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THE OCCUPATION OF CRETE  
20 May - 30 May 1941

Type of operation described: THE CAPTURE OF A MAJOR  
OBJECTIVE BY AIRBORNE FORCES

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## THE OCCUPATION OF CRETE

20-30 MAY 1941

### INTRODUCTION

This monograph is an account of the Occupation of Crete, by the German Armed Forces, over the period 20-30 May 1941.

It is necessary first, to orient the reader by summarizing briefly, the events leading up to the occupation of Crete, it's strategic location and the military importance from the British and German standpoints. Second, the reader should have an understanding of the topography of Crete to fully realize the military significance of the operation from a tactical standpoint.

After the capitulation of Yugoslavia, the German forces invaded Greece in an effort to climax their conquest of the Balkans.

On 20 April 1941 the commander of the Greek Forces surrendered to the commander of the German Forces in Greece. At that time, the British Expeditionary Forces in Greece were holding the Thermopylae line. However, finding the position untenable, they made preparations for an evacuation. (1)

During the moonless nights 24-30 April 1941, the British succeeded in evacuating approximately <sup>74,000</sup>44,000 of their troops to Egypt and Crete. (2)

Thus, we find the conquest of the Balkans, by the German Forces, complete.

This brings us to the Occupation of Crete.

(1) A-2, p. 19; (2) A-1, p. 79;

### GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Crete is located at the entrance to the Aegean Sea, 165 air miles south of Athens, Greece; 340 air miles west of the Isle of Cyprus and 340 air miles northwest of Alexandria, Egypt. (3)  
(See map A)

### STRATEGICAL LOCATION

Crete is a barrier dominating the entrance to the Aegean Sea and affords a stepping stone between Sicily and the Dodecanese Islands. If held by the British, it could be used as a Base for air operations against objectives farther to the North and West. If held by the Germans, it could be used as a Base for air operations against Cyprus, Syria, the Suez Canal, and the North African coast. The strategic situation being what it is, it is not surprising that following the occupation of Greece, Germany decided that the <sup>(FURTHER)</sup> occupation of Crete was worth a major effort. (4) (See map A)

### TOPOGRAPHY

Crete is long, (160 miles) and narrow, (averages 18 miles in width) and consists essentially of the upper levels of a range of mountains which rise out of the very deep eastern Mediterranean waters. Along the axis of the Island the mountains are largely composed of limestone and igneous rock. They are not wooded, but are quite extensively covered with wild bushes and thickets. (5)

There are very few plains or flat areas on the Island. Generally speaking, the mountains fall precipitously into the very deep surrounding waters. As a result, the Island has a regular (3) A-3, p. 186; (4) A-3, p. 185; (5) A-3, pps. 186, 187.

coast line with very few acceptable harbors. <sup>(INDEX)</sup> Along the entire south coast there is nothing deserving the name of a harbor and along the north coast the only harbor which is at all suitable for deep draft vessels is the one at Suda Bay. Suda Bay formed the base for such British Naval units as operated from Crete after the British Occupation in October of 1940. (6)

Crete has a population of about 400,000. A few of the people live in the mountains and depend principally upon the raising of sheep; a few more live in the fishing villages of the south coast. Most of the population however, live along the narrow northern coastal plains where the chief means of livelihood is the raising of olives. Consequently the few flat places on the Island are usually covered with olive trees, which have low, thick foliage, making observation for military purposes extremely difficult. (7)

The road net of Crete is exceedingly simple and sparse. There is one road running generally along the north coast, connecting all the principal centers of population. This road, <sup>(Poor as 1+15)</sup> despite its inadequacy, is the backbone of the Island's communication system. A few subsidiary roads, (trails is a better word) extend south from the main coastal road to specific points in the interior or on the south coast. These subsidiary roads <sup>(RUN)</sup> are built through saddles which connect the mountain masses. An example of such a road is the one from Kalami, (just east of Suda) to a point just short of Sphakia, on the south coast. All Cretan roads, including the main coastal road, <sup>(ONE)</sup> pass through many defiles. Meanwhile, the country between and off the roads is exceedingly rough, being practically impassable for any <sup>(SORT)</sup> type of self-propelled vehicle. (8)

