

= Operation Leader =

Operation Leader was a successful attack conducted by United States Navy aircraft against German shipping in the vicinity of Bodø , Norway , on 4 October 1943 , during World War II . It was carried out by aircraft flying from the aircraft carrier USS Ranger , which at the time was attached to the British Home Fleet . The American airmen located many German and Norwegian ships in this area , destroying five and damaging another seven . Two German aircraft searching for the Allied fleet were shot down as well . Three American aircraft were destroyed in combat during the operation , and another crashed while landing .

= = Background = =

During mid to late 1943 the Home Fleet , the Royal Navy 's main striking force stationed in the United Kingdom , was augmented by two forces of United States Navy warships to replace British ships which had been dispatched to the Mediterranean and Pacific . These reinforcements were considered necessary to ensure that the fleet remained able to counter the German battle group based in Norway which was built around the battleships Tirpitz and Scharnhorst and the heavy cruiser Lützow .

The initial US Navy task force arrived in May , and comprised the battleships USS Alabama and South Dakota , the heavy cruiser USS Tuscaloosa and five destroyers . This force came under the command of Rear Admiral Olaf M. Hustvedt and conducted a number of patrols into the Norwegian Sea with British Home Fleet warships , but did not make contact with German forces . The two battleships and the destroyers were withdrawn in August , and proceeded to the Pacific .

A second task force built around the aircraft carrier USS Ranger replaced the two battleships in September . The other elements of this force were the heavy cruisers USS Augusta and Tuscaloosa as well as five destroyers , with Rear Admiral Hustvedt remaining in command . Ranger 's air wing was made up of three squadrons : VF @-@ 41 which was equipped with 27 Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters , VB @-@ 41 with 27 Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bombers and VT @-@ 41 which operated 18 Grumman TBF Avenger torpedo bombers . Prior to Ranger 's arrival the Home Fleet had only a single aircraft carrier , the elderly HMS Furious , which was unavailable for operations as she was undergoing a refit . Ranger had last seen combat against Vichy French forces while supporting the Operation Torch landings in Morocco during November 1942 , and had subsequently been used to ferry aircraft to North Africa and train aircrews off the United States east coast . On 8 September the main body of the Home Fleet , including the American task force , sortied in response to reports that Tirpitz , Scharnhorst and nine destroyers had put to sea . However , the Allied force returned to the Home Fleet 's main base at Scapa Flow the next day after it was learned that the German ships had returned to port after briefly attacking Allied positions on Spitsbergen .

On 22 September the German battle group in Norway was attacked by several British midget submarines . This attack inflicted significant damage on Tirpitz , leaving the battleship unable to proceed to sea until repairs were complete . Once this was known to the Allies , the commander of the Home Fleet , Admiral Bruce Fraser , judged that the changed balance of forces would allow his force to take on a more offensive role by attacking German shipping off Norway and restarting the Arctic Convoys to the Soviet Union .

= = Attack = =

Fraser followed up on the midget submarine attack by deciding to dispatch the main body of the Home Fleet to conduct an air attack against ports and German shipping in northern Norway . Ranger was assigned responsibility for attacking the port of Bodø , which was an important rendezvous point for German and German @-@ controlled Norwegian shipping . Fraser also initially planned to use the aircraft carrier HMS Formidable to attack shipping in a port to the south of Bodø , but this element of the operation was cancelled due to unfavourable weather . While several Luftwaffe (German Air Force) bases were located near Bodø , most of the aircraft previously

stationed in northern Norway had been transferred elsewhere and those that remained posed little threat to the Allied fleet .

The Home Fleet 's plans were informed by considerable intelligence on German shipping movements and forces in northern Norway . The Royal Navy 's Operational Intelligence Centre collated information on these topics , and regularly provided assessments to the Home Fleet and other commands . The choice of the Bodø area as the target for the attack was made on the basis of Ultra intelligence obtained by decoding German radio signals , from which the Allies learned that the ships in the region included the large oil tanker Schleswig which was carrying fuel for the German battle group at Altafjord . In addition , at the time of Operation Leader two groups of Norwegian Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) agents operated radio transmitters on the coast of Helgeland ; " Crux III " on the island of Renga and " Pisces " on Lurøy . Both groups provided reports to the Allies on the weather and shipping movements in the target area in the lead @-@ up to the attack . From 3 October onwards , " Crux III " radioed weather reports every half hour .

