Indefensible? A Reassessment of the Part Played by RAF Personnel in the Battle of Crete 1941

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Abstract: The German invasion of Crete in 1941 and subsequent loss of the airfield at Maleme led, almost immediately, to the acceptance of a narrative in London that suggested significant RAF failure. Criticism, reinforced by the New Zealand official history, bemoaned the lack of fighter aircraft cover and questioned the fighting prowess of RAF ground crew. This article examines the New Zealand commanders' errors of judgment, which resulted in inappropriate positioning of their soldiers to face the main thrust of the German attack, and argues that RAF airmen became convenient scapegoats for the failings of others. Further, Winston Churchill's motives in questioning the motivation, ability and willingness of airmen to defend airbases are analysed, as is the ensuing political maelstrom, which led to knee jerk reactions and unnecessary reorganisation of RAF ground defence training.

Introduction

On 28 April 1941, only a day after German troops occupied Athens and British troops were beginning to evacuate the Greek mainland, the Prime Minister Winston Churchill received intelligence that a German assault of Crete would take place in May 1941. He anticipated 'a fine opportunity for killing the parachute troops' and directed that the 'island must be stubbornly defended' [1]. Nine days later the topic of Greece and the Middle East would be debated in the House of Commons. It would conclude with a vote of confidence on Churchill's leadership which, if it had gone against him, would have required him to step down as Prime Minister. It is highly probable therefore that Churchill hoped a successful defence of Crete would put a stop to the apparently inexorable series of defeats suffered by the British Army when facing German opposition and would reinforce his grip on power.

At the time it was widely understood that any German airborne attack against Crete would have to be conducted without their superior tanks and heavy weapons, as their transport aircraft would be able to carry little in the way of logistics and mechanical transport[2]. Put simply, the Germans would not have access to the advantages they enjoyed in earlier campaigns and, given the history of all arms warfare between British and German forces between 1940 and 1941, the loss of these advantages should have made a British victory more likely. Moreover, the aircraft of the German Air Force (GAF) would have to fly well over a hundred miles, much of it over the sea, to make attacks on the island and this would reduce their 'time over target' and, presumably, restrict their effectiveness. The parallels between the resistance in Great Britain in 1940 and the situation in Crete, as seen from the perspective of the War Cabinet, appeared strong, the only significant difference being the relative weakness, due to a lack of available first-rate fighter aircraft, of the RAF presence on the island and its consequent inability to deny the GAF control of the air.

Nevertheless, the RAF's known weakness in the region did not seem to worry Churchill or the Cabinet. On 29 April the War Cabinet signalled General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief British Forces in the Middle East, with the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) estimate of the size of the GAF his forces on Crete were likely to face: 315 long-range bombers, 60 twin-engined fighters, 240 dive-bombers and 270 single-engined fighters. It also articulated the likely method of air attack[3]. Wavell was aghast at the assessment, which he thought likely to be incorrect and he will almost certainly have consulted Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, Air Officer Commander-in-Chief Middle East, before he challenged the provenance of the JIC's assessment, arguing that the JIC estimate probably included all of the opposing aircraft in the Balkans, Sicily and Libya. Wavell suggested his forces were more likely to face the 150 single-engined fighters and 40 twin-engined fighters in the Balkans[4]. Curiously, he chose not to mention the number of bombers, which indicates his, or perhaps Longmore's, understanding of the importance of the fight for control of the air. What was abundantly clear was that the available first-rate RAF fighters were vastly outnumbered. On 25 April the RAF on Crete had 7 Hurricanes and a mixed assortment of pilots from 33 Squadron and 80 Squadron. One of

the Hurricanes had an irreparable hole ten inches in diameter through the main spar of one wing but the pilots elected to take turns in flying it even though the potential for catastrophic collapse was very real[5].

According to the official British historian for intelligence the first signs of German preparations for an airborne operation were received in the last week of March 1941. But knowledge of the German efforts to amass JU 52 transport aircraft and the likelihood of using them for multiple glider-towing operations, by positioning them in the Balkans, was not supported by evidence to indicate the target[6]. Indeed, the intelligence preceded the German invasion of Greece, which began on 6 April. In strategic terms Churchill considered Libya to be the dominant theatre of operations. So, although Churchill had been an ardent advocate of the defence of Crete on 18 April he ruled that, in the event that it was necessary to evacuate Greece, operations in Libya would take precedence over those on Crete[7]. The date, 18 April, is significant because on that day Wavell, who earlier suspected the intelligence had the hallmarks of a typical German deception plan[8] learned that Crete was likely to be the target of airborne attack. Significantly, the War Office received intelligence on 29 April warning of a simultaneous airborne and seaborne attack on Crete, with the initial wave of parachutists, comprising 3,000 to 4,000 men, being delivered in the first sortie of a possible 3 sorties on the first day[9].

Command and Judgement

It is clear that given the importance of denying Crete to the Germans the decision makers in London wanted the island to be commanded by a man they trusted. Messages from the Chiefs of Staff on 29 April and from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Alan Brooke, on 30 April were explicit in suggesting that Major-General Bernhard Freyberg should take over from Major-General C. E. Weston[10]. Freyberg was a much-decorated officer who dined with, stayed with and was on first-name terms with Churchill. It is clear that he was Churchill's choice for the job[11]. Wavell travelled to Crete, on 30 April, to appoint Freyberg as Commander of British Forces on the island and during his visit he told Freyberg about the Ultra secret[12]. It is likely that he also related the assessment that anticipated a simultaneous air and sea attack against the island. The Official New Zealand History, however, suggests that Wavell disagreed with this assessment, thinking large-scale seaborne landings improbable[13].

