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CRUISE AND THE THREE LEVELS OF WAR

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN M. MILLER

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

CRETE AND THE THREE LEVELS OF WAR

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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U.S. Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
28 February 1989

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CRETE AND THE THREE LEVELS OF WAR

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Between 20 May and 1 June, 1941, Germany and the British Commonwealth fought the intense battle for the Island of Crete. For the first time in history, airborne forces operated independently from regular ground forces, and control of the sea lanes was dominated by the airplane. Although the battle was of short duration, the opposing strategies and tactics provide a superb setting for studying the different levels of war. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the battle of Crete at the strategic, operational and tactical level of war.

There are established definitions for the strategic and tactical levels of war. However, the U.S. Army has only recently recognized the operational level as the linkage between strategy and tactics. The following definitions will be used to compare the battle of Crete with the strategic, operational and tactical level of war. According to Parameters, December, 1988, the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 5 May 1988 approved the recommendation to include these definitions in JCS Publication 1-02, Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.

Strategic Level of War. The level of war at which a nation or group of nations determines national or alliance security objectives and develops and uses national resources to accomplish those objectives. ¹

Operational Level of War. The level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters of

operations. Activities at this level link tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives needed to accomplish the strategic objectives, sequencing events to achieve operational objectives, initiating actions, and applying resources to bring about and sustain these events. ²

Tactical Level of War. The level of war at which battles and engagements are planned and executed to accomplish military objectives assigned to tactical units of task forces. Activities at this level focus on the ordered arrangement and maneuver of combat elements in relation to each other and to the enemy to achieve combat objectives. ³

BACKGROUND

The key events leading to the battle of Crete really began on 13 April 1939. On this date, England signed an agreement with Greece guaranteeing Greek independence and sovereignty. ⁴

In mid September 1940, Adolf Hitler, German Chancellor, established the German Military Mission in Romania. Officially, these German forces were to provide assistance in organizing and training the Romanian Army. Unofficially, however, they were to guard the Romanian oil fields and to prepare bases for the future German attack against Russia. ⁵

When Benito Mussolini, Dictator of Italy, learned about the German forces in Romania he became irate. He immediately ordered the Italian Army to prepare for an attack on Greece. On 28 October, 1940, Italy attacked Greece. After some initial Italian successes, the Greek Army counterattacked and drove the Italians back across the Greek-Albanian Border. ⁶

On 14 November the Greeks launched another attack, driving deep

into Albania towards Valona to threaten Italy's major resupply port.⁷ England, in response to Italy's initial attack on Greece, offered Greece both ground and air force assistance. Greece rejected the offer, fearing that British military assistance might cause Germany to intervene in support of the Italians. According to official British war records, however, Greece did request British Air Force assistance. Within three days of the initial Italian attack, British forces occupied and established air operations on Crete.⁸

After the Italian attack on Greece faltered, Hitler on 4 November decided to intervene in the Balkans. His major concern was the threat of the British air operations from Crete and Greece, a concern the British later justified when they bombed the Italian Navy at Taranto. During this air attack the British destroyed two heavy cruisers and three battleships. Within weeks British aircraft operating from Greece and Crete controlled the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean sea lanes.⁹

Hitler's Directive No 18, dated 20 November 1940, articulated the objectives which predicated Germany's attack against the Balkans region, Greece and Crete. Hitler's strategic plan for eliminating the British threat in the Mediterranean Theater consisted of the Vichy French defending its African possessions. The islands of Gibraltar and Malta were to be seized, and English shipping denied the Straits of Gibraltar. The British were to be stopped from landing elsewhere on the Iberian Peninsula, and Germany would assist Italy in occupying and controlling Egypt and the Suez Canal. Lastly, the Balkan countries were to be occupied

and all British air bases in the Eastern Mediterranean which could endanger the Romanian oil fields were to be destroyed. Hitler, on 13 December 1940, approved Directive No 20, Operation Marita, which outlined the concept of operations against Greece.¹⁰

