

Heraklion - Evacuation

Middle East Command notified Brigadier Chappel, Heraklion section commander, that a rescue force consisting of the cruisers "Ajax", "Dido" and "Orion" escorted by the destroyers "Hasty", "Havoc", "Hereward", "Hotspur", "Imperial" and "Jackal" would evacuate 4000 men on the night of 28th May.

The force departed from Alexandria at 6 a.m. on 27th May but "Ajax", damaged during a bombing attack, was forced to return. "Imperial", after a near miss, continued in spite of some damage.

Captain Baglin recalls that after receiving instructions for preparations for the evacuation, timed from 2300 hours onwards on the night of the 28th May, he issued orders to mark out the route past 7th Battery H.Q. on to the mole, where destroyers would embark the troops. Rope and strips of cloth staked along the route would guide personnel moving in darkness to the embarkation points. The destroyers would wait for only a few minutes before transporting their loads to the cruisers waiting off-shore. No lights of any description were to be shown either by embarking troops or the naval vessels.

All units proceeded to damage vehicles; guns were spiked and vital parts removed; clothing was torn and supplies destroyed to deny their use to the enemy. Timed demolition charges were planted in dumps and troops used all their acquired skills in preparing booby traps with grenades.

Small groups assembled as planned, while rear guards provided sufficient activity to allay any enemy suspicions that anything unusual was afoot. In the darkness, in single file, troops were ready to move as instructed along the mole at the appointed time. As could be expected, in the pitch darkness there was some confusion with men stumbling and cursing, but the lines kept moving steadily.

Gunner Armitage of "B" Troop wrote: "*As we made our way under cover of darkness on the outskirts of the town, we noticed there were dead Germans everywhere and the stench was terrible.*" The fumes of smouldering wreckage of bombed buildings added to the stench from broken sewers, as the men moving forward tried to keep in touch with their mates. Captain Baglin admits that he was intent on making sure that his driver, Gunner Tommy Newcombe, D.C.M. and a W.W.1 soldier, who had shared so much with him, should not be left behind. The same thoughts were in the minds of many members of gun crews who, in the hours

ahead, owed their lives to, or gave their lives for, their mates.

As each destroyer was loaded, it moved out to the waiting cruisers. Sailors formed human chains linking hands to guide the troops across the heaving gang-planks up on to the larger vessels.

Most of 7th Battery boarded the "Hereward" first, and then transferred to the "Dido", but the majority of "B" Troop men were on the "Hereward" when the convoy put to sea. A few of the Battery who had been in hospital were among those transferred to the "Orion".

Fortunately, unaware of the important target in the harbor that night, the enemy had not made his customary raids or dropped flares, and by 1 a.m. when the last manned-post had been abandoned, all those able to move had been loaded. The fleet sailed at 3.20 a.m. unopposed.

On all those ships, the crews, who had been risking their lives daily at sea for many weeks, treated the weary troops as heroes, gave them cigarettes, soup, cocoa or a tot of rum and earned the heart felt, "Thank God for the Navy" from every man.

The convoy moved off, with orders to maintain 'full speed ahead', in the hope of passing through the narrow Kaso Strait before daylight brought the inevitable air attacks. Half an hour later, the "Imperial's" steering jammed as the result of earlier bomb damage. As she was unable to steer, "Hotspur" was sent back to take off all her 900 men aboard before "Imperial" was sunk by torpedoes.

The valuable time lost in this rescue found the convoy still in Kaso Strait when "Hereward" suffered a direct hit at 0625 hours. With the convoy at risk in such dangerous waters, Admiral Rawlings had no other choice than to leave her and try to get the rest of the convoy safely to Alexandria.

Several 7th Battery men on board "Hereward" later recorded their recollections of subsequent events.

Gunner Bill Dellar's account is typical of the experience of many: *"On clambering aboard the "Hereward" we went through one compartment below decks and then into another where water-tight doors were closed.*

"This compartment had no stairway – just a manhole in the upper deck and one in the floor through which a rope, with a sling attached, fed the guns above from the magazine below us. We were tired and slept.