The Home Fleet sailed from Scapa Flow on 2 October . The British elements of the force were the battleships HMS Duke of York (Fraser 's flagship) and Anson , the light cruiser HMS Belfast and seven destroyers . The US Navy component comprised Ranger , Tuscaloosa and four destroyers . The Allied ships were not detected by German forces during their voyage north , and arrived at the flying @-@ off position for Ranger 's air wing approximately 140 miles (230 km) off Bodø shortly before dawn on 4 October .

The US Navy attack force was organised into two groups of aircraft : the Northern Attack Group , which was to strike shipping at Bodø , and the Southern Attack Group which was to target ships near the town of Sandnessjøen nearly 100 miles (160 km) to the south . Each of the two groups had one Norwegian navigator from No. 333 Squadron RAF in the lead aircraft , providing knowledge of the local geography .

The Northern Attack Group , which comprised 20 Dauntless dive bombers escorted by 8 Wildcat fighters , began to take off at 6 : 18 am . These aircraft flew at low altitude towards Bodø until their crews sighted Myken Lighthouse , and then turned to the north and climbed as they neared the target area . Weather conditions were clear , with the air crews having good visibility . Four Dauntlesses and a pair of Wildcats were detached from the force shortly after it passed Myken Lighthouse to search for German shipping near Åmnøya island . They soon sighted the 8 @, @ 000 GRT German freighter La Plata , and two of the dive bombers attacked the ship . The Americans believed that La Plata was badly damaged , and the six aircraft rejoined the main body of the Northern Attack Group .

In the meantime the other American aircraft continued north , sighting but not attacking many small cargo ships and fishing boats . At 7 : 30 am they located a German convoy comprising the steamer Kerkplein and the tanker Schleswig under the escort of the minesweeper M 365 . Eight of the Dauntlesses attacked Schleswig and another pair targeted Kerkplein , inflicting significant damage on both ships . One of the escorting Wildcats was damaged by gunfire during the attack and returned to Ranger . Schleswig was beached to avoid sinking , and later salvaged and brought to Bodø for repairs . Following this engagement , the eight Dauntlesses which had yet to drop their bombs continued on to Bodø where they attacked four small German cargo ships . All of these vessels were hit : the 2 @, @ 719 GRT ore carrier Rabat was sunk , Cap Guir badly damaged , a bomb which nearly struck Malaga inflicted minor damage and the small steamer Ibis was machine gunned . Two of the dive bombers were shot down by anti @-@ aircraft guns located on the shore and ships . The crew of one of the aircraft survived and were taken prisoner after ditching into the sea , but both men on the other Dauntless were killed .

The Southern Attack Group began launching from Ranger at 7 : 08 am . It was made up of ten Avenger torpedo bombers and six Wildcats . Two of the Avengers attacked the 4 @, @ 991 GRT Norwegian cargo ship Topeka off the island of Løkta south of Sandnessjøen , resulting in the ship being set on fire and beached to avoid sinking . Three of the Norwegian crew members on Topeka were killed in the attack , along with several German soldiers manning anti @-@ aircraft guns on board the ship . One of the attacking aircraft was shot down by anti @-@ aircraft fire from the shore with only its pilot surviving . Topeka was carrying a cargo of cement and timber , and had until the

previous evening been sailing in an escorted German convoy . Local fishermen made their way to the burning vessel to help rescue those on board .

Following the attack on Topeka the American aircraft continued north , and bombed and sank the 687 GRT Norwegian cargo liner Vaagan off Fagervika without loss of life . The crew of Vaagan had observed the bombing of Topeka and brought their unarmed ship close to shore and lowered the lifeboats in preparation for a possible attack . Vaagan was carrying a cargo mostly of food for civilian consumption , and the sinking led to a margarine shortage in parts of northern Norway . The force subsequently bombed La Plata , causing her to be beached on the island Rødøya where the ammunition on board exploded and she burned for several days . The aircraft also bombed the 4 @, @ 300 GRT Kriegsmarine troop ship Skramstad (a Norwegian cargo ship requisitioned with her crew by the German occupying authorities) , which had some 850 German soldiers embarked and was protected by two escorts . Skramstad was severely damaged and beached , burning for days . According to some sources 200 of the troops were killed , while Norwegian sources state that only one Norwegian sailor and a small number of German soldiers were killed . According to further Norwegian sources , the Norwegian resistance movement claimed in a report after the attack that around 360 Germans had been killed in the bombing of Skramstad while the Germans admitted in their reports to the deaths of 37 soldiers . The American aircraft also strafed the German cargo ship Wolsum and attacked the ammunition barge F231 , which was hit by a bomb and beached . After all the aircraft had completed their attacks , the force returned to Ranger shortly before 9 : 00 am . In addition to the four aircraft lost , six had suffered damage from anti @-@ aircraft artillery .

