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Conceiving and Executing Operation Gauntlet

The Canadian-Led Raid on Spitzbergen, 1941

RYAN DEAN & P. WHITNEY LACKENBAUER

Abstract: In August and September 1941, Canadian Brigadier Arthur Potts led a successful but little known combined operation by a small task force of Canadian, British, and Norwegian troops in the Spitzbergen (Svalbard) archipelago in the Arctic Ocean. After extensive planning and political conversations between Allied civil and military authorities, the operation was re-scaled so that a small, mixed task force would destroy mining and communications infrastructure on this remote cluster of islands, repatriate Russian miners and their families to Russia, and evacuate Norwegian residents to Britain. While a modest non-combat mission, Operation Gauntlet represented Canada's first expeditionary operation in the Arctic, yielding general lessons about the value of specialized training and representation from appropriate functional trades, unity of command, operational secrecy, and deception, ultimately providing a boost to Canadian morale. Interactions also demonstrated the complexities of coalition warfare as well as the challenges associated with civil-military interaction in the theatre of operations.

Brigadier [A.E.] Potts and his officers and men had ... been the chief actors in an episode unique in military history, and one which illustrated in singularly striking fashion the extent of a conflict which far better than that of 1914-18, deserves the title of World War. No previous struggle between modern states had brought the Arctic seas so definitely within its scope; and never before had a military force advanced so close to the North Pole. Before this unpredictable war has run its course, Canadian soldiers may serve in other strange corners of the world; but it may be doubted whether any detachment will find itself

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operating in a more remote area than that which fell to the lot of the expedition to Spitsbergen.

– C.P. Stacey (1942)¹

IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 1941, Brigadier Arthur Potts, the officer commanding 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, led a successful combined operation by a small task force of Canadian, British, and Norwegian troops in the Spitzbergen archipelago. This remote cluster of islands, situated on the Arctic Ocean route to Russia's northern ports, had assumed heightened strategic importance after the German invasion of Russia two months earlier. Part of a series of initiatives undertaken by the British at the insistence of the Soviets to establish and secure an Arctic convoy route between the newfound allies, Operation Gauntlet wrecked the valuable coal mines of Spitzbergen and their supporting infrastructure, destroyed the archipelago's wireless and meteorological stations, repatriated the Russian mining population working there to Archangel, and evacuated all the Norwegians on Spitzbergen to Britain.

Gauntlet is notable for being Canada's first expeditionary operation in the Arctic and for being one of only two operations in 1941 that took Canadian troops beyond the confines of the United Kingdom.² Like the better-known Canadian contribution to the US-led, unopposed invasion of the Aleutian island of Kiska in August 1943,³ the operation at Spitzbergen did not involve combat against an enemy force. Consequently, it is generally overlooked in the historiography of the Canadian Army during the Second World War. Official army historian C.P. Stacey wrote a short wartime article on Gauntlet in *Canadian Geographical Journal*⁴ highlighting some of the soldiers' experiences for the public and dedicated a few pages in *Six Years*

¹ C.P. Stacey, "The Canadians at Spitsbergen," *Canadian Geographical Journal* 24-5:5 (1942): 71.

² The other operation involved the deployment of Canadian sappers to the fortresses of Gibraltar. See C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955), 299.

³ On Canadian contributions to Operation Cottage, see Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 492-505; Brian Garfield, *The Thousand Mile War* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1995) and Galen Perras, *Stepping Stones to Nowhere: The Aleutian Islands, Alaska, and American Military Strategy, 1867-1945* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003). As a result of a friendly-fire incident, Japanese booby-traps, and ammunition incidents, four Canadians and 28 Americans were killed during the Kiska operation.

⁴ See Stacey, "Canadians at Spitsbergen," 49-73.

of War to outlining the operation from a Canadian perspective.⁵ American officer Donald Bittner elaborated on the operational experiences covered in Stacey's original article some twenty-five years later, nesting Gauntlet within the larger context of the Allied occupation of Iceland,⁶ while a recent article by French historian Éric Coutu situates the raid in the early wartime development of Britain's Combined Operations Headquarters.⁷ Beyond these sources and a handful of memoirs,⁸ few commentators seem to consider this relatively minor Arctic operation worthy of serious consideration.

This article situates and analyzes Gauntlet in its larger strategic context, explaining how and why the operation evolved into the form that it did—and the Canadian role in it. The scope of the operation reflected the complexities of coalition warfare, demonstrated by the interplay between Soviet political pressure for aggressive Allied action in the Arctic and the limited British military capability to meet these demands. Ultimately representing a compromise between the political objective of heartening the Russians and the military objective of securing the new Arctic convoy route, Operation Gauntlet satisfied neither strategic objective in attempting to accomplish both.

At the tactical level, however, Brigadier Potts' force carried out its limited mission with complete success. The enemy did not interfere with the operation, and not a single soldier or sailor was lost. Furthermore, Gauntlet gave a few hundred Canadians an adventure and a taste of active employment after weary months of waiting in Britain. While the operation provided a boost to Canadian morale, interactions between the Canadians and some local civilian authorities

⁵ See C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 301-07, which includes a full-page map of Spitzbergen.

⁶ Donald F. Bittner, "Descent in the North - The 1941 Canadian raid on Spitsbergen," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 11:4 (1982): 28-34. In broader context, see Bittner, "The British Occupation of Iceland, 1940-1942" (University of Missouri - Columbia, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1974).

⁷ Éric Coutu, "Le quartier général des opérations combinées et l'expédition canado-britannique au Spitzberg (août 1941)," *Guerre mondiale et des conflits contemporains* 220/5 (2004): 45-69. See also Coutu, «Les missions effectuées par le Quartier général des opérations combinées de 1940 à 1942» (Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2005).

⁸ See, for example, Ross Munro, *Gauntlet to Overlord: The Story of the Canadian Army* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1946); Sir Philip Vian, *Action This Day: A War Memoir* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1960); and Alexander Glen, *Footholds Against a Whirlwind* (London: Hutchinson of London, 1975).

revealed the challenges associated with civil-military interaction in the theatre of operations, the need for creative and practical problem solving, and the requirement to correct misinformation at the diplomatic level. Despite these challenges, Operation Gauntlet, in the words of C.P. Stacey, “accomplished everything which it set out to do”⁹ at the tactical level.

SETTING THE STAGE: STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND OPERATIONAL PLANNING

The notion of sending an Allied military force to Spitzbergen¹⁰ in August of 1941 was originally a Soviet one. Stalin met Churchill’s offer of support to the Soviet Union in the wake of the 22 June 1941 German invasion with steep demands: the establishment of a second front on the European continent to relieve German pressure on the Red Army and the immediate shipment of Western war materials to make good Soviet shortages.¹¹ Despite Britain’s strained capabilities at the time, Churchill strove to meet these demands to keep the Soviet Union in the war. On 7 July Churchill instructed the British ambassador in Moscow, Sir Stafford Cripps, to open negotiations for a mutual aid treaty.¹²

From the beginning of these negotiations the Soviets attempted to draw the British into the Arctic. Admiral Nikolay Kuznetsov, the Soviet Commissar of the Navy, requested that the British send a naval force to the White Sea to disrupt Germany’s sea-borne supply route around Norway and undermine General Eduard Dietl’s offensive against Murmansk.¹³ Churchill responded positively, commanding First Sea Lord Admiral Dudley Pound on 12 July to send a squadron of ships to Archangel, and Pound in turn dispatched a naval delegation to Murmansk to investigate further naval cooperation

⁹ Stacey, “The Canadians at Spitsbergen,” 71.

¹⁰ Now commonly known by its Norwegian name of Svalbard. This paper will use the geographic names commonly used at the time.

¹¹ David Wragg, *Sacrifice for Stalin: The Cost and Value of the Arctic Convoys Re-Assessed* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2005), 49.

¹² Christopher Mann, *British Policy and Strategy towards Norway, 1941-45* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15.

¹³ Philip Vian, *Action This Day: A War Memoir* (London: Frederick Muller, 1960), 65–66.

measures such as the basing of British ships in Soviet Arctic ports.¹⁴ Stalin had made it clear that he favoured the Murmansk route for conveying war materials because he was concerned that the Japanese might cut-off Vladivostok on the Pacific and that the land route through Iran lacked the infrastructure to be a viable option.¹⁵ The Murmansk convoy route was the shortest and most direct, but also the most dangerous as Allied ships would have to run a 2,000-mile long gauntlet around Norway, contending with the threat of German air and sea attack along with the freezing and tempestuous Barents Sea.¹⁶

The Admiralty, however, did not share the Soviet enthusiasm for joint action in the Arctic. Admiral Sir John Tovey, Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet, whose stretched command would assume the burden of these proposed operations, was certainly cool to the idea. It was vexing from the British perspective, as naval historian Richard Woodman writes, that Stalin “comprehended little of the war at sea, an ignorant and infuriating disinterest he was to exhibit during the whole of the maritime Arctic campaign that he now expected Churchill to open.”¹⁷ In weighing the mismatch between British military capabilities and Soviet ambitions, Tovey concluded “that no political object would be served by attempting military impossibilities.”¹⁸ This stance earned Tovey the ire of Churchill who was coming under increasing political pressure to take concrete action in supporting the Soviet Union.¹⁹

¹⁴ Mann, *British Policy and Strategy towards Norway*, 15. A force under Rear-Admiral W.F. Wake-Walker sailed from Scapa on 23 July comprised of the aircraft carriers *Furious* and *Victorious* and cruisers *Devonshire* and *Suffolk* escorted by six destroyers. The results of their operations against Dietl’s sea-borne supply line were small. B. B. Schofield, *The Russian Convoys* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1964), 23-24.

