***The Battle of Crete: Resistance, Paratroopers, and Enigmas***

By Andrea L. Glass

BACKGROUND

After enduring the persistent night bombings and defeating the German Air Force, or the Luftwaffe, in the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, the British Commonwealth and their Allies had managed to keep the Germans at bay. The British Commonwealth forces were made up of battalions from Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and South Africa, and were battling the Germans and their Italian allies primarily in North Africa and on the seas, or in an espionage war in resistance movements across Europe. By the end of 1940, Nazi Germany controlled much of continental Europe and parts of North Africa, with Egypt, Greece, and the Eastern Mediterranean the focal points of contention.

On October 28th, 1940, the fascist Italian army invaded Greece through the occupied territory of Albania after the Greek Prime Minister, Ioannis Mtaxas, summarily rejected Italian dictator Benito Mussolini’s demands for the cession of Greece. The Italian assault was a surprise to everyone, including to *Il Duce*’s German allies, who condemned the hubris and strategic disaster of the offensive.

The Greek military, with their British allies, swiftly defeated the Italians and drove them back into Albania. The British forces moved quickly set up airfields, prepared shipyards, and drop troops on the Greek peninsula and on Crete to prepare for the inevitable further engagement with the Axis powers. In mid-March of 1941, the Germans sent thousands of troops to Greece through occupied Bulgaria to take it from the Allied forces’ grasp in Operation Marita. Grecian forces, alongside Commonwealth soldiers, fought ferociously against the advancing Germans.

A person sitting on a tank

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Greek soldier sitting on a damaged Italian L3/33 tankette after the Battle of Elaia-Kalamas. November 1940.

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The exhaustive and gallant efforts by the Greek and Commonwealth troops to repel the invading Axis armies ultimately failed, so on April 17th, 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill permitted the Commander in Chief of the Middle East, General Archibald Wavell, to order the evacuation of the Allied troops from Greece. Having naval superiority and immense presence in the Mediterranean, the Allies were able to withdraw Greek and their own troops relatively easily from the mainland of Greece by April 30th and extract them to Crete, Jerusalem, or Egypt to avoid capture or further military engagement. The Germans swiftly began oppressing the civilian Greek population as the pressed on to take the rest of Greece and set up military outposts to organize and establish the authorities and process for occupation.

Greece was an important victory for the Axis as it acted as an access point into the southern tier of Europe, North Africa, and the gateway to the Middle East via Turkey and/or the Mediterranean itself. Adolf Hitler and his Military High Command (OKW) had all agreed on the importance of the invasion of Greece but had continually debated on whether they should attack Crete immediately afterwards.

A picture containing outdoor, person, military uniform, group

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Crew members of the Australian 1st Anti-Tank Regiment with their QF 2 pounder 40mm anti-tank gun near Vevi, Greece, April 13th, 1941.

Crete is the largest island of the Greek isles and fifth largest in the Mediterranean with a long and narrow shape of about 160 miles (260 km) long and varying widths ranging from approximately 7.5 to 37 miles (12 to 60km), with its highest elevation reaching 8058 ft (2,456 m). It lies just shy of 100 miles (160km) southeast of Greece and in the southerly boundary of the Aegean and holds the position of being a vital landmass in the Mediterranean. It has several cities and villages scattered throughout its shores and interior rocky terrain. Like much of mainland Greece, Crete boasts a warm climate in the summer and cool but not predominantly cold winters, although its mountains often bore snow at their peaks. Most of the center of the island is carved by its wild mountains and rocky hills that are outlined by plains, gorges, and valleys in between.

The geography of Crete made it a complicated land to traverse but possessed natural harbors that were vital for trade. These ports were defined by the several towns along both the flatlands and coasts. Crete became known as a massively important island throughout history as it guarded the Aegean and Mediterranean, and overlooked the southern regions of Europe, the West of the Middle East, and the Northern coast of the African continent. Crete also possesses a rich history marked with war, conquest, and occupation, dating back to the ancient Greeks. Crete had been ruled then the Romans, the Byzantine Empire, the Andalusian Arabs from North Africa, the Byzantine Empire once again, the Venetian Republic, and finally the Ottomans in 1669, who controlled the island until it became independent in 1898. The Cretan state had eventually became part of Greece itself in 1913 after the conclusion of the Balkans War.