As the winter of 1940-1941 progressed, the Greek Government came to realize that war with Germany was inevitable. In February Greece and England agreed that England and her allies would support Greece with a force of two or three divisions. During March 1941, Field Marshal Earl Wavell, Commander-in Chief of the British Army in the Middle East, transferred approximately 58,000 allied soldiers from Egypt to Greece. The units dispatched to Greece consisted of the 1st Australian Corps Troops, 6th Australian Infantry Division, 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division, 1st Tank Brigade, 2nd British Armored Division and assorted army and air force service support units.¹¹

Germany launched its attack against Greece on 9 April 1941. Field Marshal Wilhelm List, Commander, Twelfth Army, was responsible for planning and executing Operation Marita. The German forces involved in the attack consisted of two armored divisions, four infantry divisions, two mountain infantry divisions, one infantry regiment and one SS infantry motorized infantry regiment.¹² By the end of April, the Germans had defeated both the Greeks and Commonwealth forces. By the completion of Operation Marita the German forces had lost a total of 5,100 men killed, wounded or missing. The Commonwealth casualties numbered approximately 15,111.¹³ Although there are

many conflicting reports of the number of allied soldiers evacuated from Greece, British Army records report 32,450 men evacuated.¹⁴

ENDNOTES

1. Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine Branch, J-7, "Commentary & Reply Parameters U.S. Army War College Quarterly, December 1988, p. 121.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Great Britain. War Office. The Campaign In Greece and Crete, p. 12. (hereafter referred to as The Campaign In Greece and Crete)

5. Alan Clark, The Fall Of Crete, pp.8-16.

6. Ibid., p.12.

7. Ibid., p.70.

8. The Campaign in Greece and Crete, p.6.

9. Clark, p.12.

10 Center of Military History The German Campaign In 'The Balkans (Spring 1941), p.9. (Hereafter referred as The German Campaign In The Balkans)

11. The Campaign in Greece and Crete, pp.14-15.

12. Gavin Long, Greece, Crete and Syria: Australia In The War Of 1939-1945, p.50.

13. The German Campaign In The Balkans, p.112.

14. The Campaign in Greece and Crete, pp.38-42.

CHAPTER II

WHY CRETE?

On 20 April 1941, Hitler held a planning conference to discuss operations after the capture of the Greek mainland. One course of action addressed the seizure of Malta, and an alternate proposal concerned the invasion of Crete. After reviewing the Mediterranean Regional strategic and operational objectives, Hitler decided to invade Crete, basing his decision on a number of strategic imperatives. Whomever controlled Crete controlled the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Suda Bay, located on the Island of Crete, was the finest naval anchorage in the Mediterranean. The Romanian oil fields were only four hours flight time from the British air facilities on Crete, and lastly, the Island of Crete provided a superb location from which Germany could support operations against Egypt and the Suez Canal. ¹

THE OPERATIONAL PLAN

Hitler issued Directive No 28 on 25 April 1941. The objective of this directive stated: "The occupation of the Island of Crete as a base for the conduct of war against England by air in the Eastern Mediterranean, is to be prepared.(OPERATION MERKUR)" ²General A.Lohr, Commander, German Fourth Air Fleet, was responsible for actually planning and executing the tactical phase of the operation. The Luftwaffe would furnish the necessary airborne assault troops and airframes to seize Crete. The Army would provide support by reinforcing the airborne corp's assault units. Furthermore, once Crete was captured the Army would

provide the necessary occupation forces. The Navy would secure the sea lanes between Greece and Crete and coordinate Italian Naval support for transporting seaborne reinforcements and supplies to the initial assault forces. ³

The British considered Crete strategically important for the same reasons as the Germans, but in reverse. Moreover, England felt morally obligated to fulfill the 1939 treaty agreement to their Greek ally. The British plan for the defense of Crete was flawed from the very beginning. In November 1940 the British occupied Crete. In April 1941, the British increased their forces on Crete by transferring 2,000 Marines belonging to the Mobile Naval Base Defense Organization. This unit was equipped with anti-aircraft guns, searchlights and several 4" coastal defense guns. Wavell's North African Command was too weak to provide any additional troops for the defense of Crete, consequently he decided that the forces evacuated from Greece would reinforce the allied units on Crete. ⁴ In preparing defensive obstacles and fortifications on Crete the British accomplished almost nothing prior to mid April 1941. One possible reason they were negligent in preparing for the defense of Crete was that the commander on Crete was changed six times between December 1940 and March 1941. However, according to the official Australian War Records:

