

Withdrawal from Maleme

An early morning conference of the three battalion Commanders on 21st May decided that the New Zealand troops east of Maleme should remain in their defensive positions where the corpses of the enemy and their parachutes littered the area. 22nd Battalion was to reorganise the weary scattered groups moving back from the airfield and Hill 107.

Although machine-gunning from the air caused few casualties in slit trenches, the ever-present menace of strafing and bombing aircraft severely limited the movement of groups of troops in daylight, and the landing of additional paratroops and sea-borne forces was expected, so it was decided that counter-attack must await darkness.

Where they could, troops sheltered during the heat of the day under olive trees, while others maintained listening posts in the trenches.

Several "A" Troop gunners recall this period when individuals were allotted duties with New Zealanders. Gunner Hal Dickinson in his diary mentions 'taking post' with N.Z. Corporal Ken Brewer; Gunner Dick Plant was wounded while serving alongside "*a Kiwi answering to the name 'Greko' – a title earned because of an exploit in Greece where he had dealt with a fifth-columnist*".

According to German reports, on the morning of 21st May their paratroops moved cautiously into the area from which the defenders had withdrawn during the night, meeting only occasional resistance from snipers.

On the airfield, parties of prisoners were employed repairing the damaged runway in preparation for the arrival of troop transports.

At about 8 a.m. on 21st May, a single Ju 52 landed safely in a field about three miles west of Maleme to obtain information on the situation for the German High Command. The pilot's favorable report brought six more Ju 52s an hour later to unload urgently required ammunition and take off again without incident.⁽⁴³⁾ Another account of this event states that "*The six planes thudded into the sand near the river mouth*"⁽⁴⁴⁾ – a difficult place for subsequent take-off!

Later in the morning, a flight of Ju 52s dropped 350 paratroops in the safe landing area to the west. During the afternoon, a furious bombing attack on villages east of the airfield was a prelude to a drop of paratroops east of Pírgos along the coast. These men had

(43) Kuhn p 100

(44) Stewart p 262

been originally destined for the attack on Heraklion but transport problems had delayed their departure. In the area between Plataniás and Pírgos some landed in zones strongly defended by the Engineers and Maoris; other unfortunates were drowned because of their heavy equipment when dropped over the sea.

At about 5 p.m., when the Germans advancing to the east overran the N.Z. 22nd Battalion Regimental Aid Post, a large number of wounded including some of "A" Troop, 7th Battery were taken prisoner.

Heavy dive-bombing and strafing attacks wrecked the early warning station south of the airfield as more paratroops continued to land.

A single Ju 52 which had landed on the airfield after midday, had unloaded ammunition, taken on wounded and, in spite of heavy fire from New Zealand artillery, had taken off successfully – *"the first to land on the airfield – and get away with it."*⁽⁴⁵⁾

As the troop transports bringing the 5th Mountain Division began to arrive towards 5 p.m., work parties were hurried out of the way. In quick succession sixty planes unloaded approximately 800 troops. Because of the congestion above the airfield as pilots sought a space to land, some were tempted to put down on the beach; six which did so were immediately destroyed by the New Zealanders.

On the airfield, several planes were set on fire by shells and machine-gun fire, but the landings and unloading continued relentlessly.

Troops, assisted by prisoners, helped to remove wounded and drag damaged planes out of the way of those following close behind. Of this period, Sergeant Rol Tonkin of "A" Troop H.Q. recalls how:

"Most of the troops captured on or near Maleme airfield were forced to work unloading Ju 52 transport planes, carrying ammo and supplies, filling bomb craters, moving wrecked planes and loading wounded for transport to the hospitals on the Greek mainland.

"Reg Thomson and I spent one day as stretcher-bearers – an experience we could have done without; but it is marvellous how persuasive a tommy-gun in the wrong hands can be.

"The paratroops, and later the mountain troops, gave the fit men hell and worked them like slaves with no food other than what they could scrounge.

"Locked up in stables, schools, churches or sheds for the few hours of darkness, we returned to the drome where Aussies, Brits and Kiwis did everything possible to disrupt the movement of transport planes."

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Kuhn, p 100



Junkers Ju 52 transports, mainly wrecked, on Maleme airfield after its capture 21st May, 1941. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum)



Rol Tonkin, Reg Thomson, Snowy Spark photographed by German camera in line-up of prisoners following capture near Maleme airfield, May 1941.

