

Maleme to Sphakia - Evacuation

While the Navy was embarking 4000 troops from Heraklion on the night of 28th May in a well-planned and efficiently executed operation, the only chance of evacuation for the remaining 20,000 troops involved a hazardous journey to the south coast of Crete.

The Navy's "decoy" operation from Heraklion took a clearly-understood calculated risk which in the event proved so costly in men and ships. Similar efforts could not be maintained in the face of enemy air power, on the scale required to evacuate all remaining troops.

The Sphakia plan provided for evacuation of 1000 men on the night of 28th/29th May, 6000 on 29th/30th May, 3000 on 30th/31st May and 3000 on 31st May/1st June. This inevitably meant that many could not be taken off.

By 26th May, many groups had already begun to move from the Suda area towards the south coast as defending forces withdrew before the ever-increasing pressure from the enemy advancing from the Maleme sector.

Apart from the organised army units steadily joining the southward movement, many isolated groups of Air Force and Army personnel cut off in the Maleme sector were moving by various routes in the same direction.

The original group of "A" Troop gunners, who had viewed the distant glow of the naval action from the high ground above Maleme on the night of 21st May, had been joined by two R.A.F. men from the A.M.E.S. radar station destroyed that day in a bombing raid. These men knew of a British post near Palaiochora on the south coast.

This was marked on a small map of Crete one of the party had taken from a newspaper.

Tony, the guide, agreed to lead in that direction. Suspecting that some of the villages had newcomers who might be fifth-columnists, he made a practice of visiting villages ahead of the party.

Progress was slow during the darkness, and empty stomachs were no help to weary feet. The treasured scraps of bread, or the handful of waxy raisins or olives villagers had provided, were eaten as slowly as possible to make them last. It was typical of the Cretan villager that he gave so generously of what he could ill spare. An occasional mulberry tree helped ease the pangs of hunger but green barley grains were less satisfying even if nourishing.

On the afternoon of 22nd May, while climbing what appeared to

be part of the bed of the river that flowed down to Maleme, the party was joined by Lieutenant Sutton D.S.C. of the Royal Navy. He immediately assumed command of the mixed group of 15 Australian, New Zealanders and Englishmen.

After the heat of the day the night air was bracing, so the climbers moving higher into the hills decided to walk through the night with brief stops, and to rest more often in daylight, when roving enemy aircraft made movement in the open hazardous.

Groups of local villagers appeared unexpectedly from behind rocks and exchanged news of enemy action in the area with Tony. One of the party had salvaged from his writing case a photo of his fiancée which he carried inside his shirt. Whenever Tony was speaking to locals he was eager to show the photograph – perhaps because the plain black local dress contrasted with that worn by the lady. Always it became a centre of great interest.

Weary, hungry, and thirsty, because some did not have water bottles, the party reached Sougia, a small village on the south coast, about twelve miles from Palaiokhora. A number of R.A.F. and New Zealanders had already arrived there and those with money had been buying whatever food they could.

Lieutenant Purcell and two army signallers from a listening post near Palaiokhora also arrived. The signallers had destroyed their code books before withdrawing as a German force approached their post.

A party of twelve, with R.A.F. officer Brittain, had tried to row in a small boat eastward along the coast, seeking a larger vessel. They had been forced ashore by rough weather, according to the two men who returned to Sougia overland.

After the arrival of a Navy officer, Lieutenant Blake, it was decided to try to reach Sphakia by going back into the mountains to reach the coast again further east. Lieutenant Blake had commanded Motor Launch 1011 which had been despatched from Suda with radio equipment for Sphakia to assist in providing communications during the evacuation. Forced to shelter overnight by rough weather, the launch had been sunk on the morning of 24th May when attacked by four German bombers and five fighters near Palaiokhora.⁽⁶⁶⁾

The party, numbering 15 in all, including Australians, New Zealanders, R.A.F. and Royal Navy launch crew, set off with Tony at 5 p.m. on 25th May. Some of the "A" Troop gunners had lost contact with the group during darkness.

The climb back into the mountains became increasingly arduous as darkness closed in. The chill of the night air turned to freezing temperatures as higher levels were reached, so the thought of rest, in a shepherd's stone hut that loomed out of the mist, proved

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most welcome.

Inside, the bare hut with its bunks and rough furniture seemed cosy as the men packed in. Invited to help themselves to the large dish of cheese-in-the-making, which had reached the stage of thick junket, all ate with relish. Meanwhile, the shepherd went outside and returned with a supply of fresh milk he had taken from the herd penned nearby. As to whether they were sheep or goats has not been decided, for it was dark and departure came before daylight, but the warm milk was as nectar to those who shared it.

It was agreed to rest for a few hours prior to moving before daylight. One member of the party recalls with gratitude that, as he was dozing off, he became aware that the shepherd was placing his shepherd's woollen skin cloak over him as a rug. The fact that on awakening after a brief sleep he realised that he had played host to some of the inhabitants of the cloak, in no way spoils his pleasant memory of that kindly action.