During the war, small outposts of Greeks and local Cretan forces were garrisoned on the isle, and several outposts of British and other Allied troops were stationed on Crete and its smaller neighboring islands. Despite its size, the ambition of Germany to take Crete was not going to be an easy fight, especially with the number of British forces now retreated and stationed on the island. This attack on Crete could potentially pull supplies, troops, and resources away from the tremendous upcoming operation against the Soviets, and that mission was far more important to the German High Command than the efforts and means to occupy a small island in the Mediterranean.

Once Greece was conquered, the High Command of the Army (OKH) focused on the impending invasion of the Soviet Union and did not see the necessity of an assault of Crete to be a wise endeavor. The growing power of the Soviet forces in Russia and Ukraine had led Hitler to become overly concerned of a possible Soviet invasion into German occupied territories, so the High Command began organizing their troops for the Russian offensive. This undertaking would be known as Operation Barbarossa (Red Beard), so named after the famed Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa Hohenstaufen, who had died in 1190 CE after drowning in a river in what is now Turkey whilst en route to the Levant to take part in the Third Crusade. Although history has shown an invasion of Russia generally does not work well for the conquering army, perhaps the unwise decision to name the mission after a Crusader who died ridiculously was more of a fortuitous indication to the impending failure of the Nazi invasion of Russia rather than a poor attempt by the Nazis to obtain military grandeur and glory.

Hitler was, notwithstanding of the High Command’s opinion, deeply troubled by the potential threat Allied controlled Crete could play should the Allies use the island to organize maneuvers against the Axis occupied Romanian oilfields, a vital resource of the Axis War Machine, or even more dangerously, pose a reasonable threat to Operation Barbarossa. The Luftwaffe commanders in the High Command voiced an interest in taking Crete, as it would allow them to use the airfields on Crete for base operations and better access to the North African theater and the German held Mediterranean territories. It would also, perhaps, allow the German air force to regain their superiority following the devastating losses in the Battle of Britain. Eventually, the High Command agreed on the importance of acquiring Crete and set to work to plan the invasion, code name Operation Mercury, led by General Kurt Student, commander of the Luftwaffe XI Air Corps.

PRELUDE

On April 26th, the British Commonwealth heard the first hint of a plot of an impending invasion of Crete after British Intelligence successfully deciphered the intercepted wireless traffic communication sent to different branches of the German military from the High Command Intelligence through the Enigma machine. The message, part of what would be known as Directive 28, stated that Crete would serve as the German operational base for the Luftwaffe to continue its air assaults in the Mediterranean and North Africa in unison with the impending invasion of the Soviet Union. Although the message was understood and there was significant evidence of troop movement in the Mediterranean and the neighboring territories in Greece and along the Aegean, the British were wary of trusting the newly acquired intel, as well as what reports on military operations were occurring, coming in from Greece, North Africa, and neighboring occupied territories.

The British Chiefs of Staff believed the message could have been an attempt by the Axis powers to misdirect the focus of the Allied forces from a potentially different target, such as attacking the Allied controlled regions of the Suez Canal, oilfields in Iran, or refineries in Palestine. While there was no evidence of this being the case, the concern was very real. If any or all those objectives were to be attacked and indeed be captured, it would almost certainly cripple the British war effort. The naval base on Crete’s northwest coast at Suda Bay would be essential for refueling and guarding much of the Allied forces’ fiscal assets, so Crete, while lower on the necessity for the Allies, was a location invaluable to the cause.

Churchill agreed with the possibility of the mention of Crete being a false lead, but eventually was convinced of the impending engagements as the battle for Greece swayed in favor of Axis control. In a telegram to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff General Sir John Dill, Churchill stated, “It is necessary that all the efforts are made to forward, immediately, weapons and reserves on the island and enough men to defend it [. . .] to lose Crete because we had not sufficient bulk of forces it would be a crime.”

Thousands of Allies were captured trying to evacuate Greece, and the British began moving faster, abandoning their heavy gear to get on ships and escape the advancing Germans. The exhausted Allied troops being evacuated from Greece, many, despite being predominantly lacking in equipment and weapons, were sent to Crete to strengthen the comparatively small number of Greek, Cretan, and Commonwealth soldiers already present on the island until new and fresh reinforcements could be sent. Out of the approximate 42,000 troops on Crete, only about 15,000 were battle ready.

