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R. A. F. NARRATIVE

THE CAMPAIGN IN CRETE

MAY, 1941.

(FIRST DRAFT)

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AIR MINISTRY.

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R.A.F. NARRATIVE

THE CAMPAIGN IN CRETE

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MAFS Crete

Maleme - Canea - Suda

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CHRONOLOGY

1940

November Arrival of British Garrison

1941

April 6 German invasion of Greece
17 Group Captain Beamish appointed S.A.F.O. Crete
28 Major-General Freyberg appointed O.C. Crete
29 Completion of evacuation of Greece
May 1 First attacks on shipping in Cretan harbours
14 First attacks on Cretan airfields
19 Group Captain Beamish decides to withdraw
aircraft from Crete
20 Attacks on Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion.
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27 Loss of Canea
27 Decision to evacuate Crete
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29 Attack on H.M.S. Orion
31/
June 1 Final evacuation from Sphakia

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THE CAMPAIGN IN CRETE

SECTION I

PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK

The history of the R.A.F. in the Cretan campaign was primarily negative - the story of the disaster of its absence. But the campaign is of the first importance in the history of aerial warfare in general, providing as it does the first large example of a successful airborne invasion over sea by a Power which did not possess command of the sea. (1)

The Arrival of the British Garrison

Proposed Occup- In the early months of 1940 the French had been developing
ation of Crete plans for the occupation of Crete if Italy should come into
and Milos. D.O. the war. With the French collapse these plans fell by the
Ops. I. 3.5.40. wayside. When Italy attacked Greece the Greek Government,
afraid to offend the Germans, was not prepared to allow
British troops to land on the Greek mainland, but it allowed
troops to land in Crete in order to protect the naval
re-fuelling base at Suda Bay, the use of which was required by
the Navy for its task of protecting the Aegean waters. The
first British troops, therefore, landed in Crete early in
November 1940. This force then consisted of a Brigade
Group, less 2 battalions, under Brigadier Tidbury. There was
little prospect of a serious attack on Crete so long as the
Greek army was able to hold the Italians on the mainland,
although between November and May there were a number of air
raids both on Suda Bay and on Heraklion, but in these first
weeks it was not yet known whether the Greeks would be able
to hold the Italians at all. Brigadier Tidbury therefore,
preparing for the worst, ordered intensive digging-in so as to
enable the garrison to defend itself against airborne attacks
on Heraklion, Retimo or Canea.

/In

(1). The island of Oesel in the Baltic was captured by the Germans from the Russians by troops landed by aeroplane in October 1917 but there was no Russian resistance and

In the middle of November the Greek Commander-in-Chief insisted on the transfer of the greater part of the Cretan divisions to the mainland to take part in the campaign there. In consequence of this, the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, decided to increase the British garrison in Crete to a division and to increase the anti-aircraft defences in proportion.

Air Dispositions in Crete Before the Conquest of Greece

During these months no Royal Air Force operational units were permanently stationed in Crete. The Fleet Air Arm maintained a Fighter Squadron, No. 805, of reduced strength, consisting of Fulmars, Gladiators and Brewsters, at Maleme. The Brewsters were flown only in emergency. The Royal Air Force used Suda Bay as an advanced base for the flying boats of No. 230 Squadron, based at Alexandria. In December 1940, No. 252 A.M.E.S. was established at Maleme as part of the defence system of Suda Bay. This Station fed information to the gun operations room at Canea, which was developed as an operations centre. There was an efficient Greek Observer system which gave information by telephone to the operations centre at Canea. Another A.M.E.S. Station, No. 220, was being prepared throughout these months at Heraklion. In February there was a passing proposal, which came to nothing, to station No. 73 Hurricane Squadron at Maleme with minimum maintenance crews and minimum transport. It was reported to the Inter-Branch Conference at Cairo (to whom all problems of equipment and defence in the Middle East were submitted) on April 10th that there was a proposal to station No. 203 Squadron of Blenheim IVs from Aden at Maleme in order to attack Scarpanto and Rhodes air bases. "Experience has shown" reported a brief appreciation on the air situation on March 6th, 1941, "that the Fleet anchorage and the aerodromes at Crete are extremely vulnerable to attack from the air. It had been intended to detach a half squadron of fighters from Libya to provide fighter defence of Crete. The changed situation in Libya made it necessary to cancel that move and there is no immediate

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A.O.C/9

16A

15.2.41

A.O.C/14

6A

prospect of providing fighters in Crete". In general, the Royal Air Force in Crete was almost entirely concerned with administrative problems, such as the improvement and construction of airfields and the building-up of petrol, bomb and ammunition dumps. There were no R.A.F. Controllers or Operations Officers. One Warrant Officer and one Lieutenant (Meteorological) attached to the Fleet Air Arm acted as Controllers at Suda Bay. The Senior Air Force Officer in Crete was only a Flight Lieutenant, Flight Lieutenant Williams, and a report of the Inter-Services Committee⁽²⁾ complains that his duties were ill-defined and instructions issued to him "inadequate".

Airfield Preparation

During these months the facilities at Heraklion airfield were improved, and additional airfields were being constructed at Maleme, Retimo, Pediada-Kastelli, Massara Plain and Kassamos-Kastelli, but owing to shortage of equipment work was slow. The Minutes of the Special Conference on the Movements of Forces to Greece, held at Headquarters, Middle East on November 5th, 1940, and presided over by Air Vice-Marshal Maund, A.O.A., M.E., record "Crete - policy - to make this into fortress" but add the rider "S.A.S.O. said that this could be considered of secondary importance at present". On March 11th it was reported to the Inter-Branch Conference "C.E. gave a resumé of his report of his visit to Crete. He said that the main runway at Heraklion is in use and the other will be finished in a month. Retimo is about 80 per cent complete. There is no possibility of any other runway being constructed on this site. Maleme is progressing satisfactorily and they

/are

(2) The Inter-Services Committee, consisting of Brigadier Salisbury Jones, Commander Wauchope R.N., Wing Commander Huddleston and Lieut. Colonel Bastin, was set up in Cairo in June 1941 to enquire into the lessons of the Cretan Campaign and reported on July 2nd, 1941.

are actually operating on it though it is still only 70 per cent complete. Arrangements have also been made for the construction of camp buildings for two disembarked Squadrons of the Fleet Air Arm, but C.E. wished to know if this aerodrome would be used exclusively for the Fleet Air Arm as there is not enough accommodation for others. Answer is - for the present. The camp site at Heraklion is getting on very well and C.E. spoke to Group Captain Spackman⁽³⁾ in regard to accommodating Z Wing⁽⁴⁾ in this camp. S.A.S.O. to inform Halliday.⁽⁵⁾ Pediada (south-east of Heraklion) is a very good site but the road approach is poor. Work on this aerodrome cannot be started until Maleme is finished and will have to include work on the road. Should another aerodrome be required C.E. recommended Massara Plain which, in his opinion, is the best site on the island, but it will take at least six months to build an aerodrome there."

Condition of Airfields in March, 1941.

Thus, by the time the battle of Crete began only a landing strip at Retimo,⁽⁶⁾ and an airfield for fighters at Maleme and one for all aircraft at Heraklion were completed. The landing ground at Pediada-Kastelli was operationally complete but it was not in use, as the G.O.C., Crete, decided that he was not able to provide protection for it. As it had been reported to the Inter-Branch Committee on April 10th that it would not be fully ready till July 2nd no preparations had been made for its defence.

/It

(3) Group Captain Spackman, D.F.C. A.O.C. Z Wing, March, 1941.

(4) Z Wing - the force detailed to attack the Dodecanese from Heraklion in operation Mandible.

(5) Squadron Leader Halliday, Senior Administrative Officer Z Wing.

(6) Retimo, though it was primarily only a landing strip, had cover for a small number of aircraft at an adjoining olive grove.

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Services
Committee
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It was, therefore, obstructed by digging trenches across it and piling earth between the trenches. No satellite airfields had been constructed. No aircraft pens had been constructed except at Heraklion. (7) At Heraklion the petrol dump was put outside the perimeter. "All useless ground on aerodromes" reported Group Captain Beamish in his Despatch "was blocked by barrels filled with earth". Brigadier Chappell, who became Commander of British Forces in Crete in March 1941, (8) afterwards complained that had the whole airfield at Heraklion been built a thousand yards to the south-west its military defence would have been very much easier.

The German Attack on Greece

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With the German attack on Greece a new situation arose. It was, from the first, probable that it would be only a matter of time before the Allies were expelled from the Greek mainland, and in a very few weeks it was clear that Crete's first task would be to receive the evacuated troops. At the beginning of April Suda Bay was transformed from a re-fuelling base to a Fleet base. This greatly increased the importance of its defences and it was decided to send there the Mobile Naval Defence Organisation which had recently arrived in the Middle East. Towards the end of April Major-General Weston commanding M.N.B.D.O. was, therefore, sent out by Field Marshal Wavell to make a report on the military situation. He saw that with the success of the German offensive in Greece it was /now

- (7) The pens at Maleme were constructed by Group Captain Beamish only in the days immediately before the invasion.
- (8) The British Forces had seven Commanders during the seven months of our occupation. They were:-

Brigadier Tidbury	November 1940 - January 9th 1941
Maj.-Gen. Gambier Parry	January 9th - February 7th
Lt.-Col. Mather	February 7th - February 19th
Brigadier Galloway	February 19th - March 19th
Brigadier Chappell	March 20th - April 22nd
Maj.-Gen. Weston	April 22nd - April 30th
Maj.-Gen. Freyberg	April 30th - May 30th

now no longer merely a question of defending the Fleet base against a raid but rather of a total defence of the island against invasion. The enemy might attack at either or both ends of the island, or at Retimo in the centre. In the middle of April reports began to come through of Italian concentrations in the Dodecanese for an attack on Crete. Major-General Weston proposed to station an Infantry Brigade at the western end of the island and another Infantry Brigade in the centre. The defence of the eastern end of the island was to be entrusted to Greek troops. He also advocated the construction of full-scale operational airfields for both bombers and fighters. He reported "Forces at my disposal are totally inadequate to meet attack envisaged..... The forces here can, and will, fight but without full (?) support from Navy and Air Force (?) cannot hope to repel invasion." He was told in reply "Air support is difficult. We are going through very lean period as regards fighter aircraft but every effort is being made from home to reinforce as early as possible". Towards the end of the month he was told by Field Marshal Wavell to expect 25,000 evacuees from Greece and to arrange reception areas for them - first, east of Suda Bay; secondly, in Canea; and thirdly, nine miles west of Canea.

Dodecanese
D.O. Ops.
21.4.41.

C.O.S.Signals
1.5.41

Ibid

On April 15th C.A.S. suggested to Air Chief Marshal Longmore to "put part of Blenheim forces in Crete" as "a more central station than Mersa Matruh." Air Chief Marshal Longmore rejected the suggestion because of the inadequate airfield facilities.

A.O.C. in C/
2. 67A

A.O.C. in C/
2. 69A

Group Captain Beamish's Appointment

On April 17th Group Captain Beamish took over the duties of Senior Air Force Officer in Crete. He established his headquarters in Canea and, from the first, set about establishing relations of co-operation and confidence with the Army Commanders, but his headquarters and operations rooms staff were drawn from evacuees from Greece who had little or no experience of the work which they were now called on to do. The first task was that

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of protecting evacuating convoys from Greece and the forwarding of R.A.F. personnel on from Crete to Egypt. No.230 Squadron of Sunderlands from Suda Bay under Wing Commander Francis and bomber transport aircraft from Heraklion were used in these tasks. Convoys were protected near the Greek coast by Blenheims, operating in flights of six at late evening and early morning, and by fighters during disembarkation at Suda Bay. No.30 Squadron with fourteen Blenheim I's, six to eight of which were serviceable, was established at Maleme on April 18th and remnants of Nos.33, 80 and 112 Squadrons arrived in Crete between April 22nd and April 24th. Nos.33 and 80 Squadrons had between them six serviceable Hurricanes. No.112 had fourteen Gladiators, of which about six were serviceable. Protection was provided by these aircraft which had escaped from Greece, and also by nine Blenheim IV's of No.203 Squadron from Egypt, now stationed at Heraklion, which had been sent there for the purpose of attacking Rhodes and Scarpanto. The evacuation of Greece was completed by April 29th, and personnel were being taken on to Egypt by Bomber transport and Sunderlands from the 23rd onwards. A large contingent left by sea on April 29th.

Evacuated R.A.F. personnel were accommodated in a well-concealed transit camp. This camp was kept open until the final evacuation of R.A.F. personnel on May 9th.

A.O.C.

Pt. I. 2A

On April 24th Air Chief Marshal Longmore expressed the opinion that "there should be reasonable chance of keeping Suda Bay usable by Navy by one Hurricane Squadron with 100 per cent reserve pilots and replacement rate 100 per cent per month. Excellent scope for dispersal and concealment vicinity of Canea if Greek Government resign themselves to certain discomfort. Present location of King east of Heraklion not really safe and I have told G.O.C., Crete. Question is whether possible to keep Hurricane Squadron up to

/strength

strength against heavy wastage, in addition to Libyan commitments. In meantime Nos.30 and 203 Blenheim Fighter Squadrons and No.112 Gladiator Squadron are doing their best from Maleme and Heraklion to provide more degree of air protection to ships coming from Greece and to Crete itself."

Air Establishment in Early May

On April 30th and May 1st, since there was little further convoy work to be done and since the Blenheims would be useless against enemy fighters which were now, of course, strong in the Aegean, No.203 Squadron returned to Egypt. This left in Crete Nos.30, 33 and 80 Squadrons and No.805 Fleet Air Arm at Maleme and No.112 at Heraklion. No.30 Squadron had twelve aircraft at full strength but had lost its specialist personnel. It was reported to the Inter-Branch Conference on May 3rd that it was "a wasting asset but is to continue as long as possible". Nos.33 and 80 were skeleton units with six aircraft which had been combined to form a Hurricane unit. No.80 had very few personnel, and No.33 was at about half strength. No.33 was "to be built up with Hurricanes to normal establishment". No.112 had a small maintenance party only to operate its twelve Gladiators. No.805 had full squadron strength but only six aircraft. Thus the combined strength of these squadrons in aircraft was 36, but only half were serviceable. The serviceable aircraft throughout the Cretan fighting were only kept so by robbing the unserviceable. Nos.252 and 220 A.M.E.S. were at full strength in personnel. There were also five Greek Avro 626s and one Avro 621, and some 800 odd Royal Hellenic Air Force personnel, including 157 pilots, at Maleme. The other six Greek aircraft which had survived, five Ansons and a Dornier, were at Alexandria.

Inter-
Branch
Conference
May 3rd

/During

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13A.

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Inter-

Branch

Conference

May 3rd

During these weeks a Wireless Station had been established at Canea to supplement the Wireless Station at Heraklion which was unsatisfactory as a D/F site owing to the surrounding hills. Work on aerodromes was postponed and that on defence posts at Maleme and Heraklion was pushed forward. Additional personnel from Greece were taken over and the personnel which had been assigned to Z Wing, detailed to the attack on the Dodecanese, were kept at Heraklion, whence it had been intended to launch their attack, and attached to the Cretan Defence Force.

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on Crete

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On April 28th General Wilson reached Crete from Greece, and at once reported that it would not be difficult for the enemy to launch a seaborne attack on Crete. So long as the enemy possessed command of the air it would be difficult for the Navy to stop him from landing or to bring reinforcements to the defenders. Our one chance was, General Wilson argued, to hold the three serviceable airfields at all costs. A minimum force of three Brigade groups, each of four Battalions, and air and anti-aircraft support for vital points was essential. The Chiefs of Staff replied with the instruction that "the island must at all costs be denied to the enemy but that no air reinforcements would be available for some time".

C.O.S.Signals

98 9/5/41

C.O.S.Signals

101 10/5/41

Appointment of Major-General Freyberg

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3. Section 52

On that same day, April 28th Major-General Freyberg was appointed by Field Marshal Wavell Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in Crete. He was warned that a German airborne attack with three or four thousand parachutists in the first attack was imminent, and on April 30th was instructed that his task was "to deny to the enemy the use of air bases in Crete". He replied that his forces were not sufficient to repel such an attack. His forces, such as he had, were ill-equipped and, in particular, he asked for more

/fighter

fighter aircraft. If such were not available, he asked that the decision to hold Crete be reconsidered. (9) The Commander-in-Chief replied that every effort was being made to get fighter reinforcements from England, but in the meantime General Freyberg must do the best that he could. Yet it was obvious that, with his forces such as they were, he was left in a hopeless dilemma. If he dispersed his forces with the hope of preventing landings anywhere, then, as was proved at Maleme, he had not sufficient to defend the airfields. If he concentrated them solely on the airfields, then, as was proved at Heraklion, there was nothing to prevent the enemy landing elsewhere sufficient forces to give him an overwhelming superiority for an attack at his leisure.

Commanders-in-Chief's Appreciation

On the 3rd May the Chiefs of Staff asked the Commanders-in-Chief for "an appreciation of the defence of Crete in relation to the situation in the Middle East as a whole, in the following alternative cases:-

- (a) Crete to be used as a fuelling base, etc.
- (b) Crete to be denied to the enemy."

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Signals
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The Commanders-in-Chief replied on the 5th May -

/"(a)

(9) Group Captain Beamish says "The G.O.C. -in-C. had every confidence in the ability of the land forces to hold these aerodromes". This is in contradiction of the evidence of the Inter-Services Committee on General Freyberg's opinion. It is true that after a tour of the island General Freyberg felt somewhat less pessimistic and told Field Marshal Wavell that "at least the defenders would give a good account of themselves" and that he "hoped" that "Crete would be held".

Group/Cpt.
Beamish
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"(a) Main threat comes from air. Enemy has ample strength and operational facilities in the Med. and Balkan areas to maintain very heavy scale air attack on Crete, at same time continuing operations in strength against Malta, Cyrenaica, Egypt. In view of heavy recent fighter losses Greece and Cyrenaica, new commitments Iraq, need maintain strong air defence main base area Egypt, and to watch the Syrian situation. Adequate degree fighter protection Crete impracticable until further reinforcements arrive and during this period use Naval and Air bases Crete liable to serious interruption. Heavy casualty rate aircraft Crete inevitable. Landing enemy airborne division and of seaborne division up to one division supported by heavy air attack is possibility we are preparing to counter. Estimated minimum land garrison three Infantry Brigade groups. Present garrison one British Infantry Brigade and equivalent two New Zealand and one Australian Infantry Brigades ex Greece immobile and with low-scale L.M.Gs. Propose eventually relieve Anzacs by British formations. Equipment being despatched Crete includes four 3.7 howitzers and number 75 mm guns, plus eighteen light and six infantry tanks. Hope eventually Greek troops, of whom 11,000 in island, may relieve position British garrison but minimum three months required for re-equipment and training. Anti-aircraft defences will require eventually three heavy and two light batteries addition to present sixteen heavy, thirty-six light guns and M.N.B.D.O. Anti-aircraft cannot at present be diverted from other vital requirements. Consider reasonable chance Suda Bay being sufficiently usable by November with one

Squadron Hurricanes with 100 per cent reserve pilots and replacement rate aircraft 100 per cent per month, but if enemy really concentrated on problem seems little doubt harbour could be rendered untenable. Allocation fighters Crete from expected early. reinforcements will, of course, depend situation Cyrenaica, Egypt, Iraq, Syria. In meantime present air garrison for defence purposes is one Fighter Squadron Gladiators, a few Hurricanes and Fleet Air Arm Fighters.

(b) Threats and land defence generally as for (a).

Provision full fighter protection with its inevitable heavy losses would not be justified on holding policy alone but on political grounds it may be advisable to retain some fighters on island."

C.O.S.Signals

No.87

General Situation in the Middle East

The general situation in the Middle East was, at that time, a very grave one. After our defeat in Greece Field Marshal Wavell found himself with the threat of five campaigns on his hands - Crete, the Western Desert, Iraq, Syria and Abyssinia. His resources for meeting all these threatened campaigns were most inadequate, and, important as all of them were, it was the threat in the Western Desert which had the priority. As all were well aware, commanders had to do the best they could rather than the absolute best, and both Field Marshal Wavell and every other responsible officer well knew that troops who had just been through the Greek campaign were not in condition to fight a second campaign immediately in Crete, but, with the naval and military situations as they were, there was no alternative if that campaign was to be fought at all.

/Military

Military Forces in Crete

The military forces on the island consisted at that time of a British Brigade, an Australian Brigade and two New Zealand Brigades. There were also three Greek Battalions and various other miscellaneous troops, making a total of approximately 28,600. General Freyberg's plan was to dispose his troops into four self-contained sectors as under:-

Heraklion. Commander - Brigadier Chappell,
Commanding 14th Infantry Brigade

2nd Black Watch

2nd Yorks and Lancs

300 of 1 Australian Battalion

250 of 7 Medium Regiment R.A. armed as
infantry

Three Greek battalions.

Retimo. Commander - Brigadier Vasey,
Commanding 19th Australian Brigade

Two Australian and three Greek battalions
holding the aerodrome

Two battalions at Georgopoulis

One battalion area Stylos

Some Greek troops and police at Retimo.

