

Operation Brandy

The Raid on Floro Harbour, Norway, 12–13 March 1943

By early 1943 the war at sea along occupied Europe's coastline had entered a new phase. The Royal Navy and Combined Operations Headquarters were no longer content merely to defend Britain's lifelines or blockade German shipping at distance. Instead, a campaign of aggressive coastal raiding was under way—designed to disrupt enemy supply routes, gather intelligence, and force Germany to divert men and matériel to defend every vulnerable inlet and harbour.

Nowhere was this strategy more relevant than in Norway. Since April 1940 the country had been under German occupation, its long, deeply indented coastline transformed into a vital artery for the Reich. Iron ore from Sweden, transported through Norwegian ports, remained essential to German industry. The fjords also provided sheltered anchorages for warships and supply vessels, while coastal convoys moved men and matériel north and south with relative impunity. For the Allies, Norway was both a threat and an opportunity.

Raids along the Norwegian coast served several purposes. They damaged shipping, gathered intelligence on defences, maintained contact with the resistance, and—crucially—reminded both occupier and occupied that the Allies had neither forgotten Norway nor relinquished the initiative. Operations such as Claymore, Anklet, and Archery had already demonstrated the effectiveness of small, well-trained forces striking suddenly and disappearing before the enemy could respond.

By 1943 this work increasingly fell to specialist units. Among them was 30 Commando, a newly formed and still experimental unit created by Ian Fleming, then Personal Assistant to the Director of Naval Intelligence but later famous as the author of James Bond. The unit, made up of Royal Navy, Royal Marines and Army personnel was tasked with operating at the very 'tip of the spear', gathering technical intelligence and personnel. The Army Section, 34 Troop was one of the smallest and least tested elements. Operation Brandy, mounted against Floro Harbour in March 1943, would prove a formative moment—not only for the men involved, but for the future employment of commando-style intelligence raids.

Into the North Sea

In the early hours of 12 March 1943, two Motor Torpedo Boats slipped quietly out of Lerwick, Shetland. Aboard MTB 631 were three soldiers of 34 Troop, Troop Sargeant-Major Warby, Sargeant Whitby, and Fusilier Mares. They were carried by Norwegian-crewed MTBs, many of whose sailors were exiles determined to strike back at the occupiers of their homeland. Their destination lay more than 200 miles away, deep within the fjords of western Norway.

The crossing was long and punishing. The North Sea in March offered no mercy: freezing spray, heavy seas, and constant vigilance against German patrols and aircraft. The small flotilla pressed on regardless, knowing that speed and surprise were their only real protection. Nearly twenty-four hours later they reached the approaches to Floro Fjord.

By 0100 on 13 March the boats were concealed among rocks along the shoreline. Camouflage nets were thrown over the hulls and hastily supplemented with grass and heather cut from the nearby slopes. Any discovery—by patrol boat, aircraft, or even an inquisitive fisherman—would have spelled disaster.

The commandos remained aboard. Strict orders prohibited Army personnel from landing on Norwegian soil, a political sensitivity designed to protect the civilian population from reprisals. Instead, the local resistance came to them. Under cover of darkness, Norwegian civilians rowed silently out to the hidden MTBs, bringing news of shipping movements, harbour defences, and German routines.

The intelligence they provided painted a clear but daunting picture. Florø Harbour contained one destroyer and two medium-sized merchant vessels, protected by well-sited coastal artillery. It was not a soft target. Precisely for that reason, it offered the chance to deliver a sharp psychological and material blow.

The Attack

At 2200 hours the MTBs cast off their camouflage and moved into the fjord. There was no preliminary bombardment; surprise was essential. Mines were quietly dropped into the water to hinder pursuit, and then MTB 619 surged ahead, making directly for the harbour.

Her torpedoes were launched at close range against the *Optima*, a 3,000-ton merchant vessel. Moments later a heavy explosion tore through the ship's hull. She heeled violently and began to settle, effectively destroyed.

MTB 631 followed close behind. Two torpedoes streaked toward their targets. One struck a 9,000-ton vessel lying alongside the quay, detonating with devastating effect. The second hit the quay itself, demolishing German gun positions and hurling men and equipment into the air. For a few critical seconds the harbour was paralysed by shock.

Then the defences came alive. Searchlights slashed across the water, and coastal guns opened fire. Tracers arced through the darkness as the MTBs turned hard for the fjord entrance.

It was at this moment that disaster struck.

MTB 631 shuddered violently and came to an abrupt halt, having struck a submerged obstruction—possibly wreckage or a rock just below the surface. Engines roared as the crew attempted to free her, shifting weight and reversing thrust, but she remained immovable. With German fire intensifying, the boat had become a stationary target.

Her captain made the only call possible. Over the radio he signalled MTB 619, requesting immediate assistance.

Under Fire

Turning back into a defended harbour under fire was an act of extraordinary risk. Yet the Norwegian crew of MTB 619 did not hesitate. They swung their boat around and edged back toward their stranded sister, shells splashing and bursting around them.

The two MTBs drew alongside one another in the darkness. With no time for finesse, men leapt across the gap as it opened and closed with the swell. Equipment was abandoned. Some slipped and fell, dragged to safety by grasping hands.

It was during this desperate transfer that Fusilier Mares realised something vital had been left behind: the Contax camera borrowed from the Naval section of 30 Commando, 36 Troop. A critical intelligence tool, the camera, and the film inside, had to be returned to the UK>

Without hesitation, Mares turned back. He retrieved the camera and, finding the gap between the boats too wide, plunged into the freezing water. Holding the camera aloft, he swam for MTB 619 and was hauled aboard—soaked, exhausted, but successful.

Other items could not be saved. Maps, documents, and letters entrusted to the commandos by Norwegian civilians were left behind, a source of deep anxiety given the certainty of German reprisals should they be discovered.

With all survivors aboard, the final decision was made. MTB 631 could not be allowed to fall intact into enemy hands. Under covering fire, she was deliberately destroyed, erupting into flames that briefly illuminated the fjord before collapsing into a burning wreck.

MTB 619 withdrew at speed, overloaded and under constant threat until she reached open sea.

Return to Lerwick

The return crossing was as punishing as the approach. For three days MTB 619 battled heavy seas, mechanical strain, and exhaustion. The men aboard were soaked through, many suffering from cold and exposure, yet discipline held. On 16 March 1943 the battered boat finally limped into Lerwick, escorted by a single RAF Spitfire—a small but poignant symbol of protection after their ordeal.

Operation Brandy had been successful. Enemy shipping had been sunk, harbour facilities damaged, and valuable intelligence gathered. Just as importantly, the raid reinforced the message that no stretch of occupied coastline was beyond Allied reach.

For the men of 34 Troop, it was a defining experience. They returned blooded, hardened, and far more aware of the realities of combined naval and commando warfare. The lessons learned at Floro—about intelligence, inter-service cooperation, and the value of small, highly trained teams—would shape future operations.

In an intriguing postscript, the Norwegian flotilla commander, Lieutenant **Patrick Dalzel-Job**, would later join **30 Assault Unit** in 1944, serving alongside the commandos during the

campaign in north-west Europe. The connections forged in the fjords of Norway would carry forward into the final year of the war.

Legacy

Operation Brandy was small in scale, but its impact was disproportionate to the number of men involved. It exemplified the Allied raiding philosophy of 1943: precise, daring, and intelligence-driven. In the frozen darkness of Floro Fjord, a handful of commandos and sailors demonstrated that courage, skill, and cooperation could strike powerful blows against a seemingly entrenched enemy.