

The Storm Breaks

Attack was certain, but there were several false alarms when Intelligence miscalculated impending events. Delays it seems were due to the huge logistical problems the Germans faced in establishing supplies, equipment, and lines of communication, to cope with this first "all air" operation in military history.

On airfields throughout Greece and the Aegean islands, German fighters, fighter-bombers, and dive-bombers awaited the order to launch the first phase of the assault, while glider troops and paratroops prepared to follow. They were scheduled to take off once the first wave had reached the island and begun the attack, and were timed to arrive immediately following that initial onslaught. Their task was to undertake the rapid decisive campaign to gain control of the airfield at Maleme.

Dawn came on 20th May, beautiful, as it always seemed to be in Crete; but soon the calm was shattered by the banshee wailing of the "red alert" siren as it sounded for the last time. The sky, in the distance first, and then all over Suda, Canea and Maleme, was swarming with squadron after squadron of fighters, many flying as low as a hundred feet, skimming the tops of the olive trees, guns blazing as they raked their targets with machine gun and cannon fire.

They were followed immediately by screaming dive-bombers peeling off from higher up to dive on gun positions and tented areas. Fighter-bombers rained showers of bombs over the areas where troops were believed to be entrenched along the coast, around the airfield and beyond.

The ground trembled and shuddered under the avalanche of explosions. Planes circled and returned again and again before sweeping away to seawards to refuel and rearm.

"At first, the staccato barking of the Bofors added to the din, but as the clouds of dust and smoke rose in a pall over the airfield, the luckless gunners, exposed in the open, quickly suffered the fate which from the first seemed inevitable. They were already silent under the terrific weight of the attack." (23)

The troops higher on the slopes away from the airfield, as they gradually recovered their senses in the brief calm that followed, heard a new distant rumble that became a roar as squadrons of yellow-nosed Ju 52s, with the familiar, peculiar uneven rhythm of their engines, darkened the skies to the horizon. They heralded the arrival of the invasion troops.

Towed at 7,000 feet, the gliders had been cast loose some miles from the coast to glide silently and uncannily towards their targets. Many of those watching gazed in awe and amazement as the gliders slid past to crash on hillsides, have wings torn off by trees, crumple on the rugged terrain, or – incredibly, land safely and disgorge their loads of ten men each. Meanwhile, the tow-planes circling overhead fired their machine guns in support.

Major-General Meindl, in charge of the Western Group, detailed to capture the area around Maleme and to the west, had organised the landing of glider-borne troops to be as close as possible to their objectives – the gun sites, the bridge over the Tavronitis River west of the airfield, and the strategic Point 107, on the top of the small hill to the south of the airfield. This was the site of coastal defence guns, three-inch mortars and headquarters of the R.A.F., F.A.A. and 22nd N.Z. Battalion.

Each glider squadron had originally taken off in three groups of three abreast, but they arrived at their landing place in twos and threes. Some landed on the sand dunes on the beach, others near the mouth of the Tavronitis.

Seventeen gliders were counted in the dry bed of the Tavronitis to the west of the airfield and above the bridge to the south; one succeeded in putting down safely high on the hillside and another on the road to the east.

In many instances the occupants were stunned or injured on impact, but those who could, scrambled out seeking cover among the scrub, boulders and gullies. Of these, many were mown down by machine-gun and rifle fire from the New Zealand infantry and air-force strong points.

Within fifteen minutes, all the sixty or more gliders that had completed their journey had landed between Suda and Maleme, but still the Ju 52s continued to come as General Freyberg reported:

"I picked out hundreds of planes tier upon tier coming towards us – here were the huge, slow-moving troop carriers with the loads we were expecting. First we watched them circle counter-clockwise over Maleme aerodrome and then when they were only a few hundred feet above the ground, as if by magic white specks mixed with other colors suddenly appeared beneath them as clouds of parachutes floated slowly to earth."

