



THE SINKING OF THE *BLÜCHER*

By Major T. G. W. Potts

An observer standing at the entrance to Oslo Fjord on the night of April 8, 1940 might have caught sight of a procession of blacked-out warships proceeding in a northerly direction towards the Norwegian capital Oslo. These comprised Germany's Warship Group 5 and, as part of Operation 'Weserübung', they were to reach the narrows outside Oslo at 0400 hours on the 9th and effect an immediate surprise landing at the capital shortly afterwards. Leading the column was Hitler's brand new heavy cruiser *Blücher* (the flagship of Konteradmiral Oskar Kummetz) which only ten days earlier had been undergoing trials and receiving last minute improvements and modifications. Her crew was not fully trained or worked up and she was included in the operation despite the opposition of the Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine, Grossadmiral Erich Raeder. *Blücher* was about the size of HMS *Belfast*, the museum ship moored in the River Thames, having a displacement of about 12,000 tons.

She was followed by Germany's only serviceable pocket battleship *Lützow* (formerly named *Deutschland*) which was also taking part despite Raeder's objections as he wanted her to begin distant ocean raiding after further repairs. She also displaced about 12,000 tons.

She was followed in turn by the light cruiser *Emden* (5,600 tons), three torpedo boats, eight motor minesweepers and various other support vessels. In addition to their normal crews, the German squadron also carried 2,000 soldiers, some motor transport, and administrative personnel for the running of Norway, including a detachment of Gestapo. Thus, the heavy ships were seriously overloaded with men. The German plan was to capture all Norway's major ports simultaneously on the morning of April 9 without a prior declaration of war. In his Decree for the Execution of 'Weserübung' Raeder wrote:

'The Führer and Supreme Commander, in order to ensure vital German interests, has imposed upon the Wehrmacht a task, the success of which is of decisive importance to the war.

'The execution and protection of the landing operations by the Kriegsmarine will take place mainly in an area in which not Germany, but England with her superior naval forces, is able to exercise control of the sea. In spite of this we must succeed, and we will, if every leader is conscious of the great-

ness of his task and makes a supreme effort to reach the objective assigned to him.

'It is impossible to anticipate the course of events and the situations which may arise locally. Experience shows that luck and success are on the side of him who is eager to discharge his responsibilities with boldness, tenacity and skill.

'The pre-requisite for the success of the operation are surprise and rapid action. I expect the senior officer of every group and every commanding officer to be governed by an inflexible determination to reach the port assigned to him in the face of any difficulty that may arise. I expect them to enter the ports of disembarkation with the utmost resolution, not allowing themselves to be deterred by the holding and defence measures of the local commanders, nor by guard ships and coastal fortifications.

'Any attempt to check or hinder the advance of our forces must be repulsed. Resistance is to be broken ruthlessly in accordance with the directives in the operational orders.'

Thus, surprise was to take the place of sustained sea-power and the orthodox principles of war were to be violated. If they could get away with it, the Germans wanted the invasion to seem like a peaceful occupation. Any opposition was to be ruthlessly broken, as the Norwegians forces found out. Norway had been at peace for over a century. She had only a small and largely obsolete navy. The principal Norwegian warship at the mouth of the fjord was the minelayer *Olav Tryggvason*, supported by two minesweepers. The Germans planned to trick the defenders with a false message: 'Am putting in with permission of Norwegian Government. Escorting officer on board'. However, *Lützow's* radio operator intercepted a Norwegian Admiralty radio message: 'Douse all lights forthwith!' The lighthouses in Oslo fjord started to go out. Thus, the Germans had lost the key element of surprise at the start of the operation.



The heavy cruiser *Blücher* (top), built by Deutsche Werke at Kiel, was launched on June 8, 1937. She was the sister ship to the *Admiral Hipper* launched at Hamburg four months earlier. The *Blücher* was commissioned on September 20, 1939 being sunk in Operation 'Weserübung' in April 1940. (IWM) Above: Major Tom Potts, our author, pictured with one of the two 28cm (11-inch) guns which helped send her to the bottom. Ironically, they were constructed in the German Krupp factory in Essen!

