

# SOF in Large-Scale Combat Operations: An Operational- Level Analysis of the British SOE in Crete and Greece during World War II

A Monograph

by

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## Abstract

SOF in Large-Scale Combat Operations: An Operational-Level Analysis of the British SOE in Crete and Greece during World War II, by Lieutenant Colonel Luke A. Wittmer, US Army, 55 pages.

In a global environment characterized by increasing complexity and parity between ‘great power’ states, the possibility of large-scale combat operations is an emergent exigency. Application of Special Operations Forces (SOF) power is often thought of within the confines of low-intensity, or ‘irregular’ conflicts and not the manifestation of large-scale combat. This monograph seeks to identify the modes of special operations activities applied by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) in Crete and Greece during World War II as a means to understand SOF roles, functions, capabilities, and limitations intrinsic of a large-scale conflict setting. When reconciled against contemporary doctrine, the SOE’s activities affirm several USSOF doctrinal activities and tasks. The cumulative effects of the SOE’s activities diverted, disrupted, delayed, and destroyed enemy forces relative to Allied conventional forces’ deep areas or peripheral areas of interest, a significant planning consideration should a future large-scale conflict emerge.

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## Acronyms

COHQ	Combined Operations Headquarters
D	Sabotage Section of MI6—Forerunner Organization to the SOE
EAB	Echelons Above Brigade
EAM	Ethnikon Apeleftherotikon Metopon—The Greek National Liberation Front
EDES	Ethnikos Dimokratikos Ellenikos Syndesmos—The Greek National Army of a Free Democratic Nation
EH	Electra House—Propaganda Section of the FO and Forerunner Organization to the SOE
ELAS	Ethnikos Laikos Apeleftherotikos Stratos—The Greek National People's Liberation Army
FO	Foreign Office
GHQ	General Headquarters
GS(R)	General Staff (Research)—Precursor to MI(R)
ISLD	Inter-Services Liaison Department—Secret Military Offshoot of SIS
MEW	Ministry of Economic Warfare
MI	Military Intelligence [London]
MI5	Internal Security
MI6	Foreign Intelligence—Also Known as SIS
MI9	Escape and Evasion
MI(R)	Military Intelligence (Research)—War Office Organization to Raise, Train and Equip Guerrillas Behind Enemy Lines, Forerunner Organization to the SOE
MO4	Section D's, later SOE's, Office in Cairo
MOI	Ministry of Information
PWE	Political Warfare Executive [London]
RAF	Royal Air Force

SAS	Special Air Service
SBS	Special Boat Service
SERE	Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape
SIS	Secret or Special Intelligence Service—Also Known as MI6
SO1	Special Operations Executive Propaganda Branch
SO2	Special Operations Executive Active Operations Branch
SO3	Special Operations Executive Planning Branch
SOE	Special Operations Executive
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SS	Schutzstaffel
US	United States
USSOF	United States Special Operations Forces

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## Introduction

Large-scale combat operations—a new term referenced in the US Army’s recently published *Field Manual 3-0*—may be an increasingly likely occurrence to counter near-peer threats to US global security interests such as Russian aggression in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as Chinese expansion in the Southwest Pacific. Any potential large-scale conflict campaign will require the application of Special Operations Forces (SOF) power to support the pursuit of national military objectives, and therefore the role of SOF in such a campaign merits further examination to better understand the full potential and limitations of possibility. Yet there is a lack of understanding of SOF roles in such a conflict. Senior decision makers often do not understand and, consequently, misuse SOF power, conceivably because irregular warfare is not as eminent as the more widely contemplated traditional form of maneuver warfare. This can lead to inefficient and ineffective employment of SOF with unnecessary risk to a low-density capability. This project will help to close a gap in understanding.

World War II was a US and British war for national survival against other ‘near peers,’ and employed SOF on a considerable scale. Throughout World War II, cases of SOF employment were broad and varied. The British Special Operations Executive (SOE) presents some of the most relevant historical cases. SOE has a close antecedent relationship to modern US Special Operations Forces (USSOF). The SOE’s activities in Axis-occupied Crete and Greece are of particular interest. Together these case studies present a broad range of activities that the SOE provided, successful and unsuccessful, in support of the broader large-scale war effort. The consideration of the Crete and Greece cases will enable a better understanding of SOF in the context of modern history and current doctrine to elucidate optimal employment, training, and resource considerations of SOF in future large-scale conflicts.

US military doctrine does not define *large-scale combat operations* despite referencing it frequently in several US Army 3-0 series publications. This project defines *large-scale combat operations* as combat operations between two or more near peer states on a global scale that are

characterized by the highest degree of lethality, destruction, intensity, chaos, complexity and uncertainty. When referring to *special operations*, this project intends the *Joint Publication 3-05* definition: “Operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk.”<sup>1</sup>

Understanding SOF operations in the context of large-scale combat operations first requires establishing the modes of activities that special operations forces provide in support of such a conflict. SOE operations in Crete and Greece show the diversity of special operations activities. The SOE cases illuminate various modes of SOF activity that are then categorized into like groups based on frequency across the case studies for both positive and negative outcomes. They affirm several USSOF doctrinal activities and tasks when reconciled with contemporary doctrine. SOE agents and their proxies provided effects through special reconnaissance, cover withdrawal of conventional forces, personnel recovery, unconventional warfare, direct action, SOF communications, military information support operations, information operations, negotiate terms of surrender, clandestine logistics, and survival tasks. The cumulative effects of the SOE’s activities diverted, disrupted, delayed, and destroyed enemy forces relative to Allied conventional forces’ deep areas or peripheral areas of interest—a significant planning consideration should a future large-scale conflict emerge.

The first section of the monograph provides relevant background information for the reader to grasp the history, structure, function, and training of the SOE organization. This section also presents the necessary strategic context for understanding the operational significance of the

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, *Joint Publication (JP) 3-05, Special Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), G-11.

Crete and Greece cases. The analysis of Crete and Greece case studies comprise the second section of the monograph. While Greece's unique geography and culture may limit the ability of this project to make wider inferences towards the application of SOF power, the examined cases indicate what is possible when considering SOF support to a large-scale combat operation.

The third section includes a synthesis of the historical analysis in section two with current doctrine. The outcome identifies the categories of SOF activities that apply to future large-scale conflict environments. The categorization provides understanding for the application of SOF within the context of current doctrine's battlefield framework. This section also discusses implications concerning future doctrine and SOF theory, leading to potential areas for future research.

This monograph explores two categories of literature: contemporary and historical doctrine, and history of the SOE and its campaigns in Greece and Crete. Contemporary US Joint and Army doctrine of the 3-0 (operations) and 3-05 (special operations) variety provide useful definitions, employment considerations, and current modes of SOF core activities and tasks.<sup>2</sup> However, there is a doctrinal gap in which, and how, SOF activities integrate within large-scale combat operations.

The SOE histories cover a broad array of SOE operations in World War II, but do not adequately address operational-level effects integration. The SOE is a relatively new and emergent area of study. There are a few in house histories written by William Mackenzie, M. R. D. Foot, and Leo Marks amongst other SOE originals. Their works consist of reports and books

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<sup>2</sup> US Joint Staff, *JP 3-05*, x. *JP 3-05* defines SOF core activities as, "...direct action, special reconnaissance, countering weapons of mass destruction, counterterrorism, unconventional warfare (UW), foreign internal defense, security force assistance, hostage rescue and recovery, counterinsurgency, foreign humanitarian assistance, military information support operations, and civil affairs operations."

written to establish an official historical record, but also to pass along lessons learned for future practitioners.<sup>3</sup>

The reliability of some SOE histories may be viewed as questionable given that several members of the SOE were willfully misleading in their war diary records due to operational security requirements and interagency rivalry, particularly with the Special Intelligence Service (SIS). Additionally, the SOE may have lost several of its original records during the bulk destruction of files in 1946 when the SOE was disbanded and subsumed into the SIS. By the 1970s, approximately 87 percent of the original SOE archive was lost.<sup>4</sup> Many of the core histories are reliable and corroborate other World War II histories as several substantive documents remained and new works emerged. SOE historian William Mackenzie wrote the first volume of the SOE's 'official history' series between 1945 and 1947.<sup>5</sup> However, Mackenzie presents a narrow perspective from the SOE headquarters in London and not as an operative agent in the field.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Mackenzie's work is foundational to the SOE historiography.

Michael Richard Daniell (M. R. D.) Foot is another prominent contributor to the SOE historical record as it stands today. Several other SOE agents have also added their memoirs to the SOE body of work. However, none of these speak directly to the modes of special operations activities as they relate to operational level effects and doctrine for large-scale combat operations. This project seeks to address this gap in the doctrinal and SOE historiography record as it relates to contemporary doctrine and future application.

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<sup>3</sup> Neville Wylie, "Introduction: Politics and strategy in the clandestine war—new perspectives in the study of SOE," In *The Politics and Strategy of Clandestine War: Special Operations Executive, 1940-1946*, edited by Neville Wylie, 1-14 (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Wylie, "Introduction: Politics and strategy in the clandestine war," 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

## Background and Context of Special Operations in the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean in World War II

### A New Way of Warfare: The Emergence of the SOE

By the Spring of 1940, Britain was the last remaining European opposition unconquered by Germany and found itself searching for answers to Nazi expansion and aggression throughout Europe. Winston Churchill, a proponent of irregular warfare approaches, believed the only hope for immediate offensive action against the Axis powers was by air bombardment, raiding the coastal areas of the occupied countries, and sabotage and subversion inside Europe.<sup>7</sup> Churchill identified the need to create a secret and specialized organization to oversee the conduct of irregular activities that operated beyond the scope of merely collecting intelligence, which at the time was the purview of the SIS. Thus the pretext for the founding charter of SOE, signed into existence by Churchill on 19 July 1940, states that it was “a new organization...established forthwith to co-ordinate all action, by way of subversion and sabotage, against the enemy overseas.”<sup>8</sup> Churchill later described SOE’s mandate more coarsely as “set Europe ablaze!” in his original order to the Minister of Economic Warfare (MEW), Hugh Dalton, under which the SOE was established.<sup>9</sup>

### SOE Organization

The structure of SOE was hewn from Section D—an offshoot action arm of the SIS—and Military Intelligence—Research (MI(R)), a British War Office organization started in 1938

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<sup>7</sup> E. H. Cookridge, *Set Europe Ablaze* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 1-2; Andrew L. Hargreaves, *Special Operations in World War II: British and American Irregular Warfare* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 10-11. Historian Andrew Hargreaves cites that “The prominent vein of irregular actions occurring throughout British military history ensured that by the outbreak of the Second World War the British ‘way in warfare’ was inherently amenable to the creation and employment of specialist formations.”

<sup>8</sup> M.R.D. Foot, *SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940-1946* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984), 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 30.

purposed for organizing, training, and equipping guerrilla groups behind enemy lines.<sup>10</sup> MI(R) and Section D competed with one another, which in turn led to command and control issues.<sup>11</sup> The 19 July 1940 SOE charter brought both like-function organizations together under one command along with the Foreign Office's (FO) Electra House (EH)—a black propaganda unit.<sup>12</sup> The whole of SOE was placed under the MEW for cover and cabinet representation.<sup>13</sup> The SOE council provided oversight and direction for the organization and consisted of a variety of members: soldiers of diverse specialties, airmen, sailors, FO representatives, accountants, businessmen, and civil servants.<sup>14</sup>

Once established, the SOE was further organized into three branches: SO1 for propaganda, SO2 for active operations, and SO3 for planning.<sup>15</sup> The arrangement did not last long though as SO1 was pulled from SOE in August 1941, renamed the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), and placed back under the overall control of the FO, but with input allowed from the MEW, Ministry of Information (MOI), and SOE.<sup>16</sup> Though a separate organization, the SOE enabled propaganda for the PWE and SOE organizers were sometimes given basic training in how to circulate rumors and produce leaflets.<sup>17</sup> SO2, which focused on sabotage and the organization of resistance groups in enemy occupied territories, became the core of SOE.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Antony Beevor, *Crete 1941: The Battle and the Resistance* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 353.