Suda Bay. Commander - Major-General Weston,
Commanding Suda Bay Sector

Northumberland Hussars (100 rifles)

106 R.H.A. (improvised rifle battalion)

1st Rangers (400 rifles)

700 rifles Perivolias Transit Camp

(known as "Royal Perivolians" composed of
details of various British units)

16 and 17 Infantry Brigades (very weak)

Two Greek battalions

Personnel of base installations, etc.

Maleme. Commander - Brigadier Puttick,
 Commanding New Zealand Division
 4 New Zealand Brigade in area 3 miles west
 of Canea
 5 New Zealand Brigade in area Maleme
 Three Greek battalions.

"There were anti-aircraft defences round Suda Bay and at Maleme and Heraklion. The Field artillery consisted of captured Italian guns intended for static defence only. Two infantry tanks had been provided for each of the aerodromes at Heraklion, Retimo and Maleme and three additional 'I' tanks were also sent to the island. The single means of land communication between the various sectors was the road which ran along the north coast of the island and was obviously likely to be a target for enemy air attack. The shortage of transport in any case prevented the possibility of large scale reinforcements from one part of the island to another. Each of the three main groups at Heraklion, at Retimo, and in the Suda Bay - Maleme area had to fight as a separate force. The general scheme of defence was the same at each - to prevent enemy landings on the aerodromes and landings (whether airborne or seaborne) at the beaches."

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The New Zealanders, the Australians and others were evacuees from the Greek campaign and had reached Crete almost without equipments. Indeed their equipment was so short that to begin with they had to use steel helmets for digging for lack of spades. Their morale had naturally been badly shaken by their experience in Greece, as had that of the R.A.F. personnel. It was not possible, as Field Marshal Wavell had intended, to withdraw them and substitute fresh troops, as the hands of the Navy were fully occupied in escorting the convoy which was bringing to Egypt those reinforcements without which our position in the Western Desert could not have been held. As for the Air Force, the

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A.O.C.-in-C, Middle East had informed Group Captain Beamish on April 24th that he proposed to keep one Blenheim squadron for convoy duties at Suda Bay, to build up a fighter squadron there, and to station another fighter squadron at Heraklion.

Ground Airfield Defences

At Heraklion 10 Bofors guns (six static and four mobile) were placed round the airfield which was about three miles to the east of the town. Two sections, each of two field guns, were posted to the south and south-west of the airfield to cover the airfield and the harbour. Two companies of the Black Watch with one platoon and a section of carriers dug in were posted to the close defence of the aerodrome. Two 'I' tanks were concealed nearby. The remainder of the Black Watch was posted near the airfield. Nine 100 mm and four 75 mm guns, together with six light tanks, were placed to the south-west of the airfield. The rest of the brigade occupied an area facing outwards about 2,000 yards from the airfield. The defence of the town was entrusted to Greek troops.

At Retimo two Australian battalions and two Greek battalions were entrusted with the defence of the town and airfield. There were no anti-aircraft guns there. Anti-aircraft defence was limited to machine guns provided by the land garrison. The other two Australian Brigades were detailed to Georgopoulis beaches against possible enemy landings.

The troops at Suda Bay were posted to protect the harbour and base installations at Canea. There was no airfield there. At Maleme the 5th New Zealand Brigade was posted to defend the airfield and beaches with one 3 in. gun section. The 4th Brigade were stationed further along the coast at Galatos to be kept as a mobile reserve.

Communications were always unsatisfactory. Airfields were linked with H.Q., R.A.F. Canea by W/T and by one overhead telephone line through G.O.R. Canea, which was easily put out of action by the Germans as soon as they attacked.

Report of Director of Overseas Operations

On May 2nd the Director of Overseas Operations reported to C.A.S. on the requirements if Crete was to be held. "Total Army A.A. defence consists of eight heavy and twelve light A.A. guns. R.D.F. sets, giving range of approximately 50 miles, are installed at Heraklion and Maleme. As from the A.A. point of view Crete is exposed in exactly the same way as Malta, we must first build up our light A.A. defences to the very maximum degree possible on the two aerodromes so that we can operate fighters without undue loss on the ground. With the short range R.D.F. available the Hurricane, as at Malta, would not be able to get sufficient height before high flying bombers and fighters are in a position to attack. Fighters alone will not, therefore, be entirely effective and the A.A. gun requirement is very similar to that of Malta. Malta has, at the moment, 52 serviceable Hurricanes for the two Squadrons and 94 heavy and two light A.A. guns. Arriving in a few days are ten heavy and eight light guns.

Proposed
occupation
of Crete and
Milos G.6

Arriving in five weeks are eight heavy and twelve light guns, also 50 U.P. at a date not yet known. We know from a recent return that R.A.F. Middle East have 625 ground Lewis guns in stock. My immediate proposals for increasing the A.A. defences of Crete would be -

- (i) As we cannot further denude Egypt or the Western Desert despatch 50 non-tropicalised Hurricanes from Malta to Crete.
- (ii) Divert to Crete eighteen heavy and twenty light A.A. guns en route to Malta, and also possibly send further heavy and light A.A. guns from Malta to Crete.
- (iii) Increase the R.A.F. ground defences at each aerodrome by 100 guns from stocks in the Middle East.
- (iv) Build up 80 and 112 Squadrons with Hurricanes as soon as the Hurricane position in Middle East permits. Blenheim IVs, which will not be of much use in defence of Crete, could then be withdrawn.

Although it may be possible to get more than two fighter squadrons on to the two existing aerodromes, losses on the ground would inevitably be high. Better results would be achieved by keeping any fighters which could be made available in Egypt so that immediate reinforcements can be sent to Crete to replace losses."

Recall of Air Chief Marshal Longmore

Longmore Middle Air Chief Marshal Longmore was recalled to England on
East Part 2 May 3rd and did not resume command of the Middle East.
Sect. I Throughout the Cretan campaign Air Marshal Tedder was acting
 A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East.

SECTION IITHE PRELIMINARY ATTACK

From the beginning of Major-General Freyberg's assumption of command it became evident that the enemy's air attack was going to be far heavier than had been foreseen. The rapidity with which the Germans made operational the Greek airfields in a matter of three weeks after their occupation of them can only be described as remarkable, and contrasted most strongly with the length of time which it took us to prepare airfields, whether in Greece or Crete. Of course it was now a dry summer, whereas we had fought in Greece in wet winter, and the Germans were ready at this date to operate from far less elaborate airfields than we were, as they were prepared to suffer a far higher rate of crashes than we could afford. Also, the Germans had abundant tools and materials (we had next to none) and ruthlessly conscripted local labour, which we were unwilling to do for political reasons, and to some extent were unable to do as all able-bodied men were at the front with the army. There are grave disadvantages in fighting in an unfriendly country, but there are also advantages.

The First Attacks

Throughout the whole of May, both before and after the attack, the enemy carried out continued photographic reconnaissance flights over Kythera Channel, but they met with losses which were too heavy to be borne. Group Captain Beamish suggested that 30 Squadron be kept at Maleme for convoy protection only. He signalled to Air Marshal Tedder on May 11th - "I consider main requirement Air Force Crete; firstly fighter defence Suda Bay area and Heraklion, secondly sea reconnaissance of possible landing and approach of seaborne expedition, thirdly fighter protection for convoys. Suggested location. Four additional Hurricane aircraft Maleme, making total ten. Fleet Air Arm aircraft to be removed. Six Hurricanes Heraklion, which I am now in

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11.5.41

a position to accept immediately for operations after maintenance personnel provided. Consider Hurricanes and pilots greater value here now than held as reinforcements in Egypt. Twenty-four Maryland aircraft at Heraklion for sea recco. 30 Squadron Blenheim I aircraft to be maintained Maleme for convoy protection only..... would propose if possible return these aircraft to Egypt before enemy attack develops. Aircraft to be returned to Maleme after attack defeated". On May 7th it was decided to withdraw the Squadron to Egypt but individual aircraft were to continue to operate around Crete up till May 15th.

Air Marshal Tedder's Appreciation

A.O.C.-in-C.

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On May 11th Air Marshal Tedder sent C.A.S. a general appreciation of the whole Middle Eastern situation. He began by emphasising the general principles on which our strategy in the Middle East had to be based, i.e.

"(1) Our prime responsibility is the security of Lower Egypt as an effective base. That security can only be assured by defeat of the Germans in Middle East.

(2) Since the German has superior numbers, both in material and personnel, it is essential to avoid dispersal of our forces and that we must be able to concentrate quickly and powerfully."

In the light of these general considerations he reviewed the situation in each sphere of operations. On Crete he wrote "The method of providing air support for the defence of Crete against impending attack must depend on the Army plan of defence. This being discussed in Crete to-day. There are at present in Crete six Hurricanes and approximately fourteen very old Blenheim Is and Gladiators. The former have been useful on convoy protection. We may be able to stage low-flying Blenheim attack on Scarpanto, but apart from this there appears

no useful role for either type in meeting attack. In view of need for minimising losses on the ground my present intention is maintain two Hurricane flights in Crete and hold reserve of aircraft and pilots in Egypt for immediate reinforcement. The most useful contribution towards defence of Crete will be attack on departure aerodromes, and for this maximum strength of Wellingtons will be needed. Am withdrawing Wellingtons from Iraq for this purpose and increasing Blenheims in Iraq instead." Anti-aircraft defence was concentrated in an umbrella over Suda Bay, yet in spite of this the losses of shipping were even heavier than aircraft. Ships were sunk either en route or while unloading, and it was soon clear that the enemy's air attack was such as to make impossible the planned replenishment of the garrison. The aircraft carrier 'Formidable' was temporarily out of action owing to damage and could not be operational again until May 25th. This loss left our shipping in a desperately unprotected state. Our naval vessels, with no adequate physical defence against air attack when it came, were also inadequately warned of its coming, as R.D.F. was useless in Cretan waters owing to land echoes. Hurried reconnaissances had to be made of the southern beaches of the island to discover the possibility of landing stores and reinforcements there. It was reported that landings would have been practicable on the beaches from small fast craft had such craft been available, but even had the goods been landed, there was only one usable road, that from Tymbaki to Heraklion. The only other southern beach with road communication was Kastelli and its road was unusable owing to enemy action. Freight-carrying aircraft would have been invaluable, at least for night use, but they were not available nor was sufficient parachute equipment for the dropping of supplies on any large scale. When ammunition was dropped from the air without parachute equipment. 303 was found in serviceable condition but tommy-gun ammunition was very badly damaged.

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/Fighter

Fighter Technique

Our fighter technique at this time was to maintain fighter aircraft at readiness. On the plotting of one + enemy aircraft one aircraft came to standby. On the enemy's approach to the island the aircraft took off and made contact with the Operations Room on R/T. 50 per cent of the remaining aircraft were then brought to standby and, if a raid of size developed, these took off, the remaining 50 per cent then again in their turn being brought to standby. The facts that, though the enemy's air attack was such as to compel our withdrawal from the airfields and yet only two fighters and one medium bomber were lost on the ground, bear their own witness to the intensity of operational activity. While ships were being unloaded at Suda Bay a constant patrol of one aircraft from Maleme was maintained every day. The warning system was admirable except for aircraft approaching from the south. A signalling system kept the aircraft informed if their airfields were still serviceable. Two boards were laid out in parallel lines if the airfield was serviceable and across at right angles if it was not. The fighters could also be kept informed of the state of their airfields by R/T from G.O.R. Canea and Operations Room Heraklion.

The Attack on the Airfields

From May 14th onwards the enemy switched his attack from shipping to airfields. As soon as it was understood how overwhelming was the air power which the enemy was able to bring to bear, both Group Captain Beamish and Major-General Freyberg had been very dubious of the wisdom of keeping in Crete aircraft which must inevitably be overwhelmed by such an attack. Our fighters during their period of operations had given a good account of themselves, claiming to have destroyed 23 and probably destroyed 9 more enemy aircraft and damaged 41, but there was no purpose in keeping aircraft in Crete merely to meet a certain destruction. It was proposed to keep two flights of Hurricanes to prevent the enemy from having everything his

own way but to withdraw all other aircraft, with the hope, of course, of bringing them back again after the attack had been beaten off, and to confine our effort to attacks on Dodecanese and Greek airfields by Wellingtons and Beaufighters operating from Egyptian, or in one case from Maltese, airfields.

The enemy began with spasmodic bombing and occasional low-flying attacks, but these grew in intensity. His attack on the Cretan airfields had become so devastating by May 19th that in spite of a reinforcement of ten Hurricanes we had only three Hurricane and three Gladiator aircraft left fit for operations on Heraklion. At Maleme there was only one Hurricane. Before the weight of the German attack the destruction of these aircraft was certain. No reinforcements were available from Egypt. Group Captain Beamish therefore decided that there was no alternative but to fly even the Hurricanes back to Egypt and to abandon the air defence of the island. Air Marshal Tedder reported the decision and his acceptance of it in a signal to C.A.S. on May 20th. "Situation" (of the fighting of the 20th) he reported "confused but appeared well in hand at 1800 hours. You will have military details. On 18th Beamish, who is O.C., R.A.F., and Freyberg decided to send out remaining aircraft since they could do nothing against the scale of attack. I agreed this was sound and three Hurricanes and four Gladiators flew out dawn 19th. This morning Crete advised that our joint plan to send two flights Hurricanes from Egypt to operate for limited period over Crete should be suspended. Force of fifteen Wellingtons detailed attack Greek aerodromes tonight in hopes they will be illuminated making preparations for further operations tomorrow. Weather doubtful and moon waning, so big results unlikely but every little helps. The long range

A.O.C.-in-

C. 31A

/Maryland

A.O.C.-in- Maryland sent recco Athens-Crete p.m. to-day to assist Fleet
C. 50A against seaborne attack returned safe". The Prime Minister
27.5.41 gave his approval to this decision to withdraw the aircraft.

Air Marshal Tedder followed up his signal with a further
A.O.C.-in- signal begging for more long range fighters, without which
C. 39A our position in the Mediterranean would, he prophesied, be
28.5.41 untenable.

The Massara Landing-Strip

Beamish A curiously desperate eleventh hour attempt was made to
Despatch solve the problem of the provision of more airfields. Air-
Crete fields had up till then been kept few, because, among other
Page 23 reasons, there were not troops to defend them. On May 19th
a detachment of the Argyll and Sutherlanders was landed at
Tymbaki, and it was thought that they might provide a defence
force for the Massara Plain. "In the hope of providing a
haven for fighter aircraft operating over the island", wrote
Group Captain Beamish "such as long range Hurricanes from
Egypt, it was hoped to develop a landing strip on the Massara
Plain. On May 19th (H.Q., R.A.F. Crete were only informed on
that morning) a party of W.D. and G.D. officers was despatched
to find a landing strip which could be made usable in a very
short period..... A landing strip was in fact found, which it
is understood would have been ready for use by May 28th, but it
was then too late. Additionally, it would not have been
possible to provide adequate stocks of material there owing to
the road from Heraklion being blocked."

Attacks on Greek Airfields

In truth, the only contribution apart from reconnaissance
that the R.A.F. could make to the defence of Crete in the
circumstances was that of bombing the airfields from which
the enemy was operating. This it did to the best of its
ability. Photographic reconnaissances of Greek airfields on the
12th had shown "large concentrations all types of aircraft,

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maximum being about 150 at Menidi". "Maximum available force A.O.C./14
Wellingtons attacked those aerodromes nights 13/14th, 14/15th. 15A 16.5.41
Pilot reports indicate considerable success. This will
continue to maximum possible scale. Unfortunately last night
weather hopeless. Also arrange with Malta for Beaufighters
to attack aerodromes dawn 17th. This was to have been done to-day
but postponed by enemy action Malta..... Only Maryland with long
range tanks have required range from Western Desert or Malta. I
had five such aircraft to meet strat-recco and Fleet recco.
Three lost in past ten days. Have arranged one recco to
maximum range west of Greece from Western Desert. Also
short recco of Heraklion from Colorado if practicable. This is
literally all that can be done. Try and improvise long range
defence from Maryland but this cannot give immediate answer." A.O.C.-in-
He was able to report to C.A.S. on May 18th "Beaufighter dawn C. 35A
attack on Greek aerodromes from Malta via Heraklion appears to
have been successful and emphasises value of long range
fighter. Hope have 15 Wellingtons against Greek aerodromes
tonight."

The night operations were all carried out on moonlit
nights and all the operations were hampered by the difficulties
of the mountainous Greek country, by the long range and the
small number of aircraft. 42 sorties were made in 17 raids
against aerodromes in Greece during this period. It is
certain some enemy aircraft were destroyed, but no full
evidence of the damage caused by these raids has ever been
obtained. However great it may have been, there is no
reason at all to think that it even deranged the enemy's
plans.

SECTION IIITHE ORGANISATION OF THE GERMAN ATTACK

II.J5/1

Considerable information about the organisation of the German attack on Crete has been extracted from captured German documents and published by H.Q., R.A.F. M.E. It is from those documents that the following account of the Cretan campaign from the German point of view is mainly derived.

Preparations for the Attack

The preparations for the attack on Crete were already under-way in the first days of April - that is to say, in the first days of the German attack on Greece. Many of the air-landing troops and parachutists were already in Bulgaria in March and some had taken part in the attack on Greece, but the glider troops - Flieger division VII - were specially brought down to the Balkans later in great secrecy. They travelled by easy stages from Germany to Salonika and were flown thence to Tanagra on May 16. The Ju.52's likewise moved down from Rumania and Bulgaria to bases in Southern Greece a few days before the operation. By the middle of May troops, aircraft, ammunition and stores were all assembled ready for action.

The greatest secrecy had been maintained, particularly among the glider troops, who had been forbidden to communicate with anyone in any way and from whose vehicles and equipment all distinctive markings had been removed. They had even been forbidden to sing their regimental songs for fear of revealing their identity.

The airfields from which the Germans operated were as follows - dive-bombers and single-engine fighters from Molaoi in the Southern Peloponese, the island of Melos, occupied by the enemy on May 10, and the Italian Dodecanese island of Scarpanto - twin-engined fighters from airfields in the Athens area (Eleusis, Menidi and possibly Hassani) and also from Argos and Corinth - transport, recco. and bomber aircraft from more distant airfields.

/Throughout

Throughout the first half of May the Germans carried out a most thorough photographic reconnaissance of the island. A most detailed photographic mosaic of Retimo was discovered in one crashed aircraft, photographs of the Canea area in others and there is no doubt that they possessed similar mosaics of every other part of the island. The accuracy of their knowledge of our dispositions seems proved by the fact that one Magister on the ground at Maleme and one dummy Blenheim at Heraklion remained untouched through all attacks in spite of the many aircraft surrounding them which were attacked and destroyed. Reconnaissance was mainly carried out by Dornier 17's and 215's, though sometimes by Henschel 126's. Often four or five of them would be operating over the island on a single day. After the withdrawal of our fighters they flew very low and very slowly. During these first weeks from May 1st to May 20th they also strongly attacked our shipping. As a result of these attacks out of 27,000 tons of supplies sent to Crete, 21,000 tons were turned back, 3,400 tons were sunk, only 2,700 tons were delivered.

The glider troops who had arrived at Tanagra on May 16th, were told on the 17th that Crete was their objective. Two days were spent in final preparations - such as the issue of a phrase-sheet in German and phonetic English, the first sentence of which ran 'If yu lei yu uill bi schott'. At 0445 on the 20th the embarkation began.

Order of Battle XIth Flieger Corps

The attack on Crete was entrusted to the XIth Flieger Corps whose order of battle was -

- 1 Storm Regiment (Gliders)
- 7 Flieger Division (Parachutists)
 - 1 Parachute Regt.
 - 2 Parachute Regt.
 - 3 Parachute Regt.

/Parachute

Parachute M.G. Battalion (5 Companies)
Parachute A.A. Battalion (4 Companies)
Parachute Anti-Tank Battalion (3 Companies)
Parachute Artillery Battery (3 troops)
Parachute Engineer Battalion
Parachute Signals Company
Parachute Medical Unit
Parachute Supply Unit
Air Signals Unit 41
5 Mountain Division (Air landing troops)
85 Mountain Rifle Regt.
100 Mountain Rifle Regt.
95 Signals Unit.

This Corps was divided into an Eastern Group, which was to capture Heraklion, a Central Group to capture Retimo, Canea and Suda, and a Western Group to capture Maleme. The force to attack Canea was

Inter-Services Committee Report page 18. 7 Air Division (less No.1 parachute regiment and 2 battalions No.2 parachute regiment) (Parachutists)
100 Mountain Regiment (Air-landing Troops)
2 Companies Storm Regiment (Gliders)
Parachute Pioneer Forces
Parachute A.A. and M.G. Battalion
Parachute Medical Forces.

Prior to the landings strong enemy fighter forces were to attack various objectives and in particular the anti-aircraft batteries round Suda Bay and south of Canea and encampments west of Canea and south-east of Alikianu. One parachute regiment was to be in the second wave, which was to capture Retimo eight hours after the capture of Canea and then to capture British motor transport and move on Canea. Part of the division was to be landed by sea on the Maleme beachhead.

/Plan

Plan of Attack

At zero one company of the Storm regiment was to land in the south-west of the Akrotiri peninsula, and the other company in the area between the southern outskirts of Canea and north-west of Perivolia.

At zero +15 minutes one battalion and one company of the parachute A.A. and M.G. battalions were to land between the Alikianu - Canea and the Galatos - Canea roads.