¹⁵ Robert Carse, *A Cold Corner of Hell* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 12.

¹⁶ James Levy, “The Needs of Political Policy versus the Reality of Military Operations: Royal Navy Opposition to the Arctic Convoys, 1942,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 26:1 (2003): 38 and Schofield, *The Russian Convoys*, 24.

¹⁷ Richard Woodman, *The Arctic Convoys* (London: John Murray Ltd, 1994), 8.

¹⁸ Quoted in Vian, *Action This Day*, 73.

¹⁹ Mann, *British Policy and Strategy towards Norway*, 15.

On 15 July, Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov floated a scheme of his own during a meeting with Cripps.²⁰ He suggested that Anglo-Soviet cooperation be extended to cover an occupation of Spitzbergen and Bear Island which flanked the sea lane from Britain to the Soviet Union. "This would enable a secure sea lane to be made from Archangel to the West and would also give facilities for air service between the countries," Cripps noted in his report of the meeting. There were 1,500 Soviet miners on Spitzbergen who could be armed to garrison the archipelago for Allied use. With the sea lane secured, Cripps recounted that Molotov outlined a plan that would use Soviet troops supported by the British to drive the Germans from northern Norway. "The idea seems to me a good one," Cripps reported to his Foreign Office, "especially as regards the Islands and it should present no difficulty and would protect Soviet miners in Spitzbergen from possible German raids."²¹ The British quickly rejected any large-scale military operations in northern Norway, however, given that this would divert naval and air assets from more pressing commitments elsewhere.²²

Aware of the mounting political pressure for action, the British Chiefs of Staff (COS) saw the benefits in occupying Spitzbergen and Bear Island. By 17 July, the British Joint Planning Staff (JPS) reported to the War Cabinet that "the alliance between Great Britain and Russia has given Spitzbergen a strategical value which it did not previously possess."²³ Given its position astride the sea lines of communication between Britain and northern Russia, control of the archipelago mattered. If the Allies cut off the supply of high-quality coal to Norway, this would have economic implications for the German war effort. Furthermore, Spitzbergen could be used as a refuelling base for Allied shipping to Murmansk and to support Allied aviation in the area. Noting the constraints on British forces, the JPS "consider[ed] that Spitzbergen should be occupied provided

²⁰ Despite General Filipp Golikov and Admiral Kuznetov being present at the meeting between Molotov and Cripps, the British Military Mission in Moscow understood the idea to have been Molotov's. No.30 Military Mission Moscow to War Office, 15 July 1941, The National Archives (TNA), file CAB 121/442.

²¹ From Moscow to Foreign Office, 15 July 1941, TNA, file FO 371/29487.

²² From Chiefs of Staff to No. 30 Military Mission in Moscow, 19 July 1941, TNA, file WO 106/1998.

²³ Joint Planning Staff to the War Cabinet, "Operations in the North," 17 July 1941, TNA, file CAB 121/442.

the Russians are prepared to provide the necessary army garrison.”²⁴ The COS approved the operation contingent on the Norwegian government-in-exile giving their consent.²⁵

Negotiations between the British, the Norwegians, and the Soviets soon yielded consent to mount a joint operation along one of two lines: evacuating the miners from Spitzbergen or occupying the archipelago. British planners initially focused on the latter option, which would deny the “important areas” to Germany and allow the Allies to defend an anchorage for shipping. According to their plan, a force would garrison Spitzbergen until it froze over in October. Intelligence appraisals assumed that the landing would be unopposed—an important assumption given that all British assault craft were allotted to the pending Operation Pilgrim (the proposed British seizure of Portugal’s Canary Islands), thereby making it “impossible to equip an expedition to Spitzbergen which will be capable of overcoming anything more than the very slightest opposition.”²⁶ On 24 July, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill, met with the commander of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton, to informally offer the developing operation to him and his troops. McNaughton readily agreed, and the next day the War Office officially approached the Canadian Army to provide the troops to defend the proposed naval anchorage and refuelling base at Spitzbergen.²⁷

McNaughton’s enthusiasm for Canadian action was unsurprising. His soldiers, eager for active service since their arrival in Britain in December 1939, had “found themselves committed instead to a defensive and largely static role” for the next two years.²⁸ However vital this anti-invasion role may have seemed, it was no replacement for actual battle indoctrination. Canadian units had been tapped for proposed British operations in Norway, the Low Countries, and France earlier in the war, but these plans had all been cancelled,

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 17 July 1941, TNA, file CAB 121/442.

²⁶ Joint Planning Staff, “Spitzbergen,” 23 July 1941, TNA, file CAB 84/33.

²⁷ Instructions for the Preparation of Force 111, 25 July 1941, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), file RG24 C-2 Vol 12298.

²⁸ Stacey, *The Canadians in Britain*, 11–12.

leaving the Canadian field force “bitterly disappointed.”²⁹ Although the subsequent German invasion of the Soviet Union made an attack against England increasingly unlikely, two restrictions kept the Canadians confined to England. First, McNaughton had insisted that the Canadian Corps remain together so that British commanders did not siphon off units piecemeal. This earned him a wrongful reputation for wanting to keep the Canadians out of fighting when, in the assessment of historian John Rickard, he had demonstrated “a sincere willingness to consider any and all requests from the War Office for Canadian forces to join the fighting” in Europe.³⁰ Second, Canadian Minister of National Defence J.L. Ralston, having crossed swords with McNaughton about the general’s unilateral decision to commit Canadian troops to Norway the previous year, ruled that Canadian troops could not be moved out of England without government consent. Thus, McNaughton was limited to pursuing raiding opportunities so that his men could acquire combat experience. At the end of June 1941 he had sent a representative to the War Office to explore opportunities along these lines.³¹ Now, a month later, the War Office was offering one.

With McNaughton on board, senior Canadian officers met with representatives from several British War Office branches on 26 July to devise a plan for Operation Flaxman. “The proposal made at this time was for a considerably more ambitious enterprise than the one finally carried out,” Stacey observed. The basic intent was to deploy effectively an infantry brigade, less one battalion, to Spitzbergen to occupy the islands until the end of October. According to this plan, “Force 111” would primarily comprise an infantry battalion from the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) and an infantry

²⁹ Ibid, 22-26. On earlier aborted plans for Canadians to engage in combat and the resulting frustration of Canadian soldiers, see *The Canadians in Britain 1939-1944* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1944), 22-26; and David J. Bercuson, *Maple Leaf Against the Axis* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995), 62-65.

³⁰ John N. Rickard, *The Politics of Command: Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton and the Canadian Army* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 40-41, 52-53.

³¹ Bercuson, *Maple Leaf Against the Axis*, 65; John Swettenham, *McNaughton 1887-1943*, Vol. 2 (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1969), 181; and Rickard, *Politics of Command*, 41-43.

battalion from the Edmonton Regiment.³² The British would provide ancillary units and additional supplies.³³ Information on German activities on Spitzbergen was scanty, but planners continued to expect an unopposed landing.

The Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) eagerly threw itself into planning Flaxman, but the War Office continued to shape the character of the operation—and to raise doubts about whether it should proceed. Senior British officers voiced concerns about a possible German air threat to the operation, but McNaughton did not see this as a serious risk. “Any air attack would be limited,” a contemporary report noted, “and he was of the opinion that the expedition should not be cancelled on account of the danger of air attack.” The Canadians could adopt passive defence (troop dispersion and slit trenches) to withstand a German attack, and the force did have one light anti-aircraft battery. Brigadier Arthur Potts, the commander designate of Force 111, concurred.³⁴ Besides, McNaughton argued, the threat of air attack was worthwhile if it meant drawing off German bombers from somewhere more important like the Soviet front.³⁵ Having heard McNaughton’s appraisal of the risks, the War Office decided to proceed with preparations for Flaxman, but delayed launching the operation until more intelligence could be collected on the archipelago.³⁶ Based on the assumption that the project had been approved by the British War Committee, the Canadian War Committee told McNaughton on 31 July that it was:

[...] quite prepared to have you act on your own judgement as to whether to cooperate and to what extent. In arriving at a decision you will no

³² C.P. Stacey noted the similarity between this order of battle and the Canadian force provided for service in Norway in April 1940. Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) Historical Report No.56, “The Spitzbergen Operation, August-September 1941” (20 December 1941), 2-3. These two regiments had been thwarted from seeing action in Norway the previous year when that operation was cancelled. G.R. Stevens, *A City Goes to War: History of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment (3 PPCLI)* (Edmonton: Edmonton Regiment Association, 1964), 211. On the secrecy surrounding the operation, see War Diary No. 5 Fd. Amb. R.C.A.M.C, Force 111, 27 July 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol. 17489.

³³ Minutes of meeting attended at the War Office, 26 July 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-2 Vol. 12298.