As of April 30th, Wavell gave New Zealander commander Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg the command of the Commonwealth and Cretan forces, or “Creforce.” Freyberg’s role was to halt the invasion and answer to Major General E.C. Weston of the Royal Marines. Weston would be the senior officer on Crete and would oversee the Mobile Naval Base Defense Organization (MNBDO) command on Suda Bay with the makeshift 16th and 17th Australian Battalions.



Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg, foreground, on Crete, May 1941.

The commanders on Crete had been informed of the potential invasion over the course of mid-April and through early May when it was reported to them that several different Axis transports and aircrafts were pulled from routine operations and slated to be preparing for a special mission in Greece and Axis occupied southeastern Europe. These tactics in the end of April showed the intention of preparing an invasion force and setting up for a bombing campaign. On May 1st, the Germans began bombing parts of Crete, and fuel, supplies, and ammunition were being delivered to the Fliegerkorps XI stationed in Greece on May 5th. Further arrangements were noted to be preparing troops, crafts, and equipment for an offensive to occur sometime soon, albeit not immediately. In response, the Allies scrapped together what weaponry they could get, and by the early part of May, had a total of 68 antiaircraft (AA) guns of varying sizes and weights.

On May 15th, Churchill formally announced his intention for the British and the Allies to fight against the incoming attack by the Nazis, and Britain would defend the island of Crete. He spoke in such a way to make sure the public understood the injustices and brutality of the German regime to other nations not involved in the war (such as the United States, who would officially join the war on the side of the Allies after the events of the Attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941). The message Churchill gave was clear: Crete would not be conquered by the Germans without a fight.

THE INVASION AND DEFENSE

Commanders

Allied Forces:

Lieutenant Bernard Freyberg, VC

Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham

Axis Forces:

General Kurt Student

Numbers[[1]](#footnote-1):

Allied:

42,000

-British: 16,000

-Commonwealth: 14,000

-Greek: 12,000

Axis:

32,000:

-German: 29,000

-Italian: 3,000

The Battle (May 20th-June 1st, 1941)

The Battle of Crete began in late May of 1941. It was a crucial and defining moment of the Second World War, as well as for the progression of strategy and military ingenuity of modern warfare overall. It was the first time in history where a massive paratrooper force was deployed as an invasion force; it would be a defining moment for the advancement of modern warfare. It was also the foremost instance of the Nazis having to contend with a unified armed civilian movement, and the first time the Allies used information acquired through decoded messages of the German Enigma machine to then plan their defenses and counteroffensive against the German army. With war raging, the British Commonwealth endeavored to keep control on the Mediterranean Sea and keep the Axis forces of Italy, Germany, and the puppet administrations of Nazi collaborators at bay in Europe and North Africa.

On May 20th, at 0800, two hours after intense bombing, the invasion began with German paratroopers (*Fallschirmjägers*) jumping from twelve Junkers (Ju) 52s over the Maleme airfield and surrounding areas. The paratroopers, despite being well off compared to the Allied troops, were not heavily armed, carrying only their knives, a short rifle and/or submachine guns, and pistols in the jump, while their heavy machine guns and weaponry were parachuted in separately to designated drop zones. With their precarious descent no longer a surprise attack and being so lightly armed, they were quickly set upon by the Greeks outside of Chania, as well the 5th Brigade, made up of the 21st, 22nd, 23rd, and 28th (Māori) New Zealand Battalions as the Junkers endured heavy antiaircraft fire.

The Fallschirmjägers were easy prey and were cut down in staggering numbers as they glided down to land outside of the Maleme Airfield and Chania. For the Germans, the Company of the III Battalion Assault Regiment lost 112 out of the 126 paratroopers, and four hundred out of six hundred of the III Battalion were killed. Most of the gliders that followed the paratroopers were hit by mortars within moments of landing or were killed en route to the ground. The glider troops, also lightly armed, and paratroopers who had missed their drop zones or had survived the Allied defenses, quickly regrouped, and set up a defensive West of the airfield, or in the “Prison Valley” just outside of Chania, southwest of Suda Bay.

A picture containing outdoor

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German paratroopers are shown leaping from Ju-52s, with one ablaze having been severely damaged by antiaircraft fire and is about to crash.

Glider troops attempted to land north of Suda Bay moved to take out the antiaircraft guns and communication outposts near Hania, which was protected by the 4th New Zealand Brigade. The Allies shot down many of the gliders as they came in or fired upon the grounded troops as they moved towards their positions. Many were captured, and those that escaped were routed and forced to retreat to recover from the failed assault.