Although the possibility of an evacuation from Greece had been in mind since early in March, plans and preparations to defend Crete against a major attack were not initiated until the middle of April. Much that could have been done in the meantime---

reconnaissance, shipping of vehicles, improvement of roads and harbors, the equipment and training of Greek forces, and the establishment of effective liaison with them-- remained undone. The responsibility rests not with the succession of local commanders, whose role was to administer a small garrison, but higher up, whence came no direction to begin effective preparation to defeat invasion.⁵

On 28 April, the Greek Government requested that the British take responsibility for the defense of Crete, placing approximately 11,000 Greek soldiers on Crete under the command of the designated British commander. Most of these men were without weapons, ammunition or basic equipment. The Greeks requested the British resupply the Greek forces, which exacerbated the already over burdened British logistics system.⁶

Wavell, on 30 April 1941, visited Crete and appointed Major General B. C. Freyberg, Commander of the 2nd New Zealand Division, as commander of all allied forces on Crete. Freyberg was very reluctant to accept the new command and did so only after Wavell prevailed upon his honor as a soldier.⁷

Freyberg made several attempts to get Wavell to reconsider the decision to defend Crete. In his judgement the island could not be successfully defended by his current onhand forces. Like the Greek forces, the estimated 30,000 allied soldiers evacuated from Greece to Crete had abandoned most of their weapons and equipment in Greece. The British had lost local air superiority with the German occupation of Greece. Freyberg informed Wavell that he was compelled to present the decision to defend Crete to the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Mr. P. Fraser.⁸ On 1 May, 1941, Freyberg

sent Fraser the following message: "Recommend you bring pressure on highest plane in London either to supply us with sufficient means to defend island or to review decision Crete must be held."⁹

British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, who had been following the situation in Crete, contacted Fraser to assure him that Wavell would take all actions necessary to reequip the defense forces on Crete. The New Zealand Government notified Freyberg that it was working with the British Government on the Crete issue. Freyberg realized that time was most critical, so he set out to establish the best possible defense time allowed.¹⁰

THE ATTACKING FORCE

At the time the Germans were preparing for Operation Merkur the British Navy ruled the Aegean. To accomplish the capture of Crete meant the German Luftwaffe would have to carry the major portion of the effort. It would not only have to transport the assault forces, provide close air support, and maintain air superiority, but it would also have to defeat the British Navy.¹¹ Lohr was responsible for planning and executing Operation Merkur. To accomplish his mission, Lohr had the following forces.

1. XI Air Corps, commanded by General K. Student, included the 7th Airborne Division, all of the German parachute forces; the Army's 5th Mountain Division reinforced with a regiment of the 6th Mountain Division; two attached antiaircraft battalions, a medical battalion and an engineer battalion comprised the Corp's support troops. In addition to Corp's organic air transportation squadron and reconnaissance squadron, the Corps had attached ten air transportation groups which totaled approximately 600 aircraft. Four of the ten groups had their aircraft rigged to tow approximately 100 glider aircraft.¹² XI Air Corp's had an estimated strength of 25,000 men.

2. VIII Air Corps, commanded by General W.von Rickthofen, consisted of two bomber wings with 180 bombers; one dive bomber wing of 120 JU-87s; one fighter wing of 110 ME-109s; one twin-engine fighter wing of 60 aircraft; and two reconnaissance groups. VIII Air Corps had an estimated strength of between 500 and 600 aircraft.¹³
3. Two naval patrol squadrons, one mine-layer group and one air-sea rescue squadron were tasked to support the Fourth Air Fleet.¹⁴

Admiral K. Schuster, German Southeast Naval Commander, had no German Naval units, but he did have 63 motorized sailing ships and seven freighters captured during the Greek campaign. These were organized into two convoys, which were to transport a battalion of the 6th Mountain Division, support elements of the 7th Airborne Division, pack animals and equipment of the 5th Mountain Division, tanks, antitank and anti-aircraft guns and other heavy equipment and supplies.¹⁵ The Italian Navy was responsible for providing convoy escort.

