

# The saving and rescue of wounded British soldiers from Romsdal in Norway in World War II<sup>1</sup>

*Michael* 2018; 15: 270–88.

*In the last half of April, 1940, there was severe fighting between German forces who just were occupying the area of Romsdalen in Northwestern Norway, and British units trying to halt the German campaign. Casualties were admitted to the County Hospital in the city of Molde. The article describes the circumstances and the rescue of 29 men, of whom 27 could be evacuated to Britain. Two were taken prisoners by the Germans. The article is based on notes taken by the physician in chief, the surgeon Hans Fredrik Harbitz (1900–1971), the father of the author.*

## Introduction

The humanitarian effort to rescue the wounded British soldiers and seamen from the battlefields in Romsdal, Norway during the German invasion April 1940 is not well known. In the Yearbook of the Romsdal Museum 2014, Dr. Guttorm Eldøen reports on “Foreign patients at Molde Hospital during the Second World War”, amongst them are named some British patients (soldiers) who were admitted after the German air attacks on British warships and ground forces to be landed in Romsdal, west coast of Norway [1]. As mentioned there, Medical Doctor Hans Fredrik Harbitz (my father) was appointed as Chief Surgeon and Chief Administrative Medical Officer at Møre and Romsdal County Hospital in Molde since 1938, and he continued to work there during the years of war and the German occupation of Norway 1940–45. Based on his private notes, I will describe and detail the efforts to organize the saving and successful evacu-

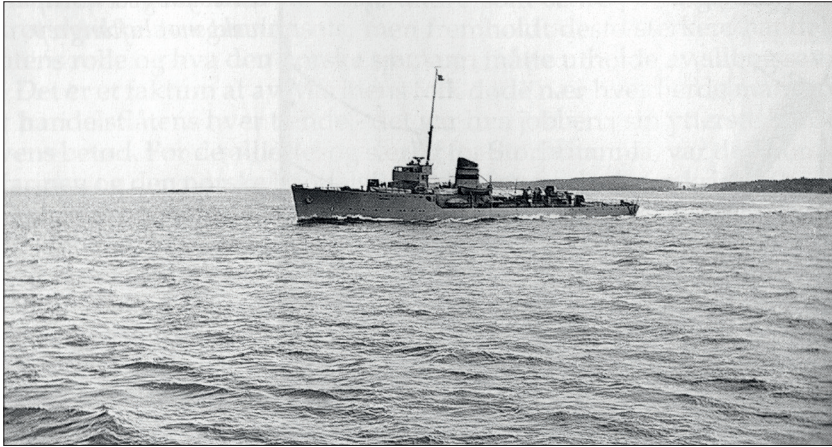
<sup>1</sup> A Norwegian version of this article has appeared in a local, historical yearbook: Harbitz TB. Redningen av sårede britiske soldater fra Romsdal i april 1940. *Romsdalsmuseet Årbok* 2015. Molde 2015, s. 228–44.

ation of the British victims, who were brought to the County Hospital from the battles near Åndalsnes and Molde during the landing of British land forces in Romsdal April 1940. The special story of the two British soldiers who were taken to the County Hospital in Molde from the inland battlefields in Gudbrandsdalen valley is included [2][3].

Molde at that time was a town with only 4,000 inhabitants. All of a sudden, that small town on the Romsdalsfjord was to become so central after the stay there of King Haakon and his son, Crown Prince Olav and members of Government during their escape following the German invasion on 9th April, 1940. The towns of Molde and Åndalsnes were terribly bombed, burned and devastated, and consequently the considerable contribution of the County Hospital in Molde was to be praised.

Chief Surgeon Harbitz writes of the County Hospital in Molde as “a small and primitive hospital which is almost 100 years old, with a wooden main building and one operating theatre. For a lift between the floors there was a big wooden plank inbetween the stairs, which was wound up by hand as it had some iron straps around it. The X-ray department a single small room” [2]. Of trained medical staff, the chief surgeon had only the registrar and one trainee with him. A big Red Cross had been painted on the roof of the hospital building, “in the event of war” and in the hope that hospital buildings might be respected by an air raid. Fortunately, the hospital was never struck during the bombing or the roar of fires, even so since it was located so close to the targets next to the docks and centre of the town. This local hospital and staff constituted the total Central Public Health and Resource facilities that would face the battlefields along the Romsdalsfjord, in Molde and at Åndalsnes during the Second World War.

Among the personal notes of Mr. Harbitz are included a summarized and complete list and progress report on the 29 wounded British soldiers and seamen, admitted to Møre and Romsdal County Hospital from the attacks during the landing of British forces in Romsdal and from the battles in Gudbrandsdalen in late April 1940. All the 29 men were rescued and alive, and 27 of them were successfully evacuated back to Britain. The two soldiers from the actions in Gudbrandsdal were taken to hospital too late to be evacuated in company with their comrades. Unfortunately, they were taken prisoners of war by the Germans. The report concludes “After the initial war operations in April–May 1940, there were no British patients in the Møre and Romsdal County Hospital during the remainder of the war”.



