

The Faroe Islands in World War 2

The Start of the British Occupation

11 April 1940. Winston Churchill — then First Lord of the Admiralty — announced to the House of Commons that the Faroe Islands would be occupied. An announcement was broadcast by the BBC radio and an RAF aircraft was seen over the capital, Tórshavn on the island of Streymoy that day. The occupation was considered necessary so that a blockade could be enforced between Shetland, the Faroes and Iceland in order to counter the German threat from recently invaded Norway.

12 April 1940. Two Royal Navy (RN) destroyers (HMS Havant and HMS Hesperus) arrived in Tórshavn. Following a meeting between the ships' captains, the Danish Prefect of the Islands and the president of the Løgting, an emergency meeting of parliament was convened that afternoon. An official announcement was later made regarding the imminent British occupation and ordering a night time (8.00pm – 8.00am) blackout in Tórshavn and neighbouring Argir, the censorship of post and telegraphy and the prohibition of the use of motor vehicles during the night without a permit. The blackout was extended to the remainder of the islands a few days later.

13th April 1940. The RN cruiser HMS Suffolk escorted by two destroyers and accompanied by two armed trawlers arrived at Tórshavn. Lieutenant Colonel TBW Sandall of the Royal Marines (the British military commander) and Frederick Mason (a 26 year old member of His Majesty's Consular Service and the new British Consul to the Faroe Islands) then met with the Danish Prefect. The Prefect responded with what Colonel Sandall took to be a formal protest, though the Prefect maintained that, owing to the occupation of Denmark, he was unable to formally represent the Danish government. He duly accepted the British terms on the basis that the UK would not seek to interfere with the internal affairs of the islands. A formal protest was however made by the Løgting while still expressing the wish for friendly relations. A detachment of Royal Marines (RM) then disembarked. The RM force was later reinforced by the addition of 2 x 3.7in Howitzers shipped to the Faroes from the UK. The original intention was that the strength of the force would be 250 all ranks. However, such were the demands on manpower at that time that its actual strength was 193 all ranks¹.

14th April 1940. An RM party was moved to the deep water anchorage of Skálafjørður on the island of Eysturoy where a naval base was to be constructed. It was also intended that the fjord should be an alternate base for the Home Fleet. The British occupying force's HQ was established at Fort Skansin in Tórshavn.

22nd April 1940. All lighthouses ceased operating and were only used during the war years when required to assist with the movement of allied shipping.

May 1940 Onwards

The Royal Navy. The RN detachment's HQ was in Fort Skansin, Tórshavn. It was subordinate to HQ Orkneys & Shetlands Command located at Kirkwall in the Orkneys. The Naval Officer in Charge, a Captain RN, was the senior British officer on the Faroes and held the appointment of Fortress Commander. The RN used the deep water anchorage of Skálafjørður as a repair and refuelling base for Allied warships operating in the North Atlantic. Despite the fact that Allied naval activities in the North Atlantic are well documented, very little information is available on the RN Faroes detachment. This is due to the fact that it was a small organisation and, as such, not obliged to keep many records².

¹ The Royal Marines were formed into a small infantry battalion comprising an HQ and 2 x rifle companies ('A' and 'B') each of 3 x platoons.

² Research is currently being carried out on the Faroes RN detachment and, when completed, this briefing sheet will be updated.

The Army. In May 1940, the navy's Royal Marines were replaced by Army personnel of the Lovat Scouts. HQ Faroe Islands Force (FIF) was formed in mid - April 1942 under the command of an Army Colonel who was also the CO of the infantry battalion. That same year, the Lovat Scouts were replaced by a second infantry battalion, the 12th Battalion The Cameronians, which, in 1943, was replaced by a third and final battalion, the 15th Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment. In addition to an infantry battalion, the FIF comprised two Royal Artillery (RA) regiments (anti - aircraft and coastal defence) - 178 Heavy Anti Aircraft Regiment RA and 537 Coast Regiment RA, and several Royal Engineer and Pioneer Corps companies who were mainly employed on constructing the RAF base on Vágur in 1942 - 43. There were also supporting units such as supply and transport, signals, workshops, medical, military police, etc. The total military strength, including RN and RAF personnel, was approximately 8,000³ all ranks, nearly 27% of the islands' population of 30,000 at that time. Despite this, relations between the armed forces and the Faroese generally remained cordial throughout the occupation although the large British presence on Vágur did lead to some local tensions. Isolated incidences of drunkenness, etc were satisfactorily dealt with by the British services police and local authorities.

The Royal Air Force. The RAF airfield and adjacent flying boat base on the island of Vágur became fully operational on 8 June 1942 and were commanded by an RAF Group Captain. By that time, the need for both facilities had been reduced due to the increased range of aircraft. This meant that the North Atlantic area could be patrolled from bases in the UK. As a result, both the airfield and flying boat base saw little operational activity and both were closed down in September 1944. Some RAF personnel did, however, remain on the islands operating various radar stations until 1946. The strength of the RAF contingent varied between 583 all ranks in December 1942 to 56 all ranks in July 1944.

