

# Warship World

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# “SEEK SWEDISH WATERS”

THE DANISH ARTILLERY SHIP NIELS JUEL AND THE SCUTTling OF THE DANISH NAVY ON 29 AUGUST 1943

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When, on 9 April 1940, Germany attacked Denmark and Norway, it came as a surprise for the Danish government, which quickly realized that resistance was futile. As a result only a few Danish soldiers in the southern part of Jutland fought the Germans. They managed to slow the German advance for a few minutes, and the Danish Navy was directly ordered not to resist the German attack.

Following the Danish surrender, the German forces took over the responsibility of defending Denmark. The Danish army and navy was, however, allowed to continue operating, even though their task was no longer the defence of Denmark – this task was now the responsibility of the German Wehrmacht and Kriegsmarine.

In mid-April 1940, British aircraft began laying mines in Danish waters, and the Danish Navy was ordered to participate in the sweeping of these mines. The Chief of the Navy initially refused this task, but following the mining of three Danish ferries in the Great Belt, the navy yielded. An agreement was made with the Germans, where German minesweepers swept the route north-south to and from Norway, while Danish minesweepers swept east-west in the Great Belt. The navy could hereby maintain the illusion that it was not contributing to the German war effort. In the spring of 1943 the Navy, however, had to bow to German pressure and agree to also sweep the north/south routes.

In addition, the Navy was, from October 1940, given the responsibility for the seaward part of the Coast Guard between Denmark and Sweden, which were tasked with preventing illegal travel between the two countries.

In return the Navy was allowed to continue operating and training new personnel. The German requirements were, however, harsh, and Danish naval ships were only allowed to operate in specific waters: South of Zealand, in the Isefjorden in the northern part of Zealand and the few Danish submarines were also allowed to use the Mariager Fjord, which was the only place deep enough for the boats to operate submerged. Furthermore the ships were only allowed to move in daylight and all movements had to be reported to the German authorities at least 48 hours in advance.

In the spring of 1941 the Germans forced the Danish government to hand over the Navy's six most modern torpedo boats. This was a heavy blow to the Navy's morale, but the boats were handed over and served the rest of the war as German "Torpedo fang boote" in the Baltic. The handover of the torpedo boats did not go unnoticed among the parties fighting Germany. On 26 February, the Danish Navy received a note from the British prime minister Churchill, in which he stated that the only thing that could save the honour of the Danish Navy was that, in anticipation of future German demands, the Danish Navy scuttle its ten submarines. The Commander of the Navy



Two Danish torpedo boats being towed through the ice-filled Copenhagen Harbour on 5 February 1941, on their way into German hands. Before being handed over the boats were stripped of weapons, radio material and fuel. That way the Danish government could maintain that it did not contribute to the German war effort, even though former Danish naval vessels were now sailing under German command and participating in the important task of training new crews for the German submarines. As payment for the boats the Germans gave the Danish Navy materials for building new torpedo boats, but these were not completed before the end of the war.

was, however, not ready to take such a step, which would surely have meant the end of the Danish collaborative government and a much harsher German rule of Denmark.

As mentioned the Danish Navy had not been allowed to fight the German occupation of Denmark on 9 April 1940. This order came from the Commander of the Navy, Vice Admiral Rechnitzer, and created a lot of resentment towards him among both officers and crews. In May of 1940 all senior officers of the Naval High Command told Rechnitzer that they had lost all confidence in him and urged him to step down. Faced with this mutiny, for lack of a better word, Rechnitzer asked for, and received, the government's permission to leave his post. Captain Emmanuel Briand de Crèvecoeur was named temporary Commander of the Navy, but since he had been one of the "mutineers", the Danish government believed that he had thereby shown that he was unfit to become "real" commander of the fleet.

Instead, the government looked to the level below the mutineers and found the man they were looking for in the 47-year-old Commander (Senior Grade) Aage Helgesen Vedel. In May of 1941 he was promoted to Rear Admiral (skipping entirely the rank of Captain) followed by his promotion to Vice Admiral on 1 September 1941. On the same day, he was promoted to Chief of the Navy and director of the Ministry of Naval Affairs. His first priority was to prepare the fleet for the eventuality that the Germans tried to take the ships and one of his first orders was to prepare bombs for scuttling for every ship under command. A number of 2½, 5 and 10 kilo bombs with a ten-minute timer was prepared and secretly brought aboard the ships, where they were placed in a safe in the captain's cabin.