"About 5.30 a.m., an alarm sounded. False alarm. Then another, and this time a near miss shook the plates against which I was resting. Another landed amidships, evidently penetrating the boiler room, bursting pipes and badly burning some of the crew.

"Lights in our compartment failed and in darkness, except for

the light through the manhole above us, we began climbing up or were pulled up on deck. Here, a Petty Officer told us to leave immediately as it was every man for himself!

"The ship was making no way and the sea was already dotted with soldiers and sailors, some clinging to Carley floats, others floating or drifting on the surface clinging to pieces of wreckage. A coating of oil was spreading on the surface. Ropes dangling from the rails into the water supported a number of men.

"My mate, Gunner Burns, and I found two blow-up type life-belts hanging behind a cabin door. One was O.K. but the other had the plug missing. We blew it up and tied the rubber teat with a piece of cord, doubled it over and tied it again like a football bladder. We pulled a door from a cabin, souvenired a hammock and lashed it rolled up to the door. As we entered the water and paddled along the side of the ship so many joined us that our raft sank.

"What to do? My mate decided to climb back on board. I decided to swim and risk drowning rather than be blown up, as I saw smoke rising from the ship and planes were still circling.

"I heard another of my mates, Gunner "Pud" Moody, say he couldn't swim, and Bombardier Archie Moncur said, "Don't worry I will look after you." Unfortunately none of them survived.

"From the top of the swell, the coast of Crete was visible with white breakers pounding the cliff face. Feeling drowsy later, I was thinking it would be easy to let go, when I sighted a Carley float with Gunner Roy Thomson in it. I joined him and later I woke in an Itie M.T.B. with raging thirst.

"Roy assured me we had swum to the motor torpedo boat, whose crew treated us well and took us to Scarpento. Later we travelled by destroyer to Rhodes."

It had been said that the Italian Navy had not forgotten the help given to their own survivors after the Battle of Matapan.

Gunner Tom Chadwick and Gunner Harry Anchen, after "legging-up" twenty or thirty chaps through the manhole above them, decided it was their turn to get out. On reaching the deck they "were astonished to see many men swimming in the Mediterranean as the order to 'abandon ship' had been given." Gunner Chadwick continued, "We stripped to our shirt and shorts and dived in. Cyril O'Meara and Jim 'Chippie' Gibson swam nearby, suggesting that we should take our clothes off as it would be easier to swim. Unfortunately, neither Cyril nor Chippie made it." Some six hours later, when he lost his grip of the paravane they were holding on to, and felt he was "gone for all money", he called "Bomber" and 'Bomber' Mannix grabbed him. When he came to the first thing he saw was Gunner Jack Nicholson, "as naked as the day he was born". He was so far gone that, having been rescued, he

didn't realise until he landed at Scarpento Island that he was a P.O.W.

Among the many instances of men helping their mates to survive, the efforts of Lieutenant Jim Mann of "B" Troop earned the admiration of all for the manner in which he helped in the confusion when the order "Abandon Ship" was given. He moved amongst the men in the water, later refusing to take a place on the crowded floats, and swam from group to group encouraging the men. Unfortunately, he was one of the many who did not survive.

Various accounts have been given of the fate of the "Hereward". Gavin Long, in the official history, states that: "*The Hereward was hit and beached and her crew and the troops on board taken prisoner.*"⁽⁶¹⁾ but the Admiralty's official record of "Hereward's" service states: *H.M.S. "Hereward", a Hero class destroyer of 1340 tons built in 1936 was 323 feet long and 33 feet in breadth; armed with 4 x 4.7" Q.F. and 2 x 5" M.G. and 4 Lewis guns*. From the out-break of war she participated fully and nobly in every type of naval activity – captured a German disguised merchant ship, escorted Canadian troops, assisted in evacuation from Holland; engaged in Mediterranean battles with Italian fleet; assisted commando desert landings; destroyed Italian submarine; escorted convoys to Malta, Gibraltar, Egypt; torpedoed Italian destroyer; Battle of Matapan; evacuation from Greece; with Force D intercepted German sea-borne invasion troops north of Crete and that "*during evacuation from Crete she was hit by dive-bombers and eventually sunk by further bombing close to the Cretan coast.*"⁽⁶²⁾ This confirms the belief held by 7th Battery survivors.