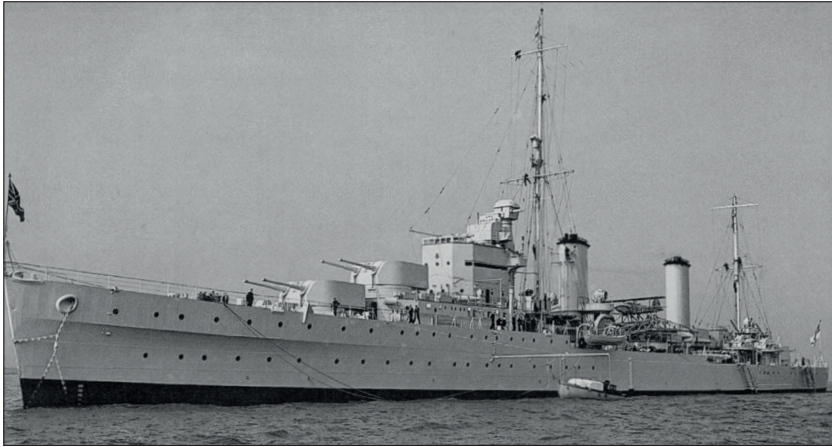
*Fig. 1. KNM "Sleipner" operating in the Romsdalsfjord near Molde [6]*

### **The German Invasion and "Operation Sickle"**

On the 8th of April 1940 German Naval forces and warships carrying around 11–13000 soldiers were on course northwards for the invasion of Norway, as they steamed towards the many ports of Oslo, Kristiansand, Egersund, Bergen, Trondheim and all way north to Narvik. At the same time an armada of British cruisers, destroyers, battleships and even an aircraft carrier mobilized in the North Sea on their way to Norway. The German battleship "Blücher" was attacked in the Oslofjord on its way towards Oslo and sank with serious losses early in the morning of 9th April. That same morning, after the Norwegian Government had received the first German ultimatum to surrender, members of Government, Parliament and the Royal Family left their offices in Oslo to escape from the German invasion. The gold reserves of the Bank of Norway were rescued and taken from Oslo by car and train to the cities of Åndalsnes and Molde in Romsdal on the northwest coast, where the King and Crown Prince ended up together with the Government members [4].

Immediately after the German attack on Norway and the many coastal towns had been invaded, an agreement was concluded between the British and French governments to come to the rescue of Norway. The defeat of German naval forces in Norwegian waters and the relief of Narvik and Trondheim were the first declared goals for the operations. British forces were to be landed in Romsdal to prevent German army units to proceed from south, and to secure the overland connections between Oslo and Trondheim. Trondheim was to be relieved by an attack northwards from

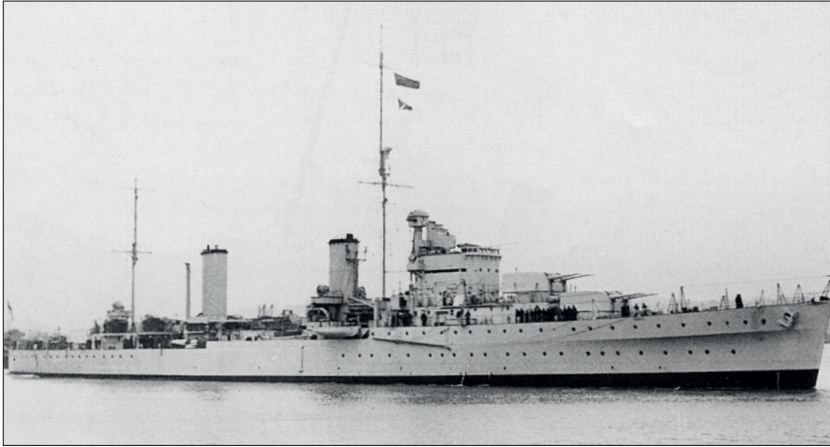




*Fig. 3. HMS "Galatea" transported British troops to Åndalsnes, Romsdal April 1940 [7].*

### **British Land Forces in Romsdal**

As early as the 11th of April 1940, three British troopships, originally meant for Narvik in northern Norway, had left from the Firth of Clyde at Glasgow. Another two troopships joined the group from Scapa Flow in Orkney, in addition to the cruisers HMS "Manchester" and HMS "Birmingham" on their way to escort the convoy. Two of the ships were later redirected to Namsos to land their troops there. On the 14th and 15th April, an other large force of 700 marines and seamen sailed out from Rosyth, Firth of Forth on board the 4 sloops HMS "Auckland", "Black Swan", "Flamingo" and "Bittern". The original strategy was to land these troops in Ålesund to secure that town, and moreover, to divert the German's attention away from the operations of the Allies in the Namsos area. However, because of bad weather and rough sea, the ships were behind schedule and these plans were abandoned. After new orders, the majority of the force was redirected to Åndalsnes and arrived there at night on April 17th. After these first British troops had been landed at Åndalsnes in Romsdal, at this point there was still no resistance from the enemy side, the ships left Romsdalsfjord at 08.00 next morning for the return to Britain and immediate new commissions of transport of more troops to Romsdal.



