

## **Britain and the Campaigns in Greece and Crete in 1941**

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One of the intriguing questions about Britain's strategy in the Second World War concerns its decision in February 1941 to commit forces to the defence of Greece. At that time, the British Commonwealth was standing alone against Hitler's Germany. The Axis powers—Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Romania—dominated Europe. Germany had a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, and Spain seemed to be tilting towards Germany. The Battle of Britain might have been over, but German bombers were still striking each night at British towns and cities. At sea, German submarines were gaining the upper hand. The only glimmer of success was in northern Africa, where Commonwealth forces had advanced into Italian Libya. It hardly seemed that Britain was in a position to open a new front against the Axis, which would need to be supported across the seas, at the other side of Europe.

Britain's efforts to assist Greece to resist the German invasion in April 1941 quickly led to defeat, with the loss of some 15,000 British Commonwealth troops, killed, wounded, and captured. On the face of it, the decision to help Greece seemed unwise. Equally contentious was the effort to try to hold the island of Crete which the Germans attacked in May 1941. This too led to a British defeat.

There has been much historical discussion about these decisions. In his monumental six-volume memoirs the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, sought to explain his government's decisions in the best possible light. Other key figures, General Sir Archibald Wavell, the British Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Minister, tried to resist being saddled with the blame for the campaign. Because Australia provided the largest number of combat troops, Australian historians have come to a slightly different view, with some of them accusing Churchill and the British Government of deceiving the Australian Prime Minister and his military advisers about the chances of success. In this short paper I can only highlight a few of the key issues.

Britain's commitment to Greece dated back to September 30, 1938 when the British and French Prime Ministers, Neville Chamberlain, and Édouard Daladier, signed an agreement in Munich with Germany's Adolf Hitler and Italy's Benito Mussolini in which they accepted Germany's take-over of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, so long as Hitler promised to go no further. The high ideals of this policy of appeasement were soon shattered when on March 16, 1939 Hitler seized the remainder of Czechoslovakia. In response, the British and French now looked to a policy of containment rather than appeasement, and on March 31 Britain guaranteed the security of Poland against a possible German attack. A week later, on April 7, Italy attacked Albania. Continuing their new approach of containment, and alarmed at rumours that Germany might move into Poland or Romania with its valuable oilfields, on April 13 Britain and France jointly agreed to guarantee the security of Greece and Romania against

external attacks. As the diplomatic historian, Elisabeth Barker, put it, “These guarantees in the Balkans were not the outcome of serious political or military planning ... The guarantee to Greece was a panic response’ to Italy’s invasion of Albania.”<sup>1</sup>

The guarantee to Greece came back to bite Britain some eighteen months later. By that time the Second World War had begun. Germany had taken Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Low Countries, and France. Italy had joined in to share the spoils. Then in October 1940 the Italian Army in Albania began an invasion of Greece.

Under its guarantee of April 1939, Britain felt obliged to assist Greece. But the Greek Prime Minister, General Ioannis Metaxas, did not ask for British ground troops. He wanted weapons and equipment. Britain supplied what it could and also agreed to send three Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons. In addition, Britain agreed to send troops to Suda Bay on the island of Crete, thereby allowing the Greeks to redeploy a Cretan Division to the mainland.

This assistance was not driven just because of the 1939 guarantee. The Mediterranean was now developing as a major British theatre of war. British troops in Egypt were confronting an Italian army in Libya. If the Axis powers took Greece they would threaten the whole British position in the eastern Mediterranean. At this point, Greece had successfully resisted the Italian invasion, and it was in Britain’s strategic interest to ensure that the Greeks did not eventually give way. Sentiment also played a part: the kings of Greece and Britain were cousins.

Meanwhile, things had begun badly for the Italians in their invasion of Greece, and the Greeks launched a successful counter-attack. With the arrival of British troops in Crete, the consequent threat of British air attacks on the Romanian oilfields, and the possibility of Italian defeat, Hitler now decided that he would need to help the Italians by invading Greece. This would secure his southern Mediterranean flank for his eventual invasion of Russia. To do so, however, Hitler would need to move troops through Romania and Bulgaria. On October 8, 1940 German troops entered Romania. After a coup in Romania, the new regime joined the German-Italian Axis in November 1940. Germany also demanded that Bulgaria allow its forces to pass through Bulgaria so that they would be ready to attack Greece.