³⁴ Memorandum by Brigadier Murchie, 6 August 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-2 Vol. 12298.

³⁵ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 6 August 1941, TNA, file DEFE 2/228.

³⁶ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 6 August 1941, TNA, file CAB 79/13/0/1.

doubt have regard to question as to whether prospects of success are sufficient to warrant risks involved which include not only personnel but possible encouragement to enemy if results negative or worse. We here are not in a position to judge of above and other conflicting factors but prepared to leave decision to your judgement.³⁷

The British War Cabinet approved Operation Flaxman on the morning of 5 August. CMHQ in London issued the secret instruction "ALLIANCE" to Canadian soldiers, and, the following morning, troops began to move out of their camps at the town of Oxted, south of London, to board trains which would take them to Glasgow, from where they were to be shipped to Spitzbergen.³⁸

In summing up the purpose of Operation Flaxman, the British Chiefs of Staff commented "that we were operating a fleet in Far Northern Waters largely for political reasons." For this fleet "to operate to the best advantage," the COS indicated that "it was necessary to defend the refuelling base at Spitzbergen with a small garrison."³⁹ Thus establishing a military objective for the politically-motivated Flaxman, they concluded that the operation should be designed to "secure, against seaborne and airborne raids, a harbour, selected by the Naval Commander as a refuelling base" for Arctic shipping until October 1941.⁴⁰

CHANGING COURSE

In the meantime, the COS had sent a naval reconnaissance mission to the archipelago.⁴¹ Consequently, the Admiralty [HQ] received a signal on the evening of 5 August which fundamentally changed the nature of the Spitzbergen operation. Rear-Admiral Philip Vian, the commander of Force "K" then operating in northern waters in

³⁷ DEFENSOR to CANMILITARY telegram G.S. 203, 31 July 1941, LAC RG25 A-2 Vol 829.

³⁸ From SEARAIL TWO to Movements Secc, 5 August 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-2 Vol 12298.

³⁹ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 4 August 1941, TNA, file WO 106/1995A.

⁴⁰ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, Annex "Draft Directive to the Military Commander for an Operation in Spitzbergen," 5 August 1941, TNA, file CAB/80/59/0/1.

⁴¹ Joint Planning Staff (41) 584, "Spitzbergen," 23 July 1941, TNA, file CAB 84/33.

support of the Soviets, had been part of the initial British naval delegation sent to Murmansk in mid-July to discern joint naval arrangements with the Soviets and to scout opportunities for basing British ships there. His assessment was decidedly negative, noting that the naval facilities and air defences at Murmansk left much to be desired, and that the port would only be viable if the British invested heavily in improving and strengthening it.⁴² His subsequent naval reconnaissance of Spitzbergen in search of alternative naval basing options found the situation there even worse. There were no Germans on the archipelago, he reported, and “that [while] a military occupation of Spitsbergen would no doubt be possible... a naval one was not, because the fiords were iced up for most of the year.”⁴³ He determined that available harbours in Spitzbergen were too large for effective anti-submarine and anti-aircraft defences,⁴⁴ and the lack of port facilities made it “doubtful if even the redoubtable American Sea-Bees could have made a base out of those mountainous and ice-covered islands.”⁴⁵ Accordingly, he informed the Admiralty that the “object of heartening Russians will not be achieved by [a] Naval force based at sea” and recommended that the “project should be abandoned.”⁴⁶ Vian’s superior, Admiral Tovey, concurred fully, echoing that the planned “expedition to Spitzbergen should be abandoned” on the grounds that “an operational base at Spitzbergen for units of [the] Fleet is not necessary and if established will form a commitment which will severely hamper any operations.”⁴⁷

The COS weighed Vian’s recommendation to abort Flaxman against the mounting political pressure that Churchill was placing

⁴² Woodman, *The Arctic Convoys*, 11.

⁴³ Vian, *Action This Day*, 70.

⁴⁴ The most suitable anchorage was a harbour 5 miles wide at its mouth, much too wide for an effective anti-submarine warfare (ASW) defence. The alternative anchorage suffered from poor anti-aircraft (A.A.) gun firing positions. Soldiers would not be able to get from their garrison to their guns fast enough to respond effectively to a sudden air attack. Regardless, the harbour was so large that the Bofors guns available had insufficient range to protect the anchorage. Chiefs of Staff Committee, Spitzbergen Report, 11 August 1941, TNA, file PREM 3/410.

⁴⁵ Schofield, *The Russian Convoys*, 23.

⁴⁶ Naval Cypher from S. O. Force A to C. in C. Home Fleet, 5 August 1941, TNA, file PREM 3/410.

⁴⁷ Naval Cypher from C. in C. Home Fleet to Admiralty, 7 August 1941, TNA, file PREM 3/410.

on them for Arctic operations in support of the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden had told Soviet Ambassador Ivan Mikhailovich Maisky on 5 August that, with Soviet approval, the British would dispatch a force to occupy Spitzbergen three days later.⁴⁹ Reneging on this promise would have been politically difficult.⁵⁰ When McNaughton and Potts met with the COS on 6 August to review the situation, McNaughton, who argued that Admiral Vian “did not appear to have a clear appreciation of the ‘object’ of the proposed expedition,”⁵¹ requested that Force 111 be sent for training at the Combined Training Centre at Inverary, Scotland, until the COS rendered their final decision on whether Flaxman would proceed. “The troops taking part in the expedition were completely untrained in combined operations,” McNaughton explained, “and if they could be held at Inverary they could spend their time most usefully in practicing beach landings.”⁵² The committee agreed to McNaughton’s request and postponed the sailing of Flaxman. It also ordered Vian to return to London and report to them in person before they made a final decision as to the fate of the operation.

The 2,000 Canadian troops, “loaded like a bunch of sardines into the carriages” of trains then heading north to Glasgow, were completely unaware of the developments at the War Office. The Canadians had arrived at Oxted’s train station before noon, finding specialized kit waiting for them. By 12:30 pm the first train had been packed with kit and men and departed the station for Glasgow. As Oxted disappeared from view behind them “the general feeling... was one of relief that the journey had commenced,” noted the Saskatoon Light Infantry war diarist, “and many wondered whether or not we should see the village again.”⁵³ Secrecy had been a central element in the preparations of Flaxman.⁵⁴ There was plenty of speculation amongst the men as to what was going to happen to them. As far as they knew, they were participating in an exercise called “Heather.”

⁴⁸ For example see Prime Minister to General Ismay for Chiefs of Staff, 27 July 1941, TNA, file CAB 120/657.

⁴⁹ Mr. Eden to Sir S. Cripps, 5 August 1941, TNA, file FO/954/24B/0/58.

⁵⁰ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 7 August 1941, TNA, file CAB 121/442.

⁵¹ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 6 August 1941, TNA, file WO 106/1995A.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ War Diary Saskatoon Light Infantry, Exercise Heather, 27 July 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol. 17489.

⁵⁴ Donald F. Bittner, “Descent in the North - The 1941 Canadian raid on Spitsbergen,” *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 11:4 (1982): 30.

Staff Officer Major A.H. Norrington outlined to the men what they were about to do but not where they were going. As the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade war diary notes, the soldiers were simply told “that we were to do a job of extreme importance, a job that had to be done before the enemy could get a chance at it. That this job involved a sea voyage was also given out.”⁵⁵

Arriving in Glasgow that evening, the Canadian troops disembarked from the trains and quietly boarded the large transport ship *Empress of Canada*. That night the *Empress* departed Glasgow, proceeding slowly down the congested Clyde before turning north and heading up Loch Fyne. At noon on 8 August, the ship dropped anchor offshore the Special Training Centre (STC) at Inverary. Centre staff devised an intense training regime for the Canadians, consisting of two main elements. The first was infantry training: rough country route marches and cross-country manoeuvres.⁵⁶ The troops were subjected to physical exhaustion, exposed to the harsh highland elements, and then forced to make tactical decisions. They were also taught to read and sketch maps of the terrain, set demolitions, and fight in an urban environment.⁵⁷ The second element of training was “boat work” wherein the troops practiced landing operations. This realistic and comprehensive training impressed the officers and troops, although “the complete lack of air support integrated into the combined arms training” reaffirmed what Stacey observed to be “a common army complaint of the period.”⁵⁸

While the COS awaited the arrival of Vian on 9 August, they tasked the JPS with investigating the economic consequences for Germany if Flaxman succeeded in shutting off the flow of Spitzbergen coal to occupied Norway. Military planners consulted with the Ministry of Economic Warfare, which said it would welcome a stop to the supply of Spitzbergen coal to occupied Norway in hopes that this would strain the German economy. The ministry also noted that the Soviet Union had been importing about 500,000 tons of coal annually from Spitzbergen and that the Royal Navy could provide coverage to Russian shipping to re-establish this Arctic coal trade. Furthermore,

⁵⁵ Special War Diary 2 CDN INF BDE, Spitzbergen Expedition, 6 August 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol 17489.

⁵⁶ CMHQ Historical Report No.56, “The Spitzbergen Operation,” 6.

⁵⁷ Military Intelligence Service, *British Commandos* (Washington DC, US War Department, 1942), 29, 100.

