

Last of the Gallant Few

The 17th May saw the last Fulmar and the last two Gladiators at Maleme destroyed on the ground, leaving a single Hurricane able to fly.

It must be remembered that the ground staff, striving to keep the few remaining aircraft on Crete ready for combat, lacked essential maintenance equipment and even basic requirements, in correct engine lubricants and machine-gun ammunition. Spare parts were cannibalised from damaged aircraft, and some salvaged Browning machine guns were mounted in New Zealand infantry positions.

For the small group of surviving pilots, certain death was only the next flight away, and with it the knowledge that their sacrifice at this stage would have no effect upon the campaign. Gradually, their gallant squadrons had been reduced to almost zero with no chance of reinforcements, but they fought on in the highest tradition of their service.

When bombing the airfields, the Germans used anti-personnel bombs (daisy-cutters) which were intended to destroy gun positions and kill, without leaving large holes in the surface of the runways, because they intended to land their troop carriers on those runways once the airborne attack began.

As a result of this policy, the surface of the airfields became littered with shrapnel from exploded bombs. On some occasions, unexploded bombs remained as hazards for disposal experts.

One gunner recalls an incident at Heraklion when two servicemen, on returning after imbibing less wisely than well on the local wine, found an unexploded bomb. One mounted the bomb giving an impromptu demonstration of a Melbourne Cup jockey until his mate coaxed him away. When the bomb exploded, while being moved for disposal by experts the following day, two men died.

The British had declined to allow the New Zealand engineers to plant mines or obstructions on the runway at Maleme because, as Churchill had informed Cunningham, Commander of the Fleet, he hoped "*sixty-four Hurricanes and nine Fulmars will arrive in the Middle East by 24th May*".⁽¹⁵⁾

Lieutenant-Commander Black flew the last Hurricane back to Egypt on the 19th May expecting to bring back eight more Hurricanes with fresh pilots. They did not come before the airborne invasion began on 20th May.

On the morning of 19th May, enemy aircraft machine-gunned the gun positions early in the morning and again in the

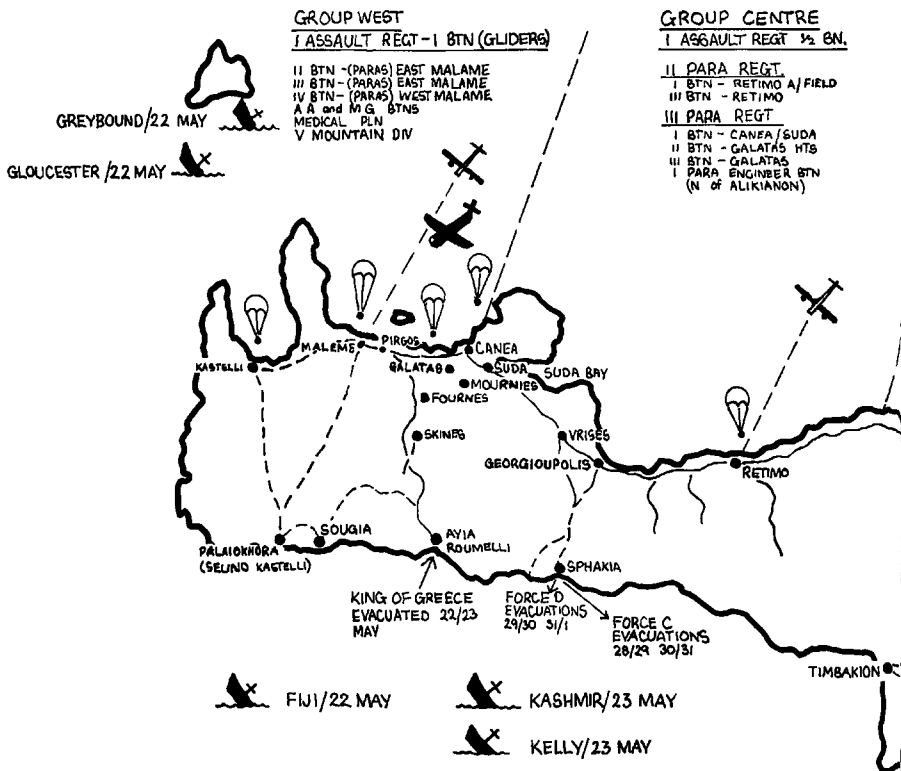
(15) Churchill Vol III WW II p243

evening.

General Freyberg, knowing that the invasion was imminent, and that only three Hurricanes and three Gladiators at Heraklion remained in Crete, gained Churchill's approval for their return to Egypt as *"it would be painful to see these machines and their gallant young pilots shot down on the first morning"*.

With the departure of the last aircraft, the Bofors gunners knew that "stand-to" next morning would not be to the accompaniment of spluttering aircraft engines warming up.

BATTLE FOR CRETE MAY 1941



GROUP WEST

I ASSAULT REGT - I BTN (GLIDERS)

- II BTN - (PARAS) EAST MALAME
- III BTN - (PARAS) EAST MALAME
- IV BTN - (PARAS) WEST MALAME
- A A and M G BTNS
- MEDICAL PLN
- V MOUNTAIN DIV

GROUP CENTRE

I ASSAULT REGT 1/2 BN.