As the battle raged on the one side of the island, a second wave of transports, protected by the support of the *Luftwaffe* and Italian Airforce (*Regina Aeronautica*), arrived in the mid-late afternoon to drop more troops via parachutes and gliders, as one group focused on laying siege to Retimo and the other on Heraklion. Lieutenant Colonel Ian Campbell, who oversaw the 4th and 5th Regiment of the Greeks and the 19th Australian Brigade, fought the paratroopers landing at Retimo in the afternoon of the first day while at Heraklion, the British 14th Brigade, 2/4th Australian Battalion, and Greek 3rd and 7th Battalions and the 5th Division (Garrison) were waiting for the paratroopers under the command of Brigadier B.H. Chappel. The Allies were prepared for their arrival and easily overwhelmed the Axis soldiers, causing a multitude of casualties despite the Allies lacking supplies, ammunition, and equipment. At Heraklion, the Nazis managed to break the defensive line and take the barracks and docks on the western side of the town, but with a swift counterattack led by the Greeks, the Allies easily recaptured both points. Eventually, the severely exhausted and poorly armed Greek soldiers stationed in and around the city were relieved of their post by the New Zealanders and moved to a defensive position on the highway to Knossos.

By the evening of the first day, the Germans had not achieved any of their objectives, although they managed to push the New Zealanders back from the knoll overlooking the airfield from the south, Hill 107, the Germans had to move out of their fortified position to engage with the Allied troops and suffered further casualties to gain any new ground. At the same time, the 8th Greek Regiment and some of the Cretan forces managed to suppress the advancing paratroopers of the 95th Reconnaissance Battalion on Paleochora and Kolimari as police, cadets and provisional military personnel worked alongside armed civilians worked together to subdue the detachment of paratroopers at Kastelli. Due to their efforts, further Allied reinforcements from Egypt could land and bolster the Allied defensive of Crete. Freyberg relayed to Wavell: “Today has been a hard one. We have been hard pressed. So far, I believe, we hold aerodromes at Retimo, Heraklion, and Maleme, and the two harbours. Margin by which we hold them is a bare one, and it would be wrong of me to paint an optimistic picture. Fighting has been heavy, and we have killed large numbers of Germans. Communications are most difficult.”

Map

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Map of Crete May 1941, with the paratrooper drop zones and topography of the island.

The civilians of Crete worked alongside the Allied troops, fighting beside them, and helping to supply them and guide them around the island, as well as fighting independently to take out the invaders with their rudimentary weapons, such as old rifles, scythes, shovels, clubs, and kitchen knives. This was the first time the Germans faced such great opposition from the civilian population from the onset, rather than just small pockets of resistance or only a military force.

By the evening, the Germans had cut all the communications between the two westernmost companies of the New Zealander brigades. Battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Andrew VC, commander of the eastern side of the airfield, believed that the lacking communication was a result of western side of the battalion being overwhelmed by enemy forces, and called for reinforcements. This request was denied by Brigadier James Hargest, who oversaw the 5th New Zealand Battalion. Hargest mistakenly thought the 23rd was still fiercely engaged in combat with German paratroopers in their own zone, and if he were to permit pulling troops from one side of the airfield to fortify another, it would give the Germans an opportunity to flank and out maneuver the Allies.

The German commanders were at a loss as to why their massive paratrooper mission had not caught the Allies off guard, especially since they had maximized their efforts to surprise the Allies on Crete by dropping their troops in four distinct and diverse regions. It was unknown to them that the British Intelligence had successfully intercepted and deciphered the Luftwaffe Enigma codes and had learned of the possible attack through the wireless messages sent to and from the German High Command. General Student, from Athens, would then order the German paratroopers and his commanders to focus mainly on the airbase at Maleme, since it was the only place on Crete where the Germans had had some relative success against the Allied defenses.



A unit of New Zealanders awaiting an enemy behind a stone wall. They are armed with bolt-action Enfield rifles with fixed bayonets; the third soldier (in the center-left) is holding a Thompson submachine gun (often called a Tommy Gun, made famous by American gangsters in the 1920s and 1930s). This picture is excellent representation of how the Allied soldiers fighting in Crete were equipped following their hasty departure from Greece, having had to depart and leave much of their weaponry and gear behind.