The paratroops, in theory, should have landed sufficiently far from their targets to allow them to muster, collect heavy weapons from canisters, and organise their support of the already-landed glider troops. In fact, many of them fell directly over strongly defended infantry positions and suffered very heavy casualties.

Three battalions of paratroops came in over Maleme. Two of those landed according to plan well west of the Tavronitis bridge, where there were no defending troops, and out of range of the

troops at the airfield to whom they appeared "as about the size of ants".

The third battalion was supposed to have landed on the coast near the village of Pirgos, just east of the airfield, but was dropped further inland in the midst of the New Zealanders at whose hands they lost all their officers and two-thirds of their total strength.

Around Galatas, Canea, the 7th British General Hospital, and inland, near the Field Punishment Centre (where "detained" soldiers armed themselves with equipment dropped for the paratroops), the invaders suffered heavy casualties at the hands of the 2/2nd Field Regiment, R.A.A., 2/8th Aust. Infantry Battalion, 1st Welch Regiment, New Zealanders, and Greek Regiments.

The heavy preliminary bombing had cut signal lines and so hindered communication which became vital in the next twenty-four hours. Paratroops made a practice of cutting any wires they found on landing.

The glider troops who succeeded in gaining cover in the river bed, and those who landed further west at Maleme, immediately attacked the bridge and the neighboring gun sites using machine guns, mortars and grenade launchers.

Some of the men from the "A" troop gun on the western side of the airfield joined with the New Zealanders in their trench.

The New Zealand sergeant had rigged up a Browning machine gun salvaged from a damaged fighter. It was mounted on bits and pieces of aircraft and timber with sights devised from chewing gum, soap and screws. The 22nd Battalion history records that the New Zealand L/Sgt. had with him in his trench "*survivors of the blitz on the gun crew*". Gunners L. Horne and C. G. Stainer of that crew had been killed, and Gunner L. F. Eager wounded in the head by a sniper's bullet, which pierced his tin hat and lacerated the top of his head, when he was engaging the enemy mounting a machine-gun on the edge of the airfield.

With the Germans only a few yards away, making a great deal of noise while sheltered by the bank of the river and hurling grenades into the main trench near the gun, the position was taken and all the occupants, except one, killed; these were Sergeant E. E. E. Manning, Lance-Bombadier A. J. Murphy, Gunners A. S. Baird, A. J. Goad, H. E. Lyle, R. F. Maskell, D. P. Ryan and D. St.Clair.

Major Braun, the commander of the glider group of nine gliders that had landed west of the bridge, had been killed by the New Zealanders of "D" Company, but approaching behind the bridge pylons the enemy with reinforcements captured that objective.

The group that had landed near the mouth of the Tavronitis also lost its commanding officer and several men in their attack along the western edge on that corner of the airfield.

Major Koch, commander of the group of gliders assigned to

capture the southern slopes of Hill 107, was a casualty with a number of his men in the initial encounter with New Zealanders of "B", "D" and H.Q. companies covering the line along which the gliders descended.

Meanwhile, glider troops who had survived the landing in the river-bed to the west of the airfield, were reinforced by paratroops who had landed unopposed in the undefended area further to the west and south, where they had assembled and obtained supplies from canisters. This equipment included heavy machine-guns, artillery, mortars and motor cycles.

Communication with aircraft brought dive-bombing support against defended positions, while marker strips of cloth laid out in a particular manner, and colored flares, indicated what supplies were required. Pennants, used to indicate captured positions, appeared around the perimeter of the airfield as gun positions were taken.

The glider force established its headquarters in the village to the west of the bridge where a regimental aid post was also established to treat the wounded. Gunner L. Eager was treated there for his head injuries after his capture.

The crew of the "A" Troop gun on the north-west corner of the airfield eventually joined up with the New Zealand infantry opposing the enemy in the Pirgos village area to the east of the airfield. Lacking personal weapons at first, some gunners assisted in getting a captured German gun into action.