(6) A-3, pps. 186, 187; (7)&(8) A-3, p. 187;

FOLLOWS BY PART TIME  
W/IT A FEW CHANGES

*CLOSE TO SOURCE*

The almost complete absence of flat, cleared terrain in Crete, obviously accounts for the fact that good airfields are practically non-existent. As a matter of fact, in their six months of occupation, the British appear to have attempted to develop only three airfields; the main field being at Maleme, ten miles west of the Island Capital of Canea; one at Rethymnon; and another airfield at Candia. (9) (See map B)

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

(BRITISH)

*SOME CHANGES STILL TO BE MADE*

When the attack on Crete began there were about 28,600 troops stationed there, including Greek Troops, but many of these were unarmed as a result of losses sustained in the evacuation from Greece. Supporting weapons, such as artillery, were practically non-existent. In addition, many of the troops had just completed heavy fighting in Greece and were in need of rest. Attempts were made to procure arms and supplies. However, due to the domination of the German Forces over the Aegean Sea and the surrounding area, very few ocean-going ships were able to reach the few existing harbors on Crete. (10)

The British Base Depots were located in the Suda Bay area, and were well dispersed and concealed in olive groves. At these depots the British had on hand about 30 days supply of rations; a small quantity of small arms ammunition, gasoline and oil. From these meager supplies they were also attempting to furnish subsistence to the Cretan population of 400,000. All supplies such

(9) A-3, p. 188; (10) A-4, p. 6.

as gasoline, oil, ordnance and maintenance were very low. When it became evident that the German invasion was imminent, the British immediately set up field supply points at Maleme, Candia and Rethymon, and a 15 day supply of rations was immediately displaced to these field supply points. (11)

Under the Command of Major General Freyberg, the Commander of the British Forces on Crete, an all around defense of certain definite sectors was indicated and General Freyberg decided upon four vital sectors and disposed his troops as follows:

1. Candia: (Commander, Brig. Chappell); two British Battalions, three Greek Battalions, 300 Australian riflemen and 250 artillerymen armed as Infantry.

2. Rethymon: (Commander, Brig. Vasey); Headquarters 19th Australian Infantry Brigade, four Australian Battalions and six Greek Battalions.

3. Suda Bay: (Commander, Major General Weston, RM); 16th and 17th Australian Brigade, (both improvised); 1,200 British Riflemen from various units, the 106th Regiment, a unit of the Royal Heavy Artillery, armed as Infantry and two Greek Battalions.

4. Maleme: (Commander, Brig. Puttick, New Zealand Division); 4th New Zealand Brigade in the area west of Ganea, the 5th New Zealand Brigade in the Maleme area, the 10th (improvised) Infantry Brigade of Composite Battalions, formed from <sup>VARIOUS</sup> New Zealand personnel and two Greek Battalions, and one additional Greek Battalion. (12)

Anti-air defenses were located at Suda Bay, Maleme and Candia.

There were two British tanks located at each airfield; Maleme,

(11) A-6, p. 216; (12) A-<sup>4</sup>5, p. 4-6

Candia, and Rethymnon also; there were a few Italian static defense guns which served as field guns. At Suda Bay the coastal defense guns were still in operation. (13)

Due to the lack of roads and road transport there was little hope for the employment of reinforcements from one area to another and, accordingly, each area was designed to be self supporting. The British force in each area was assigned the mission of defending an airfield and to prevent the landing of the enemy on the beaches. (14) (See map B)

#### (GERMAN)

The German action against Crete was under the general command of Reichsmarschall Goring and the Tactical operations were under the direct command of Colonel General Lohr, commanding the 4th air fleet. The principal figures in the Lohr Task Force were the following: General-of-Aviation, General Student, with strong parachute, airborne and mountain units; General-of-Aviation Richthofen, with his strong VIII air corps, and an Austrian, General Rengl, was the commander of the mountain troops. (15)