British intelligence became aware of the plans and troop movements. On December 13 1940, the German Armed Forces High Command issued a directive for Operation Marita, the invasion of Greece. On December 27 the British code breakers deciphered a German signal that mentioned Operation Marita.<sup>2</sup>

Churchill and his advisers believed that from a political point of view, they should do everything possible to send forces to support the Greeks. British support for the Greeks would need to come from their forces based in Egypt and Palestine. The British army Commander-in-Chief in the theatre, General Wavell, was already presiding over an offensive against the Italians in Libya and was reluctant to withdraw troops to undertake another campaign. In meetings in Athens on January 13, 1941 between General Metaxas, his military commander, General Alexandros Papagos, Wavell, and the commander of the British air force in the Middle

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, Macmillan, London, 1976, pp. 3, 4.

<sup>2</sup> F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Volume One, HMSO, London, 1979, p. 352.

East, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, the British offered Metaxas a small force that would build up to two or three divisions within three months. Metaxas wanted much more help, and declined this modest offer because it might give the Germans a pretext to attack.

Churchill continued to try to encourage Turkey and Greece to form a combined front against the Axis, and the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Dill, visited both countries. Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff now decided to halt the British advance in Libya and to send troops to Greece.

On February 1, 1941 Churchill directed Wavell to persuade the Greeks to accept a British force. "In the event of it proving impossible to reach any agreement with the Greeks and work out a practical military plan [he wrote], then we must try to save as much from the wreck as possible. We must at all costs keep Crete and take any Greek islands which are of use to us as air bases."<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, General Metaxas had died and the Greek King had appointed a new Prime Minister. On February 23, Eden, Dill and Wavell met with the Greek leaders in Athens and persuaded them to accept a British expeditionary force. The British War Cabinet approved the operation the next day. The Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies was at the meeting and agreed.

At this stage the British expeditionary force was planned to consist of the 1st Australian Corps, including the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions, the New Zealand Division, a British armoured brigade, and a Polish brigade, all located in the Middle East. Because the Australians would be forming the largest part of the force, the Australian Government needed to approve the operation.

In early February, Menzies had been visiting the Australian troops in the Middle East, and on February 13, shortly before he departed for London, Wavell told him that he was planning to send a force to Greece. Five days later, Wavell told the commander of the Australian forces, Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey, that he had discussed the proposed Greek operation with Menzies. Blamey did not like the prospects of the operation, but believing that Menzies had approved it, he hesitated to complain to the Australian Government. In London, Menzies did not know that Blamey had doubts about the Greek operation; indeed he assumed Blamey had been consulted. He had doubts himself; but lacking any detailed knowledge he agreed to the commitment.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually Blamey cabled the Australian Government to express his deep misgivings about the operation, but by that time the decision had been made. An uncharitable view is that the British had not fully explained the dangers of the operation to the Australians. But Australia's leaders were also at fault. Blamey should have cabled his concerns immediately to both Menzies and Canberra, and Menzies should have sought Blamey's views. The incident demonstrated the problems faced by a small coalition partner which had little say over the

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<sup>3</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume III: The Grand Alliance*, Cassell, London, 1950, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> The course of these discussions is described in David Horner, *Defence Supremo: Sir Frederick Shedden and the Making of Australian Defence Policy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pp. 101-104, and David Horner, *Blamey: The Commander-in-Chief*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, pp. 168-176.

strategic direction of the war.

The prospects of a successful operation now declined quickly. On March 1 came news that Bulgaria had joined the Tripartite Pact and that German troops were moving up to the Bulgarian frontier opposite Greece. Eden had been unsuccessful in his attempt to persuade the Turks to join the Allies. German mechanised units were arriving in Libya to bolster the Italians there. And there were disagreements over the way General Papagos was planning to use the British force once it arrived in Greece.

Churchill now asked Eden, Dill and Wavell in Cairo for their assessment of the likely success of the operation.<sup>5</sup> He reminded Eden that they had given him few facts or reasons for the operation which he could present to the Australian and New Zealand, “as justifying the operation on any grounds but noblesse oblige. A precise military appreciation is indispensable.”