*Fig. 4. HMS "Arethusa" arrived to Molde with British troops April 18th 1940 [7].*

The first big force meant for Operation Sickle embarked in Rosyth on the cruisers HMS "Galatea" (Fig. 3) and "Arethusa"<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 4), the two anti-aircraft cruisers HMS "Carlisle" (Fig. 5) and HMS "Curacao" (Fig. 6) and 6 destroyers [6]. Because of unforeseen restrictions as to the transport capacity of the troopships, half of the Royal Leicestershire Regiment's 5th battalion had to remain in Rosyth until further notice, together with half of the brigade's anti-aircraft arms, all their motorized vehicles, ammunition and 75 tons of provisions. The flotilla sailed from Rosyth in the morning April 17th, and the troops were landed in Åndalsnes and Molde the next evening April 18th, again without being the subject of any German air raids. HMS "Carlisle" and HMS "Curacao" remained for operations in the Romsdalsfjord, while the two other cruisers and two destroyers returned to Britain for other missions. The remaining personnel and war materials in Rosyth were then sent to Romsdal on two ships later on. However, one

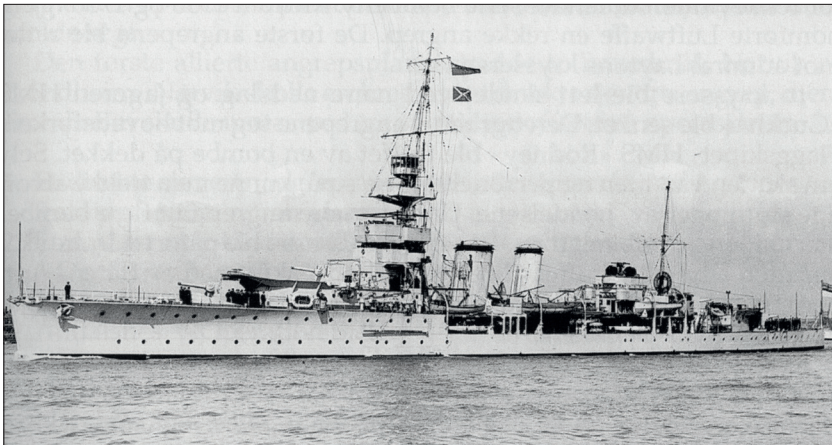
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2 The cruiser HMS "Arethusa" belonging to the 2nd cruiser flotilla of the British Home Fleet, was the first Allied ship to observe the German military supply ship "Altmark" along the coast of Norway, before the actions with the British in Jøssingfjord. After carrying out its operations along the coast of Norway in April 1940, "Arethusa" went for new orders to the Netherlands, France, Gibraltar, Algeria, Iceland and Malta in the Mediterranean. In December 1941 the cruiser took part in the "Lofoten raid" in Northern Norway. That same year, the ship landed 600 British commandoes in the "Måløy raid" in Nordfjord, Norway west coast. HMS "Arethusa" was torpedoed near Malta in 1942, with subsequent serious losses due to a big fire on board (Fig. 7). However, after repairs this ship was operative again, in the Eastern Task Force on the landing in Normandie June 6th 1944. Finally, the "Arethusa" ended its proud naval story as it was broken up near Troon in Scotland in 1950 [8].

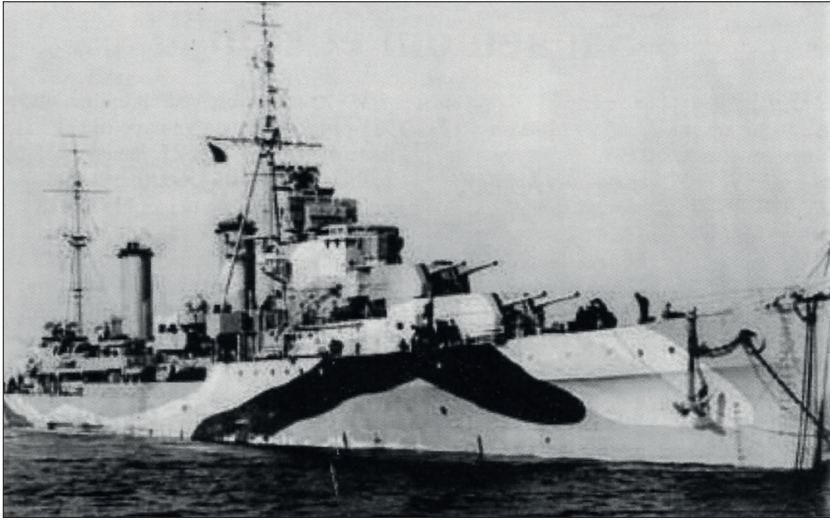


*Fig. 5. HMS "Carlisle" transported British troops to Åndalsnes, Romsdal April 1940 [7].*

of them, the cargo ship "Cedarbank" loaded with the vital materials, was sunk after an attack from a German submarine off the coast near Ålesund, whereby the brigade was deprived of essential equipment. The other ship carrying personnel arrived to Åndalsnes on the 21st April, definitely now under heavy bombardment from the air, which had taken place there right since the previous evening. It was from that battle, on the 21st April, that



*Fig. 6. HMS "Curacao" transported British troops to Romsdal, and was hit in an airstrike near Veblungsnes 27th April 1940. Eight men of the crew were killed [7].*



*Fig. 7. HMS "Arethusa" in April 1942 in the Mediterranean [8].*

the seriously wounded British Major Gerald Wills Beazley (together with his batman) arrived at the hospital in Molde, to be the first of a total of 29 British soldiers and seamen, who in time became patients at the Møre and Romsdal County Hospital in April 1940.