As New Zealand commanders discussed plans for the counter-attack, German numbers were reinforced by fresh paratroop drops during the afternoon of the 21st May and the arrival of Mountain Troops landed from transports.

The need to maintain forces to oppose seaborne landings influenced the final decision – that the 20th and 28th N.Z. Battalions should launch the attack to recapture the airfield and Hill 107, after the 2/7th Aust Battalion had first taken over the positions then occupied by the 20th Battalion; the 21st N.Z. Battalion would advance in the high ground further south.

Lack of their own transport and problems of moving in daylight with enemy aircraft waiting to attack any road convoys delayed the arrival of the 2/7th Aust. Battalion at the N.Z. 20th Battalion's positions, so the Maori 28th Battalion was kept waiting for several hours for their 20th Battalion to arrive. In consequence, after dealing with opposition along the way from enemy in houses, thickets of bamboo, and roadside ditches, with grenade and bayonet attacks, the New Zealanders found themselves short of their objectives as dawn approached.

Lieutenant Upham of the N.Z. 20th Battalion, for his outstandingly courageous conduct during the advance and subsequent withdrawal, was awarded the Victoria Cross. He was to win a second such award later in the Western Desert. The Maoris, approaching Hill 107 on the south side of the road, found their numbers further complemented by local villagers eager to join the fight.

In the face of heavy ground and air attack as daylight came on 22nd May the advance was halted, but not before the Maoris had made a memorable bayonet charge which sent the enemy immediately before them fleeing in terror. The 20th Battalion, in the open approaching the airfield, came under heavy attack from the air and from fresh German troops unloading from transports and entering straight into the battle.

Further inland, the 21st Battalion moving in the higher country, to the south, cleared the wireless station and Xamoudhokhora village areas, but, as Gunner Hal Dickinson who accompanied them on the patrol recorded in his diary, they were forced to withdraw in the face of strong resistance. While they were moving back, a German accompanied by a prisoner carrying a white flag presented an ultimatum stating that the enemy forces occupied all the area through which the patrol had passed that morning, and demanded their surrender within two hours. The 21st men pushed on, reaching H.Q. after the loss of a few men.

Later in the afternoon, troops moving in the hills to the south took cover from Stuka bombers ranging up and down the gorges and valleys leading towards the mountains and the south coast.

Partisans in the area had fiercely opposed the paratroops landed inland south of the airfield and the company of Germans detailed to travel inland to capture the coastal village of Palaiochora (Selino Kastelli).

The enemy's strong resistance to the New Zealand counter-attack on the morning of the 22nd May was partly attributable to the plans, already made by the Germans for that day, for "*every available man to advance east to link up with Heidrich Force at Canea.*" (46)

While the sentries had waited on the beach with torches to guide the expected seaborne troops and their equipment ashore, and the New Zealanders had waited impatiently to launch their counter-attack, the Royal Navy was cruising north and west of Crete searching for the German convoys of seaborne troops.

Shortly before midnight on the 21st May, members of the "A" Troop gun crew, whose short-lived rest period away from their gun site had been interrupted by the attack on Maleme and the arrival of paratroops, were making their way into the mountains. Tony, a local villager, was guiding the party of gunners, two New Zealanders, and two R.A.F. men, towards the south coast.

Amid the uproar of bombing and rifle fire and confusion on the morning of the 20th May, they had tried to link up with Troop H.Q. A group of paratroops escorting four prisoners carrying an outstretched swastika flag discouraged progress in that direction, but movement back up hill unfolded the view of paratroops landing to the south and west and mustering in groups, while fighting raged to the east and north around Hill 107.

A New Zealander runner whose back was peppered with pieces of grenade joined the group which late in the afternoon was guided by Tony to a village on a ridge. There, pieces of shrapnel nearest the surface were removed from the Kiwi's back with local wine as the only available antiseptic. The villagers supplied bread, cheese and wine and showed that friendliness so typical of the Cretans.

During darkness, Tony guided the party through the area where the enemy had landed. At daylight on the morning of the 21st May, a New Zealander told of the withdrawal from Hill 107 and the airfield. Later, the party's equipment was supplemented by a Luger pistol, taken as fair exchange for the field dressing used on a paratrooper's arm which had been severely injured by the shot fired from a machine-gun, Gunner Ron Selleck had acquired.