II PARA REGT

- I BTN - RETIMO A/FIELD
- III BTN - RETIMO

III PARA REGT

- I BTN - CANEA/SUDA
- II BTN - GALATAS HTS
- III BTN - GALATAS
- I PARA ENGINEER BTN (N of ALIKIANON)

MALEME SECTOR

(2ND NZ INFANTRY DIVISION)

5TH NZ INFANTRY BRIGADE

21, 22, 23, 28 NZ INF BTNS
NZ COMPOSITE BTN

10TH NZ INF BDE

20 NZ INF BN
NZ COMPOSITE BN.
ONE GREEK BN

ARTY TEN 75 MMS
SIX 37 HOWS.

ARMOR TWO INF TANKS
SEVEN LT TANKS

4TH NZ INF BDE (FORCE RESERVE)

18, 19 NZ INF BTNS
14TH WELSH REGT

A.A. 4 BOPORS A TO 7 AUST BTY
6 BOPORS 156 BTY R.A.
2 H A A R.A.

SUDA BAY SECTOR.

(MARINE NAVAL BASE DEFENCE ORGANISATION) M.N.B.D.O.

MARINE DETACHMENTS

- 1 RANGERS
- 102 ANTI-TANK REGT (as INF)
- 106 R H A (as INF)
- 2/2 AUST FD REGT (as INF)
- 2 AUST COMP BTNS.
- 1 GREEK BTNS

GEORGIPOULIS

(PART OF 14 AUST BDE)

- 2/7 AUST INF BTN.
- 2/8 AUST. INF. BTN.
- (2 COY STRENGTH ONLY)

RETIMO SECTOR

PART OF 19 AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE

3/1 AUSTRALIAN INF BN

3/11 AUSTRALIAN INF. BTN

2 GREEK BTNG

2 INF TANKS

ARTY 8

GROUP EAST

I PARA REGT

- I BATTALION - EAST OF AIRFIELD
- II BATTALION - EAST OF HERAKLION
- III BATTALION - DROP ON HERAKLION

II PARA REGT

- II BTN - DROP ON HERAKLION (as FORCE RESERVE)
- V MTN BTN (LESS I REGT)

III ARM^d REGT

- II BTN

GERMAN REGIMENT = BRITISH BRIGADE

1st PHASE 1st ASSAULT REGT (GLIDERS)
+ VII AIR LANDING DIVISION (PARATROOPS)
XI AIR CORPS IN SUPPORT

TARGETS MALEME, SUDA AQEAS

2nd PHASE RETIMO, HERAKLION
+ SEABORNE TROOP LANDINGS

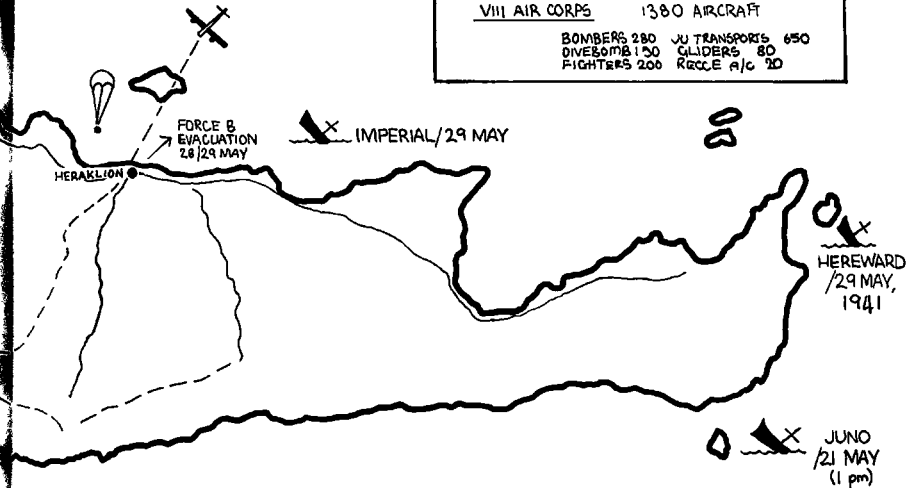
GERMAN TROOPS 22,750

XI AIR CORPS (AIRBOURNE)

VII AIR DIVⁿ PARATROOPS
I ASSAULT REGT 600 GLIDER TROOPS
V MOUNTAIN DIVⁿ + I BTN MTN DIVⁿ
I BTN TANKS

VIII AIR CORPS 1300 AIRCRAFT

BOMBERS 280 JU TRANSPORTS 650
DIVEBOMB 120 GLIDERS 80
FIGHTERS 200 RESCUE A/C 20



HERAKLION SECTOR

14th INFANTRY BRIGADE

- 2 BLACK WATCH
- 2 YORK & LANCASTER
- 2 LEICESTER
- 2/4 AUSTRALIAN INF BTN.
- 7 MEDIUM REGT (as INFANTRY).
- 3 GREBEK BTNS
- 4 INFANTRY TANKS
- 6 LT TANKS
- 8 SPOPS B & C, Tps 7th Bty Aust L.A.A.
- 4 SPOPS 156 Bty L.A.A. R.A.
- 8 VICKERS 2 PDR A.A.
- 2 ARGYLL & SUTHERLAND INF. BTN.

KEY



R.N SHIPS SUNK



GLIDERS



AIR ATTACKS



PARATROOPS


CALCUTTA
/ 1 JUNE