The task of the Storm Regiment on Akrotiri was, first, to destroy the anti-aircraft batteries on the high ground in the peninsula and then to occupy the Royal Villa, which was in fact the Headquarters of Major-General Freyberg but which the Germans seem to have thought to be the King's residence. They were then to prevent any attacks from Canea towards the south-east or from Suda towards the east or any fresh British landings in Suda Bay.

The task of the Storm Regiment south of Canea was to destroy the anti-aircraft batteries and the wireless station south of Canea and the supply dump south-east of Canea and then to push forwards to join hands with the regiment on Akrotiri.

The task of the parachutists was to attack the encampments west of Canea and to block the three roads into Canea from the west. Then, if possible, they were to advance into the centre of Canea and occupy it. One battalion was to advance still further east through the Canea - Perivolia gap, cut the Canea - Suda road and thus prevent any relief of Canea from Suda Bay. A reserve was to take position in the olive groves to the south-east of the Alikianu - Canea road, ready to be thrown into the attack on Perivolia, Canea or Suda Bay as might prove necessary.

At zero + 8 hours No.2 Parachute Regiment was to land at Retimo and capture the town and airfield, and No.1 Parachute Regiment at Heraklion, capture the town and airfield and prepare the ground for the 85th Mountain Rifle Regiment.

As soon as the local beaches were captured, the troops were to spread out so as to form a continuous line along the coast from Heraklion to Maleme and thus to prepare the way for the arrival by sea and air of the remaining elements of Flieger division VII and 5th Mountain Division. With these forces it was anticipated that the island would soon be captured. 5th Mountain Division would then remain behind as a garrison, and the other troops would move on.

German Strength.

The attacking forces provided for the original attack were -

Glider troops	750
Parachutists	10,000
Air-landing troops	5,000
Sea-borne troops	<u>7,000</u>
	22,750

It was believed by the Germans that the British forces on the island amounted to only 5,000.

The German air forces available were -

Bombers (Ju.88, He.111, Do.17)	280
Dive-Bombers (Ju.87)	150
Twin-Engined Fighters (Me.110)	90
Single-Engined Fighters (Me.109)	90
Recco (Do.17, Ju.88, Do.215, He.111, Me.110)	<u>40</u>
	650
Gliders	75 - 80
Glider-towing Ju.52's	75 - 80
Troop Transport Aircraft (Z.b.V.)	600 - 650 (with a capacity to carry 5,000 - 6,000 troops)

Gliders

The gliders in the German attack on Crete all belonged to No.1 Storm Regiment (O.C. Col.Meindl). The Storm regiment is organised on the normal infantry basis of 3 battalions of 4 companies each plus Nos.13 and 14 companies. Each company contains 150 gliders, divided into five sections of 30 men, each section being carried by three 10-seater gliders. In the Crete operations

operations 5 companies - Nos. 1,2,3,9 Companies of 1st Battalion and No.5 Company of 2nd Battalion - were employed as glider troops. Other members of the Storm Regiment took part in the operations as parachutists.

Towing aircraft were provided by Luftlandings Geschwader 1. In the Luftlandings Geschwader there are 15 aircraft to a Staffel which is thus equivalent to a company of the Storm Regiment. The main training centre of the Luftlandings Geschwader was at Hildesheim where a Deutsche Forschungsanstalt fur Segelflugzeuge (German Glider Experimental and Research Establishment) had been established shortly after the beginning of the war. Glider pilots are not ranked as G.A.F. pilots, yet of the three glider pilots captured or killed in Crete two held long term commissions in the German Air Force and the third had a civil flying licence. Many of those who fought in Crete had already taken part in the Norwegian and Belgian campaigns.

The training of glider-borne troops consisted in practice-loading, in practice-entering and leaving the glider in full equipment and in practice-flights, which included an intensive training in light and ground signals.

The glider used in Crete was the D.F.S.230 - a high-winged 10-seater monoplane, of about 50 feet in length and with a wing span of about 80 feet. It had one door on the port side. It had a range from a cast-off height of 10,000 feet of from 25 to 44 miles according to the wind.

On operational flights Ju.52's were invariably used as towing aircraft, though He.46's and Hs.126's were reported as having been used in training flights. For operational flights it was generally considered that it was only practicable to tow one glider at a time. The glider had as armament one M.G.34 machine-gun but it was the general opinion that this was only valuable for purposes of morale. When the glider was landed, the pilot joined the other troops in the fighting. Seating capacity was for one pilot and nine passengers, seated

one behind another, and the glider was able to carry as much luggage approximately as much weight again as that of its human cargo. The equipment was carried in the fore and rear compartments and under the seats.

In Crete gliders were only used in the first fifteen minutes of the attack before the arrival of the parachutists, and for some curious reason the Germans never publicly confessed their use of them. Fighter escort was provided to the gliders in the final stage of their journey. Before the arrival of the gliders, the ground where they were to land was subjected to an hour's intensive bombardment, but contrary to expectation this bombardment did not cease when they came to land but continued all round the place of landing. Many gliders crashed on landing, particularly on hard ground, and there were many landing casualties.

The glider troops operated in companies, each company being composed of 5 platoons of 30 men, to each of which was assigned a specific objective. They had the advantage over parachutists that they could operate immediately and their use was to destroy anti-aircraft positions, to cut communications and generally to provide cover for the parachutists who were to follow them.

Bombing and Fighter Attacks

The later attacks were either low-flying fighter attacks or attacks by bombers or, more often, dive-bombers, with a heavy fighter escort of Me.109's or, more usually, 110's. During the attack a small formation of fighters remained high above the bombers, while others circled the airfield from which an attack might be expected. The bombers used were most frequently Ju.88's - sometimes Ju.87's, Do.17's, Do.215's or He.111's. They operated in loose formations of 3 to 12 aircraft and attacked in waves. Medium-level and low-level attacks were made by small formations of anything up to

9 aircraft. Sometimes they attacked their objectives direct. Sometimes they made landfall at Retimo and then swung right or left and flew along the coast to Canea or Heraklion, as the case might be.

Fighter attacks were by formations of from 6 to 30 aircraft. Their tactics were to open up with quite indiscriminate machine-gun fire as they flew in, then to split up, each aircraft making for its particular objective, then to reform and make off together. Fighter attacks lasted anything up to an hour. Their most usual objectives were slit-trenches or moving transport on a road. For an attack on grounded aircraft a very high proportion of incendiary ammunition was used. It was the practice in such cases to make two attacks at intervals of ten minutes, the first to hole the aircraft and the second to set it on fire. The level of accuracy of machine-gun fire was high.

Parachutists

The campaign saw the use of parachutists on a larger scale than ever before. At least 10,000 parachutists of Flieger division VII were employed. The Flieger division was organised on the lines of an ordinary infantry division into three regiments of 4 battalions each, each battalion consisting of 14 companies. Companies seemed to vary considerably in strength. One consisted of 144, all parachutists; a second of 225, of whom 27 were M.T. drivers and 196 parachutists; a third of 263 with no indication of function, but 144 seemed to be the standard organisation per company. Each company had two rifle platoons, one heavy machine-gun platoon, and one platoon of heavy bomb-throwers. Their uniform consisted of knickerbocker trousers, open neck tunic with wide pockets, leather belt with flat rectangular buckle, non-lacing boots with thick rubber soles and round steel helmet with narrow brim. A loose grey-green combination overall with short wide legs was worn while jumping. The report that was current at the time and appeared in many of the signals reports of May 20th that parachutists were dressed in New Zealand uniform does

not seem to be true, but the discovery of a captured German order, saying 'British uniforms will not be worn' seems to show that they had perhaps been used in practices and the use of them in operations considered. When going into action, the parachutists took two days' rations in a special haversack. They were ordered to drink sparingly and only from their own flask of water, avoiding the water of the island. Their parachutes were green and brown, which were difficult to see against a background. On the other hand containers, with equipment, were white so that they might be easily seen. Medical supplies were in pink parachutes.

Method of Attack

The aircraft, as has been said, set off in flights of three. On reaching the objective, they circled round at a height of 300 to 500 feet across the area where the parachutists were to land. Jumping was in formation. The Abseter (O.C.Jumps) of the flight showed a yellow flag two minutes before jumping as a sign to get ready. Half a minute before the jump, he showed a white and red flag. When the target was reached, he pulled in the flag which was the sign to jump. If on the other hand he waved both flags across one another, this meant, 'Don't jump'. At night signals were given by coloured torches. Red meant 'Get ready', green 'Ready to jump' and white 'Jump'. All the parachutists before jumping attached the ring of their parachutes to a wire running along the length of the aircraft on the starboard side. The jump was made through the starboard door, and the parachute was supposed to open automatically after a drop of some 5 seconds, or about 80 feet, but some failed to open. Equipment canisters were thrown out of the port door at the same time as the men jumped from the starboard. It was supposed to take from 9 to 12 seconds for the twelve men and their canisters to leave the aircraft. If the jumps were made at from 300 - 500 feet,

/as

as was the usual custom, then it took the parachutists 20 - 30 seconds to reach the ground. Some came down with machine-guns or tommy guns at the ready; others carried hand grenades. The parachutists descended in a terrifying cloud. The aircraft then turned immediately seawards and made off at sea-level. On May 20th approximately 12 parachutists were carried in each aircraft. Later the number varied, sometimes being as low as 7 and sometimes as high as 20. Requests for ground supplies to be dropped were made by the laying-out of ground strips of white bars with heavy bars at each end to keep them in place. Ammunition and supplies were dropped in metal containers, the bigger ones on wheels. Usually one container was dropped for every four men, sometimes for three or two. At Maleme 80 mm heavy mortars were dropped; at Heraklion spare parts for British and American M/T. It is possible, though not quite certain, that motorcycles were dropped. Medical equipment was of the highest grade, including test-tubes full of blood for transfusion. The greater part of supplies seem to have arrived in perfect condition.

Instructions to Parachutists

The following is a summary of the instructions issued to parachutists:-

- (a) All commanders from section leader upwards must have sketches with the enemy positions, etc.
- (b) All must before the operations be thoroughly familiar with the terrain, names of neighbouring units, etc.
- (c) Advance platoons must always jump first to hold the ground for the main body.
- (d) Immediately on landing, telephone lines must be out. All prominent people, civilian or military, must be seized and held as hostages.

There was no direct wireless communication between the troops on land and the aircraft. Communication between them was by signal strips. The troops could only communicate by wireless with Group or Regimental Headquarters.

/The

The troop-carrying aircraft used in Crete were Z. b. V's of at least 4 Geschwadern.

The losses suffered by Flieger division VII in Crete were very heavy. Some battalions were almost wiped out and the total casualties were reported to be over 50%.

The Air Landing Troops

The air-landing troops were drawn from the 5th and 6th Mountain Division. In the original plan only 85 and 100 Mountain Rifle Regiments and 95 Signals Battalion of the 5th Division had been assigned to the operation.

The air-landing troops were all placed under the orders of Fliegerkorps XI, for the operation. According to the original plan, the parachutists and the glider-troops were to capture the key points of the island, and the air-landing troops were merely to be brought in afterwards to garrison it. As it turned out, the parachutists and glider troops succeeded only in capturing Maleme airfield, and the rest of the island had substantially to be captured by air-landing troops, operating from that airfield. Obviously, whereas both parachutists and glider-borne troops are highly trained specialists of whom the supply is limited, any troops can be used as air-landing troops, so long as there are aircraft available and an air-field at which to land them. Once Maleme had been captured there was then nothing to prevent the Germans from bringing in air-landing troops almost indefinitely. They did so most ruthlessly.

Troop-carrying aircraft were crashed without hesitation. They landed in an incredibly short space of from 400 - 500 yards, following each other in at regular intervals in a steady stream. On the captured airfields they landed three at a time. They unloaded with very great rapidity and were in the air again five minutes after landing. There is no evidence that any tanks were landed by air. The first German tanks to reach Crete reached it on May 28th by sea.

The aircraft used were Ju. 52's. The load carried, as has been said, varied. Maximum fire power was preserved, whatever the other demands on the aircraft. It is almost certain that the same aircraft that had been employed to carry parachutists in the first days of the operations, carried air-landing troops later on.

Signal System

The success of the German attack was in the last analysis very largely due to the extreme efficiency and flexibility of their signals. All the main headquarters were joined to one another, and their channels could be used simultaneously as they were all organised on different frequencies. Each channel was also provided with two alternative frequencies against emergency. These arrangements provided them with an almost fool-proof antidote to jamming and made interception almost impossible. Between air-landing headquarters and each of its operating units ran a line with its own frequency and provided with an alternative frequency. Communication with Company Headquarters was provided by two Pack Sets.

The Germans had also a system known as Staff Information Service, by which additional intercept receivers were supplied so that all messages could be intercepted and decyphered for the Staff.

Aircraft of the heavy transport type were adapted as signal offices with complete cypher machinery. The precise use made of them in the operations is not known.

Reconnaissance aircraft were of course in communication with Rear Headquarters, but there is no evidence of communication between landing or support aircraft and Headquarters. Communication between ground and air was by ground strip code, flares or recognition signals.

/There

There were ancillary signal organisations for air-sea rescue and aerial security.

The importance attached by the Germans to communications may be judged from their orders that the first places to be seized on landing were W/T stations, the telephone exchange and the sea-cable stations.

SECTION IV

MAY 20TH.

The battle of Crete proper began at dawn on May 20th. It began with heavy air attacks at about 0700 hours on the airfield and surrounding area at Maleme and on the Akrotiri Peninsula. Under cover of attacks the first of these between 50 and 100 gliders landed in the bed of the Tavronitis River to the west of the airfield at about 0800 hours.

The enemy thus achieved a surprise by landing during the bombardment, when it had been expected that he would not land until after the bombardment. This gave the advantage, of course, that the gliders landed while almost all our troops had their heads down to shield themselves from the bombing. The gliderborne troops were followed by parachutists at 0815 hours. Wave after wave of parachutists quickly followed the first comers. The parachutists were landed either in the bed of the Tavronitis river, to the east of Maleme village, in the valley between Galatos and the prison, or near the hospital which was captured at 1030 hours. Gliders also crash-landed on the beaches.

A New Zealand brigadier reported, 'I never saw such wanton expenditure of manpower and machines. For example, I saw a Nazi pilot crash an expensive Messerschmitt, which had not been shot up, into the sea off Maleme, dive out and swim ashore apparently just to deliver a message.'

Airborne
Invasion
By John
Hetherington
Allen and
Unwin p.70.

/First

First Landings at Maleme

By far the greater number of the parachutists who landed near our troops were quickly dealt with, but a few caused trouble by succeeding in cutting the telephone line, and for a short time the road from Canea to the main base depot at Suda was also cut. But the main trouble came from concentrations of glider and parachute troops in the Tavronitis bed. These forces were strong enough gravely to threaten No.22 Battalion. A particularly effective weapon which they used reported P/O Crowther of No.30 Squadron who was in the attack was the petrol bomb. (10) Counter-attacks by tanks were not able to drive them from their position and the Commander found it necessary at nightfall to withdraw No.22 Battalion to the line of Nos.21 and 23 Battalions, thus leaving the enemy in possession of Maleme airfield. During the day, further east, the enemy had been ejected from Galatos village and the hospital, but nightfall found him still in considerable strength in the prison area. The cover from air attack which the olive groves gave stood him in good stead. General Stressmann, O.C. Flieger Division VII, and several of his staff were killed on this day in a glider which crashed into the sea. Both at Maleme airfield and at the hospital the Germans drove prisoners in front of them in order to prevent us from opening fire.

Landings at Canea

At the same time as the landings at Maleme there had also been landings on the other side of Canea in the Suda Bay area. Their objectives were heavy anti-aircraft batteries in that area. By midday this attack had been mopped up, though it had first succeeded in wiping out at least one gun crew. The enemy had cleverly chosen for their troop carriers a corridor which avoided the range of all our anti-aircraft guns.

/Eleven.

(10) G/C. Beamish told the writer that he himself never saw such a bomb.

Beamish
Despatch
Enclosure C.
Report by
P/O Crowther
p.2.

Eleven gliders out of a projected fourteen landed soon after dawn on the Akrotiri Peninsula, also with the apparent objective of anti-aircraft batteries. The preliminary air bombardment here was not carried out and fighter and dive-bomber support was lacking. Some of the gliders crashed so violently on landing that the occupants were either killed or wounded. All but a few isolated snipers were rounded up, most of them before they had emerged from their gliders, and their Commander (Colonel Sturm) was captured.

The Attack on Heraklion

The British troops at Heraklion, being the original garrison of Crete, were much better equipped than those at Maleme and Suda, who were evacuees from Greece.

Before May 19th Heraklion had been only lightly attacked and that for the most part, contrary to the German habit, at night. On May 19th 200 aircraft, mainly Do.17s, Ju.88s and Me.110s, attacked the gun positions. On the morning of the 20th it was attacked again from 0800 hours until about midday. Then there was a lull.

That afternoon Heraklion was bombarded between 1600 and 1700 hours by Do.17s, Ju.87s, He.111s, Me.109s and Cr.42s, and under cover of that bombardment four Battalions of parachutists from 132 Ju.52s were landed west and south of the town, north and south of the road down to the airfield, and east of the airfield, at 1845 hours. Immediate and heavy attacks were made on them with tanks, bayonets and small arms. About sixteen enemy aircraft were claimed as shot down and by 2130 hours all areas within the British perimeter had been cleared. Sporadic fighting continued.

The Attack on Retimo

Retimo had also been attacked. A bombardment in the morning was followed by landings of two battalions of parachute troops at 1600 hours. The airfield remained in our hands but a party of about 100 were unable to hold the church on the road

/between

between Retimo and the airfield. They were thus able to cut communications not only between the airfield and Retimo but also between the airfield and Force Headquarters at Canea and between Heraklion and Force Headquarters.

On this day it was estimated that there landed from the air -

Inter-Services	At Canea	1,800
Committee	At Maleme	1,700
Report p.17.	At Retimo	1,700
	At Heraklion	2,000 ⁽¹¹⁾

Owing to the withdrawal of the fighters the Royal Air Force, in its proper role, of course played no part in this day's combat, but airmen (and also sailors and even on one occasion a New Zealand concert party) who chanced to find themselves in the thick of the battle turned infantrymen for the day and did what they could to help repel the invader. Greek civilians, men and women, also gave their assistance.

(11) German documents (Report on Airborne attack, Crete, Page 10) makes the numbers out rather larger - 750 glider troops and 8,000 parachutists.

SECTION V

THE EVACUATION

As may be seen from an examination of the German plan of campaign, the enemy's objectives were not obtained in full on May 20th. On the other hand, that day's fighting had given him the all-important possession of Maleme airfield, and throughout the next two days (the 21st and the 22nd) he took full advantage of this. He switched to Maleme troops, such as the 100th Mountain Rifle Regiment, which in the original plan had been destined for Heraklion, or the 5th and 6th Mountain Divisions which had been destined for Canea and Retimo. Parachutists who landed east of the airfield were quickly mopped up, but on the other hand, on the 21st, some 600 troop carriers, as it has been estimated, carrying these battalions of the 100th Mountain Regiment, landed on the west side of Maleme airfield, and that although the airfield was still under our constant artillery fire. To give an example of the strength of the air support, a glider company that landed in the Canea area had a whole flight of Stukas to support it. These Stukas dive-bombed anti-aircraft and artillery positions and a group of houses that was the company's objective, for three minutes. The operation was also covered by 12 Me.109s and 6 Me.110s. Bombing and machine-gun attacks were continuous throughout the day. Me.110s and Me.109s in groups of fifteen patrolled the area continuously throughout the day, flying very low and machine-gunning whenever they saw any signs of movement. Officers who had been in France said that no air bombardment there equalled that which they suffered in Crete, reported Field Marshal Wavell.

Wavell's
Middle East
Despatch
Part III
Sec. 69.

/The

The Attempt to Recapture Maleme

On the night of the 21st/22nd we made a counter attack with the hope of recapturing the airfield. It met with considerable success, but day broke before our troops had had time to dig into their new positions, and with daylight the enemy was able to use his unchallenged supremacy in the air to deliver an attack which compelled us to abandon our new gains. The Navy, during that night, intercepted and sank a number of vessels that were bringing the enemy seaborne reinforcements.

Throughout the 22nd more troop-carriers landed on Maleme airfield and there was fluctuating fighting around Galatos.

On the night of the 22nd/23rd the Navy, in addition to sinking several troop-carrying vessels, bombarded Maleme airfield. About sixteen caiques, several submarines, probably between 4,000 and 5,000 troops⁽¹²⁾ and at least twenty aircraft were lost by the enemy in these naval engagements. Eleven more aircraft were probably destroyed and at least fifteen damaged. As a result, with the exception of a small caique and a few ship-wrecked survivors, no enemy seaborne troops were landed in Crete until May 28th, when the battle was virtually over and when some Italians were able to land at Siteia in the east of the island, but, exposed to enemy dive-bombers and unprotected by our fighters, our Navy had paid its price. Two cruisers and four destroyers were sunk, one battleship put out of action for several months, and two cruisers and four destroyers considerably damaged. It was a rate of loss which could not possibly be afforded.