<sup>11</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>18</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 353.

The SOE matured into a more effective organization and established country sections to oversee SOE agents' activities and coordinate actions with regional General Headquarters (GHQs). The SOE also established a signals and codes section to manage the large volume of wireless telegraphy (W/T) traffic sent in code from the agents to the country sections. Due to the critical vulnerability of the SOE agents' wireless transmissions, the signals and codes department focused on increasing the security of W/T. The SOE required that agents route all wireless traffic through the country home station to reduce the risk of compromise.<sup>19</sup>

SOE relied on other agencies, departments, and service organizations to achieve effects. The first of such was the Independent (Commando) companies, later joined by formations such as Special Air Service (SAS) and Boat Service (SBS). A forethinking officer in the field of irregular warfare, Major J. C. F. Holland believed conventional forces required small teams of steadfast soldiers to operate in front of and on their flanks in fluid battles.<sup>20</sup> Holland envisioned units that could raid locations critical for the enemy, and cause destruction and dislocation as an economy-of-force.<sup>21</sup> The Independent companies were originally intended to stage amphibious guerrilla attacks against the Germans to slow their advance into Norway in April 1940 as there were not enough Royal Marines for the task.<sup>22</sup> A directive on 17 June 1940 officially created a command and training structure for the Independent companies that became the foundation for raiding Commando companies.<sup>23</sup> The command and control of the Commando companies fell under the newly created Combined Operations Directorate, later termed the Combined Operations Headquarters (COHQ), which was to work under the SOE initially, however, Churchill was

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<sup>19</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 112, 121-122.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Macksey, *Commando: Hit-and-Run Combat in World War II* (Chelsea, MI: Scarborough House Publishers, 1990), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Macksey, *Commando*, 8-9.

persuaded by the Admiralty to place the COHQ directly under the War Office instead.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, COHQ and SOE developed an interdependent relationship for raiding operations which enabled them to work closely throughout the war.

The SOE also relied on the Royal Navy and Air Force (RAF) to provide its logistical support in the form of airborne and maritime infiltration, exfiltration, and resupply. Additionally, the SOE maintained a close and sometimes strained relationship with the British Army throughout the war. Coordination at the operational level principally occurred through the co-located regional SOE and War Office GHQs.

SOE's relationship with the SIS and FO was more strained. The SIS viewed SOE as a competing and redundant organization that impinged on the SIS's authorities and functions. Throughout the war, the SIS often sought to subvert the SOE's activities by withholding intelligence and highlighting the SOE's communications and operational failures.<sup>25</sup> The rivalry continued until after the war when the SOE was absorbed into the SIS. Similarly, the FO perceived the SOE as overstepping its authorities and boundaries by inadvertently involving itself with political issues inherent of irregular warfare campaigns. SOE, in turn, viewed the FO as trying to exert control over SOE functions outside of the FO's mandate.<sup>26</sup>

### SOE Recruitment and Training

The personalities that worked in SOE and the agents themselves had a quality and personality traits that were altogether unique. SOE codemaker Leo Marks termed this trait as 'SOE minded.'<sup>27</sup> 'SOE-minded' was a singular term to articulate the can-do, independent,

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<sup>24</sup> Macksey, *Commando*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Leo Marks, *Between Silk and Cyanide: A Codemaker's War, 1941-1945* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 40, 103-104, 453.

<sup>26</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Marks, *Between Silk and Cyanide*, 72-73.

initiative-based, secretive, prudent character and spirit of the men and women that worked in the SOE. These attributes were notable when it came to recruiting and training SOE agents.

The recruitment process was deliberate to ensure the SOE candidate had language fluency, intimate knowledge of the culture and area, capacity for learning clandestine tasks, anti-Nazi motives and prudent character.<sup>28</sup> The SOE placed recruiting emphasis on foreign language fluency, and the most expedient, secure method of finding recruits was to bring in those who were known already to the original SOE staff.<sup>29</sup> The SOE did not select their recruits for innate military skills or physical aptitude as those were trainable qualities. The SOE was also indifferent to the political, religious, or social views and identity of their recruits so long as they had a deep motivation for defeating Nazi aggression.<sup>30</sup> Several SOE agents came from a criminal class social stratum, all of which brought skill sets and instincts useful for sabotage and subversion activity. Women comprised a large number of those working for the SOE and viewed with equal standing to men.<sup>31</sup> There were several clandestine tasks that women performed better than men as they could gain easier access to some locations, areas, or people where men often could not.<sup>32</sup>

SOE candidates that matched these recruitment criteria began a three phased training process. Phase one trained physical fitness, basic map reading, small arms training, and social skills.<sup>33</sup> Phase two provided paramilitary, hand-to-hand combat, and small arms training.<sup>34</sup> The training then progressed to demolitions using live explosives, with primary targets including

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<sup>28</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

railway tracks, bridges, engines, and rolling stock.<sup>35</sup> Intensive map reading and cross-country navigation were reinforced in this phase in addition to instruction in small unit tactics that focused on patrolling, fire and maneuver, ambush and some urban combat techniques.<sup>36</sup> Phase three was defensive in nature and focused on survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) techniques as well as clandestine fieldcraft techniques like the use of a cover identity and action.<sup>37</sup> After phase three, SOE agents received more technical courses such as parachuting, industrial sabotage, clandestine printing, lock- and safe-breaking, or clandestine wireless techniques.<sup>38</sup>

## Axis Expansion into the Mediterranean

By the fall of 1940, Great Britain was not yet certain that Germany intended to invade the Soviet Union and therefore was concerned about maintaining access to the Middle East.<sup>39</sup> Germany could potentially seize Greece and use it as a foothold to attack south towards Egypt and the Suez Canal.<sup>40</sup> On 12 October 1940 Benito Mussolini decided to invade Greece as a bid of one-upmanship in response to Hitler's occupation of Romania.<sup>41</sup> The Italian invasion of Greece commenced on 28 October 1940, and radically changed the Balkan situation. It forced Britain to honor its pledge of military assistance to the Greeks.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 66.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, xv.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> David Thomas, *Nazi Victory: Crete 1941* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1973), 38.

<sup>42</sup> Heather Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans: The Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia, 1941-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 27; Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 5.

The successive Italian defeats in the Balkans, North Africa, and the Mediterranean Sea forced Germany to intervene in the Mediterranean theater.<sup>43</sup> The German defeat in the Battle of Britain compounded Hitler's problems further. Hitler faced an undesirable situation in a committed and prolonged struggle across multiple fronts instead of a short, decisive campaign on a single front.<sup>44</sup> With an invasion of Britain unachievable, Hitler turned his attention to the south and east of Europe.<sup>45</sup>

The southern European Balkans region offered easy spoils. Hitler made a choice for his next move described in German War Directive no. 18, "The Balkans. Commander-in-Chief Army will be prepared, if necessary, to occupy from Bulgaria the Greek mainland north of the Aegean Sea. This will enable the German Air Force to attack targets in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in particular those English air-bases which threaten the Romanian oil fields."<sup>46</sup> Germany wanted to deny the British access to the island of Crete and mainland Greece to prevent the RAF from bombing the Romanian oil fields.<sup>47</sup> War Directive no. 20, transmitted on 13 December 1940 clarify Hitler's war plans for Greece.<sup>48</sup> The Directive articulated that if Germany could not defeat Britain by direct invasion, then Germany must deny Britain a foothold in Europe.<sup>49</sup> It also laid out the plan for 'Operation Marita,' the German invasion of Greece: "The first objective of the operation is the occupation of the Aegean coast and the Salonika basin....It will be the task of the Air Force to give effective support in all phases to the advance of the army, to eliminate the

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas, *Nazi Victory*, 46.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>47</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas, *Nazi Victory*, 46-47.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

enemy Air Force; and, as far as possible, to seize English bases in the Greek islands with airborne troops.”<sup>50</sup> Hitler set the stage for the SOE to intervene.

## SOE Operations in Crete and Greece

### Crete

#### Background

In 1938, before Nazi Germany decided to invade the island of Crete in Operation Mercury, MI(R)—a forerunner of SOE—recruited archeologist John Pendlebury to work from Crete as an agent. Pendlebury’s extensive knowledge of Crete from his time as a curator at Knossos in the 1930s made him an ideal candidate for special operations.<sup>51</sup> Pendlebury also spoke fluent Greek. MI(R) charged Pendlebury with establishing contact with potential resistance leaders and facilitating the organization of the Cretan guerrilla bands should Crete ever come under Axis occupation.<sup>52</sup> Pendlebury also pursued this task by setting caches, organizing guerrilla groups, and reconnoitering sites for ambushes and demolition targets. Pendlebury accordingly placed Cretan snipers covering springs and wells in advance of the German invasion. The battle for Crete that began with the German airborne invasion on 20 May 1941 validated Pendlebury’s efforts.<sup>53</sup>

The Cretan resistance formed by Pendlebury before the German invasion proved to be a capable fighting force alongside the British conventional forces during the battle for Crete. The senior British Allied commander on Crete, Major General Bernard Freyberg, lauded the Cretan irregulars, their fighting spirit, and advantages posed by their intimate knowledge of the terrain.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas, *Nazi Victory*, 46-47.

<sup>51</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 3-4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

The Cretan guerrillas were led by guerrilla *kapitans* Manoli Bandouvas, Petrakageorgis, and Antonis “Satanas” Grigorakis.<sup>55</sup> These prominent guerrilla *kapitans* and their respective units were the fruits of Pendlebury’s pre-invasion organizational efforts. The initial Cretan guerrilla resistance to the German’s invasion was ferocious and unanticipated which resulted in a psychological effect on the German paratroopers. This in turn led to wholesale reprisals against the Cretan population after the initial battle of Crete ended on 1 June 1941.<sup>56</sup>