On April 22nd the cruiser HMS "Arethusa" was again lying alongside the quay in Åndalsnes, on this occasion to put ashore an advance party with light anti-aircraft batteries from the R.A.F. (Royal Air Force), which would operate from a temporary airfield on the ice at Lake Lesjaskogsvann further up the valley south of Åndalsnes. Still more reinforcements for "Operation Sickle", consisting of 2,200 men were sent from Rosyth on the 22nd April on board the cruisers HMS "Galatea", HMS "Sheffield" and HMS "Glasgow" together with 6 destroyers under the command of Admiral Edward Collins. These forces were landed in Molde and at Åndalsnes on 23rd April, according to reports "without losses". Notes from the hospital in Molde, however, reveal that on the 23rd April, many wounded British soldiers were actually brought to the County Hospital, coming from a British sloop HMS "Pelican". The sloop had been bombed and sunk by German aircraft off the coast near Molde, before the troops were ready to land, resulting in a big loss of dead and wounded men. This is also the first time we recognize that HMS "Glasgow" was operating in the Romsdalsfjord, the famous cruiser which a few days later would carry the King and Crown Prince, members of government, and the gold reserves of Bank of



Norway, away from Molde on their escape around the country and northwards for the final goal to England.

### **Bombers over Molde and Åndalsnes**

On the 24th April, a further and final reinforcement of 1600 men and 300 tons of war materials for the British forces in the Romsdal area, were carried from Rosyth on the cruisers HMS “Manchester”, HMS “Birmingham” and HMS “York”, together with 3 destroyers under the command of Admiral Layton. The big force (15 Brigade) was landed at Åndalsnes the next day. However, a heavy German attack from the air on Åndalsnes started in the morning of the 25th of April, directed against the British anti-aircraft batteries there, the railway station and the quay, aiming at the Norwegian torpedoboat “Trygg” which was seriously damaged and sank the next day. The British anti-aircraft batteries were destroyed, with considerable losses among the crews. The heavy German air raids with incendiary and explosive bombs over Åndalsnes went on for days up to the 30th April. The British anti-aircraft batteries were destroyed, with considerable losses among the crews and civilians of the town.

It would appear that German land forces were still not on the ground in Romsdal, Molde and Åndalsnes during these first few weeks after the invasion on the 9th April [9]. German aircraft appeared for the first time over Molde on April 14th, and the air raid warnings sounded 5 times from early morning from 5 am. until 9.15 pm. that day.

On Sunday 15th April the first exploding bombs were dropped from German aircraft over Molde. Two bombs were aimed at the torpedoboat “Trygg” which was lying at the quay there that day, very near the County Hospital, but neither the boat nor the hospital were hit. However, one bomb struck the quay not far away, and the local steamer “Eira” was damaged and sank alongside the quay. With its own guns, the Norwegian destroyer KNM “Sleipner” registered “a hit on the engine on the left wing of a German Heinkel aircraft, which then disappeared in a north easterly direction ...”. A third bomb ruined the south wing of the Alexandra Hotel only 50 metres away from the County Hospital. The hospital buildings were never hit, although most of the town was bombed and gradually laid in ruins over the days.

On Thursday April 16th, the air raid warnings sounded in the town a total of 15 times. That same day, the first of several German wounded paratroopers arrived to the County Hospital in Molde from the inland actions at Dombås south of Åndalsnes. At the same time German aircrafts circled over the city the whole forenoon, “but no bombing that day” [9].

Working in the hospital must have been dramatic and hectic day after day, while the air raid alarms wailed and the bombs fell over the town as it was burnt and laid waste.

After they left just hours before the German soldiers invaded Oslo on the 9th of April, the King and Crown Prince and their company were steadily moving and hiding around in the southern parts of the country. On their way towards Åndalsnes and Molde on the north-west coast, an important (and famous) declaration was agreed and issued by the King and his cabinet at Stugufflåten in Romsdal on April 22nd, implying that the Norwegian merchant fleet ("Nortraship") would be put at the disposal of the Government and Allied forces. Thereafter, the whole company moved on to Molde town along the Romsdalsfjord, arriving on April 23rd to stay there for the oncoming days. The small and provincial city of Molde all of a sudden became the political capital, housing the seat of government and providing a "hiding place" for the King and Crown Prince. At the same time, Molde constantly held a central position as a base and transit area during the landing of the British in Romsdal and at Åndalsnes, as the Norwegian Navy Defence Headquarters were also based in Molde (in the Hotel Nobel) from the 21st April.

After the defeat of the British forces inland in Gudbrandsdalen, the Germans realised at an early stage that the British forces would have to withdraw through Romsdal and Åndalsnes. This gave the German air force additional grounds to continue the bombing of potential evacuation locations for the British, such as the ports of Molde and Åndalsnes, at least until all the British land and sea forces had left Romsdal. Incendiary and explosive bombs "rained" over Molde in the few days right up to 29th April, when the King and his company left there on board the British cruiser HMS "Glasgow". It was under such circumstances in April 1940, in an old wooden building with a "Red Cross on the roof", that the County Hospital in Molde rescued the many wounded from the fighting associated with the landing and defeat of British troops in Romsdal.