Commanders-in-Chief's Appreciation

On the 24th, in reply to a request for an appreciation from the Chiefs of Staff, the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, wrote "Scale of air attacks has made it no longer possible for Navy to operate in the Aegean or vicinity Crete by day and to guarantee prevent seaborne landings without suffering losses which, added to those already sustained, would very seriously /prejudice

Battle
Summary No.4
Admiralty
page 27

C.O.S.Signals
113

In a press state- (12) General Freyberg only allows 'at least.... 2,000 drowned,'
ment, see Battle

Summary No.4.
p. 27.

prejudice our command of the Eastern Mediterranean. We are, therefore, unable to reinforce or supply Crete except by fast warships at night, which will seriously curtail the support we can afford to the garrison, particularly if enemy are able to operate from aerodromes in Crete. Little prospect of R.A.F. stopping movement enemy shipping which can now take place piecemeal and under strong air protection,.... As yet enemy has only established himself in strength in one area and his supply problem is acute. Information that he is calling up aircraft from other theatres suggests he is stretched to limit. Provided we can prevent him from exploiting his one success by further large sea- and air-borne landings and can reinforce and maintain our forces, we should be able to hold him and eventually defeat him." It was a somewhat self-contradictory appreciation.

C.O.S.Signals

113 24.5.41

"Crete battle must be won," the Prime Minister signalled to Field Marshal Wavell on May 23rd. "Even if enemy secure good lodgements fight must be maintained indefinitely in island thus keeping enemy main striking force tied down to task,.... Hope you will reinforce Crete every night to fullest extent. Is it not possible to send more tanks and thus reconquer any captured aerodrome? Enemy's exertions and losses in highest class troops must be very severe. He cannot keep it up for ever." Air Marshal Tedder replied by emphasising the impossibility of ships approaching near to the coast by day if the R.A.F. could not provide fighter cover. "Naval operations yesterday and this morning round Crete have emphasised need for fighter cover if our ships are to be able to approach close enough to Crete in daylight hours to operate at all against seaborne attack. Two Beaufighters 252 Squadron arrived yesterday but not serviceable. Can

C.O.S.Signals

23.5.41

/remainder

remainder 252 come out at once? Joint meeting of C.-in-Cs at which this signal being written strongly urged despatch remainder this squadron. In present critical phase small force of Beaufighters might well be decisive. Am trying operate Hurricanes Heraklion to-day but they will be fully occupied Maleme". C.A.S. replied to Air Marshal Tedder - "Do you wish me also to send out conversion sets for Blenheim IVs? Agree entirely that your primary concern is Crete and more especially Maleme. Every indication is that enemy is making prodigious efforts and undoubtedly fully stretched. Your superior power will tell in the end, and all our efforts should be devoted to driving the enemy out of Crete. So give the Hun all the hell you can."

C.O.S.Signals

A.416

23.5.41

A.O.C.-in-

C. 46B

23.5.41

The trouble with Beaufighters at that date was that they were not tropicalised. The matter had been already raised even before the opening of the main attack. Air Marshal Tedder had signalled to V.C.A.S. on May 12th - "C.-in-C. Mediterranean has asked if we can provide fighter cover to the Fleet operating west of Crete to deal with possible seaborne attack on Crete. Only possible means of doing this, apart from aged Blenheim Is operating from Crete, would be Beaufighters. My impression is that Beaufighters are not tropicalised in any way and therefore it is useless to consider moving any from Malta for this operation. Can you confirm?" V.C.A.S. replied - "The Beaufighter is all right as regards oil-cooling and cylinder temperature but has no air cleaner". Nevertheless, they proved useful for this work. "Two more arrived yesterday from Malta" wrote Air Marshal Tedder to V.C.A.S. on May 29th "and they are on the job to-day trying to help cover our unfortunate Navy in its attempts to get to and from Crete. I hope the others will come through very soon since the Beaufighter is literally the only possible way of providing any cover for the ships and without they appear to be quite cold meat..... I am hoping that the second Beaufighter squadron to which C.A.S. referred will, in fact, be able to come out here".

A.O.C.-in-

C. Pt. I 22A

A.O.C.-in-

C. Pt. I 25A

A.O.C.-in-

C. Pt. I 29A

Bombing of Enemy Airfields

The policy of bombing enemy airfields in Greece and the Dodecanese was continued even after the invasion, and Tapolia, Menidi, Eleusis and Molasi were bombed on May 20th/21st. Fires and explosions were started and at Eleusis bombs fell among dispersed aircraft.

It had been planned to attack Maleme airfield on the night of May 22nd/23rd before the Germans had had time to consolidate themselves there, but bad weather in the Western Desert made the operation impossible. Three Wellingtons dropped medical stores and rations on Heraklion and Retimo on May 22nd and 23rd. The supplies for Retimo unfortunately fell into the sea.

Hurricanes and the Extra Tank

The only fighters that were used in these operations were Hurricanes. They had been fitted with extra tanks to increase their range but the experiment was not a success both because it was found to impose too great a handicap on their manoeuvrability and because the tanks could be carried only at the sacrifice of armour and ammunition. "The additional tanks gave the Hurricanes a range of 900 miles," a pilot told Mr. Hetherington, "compared with the normal range of 600 miles. There were two additional tanks - one port, one starboard. The port tank emptied first, then the starboard tank. Air locks were liable to develop owing to bad refuelling or severe bumps in the air and throw the system out of commission. You never know when the port-tank emptied, if the starboard tank was going to feed through. If your starboard tank refused to work over the sea, that was the end." On the morning of the 23rd it was attempted to send two flights of six Hurricanes each to Heraklion from Egypt. The first flight was fired on by our naval anti-aircraft barrage in error. Two were shot down and three were driven back to their bases. One landed safely at Heraklion. Of the second flight all six reached Heraklion but

Airborne
Invasion By
John Hetherington,
Allen and
Unwin. p.108.

/four

four were found to have damaged tail wheels. A fifth was damaged on the ground by enemy action. Therefore, of that flight also only one aircraft was serviceable. These aircraft had been sent from Egypt with instructions to attack enemy landings at Maleme, but the instructions were overruled by the local military commander at Heraklion who ordered them instead to act in support of the operations in Heraklion - a questionable exercise of authority.

Difficulties of Fighter Protection

Air Marshal Tedder summarised these operations and summed up the problem as it existed on May 23rd in a signal of that day to C.A.S. - "Small scale of effective air support we are able to give to defence of Crete has been, and is, my main concern. Wellingtons' attacks on Greek aerodromes before blitz were useful but last attempt without moon largely abortive. Two night attempts to assist at Maleme abortive owing to difficulty distinguishing friend from foe. Wellingtons successfully dropped supplies last night. Have maintained sea reccos north of Crete. In view present critical situation Maleme, Blenheims from Western Desert operating to-day Maleme and sent six Hurricanes in hope they may be able to operate few sorties from Heraklion. Latter in particular is somewhat desperate gamble but feel big risks must be accepted. The two Beaufighters have been made nearly serviceable and on job covering disabled destroyer. Events of past day-and-a-half at sea have shown no longer possible for our ships operate in Aegean or vicinity of Crete by daylight. This means enemy can pass vessels to Crete from Greece or Melos in daylight. Convoys are escorted by Me.110s and consist mostly small auxiliary vessels. Little prospect of Blenheims from Western Desert being able stop such movements. Our main efforts therefore must be against enemy forces landed or landing by air and sea. Hope we may be able to snatch a few valuable sorties from Heraklion, but regular operations from there

/will

C.O.S.
Signals
23.5.41

will be precarious and expensive at best. Bulk of air operations necessarily based on Africa near operational limit of Blenheims and Marylands and outside range of Hurricanes and Tomahawks. Will do what we can with Blenheims and if lucky enough have cloud cover may be able effect something. Far most effective striking force would be low flying fighters, but only possibility with necessary range is Beaufighter. If Admiralty agrees despatch remainder 252 they will have dual role -

- (a) provide dawn and dusk cover for ships approaching and leaving Crete;
- (b) low attack enemy air transports and seaborne forces in caiques.

Wellingtons will persevere in trying locate useful targets and tonight eleven will be attacking Maleme and Scarpanto (latter to give some relief to Navy). All this means diverting practically our whole effort from Western Desert to Crete and feel this essential at present juncture. Enemy probably in awkward situation too, but we must do all we can to rub his nose in it."

The Chiefs of Staff replied to the C.-in-Cs "Our difficulties Crete are great but, from all information we have, so are those of the enemy. If we stick it our enemy's effort may peter out. It seems to us imperative that reinforcements in greatest strength possible should be sent as soon as possible to island to ensure destruction enemy already landed before they can be seriously reinforced. The vital importance of this battle is well known to you and great risks must be accepted to ensure our success".

C.O.S.Signals

25.5.41

Withdrawal to Ay Marina

On the 23rd, German troops which had landed near the prison began to push towards Ay Marina. They threatened to cut the British forces in two, and it was therefore necessary to withdraw the New Zealand forces round Maleme back to

/Ay Marina.

Ay Marina. On the night of the 25th/26th a further withdrawal to the neighbourhood of the hospital was necessary.

Meanwhile, throughout the 24th and 25th Canea had been constantly bombarded from the air in a series of attacks, sector by sector, and was now virtually destroyed.

The R.A.F. had given such support as it could to the counter attack against Maleme. In the afternoon of the 23rd twelve Blenheims attacked Maleme airfield and later in the afternoon there was a second attack by a force of Blenheims and Marylands which bombed and machine-gunned about 130 JU.52s. Ten of the JU.52s. were claimed as destroyed and others as damaged. Two long range Hurricanes also machine-gunned aircraft on the ground. A number of these aircraft were claimed as destroyed or damaged.

During the 24th, five long range Hurricanes attacked enemy positions in the Heraklion area. Our operations were hampered by a heavy sandstorm in the Western Desert.

On the night of May 24th/25th Maleme was bombed by eight Wellingtons. Large fires were started on the airfield and five other fires were started on the beaches. Medical stores were dropped by Wellingtons at Retimo.

Air Marshal Tedder's Appreciation of May 24th.

A.O.C.-
in-C. 44A

On the 24th Air Marshal Tedder sent a further report on the situation to C.A.S. - "Blenheim and Maryland squadrons from Western Desert operated successfully against Maleme yesterday afternoon and evening, also the two Beaufighters. Afraid attempt use Heraklion for Hurricanes largely failure. First Hurricane shot up on ground immediately landed, two damaged owing state of runways, remainder hoped do one sortie early this morning returning direct to Western Desert. Heraklion now non-operational. Second flight standing by for further attempt as soon as landing ground on Massara Plain reported fit; meantime trying improvise more long range Hurricanes which can just

/reach

reach Maleme from desert. Wellingtons last night made gallant effort in very bad weather. Two missing. Reports from others not complete since they landed widely dispersed from El Areish to Mersa Matruh, and indications that some at least were successful. Unfortunately, to-day Western Desert blotted out severe dust storm, flying impossible and prospects of clearing to-day poor. We will hit again immediately it is humanly possible". On the 25th he reported - "No flying possible by day yesterday. Last night, despite bad weather at Crete which stopped naval operations and thick weather in desert, Wellingtons operated against Maleme. One Wellington dropped urgent supplies Retimo, (13) Still thick to-day and bad over Crete, but twenty-four Blenheims successfully attacked enemy aircraft on ground at and near Maleme, about ten seen on fire. Further attack this afternoon. Attempt to operate Hurricanes from Heraklion was abortive and we only got three back out of seven. One Hurricane brought back as passenger pilot whose aircraft had been shot up. Am going try Hurricanes singly using standard long range tanks, which should be empty when they reach Crete. Scale enemy air attack terrific and feel we must make desperate attempt at least show the flag."

A.O.C.-

in-C. 46A

Loss of Canea

On the night of the 25th/26th Headquarters were moved to a house a few miles east of Suda. It was hoped that on the night of the 26th/27th a destroyer would arrive containing the bulk of the Commando Layforce under Colonel Laycock, and essential stores. Major-General Freyberg therefore gave orders that Canea should be held until then at all costs, but it did not prove possible, and throughout the 26th and 27th our troops were driven back in some confusion from Canea on to Suda.

/Decision

(13) Unfortunately the supplies fell short and were captured by the enemy. See page 23.

Decision to Evacuate R.A.F.

A.O.C/9

80B

On May 26th Group Captain Beamish signalled to Air Marshal Tedder - "Resistance offensive appears impracticable. Regarding R.A.F., situation is that twenty-two officers, 176 other ranks are temporarily located in Suda Bay, representing mass squadron detachment and stragglers coming in from Maleme. One officer, six other ranks are at Retimo as far as known and one hundred all ranks approximately in Heraklion area. The garrison at Retimo and Heraklion are cut (?) off from western end. Operationally, R.A.F. personnel are not fulfilling any useful purpose and I consider unlikely to do so now if aerodrome cannot be recaptured and, therefore, they should be evacuated. Majority have suffered at Maleme and are not now fighting personnel. R.A.F. personnel at Retimo and Heraklion cannot be evacuated at present and must be under orders of local Army Commanders. At western end there is reasonable chance of using Suda Bay to-night, 26th/27th May, landing after dark and leaving before dawn, to get some R.A.F. personnel off by Sunderland. Suda Bay may not be available afterwards. Probably if Sunderland did come precedence would be given to politicians and officials but would be at least possible to get away flying personnel, regarding the remainder if evacuation was ordered. It is my intention to move remaining personnel to the small port of Sphakia on the south coast. Grateful your instructions. I have not yet discussed this with G.O.C.-in-C."

A.O.C./9

80A 27.5.41

A.O.C./9

81A 27.5.41

Air Marshal Tedder followed this up to C.-in-C. Mediterranean - "Would much appreciate if high priority can be given to flying personnel in any evacuation that may be possible. As you know we are now getting aircraft but are short of pilots and every trained aircrew is worth its weight in gold". To Group Captain Beamish he signalled - "You are authorised to evacuate R.A.F. personnel as opportunity offers. Every effort should be made to get flying personnel away first opportunity. Our

/fellows

fellows here doing damndest help you. Good luck". As for support to the evacuation, Air Marshal Tedder had to say - "Will do what we can but our effort is concentrated on giving cover to ships carrying out evacuation and on attacking bases from which enemy attack comes." The problem of the evacuation of the R.A.F. was almost immediately merged into the larger question of general evacuation, for on the 27th Major-General Freyberg decided that such a general evacuation was inevitable. The Chiefs of Staff at home agreed.

A.O.C./9
82A 29.5.41

C.O.S.Signals
118 27.5.41

Attacks on Cretan Airfields.

Up to the last moment the R.A.F. had continued its policy of supporting the Army by attacks on the enemy positions. On the 25th five long range Hurricanes attacked enemy positions at Heraklion. At dawn on that day Hurricanes and fighter Blenheims were despatched to attack Maleme airfield. They failed to locate the target owing to low cloud and heavy mist, and a Hurricane force-landed at Heraklion. Later in the morning a combined force of Marylands, Blenheims and Hurricanes successfully attacked Maleme airfield. "About 24 JU.52s and fighters" were claimed as destroyed. A Hurricane shot down one JU.88 and damaged another over Suda Bay. In the afternoon Maleme was again twice raided, first by two and then by three Blenheims. The three Blenheims of the second raid did not return. Reconnaissances for enemy shipping were carried out over the Aegean.

sic
Beamish
Despatch
Page 14

Four Wellingtons again attacked Maleme airfield and the nearby beaches on the night of the 25th/26th, and Wellingtons also attacked Scarpanto.

On the 26th six Hurricanes attacked Maleme and claimed to have shot down at least five JU.52s and probably damaged others in the air and on the ground by machine-gun fire. Maleme was again attacked at dusk by Blenheims and Marylands, which set fire to more JU.52s on the ground. On the 26th/27th

/aircraft

aircraft on the ground at Maleme were again attacked. Five were claimed as destroyed, and there were explosions and fires on the beaches. On the 27th a Hurricane fighter patrol shot down three JU.88s. At dusk a force of Blenheims was sent to attack enemy troop concentrations at Canea, but, failing to find the objective, bombed the airfield at Maleme instead and destroyed several aircraft on the ground. On the night of the 27th/28th the airfield at Maleme was again attacked, and four aircraft attacked Scarpanto. Blenheims and Hurricanes claimed to have shot down three JU.88s over the sea.

Air Marshal Tedder on Lack of Air Bases

A.O.C.-
in-C.49A
27.5.41

Air Marshal Tedder recounted these operations, while elaborating the decision to evacuate, in a signal to C.A.S. on the 27th - "You will have seen Wavell's signal to Prime Minister saying situation in Crete no longer tenable. Yesterday C.-in-Cs meeting held at Alex, and it was decided to continue push in reinforcements and supplies, though this could be only in small packets. On return here signals from Freyberg led us to conclusion that in view terrific strain of past week Freyberg himself needed fresh help and agreed to send Lieut.-Gen. Evetts in by Sunderland last night. This cancelled late last night without reference to me or Wavell, but may still be able to get Evetts in to-night. Difficulty is to get true picture but appears that heavy and continuous attack of bombers and fighters operating from aerodromes in Greece, Crete, Melos and Scarpanto have succeeded completely neutralising our A.A. and, consequently, in pinning down our troops and wearing down their morale. Our squadrons have, I think, done all that was humanly possible, and sometimes more than one would have thought possible, to help. Now that enemy able to operate fighters from Crete our losses heavy in proportion to strength, (twenty aircraft in last three days), but yesterday, in addition to what appeared to have been successful Blenheim and Maryland attacks Maleme, Hurricanes with reinforcing tanks shot down

/number

number loaded troop carriers. Fighter protection for army against bombers and low-flying fighters has, however, been literally impossible once the aerodromes in Crete were denied to us. It will certainly be said Crete is being lost for lack of air support, but the primary reason is lack of secure air bases. I have warned Wavell that once Hun able to transfer his effort similar situation may arise in Tobruk unless Eastern Cyrenaica is cleared in the immediate future. Need for giving what cover possible to Navy probably mean will have to divert some effort from Crete itself during next few days. Meantime, aircraft are coming in. Fifteen arrived Cairo yesterday, nearly forty more en route."

C.A.S. replied - "You will by now have received orders for evacuation in Crete. I know that your squadrons have done all that could be expected of them in conditions which gave them no chance of countering German air attack effectively. You know that Prime Minister clearly endorsed at the time the decision to withdraw remaining fighters from Crete on May 19th and that reasons which subsequently made it impossible for you to protect Crete against air attack and landings are fully understood by War Cabinet. I am confident you will do all that is possible to help evacuation, particularly by protection of ships. Success attained on May 26th by Hurricanes with reinforcing tanks is most satisfactory and fully justifies your enterprise in trying for it. Death of Bismarck⁽¹⁴⁾ means second and third instalments of Hurricanes earlier than we dared hope yesterday."

A.O.C.-
in-C. 50A
27.5.41

Withdrawal to Sphakia

The enemy had by then landed thirty to thirty-five thousand troops. General Freyberg therefore put General Weston in command of the rearguard in the north and moved his own Headquarters to Sphakia to organise the evacuation.

/When

(14) The Bismarck was sunk on May 27th.

Beamish
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When the R.A.F. personnel from Nos. 30 and 33 Squadrons and No. 252 A.M.E.S., about 230 strong in all, had arrived at Headquarters R.A.F. Crete on May 23rd from Maleme, they were in what Group Captain Beamish describes as "a pitiable condition". Temporary accommodation was found for them in a camp near Vamos, twelve miles east of Suda Bay. When total evacuation was seen to be inevitable, all this personnel, together with the detachment from No. 230 Squadron which was at Suda Bay, was moved south to Sphakia during the night of May 26th/27th. The first of this party to arrive in Sphakia established themselves in caves there on the morning of the 27th. The remainder arrived in the afternoon of the 27th. Operational Headquarters of the R.A.F. remained with the Army Headquarters which did not reach Sphakia until the 28th.

General Weston's difficulties were enormous as communications and order had by now alike broken down. The 4th New Zealand Brigade had, on the night of the 26th/27th, been withdrawn to Stylos and thence was withdrawn again to the Askiphio Plain, known as the "Saucer", in the middle of the island between Suda and Sphakia, as a precaution against parachutist landings which would cut the troops in the north off from their hope of embarkation. Meanwhile, the troops in the north maintained a fighting rearguard, as a result of which a remnant of them made their way back to the Askiphio Plain by the morning of the 29th.

It was decided that the rearguard should hold up the enemy there, but that the main force should move off for Sphakia on the night of the 29th. Both the hardships and disorganisation of this march are beyond the scope of this narrative. It was only fortunate that the enemy then, as always, showed a quite extraordinary lack of initiative in his almost total failure to operate at night. The only exceptions to this were a certain amount of not very serious bombing of Heraklion during the moon period, and an attack on Suda Bay by twelve aircraft on the night of May 12th/13th.