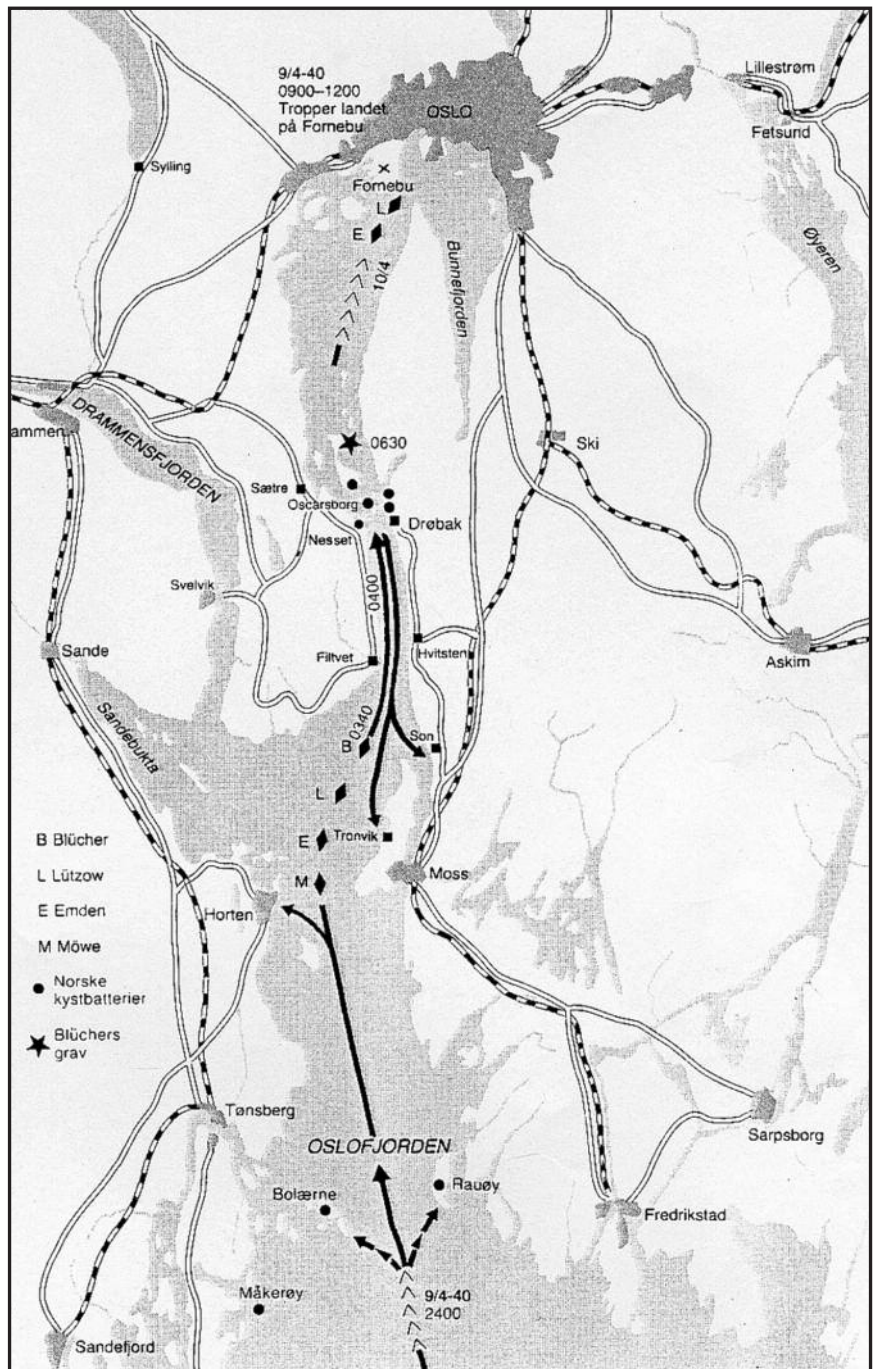
A small Norwegian patrol boat *Pol III*, a 214-ton whaler mounting a single gun, raised the alarm at 2306 hours firing warning shots and attempting to ram the German torpedo boat *Albatros*, having called upon it to surrender. A German officer ordered his men to 'take care of it'. The Germans opened fire and a shell cut off both legs of the brave skipper, Leif Welding Olsen. Mr Churchill wrote in *The Gathering Storm*: 'The armed Norwegian whaler went into action at once without special orders against the invaders. Her gun was smashed and the commander had both legs shot off. To avoid unnerving his men he rolled himself overboard and died nobly.' Fourteen Norwegians were rescued from the *Pol III* to become the first prisoners of the campaign.