The intelligence assessment, however, tallied with the assessment made by General Wilson, the former Commander of British 'W Force' in Greece, who had been evacuated to Crete on 28 April. Wilson told Freyberg that it would not be difficult for the enemy to launch a seaborne attack on Crete, because the GAF, which dominated the skies, could protect it from the Royal Navy[14]. Indeed, the GAF's aerial domination over Greece strongly influenced Wilson's thinking. During his day on Crete Wavell was often reminded of the GAF's complete air superiority in Greece, even though, at the time, this superiority had not been seen over Crete. Actually, only one large-scale raid had been launched by the GAF on the afternoon of 29 April, when some 20 Ju88s approached Suda Bay to bomb the ships in the harbour. The raid was detected by RAF radar and all 6 available Hurricane fighters were scrambled, as were some 805 Squadron

Fulmar aircraft and the single Sea Gladiator. One Ju88 was claimed shot down but German records show no losses that day[15].

Before Wavell gave Freyberg Command of Crete he praised the performance of the New Zealand division in the recent fighting and during the evacuation from Greece[16]. Freyberg certainly epitomised the brave and aggressive type of leader Churchill preferred. Yet, soon after the level of responsibility entrusted to him sank in Freyberg began to have doubts about the ability of his forces to resist the impending attack. Within 24 hours he signalled Wavell and the New Zealand Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, to claim that the forces at his disposal, particularly RAF forces, were 'totally inadequate to meet envisaged attack'[17]. Yet, his resolve began to stiffen less than 4 days later, after he was given reassurances from Wavell that the appreciation of German strength was likely to be exaggerated and that it was doubtful whether there would be time for an evacuation before the attack came[18]. His indoctrination into the Ultra secret may also have helped bolster his confidence.

Certainly, around this time, Freyberg told Group Captain George Beamish, the Senior Air Force Officer (SAFO) on Crete that he had every confidence in the ability of the land forces to hold the aerodromes[19]. He also signalled Churchill to say that he was 'not in the least anxious about airborne attack, have made my dispositions and feel can cope adequately with the troops at my disposal' and that while Royal Navy support would be essential to thwart any seaborne attack 'with a few extra fighter aircraft, it should be possible to hold Crete'[20]. By 10 May the situation in Crete appeared much improved; the defences had been reinforced by the arrival of artillery and additional equipment was on its way. Wavell expressed his 'full confidence' in Freyberg and his troops when signalling the War Office[21]. Freyberg signalled Wavell on 16 May, having just returned from a tour of the defences, saying that 'he did not wish to be overconfident, but I feel that we will give excellent account of ourselves. With the help of the Royal Navy I trust Crete will be held'[22]. The idea that the successful defence of Crete was conditional on significantly increased RAF fighter support had disappeared from the narrative. Certainly, at the time, Churchill was convinced that, in spite of the lack of air support, there was a good chance of winning the forthcoming battle[23].

So, less than two weeks before the assault was scheduled to take place, and with full knowledge of the size of the GAF threatening the island, the idea that a significantly larger force of first-rate RAF fighter aircraft was necessary to repel the invasion was not what the commander on the ground was thinking or, indeed, reporting to his command chain or his friend, the British Prime Minister. Only after the defeat did the narrative change. The Inter-Services Report on Crete, written soon after the defeat, in a period of high tension characterised by inter-Service muck slinging suggested 'that at least six fighter squadrons were needed' and that 'it is doubtful whether they would have been enough'[24]. This narrative was perpetuated in the official New Zealand history, published in 1953, written by an officer who experienced the campaign first hand. It also argued that 'one shortage above all was conspicuous to the defenders, that of aircraft'.

The Blame Game

What is clear is that after the defeat in Crete the blame game began almost immediately and the main focus of criticism was directed towards the RAF, mostly because of the lack of fighter aircraft cover. Air defence, something previously considered to be of only marginal importance to the outcome of the battle, was now deemed to be the most significant factor in the defeat and generalised perceptions about the fighting prowess of RAF personnel on the ground added to the feeling that the RAF had let everyone down. Essentially, much of the animosity had carried over from the evacuation of Greece a month earlier. While Dominion troops often measured themselves against the English, usually judging them inferior[25], the antipathy was often exemplified by a simplistic dislike of those wearing a different uniform. In one instance a party of Australians, who had made a heroic escape by rowing from Greece to Crete, brought with them a precious cargo: four sacks of mail, and mail was well-known to play a crucial role in determining morale[26]. When they discovered that three of the four sacks turned out to be for the RAF, they dumped them in the sea[27].

So, when on 3 June 1941 Wavell circulated a signal that described the defeat of Crete as attributable to a lack of air support[28], he was merely reiterating the general perception of soldiers about the utility of the RAF and, by implication, the performance of the airmen in ground fighting on the island. The consequences of these feelings, however, generated a toxic atmosphere between the two Services, which resulted in a number of fights breaking out between the large numbers of soldiers evacuated to Alexandria and RAF personnel located there[29]. Wavell was eventually forced to act to stamp out such behaviour[30] but the feeling that defeat would not have been inevitable had the RAF had played a fuller part in the battle was widespread, and it persisted[31]. The Inter Services Report on Crete was chaired by guardsman Brigadier-General A. (Guy) Salisbury-Jones, although it was composed of RAF and RN members too. The resultant report concluded that:

> The major lesson of this campaign was that to defend with a relatively small force an island as large as Crete, lying under permanent domination of enemy fighter aircraft and out of range of our own, was impossible, .. *that* ..The Royal Air Force cannot claim to have shown greater foresight or energy than the Army.. *and that* ..The Committee are of the opinion that until the eleventh hour no Service gave due weight to the preponderating factor affecting this problem, which was the overwhelming superiority of the German Air Force[32].

The distribution of these hastily produced lessons identified ensured that the earlier belief that the defence of the island *had been* tenable without substantial RAF support disappeared from the narrative and subsequent accounts of the battle began to suggest that the defence of Crete had never been considered viable without a significant amount of supporting air defence fighter aircraft. Moreover, in this context the decision to keep RAF ground crew on the island looked, at best, a flawed plan and, at worst, an idea based on wholly wishful thinking. However, the idea that in early May everyone agreed that the island's defence *was* conditional

on a significantly increased RAF fighter presence does not tally with what Freyberg was saying and reporting when the decision to keep the RAF ground crew on the island was made. The tendency to blame RAF personnel for what went wrong in the ensuing battle is, therefore, worthy of particular scrutiny.

