

## Darkening Clouds

Following the Italian invasion of Greece on 28th October, 1940, Britain sent a Naval force, supply ships, auxiliary small craft, and the 2nd Battalion of the York and Lancaster Regiment as the first army unit, to establish a defence garrison in Crete

Suda Bay served as the fueling base for the British Navy and plans were prepared to improve the airfield at Maleme.

During the period October 1940 to April 1941, command of the defence base changed six times before passing on 1st May, 1941, on Churchill's orders, from Major-General Weston, Commander of the Royal Marine Naval Base Defence Organisation (M.N.B.D.O.), to Major-General Freyberg, Commander of the New Zealand Division.

After H.M.S. "Illustrious" was damaged during a dive-bombing attack near Malta in February, 1941, her squadron of Swordfish torpedo-bombers was transferred to the Naval Air Station at Maleme, under Lieutenant Commander J. de.F. Jago, R.N., to assist in preventing penetration of the Aegean Sea by the Italian fleet.

In March, a composite squadron of Fulmars and Gloster Gladiators, under command of Lieutenant-Commander A. Black, D.S.O., R.N., arrived from Egypt, to protect the Suda Bay Naval Station and convoys, and to act as fighter cover for the Swordfish.

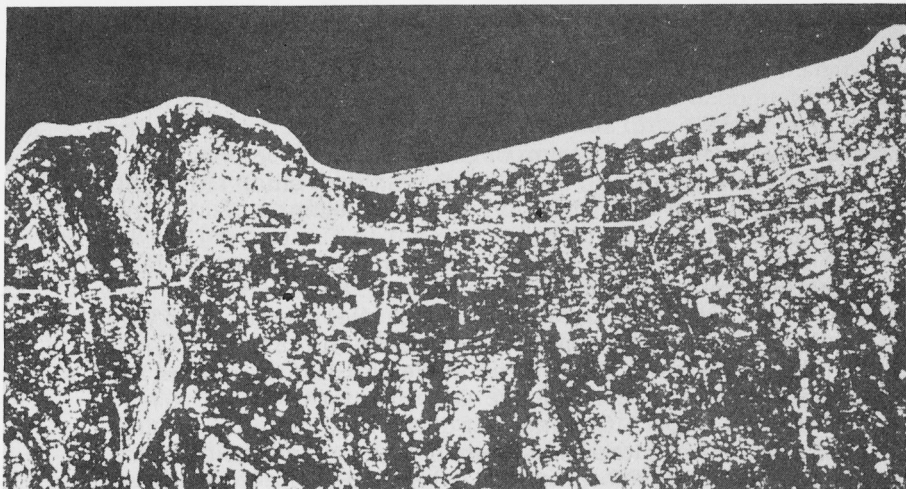
Four unserviceable Brewster Buffalo fighters remained forlornly in a row at Maleme amidst the sand dunes sheltered by a clump of bamboos below Sergeant Humphrey's gun. They couldn't fly "*because of some fundamental internal affliction that had remained undiagnosed since their departure from America*".<sup>(4)</sup> The airmen claimed they had been sabotaged, with faulty metal bearings ruined, when the engines were started. The Germans must have known their value because they wasted neither bombs nor bullets on them.

Lieutenant H. Sutton, D.S.C., of the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm had flown from Greece on 22nd April to advise on the Maleme airfield building program, which was far from complete with only one of the three planned runways available.

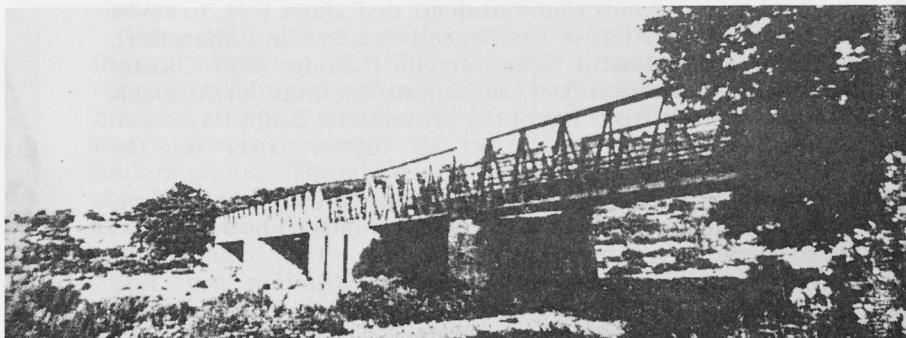
At the beginning of May, the Maleme Naval Air Station was handed over to the R.A.F., but Commander G. H. Beale, staff-officer from H.M.S. "Illustrious", remained in charge.