After this, Dill reported that Blamey and the New Zealand commander, Major General Bernard Freyberg, were willing to undertake the operation. At the War Cabinet meeting on March 7, Churchill declared that he was convinced that the operation should go ahead, and Menzies agreed. Later Menzies told his Cabinet in Canberra that in answer to his concerns Churchill had stated that:

“This venture is not based on a commitment. If that were its only foundation, we could have been prepared to overrule it. Its real foundation is the estimate on the spot by our military advisers and the overwhelming moral and political repercussions of abandoning Greece.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the political repercussions that Churchill probably had in mind was the effect in the United States. Since November, he had been working to secure the Lend-Lease arrangement in which the United States loaned destroyers and other equipment to Britain in return for being able to lease bases in British overseas territories. Some British strategists believed that British prestige would be hurt more if their forces suffered defeat once they arrived in Greece, rather than by failing to send help Greece. Others believed that the Lend-Lease agreement would be approved by the US Congress irrespective of what happened. Nonetheless, securing the Lend-Lease agreement weighed heavily with Churchill. The Lend-Lease Bill passed the US House of Representatives on February 9 and the Senate a month later. Churchill was sensitive to US opinion and on March 10, informed President Roosevelt of the decision to assist Greece. The next day, Roosevelt signed the Lend-Lease into law.

A crucial development was a coup in Yugoslavia on March 26 by elements who were dismayed that the Yugoslav Government had been about to join the Tripartite Pact. The new government detested Germany and Italy. Hitler would now need to invade Yugoslavia as well. The coup in Yugoslavia raised the morale of the Greeks and the British, who saw the prospect of gaining another ally. As Churchill cabled the Australian Government: “When a month ago we decided upon sending an army to Greece it looked rather a bleak military adventure dictated by noblesse oblige, Thursday’s events in Belgrade show the far reaching effects of

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<sup>5</sup> For a useful discussion of Churchill’s decision to commit forces to Greece see Sheila Lawlor, *Churchill and the politics of war, 1940-1941*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Cable M27, Menzies to Fadden, 14 March 1941, National Archives of Australia (NAA): 290/9 bundle 1 (13).

this and other measures we have taken on [the] whole Balkan situation.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, before the illusory optimism engendered by the Yugoslav coup, the venture had been dictated by *noblesse oblige*, meaning that Britain had been acting out of a sense of honour and the responsibility that comes with being a great power standing up for small countries against powerful aggressors.

Let us now look at some of the military aspects of the campaign. In some ways the British task was similar to that of trying to defend a remote island. All the British troops and equipment needed to be transported by sea to Greece, and once there they needed to be supported because Greece could provide only limited logistic support. The British Mediterranean Fleet, under Admiral Andrew Cunningham, based at Alexandria in Egypt, transported the troops and protected the supply ships. The importance of this task was brought home off Cape Matapan on March 28 when British ships clashed with an Italian squadron which was attempting to intercept the British convoys going to Greece. Three Italian cruisers and two Italian destroyers were sunk, and an Italian battleship was damaged.

The British force, known as W. Force, was commanded by Lieutenant General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson. As mentioned earlier, it was to consist of the First Australian Corps (6th and 7th Divisions), the New Zealand Division, the British 1st Armoured Brigade, and the Polish Independent Brigade Group. The small British air force, commanded by Air Vice-Marshal John D’Albiac, had about 80 serviceable aircraft.

The problem was that because of a shortage in shipping, these forces arrived in Greece in a piecemeal fashion. By the time the Germans attacked on April 6, Lustreforce in Greece consisted of the New Zealand Division, two brigades of the 6th Australian Division and the 1st Armoured Brigade. The third brigade of the 6th Division had not even left Alexandria. Furthermore, on April 5 General Blamey learned that the 7th Division would not be coming to Greece. After the German Afrika Korps, led by Erwin Rommel had attacked in Libya, Wavell had decided to retain the 7th Division as well as the Polish brigade in North Africa.