One account of the incident states: *"Eight gunners (from Sergeant Bruce Tulloch's gun) after being cut off by paratroops had done excellent work with a small German field gun presented to them during the day by a passing Junkers. Determined to defend themselves against the parachutists whom they had seen falling further east they had fired upon all movement in this direction and had thus discouraged the patrols from the 23rd which was trying to make contact with them."* (24)

The official history of the N.Z. 22nd Bn. has a further interesting reference to this incident. Lieutenant Bevan O.C. Headquarters Company defending Pirgos village sent a runner to N.Z. 22nd Bn. H.Q. with a report on the situation.

The runner was captured but kept the message in his boot to be delivered after the war ended. It read, in part: *"We have a small field gun plus 12 rounds manned by Aussies."* (25)

The Maori 28th Battalion records also mention that *"several Aussie A.A. gunners did a grand job in helping with the wounded."* (26)

"A" Troop Bofors crew on the south side of the airfield found themselves sharing trenches with "A" Company of the N.Z. 22nd

(24) Stewart. p 23

(25) Henderson p 46

(26) Henderson p 47

Battalion in defence of Hill 107.

By 11 a.m. the Germans had captured the Tavronitis bridge and controlled the dried river bed and the western end of the airfield north to the beach. A strong attack on the R.A.F. camp area resulted in an enemy break-through and the capture of many R.A.F. personnel, but higher up the hill the defenders, including a number of "A" Troop gunners, held out until dark when the enemy withdrew to the bridge.

Many of the troops away from the airfield were unaware of the progress made by the enemy working their way around the perimeter sheltered by the banks of the river and the edge of the airfield. Although the small groups of New Zealand infantry from their slit trenches had taken heavy toll of the enemy they could not cover the whole area. Lacking the means of defence against grenade and ground attack, the gun positions were taken as the paratroop landings continued.

Some writers have commented on the failure to move guns to alternative positions to confuse the enemy. Such moves were impossible because the guns were bolted down on concrete bases.

The comments of a New Zealander from the 22nd Battalion expresses the infantryman's feelings for the gunner. He wrote:

"I have the greatest admiration for the Bofors crews and Jerry pilots who attacked them. On many occasions I saw Stuka pilots diving down the fire of these guns and had no misgivings as to whether I would have the guts to withstand such a gaff." (27)

German accounts of the attacks on A.A. guns on Maleme airfield include reference to men of No. 2 Platoon who were the first of the glider troops to reach the perimeter of the airfield; moving through the smoke and dust with much shouting and calls for surrender they attacked guns on the west of the airfield. The account continues: *"They suffered casualties and withdrew behind the bank. Under cover from machine guns and grenade launchers the enemy holding the centre of the airfield's western perimeter were eliminated."* (28)

Another party detailed to attack an A.A. gun position on the western edge of the airfield *"was completely annihilated and the second squad was scarcely more fortunate."*

"Leading the attack on another A.A. position further south Von Plessen himself was killed but after an attack launched under cover of a barrage, put down by the heavy weapons of the group and despite fierce opposition, the copse and southern-most enemy A.A. position on the airfield were taken."

One platoon *"had more luck with its mission when the A.A. gun which was the platoon's objective turned out to be a decoy, so*

(27) Henderson p 43

(28) Kuhn p 73

their efforts were directed to mopping up enemy in the buildings surrounding the dummy gun. The platoon then pulled back to the gorge which had been designated as the area where the platoon would concentrate once the initial objective had been achieved." (29)

Enemy records show that they feared a night counter-attack and spent the afternoon digging defensive positions.

The glider troops who attacked the Tavronitis Bridge suffered 44 casualties including 17 killed and 27 wounded – 19 of them seriously. The wounded were evacuated to the main medical post west of the bridge while *"the rest of the company grimly settled down in the trenches and waited for the night attack. In the event no attack came that night – nor did the 50 reinforcements which had been promised"*. (30)

By mid-afternoon, Colonel Andrew had received no word from the platoons defending the northern and western areas where paratroops had joined up with the glider-borne troops, and runners had failed to get through.