## THE BREAKDOWN

After the German defeat at Stalingrad most of the world realized that the Germans were not going to win the war

after all. This led, among other things, to a growth in the Danish resistance movement and during the summer of 1943 the number of attacks on German facilities and Danes working for the Germans rose sharply. During the months of June and August strikes paralyzed the country and this eventually became too much to bear for the German military. On 28 August the Germans gave the Danish government an ultimatum and demanded that the government immediately ban freedom of assembly, introduce a curfew and the death-penalty for sabotage. This was too much for the Danish government, which therefore resigned, and this led to a German decision to take control of the Danish army. This could, however, not be done without suspending the entire Danish armed forces, so a move against the Danish Navy was also included in the plan, which was given the code name *Operation Safari*. The move against the navy was not popular with the German Navy, since the Danes did an important job of sweeping mines in the Danish waters.

The Germans needed to strike the Danish fleet simultaneously in several places. Most of the fleet was at the Royal Dockyard (Holmen) in Copenhagen, but a number of ships were engaged in minesweeping and in training new officers and crews. The largest ship in the Danish Navy, the artillery ship NIELS JUEL, was laying at Holbaek in the southernmost part of Isefjorden.

On board the NIELS JUEL were a crew of 323 men. They were all aware that something was going on, and ship commander, Commander Carl A.S. Westermann had ordered "increased readiness", which meant that there had been given no shore leave, and that the ship's machinery was at 15-minutes notice.

By 0430 the ship received a short alarm-signal from fleet headquarters. Steam was immediately raised on all boilers, and the crew went to action stations - however without the use of the normal signal horn,



The NIELS JUEL was laid down in 1914, but due to the First World War, the ship was not launched until 1918. Originally intended as a small battleship with two 305 mm guns from Krupp, the war meant that the guns were not delivered by the Germans, and the ship was instead equipped with ten Swedish 150 mm guns. NIELS JUEL was first commissioned in 1923, and was, when the Second World War broke out, obsolete. Here the ship is seen leaving Copenhagen for the last time on the 16 August 1943.

as Commander Westermann did not want to attract attention. While this was happening another signal was received. It was short and just said: "Seek Swedish Waters".

The weather during the night of 28/29 August was miserable with rain, strong winds and high waves, and it proved difficult to get NIELS JUEL out of the harbour at Holbæk. The wind and waves pushed the ship against the quay and it was not until 0640 that the ship was finally able to clear the harbour. Course was now set for Hundested at the mouth of the fjord at the highest possible speed, 16 knots. The plan was that the ship would act as if it was on its way to Copenhagen until it reached a point north of the small port of Gilleleje, where the she would turn to port and make for neutral Swedish territory.

As early as 0610 a German aircraft was spotted over NIELS JUEL, and when, at 0830, the ship reached Hundested, 3-4 German Junkers Ju-88 and Heinkel He-111 bombers in company with 2-3 Junkers Ju-87 Stukas circled the ship.

From a Danish Navy cutter stationed in Hundested, NIELS JUEL received a message by flashing light that the Germans had announced that they had laid mines off the Isefjord mouth. At the same time another message was received, telling Commander Westermann that the NIELS JUEL was to anchor and await the arrival of new orders, which were coming by plane from Copenhagen.

A minefield at the mouth of the Isefjord had indeed been included in the German plans for *Operation Safari*, but on August 29 the minefield was not yet in place. The mere risk of mines, however, was enough to achieve the desired effect, and Westermann ordered the NIELS JUEL to stop off Hundested and await the arrival of the new orders. At about 0840 the artillery ship came to a halt just north of the harbour mouth.