⁵⁸ CMHQ Historical Report No.56, “The Spitzbergen Operation,” 6.

because “the Germans are very unlikely to get any coal from Spitzbergen,” the JPS concluded that “there is no object in destroying the facilities of the mines in order to deny the coal to the enemy.” It advocated for a British policy that would encourage Russian mines to supply coal to northern Russia to the fullest extent possible. If the Soviets lost their northern flank, the JPS recommended the complete destruction of all mining facilities and equipment in Spitzbergen, as well as the withdrawal of all miners. The Ministry of Labour would happily employ the Norwegian miners in the UK, but given the unique arrangement that provided for Norwegian sovereignty over the archipelago, the Norwegian government-in-exile was unlikely to welcome a proposal that would remove their people from Spitzbergen while leaving the Russians in place.⁵⁹

Vian arrived in London on 9 August and immediately reported to the COS. His Force “K,” consisting of two cruisers and two destroyers, had visited Spitzbergen on 31 July.⁶⁰ HMS *Nigeria* visited the main Norwegian settlement at Longyearby, where the admiral met the civilian governor of Spitzbergen. Meanwhile, Captain William Agnew in the cruiser *Aurora* visited the main Soviet settlement of Barentsburg, where he was welcomed by Russian Consul F. I. Wolnuhi. While the community continued to mine, Agnew learned, the Russians expected a German occupation at any moment.⁶¹ Before the British departed the next day, they seized a Norwegian collier,⁶² recruited seventy Norwegian miners to serve in the Free Norwegian Army,⁶³ and installed Royal Norwegian Navy Løjtnant R. A. Tamber as Military Governor of Spitzbergen. Tamber’s objectives were to make sure that local residents did not pass any information about the British visit to the Germans and to ferret out any clandestine German influence on the islands.⁶⁴ In his report, Vian reiterated that the proposed anchorages at Spitzbergen were not defensible and that

⁵⁹ Joint Planning Staff Aide Memoire, Spitzbergen, 8 August 1941, TNA, file CAB/79/13/0/1.

⁶⁰ Mathisen, *Svalbard in the Changing Arctic*, 34.

⁶¹ Vian, *Action This Day*, 68-69.

⁶² The collier *Dagney* was crewed by twenty Norwegian volunteers and was sunk a week later by German aircraft while on passage to Scapa Flow. J. G. Elbo, “The War in Svalbard, 1939-45,” *Polar Record* 6:44 (1952): 485.

⁶³ Vian, *Action This Day*, 68-69.

⁶⁴ Mathisen, *Svalbard in the Changing Arctic*, 35.

he saw “no military advantage in establishing a garrison” in the archipelago.⁶⁵

The COS Committee’s discussions turned to what to do in light of what they had learned. The economic advantages to stopping the flow of Spitzbergen coal to Norway remained. “Germany’s war effort would mainly be affected by the loss of the bunker coal which would have to be made good out of the surplus production from Eastern Germany via the Baltic,” a Ministry of Economic Warfare representative explained to the Chiefs. “This would throw a further strain on German transport. From this point of view, the Ministry of Economic Warfare would like to see the mines put out of action, if there was no other way of denying our enemies the advantages derived from this coal.” Furthermore, the Norwegian miners on Spitzbergen had six months of supplies left, while the Soviets only had five weeks’ worth (with no prospect of resupply because the Soviets were unwilling to send ships to the archipelago). In this context, the COS decided that the Allies would benefit if the miners were evacuated from Spitzbergen.⁶⁶

Having reconsidered Flaxman, the COS tasked the JPS to revise the operation to accomplish the following:

- a) evacuate the Soviet miners to the Soviet Union;
- b) bring the Norwegian miners to the UK to mine coal;
- c) destroy the coal mining facilities in Spitzbergen;
- d) destroy the wireless and meteorological stations which supplied Germany with weather data.⁶⁷

“The essence of the operation is speed”⁶⁸ to minimize the chance of German interference, the JPS concluded. The JPS called for a much smaller force of about 400 men, built around a company of Canadian infantry from the Edmonton Regiment and a company of Royal

⁶⁵ Chiefs of Staff Committee, Spitzbergen Draft Report, 9 August 1941, TNA, file CAB/80/59/0/1.

⁶⁶ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, Spitzbergen Draft Report, 9 August 1941, TNA, file CAB/80/59/0/1. See also Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 6 August 1941, TNA, file WO 106/1995A. On the political fallout of the handling of the operation with Norway, see Mr. Eden to Mr. Collier, 6 August 1941, TNA, file FO/954/23B/0/105 and Mann, *British Policy and Strategy towards Norway*, 45–47.

⁶⁷ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 9 August 1941, TNA, file CAN/79/13/0/1.

⁶⁸ Joint Planning Committee Meeting, Operation “GAUNTLET”, 11 August 1941, TNA, CAB 84/34.

Canadian Engineers. The artillery and supporting occupational troops were cut, and a small detachment of Kent Corp Troops, Royal Engineers (specially trained for commando demolitions of machinery and port installations) added in their place. Designated “Force 111,” these troops could still defend themselves against a German air attack during their short stay at Spitzbergen using slit trenches and dispersion. A single ship, the *Empress of Canada* (already allotted to Flaxman), could transport the whole force. While this vessel returned the Russian miners to the Soviet Union, Force 111 could carry out the demolitions of the mines on Spitzbergen. If the enemy managed to sink the *Empress*, the Canadians and the Norwegians could be embarked on the escorting British cruisers and destroyers and returned to England from Spitzbergen. Brigadier Potts would be in charge of land operations while overall command of the revised Flaxman, now called Operation Gauntlet, would fall to Rear-Admiral Vian.⁶⁹

Given that the operation had direct implications for Norwegian and Russian nationals, the British plan needed the consent of its Allies. Vian personally explained the situation to King Haakon VII of Norway, who was living in exile in Britain, and to Ambassador Maisky. The king, concerned for his people on Spitzbergen, supported the new evacuation plan as long as damage to Norwegian mining facilities was minimal. Maisky, however, thought little of the plan because it did not involve the killing of Germans. “I undertook to do my best,” Vian promised, “to include this in the programme.”⁷⁰ Nonetheless, when Maisky met with Eden on 11 August, he insisted that occupying Spitzbergen was pivotal to the Soviet aim of safeguarding the Allies’ northern supply route to the Soviet Union. Rather than withdrawing Soviet miners from the archipelago, Maisky reiterated his preference of arming them and leaving them in place for the winter. A frustrated Eden convinced Maisky and his naval advisor to meet with the COS and the Norwegians to discuss the new evacuation plan.⁷¹ At that meeting, the Norwegian prime minister stated that his government fully realized the importance of denying the coal to the Germans, as well as the dangers to the miners if the Germans bombed them. Accordingly, he agreed to the destruction of the coal mines but wanted

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Vian, *Action This Day*, 70.

⁷¹ Mr. Eden to Sir S. Cripps, 11 August 1941, TNA, file FO/954/24B/o/61.

his people evacuated. Turning to the Soviets, the Chiefs explained why occupying Spitzbergen would subject its civil population to an unacceptably high risk of bombardment, with the highly flammable wooden buildings portending a high rate of civilian casualties from exposure. Following this logic, Maisky agreed to recommend the evacuation of the Soviet miners to his government.⁷²

The Canadians at Inverary ceased their training late in the afternoon on 13 August. Boarding the *Empress* that evening, they arrived back in Glasgow the following day where the *Patricias* and the bulk of the *Eddies* departed, their trains returning them to their camps at Oxted. The *Empress* was unloaded and then reloaded with kit and supplies specific to Gauntlet. A Norwegian contingent of soldiers boarded the ship, along with a Soviet embassy official, who carried a letter from his government to the Soviet consul in Spitzbergen.⁷³ By the morning of 18 August, the men of Force 111 onboard the *Empress* sailed, with a naval escort, for a still undisclosed destination—although the involvement of the Norwegians hinted to where they were going.⁷⁴ Buoyed with enthusiasm at the prospect of seeing action, the Canadians conducted boat drills as the *Empress* sailed north between the inner and outer Hebrides. Shortly afterwards the aircraft carrier *HMS Argus* and her destroyers dropped behind the stern of the *Empress*, replaced as escorts by the cruisers and destroyers of Vian's Force K.⁷⁵

OPERATION GAUNTLET

On the morning of 21 August, the *Empress of Canada's* anchor hit the water off Hyalfjord, Iceland. There to refuel along with Force K, the *Empress* found herself surrounded by a large number of American naval ships, most prominently the battleship *USS New Mexico*. The

⁷² Betraying an insecurity regarding the sovereign status of Spitzbergen, the Norwegian prime minister stated his preference that if the Soviets decide not to evacuate, that no arms should be shipped to their miners. If the Soviets insist on staying, he would like to reconsider his decision to evacuate the Norwegian miners. Chiefs of Staff Committee, Annex, 12 August 1941, TNA, file CAB 121/442.

⁷³ War Office for Foreign Office, Operation "GAUNTLET", 17 August 1941, TNA, file WO 106/1998.

⁷⁴ Bittner, "Descent in the North," 29.

⁷⁵ War Diary "X" Canadian Field Cash, R.C.A.P.C. Force 111, 18 August 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol. 17489.