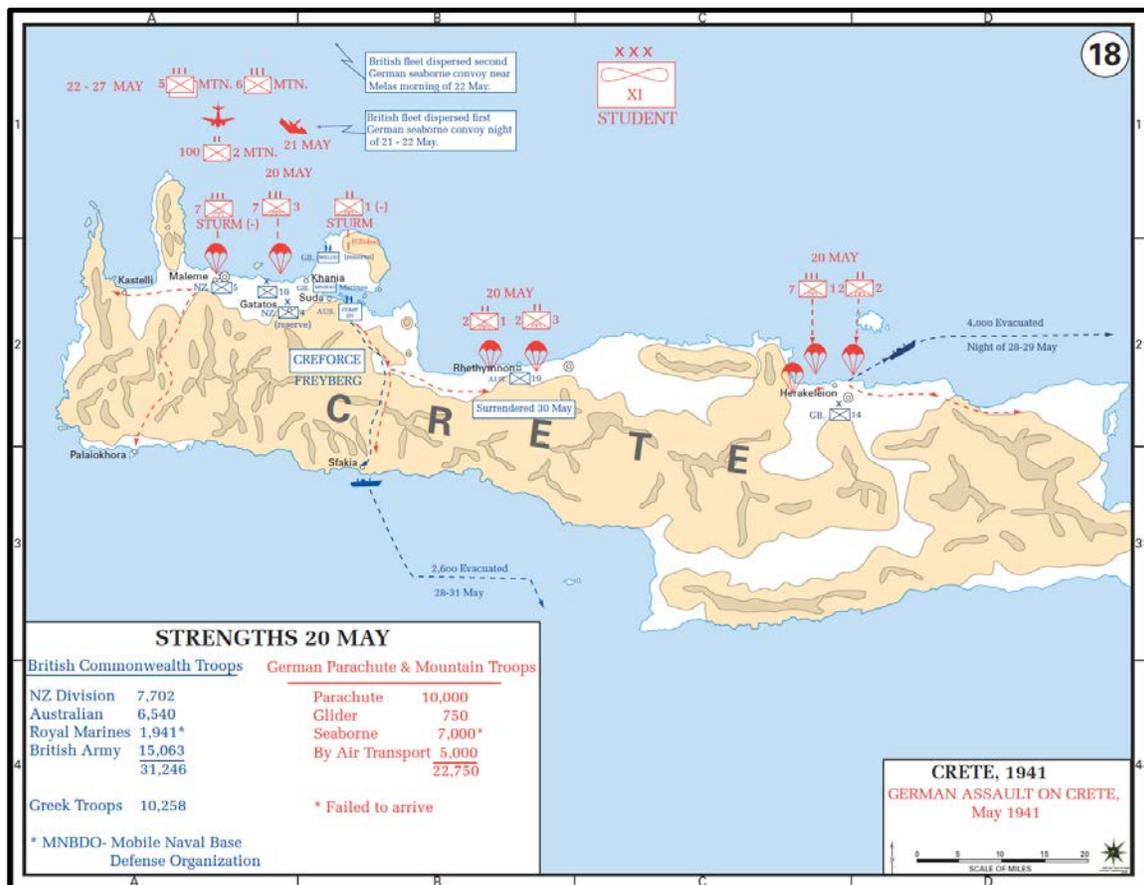


Figure 1. Campaign in the Balkans, German Assault on Crete, May 1941. US Military Academy, West Point, “Atlases: World War II European Theater,” accessed March 11, 2019, [https://westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic\\_departments/history/WWII%20Europe/WWIIEurope18.pdf](https://westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic_departments/history/WWII%20Europe/WWIIEurope18.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 99.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

Along with Pendlebury's Cretan irregular forces, the newly formed SBS Layforce commandos conducted a courageous delaying action in the vicinity of Maleme, which provided valuable time for retrograding Commonwealth forces.<sup>57</sup> The Layforce commandos could not dislodge the Germans from Maleme. With only two battalions, the commandos lacked the organization and equipment to fight the German airborne and mechanized units head-to-head.<sup>58</sup> Though they failed to retake the Maleme airfield, the Layforce commandos succeeded in delaying the German pursuit of British Commonwealth forces evacuating Crete. Brigadier Robert Laycock and a few other officers and men managed to evacuate, but several commandos were left behind.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the SOE Layforce commandos, the Cretan resistance enabled the evacuation of retreating British conventional forces. Pendlebury's guerrilla groups inflicted heavy casualties on the Germans and proved to be more effective night fighters than Germans and Allied forces on Crete.<sup>60</sup> Along the northern coast of Crete, the Cretan resistance held their ground near the Gulf of Canea and Kastelli Kissamou, which allowed Freyberg's British forces to conduct a withdrawal to the southern part of the island to stage for evacuation. The delaying action conducted by the Cretan irregulars prevented the Germans from bringing its mechanized forces ashore, and bought the British two-days to withdrawal.<sup>61</sup> The 8th Greek Regiment and

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<sup>57</sup> Macksey, *Commando*, 43. The 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> SBS commando battalions all served under the command of Brigadier Robert E. Laycock, whose namesake the task force was named for as was common for amalgamated British special operations units at the time.

<sup>58</sup> David Sutherland, *He Who Dares: Recollections of Service in the SAS, SBS and MI5* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 38; Macksey, *Commando*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Sutherland, *He Who Dares*, 38-39.

<sup>60</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 182.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

Cretan irregulars saved General Freyberg and his forces from German encirclement and surrender at Alikianou in the last days of the battle for Crete.<sup>62</sup>

With the end of the British withdrawal on 1 June 1941, the victorious Nazis conducted reprisal attacks against Cretan civilians, and in so doing, galvanized an already building Cretan resistance movement. Cretan sentiment was ripe for SOE agents to organize and channel towards their common enemy.<sup>63</sup> Upon occupation, the Axis powers separated the island into Italian and German zones with the troop concentrations principally along the more populated northern coast where the airfields, seaports and harbors were.<sup>64</sup> The center of the island and more rural southern coast with their mountainous terrain, and caves to shelter the resistance forces, were the natural and densely occupied guerrilla areas.<sup>65</sup> With John Pendlebury killed in action during the German invasion, additional SOE agents infiltrated Crete to bring organization to the Cretan resistance and mayhem to the German occupiers in the form of espionage, sabotage, and subversion. The first British SOE mission to help organize and support the Cretan resistance after the invasion arrived on the island on 9 October 1941. SOE agent Jack Smith-Hughes and Ralph Stockbridge of Inter-Services Liaison Department (ISLD), the first two British agents to infiltrate Crete after the occupation, were inserted by submarine.<sup>66</sup>

Smith-Hughes began by assessing the potential of guerrilla leaders, many of the same ones that Pendlebury had worked with to organize just months before.<sup>67</sup> Smith-Hughes' initial

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<sup>62</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 203.

<sup>63</sup> G. C. Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete: 1941-1945* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1995), 29. Nazis executed an estimated 2,000 Cretan civilians in June 1941 alone. Such killings continued for the duration of Nazi occupation through 1945.

<sup>64</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 243.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 247. Submarine insertion was the SOE preferred method of infiltration and exfiltration in the Greek maritime environment next to indigenous caique ships.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

organizational efforts and meetings paid off as Cretan *kapitans* agreed to fight unified under the National Organization of Crete, or EOK, the namesake of the British sponsored national Crete resistance.<sup>68</sup> In the relatively brief time that Jack Smith-Hughes served on Crete, he formulated the basic concepts of the underground resistance under British direction: infiltration, supply, communications, assault, and evacuation. Smith-Hughes later withdrew from the island and was given command of the Cretan operations desk for the SOE at Cairo GHQ.<sup>69</sup>

Other SOE agents replaced Smith-Hughes. Two of the most noteworthy were Xan Fielding, one of the earliest arrivals who took command of the agents on the western part of the island, and later Patrick Leigh Fermor who planned and executed the famed operation that captured the ranking German commander on Crete, General Heinrich Kreipe.<sup>70</sup> Leigh Fermor built a robust network of Cretan intelligence agents and guides all across the island.<sup>71</sup> The security and success of the SOE agents depended upon the protection and provisions of the Cretans. Communications relied upon ‘local runners’ like George Psychoundakis, the runner for SOE agent Leigh Fermor.<sup>72</sup> The first resistance efforts lacked coherence and organization, but over time with experience and training, the EOK became more organized and lethal.<sup>73</sup> However, the SOE’s first significant operations were not of the lethal kind.

### SOE Operations on Crete

The first SOE operation in occupied Crete facilitated the escape and evacuations of POWs and stranded British Commonwealth troops off of Crete. When General Freyberg’s

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<sup>68</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 250.

<sup>69</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 57-58.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>71</sup> Damien Lewis, *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare: How Churchill's secret warriors set Europe ablaze and gave birth to modern black ops* (New York: Quercus, 2016), 178-179.

<sup>72</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 63-64.

<sup>73</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 252.

Creforce troops hastily evacuated the island in the last week of May 1941, roughly 5,000 troops were left behind.<sup>74</sup> Cretan villagers helped the British POWs to escape, recover lost provisions, and provided food, supplies, shelter, and early warning for British escapees.<sup>75</sup> Faced with the problem of recovering the left-behind soldiers, General Archibald Wavell, British GHQ commander in Cairo, decided to dispatch a SOE representative to Crete with orders to contact the Cretan underground and initiate a plan led by Commander Francis Pool to collect these soldiers for evacuation from the island.<sup>76</sup>

Pool infiltrated Crete by submarine on 17 July 1941. After linking up with the Cretan resistance leaders, Pool proceeded with the coordination and evacuation of left-behind forces.<sup>77</sup> Royal Navy submarines and a few SOE operated a few indigenous Greek caiques exfiltrated the remaining troops and escaped POWs.<sup>78</sup> The same SOE flotilla of caiques were a primary method of smuggling men, weapons, and equipment between North Africa and Crete as a part of the logistics effort that fueled the Cretan resistance.<sup>79</sup>

Resistance forces formed into two diametrically opposed political groups as they developed in post-occupation Crete and Greece. The Greek National Liberation Front--the Ethnikon Apeleftherotikon Metopon (EAM) was a powerful emergent political group on continental Greece, and their influence was far-reaching to the Greek archipelago and Crete islands. The National People's Liberation Army-Ethnikos Laikos Apeleftherotikos Stratos

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<sup>74</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 221.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>76</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>78</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 245-246.

<sup>79</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 55.

(ELAS) served as the military arm of the EAM from the day of its founding on 10 April 1942.<sup>80</sup> The communist EAM-ELAS group was unreconcilable with the British SOE political leanings and were more concerned with competing with SOE backed guerrilla groups than fighting the German occupation forces. The SOE supported Greek National Army of a Free Democratic Nation, otherwise known as EDES, under the command of General Napoleon Zervas opposed EAM-ELAS.<sup>81</sup> There were also difficulties amongst the SOE-backed Cretan guerrilla *kapitans*, especially when it came to vying for SOE airdrop arms and provisions, but none that fractured the Cretan resistance effort beyond the diplomatic skills of SOE agents to arbitrate. To a degree, the mediation role empowered and legitimized SOE agents in the eyes of the resistance.

As SOE led guerrilla operations built momentum in June 1942, the Cairo GHQ asked the SOE to conduct a shaping operation on Crete to support Operation Husky, the Allied invasion of Sicily. The SOE operation, termed Operation Albumen, aimed to destroy German aircraft on strategically important Cretan airfields to prevent them from affecting the Allied shipping and invasion force on Sicily. Aircraft based on Crete were well positioned to attack shipping and dominate the sea lanes in the Eastern Mediterranean. These airfields also provided valuable staging points for Germany to reinforce Rommel's Afrika Korps.<sup>82</sup>

SOE's initial plan was to attack four operational airfields on Crete simultaneously at midnight on the night of 12 June. The pre-mission briefings described the operation's objective:

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<sup>80</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 186-187. The EAM-ELAS organization was dominated by an uncompromising group of communist leaders who intended to prevent the return of the monarchy to Greece once the German occupation army withdrew. ELAS recruited former officers of the Greek army, the disgruntled political bourgeoisie, and others disenchanted with the pre-war government. ELAS filled the remainder of their numbers by way of intimidation, threats, coercion, and fear. Enticed by the EAM-ELAS promise of a future utopia, several people of Greece and Crete rushed to join the communist party and guerrilla ranks.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. EDES had conservative political leanings yet did not favor the return of the monarchy; however, unlike EAM-ELAS, Zervas's allegiances were to Greece and not the Soviet Union.

<sup>82</sup> Sutherland, *He Who Dares*, 63. Four operational airfields interested SOE planners. Maleme in the west, Heraklion in the east, Kastelli in the center, and Tymbaki in the south.

