

Battle for Heraklion

Brigadier B. H. Chappel, D.S.O., a regular British army officer, responsible for the Heraklion sector, commanded the strong infantry force of experienced, disciplined Australian and British units, as well as two Greek battalions, generally untrained and lacking equipment. Artillery support consisted of a few captured Italian guns, many lacking essential aiming equipment.

Two heavy tanks, placed in camouflaged positions at either end of the airfield, were supported by six light tanks held in reserve to assist in defence of the airfield, the town of Heraklion with its 36,000 inhabitants, as well as the foreshore and harbor.

The disposition of troops provided a solid defence against the expected airborne attack from the east, south and west, and any seaborne attack from the north.

Major Hipworth, in addition to the eight Bofors of "B" and "C" Troops of the 7th Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Battery also commanded the four Bofors of 156 L.A.A. Battery, R.A., and the few 3", pom-pom and Vickers 2-pounders available to protect the airfield and the town of Heraklion.

The first phase of the German plan of attack aimed to capture the airfield and Hill 107 at Maleme, and to over-run the defenders of Canea and Suda areas – this to be completed during the morning of the 20th May.

The second phase provided for the capture of Retimo airfield, the town of Heraklion and its airfield during the afternoon of the same day. The airfields were of prime importance because their capture would enable mountain troops to fly in with heavy equipment and land from transports.

At Heraklion, the paratroop force attacking the airfield was to have paratroop artillery, mortar and air support. A unit to be dropped further east had as its objective the early warning station on A.M.E.S. Ridge.

The attack on the town was to be launched by a force dropped to the west of that objective, while another force dropped further to the west would provide protective support.

The success of the plan depended upon strict adherence to the timing and orderly sequence in which units and their equipment arrived at their objectives. That had been the case during the morning attack on Maleme, where intense dive-bombing and machine-gunning immediately preceded the arrival of gliders and paratroops, and continued to support them during their landing, when seven Ju 52s were lost in the first wave.

Discrepancies appear in accounts given as to the time at which defending units at Heraklion knew of the attacks on the west of the island, and of the impending attack on the Retimo – Heraklion sector. Gavin Long in the Official History ⁽⁴⁰⁾ states that this information was known by 1100 hours.

Another account tells of Leicesters' officers being granted permission to visit positions held by other units between 1400 and 1600 hours, apparently unaware that the invasion had begun. They were trapped by a raid before returning to their unit.

Captain Baglin believes it was about 1500 hours when official word was received.

The important fact, for the attackers, was that the second phase of the invasion was delayed up to two hours beyond the intended time. At various enemy bases there had been logistical problems in refuelling and loading; saboteurs had interrupted essential land-line communications which went through local telephone exchanges, clouds of dust hindered the loading and contributed to delays in departures of aircraft and out-of-sequence arrivals at objectives.

German records indicate that lack of information from the Maleme sector raised doubts as to the success of that enterprise, especially when requests were received for reinforcements which had already been committed for the attack on Retimo and Heraklion timed to commence at 1515 hours.

Fifty bombers and fighter-bombers commenced the preliminary raid aimed at destroying or demoralising the defenders and softening-up the defences. In fact they caused few casualties.

Anti-aircraft crews, acting under Chappel's orders, "*to fire when they saw fit until the preliminary bombardment was finished*", held their fire, deluding the enemy into believing that the guns had been knocked out.

The infantry in their well-camouflaged positions remained an under-estimated force to meet the impending airborne attack.

Bombing continued to the accompaniment of "Jericho sirens" on the dive-bombers, as squadrons of enemy aircraft maintained the attack, dropping hundreds of bombs in almost continuous succession for more than an hour.

Clouds of chalky dust rose from the quivering ground and troops waited in stunned awe as silence followed the departure of the last aircraft at 1615 hours.

They did not have long to wait. The air soon began to throb with the peculiar rhythmic roar of swarms of lumbering transport planes flying at 600 feet, row after row darkening the sky from the horizon as they approached from the north and north-east. But they were late, and so lacked the protection of the fighter-bombers.

(40) Gavin Long p 280

which had arrived on schedule and had remained over the target for as long as their limited range permitted, before returning to refuel. There were however no gliders to distract the ground forces with their silent uncanny approach as at Maleme.

Apparently confident that the anti-aircraft defences had been neutralised by the preliminary bombing, the approaching aircraft came in low over the defended area, to be suddenly met by a wall of withering fire as every anti-aircraft gun, machine gun and rifle opened up.