From Greece, the R.A.F. brought to Heraklion fourteen Blenheims (seven operational), fourteen Gladiators (six operational), and six Hurricanes. Nine Blenheims of No. 203 Squadron

<sup>(4)</sup> Stewart p.31



*Aerial View Maleme Airfield and Tavronitis River.*



*Bridge over Tavronitis River - Maleme*



*Bofors gun - north side airfield Maleme.  
Sabotaged aircraft in back ground*



*German glider - carried pilot and  
ten men.*

flew from Egypt to Maleme.

"A" Troop, with Lieutenant J. Purcell and Lieutenant S. C. G. Macindoe in command, was attached to 156 L.A.A. Battery R.A. and allotted four of the ten Bofors guns sited around the perimeter of Maleme airfield; the other six guns were manned by the R.A. gunners.

One of "A" Troop guns was sited on the south side of the airfield, near the east-west road and the R.A.F. camp area; the second site, on the south-west boundary of the airfield, was adjacent to the bridge over the Tavronitis River which became a prime objective of the German attack; the third gun-site on the north-west corner of the airfield overlooked the beach; the fourth, also on the northern, seaward edge of the runway, was further to the east.

Each gun was allotted an arc of fire within which it could engage enemy aircraft, but this arc was limited on the static gun-sites by the presence of the Kerrison predictor accommodated in a separate pit.

The Kerrison predictor had been designed by Colonel Kerrison at the Admiralty Research Laboratory to control anti-aircraft gun-fire.

An electric generator provided power to the gun and predictor when they were linked "in phase". Standard procedure required gun layers to pick up the identified target centrally in their gun-sights while the two layers on the predictor did the same through their telescopic sights; an estimated range was fed into the predictor by a third predictor operator. When gun and predictor layers were "on target", movement of a switch on the gun brought it electrically under the control of the predictor to follow the target and make the necessary corrections to score a hit.

In Crete, the gun crews, while knowing something of the drill for predictor equipment, had never had practical or operational experience with it. It was a regrettable fact that the first opportunity the gun crews had to fire a Bofors gun came when permission was granted to fire single practice rounds almost on the eve of the first encounter with the enemy.

When attacks came, they were usually with a minimum of warning and in such numbers that firing under manual control became the most effective method of engaging the enemy.

Because of the distance separating them, there was little opportunity for communication between the "A" Troop crews or with the inter-spaced 156 Battery R.A. guns; nor were there any established lines of communication, either between gun-sites or with Troop H.Q.

On arriving at their allotted positions, the crews were amazed to find that the Bofors had been removed from their carriages and

bolted down in concrete, thereby forfeiting the chance to confuse the enemy by moving guns to alternative positions during the night. Certainly, the enemy soon identified the permanent gun positions, even if he did waste effort on also attacking dummy sites. It is possible that some of his information concerning the defences was obtained from spies working on the airfield at Maleme.

A 30 Squadron Intelligence Officer who spoke Greek had interviewed several suspects: one found at a gun-site after workmen had left; another in an operations room at the R.A.F. site; and another with cutting implements under the wing of a Fulmar.

The next shock was to learn that because of the drastic shortage of ammunition, targets were not to be engaged until within one thousand yards range. With an attacking Me 109 approaching at 300 m.p.h. this meant that about ten rounds could be fired before it passed overhead and the gun had to fast-traverse through 180° before engaging again.

The gunners learned that New Zealand infantry had been assigned the task of protecting the Maleme airfield, but there was no precise information on their resources, role or actual situations.

The artillery defence of Maleme remained under the command of Major-General Weston (M.N.B.D.O.) from Suda and comprised: two three-inch anti-aircraft guns and two four-inch coastal defence guns manned by Marines, and ten Bofors manned by Royal Artillery, Australians and Marines.

Major-General Freyberg, Commander of "Creforce", defined the roles of sector infantry commanders: Heraklion (Brigadier Chappel), Retimo (Brigadier Vasey), Suda Bay (Major-General Weston), Maleme (Brigadier Puttick commanding N.Z. 4th and 5th Brigades).

They were instructed to dispose "*one-third of their troops on or around landing grounds and two-thirds outside the area which will be attacked in the first instance*".<sup>(5)</sup>

The attack was expected to involve intense bombing and machine-gunning of the airfields and their defences, landing of paratroops to capture and clear airfields for the final landing of troop-carrying aircraft, and accompanying seaborne attacks on beaches close to the airfields.

Operation Instructions for the New Zealand 5th Brigade (Brigadier Hargest) specified:

(a) *5th Brigade will maintain a defensive line running east and west from Platania to Tavronitis River with special regard to defence of Maleme aerodrome.*

(b) *In the event of the enemy making an airborne or seaborne attack on any part of the area to counter-attack and destroy*

(5) Long p213

him immediately.<sup>(6)</sup>

The 22nd Bn. (Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, V.C., D.S.O.) was entrusted with the task of holding the airfield and its approaches.