The *Lützow's* commander, Kapitän zur See August 'Curry' Thiele, suggested to Admiral Kummetz in the *Blücher* that as surprise had been lost, the squadron should proceed up the fjord at a faster speed before all the lighthouses were doused but the admiral insisted on adhering strictly to his orders. He planned to maintain the fiction of peaceful occupation and to land at the harbour in Oslo at about 0500 hours. The first of the soldiers would then race to the royal palace and take King Haakon II into custody. To preserve the pretence of a friendly occupation, the King would be serenaded by a Wehrmacht band which was included in the invading forces.

From the German point of view, the most dangerous point in the trip north to Oslo was likely to be at the Drobak Narrows, where the width of the seaway is reduced to about 600 yards. Defending the narrows was the very elderly fortress of Oscarsborg, situated on South Kaholmen Island in the middle of the fjord, about ten miles south of the capital. Oscarsborg fortress is named after the Swedish King Oscar, who christened it in 1855, when Sweden ruled Norway. It still looks substantially the same today as it did in 1940 and, indeed, in 1855. Everything depended on whether the defenders of Oscarsborg could stop the invaders. The main armament of the *Blücher* was eight 20.3cm (8-inch) guns and twelve 10.5cm (4-inch) guns while the pocket battleship *Lützow* had a main battery of six 28cm (11-inch) guns. The Norwegian artillery in their principal fortress consisted of three 28cm (11-inch) guns made by Krupp in 1892. These were known as Josva (Joseph), Moses and Aron (Aaron), Joseph being so named because, on being unloaded nearly half a century before, it had been dropped in the water! The three guns were manually operated and had no protective cover. Each had a built-in manually operated crane to enable the 600lb shells to be lifted up to the breach of the guns. The rate of fire would have been one round every four or five minutes.

On the eastern side of the fjord, on the mainland north of Drobak village were situated three 15cm (6-inch) guns based at Husvik and two 57mm (6-pdr) guns on the foreshore. There was another battery on the western side of the fjord at Nesit. This took no part in the action.

The defences at Oscarsborg were the last significant defences before Oslo. How would the defenders react? They were seriously handicapped because successive Norwegian governments had allowed the defences to run down to an unbelievable extent. The garrison commander, Colonel Birger Kr Eriksen, already warned of an impending attack, lacked even the minimum number of men to crew the three serviceable 28cm Krupp guns. All he could muster to fight a night action against a moving target on a dark and misty night were two sergeants and 23 young trainees, some of whom had only served for nine days. Thus, he could only man two of the three serviceable heavy guns. His other soldiers, officer cadets, were sent in the



Schematic of the voyage up Oslo Fjord on the night of April 8, 1940. [B] *Blücher*. [L] *Lützow*. The latter was the first of Germany's new breed of 'pocket battleships' which cleverly circumvented the tonnage restrictions on new capital ships as laid down in the Treaty of Versailles. Launched in May 1931 and christened *Deutschland*, in January 1940, she was confusingly renamed *Lützow*, the same name as a heavy cruiser launched in July 1939 and sold to the USSR in 1940. [E] *Emden*, a light cruiser dating from 1925. [M] *Möwe*, a torpedo boat constructed in the mid-1920s. [●] Marks the positions of the Norwegian coastal batteries. [★] *Blücher's* sinking position.

middle of the night to man the batteries on the eastern side of the fjord.