An English officer, recalling the event wrote: "*From their scarred emplacements – the Bofors were at last enjoying the reward of their long patience and deception.*"⁽⁴¹⁾

Major Nicholls of the Leicestershire Regiment said of the effect this had on his men: "*If ever there was a fillip to morale this was it! These guns which had been battered for past days were not out of action. The sound of those guns put life into us all and we cheered.*"

Almost immediately, planes were seen on fire or beginning to crash with paratroops hurling themselves clear from the open doorways. Burning parachutes trailed above the doomed men like torches as they hurtled to their death. Of those who made the descent beneath the billowing canopy of the opened chutes, many fired automatic weapons as they fell only to be riddled while hanging in trees or tangled in telephone wires.

Sixteen aircraft were destroyed in the first attack. In the ensuing confusion some pilots breaking formation to avoid the burning or crashing transport caused paratroops to become entangled with their own planes. Several planes banked and turned as pilots made their way out to sea, striving, often vainly, to dislodge their luckless comrades.

The Black Watch took merciless toll of the first flight of paratroops who landed in their area to the east of the airfield. Those who fell to the west and south of that objective met a similar fate at the hands of the Australian and Greek infantry. Very few of those who landed within range of the defenders survived long enough to form groups and reach their weapon canisters.

For more than two hours, at twenty minute intervals, successive waves of troop carriers continued to drop their loads of men and equipment. With so many enemy destroyed, canisters and various items of equipment lay scattered around the countryside. Soon those nearest to the booty replenished their depleted supplies of ammunition, weapons, food and a host of items meticulously planned and prepared for these elite paratroops.

In the hills and gullies villagers and Greek troops, sometimes directed by British and Australians, carried on the fierce encoun-

(41) Stewart p205

ters until darkness brought a lull. After the blazing heat and action of the day both sides welcomed the opportunity to rest and take stock of their position. For gunners, it was an opportunity to replenish ammunition supplies and have a meal.

For the invaders who had survived, their main concern was to link up with their mates to prepare to defend themselves against this terrible resistance. They had been given offensive roles with very limited time schedules on the definite understanding that they would encounter little opposition.

By 1930 hours almost three-quarters of the 2000 who had jumped at Heraklion were casualties.

Close to the city wall, defenders on the ramparts caused heavy casualties amongst Germans who reached the moat. Further to the west, pockets of paratroops established strongpoints and cut the road to Retimo. Supported by airborne artillery a group from this area succeeded in forcing an entry into the town through the north and west gates at nightfall.

As they moved through the streets local residents resisted fiercely using whatever weapons they could find. Admiral Canaris's counter-intelligence organisation had encouraged the belief that towns-people would not prove unfriendly to the invaders, but the bitter house to house fighting throughout the night dispelled that illusion.

A 7th Battery gun crew manning the two-pounder Vickers gun on the mole had been in action throughout the attack from the air.

Portion of the crew had recently relieved at the airfield on a gun that had suffered casualties, with Gunner Jack Hawke killed and Gunners Duncan, Grace, and Parker wounded. One of the members of that crew recorded in his diary for the 20th May:

"We return to Fort for a spell. Bombers begun again in dozens, dive-bombing and machine-gunning for over two hours. Aerodrome knocked to bits. We fire till our gun boils. Parachute troops come. Planes everywhere in hundreds. Get three with Vickers. Jerry in town. Gun boiling. No ammo left"

As darkness settled over the scene the sound of infantry action, heard since the landing began from the direction of the airfield, suddenly erupted in the streets across the stretch of water between the mole and the town. The Vickers gun position came under attack from anti-tank, rifle, and machine-gun fire from the enemy who had reached the quay. In the darkness, flames arose eerily from burning buildings as paratroops occupied the town.

Without means of communication with Battery Headquarters, and with the town apparently in enemy hands, the men on the mole were in a critical situation. The decision was taken to evacuate in rowing boats moored nearby.

The plan was to try to reach the number three gun site where the sergeant and some members of the crew had been stationed previously further to the east on the coast near the airfield.

One account of the incident continues: *"We piled into the rowing boats at 11 p.m. and rowed quietly out under the cover of the breakwater. All hell was on in the town itself with countless fires burning and screams filling the air."*

After rowing for about three hours, the throbbing engine of an approaching ship was heard. Not knowing whether it was friend or foe they stopped rowing as the outline of a British destroyer materialised.

One explanation for their fortunate identification as Australians, was that Gunner 'Cowboy' Calvert, when struck by one of the "resting" oars, made his feelings clearly known. The sailors on H.M.S. "Kingston", once satisfied that the boats did not contain the enemy troops they were seeking, dropped rope ladders over the side. Soon the weary but relieved rowers were on board and the "Kingston" sped on to rejoin the rest of the squadron.