However, around 35 minutes earlier, the Germans had received word that NIELS JUEL was leaving Isefjorden at high speed. They ordered the ship stopped and at 0855 a Ju-87 Stuka dive bomber suddenly attacked the ship. From approxi-

mately 300 feet the plane first strafed the ship with machine guns and then dropped two 50 kg bombs. They hit the water about 30 m from the ship's starboard side and detonated moments later. The explosion was strong, and water and mud was thrown up to a height of approximately 50 m. The shock waves from the bombs caused extensive damage on board, where among other things the entire elec-

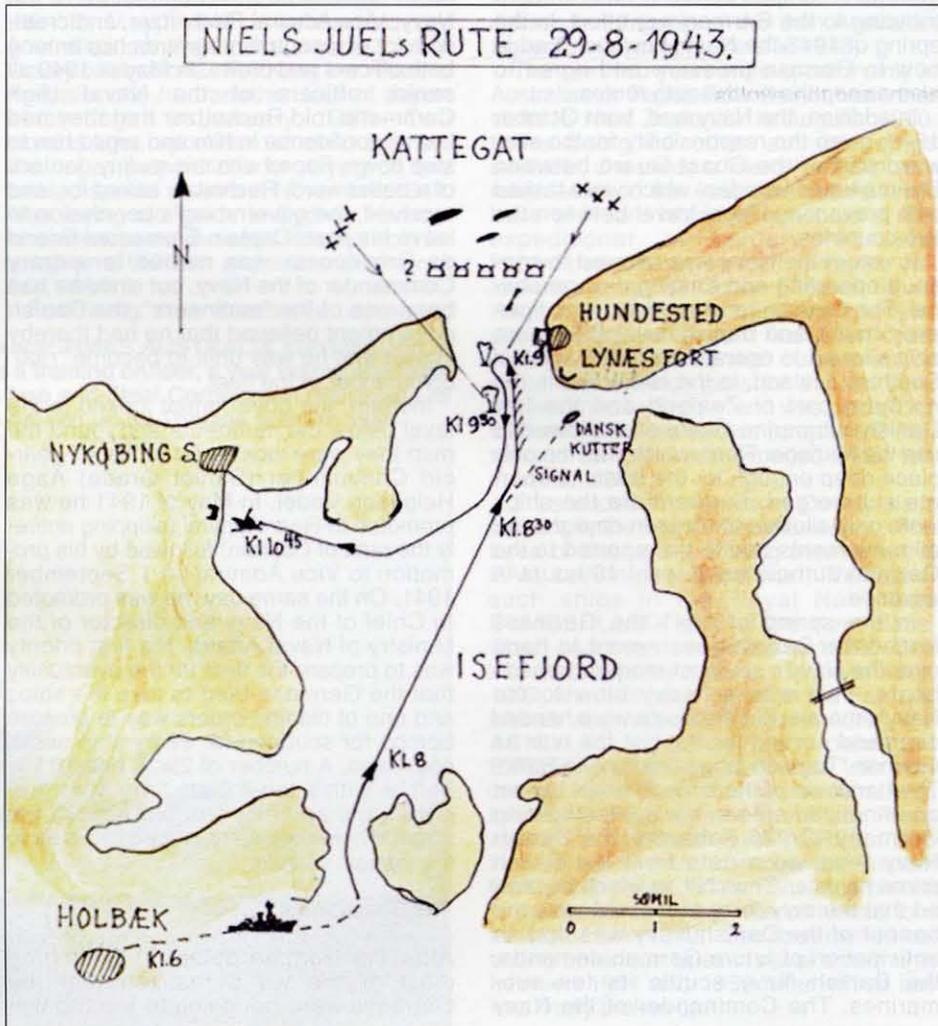
trical system broke down. Westermann had ordered that the ship's anti-aircraft-guns were not to shoot unless directly ordered to do so by him, and despite the bombing he did not give the order to open fire. He did not regard the bombing as an attack, but as a warning of what would happen if NIELS JUEL left Isefjorden. It is worth noting, however, that nothing in German sources indicate that the attack was only meant as a warning.

Instead Westermann ordered that the ship be turned, so that her bows pointed due south, so the Germans could not get the mistaken impression that the NIELS JUEL was leaving the fjord. During the turn, the ship was again attacked, this time with machine guns, and several of the ship's anti-aircraft guns opened fire - without Westermanns permission.