Most of the Greek Army was facing the Italians in north-west Greece. It was agreed that General Wilson would assume responsibility for the Olympus line, which ran from the Aegean Sea northwest to the Yugoslav border, and he was given the task of holding a German offensive thrust from Bulgaria through southern Yugoslavia into north-east Greece. Wilson’s command, W Force, included the Greek Eastern Macedonian Army (only three very understrength divisions) and his British Commonwealth force. The New Zealand Division now became part of the 1st Australian Corps, which was renamed the Anzac Corps.<sup>8</sup> The New Zealand Division was on the right, bordering the sea, near Mount Olympus. The 6th Australian Division was on the left, but it had only two brigades. It was obvious that if the Germans attacked through Yugoslavia they could bypass this line.

The Germans attacked with two armies. The Second Army was responsible for central and northern Yugoslavia. The Twelfth Army, which was to attack Greece and move through

<sup>7</sup> Cable Churchill to Fadden, 30 March 1941, UK National Archives (TNA): PREM 3 63/13.176.

<sup>8</sup> For the Australian account see Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1953.

southern Yugoslavia, consisted of three corps with two armoured divisions, four infantry divisions, and two mountain divisions, with two more infantry divisions in reserve.

When the Germans attacked on April 6, the Greek formations in defensive positions in the eastern area along the Bulgarian border did quite well. But the Germans thrusting through Yugoslavia found little resistance and reached the city of Thessalonika on April 9.

The biggest threat came from the Germans pushing through Yugoslavia to the Monastir Gap, which would bring them in behind the British defensive line. General Wilson quickly assembled a force under the commander of the 6th Division, Major General Ivan Mackay, to try to hold this area. It consisted of the 1st Armoured Brigade and the 19th Australian Brigade, pulled away from the Olympus line. The Germans attacked Mackay Force on April 11 and 12 and soon broke through. Mackay Force had to withdraw. Meanwhile, Blamey pulled the rest of the Anzac Corps back to the line of the Aliakmon River.

The Germans now attacked around Mount Olympus, near the sea and by April 18 had broken through the Australian and New Zealand lines. With news that the Greek divisions had given way, Wilson ordered a general withdrawal. By this stage, the third of the 6th Division's brigades had arrived from Egypt.

The Anzac's managed an orderly withdrawal back to the Thermopylae line, which they reached on April 19. The New Zealanders were on the coastal plain. The Australians were on their left in the mountains.

By this time, General Wavell had ordered an evacuation of the force. The forward Australian and New Zealand troops were to hold their positions while the others were evacuated from a string of beaches around the south coast of Greece. The Germans attacked on April 24 but the Anzacs held them for 24 hours while the evacuation continued. At this stage more than 62,000 Commonwealth troops had arrived in Greece.

Admiral Cunningham gathered six cruisers, 24 destroyers and escort vessels, two landing ships, 14 troopships, and a number of landing craft to evacuate the British force. By April 29, the Navy had evacuated about 50,000 British troops. Only four British transports and two destroyers were sunk by aircraft, with about 500 troops being lost in these sinkings. About 14,000, largely base troops and Cypriot and Palestine labourers were left behind, but 3,600 Anzac troops were captured.

The British had never deployed a large enough force to defend Greece adequately. The Greek high command proved irresolute, and the Greek Army did not have sufficient equipment and logistic support to fight a modern war. There was no proper coordinated command of the British and Greek armies. The German army was larger than its opponents, had more tanks and a more powerful air force. The Anzacs had generally fought well against a superior enemy but some troops were unnerved by the unequal fight.

Several myths, however, have been allowed to continue about the fighting in Greece. The first is that the Anzacs were overwhelmed by the German armoured divisions. Recent scholarship has shown that in most cases the Anzacs met only the forward elements of the German armoured divisions and that the Anzacs withdrew before the Germans could deploy

their tanks in force.<sup>9</sup> The German advance was delayed by demolitions, poor roads, and the British artillery.

Another myth is that the German air force was decisive in forcing the Anzacs to withdraw. In fact, with poor weather and inappropriate tactics, the German aircraft often had little influence over the conduct of the withdrawal.<sup>10</sup> The main reason for the Anzac withdrawal was the concern that it might be outflanked when Greek formations gave way. But in many cases the Greeks had not given way before the British withdrew. Rather, W Force conducted a controlled withdrawal, and in each defensive, W Force troops withdrew before they were fully engaged.