Canadian officers aboard the *Empress* soon found themselves playing hosts to visitors from the dry American ships who were eager to avail themselves of the ship's stores of alcohol.⁷⁶ As the festivities commenced, Brigadier Potts departed the *Empress* for the *Nigeria* to meet with Vian and work out the details of the operation order for Gauntlet.⁷⁷ By midnight, the general plan had been drawn up, the Americans returned to their ships after various rounds of toasts, and Force K and the *Empress* were once again underway.⁷⁸

With Iceland well behind the force, Potts held conferences revealing to his officers and men that they were heading to Spitzbergen. Due to strict operational secrecy, "only a very few senior officers of the force had the slightest inkling of the real plan."⁷⁹ The men cheered when told that they were mounting a raid on Spitzbergen, but were disappointed to learn that they were not expected to engage any German forces. As the officers of Force 111 stayed up into the night working out the details of the plan for their respective units, the soldiers manning the anti-aircraft guns on the upper decks of the *Empress* donned the leather jerkins and heavy sheepskin coats that had been specially provided for the mission. "The men were saying it was the first time their feet had been cold in August," the Saskatoon Light Infantry's war diary recorded. "This expedition is proceeding further north than any military expedition in history."⁸⁰

Force K arrived in the Isfjord of West Spitzbergen, the main waterway along which the Norwegian and Soviet settlements were situated, early on 25 August. The previous night, Force K had rendezvoused with a ragtag convoy of fishing trawlers and an oiler sent to support Gauntlet.⁸¹ These ships and the rest of Force K followed a scouting party of Walrus aircraft that had launched from

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Stacey, "The Canadians at Spitsbergen," 60.

⁷⁸ Chris Mann and Christer Jorgensen, *Hitler's Arctic War: The German Campaigns in Norway, Finland, and the USSR 1940-1945* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2003), 118; Mann, *British Policy and Strategy towards Norway*, 12; Henrik O. Lunde, *Hitler's Pre-Emptive War: The Battle for Norway, 1940* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2009), 551. For the most comprehensive look at Iceland during the war, see Donald Bittner, "The British Occupation of Iceland, 1940-1942" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, 1974).

⁷⁹ Stacey, "The Canadians at Spitsbergen," 53.

⁸⁰ War Diary Saskatoon Light Infantry, Exercise Heather, 23 August 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol. 17489.

⁸¹ Diary of Ross Munro, 24 August 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol 12298.



Major Bury with Edmonton Regiment, Barentsburg. [Canadian Army Photo]

the cruisers up the Isfjord, with the *Empress* dropping anchor offshore the main Soviet settlement of Barentsburg. The soldiers emerging on deck found themselves confronted with a sense of “immobility and silence.”⁸² As the Canadians took in their first impressions of Spitzbergen, the destroyers, trawlers, and motorboats accompanying the *Empress* came alongside her, picking up detachments of soldiers to be ferried to the other settlements that were scattered along the western coast of the island.

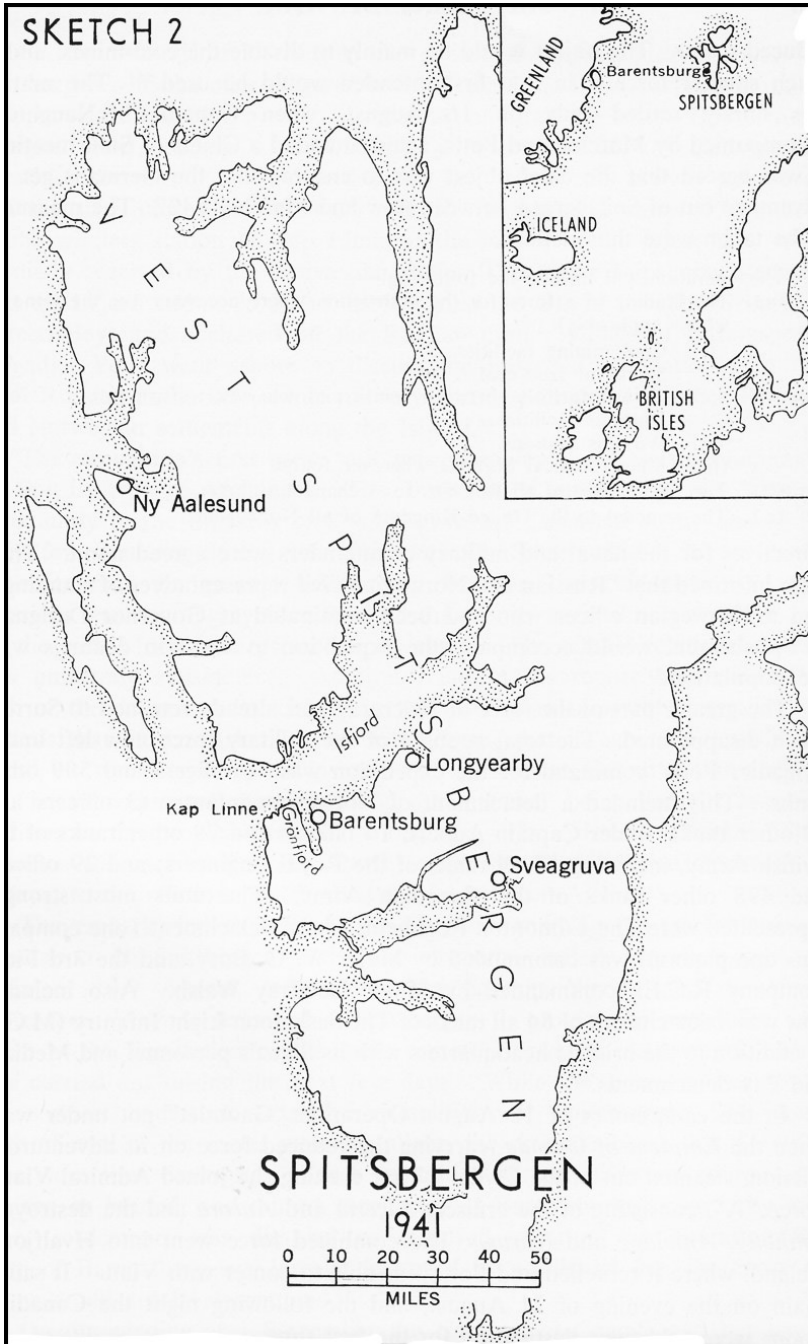
The Canadians landed first at Barentsburg, the major Soviet settlement at Spitzbergen.⁸³ The town was home to just over 1,200 men, women and children,⁸⁴ built around “three dreary but surprisingly well-built barracks,”⁸⁵ with some fifty-five wooden buildings in all. The town had an enclosed small gauge electric railway for coal transport that led from the coal pile along the shoreline at the foot of the town up to the primary mine shaft above the town and

⁸² Jean Brillhac, *The Road to Liberty: The Story of One Hundred and Eight-Six Men Who Escaped* (London: Peter Davies, 1945), 201.

⁸³ Stacy, “The Canadians at Spitsbergen,” 60–61.

⁸⁴ Report on Barentsburg Party by Major Bruce Blake, 4 September 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol. 17489.

⁸⁵ Alexander Glen, *Footholds Against a Whirlwind* (London: Hutchinson of London, 1975), 81–82.



Spitsbergen 1941. [Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War Vol. I by CP Stacey.]

off to another mine shaft roughly 4 miles to the north.⁸⁶ Along the beach in front of Barentsburg stood a party of a dozen dour Soviet officials, clad in “dark caps and blue padded tunics with black drill trousers.”⁸⁷ Arrayed around them were many of the townspeople of Barentsburg, silently regarding their visitors. After a brief exchange with the Soviet embassy official P.D. Yerzin and their local hosts, Potts and his officers climbed a long set of stairs leading up the steep slope to conference in the administration building with the Soviet consul.⁸⁸ There, Yerzin gave the consul a letter from Ambassador Maisky directing him to cooperate with the Canadians and evacuate Spitzbergen’s Soviet citizens.⁸⁹ The Canadians left at the boats found the townspeople to be friendly and welcoming, quickly helping the troops to unload their supplies for the command post they intended to establish in the town.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, other detachments of Force 111 fanned out across Spitzbergen. Their first priority was the evacuation of the Soviet miners from their settlements of Barentsburg, Grumantby, and Pyramiden.⁹¹ Similar to Barentsburg, the inhabitants at the other Soviet settlements gave Force 111 a friendly greeting upon their arrival.⁹² Allotted only twenty-four hours to evacuate, the Soviets were very cooperative, assisting Force 111 in both the unloading of Canadian supplies, the loading of their own baggage, and in the demolitions of their mining infrastructure.⁹³ In Barentsburg, however, the Soviet consul soon interrupted this cooperation. Described by an accompanying British official as “an unctuous little man with a diverting squint,” Consul Wolnuhi was openly apprehensive about repatriation to the Soviet Union and quickly turned to drinking after his meeting with Potts and Yezin.⁹⁴ Fortified with large quantities

⁸⁶ Special War Diary 2 CDN INF BDE, Spitzbergen Expedition, 25 August 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol 17489.