"Primary tasks will be the destruction of as many aircraft as possible on the allotted airfields. Targets other than aircraft (e.g., gas or bomb dumps) will only be attacked if it appears that this is the best way of destroying nearby aircraft."<sup>83</sup> The SBS was handed the task for execution, but they required significant assistance from the SOE agents and EOK on Crete primarily in the form of intelligence and logistical support.<sup>84</sup>

On 6 June 1941, the SBS raiding forces infiltrated by submarine and motorboat.<sup>85</sup> Upon landing, SOE agent Tom Dunabin, an archaeologist and Cretan scholar by trade who lived and worked in the Cretan mountains since the German invasion in 1941, met the SBS group. Dunabin provided Cretan local guides and presented the SBS teams with critical intelligence needed for the operation.<sup>86</sup> The local Cretans also provided the raiding force with food and water, helped carry heavy loads of explosives and communications equipment, and provided accurate intelligence for the airfield objectives, infiltration and exfiltration routes. The Cretan underground also hijacked a German supply truck to support the infiltration of the raiding force at the Heraklion airfield, which was further augmented by a Cretan diversionary attack.<sup>87</sup> The Operation Albumen Commander later recalled, "Without Cretan support the SBS would never have reached their targets or been able to attack them."<sup>88</sup>

Operation Albumen was a multifaceted undertaking. The PWE aimed to win the information war against the Axis forces by getting positive stories of the raid broadcasted by the British media at the earliest opportunity.<sup>89</sup> Planners of Operation Albumen expected the Germans

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<sup>83</sup> Lewis, *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare*, 171.

<sup>84</sup> Sutherland, *He Who Dares*, 63.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>87</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 91.

<sup>88</sup> Sutherland, *He Who Dares*, 104.

<sup>89</sup> Lewis, *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare*, 171.

to take reprisals against the local Cretans, upon whose help the SBS raiders relied. The local broadcasts in Greek were to deflect blame for the raids away from the Cretans.<sup>90</sup> To enhance the credibility of the narrative, each SBS patrol carried a decoy Union Jack flag which was left behind on the objectives to indicate that the raid was carried out by British troops.<sup>91</sup> Other British standard issue items were also left behind.<sup>92</sup>

The SBS raiders assessed Maleme airfield as too difficult to raid successfully.<sup>93</sup> There were no aircraft to destroy at Tymbaki, but the Kastelli SBS team successfully destroyed eight aircraft, six trucks, and multiple bomb and petrol dumps.<sup>94</sup> The most lucrative target was Heraklion airfield with 21 aircraft destroyed. In all, the SBS destroyed 29 German aircraft on Crete.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the SOE raiding force exfiltrated with two German prisoners for intelligence exploitation processing back at Cairo GHQ.<sup>96</sup> The SBS Commander's after action report described Operation Albumen's effects in support of Operation Husky as successful since "No air attack was made on the slow Husky convoys."<sup>97</sup> In addition to the material effects, Operation Albumen's success had a psychological effect on the German troops at Crete.<sup>98</sup>

With the overthrow of Mussolini, the Italians quickly moved to sign an armistice with Allied forces in September 1943. The problem on Crete for the Italian garrisons was there were

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<sup>90</sup> Lewis, *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare*, 172.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Sutherland, *He Who Dares*, 64.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>97</sup> Lewis, *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare*, 220.

<sup>98</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 105. Despite the SOE's best efforts to prevent reprisal attacks, several civilian hostages were rounded up and executed in retribution for the raid.

no Allied commanders to accept their surrender. The SOE charged Leigh Fermor to meet with the ranking Italian commander on Crete, General Angelo Carta, to discuss terms of surrender.<sup>99</sup>

Leigh Fermor believed that the overthrow of Mussolini provided an opportunity guerrilla alliance with the Italian forces.<sup>100</sup> However, with no Allied landing planned for Crete, the armistice did not mobilize Italians as Leigh Fermor hoped because the German commanding general on Crete, General Müller, implemented control measures to keep the Italians in check.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, Leigh Fermor negotiated the terms of surrender for General Carta's forces and coordinated for his exfiltration to Cairo GHQ where a British general accepted Carta's formal surrender.<sup>102</sup>

The capture of the ranking German commander, General Kreipe, in early 1944 was one of the boldest SOE operations on Crete. The idea to capture the German commanding general on Crete was the imaginative idea of Leigh Fermor and SOE agent William Stanley Moss.<sup>103</sup> Both agents believed that capturing the ranking German commander—a symbol of fear and oppression on Crete—would encourage Cretan support of the resistance with the added psychological effect of demeaning “the German and shatter his prestige and self-confidence.”<sup>104</sup> Leigh Fermor and Moss recruited two Cretan guerrillas to execute the operation, who were trained offsite in the SOE demolitions and parachute training program.<sup>105</sup> The four-man team planned the operation at SOE HQ in Cairo and all infiltrated Crete separately over the course of three months by way of airborne and maritime methods. The team linked-up on Crete and then made the long trek over

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<sup>99</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 135.

<sup>100</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 292.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 153.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 153, 159.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

the Cretan mountains to the ambush area near Heraklion. The operation moved into the reconnaissance phase where the SOE agents and their Cretan guerrillas leveraged their robust intelligence network to determine General Kreipe's pattern-of-life.<sup>106</sup> Leigh Fermor assessed that the best opportunity to capture Kreipe would be by interdiction of his limousine in transit.

Leigh Fermor's team executed the operation on 26 April 1944. Dressed in captured German uniforms and posing as a German traffic control point, the small SOE team executed the ambush quickly.<sup>107</sup> The SOE team managed to pass through 22 enemy checkpoints in all, many times needing to speak German to the enemy guards to sustain the ruse.<sup>108</sup> Once free and clear of the checkpoints, the team abandoned the limousine and left behind a note with British army items to claim responsibility for the operation to limit reprisals.<sup>109</sup> The raiding party exfiltrated by boat on the evening of 14 May 1944.<sup>110</sup> The RAF conducted a leaflet drop after the operation to reinforce the psychological effect and to prevent reprisals.<sup>111</sup> The operation had the intended psychological effect that Leigh Fermor and Moss had hoped for as the news of the successful operation encouraged the people on Crete and in London alike.<sup>112</sup>

With the invasion of Sicily and the follow-on invasion of Italy, the Allied conventional forces decided to bypass Crete and the Balkans in a southern approach into continental Europe. The Allied decision meant that the responsibility for the liberation of Crete rested with the SOE-

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<sup>106</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 160.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-166. It took only 90 seconds for Leigh Fermor and the others to subdue General Kreipe and his driver, sterilize the area and drive away in the general's limousine.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-171.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 172, 175. Despite the Allied efforts to avoid them, the Germans responded with reprisal attacks on civilians.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 173, 184.

led Cretan resistance alone. As the struggle for Europe entered 1944, the Cretan guerrilla campaign heightened its tempo of sabotage and subversion by way of ambushes and raid attacks. SOE also sponsored targeted assassination, or kill, missions of the Gestapo and SS which had the desired psychological effect of inciting fear and paranoia.<sup>113</sup>

The Cretan guerrillas progressed to company and battalion-sized ambushes as their tactical proficiency increased. Bandouvas' guerrillas achieved initial success in one such ambush. However, the Germans responded with their aircraft, armor, and artillery advantage to inflict heavy Cretan casualties.<sup>114</sup> In this case, Bandouvas did not coordinate his actions with the SOE agents, who had the responsibility to manage the timing, size, and scope of the guerrilla activity. The results had dire consequences and emphasized the importance of timing the spike of lethal guerrilla activity commensurate with what the guerrilla force could sustain.<sup>115</sup> Despite setbacks, there were more successful ambushes and raids that achieved damaging psychological effects against the Germans.<sup>116</sup> SOE agents also waged psychological operations to attack German soldiers' morale.<sup>117</sup> The propaganda on Crete aimed to cause the disaffection of German soldiers by targeting the emotions of German soldiers who disliked the Nazi regime and others who had Cretan girlfriends.<sup>118</sup>

The insurgency momentum increased as reports of the Soviet Army's movement into Romania threatened the German southern flank. The Cretan resistance provided an economy-of-force operation for the Allies in the Eastern Mediterranean as the Allied conventional forces

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<sup>113</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 136. The Gestapo and SS were principally responsible for the summary executions on Crete.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 277.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 328-329.

squeezed the eastern and southern fronts.<sup>119</sup> As the Allied forces seized the initiative in continental Europe during the summer of 1944, the Cretan guerrillas could spike their lethal activity in scale and frequency transitioning closer to a war of movement, attacking German patrols daily.<sup>120</sup>

By July 1944, guerrilla leader *Kapitan* Petrakogeorgis could ambush battalion-sized elements, inflicting scores of German casualties while sustaining few themselves.<sup>121</sup> The German strength in the summer of 1944 reduced to 15,000 from 22,000 as German garrisons did not receive replacements given demands of other European fronts.<sup>122</sup> By the end of 1944, increased numbers of guerrilla bands constantly harassed the Germans. Given no troop reinforcements or supplies to supplement losses, the Crete German command withdrew German troops from all satellite garrisons to concentrate forces within the Canea city limits.<sup>123</sup> The Germans retrograded to Canea from the outstations under relentless guerrilla ambushes and attacks, where they were eventually encircled.<sup>124</sup>

With Allied victory assured on the continental European front, the encircled German garrison at Canea surrendered on 8 May 1945.<sup>125</sup> On 7 May 1945, ELAS attempted to seize all of the major towns on Crete to gain political control in response to EAM issued orders to do so as the last of the German troops retrograded from the outstations.<sup>126</sup> The SOE-backed EOK

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<sup>119</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 323.

<sup>120</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 196.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-196.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>124</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 327.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 346. Victory-Europe Day was 9 May 1945.

<sup>126</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 200, 204.

encouraged the guerrilla leaders on Crete to oppose the EAM-ELAS move to maintain control and security of the cities until a Greek government could form.<sup>127</sup> On Crete, the EAM-ELAS guerrillas stood-down in the face of the EOK opposition. Notwithstanding, the Cretans celebrated their unlikely victory over the German division-sized force in May 1945. It was a victory enabled by the British SOE agents and commandos that fought alongside the Cretan guerrillas.

### Modes of Special Operations Activities on Crete

Examining SOF activities conducted on Crete, the active and passive collection of information on the enemy was pervasive throughout the entirety of the conflict. Most, if not all, of the resistance operations conducted on Crete required precise information for the success of guerrilla units overmatched by the Axis forces in every measurable category of conventional combat capability. Gaining a position of relative advantage in time and space required surprise, or clandestine execution at the very least.<sup>128</sup> The evacuation of British troops and escaped POWs required an information collection effort from the SOE established intelligence network to effectively coordinate exfiltration operations with the Royal Navy. The successful raids of Operation Albumen, ambush and capture of General Kreipe, and the myriad of other subversive raids, ambushes, and acts of sabotage all required detailed intelligence derived from the SOE's collection capabilities.

SOE-led guerrillas and SBS commandos performed a delaying action for the retreating and evacuating British forces from 23 May-1 June 1941. The efforts of the resistance and SBS commandos provided time and space for General Freyberg to evacuate thousands of his troops to allow them to fight another day in Northern Africa.

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<sup>127</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 204.

<sup>128</sup> David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 168. Tucker and Lamb define clandestine as the operation itself is hidden to increase its chances of success.