### **Wounded British Soldiers in the County Hospital in Molde**

Information is scarce as to the circumstance of the wounded and killed soldiers after the bombardment of the landed British military forces in Romsdal, Åndalsnes and Molde in April 1940. Here are put forward a few facts from documented material regarding the 29 British soldiers and their injuries, treated in the Møre and Romsdal County Hospital in Molde (Fig. 8). A detailed description of "The following British wounded were treated in Møre og Romsdal Fylkessykehus during the war" is given, typewritten

MØRE OG ROMSDAL FYLKESSYKEHUS		MOLDE.	
OVERLÆGEN			
Følgende britiske sårede er blitt behandlet i Møre og Romsdal Fylkessykehus under Krigen.			
Navn	Bv.grad og nr.	Inn.	Ut.
1 John Hall	Marinesoldat/IX 144759	23/4	25/4-1940
2 J.R.Constable	Soldat/4742317	"	"
3 Robert Murray	Marinesoldat/O/SBX 19599	"	"
4 Gerald Wills Beazley	Major	21/4	25/4-1940
5 William Henry Statham	Soldat EK 99524	23/4	"
6 R.H.Hand	Oppasser for major G.W.Beazley	21/4	25/4-1940
7 Reginald Wessance	Soldat G/IX 141186	23/4	29/4 - "
8 E.Allan Evans	Soldat SX 26466	"	"
9 David Wright	Sykepasser	"	"
10 Roy Talbot	Lieutenant (nr.1845)	"	"
11 Harold Spencer	Seaman H.M.S."Victoria"	28/4	29/4 - "
12 Harry Smith	Leading Seaman 1-19729	"	"
13 Ronald Slade	Marinesoldat E/IX 147918	23/4	"
14 James Rewell	Seaman H.M.S."Northern Pride"	"	"
15 Douglas Oakley	Seaman H.M.S."Victoria"	"	"
16 Charles Mayhead	Marinesoldat S/SBX151965	28/4	29/4
17 Thomas Martin	Seaman H.M.S."Victoria"	28/4	29/4
18 Cyril Kent	Marinesoldat E/IX 152014	23/4	"
19 Douglas Jones	Marinesoldat PSX 21795	"	"

MØRE OG ROMSDAL FYLKESSYKEHUS		MOLDE.	
OVERLÆGEN			
Navn:	Bv.grad og nr.	Inn.	Ut.
20 Philip Dobby	Signalman H.M.S."Victoria"	28/4	29/4-40
21 John Chiphase	Seaman H.M.S."Victoria"	"	"
22 Thom.s Campbell	Marinesoldat IX 1566898	23/4	"
23 Stanley A.V.O'Meara	Marinesoldat IX/19	23/4	"
24 John Ovensen	Marinesoldat H.M.S."Pelican"	"	"
25 Edward Arthur Aris	Soldat SX 20182	"	"
26 Victor Cloyton	Sykepasser	23/4	24/4-40
27 C.Halstead	1459284,168 Light Anti Air	30/4	1/5-40
28 Thomon Welsh	Soldat 4792520	1/5	7/5-40
29 Frank Gunning	Soldat	1/5	7/5-40

Det har ikke vært behandlet engelske sårede her i sykehuset senere under krigen.

Av de ialt 29 engelske militære - stivle her ikke ligget her under krigen - som var innlagt i sykehuset var det tre stykker som ikke var såret,men som ble innlagt her for å hjelpe sine sårede kamerater (nr.6,9 og 26).

De fleste sårede kom fra H.M.S."Pelican",en "sloop" som ble senket av tyske fly utenfor kysten.Ialt 13 stykker (nr.1,3,5,7,8,13,16,18,19,22,23,24,25) +(9 og 26) (se ovenfor) "Pelican" ble angivelig truffet av en bombe i ammunitionrommet og ble delt i to. En mengde ble drept og de overlevende ble tatt opp av en båt som kom i følge med den og transportert hit til Molde.

8 sårede kom fra noen trålere som opererte i fjorden utenfor Molde.Det var "Victoria", "Northern Pride" og "Cape Sirotoko" (nr.10,11,12,14,15,17,20,21) Disse ble jaget i fjorden en hel for-

Fig. 8. Chief Surgeon Hans Fredrik Harbitz' report on 29 British soldiers admitted to the Møre and Romsdal Fylkessykehus (County Hospital) in Molde 1940 [3].

by my father on yellowed and original writing paper of the County Hospital marked "Overlægen" ("Chief Surgeon"), and undated. Twenty-nine soldiers and seamen are listed, by name, number, military rank, active unit, date of admittance, from where they were brought to hospital, and the individual diagnosis or type of injury, such as "bullet wound" injury. The dates of discharge provided relate to the day when they were handed over from the hospital to British warships at the quay in Molde for transport back to Britain. It appears that all the 29 men were rescued and alive when discharged, and the 27 of them were successfully evacuated and reunited with their British comrades. It is also reported that there were no more British, neither military nor civilians admitted to the County Hospital during the war (indicating that the final notes have been written after the war) (Appendix A).

From the bombing of Åndalsnes on 21st April came Major Gerald W. Beazley (No. 4) together with his "batman" R.R. Hand (No. 6), as the first among the wounded British. He was very seriously injured, with his own special story, described by Mr. Harbitz as "we admitted an English officer

who was sent from Åndalsnes after he had been struck by a bomb splinter in the middle anterior of his chest. The water and electricity supplies in the hospital were defective. But we managed to raise life in a Siemens X-ray machine and located the splinter in his heart and removed it under local anesthesia with a good result. During a hail of bullets, the patient was later carried over on to a British cruiser which was at the quay and came home to England. After the war, through pure chance, I met him and was guest at his home outside London.” [2]. The notes reveal that Major Beazley was sent back to Britain on board the cruiser HMS “Galatea” on April 25th, together with several others who had been treated and stabilized, able for evacuation and onward transport that day.