When writing about Crete, soldier historians, including Anthony Beevor and Major James Bliss are apt to lace their interpretation of events with soldiers' derisive epithets about the RAF. For example, Beevor told his readers that the RAF was known to New Zealanders as 'Rare as Fairies' and to the Royal Navy (RN) as 'Royal Advertising Federation'[33]. Bliss, a New Zealander, and an ardent supporter of Freyberg's conduct of the battle, went as far as describing the RAF as 'absent from the battle'[34]. However, Beevor's use of selected anecdotes is particularly unbalanced and one-sided: disparaging anecdotes by airmen, though relatively hard to find, or by civilians about soldiers are almost entirely absent in his version of events. John Ferris has questioned the validity of writing history through anecdotes, describing the technique as typical of the 'Bloomsbury syndrome': where the marked preference for anecdote over analysis threatens to diminish the integrity of the conclusions made[35]. Interestingly, the Bartholomew report, written after the defeat in France and subsequent evacuation, drew the main body of its evidence from soldiers. The report insisted that 'man for man the Britain was better than the German[36]' but the tendency for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to evacuate by sea following contact with the German army had not escaped the public's attention. To many civilians the BEF stood for 'Back Every Friday'[37]. So, to provide a more balanced account of the events on Crete, this paper will concentrate on an analysis of the facts, based on the evidence, rather than through the selective use of anecdotes by the supporters of one Service against another.

In taking the first step to add some balance to the current historiography it is important to see how the considerable knowledge about enemy intentions, derived through Ultra intelligence, influenced Freyberg and his commanders to position their forces. Barely a month after the defeat Wavell wrote to the War Office, summarising the way Freyberg positioned his forces:

> Our troops were disposed in three groups. The main group held from Maleme Aerodrome, about ten miles west of Canea, to Suda Bay. The second was at Retimo and the third at Heraklion. The general composition of these groups was given in my 0/67416 of 25 May[38].

On first impression Freyberg's plan, described by Wavell above, to deploy the main body of forces on, or very near to the 3 airfields, the known targets, was logical but the actual disposition of forces was subtly different. Freyberg's Operation Instruction number 10, issued on 3 May, described four sectors and four commanders, rather than the three groups described above, though the omission of the Suda Bay Sector in Wavell's message was reflected in earlier reports. Major-General Weston, the man who had been Commander of Crete but was relieved

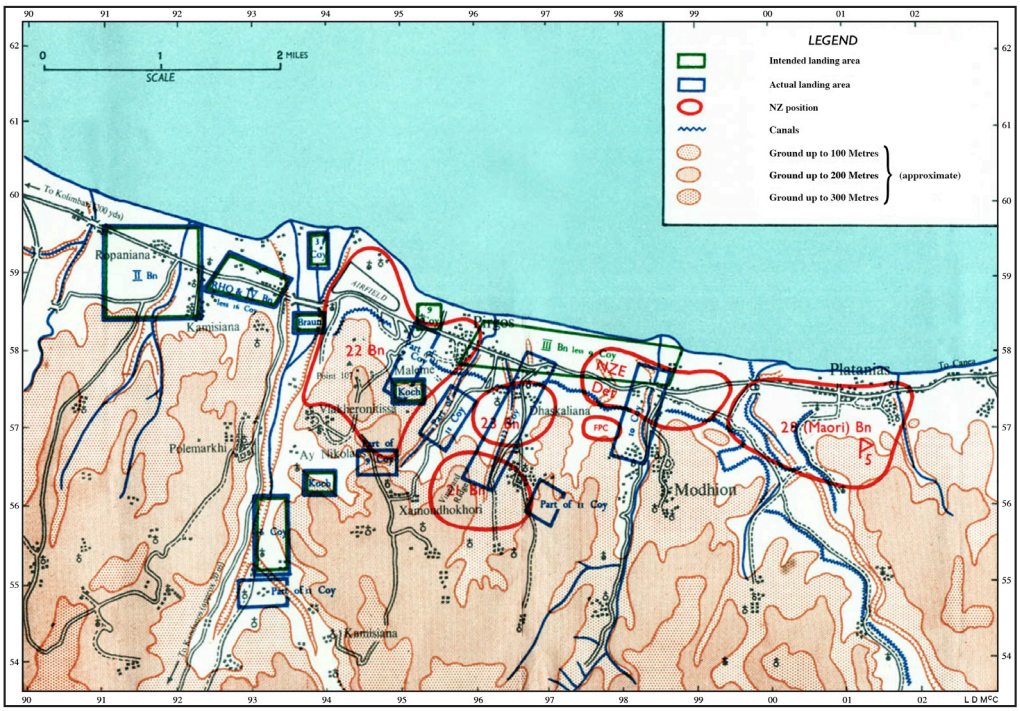
by Freyberg, was given command of the forces around the Suda Bay area. New Zealander Brigadier Edward Puttick commanded the Maleme sector, but his command did not stretch to Suda Bay, so he had the option to position his forces in denser concentrations closer to Maleme enabling them to engage, through counter attacks, any German forces trying to establish a foothold on the airfield. Indeed, on 3 May Freyberg directed Puttick to adjust the disposition of Brigadier James Hargest's 5th NZ Bde, to strengthen the airfield defences so that they could provide mutual support between battalions for counter attacks[39]. However, no significant changes were made in the subsequent 17 days, before the assault began on 20 May.

