

Retimo-Heraklion Sector

Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Campbell of the 2/1st Australian Infantry Battalion was given the responsibility of defending the town of Retimo and the airstrip which was situated five hundred yards from the beach, parallel with the road and about five miles east of the town. His command included: 2/1st and 2/11th Australian Infantry Battalions; 90 gunners of the 2/3rd Australian Field Regiment manning eight French and Italian guns replacing their own guns left behind in Greece; two machine-gun platoons; 800 disciplined Greek Police; 2,300 Greeks, many of whom lacked arms or ammunition; and a detachment of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment with two Matilda tanks. Ammunition was in short supply for the field guns, mortars and machine-guns. There were no anti-aircraft guns.

Lack of equipment, as elsewhere in Crete, posed serious communication problems within the area and with forces at Heraklion and Suda on either side.

Defensive positions established on high ground to the east and south of the airfield provided effective cover of the area by machine-gun and rifle fire. Use of camouflage and the natural foliage on the terraces deceived the enemy into believing the area was only lightly defended.

The preliminary attack by strafing and dive-bombing aircraft late in the afternoon of the 20th May caused few casualties. When the following transports flew slowly along the beach front, several were brought down in flames or crashed as the paratroops jumped. Within an hour, 161 planes had passed leaving paratroops spread from east of the airstrip to short of the town in the west.

Fierce individual battles were fought for defended positions. To the east, near a strategically vital hill, infantry, artillery-men and machine-gunners fought in a bitter struggle to retain control of the high ground. A mortar bomb finally put the guns out of action. The unarmed defending artillerymen and machine-gunners suffered heavy casualties.

Many of the paratroops had landed in the midst of defended positions so support aircraft were unable to select targets without endangering their own troops.

Paratroops landing near the 2/1st Battalion and the Greek 4th Battalion positions were all killed or captured. Others landing in the 2/11th Battalion's area, suffered a similar fate. Groups dropped further west, beyond the defended area, were able to form organised units and make use of vineyard cover.

Using night patrols, the defenders captured many prisoners and

a great deal of German equipment.

Two tanks brought into the fray to clear the airstrip and attack the captured positions on high ground came to grief in the steep gullies, and were captured.

Strong sustained counter-attacks by the 2/1st and 2/11th Battalions captured many prisoners, including Colonel Sturm, commander of the invasion force in the Retimo area. The captured code for air support enabled the Australians to call down bombing attacks on positions held by the Germans.

By the 23rd May, the 2/1st Battalion, after capturing the paratroop medical aid post east of the airfield, arranged for the Australian and German medical officers and orderlies to work side by side tending their wounded. Greek medical officers and orderlies joined the group which attended to "147 Australians, 51 Greeks and 252 Germans" on 24th May.⁽⁴⁹⁾

At sea, the Royal Navy's success in destroying the seaborne invasion troops was a serious blow to the German plan, but with all resources committed to Maleme no effort was spared in attacking the defenders. The paratroops in the Prison Valley area had been unable to move on Canea and Suda Bay. The airfields at Retimo and Heraklion had not been captured, but, with the failure of the New Zealand counter-attack at Maleme on the morning of the 22nd May, the German forces were able to land aircraft laden with men and equipment on the airfield.

At Galatas, when the New Zealanders came under heavy attack from the enemy, supported by aircraft, trying to capture the high ground, they received unexpected assistance from a motley force of local villagers who had joined the survivors of a Greek unit led by an English Captain Forrester.

They appeared dramatically, "*running, bounding and yelling like Red Indians; about a hundred Greeks and villagers, including women and children, led by Michael Forrester twenty yards ahead. It was too much for the Germans. They turned and ran without hesitation.*"⁽⁵⁰⁾

At Retimo the Greek Police unit held the town, while paratroops in the countryside beyond the defended areas, at Retimo and at Heraklion, with no hope of reinforcement or adequate supplies of food and ammunition, were under constant threat from the local population.

