

Hugh O'Neill's account of the events of 23 April 1940

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By now, the British Expeditionary Force in Norway was in some difficulty and part of it was concentrated for withdrawal on the town of Åndalsnes at the top of Romsdalsfjord in Northern Norway. There were no shore-based fighters to cover the withdrawal as the remnants of a Gladiator squadron had been left on a frozen lake and the only Hurricane squadron had withdrawn to land on the ill-fated carrier *Glorious*. It was therefore almost inevitable that Hudsons would be called on to give long-range support. Orders for a "battle flight" to support the BEF were not long coming and, on April 23, I set off leading a flight of three aircraft. Webb and James were flying the second and third aircraft and I had T. N. C. Rothwell as my copilot. He was a person of wry humour as he demonstrated after the war as script writer for the *Carry On* comedy film series. We were going to need a sense of humour.

Landfall at Moldefjord

We made our landfall as planned at the entrance to Moldefjord at about a thousand feet, moved into line astern for our passage up into Romsdalsfjord and began to lose height. A naval vessel of some sort was anchored at the entrance to Moldefjord and she released a plume of smoke at our appearance -- probably a warning blast on the hooter to warn those further up the fjord. Cloud cover in Romsdalsfjord had settled below a thousand feet, so that the sides of the fjord rose sheer into the cloud base. It had not been possible to determine beforehand exactly what we would do over Åndalsnes; indeed we really did not know what to expect. As we were supposed to be fighters, I wondered if the tired soldiers might appreciate some pansy formation flying and perhaps a noisy "show the flag" type beat-up. As it was, there seemed little room for manoeuvre, so I decided to run the formation in line astern up the north side of the fjord, make a fairly tight turn over Åndalsnes and then withdraw down the south side before making a second and possibly more runs. After that we would see how matters developed.

The AA cruiser *Curacoa* lay alongside the fjord bank some distance from the town, so we took the usual precautions with Very pistol, Aldis lamp and yo-yo undercarriage. There was no time for St Luke. Hardly had we arrived abreast of the cruiser and just short of the harbour in time to start our formation turn, when we received a shower of high explosive from both the cruiser and the guns on the jetty. Number Two was immediately shot into the fjord, A. B. J. Pearson, the sole survivor, making a miraculous descent into the water by parachute and returning to Leuchars, some time later, wrapped in a naval blanket. I, on the other hand, found myself driving on one engine, full of holes and smoke and without room to turn. Rothwell appeared to regard the whole affair as a huge joke and we were both inclined to agree that our reception had been a little ungracious. We also agreed that our only course of action, without further delay was to move forwards and upwards. There was a swift clipping-on of seat-type parachutes and I pointed the aeroplane up into the cloud at the top end of the fjord muttering a quick prayer to St Christopher.

Hurrah for the Wright Cyclone, but thumbs down for the propeller which could be put only into "positive coarse". Up we went and broke cloud at about 4,000ft. A series of sharp-looking peaks stuck up out of the cloud all round us, so we must have sailed up some sort of groove. At any rate, we judged ourselves to have been quite lucky and set about the return journey, deciding to make for the rigours of Wick. Halfway back across the North Sea, James came alongside in Number Three of the formation and I was delighted to see that he had extricated himself from the events in the fjord. He had a close look at our damage and reported by Aldis lamp. Although there were a number of sizeable holes, and plenty of oil and fuel leaks, the aeroplane seemed quite happy to fly manually straight-and-level. The autopilot was unable to cope with stick forces required to keep the starboard wing up. Rothwell and I chatted about landing tactics over coffee and we decided to approach without flap, ejecting the cockpit escape hatch as we crossed the hedge. This we did, after checking the undercarriage in the air, and the aircraft settled firmly on two burst tyres. I lowered flap as we lost speed on the ground and only one side came down, so we raised our glasses later to a sensible decision.

Some time afterwards I was able to discuss our hasty exit from Romsdalsfjord with Wg Cdr R. L. R. Atcherley, as he then was, and Whitney Straight. Both were in Norway and had been watching the affair from the mountainside. They thought little or nothing of our chances of survival as we disappeared into cloud. I also ran into the Major of Marines from the *Curacoa* in the Union Club in Alexandria, so I was able to have a quiet word in his ear about aircraft recognition.

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