The SOE also provided an organizing function for the Cretan resistance both before and during Axis occupation. Before the German invasion of Crete, Pendlebury built the nascent structure of what became the backbone of the EOK underground and guerrilla coalition. Under Pendlebury's direction, these resistance forces fought effectively as a force multiplier during the German invasion of Crete and conducted an effective delaying action to provide General Freyberg a few extra days to evacuate thousands more troops.

After the evacuation, SOE agents provided the necessary military expertise and organizing skills to unite disparate and self-interested guerrilla groups to achieve unity of effort. EAM-ELAS and guerrilla *kapitans* that opted to work apart from SOE's organized method, like Bandouvas' ill-fated ambush in 1943, did not realize successful outcomes relative to groups that did. The organizational challenges for the SOE agents also highlight the inherent political nature of an unconventional warfare campaign. SOE agents constantly arbitrated internal disputes between guerrilla groups and leaders vying for political power.

SOE agents also trained the Cretan guerrilla units themselves, and in specific cases, did so for select guerrilla soldiers offsite in Allied controlled areas. In the operation to capture General Kreipe, the SOE trained select guerrillas at one of the offsite SOE demolitions and parachute training program schools.<sup>129</sup> This arrangement allowed the guerrillas that SOE worked with to gain greater technical proficiency in a shorter time period, access to resources unavailable in occupied territory, and without the added concern of compromise.

The SOE agents' ability to communicate by both technical and non-technical means enabled the effectiveness of special operations on Crete in support of the overall Allied effort. Cretan runners were invaluable to the SOE agents as over-use of W/T required an inexhaustible

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<sup>129</sup> William Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940-1945* (London: St. Ermin's Press, 2000), 145; Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 154. Offsite training was customary practice for SOE in the Mediterranean theater. The principal offsite schools for training Greek guerrillas were in the city of Haifa of modern-day Israel.

supply of batteries and left SOE agents and their guerrillas vulnerable to SS and Gestapo signals intercept trackers. Furthermore, runners and SOE agents that spoke fluent Greek, and could pass in appearance for locals, maintained a degree of freedom of movement to smuggle past checkpoints and guarded German garrisons to carry out intelligence collection, sabotage, or subversion operations. SOE agents reserved long-range W/T transmissions for relaying essential intelligence; coordinating airdrops; and maritime transport of men, weapons, and equipment between Crete and Cairo GHQ. Notably, neither technical or non-technical communications methods were instantaneous. Communications could take several days or weeks to send, receive, and action.

Perhaps the most significant activities conducted by the SOE on Crete were sabotage and subversion by way of ambushes, raids, and attacks that varied in scope, scale, sequence, duration, and frequency. The resistance could not conduct these operations on a larger, battalion-sized scale until later in the campaign when the pressure of Allied conventional forces on adjacent fronts in 1944 constrained the Germans' ability to reinforce Crete. Transitioning to larger-scale operations earlier was met with a devastating German response that quickly overwhelmed the guerrillas and inflicted heavy casualties. German reprisal attacks were damaging to the civilian population and often deterred SOE-led resistance attacks. So much so that at one-point Cairo GHQ issued instructions to SOE agents on Crete to cease any sabotage operations that would result in Axis forces harming civilians.<sup>130</sup> SOE agents and commandos took great care to weigh expected gains of an operation with the likelihood of Axis reprisals, and mitigate risk through information operations messaging. Notwithstanding, the relentless ambushes of German patrols; Operation Albumen raids that destroyed German aircraft; and targeted capture and kill missions of senior German officers, Gestapo, and SS personnel all had outsized psychological effects to both encourage the Cretan resistance and demoralize the occupying forces.

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<sup>130</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 326.

Deliberate propaganda and information operations amplified the psychological effect of sabotage and subversion operations. Propaganda actions were pre-planned for significant operations like Albumen and the capture of General Kreipe. SOE agents tried to magnify the lethal activities of the resistance through propaganda messaging to demoralize Axis forces while encouraging the Cretan population to increase support for the EOK resistance. Demonstrable measures of effectiveness were increased support from the population and the progressively apprehensive actions of the Germans culminated in the consolidation of Axis forces at Canea.

SOE agents played a unique role with the conduct of political negotiations for terms of surrender for General Carta's Italian units once the armistice was signed. SOE agents on Crete assumed the responsibility for negotiating the surrender of the Italians in 1943, and the Germans in 1945 given the absence of any ranking Allied commanders. Usually the responsibility of senior military leaders or diplomatic FO officials, SOE agent Leigh Fermor demonstrated a diplomatic acumen and confidence atypical of junior officers. The attributes that the SOE selected its agents for paid an unexpected dividend in this case.

SOE clandestine logistical operations enabled all the above SOF activities. Much of the supplies and equipment the guerrillas utilized came from battlefield recovery from successful ambushes of German patrols, theft from the German and Italian bases and garrisons, and surrender of Italian forces. The local Cretans mainly supplied food and sustenance themselves or by living off the land enabled by SOE-trained survival skills.<sup>131</sup> The SOE supplied the remaining balance by way of airdrop or maritime delivery, though provisions delivered this way were mainly personnel replacements, weapons, explosives, and ammunition.

Evaluating the holistic effect of the SOE-sponsored Cretan resistance movement, Leigh Fermor described it as "one of the most successful in Europe," but "it was never put to the final test— island-wide revolt in cooperation with an Allied landing. The Balkans never received this as

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<sup>131</sup> Kiriakopoulos, *The Nazi Occupation of Crete*, 112.

well.”<sup>132</sup> This quote shows the archetype of an unconventional warfare campaign culminates with the introduction of conventional forces.

The wonder of the campaign on Crete was that it succeeded without Allied conventional forces on the island. The scale of guerrilla operations on Crete from June 1944 through Victory-Europe Day was indirectly enabled by the scale and success of the Allied conventional efforts on continental Europe. In this view, Crete, though significant in the Eastern Mediterranean, was a peripheral effort for the Allies. SOE on Crete was an economy-of-force option that successfully tied-down German forces and provided protective shaping effects for the Allied invasion of Sicily, Italy, and to a lesser degree, Northern Africa. SOE operations in nearby Greece contributed similar effects.

## Greece

### Background

In 1940, the position of Greece differed from the other Balkan countries as no German lines-of-communication of vital importance ran through it; nor was there German property of value to warrant the invasion of a friendly, neutral country.<sup>133</sup> To avoid compromising the neutral Greek government, SOE built-up its operations and agents under a local business cover.<sup>134</sup> SOE’s directive for pre-invasion operations in Greece emphasized the pre-positioning of resources to support operations in other countries in southeastern Europe.<sup>135</sup> SOE also directed preparations for operations in Greece including an underground propaganda campaign before the 1941 Axis

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<sup>132</sup> Patrick Leigh Fermor, “Foreword,” in *The Cretan Runner: His Story of the German Occupation*, auth. George Psychoundakis, trans. Patrick Leigh Fermor (New York: New York Review of Books, 1998), 11.

<sup>133</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 133.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

invasion, but was careful to honor Greece's neutral status.<sup>136</sup> Anti-Axis propaganda was distributed across the Greek border in Albania by the SOE, and pan-Balkan propaganda broadcasts from Greece *ante bellum* were deemed successful.<sup>137</sup>

The Italian attack on Greece in October 1940 unified the politically divided Greeks and created a fervor of patriotism and resistance. It also brought promised British military assistance in the form of the Royal Navy, RAF, Commonwealth Army, and SOE support.<sup>138</sup> The British conventional forces built-up their forces on mainland Greece over seven-weeks.<sup>139</sup> Local naval superiority enabled Britain to project power from Egypt and modest logistical support for conventional and SOE operations in Greece.<sup>140</sup> In addition, SOE agent Peter Fleming established an indigenous force to defend the Greek border alongside British troops. Named 'Yak Mission,' this force moved into Northern Greece to train resistance groups and establish defensive positions along the Yugoslav border.<sup>141</sup>

Initially, the Greek Army held its own against the 1940 Italian invasion. However, on 6 April 1941, the more competent and capable German *Wehrmacht* invaded Yugoslavia and Greece.<sup>142</sup> The British-led Allied forces responded to the German invasion of Yugoslavia with the deployment of a coalition corps, known as 'W Force,' to defend Greece.<sup>143</sup> SOE did not have

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<sup>136</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 134-135.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-143.

<sup>138</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, xv.

<sup>139</sup> Thomas, *Nazi Victory*, 52-53. The build-up of British forces on mainland Greece was designated Operation Lustre.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>141</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 27.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi. W Force consisted of an Australian division, a New Zealand division, and a British armored brigade.

much time to prepare the Greek resistance before enemy occupation; nor were there many opportunities for much to be done in the way of demolitions along the retrograde route.<sup>144</sup> Nonetheless, Fleming's Yak Mission and his demolition party of ex-MI(R) soldiers managed to sabotage some of the railways.<sup>145</sup>

Despite Allied defensive effort, the Germans turned the Allied right flank in late April 1941, flowing south from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria to defeat the Greek and Anglo-Anzac forces. The Royal Navy Mediterranean Fleet evacuated remnants of the defeated armies to Crete after the Greek Government formally capitulated on 24 April 1941.<sup>146</sup>

Like Crete, SOE-led resistance groups conducted a delaying action for Allied conventional forces as the Royal Navy evacuated them from the Greece mainland. Cairo GHQ planned for SOE to cover the withdrawal of Allied troops if Greece fell under Axis control.<sup>147</sup> The Yak Mission conducted sabotage and economy-of-force operations to buy W Force time to evacuate troops by destroying bridges, locomotives Greek railways, and blocking roadways to delay the German advance on Athens.<sup>148</sup> To this end, SOE use of improvised demolitions were effective enough to slow down the German advance.<sup>149</sup> Despite the Allies' best efforts to evacuate W Force from mainland Greece, there were still some 7,000 troops left behind. The remaining British forces were forced to surrender to the Germans on the morning of 29 April

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<sup>144</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 233.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Thomas, *Nazi Victory*, 58.

<sup>147</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 141.

<sup>148</sup> Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 45.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*



## SOE Operations in Greece

The SOE played a significant role in evacuating the left-behind Allied troops on mainland Greece in the wake of Germany's blitzkrieg advance. The geography of Greece was more natural territory for the SOE to operate in than the other Balkan countries as the Germans could not entirely stop the maritime traffic without destroying the livelihood of the people.<sup>151</sup> The abundant coastlines and islands made the border and maritime security impossible for the Germans to enforce and easier for the SOE to infiltrate and exfiltrate personnel. SOE agent N. G. L. Hammond and his small group provided a low-visibility sea ferrying capability to evacuate elements of W Force to Crete. The Athens based 'Apollo' resistance network also established an underground escape route and used it to evacuate at least a hundred individuals successfully.<sup>152</sup>

The SOE began organizing the Greek resistance after the German occupation in Spring 1941. The resistance and intelligence network the SOE established in Athens, known as the 'Prometheus' and 'Apollo' organization, was one of the largest and most effective for SOE during the war. The network was based in Athens and Piraeus, which together formed an industrial town and seaport of vital importance where it could target industrial and logistical objectives. The network was successful against Axis shipping in the summer of 1942 and served as a reliable source of shipping intelligence. It also served as a vital link in the development of guerrilla networks in the mountains.<sup>153</sup>

Apollo's network prospered in 1943 as it reported a continuous series of sabotage successes against Axis shipping and some minor industrial sabotage. The Apollo network attacked some 50 ships in total.<sup>154</sup> Apollo also managed to conduct six successful railway

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<sup>151</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 145.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>153</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 479; Beevor, *Crete 1941*, 49.