To the east of the airfield, around Pirgos, the platoon of Headquarters Company was also cut off.

Unaware of the actual growing strength of the parachute battalions landed out of his range of view to the west and south, Colonel Andrew signalled by flare, since lines were out, for the support of 23rd Battalion as planned for a counter-attack to regain lost ground.

When the counter-attack did not materialise, possibly because of the anticipated seaborne attack, or failure to recognise the signal, Andrew sent the only two Matilda tanks at his disposal to assist troops near the bridge.

The tanks advanced westward, with a group of New Zealanders from 14 Platoon joined by an English officer and gunners from 156 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, trotting behind the second tank. As they neared the western edge of the airfield, the gun on the leading tank jammed so it turned back; the second tank proceeded into the dried river bed where it was stopped and the crew captured.⁽³¹⁾

According to a German account the tank was stopped by a 37 mm A.A. gun and the infantry was dispersed by mortar fire.⁽³²⁾

Another account of the incident states that the two-pounder ammunition did not fit the breech block of the first tank, and that the second caused panic amongst the crowd of Germans in the river bed before it came to rest stuck among the boulders two hundred yards downstream.⁽³³⁾

The wounded officer of N.Z. 15 Platoon saw the incident and mentioned that the crew of one tank attempted repairs.⁽³⁴⁾ Gunner

(29) Kuhn p 73

(30) Ibid p 75

(31) Spencer p 150

(32) Kuhn p 75

(33) Stewart p 172

(34) Henderson p 54

L. Eager recalls that he was at the German R.A.P. receiving medical attention when the tanks were seen approaching and everyone was ordered back from the road. It was obvious that the Germans feared the effect of tanks on the progress of the battle.

Of the forty or more men who took part in the attack, the English officer was killed and only three of the rest returned uninjured.

Intelligence had indicated that aircraft would land on the airfield as soon as it was under German control, but, late in the afternoon when two Ju 52s tried to land, they were met with such a hostile reception of machine-gun fire from Hill 107 that they aborted the landing and returned to base. No planes landed deliberately on the 20th May, although gliders seen in the distance may have been counted as planes.

The German account of this incident states that their High Command in Athens by mid-day on 20th May still awaited reassuring news from Crete, both as to the progress made by the invaders and the enemy's situation. Finally, General Student decided to send a Ju 52 with orders "*to land on Maleme airfield, organise a flying control unit and prepare for the fly-in of the first line unit of the 5th Mountain Division*".⁽³⁵⁾

The pilot returned with the news that the airfield was still in enemy hands and that he had been fortunate to get off after touching down. The second Ju 52, carrying the men who were to operate the airfield control, was coming in to land also, but roared away when the pilot saw what happened to the first aircraft.⁽³⁶⁾

Only seven Ju 52s had been lost in the attack on Maleme; but a re-appraisal of the situation was made taking account of the effect of casualties, delays involved, and the problems of maintaining the original schedules for the landing of troops from transports. The capture of the airfield was vital to the build-up of an invasion force and the success of the enterprise.

By the end of the day, efforts to capture airfields at Heraklion, Retimo and Maleme had failed "*against all expectations*", leaving the outcome "*balanced on a razor's edge*".⁽³⁷⁾

Giving up the campaign and the consequent abandonment of 7,000 paratroops was considered but rejected in favour of concentrating all resources and reserves on Maleme "*as the centre of gravity of the operation*".⁽³⁸⁾

The vital part played by Maleme airfield in the revised German plan was to exact a heavy toll in men and machines. At the War Crimes Trial in 1945 General Student admitted that the parachutists holding the airfield were short of ammunition and that a counter-attack, as expected, on either the night of the 20th May or the morning of the 21st May could have succeeded.

The decision to put the "*whole mass of the reserve into action*".⁽³⁵⁾

on the airfield at Maleme" indicated the extreme gravity of the German situation on the morning of the 21st May. Several senior commanders had been killed or wounded, forces at Suda and Canea had not gained their objectives, Heraklion airfield was still in British hands and Retimo still held out.