*"In the event of a major landing being made on the aerodrome, support and reserve companies will be utilised for immediate counter-attack under cover of mortars and machine-gun fire. If necessary, support will be called from 23rd Bn. – 22nd Bn.'s position would be defended at all costs."*<sup>(7)</sup>

23rd Bn. was stationed two miles east of Maleme airfield; 21st Bn. in the foothills behind the 23rd to the south and Brigade Headquarters and the 28th Bn. (Maoris) at Platania, five miles east of Maleme, covering the coast area.

Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew established his headquarters in a hollow upon the north-eastern slope of Hill 107. This commanded a northward view of the airfield and the beach but a limited view of the whole Bn. area, especially to the south and west.

The 22nd Bn. who were to be the A.A. gunners' immediate neighbors, had gone to England at the time of the fall of France and had prepared to help repel the invaders, if Goering's airborne troops had dared to risk destruction at the hands of the R.A.F. during the Battle of Britain.

In the Greek campaign they acquitted themselves with distinction. Freyberg in his foreword to 22nd Bn. official history wrote: *"The Battalion was given the most difficult task of all, to try to hold Maleme airfield."*<sup>(8)</sup>

Later, the 22nd Battalion served in the Libyan campaign, in Syria, the Western Desert, Alamein, Italy, and Japan; but with all this vast experience their historian wrote: *"Of all the days of the war one stands alone in the minds of the Battalion; the day is the 20th May, 1941 at Maleme, Crete."*<sup>(9)</sup>

The 22nd Battalion's strength of six hundred and twenty men was spread thinly to cover its allotted area. This extended from Pirogias village in the east, with its rounded church dome providing a convenient aiming point for the anti-aircraft crews when testing the lining-up of their guns and predictors, to the southern boundary skirting the foothills south of Hill 107, on which the N.Z. B.H.Q. was established; then to the western boundary on the east bank of the Tavronitis River, and thence north to the beach. This area measured approximately one by one and a half miles.

The Tavronitis River banks in places ranged from twenty to forty feet high, providing dead-ground for some of the glider troops who later landed on its gravelly, boulder-strewn bed extending from six hundred to eight hundred yards in width between the bridge and the beach. Bofors guns sited on the west of the airfield were close to