The Tasks of the Occupying Forces. The British forces defence tasks in order of priority were:

- Vágur the RAF airfield and the locations of the majority of the Army units.
- Skálafjørður the deep water anchorage, naval base and oil storage facility.
- Prevention of the establishment by the Germans of a submarine base on the islands.
- Tórshavn the capital and harbour and the location of the civil administration, the Naval HQ, HQ FIF and communications centre.

The British Forces' Withdrawal. From early 1944 onwards, the British presence was reduced, the infantry battalion being replaced by an infantry company and the two artillery regiments reduced to two batteries in March 1944. The majority of the RAF personnel left around September 1944 on the closure of the RAF base on Vágur. The strength of the whole occupying force was then further reduced to approximately 400 all ranks by May 1945. The remaining Army personnel left the islands in September 1945 or shortly afterwards. It is not known when the naval detachment left but a small RAF detachment remained until late 1946, manning a radar station on the island of Suðuroy.

Enemy Action

The Faroe Islands received occasional attacks by German aircraft during the course of the war, mainly targeting naval vessels which were either in harbour or at sea off the islands. A full-scale invasion was never attempted. Drifting sea mines and U-Boats proved to be considerable threats and resulted in the loss of numerous fishing boats and their crews. During the war, Faroese ships had to fly the Faroese flag and have 'FAROES/FØROYAR' painted on the hull so as to allow the Allies to identify them as 'friendly'. Throughout the war, Faroese fishing vessels fished in the sea near Iceland and around the Faroe Islands, and then took the fish to the UK to sell.

³ Some accounts state 10,000. However, 8,000 is the most quoted figure.

Losses and Damage Ashore

Air Raids. The first air raid took place on 22 November 1940 when one or two (official reports are unclear) seaplanes dropped torpedoes which missed the intended target, a trawler, and exploded on shore causing minor structural damage. The most serious air raid was on 21 February 1941 when the anti - submarine warfare trawler HMT Lincoln City was sunk in Tórshavn by two enemy bombers. Eight crew members were killed in the raid. Other crew members were saved by the brave actions of Faroese fishermen who hurried to the scene, despite that fact that the raid was still in progress. One of the bombers, an HE111, was later shot down by light machine gun fire and its crew of four taken prisoner. In 1942, a civil defence force was established in Tórshavn to assist in air raid precautions. Other air raids resulted in material damage only such as the destruction, also in 1941, of the lighthouse at Borðan on the island of Nólsoy.

Drifting Sea Mines. These were a serious threat, particularly when washed up on beaches where they occasionally exploded. Some 200 – 300 houses were damaged as a result. In 1941, five Faroese citizens were fatally injured when tampering with unexploded mines. This led to warning signs being erected and the best marksmen in some of the coastal villages being issued with rifles and ammunition so that they could shoot at the mines and detonate them. In this manner, some 850 mines were destroyed before they could cause any injuries or damage.

The Fishing Industry and Losses at Sea

At the start of the war, the Faroese fishing fleet consisted of a total of 162 boats of which only 10 were relatively modern trawlers. More than half of the fleet was comprised of sailing ships which were more than 50 years old. Whereas the results of enemy action ashore remained limited, the Faroese fishing fleet was exposed to far greater dangers. At first, the Faroese fishing fleet continued to fish in the Iceland and Greenland areas. As a result of the German occupation, Norway – at the time Europe's largest fishing nation – was unable to supply fish to the UK. In addition, much of the British fishing fleet had been requisitioned by the RN. The Faroese therefore concentrated their fishing on supplying fish for the UK market, particularly as Iceland had refused to export its fish to the UK unless its vessels were provided with air cover. As a result, approximately 20% of the UK's fish, including some of the Icelandic catch, was shipped to the UK on Faroese boats. Enemy action and drifting sea mines, however, led to the deaths of 132⁴ fishermen and the sinking of 25 fishing boats. The first loss of life occurred on the Aldon in July 1940 when six fishermen were fatally injured. The worst tragedy was the sinking of the trawler Nýggjaberg near Iceland on 28th March 1942 when all 21 crewmen disappeared without trace. It was suspected that the vessel had been the victim of a German U-Boat attack.

Wartime Conditions for the Civil Population

Conditions for the civilian population throughout the war were quite good. This was particularly the case in rural areas. As items such as sugar, margarine, tea and coffee were rationed; the population did suffer shortages. As most of the fish caught on the high seas was being exported to the UK, the villagers were able to supplement their diet by fishing in coastal waters. This fish, together with home grown potatoes, seabirds and whale meat, became the islanders' staple diet.

Clothing remained readily available due, to a certain extent, to the local cottage industry and its ample supply of Faroese wool. Towards the end of the war, however, footwear became expensive.

⁴ Some accounts give a total of 200 fatalities at sea but 132 is the most quoted figure.

To prevent inflation being caused by the Germans flooding the market with DKK, Danish banknotes in circulation on the islands were over stamped to indicate their validity for use only in the Faroe Islands. The Danish Krone was fixed in the Faroe Islands at 22.4 DKK to £1 Sterling.

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