<sup>154</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 479; Foot, *SOE*, 234. After the Axis occupation of Greece, SOE agent Prometheus (Colonel Bakirdzis) remained behind with others from his network to supply intelligence until he was compromised in mid-1942. Another SOE agent, Koutsoyannopoulos or

sabotage operations and two successful attacks on munition dumps. Moreover, the network staged a serious strike and popular demonstration in June 1943 in response to the Nazi shooting of 18 hostages in reprisal for the sinking of a German 7,000-ton ship in the Piraeus.<sup>155</sup> The Apollo network also prevented the Germans from destroying key areas of the Piraeus port to accelerate its opening for Allied use after the German withdrawal in Spring 1945.<sup>156</sup>

Organizing the Greek resistance groups proved challenging for the SOE. The resistance groups in Greece were a kaleidoscope of various factions with different political leanings. The lack of any unified Greek government also gave rise to several competing resistance factions. In aligning with the various groups, Churchill's position was that anyone the Nazis attacked was a potential ally.<sup>157</sup> Therefore, most groups that were willing to oppose Nazi occupation drew SOE interest.<sup>158</sup> SOE operated closely with communist elements in occupied territory: notably in Greece and Yugoslavia.<sup>159</sup>

The main guerrilla movements in the Greek mountains were republican in tendency—open to the return of the monarch. Others were anti-monarchical, the strongest and largest of which was EAM-ELAS.<sup>160</sup> The SOE preferred to work with the Zervas led EDES organization.<sup>161</sup>

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'Prometheus II,' took over the Athens network for a short time and was able to coordinate some re-supply airborne operations until being caught in 1943, at which point SOE replaced him with John Peltekis, codenamed 'Apollo.'

<sup>155</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 480.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 149.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 154. Some SOE historians have since critiqued this approach as short-sighted and a catalyst for post-World War II political conflicts in Europe.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. The communists had a conception of guerrilla warfare prior to World War II as asymmetric, clandestine approaches were a hallmark of Soviet foreign policy grounded in the origins of the Soviet regime.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-237. EDES was the only non-communist dominated Greek resistance armies that managed to stay in the field till the Germans left the country; ELAS consumed the other smaller resistance groups.

The SOE did not have much success with underground work from ranking Greek politicians. Day-to-day sabotage was instead carried out by unknown 'men of the people,' with the tacit support of commonplace Greeks and not the politicians of Athens.<sup>162</sup> In the end, EAM-ELAS and communist competition with Greek republican politics encumbered SOE's efforts to organize guerrilla bands and area commands in Greece.<sup>163</sup> As the SOE gained its footing in Axis-occupied Greece, it turned its attention towards its *raison d'être*, sabotage and subversion.

Two of the first major sabotage operations were attempts to block the Corinth Canal to deny the Germans shipping access to Field Marshall Rommel's Afrika Korps that was advancing rapidly on British Forces at El Alamein in North Africa. Operations Thurgoland and Locksmith were the SOE's attempts to sabotage the Corinth Canal to achieve the desired blocking effect. The SOE recruited a Greek military officer, Major Ioannis Tsigantes, to oversee Operation Thurgoland—the first of the two sabotage attempts. After receiving SOE training with his team at the STC 102 training sites in Haifa and Lebanon, Tsigantes infiltrated Greece by Royal Navy submarine.<sup>164</sup> Once ashore, Tsigantes coordinated the transport of necessary explosives and supplies to blow the canal on the appointed dates of 27-28 July 1942.<sup>165</sup> However, Tsigantes was forced to abort Thurgoland after a German informant compromised the operation.<sup>166</sup>

Operation Locksmith was the SOE's second attempt at destroying the Corinth Canal. Planned from the Cairo SOE HQ office, SOE agent Mike Cumberlege led the second attempt. The plan was a variation of the first as the aim was to block the canal with a sunken vessel instead

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<sup>162</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 138.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>164</sup> O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece during the Second World War* (Lexington, KY: lulu.com, 2016), 105.

<sup>165</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 166.

<sup>166</sup> O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece*, 106.

of destroying the canal outright. Cumberlege and his team inserted onto mainland Greece by submarine on 13 January 1943.<sup>167</sup> After several months of careful reconnaissance and planning, the operation went forward on 4 March 1943. The sabotage team managed to successfully emplace the magnetic mines on the targeted vessel, which was large enough to block the channel for several months. However, the mines never detonated rendering Operation Locksmith a tactical and operational failure alongside Thurgoland.<sup>168</sup>

Greece's railways were significant to sustain the German war effort in Northern Africa. Cairo GHQ asked the SOE to attack this critical line of communication. Four-fifths of Rommel's Afrika Korps were supplied and reinforced by the main railways that ran through Yugoslavia down into Greece where troops and equipment were then transported to the African Front.<sup>169</sup> Field Marshal Montgomery planned a counter-offensive against Rommel's Afrika Korps, otherwise known as the second battle of El Alamein, which was set to begin in late October 1942. Montgomery wanted to use the SOE to block the main railway that ran south through Greece to the main ports of the Peloponnese. Though sabotage of railway systems was a *modus operandi* task of SOE led resistance forces, the problem was in the prompt communication and execution in a coordinated timeline to compliment Montgomery's offensive.<sup>170</sup> SOE agent Prometheus II led the planning effort for Operation Harling to fulfill Montgomery's requested effects.<sup>171</sup>

Prometheus II selected the Gorgopotamos viaduct as the target for Operation Harling as it offered the best prospect for success. Prometheus II assembled the sabotage team led by SOE agents E. C. Myers, a sapper and demolitions background, and C. M. Woodhouse, a Crete and

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>168</sup> O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece*, 109-110. Cumberlege and several on his sabotage team were compromised and caught on 1 May, and eventually executed, like many other SOE agents during the war.

<sup>169</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 234.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece*, 120.

Greek scholar.<sup>172</sup> Zervas, the EDES guerrilla leader, was approached by Myers and Woodhouse to assist with the destruction of the Gorgopotamos viaduct while another SOE party was air inserted to link-up with ELAS guerrilla leader Ares Veloukhiotis.<sup>173</sup>

The task organization for Operation Harling was complex due to the blended make-up of guerrilla groups all placed under the command of Zervas. Montgomery wanted the operation to occur on or about 23 October 1942, but it did not occur until 25-26 November 1942 due to lengthier planning and execution time horizons characterized by guerrilla operations. Nevertheless, the SOE agents and guerrillas successfully destroyed the Gorgopotamos bridge along with a nearby Italian garrison of 80-troops. The tactical success indicated the offensive capability of guerrillas that operated in the Greek mountains, who could cooperate under the guidance of SOE agents and needed only supplies to maintain a continuous offensive.<sup>174</sup> However, there was some fallout from the operation as it raised political support questions of involving ELAS which again demonstrated that guerrilla operations were more political in nature than simply military.<sup>175</sup>

As successful of a sabotage operation on the Greek rail line as Operation Harling was, German engineers rebuilt the Gorgopotamos viaduct by January 1943. A new sabotage operation, Operation Washing, was needed to block German logistical transports along the Greek railways

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<sup>172</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 450; O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece*, 120. Myers and Woodhouse's original mission was to destroy one or more of three viaducts—the Gorgopotamos, Asopos, and Papadia—on the only railway connecting Southern Greece with Central Europe, and so disrupt the transport of reinforcements to Rommel through the Piraeus port for the movement out of Greece.

<sup>173</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 451.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 453; Basil Davidson, *Special Operations Europe: Scenes from the Anti-Nazi War* (London: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1981), 93. Analyzing this point, Basil Davidson stated in his book *Special Operations Europe* that “in Greece and Yugoslavia, and to varying degree in all other occupied countries, large and serious resistance came and could only come under left-wing leadership and inspiration. Whole ruling classes had collapsed in defeat or moved into compromise with the Nazis. With exceptions, the right-wing sold out and the center simply vanished from the scene.” This point suggests that the communist-based movements had broader appeal to the Greek and Yugoslav populations than did any democratic or monarchic movement supported by political elites.

once more. This time the target was the Asopos viaduct.<sup>176</sup> SOE agent Myers planned the operation and delegated the leadership of the operational team to Don Stott, a New Zealander. Stott was unable to use any of the Greek guerrilla groups because they were wary of German reprisals and more concerned with fighting one another at the time.<sup>177</sup> Stott and his men executed the operation on the night of 20-21 June 1943. The operation proved successful, and the destruction of the Asopos viaduct shut the rail line down for months.<sup>178</sup> The successful destruction of the Asopos bridge was the first of a concerted sabotage and subversion effort by the SOE in summer 1943 as a part of a broad deception effort, Operation Animals.<sup>179</sup>

Similar to the SBS's Operation Albumen on Crete, the SOE conducted Operation Animals in support of the Allied invasion of Sicily as a broader deception operation.<sup>180</sup> The SOE plan for Animals required a broad, simultaneous attack on lines-of-communication throughout Greece designed to pull German resources and attention away from Sicily and Italy while fixing German units to prevent the withdrawal of German troops for use elsewhere.

Animals was timed to begin in the third week of June 1943, preceding Operation Husky by a few weeks.<sup>181</sup> Given each resistance group's self-serving agendas, it took a great amount of effort for the SOE to organize the guerrilla forces to execute Animals by the appointed time of 21 June 1943.<sup>182</sup> Over the three weeks following the attack on the Asopos railway bridge on 21 June,

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<sup>176</sup> O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece*, 176.

<sup>177</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 235.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.; Richard Clogg, "Negotiations of a Complicated Character: Don Stott's 'adventures' in Athens, October-November 1943," in *Special Operations Executive: A new instrument of war*, edited by Mark Seaman, 148-56 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 148. Clogg noted that Stott demonstrated courage and physical endurance of an unusual order in the destruction of the Asopos railway viaduct in June 1943 and was later charged with a mission to destroy aircraft on airfields in the Athens region and organized sabotage and counter-sabotage in Athens and Piraeus.

<sup>179</sup> O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece*, 214.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 457.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 458-459.

there were 44 major and 60 minor cuts in the few serviceable road and rail line-of-communications as well as numerous minor raids, ambushes, and other sabotage and subversion activities. Additionally, the SOE organized a five-day strike of transport workers at Piraeus to shut down the seaport.

Operation Animals was successful in its purpose as part of the deception plan for Husky, which landed in Sicily on 10 July 1943.<sup>183</sup> Deception and propaganda was the role of the PWE, but the SOE's use of sabotage and subversion was inherent of the broader deception plan for Husky. The sabotage of the Asopos viaduct coupled with the attacks during Operation Animals had the desired effect of reinforcing the Allied deception that an invasion of Greece was imminent. Operation Animals caused no less than one German Panzer division to deploy to Greece instead of reinforcing Sicily for the Allied invasion and the eventual surrender of the Italians in Greece.<sup>184</sup> The success of Operation Animals also led to increased guerrilla raiding in Greece on the heels of the German withdrawal in 1944.<sup>185</sup>

Soon after Animals and Husky, the Italians signed the armistice with the Allies on 3 September 1943. Allied forces then landed at Salerno on 9 September, and Italy declared war on Germany on 14 October 1943.<sup>186</sup> This led to a race to disarm the Italians in Greece where the Germans succeeded in many places, EAM in several others, but the SOE managed to disarm the Italians in Thessaly and tried to organize some remaining Italian units to fight against Germany, similar to Leigh Fermor's efforts on Crete, which some did very well. Once again, the SOE was

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<sup>183</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 459.