Identified units were; the 22nd Air Infantry Division and the 5th Mountain Division, which were assembled and organized in Greece, for participation in the assault on Crete. (16)

#### THE PREPARATION

Upon the termination of the fighting in Greece, the Germans immediately occupied the Peloponesus Peninsula or the lower part of Greece and began preparing, in secret, for the invasion of Crete, expecting to complete the conquest in two days. Extensive

(13)&(14) A-4, p. 7; (15) A-3, p. 189; (16) A-2, p. 23

aerial reconnaissance was undertaken and all important terrain features on Crete were photographed to the last detail. On 14 May 1941 Italian bombers struck heavily at a British convoy in the eastern Mediterranean as the air attacks on Crete rapidly increased in fury. Waves of planes attacked every defensive position which could be identified. Airports, particularly Maleme, were bombed again and again and on 19 May 1941 six of the defender's few anti-aircraft guns were knocked out by direct hits, since the anti-aircraft guns had been distributed without due regard for concealment. It was this preliminary attack, from 15-19 May 1941, which brought about the decision of the Royal Air Force to abandon Crete. Therefore, when the initial German assault was launched, the British defenders were without any air support. During this crucial period, the British were constantly losing vitally needed ships, sunk in the harbor at Suda Bay, and the situation became so acute that low tonnage, fast ships were employed. It was possible for these ships to dock at night, unload, and put to sea again before daylight. This increased enemy air activity gave the British a positive warning that an impending German assault was imminent and, therefore, they requested that Naval units from the various Mediterranean stations be sent to Crete. (17)

THE BATTLE (SEE MAP C)

20-21 May 1941

On 20 May the German invasion of Crete began. The invasion was opened by an aerial bombardment of extreme vigor, involving high altitude bombing followed by dive bombing. The initial points of attack were on the north shore of the Island, at Canaa,  
(17) A-5, p. 850.

Too Close To  
Source

the capital of Crete, and the adjoining Maleme airport; the Naval Base at Suda Bay; Rethymon and Candia. Maleme airport, about 10 miles west of Canea, was apparently the principal objective and the scene of the heaviest fighting. The air bombings, here, were without precedent in their violence; the bombs being of all sizes up to and including one thousand pounds. (18)

AT MALEME  
SITE

About 0800, 20 May, following the aerial assault, the first wave of parachutists <sup>was</sup> were dropped. ~~Early~~ <sup>By</sup> in the battle the British suffered a serious loss. ~~By~~ <sup>By</sup> accident, or design, the second wave of parachutists fell behind the Maleme defenses very near <sup>to</sup> the 3.7 inch howitzer troops. The latter <sup>were</sup> was <sup>(5)</sup> 800 yards from the nearest Infantry support ~~and~~ since the gunners had no rifles, they were quickly driven off and the guns were lost. With them went the most effective body of the British artillery. The captured Italian guns, some of which had to be fired over open sight, were all that ~~remained.~~ <sup>(WAS LEFT)</sup> (18) The parachutists, transported in German Junkers JU-52's, came in waves of about 600, dropping from an altitude of from 200 to 300 feet. In addition to the parachutists, more troops came in by gliders, which transported about 12 men each. Treacherous wind currents hampered the glider landings and some of them were blown far off course while others cracked up, missing the landing areas completely. (19)

Approximately 3,000 airborne troops were landed in the Maleme area during the morning hours. Later, in the afternoon, parachutists and glider troops were dropped near the airfields at Rethymon and Candia, about 1,500 in each area. (20) (MAP B)

It was reported that the German forces landing near Rethymon and Candia had been either killed or captured by the British, however, a link-up between these forces and other German forces.

(18) (19) (20) A-5, p. 850;

subsequently took place in later actions.