The gunfire from the NIELS JUEL is reported to have damaged one of the German planes, but at the same time gunfire from the German planes injured the five man crew on one of NIELS JUELS anti-aircraft guns.

Still not regarding the attack as anything other than a warning shot, Westermann chose to order the AA-guns crews below decks to protect them against fire from the German aircraft, and despite several new strafing attacks in the following twenty minutes, permission to fire back was not given by Westermann. A crew member later counted more than 100 bullet holes in the ship's deck.

Following the attacks the period from 0920 - 0935 was quiet, but at 0935 another German Ju-87 suddenly dropped out of





**A photo taken the moment the 250 kg bomb detonated right next to the NIELS JUEL. A naval officer who witnessed the attack, later said that the water column was so high and wide that NIELS JUEL was almost completely covered and only the bow could be seen.**

the sky and dropped two bombs close to the artillery ship's port side. NIELS JUEL's artillery officer subsequently described the attack: "At about 0935 a German plane attacked from the port side. [...] Two heavy bombs were dropped about 25 metres from the port side next to the bridge. The bombs detonated almost directly beneath the ship."

Judged by the power of the explosions the bombs were approximately 250 kg each, and the explosions were magnified by the fact that the NIELS JUEL was in shallow waters. So despite the fact that none of the bombs hit the ship, the misses were enough to cause extensive damage aboard.

In one of the ship's magazine, located at the bottom of the ship, conscript Otto Ludvig later described the attack: "The two bombs fell near the ship. One went in the water only 4-5 metres from our magazine, and we heard two violent bangs. The detonations lifted us up from the floor. The whole ship shook, and shells and warheads fell off the shelves and on to the floor. At the same time the lights went out again, and we felt the ship heel heavily."

Following this attack Westermann realized that the Germans were in fact trying to sink his ship, and he ordered that anti-aircraft guns manned, and that any attacking German aircraft were to be engaged, but no more attacks materialized.

Unbeknown to the Germans the second attack had actually put NIELS JUEL out of action. The ship's artillery officer described the damage: "... The torpedoes began running in the torpedo tubes, steam rose from the safety valve, the ship lurched heavily and drowned almost in the water from the bombs." All watertight bulkheads were ruptured, the starboard side of the ship sprung a number of leaks, the fire control equipment was destroyed and there was also a minor leak in the bow. The damage clearly showed the weaknesses in NIELS JUEL'S design, and that the ship, which was designed and built during the first World War, was in 1943 thoroughly out-

dated.

Shortly after the attack a German seaplane with the new orders from Copenhagen arrived. These stated that the NIELS JUEL was to anchor at Hundested and await further orders. It was clear to Westermann that despite the fact that the order was signed by the Chief of the Navy, Vice Admiral Vedel, it was in fact written by the German occupation authorities.

Westermann therefore did not feel obliged to follow the order. At the same time Westermann was aware that his ship had been heavily damaged by German bombing. An attempt to reach Sweden was not feasible and would most likely end with a sinking of the ship with many dead and wounded among the crew. Westermann therefore decided to destroy the ship.

Course was set to the southwest, and at 1048 NIELS JUEL was run aground at 16

**The ship was beached just a few hundred metres from shore.**



knots. Westermann then ordered the anchor released, and the German planes took this as a sign that the ship, in accordance with the order from Copenhagen, had anchored, and then left the area.

In line with the rest of the fleet the NIELS JUEL was equipped with a small 10 kg bomb, which should serve to destroy the ship in just a situation like this. The detonator did not, however, work, and Westermann instead gave the order to the crew to manually destroy the ship. The magazines were flooded and the sea cocks opened and soon more than 2500 tons of water had filled the hull, causing the ship to settle firmly on the bottom, while the salt water ruined the machinery and other equipment.

At the same time the crew destroyed the ship's equipment and guns, small arms, ammunition, rangefinders and another equipment was thrown overboard. A crew member subsequently wrote: "Then came the order to make NIELS JUEL useless, and it was a sad spectacle, which we witnessed over the next hours. The large breeches for the 15cm guns went overboard, and gauges, switches, yes everything was destroyed. All our anti-aircraft guns, 40mm, 20mm and 8mm went the same way with the ammunition. The fire control system, which cost more than 2 million Danish Kroner in 1935, was completely destroyed. We used our rifles as clubs and bayonets as crowbars, nothing was spared. All our rifles and revolvers were rendered useless and thrown overboard – the drums for the revolvers went the same way. As did the equipment from the bridge - telephones, compass, depth sounder, steering wheel, etc. Nothing was spared, in short, everything was destroyed."

