



“Hitler leaped upon his largest friend” was how the novelist A P Herbert described Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Across a front of 1,800 miles (2,896km), Panzer tanks spearheaded an assault comprising 4½ million men, which began in the early hours of June 22, 1941.

It became a political imperative for Britain to support the USSR in any way possible. The Royal Navy focused on the Scandinavian Arctic coast of the Barents Sea and the ports of Kirkenes, in northeast Norway, and Petsamo (now Pechanga), 40 miles further east in Finland, which were vital in sustaining the German assault on the Soviet harbour at Murmansk.

Norway had fallen to the Germans in June 1940. The Wehrmacht invaded northern Finland on June 8, 1941 and three weeks later was in striking distance of Kirkenes and Petsamo. While the Finns had allied themselves with Germany against the Soviets, a British attack on Petsamo should have been preceded by a declaration of war, but British Prime Minister Winston Churchill took the decision to ignore this procedure.

FORCE P

So Operation EF began. On July 23 the carriers HMS *Victorious* and *Furious*, escorted by the cruisers HMS *Devonshire* and *Suffolk* and a destroyer screen, sailed as ‘Force P’ from Scapa Flow in Orkney for Seidesfjord in Iceland. After refuelling, the flotilla headed for the Barents Sea on the 26th.

led by Lt Cdrs Sanderson and Waters respectively. Lt Cdr Wroughton’s nine Fulmars of 800 Squadron provided escort while four Hawker Sea Hurricanes of 880 Squadron ‘A’ Flight, under Lt Cdr ‘Butch’ Judd, making the type’s operational debut, would defend the fleet while *Furious* struck shipping in Petsamo.

Approaching Norway, the aircrews received a briefing, although notably the telegraphist/air gunners (TAGs) were not included. Pilots and observers in

Victorious were told that 827’s Albacores were to strike targets in Langefjord while those from

828 were to hit any shipping found in the Holmengraafjord and around

Renoy Island.

The Fulmars were to defend the biplanes, but take no part in hitting surface targets.

Aboard *Furious*, similar instructions were issued. Ominously, there was little accurate information about enemy defences.

The main Luftwaffe fighter unit in northern Norway, Jagdgruppe zur besonderen Verwendung Petsamo (special-purpose fighter group), based at Kirkenes, controlled the Messerschmitt Bf 110-equipped



Embarked in *Victorious*, a new ship not fully worked up, were the 21 Fairey Albacore torpedo bombers of the Fleet Air Arm’s 827 and 828 Squadrons, commanded by Lt Cdr Stewart-Moore and Lt L A Cubitt, and a dozen Fairey Fulmar two-seat fighters of Lt Cdr Grenfell’s 809 Squadron. *Victorious* would attack Kirkenes.

The older and smaller *Furious* carried nine Albacores and nine Fairey Swordfish of 817 and 812 Squadrons,

ARCTIC MISADVENTURE

Zerstörerstaffel Jagdgeschwader 77 (Z/JG 77) and 14/JG 77 flying a mix of Bf 109Es and Ts. Also based there was IV Gruppe (Stuka)/Lehrgeschwader 1 (IV[St]LG 1 – (tactical development unit) with Junkers Ju 87 dive-bombers and 1 Staffel of Aufklärungsgruppe 124 – a reconnaissance unit with Ju 88s.

Meanwhile, 5 Staffel of Kampfgeschwader 30 (5/KG 30), also flying Ju 88s, flew from Banak. The Stukas and the Ju 88s posed a genuine threat to the carriers.

PREPARING A TRAP

Aboard the carriers, aircraft were positioned and loaded, some with torpedoes, others with bombs. Many of the weapons carried chalked-on slogans from the groundcrew such as 'From all at Plymouth Hoe'.

In the early afternoon of July 30, in the perpetual daylight of an Arctic summer, as Force P reached the



flying-off position 80 miles northeast of Kirkenes, the cloud cover that had been present all morning dissipated.

In the now clear skies a Dornier Do 18 flying-boat of 1 Staffel Küstenfliegergruppe 406 (1/KuFlGr 406 – naval co-operation unit) sighted the task force, its vital element of surprise lost.

At 14:00 hours *Victorious* and *Furious* began launching their aircraft. The CO of 827 Squadron, Stewart-

Moore, the observer in Albacore N4330 flown by the unit's senior pilot, Lt 'Cocky' Reed, set course for the coast north of Kirkenes at the head of his four flights. Off to port was 828 Squadron, both units flying sedately over the sea at between 100 and 200ft (30 to 60m).