⁸⁷ Ross Munro, *Gauntlet to Overlord: The Story of the Canadian Army* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1946), 284.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Special War Diary 2 CDN INF BDE, Spitzbergen Expedition, 25 August 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol 17489.

⁹⁰ Army Film Unit Secret Dope Sheet, 9 September 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol 17489.

⁹¹ Stevens, *A City Goes to War*, 211.

⁹² Stacey, “The Canadians at Spitsbergen,” 61.

⁹³ Report by Major Bruce Blake in “EMPRESS OF CANADA” on Embarkation of Russians at Barentsburg, 28 August 1941, TNA, file WO 106/1942.

⁹⁴ Glen, *Footholds Against a Whirlwind*, 82.

of alcohol by mid-afternoon, he suddenly demanded that the heavy machinery and mining equipment of Barentsburg also be loaded aboard the *Empress*, despite having already agreed to restrictions imposed by the tight operational schedule and the limited space aboard ship.⁹⁵ In response to his demands, Soviet officials immediately ceased cooperating with the Canadians, throwing the tight schedule of Gauntlet into jeopardy. Despite the best persuasive efforts of military liaison officer Major Blake Bruce, Wolnuhi would not budge.⁹⁶ His demands could not have come at a worst time. Dead in the water and loading civilians, the *Empress* was a sitting duck for a potential German air attack.

Potts was quickly summoned to Barentsburg to deal with the troublesome consul. Wolnuhi continued to be obstinate, declaring that he would only drop his demands if ordered to do so by Vian (the overall commander of Gauntlet as indicated in the letter from Maisky). While Potts left to signal Vian aboard the *Nigeria*, Major Bruce's alternative effort to induce Wolnuhi to cooperation came to fruition. Bruce had made sure that two additional bottles of champagne and a bottle of Madeira made their way into the consul's hands. Before Potts received a response from Vian, Wolnuhi had degraded into a drunken stupor and then fell asleep.⁹⁷ The consul's officials carried him aboard the *Empress* and proved more cooperative in helping the Canadians finish their evacuation of Soviet citizens. Just after midnight, the *Empress* was underway for Archangel, escorted by Vian's *Nigeria* and half of Force K's destroyers.⁹⁸

Meanwhile the Norwegian communities, expecting a permanent occupation, were "astonished and upset" to learn that they were to be evacuated.⁹⁹ After appropriate explanations from the Norwegian officials and the soldiers of Force 111, they accepted the requirement for evacuation, which proceeded with minimal difficulties. Over the next few days the remaining half of Force K visited the various Norwegian settlements, depositing detachments from Force 111 to

⁹⁵ Bittner, "Descent in the North," 31.

⁹⁶ Report by Major Bruce Blake in "EMPRESS OF CANADA" on Embarkation of Russians at Barentsburg, 28 August 1941, TNA, file WO 106/1942 and Mann, *British Policy and Strategy towards Norway*, 49.

⁹⁷ Mann, *British Policy and Strategy towards Norway*, 49.

⁹⁸ Bittner, "Descent in the North," 31, and Stacey, "The Canadians at Spitsbergen," 61.

⁹⁹ Bittner, "Descent in the North," 30.



The Norwegians readying for evacuation from Longyearbyen. [Library and Archives Canada e011184640]

conduct demolitions and collect miners and trappers, whom they concentrated at the main Norwegian settlement of Longyearby. The Norwegians manning the weather and wireless stations broadcasted false reports of heavy and persistent fog to discourage any German reconnaissance flights over the archipelago during the operation. The deception worked.¹⁰⁰

As had been the case with the Soviets, the relations between Force 111 and the Norwegian officials proved challenging. Einer Sverdrup,¹⁰¹ the director of the mines at Longyearby, argued with Potts over the proposed destruction of the mining facilities. Motivated to preserve the mines for postwar Norway, Sverdrup sought to remain in Spitzbergen with a small caretaker party. Even when the sappers repeatedly assured him that the demolitions would be made in such a manner as to allow the mines to restart later in a reasonable period of time, Sverdrup still refused to leave. When the frustrated mining

¹⁰⁰ Stacey, “The Canadians at Spitsbergen,” 62.

¹⁰¹ Einer was the nephew of arctic explorer Otto Sverdrup who rose to fame while captaining the *Fram* on her voyages to chart what became known as the Sverdrup Islands in the Canadian Arctic archipelago from 1898 to 1902. Glen, *Footholds Against a Whirlwind*, 82.



Royal Canadian Engineer sappers fire the coal pile at Barentsburg. [Library and Archives Canada PA-180524]

director threatened to protest to his government, Potts assured Sverdrup that he would have every chance to do so when he arrived in Britain in a few days' time.¹⁰² Sverdrup had little recourse but to acquiesce, and the demolitions of the Norwegian mines' audits and supporting facilities went ahead as planned.¹⁰³

After an uneventful voyage, the *Empress of Canada* and her escorts arrived in the White Sea on 29 August where they were met by a Soviet destroyer flying the flag of Admiral Dolini. During his altercation with the officers of Force 111, Consul Wolnuhi had broken radio silence and dispatched a message to his superiors in Leningrad alleging that the Canadians had mistreated him and the miners. The following day Maisky took up the matter with the Foreign Office, recounting the consul's message.¹⁰⁴ Word of this reached Vian aboard the *Nigeria* who simply replied to the Admiralty that the consul's allegations were "quite untrue."¹⁰⁵ What could have grown into a diplomatic incident was quickly diffused when Dolini confronted the

¹⁰² Report by Major A.S.T. Godfrey, Operation "GAUNTLET", 4 September 1941, TNA, file WO 32/10090 and Elbo, "The War in Svalbard," 486.

¹⁰³ Bittner, "Descent in the North," 32–33.

¹⁰⁴ F.O. Minute, Mr. Strang, 27 August 1941, TNA, file FO 371-29489.

¹⁰⁵ Naval Cypher from S. O. Force "A" to Admiralty, 28 August, TNA, file FO 371/29489.

consul, who admitted that the evacuation arrangements and the passage to Archangel had been satisfactory.¹⁰⁶

That afternoon, 2,000 Soviet miners and over 200 tons of their baggage were disembarked at Archangel. The ships spent the night offshore only to be met the following morning by a rendition of “La Marseillaise.” Some 192 French soldiers emerged out of the fog aboard a Soviet barge, haggard in appearance but jubilant at the sight of the *Empress*. Following the Fall of France, these soldiers had been interned in German prisoner of war camps. Their repatriation continuously pushed off by their captors, they had escaped into the Soviet Union only to find themselves in worse conditions. Gauntlet afforded the various parties involved in this uncomfortable reality to return these soldiers to Britain where they could join the Free French Forces.¹⁰⁷

Late on 2 September the two halves of Force K were reunited in the waters of the Isfjord to find the town of Barentsburg in flames. Much of Force 111 had been billeted there, and the troops had been awakened the previous morning to the alarm raised by the sentries. A fire had broken out in a covered area of the light railway leading from the mouth of the mine to the jetty below the town. The structure was wooden and saturated in coal dust. The steady 18-knot wind was channeled by the shape of the covered railway, which acted as a flue and quickly whipped the fire into a raging inferno. Firefighting equipment was limited and a pump fed by seawater to keep the flames at bay broke down after a few hours of use. The troops did everything they could to stem the blaze but, at times, they could not get within 300 feet of the inferno due to the intense heat. Ultimately, the fire destroyed the town.¹⁰⁸

Despite this setback, the demolitions elsewhere on Spitzbergen went off as planned over the next few days. Military engineers destroyed the infrastructure supporting the mines while leaving the mines themselves largely intact. The various railways and conveyors that transferred the coal from the mines to piles along the shoreline were blown-up. All of this free coal, approximately 450,000 tons, was burned along with 225,000 gallons of oil and gasoline. Another 50,000 gallons were poured into the sea. Power plants were either disabled through the removal of critical components or destroyed outright

¹⁰⁶ Mr. Sargent to Mr. Maisky, 5 September 1941, TNA, file FO 371/29489.

¹⁰⁷ For an eye-witness account of their ordeal, see Brillhac, *The Road to Liberty*.

¹⁰⁸ Bittner, “Descent in the North,” 33.

with explosives. Radio and meteorology equipment was disabled and wireless masts felled by charges. Motor boats and lighters, after assisting Force 111, were sunk. Summarizing his handiwork, the head engineer of Force 111 estimated that it would take six months of work to put the mines of Spitzbergen back into production.¹⁰⁹

When demolitions were completed, the vessels of Force K collected the Canadians who were scattered across Spitzbergen and returned them to the *Empress* to mingle with the 765 Norwegian civilians and 192 French soldiers now aboard. Thus on 3 September, with operations concluded, the *Empress* weighed anchor and departed with Force K for Scotland. The voyage home was uneventful, aside from some receptions thrown by the Free French and Norwegian soldiers for the Canadians and crew.¹¹⁰ Vian, however, had received new orders: intercept a German troop convoy sailing around Norway for the Murmansk front. His two cruisers slipped away once the *Empress* came under the air umbrella protecting British waters, and Vian successfully engaged the German vessels just east of the North Cape early on 7 September. In rough waters and in poor visibility *Nigeria* and *Aurora* sunk the German training cruiser *KMS Bremse*. *Nigeria's* bow was heavily damaged, having rammed and shorn *Bremse* in half during the engagement, but she was able to limp home without sustaining any casualties. The troop ships under escort of *Bremse* managed to escape into the foul weather. In the end, Vian had kept his promise to Maisky—he had killed Germans.¹¹¹

The *Empress of Canada* berthed back in Glasgow on the morning of 9 September, “her deck rails ... lined with uniformed and un-uniformed figures curiously surveying all around them, probably wondering what their new surroundings and temporary home were like, and prospecting on what it held for them in their immediate days ahead.”¹¹² The French were taken off the ship first and almost immediately entrained for London to join General Charles De Gaulle's

¹⁰⁹ Major G. Walsh, C.R.E. Report, Force 111, 6 September 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol 17489 and Bittner, “Descent in the North,” 33.

