

THE OPERATION ALPHABET DISASTER

EVEN TODAY, THE FACTS SURROUNDING THE LOSS OF HMS GLORIOUS AND
HER ESCORTS ARE SHROUDED IN SECRECY AND MUDDLED NARRATIVES

BY LEROY PRINZ



German painting of the sinking of HMS *Glorious*.

The end of May and the start of June 1940 could not have gotten much worse for the British Empire. The defeated British Expeditionary Force was massed on the beaches of Dunkirk and praying for a miracle — a miracle that did, however, happen. More to the north, the debacle known as Operation *Alphabet* was taking place.

British forces had suffered a humiliating defeat in Norway as they and Allied troops were involved in an attempt to defend northern Norway from German invasion. The main strategic reason for the German invasion was to seize the port of Narvik and guarantee the delivery of vital iron ore for the German war industry.

Prior to the feared German attack, a Royal Navy force consisting of the battlecruiser HMS *Renown* and a dozen destroyers had departed the major naval base at Scapa Flow on 4 April and set sail for Vestfjorden under the name Operation *Wilfred*. The reason for this rapid departure was that on 3 April, British intelligence began to receive reports of an accumulation of shipping and troops in the Baltic German ports of Rostock, Stettin, and Swinemunde. The Germans also had an inkling of what was happening and had received reports that *Wilfred* would involve the laying of mines off the Lofoten Islands in the channel leading to Narvik and this could be disastrous for German plans to keep the iron ore flowing.

Anticipating German retaliation, the British instigated Plan *R4* and this would be an operation to forestall German landings by occupying Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim, and Narvik as soon as the Germans revealed their intent. Churchill thought that a landing in Norway, without Norwegian acquiescence, was a mistake, even if there was no more than a minor exchange of fire with the Norwegian army. He held that laying mines in Norwegian waters could be done without a confrontation with the Royal Norwegian Navy.

British and Allied troops were assembled on the Clyde to commence embarkation on the morning of