The German ground forces, supported by attack planes, succeeded by night fall of 21 May in capturing the air field at Maleme. Immediately upon capture of the airfield, reinforcements came in as fast as the pilots could land their transports. (21)

The British, occupying a position on Hag Marina, a hill about four miles from Maleme and using Italian Field Guns, were successful in delivering intermittent fire on the airfield and in destroying some of the transports. The damaged condition of the field, due to bomb craters, caused a number of the air transports to be crash-landed by their pilots. (22)

By night fall on 21 May 1941 the German Forces had succeeded in bringing in, by air transport, part of the German 5th Mountain Infantry <sup>DIVISION</sup> ~~Regiment~~ and a detachment of Engineers. The 1st Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, was assigned the mission of silencing the guns which the British were employing to fire on the airfield and the Engineers were utilized to repair the runways. (23)

#### 22 MAY 1941

On the morning of 22 May the 1st Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, launched an attack against the British positions on Hag Marina. During the greater part of the day, the British, utilizing the captured Italian Field guns and small arms fire, successfully delivered effective fire on the Germans who were attempting to drive the British from their position. However, the British, who were faced with numerically superior forces and about to be enveloped, withdrew to join other British forces west of Canea. The German Battalion occupied the position by nightfall on (21) (22), A-5, p. 850; (23) A-3, p. 195

22 May, insuring the consolidation of the Maleme airfield. Meanwhile, the Germans continued to bring in reinforcements and supplies by aircraft. (24)

#### 23 MAY 1941

During the night of 22-23 May the Germans attempted to reinforce their troops, making use of small Greek schooners escorted by one Italian warship. However, the strong British Naval fleet that had been dispatched to aid the British Forces on Crete, had intercepted and destroyed a large part of this force. The remainder was dispersed and managed to escape back to Greece, or to the German held islands in the Aegean sea. It is believed that the force engaged in the attempt to land by water transport was the 3rd regiment of the German 5th Mountain Infantry Division. (25)

The Germans, during the early hours of 23 May, succeeded in landing the remainder of the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment and another Regiment of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, on the airfield at Maleme. In the early afternoon, the other Regiment, with the 1st Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, protecting its right flank, started advancing toward Canea and Suda Bay. (26) (See Map C)

#### 24-25 MAY 1941

The advance of the German Mountain Infantry Regiment along the coast road from Maleme to Suda Bay, slowly forced the British to give ground and to withdraw their forces east of Galatos. (27)

Early on the morning 25 May the British in the vicinity of Galatos launched a counterattack and with troops engaging in hand to hand combat, succeeded in forcing the Germans to withdraw.

(24) A-3, p. 196; (25) A-2, p. 27; (26) (27) A-3, p. 196, A-~~3~~<sup>2</sup>, p. 26

However, the British occupied the position for only a short period of time, as the troops were exhausted from continuous fighting and from the pressure the Germans were applying, slowly withdrew to Canea. (28)

The 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, which had landed 23 May, <sup>was</sup> ~~were~~ assembling in the vicinity of Modion. Meanwhile, the British were occupying positions southwest of Alikianou and south of Episcope. (29) (See Map C)

#### 26 MAY 1941

On the morning 26 May the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment started an advance toward the east, over trackless mountains, with succeeding objectives; 1 - Episcope, 2 - Hill 542, and then on to Stylos, on the coastal road, to link up with the other Regiment of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division. Their mission was to cut off the retreat of the British to the east and prevent an escape south to Sphakia, on the south coast. The 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment advanced by bounds, sending one Battalion to an objective, then passing through with a succeeding Battalion to attack the next objective. (30)

During the night of the 25th the British withdrew their Forces from positions at Episcope and Alikianou. Therefore, the advance of the German 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment was uninterrupted until it encountered stubborn resistance on Hill 542. The German Commander was forced to commit his 3rd Battalion to capture the objective. This Battalion assaulted the British on Hill 542, and by night fall, had captured the objective. In the meantime, the British force at Canea was stubbornly resisting the assault of the