The paratroops, who had entered the town at Heraklion on 20th May, were driven out by the Yorks and Lancasters on the 22nd May and forced to withdraw to the west. The Black Watch were responsible for the withdrawal of an eastern enemy group to the A.M.E.S.

[49] Long p 265 Note 2

[50] Stewart. p313 quoting Kippinger p 59

Hill where, instead of striving to capture the airfield, this force then concentrated on preventing British aircraft from landing there.

Within the defended area around Heraklion at the end of 22nd May, 950 German corpses had been collected in the British area and 300 in the Greek zone. Many more lay amidst the vines and in inaccessible places. Of the attacking force of 2,000, it was estimated that 1,450 were killed apart from those wounded and captured around Heraklion. British casualties were believed to be fewer than 50.

On 23rd May, 1941, six Hurricanes of 73 Squadron with a Blenheim escort were briefed to use Heraklion airfield as a base for *"low-level attacks against the parachutists at Maleme and to shoot up transports landing there"*.⁽⁵¹⁾

Approaching Crete, the flight was fired on by naval gunners who refused to accept aircraft flying over them as being friendly.

While dodging the heavy barrage, five of the Hurricanes lost their escort and returned to North Africa. The Blenheim and the sixth Hurricane arrived safely at Heraklion but *"the fighter was destroyed on the ground"*, as recorded in Gunner Frank Worsley's diary.

A second flight, with five of the original six pilots, took off in the afternoon with an escort of Marylands to arrive at Heraklion as an attack on the town was in progress.

They engaged the enemy, damaging two of them and driving the rest off. On landing, two of the Hurricanes damaged their rear landing wheels on the rough surface. The others refuelled and patrolled until dusk. Next day all returned towards Africa with the pilot from the first flight (Flight-Sergeant Laing) "hitching" a lift with Flying Officer Goodman in the cockpit of his Hurricane.

Unfortunately, the returning aircraft encountered a sandstorm which caused two of them to crash when trying to land. Two others were posted as missing.

Gunner Cec. Rae, of 9th Aust. L.A.A. Battery, stationed at the time near an airfield in the desert, recorded in his diary:

24th May, 1941: *"Seven planes left for Crete yesterday to do some strafing.*

"Two planes are missing and one was shot up on the ground in Crete whilst refuelling so the pilot came back sitting on the knee of another pilot in a Hurricane. Sand-storm all day.

26th May: *"Bob Laing the pilot who came over from Crete had a chat with us. He originally came from Tasmania but joined up in N.Z. He met some of our 7th Battery chaps in Crete."*

The 23rd May at Maleme had brought a steady flow of Ju 52 transports laden with troops and equipment, but fighters and dive-bombers made few appearances as the main force was attacking Royal Navy ships which had so successfully dealt with the German

(51) Spencer p 239

seaborne forces.

The troop arrivals at Maleme had increased from the 2,400 on 20th May, with 300 paratroops and 300 airborne on the 21st, followed by 1,500 airborne troops on 22nd, and 5 battalions with heavy mortars and machine-gun units on the 23rd May.

Under the steadily increasing pressure from these fresh, well-armed troops the New Zealand 5th Brigade withdrew five miles, forming a new line west of Galatas.

Several "A" troop gunners who had linked up with the New Zealand infantry were involved in this action. Gunners Dickinson, Birch, Hansen, Tuck and James were to spend the next week with the New Zealanders in the withdrawal to Sphakia. Dickinson's diary records for 23rd May: *"Few hours rest. Moved at dawn with N.Z. Brigade; to cross six miles through mountain towards Galatas where fresh stand to be made. Dangerous tiring march; lost several men. Cut off and forced to deviate, wading through river to get through; wounded left behind as Jerry was close on our heels. There I got temporarily attached to N.Z. artillery who had lost all their guns. Remained with them in gully under shell, mortar fire, and bombing until 2130. Heavy fighting with many killed and wounded. Maoris did good job – always cheerful and bright. Retreated again at dusk carrying six trench mortar shells for 1½ miles, which nearly killed me. Dumping them, marched four to five miles around coast road to fresh defence line outside Canea. There met Bill Hansen and Ed. Birch again and we decided to look for "C" Company 21st N.Z. tomorrow. All dog-tired but many troops – Australians and others around us."*

Gunner Dick Plant of "A" Troop H.Q., after being wounded by mortar shrapnel, was taken to the New Zealand aid post where, along with Sergeant Max Whiteside, Gunners Layton and Gillingham, he was captured when the R.A.P. was over-run by the advancing Germans.