First Evacuation

The first evacuation had taken place on the night of the 28th/29th and there were further evacuations on the night of the 29th/30th. 100 R.A.F. personnel were evacuated to Egypt by destroyer on May 28th/29th and the remainder, with the exception of Operational Headquarters, by Glen ship on May 29th/30th. Air Marshal Tedder had promised the naval authorities that the R.A.F. would do all that it could to provide fighter protection for evacuating vessels, but he frankly warned them that cover would be likely to be "meagre and spasmodic". "I know that your natural desire" C.A.S. had warned him "will be to take all risks with every type of aircraft in order to protect ships evacuating troops from Crete. You must, nevertheless, resist temptation to squander aircraft unprofitably, bearing in mind vital importance of adequate air strength for forthcoming operations in Libya". Air Marshal Tedder replied - "Your X.169 of May 29th (i.e. above signal) confirms line I have taken on question of providing cover for shipping. Effort we are making, which is maximum practicable, should not drain resources. Four successful interceptions yesterday over convoys without loss. Sending two Sunderlands tonight to Sphakia to bring off final Headquarters party." In the event there was, as we shall see, the most unfortunate failure of the escort to locate the convoy from Heraklion in northern Crete, but in the southern waters things turned out better than had at one time been feared. "Fighter protection became steadily more effective and the enemy less enterprising". "Fighter cover has been effective in covering ships" Air Marshal Tedder was able to report to C.A.S.

Air Cover of Evacuation

On the 28th/29th Hurricanes and Blenheims maintained patrols over ships en route from Egypt to Crete. On the 28th/29th Scarpanto was bombed by eight Wellingtons. On the 29th/30th both Scarpanto and Maleme airfields were attacked, the former by

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A.O.C.-
in-C. 54A
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A.O.C.-
in-C. 63A
2.6.41

six Wellingtons and the latter by two Wellingtons. Two Wellingtons also attacked Catavia in Rhodes. On the 30th/31st Maleme and Heraklion were attacked by ten Wellingtons. At Maleme three unidentified aircraft were burnt out and there were fires and explosions. At Heraklion six JU.52s were burnt out and there were also fires and explosions.

Fighter protection was again provided for ships on May 31st and June 1st. During these patrols at least five JU.88s, one ME.110, two Cant.1107s and one S.79 were claimed as destroyed⁽¹⁵⁾ and three JU.88s as damaged.

On the night of the 31st May/1st June Heraklion was again attacked and a large fire started. Five Wellingtons bombed Maleme where they claimed four aircraft destroyed and five probably destroyed, and started four large fires. Supplies were dropped on the beach at Sphakia.

Final Evacuations

The enemy made his first contact with the rearguard at dawn on the 30th. The final evacuations were on the nights of the 30th/31st and 31st May/1st June. Two Sunderlands assisted on these nights, and Group Captain Beamish, together with the G.O.C.-in-C. and the Naval Officer in charge at Suda Bay and their staffs, was taken to Egypt in one of them on May 30th/31st. That, in spite of their disorganisation, so large a proportion of our forces were successfully evacuated was due to the failure of the enemy to drop parachutists either in the Plain of Askiphio or Sphakia and to the absence of attacks by the German Air Force during the embarkation, in spite of the fact that their reconnaissance planes had been over Sphakia as early as May 28th. They dive-bombed Sphakia during the day of May 29th but did not attack it at night.

/On

On the night of June 2nd/3rd a small party of all services made seaworthy a motor landing craft found on the beach of Tymbaki and set out to sea. In this party were nine R.A.F. personnel, including three of the members of a South African Maryland which had crashed near Tymbaki on May 25th. Twenty miles out they were intercepted by an Italian submarine which took prisoner the officers, who included two officers of No. 112 Squadron and two South African officers of No. 24 Squadron. The remainder of the crew reached Egypt. About 1,000 personnel were left at Tymbaki, including some of the R.A.F.

The Fighting at Heraklion

Communications in Crete were so poor that it was inevitable that the defence of the three points at which troops were stationed, should be conducted in almost unconnected operations, and, as it was at Maleme that the battle of Crete was won and lost, the story of the troops who were attacking at Maleme and finally evacuated from Sphakia is the most important story, but it is necessary also to say a few words about events at Heraklion and Retimo.

At Heraklion, the first day's fighting had left the airfield still in our hands, but throughout the following days a steady stream of troop-carriers landed to the east of the area occupied by our troops, principally on Malea beach. By the 23rd the enemy was able to bring mortar and machine-gun fire to bear on the airfield and camp, and on the 24th the airfield, though still untaken, was reported as untenable. By the 23rd the enemy, largely owing to the gallantry of the Greek troops and, indeed, also Greek civilians, had been driven out of the town of Heraklion, though it had been virtually destroyed by systematic air attacks, but he had entrenched himself to the west of the town. From there he issued an ultimatum to the Greek Commander to surrender the town. This ultimatum was rejected. As a result, the town was heavily bombed on the 24th and more parachutists were landed to the west

/of

A.O.C/9

79A

of it. On the 25th it was again attacked, but the attack was repulsed. On that day Headquarters 204 Group was still able to signal to H.Q., R.A.F., M.E. - "Heraklion would be serviceable with slight work to fill in craters. 100 octane petrol available if troops recover from enemy area. Suggest urgent action to provide facilities at Heraklion pending (? opdor ?) Retimo. So Hurricanes can refuel there individually at intervals and take advantage of enemy spasmodic fighter efforts". On the night of the 25th/26th some of the German troops to the west of Heraklion started to move across in order to join up with the rest of the troops at Ay Iyas to the south. Daybreak found them still on the move and the Leicestershire Regiment took the opportunity to attack them. The attack was at first successful, but the British troops were, in the end, driven back by machine-gun fire from the air, against which they had no defence.

On the 28th further German reinforcements, amounting to some 900 fresh troops, were seen to land to the east, and a major German attack was clearly now only a matter of time. Heraklion had by now also been bombed almost to destruction. With the collapse of resistance in the west of the island there was no point in waiting to meet certain annihilation. The evacuation was ordered for the early hours of the 29th, and was carried out successfully and with very little enemy interference. The R.A.F. party, including No.220 A.M.E.S., was embarked uneventfully on H.M.S. Orion.

The Attack on the Heraklion Convoy

The convoy put to sea at 0320 hours on the 29th, but the fighter escort, which they expected, failed to find them. Owing to the failure of H.M.S. Imperial's steering gear the convoy was an hour and a half late in setting sail. The fighter protection was to have met it in the Kaso Strait at 0530 hours but this time was amended by signal to 0630 hours. However, before the meeting could take place the convoy had already been intercepted by the enemy at 0600 hours. Wireless silence.

/was

was necessary after leaving port and, therefore, our aircraft were at a rendezvous some fifty miles away from the convoy. Although our squadrons made several attempts to find the convoy, in the course of which two JU.88s were shot down for the loss of one Hurricane, they were never able to get through. The convoy was dive-bombed throughout the morning and bombed throughout the afternoon by JU.88s and JU.87s. The only friendly fighters that they saw were two Fulmars of the Fleet Air Arm which appeared at noon, and even they, according to the testimony of a survivor, were never seen by those on board H.M.S. Orion. (16) As a result, H.M.S. Imperial and H.M.S. Hereward were sunk and there were severe casualties on other ships. H.M.S. Orion, on which the R.A.F. personnel were embarked, suffered three direct hits, as a result of which, in addition to Army casualties, two R.A.F. personnel were killed, eleven wounded and eleven missing presumed killed.

Unfortunately it was not possible to include in the evacuation a small party of nine officers and fifty-two other ranks who had been sent to the south of the island to open up the landing ground at Massara and who had to be left behind.

The Fighting at Retimo

The story of Retimo is less clear, since no survivors have been left to tell it. Two Australian and two Greek Battalions had been detailed for the defence of Retimo town and airfield, and two more Australian Battalions to the defence of the Georgopoulis beaches against a possible enemy landing. When there were no signs of any such landings at Georgopoulis these two Battalions were transferred to Canea. Communications between Retimo airfield and Headquarters were cut, by the

/German

(16) Flight Lieutenant Hubbard supplied this information.

German occupation of the church on the road between the town and the airfield on May 20th. After that, communication with the troops on the island was only by W/T and en clair. On the 21st an attempt was made to dislodge the enemy from his position by co-ordinated attacks upon him from both sides, but the attempt failed.

During these days the enemy had been steadily reinforcing the area to the south-east of the airfield. The garrison of the airfield was in serious danger of being cut off. On the night of the 27th/28th the Navy, at great risk, sent in to the garrison a motor landing craft with rations and medical stores, but its position was untenable, particularly after the general collapse of the defence of the island. The difficulty was how to communicate to the garrison the order to evacuate, in such a way that it should not be known to the enemy. An aircraft was sent from Egypt which was instructed to drop the garrison the order to evacuate from Plaka Bay. The aircraft took off but was never heard of again, and the fate of the garrison at Retimo is not known. It included one R.A.F. officer and eleven other ranks.

Air Marshal Tedder's Stocktaking

In all these operations the R.A.F. played no part of importance, nor were they able to play any part in the defence of the naval vessels which attempted to bring stores and reinforcements to the defenders. Among these vessels casualties were severe.

A.O.C.-in-C.
59A..

"Have held stocktaking on Crete" Air Marshal Tedder reported to C.A.S. on May 30th. "Sorry to say that though effort has had some valuable results the cost has been heavy in relation to strength, especially in Blenheims. Blenheim dawn and dusk raids in particular have been expensive, both in Crete and on return to Desert, and no doubt I am to blame in not keeping tighter rein on Collishaw. Total aircraft losses in Crete up to

/date

date have been 47, of which 30 between 20th and 27th. (17)

Stopped all day action over Crete other than recon on 28th, except an attempt to drop messages Retimo yesterday which failed".

R.A.F. Casualties

Of the 618 R.A.F. personnel who were engaged in the battle of Crete, 361 returned to Egypt and 257 were casualties in Crete. Out of the 28,000 Imperial troops on the island, 14,580 were evacuated. It is not possible to say what number of the rest, either of R.A.F. or of the military, were killed or wounded. The enemy losses have been estimated at twelve to fifteen thousand, including a high proportion killed. The total naval casualties, in anti-invasion operations and evacuation combined, were 3 battleships and one aircraft-carrier damaged, three cruisers and six destroyers sunk. Six cruisers and eight destroyers and the special service ship Glenroy were damaged. (18)

(17) i. e. in all operations in any way connected with the Cretan campaign, whether over Crete, the sea, Greece or the Dodecanese. See Appendix D. The figure as finally agreed was 44 in April and May combined. In the campaign proper, i. e. from May 14th onwards the losses were 38. See Appendix E.

(18) See Appendix A.

LESSONS OF THE CAMPAIGN

The criticisms of the campaign are, from the nature of things, mainly military criticisms. Of the R.A.F. the most important thing to say is that it was not there, and it was not there not because of any failure of the men on the spot nor even of the authorities in the Middle East, but because the aircraft, and still more the airfields, did not at that date exist. Yet even if it were granted that without fighter support a successful military defence of Crete against the Germans was impossible, it would not follow from that either that the campaign was without point or that any detailed criticisms of it were otiose. There were not the overriding political reasons for fighting in Crete that there were for fighting in Greece. From the political point of view we might have evacuated Crete at the same time that we evacuated all the other Greek islands, but our major purpose in all the campaigns of that date was to delay the enemy and thus to disarrange his time-table, and, just as the Greek campaign had, in spite of this failure, a military importance in that it did so delay the enemy and cost him casualties, thus preventing him from other conquests further afield, so the Cretan campaign, failure as it too was in its turn, can be justly defended on this ground and its conduct rightly criticised if it can be shown that we could in any way, even with our limited resources, have delayed the Germans longer or inflicted upon them more casualties.

"There are some, I see," said Mr. Churchill in the House of Commons on June 6th, 1941, "who say that we should never fight without superior, or at least ample, air support, and ask 'When will this lesson be learned?' But suppose you cannot have it?.... Must you, if you cannot have this essential and desirable air support, yield important key points one after another? The further question arises as to what would happen if you allowed the enemy to advance and overrun without

cost to himself the most precious and valuable strategic points? Suppose we had never gone to Greece and had never attempted to defend Crete! Where would the Germans be now? Suppose we had simply resigned territory and strategic islands to them without a fight! Might they not at this stage in the campaign of 1941 already be masters of Syria and Iraq and preparing themselves for an advance into Persia?" In a world of speculation two things at least are certain - that the Germans captured Crete by airborne invasion and that they never again attempted to capture anywhere else by these means. The price that we made them pay was, it seems, deterrent.

Prior Expectations

In criticising the Cretan campaign, as in criticising the Greek campaign, it is right to ask, while avoiding any wish to be wise after the event, how those in authority could have expected things to turn out other than they did, the forces on both sides being what they were. But while in Greece there is a certain ground for bringing this charge of over-optimism against leaders on the spot, in Crete the military leaders - General Maitland Wilson, Major-General Freyberg and Major-General Weston - were, from the first pessimistic although, rightly, they did not publicise their pessimism. Air Chief Marshal Longmore also emphasised the difficulties. "Have just seen Prime Minister's signal to Wavell of to-day's date", he signalled on April 17th, "in which position regarding Crete (i.e. that it must be held) is given. Quite realise importance of holding Crete but heavy air commitment is involved if sufficiently effective to satisfy naval requirement for Suda Bay and to enable Greek Government to continue functioning from there. My A.401 of April 17th to you describes Cretan aerodrome limitations".

A.O.C./14

12A

A.401 said - "At present only two aerodromes available, Maleme and Heraklion. Former not fit for heavily loaded Blenheims and very limited dispersal capacity. Latter extremely

A.O.C.-

in-C./2

69A

/vulnerable

vulnerable to low attack from raiders. New aerodromes being prepared Padiada fifteen miles south-east Candia cannot be ready till end of May. Immediate prospect is that very limited aerodrome facilities Crete will be fully occupied in connection with air protection to shipping during evacuation from Greece if decided upon".

A.O.C.-
in-C./2
74A

"I intend to fly Crete tomorrow," signalled Air Chief Marshal Longmore on April 21st "to estimate chance of being able to provide sufficient effective fighter defence -

- (a) to enable Navy to use Suda Bay under new conditions which will exist, and
- (b) to justify establishment of Greek Government there if they decide to move.

A.O.C.-
in-C.Pt.I
2A 24.4.41

Such air commitments might well involve heavy wastage in fighter aircraft through ground attack from Dodecanese and Greece". The result of his investigation was that "there should be reasonable chance of keeping Suda Bay usable by Navy by one Hurricane squadron with 100 per cent reserve pilots and replacement rate 100 per cent per month.... I have told G.O.C. Crete question is whether possible to keep Hurricane squadron up to strength against heavy wastage in addition to Libyan commitments. In meantime, Nos.30 and 203 Blenheim fighter squadrons and No.112 Gladiator squadron are doing their best from Maleme and Heraklion to provide some degree of air protection to ships coming from Greece and to Crete itself".

No charge of complacency before the event, therefore, can lie against the military or R.A.F. leaders in the Middle East. It was well understood on both sides that all that the R.A.F. could in any way promise was a degree of convoy protection during the evacuation from Greece to Crete. There was no concealment, that with resources as they were it was from the first quite doubtful whether they would be able to play any effective part in the defence of Crete against a German attack. All depended on the weight which the enemy would be found able to throw into that

/attack.

attack. There was as little illusion about the limits of the support which, things being as they were, the R.A.F. could offer to the Navy.

General Position in Middle East

Again, it is important to remember that up till April 1941 we were in possession of the African coastline as far as Benghazi but that the German offensive in Greece coincided with the German offensive in North Africa which drove us back beyond the Egyptian frontier. A glance at the map will show that the defence of Crete was made enormously more difficult once the Germans were in possession of Cyrenaica. Air Marshal Tedder emphasised this in a signal to C.A.S. on May 16th - "Position", he wrote, "is that now we are pushed back to bases in Western Desert the only aircraft which have the necessary range (to provide recce cover for the ships of His Majesty's Navy) have been certain Marylands off French contract which have long range tanks. There were originally seven. We have two left, of which one is serviceable. The standard Maryland can only cover required radius by refuelling Heraklion. The reccos to-day had to be done by a standard Maryland and aircraft is now at Heraklion. With repeated air attacks which have taken place and are to be expected on Heraklion, to maintain a recce in such manner is precarious. It is not question of priorities but of practicability. Situation is that Fleet is now having to operate in an area literally surrounded by enemy air bases at which are stationed large numbers of various types enemy aircraft, including fighters, bombers, torpedo carriers and reconnaissance, and, moreover, an enemy considerably more efficient than the Italian. The Fleet is operating in the centre of the ring, and so far as effective and secure air bases are concerned we are outside the ring. Once we can operate from Cyrenaica, reconnaissance cover can be given but until that I find it difficult to see any satisfactory solution. The Maryland, even with long range tanks, is not really suitable, navigation facilities being poor and speed inadequate, as recent casualties

C.O.S.
Signals
16.5.41

/indicate.

indicate. We have successfully improvised two or three long range Hurricanes for photographic recce, and I have considered possibility of using them but lack of navigational facilities, impossibility of getting accurate positions, courses, etc., from pilot of single-seater rules it out in my opinion. The only ultimate remedies I can see are - first, recovery of bases in Cyrenaica; second, provision of squadron of high speed, long range (at least 1,500 miles) aircraft, if such aircraft exist and are available; third, provision of long range photo single-seater aircraft for recce of harbours in Aegean. Would welcome any suggestions for immediate improvement based on experience in Home waters, but clearly our problem very much more difficult".

A.O.C. -
in-C.34A
17.5.41

C.A.S. could only reply - "There are no aircraft in Service with greater range and speed than Marylands and suitable for sea reconnaissance in conditions required. Regular reconnaissance of distant areas is, therefore, entirely beyond our resources but I am sure you will make utmost effort to perform vital specific tasks at critical periods, for example before "Scorcher" (the German invasion of Crete), accepting risks refuelling Heraklion, also using Malta and employing Blenheims if necessary. Regret no ultra long range Spitfires available before July. It might be possible to send you six Coastal Command Blenheim IVs next week but doubt if they will do any better than your own."

Limitations of Possible Air Support to Navy

DO/AML/6.
40A

Air Marshal Tedder, in a letter to Admiral Cunningham written on May 15, made clear the narrow limitations of support which the R.A.F. could offer to the Navy. "I have been trying to find a solution to what is actually an insoluble problem, i.e. the business of trying to provide you with the reconnaissances you need for the impending Crete operations. The position is, of course, that you are now having to operate in waters quite literally surrounded by enemy air bases from which shore-based aircraft are operating. That in itself cuts out the employment of Sunderlands which have the range necessary for the role. The only bases we

have from which to operate shore-based aircraft are those in the Western Desert, a precarious base in Malta (three Glenn Martins were knocked out on the ground there last night) and the still more precarious one at Heraklion (we have been out of W/T touch with Heraklion since 5 a.m. this morning so cannot tell whether it is still usable). Out of the five long range Glenn Martins with trained G.R. crews which I had in Egypt I have lost three in the last fortnight. At this moment I have one available. I fully recognize the vital importance of reconnaissance to your operations and I am ordering a recce from the Western Desert to extend to a line south of Zante by 1000 hours tomorrow. If Malta have a serviceable aircraft and crew available they will carry out a recce from Malta early in the day to the north of Cephalonia. I am also telling Crete to carry out a visual recce of Monemvasia with a Hurricane if they can still operate from Maleme. It may be that we are doing this a day too early but I gather from Norman⁽¹⁹⁾ that you feel it is important to cover the possibility of a seaborne attack on the 17th. Whether one will be able to repeat it on the following day one literally cannot tell until one knows how things go. This may appear pretty meagre provision, but I hope you will take it as the widow's mite which, in fact, it is."

Opinion at Home

In Crete it is against the strategical masters at home that the charge of over-optimism must be brought, if it must be brought at all. "So complete is our information", thought the Chiefs of Staff, "that it appears to present heaven-sent opportunity of dealing enemy heavy blow". The Chiefs of Staff signalled to the Commanders-in-Chief on May 10 - "The following /suggestions

C.O.S.Signals

98. 9.5.41

(19) Captain Norman was Naval Liaison Officer at H.Q., M.E.

suggestions are put forward for your consideration but without knowledge of local conditions which we do not possess we cannot judge whether or not these ideas will be of value to you. When initial landing of parachute troops takes place there appear to be two alternatives -

- (a) To allow enemy to become well committed to normal sequence of landing operations by giving impression of weakness of defence in early stages.
- (b) Killing or capturing all parachutists as quickly as possible and then laying out on aerodromes the marks carried by Germans to show that operations of parachutists have been successful.

However desirable it is to kill Germans it must not be forgotten that our object is to prevent the enemy from taking the island, and whether (a) or (b) is adopted there should be no hesitation in providing additional troops and, if possible, a few tanks from Egypt for counter-attacking in strength. It might be possible to disembark some tanks loaded on the deck of Clan Lamont immediately she arrives at Alexandria and send them at once to Crete. Air action, particularly before dawn, against emplaning points might be most effective. Possibility should be considered of a naval feint, e.g. threat of coast bombardment in North Africa which would permit naval forces, by altering course in darkness, to intervene against enemy sea communications. Arrangements must be made in advance for rapid repair of aerodromes to enable air reinforcements to operate at later stages. My 62817 22.4 summarises important points to be observed in local defence arrangements but these may have to be modified in the interests of deception. Smoke may be used by enemy to cover parachute landing which will probably be preceded immediately by machine-gunning and intense dive-bombing on all obvious Ack-ack and ground defences and fighter aircraft. No doubt you have considered use of dummy defences and dummy aircraft on aerodromes to draw fire, and dummy

or light obstacles on aerodromes to force parachutists to land and clear them. Also the use of armed motor boats to counter-attack landings from sea. Any additional information of probable plan will be telegraphed immediately". The C.-in-C. replied on the same day - "Had already arranged to send six infantry tanks and fifteen light tanks to Crete. These should arrive within next few days if all goes well. Have reinforced island with artillery and am sending additional equipment. Army and R.A.F. Staff Officers go Crete immediately to discuss defence plan which is not easy for several reasons. Your suggestions will be put before Freyberg but details must be left to him. Have full confidence in him and his troops."