(28) (29) (30) A-3, p. 196

The Pursuit Detachment, continuing it's march, made contact with parachutist west of Rethymon, who had made the initial landing on 20 May. Apparently, these parachutists had been supplied by air or had subsisted on the land because they had not been in contact with their own force since the day of the initial attack. The parachutists reported that strong British positions were located at a pass about 3 miles east of town, therefore, the Pursuit Detachment Commander decided to bivouac for the night at his present position. (38) *no map ref.*

30 MAY 1941

The German 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment continued it's pursuit of the British until they met strong resistance from Hill 798, just north of Sphakia. Immediately, the Germans employed the characteristic envelopment, sending the 1st Company of the leading Battalion to the left and the 2nd Company to the right in a double envelopment. This maneuver was not wide enough due to the extended flanks of the British. Consequently the Germans planned to employ the 7th and 8th Companies; the 7th to the right and the 8th to the left, in a double-double envelopment. From his observation post on Hill 892, the Commander of the German 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment was in a position to observe the British troops crowding into Sphakia. He decided to call for dive bombers to attack Hill 798 and to delay the double-double envelopment. (39)  
(See Map D)

The Pursuit Detachment initiated it's action against the British Forces east of Rethymon on 30 May and by about 0730 that (38) A-3, p. 202; (39) A-3, p. 202

morning the British and Greek Forces surrendered.

Upon the termination of this action, the Pursuit Detachment continued it's advance and by 1600, had arrived and were occupying the airfield at Candia. It was here that they made contact with the parachutists who had dropped on 20 May. Again, the advance was continued and at ~~Sphakia~~ the Pursuit Detachment made contact with Italian Troops of about one Regiment in strength. The Italians had landed by boat the night before and were on the coastal road, marching toward Rethymnon. The advance element of the Pursuit Detachment continued the march and reached it's objective, Herapetra, by nightfall. (40) (See Map B)

31 MAY 1941 (See Map D)

The German Commander of the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, during the night of 30 May, brought into position on Hill 892, a light Infantry Howitzer. From this position, accurate observed fire was delivered on the British position on Hill 798 and with the addition of the four Stukas he had requested, the position was neutralized. The planned double-double envelopment was put into effect, and succeeded, with the 7th Company occupying Sphakia and the 8th Company occupying Kometades. (41) (See Map D)

Thus, with the capture of Sphakia by the Germans, further evacuation by the British was ended. The remaining British and Greek Troops were taken prisoner, which ended resistance and consequently completed the "Occupation Of Crete," by the Germans.

(40) A-3, p. 201; (41) A-3, p. 203

*no mag ref*

### THE EVACUATION

During the nights of 28-29 and 29-30 May 1941, warships of the British Fleet in the Mediterranean were putting in at Sphakia for the purpose of evacuating British personnel. This action was being accomplished under extreme difficulties as a result of heavy attacks, by German low-level bombers and dive bombers. By the morning of 31 May, however, the British had succeeded in evacuating approximately 14,000 troops from Crete. (42)

The Garrison at Candia, which had not been hard pressed during the overall operation, was evacuated on the night of 28-29 May by British Warships. Only a few of the wounded, who could not be moved, and the necessary medical personnel were left behind. (43)

### THE NAVAL ACTION

Coincidental with the invasion of Crete, units of the British Mediterranean Fleet entered Cretan waters, intent upon destroying any surface craft which the Germans might have planned to utilize in a coordinated Air - Sea operation. The Fleet arrived in time to intercept, during the night 22 May 1941, a sea-borne force of about 30 small Greek schooners, convoyed by a lone Italian Destroyer, who were transporting a German expeditionary force. The British destroyed and dispersed this Force, resulting in heavy casualties to the German Expeditionary Force. (44)

The location of the British Fleet was soon known to the German Command and a great number of "Stuka" dive bombers were dispatched to give battle. The British, having practically no air support, suffered heavy losses and were forced to withdraw, thereby, virtually insuring the Germans of a victory on Crete. (45)

(42) A-4; (43) A-4; (44) (45) A-2, p. 27.