An old Ford truck was used as an ambulance to move the wounded back to the German field hospital set up in the houses of the village over the Tavronitis bridge. Gunner Dick Plant remembers how quiet the wounded were although *"doing it tough"*.

When the word was passed around that wounded were to be flown out to Greece, Plant decided his chance of rescue would be better if he stayed in Crete, so after shaking hands with his mates he *"blew through"* into the hills. There he was befriended first by a young boy who guided him to a village.

Gunner Plant's story, until his capture seven months later, has been woven with that of another soldier, from the 2/3rd Field Regiment, in a documentary film *"Flowers of Rethymnon"*⁽⁵²⁾ which relates the experiences of soldiers, the brave Cretans who sheltered

(52) Shown on Channel S B S 1986

them, and the efforts made to rescue survivors. Plant's story appears in a later chapter of P.O.W. experiences.

Sergeant Rol Tonkin recalls that *"some of our wounded and medics were flown out from Maleme to Salonika in Greece – among them Sergeant Max Whiteside, C. S. Gillingham, Reg Thomson, Bill Morrissey, A. G. White and Les Martin.*

"Five Blenheims bombed the drome as we worked, and with all the noise going on we could not hear the R.A.F. approaching. Our first warning was the burst of the bombs. We lost quite a few P.O.W.s but the cost to "A" Troop was nil"

In spite of their superior fire power on the ground and from the air, the Germans had been unable to capture the heights at Galatas, but the New Zealand withdrawal left them with *"the matchless prize – a strip of sand 800 yards long under the protection of its guardian hill,"*⁽⁵³⁾ the Maleme Airfield, the key to the ultimate success of the campaign.

Between the airfield and new defence positions taken up by the New Zealanders, the advancing Germans were horrified at the evidence of the fate of the battalion that had dropped there on the first day and had been annihilated. The effect of the burning summer heat was all too evident.

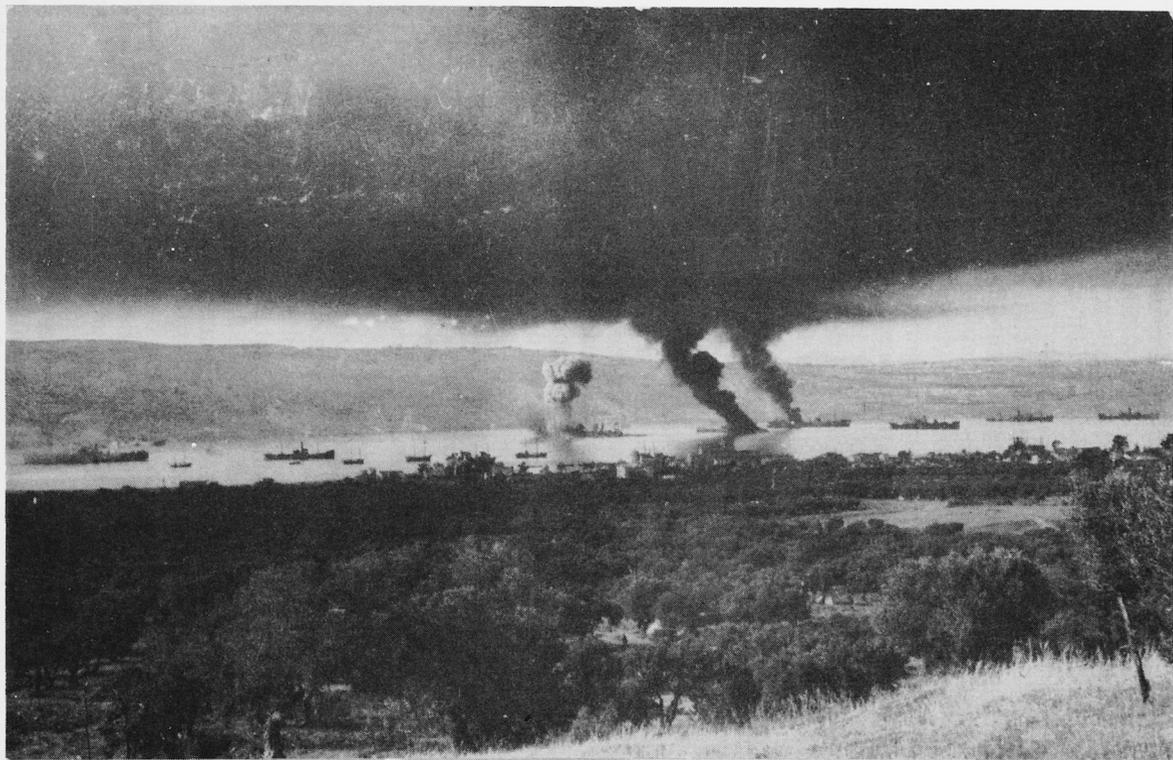
As German fortunes improved in the Maleme area on the 24th May, with the airfield serving its essential purpose in handling the steady flow of transports, the Luftwaffe concentrated on attacking Suda Bay and the British Fleet. The dense black smoke cloud from burning oil tankers and ships hung like a pall over Suda Bay.