The analysis in the appreciation, which formed part of Freyberg's 3rd May Operation Instruction, drew heavily on the information provided by Ultra[40] and at the time it is likely that subordinates would have thought their commander incredibly perceptive about the targets and the likely method of assault. Freyberg had a force of 42,547, comprising 15,063 troops from the British Army; 10,258 Greek soldiers; 7,702 New Zealand soldiers; 6,540 Australian soldiers; 2,366 sailors/Royal Marines and 618 officers and airmen from the Royal Air Force[41]. The overall number and disposition of the fighting men on Crete is important because the data shows that less than 1.5% of the island's defenders were RAF servicemen, and these were distributed between the three airfields at Maleme, Reythmo and Heraklion. Indeed, only after delving deeper into the detail of the numbers does the wider picture emerge. The Maleme Sector was defended by the 7,702 New Zealand troops; its 5th Brigade was specifically charged with the defence of Maleme airfield. Most of the 6,540 Australians were responsible for defending Retimo (Reythmo) Sector and most of the 15,063 troops of the British 14th Brigade were deployed around Heraklion Sector[42]. The Suda Bay Sector included the Royal Marines Naval Base Defence Organisation and was protected by the majority of the 2,366 Royal Marines with the 1st Welch and an Australian battalion. Surprisingly, given the apparently perceptive analysis of Freyberg's appreciation, less than one tenth of the available New Zealanders were positioned for the immediate defence of the airfield it was charged to defend.

Of the 989 personnel defending the airfield at Maleme only 620 were New Zealanders, from the 22nd Battalion of the 5th NZ Brigade. The others include 229 RAF personnel, mostly ground crew from 30 and 33 Squadrons and 85 Royal Marines, together with 55 personnel from the Fleet Air Arm[43]. Significantly, given Ultra identified Maleme as one of primary targets, RAF personnel comprised some 23% of the defenders! The other 7,082 New Zealanders defending the sector had been positioned to the south and east of the airfield. All non-essential RAF personnel had been withdrawn from the island by 9 May. Those left on the island were responsible for maintaining the twenty-four remaining aircraft at Maleme and the twelve at Heraklion and were to provide the 'seed corn' for RAF expansion once the assault had been repulsed[44]. Naturally, given the air defence role of these aircraft RAF personnel remained under RAF command, yet New Zealander Lieutenant-Colonel Leslie Wilton Andrew V.C., whose primary job as Commanding Officer of 22 Battalion was the 'static defence' of the airfield[45], began to worry about the unity of action in such defence and, in particular, the positioning of the anti-aircraft guns, which he felt were unduly exposed.

The official New Zealand historian thought it highly likely that Puttick or his commanders recognised that the ground west of the Tavronitis river (a likely assembly area for the invaders), was too lightly defended, but Puttick claimed he did not have enough troops to spare for the task[46]. Given the direction Puttick had received from Freyberg on 3 May the idea that the troops he had at his disposal would be better employed elsewhere was an odd conclusion to draw; particularly given his understanding that the area he chose not to defend had been identified as one of the main points of the forthcoming enemy attack. The ad hoc and uncertain nature of the communications between units was well-understood and by positioning his troops some way apart he was increasing the likelihood that some units would miss important messages and therefore be unaware of the necessity to take part in counter attacks. His decision should also be seen in the context of the reports distributed by CREFORCE headquarters, which recommended swift counter-attacks and stressed the importance of parachute troops being rounded up on the aerodromes before the arrival of their airborne supports[47]. Clearly, in this context, given the time delays in organising counter-attacks on the airfield, more troops from the 21st and 23rd Battalions should have been deployed closer to the airfield to supplement the 620 New Zealanders from the 22nd Battalion around Maleme airfield.

On 10 May Wavell advised the War Office that he was sending Army and RAF staff officers to Crete to discuss the Defence Plan[48]. The Army officer who arrived on 11 May was Eric Dorman-



MALEME, Intended and Actual Landing Areas of *Assault Regiment*, 20 May

Smith, a man notorious for questioning the thinking of others. Dorman-Smith was sent to assess Freyberg's state of mind as well as to take him the latest intelligence picture. After their meeting Dorman-Smith added Freyberg to a category of officers he called 'Bear of Little Brain' as far as tactical sense went[49]. Yet, in defending the disposition of the New Zealand soldiers, James Bliss notes that, on 11 May, Freyberg had been told that twelve ships, carrying 27,000 tons of equipment had left Naples. On 13 May Ultra message OL 2/302 provided an extensively detailed list of the attacking force, in which the tenth paragraph said 12,000 of the attackers would land by parachute and 10,000 would be transported by sea. On 18 May another Ultra message had revealed that the convoy had departed Piraeus for Crete[50]. Bliss argues that the threats from the sea merited less concentrated defensive positions around the airfields; but given the airfields were known to be the primary targets it would have been reasonable to assume that 4,000 para troops would be dropped on, or very near to, each airfield. Consequently, the RAF personnel, whose camp was located close to the airfield, adjacent to the eastern bank of the Tavronitis River, adjacent to where the German attackers were likely to concentrate, became the focus of attention when questions were raised about the failure to oppose, counter-attack and round up the attackers.

RAF ground crew- Proactive in Defence

When the invasion began the British and Australian Sector commanders quickly recognised the necessity of committing their reserves in the early stages of the battle, and almost annihilated the attackers[51] but, in contrast to their dynamic response, the New Zealand commanders procrastinated. The earlier misjudgement in deciding not to position more troops close to the airfield, together with the failure to commit the reserves to the battle at the earliest opportunity helps to explain why the performance of the RAF personnel at Maleme came under so much scrutiny. It appears that it became important to protect the reputation of the New Zealand commanders at the expense of the reputation of the RAF officers and airmen at Maleme. In this context the Official New Zealand history of the battle of Crete appears particularly partial. While it remarked positively about the odds faced by the pilots of the relatively few fighter aircraft the RAF were able to commit to the battle, until the last few serviceable aircraft were withdrawn on 19 May, it described the RAF crews and ground staff as 'very tired' and 'in low spirits'[52]. Beevor continued the theme in his book, describing how the RAF ground crew appeared to be 'dispirited', had a 'slightly anti-military insouciance', and that they 'did not bother to take their rifles with them' on the morning of the assault on 20 May, and 'did not even look up when the troop carriers thundered overhead in threes discharging their loads'[53]. If we take these comments as reflecting widespread reality it would be reasonable to conclude that RAF personnel as a whole are likely to have performed very badly. Clearly, that is the impression such comments were designed to create. Indeed, the myth that RAF personnel were ill prepared to defend Maleme, and therefore responsible for the loss of Crete has been repeated to a variety of audiences as reality[54].