In the early hours of the morning of May 21st, with Hargest’s permission, Andrew used the cover of darkness to move the 22nd Infantry Battalion up to Hill 107, leaving the Maleme airfield unprotected. This would be the downfall of the Allied defense and would lead to the eventual defeat of the Allies on Crete. Captain Campbell, leading the westernmost company of the 22nd, was unaware of what was taking place on the eastern side, and did not learn of the withdrawal of the eastern company until the morning of May 21st. After a reconnaissance flight over the airfield, the Germans learned of the Allied retreat and were able to quickly take advantage of the Allied forces’ miscommunication and confusion, and swiftly took the airfield at Maleme. This allowed the Germans to begin bringing in larger number of reinforcements unimpeded with a large sea-based deployment of troops and more parachute drops.

Freyberg ordered a counterattack of the Maleme airfield in the afternoon of the second day to retake it as Heraklion was swiftly bombed for not surrendering to the Axis threats. Because there had not been an attack at Hania, Freyberg had the 2/8th moved to Suda, and the 2/7th Battalion was ordered to move 18 miles (29 km) to head north into the region of Maleme to relieve the 20th Battalion and help with the counterattack on the airfield. Because of the Luftwaffe causing severe delays in acquiring transport vehicles, the 2/7th marched across the rough terrain on foot to the airfield, arriving at about 2330. The 20th Battalion took an additional three hours to get to the staging area by the airbase, arriving around 0245 on May 22nd. About forty-five minutes later at 0330, the Allies began the counterattack. As daylight approached, however, the Allies were swiftly pushed back with the arrival of German air support.

Meanwhile, Hargest was eventually contacted by Andrew who informed him of the failed counterattack and his withdrawal. Hargest reluctantly agreed and promised to send two companies, the 28th Māori and 23rd Battalions, to support and reinforce Andrew. Andrew moved his troops shortly after 2100 southeast to the Vineyard Ridge, practically handing the airfield over to the Germans. The 28th reached the airbase but did not meet up with the 23rd, which could have given the Allies the opportunity to attack the airfield again and retake it.

Captain Campbell likewise withdrew his troops, and by the morning of May 21st, Captain Johnson of Company C of the 22nd also led his men away from the airfield as the Germans moved to take Hill 107. Unbeknownst to the Allies, the Germans were in dire straits with low quantities of ammunition. One German officers wrote, “Fortunately for us, the New Zealanders did not counterattack. We were so short of ammunition that, had they done so, we should have had to fight them off with stones and sheath-knives.” The 100th *Gebirgsjäger* Regiment arrived in Maleme in the evening of May 21st, while the 3rd *Fallschirmjäger* Regiment took Prison Valley and moved to meet up with the other German. This allowed their advantage to be secured.



Soldiers of the 5th Gebirgsjäger (Mountain) Division load up onto a Junker Ju-52 transport.

Andrew was injured during the counterattack and his men were facing further conflicts with the German paratroopers, he had no choice but to order the 22nd Regiment to fall back. Due to the bungled affair over the Maleme Airfield, Brigadier George Alan Vasey and Lieutenant-Colonel William Cremer of the British military command criticized Freyberg for his failure to retain the grounds and defend it, as well as his incapacity to recover it. Hargest blamed Freyberg for the loss of the airfield, as did many others in the military. The loss of the airfield and, overall, all of Crete, and the shame and anger over the failure of the mission would be something Freyberg would have to deal with for much of his life during and following the war.

Although Freyberg misunderstood Hargest’s message, Freyberg was concerned over the arrival of seaborne reinforcements. His seeming ambivalence towards the possibility of another air attack or if the Germans would instead utilize the Mediterranean to launch a seaborne attack. Whether he simply was erroneous in his decision making or was just hesitant without further deciphered intelligence from the Enigma machine or intel gathered on the island, Freyberg did not proceed with furthering the defenses of the airfields. Historian Antony Beevor wrote that the commanders “all accepted the principle of counterattack yet showed little enthusiasm for the enterprise. [. . .] Without action to prevent a German build-up and attack from Maleme, a German victory became inevitable.” Hesitation and uncertainty would be the poison to the Allied forces and the downfall of their control of Crete.