The following day, the bombing of Heraklion raised a dense yellow cloud over the harbor when a storage dump of sulphur was hit. As one gunner recalls, *"We thought the Jerries had dropped gas bombs"*. The town, already evacuated by civilians, lay in ruins.

The punishment for resistance by civilians was to fall also on the villagers of Canea. Waves of bombers and fighter-bombers circled and returned time and again as explosions reduced the houses to rubble, and fleeing men, women and children were strafed in the streets and surrounding fields.

By the end of the 24th, it was estimated that the Germans had landed 6450 troops at Maleme, 5800 at Prison Valley and Retimo, and 3300 at Heraklion – all airborne troops. Losses were estimated at Germans 3340; British, Australian and New Zealand 396 killed, 1118 wounded; 395 missing (three-quarters of these from the New Zealand Division).

The Germans had planned to complete the attack on Crete by their Air Division, quickly, and then hand over garrison duty to the army so that airborne troops and the Air Wing could serve on the



*SUDA BAY – Ships burning after German air raid.
(Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)*

Russian front.

Their time table had been disrupted, but authorities in Cairo and London were slow to appreciate the desperate problem Freyberg faced in withdrawing, lacking as he did, tools, artillery and transport to prepare defences to cover a rear-guard action. With the loss of Maleme he knew that Crete was lost. He was later to write to the author of the New Zealand, 22nd Battalion history:

"I do not for one moment hold Colonel Andrew responsible for the failure to hold Maleme, he was given an impossible task. He has my sympathy. I take full responsibility as regards policy of holding the aerodrome. I did not like the defences of any of my four garrisons. I would have put in another infantry battalion to help Andrew but it was impossible in the time to dig them in. The ground was solid rock, neither did we have the tools. Puttick, Hargest and I must bear our share of responsibility for the defensive positions that were taken up at Maleme, which were as good as we could hope for under the difficult circumstances."⁽⁵⁴⁾

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In the fighting around Retimo, Colonel Campbell's forces continued to inflict heavy casualties and capture large numbers of prisoners. The problem of burying the enemy dead was so great that German prisoners volunteered to assist. Having recovered bodies from among the vines the prisoners kept their word and "returned to their cage" which at the time enclosed 500. Freyberg's message to Campbell read, *"You have done Magnificently."*⁽⁵⁵⁾

(54) Henderson p74 Note 103 (Letter to author, Jan 1956)

(55) Long p265