Arguments continued for years about the wisdom of Britain's commitment to Greece. When he sent troops to Greece, Wavell was forced to curtail his offensive in Libya, and he was ill-prepared for the counter-attack by Rommel's Afrika Korps which drove the British back to the Egyptian border. The historian Robin Higham has speculated that Wavell planned to move his forces slowly into Greece so that when the Germans attacked on March 6, as his intelligence told him was likely, he would have been able to withdraw quickly the few forces that would have arrived by then. But bad weather in the lower Balkans delayed the German attack until April 6, by which time the British force was too large to withdraw quickly, but not large enough to change the outcome.<sup>11</sup>

One scholar has argued that the British military leaders did not understand mechanised warfare. They believed, incorrectly, that the Greek terrain would hold up the German tanks, and that therefore the British had a good chance of success in Greece.<sup>12</sup> But the manner of the deployment of W Force suggests that its commanders always had the probability of withdrawal on their minds.

The most persuasive explanation of the Greek campaign is provided by Stockings and Hancock in their 2013 book, *Swastika over the Acropolis*.<sup>13</sup> They argue that there were very strong political reasons for Britain to assist Greece. They point out that on April 18, during the campaign, Churchill explained that: "The British Forces had, and have, but one role to play in Greece, and that is to render the maximum possible assistance for as long as possible,"—not to defeat the German invasion.<sup>14</sup> Stockings and Hancock conclude that: "For all its military difficulties, the deployment of W Force to Greece was essentially successful—a political gesture with political dividends made with at a relatively minor cost."<sup>15</sup>

Defenders of the British commitment have argued that it forced the Germans to fight

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<sup>9</sup> Craig Stockings, 'The Fairy Tale of the Panzers in Greece, April 1941', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, no 185, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Stockings and Eleanor Hancock, 'Reconsidering the Luftwaffe in Greece, 1941', *The Journal of Military History*, vol 76, no 3, July 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Robin Higham, *Diary of a Disaster: British Aid to Greece, 1940-1941*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1986, p. 236.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Ewer, 'The British Campaign in Greece 1941: Assumptions about the Operational Art and Their Influence on Strategy', *The Journal of Military History*, vol 76, no 3, July 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Craig Stockings and Eleanor Hancock, *Swastika over the Acropolis: Re-interpreting the Nazi Invasion of Greece in World War II*, Brill, Leiden, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, p. 546.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 543.

for Greece and thereby delayed the German attack on Russia, which took place on June 22, 1941 and that this contributed to the German Army's inability to take Moscow later in the year.<sup>16</sup> Later studies by scholars such as Martin van Creveld argued that the German attack was delayed for other reasons, and that the Greek campaign had no influence on the date of Operation Barbarossa.<sup>17</sup> This is not quite the case. Britain's decision to aid Greece was a strong factor behind Hitler's decision to invade Greece. Further, on April 6, 1941—the date of the German invasion of Greece—Hitler set the date of Barbarossa as June 22. Thus as Stockings and Hancock concluded: “The inescapable conclusion is that it was perhaps not exclusively, but primarily Operation Marita that delayed the beginning of Barbarossa until June 1941.”<sup>18</sup> But it was not the purpose of British strategy to delay the German attack on Russia. Further, the German failure to capture Moscow at the end of 1941 was caused by other reasons beyond the delay in the start date of the operation.<sup>19</sup>

Churchill remained sensitive about criticism of the wisdom of the Greek commitment. In November 1941, Britain was considering the possibility of sending troops into Turkey if the Germans broke through the Caucasus. At the urging of General Blamey the Australian Government reminded the British Government of the shortcomings in the campaigns in Greece and Crete and sought assurance that similar shortcomings would not be present in any military operations in Turkey. Churchill was intensely irritated by this criticism. General Dill advised Churchill that it was, “important that the Australian should know how right we were to assist the Greeks.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1948 the British military historian, Cyril Falls, wrote that, “The whole episode now appears as a sorry tale of political and strategic frivolity.” In a draft response, Churchill replied that the Greek decision, “may have been wise or unwise, but Agony rather than ‘Frivolity’ characterised the process by which it was reached.”<sup>21</sup>

The battle for the island of Crete followed soon after the battle for Greece. As mentioned earlier, in November 1940 Britain had sent troops to Suda Bay on the north coast of Crete to release Greek troops to fight on the mainland. Britain hoped to establish a forward naval base at Suda Bay, but the successive commanders of the British forces there failed to build up the defences or prepare for a possible German attack.