The escorting Fulmars flew higher and had some difficulty in seeing the biplanes owing to the brightness of the sun's glare ahead of them. Their increased altitude may have further alerted the defences.

On reaching the coast at the end of the Ribachi Peninsula the two Albacore squadrons turned towards the target, coming under very heavy ground fire from the start.

In 827's third flight was N4307, piloted by Lt Nigel Ball, whose TAG, Petty Officer (PO) Dickie Sweet, recalled: "We headed towards the coast at 500ft and we still pressed on, 828 Squadron off to port. As their aircraft flew into the entrance to the harbour the German gunners were firing *down* on them. It was a trap!

"I can remember seeing some people wave at us as we flew over at 100ft before we dropped down into the harbour. There wasn't any target – all I could see was one merchant ship. We had been told the harbour would be full."

The harbour contained just the gunnery training vessel *Bremse* and two small coasters.

On board 828 Squadron's N4327, flown by Lt Williamson, TAG PO Frank Smith remembered: "We're flying up the fjord and the Germans are firing down, from the cliffs with

light ack-ack... At the end of the fjord there was a mountain that had to be climbed over and, on the other side, Kirkenes bay; and before anything can happen there were [Messerschmitt] 110s and Stukas all over the place."

Aircraft began falling all around the fjord as they were hit by flak or the Luftwaffe: in very short order, 828 lost five Albacores.

Sub Lt Charles Howard, flying N4359, who ended up in Stalag Luft III at Zagan in Poland, recently recounted his experiences: "We launched our torpedo at a German ship in the harbour. As we turned to make our escape I heard a roar of cannon fire from below us, we were hit and the aircraft broke up around us. The next thing I knew we were in the fjord and swimming for the shore and into captivity."

WITNESS TO CATASTROPHE

Even worse befell 827 Squadron, which lost six Albacores. Dickie Sweet, the TAG in N4307, watched as catastrophe overtook the raid: "By this time my pilot had got down to torpedo-dropping height. We shot upwards as the torpedo fell away. I was aware we were being shot at as the pilot made for the high ground, jinking around violently. We succeeded in evading the harbour defences.

"As we approached the entrance to the fjord, high in the sky was a terrible circle of aircraft picking off our machines as they left the fjord... Our pilot headed for the far bank and banked, and stuck to that position. ➔

Left
Flying from 'Furious', the Fulmars of 800 Squadron escorted the attack on Petsamo.
VIA R C STURTVANT

ADVENTURE

AN ATTACK ON THE GERMAN-HELD PORTS OF KIRKENES AND PETSAMO IN JULY 1941 PROVED VERY COSTLY TO THE ROYAL NAVY, AS **ANDREW THOMAS** EXPLAINS

Right
HMS 'Victorious' in
1941. VIA C F SHORES

Centre right
Albacore X9034 of
827 Squadron, 1941.
612 SQUADRON RECORDS

Below
Captured Fleet Air
Arm aircrew after
the raid, assembled
at Malmi airfield
on August 2. PENTTI
MANNINEN VIA KARI
STENMANN



"Lt Lee's Albacore, N4250, was shot down by a Bf 109. Scrambling into their dinghy the crew paddled ashore and two days later made it through German lines to reach the Russians at Murmansk"

Prendergast the observer called the direction of [attackers]... I used the gunsight to range the aircraft; an Me 109 would fill half my gunsight. When the wingspan filled my whole diameter I stopped firing.

"Every time we evaded by turning at the right time. We evaded and, coming over the cliff, was a Junkers 87 – and he dropped and moved across our front and [we] shot it down. Beautiful! We continued to evade and returned to the ship."

The victim was 'L1+EW' of IV(St)/LG 1, the only confirmed victory by an Albacore pilot. Sweet attributes their survival to the close harmony of the drills, particularly the evasion directed by Lt Prendergast. Albacore N4307 was the only one of its type to return to the ship unscathed.

Attacked by a fighter, cannon shell ruptured the overload fuel tank in the cabin of the CO's aircraft, N4330,

fortunately without exploding. Stewart-Moore rammed his elbow into the breach to stem the flow of fuel despite being drenched himself.

After return fire from Lt Reed, the pilot, and PO Jacky Lambert, the TAG, they claimed a Bf 110 probably destroyed and a Bf 109 damaged, while Sub Lt J S Bailey claimed another '109 as a probable.