In developing the invasion plan, the German intelligence on the British order of battle placed the enemy strength at no more than two infantry brigades, an artillery regiment and an unknown number of troops evacuated from Greece. This lack of accurate intelligence on the British defense forces was to prove catastrophic to the airborne assault forces.

The final plan called for the 7th Airborne Division to attack in two waves. The first wave would consist of both gliderborne and airborne units landing to seize the airfield at Maleme and the town of Canea, next to Suda Bay. The second would be primarily airborne forces, and they had the mission of capturing the airfields at Retimo and Heraklion. On D-plus 1 the 5th Moun-

tain Division would deploy into the captured airfields where they would join the 7th Airborne Division in destroying any remaining enemy resistance. D-plus 1 was the date it was expected that Suda Bay would be captured and ready to accept the seaborne forces.¹⁶

THE DEFENSE FORCES

At the end of the first week of May, the Cretan defense forces consisted of an estimated 30,000 Commonwealth and 11,000 Greek soldiers commanded by Freyberg. Of this very seizable force only the 5,300 men of the Mobile Navy Base Defense Organization were properly equipped. While Wavell and his North African Command worked to resupply Freyberg's forces, the German Luftwaffe intensified its daily attacks on British ships in and around Crete. These air attacks were so effective that Suda Bay Port could operate only during the hours of darkness. Between 29 April and 20 May, the Cretan defense forces received 15,000 tons of supplies, less than half the requirements considered necessary to maintain the Cretan defense forces. By 20 May Freyberg's forces had been reinforced with a troop of mountain artillery with eight 3.7" howitzers, sixteen light tanks, six infantry tanks and forty nine field guns composed of a mixture of Italian and French 75mm and 100mm caliber.¹⁷ It is sad but interesting to note that the tanks shipped to Crete were not new, but tanks that had been withdrawn from maintenance shops. These vital pieces of equipment arrived without their radios, some did not have their machine guns, and several of the tank turrets would not even traverse.¹⁸ Although Wavell tried to resupply the Cretean defense forces critical shortages remained in individual weapons, crew

served weapons, artillery pieces, armored vehicles, wheeled vehicles and communications equipment.

THE DEFENSE PLAN

In developing his defense plan Freyberg divided his forces into four elements. The New Zealand Division, now commanded by General Edward Puttick, was to defend the Maleme and east of Canea sector. This division was reinforced on 14 May with the 10th Brigade, a composite unit transferred from Egypt. Puttick also had attached two infantry tanks, ten light tanks, and a Greek infantry regiment. General E.C. Weston was responsible for the defense of the Canea-Suda Bay area. The forces assigned to this sector consisted of the British Mobile Naval Base Defense Organization, three Australian composite battalions and a Greek infantry regiment. The 19th Australian Brigade, commanded by General G.A. Vasey, was required to defend the Retimo area. Vasey's Brigade was reinforced with two infantry tanks and three Greek regiments, each of battalion strength. General B.H. Chappel, commander of the British 14th Brigade, was responsible for the defense of the Heraklion sector. Chappel's brigade was augmented with six light tanks and three Greek regiments, each of battalion strength. Freyberg also established a force reserve composed of the New Zealand 4th Brigade and the 1/Welsh Battalion.¹⁹

Freyberg's concept for the defense of Crete was confusing and contradictory. On 3 May, he directed his commanders to position one-third of their forces on or around the expected German landing sites. The remaining two-thirds were to be positioned