C.O.S.Signals
101.
10.5.41.

Ibid

Criticisms of Air Policy

The Naval authorities in the Middle East were before the battle, if anything, even more conscious of the difficulties of the tasks assigned to them than were the soldiers and the airmen, but there again the authorities at home were more optimistic, nor had it been foreseen that the battle of Crete would take place at a time when the Navy in the Mediterranean was already more than fully occupied in the protection of a convoy which was making its way through to the Western Desert. The Chiefs of Staff signalled on May 11 - "Note that General Wavell states that your information points to insufficient sea-going shipping left Aegean for large-scale seaborne operations. In this connection our information is that if sinkings of enemy merchant ships at the rate of recent months are continued a position of considerable embarrassment to the Axis Powers may shortly arise".

C.O.S.
Signals
102

There was, of course, a lot of military, naval and political criticism, informed and uninformed, of the lack of air support given to the troops and the ships. C.A.S. signalled to Air Marshal Tedder on May 28 - "Have been informed unofficially that Ambassador (i.e. the British Ambassador to

A.O.C.-
in-C.41A

/Egypt

Egypt, Sir Miles Lampson) is expressing serious concern at what is regarded as our neglect or failure to provide adequate air forces for Mideast, resulting in Army having to fight in Greece and Crete without adequate air support. You know the efforts that have been made and are being made to overcome difficulties and to raise repair above wastage. You also know that our inability to afford adequate support to our troops in Greece and Crete was mainly due to other factors having nothing to do with numbers. Suggest you might with advantage see Lampson and perhaps also New Zealand Prime Minister and inform them generally of the recent and prospective improvement in your air strength, explaining to them reasons for inadequate air support in Crete and Greece and your prospects for future operations in Libya".

A.O.C. -
in-C.52A
29.5.41.

Air Marshal Tedder replied - "Ambassador told me yesterday he had communicated home on these lines. I told him frankly he had been misinformed. I explained the factors which have led to the present situation and think he understood and appreciated them. I also explained what was being done to increase our strength. Will make a point of explaining situation to him periodically. I have also spoken to Fraser⁽²⁰⁾ on these lines."

A.O.C. -in-C.
to V.C.A.S.
30A 3.6.41.

"There is", wrote Air Marshal Tedder, "as I expected, a first-class hate working up in the Army against the Royal Air Force for having 'let them down' in Greece and Crete. Wavell is very worried about it and is doing his best to stamp on it. But I am not sure that even now the real reasons for the lack of air support are appreciated in higher places in the Army here." Air Marshal Tedder thrashed the matter out very thoroughly in an argument with Admiral /Mountbatten.

(20) The Prime Minister of New Zealand, who was at that time in Egypt.

SECRET.

- 72 -

A.O.C.-in-C.

57A 31.5.41.

Mountbatten. He reported back to C.A.S. - "Have just had long discussion with Mountbatten who is bringing this home. He has been round discussing things with everyone and, as you probably know, was in the recent operations in the Aegean and got blown out of the sea, or rather into it, by a JU.87. He has heckled me extensively on the subject of air support both to the Navy and the Army in Greece, the Aegean and Crete. I think I have succeeded despite an extensive smoke screen raised in other quarters in getting him to realise that the fundamental reason for the lack of air support was the failure to hold the necessary air bases. He also heckled me on the ability of the Hun to move forward quickly and establish and operate from forward bases. I said that of course one factor, and a vital one, was the large numbers of transport aircraft which he possessed. I also pointed out that in fact he possessed large numbers of JU.52s because he had built up, before we did, a very large bomber force of which the JU.52 was the backbone. He thus had large numbers of obsolete bombers for transport, and was able to continue useful production of this type. I also pointed out another vital factor, which was the fact that stocks of some 2,000 tons of 87 octane fuel at Athens were not destroyed (I have reason to believe that the order cancelling the destruction of this fuel was given by General Heywood,⁽²¹⁾ but I have not yet been able to get evidence of this). A third line of attack in which he has been extensively primed by the Army is the fact that we have not got the close support bombers and the close support organisation for working with forward troops. All the evidence on this point comes from Greece and Crete It is of course true that we have nothing like the highly refined organisation which the Hun has developed for communicating between close support aircraft and forward troops but Mountbatten's deduction is that the Army should have their own Air Force for close support and

/Army

(21) Head of the British Military Mission in Athens up to the evacuation of Greece.

Army co-operation. I told him I did not see how we could conceivably afford the luxury of dividing up our available Air Forces into penny packets."

Lack of Air Bases

A.O.C. -in-C.
65A 4.6.41.

Even from Field Marshal Wavell himself Air Marshal Tedder did not receive that full appreciation of the problem for which he had hoped. He had to complain somewhat strongly of the Field Marshal's interpretation of events. "I have just seen Mideast 69893 dated 3.6 to C.I.G.S. from General Wavell", he wrote to C.A.S. "It is very unfortunate that this signal with its wide circulation should have been issued without discussion or reference to me and I feel I must record that in my opinion the second sentence in para.9 (ascribing the defeat in Crete to lack of air support) is misleading. As I have emphasised again and again, our inability to provide fighter defence and other air action was due primarily to the loss of the essential air bases. The aerodromes on Crete itself were deliberately limited so that the available ground defences could be concentrated. These ground defences proved utterly inadequate not only to enable us to use the aerodromes ourselves but even to prevent the enemy from seizing them and using them himself. Am concerned not so much in accurate post-mortem on Crete as in grave danger that incorrect conclusions may be drawn from those operations and one of the fundamental principles of air operations be obscured or forgotten. General Wavell has seen this signal, and I understand that further report on Crete will cover this point."

Air Marshal Tedder continued to insist again that the root defect was not lack of aircraft so much as lack of air bases. "There is, and undoubtedly will be more, loose talk", he signalled to C.A.S. "about the alleged lack of air support Greece and Crete. I am taking line that root of situation is

/secure

secure air bases. We failed to clean up Dodecanese and failed to secure our air bases in Larissa Plain. As a result enemy air operations based on increasingly wide front whereas ours increasingly cramped till finally two remaining aerodromes untenable and out of range of effective support from Africa. This campaign is primarily a battle for aerodromes".

A.O.C.-
in-C, 54A
30.5.41

R.A.F. and the Navy

There were also differences between the Air and the Naval authorities and complaints of each against the other. These was, for instance, a complaint of the inaccessibility of Admiral Cunningham, always either at sea or at Alexandria when other headquarters were at Cairo. "It is, of course, sheer lunacy", wrote Air Marshal Tedder, "that vital decisions like this (the decision about the Sphakia evacuation) where the three Services are deeply concerned, should have to be made at two places some 125 miles apart". There was criticism of Admiral Cunningham's inaccessibility in Naval circles as well. Rear-Admiral Rawlings⁽²²⁾ complained of the signal 'lag' and said that when the Commander-in-Chief is conducting operations from on shore there should be "far more signal lines etc."

A.O.C.-
in-C. to
V.C.A.S.
29A
29.5.41
Battle
Summary No.4
Admiralty
Page 18.

The story of Admiral Cunningham's complaints against the R.A.F. and of Air Marshal Tedder's reply to them is given in another letter from Air Marshal Tedder to V.C.A.S. "On the 4th we had one of our periodical C.-in-C's meetings.....Cunningham, à propos of the fighter cover to the Fleet for the evacuation of Crete, raised the whole question of a special group allocated for work with the Fleet..... the burden of his argument being that -

A.O.C.-
in-C. to
V.C.A.S.
33A
11.6.41.

- (a) there were not sufficient air forces out here;
- (b) the forces available to support the Fleet were quite inadequate; and
- (c) the forces for Fleet co-operation must do that and nothing else.

/I

(22) Commanding 7th Cruiser Squadron, composed of H.M.S. Orion, H.M.S. Ajax and H.M.A.S. Perth.
G. 55,286.

I pointed out that inadequacy of forces to meet new commitments did not by any means apply only to the air forces, that the beam in the Naval eye as regards submarines and light craft generally might well be removed before Naval surgeons investigated the mote in the air force eye as regards the shortage of long range fighters (the need for which arose from a threat which the Navy had consistently refused to admit until they had heavy losses of ships).....All the same we must face the fact that the naval situation in Eastern Mediterranean has at long last completely changed and has now become what we have for years been prophesying, and they have stubbornly been refusing to credit, until they lost half their Fleet in deliberately putting their head into a hornet's nest by day. As I see it, control of sea communications in the Eastern Mediterranean has now got to be done by air or not at all. Cunningham envisages going to sea and staying at sea under a fighter umbrella..... I am enclosing a copy of a letter I have had from Cunningham to-day. On the whole I think it is, from the Naval point of view, a fairly sane document. There are, of course, misstatements.....The present situation is fantastic.....As regards the Army, it is largely a question of educated soldiers."

Maleme, the Key-Point

The enemy had, as in all campaigns of that date, a superiority not only of numbers but of interior lines of communications. We had few airfields, and the size and bad communications of Crete would have made it impossible to prepare a defensive system similar to that of this country in the Battle of Britain even had the aircraft been available and the labour been undertaken in time. On the other hand, Crete, if a smaller island than Great Britain, is a larger island than Malta and the story of Malta forbids us from saying that a successful defence was impossible if it could not be in depth.

/The

The main attack was on Maleme airfield. Here the defence consisted of perimeter defence, with general and local reserves which were immobile owing to lack of transport. There were no concrete works and the troops were insufficiently dug in owing to lack of tools. Stocks of wire were insufficient to wire all positions. Ten Bofors guns were mounted, six static and four mobile, but, since their effective range is only some 800 yards, it was necessary to site them near the edge of the airfield if they were to cover it efficiently. The German plan was, first, to obtain command of the air in general, then, by consistent attack on the anti-aircraft gunners to destroy their morale. During the week when this attack was being delivered, hardly a bomb fell on the landing grounds. Thirdly, came the phase of the first parachute and airborne landings, whose object was to establish themselves on the airfield. The fourth phase was that of the reinforcement of the first landings, when the object was to overwhelm the defenders by sheer weight of numbers. These tactics proved successful at Maleme, where the defenders were troops already shaken by their experiences in Greece. They did not prove successful at Heraklion and Retimo.

As things were in the Cretan campaign, there was no way of stopping the Germans from enjoying a general superiority in the air, nor, if they could destroy the morale of the anti-aircraft gunners was there much chance of stopping them from proceeding from the second to the third and fourth phases. It was in the second phase that they must be challenged if they were to be challenged successfully.

Possibilities of Ground Defence to Air Attack

Military opinion at that time was very defeatist about even the possibility of soldiers standing up to intense aerial attack. "It must be admitted", wrote Major General Weston, "that under these conditions it is a matter of extreme difficulty to get guns' crews to stand up to their guns, and it is doubted whether on the day of the attack the Bofors

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defence reached anything approaching its full efficiency. In general it is the moral effect of air blitzing which puts the guns out of action and not the casualties incurred. At Maleme, after several days strafing, culminating on the 19th, only one N.C.O. had been killed and three other ranks wounded. At only one site (St. John's Hill) were casualties serious, and here they reached twenty out of a hundred..... The effect produced on troops appears out of all proportion to the actual damage inflicted.....It appears clear that the casualties produced by air action are negligible in comparison with the effort expended. Machine-gunning from the air is usually quite ineffective and, as regards bombing, the only serious casualties appear to have been produced when bombs of the heaviest calibre were used. In the last war, troops endured with fortitude much greater dangers, and casualties incomparably greater than those inflicted by air action, yet in Crete air action had produced a state of nerves in troops which seriously interfered with operations and movements both by day and night. It is considered of the first importance that the training of the soldier should be such as to discount the moral effect of the air and to impress on him the comparatively small risk he runs from it".

Battle Summary
No. 4 p.42.

In general Major General Weston reports "One important point that emerges from the recent operations is that no A.A. or coast position is immune from glider or parachute **attack**. In consequence, it should be the established practice for all A.A. and coast positions to be wired as soon as established, and for all personnel in the battery to be provided with small arms, a large proportion of them being 'Tommy guns' since these are handier and quicker than rifles in dealing with short range attacks. A supply of hand and rifle grenades would also be invaluable for dislodging small parties of the enemy established close to a position".

/Field

Field Marshal Wavell's Lessons

The C.-in-C. Middle East summed up the lessons of the campaign in a signal of June 6, 1941, as follows:-

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- "(a) Aerodromes being enemy main objective must be organised for all-round defence (including pill boxes), specially as parachutists may drop behind defences. Defences, including artillery, must be in depth. Artillery in sites with cover proved more useful than those in open with all-round field of fire.
- (b) All ranks of all arms must be armed with rifles and bayonets and high proportion of tommy guns to protect themselves, and in the case of artillery, their guns.
- (c) By day it should be easy to deal with parachutists, but it must be remembered that parachutist may land at night, and secure an aerodrome. Main problem is to deal with enemy airborne troops, and as it is impossible to be strong everywhere, there must be strong mobile reserves, centrally placed, preferably with tanks.
- (d) Defence must be offensive. Immediate action by mobile reserves essential to prevent enemy settling down, and in order to secure quick action, good system of intercommunication is vital. Delay may allow enemy air to prevent movement.
- (e) During bombing phase, A/A and L.M.Gs should remain silent unless required to protect own aircraft on the ground.
- (f) A/A lay-out should include dummy A/A guns and alternative positions. Positions of A/A guns should be continually changed.

/(g)

- (g) Arrangements must be made quickly to render aerodromes liable to attack temporarily unfit for landing.
- (h) Equally important to quick action of mobile reserve is position of fighter aircraft support, the existence of which might prevent any airborne landing from succeeding, or at least reduce enemy effort."

Incidental Lessons

Whether the defence of Crete was a forlorn hope or not, it is nevertheless important to consider incidental lessons which can be learnt from it. Among the criticisms, it has been suggested that it would have been well had there been a clearer understanding whether it was our hope to use Cretan airfields ourselves or merely to deny their use to the enemy. If the first, we clearly needed to make them as good as possible, and if the second, as vulnerable as possible. In any event, when there is a danger of an airfield falling into enemy hands the airfield should, suggested the Inter-Services Committee, be charged with demolition charges which should make it possible to render it unserviceable by the pressing of a button at the moment of evacuation. The landing of troop-carriers on the Maleme beaches on the 20th was certainly costly, and perhaps prohibitively costly, to the Germans, and they might not have been able to continue their attack, had it not been possible for them to switch their carriers the next day to the airfield. In the same way any land that could possibly be used as a landing ground should have been obstructed. G/Capt. Beamish says, "Full petrol barrels were also located on the aerodrome (of Maleme), covered by machine-gun fire so that they could be ignited on transport aircraft landing." Unfortunately they do not seem to have been

/ignited

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Beamish

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ignited when the aircraft did land. Major Hanson of the New Zealand Royal Engineers, (23) criticised this omission in his report on the campaign. "I still feel he wrote that a major mistake was made in not making the (Maleme) aerodrome unsuitable for landing planes".

The second recommendation of the Inter-Services Committee, is that, where there is danger of enemy capture, landing-grounds should be as small as possible. They would then be easier to defend and it would also be more difficult for the enemy, when he seized them, to land troops and equipment at the same time. Heraklion was reduced to its flight paths by the judicious disposition of barrels, and Heraklion was never captured.

The third recommendation was that petrol and ammunition dumps should be so dispersed that, if one dump is captured, alternative supplies could be obtained from another.

Fourthly, they recommended overhead cover, and possibly even underground hangars for aircraft on the ground in place of the protective pens which were built at Heraklion and Maleme.

Fifthly, they recommended that all R.A.F. personnel be trained, if necessary, to take part in airfield defence and issued a warning against the confusion caused by similarity of the blue of R.A.F. uniform to the German uniform colour in the thick of battle. No. 220 A.M.E.S., for instance, was fired on by the Black Watch in mistake during the evacuation and casualties were caused.

G/Cpt. Beamish in his despatch argues for the necessity of deep dug-outs around the perimeter of an airfield to be defended, or a large number of scattered posts in the vicinity of the airfield, ready to wipe out parachutists, whenever they may drop,

/and

(23) Airborne Invasion by John Hetherington. Allen and Unwin. p. 51.

and for strong mobile forces in the neighbourhood, ready to be thrown into the battle whenever needed. All these arguments are doubtless ideally sound. Unfortunately in Crete neither the troops nor the equipment existed.

The German Tactics

Since by May 19 the enemy had both carried out a thorough reconnaissance of Crete and also driven our fighters off the island, his air task in the campaign was a straight-forward one. The main feature of the German tactics was the employment of low-flying aircraft in support of air-borne and parachute troops. Each day's operation was preceded by an air reconnaissance at dawn to establish the positions of our guns and troops. No attack or landing was ever made until this reconnaissance had been carried out.

The Germans generally attacked anti-aircraft positions with bombs and machine-guns from several sides at once. The evidence seems to show that casualties from machine-guns were few, but they performed very effectively the part for which they were designed, which was to demoralize the anti-aircraft crews, a demoralisation which was greatly helped by the technique of the simultaneous attack from many directions. For the most part the Germans used small bombs, but included some 250 Kg and possibly some 500 Kg. By varying the size of the bombs they made it impossible for our troops to know beforehand how much damage to expect and thus helped to weaken morale. For the same reason they also used a number of screaming bombs and fitted some of their aircraft with screaming devices. No incendiaries were used. The percentage of dud bombs was low.

The Germans frequently dropped supplies and equipment by parachutes. The containers sometimes had detachable wheels and a handle which could be fixed on in order to convert it into a small cart. Troops on the ground sent up white Verey-light signal cartridges and used signal strips to indicate dropping positions, and our troops, observing this, sometimes imitated these

/signals

signals and thus had enemy supplies dropped to them. Casualties among glider troops were very high, if ever they came within rifle or machine-gun range, owing to their slow rate of descent. Some parachutists fired tommy guns from the air, but such fire was ineffective and inaccurate and parachutists had the initial handicap, as opposed to glider and airborne troops, that they had to collect their equipment on landing. Casualties among them were also high. The landings were only successful for the Germans because they had so great a superiority of numbers and such admirable morale that they could afford heavy casualties. Even so, they could not have been successful had not the German air supremacy made it possible for the troops to land under air cover.

German Ruthlessness

A further interesting reflection is suggested. It is often stated, almost as a truism, that with complete air superiority the Germans were bound to succeed in the end provided that they went on long enough and provided that they did not care how many casualties they suffered in the process. But it may well be asked whether any other nation than the German - and perhaps the Japanese and the Russian - would be capable of using its troops in this way for the sake of victory, would be capable of sending glider after glider packed with men to almost certain death. Mr. Hetherington alleges⁽²⁴⁾ that, as it was, there were mutinies among embarking Austrian troops in Athens. It may well be so, though the evidence is not compelling. The superficial comment is that if the Germans can do this and others cannot do it then the Germans will win in the end, but experience has proved in this, as in the last war, that the exact opposite is the truth in the long run. Ruthless inhumanity - the brutal treatment of men as if they were cattle - demands its psychological price, and it is because they behave thus that the

/Germans

(24) Airborne Invasion, P. 81.

Germans crack in the end and are found to have less staying power than other nations who, even amid the horrors of war, preserve a certain fundamental regard for humanity. Ruthlessness, in the long run, does not pay.

Aircraft Dispersal

A.O.C/9/91A

17.6.41

Brigadier Salisbury-Jones, in a report on suggested mistakes in the Greek and Cretan campaigns, criticised the lack of dispersal of aircraft on airfields in both campaigns. He wrote "The only case of which I can speak from personal knowledge is that of Malome aerodrome. I visited this aerodrome shortly after my arrival in Crete and I was horrified to see the amount of aircraft on the aerodrome without any protection at all. To the best of my knowledge there had been an effort to conceal a few in the neighbouring olive groves and there were some in pens, a very few". Air Chief Marshal Longmore commented - "These were aircraft being evacuated from Greece - including Greeks and Yugoslavs probably". "So far as I remember", wrote Brigadier Salisbury-Jones, "we went to Crete in November or December last and no steps that I know of were taken to build hangars for aircraft (dispersion to any degree was impossible in Crete). Such steps would have been palliative, but better than none". Air Chief Marshal Longmore commented - "There was room for area dispersal in Crete if we had been content with strips instead of trying to make Croydons". It must also be added that dispersal is no remedy where ground defence is wholly inadequate. If the attacking aircraft can only dash in for a second, drop its bombs, and then fly off again, it is indeed of the greatest value that the aircraft on the ground against which the attack is to be delivered should be properly dispersed, but if the ground defence is inadequate then the attacker can deliver his attack at leisure and can hit the aircraft on the ground whether it be dispersed or not.