By daylight, the highest level of the pass was reached and the descent began into the Samaria Gorge. For ten miles the track winds down the steep ravine, the walls in some places being no more than twenty feet apart and towering upwards for a thousand feet.

The sharp rocks underfoot rip and tear at boot leather, and lighter service footwear or shoes soon disintegrate. The soles of Lieutenant Sutton's shoes were completely ruined by journey's end. But the ever-present threat of aircraft while moving in open country was no longer a problem, and there was water for those who had depended on other men's water bottles for the rest of the journey.

At the bottom of the gorge, on the small flat area near the beach, the fishing village of Ayia Roumeli came in sight. From there the King of Greece had departed three days previously, on 23rd May, relieving Freyberg of the responsibility for his safety.

Following the withdrawal of the Government of Greece to Crete in April, the King's presence and safety had been matters of great political significance.

On the first day of the invasion, King George II had narrowly escaped capture by paratroops who evidently knew of his whereabouts in Canea.

Escorted by Greek gendarmes and a New Zealand body guard, the King, his entourage, and British diplomats, crossed the 7000' high mountains and travelled down the Samaria Gorge to be evacuated by the destroyer H.M.S. "Decoy".

The telephone line between Roumeli and Sphakia was still operating and Lieutenant Blake made contact with a British Intelligence officer, Captain Ellabeck, who operated a Government caïque in the area.

Arrangements were made to pick up the party at night. A flicker

of light out at sea gained the desired signal from the beach. The sound of oars heralded the arrival of the rowing boat which soon transported the eager passengers on board the caique.

One member of the party recalls the luxury of finding a spot on the deck and being told to "*make yourselves as comfortable as you can*", as the diesel engine came to life. The silence a few minutes later, as the engine stopped, recalled most to wakefulness, but a Scottish voice reassured the English skipper he would soon have it going again, and the passengers lapsed into unconsciousness, to awake some hours later at Sphakia.

"A" Troop men were allotted duties at control points on the steep tracks leading down into the village of Sphakia where hundreds sheltered wherever they could. The order was that no more troops were to move into the beach or village areas until they were called forward.

Later in the evening, a Greek officer presented a letter, signed by the King of Greece, stating that General . . . had given loyal service, and requesting that he be "granted safe conduct" with the embarking troops. In accordance with instructions, the officer was told a runner would call them forward at the appropriate time.

At about 2.30 a.m. on 29th May a runner came to the post with orders to withdraw to the beach. There, the landing barges were loading the men waiting in line. The last barge was filling as the "A" Troop men scrambled in. A curt order: "That's all". The last man of the "A" Troop party "made it" into the barge because he was pulled in by Gunner Selleck.

A short, quiet journey to the waiting ship, up the side and in through the black-out screens to the lighted interior, past the armoury. "Pass in all fire-arms".

The "acquired" R.A.F. Smith and Wessons, and German Lugers were reluctantly passed into H.M.S. "Kelvin's" keeping. Everyone received a cup of cocoa and ship's biscuits. At least one man had a piece of stale rye bread left inside his shirt. He would keep it and that first ship's biscuit to remind him of the debt he owed to the Cretans and the Navy.

Then, the chance to look around and determine the substance of the sudden feeling of security: officers and sailors in clean, smart uniforms; order and efficiency without fuss; the hum of engines below deck and the friendliness of those directing you; and then the realisation that the ship was moving, faster and faster as the engines developed their thrust.

The Captain's voice came calm and clear over the loud-speaker, welcoming the troops aboard, anticipating there might be some trouble, but assuring everyone that his gunners would take care of that. Soon most slept where they were.

With daylight, came the inevitable, "Action Stations" as enemy



Troops awaiting evacuation under shelter of pines above Sphakia. (Courtesy Australian War Memorial).



Samaria Gorge above Sougia, Southern Crete.



15,000 troops embarked from this beach-head at Sphakia, Crete.



"A" Troop men in front of ship's bell – H.M.S. "KELVIN".



H.M.S. "KELVIN" evacuated troops from Sphakia 29th May, 1941. (Courtesy Imperial War Museum)

aircraft appeared. The men on "Kelvin" could see the accompanying destroyers "Kandahar", "Nizam", and "Napier", each throwing up bow waves as they twisted and turned in dodging the bombs aimed at them. Words of praise from the Captain for his gunners followed.

Entering Alexandria harbor, the sight of "Warspite" with a huge gash in her side made those on board "Kelvin" realise that not all came through unscathed. On the morrow, when returning for another load, "Kelvin" herself was to suffer bomb damage and be put out of action.

Sergeant Dave Humphreys, who came out the same night on "Napier", had met up with the Greek soldier who had boxed with Lance-Bombardier Twyman in the olive grove in 42nd Street area, soon after the 7th Battery arrived in Crete. By coincidence he reached the "Napier" in company with Navy Lieutenant Blake whose motor launch had been sunk at Palaiochora (Selina Kastelli).

The organised withdrawal of units from Suda provided for rearguard actions to allow a leap-frogging process towards Sphakia with the N.Z. 4th and 5th Brigades, the Australian 19th Brigade, and British troops co-operating.