Certainly, RAF culture and attitudes evolved differently to those in the British Army, but by 1941, as Jeremy Crang has shown[55], a more egalitarian atmosphere prevailed. Even amongst

army commanders it became necessary for officers to engender a spirit of cooperation, using persuasion as well as their power and authority to get soldiers to do their bidding. What is clear is that RAF personnel took pride in a lack of formality, preferring to champion their professional competence and decry traditional military discipline. The RAF's structures of command were not based on the same rigid distinctions between officers and other ranks as in the Army[56]. In this context displaying an 'anti-military insouciance' was typical of the way the RAF did business; it did not reflect low spirits, quite the opposite.

Of course it is important to realise that many of the RAF personnel on Crete had been fighting with their squadrons in Greece since December 1940, five months before the British Army had arrived there and they had also been evacuated to Crete after a perilous journey through southern Greece. Indeed, Beamish's post defeat report on Crete, together with Marcel Gerard Comeau's first-hand account of the island's fall, written from the notes he took for his daily diary, suggest that RAF ground crews were busy, proactive and generally in good spirits. Moreover, as Beevor noted, most of the Royal Perivolian Greeks, gunners and rear echelon soldiers, such as fitters and drivers, had never received any infantry training, so, in this context, the idea that RAF personnel were somehow delinquent because of their unfamiliarity with small arms training[57] is a most unfair criticism.

Beamish's airmen had set about building aircraft pens at Heraklion and Maleme to protect the fighter aircraft they anticipated would arrive in Crete once the airborne assault had been repelled. At Maleme this required the airmen to excavate into the shallow hill ledge on the south side of the aerodrome, which gave the GAF very little time to locate the pens and made them a difficult target to attack. The construction of each pen, which took four to six days, was interrupted by repeated air attacks. Nevertheless, four pens were ready by 20 May, and a further six were under construction[58]. Beamish and Weston were both proactive in visiting the RAF's 252 Air Ministry Experimental Station (AMES), located at Xamodochori, on a high-ridge a couple of miles south of Maleme. The aim of these visits was to assess how the radar plots generated could provide Weston's operations centre with information necessary to give warnings of impending attacks to the island's defenders. The men even sought to integrate the radar plots produced by a portable Royal Navy radar set taken from HMS York after it was sunk in Suda Bay. The set was positioned on the Akrotiri peninsula[59] until it was destroyed by GAF bombing on 4 May.

Moreover, the reason some airmen 'did not bother to take their rifles with them' has been relatively easy to deconstruct. On 26 April a Most Secret Most Immediate signal from SAFO Crete ordered that aerodrome defence posts were to be fully manned and that all RAF personnel were to carry arms[60]. So, why did some RAF personnel leave their weapons behind when they went to breakfast, after the first strafing attack from German aircraft on 20 May? The attacks on 19 May had been so intense that the airmen had been moved, as a precaution, to within the boundaries of the New Zealand defences on the northern slopes of Kavkazia Hill, otherwise known as Hill 107. Beamish had agreed the defence and communication

arrangements with the Army Commanders[61], and some RAF airmen had, on their own initiative, concocted defences, using machine-guns taken out of wrecked aircraft. What happened subsequently goes some way to mitigate the airmen from blame for leaving their rifles in their new defensive positions and exonerates Weston from blame entirely. Essentially, there was a significant delay in passing the warning of the second assault wave on 20 May after it had been detected by radar. Beevor blamed this delay on Weston, citing what he describes as his ineffectual communications arrangements at his air defence centre at Suda Bay[62].

The previous day a New Zealand sergeant had instructed the airmen, on and around Hill 107, on their defensive responsibilities and identified each man's defensive arc of fire. On 20 May the airmen were ready and waiting in position, though the weapons they had were of varying quality. The now routine early morning strafe attack on the airfield, known as the 'daily hate', began and lasted around 30 minutes, ending at around 0730. Soon after, the same sergeant who had instructed the airmen the day before went from trench to trench telling everybody to stand down and that 'If Jerry was coming, he'd have been here by now?[63]' After that assurance some of the airmen went off to breakfast, leaving their rifles behind, as did many soldiers[64]. Weston's Operations Centre gave no warning about the second assault wave of German aircraft, even though the 252 AMES radar site had detected the attackers. The reason for the delay in passing the message was because a bomb had broken the single telephone line, linking 252 AMES with the Operations Centre, during the first raid that morning. Something similar had happened with 220 AMES, at Heraklion, on 15 May, requiring the unit to use Morse code, the secondary communications method, to pass the information on the plots[65]. So, when the same thing happened, on 20 May, 252 AMES followed the protocol and began to transmit the plots by Morse code to HQ RAF Crete. However, the time delay in sending and decoding the Morse code messages meant the warning did not reach the defenders at Maleme in sufficient time for them to be in position to repel the assault[66]. Interestingly, the Germans intercepted these Morse code transmissions, warning of the invasion armada, and assumed that British patrol boats in the Aegean were sending the warnings as part of a bespoke aircraft reporting system[67]. RAF airman 'Ginger' Stone, however, was ready and waiting. He had concocted a defensive position, albeit without sandbags, trench or other protection, and when the attack came later that morning he continued to fire his adapted machine gun after the Bofors anti-aircraft guns had been silenced[68].