Ibid

Ibid

Ibid

/Brigadier

Brigadier Ingles' Views

Brigadier Ingles of the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces, who had been in Crete during the battle, had an interesting discussion on the reasons for the failure there with members of the Air Staff on June 17th 1941. Apart from repeating the obvious points about our general military and air shortage and geographical difficulties he emphasised the accuracy of the German dive-bombing and of their concentrated blitz which he ascribed to the precise and limited nature of the targets selected and the poorness of our field guns. This was in some contradiction to the testimony collected by Air Marshal Tedder from the Greek campaign. In contrast, the Germans' general and indiscriminate ground- strafing caused few casualties, said Brigadier Ingles, but it prevented movement - which was its purpose. The Brigadier criticised the placing of anti-aircraft guns and defending troops round the regular perimeter of the airfield at Maleme. More use, he thought, should have been made of camouflage and dispersal, but nothing, in his opinion, could have been effective if we were not able to give the airfield proper fighter cover. With such cover the attack could not have taken place, let alone succeeded. He did not think very highly either of German parachutists, gliders, or airborne troops. They were far from invincible or invulnerable, particularly if attacked immediately on landing. But if the enemy was not challenged in the air at all then, he argued, his inevitable success was assured so long as he was willing to pay the price and to go on bringing in troops until numbers gave him the victory.

Was Defeat Inevitable?

It is, of course, the most interesting question raised by the whole campaign to decide whether this opinion of Brigadier Ingles, and many others, of the inevitability of the German victory was correct. To the question 'Whether under any circumstances the defence of Crete was possible' one can hardly give a satisfactory answer. It largely depends on what is meant by 'under any

circumstances' and to what extent one is permitted to assume that lessons which were, in fact, only learnt through experience of Crete might have been learnt otherwise. It is obvious that the new power in the air required a technique of ground defence against it, which has now, to a large extent, been acquired but which had not been acquired in those earlier days. There is little dispute to-day that it was a psychological mistake to insist so continuously on the hiding of the soldier in his trench, that much more might have been done by way of attacking the low-flying enemy aircraft with small arms. It is easy to be wise after the event. But there are at least certain points which can be fairly made. It is sometimes argued that because the enemy only attacked three points - Maleme - Canea - Suda, Heraklion and Retimo - and only captured the airfield at one of them, therefore if we had only had more airfields or if we had only been able to defend Maleme with fresh troops as at Heraklion and Retimo instead of tired evacuees from Greece, we could have held Maleme and held Crete. The arguments are not necessarily conclusive. To the enemy enough was enough. It does not follow that they could not have done more had more been necessary. If they did not attack Retimo and Heraklion was that because they could not or because they preferred to concentrate their effort on the weakest link? Group Captain Beamish thought the latter. "It is clear also", he wrote, "that if Retimo had been used extensively this landing ground would have suffered an equivalent scale of air attack and there was no A.A. defence available for it". "The scale of the enemy effort" argued Group Captain Beamish, "was sufficient to undertake very frequent devastating and consistent attacks on a number of aerodromes on the island, not alone the existing two and one landing ground, over the period of the operations". The enemy had power and to spare. "Waste of bomber effort, which could have been diverted more profitably elsewhere, was obvious in the continued bombing of Canea and Heraklion towns and the attacks on previously damaged and useless shipping in the Suda Bay /anchorage.

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anchorage. Regarding fighter effort, ME.110s were over objectives in Crete for a considerable period, literally waiting for some movement on the ground before opening up cannon and machine-gun fire, and a proportion of this effort could well have been employed against aerodromes. Large numbers of fighters were also available to escort bombers if opposition was feared and also to attack individual aircraft on the ground, or individual gun defences around aerodromes". "This", argued Group Captain Beamish, "was in itself a justification of the policy of trying to keep even a few fighters going for as long as possible". But it was equally an argument that the position was extremely difficult when our fighters were withdrawn. It was not, of course, intended to withdraw them permanently. It was intended to bring them back again, and, had Maleme been held for a few days, they might have been brought back, but with things as they were it is difficult to see how they could have been brought back in such numbers as to prevent them from being driven out again.

"With the enemy scale of attack", wrote Group Captain Beamish, "large numbers of defensive fighters would have been necessary to counter it, and the task was far beyond the capabilities of the few fighter aircraft remaining and the A.A. defences existing in Crete. No large-scale reinforcements were available". On the question whether Crete could have been held without air defence, whatever doubts may be raised by the experience of later campaigns, Group Captain Beamish was, at any rate at the time, quite definite that it could not. "Additional aerodromes and fighter squadrons", he wrote, "would have delayed the date by which the enemy had achieved this result, but a very heavy effort indeed would have been necessary to counter it. Further A.A. guns would have had little effect on the situation".

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/Reason

Reason for Lack of Air Bases

If Air Marshal Tedder's contention be admitted - and it can hardly be seriously denied - that what were needed were more air bases then it obviously only remains to ask the question 'Would it have been possible in the months before the German attack to have prepared more airfields'? In that roadless island it would clearly have been to little purpose to have prepared more airfields unless we had also built more roads. The answer of fact is clearly that we did not build more airfields because during the months of the Greek campaign the authorities did not foresee the fate that awaited Crete. Perhaps, also, the Inter-Services Committee are justified to some extent in their complaint of slackness. But, even had all been foreseen, and had there not been the obstacle of winter-weather would it have been wise to have directed labour and materials from other tasks - for only thus could they have been obtained - for the building of more Cretan airfields, more particularly if on the day of battle troops would not be available to defend them? Is the true question, perhaps, not 'Could Crete have been held?' but 'Was it more important to hold Crete or to hold Egypt'? All turns on whether the decision of the Special Conference on the Movements of Forces to Greece on November 5, 1940, that Crete should not be given a first priority was, in view of the total situation, justified or not.

If then, it be admitted that, granted the lack of air bases, the withdrawal of our fighters before the German attack was inevitable, then the next question that forces itself on us is - 'Without fighter support was there any prospect of holding Maleme'? We were, of course, short of anti-aircraft guns and, though it may not be easy to see how more anti-aircraft guns could have been spared for Crete at that date, yet

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it is of course possible to maintain the theoretical contention that had there been better ground defences our troops could have held. But this was very definitely not the opinion of Group Captain Beamish'. (25)

Again, although in practice we had, as has been shown, no alternative but to oppose to the Germans troops whose morale had already been shaken in the evacuation of Greece, it is possible to advance the theoretical contention that fresher troops would have held better. It can be pointed out that Retimo and Heraklion, where the troops were fresh, held, while Maleme failed. But, again, these arguments only have great force if the enemy was stretched to his utmost and if a little more would have sufficed to make him give up. It is true that the Chiefs of Staff at home thought that this was so, but was their evidence satisfactory or were they still under the influence of wrong Intelligence reports which caused them to underestimate the enemy's strength during the attack as they had underestimated it before the attack? Group Captain Beamish again did not believe that the enemy was stretched to his uttermost limit.

Maleme, The Key

On the answer to the further question again, - 'If Maleme fell and could not be re-taken, was there any chance of holding Crete?' - there is not much dispute. Air Marshal Tedder gave it. "Yesterday I saw one of our young fellows who had just come out from Maleme", he wrote to V.C.A.S. on May 29th. "The turning point there was when it was found impossible to hang on

A.O.C.-in-C.

Part I 29A

/to

(25) For what it may be worth, Max Schmeling, the boxer, who fought in the campaign as a German parachutist, held the opposite opinion. "Schmeling said the fighting was hard, but, if the enemy had had any heavy arms, we could not have beaten them;" the Berlin Radio reported (Airborne Invasion. John Hetherington. Allen and Unwin. p.78.)

to the aerodrome. Up to that point the feeling was quite confident that the parachutists were a busted flush and were being cleaned up quite satisfactorily. The concentrated air blitz, level bombers, dive bombers and ME.110s, appears to have literally stopped all our A.A. fire and to have pushed back our troops off the positions commanding the aerodrome, and they do not seem to have been able to recover them during the night when the Hun did nothing in the air. I think there is no doubt that it was at least 70% moral and barely 30% physical. Once the troop-carriers began to come in one continuous stream and land, the tide seems to have turned. There is no doubt the Hun lost scores of 52s besides many other items but not enough to turn the scale. Our fellows put up some magnificent shows but the losses were very heavy and in relation to the scale of Hun effort I am afraid ours was but puny; probably its main value was a moral support to the troops on the ground. The Hurricanes with the reinforcing tanks (illegally carrying all eight guns and full ammunition, and fighting) got a big bag of 52s - at a price - but again I am afraid on far too small a scale to be really effective."

The Possibilities of Sea-Borne Invasion

Finally, if we can conclude that if Maleme could have been held then the airborne invasion of Crete would have failed, that is, of course, of great interest as a lesson on the limitations of airborne troops, but it would be a great mistake to argue from that, therefore, Crete could necessarily have been held. We must not forget, in debating that larger question, that the Navy had already decided that its losses were such that it could no longer operate north of Crete and that, therefore, even had airborne landings not succeeded, there seems no reason to think that the Germans could not have captured the island by seaborne landings

/instead.

SECRET.

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instead. It would, of course, be quite beyond the purpose of this narrative to discuss whether there were sufficient submarines available to have effectively hampered such seaborne landings, but it does not seem to have been even seriously suggested by the Admiralty that there should be any such possibility.

APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF AIR ATTACKS ON H.M. SHIPS

Date	Number of Attacks	Damage to Ships (H.L.) High level attack (L.L.) Low level attack (D.B.) Dive bombing attack	Aircraft Casualties		Damaged
			Shot Down		
			Certain	Probable	
19th May	5	NIL	None observed		
20th May	1	NIL	None observed		
21st May	Records incomplete at least 26 recorded.	Juno sunk. (H.L or L.L.) Ajax damaged by near miss.	4	2	1
22nd May	Records incomplete at least 67 (recorded) many more took place.	Greyhound, Gloucester, Fiji sunk (D.B.). Naiad, Carlisle, Warspite, Kingston (D.B.) Valiant (H.L.) damaged	2	6	3
23rd May	At least 32.	Kelly, Kashmir sunk (D.B.) Ilex, Havock (D.B.) damaged.	3	1	5
24th May	3	NIL	None observed		
25th May	6	NIL	None observed		
26th May	About 40	Formidable, Nubian (D.B.) hit and damaged. Glenroy damaged (D.B.)	3	-	1
27th May	About 40	Barham (D.B.) hit and damaged	4*	1*	3*
28th May	13	Ajax and Imperial damaged. Imperial left to sink	2	1	3
29th May	20 on the two cruisers: many more on screen	Hereward (D.B.) hit and lost. Orion, Dido, Decoy damaged (D.B.) Nizam slightly damaged (D.B.)	1	-	-
30th May	4	Perth (H.L.) Kelvin (D.B.) damaged.	-	-	1
31st May	4	Napier, Nizam (D.B.) damaged	1	-	4
1st June	1	Calcutta (D.B.) sunk	-	-	-
			20+	11+	21+

* Hit by fighters of F.A.A.

+ In addition, 2 certainly, 2 probably shot down by Suda Bay M.T.B. Flotilla.

APPENDIX B

CRETE AIR OPERATIONS COVERING H.M. SHIPS AND CONVOYS (26.5.41. - 1.6.41.)

As we had withdrawn our fighters from Crete, fighter-protection in Cretan waters could only be flown from aircraft-carriers. The only aircraft carrier available, H.M.S. Formidable was under repair at the time of invasion and only became operational on May 25th. Hence from May 20th to May 25th no fighter cover was provided for H.M. Ships.

Date	Aircraft Type	Squadron	No. of Sorties	Duty and Remarks	Confirmed Own and Enemy Losses		
					OWN	ENEMY Destroyed	Probable
26th May	Hurricanes Blenheims	274 45	5) 1)	Defensive patrols over H.M.S. "Formidable"			
27th May	Hurricanes Blenheim F.	73 45	3) 1)	Defensive patrol over H.M.S. "Formidable" 1 J.U.88 damaged. Blenheims patrolling over H.M. Ships damaged 1 JU.88 and probably 2 others.			
28th May	Hurricanes Blenhcims Marylands	274 45 24	2 Unknown Unknown	Aircraft of these squadrons provided defensive patrols over H.M Ships between Alexandria and Crete. The number of Blenheim and Maryland sorties made are not available.			
29th May	Blenheim F. Marylands	45 24	3) Unknown)	Continuous fighter patrol over H.M. Ships in 3 forces between Crete and Alexandria and vice versa. Several engagements and losses inflicted on enemy. Total number of Beaufighter and Maryland sorties unknown.	1 Hurricane	2 JU.88	
	Hurricanes Marylands	274 39	18 1)				
	Beaufighters	272	Unknown)				
30th May	hurricanes Hurricanes Beaufighters	73 274 272	3) Unknown) Unknown)	Patrol over H.M. Ships and convoys. Aircraft engaged and drove off 2 JU.87's and 88's damaging 2 of the latter and inflicting other casualties. Total sorties unknown.		2 HE.111	2 JU.88 1 ME.110
					/31st May		

Date	Aircraft Type	Squadron	Nos. of Sorties	Duty and Remarks	Confirmed Own and Enemy Losses		
					OWN	ENEMY	
						Destroyed	Probable
31st May	Hurricanes	1	5	Continuous protective patrol maintained over H.M. Ships and M/V's. engaged in evacuation of personnel. Enemy successfully engaged and casualties inflicted. 1 formation of 6 aircraft also driven off and forced to jettison bombs.		3 JU.88 1 Cautz. 1007	1 JU.88
	Marylands	24	6				
	Blenheims	S.A.A.F. 45 & 55	6				
	Beaufighters	272	8				
	Hurricanes	274 & 73	39				
1st June	Hurricanes	73	5	Continuous protective patrols over H.M. Ships and convoys en route from Crete to Egypt. Several engagements but none decisive, although several aircraft driven off and forced to jettison bombs. Total Beaufighter, Blenheim and Maryland sorties unknown, but 6 Beaufighters, 7 Marylands and 1 Blenheim took part in protection of H.M. Ships "Coventry", "Calcutta", "Vendetta", "Falk" and A.A. Ships			
	Hurricanes	274	20				
	Hurricanes	S.A.A.F. 1	10				
	Blenheims	45	Unknown				
	Beaufighters	272	Unknown				
	Marylands	24	Unknown				

APPENDIX C

TABLE OF R.A.F. BOMBING OPERATIONS

I
Aerodromes and landing grounds in Greece

Objective	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks
<u>KATTARINI</u> Landing Ground	13 May	2 Wellingtons	148	High level attack. 7000' 1864 lbs. bombs. One stick dropped along north edge of landing-ground. Bursts observed and 4 minutes later large white explosions. Good visibility. Much light moderate accurate A.A.
<u>HIPPAIN</u> Landing Ground	Night 14/15 May	1 Wellington	38	High level bombing attack 9000'. 2,500 lbs. bombs. 6 enemy aircraft on fire and others catching fire. 8 fires including 1 very large one which was spreading and 3 medium fires. Excellent and clear over target. Very little flak.
<u>MENIDI</u> Landing Ground	Night 14/15 May	2 Wellingtons	148	High level attacks. Bombs started fires along N.W. boundary of aerodrome which was still burning 25 minutes later. Clear weather over target. Slight flak from hills.
<u>MENIDI</u> Landing Ground and hangars	Night 14/15 May	3 Wellingtons	148	High level bombing attacks. 2 aircraft dropped 3,720 lbs. bombs. 1 aircraft jettisoned his bombs. Direct hits on buildings and hangars. 2 explosions caused from fires at northern hangars. Remainder results unobserved.

/Aerodrome

Objective	DATE	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks
Aerodrome	Night 16/17	3 Wellingtons	148	First aircraft started large fires N.W. corner of aerodrome. Second aircraft 4 large explosions and fires between N. end line of buildings and most N. point of aerodrome. 3rd aircraft one large fire vicinity N. of line of buildings to W. of aerodrome. 4th aircraft one or more of these buildings set alight towards S. end of line. Weather good.
<u>HASSANI</u> Landing Ground and hangars.	Night 14/15 May	2 Wellingtons	37	High level bombing attacks. Aircraft dropped 4,500 lbs. bombs and brought back one S.B.C. 4 lb. incendiary which had hung up. Bursts seen on boundary of L.G. spread 5 large fires which were already burning from previous raid on N. boundary of aerodrome, and made the fires burn more fiercely. Weather good. Fairly heavy and light A.A. accurate.
Aerodrome	Night 18/19 May	4 Wellingtons	70	10,000 lbs. bombs dropped level bombing attacks from 8,000 to 2,000 feet. Small red fires started suggesting burning oil. 3 heavy explosions which lit up pilot's cockpit at 8,000 feet. No fires developed from these explosions. Hazy over Athens. A.A. fire in and around Athens very accurate. 2 further aircraft failed to locate the target.

/MOLAOT

Objective	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks
<u>MOLAOI</u> Aerodrome	16 May	5 Wellingtons	38	High level attacks 8,000 to 10,000' low level attacks 3,000' 4,500 lbs. H.E. 2,250 lbs. incendiary bombs. Results unobserved. Weather good. No opposition.
Aerodrome	Night 16/17 May	5 Wellingtons	38	High level attacks 5,000 to 9,000'. Dive-bombing attacks 9,000' to 6,000'. 8,270 lbs. H.E. 2,520 lbs. incendiary bombs. 4 aircraft dispersed on ground. 2 direct hits on runway and 3 hangars; and incendiaries among dispersed aircraft on S.W. corner of aerodrome. Petrol or bomb dump hit. Large fire seen 80 miles away.
<u>ARGOS</u> Landing ground	Night 16/17 May	4 Wellingtons	37	4 tons of bombs level attacks 8,000' to 10,000'. 3 small fires started on N.E. boundary of aerodrome and a 4th on the E. boundary.
<u>MEGARA</u> Landing ground	Night 18/19 May	1 Wellington	148	2,000 lbs. bombs. High level attack. Started 2 fires on target. Remainder results unstated. Weather 8/10 cloud. No A.A. opposition.
<u>ELEUSIS</u> Landing ground	Night 18/19 May	5 Wellingtons	38	High level attack 5,000' to 10,000' 5,250 lbs. H.E. 2,250 lbs. incendiary bombs. Buildings hit. Fires observed on aerodrome.

/ELEUSIS

Objective	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks
<u>ELEUSIS</u> Aerodrome	Night 20/21 May	0040 hrs. G.M.T. 1 Wellington	37	Level attack 9,600'. 1,230 lbs. H.E. 240 lbs incendiary bombs. Bombs fell near fire already burning. No results observed. Weather good very dark. Very intense heavy A.A. from 5 batteries. No searchlights.
Aerodrome	Night 20/21 May	0015-0100 hrs. G.M.T. 1 Wellington	70	Stick bombing, 5,500'. Bursts observed among dispersed aircraft. Weather good, but no moon made operations difficult. Heavy battery 3 gun S. of aerodrome on coast.
<u>MENIDI</u> Aerodrome	Night 20/21 May	2 Wellingtons	38	Level attacks 8/9,000'. 2,500 lbs. H.E. 950 lbs. incendiary bombs. Impossible to dis- tinguish aerodrome. Possible position assumed from search- lights. 1 stick in vicinity of search- lights. Exact result unobserved. High and low cloud. Very dark.
<u>MOLAOI</u>	Night 20/21 May	1 Wellington	38	1,250 lbs. H.E. 480 lbs. incendiary bombs. Bombs dropped on or near aerodrome. Some small explosions. High and low cloud, very dark. No opposition.
TOPOLIA (N. of Athens) Aerodrome	Night 20/21 May	1 Wellington	148	Attack from between 6/9000'. 1,600 lbs. bombs on Topolia. 2 fires started. Other bombs seen exploding but no other results observed. Weather and visibility good. 120 m.m. gun firing at our flares N.W. of target.

APPENDIX C

TABLE OF R.A.F. BOMBING OPERATIONS

II

Aerodromes and Landing Grounds in the Dodecanese

Objective	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks
<u>MARITZA</u> Aerodrome	Night 12/13 May	3 Wellingtons	37	Level attacks 6,000' to 9,000'. 3,500 lbs. H.E. bombs, 960 lbs. incendiary bombs. Bombs straddled runways and fell near buildings between hangars and runway. Further bombs fell S. of main hangars. Incendiaries started small fires. A.A. inaccurate. Weather good, no cloud but slight haze.
N.B. 1 Wellington dropped 1 x 250 lb. and 480 lbs. incendiary bombs on Calato aerodrome before reaching Maritza. Results unobserved.				
Aerodrome	Night 16/17 May	2 Wellingtons	?	4 enemy aircraft damaged - also repair shops and offices. 2 M.T. damaged and approximately 25 drums of petrol, naphtha and oil destroyed.
<u>CALATOS</u> Landing ground	18 May	1 Wellington	37	2,230 lbs. H.E. bombs. Dive-bombing 7/5,000' feet. 240 lbs. incendiary bombs fell on S.E. corner L.G. 7 small fires lasting 20 minutes. Weather good. Heavy more intense than light A.A.
<u>SCARPANTO</u> Aerodrome	Night 25/26 May	2 Wellingtons	257 Wing.	4,000 lbs. bombs. Both aircraft placed bombs on aerodrome. Bursts observed. No results observed. No aircraft seen. 3 heavy A.A. guns inaccurate.
Aerodrome	Night 27/28 May	4 Wellingtons	257 Wing.	Bombing attack started one small fire light and heavy A.A. fire. Hazy.