¹¹⁰ Special War Diary 2 CDN INF BDE, Spitzbergen Expedition, 5 and 7 September 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol 17489.

¹¹¹ Vian, *Action This Day*, 72. The two troop ships being escorted by *Bremse* carried 1500 soldiers bound for Dielt's army. Woodman, *The Arctic Convoys, 1941-1945*, 36.

¹¹² Immigration Officer's Report, Norwegian Refugees & Company from Spitzbergen, 17 September 1941, TNA, file HO 213/1759.

nascent Free French Forces.¹¹³ By noon the bulk of the Canadians began to disembark the *Empress*, taken by truck to a transit camp to await trains that would return them to their barracks in Oxted.¹¹⁴ The Norwegians were the last to leave. Billeted in a nearby school for a few days as British immigration and security forces vetted them, most of the Norwegians who did not volunteer for service with the Free Norwegian Forces were eventually sent to work the coal mines of the remote Orkney Islands.¹¹⁵

The Canadians arrived back at Oxted the following morning, dragging themselves off their overnight trains from Scotland to be granted a twenty-four hour leave. Looking back on Gauntlet, the Saskatoon Light Infantry's war diarist offered the opinion that "the expedition was a wonderful experience," their only real complaint that "they had no Bosche to shoot." In the meantime, the Canadians determined that they would make the most of the short leave granted to them as a reward for their hard work at Spitzbergen. After all, while Spitzbergen was a small event from the perspective of the overall war, "five weeks away from their lady friends seemed a long time to them."¹¹⁶

TAKING STOCK OF GAUNTLET

In summing up Operation Gauntlet, C.P. Stacey concluded that "the force employed was small and its object limited; this was, in fact, a minor operation whose importance could easily be exaggerated."¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, the small force and limited objectives reflected the complexities of coalition warfare. The evacuation of 2,000 Russian and 765 Norwegians from unoccupied Spitzbergen and the demolition of the supporting mining infrastructure in the archipelago followed ten weeks of diplomatic negotiations between Britain, the Soviet Union,

¹¹³ Immigration Officer's Report, Volunteers for the Allied Forces, 28 September 1941, TNA, file HO 213/1759.

¹¹⁴ Special War Diary 2 CDN INF BDE, Spitzbergen Expedition, 10 September 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol 17489.

¹¹⁵ Immigration Officer's Report, Norwegian Refugees & Company from Spitzbergen, 17 September 1941, TNA, file HO 213/1759 and Orkney Constabulary to the Under Secretary of State, Home Office, Aliens Department, 10 November 1941, TNA, file HO 213/1759.

¹¹⁶ War Diary Saskatoon Light Infantry, Exercise Heather, 9 September 1941, LAC, file RG24 C-3 Vol. 17489.

¹¹⁷ Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 306.

Norway, and Canada. During this process two operational plans were drawn up, with Flaxman rescaled into Gauntlet as the Chiefs of Staff sought a military rationale to justify a politically-motivated operation. This smaller evacuation scheme disappointed the Soviet Union, satisfied a reluctant Britain, and Norway acquiesced. As Gauntlet unfolded, the Canadians experienced difficulties with local Soviet and Norwegian officials that threw important aspects of the operation into jeopardy and touched off two minor diplomatic incidents.¹¹⁸ Conversely, Gauntlet allowed for the quiet transfer of Soviet-held French soldiers to Free French Forces, removing a diplomatic impediment that illustrates the awkward political baggage that had to be overcome between the newfound allies.

Ultimately, Operation Gauntlet was a “diplomatic raid”¹¹⁹ motivated by political pressure for early British military action to support their new and hard-pressed Russian allies. From this strategic perspective, the operation had little impact. Enthusiastic British and Canadian media coverage following Gauntlet’s conclusion greatly exaggerated its significance, exacerbating Russian disappointment with Britain’s meagre efforts to support them militarily. Sir Stafford Cripps, the British ambassador in Moscow, reported to the Foreign Office on 9 September 1941:

The account of the Spitzbergen operation by the B.B.C. today... was disastrous as far as this country is concerned. It was apparently an attempt to make out that this operation was a dangerous and important one... In view of their recent pressure on us to do something big in the West, this will be taken as an elaborate and stupid attempt to magnify a simple and safe operation into something large and important and will either be resented or laughed at.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ While the Russian consul’s allegations of mistreatment at the hands of the Canadians were resolved with Russian officials as recounted, Einer Sverdrup’s protest of excessive destruction of his mines by the Canadians were taken up by his government after the completion of Gauntlet, leading to a Norwegian request for compensation. See Laurence Collier reporting RE: Norwegian Complaint about Canadians, 6 March 1942, TNA, FO 371/32928. Sverdrup was able to use this pressure to help secure British naval support for an ill-fated Norwegian caretaker party led by himself that returned to Spitzbergen the following summer. See Glen, *Footholds Against the Whirlwind*, 94-95, 102-06.

¹¹⁹ Coutu, “Le quartier général des opérations combinées et l’expédition canado-britannique au Spitzberg,” 48.

¹²⁰ Sir S. Cripps to Foreign Office, 9 September 1941, TNA, file WO 106/2001.

Britain's No. 30 Military Mission in Moscow elaborated on this in a report to the War Office, calling the results of the overblown news coverage "psychologically tragic" for the Russians. Pointing out that these new allies were "continually begging us to do something on a scale sufficient to relieve the pressure on them," he noted "that so fulsome a description of this landing operation on an island full of Russians will strike a very false note here."¹²¹ From a Russian perspective, Operation Gauntlet—like the other minor operations undertaken along the Norwegian and French coasts—was no substitute for the demanded second front.¹²²

The original Soviet geostrategic premise motivating Operation Gauntlet was that Spitzbergen could be used as a base to protect the vital sea lane from Britain to Russia. When this premise was scuttled after Vian's reconnaissance of Spitzbergen, the COS settled upon an economic warfare rationale: depriving Germany of a source of coal while securing Soviet and Norwegian miners to support the Allied war effort.¹²³ An additional benefit of Gauntlet, underappreciated by its planners, saw the raid temporarily disrupt the flow of valuable weather data to Germany with which they planned their military campaigns.¹²⁴

¹²¹ No.30 Military Mission Moscow to War Office, 9 September 1941, TNA, file WO 106/2001.

¹²² Christopher Mann notes that this argument for coastal raids as a surrogate second front was taken to its logical conclusion with the tragic Dieppe Raid. Mann, *British Policy and Strategy towards Norway*, 50, 92–93.

¹²³ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 9 August 1941, TNA, file CAN/79/13/0/1.

¹²⁴ William Dege, *War North of 80: The Last German Arctic Weather Station of World War II* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); and Franz Selinger and Alexander Glen, "Arctic Meteorological Operations and Counter-Operations During World War II," *Polar Record* 21:135 (1983): 563. As the weather that affects much of Europe comes from its north and west, Spitzbergen's weather reports played an important role in Germany's compilation of continental weather forecasts. Throughout the war, Germany used these forecasts to shape many of their military campaigns, from postponing their invasion of France to the planning of bombing raids against Britain. This weather data was even used to set the date for their invasion of the Soviet Union. See Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World At Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122, 204, 764; Dege, *War North of 80*; Selinger and Glen, "Arctic Meteorological Operations," 563; and MIS, *British Commandos*, 114. Germany established manned and automated weather stations across the Arctic and on Spitzbergen soon after Gauntlet which operated until the end of the Second World War. On these stations, see Dege, *War North of 80*. Given the size, isolation and ruggedness of Spitzbergen it would have been impossible for the Allies to have prevented the establishment of these stations with even a large garrison of the archipelago. See Selinger and Glen, "Arctic Meteorological Operations," 564.

To these benefits must be added the counter-factual argument made by the JPS that the evacuation of Spitzbergen's miners prevented a humanitarian crisis from developing: either in the form of the Soviet miners running out of supplies as Spitzbergen slipped into the frozen and lingering darkness of an Arctic winter, or of German incendiary bombing of these miners, leading to mass exposure.¹²⁵ Had either scenario come to pass, the British would have been hard pressed to respond.

