

## The Planned Assault

General Student, Commander of German Airborne Forces, is recognised as the author of the plan for the airborne attack on Crete. He had played an important part in the successful use of airborne troops in Europe during 1939-40, when the parachute and glider troops became an "elite corps".<sup>(16)</sup>

Consideration had been given to landing airborne troops to establish a bridgehead for an attack on England, and special gliders had been constructed able to carry a tank or field gun with loads up to 21 tons. Multiple parachutes enabled heavy equipment to be dropped from supporting aircraft.

Failing to gain the necessary control of the air over England for a successful airborne invasion, the German high command considered alternative use of these highly-trained troops in the Mediterranean-Suez Canal, Cyprus, Malta or Crete.

After Yugoslavia capitulated on 17th April, and the Greek Army laid down arms on 21st April, the British Expeditionary Force advanced its withdrawal from the 28th to the 24th April, a decision which undoubtedly affected the destination of 7th Battery.

British troops had been on Crete since 29th October, 1940, and Student saw the capture of Crete as a prelude to an attack on Suez via Cyprus. Hitler approved the plan on 20th April, and on 25th April issued a directive for the operation to occupy Crete using the code name Merkur (Mercury); the British named it "Scorcher" and their counter-plan "Colorado".

The German High Command initially considered occupation of the western part of the island, from Maleme to Canea, by two divisions which would then move eastward towards Suda, Retimo and Heraklion.

The second alternative proposed simultaneous attacks at seven points, with Maleme, Canea, Retimo and Heraklion the most important, to be "taken quickly".

The final plan was a compromise of these two, with the capture of the four important strategic points timed to make full use of air support groups. Maleme and Canea were to be attacked in the morning and Retimo and Heraklion in the afternoon.<sup>(17)</sup>

From these bases the remainder of the island was to be subdued in four days by the 22,750 men to be landed by air and sea.

Air strength totalling 1,380 aircraft comprised approximately 650 Ju 52 troop carriers, 80 gliders, 280 bombers, 150 Stuka dive-bombers, 200 single and twin engine Messerschmitt (109s and

(16) Kuhn: p 47

(17) Kuhn: p 57

110s) fighters and 20 reconnaissance and spotter aircraft.

Churchill claimed that, "*at no moment in the war was our intelligence so truly and precisely informed. Our agents in Greece were active and daring*".<sup>(18)</sup> He was therefore well aware of the German plan to launch simultaneous airborne and seaborne attacks.

But some of his senior commanders considered the target might be Iraq, Cyprus, Malta, or the attack on Crete only a feint. Churchill was to be proved correct.

The enemy hastened the building up of their airforces and the movement of stores and fuel to the many air bases established in Greece and Aegean islands. Meanwhile, commandeered Greek caiques (small high-prowed fishing craft), trawlers and small freighters, were assembled in two convoys, loaded with guns, vehicles, motor cycles, drums of petrol, and pack animals and men of the Mountain Division.

Each small armada, escorted by an Italian M.T.B., headed for the island of Milos, thence en route to Crete once the invasion began. The group of 25 vessels carrying 2,300 men was due to arrive at Maleme on the evening of the second day of the attack; the second group of 38 vessels with 4,000 troops was expected at Heraklion on the evening of the third day.<sup>(19)</sup>

Dive-bombers and single-engined fighters were stationed on the island airstrips nearest to Crete. Fighter-bombers, bombers and reconnaissance aircraft mustered at bases as far afield as Rhodes, Bulgaria and Salonica. Glider-towing transports and paratroop aircraft operated from airfields in southern Greece.

Churchill referred to the German Air Division as representing "*the flame of the Hitler Youth Movement*".<sup>(20)</sup> Most of the paratroops were in their twenties with most officers in their thirties.

Using specially designed parachutes, paratroops were trained to drop from heights of only 200 to 400 feet with a fall time of up to twelve seconds. Each "stick" (so-named by the Germans) numbered twelve to fifteen men. They did not carry back-up parachutes but equipment was of the highest standard. Their crash helmets were rimless and the knees and elbows of their over-alls were thickly padded. In addition to a machine pistol, three grenades and a jack-knife, each carried two days rations of sliced bread, processed chocolate, sugar, biscuits, thirst-quenching tablets, water bottle, cooking utensils and a blanket. Spare socks and underwear fitted in the folded trouser cuffs.

Officers used pink parachutes and carried an amazing assortment of equipment compactly arranged in a neat leather bag which contained:— pencil, rubber, cellophane map covers, probes, tweezers, syringes (made in England), hypodermic needles, a dozen

(17) Kuhn p57

(18) Churchill Vol III p240

(19) Kuhn p64

(20) Churchill p252

or so small sealed bottles of various kinds of drugs, from morphia to pep-pills (called 'courage pills'), thirst quenchers, food tablets, notebooks (graph and plain paper), bandages and first-aid kit.

Canisters, dropped with each "stick" from one transport, contained rifles, machine-guns, mortars, ammunition, grenades, light field guns, water, food and medical supplies. Yellow parachutes indicated a special supply of medical equipment and various colors indicated other specialised packages. Multiple parachutes, up to as many as five on one load, were used for heavy equipment such as guns and vehicles.

The six hundred elite troops of the Storm Regiment travelled in seventy gliders made of wood and canvas over steel ribs, with perspex windows providing a view of their destination. They were seated over a central beam extending over the length of the glider.

