

Across the sea to Ireland



Top: A chopper from Fearless picks up invasion troops on the deck of Sir Tristram. Above: Ferrets of 3rd Royal Tank Regiment splash ashore complete with waterproofing "mini-skirts." Left: A medium wheeled tractor laying assault tracking.

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THE quiet lanes and bleak mountains of County Down in Northern Ireland echoed to the sounds of war—the harsh thrumming of helicopters flying troops into assault areas, the rattle of machine-gun fire and the deep roar of powerful vehicle engines . . .

Swap, the largest exercise in Northern Ireland in peacetime, involved more than 6000 Servicemen. Its aim—to practise joint Service techniques, including amphibious, in a limited war setting.

The exercise was delayed for three days because the commando-carrying HMS Fearless, which played a large part in the operations, had been used at Gibraltar by the Prime Minister and Mr Ian Smith for their dramatic meeting over Rhodesia.

As thick fog closed in over the Irish Sea in the early hours of a Monday morning the main tactical phase began with a landing by 45 Royal Marine Commando.

To add realism the setting envisaged a Federation of North Atlantic islands—Saxonia (parts of England and Wales), Manlia (Isle of Man) and Downia (County Down). Manlia and Downia had broken away from the Federation and the Saxonian forces aimed to land in Downia and seize control.

The Saxonian force comprised 24th Infantry Brigade of The Strategic Reserve's 3rd Division, commanded by Brigadier H D G Butler, supported by the Royal Navy, 45 Royal Marine Commando and the Royal Air Force.

Representing breakaway Downia were 39th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brigadier J M Strawson, and elements of The North Irish Militia.

Supporting Fearless in the landings were two of the Army's logistics ships, Sir Tristram and Sir Percival.

Although hampered by fog the landings went well and soon Bishops Court airfield, just inland from the coast, was in the hands of the invaders. The amphibious operation was controlled from the operations room of Fearless.

And as soon as a firm footing ashore was established Brigadier Butler moved from Fearless to the mainland to take control of the battle.

His forces moved steadily inland against tough Downian opposition and it soon became apparent that the defenders would have to be removed from the commanding heights of Slieve Croob.

The persistent fog made things difficult for the Saxonian forces as often it was not possible to make full use of the Royal Navy's Wessex helicopters and troops had to move forward on foot or in the available wheeled transport.

The battle raged over a wide area—from the beach head at Ballyhornan to Slieve Croob and then south into the wild, romantic heights of the Mountains of Mourne.

Then the seven-day war ended and the sea birds settled again in the sheltered bays and inlets. The grey shape of Fearless and the white hulls of Sir Tristram and Sir Percival no longer loomed through the off-shore mist—and only the tracks of heavy plant vehicles at the landing beach remained to bear witness to this invasion of Northern Ireland.



Above: Brigadier Butler of 24 Infantry Brigade checks plans for the advance with Lieut-Col H G Dormer, 47 Light Regiment, RA (centre), and the Brigade Major, Major J R A Macmillan (left).



Top: Men of 2nd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, move inland through a quiet village in County Down. Above: A gunner of 4 (Sphinx) Light Battery and a "native" of Downia.