Bill Dellar's poem, written while he was a P.O.W. in 1941, pays a sincere tribute from the army to those gallant seamen, who risked so much, in the highest tradition of the Royal Navy, to come to the aid of their comrades in their hour of need. He remembers a ship whose Battle Honors included: Atlantic 1940, Calabria 1940, Spartivento 1940, Libya 1940, Mediterranean 1940-41, Greece 1941, Crete 1941.

The Hereward

*It was early in the morning of the twenty-ninth of May
When she received the warning of Stukas on the way.
"HEREWARD", that grand old ship, a destroyer of the Fleet
Was sorely overloaded with evacuees from Crete.
Guarding her two mother ships, unable to manoeuvre
A fighter to the last, as records well will prove her.
Her four point sevens flinging death into the skies
Mingled with the chatter of her multiple point fives.*

(61) Gavin Long p292

(62) Naval Historical Branch, Ministry of Defence, London

*A near miss shook her plates and then like noisy thunder
 One landing down below split boilers and pipes asunder.
 With motive power silenced and guns destroyed on deck,
 She lay upon the ocean a helpless, floating wreck
 To leave the burning ship, was the order of the day,
 Without panic or confusion but a little less delay,
 Throwing floats and wreckage overboard and discarding all our gear
 We quickly followed after into Father Neptune's care.
 A south-east swell was rolling, the water icy most
 As we bravely struggled onwards towards the distant coast
 Above, the Stukas glided to the object of their quest
 Till battle scarred and burning she slid to her last rest.
 For five long hours we labored at the mercy of the seas
 Till rescued, wet and weary, by the Ities M.T.B.s.
 Some killed on board by shrapnel, some perished in the sea
 And we picked up at long last, live in captivity.
 But when the war is over, and we are back at home,
 We'll think of them in future years who lie beneath the foam;
 Those comrades of our hardships, and pals of high degree,
 We'll remember at reunions and drink to their eternity.
 W.M. Dellar 5/10/41 Prato Isarco (P.O.W. Camp)
 "C" Troop 7th Battery.*

A number of 7th Battery men had been transferred from the "Hereward" to the "Dido". Feeling safe in the security of the steel-clad vessel, the exhausted troops fell asleep after accepting the traditional Navy hospitality of food and drink.

The Captain's voice came over the intercommunications system: *"Men of the Australian and British Imperial Forces, your deeds in the last week have been an inspiration to us; you have been through hell; you are not out of it yet and possibly the worst is yet to come. We are at present in 'Bomb Alley' and can expect attack at any time; remember while you are taking it, your mates are slipping off the back of the island at Sphakia. We are the 'decoy', but we will do our utmost to get you through. The crew are at action stations. Keep calm!"*

The soldiers who listened already knew enough of the Royal Navy's experience in supporting them, to realise that they could wish for no braver comrades.

Major Hipworth as senior army officer on board was summoned to the bridge with the Captain.

An alarm heralded the arrival of about fifty Stukas flying from nearby Scarpento. The fleet took evasive action to dodge the falling bombs. Two Stukas were shot down in the first onslaught but successive waves maintained the attack on the weaving, swaying vessels whose 5.2 guns, multiple Bofors, and machine-guns con

tinued to blaze away.

Captain Baglin, who had the luxury of a Navy officer's bunk, recalls that he probably shared the thought in everyone's mind, that sooner or later one of those bombs would hit.

At about 0800 hours, the dreaded explosion occurred when two 500 pound bombs struck the forward gun turrets, and after crashing through three decks, exploded one deck above the ammunition store, where a direct hit would have blown the ship to pieces. Lights went out, water pipes burst, and the whole ship was filled with acrid fumes and the smell of burning flesh. Men using shell cases as buckets tried to put out fires. The Captain flooded the forward decks behind automatically controlled air-lock doors.