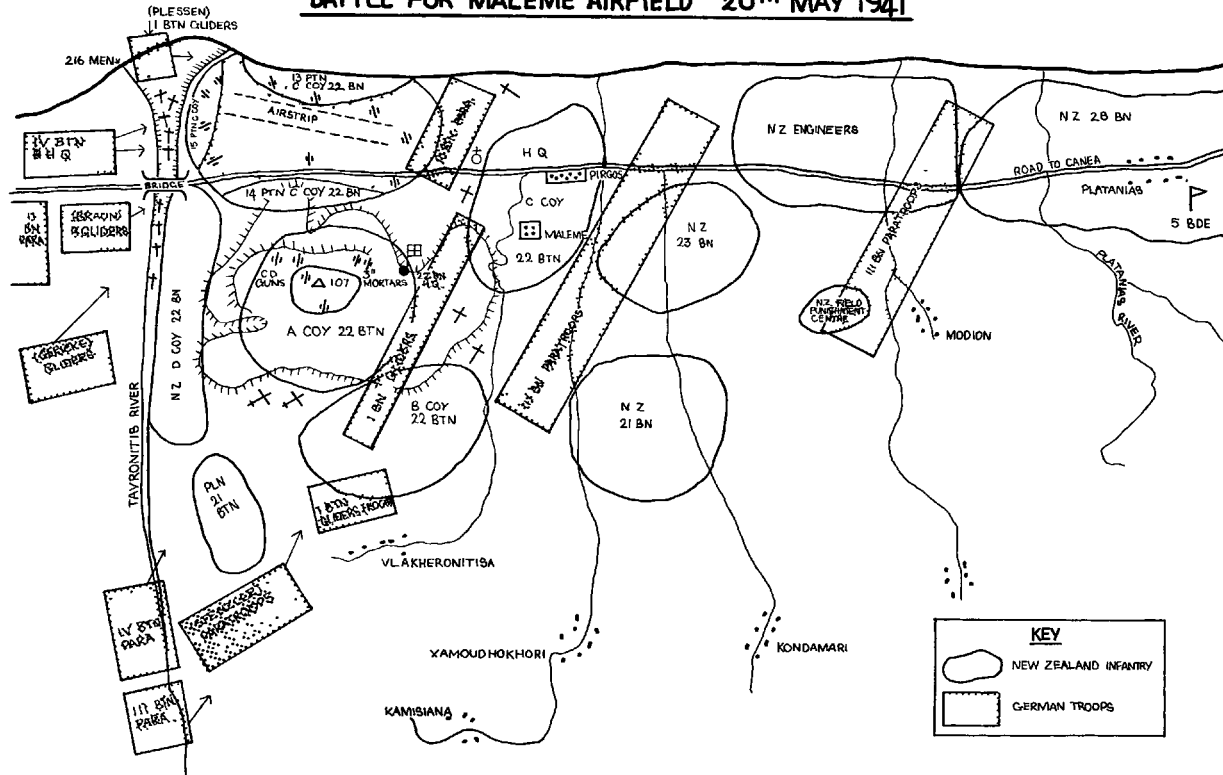
(6) Stewart p 124

(7) Henderson p 37

(8) Henderson P 24

(9) Henderson p 34

## BATTLE FOR MALEME AIRFIELD 20<sup>TH</sup> MAY 1941



the east bank of the river which ran only a trickle of water in May. The area beyond the river, to the west, was not defended and became the most important mustering area for paratroops who were able to land almost unopposed.

On the eastern and northern slopes of Hill 107, broken ground, terraces, patches of scrub, and wadis extending towards the beach from the foothills, restricted the range of view. The western slopes of the hill were covered with olive trees up to sixteen feet high providing good cover against aircraft.

New Zealand troops of the 21st Bn. provided one platoon to guard the A.M.E.S. (Air Ministry Experimental Station) on high ground about a mile south of N.Z. B.H.Q. This "hush hush" unit using the new radar early warning system controlled the air raid warning signals. A similar unit operated at Heraklion at A.M.E.S. Ridge.

13, 14 and 15 Platoons of "C" Company, 22nd Bn. were assigned the task of protecting the airfield. *"Their total strength of one hundred included signallers and stretcher bearers; in addition to rifles they shared seven Brens, six Brownings (some of them on improvised mountings after being salvaged from wrecked aircraft), nine tommy guns but no mortars."*<sup>(10)</sup>

13 Platoon covered the northern beach side of the airfield; 15 Platoon faced the Tavronitis River and the bridge to halt attacks from the west across the almost dry river bed; 14 Platoon dug-in on the southern side of the airfield at the foot of Hill 107 to halt attack from inland.

Although Bofors gun crews at Maleme had no idea of the strength of the New Zealand infantry units allotted to protect the airfield, the presence of these experienced infantrymen was reassuring. Whatever the deficiencies in their equipment, their reputation as soldiers was appreciated by all the gunners, whose issue of personal weapons was limited to the one rifle for guard duties on each gun site.

The failure to issue small arms to gun crews cost many lives in the Canea area, where a Royal Artillery A.A. unit, lacking rifles or automatic weapons to defend themselves against glider troops landing close to their guns, had 173 of their 180 un-armed men shot.<sup>(11)</sup>

Apart from the lack of authoritative information on the numbers of New Zealanders in the Maleme area, the skilful camouflaging of slit trenches, under the olive trees or against terrace walls, made these invisible from the air and not easily detected at ground level because of ground cover. This, the Germans were later to ruefully admit after their troops met strong resistance and suffered heavy casualties, in areas where their aerial reconnaissance had shown the positions to be lightly defended.

<sup>(10)</sup> Henderson p47

<sup>(11)</sup> Davin p152

The A.A. gunners' efforts at making sites as inconspicuous as possible proved rather futile as the guns were sited around the edge of the airfield and were static.

Enemy reconnaissance planes photographed the airfields regularly, so the best that could be done was to construct dummy gun positions, which did in fact deceive the enemy, and to withhold fire at times.

With no trees or natural shelter to hide tents on the east, north and west of Maleme airfield, the order was given to put these below ground level.

One tent on the northern perimeter was recessed into the bank forming the northern edge of the airfield, with the doorway facing the ocean. A camouflage net stretched over the top completed the job. Nearby, mechanics had worked on fitting a new engine into a Gloster Gladiator. They had tested the engine and pronounced it ready to test fly the next day.

The feeling of satisfaction for both the R.A.F. mechanics, and the gunners contemplating their camouflaged tent, was short-lived. An enemy aircraft, approaching at sea level from behind the island immediately north of the airfield, sneaked in undetected by the early warning system, poured a burst of machine-gun fire into the tent and another into the repaired Gloster Gladiator before streaking away across the airfield to the west. Fortunately no-one was in the tent, but bedding, clothing, and equipment looked as though the moths had feasted there. The Gloster Gladiator was once again unserviceable.



*SUDA BAY – Convoy brings troops from Greece. (Photo courtesy of Australian War Memorial)*