During the afternoon, two airforce men, from the secret wireless early warning station destroyed in a dive-bombing raid, said they were trying to reach the British post at Palaiochora on the south coast.

Tony agreed to guide the party to that village and the upward

trek into the mountains continued.

Groups of Partisans appeared from behind rocks and invariably shared a piece of rye bread or cheese from the bag carried slung over the shoulder. They told Tony that they had killed a number of the paratroops who had landed in the area.

Night time was free of the constant threat of attack from searching aircraft and the cooler night air was refreshing after the heat of the day, but the path was narrow and rockstrewn, as it zig-zagged up the steep slopes. Moving in single file the party slipped and stumbled upwards in the darkness. Dislodged stones rolling down on those at the rear resulted in some bruised shins and a few oaths.

Tony with the agility of a mountain goat, was always well ahead of the last man, so regular stops were made to try to make sure no one was left behind and to provide a welcome breather. Then the few precious water bottles were shared and individuals nibbled whatever scraps of food they had.

It was while the party was resting on one such occasion and looking back northwards, wondering how many friends had survived in the war-torn area below, that the beams of sweeping searchlight and flashes of light were seen out to sea, to be followed by the rumble of thunder. It could have meant only one thing – the Royal Navy was in action.

Maintaining its nightly vigil north and west of Crete, the Royal Navy had sighted the first convoy of caiques and small steamers bound for the Maleme – Canea sector, escorted by Italian torpedo boats and the destroyer "Lupo".

H.M.S. "Janus", "Kimberley", "Hasty" and "Hereward" escorting the cruisers "Ajax", "Orion" and "Dido" raced in as the cruisers' searchlights illuminated the scene.

During the past weeks, the Royal Navy had suffered countless bombing and strafing attacks from German and Italian planes. Hundreds of their brave shipmates had lost their lives as the result of those pitiless attacks so, in what seemed to be the moment of retribution, the destroyers went at their task in the words of a sailor, *"like terriers in a rat pit."* The Admiral recorded that they *"conducted themselves with energy and zeal."*

A few blazing wrecks marked the area where the artillery, motor vehicles and tanks, along with hundreds of troops, met their end. Italian motor torpedo boats later rescued a few of the troops and some reached the shore but the convoy as a unit ceased to exist.

The second convoy making for Heraklion was intercepted a few hours later in the early morning, but a smoke screen laid down by the escorting Italian destroyer "Sagitario" enabled many of the caiques to scatter and make back to the protecting islands. In

daylight, with swarms of aircraft attacking, the naval flotilla had to withdraw but not without loss and damage to ships.

The morning of the 22nd May found a large section of the Mediterranean Fleet north and west of Crete where the Luftwaffe ruled the skies unchallenged. In the ensuing continuous attacks "Warspite" was seriously damaged, the "Greyhound" was sunk; "Gloucester" after a record of magnificent service suffered the same fate, to be followed soon after by "Fiji" whose crew were rescued by "Kandahar" and "Kingston".

On the night of 22nd May, the destroyers "Kelly", "Kashmir" and "Kipling" went back seeking survivors of the "Gloucester" and fired a few shells on Maleme; but in the morning a swarm of Stuka bombers sank first the "Kashmir", then the "Kelly", leaving only "Kipling", after having searched for survivors, to eventually return to Alexandria, under tow – her fuel exhausted.

The Royal Navy's losses for three days totalled: two cruisers and four destroyers sunk; one battleship, two cruisers and four destroyers badly damaged.

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The village of Kastelli provided the only potential site for landing seaborne troops and heavy equipment on the west coast of Crete. A hastily-formed defence force of Military Police recruits and villagers was directed by New Zealand officers and N.C.O.s.

When the paratroops dropped in the area on the morning of 20th May, anticipating only slight resistance, they found instead that they faced a determined, ruthless band of local defenders prepared to give their lives in defence of their country. Many of them were armed with primitive fire-arms or improvised weapons, but they lacked nothing in resolve.

The invaders suffered heavy casualties and it was only the presence of the New Zealanders that saved the captured paratroopers from lynch law; instead they were locked in the local gaol.

