

Initiation — In Action

Hills rising to the south of the airfield at Maleme restricted the arc of fire for guns on the northern edge of the runway, which could only engage low-flying enemy aircraft intent on strafing grounded planes, at the risk of landing shells in the hill defences.

In the days that followed, enemy pilots made full use of the natural barriers to radar detection, provided by the high ground of the Akrotiris Peninsula at Suda, the island north of Maleme, and the mountains to the south. The air-raid warning barely gave the British pilots time to get their planes airborne before the attack, even though they had been sitting in them with engines warmed-up since before first light.

There was no time for "scrambling" and racing across the airfield at the wailing of the "red alert" siren. With R.A.F. and F.A.A. pilots at Maleme sharing the available Fulmars, Gladiators and Hurricanes, life was even more complicated for the young pilots than it would have been in a squadron with only one type of aircraft.

The Gloster Gladiator, a single-engined bi-plane, reminiscent of World War I aircraft in design, was first flown in 1934. It became a R.A.F. front-line fighter in 1937 and saw service in Norway and France in 1940. Later, it was used in the Mediterranean against the Italians, and scored victories too, in spite of the odds, in Crete, before the last of them was shot down over Maleme.

The radial engine gave a climbing rate of 2,300 feet per minute and a speed of 253 m.p.h. It carried four .303 inch Browning machine guns and provided watching troops with marvellous displays of aerobatics when tackling the over-whelming odds in numbers, speed and fire-power of the enemy Me 109s and 110s which always accompanied the Stuka Ju 87 dive-bombers.

The Hurricanes, with a speed of 316 m.p.h. and a climbing rate of 2,530 feet per minute, carried eight wing-mounted .303 Browning machine guns which reduced the odds in terms of performance, although they were always hopelessly out-numbered in any dog-fight.

From the 8th May, and many times a day from then on, gun crews took post as enemy aircraft in ever-increasing numbers continued their reconnaissance, bombing and strafing raids.

As planes took off in a cloud of dust, ground staff and troops in the open promptly disappeared out of sight into dug-outs or slit-trenches, perhaps with a friendly wave or thumbs-up to encourage crews manning the guns.

All eyes then followed the planes straining to gain sufficient height before the enemy arrived "to jump" them, but as the gunners watched in admiration they became conscious of their own vulnerability, standing so conspicuously awaiting action.

Of all crew members, number four, standing high on the gun platform head and shoulders above his mates in the comparative calm before the storm, had most cause for such feelings. Once the gun began firing however, he was so busy, keeping his head down, his foot on the firing pedal and his hands accurately feeding the clips of four shells at a time into the hungry loading mechanism, that he had time for little else. A mis-directed clip of ammunition would cause the "cross-feed" that put the gun out of action. The ammunition numbers, while delivering clips of ammunition correctly, were busy dodging the hot empty shell cases ejected into the gun pit at the rate of two a second.

At Maleme, dive bombing raids usually began with strafing planes approaching from low at sea or from behind the natural barriers to radar detection.

The Messerschmitts by flying down the airfields in threes could attack the gun positions on the north and south side of the airstrip, while the aircraft flying down the centre concentrated on any aircraft trying to take off or still on the ground, as well as raking gun positions at either end of the field. These strafing attacks continued as the Stukas, circling well out of range, peeled off in groups and began diving out of the sun on their selected targets, their "Jericho sirens" (so named by Germans)⁽¹²⁾ screaming to simulate the sound of falling bombs before the bombs were actually released. In spite of the number of such attacks the few casualties caused proved the deterrent effect of the firing Bofors.

At Heraklion, apart from the usual advantage of attacking from out of the sun, the enemy sought cover by approaching from behind the Charlies⁽¹³⁾ and the high ground to the south and south-east.

At night, when guns were not allowed to fire because they would reveal their positions to night bombers, it was exasperating to gun crews to see lights appear on the hillsides, obviously turned on by collaborators to guide enemy planes. After some incidents where rifles were discharged, to encourage the lights to go out, orders were issued forbidding such reaction.

The co-ordination of defences in the Maleme area posed special problems for Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew who was responsible for holding the airfield and its approaches. Many of the fourteen formations and units did not come under his command although he had made several requests, through his superiors, to gain the

(12) Kuhn p#6

(13) Two small hills south of the airfield so named because of their resemblance to two breasts

co-operation of those commanding Royal Navy, Fleet Air Arm, Royal Marines, Royal Artillery, Royal Air Force and Australian L.A.A. personnel in the area.

The R.A.F. camp, near the vital bridge over the Tavronitis River west of the aerodrome, was claimed to impair the 22nd N.Z. Battalion's defence perimeter, and it was in fact there that the enemy initially broke through.

The Heraklion Sector had advantages for the defenders: both the airfield and the harbor were enclosed within a perimeter four miles long and two miles wide, with better visibility and communication between the units which were all within a three miles radius of Brigade H.Q. Of the units defending the area in depth, the 2nd Black Watch, the 2nd York and Lancs, the 2nd Leicesters and the 2/4th Australian Battalion were all fully trained infantry, and during the battle were to be joined on 25th May by the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders who marched overland after being landed on the south coast on 19th May.