As for Beevor's charge that some RAF personnel did not look up when the troop carriers were discharging their loads, it is worth noting that there are similar anecdotes about some New Zealanders and some Royal Marines. Comeau, for example, found six New Zealanders in a trench, still sheltering with their 'heads down' and blissfully unaware that the gliders were landing. Shortly afterwards, he found two Royal Marines playing dead in the hope that the Germans might not kill them, only take them prisoner[69]. Meanwhile, Comeau carried on fighting, using any weapons that came to hand. A few RAF airmen, holding a trench near the Tavronitis River, the area Puttick claimed he had too few troops to protect, also carried on fighting, without relief, until they ran out of ammunition. Nevertheless, the enduring

implication of the writing in the Official New Zealand narrative is that while some of the FAA, RAF and RM personnel, particularly those led by Pilot Officer Crowther, 'did do some fighting' the remainder were either in the way of the New Zealanders, failed to do as they had previously agreed, or were a burden on defence[70]. This was a very harsh judgement as many airmen were anything but a burden on defence. One airman was later awarded an OBE; two (one being Comeau) were awarded Military Medals; another was awarded the MBE; two were awarded BEMs and another was mentioned in dispatches[71].

Events around 252 AMES radar site

As Andrew had feared, most of the Bofors anti-aircraft guns, manned by the Royal Marines had been silenced before the main assault took place[72]. Andrew must have been irritated to learn of the refusal to use the 4-inch guns on Hill 107, and the 6-inch coastal gun battery on St. John's Hill against the glider force and German troops on the airfield so they could be used against a seaborne threat yet to emerge. At 252 AMES Lieutenant Wadey, from HQ Coy, 22nd Battalion, took over command as Officer i/c Defence and his platoon took a high toll of the German gliders as they made their way towards Maleme[73]. Behind the radar station, to the south, German parachute troops were dislodged by concentrated fire from the station's two machine guns before, at around dusk, a patrol from the New Zealand 21st Battalion reported the area cleared, apart from isolated parachutists. Later still a Maori Battalion, from 28th Battalion, moving west towards Maleme, advised Flying Officer Britton that they were on their way to relieve the troops on the aerodrome but the troops were not relieved and the Maoris did not position themselves to counter attack the next day. Instead, later that evening, they retraced their steps to the east.

The next morning Britton learned that during the night the whole 21st Battalion and HQ 22nd Battalion had retreated from the aerodrome to the north-east of the station. Andrew had sent runners to the New Zealand Companies and HQ Company to warn of this move, but not to 252 AMES. That said, none of the runners got through[74]. When it was clear that the Germans had taken the airfield the AMES detachment, together with the New Zealand troops were directed to head east to Canea, if possible, but doubt as to whether the road to Canea was open, which it wasn't, encouraged the Commanding Officer Flight Lieutenant Babcock to keep the unit in its defensive position. As no orders had been received from Andrew, it was decided to destroy the technical equipment and dispatch Lieutenant Wadey to seek direction whether to withdraw or, with reinforcements, try to hold the position. Andrew directed that they should stay put and hold out for as long as possible. Soon after this decision had been made the station came under concentrated heavy bombing and machine gun attack, lasting around 45 minutes, which wiped out two of the gun posts, killed several of the personnel and wounded Wadey. As soon as darkness provided cover the station was evacuated and the airmen made their way via Dere, Genina and Suya, Ayer Rumeli, and eventually Sphakia, where on 28 May at 0200 they were evacuated to Alexandria, Egypt[75]. Of the RAF's 618 personnel on Crete when the German assault began 71 were killed and 235 were either wounded, or wounded and taken prisoner[76].

How London saw things

While the behaviour of personnel under fire is often a matter of conjecture the important aspect here is that a narrative, suggesting RAF failure, made its way to London. Somehow, the idea that indolence, fatigue and inertia amongst RAF personnel had been a key feature in the loss of Maleme was allowed to fester. Yet Churchill did not meet any of the senior RAF commanders involved in the battle of Crete to seek their counsel on this topic. The Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, had relieved Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, Air Officer Commander-in-Chief Middle East, of his command the day before the attack on Crete began and had replaced him with Tedder[77]. Longmore had a long history of complaining about the lack of first-rate fighter aircraft reaching his command.

After surviving the vote of confidence over the defeat and evacuation from Greece, on 7 May, Churchill may have worried how the loss of Crete would affect his position as Prime Minister but when the House of Commons debated Crete on 10 June Churchill's leadership, oversight and involvement in the decisions affecting the events on Crete was never seriously questioned[78]. Former lawyer Brigadier Lindsay Merritt Inglis, commander of the 4th New Zealand Infantry Brigade, went to London and met Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), on 12 Jun, where his comments on the 'German method of attack' were adjudged useful[79]. They were deemed so interesting that the next day he was given an audience with Churchill, where he suggested that Freyberg had been reticent about undertaking counter attacks for fear of seaborne invasion[80]. The next day Churchill sent a memo to the Chiefs of Staff. It questioned Freyberg's tactical conduct of the defence of Crete[81]. Clearly, representations to Churchill gained immediate traction.

Colonel Robert Laycock also visited Churchill. He had been in charge of the Commandos on Crete and, according to Beevor, had extracted himself from surrender and capture by delegating, at the last minute, the task to a Lieutenant, George Young, who though not a member of the 'White's Club gang', was, according to Beevor, a natural choice for the onerous duty. Laycock, was another of Churchill's favourites; they lunched together at Chequers, where Laycock suggested that 'a dozen tanks could have saved Crete', something Churchill is likely to have been more than willing to believe.

Yet another of Churchill's favourites, Captain Louis Mountbatten, visited him on 21 June. On 23 May, Mountbatten, the Captain of HMS Kelly, had responded to a 4 am request by Freyberg to shell Maleme airfield. Mountbatten had gambled that the GAF, which generally only flew in daylight, would not catch him if his ship was heading south shortly after first light, but this gamble failed and his ship was sunk by GAF dive-bombers, around 8 am, south of Crete[82]. Mountbatten blamed the RAF for its inability to provide air cover for his ship and spent some time in Cairo telling everyone in Middle East Command as well as Sir Miles Lampson, the British Ambassador, how the RAF had neglected its responsibilities[83]. Lampson signalled London, supporting Mountbatten's charges. Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, in Cairo, was warned of the brewing storm and met with both Lampson and Mountbatten to assuage their concerns.