Lance-Bombardier Jack Morrison recalls that the wine they took aboard was immediately confiscated but there were sailors who regretted that they could not stay long enough to collect what was left in the boats.

During the following four days spent on the destroyer "Kingston," the Australian gunners assisted in carrying ammunition and in general duties wherever required.

They shared the stress and action during the incessant bombing and machine-gun attacks which continued throughout the daylight hours, as the British naval squadron patrolled in search of the expected seaborne invasion fleets of caiques known to have assembled in the Aegean.

Gunner 'Tak' Takasuka recorded in his diary the events during their time on the "Kingston": *"Wed. 21st May. Aboard destroyer "Kingston". Continous air attacks from dawn. 2 p.m. bomb scores direct hit on "Juno". Magazine hit. Sinks in 1½ minutes. 8 survivors taken aboard. 5 die"*.

Navy records show that the destroyers "Nubian", "Kandahar" and "Kingston" between them rescued six officers and 91 ratings. Another 7th Battery gunner recalls: *"The terrible experience of seeing the survivors pulled aboard, covered in oil and gasping for breath."*

Gunner Takasuka's diary continues: *"Thurs. 22nd May. Off Suda again early morning orders to 'stand to'. Jerries begin at dawn - continues attacks. 2 p.m. "Greyhound" hit and sunk. We take aboard some survivors amid machine-gun fire from Messerschmitt 110s. Many narrow escapes from bombs. One big one jars ship - set on fire. 5 p.m. cruiser "Fiji" hit and sinks. Only*

about half survivors rescued. We take aboard many after dark 42 air attacks for day. All remaining fleet pull out"

"Friday 23rd May. Headed for Alexandria this time 9.30 a.m. fleet of 21 ships. Take aboard oil from "Valiant". Bury 3 more. All appears to be well 7 ships in all sunk

Sat. 24th May. Arrive Alexandria 2.30 a.m. disembark 3 a.m. English Barracks in air raid."

The official Navy account of these events tells of the anguish of would-be rescuers forced by air attack to leave survivors with whatever floats or life saving gear they could. After dark, the search for survivors was continued by flash-light as ships returned to the scene.

The rendezvous that brought the fleet of 21 ships together on 23rd May under orders from the Commander-in-Chief, was followed by the order to return to Alexandria for fuel and ammunition.

The 2/3rd Aust. L.A.A. Regiment's War Diary contains the following report from the Commander of H.M.S. "Kingston" explaining why the 7th Battery men were returned to Egypt. Dated 26th May 1941 the report states:-

"During the recent operations north of Crete, Lieutenant W. E. Kelly and 18 other ranks of the 7th L.A.A. Battery of the 2/3rd Australian L.A.A. Regiment were picked up in Candia (Heraklion) Bay by this ship at 0100 hours on 21st May: H.M.S. "Kingston".

"Owing to Naval Operational requirements no opportunity occurred to land them again in Crete and they were retained on board until the ship returned to Alexandria in the early morning of 24th May.

"During the three days this party was on board I was greatly impressed by their splendid discipline, which reflects the greatest credit on Lieutenant Kelly.

"On 21st and 22nd May a number of dive-bombing attacks were made on the ship. They were particularly intense on 22nd May when all hands were at their action stations from 0815 until after dark.

"The assistance provided by Lieutenant Kelly and his detachment during this trying period was of the utmost value. They formed a party to augment the supply of ammunition to the Pom-Pom gun. Without this help it is more than probable that this gun could not have kept continuously in action.

"They were also of great assistance in attending the many survivors who were picked up from other ships. In addition, Lieutenant Kelly himself was continually going around the quarters encouraging the hands, supplying them with chocolate etc.

"All on board were filled with admiration for the detachment particularly when it is remembered that they were 'doing their stuff' in circumstances which would have been very strange to them."

Signed: P. Somerville, Lieutenant Commander
 Commanding Officer, H.M.S. "Kingston". (42)

(42) War Diary.



7th Battery personnel picked up by H.M.S. "KINGSTON".
 Back row: J. Morrison, T. Etchell, A. Howlett, N. Littler (Sgt), S. Calvert, N. Klippel,
 W. E. Kelly (Lieut), R. Allwood, H. Rickerby, H. Bradford. ^{Sgt}
 Front row: G. Grace, M. O'Conno, M. Takasuka, G. Connor, C. Seabridge.
 A. Hough. ^A