### LOSSES SUSTAINED

The reported estimated losses of personnel during the Crete operation were as follows: (46)

British:

Captured, Killed, and Wounded - 15,000

German:

Captured, Killed, and Wounded - 17,000

### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISMS

In making a study of this occupation, it is my opinion that the British were without adequate troops, equipment or weapons to stop, repel or eject the German forces prior to and after the initial attack.

The initial positions occupied by the British, although logical in respect to the key points to be defended, caused a split in their small forces, subsequently resulting in the isolation of each area. The evacuation of the small air force left the defenders without adequate air support. <sup>never really had</sup> The only air support consisted of a few sorties flown by planes based along the African Coast.

It is apparent that the British, after having occupied Crete in October 1940, did very little to establish any form of permanent defenses. The fact that the main airfield at Maleme was captured the first day indicated a failure to occupy hastily constructed defenses which would have denied the airfield to the attackers. The mere fact that a Battery of Field Artillery was lost to parachutists who had landed on their position, mainly because the artillerymen were without <sup>individual</sup> weapons, indicated a lack of preparation.

(46) A-8

The Germans, in all probability, had not decided on which objective would constitute their main effort until after their success at Maleme. As a result, after the initial landing of approximately 1,500 Parachutists in each of the Rethymnon and Candia areas, all the German effort was concentrated at Maleme.

With the initiation of their withdrawal, employing a strong rear guard action, the British successfully delayed a rapid conquest by the Germans until they could evacuate approximately half their forces from Crete. (This strong delay upset the time table of the Germans, preventing them from subsequently employing airborne forces in the Mediterranean area or utilizing Crete as a jumping-off place to attack further objectives.)

THIS IS NOT LOGICAL

The heroic action by the British Navy deserves mention. Operating in waters, over which a dominating airforce was operating, the Navy succeeded in repelling the landing of a German force which, in the event they had landed, would, in all probability have enabled the Germans to occupy Crete in much less time than it actually required. The success of this water transported force, in this writer's opinion, would have inflicted considerably more (severe) casualties on the British and would have prevented their withdrawal and evacuation from Crete.

To summarize, it was quite evident that the British had very little chance of actually repelling the initial attack of the German airborne forces. The attack had been well planned and was executed with well trained, self sustaining individuals and units. This was attested to by the Parachutists in the vicinity of Rethymnon and Candia who remained in sustained combat for approximately 10 days before making contact with their own forces.

The attack on Crete, having been unique in that it was an airborne conquest, drew the attention of military figures the world over. It was the first time in history that an airborne force, employing parachutes, gliders and air transports without the usual normal ground support, succeeded in capturing an objective on such a large scale.

It behooves us to remember that at the time of the occupation of Crete, over the period 20-30 May 1941, our army was conducting experiments in airborne landings at Fort Benning, Georgia.

#### LESSONS

1. The time to strike at parachutists is when they are in the air or immediately upon their impact with the ground, and before they can organize and attack in strength.
2. Gliders are extremely vulnerable to artillery fire immediately upon landing.
3. The paramount lesson is: A Commander of ground forces, in an isolated position, should have adequate air support in the face of an impending attack by either airborne or seaborne forces.
4. The cooperation of all forces is of the utmost importance in an operation of any type.
5. Prior planning is essential to the success of a large-scale operation.
6. Strong static defenses should be initiated and continually improved on a position that is isolated and extremely vulnerable from all directions.
7. Destroy all installations and material that may be of use to the enemy when it is necessary to evacuate a position and impossible to utilize it.

8. Communications are essential. Therefore, alternate and supplementary methods should be employed to insure that communications are maintained.

9. Surprise insures initial success which, otherwise, would be difficult to obtain.

10. Naval Forces, without adequate air cover, are vulnerable to air attack.

11. Water-Transported Forces with insufficient surface convoy escort, although enjoying air superiority, are vulnerable to attack from warships.

*Primary lesson for command and control is that  
surprise is essential for success (not only in  
ground operations)*