Two days later, a big group of wounded British soldiers were brought to the County Hospital from HMS “Pelican”, a sloop (corvette) which was sunk by German bombers outside the Romsdalsfjord on April 23rd. According to the notes, the “Pelican” had been struck by a bomb, hitting the ammunition store on board so the ship had been broken in two.<sup>3,4</sup> Many were killed, and the survivors were picked up by a boat from the same group. In all, 13 wounded and two medical orderlies, all soldiers, were taken to the hospital in Molde. The same day, a soldier (No. 2) was admitted, suffering from serious respiratory distress and heart failure after marching in the streets in Molde upon landing there. After primary treatment at the hospital, all men were discharged and evacuated on the 25th April on board the HMS “Galatea”, and “the others on the 29/4/40 with HMS “Southampton”, together with King Haakon and Crown Prince Olav” [2][3].

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3 According to recent information from Mr. Douglas Smith, Lerwick (88), the “Pelican” was not sunk along the Møre coast near Molde, as he “can remember the very badly damaged “Pelican” lying at a quay in Lerwick, being temporarily repaired before going to Scotland for more permanent works. Most of the stern above water had been blown off, it was said by a bomb exploding on the depth charges. And what made a great impression on me, was that on the remainder of the after deck there was a gun, complete with gun crew, rolled up in the steel deck, which had to be cut away by local engineers in full view of the local folk” . . . . “As I recall it, the stern of the “Pelican” was missing down to almost sea level and the deck, as I said, was rolled up like an open sardine tin lid almost back to the funnel, a dreadful sight, if exciting to a 12 year old. She was repaired by workers at our local boat repair yard using wood and tarpaulins for the journey back to Rosyth or wherever”.

4 Furthermore, it is documented in the diary of Mr. John Manson, Lerwick (92), a friend of Mr. Smith, that “On the 24th April, the tug “St. Mallone” arrived towing HMS “Pelican” with her stern blown away by a bomb which ignited her depth charges. 62 killed, 30 wounded had been transferred to another vessel. MacLeod and MacLean (a local engineering firm) were called on to clear up the gruesome scene on the afterdeck and the wreckage was loaded onto another cargo ship and removed. HMS “Pelican” sailed from Lerwick under tow of the tug “Brigand” on 2nd May ’40”. These anecdotal notes confirms that the “Pelican” had in fact been rescued after the bombing off the coast of Norway, and that explosions from the depth charges on board the ship had caused the death and injuries of such numbers of British men, and the extensive damage to the ship.

It is well known, however, that King Haakon left Molde onboard the cruiser HMS “Glasgow” (Fig. 9) on April 29th at 23.00 hrs, and not on HMS “Southampton”. The information given in the notes, that the last group of British soldiers to be evacuated from the County Hospital on the 29th April left Molde on board the HMS “Southampton”, should be corrected. It is a fact that the wounded soldiers travelled “together with King Haakon and Crown Prince Olav”, who certainly left with the HMS “Glasgow” on April 29th 1940. This is confirmed from notes made by Tore Prytz Dahl [6], describing that “during the afternoon and evening, German aircraft came steadily more often over Molde, dropping their loads of bombs.

When the King, the Crown Prince and members of government were ready to board the cruiser, their vehicles drove into a town resembling a sea of fire. The cruiser used its fire extinguishers and fired cascades of water to keep off the flames. The embarkation of the King and government was a dramatic affair, brilliantly lit by the burning town. However, the boarding took place without hindrance. At the same time, a quantity of the gold reserves of the country was taken on board as well, while the remainder was transported on fishing boats later on. In all, HMS “Glasgow” embarked 258 passengers. In addition to the King, Crown Prince, members of government and Diplomatic Corps, British soldiers and marines were also evacuated with the cruiser. After three hours, HMS “Glasgow” and two destroyers left Molde on a northerly course for Malangen, directing



*Fig. 9. HMS “Glasgow” operated in the Romsdalsfjord, and took the King and Crown Prince and members of Government together with wounded British soldiers out from Molde late night 29th April 1940 [7].*

heavy fire towards the German aircraft. The next day, in the evening of May 1st, HMS "Glasgow" stopped at Hekkingen lighthouse up north. The old Royal Yacht "Heimdal" came alongside, and the King, Crown Prince and their staff together with members of government were landed."

On April 28th a further 8 casualties arrived from some British trawlers which were operating in the fjord off Molde. HMS "Wisteria", "Northern Pride" and "Cape Sirotoko"<sup>5</sup> were attacked by German bombers during the long forenoon. The "Wisteria" (and the other two?) was hit and run ashore not far from Molde. According to the notes, altogether 8 wounded soldiers and seamen from all the three trawlers were picked up and transported right into the County Hospital, which was still intact despite the intense and constant bombing of the town. After treatment, all those eight men were evacuated the next day already on board HMS "Glasgow", leaving Molde on April 29th. One soldier (No. 27) from a British Light Anti Aircraft Battery, R.A. had been wounded during the bombing at Åndalsnes and was admitted on 30th April. Fortunately, he was able to be discharged the next day May 1st, to be the last among the 27 wounded British soldiers and their medical orderlies who were successfully evacuated from the hospital in time and before the German troops invaded the city, and presumably returned to Britain with the last British naval vessel still operating in the Romsdalsfjord [3].