On May 23rd, having been busy dealing with the paratroopers, the British Commonwealth now faced fresh well-armed German soldiers, and the Allies were facing further dire situations. By May 24th, the Germans had bombed the Allies on Kastelli and moved their mountain division to attack the town. By doing so, imprisoned Axis paratroopers escaped and were able to fight back against the New Zealand officers assigned to oversee the Greek platoons and the prisoners, either killing or capturing them. Afterwards, the escapees rejoined their fellow Axis troops. The Greeks attempted to subdue the Germans but did not have the weaponry to do so and were forced to retreat. Under the cover of night, a few hundred special operation Layforce commandos of the 50/52 Commandos were deployed. They were assigned to carryout rearguard proceedings to help with the evacuation orders of Suda Bay.

NAVAL AND AIR BATTLES

As the Allied troops were combating the Axis forces on the island in a frustrating counterattack, British Commonwealth naval commander Admiral Andrew Cunningham deployed Force C, commanded by Rear Admiral Edward Leigh Stuart King to move against the next wave of Axis landing parties. The Germans attempted a sea landing near Maleme using several fishing boats (also called caïques) while being escorted by the Italian torpedo boat the *Lupo*. Force D, composed of four destroyers and 3 light cruisers, were under the command of Rear Admiral Irvine Glennie and they successfully intercepted the convoy before midnight of May 22nd, and despite having the torpedo boat present, the Germans lost over half of their caïques and were forced to flee. The British ships in Force D went relatively unscathed, where only the *HMS Orion* received minor damage caused by friendly fire.

Over 2,000 German troops were rescued from the sea by Italian naval commander Francesco Mimbelli, who successfully evade the overwhelming British naval presence. In the skirmish, only 2 British sailors died, while the Axis forces lost a total of 299 personnel. Almost all the 3rd Battalion of the 100th Mountain Regiment in the battle. Of the small boats en route to the shore, six managed to escape, eight were sunk, and only one landed any troops on the beach. The men swiftly moved to meet up with the other German forces at Chania.

King’s fleet, comprised of three cruisers and four destroyers, moved to the Aegean Sea via the Kasos Straight to attack a second German convoy and other transport ships being escorted by the Italian torpedo ship, the *Sagittario*, and several Luftwaffe aircrafts. Force C swiftly moved to stop the enemy ships and endured a bombardment to sink one of the enemy crafts.

As Force C met the convoy and diverted their attempts to land, Force A1 under Rear Admiral H.B. Rawlings and Force B under Captain Henry A. Rowley met up with Rear Admiral Irvine Glennie’s Force D to the west of Antikythera. Fearful of high angle antiaircraft ammo shortages, the *HMS Orion*, *HMS Ajax*, and *HMS Dido* were ordered to return to Alexandria with Force D to be restocked with ammunition while the *HMS Gloucester* and *HMS Fiji* were to remain with Force A1. Rear Admiral King requested aid for the *Naiad* at about 1225, and Force A1 arrived between 1300 and 1400. King, the senior officer, took charge of the ships. The convoys were bombarded by continual air strikes, and both the *HMS Warspite* and *HMS Greyhound* were hit with the *Greyhound* eventually sinking.

Survivors of the ships were picked up by the *HMS Kandahar* and *HMS Kingston*, while the *HMS Fiji* and *HMS Gloucester* provided antiaircraft coverage. King had been unaware of the shortages of arms on the *Gloucester* and *Fiji* and was eventually informed by Rawlings while the ships returned fire on the Luftwaffe. The Royal Navy moved to escape, and the *Gloucester* was struck heavily, and was left behind during the tactical countermeasures the ships needed to take to avoid the persistent bombing the rest of the fleet was enduring. The *Gloucester* sank, and of the 807 sailors and officers on board, twenty-two officers and seven hundred enlisted sailors perished. The air attacks continued, and bombarded *HMS Valiant* and *Fiji*, who became disabled at 1845. At 2015, including three more bombardments by Luftwaffe pilot Lieutenant Gerhard Brenner flying a Ju 88, *HMS Fiji* sank. The *Kingston* and *Kandahar* picked up about 500 out of the 900 survivors of the *Fiji*.

Force C managed to escape more of the Luftwaffe attacks as the pilots strove to avoid accidentally killing their own men in the water. Force C suffered many casualties and had two severely damaged ships (*HMS Naiad* and *HMS Carlisle*), and King chose, because of ammunition shortages and risk of continued engagement with the bombers, to not continue the fight despite having the numerical and military superiority. The Axis convoy managed to eventually escape thanks to the maneuverings of the *Sagittario*, the ferocity of the Luftwaffe, and the mercy of the British, but the Axis did not pursue their plan to land and instead aborted the mission. Despite the heavy losses, the Allied also took out five Ju 87s and five Ju 88s, damaging another sixteen, some of which alter crash landed, through antiaircraft fire.