As no news had reached the German command of the progress made by the assault force, a patrol was sent to investigate. The report sent back made reference to the number of paratroops killed and evidence of atrocities committed on some of the bodies. Later, the Germans executed 200 men in the village square in reprisal.

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The German decision to concentrate all their resources on Maleme on the 22nd May meant that supplies and support, originally planned for Suda, Retimo and Heraklion areas, were seriously reduced and reinforcements were sent only to the Maleme

Sector. There, the might of the Luftwaffe gradually silenced the field guns manned by the New Zealanders, and pinned down the N.Z. infantry. The enemy meanwhile advanced steadily, indicating their positions with flares, and maintaining radio contact with their supporting aircraft.

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The major contribution made by the Luftwaffe to the Heraklion sector at this time was the heavy bombing assault on the town itself and its civilian population, as punishment for their refusal to surrender the town. Scattered enemy troops outside the defence perimeter had to contend with guerrilla groups and villagers for possession of the limited supplies dropped for them.

During the 22nd May, three further Mountain Troop battalions and a Field Hospital unit were landed at Maleme, in spite of the littered airstrip and the steadily growing piles of crashed and burning aircraft.

Prisoners, who were forced to assist captured tanks detailed to move wreckage, came under New Zealand shell-fire. When some refused "*to unload guns, shell cases and stores*" other prisoners saw three of their number, on the orders of the officer-in-charge, marched aside and shot.⁽⁴⁷⁾

At the end of the day prisoners were marched to the British General Hospital near Galatas. The large marquees and tents were riddled with holes bearing witness to the tragic events when German aircraft, in spite of clearly marked Red Cross symbols on the ground and tents, bombed and strafed them during the initial attack. Later, after capturing the hospital, paratroops forced three hundred wounded, taken from their beds, to march in front of them as they moved towards a village they thought had already been captured. Among those involved in this episode were Sergeant Jack King and Gunner Scotty Duncan, of 7th Aust. L.A.A. Battery, both of whom had been hospitalised after being wounded in action at Heraklion.

They had to march in their pyjamas. A doctor who protested at this illegal treatment of prisoners was summarily shot.

Retribution came swiftly and surely from a group of New Zealanders who had witnessed the attack on the hospital from their position higher on the hills to the south. All members of the German unit involved were either killed or captured, and the wounded were moved to an emergency hospital established in caves.

When the prisoners from the work party arrived, exhausted from their efforts on the airfield and the march from Maleme, they found the abandoned hospital tents strewn with medical equipment, personal belongings, first-aid supplies and medicine. By this time,

(47) Stewart p322

they were acutely conscious of their lack of personal belongings and essentials in the form of eating and drinking utensils, quite apart from the ever-present problem of finding something to eat. Suitable items were soon commandeered. Standard hospital equipment was adapted for use as mugs or dixies; items of clothing, socks, a respirator haversack, a water-bag and a kidney dish are listed among the items that individual "A" Troop men recall acquiring, and in some cases retaining, as treasured possessions through the long years of internment.

Settling-in amongst such chaotic conditions inevitably added to the frustration experienced by the prisoners, but Gunner Laurie Eager recalls one bright spot – the individual initiative shown by a New Zealand officer assisted by an N.C.O.: "*There was no organisation of the prisoners,*" he recalls, "*until a N.Z. officer took charge and a chemist dispensed medicine, dressed wounds and exercised oversight of the wounded.*"

It was from this prison compound, established on the hospital site, that later through the wires, the men saw, closer to the beach, a form of court-martial conducted. Local villagers who had resisted the invaders faced interrogation. Many were later shot as partisans or guerrillas, participating in the fighting without wearing a uniform – the price of daring to fight for their very homes and families in the long-established tradition of their forefathers.

A notice issued to the Mountain Division troops on 23rd May, 1941 stated:–

"The murder of a German airman on 22nd May has proved that the Greek population is taking part in the fighting.

"Any Greek civilian taken with a fire-arm in his hands is to be shot immediately.

"Hostages (men between 18 and 35) are to be taken from villages at once and the civilians are to be informed that if acts of hostility against the German Army take place these will be shot immediately – ten Greeks will die for every German." ⁽⁴⁸⁾

(48) Stewart p316