<sup>184</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 235; O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece*, 397.

<sup>185</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 236.

<sup>186</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 467.

involved in negotiating the terms of surrender of some of the Italian garrisons in Greece in the absence of any senior Allied military or British FO officers.<sup>187</sup>

The archipelago islands in the Greek Aegean and Adriatic were ideal geography for the SBS companies to operate in. Europe's Mediterranean shores, Yugoslavia, and Greece, with their numerous islands, was too much for the Axis powers to consolidate and defend.<sup>188</sup> The SBS's three tasks were reconnaissance, pilotage of raiding craft, and attacks on shipping in harbors. The SBS also performed beach reconnaissance for submarines.<sup>189</sup> The majority of SBS's operations in the Eastern Mediterranean region were purposed for reconnaissance among the Greek Islands.

The SOE and COHQ deployed a diverse collection of Commando raiding companies and headquarters called Force A to exploit opportunities in the enemy rear areas. These Commando companies advanced in front of British 8th Army in an intelligence collection capacity.<sup>190</sup> SBS landings were well planned, nocturnal operations facilitated by the Greek SOE reception committees.<sup>191</sup> The Commando companies increased their activity as the enemy presence waned and the introduction of Allied conventional forces became imminent, a principle that Leigh Fermor eluded to as the expectation of unconventional warfare in Crete.<sup>192</sup> As in Crete, periodic German reprisal raids against the Greeks were a planning concern of the Commando companies.<sup>193</sup> By the autumn of 1944, the constant raiding in the Aegean began to have a psychological impact as German problems and losses increased by a constant fear of ambush.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Macksey, *Commando*, 190.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 193.

Conversely, Allied morale strengthened, and intelligence collection enhanced by the work of raiders who enjoyed freedom of movement in the Aegean waters around the enemy, striking at opportune targets.<sup>195</sup>

When the Allies decided for the Operation Overlord cross-channel invasion in 1944, the burden of responsibility of operations in the Mediterranean increasingly fell to the SOE and the commando raiding forces of Cairo GHQ to maintain pressure on the Allied southeast flank. Activity in 1944 was more fluid, widespread and diluted, directed against Crete, the Greek Islands, and the Greece mainland where the SBS conducted amphibious raids since 1942.<sup>196</sup> Layforce, of notoriety from Crete, conducted high-risk reconnaissance of the Rhodes beaches in anticipation of subsequent Allied landings at Greece and Yugoslavia in the Adriatic that never came.<sup>197</sup> Nevertheless, their activities showcased the reconnaissance capability of amphibious SOF.

SBS commando companies also figured prominently in aiding the Greek resistance forces in the liberation of Greek cities during the final days of Nazi occupation. Andres “Andy” Lassen, of legendary fame in SAS historical lore, utilized deception to dupe the German garrison commander at Salonika into considering that a conventional British force of a fictitious ‘III Corps’ pended imminent landings in the area and demanded the Germans’ surrender.<sup>198</sup> Lassen’s detachment, partnered with local ELAS guerrillas, reinforced the ruse when they boldly attacked German defensive positions in and around the Salonika area causing the Germans to hastily

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<sup>195</sup> Macksey, *Commando*, 193.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Sutherland, *He Who Dares*, 38.

<sup>198</sup> Lewis, *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare*, 333.

withdrawal from the city. Lassen's SBS detachment partnered with the Greek resistance was able to liberate the entire town in advance of any British regular troops.<sup>199</sup>

In Greece, SOE agents had difficulty aligning partnered guerrilla forces with Allied objectives to defeat Axis forces instead of fighting each other. The EAM assessed that the German occupation of Greece was nearing an end in 1943 and started to position itself to seize power quickly on 9 October 1943 by becoming the sole power in the mountains and then prioritized the preparation to gain control of Greek towns over cooperating with a unified Allied military effort.<sup>200</sup>

By 14 October 1943, the Italians were no longer a factor, and ELAS outnumbered Zervas's EDES organization 25,000-5,000. Making matters more challenging for the SOE, the Germans had the advantage of a developing Greek civil war, and they encouraged its growth. If fighting one another, the Greeks would not be fighting the Germans.<sup>201</sup> The SOE struggled to gain control of the political situation and the narrative given its limited ability for action.<sup>202</sup> Almost every SOE agent was on the run at this point to avoid the Germans or ELAS led movements which brought subversive activity to cessation in late 1943.<sup>203</sup> The situation remained forlorn for the SOE in Greece until December when EAM-ELAS negotiated with the SOE after ELAS realized that the Germans did not have any near-term intention of leaving.<sup>204</sup> The crucial stage was reached in early January 1944, when SOE HQ in Cairo proposed a military plan, that

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 334-340.

<sup>200</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 469.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>203</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 471.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 471-472.

was more political than military in its intention, for coordinated operations to harass a German withdrawal, otherwise known as Operation Noah's Ark.<sup>205</sup>

Noah's Ark was the first notable operation since Animals occurred.<sup>206</sup> As the main Allied effort prepared for the Overlord D-day landings at Normandy, the SOE developed plans to complement the effort from Greece. The SOE proposed organizing the Greece area of operations into guerrilla areas to the EAM-ELAS and EDES guerrilla leadership. Two areas of operation would be reserved for Zervas (EDES) and Psaros (ELAS) respectively. Allied special operations units stiffened the guerrillas also making the Allied military mission's chain of command more flexible and effective.<sup>207</sup>

With the advance of the Soviet Army, the *Wehrmacht* in Romania collapsed late in August 1944, and it became apparent that the Germans intended to withdraw from Greece. The Germans preceded their withdrawal with raids and attacks designed to ease their escape and to discourage their men from taking refuge among the Greeks.<sup>208</sup> SOE's challenge was to conceive a military plan that would enable the remnants of the Greek Government exiled in Cairo to return to Athens with the least possible expenditure of military force while also imposing the greatest possible costs on the retreating Germans.<sup>209</sup>

Noah's Ark officially began on 10 September 1944, 10-days before the British landings in the Peloponnese, and continued through 1 November 1944, when the last of the German units departed mainland Greece. Only isolated German garrisons in the Greek Islands remained. It was a series of individual events but was a success in total.<sup>210</sup> There were a series of minor ambushes,

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 472.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 471-472.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 477.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 478.

battles, raids, and acts of sabotage that destroyed as many as 100 locomotives and 500 motor vehicles, and killed nearly 5,000 Axis troops.<sup>211</sup> The SOE-led effort to derail trains and blow up railway bridges in the night delayed subsequent Axis traffic, which allowed the Allied air forces to attack and strafe stationary, retreating convoys in the daylight.<sup>212</sup> SOE historian William Mackenzie concluded that, "...Noah's Ark paid a dividend much higher than the whole British expenditure on special operations in Greece, and that it did not in itself cost much in Greek lives."<sup>213</sup>

### Modes of Special Operations Activities in Greece

Assessing the SOF activities in Greece, the collection of intelligence through SOE developed networks and reconnaissance methods were displayed. The Prometheus I, II, and Apollo network in the Athens and Piraeus area proved the most effective at developing intelligence networks for collection and transmitting the information in a timely fashion to SOE HQ in Cairo. SOE-led resistance groups and SBS Commando companies employed thorough reconnaissance of prospective sabotage, raid, and ambush targets. SBS commandos also conducted maritime reconnaissance for Royal Navy submarines and in advance of prospective Allied amphibious landing sites, like that of Rhodes and the Greece western coastline.

SOE-led groups performed a pre-planned delaying action as the British troops retreated and evacuated with the Royal Navy from the southern coast of Greece. The delaying action was modest, but Fleming's Yak Mission managed to damage and destroy critical rail lines in advance of German formations to afford the Allied evacuation time and space.

The SOE also provided a critical organizing function for Greece resistance groups. The overall effort was not as comprehensive as the Cretan SOE enterprise due to the more fractured

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> O'Connor, *Sabotage in Greece*, 218.

<sup>213</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 479.

political make-up of resistance groups on mainland Greece. Nevertheless, SOE lead agents Myers and Woodhouse managed to broker a tenuous alliance between Zervas' EDES and the EAM-ELAS groups at critical times for the execution of Operations Harling, Animals, and Noah's Ark to achieve disruptive effects. It is difficult to imagine how EDES and ELAS-led groups might have cooperated otherwise.

The SOE's technical and non-technical communication activities were critical to the successes the Greece resistance effort did sustain, though problematic and slow-moving throughout the campaign. W/T transmissions were only as reliable as the radio sets and the technical proficiency of the operators themselves, both of which the SOE in Greece was deficient throughout the campaign. Additionally, information was slow moving in resistance networks operating in enemy territory as evidenced by the delayed effects of Operation Harling and the destruction of the Gorgopotamos viaduct. Though successful, Harling did not occur soon enough to achieve the desired shaping effect of disrupting the German supply lines along the Greek railways that Field Marshal Montgomery hoped for to compliment his counterattack of Rommel's Afrika Korps in October 1942.

The modes of sabotage and subversion by the method of raids, ambushes, and attacks on German and Italian troops, garrisons, depots, shipping, and supply lines delivered the most decisive effects in Greece. The preponderance of recorded sabotage activity in Greece focused on either the main rail-line that ran north to south through Greece, the Peloponnese rail-line, or the shipping ports. Airfields were mentioned as targets, but were not the apparent focus of SOE-led sabotage efforts. The vulnerability, accessibility, and strategic value of the sabotage targets all appeared to concentrate on the disruption of railway lines-of-communication and naval port areas. Four-fifths of Rommel's men, equipment, and supplies for operations in Northern Africa flowed along the Greek rail lines and disembarked on naval vessels from the Piraeus and Peloponnese

ports.<sup>214</sup> This operational vulnerability allowed the SOE to affect, at least in part, operations in Northern Africa. Largely contingent upon the willing participation of the resistance groups, sabotage and subversion activity came to a halt towards the end of 1943.<sup>215</sup> As with Crete, the SOE found greater success in the scale, scope, and frequency of lethal attacks in 1944 with the increased pressure on German forces by the Allied invasion of Normandy and the Soviet progress in the Eastern Front. The amalgamated effects of the Noah's Ark attacks wrought havoc on retreating German formations. The Allied propaganda efforts amplified the psychological impact of these operations.

From the earliest stages of SOE involvement in Greece, propaganda operations were forethought. The first SOE agents in Greece established pan-Balkan radio broadcasts to encourage resistance of Nazi and Italian aggression exemplified this. Effectual propagation of the news of successful resistance attacks—like the sabotage of the Gorgopotamos and Asopos viaducts—led to increased resistance activity and recruitment. The very purpose of the sabotage and subversion attacks of Operation Animals supported a greater deception effort that was successful in drawing German and Italian attention and resources towards Greece and away from the Allied landings on Sicily.

Successful Allied operations in Sicily and Salerno led to the capitulation of the Italian Government, and the subsequent surrender of Italian forces in Greece. SOE agents once again directed the terms of surrender in certain Italian occupied areas of Greece, leading some even to take up arms against the Germans.<sup>216</sup> The conduct of such negotiations was not a foreseen task for SOE agents, but a necessary one applied in Greece just as in Crete.

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<sup>214</sup> Foot, *SOE*, 234.