Despite Gauntlet proving superfluous to the protection of the sea lane from Britain to Russia, the operation demonstrated "the advantages of sea power and the options available to the nation which possesses it" to quote Bittner's assessment.¹²⁶ Given British control of the sea, they were able to dispatch the force with appropriate naval assets to mitigate the risks if the Germans opposed the landing and to ensure that the soldiers arrived safely. A report on British commando operations produced by the US military intelligence branch in August 1942, observed:

During the most dangerous part of the voyage the troop transport was safeguarded by an aircraft carrier and land-based aircraft patrols, as well as by the three destroyers, so that it could have maximum protection against air attack. When distance had reduced the danger from German bombers, the aircraft carrier left the expedition and two cruisers joined the destroyer escort as replacements. The cruisers and the destroyers were the best type of vessels to deal with a possible opposed landing and to safeguard the transport in evacuating the Russians to Archangel.¹²⁷

Equally important, the Royal Navy had the capacity to actually carry the Russian miners and their families to Russia and also to move the Norwegians at Spitzbergen to the United Kingdom. These nationals, in turn, could then support the Allied war effort.

From a Canadian perspective, Gauntlet was a tactical success that boosted the moral of the participating troops. The limited objectives of evacuating the miners, destroying the coal mining

¹²⁵ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, Spitzbergen Draft Report, 9 August 1941, TNA, file CAB/80/59/0/1.

¹²⁶ Bittner, "Descent in the North," 33.

¹²⁷ MIS, *British Commandos*, 116.

facilities, and demolishing the wireless and meteorological stations on Spitzbergen were all met efficiently and effectively.¹²⁸ The Canadians maintained the utmost operational secrecy from the conception of Gauntlet to its execution, preventing the Germans from finding out about and interfering with the operation.¹²⁹ Furthermore, the ongoing transmission of deceptive weather reports from Spitzbergen by local Norwegian operators during the Allied evacuation concealed from the enemy that anything unusual was taking place on the islands and thus discouraged German aerial reconnaissance.¹³⁰

The composition of Force 111 showed the effectiveness of integrating a balanced group of individuals with appropriate skills and expertise to handle all phases of the mission. Infantry formed the largest element of the force, which reflected the possibility of an opposed landing and the need for a critical mass of soldiers to oversee the evacuation efforts. Engineers, who were charged with carrying out the main object of the task—demolitions, formed the next largest group, led by a highly qualified mining engineer. An appropriate number of signal troops also succeeded in seizing, operating deceptively, and ultimately destroying the radio stations on Spitzbergen in cooperation with local civilians. Furthermore, the inclusion of a small detachment of twenty-five Free Norwegian troops also proved beneficial to this alliance operation, lending “greater validity to the mission in the eyes of the Norwegian residents, who had to stand by and see their property destroyed at a time when it was not under control of the enemy nor facing direct threat of attack.”¹³¹ In turn, this helped to ensure favourable civilian perceptions of the military force and indicated its determination to act in the civil interest.

Gauntlet’s tactical success can also be attributed to the unity of its command. The British Chiefs of Staff assigned supreme command of the expedition while at sea to the naval commander because of the vulnerability of the naval units to air attack. “This assignment of authority placed the greatest responsibility for the safety of the expedition and its ships on the individual—the naval commander—who alone controlled the means of evacuating the comparatively small

¹²⁸ Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 9 August 1941, TNA, file CAN/79/13/0/1.

¹²⁹ Capelotti, *The Svalbard Archipelago*, 59–60; Stacey, “The Canadians at Spitsbergen,” 71.

¹³⁰ MIS, *British Commandos*, 116.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 115.



Brigadier A.E. Potts takes the salute during the final parade in Longyearbyen. [Library and Archives Canada e011184643]

force of soldiers,” a wartime report noted.¹³² Nevertheless, Brigadier Potts was given command of all operations ashore. “In selecting Brigadier Potts for the command of this detachment of the Canadian Corps,” General A.G.L. McNaughton wrote, “both General Pearkes and I had every confidence that he would discharge his responsibilities to the satisfaction of all concerned and I am very happy that this has been so.”¹³³

The main challenge facing the Canadians came in managing the civilian dimension of the operation at Spitzbergen. Brigadier Potts showed flexibility in his approach, recognizing the need to carry out assessments of the local civilian environment and to adapt plans (where possible) to meet local needs. In dealing with the Russian consul, Potts used his command authority and skills of persuasion—aided by clever tactics such as plying the Russian consul with alcohol—to secure cooperation from civil authorities. Similarly, although the original plans provided for a small maintenance party

¹³² *Ibid.*, 115.

¹³³ 11 September 1941, A.G.L. McNaughton to General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, LAC, RG 24, vol. 12298, file “3 CDN CORPS-3 SPECIAL EXPEDITION No.111.”

of Norwegians to remain on Spitzbergen, during Pott's disagreement with the Norwegian mining official, a spokesperson for the resident community requested on behalf of the Norwegian inhabitants that everyone be evacuated to Britain. Fear of reprisals against anyone who remained, or against their families back in Norway, justified this argument. Potts considered this request in an impartial manner and, after consulting with Vian, agreed.¹³⁴ This display of pragmatism and sensitivity helped to make the mission successful. Although questions would later arise about whether the conduct of the mission met legal and moral obligations to the local population, the accusations launched at the Canadian soldiers for discourteousness, misbehaviour, or malfeasance in the burning of Barentsburg proved unfounded. Instead, the interactions between the military force and the allied populations on Spitzbergen proved overwhelmingly friendly and cooperative.

Operation Gauntlet brought additional benefits for the Canadian forces serving in Britain. Stacey observed that this "adventurous enterprise" had a "useful effect upon morale," providing expectations of future employment against the enemy.¹³⁵ Furthermore, McNaughton's biographer John Swettenham explained that "the successful outcome of this minor operation" meant that the Canadian corps commander's "powers were widened: he was now permitted to take immediate action to commit his troops to raids or similar operations."¹³⁶ None of these operations would take the Canadians back to the European Arctic, however. Instead, subsequent wartime developments would encourage

¹³⁴ Notes on subsequent Meeting held at Longyearby, 31 August 1941, TNA, file WO/32/10090.

¹³⁵ Stacey, CMHQ Historical Report No.56, "The Spitzbergen Operation," para. 112.

¹³⁶ Swettenham, *McNaughton*, 182. The War Committee of Cabinet discussed the new powers that McNaughton was granted specifically for the Spitzbergen operation and agreed to generalize this authority to cover future, similar projects of a temporary nature. "While suggesting McNaughton should use his own judgement whether to set in such cases," the committee noted, "he would notify Minister of National Defence in general terms prior to event where practicable." Secretary of State for External Affairs to Canadian High Commission, 10 November 1941, LAC, file RG25 A-2 Vol. 829. In April 1942, a small party of Canadians participated in a British raid on the French coast near Boulogne but, failing to get ashore, they took no active part in engaging the Germans.

Canadian decision makers to re-conceptualize their country's own northern expanses as a potential theatre of operation.¹³⁷



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¹³⁷ See, for example, J. Tuzo Wilson, "Winter Manoeuvres in Canada," *Canadian Geographical Journal*, vol.32-33 (1946): 88-93; Kenneth C. Eyre, "Custos Borealis: The Military in the Canadian North" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London - King's College, 1981); Hugh Halliday, Recapturing the North: Exercises 'Eskimo,' 'Polar Bear' and 'Lemming' 1945, *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Autumn 1997): 29-38; and P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Peter Kikkert, *Lessons in Arctic Operations: The Canadian Army Experience, 1945-1956*, Documents on Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security (DCASS) No. 7 (Calgary and Waterloo: Centre for Military, Strategic and Security Studies/Centre on Foreign Policy and Federalism, 2016).

APPENDIX A: COMPOSITION OF FORCE 111¹³⁸

Unit	Officers	Enlisted Men
Canadian		
Headquarters, 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade	5	12
Signals Section, 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade	2	32
3 Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers	5	191
D Company, plus one platoon C Company, Edmonton Regiment	6	153
Saskatoon Light Infantry (Machine Gun) (Composite detachment)	4	80
Detachment, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (from 5 Canadian Field Ambulance)	3	23
“X” Canadian Field Cash Office, Royal Canadian Army Pay Corps	1	2
Empress of Canada Ship’s Staff (from Edmonton Regiment)	2	5
Total Canadian	29	498
British		
Detachment, Kent Corps Troops, Royal Engineers	4	31
Detachment, 992 Docks Operations Company, Royal Engineers	1	18
Detachment, “B” Section 1 Motor Boat Company, Royal Army Service Corps	1	19
Detachment, 60 Detail Issue Depot, Royal Army Service Corps	-	6
“D” Field Cash Office, Royal Army Pay Corps	1	2
Royal Engineers (Movement Control), Attached 2 Canadian Brigade Headquarters	-	3
Intelligence Corps	3	-
Army Film Unit	1	-
Major H.C. Smith, Liaison Officer**	1	-
Captain E.W. Proctor, Royal Engineers	1	1

¹³⁸ See GAUNTLET-FLAXMAN, Appendix VI - Order of Battle, 22 December 1943, TNA, file DEFE 2/228.

Unit	Officers	Enlisted Men
Major A.W. Salmon, Royal Army Service Corps	1	-
Total British	14	79
Norwegian		
Detachment, Norwegian Infantry	3	22
TOTAL	46	599

*This figure includes civilian journalist Ross Munro (Canadian Press).

** Canadian serving with British forces.