The German response to the attack was hampered by capacity problems in the military lines of communication . Following the attacks , a German report described their channels of communications as " ... constantly noisy with interruptions . " during the attack . This prevented the Germans from sending warnings once the attack had begun .

= = Aftermath = =

At about 2 pm on 4 October , as the Home Fleet was sailing westwards , three German reconnaissance aircraft approached Ranger . At this time four Wildcats were providing a combat air patrol over the fleet , and were guided to intercept the German aircraft by Ranger 's fighter director . Two of the fighters shot down a Junkers Ju 88 bomber 22 miles (35 km) from the carrier , and the other pair downed a Heinkel He 115 float plane 13 miles (21 km) from Ranger . The remaining aircraft , a Ju 88 , was not sighted by the fighter pilots and managed to escape . These were the first German aircraft to have been shot down by US Navy aircraft . One of the Wildcats involved in this engagement crashed during landing , but its pilot survived . All of the elements of the Home Fleet dispatched for Operation Leader returned to Scapa Flow by 6 October .

Wartime Allied military commanders and post @-@ war historians deemed Operation Leader a success . Rear Admiral Hustvedt believed that the best result of the attack was that it demonstrated that American and British ships could work together with " effectiveness , mutual understanding and complete cooperation " . Admiral Patrick N. L. Bellinger , the air commander of the US Navy 's Atlantic Fleet was also pleased with the performance of the aircrews involved in the operation . Following the operation the commander of the Southern Attack Group , Commander J. A. Ruddy , was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross , while other servicemen taking part in the operation were awarded the Air Medal and the Purple Heart . The British official historian Stephen Roskill judged that the attack was an " outstanding success " , especially as it was the first combat mission for sixty percent of the aircrews involved .

Writing in 2012 , historian Robert C. Stern claimed that it is difficult to determine how many ships were sunk during Operation Leader as some of the vessels which were run ashore were possibly refloated and repaired . He assessed that five ships (Cap Guir , La Plata , Rabat , Skramstad and Vaagan) were probably destroyed , with these vessels having a total of approximately 19 @, @ 000 gross register tonnage of carrying capacity . In contrast , Norwegian sources pre @-@ dating Stern 's claims by decades , state that two ships (Rabat and Vaagan) were sunk , and three ships (La Plata , Skramstad and Topeka) were damaged beyond repair . Cap Guir , assessed by Stern as

probably destroyed , survived the damage inflicted by the American aircraft at Bodø , but was sunk by Soviet torpedo bombers in the Baltic in April 1945 .

Stern has also written that the disruption to the convoys off Norway caused by Operation Leader would have caused even greater damage to the German war effort than the shipping losses . This is in line with a wartime assessment by the British Ministry of Economic Warfare , which estimated that the raid was the main factor responsible for a 58 percent decrease in the amount of iron ore shipped from the northern Norwegian port of Narvik during October 1943 .

Operation Leader was both the only offensive operation undertaken by the US Navy in northern European waters during World War II , and the last major American operation in this theatre of the war . Ranger remained with the Home Fleet until being replaced by British aircraft carriers in late November 1943 , during which time she took part in a patrol of the Norwegian Sea . The carrier departed Scapa Flow on 26 November , and arrived in Boston on 6 December . Ranger was used to train aircrews and transport aircraft for the remainder of the war , and did not see combat again .

The German forces in Norway were taken by surprise during Operation Leader . The area had not been raided by carrier borne aircraft for two years , leading to inadequate preparations for such an attack . Precautions against further raids were subsequently put in place , and the British carrier forces which repeatedly attacked Norway until the end of the war did not encounter any concentrations of shipping like that which Ranger 's airmen located off Bodø . Following the attack , the Germans launched a search in the area for radio transmitters , arresting several local Norwegians and narrowly missing the agents of the " Pisces " group . The two members of the " Pisces " team were evacuated to the United Kingdom by Consolidated PBY Catalina flying boat on 24 November 1943 . The last SIS agents of the " Crux " group were evacuated from Renga by a No. 330 Squadron RAF Catalina on 6 June 1944 , but the transmitter on the island continued sending reports to the United Kingdom for the duration of the war , manned by a local volunteer who had been trained by the agents .

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