

HMS Warspite at the 2nd Battle of Narvik

Introduction:

This is an eyewitness account given by John G. Laing (JGL) who was 18yrs old at the time of the Battle of Narvik. He was an Ordinary Seaman in the Royal Navy and, on the 13th April 1940, his Action Station was high up on the Bridge of HMS Warspite.

This interview was carried out by his son, James C. Laing (JCL) in 1980. It is extracted from a long recording when James was asking about his father's life, and in particular, his service in the Royal Navy during WW2.

It should be remembered that John G. Laing was re-calling events that took place 40 years earlier and whilst there is no reason to believe that this is not an accurate account of what took place in Narvik, we cannot guarantee that the order of events and every detail is completely correct.

If you are reading this whilst also listening to the audio file you should know that JGL's slightly slurred speech was due to the effects of a stroke and not because he had been abusing a navy rum ration at 10 O'clock in the morning when the recording was made!

A context for this extract:

The Warspite had been in dock in Greenock (Scotland) undergoing repairs following damage sustained during a very stormy sea crossing to Nova Scotia in November 1939 and a fruitless chase in the North Atlantic for the German battleships (Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, which had sunk HMS Rawalpindi on 23rd November 1939). It was expected that once the repairs and sea trials were completed, HMS Warspite was to return to its duty as flagship of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet. This didn't happen until 30th April 1940.

The Interview/Discussion:

JGL: It was that convoy, sometime in dock. Don't forget we still hadn't had any leave. We hadn't seen home for two, something, over two years, anyway. Because we were nearly due to 'pay off' from the Mediterranean when the war broke out. So, we got back and we had to have these repairs all done at Greenock in Scotland and we were given seven days leave, I'll never forget that, seven days leave from Greenock in Scotland, to get home... to London! To see our parents and... of course it was fantastic to us! And then back again and of course as soon as the ship was repaired... Narvik!

JCL: Narvik, yes.

JGL: We were sent into Narvik.

JCL: Well, tell me about Narvik.

JGL: Well, there's also been an awful lot written about Narvik.

JCL: What about the Warspite's role?

JGL: Well the Warspite... you see there were two battles of Narvik. First of all a flotilla of destroyers went up there. The 'H' Boats, the Hotspur, Hardy and so on ... and did an awful lot of damage to a flotilla of German destroyers. Also, they received an awful lot of damage in return. And at least two of them were grounded ashore.

JCL: How much were you... sorry to interrupt... but how much were you told about the actual reasons for going into these Norwegian fjords?

JGL: Very little, very little. We were never told enough in my opinion. It's not like today where you seem to get a reason for everything. But we didn't ... you just did or you died. And that's, and that's all it was.

JCL: You would kind of liked to have known what you were dying for.

JGL: We virtually didn't know if we were in the North Sea or the Atlantic! Very rare. And especially us boys because we weren't considered intelligent enough... to understand.

JCL: So, I mean, what was the purpose of Narvik? What was the set up?

JGL: Oh, it was a good idea Narvik, because it was the iron ore terminus for, er, German industry.

JCL: Ah, yes that's it.

JGL: And um, the iron ore was being transported to Narvik, and then from Narvik to Germany... and the idea was... Narvik was protected, naturally by the Germans, and the idea was to break up this supply of ore to [Germany]... so, you know, it was well thought out. In the first destroyer attack, it didn't exactly fail, but it was not as... didn't complete the job. So they decided to send another flotilla of destroyers in, backed by a capital ship which was the Warspite. Actually, I thought... I didn't think it was a good idea at all! Even now I think that it was very dicey to do this. A couple of torpedoes and that would have been the end of a capital ship stuck up a fjord.

JCL: You did actually sail right into the fjord did you?

JGL: Yes we went right in, right up...

JCL: Ah... now you see I understood that the Warspite, kind of laid off, as it were, and the destroyers went into the fjord.

JGL: Oh, no, no! The Warspite went in with the destroyers... Oh, yes. And then we heard the destroyers in action.

JCL: Yes

JGL: I was up... I was ... on the bridge in a control tower.

JCL: This, incidentally, is really your first piece of action, isn't it?

JGL: Yes, it really is. Yes, and my word, I was frightened to death... I tell you.

JCL: Sorry

JGL: Our Swordfish was overhead.

JCL: Yes. You were where, the control tower?

JGL: I was in one of the controls for the port side six inch guns... which were the small ones down the side of the ... yes I was in there. I had a midshipman, a Lieutenant Commander looking after me. I was the telephone boy! I was in communication with them.

JCL: Right...so you saw...?

JGL: Being there...we were virtually on the Admiral's Bridge, which is the one below the Compass Platform. The Compass Platform is the main Ship's Bridge, right on the top. The one below that is the Admiral's Bridge. He's got windows to look through... and, er, so on. Anyway we were virtually on that Admiral's Platform. That's where our little hut was... so I had a good view of everything. A very good view.

JCL: What did you see... or hear? You heard the destroyers...

JGL: Well, we heard for one thing that, we heard the destroyers in action, ahead of us. Some distance ahead. They weren't risking the Warspite all that much! And then our Swordfish apparently radioed to us that there was a destroyer up in a creek at the side. Um... which our destroyers had missed, or it had dodged and gone up there. And it was waiting for us to come, with all torpedo tubes trained in the right direction. So, having had our warning from the Swordfish we got our A and B turrets, and it happened to be on the port side, so all our 6inch, four 6inch guns were there, and we were all trained and ready. So, as soon as we passed this little headland, and we could see this German [ship] we had to let go you see. Well of course, we did. Before the Germans could fire any torpedoes. And the poor thing was blown up onto the beach. It was completely out of the water! Of course, four 15inch shells from A and B turret.

