Chiefs of Staff, through his representative General Ismay, to expedite the attack on Luleå.

## Luleå saved

When Churchill awoke the next morning, **Luleå had been saved by events elsewhere.** **10 June** On the Western Front, the German army had broken through and the French government was about to declare Paris an open city, and in the Mediterranean the Italian government had declared war on Britain and France.

The Germans had captured more iron ore resources in the Lorraine basin than Britain was likely to interdict in the Norwegian leads or in the Gulf of Bothnia. The very shores of Britain were now threatened by invasion.

## New attack?

On **16 June**, having returned to Scapa Flow, and having received the printed copy of the operation order for Paul, the Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet was working up another plan to attack Luleå. This time he proposed to launch 18 aircraft from a position 60 miles north-north-east of Tanafjord. The distance to the target meant that all 18 aircraft would be sacrificed either by landing in Sweden or Finland. Finland seemed preferable “in view of the nature of the operation”. The commander-in-chief ended his signal: “*Request instructions whether operation is to proceed.*” There is no further reference to Operation Paul on any file in the National Archives at Kew or in the Admiralty Library. It appears that everyone else was preoccupied by the invasion threat.

## British determination

On **3 July** 1940, the Royal Navy bombarded the French fleet, at its berths in Mers-el-Kebir, North Africa, to stop it from falling into German hands. Over 1 200 Frenchmen died and a battleship was sunk.

Operation Judgement, when Swordfish torpedo-bombers attacked the Italian fleet at its anchorage in Taranto on the night **11/12 November** 1940. At full scale, Operation Paul would have used three carriers and almost four times more aircraft (78) than were used during the Battle of Taranto (21) against a heavily defended Italian harbour, and at reduced scale would have used only a few 101 less aircraft (18 or 15) against an unalerted and poorly defended Swedish port.

## Timeline Operation Paul

- 1939
  - September 1 – WWII in Europe begins
  - December 16 – War planning against Swedish iron ore shipments
  - 1940
  - April 9 – Invasion of Denmark and Norway
  - May 12 – 1<sup>st</sup> reference about Operation Paul
  - May 14 – Churchill want plan executed within 3 weeks
  - May 18 – Detailed plans in progress
  - May 21/22 – Review of implications of withdraw from Norway
  - May 24 – Churchill wants mines laid at Luleå
  - May 24 – Advance copy of plan exists
  - May 24 – Plan forwarded to Chief of Staff to approve
  - May 27 – June 4 Evacuation at Dunkirk
  - June 3 – Churchill comments on Operation Paul
  - June 5 – 60 modified Swordfish attack aircraft completed
  - June 6 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sea Lord declares plan impracticable
  - June 7 – Foreign Office informed
  - June 8 – Evacuation of Norway completed
  - June 8 – Operation Paul ordered on reduced scale
  - June 8 – Aircraft carrier Glorious sunk in North Sea
  - June 9 – Chiefs of Staff discuss plan
  - June 9 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sea Lord and Churchill discuss plan
  - June 10 – Churchill asks ‘why delay?’
  - June 10 – Battle of France begins
  - June 16 – Fleet receives operation orders, no further reference to Operation Paul after this date
  - July 3 – British naval attack at Mers-el-kabir
  - November 11/12 – British Fleet Air Arm attack at Taranto
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- The diagram consists of two blue curly braces on the right side of the list. The top brace, labeled 'Phony War', spans from the start of the 1939 section to the end of the 1940 section. The bottom brace, labeled 'Norwegian Campaign', spans from the start of the 1940 section to the end of the 1940 section.

## Sammanfattning

Operation Paul var en plan som utarbetades i maj-juni 1940 på brittisk sida med syftet att genomföra ett anfall på Luleå i det neutrala Sverige. Målet med planen var att stoppa exporten av svensk järnmalm till Hitlers tyska rike där Luleå fungerade som en viktig utskippningshamn.

Samtidigt med planeringen av operationen våren 1940, kollapsade den brittiska och franska gemensamma strategin rörande försvaret av Norge och när den rastlöse och ambitiösa Winston Churchill bytte jobb från First Lord of the Admiralty till premiärminister var hans mål att stoppa Hitlers framfart på alla fronter. Han stöddes av First Sea Lord, amiralen Sir Dudley Pound, och båda två visade stort förtroende för det brittiska marinflygets förmåga att genomföra anfallet och de var beredda att acceptera stora förluster för att slå ut fartyg och anläggningar i Luleås hamn. Anfallet kunde mycket väl ha lett till Sveriges inträde i andra världskriget som krigförande part.

Om attacken genomfördes, vad kunde Sverige göra?

- Ingenting, klaga på diplomatisk väg
- Frivillig bli krigförande part på Tysklands sida
- Tyskland kunde erbjuda sitt skydd
  - Invadera Sverige som beskyddare
  - Ta över Öland, Gotland och Åland
- Sovjet dras med i krig?