That the airfield at Maleme was unable to cope adequately with the proposed massive movement of aircraft was always apparent. Student had written: "*The airport at Maleme which glistened red like a tennis-court was very small and had been used only for fighter planes by the English. That was known. To concentrate a large airborne attack with 500 heavy transport planes and with all the attendant unforeseeable incidences meant to stake everything on one card. The decision was not easily arrived at but I had no other way.*"

Although much equipment was damaged during the air-drop, the enemy was well armed with heavy equipment in readiness to attack.

The wireless transmitters, lost during the Greek evacuation, would have been of inestimable value to the defenders at Maleme at this time in making commanders aware of the true state of affairs – that more than 1,000 paratroops had landed unopposed west of the Tavronitis River line.

Following the failure of the tank attack, and believing that absence of news meant that companies unaccounted for had been wiped out, the N.Z. 22nd Battalion commander realised that his headquarters could be cut off. He sought permission to withdraw eastward towards the area held by other N.Z. battalions in the Brigade area.

The order to withdraw was given at 9 p.m., but it was early in the morning of the 21st May before some of "A" Troop, who had joined up with N.Z. infantry, learned that the shadowy figures moving near them were withdrawing under orders.

Gunner Ian Rutter recalls that he had been given the job of manning a listening post in a N.Z. trench on the west side of Hill 107. When a party of New Zealanders, walking by in stockinged feet with their boots suspended around their necks, told him they had orders to withdraw, he moved with them into the area occupied by the 21st and 23rd N.Z. Battalions. He was surprised to see so many troops gathered together, when numbers defending the west of the airfield had been so few.

Gunner Harry Newstead remembers that he was at Troop H.Q. when the attack began and with others made his way to 22nd N.Z. Battalion "A" Company H.Q. on Hill 107. The N.Z. officer could not provide him with a weapon but sent him to deliver rations to a N.Z. section on a nearby ridge. There, he was invited to help himself to a selection of captured German weapons obtained from "the

torpedo-shaped canister lying amidst the parachutes decking the landscape. The paratroops had been killed except for one, wounded, who had been sent to H.Q. for interrogation."

Duly armed with a German rifle and bandoliers of ammunition, Gunner Newstead was also sent to man a N.Z. listening post with the promise of being relieved in two hours. His account continues: "*Later, in the darkness I heard marching feet moving towards the rear. Then all was quiet for about an hour. I decided enough was enough and scurried off to H.Q. — nobody there so I squatted beside a bush to consider which way to go. Suddenly, sounds of booted feet approaching along the narrow track. A startled New Zealand sergeant with my rifle at his mid-riff, wanted to know what I was doing there. After listening to my story he told me that he had been checking the posts as H.Q. and "A" Companies had left Hill 107 and I had better accompany him to join the withdrawing forces."*

In the New Zealand lines Gunner Newstead met up with Lieutenant Purcell and several members of "A" Troop. Later he acted as a runner for the New Zealand Field Battery, which maintained an intermittent attack on the airfield by timing the firing in between air attacks directed at its position.

The general lack of communications between the New Zealand units also applied to the group of R.A.F., Fleet Air Arm, and gunners who had no defined objectives once forced away from their static positions.

Many of these airmen and gunners attached themselves to New Zealand units who gave them what enemy equipment they could.

The presence of these men, untrained in infantry tactics, and lacking as they did both rations and equipment, often proved unwelcome; as one airforce officer lamented, "*No one seemed to want us.*" One gunner recalls being "bawled out" for raising his head while with a New Zealand section posted near a ridge; another was reprimanded for firing without orders on a Ju 52 flying low overhead.

Members of "A" Troop H.Q. dispersed after the attack commenced, with some reaching "A" Company of the New Zealand 22nd Battalion; others reached 21st or 23rd N.Z. Battalion lines, while others moving un-armed through narrow gullies were confronted and captured by groups of paratroops.