The Norwegians stationed two small patrol boats immediately south of Oscarsborg to warn the defenders of the approach of the hostile squadron. Admiral Kummetz adhered strictly to his orders and, without any escorting warships ahead, steered straight for the narrows in an attempt to bluff the defenders. A searchlight lit up the *Blücher*. Colonel Eriksen, the fortress commander, gave the order to open fire on his own initiative when the *Blücher* was at a range of about 1,500 yards.

Against a moving target the Norwegians must have known that they only had time to

fire one round from each gun. By the time the gunners actually fired, the target was considerably closer, perhaps as close as 500 to 1,000 yards. Both rounds were hits, although, because of the reduced range, higher up the target than intended. Nevertheless, the two heavy shells had a devastating effect. The *Blücher* had an aircraft hangar designed to hold Arado Ar 196 seaplanes. They were full of petrol. There was also some motor transport aboard. A direct hit on the hangar set the petrol on fire. The second shell flew over the bridge and struck the foretop, killing the anti-aircraft commander, Kapitänleutnant Hans-Erik Pochhammer, and those around him.



The *Blücher* in her death throes. As the burning ship reached the narrows to the north-east of Oscarsborg fortress on the morning of April 9, she was struck by two torpedoes and started to founder.

The captain of the *Blücher*, Kapitän Heinrich Woldag, ordered full speed ahead. However, owing to the damage it had received, the cruiser started to turn in a circle and so the captain could only steer her through the narrow channel by varying the revolutions of the propellers. The guns on the eastern side of the fjord opened up, causing further damage. The *Blücher* was already doomed because the inexperienced crew were unable to extinguish the fire amidships.

About half a mile north of Oscarsborg fortress lies the neighbouring small island of North Kaholmen where the Norwegian navy had positioned a torpedo battery manned by two officers and nine sailors. At a few hundred yards range, they fired two Whitehead 50cm (20-inch) torpedoes at the *Blücher*. By a quirk of fate, the torpedoes had only just been overhauled, and they ran very true indeed and at 0521 hours two dull explosions shook the ship, ripping open the port side. The *Blücher* immediately began to founder as water poured in and her turbines stopped. Meanwhile, the fire in the hangar got worse. As the ship was drifting on to the rocks on the side of the fjord, an order was given to drop an anchor. At 0630, there was a large explosion as a magazine blew up. A great column of smoke shot into the sky. By 0700, the stricken warship had developed a 45 degree list and she soon lay on her side. At 0731 hours she sank beneath the surface and subsequently there was a further explosion and flames could be seen under the water. The ship had only one small boat useable as a lifeboat which was used to transport wounded to the shore, but the bulk of the 2,500 crew and passengers who survived were faced with having to swim the 400 or 500 yards, either to the eastern shore or to a small island in the middle of the fjord. The water was freezing. The danger to the survivors was increased by burning oil which spread over the water threatening to engulf them. In all, about 1,000 Germans lost their lives.

The rest of the German squadron was cut off from the *Blücher* by the fire of the defenders and they were not immediately aware of what had happened to the cruiser. Kapitän Thiele in the *Lützow* took command. His ship had also received some damage. He deemed it impossible to break through the narrows and he led the rest of the squadron off to the south. In the gathering daylight, the garrison at Oscarsborg could see Junkers Ju 52 transport planes flying up the fjord to land at Oslo. However, there was nothing they could do about it as

the only anti-aircraft weapons they had available were a couple of machine guns on an island near the fortress and two Bofors guns on the eastern side of the fjord. There was no prospect of any air support for the Norwegian Air Force which was grossly outnumbered by the Luftwaffe.