The journey to Sphakia for the exhausted, hungry troops meant a laborious climb along steep winding tracks into the mountains. Gunner Harold Dickinson's diary records his impressions of that period; when he travelled with N.Z. 21st Battalion:

"28th May. Hot Washed in a cold stream. Turned in again. Lieutenant Smith stirred me with his foot, saying Jerry trying to outflank us. Machine-gun fire and bullets quite near. Terribly hot as we pass down valley, feet scorching, equipment heavy as lead.

"All the way saw equipment, rifles, gear, clothing cast away by troops gone ahead – to our disgust. This did not happen in N.Z. lines.

"1400 hrs. – rest in olive grove outside bomb-wrecked village – until 1615 hrs., then a little cooler to tackle climb over mountains.

"Wonderful scenery but no appeal to us. Jerry often appeared. Road full of troops, stragglers and equipment all going same way. Hill after hill until we topped the range and descended to deserted village. Dropped asleep at each stop until awakened to move on again. Passed hundreds lying exhausted at roadside but our lot, the 21st Battalion, kept together remarkably well. Jerry troops further behind. Rearguard doing good job. Flares attached to parachutes dropped by planes at intervals. Every man froze in his tracks.

"29th May. Rested all day. Changed socks. Tucker scarce.

"1600 hrs. shells landed on ridge near us. Start to move but planes force us to ground. Two miles in two hours. Entered ravine at dusk five or six miles from embarkation point - Sphakia. Expect to be off tomorrow night.

"Ravine a gem in scenery line. We passed through other troops waiting in fifty lots for embarkation. At gorge exit, taken abruptly off track and up mountain-side where we packed under pine trees for night. Look forward eagerly to the morrow.

"30th May. Still blasted hot. Lay low to escape Jerry planes. Troops got off last night. Looking out to sea a splendid sight for sore eyes and may it bode well for us. The pace has been terrific lately. We cannot keep it up indefinitely. I have stood up pretty well but a good feed and a cup of tea wouldn't go astray. Spend spare time conjuring ideas of what we will consume when we hit solid land again. Since leaving Maleme have covered 70 to 80 miles without proper rest and tucker. Told we are to stay and fight as the rear guard. Imagine our feelings, anxious as we are to get off! Get used to the idea and cheer up later. Took up positions above precipice to watch enemy. Gunfire near where Australian battalion in contact. Recalled to Battalion H.Q. at 2300 hrs."

On the night of 29th-30th May, 6,000 troops were taken off in the "Phoebe", "Perth", "Glengyle", "Calcutta", "Coventry", "Jarvis", "Janus" and "Hasty".

On the 30th-31st May, "Kandahar" had to turn back with engine trouble and "Kelvin" with bomb damage leaving "Napier" and "Nizam" to take 1,400 men mainly N.Z. 4th Brigade.

With 9,000 troops remaining, the rear guard consisted of the Australian 7th and 8th Battalions, the Marines and the 21st N.Z. Battalion under Vasey's command, on the high ground above Sphakia, and the rest of the N.Z. 5th Brigade on the lower level near the narrow beach-head.

On 31st May/1st June, the final night of the evacuation, it was apparent that more than 5,000 troops would be left behind as only a selected number from the N.Z. 5th Brigade, 2/8th and 2/7th Battalions and British troops could be taken off.

As unofficial members of the N.Z. 21st Battalion, the four "A" Troop gunners had no claim to priority, but Gunner Harold Dickinson's diary explains how the problem was solved:

"31st May. Hot as blazes. No breeze. Awakened 0430. Move down mountain towards Sphakia. Placed among rocks, without shade from sun beating down. Plenty of water but eight biscuits and one-third tin of bully beef for day. Told N.Z. 5th Brigade to embark tonight (hope that includes us).

"About 1100 hours we four Aussies sent up mountain with patrol to outposts. Recalled 1930 hours and Lieutenant Smith informed us that as Brigade refused to place our names on

"embarkation list we could not go off with 21st Bn. We were upset and so were they but to no avail.

"The boys of "C" Company collected and gave us 4,060 drachma for use in emergency. Captain Tinesdale also gave us a letter requesting help and told us they would try to smuggle us down and on the ship. This they did, although we had many anxious moments before finally boarding H.M.S. "Phoebe" an A.A. cruiser.

"Cocoa and tucker in plenty awaited us. Crew treated us like kings. Good old Navy and just another evacuation!

"1st June. Arrived Alexandria 1730 hours. Although crowded in ward room a dirty, filthy mob with full bellies for the first time in over a fortnight, the total of 1,465 troops on board and the convoy load of 4,228 were once again cheerful."

A late message to the 2/7th Australian Battalion indicated that there was room for them but the problems of moving troops forward to the limited embarkation area delayed them.

Control points and the unorganised groups of troops who crowded forward on the beach when the picquets departed, prevented most of the 7th Battalion from embarking. The rest joined their C.O., Colonel Walker, on the beach. For most it meant captivity.