The escorting Fulmars of 809 Squadron fared little better, orbiting at 4,000ft as the enemy aircraft appeared, including Ju 87s returning from a mission over the front lines. The unit's CO claimed a Bf 110 while Sub Lt Cooper, in X8550, and Sub Lt Wilkinson thought they also might have got another.

It is unclear which German pilots shot down individual Albacores, but Lieutenant Felix-Maria Brandis of 1(Z)/JG 77 was credited with two while flying Bf 110 'LN+AR' with

his gunner, Feldwebel Herbert Baus. Oberleutnant (Oblt) Max Franzisket of the same unit claimed two more.

Oblts Karl-Friedrich Schloßstein and Karl-Friedrich Koch claimed one each. Schloßstein and his gunner, Gefreiter Gütsche, later had to ditch their Bf 110, 'LN+DR' (probably the victim of Reed and Lambert) and were rescued.

The Bf 109 pilots of 14/JG 77 claimed seven Albacores. Two 'Skuas' and three 'Hurricanes' also noted as downed were actually misidentified Fulmars.

As the battered remnant of the Kirkenes force withdrew to *Victorious* there was little evidence in the harbour to show for their sacrifice.

MEAGRE RESULTS

Furious launched its strike force to Petsamo at 14:00 – nine Albacores and nine Swordfish covered by half-a-dozen of 800's Fulmars. Once





Sub Lt Gallichran and PO Black. A second ditched offshore but although the crew were seen in their dinghy they were not saved.

On its torpedo run, Lt Lee's Albacore, N4250, was shot down by a Bf 109. Scrambling into their dinghy the crew paddled ashore and two days later made it through German lines to reach the Russians at Murmansk.

Mercifully, the Swordfish of 812 Squadron escaped unscathed and all returned safely to *Furious*.

As at Kirkenes, the results were

44 aircrew, 17 of whom were killed; just three escaped. In his report, Konteradmiral Polarküste, the officer in command of the area, wrote: "Major attack on Kirkenes with 30 to 40 aircraft then secondary attack on Petsamo.

"In Kirkenes no German vessel sunk, only minor damage. In Petsamo one Norwegian vessel sunk. 31 aircraft shot down: 25 by fighters, rest by flak. 17 aircrew saved. Orders from HMS *Victorious* found on aircrew."

Captured Fleet Air Arm personnel were assembled on Malmi airfield on August 2 and the following morning flown by Ju 52 to Germany.

Having recovered, the surviving aircraft of Force P left the area with all speed to avoid a likely Luftwaffe attack, which in the event did not materialise. The following day, July 31, Dornier Do 18 '8L+DL' of 3/KuFlGr 906 located the carriers,

Left
Albacores of 817
Squadron, 1941.
VIA R C STURTVANT



Above
Graves of naval airmen
in Tromsø cemetery
include that of Leading
Airman Dennis Corner
of 828 Squadron, who
was killed at Kirkenes.
BENGT STANGVIK



Left
An Albacore on anti-
submarine patrol
over a task force. 612
SQUADRON RECORDS

again anticipation was shattered, with the harbour practically empty of shipping.

However, flak was less intense and, with the Luftwaffe's attention focused on Kirkenes, there were fewer fighters present. Those aircraft carrying bombs were able to damage shore installations and set at least one oil tank on fire.

Messerschmitt Bf 109s from 14/JG 77 then intervened and Fulmar X8624 went down with the loss of

meagre. The attack on Petsamo left two German soldiers and one seaman dead and four Finnish civilians wounded. A small Norwegian vessel, the *Rodvaer*, was sunk and oil storage tanks damaged, and the torpedo dropped from Swordfish L7644 by Sub Lt Heath destroyed a jetty.

RECKONING

In all, a dozen Albacores and four Fulmars were lost together with

but was intercepted and shot down by a pair of Sea Hurricanes flown by Lt Cdr Judd and Sub Lt Dickie Haworth. This first 'kill' by Sea Hurricanes marked the end of Operation EF.

A diary entry for HMS *Victorious* dated August 8 mournfully recorded: "The remains of the squadron flew off the 'Vic' bound for Hatston [Orkneys] for a rescrub – and by God we need it."

More soberly, the Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet, Admiral Sir John Tovey, wrote afterwards: "The gallantry of the aircraft crews, who knew before leaving that their chance of surprise had gone, and that they were certain to face heavy odds, is beyond praise."

He added, with more than a hint of irony at this politically motivated venture: "I trust that the encouragement to the morale of our Allies was proportionately great." ●