Unlike the New Zealanders who had spent three weeks in the area reconnoitring tracks and considering topographical features while preparing their defences, the Australian A.A. gun crews, with few exceptions, had not left their gun sites, and few of them had seen their own Troop H.Q. In consequence, after the attack commenced, those forced to move away from the airfield had little idea where defensive positions had been established.

Movement became extremely hazardous with cross-fire coming from all directions and no certainty as to who were friends or foes. Even the similar colors of the uniforms of the paratroops and air-force men caused some confusion.

A few of those from the airfield trying to join up with New Zealanders found themselves cut off by paratroops and were captured during the morning. They, and others captured during the afternoon, in spite of action around them from New Zealand artillery and machine-gun fire, were forced by their captors to work filling in shell holes and bomb craters on the airfield in preparation for the expected troop transports. Others were detailed as stretcher bearers to bring in both our own and German casualties.

As darkness settled over Maleme and withdrawal from Hill 107 commenced, Brigade H.Q. 5 miles to the east received the message that the defenders were "*officially off Maleme.*"

For some, this had meant that seriously wounded who could not be moved had been made as comfortable as possible and left with food and water. But the word had not reached the isolated platoons still grimly contesting the issue around the perimeter of the airfield.

By sunset, 15th Platoon while defending the western perimeter, where two of "A" Troop guns were sited, had lost 8 men killed, 15 wounded including their officer, and only 2 were not wounded when the survivors were captured.

Members of Sergeant Bruce Tulloch's gun crew, who had linked up with New Zealanders holding a large building in Pirgos, east of the airfield, obtained equipment from paratroops killed in the area.

Late that night, Maori voices of members of the 28th Battalion were heard as their patrol passed through the village towards the airfield. There they reached a knocked-out Bofors and hearing German voices decided that the shadowy figures moving around the airfield had captured that objective.

They moved inland towards 22nd Battalion H.Q. but finding that deserted, as orders to withdraw had been carried out, moved inland towards the 21st and 23rd Battalion positions. Their noisy approach with much shouting in Maori, to avoid being mistaken for enemy, caused consternation among the men in the area who wondered what was afoot. Stewart records that: "*During the evening, Captain Royal, 28th Maori Bn. had collected a number of supporters including some Australian gunners. They had increased the strength of his party to about 180. Most of them he had led to within five hundred yards of the unoccupied summit of Hill 107. Andrews told him to take them all back to Platania.*"⁽³⁹⁾

Among the Australians was Gunner Eddie Birch who vividly

(39) Stewart, p244

remembered his experiences with the Maoris – especially the bayonet charge in which he participated.

Later, in the darkness, defenders of the Pirgos position also reached the 21st Battalion lines where, with other arrivals, they were integrated into new defensive positions.

Gunner Brian Layton, hearing that his brother Doug had been severely wounded by machine-gun fire, found him at a field dressing station which was captured by the enemy during that afternoon. Gunner Doug Layton died from his wound two days later, and was buried by Chaplain Griffiths of 2 N.Z.E.F. in a small plot of ground set aside by the Germans for the burial of War Dead in the village of Tavronitis, near Maleme airfield.

After their runner returned with the news that H.Q. had withdrawn, survivors of 13 Platoon, which had defended the northern perimeter of the airfield, moved eastward and then inland to rejoin the battalion.

The party of 14 Platoon and "C" Company H.Q. troops that moved away from the southern perimeter of the airfield shortly before daylight, included 14 wounded, 14 unwounded New Zealanders and 12 airmen and gunners.

Survivors of "D" Company who had successfully defended the line along the Tavronitis River inland, south of the bridge, did not know of the withdrawal until about 3 a.m. when the group divided into three parties: one moving south was surrounded and captured at daylight; the second party moved back into the mountains and eventually reached the south coast, while the third party moving eastward succeeded in joining up with the remnants of the battalion in the Brigade area.