"outside the area which will be attacked in the first instance."²⁰ Freyberg's guidance to the New Zealanders was to counterattack immediately upon the enemy's landing. On the other hand and at a later date, Freyberg advised the New Zealand 5th Brigade not to counterattack immediately but to remain in and fight from their defensive positions.²¹

As the generals prepared the defense for their assigned sectors each respectively established his own separate reserve. These sector reserves were a result of the confusion over how Freyberg wanted the battle fought. The establishment of these sector reserves effectively reduced those forces available to defeat the enemy's initial assault. This thinning of the line proved critical when the New Zealand 5th Brigade established a reserve rather than position any forces west of the Tavonitis River and the Maleme Airfield.²²

Another decision that significantly impacted on the defense of Crete concerned the stationing of the Royal Air Force aircraft. At the end of April there were 23 bombers and 20 fighters stationed on Crete. These aircraft represented 25 percent of the bombers and 50 percent of the fighters in Wavell's North African Theater. In the next few weeks the senior military leaders, including Churchill, debated whether these aircraft would remain on Crete or be evacuated to Egypt. While this debate was going on, the Germans intensified their air operations over Crete and destroyed the majority of the British aircraft. On 19 May, the decision was made to evacuate the six remaining aircraft to Egypt. This indecisiveness by the British senior leaders resulted in the

loss of approximately half of the allied fighter aircraft in the Mediterranean Theater. In the forthcoming battle the Germans would have complete air superiority.²³

The British naval forces defending Crete were divided into two units. The smaller force, composed of two cruisers and four destroyers, was stationed north of the island. The larger force, consisting of two battleships and eight destroyers, was positioned to screen the island against the Italian fleet. There was one British aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean, but it had lost almost all of its aircraft supporting the evacuation of Greece.²⁴

ENDNOTES

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2. Hellmuth Reinhardt, Evaluation Of German Airborne Operations, p.72.
3. The German Campaign In The Balkans, p.120.
4. Gavin Long, Greece, Crete and Syria: Australia In The War Of 1939-1945, pp.203-205.
5. Ibid, p.205.
6. Ibid, p.207.
7. Alan Clark, The Fall Of Crete, pp.29-30.
8. Long, p.209.
9. Ibid
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11. The German Campaign In The Balkans, pp.120-121. ,
12. Reinhardt, pp.72-73.
13. Ibid. p.74.
14. Ibid.
15. The German Campaign In The Balkans, p.124.
16. Ibid. pp.126-132.
17. Long, pp.215-217.
18. Clark, p.44.
19. Long, pp.211-219.
20. Ibid. p.213.
21. Clark, p.35.
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23. Ibid. pp.39-42.
24. The German Campaign In The Balkans, pp. 123-125.

CHAPTER III

CRETE D-DAY

On 20 May 1941, Germany launched its attack on Crete. Prior to the arrival of the invasion force, the Luftwaffe conducted several attacks in the vicinity of Maleme, Canea and Suda Bay, which effectively destroyed many irreplaceable anti-aircraft guns as well as the telephone system which Freyberg depended upon to augment his command and control communications.

At 0800 hours the first wave of the invasion force began their descent in the vicinity of Maleme and Canea. As the German assault forces approached their assigned landing zones they soon realized that their intelligence estimates had made two strategic errors. The size of the defense force had been grossly underestimated, and many of the assigned landing sites were occupied or controlled by the defense forces. The first hours for the assault forces were hell. Most of the airborne soldiers jumped armed only with a pistol, several hand grenades and a knife. Many died prior to landing or before they could get to their weapon containers. The only assault forces that landed relatively unopposed were those assigned landing sites west of the Tavronitis River, west of Maleme. Command and control of the invasion force were severely disrupted when General Suessmann, Commander, 7th Airborne Division, died enroute to Crete. Also General Eugen Meindl, Commander of the 1st Assault Regiment, responsible for the seizure of Maleme was seriously wounded and taken out of the battle.¹