After the evacuation from Greece, many of the British Commonwealth troops landed in Crete. Some quickly moved on to the Middle East, but others remained on Crete. They had left all their heavy equipment and heavy weapons in Greece, and in many cases the units were split up and disorganised.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, see Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, Hutchinson, London, 1951, p. 392.

<sup>17</sup> Martin van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy 1940-41: The Balkan Clue*, Cambridge University press, Cambridge, 1973.

<sup>18</sup> Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika over the Acropolis*, p. 581.

<sup>19</sup> This case is argued strongly in *ibid*, ch 20.

<sup>20</sup> David Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939-1945*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1982, p. 126.

<sup>21</sup> David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War*, Allen Lane, London, 2004, pp. 233-4.

Britain saw great advantage in holding Crete. It would provide a forward base for the Mediterranean Fleet and would also be a base for British aircraft, which could bomb the oilfields in Romania. The same reasons made Crete an attractive target for the Germans. Not only would they deny the British the use of the island, but it could be used as a base for air attacks on Egypt and Palestine, and would allow the Axis forces to dominate the eastern Mediterranean.

Operations on Crete posed a challenge for both the attackers and the defenders. The British Mediterranean Fleet had achieved dominance over the Italian fleet and would make it hard for the Germans to send an invasion force by sea. In any case, the Germans would need to rely on any Greeks fishing boats they could commandeer. On the other hand, the Germans had moved a large and powerful air force into southern Greece. The British were able to spare few aircraft to be based in Crete. So the German air force, the Luftwaffe, would be able to make it extremely difficult for British ships to operate in the defence of Crete, and also to resupply the island. Indeed by May 15, the German air force had effectively blockaded the island and few supplies arrived after that, those that did being dropped off by small fast ships during the night.

Faced with these difficulties and advantages, the Germans planned to capture Crete by using a large force of paratroops that it had already used on a smaller scale in the Netherlands and in Greece. The Germans planned to seize airfields on Crete and then fly in more troops either in gliders or in transport aircraft.

The Commonwealth force on Crete faced a multitude of problems. By the first week of May, the force on Crete consisted of about 15,000 British, 7,700 New Zealanders, 6,500 Australians, and about 11,000 Greeks, although the latter were practically untrained and poorly armed.

At Churchill's insistence, command of the force was given to Major General Freyberg, the commander of the New Zealand division. Under him he had his own division, now commanded by Brigadier Edward Puttick, which had only two brigades and no headquarters. He also had the 19th Australian Brigade (five infantry battalions), and the 14th British Brigade. Other troops were formed into ad hoc units; for example an Australian artillery regiment, which did not have its guns, was designated as a small infantry battalion. The base troops around Suda Bay were commanded Major General Eric Weston of the British Marines.

Crete is a long, thin, mountainous island with poor communications. So Freyberg deployed his forces to cover the main landing areas and airfields, from east to west Maleme, Canea, Retimo and Heraklion. But he had little capacity to move forces quickly from one area to another.

Freyberg, however, did have a priceless advantage. The British code breakers had deciphered the German plan for the attack, which revealed that the attack would be made by paratroops against the airfields, assisted by sea landings. This was the famous Ultra intelligence gained by breaking the German Enigma cipher machine

Churchill considered this information to be so important that he directed that it be sent to Wavell and Freyberg. He cabled Wavell on April 28: "It seems clear from our information that a heavy airborne attack by German troops and bombers will soon be made on Crete. Let me know what forces you have on the island and what your plans are. It ought to be a fine

opportunity for killing the parachute troops. The island must be stubbornly defended.”<sup>22</sup>

Other intelligence reports advised that the Germans would be sending 10,000 troops by sea. Although he was told about Ultra, it is possible that Freyberg still did not accept its veracity completely. Further, he was told that he must not re-deploy his troops in a manner that would indicate that he had received this intelligence. In any case, Freyberg remained convinced that the main threat was from the sea, rather than the air. The historian Antony Beevor concluded that Freyberg had misread the signal containing the Ultra intelligence, and believed that the main assault would come from the sea.<sup>23</sup>