Brigadier Chappel was able to maintain closer contact with his commanders and the progress of events in his sector, than was his counter-part in the Maleme Sector.

Major Hipworth, in charge of the anti-aircraft defences at Heraklion co-ordinated their efforts in accord with the policy laid down at Brigade level on engagement of enemy aircraft: *"The anti-aircraft gunners will reveal themselves only when they see fit, in general reserving their efforts for the main attack. They will then fire not only upon the planes in the air, but also upon any troop-carriers which might succeed in landing upon the airfield."*

All other troops were ordered to remain concealed until the preliminary air bombardment had ended. Once the enemy had landed they were to be attacked immediately.

Gun crews went through their routines – gun drill, gun maintenance, and daily chores. They were never far from their gun site and always ready for action. They did find time to befriend an occasional stray dog or cat which made itself at home, obviously considering the rations available preferable to those scrounged in the village or town.

Occasional visits from sellers of oranges and eggs, or villagers eager to wash clothes in exchange for tinned bully beef, provided opportunities for the Australian gunners to practise the few Greek words they had acquired. Greetings became, *kalimera* (good morning) or *kahspera* (good evening), wine became – *krasi*, bread – *psomi*, eggs – *avgho*.

The preparation of meals on the gun sites was generally a matter of experiment by whoever was on duty as cook. The concoctions produced from bully beef, army biscuits, tinned bacon, egg powder, tinned milk, 'goldfish' (herrings in tomato sauce) and tinned butter

in various combinations, often surprised even those who feared the worst.

Enemy air activity from high-level Dornier, Heinkels and Ju 88 bombers and reconnaissance aircraft increased steadily in frequency and intensity from early May. Then Messerschmitt 109 and 110 fighters accompanying Stuka Ju 87 dive-bombers appeared in increasing numbers, favoring early morning and late afternoon for attacks on gun positions. The pilots could then take advantage of the position of the sun to screen their approach or departure.

By 12th May, the Luftwaffe sent aircraft in squadron formations. Three Gloster Gladiators stationed at Maleme engaged a flight of twenty-five Ju 88 bombers. Two were not seen again, while the third continued to try to break up the formation of bombers circling high above the airfield, until it finally disappeared losing height out to sea. The Gladiators in these combats appeared, as one gunner remarked, "*like a willie wagtail diving against a hawk*".

On 13th May, bombing and strafing continued day and night. Destruction of port facilities and shipping at Suda and encampment areas throughout the sector to Maleme was assigned to the high and medium level bombers, while the Stuka dive-bombers and fighters concentrated on the gun positions.

An aircraftsman watching the attack that morning on Maleme from a slit-trench wrote: "*There was a whine and a roar as about thirty Me 109s flashed out of the sun. Ground crews raced for cover as Sergeants Ripshu and Reynish trundled their Hurricanes along the strip at a desperate full throttle. The Messerschmitts shot overhead, while the two men fighting to gain height with their backs to the oncoming enemy, struggled to gain a little more speed as they lifted their under-carriages. Half-a-dozen more Messerschmitts were flying straight down the strip as Squadron-Leader Howell in the third Hurricane opened his throttle. Another wave of aircraft skimmed the beach. There were so many Messerschmitts it was impossible to keep track of them. Everything was yellow tracer and crackling cannon, thumping Bofors and rifle shots.*"⁽¹⁴⁾

Some three hours later Squadron-Leader Howell, who was flying a Hurricane for the first time in his life, landed safely. Reynish was rescued from the sea. Between them they had bagged six enemy planes.

In anticipation of heavy night bombing attacks, all fighter aircraft from Heraklion and Maleme were flown on the night of 13th May to Retimo airstrip.

On 14th May, forty German aircraft attacking Heraklion were engaged by two Hurricanes newly-arrived from Egypt. One came down safely in a forced landing but the second plane was last seen

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disappearing out to sea.

At Maleme, a replacement Hurricane arrived in the middle of a raid. Probably short of fuel, the pilot swung to seawards and with wheels down approached to land. The circling Messerschmitts immediately swooped down upon him with bursts of fire sending him crashing into the water.

Flight-Lieutenant Woodward twice had his aircraft set on fire before he could become airborne at Maleme. On two other occasions when there had been an earlier warning of approaching aircraft, he had managed to become airborne but had not gained sufficient height to engage the enemy. By swinging inland to the south and dodging through the valleys he had eluded his pursuers to return alive.

During these unequal contests the R.A.F. and F.A.A. pilots took turns at flying the few remaining Fulmars, Gladiators and Hurricanes. The ground staff and the gunners meanwhile agonised and watched with admiration as the fighter pilots made heroic efforts to contend with the overwhelming might of the Luftwaffe.

On 16th May, fifteen Messerschmitts escorted thirty Stukas in an attack on Maleme. Three pilots flying Hurricanes took off to intercept the attackers. From their superior attacking positions the Messerschmitts shot down two of the Hurricanes but the third, piloted by Lieutenant Ramsay R.N.V.R., destroyed two enemy aircraft before returning to make a safe landing.