## Rescue and Evacuation

The evacuation of the wounded British after their primary treatment in the County Hospital in Molde was a complicated and tense operation on its own. It meant that the men had to be discharged as soon as possible after treatment, in a stable medical state, while British warships were still present in the area or even alongside the quay, to take their own back to Britain before the German forces had advanced and occupied Åndalsnes and Molde. Of the total of 29 military personnel and seamen who had been admitted (three soldiers and medical orderlies had not been wounded), 27 were suc-

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5 In fact, the "Cape Sirotoko" is described in an obituary on Vice-Admiral Sir Roy Talbot (1909–98) [10]. "In October 1939 he was given command of the 10th Anti-Submarine Striking Force – actually force trawlers – of which he himself commanded Cape Sirotoko (. . .) On April 28, after the 10th had spent three nights evacuating troops from Aandalsnes (. . .) Cape Sirotoko was bombed and badly damaged. Talbot suffered shrapnel wounds in his left hand and arm, "not bad, but rather messy," (. . .). Yet Talbot managed to beach Cape Sirotoko before she sank, and then, to boost morale, had an obstentatious shave before supervising the destruction of confidential equipment. He and his ship's company got ashore, and eventually came home in the cruiser "Glasgow" with King Haakon of Norway. Talbot was awarded the DSO." His name is found among the wounded British soldiers who were treated in the County Hospital in Molde (Fig. 8, No. 10) in April 1940, at the time with the rank of "Løytnant (navy)", Lieutenant.

cessfully evacuated from the hospital and then transported all alive on British ships, escaping from a town which was under constant bombing and set on fire in the dramatic last few days of April, at the same time when the King, Crown Prince and members of government together with the gold reserves of Bank of Norway left there on 29th April 1940.

### **Two Unfortunate Prisoners of War**

In the end, on May 1st there were still two British soldiers (No. 28, 29) (Fig. 8) held in the County Hospital, that is to say when their comrades and all the British forces left the Romsdalsfjord region and Norway. Thomas Welsh and Frank Gunning were brought from the battlefields further south in Gudbrandsdal to the County Hospital in Molde with serious gunshot wounds. For medical reasons, they could not be discharged in time before the British naval vessels had to leave as the Germans invaded the area. However, on May 7th the two were escorted in secret from the hospital to the fishing village of Bud near Molde, for conveyance to England. Unfortunately, this did not succeed, since German troops had now invaded and occupied the area. The two soldiers were detected and taken prisoner. As can be seen from the notes (Appendix A, Fig. 8), the two prisoners of war (POWs) were readmitted to the County Hospital on May 20th, and thereafter had long stays in hospital, i.e. until August 12th (12/8-40) and December 1st (1/12-40) respectively. Thereafter, Welsh and Gunning were transferred to prison camps in Germany and France.

After the war, it can be said that the circle was closed. After the 10 years at the County Hospital in Molde, including the years of war, Mr. Harbitz was appointed as Chief Surgeon (and Professor) at the Surgical Unit, Aker hospital in Oslo from 1947. At that address, 6 years after the war, he received an 8 pages handwritten letter, dated 9th August 1951 from Frank Gunning (Fig. 10). He was one of those two British soldiers who did not escape for transport back to England, and then became a German POW. He was at that point living back home in Sheffield in England. After his expressions of thanks for the treatment he had been given in the Møre and Romsdal County Hospital in Molde, Gunning then reports of his time as POW: “when leaving you at Molde in December 1940, I had a short stay in Akers Hospital and then transferred to the German hospital ship S.S. “Berlin” on Dec. 12th . . . thence to Kiel Naval Hospital for two days, after that the nightmare”. The details on the transfer to Akers Hospital in Oslo agrees well with the fact that German authorities, immediately after the invasion in Norway 9th April 1940, required that hospital as their German Military Hospital in Oslo, the “Sinzen Kriegslazarett”. He had also survived prison

68 ANTIION (RUSSEAN)  
SHRPFIND. 3  
9 August 1951.

Уважаемый доктор Харбитц

Was a great pleasure to  
receiving the card dated the 7<sup>th</sup> this morning.  
to know you are the chief  
surgeon in the Aflers Hospital same as a very  
very pleasant surprise, this surely is a joy post  
in Norwegian medical services? Really wonderful  
doctor, they could not have found a better  
man for the position. One of the members  
I know, is the fellow called "Fuglestad"  
dated the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1940, its leader article  
is about Holm's Hospital, with photographs of  
wards, the hospital and patients, the headlines  
are "Fuglestadhuset på Gardsøy savann" and  
"Godt resultat av kirurgis" obviously an  
"Uoverskuelig" can you remember this?

The reference to a Major Bætzly in  
your card is puzzling, was he on a command  
post, both the Holm and Fuglestad then have a  
great deal to thank you for our the main  
operation must be an outstanding achievement?

2

I often wonder that you had the care of an  
English soldier wounded in Gudbrandsdal, he had  
a short stay in Aflers Hospital, our first on  
the ill-fated Fjell (Fjell) operation this in  
October 1941, he had a piece of Shrapnel  
embedded in close proximity to the brain, alas!  
it was not to be, record of the Aflers  
Hospital may remember him, his name was  
Holm's.

With me in Sherriff is an equally recent  
acquaintance of Norway and its people a kind of  
whose name is Finlay, wounded in the same  
battle he was taken to Kirkjubæjarklepp and  
was eventually repatriated with me in Oct. 1942.

Can you remember the accident of the plane  
of Constable who had an awful crash, think  
of Holm's in the middle of April 1940, he  
died of the same cause two years since.

When leaving you at Holm's in December  
1940, I had a short stay in Aflers Hospital  
and then transferred to the County Hospital  
ship "S.S. Bæckin" since it, a date to be

Fig. 10. Letter to "Dear Dr. Harbitz" 9 August 1951, from Frank Gunning (Soldier No. 29, Fig. 8) [11].