On May 21st, the naval force the Fifth Destroyer Flotilla under the command of Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten left Malta and on May 23rd, arrived in the region where the *Gloucester* and *Fiji* sank. Having only arrived shortly after the sinking, the convoy proceeded to help pick up survivors upon meeting up with the fleet. The Flotilla included *HMS Kelly*, *HMS Kelvin*, *HMS Kipling*, *HMS Jackal*, and the *HMS Kashmir*.

A person in a hat looking at a ship in the water

Description automatically generated with low confidence

The *HMS Kelly* on the sea, as photographed by the *HMS Kipling*, April 1941

The ships were split up to attack another convoy of German ships, bombard the Germans at Maleme, or to continue the search and rescue. The *Kelly*, *Kipling*, and *Kashmir* were sent to return to Alexandria, but were attacked by 24 Ju 87s on the Western side of Crete. The *Kashmir* was hit repeatedly and sank quickly, and the *Kelly* managed to down three aircraft before sinking. The *Kipling* endured 87 bombardments but continued to operate and pick up a total of 297 survivors. This incredible engagement inspired the 1942 patriotic war film “In Which We Serve” by Noël Coward. The remaining intact ships were then reorganized to help with the upcoming evacuation of Crete.*MS*

THE GERMAN ASSAULT AND ALLIED RETREAT

In the early morning of May 27th, the 28th Regiment of Māori, the Australian 2/7th, and the Australian 2/8th led a bayonet charge (dubbed the “Battle of 42nd Street, so named after the 42nd Royal Engineers), supported by the 23rd, 21st, 28th, 22nd, and 19th New Zealanders against the German blockade. The Germans suffered about 280 casualties and 3 imprisoned, while the Allied had only 52 casualties. At about 0845, Wavell told Churchill Crete was lost, and the evacuation was ordered, as Freyberg had “decided that evacuation was inevitable” and the Germans blockaded the road between Chania and Suda.

On May 28th, the Allies began the process to withdraw from Heraklion and evacuate on Royal Navy ships and were able to disembark with 3,500 troops at 0245 the following morning. As the day wore on, the Axis pushed the Allies down south, and bombarded them as they fled. The garrisons of Suda and Beritania evacuated and headed towards Sfakia. Enduring further bombings, the naval transports arrived on the 29th and began to try the evacuation process for the fleeing soldiers as the airfields of Retimo and Heraklion fell into German control.

Between May 28th and June 1st, between 18,600 of the 32,000 British troops were evacuated from Crete. By the time the Germans took control of Crete, about 12,000 British and Dominion soldiers were still on the island. Colonel Campbell, wanting to end the devastation of his men at Retimo, ceded his garrison on May 30th, and on June 1st, the remaining 5,000 defenders at Sfakia surrendered. The Allied soldiers who had managed to escape the Germans and/or had been unable to evacuate the island were either picked up by the Nazis during patrols or joined up with the local resistance movement and learned to survive in the rough terrain. They would help organize and lead raids and attacks on the occupying German army, or coordinate with SOE operators sent to infiltrate the German forces on Crete.

A picture containing person, boat, outdoor

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Wounded and evacuated British Commonwealth soldiers disembark from a transport ship at a port in Egypt after being departing from Crete, May 31st, 1941.

Casualties:

Allied:

Dead or Missing: ~4,000

Injured: ~1,900

Captured: ~17,000

Ships Destroyed: 9

Ships Damaged: 18

Axis:

Dead or Missing: 4,041

Injured: 2,640

Captured: 17

Aircraft Destroyed: 370

AFTERMATH

Due to the sheer number of civilians involved in the defense of the island and no way to tell innocents apart from the participating fighters, many Cretans were subjected to tremendous cruelty and violence, with massacres, rapes, looting, torture, and destruction of property part of the normal procedure on the island under the regime of General Student. Mass executions were carried out in multiple villages and towns, often killing a substantial number of men from an area regardless of affiliation or action. One of the more notorious acts of violence occurred in what is now remembered as the Holocaust of Kedros, where General Friederich-Wilhelm “the Butcher of Crete” Müller ordered the mass execution of 164 civilians. The cruel treatment of the Cretans would continue throughout the war, especially when a rebellious act occurred, until the liberation of Crete in 1944.