During the daylight hours on April 9, the garrison on Oscarsborg was repeatedly bombed from the air and about 500 bombs of 50kg (110lbs) and 250kg (550lbs) were dropped on them. All they could do was seek refuge in the fortifications. Astonishingly, no



Old Norwegian coast artillery gunners never die — they only meet on a Thursday! (Tom forgot to ask why but see *After the Battle No. 95*.) L-R: Ole Slaake, Per Halvorsen, Magnar Thorvardsen, Magne Lundby, Alf Stafne, Arnold Lange, Ragnar Toensberg. In the background on the left is Oscarsborg and on the right Kaholmen Island. Tom Potts is indebted to these gentlemen for their help.

Having been ripped by shell-fire and slammed by two torpedoes, the *Blücher* was doomed. At 6.30 a.m., her magazine blew up sending a huge column of smoke skywards. She then lay on her side for an hour before disappearing from sight beneath the surface of the fjord which at that point is around 50 fathoms deep.

significant damage was inflicted on the fortress by either the German navy or air force and no Norwegians were injured.

The Kriegsmarine returned to the fray at 1417 hours when the *Lützow* opened fire on Oscarsborg with her 28cm guns. Under cover of this fire, a small patrol boat passed through the Narrows unscathed and then reported by radio: '*Blücher* sunk off Askholmen. Probably two torpedo hits. Part of crew on Askholmen and mainland.'

Kapitän Thiele was not prepared to hazard the *Lützow* by attempting to force the Drobak narrows himself so he sent a boat under a white flag to Oscarsborg. A Norwegian vessel came out from the island to meet it. Terms of surrender were negotiated in writing. These included the clause that 'it is agreed that the brave defenders of the fortress may hoist the Norwegian flag next to the German flag'. At 0900 hours on April 10, the two flags were hoisted and *Lützow* and *Emden* sailed on northwards into Oslo harbour, where they arrived 30 hours late. King Haakon and his cabinet had left for central Norway at 0720 hours the day before and were thus able to continue the war. In the British Official History of the Second World War, the author wrote: 'But the important fact is that Oslo, unlike the other ports, was not firmly in German hands during the vital period of the morning of the 9th. Had it been, the Government could not have organised resistance and the success of the German coup would have been complete.'

The continuance of Norway in the war was of considerable importance to the Allies. At the time, the Norwegian mercantile marine was the fourth largest in the world and Norwegian ships were able to play a valuable role in the Battle of the Atlantic which Churchill admitted was the battle that worried him most. The 20-minute battle at Oscarsborg was Norway's biggest victory in the invasion of 1940.



Hundreds of German sailors lost their lives when she sank and today the wreck is consecrated as a war grave. More succumbed trying to swim ashore in the freezing waters covered in burning oil, and the final death toll was around a thousand, including senior officers earmarked for appointments in the German administration in Oslo and members of the Gestapo. These lucky survivors have made themselves improvised shoes, one of the golden rules of surviving a sinking vessel being to discard footwear to aid swimming.



Bomb splinter marks remain on one of the doorways at Oscarsborg. Among the aircraft which attacked the fortress were 22 Stukas from Gruppe 1/StG1, based at Kiel-Holtenau, which bombed at 1059 hours on April 9.





The Germans erected a memorial to their fellow-crewmen but the Norwegians removed it after the war.

