

PART III.

OPERATIONS IN THE ÅNDALSNES AREA.

29. The area of operations was confined to the Gudbrandsdal valley between the base at Åndalsnes and Lake Mjøsa, a distance of some 140 miles. Except in the area of Lesjaskog, and at its Southern end, where there are roads on either side of Lake Mjøsa, the valley is seldom more than a mile wide and in places narrows to a few hundred yards; along the whole length of the road, river and railway interwine. The valley is flanked with mountains and hills which are covered in snow at the high levels. The side roads and tracks leading into the valley are for the most part impassable at this time of the year, except to ski troops, of whom the enemy were reported to have a considerable number. Scattered along the valley throughout its length are wooden farm buildings and occasional villages or small towns such as Åndalsnes, Lesja, Dombås, Otta, Ringebu, Øyer and Lillehammer.

30. It would be difficult to imagine a Line of Communication more exposed to air attack, to which it was continually subjected during the hours of daylight by means of heavy bombing and machine gun fire: and there were no means of protecting it nor of repairing the damage done to the roads and railway: for this latter work reliance had to be placed entirely on the Norwegians, who did their best with very limited resources. The key point of Dombås was completely destroyed by bombing and Otta almost completely so. Large craters on the road made motor transport movement increasingly difficult; it was singularly fortunate that the railway was not more seriously damaged.

31. The 148th Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier H. de R. Morgan and consisting initially of 1/5 Leicesters, less two companies, 8 Sherwood Foresters and one light Anti-Aircraft Battery, a total of 1,000 all ranks, landed from His Majesty's ships in the Åndalsnes area on the evening of 18th April. A force of Marines had landed previously to make preliminary arrangements. Brigadier Morgan's instructions were to land in the Åndalsnes area, secure Dombås and then operate Northwards and take offensive action against the Germans in the Trondheim area. His instructions also stated that his force was an independent command under the War Office until receipt of further orders. As a preliminary to carrying out his rôle Brigadier Morgan despatched a company to Dombås where it arrived at 0400 hours, 19th April.

32. On 19th April, the British Military Attaché, Lieutenant-Colonel King Salter, represented that the Norwegian Army was in urgent need of assistance, and stated that unless this was forthcoming immediately, the Army would abandon all further resistance. He further stated to Brigadier Morgan that the War Office had sanctioned the 148th Infantry Brigade coming under the command of the Commander-in-Chief, Norwegian Army. Owing to the urgency of the situation Brigadier Morgan decided to comply with the Norwegian request for assistance, at the same time sending a signal to the War Office for further instructions.

The Norwegian Commander-in-Chief's orders were that 148th Infantry Brigade should be sent at once to the Lillehammer area to replace

the Norwegian troops who were tired out. He hoped that the arrival of the British troops would lend fresh heart to his force and consequently he required Brigadier Morgan to attach his troops under direct command of Norwegian formations. The force was moved by train to the Lillehammer area during 19th and 20th April, where it was placed under command 2nd Norwegian Division.

33. On 21st April, it was to move forward in three groups to take up previously reconnoitred positions south of Lillehammer and on either side of Mjøsa Lake.

Owing to a German attack during the afternoon these groups never reached these positions and orders were issued for a withdrawal at 0100 hours, 22nd April, to the high ground between Fålberg and Lillehammer. During this withdrawal a party of 5 officers and 50 men, 1/5 Leicesters, was cut off and lost.

34. On 22nd April our position was heavily attacked from the air and with 3.7 inch howitzers and 4 inch mortars. Shortly after mid-day the Germans succeeded in working round the Eastern flank and a daylight withdrawal became imperative if the whole force East of the river was not to be cut off.

The Norwegians had made no arrangements for the occupation of the position in rear, but the timely arrival of the remaining two companies of 1/5 Leicesters at the base enabled them to be rushed forward by rail and bus to positions near Øyer.

The Germans made no serious efforts to follow up the withdrawal, being checked by fire and road blocks. Their aircraft were however very active and the force suffered heavy casualties from bombs and machine gun fire from the air.

The position at Øyer was reached by about 1800 hours, though battalions and companies were somewhat mixed. At this hour the force was some 12 miles in front of any formed body of Norwegians though three squadrons of the Dragoons, a motorised machine-gun unit, were placed under Brigadier Morgan's command, with orders to report to him at Tretten.

35. During the night 22nd/23rd April the British force fell back to a previously reconnoitred position just South of Tretten.

Owing to this continued withdrawal rations had been jettisoned in order to transport troops so there was a shortage of supplies. Also positions were not entrenched, as all tools had been left behind in the early stages of the withdrawal. Consequently the men were lying in the open exposed to full view of the enemy aircraft and to artillery fire.

36. During 23rd April the Germans brought up a section of 5.9 howitzers and at least two tanks. They again started working round our Eastern flank and a further withdrawal became essential. Owing to the difficulties of communications it is doubted whether the forward companies ever received any orders and they were cut off by the enemy getting round behind them.

The withdrawal of the remainder was followed up by tanks and aircraft and casualties were heavy, but the forward companies were still holding out and must have inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. The Norwegians had taken up a defensive position about Favang and the remainder of the force withdrew through them during the night 23rd/24th April.