Towed by Ju 52 transports at 15,000 feet, fully-loaded gliders when released could cruise at seventy-five m.p.h. for fifty miles. Flaps controlled the rate of descent and wire-bound runners helped absorb the shock of landing.

Each glider, in addition to the pilot, carried nine men trained to operate as a team, with a specific objective to be attacked immediately on landing. Their role was to surprise the enemy by their silent approach while other planes strafed and bombed the defenders. The pilot tried to land as close as possible to the target to enable the Assault Troops to capture the gun positions and immobilise them before the parachute troops arrived.

The glider troops in the assault force, in addition to the equipment provided for the paratroops, carried a life jacket, in case they were dropped in the sea, heavy machine-guns, and mortars ready for action.

Paratroops faced a special problem in mustering after a successful descent and then reaching the accompanying canisters dropped with them to provide the heavier equipment required. Each was expected to be prepared to take over the leadership of the group when casualties occurred. Their commanders dropped with them and shared all the hazards. Esprit de corps developed strong bonds between all ranks and created a very cohesive force.

The co-ordination of airborne forces with the fighter and bomber commands involved a great deal of detailed planning under the control of a supreme commander responsible for the success of the venture. The effectiveness of this organisation and chain of command contributed greatly to the ultimate German success.

By contrast much of the planning for the defence of Crete evolved in a disjointed fashion, with six commanders in as many months while much of the planning, envisaged by the High Command in England, was never put into effect.

Reference to Churchill's speeches in the House of Commons during the battle for Crete, clearly indicates that he was either uninformed or misinformed of the true situation concerning the implementation of his plans to equip the defenders of Crete.

The first echelon of Major-General Weston's Marine Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation did not arrive in Suda Bay until a week after General Freyberg had taken over, from him, command of forces on the island. Major-General Weston retained command of the Suda Bay-Canea sector which included "A" Troop, 7th Battery at Maleme. Two three-inch anti-aircraft sections went to Heraklion by sea; another three-inch anti-aircraft section and a six-inch coastal battery were sited at Maleme, five anti-aircraft sections remained at Suda and a six-inch coastal battery was sited near the coast to the west of Retimo.

When the second echelon of the M.N.B.D.O. arrived on 15th May, one light A.A. troop went to Heraklion, another to Maleme, and the remaining third troop to the Canea area as infantry. Movement of the third echelon to Crete was cancelled. The troop that arrived at Maleme on 17th May began relieving gun crews, to provide each in turn, with a twenty-four hour spell from the constant strain of manning their guns.

On the evening of 19th May, members of the crew of the "A" Troop gun on the north side of the airfield were instructed to take twenty-four hours rations and their blankets, as it was their turn to be given one day's relief away from the gun site. Transported at dusk to higher slopes about one mile south of the airfield, they were set down in the open and prepared to make themselves comfortable for the night, hoping to have an uninterrupted sleep for a change. Some of them had taken writing materials with them intending to spend their leisure in writing letters home next day. In the meantime, resting out in the open on the hillside, south of the defended area, they were able to contemplate the clear northern sky with the moon past full, and the clusters of alien stars that lacked the familiar Southern Cross circling above the southern horizon.

One of the gunners from an "A" Troop crew, on the western side of the airfield, recalls that on the same evening their sergeant sent him and some of his mates to spend the night in the slit trench of a nearby New Zealand platoon covering the area. The night was mild and calm and they slept peacefully in the security of the company of the New Zealanders.

On the evening of 19th May, the raids had been neither as heavy nor as prolonged as usual, but, unknown to many, the several-times-delayed invasion was about to be launched. That day, Freyberg was told that two German airmen, taken from the sea by Cretan fishermen, had confided in their rescuers that the assault would begin on 20th May.

This German confidence in Cretan sympathy proved to be misplaced for, with few exceptions throughout the island, the local population proved to be violently hostile to the Germans once the attack commenced.

It appears that Freyberg tended to discount the accuracy of this information as no definite warning reached down the line of command and the actual attack achieved an element of surprise.

As part of the German counter-intelligence organisation of the invasion plan, Admiral Canaris had established groups of agents in Crete, to ascertain the garrison's strength, and to prepare to enlist the help of local sympathisers who would identify one another with the code words "*Major Bock*".<sup>(21)</sup>

Other counter-intelligence operations involved Squadrons of 8th Air Corps flying reconnaissance missions to keep track of all shipping movements, and to prepare detailed photographs of defended positions and estimates of forces and equipment.

On this information, specific targets and objectives were allotted to individual units. Some of the commanders were able to fly over and study the targets on which they would later descend.

The last of the British aircraft had returned to Egypt and the enemy was now, in Churchill's words, "*supported by omnipotent and absolute air power which was his master weapon*".<sup>(22)</sup>

The traitor, "Lord Haw-Haw", in his radio broadcasts, for weeks had taunted the troops on the "*Island of Doomed Men*" as he called Crete. He claimed to be "*wise to the Australian shock troops hiding amongst the olive groves*" and promised them shocks to come. His theme music, "*Run Rabbit Run*", at least provided a variation from the sombre broadcasts from the B.B.C., which often caused the British troops to worry more about what was happening to their families back home rather than their own predicament; but Churchill's speeches undoubtedly boosted morale in spite of everything.

(21) Spencer p97

(22) Churchill p240