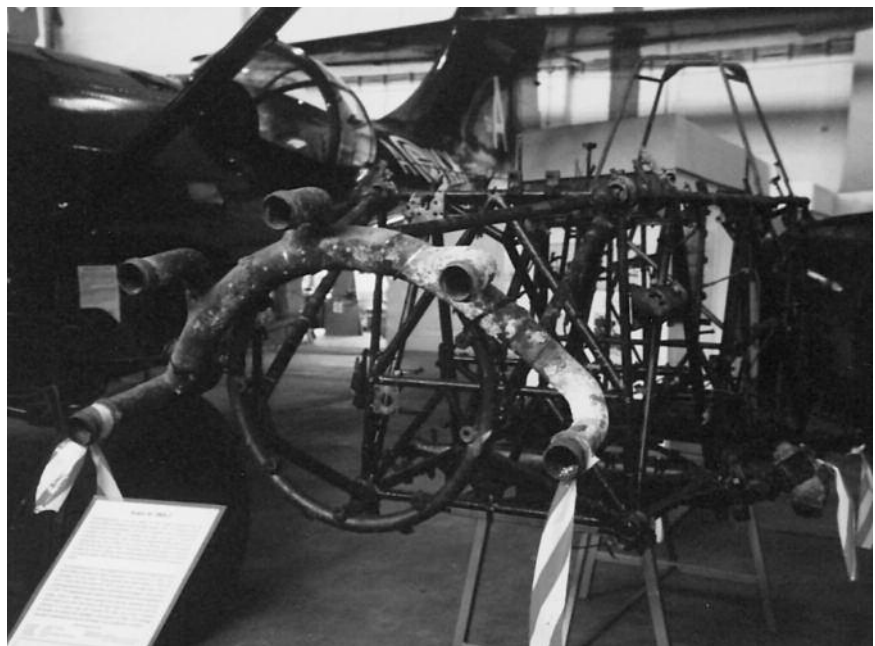


The Norwegian memorial in the mid-19th century Oscarsborg fortress to Colonel Birger Eriksen, the commander in 1940.

The *Blücher* still lies where she sank at the bottom of the fjord off Haoya Island, about 3,000 yards north of Oscarsborg. Norwegian fjords are deep and the bow is at a depth of about 300 feet and the stern at around 200 feet. Big ocean liners sail past her every day on their way to Oslo but undoubtedly most of those on board do not appreciate the significance of the spot. In 1994, the Norwegians instituted an operation to extract fuel oil trapped in the wreck which was seeping into the water and damaging the environment. Contractors drilled a hole through the hull of the wreck and recovered about 1,100 tons of oil. More interestingly, the salvagers discovered on the bottom of the fjord, about 100 yards from the *Blücher*, the battered remains of an Ar 196 floatplane which had broken away from the ship, presumably as she sank. This was salvaged and is now on display at the aeronautical museum at Stavanger/Sola aerodrome in central Norway. This is open every day from June 2 to mid-August and on every Sunday from 1200 to 1600 hours from May to November. The museum is situated in a World War II naval seaplane hangar (at the far end as viewed from Stavanger aerodrome where the passenger aircraft land). Its address is Flyhistorisk Museum Sola, Postboks 512 N-4055, Stavanger Lufthavn, Norway. The airport bus will drop passengers outside. The museum includes a surprising range of aircraft, including a rare Arado Ar 96 B-1 trainer which landed in a fresh-water lake on March 13, 1943, and was salvaged in September 1992. It is now being restored. Also being meticulously restored is Messerschmitt Bf 109 G - 1/R2 Werke No. 14141 of 2/JG5. This aircraft crashed into the sea following engine failure in late 1943. In November 1988, a shrimp trawler inadvertently salvaged the wreck at a depth of about 900 feet. It is being restored by volunteers under the leadership of a professional aeronautical engineer, Kjell Naas.

Oscarsborg fortress remains as it was at the end of the war and even some bomb-splinter marks on the brickwork remain. The heavy guns that hit the *Blücher* are still in position. The little town of Drobak is about a 45-minute bus journey from Oslo and the 541 bus can be caught from a bus stop about 300 yards from the Central Bus Station on the opposite side of the road. The Royal Norwe-

gian Navy runs a small tender which does the short journey from Drobak to the fortress on the island opposite, which is still a military base. There are conducted tours of the Oscarsborg Coastal Artillery Museum during the short summer months only. The Drobak area has two good hotels. The tourist office at Oslo airport is helpful. Even the bus drivers speak English.



The wreckage of the *Blücher's* Arado Ar 196 seaplane was salvaged from the bottom of the fjord a few years ago and can now be seen in the museum at Stavanger in central Norway.