There was a surprising absence of panic although no one knew what to expect next. Then the intercom came alive and the Captain's voice from the bridge calmly announced: *"This is the Captain speaking. As you have gathered we have been hit; precious lives have been lost but remember it is war, we are still in convoy and have not lost speed. Thank you for your calmness. We should make it."*

The ship's pumps brought into action began pumping water from the flooded lower decks.

Captain Baglin recalls that, when he was summoned to the bridge to join Major Hipworth with a number of officers, he was told that he and a senior naval officer had a difficult task – to organise a volunteer group of ten men each, to go in and recover bodies as the water was pumped out. The sight that met these work parties cannot be described. They proceeded to rescue any wounded and, after removing identification discs, wrapped bodies in blankets for burial.

Gun crews had suffered many casualties, so Captain Baglin detailed 7th Battery men to assist sailors in manning available weapons and acting as ammunition numbers in dumping heavy "armed" live shells overboard. The Captain of the "Dido" later congratulated these men for their efforts in manning Bren guns and assisting his crew members.

Gunner T. F. Evely, as one of those transferred from the "Hereward" to the "Dido", recalls his lucky escape from the bomb-blast that caused such terrible casualties: *"I went to the toilet block from the long room where we spent the night. The room had long forms on each side and hooks above for clothing and gear. On my way back, Gunner Bill Dunbar and Gunner Arthur Poole passed me on their way to the toilet and bath room. The bomb completely destroyed that area and both men, along with many others, were killed. Gunner Jack McCarron sitting opposite me suffered scalp wounds caused by the terrific blast."*

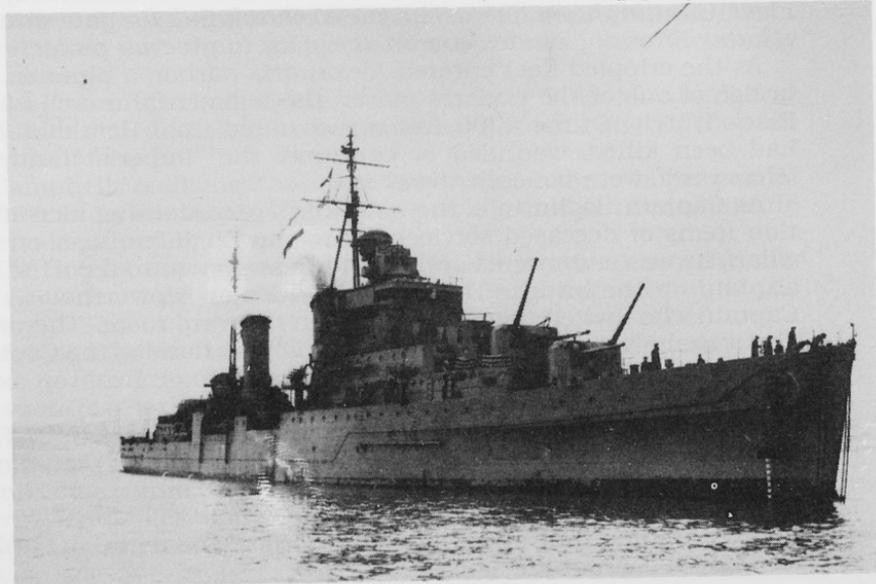
Captain G. R. B. Back, R.N. Flag-Captain of the Squadron, was



H.M.S. "HEREWARD" Hero class destroyer of 1340 tons. Sunk 29th May, 1940. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum).

H.M.S. "DIDO" suffered heavy damage during evacuation from Crete 29th May, 1940.

(Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum).



mortally wounded by a machine-gun bullet during the first attack on the "Orion", on which Gunner H. Parker and Gunner R. Duncan of 7th Battery were evacuated. In a subsequent attack the cruiser was set on fire, and soon after, successive waves of dive-bombers scored a direct hit on the bridge and gun turret. One bomb passed on to explode in the stokers' mess-deck which was crowded with soldiers. All available men joined in the *"heroic struggle against the calamity between decks, extinguishing fires, extricating and tending the wounded and removing the dead."* ⁽⁶³⁾

Meanwhile the ship, with the compass and normal steering gear damaged, was controlled by the after steering wheel with orders relayed verbally along a chain of soldiers and seamen from the bridge aft. Fires still burned forward, smoke filled the engine room where only one shaft was turning, but every man remained at his post.