Lampson was amenable but Mountbatten had deduced that the Army should have an air force, under its own control, for close support[84]. Lampson noted how Mountbatten 'being who he is he has access to everyone and is not in the least afraid of our good Prime Minister or anyone else'[85]. No doubt his circuitous route back to England, by air, frustrated him further; he left Cairo on 1 June but only arrived 14 days later. Mountbatten met Churchill and Beaverbrook on 21 June and Brooke 4 days later[86].

Knee-jerk Reactions

Churchill's interest in the performance of the RAF personnel on Crete had been aroused and soon after, when hosting Air Marshal Sir William Sholto Douglas at Chequers, the two discussed the vulnerability of RAF aerodromes in Britain and how an attack by parachutists should be handled. Churchill was clearly in a funk over the topic and the next morning when returning to London, with Douglas beside him in the car, he raised the subject again, before apparently, on the spur of the moment, directing the driver to RAF Northolt where, at the Headquarters building, he set off the parachute raid alarm so that he could watch the airmen's response. What he witnessed he found unconvincing and with his temper worsening by the minute he walked, again with Douglas, to the Polish fighter squadron. Again it appeared clear to Churchill that the alarm was not being taken seriously. By the time Churchill entered the squadron building he saw the pilots were sitting, reading, smoking; some were even playing cards. Churchill, now incandescent with rage, demanded the Squadron Commander explain to him why no action was being taken with regard to the parachute attack, but the answer he received innocently ridiculed the idea that their behaviour should have been any different. 'We know it's a false alarm. If it were not we'd have been ordered in the air by now'[87].

Of course, the Squadron Commander was right, a massed attack by German aircraft, including transport planes filled with parachute troops would have been quickly detected by radar and, given the extremely perilous nature of such an operation witnessed by the Germans in Crete, any such attack would have met the full force of the RAF's integrated air defence system and would have suffered great losses. But, in June 1940 Churchill had become fascinated by the idea of parachute troops and the defeat in Crete had reinvigorated his fears in this regard[88]. It transpired that, after Crete, no one was willing to challenge his worries about parachute troops in the War Cabinet. Brooke, as CIGS, was normally the man to reign in some of Churchill's odd or mad ideas, but on this topic he was noticeably silent. Instead, a consensus emerged about what had happened in Crete. The groupthink stymied rational thought and empowered Churchill sufficiently to mobilise the machinery of government and the Chiefs of Staff to address the topic of defence against parachute troops in a way that was out of all proportion to the real threat. Brooke suggested an exercise with parachutists 'attacking' London. For a while his idea was taken seriously until common sense prevailed when Lord Beaverbrook pointed out a number of weaknesses underpinning the whole concept, not the least of which was the impression such an exercise might have on the general public. Clement Atlee backed Beaverbrook and the idea of holding the exercise disappeared from the agenda, much to the chagrin of Brooke[89].

Nevertheless, the obsession with attacks by parachute troops and the formulation of thinking to respond to the threat persisted. Churchill's opinion of what had happened in Crete, together with his experience at RAF Northolt, go some way to explaining his tirade against the fortitude of RAF ground crew in his memorandum, of 29 June, to the Secretary of State for Air and Chief of the Air Staff:

1. Further to my minute of June 20, about the responsibility of the Air Force for the local and static defence of aerodromes. Every man in Air Force uniform ought to be armed with something - a rifle, a tommy-gun, a pistol, a pike or a mace; and every one, without exception, should do at least one hour's drill and practice every day. Every airman should have his place in the defence scheme. ... It must be understood by all ranks that they are expected to fight and die in defence of their airfields....

2. … Here is the chance for this great mass to add a fighting quality to the necessary services they perform. Every airfield should be a stronghold of fighting air-groundmen, and not the abode of uniformed civilians in the prime of life protected by detachments of soldiers.

3. In order that I may study this matter in detail let me have the exact field state of Northolt aerodrome, showing every class of airman, the work he does, the weapons he has, and his part in the scheme of defence[90].

Churchill already knew enough, from intelligence, to suggest that the Germans were about to make war against the Soviet Union, Operation Barbarossa[91], so the idea that the Germans would undertake a concurrent large-scale airborne operation against Great Britain should have been quickly put to bed. Unfortunately, neither the Secretary of State for Air, nor the Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, were willing, or able, to put Churchill right, with arguments as clear and lucid as those of the Squadron Commander at RAF Northolt.

Only a month earlier the RAF had considered how best to defend RAF aerodromes against airborne troops[92]. The report noted that at the average main Fighter station, south of a line from the Wash to the Severn, some '200 to 300 rifle-trained airmen, drawn from ordinary station personnel' had an 'allotted role in the station defence scheme in an emergency' and detailed the anti-aircraft and ground-to-ground defence equipment. Nevertheless, in tandem with the atmosphere of hyperbole, the associated minute sheet estimated that in a single sortie 16,500 German troops could be transported by aircraft and gliders. This, according to the Director of Intelligence (Operations) (D of I (O)), threatened 66 aerodromes with assault by 250 trained and well-armed men if the landings were made at, or just before dawn, when not many of the transport aircraft and gliders would be intercepted en-route, although he did acknowledge that some of the transport aircraft might be shot down while attempting to return for another load. Moreover, the D of I (O) did not think such an attack inconceivable if the Germans were convinced that they had some chance of immobilising the bulk of the RAF

for a short period, even though he assessed that this form of attack would not be made unless it was part of a plan to invade which, for a variety of reasons, he considered improbable[93]. After reading the assessment on 12 April, Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid R. Freeman, then Vice-Chief of the Air Staff, passed it on to Air Vice-Marshal Arthur T. Harris, Deputy Chief of the Air Staff for comment. Harris worried that:

> Defences are in the hands of young soldiers, untrained oafs short of weapons and with no skill in using them. Meanwhile our Bofors, Hispanos and PACs have been looted by the Admiralty. The Army don't care. ….Until we have our Bofors back and have at least 2 tanks per station and the RAF are trained with Tommy Guns we shall never be secure[94].