“in the Belsen-like atmosphere of a Polish (punishment) camp, sleeping in cramped positions with no room for turning over, overcrowded sleeping quarters, the stench of unwashed and sweated bodies with the accompanied odour of our untreated wounds, plus lice and lack of food . . . From here to a small Polish and French prison hospital . . .”. And from there, moving on to various prison camps in Germany and France. Eventually, he was repatriated from France via Sweden back home to England in 1943.

On the other hand, the fate of Frank Gunning’s fellow patient in the County Hospital is unknown. Soldier no. 4392520 Thomas Welsh was the other wounded British soldier from the battles in Gudbrandsdal who did not escape, as he became a POW after his stay in the County Hospital in Molde up to August 1940 (Appendix A, Fig. 8).

### Big Medical Efforts at the County Hospital in Molde

In conclusion, here is reported and given prominence to the magnificent efforts performed during this dramatic and traumatic period by the medical staff in the County Hospital in Molde, describing the successful saving of the 29 wounded British soldiers and seamen who were brought there from the dramatic scenes of war on land and sea in Gudbrandsdal and





*Fig. 11. Molde town in ruins after German bombardment and fires in April 1940 [2].*

Romsdal, Åndalsnes and Molde. Fortunately, the hospital itself was never hit, whereas the buildings around and the town beyond were laid in ruins, after the heavy and daily German bombardment with high explosive bombs and incendiary bombs setting the town on fire (Fig. 11).

Working day and night under such circumstances, within limited resources in this old hospital, the staff managed to save all the British wounded patients who were admitted. The casualties included serious bullet injuries (vulnus sclopetarium, Schrapnell), fractures and open wounds in the limbs and all parts of the body, even “splinter in the heart removed under local anaesthesia!”, as reported by the Chief Surgeon (Fig. 8). All the patients were discharged from hospital alive, in time before their successful transfer and repatriation to Britain, except for the two soldiers who ended up as German prisoners of war. Many of them left Molde and Romsdal on board the cruiser HMS “Glasgow”, famous for also taking the King and Crown Prince, together with members of the government, and the “Gold reserves” of the Bank of Norway.

## Appendix A. LIST OF WOUNDED BRITISH SOLDIERS

### Møre og Romsdal Fylkessykehus (County Hospital) Molde

	Name	Rank and Number	In	Out (1940)
1	John Hall	Marine/Jx 144759	23/4	25/4
2	J. R. Constable	Soldier/4742317	"	"
3	Robert Murray	Marine/C/SSX 19599	"	"
4	Gerald Wills Beazley	Major	21/4	25/4
5	William Henry Statham	Soldier KX 89824	23/4	"
6	R. H. Hand	Batman/Major Beazley	21/4	25/4
7	Reginald Pleasance	Soldier C/JX 141186	23/4	29/4
8	E. Allan Evans	Soldier SSX 26466	"	"
9	David Wright	Soldier C/MX 57232/Medical orderly	"	"
10	Roy Talbot	Lieutenant (Navy) HMS "Cape Sirotoko"	28/4	29/4
11	Harold Spencer	Seaman HMS "Wistoria"	"	"
12	Harry Smith	Leading Seaman X19725A HMS "Wistoria"	"	"
13	Ronald Slade	Marine P/JX 147918	23/4	"
14	James Rewell	Seaman HMS "Northern Pride"	28/4	"
15	Douglas Oakley	Seaman HMS "Wistoria"	"	"
16	Charles Mayhead	Marine P/SSX 151365	23/4	25/4
17	Thomas Martin	Seaman HMS "Wistoria"	28/4	29/4
18	Cyril Kent	Marine P/JX 152014	23/4	"
19	Douglas Jones	Marine P/SSX 21795	23/4	29/4
20	Philip Dobby	Signalman HMS "Wistoria"	28/4	"
21	John Chipchase	Seaman HMS "Wistoria"	"	"
22	Thomas Campbell	Marine JX 156869	25/4	"
23	Stanley A. V. O'Nion	Marine DX119	23/4	"
24	John Ovenden	Marine HMS "Pelican"	"	"
25	Edward Arthur Aris	Soldier SSX 20182	"	"
26	Victor Cloyton	Medical Orderly	"	24/4
27	C. Halstead	1459284,168 LightAntiAircraftBattery, R.A.	30/4	1/5
28	Thomas Welsh	Soldier 4392520	1/5	7/5
		POW (Readmitted)	20/5	12/8
29	Frank Gunning	Soldier	1/5	7/5
		POW (Readmitted)	20/5	1/12

No other wounded English were treated in the hospital later during the war. Among the total of 29 English military – no civilians were treated here during the war – who were admitted to the hospital, there were three that were not injured. They were admitted here to support their wounded comrades (No. 6, 9 and 26).

The greatest number of casualties came from HMS "Pelican", a "Sloop" which was sunk by German aircraft off the coast. In all, 15 persons (No. 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 13, 16, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25) + (No. 9 and 26) (see above). "Pelican" was reportedly struck by a bomb in the ammunition room and was broken in two. A number were killed and the survivors were picked up by a boat which was with them and transported on to Molde.

8 wounded came from some trawlers which were operating in the fjord off Molde. They were "Wisteria", "Northern Pride" and "Cape Sirotoko" (No. 10,11,12,14,15,17,20,21)

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