By 1500 hours, the Stuka attacks had ceased as the "Orion", listing and taking water, had slowed down; the "Dido", an A.A. cruiser, reduced speed also to stay with her. At 1600 hours the cruisers slowed right down to bury their dead. Captain Baglin recalled: *"I lost count, but I believe between 250 and 300 were buried at sea – many of them unidentified."*

Casualties on the "Dido" included, 48 Australians from the 2/4th Battalion and 2/7th L.A.A. Battery, and 103 out of 240 of the Black Watch Regiment. The Captain announced, *"We will be in Alexandria by darkness and there will be no more raids. Admiral of the Fleet, Cunningham, has asked me to thank you for your gallant efforts. Friendly planes are on the way to give us protection."*

As the crippled fleet entered Alexandria harbor, a piper on the bridge of one of the cruisers played the regimental march of the Black Watch. Of the 4000 troops evacuated from Heraklion 800 had been killed, wounded or captured; the "Imperial" and the "Hereward" were beneath the ocean.

As Captain Baglin took the navy kit bag, containing identification items of deceased servicemen, to the English officer on the wharf, he was summoned over the address system to report to the Captain on the bridge. There he found Major Hipworth with the Captain who invited them to join him in the ward room. They were about to share a drink when the Signal Officer handed the Captain a message. He read it and said, *"Farewell boys, I am off back again."*

As Captain Baglin recalls, *"Imagine how 'Hippy' (Major Hipworth) and I felt! A ship with half the front blown to pieces was being ordered back to Crete. We thought, as so many servicemen had cause to say, 'Thank God for the Navy!'"*

After landing from the "Dido" and "Orion" the remnants of 7th

Battery assembled on the wharf and entrained, only to be almost immediately directed by a British army officer to get off and into a row of buses lined up alongside. Three times this "on the train" "off the train" procedure continued until Captain Baglin, completely exasperated that his exhausted men should be so treated, approached the most senior officer involved in the transport turmoil and told him that he refused to move his men again. As he returned to the troops, feeling thoroughly annoyed at this bungling, he was approached by a dapper little man in civilian clothes who asked, "*Did any New Zealand troops arrive in this convoy?*"

The curt reply came: "*I don't give a damn for the New Zealand troops or anyone else right now, all I want is to get my men to somewhere where they can eat and rest.*"

Just then, a full colonel – red tabs and all – came up, saluted the civilian and said, "*Another ship has just come in and there's a New Zealand captain with the party.*"

To Captain Baglin's puzzled query, "*Who the hell was that?*" came the answer. "*The Prime Minister of New Zealand.*" The P.M.'s natural interest in the welfare of New Zealand troops with whom his son had served was readily understood, and it is to be hoped that he could understand that frayed tempers at such a time were excusable.

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The men who landed at Alexandria on 29th May were unaware that the units fighting at Retimo had only learned from the B.B.C. News that day that the situation in Crete was "extremely precarious".

R.A.F. aircraft tried unsuccessfully on the 29th May to deliver messages coded in slang to confuse the Germans, should they fall into their hands.

Campbell, realising that the Navy was his only hope, posted signallers on the beach. The "call signs" flashed at twenty minute intervals gained no response.

The Greek troops, to the west of Retimo, moved back into the hills as the advancing motorised German units swarmed into the town.

Having advised the commander of the 2/11th Battalion that "*the show at Heraklion had packed up*",⁽⁶⁴⁾ Campbell decided to spare his men further useless suffering and reluctantly surrendered.

Small parties succeeded in escaping into the hills. Without food they faced the hopeless task of reaching the south coast in time for the evacuation, or the alternative of accepting the help of locals, thereby endangering their lives as well, while hiding in the hills in hope of later rescue.

(64) Long p273

The record of the Retimo force remains a proud one. Having faced the greatest concentration of German troops on a man to man basis, for the loss of about 120 dead, the Australians had killed 700 of their enemies, buried 500 of them and taken 500 prisoners. ⁽⁶⁵⁾

(65) *ibid* p275