Yet, little over a month later the disastrously high German losses on Crete had led Hitler to tell General Student that '[T]he day of parachute troops is over'[95]. The British, in stark contrast, had concluded the exact opposite. Churchill managed to divert attention away from his part in choosing the commander who had misread the intelligence by getting those around him to focus on anti-invasion planning, the thinking of which was permeated by the false, yet widespread, perception that the RAF had somehow failed in their duty on Crete. Surprisingly, Portal was in full agreement with this interpretation of events and wrote to all RAF Commanders-in-Chief at Home and the Air Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland, using much of the same caustic language used by Churchill, to lend his full support to initiatives which sought to stiffen the resolve of the airmen under their command[96]. Portal was similarly persuaded that 'the use of airborne troops to attack and destroy aerodromes far behind the land battle is a new development of war and demands new methods of defence'[97]. Consequently, a conference was convened on 3 July, chaired by Air Marshal Peck, to consider how best to implement these instructions[98]. The very high losses of the Ju52 aircraft on Crete were obvious, as the Photo Reconnaissance pictures clearly indicated. Knowledge of the very high casualties inflicted on the parachute troops was also widespread, so it is difficult to understand why no one seriously challenged the idea that a similar airborne assault on England was really possible, or indeed likely.

Nevertheless, later that month, despite any solid evidence that the charges that airmen on Crete lacked fighting spirit, the Secretary of State for Air, Sinclair, weighed in to agree with the spirit of Churchill's rant:

> We are as determined as you that aerodrome defences shall be brought to the highest pitch of efficiency, that every airman must have a definite place in the scheme of defence, that as many as possible shall be equipped with weapons, however rudimentary, and that all should be imbued with a fighting spirit[99].

Soon after, another committee chaired by Sir Samuel Findlater Stewart, a civil servant with an executive post in Home Defence, examined ways to improve airfield defence, reporting their conclusions on inter-Service responsibilities to the Chiefs of Staff. The upshot was the

recommendation that the RAF should form its own Aerodrome Defence Corps under the executive control of the Air Ministry and that a force 79,000 strong would release 92,000 soldiers from airfield defence tasks[100]. The Corps became the RAF Regiment.

Concluding Thoughts

Historians agree that the German occupation of Crete was a pyrrhic victory in that the island was never used as a major base from which to attack Egypt or interfere with the battles raging in Libya. But the consequences of the German victory resonated in England too, particularly as this new way of waging war was adjudged a viable method to achieve strategic aims, where the benefits – albeit expensively bought - outweighed the costs. The fear of an airborne invasion of England increased substantially, tying down a considerable force in home defence activities[101]. After Crete, Churchill's interest in the opportunities afforded by parachute troops, which had first emerged in 1940, were significantly reinvigorated. Unfortunately, his gaze focussed rather unfairly on the ability of RAF groundcrew to defend their airbases.

Churchill's role in securing General Freyberg as the Commander of British forces on Crete is also significant as, ultimately, despite Freyberg's initial fears, he agreed that the island could be defended despite air superiority being conceded to the GAF. However, when preparing for the battle Freyberg's assessment of the Ultra intelligence caused him to believe that the seaborne threat was at least as great as the threat from parachute and airborne troops and despite his guidance to position troops so they could make quick counter attacks to deny the Germans the airfields his commanders deployed their New Zealand troops in a way that diluted their impact to such an extent that the prime target of the morning attack, the airfield at Maleme, was grossly under protected. As a result of this error the relatively small RAF contingent on Crete was disproportionately represented at the main point of the German attack. The RAF personnel, for the most part, were armed but had little training in the use of the weapons available. They took their place in the defence scheme, improvised armament and manned some of the most vulnerable positions, and did what they could to defend the airfields and their radar sites.

Though it is true that the New Zealand Battalion dispositions in the vicinity of Maleme, albeit some distance from the airfield, had to deal with the groups of parachute troops that landed near them, the effective opposition from these troops had been dealt with by mid-afternoon and the opportunity to secure the airfield, by means of counter attacks, should have been taken as soon as possible, after all that is what the orders said they should do. However, the initial positions of the New Zealand troops, other than those from 22nd Battalion, together with the poor and inarticulate communications between Andrew and Hargest stymied options for counter-attack, causing those that were launched to be small-scale, disjointed and poorly coordinated. This was a failure of the New Zealand Command.

It is worth noting that Freyberg's experiences in Greece had made him aware of the psychological effect of the loss of air superiority on his forces. However, despite his recent

experiences in this regard he was still unwilling to make the requirement for air defence, and a significant uplift in air defence fighters in particular, conditional on making positive assessments of his ability to repel the German invasion, though with increasing concern and alarm he did articulate his worries in later signals, once the battle had begun. Freyberg may have thought that he could hide his misreading of the Ultra intelligence behind the veil of secrecy that surrounded it until 1974. Whether the author of the Official New Zealand history knew about Ultra is open to question, but if he did his narrative should be seen in a new light. After the defeat the tendency to ignore Freyberg's assessment before the battle: that the battle could be won without air superiority, perpetuates the historiography. As a consequence the myth of RAF failure at Maleme has perpetuated into popularised history. Correcting this misnomer has been long overdue.

Notes

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[13] D. M. Davin, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1953), p.39.
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[17] D.M. Davin, *Official History*, p.42. David Reynolds, *Command of History*, p. 238. CHUR 4/217/12-20.
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[45] Davin, *Official History*, p.55.
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RAF airmen were positioned in the river bed and opposed the parachute troops trying to cross the bridge.

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