A picture containing text, outdoor, tree, grass

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Massacred Cretan civilians, June 1941. This scene was a common sight on the island following the defeat and retreat of the Allies. Photo by Franz Peter Weixler, German Federal Archives (*[Bundesarchiv](http://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/index.php?barch_item=en_help" \l "f07" \t "_bundesarchiv)*[)](http://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/index.php?barch_item=en_help" \l "f07" \t "_bundesarchiv). Bild 101I-166-0527-04.

The brutal battles of the Royal Navy and the Luftwaffe led to several high casualty encounters. Admiral Cunningham advised against further daylight operations because the Luftwaffe had superiority, but the Chiefs of Staff firmly disagreed. The Commonwealth command, in response to the loss of Crete, were deeply upset with the Army’s failure to comprehend the necessity for the airfields and their place in modern warfare. They responded by reorganizing the RAF to include training to handle and be responsible for all defenses of airbases and airfields. On February 1st, 1942, the Royal Air Force also included a RAF Regiment that focused on defending airstrips and bases. The Allies also began training armed paratrooper regiments as well, inspired by the preliminary attacks the Germans led in the first few days of the Battle.

Following the Battle of Crete, Adolf Hitler was disturbed by the number of casualties the Germans suffered and ordered the paratroopers’ organization to be restructured. Instead of serving as an independent airborne force, the paratroopers were integrated into serving as a part of the ground infantry battalions. Hitler believed, since the paratroopers primary use was surprise attacks and these skills had been compromised after they had suffered massive losses during the invasion of Crete, the airborne soldiers would be better suited for on the ground infantry operations. The paratroopers, along with the Fliegerkorps VIII, would be sent from Greece and Crete up to Poland to serve in the invasion of the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa on June 22nd.

ADDITIONAL:

Iraqi nationalist politician and Prime Minister Rashid Ali would negotiate with the Axis authorities after refusing to follow British commands of allegiance, and appeal to the Germans for aid against the British. Conflict between the British and Iraqis would lead to a short thirty-day war to put down a coup by Ali and his allies. This month-long war, the Anglo-Iraqi war, lasted from May 2nd to May 31st and was relatively easily put down by the British forces. The British would control Iraq for the remainder of the war following the reinstatement of British ally Prince ‘Abd al-Illah to serve as Regent of Iraq.

The most famous participant of the Battle of Crete was Max Schmeling, a drafted German paratrooper who was internationally renowned and best remembered for being a heavyweight champion boxer, one of Adolf Hitler’s favorites. Schmeling was best remembered, first, for his 1933 loss to Jewish heavyweight champion Max Baer, and then his unexpected 1936 knockout win in the twelfth-round against the undefeated Joe Louis. In the much-anticipated rematch with Louis, dubbed “The Battle of the Century,” Schmeling became even more notable for his shocking knockout and loss to Louis in the first round at Yankee Stadium in 1938. The loss to Louis had been a tremendous embarrassment for Germany; the Nazis were devastated that a top Aryan German athlete had been defeated by an African American (just as they had been when he lost to a Jew in 1933). Schmeling was shamed for the loss when his return home, albeit he was relatively unphased by it and continued to fight in boxing matches in Europe and Germany. He went on to win both the European and German heavyweight championships in the same day.

Schmeling was also notorious in Nazi Germany for his noncompliance to the Nazi ideologies. When Adolf Hitler personally demanded Schmeling end his camaraderie with his Jewish friend and fight promoter, Joe Jacobs, Schmeling unreservedly refused. He also was personally responsible for saving two Jewish children in 1938, hiding them in his Berlin apartment during *Kristallnacht*. Schmeling, following his draft and training, fought in the invasion of Crete, and was injured in the leg by shrapnel. He eventually was discharged, and he returned home to the German capital in 1944. He was known to the Allied POWs in Germany, as he would spend time visiting prisoner of war camps and appealing to the commanders to provide better services and conditions for the prisoners through the remaining year of the war. Schmeling survived the entirety of the war, and eventually reconnected with and became friends with his former opponent Joe Louis.

1. Please note these are approximate numbers of participants; multiple sources have stated different numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)