JCL: And that was on your side was it?

JGL: That was on my side?

JCL: The port side.

JGL: And then we kept on seeing these white tracks of torpedoes because they had these shore based torpedo tubes... and they must have been rotten shots because they never hit us. Then we had the ... we went right into Narvik... and the Cossack had gone aground and she was being thumped pretty badly by shore guns. And then we started opening up on the installations ashore. In the meantime the destroyer battle was still going on up creeks and odd places. We didn't know much about what was going on. We heard the Eskimo had lost her bows. They'd blown the bows off the Eskimo. And, um, the Cossack was continually

getting hit, being stuck ashore. So we opened up on the hills with our 15inch guns ... it wasn't fair! Yes, so um,

JCL: What wasn't fair? Could you see what you were aiming at?

JGL: No, you didn't have to see. A phenomenon that occurred to me then was um... the fact that being up on the bridge ... and these 15inch guns were firing more or less forward at that time. The first time in my life, I actually saw the shells in the air.

JCL: Oh, I see.

JGL: You saw four shells, because they were firing, you know, together. Four shells in the air, closing up together to one little bunch, quite clearly because you had snow background...

JCL: Yes, and you were behind them.

JGL: And you were behind them... and funnily enough they are not all that fast. They weigh a ton each. So they were pretty big. That was the first and only time I've ever seen shells actually in the air. And they caused devastation on the mountain side. Terrible. And we um, knocked out trains, and so on, these trucks.

JCL: I mean, could you actually shoot at gun emplacements?

JGL: We must have done because they eventually stopped firing at the Cossack. But it could have been through an avalanche coming down on them. It might not have been the gun emplacements. Then we took all the wounded aboard from the Cossack, which was quite a few, hell of a lot of 'em. In fact the boy's mess deck was used as a hospital.

JCL: Not a pretty sight I would imagine?

JGL: No ... some pretty bad...

JCL: That was your first real taste of war then.

JGL: So, we came out of Narvik and we thought "Well now..." At just about that time, or just before, the Ajax, and the Exeter and whatnot had met the River Plate, you know, the Battle of the River Plate... and they came home to a heroes welcome and about six months leave. We came out of Narvik and thought, "Oh well we're alright now, you know" ... and never got a blooming thing... we had to go back to the Mediterranean because Mussolini was getting nasty! Yeah, a rotten trick.

JCL: Was it Narvik, where you told me once that you were shelling a hill... no it can't have been... and there was some kind of little tank that kept popping in and out of a railway tunnel?

JGL: No, that was in Italy. But in Narvik, the saddest, if you like, incident, was when we were shelling the railway. Over the top of Narvik town, there was this railway track with an engine... and some trucks and a guard's van at the other end you see which figures doesn't it? And ... we opened up on them and the first thing that went was the engine which pulls you see. Somebody hopped out of a guard's van truck ... and ran along to see what had happened to his engine! Next thing ... his guard's van went up in smoke. So he ran back to

see what had happened to that. And we could see against the snow, poor little bloke, running backwards and forwards. We didn't want to kill him or anything, you know, but it was ironic. I don't know if he ever survived but if he did he must have a bad heart for the rest of his life!

JCL: You could actually see that clearly?

JGL: Yes, you could see... don't forget we had access to binoculars.... But it was the beautiful clear atmosphere of the fjord. Immediately after the Battle of Narvik, we went to a fjord a bit further up. Trondheim. [Note - The geography is not completely accurate, as Trondheim Fjord is actually south of Narvik, understandable confusion!].

JCL: Ah, I've heard of that, yes.

JGL: And, um, this is where we... I was stood up in this... we were anchored, we were getting on oil. We had an oiler alongside. And they had managed to get an oiler over there, and we were anchored, oh, yeah, we must have been anchored, we wouldn't have been tied up to a buoy. With the oiler alongside... and a German plane came over. Don't know what it was now, but it was a pretty heavy bomber, and he came up this fjord, and he wasn't very high, only about 2,000feet, and we opened up on him, because we knew what he was after... hitting us with the oiler alongside.

JCL: Yes, of course.

JGL: And I have never seen anybody with the nerves that pilot must have had. Because our shells were bursting within feet of his cabin [cockpit] how he didn't, they didn't, get hit by, you know, fragments. But... two shells at a time, b'boom, right in front of him. And we couldn't hit him. He came... and as steady as a rock...and he dropped his bombs, and they all went down one side... they just missed us. But how he stuck that course? I mean it must have been absolute suicide to carry on, but he did, and we never...

JCL: And you didn't get him, even after ... he'd gone over the top?

JGL: No. When they've dropped their bombs we don't bother, you know, we look for the next one coming... he went off and landed at the airfield which was just over the side of the hill there. Yeah, it was another example of the wonderful clear atmosphere... you know, you could almost see, you know, the little holes appearing in his wings and things like that. But he never wavered, but I don't know how but he missed us and all. It must have been something to do with the gunfire.

JCL: Maybe he'd been, you know, wounded, or shaken anyway... and er... because once he'd got that close... you ... it would have been harder to miss than hit I should think. Over the top of the pair of you.

JGL: I mean, he dropped them down the opposite side to where the oil tanker was. If he'd dropped them down that side, the tanker would have gone.

JCL: Yeah. Phew!

Transcribed from the original recording by James C. Laing December 2020