<sup>215</sup> Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, 471-472.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

The SOE leveraged the STC 102 training schools in Haifa and Lebanon to train select Greek guerrillas in the tasks of demolitions, parachuting, and irregular warfare. The SOE exported guerrilla warfare skills to proxy resistance forces from Greece and other allied groups throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. According to Jacob Stoil, these tasks were, "...infiltration and sabotage, how to 'lie low,' the art of successful ambush and attacking communications, night fighting, assassination, reconnaissance, constructing explosive devices and communications devices, and individual close combat skills...the SOE helped teach...all the skills it needed to make life difficult for an occupying power."<sup>217</sup> The training proved an effective method towards enhancing the SOE's overall Greek sabotage and subversion efforts.

Clandestine logistics was the lifeblood of all major SOE operations in Greece. Most of the weapons and day-to-day equipment were obtained locally or from battlefield recovery. The acquisition of Italian arms, ammunition, and supplies after the Italian surrender on Greece supplied several guerrilla groups, especially those that fought under ELAS. The SOE obtained arms and explosives by airdrop and maritime delivery. Greece's extensive coastline was problematic for the Germans to defend and allowed for the uncontested infiltration of SOE men, weapons and equipment throughout the conflict.

The effects of SOE's campaign in Greece are mixed. SOE's operations provided disruptive operational effects as early as 1942, but the SOE could not synchronize sabotage efforts with Montgomery's efforts in Northern Africa. As the resistance matured in 1943-44, the SOE provided more substantial effects in Operations Animals and Noah's Ark to support the broader Allied effort. Like Crete, the benefits of the SOF-centric campaign in Greece were felt on the periphery of the theater and achieved an economy-of-force effort in physical and

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<sup>217</sup> Jacob Stoil, "The Haganah and SOE: Allies and Enemies Irregular Warfare & Politics in Mandatory Palestine," *Society for Military History* (2012), 2, accessed December 31, 2018, [https://www.academia.edu/1504354/The\\_Haganah\\_and\\_SOE\\_Allies\\_and\\_Enemies\\_-\\_Irregular\\_Warfare\\_and\\_Politics\\_in\\_Mandatory\\_Palestine\\_-\\_Given\\_at\\_SMH\\_2012](https://www.academia.edu/1504354/The_Haganah_and_SOE_Allies_and_Enemies_-_Irregular_Warfare_and_Politics_in_Mandatory_Palestine_-_Given_at_SMH_2012).

psychological terms. SOF activities increased in lethality, scope, and frequency as the conventional Allied effort climaxed on continental Europe in 1944-45.

## Special Operations Activities in the Context of Contemporary Doctrine

### Categories of SOF Activities

The Crete and Greece case studies illustrate the spectrum of special operations activities the SOE conducted in support of large-scale combat operations in the Europe Theater from 1939-1945. Similar modes of activities were manifest in both cases as displayed in the left column of Figure 3 below.

<b>Modes of Special Operations Activities in Crete and Greece</b>	<b>USSOF Doctrinal Special Operations Activities and Tasks</b>
Active and passive information and intelligence collection through reconnaissance and HUMINT methods	<b>Special Reconnaissance</b> (JP 3-05)
Delaying action to cover the withdrawal of conventional forces	<b>Cover</b> (ADRP 3-90) *Not a task unique to SOF
Development of network lines to evacuate POWs and stragglers trapped behind enemy lines	<b>Personnel Recovery</b> (JP 3-05)
Development, organization, and training—including offsite training schools—of resistance groups	<b>Unconventional Warfare</b> (JP 3-05)
Technical and non-technical communications, near and long-range signal	<b>Special Operations Forces Communications</b> (FM 3-05.160)
Sabotage and subversion through raids, ambushes, and attacks—unilateral and combined guerrilla—that were progressive; achieved a psychological impact; and varied in scope, scale, duration, and frequency	<b>Unconventional Warfare</b> (JP 3-05) and <b>Direct Action</b> (JP 3-05)
Propaganda and information operations	<b>Military Information Support Operations</b> (JP 3-05)
Negotiate terms of surrender	<b>Interpersonal Skills</b> and <b>Political Awareness Attributes</b> (FM 3-18)
Clandestine logistics conducted through airdrop and maritime delivery means, sustainment provided through auxiliary support, battlefield recovery and survival training methods	<b>Special Operations Sustainment</b> (ATP 3-05.40), <b>Special Operations Aviation</b> (FM 3-76), and <b>Survival</b> (FM 3-05.70)

Figure 3. Modes of special operations activities in Crete and Greece compared with USSOF contemporary doctrine.

These modes of special operations activities, though not exhaustive, represent the range of primary capabilities the SOE employed to achieve disruptive effects against Axis forces in the Eastern Mediterranean. At the operational level, the modes of special operations activities yielded mixed results. Lack of large-scale, pre-existing resistance structure required the SOE to build much of the capability from the ground-up after Axis occupation in both cases, which took time.

Additionally, the SOE had difficulty initially with the coordination and synchronization of activities in Greece to compliment the conventional Allied campaign in Northern Africa. However, by the summer of 1943, SOE's activities in both Crete and Greece provided operational-level effects that supported Operation Husky, and in 1944, the Allied drive on Germany. In total, the SOE economy-of-force effort tied down multiple Axis army divisions and *Luftwaffe* squadrons that the Germans and Italians desperately needed on the Western and Eastern Europe Fronts. The special operations activities led to a slow and painful "death by a thousand cuts" that plagued the Italian and German occupying forces until their eventual capitulation and withdrawal under pressure.

### Implications for Current and Future Doctrine

The SOE's activities in Crete and Greece are informative for contemporary US military doctrine. Though Western SOF capabilities and organization evolved since the SOE in World War II, the core tenants of SOF theory and doctrine remain relatively constant. Figure 3 above shows the modes of SOE activities in Crete and Greece reconciled with contemporary USSOF doctrinal activities and tasks. This juxtaposition indicates a validation of sorts for contemporary USSOF—US Army SOF in particular—doctrine as it relates to modes of special operations activities that support large-scale combat operations.

At the operational-level of war, the broader implication of SOE's activities in World War II demonstrates that special operations can directly influence the enemy in relation to the conventional commander's 'deep area' and 'area of interest' on the periphery. The US Army's doctrinal publication *Deep Operations ATP 3-94.2* states that "During major operations, the effects of deep operations are typically more influential when directed against an enemy's ability to command, mass, maneuver, supply, and reinforce available conventional combat forces....Commanders may use any number of tactical tasks during the execution of deep

operations to divert, disrupt, delay, and destroy enemy forces.”<sup>218</sup> SOE activities in Crete and Greece displayed the effective ability to divert, disrupt, delay and destroy enemy forces in relation to Allied conventional commander’s deep area or peripheral area of interest for Northern Africa in 1942, Sicily and Italy in 1943, and continental Europe in 1944-45. This historical precedent carries potential when commanders consider how SOF could contribute to prospective large-scale combat operations.

Moreover, the study of SOE operations in Crete and Greece uncovered other relevant conceptions, and each of these merits further study. First, politics are inherent of guerrilla warfare, and there are 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> order implications for partnering with resistance movements. The SOE’s partnership of necessity with EAM-ELAS resistance contributed to more problems with the 1946-1949 Greek Civil War ex-post Axis power occupation of Greece and Crete. Also, guerrilla and partisan warfare doctrine is the very nature of a communist expansionist movement, and they were some of the most active resistance groups in Greece and Crete, as well as Yugoslavia.

SOE agents were at their best at the tactical-level when they were afforded local autonomy with respect to command and control. However, the tactical effects did not yield operational results without effectual command and control by the regional SOE HQ in Cairo, located close to the conventional GHQ and Foreign Office. SOF HQ integration with interagency and conventional HQs provided increased opportunity for coordinated and synchronized SOF effects to compliment Allied theater campaign plans.

SOE agents on the ground in Greece and Crete regularly weighed a prospective operation’s risk versus the reward of the anticipated outcome. While this idea is seemingly apparent to the military practitioner, the risk of mission failure carried ‘amplified risk’ to the broader SOE resistance network on Crete and Greece. The assessment and decision concerning

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<sup>218</sup> US Department of the Army, *Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-94.2, Deep Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016), 1-4.

the timing and scale of resistance action was a constant dilemma for the SOE. To take no action was a risk to the credibility and legitimacy of the resistance inhibiting its growth, but to incite too much disruptive action, too soon ensured the resistance network's destruction on Greece and Crete, which took a lengthy time to reconstitute. To this end, the SOE was more successful with larger-scale guerrilla operations as the Allied conventional forces were able to seize the initiative in continental Europe.

The SOE believed that the culmination of a guerrilla campaign introduces conventional forces to its area of operations. However, this was not the case in Crete and for much of Greece. In both instances, the SOE waged a 'SOF-centric' campaign. The effects of adjacent Allied conventional operations had indirect bearing on the SOE's success in Crete and Greece. The question arises: can a guerrilla campaign in large-scale conflict be decisive? If so, under what conditions?

The Allies and SOE were concerned whether their operations would elicit reprisal attacks on the population. The Axis reprisals exacted on the populace in response to sabotage and subversive attacks were harsh and often lethal. As the SOE derived its manpower and resources from the population, agents were always calculating in the timing and scale of operations while factoring in propaganda messages to mitigate risk to the people. The reprisals were sometimes useful tools in fomenting and galvanizing the resistance movements in Crete and Greece. They also carried the inherent risk of smothering a local resistance movement.

SOE agents were vulnerable to compromise when attempting to communicate. German signals intercept units, SS, and Gestapo were adept at triangulating SOE agents sending coded messages through their W/T radios. Additionally, SOE agents wirelessly communicating with other SOE networks in enemy territory put multiple resistance networks at risk. In response, the SOE tried to compartmentalize SOE agent activity by clearing all W/T traffic through the regional offices. As another countermeasure, SOE agents used indigenous 'runners' to communicate with adjacent guerrilla units and avoid detection. Though signals communication

technology capability evolved since World War II, the vulnerability of resistance networks in communication remains. Therefore, in large-scale conflict, planners of SOF-centric campaigns must give careful thought to the security and time-lag of communications.

The SOE agents on Crete and Greece were advantaged by the complex mountainous terrain that provided sanctuary to their guerrilla formations. The thousands of miles of coastline that the Axis powers could not secure allowed for the uninhibited flow of men, weapons, and equipment by maritime methods. In contrast, guerrilla formations were vulnerable in urban settings where the Axis powers established firm control. Given the advances in technology, it is hard to imagine how rural areas might still be a sanctuary for a guerrilla force. More questions arise: Is it safer for a guerrilla force to operate in urban terrain than rural where it might be easier to locate and target such a force in large-scale conflict? How might technology increase the effectiveness or constrain special operations in a large-scale combat operations environment today?

The SOE placed primary emphasis on motivations, foreign language fluency, and intimate knowledge of the area prospective agents were to operate. These qualities served SOE agents well in Crete and Greece. Fluency in language and familiarity of the local area directly enabled SOE agents to conduct negotiations with resistance groups and local authorities. Additional questions can be asked: Were the SOE's selection criteria of language fluency, knowledge of the area, and motivations correct? Are they better or worse than what USSOF uses today?

Finally, the nature of World War II large-scale combat operations in Europe was attritional warfare, and the SOE in Crete and Greece afforded time and space for Great Britain and its allies to mobilize their conventional forces and capabilities in the region. In this sense, the expanded SOE operations throughout Europe served as a strategic delaying action.

It is impossible to fully predict the time, location, and scale of future great power conflicts. Nevertheless, there is a high probability that SOF power will play a significant role.

Understanding SOF's role, function, capabilities, and limitations within the context of large-scale combat operations will be critical to the overall success of such a campaign. To this end, the lessons of SOE's employed activities in World War II are a starting point for understanding how SOF power can set an adversary ablaze in large-scale conflict.

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