The German attack began on May 20 with heavy air bombardments followed by paratroop drops and landings by gliders near Maleme, Canea, Retimo, and Heraklion. The Germans were repulsed and forced on the defensive by two Australian battalions at Retimo and by the British brigade at Heraklion. At Maleme, the New Zealanders were involved in an intense battle but they could not stop the Germans from gaining control of the airfield. In the afternoon of the second day, transport aircraft started arriving with the first elements of a German mountain division.

That night, a British naval force intercepted a convoy of 20 large Greek fishing boats carrying troops, sank several of them, drowning some 400 men. The following morning, a British naval force of three cruisers and four destroyers intercepted another convoy of Greek fishing boats. The British ships were heavily attacked by German bombers, but the convoy was forced to turn back. The naval battle widened that afternoon when more British ships were involved. Two British cruisers and three destroyers were sunk, but the Royal Navy had effectively stopped the seaborne invasion.

On Crete, the New Zealanders were unable to mount an effective counter-attack against the Germans at Maleme, and soon the Germans were advancing towards Suda Bay. By May 26, Freyberg knew that he could not defend the island and ordered a withdrawal over the mountains to the south coast. For three nights beginning on the night of May 29, the remnants of the force was evacuated by British cruisers and destroyers over the beaches near the village of Sfakia. The British troops at Heraklion were evacuated on the night on May 28, but German aircraft sank two destroyers, damaged others and machine-gunned and bombed the survivors in the water. No plans could be made to evacuate the Australians fighting gallantly at Retimo, and they were mostly captured.

Despite serious losses, Admiral Cunningham was determined that the, “navy must not let the army down” declaring: “It takes three years to build a ship. It will take 300 years to build a new tradition. The evacuation will continue.”<sup>24</sup> In the battle for Crete, the Navy lost over 2,000 killed, more deaths than incurred by the Army ashore. Of the 54 warships that participated in the battle, only 20 were not lost or damaged. In the operations around Crete, the fleet lost 3 cruisers and 6 destroyers. In addition, 2 battleships, an aircraft carrier, 2 cruisers, and 2 destroyers were damaged so severely that they would be out of action for some months.

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, p. 241.

<sup>23</sup> Antony Beevor, *Crete: The Battle and the Resistance*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1994, pp. 157-8.

<sup>24</sup> Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, p. 265.

About 16,500 troops were evacuated. The British force lost about 4,000 killed and wounded, while a further 11,400 became prisoners. The German paratroops suffered very heavy casualties causing Hitler to order that they were no longer to be used in the paratroop role.

Britain made many mistakes in attempting to defend Crete. Its initial force had failed to prepare the defences. The Crete force was poorly organised and equipped as a result of its rapid evacuation from Greece. Freyberg handled the campaign poorly. He should have concentrated his force more on the airfields, trusting that the Royal Navy would prevent a seaborne invasion, which is what happened. Some brigade and battalion commanders, especially in the New Zealand division, showed insufficient drive and initiative. Outnumbered by the Luftwaffe, the RAF failed to provide air cover. The British Mediterranean Fleet was a substantial, highly capable force, but it struggled to supply and evacuate Crete in the face of German air superiority. Wartime investigations into the failure in Crete were hampered by the need to protect the existence of Ultra.<sup>25</sup>

If ground troops are required to defend a distant island without adequate air and naval support, they become hostages to fortune. Without the sacrifices of the Royal Navy, the British would have suffered even more damaging losses in Greece and Crete. Britain's decision to support Greece needed to balance political imperatives against military realities. In embarking on the Greek campaign, the British military leaders understood that they were not strong enough to withstand the German invasion, and they planned to evacuate their force just as soon as it was politically and military expedient to do so. In Crete, Britain was more determined to make a stand. The harsh fact was that Britain's military capability was inadequate, and British and Commonwealth commanders and their troops still had much to learn about modern warfare.

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<sup>25</sup> Callum MacDonald, *The Lost Battle: Crete 1941*, Free Press, New York, 1993, p. 299.