This manifestation of "patriotic vandalism", as one of the crew members later described it, was meant to make the ship unusable for the Germans, and large amounts of ammunition spread around the ship was later to hamper the German efforts to raise the ship.

While the destruction was going on, the crew was allowed free access to the onboard supply of food, beverages, tobacco and other things from the ship invento-

ries – just to make sure that this did not fall into the hands of the Germans. During the war, these things were all rationed, so this move was quite popular, since this was the first time in three years that the crew could eat bread, for example, with as thick a spread of butter as they could manage, and smoke all the cigarettes that they could!

At the same time, the four most seriously injured crew members were taken to the nearby town of Nykøbing in the ship's motor boat, where they were immediately brought to the city hospital. Artillery Quartermaster H.E. Andreasen, however,

**The crew waiting to be evacuated from the damaged ship. As with the crews from the rest of the fleet's ships the officers and crew from the NIELS JUEL were subsequently interned at the Royal Dockyard in Copenhagen. The German Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler tried to persuade Hitler to force the captured Danes in to service in the German army at the Eastern Front, but this was fortunately not carried into effect, and in October 1943, the more than 2,000 detainee Danish officers and sailors were released.**

was so badly wounded that he died on 2 September.

In the late afternoon a German plane arrived, carrying orders for Westermann, instructing him to leave for Copenhagen escorted by a German torpedo boat that was waiting outside Isefjorden. The messenger was quickly made aware that the NIELS JUEL was unable to sail to Copenhagen, and he had to return to Copenhagen empty-handed. He brought with him, however, a message from Westermann that NIELS JUEL's crew soon had to be evacuated from the ship, as it was no longer possible to cook on board,

and the majority of the crew sleeping quarters were flooded.

First thing on the morning of 30 August the Germans came on board and took the crew prisoner. From there they were all transported to the Royal Dockyard in Copenhagen, where they were interned until late October 1943.

Despite the damage to the ship, the Germans subsequently managed to raise her, and from September 1944 it was used by the Kriegsmarine as a German training ship named NORDLAND. As the war drew to a close the ship was, on 3 May 1945, once again scuttled by its crew, this time in the Eckernförde fiord. Most of the ship was salvaged after the war and sold as scrap, but parts of Niels Juel is still at the bottom of fiord.

#### THE SCUTTLING OF THE FLEET AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DENMARK

During the night of 29 August the Danish Navy sank 32 of its 50 vessels. Just 14 ships were taken undamaged by the Germans and four ships – an old torpedo boat and three small minesweepers – made it to Sweden, where they were interned until May 1945. Seven Danish officers and ratings were killed by the Germans. The scuttling deprived the Germans of a number of ships, that they could have used in their war effort, and subsequently the Kriegsmarine had to transfer more than 2,000 German sailors to Denmark to manage the task of mine sweeping previously handled by the Danish Navy.

The Scuttling of the Danish fleet was also – along with the work of the Danish resistance movement – one of the reasons the Danes after the war were seen as having fought the Germans, despite the almost unopposed German occupation of Denmark in April of 1940.



## SHIP QUIZ

The vessel in the previous issue was the 'D' class cruiser HMS DELHI. She was refitted at Brooklyn Navy yard in 1941/42 during which she was fitted with US pattern 5-inch 38 cal guns and modern Mk37 directors, the only ship of her class to be so fitted. The first correct name out of the sou'wester was Mr L. Williams of Wolverhampton. His prize is on its way to him.

For this quiz which ship is this and what was her fate?

Send your answers on a postcard to SHIP QUIZ, WARSHIP WORLD, Lodge Hill, LISKEARD PL14 4EL to arrive by 1 December 2015. Our normal prize of a £20 book voucher will be sent to the sender of the first correct postcard out of our Sou'wester.