/Aerodrome

OBJECTIVE	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks
Aerodrome	Night 28/29 May	2 Wellingtons 6 Wellingtons	70 148	6 sticks across Efialti aerodrome, causing one red fire which exploded and turned white, and one big explosion which threw flames to 600 feet. Weather good. A.A. heavy, accurate.
Aerodrome	Night 29/30 May	1 Wellington 2 Wellingtons 3 Wellingtons 1 Wellington crashed on target.	148 70 37	Bombing attack on Efialti aerodrome. Two fires started.
<u>RHODES</u> Aerodrome	Night 29/30 May	2 Wellingtons	70	Bombing attack on Tattavia aerodrome. Results unobserved.

APPENDIX C

TABLE OF R.A.F. BOMBING OPERATIONS

III

Aerodromes, Landing Grounds and Enemy Positions in Crete

Objective	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Enemy	Own
<u>MALEME</u> Aircraft on aerodrome	23 May	5 Marylands	24 Sqdn. .A.F.	Bombs fell among aircraft. Results unobserved. A.A. S.A. fire. Cloudy.		
150 Ju.52's on L.G.	23 May	? Blenheims	45	High level attack 6,000'. Bombs fell among aircraft, but full results unobserved. Machine gun attack also made. Weather hazy, cloudy. S.A. fire only from Maleme.	10 destroyed	1 missing
Enemy positions	23 May	12 Blenheims	?	Results unobserved		
Aerodrome and beaches	Night 23/24 May	023 hours G.M.T. 4 Wellingtons	38	<u>Aircraft 1.</u> Bombs fell on beach between Spillanos river and Theodoro island. No results. <u>Aircraft 2.</u> Bombed aerodrome. One large aircraft fired, blaze spread. Visible at 40 miles on return journey. <u>Aircraft 3.</u> Failed to locate target. <u>Aircraft 4.</u> 1 bomb on coast. Remainder on aerodrome. Results unobserved. Weather 4/10 cloud. A.A. 1 burst only.	1 fired	
Beaches and aerodrome	Night 23/24 May	2338 and 0005 hours G.M.T. 5 Wellingtons	37	Level attacks 10,000'. 3,980 lbs. H.E. 240 lbs. incendiary bombs. Bombs fell along beach between Pirogop, Silanero and point south of Theodoro island. 1 small and 4 large fires started. Clear until midnight, then rain and sleet. No opposition.		3 overdue 12 personnel

/Landing Ground

Objective	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Enemy	Own
Landing Ground	25 May	8 Blenheims	45	High level attacks 14,000-16,000 feet. Bombs among aircraft. 3 fires started. Weather fine and windy. No opposition.	12	
Aerodrome	25 May	4 Marylands	24 Sqn. S.A.A.F.	Level attack 4,000'. Low cloud.	3 damaged	1 missing
Bomber aircraft on Landing Ground	25 May	3 Blenheims	55		5 destroyed 5 in flames	1 crashed on landing
Aircraft Landing Ground	25 May	6 Blenheims	14	Level attack 1,500'. 5,960 lbs. bombs. All bombs in target area. Photo's confirm destruction. Weather fine. Small and medium calibre, accurate, not very intense.	12	1 slightly damaged by high explosive and splinters.
<u>MALEME</u> Landing Ground	25 May	1236 hours G.M.T. 3 Blenheims	55	Level attack from 7,000'. Bombs fell among aircraft and across landing ground. Weather fair. A.A. nil.		3 missing
Aircraft on aerodrome and beach.	25 May	3 Blenheims	41	Results unknown		
Aerodrome	Night 25/26 May	4 Wellingtons	257 Wing	Level attacks from 7/10,000'. 1 aircraft bombed. Position of aerodrome was indicated by road junction. Aerodrome not visible. Results unobserved. 2 aircraft bombed beach N. of aerodrome. Burst observed but no results seen. 1 aircraft bombed fire reported by other crews as in vicinity Caneatown. Other 4 aircraft failed to find target. Weather 3/10 to 7/10 cloud. No opposition.		

/Aerodrome

Objective	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Enemy	Own
Aerodrome	26 May	3 Blenheims	45	Results unobserved		3 missing
Aircraft on Landing Ground	26 May	1506 hours G.M.T. 4 Blenheims	55	Level attack 10,000'. Bomb load not stated. 10 fires started and 11 explosions observed, including 4 large ones. All bombs fell in target area. Weather fair. Light A.A. fire from Suda Bay.		
Aircraft on aerodrome	26 May	4 Marylands	24 Sqdn. S.A.A.F.	Full results unobserved. Several aircraft on fire.	3 damaged	
Landing Ground	Night 26/27 May	C230 hours G.M.T. 2 Blenheims	55	No observed results. Spikes dropped. Weather fair A.A. very heavy and accurate.		
Aerodrome	Night 26/27 May	6 Wellingtons 1 Wellington	148 70	10,500 lbs. bombs. Level bombing attack from 4,500'. Bombs dropped on aerodrome causing small explosions which changed into fires. One crew reported at least 40 aircraft dispersed at mouth of river Tavroniitis. over which a pontoon bridge was seen 400 yards inland from sea. Weather gusty. Visibility good.	5 probably destroyed	1 pilot hurt by reported back-firing.
100 aircraft on beach	Night 27/28 May	4 Wellingtons	257 Wing	Bombs burst among aircraft many destroyed. 7 fires, 4 explosions.		
100 aircraft on Landing Ground	Night 27/28 May	3 Blenheims	14	Bombing attack. Many enemy aircraft destroyed. 1 aircraft returned with engine trouble.		2 missing

/Landing Ground

Objective	Date	Aircraft Employed	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Enemy	Own
Landing Ground	28 May	1505 hours G.M.T. 2 Blenheims	55	Level attack 9,000'. Bombs fell on dispersed aircraft along length of E. to W. runway, starting 4 fires. Weather fair.		
Aerodrome and Beaches	Night 29/30 May	2 Wellingtons	37	Bombing attack. Results unobserved.		
Aerodrome	Night 30/31 May	2245-0001 hours. 4 Wellingtons	38	6,750 lbs. H.E. 800 lbs. incendiary bombs. Bombs fell mainly in district south of aerodrome without results except for 2 fires with explosions at Vlakeronitissa. 1 stick in aerodrome set fire to 3 aircraft and started another fire. Weather clear over target. No opposition.	3 fired	
Landing Ground	Night 31 May/ 1 June	5 Wellingtons	37	High level bombing, 1,000' to 10,000'. 4 fires at Maleme. Weather clear and cloudless. Opposition - 1 ineffective M.G.	4 destroyed, certainly probably 5	
<u>HERAKLION</u> Aerodrome	Night 30/31 May	6 Wellingtons 4 Wellingtons	148 70	8,250 lbs. bombs. High and low level ground strafing also. First stick of bombs straddled end of runway. 12 small yellow fires. 6 large white explosions occurred in area where bombs fell. No further details. Attacks from 8,000 to 2,500'. 600 lbs. bombs on target area. Thick ground haze obscured results of bombing. One good fire started. Breda type tracer accurate.	6 Ju.52's damaged.	
<u>CRETE</u> Enemy positions	Night 24/25 May	4 Wellingtons	?	Full details not received.		

/summary

SUMMARY

Aerodromes and Landing Grounds in Greece

	No. of Raids	No. of Sorties	
		Heavy	Medium
Kattarinie	1	2	-
Hippain	1	1	-
Menidi	4	11	-
Hassain	2	6	-
Molaoi	3	9	-
Argos	1	4	-
Eleusis	3	7	-
Megara	1	1	-
Topolia	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	-
	17	42	

Aerodromes and Landing Grounds in Dodecanese

Maritza	2	5	-
Calatos	1	1	-
Scarpanto	4	20	-
Rhodes	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	-
	8	28	

Aerodromes, Landing Grounds and Enemy Positions
in Crete

Maleme	23	35	62+
Heraklion	<u>3</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>-</u>
	26	49	62+
Sum Total	51	119	62+

APPENDIX D

Fighter engagements and Ground attacks in Crete and Greece

Date	Place	Force	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Own	Enemy
5 May	HERAKLION	1 Gladiator	112	1 S.79 intercepted whilst on reconnaissance. Combat indecisive.	-	-
13 May	HERAKLION	1 Gladiator	112	4 Ju.88's and 1 Me.110 intercepted, and formation broken up as enemy were about to attack a convoy. Combat indecisive.	-	-
14 May	HERAKLION	? Gladiators	?	20 Me.'s machine gunning aerodrome were intercepted by Gladiators.		3 shot down 1 other seriously damaged.
16 May	HERAKLION	2 Hurricanes 3 Gladiators	?	30 Me.110's intercepted while ground strafing aerodrome.	1 Hurricane shot down. Pilot safe.	-
5 May	SUDA BAY	? Hurricanes	?	1 enemy aircraft intercepted on reconnaissance. Combat indecisive.	-	-
11 May	SUDA BAY	? Hurricanes	?	1 enemy aircraft intercepted. Combat indecisive.	-	-
5 May	CRETE	Hurricanes	33	30 Me.109's attacking Maleme were intercepted.	1 shot down. Pilot killed.	2 destroyed 1 more probably
16 May	CRETE	1 Hurricane	?	Hurricane returning from reconnaissance. Engaged and shot down 1 Ju. 52 and probably destroyed a Ju.87.		1 certainly destroyed and prob- ably an- other.

/14 May

Date	Place	Force	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Own	Enemy
14 May	MALEME	3 Hurricanes 2 F.A.A. GLADIATORS	?	20-40 Me.109's and Me.110's intercepted, in attack on aerodrome.	2 Hurricanes, 1 pilot safe. 1 Gladiator shot down damaged, and 1 force landed.	1 Me.109 and 1 Me.110 des- troyed. 1 Me.109 damaged
16 May	MALEME	? Hurricanes	80	Hurricanes undertaking stand-by intercepted enemy aircraft.	2 shot down. Pilots killed.	3 Me.109's and 1 Ju.87 shot down. 1 Me.109 probably down 2 destroyed by A.A.
18 May	MALEME	1 Hurricane	?	9 Me.109's machine-gunning Maleme aerodrome were intercepted. Hurricane subsequently attacked by several other Me.109's and believed missing, shot down.	1 probably	1 probably
23 May	MALEME	6 Hurricanes	73	20 Ju.88's and Me.110's intercepted. Machine-gunned aircraft landing troops.	1 missing 1 damaged	-
23 May	MALEME	2 Beaufighters	?	Troop-carrying Ju.523 machine-gunned at Maleme landing ground. 4 destroyed whilst disembarking troops.	-	4
25 May	MALEME	3 Hurricanes	274	Straffing aircraft on aerodrome. Poor visibility. Results unobserved. 1 Ju.88 shot down over Suda Bay.	-	1

25 May

Date	Place	Force	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Own	Enemy
25 May	MALEME	1 (F) Blenheim 2 Hurricanes	? 274	Poor Vicibility, and aircraft unable to locate aircraft at Maleme, which was target for ground strafing.	1 missing	
26 May	MALEME	8 Hurricanes	274	Aerodrome ground-strafing and offensive patrol.	1 missing	1 Me.109 and 5 Ju.52's shot down + others. 3 damaged.
27 May	MALEME	1 (F) Blenheim 45 Squadron		Intercepted and destroyed 1 Ju.88. 2 others hit the sea.		1 certain. 1 possible.
27 May	MALEME	2 Hurricanes	274	Interception of aircraft landing at Maleme.	1 missing	
21 May	AEGEAN SEA	1 Maryland	39	On reconnaissance engaged 1 Ju.52 shooting it down in sea.	-	1 shot down.
24 May	HERAKLION	5 Hurricanes	73	Heraklion enemy positions machine-gunned and offensive patrol over Canea.	2 missing	-
17 May	Greece	8 Beaufighters	?	Low flying Machine-Gun attacks at dawn on aerodromes at Hassani, Argos and Molaoi. 2 fighters machine-gunned 20 Ju.52's, 20 Me.109's, and 4 Hs.126 at Hassani, 3 others attacked Me.109's, Me.110's and Ju.52's on S. and E. sides of Argos aerodrome, where 2 fires were started among aircraft and M.T. Park was also machine-gunned. 3 fighters machine-gunned groups of fighters and bombers badly dispersed in 4 corners of aerodrome at Molaoi. Owing to speed of attack, damage was unassessable, but many aircraft were hit and damaged believed to be considerable.	4 damaged 1 missing	

APPENDIX D

Fighter engagements and Ground attacks in Crete and Greece

Date	Place	Force	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Own	Enemy
5 May	HERAKLION	1 Gladiator	112	1 S.79 intercepted whilst on reconnaissance. Combat indecisive.	-	-
13 May	HERAKLION	1 Gladiator	112	4 Ju.88's and 1 Me.110 intercepted, and formation broken up as enemy were about to attack a convoy. Combat indecisive.	-	-
14 May	HERAKLION	? Gladiators	?	20 Me.'s machine gunning aerodrome were intercepted by Gladiators.		3 shot down 1 other seriously damaged.
16 May	HERAKLION	2 Hurricanes 3 Gladiators	?	30 Me.110's intercepted while ground strafing aerodrome.	1 Hurricane shot down. Pilot safe.	-
5 May	SUDA BAY	? Hurricanes	?	1 enemy aircraft intercepted on reconnaissance. Combat indecisive.	-	-
11 May	SUDA BAY	? Hurricanes	?	1 enemy aircraft intercepted. Combat indecisive.	-	-
5 May	CRETE	Hurricanes	33	30 Me.109's attacking Maleme were intercepted.	1 shot down. Pilot killed.	2 destroyed 1 more probably
16 May	CRETE	1 Hurricane	?	Hurricane returning from reconnaissance. Engaged and shot down 1 Ju. 52 and probably destroyed a Ju.87.		1 certainly destroyed and probably another.

/14 May

Date	Place	Force	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Own	Enemy
14 May	MALEME	3 Hurricanes 2 F.A.A. GLADIATORS	?	20-40 Me.109's and Me.110's intercepted, in attack on aerodrome.	2 Hurricanes, 1 pilot safe. 1 Gladiator shot down damaged, and 1 force landed.	1 Me.109 and 1 Me.110 des- troyed. 1 Me.109 damaged
16 May	MALEME	? Hurricanes	80	Hurricanes undertaking stand-by intercepted enemy aircraft.	2 shot down. Pilots killed.	3 Me.109's and 1 Ju87 shot down. 1 Me.109 probably down 2 destroyed by A.A.
18 May	MALEME	1 Hurricane	?	9 Me.109's machine-gunning Maleme aerodrome were intercepted. Hurricane subsequently attacked by several other Me.109's and believed missing, shot down.	1 probably	1 probably
23 May	MALEME	6 Hurricanes	73	20 Ju.88's and Me.110's intercepted. Machine-gunned aircraft landing troops.	1 missing 1 damaged	-
23 May	MALEME	2 Beaufighters	?	Troop-carrying Ju.523 machine-gunned at Maleme landing ground. 4 destroyed whilst disembarking troops.	-	4
25 May	MALEME	3 Hurricanes	274	Straffing aircraft on aerodrome. Poor visibility. Results unobserved. 1 Ju.88 shot down over Suda Bay.	-	1

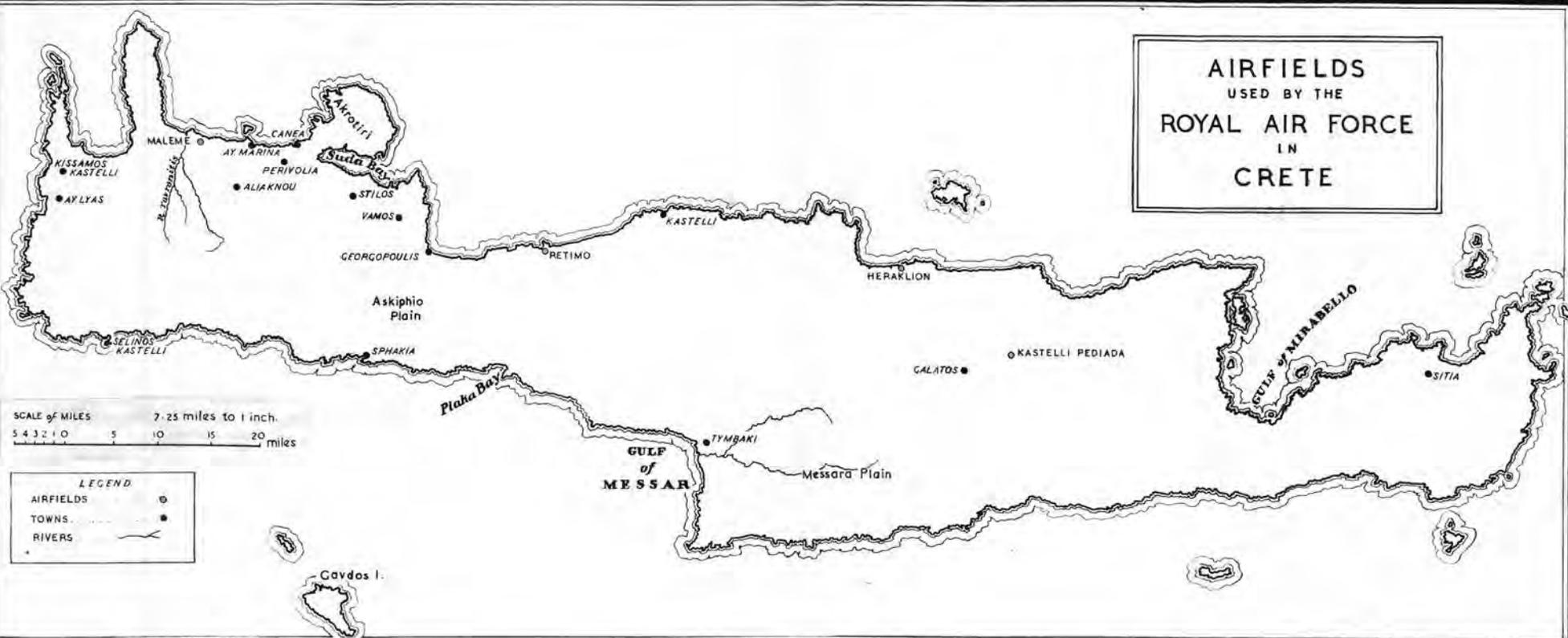
/25 May

Date	Place	Force	Squadron	Remarks	CASUALTIES	
					Own	Enemy
25 May	MALEME	1 (F) Blenheim 2 Hurricanes	? 274	Poor Vicibility, and aircraft unable to locate aircraft at Maleme, which was target for ground strafing.	1 missing	
26 May	MALEME	8 Hurricanes	274	Aerodrome ground-strafing and offensive patrol.	1 missing	1 Me.109 and 5 Ju.52's shot down + others. 3 damaged.
27 May	MALEME	1 (F) Blenheim 45 Squadron		Intercepted and destroyed 1 Ju.88. 2 others hit the sea.		1 certain. 1 possible.
27 May	MALEME	2 Hurricanes	274	Interception of aircraft landing at Maleme	1 missing	
21 May	AEGEAN SEA	1 Maryland	39	On reconnaissance engaged 1 Ju.52 shooting it down in sea.	-	1 shot down.
24 May	HERAKLION	5 Hurricanes	73	Heraklion enemy positions machine-gunned and offensive patrol over Canea.	2 missing	-
17 May	Greece	8 Beaufighters	?	Low flying Machine-Gun attacks at dawn on aerodromes at Hassani, Argos and Molaioi. 2 fighters machine-gunned 20 Ju.52's, 20 Me.109's, and 4 Hs.126 at Hassani, 3 others attacked Me.109's, Me.110's and Ju.52's on S. and E. sides of Argos aerodrome, where 2 fires were started among aircraft and M.T. Park was also machine-gunned. 3 fighters machine-gunned groups of fighters and bombers badly dispersed in 4 corners of aerodrome at Molaioi. Owing to speed of attack, damage was unassess, but many aircraft were hit and damaged believed to be considerable.	4 damaged 1 missing	

Date	No. and Type	Sqdn.	Destroyed in combat with enemy	Daily total Battle Casualties	No. and Type	Sqdn.	Destroyed on ground by enemy action	Daily Total	No. and Type	Sqdn.	Losses due to other causes	Daily Total	Daily Total all causes
26 May	3 Blenheims 3 Hurricanes	45 274	Missing, Crete Missing Crete	6					1 Blenheim	45	Crashed taking off.	1	7
27 May	2 Blenheims 2 Blenheims	14 53	Missing Crete Missing Crete	4									4

IN THE AIR				ON THE GROUND				OTHER CAUSES				TOTALS BY TYPES			
Heavy Bomber	Medium Bomber	Fighter	Total	Heavy Bomber	Medium Bomber	Fighter	Total	Heavy Bomber	Medium Bomber	Fighter	Total	Heavy Bomber	Medium Bomber	Fighter	Total
3	12	18	33	-	-	2	2	-	2	1	3	3	14	21	38

**AIRFIELDS
USED BY THE
ROYAL AIR FORCE
IN
CRETE**



SCALE OF MILES 7.25 miles to 1 inch.
5 4 3 2 1 0 5 10 15 20 miles

LEGEND
 AIRFIELDS ○●
 TOWNS ●
 RIVERS ~~~~~