The plan of attack on Maleme called for the quick capture of

the airfield to support the D-plus 1 landings of the 5th Mountain Division. The capture of the Maleme airfield also required the seizure of Hill 107 which dominated the area. With the loss of Meindl and many other senior officers, Captain Walter Gericke, Commander, IV Battalion, 1st Assault Regiment, who was responsible for the capture of the Maleme Airfield, took command of all German forces in the Maleme area. Initially he consolidated a force of approximately 200 men west of the Tavonitis River. Realizing how critical the situation was, Gericke deployed his forces and attacked the Maleme Airfield. By 1500 hours the Germans had captured the western end of the airfield. The southern side of Hill 107, which overlooked the airfield, was still defended by elements of the New Zealand 5th Brigade. German elements of the 2nd Battalion, Assault Regiment, which had initially landed between the New Zealand defensive positions had won control of the northern side of hill. However, this German unit had taken so many casualties it did not have sufficient combat power to dislodge the New Zealanders. Realizing that Hill 107 was the key to the capture of the Maleme Airfield, Gericke immediately dispatched reinforcements to assist in the capture of Hill 107.

Even though the attack had been going on the whole day, at 1700 hours the New Zealanders finally launched an uncoordinated counterattack against Gericke's forces at the Maleme Airfield. The counterattack forces consisted of three tanks without any supporting infantry. One tank withdrew after the crew determined its main gun ammunition would not fit into the breech block and the turret would not traverse, for as previously noted, the British

tanks sent to Crete had arrived with many deficiencies. The remaining two were unaware of the ammunition problem or that the third tank had withdrawn.² As the two remaining tanks pushed their attack, the Germans engaged with their only antitank weapon, a 38mm antitank gun, which failed to penetrate the tank's armor. The lack of supporting infantry allowed the Germans to isolate, surround and disable the tanks, thereby destroying the counter-attack. This miserable excuse of a counterattack exemplifies the lack of appreciation Puttick had for the critical situation facing the Germans.³

In the battle for Canea and Suda Bay the assault force losses were significantly higher than at Maleme. The airborne assault forces at Canea suffered major losses when they jumped directly over and into the New Zealander's defensive positions. Those glider assault units that landed on the beach east of Canea fared somewhat better. They were soon faced, however, with enemy forces of overwhelming superiority. By nightfall the Canea assault forces were reduced to isolated pockets of resistance.⁴

Back in Athens, Greece, as D-Day progressed, Lohr and Student continued with the preparations for the second wave, afternoon assaults on Retimo and Heraklion. In the initial assaults against Maleme and Canea the Luftwaffe had lost only seven troop carriers. Returning aircrew debriefings failed to note any of the problems the assault forces on the ground were having. Based upon the lack of accurate information the decision was made to launch the assaults on Retimo and Heraklion. As the day continued incoming

reports identified that serious problems had developed at both Maleme and Canea. According to Student, "that by 1500 hours it was obvious that the British were stronger and tougher than expected", but by that time the second wave of assault forces were approaching their designated landing sites at Retimo and Heraklion.⁵

The second wave assault forces at Retimo and Heraklion received the same hot reception as those that landed at Maleme and Canea, with the significant difference that the Retimo assault force had only limited close air support. This was the result of aircraft refueling problems. As the assault forces descended onto their designated landing zones, the defense forces opened fire killing many of the parachutist before they could reach the ground. Those who did survive quickly established survival pockets of resistance. By sundown on 20 May the invaders at Retimo were eliminated except for a group which controlled the ridge overlooking the southeast end of the airfield. At Heraklion the defense forces eliminated all of the assault force but small parties of snipers and a small group fighting in the town.⁶

By the end of the first day the capture of Crete was in serious doubt. Only the 1st Assault Regiment at Maleme had a chance of accomplishing its mission. Back in Athens, Student decided to concentrate all D-Plus 1 follow-on efforts on reinforcing Gericke's unit at Maleme.⁷

THE SEABORNE ASSAULT

The night of 20-21 May the British light naval force, search-

ing for any German reinforcement/resupply convey, sailed north of Crete. At dawn on the 21st, the Luftwaffe located the British ships and sank one destroyer and damaged two cruiser's. By 0900 hours, the British naval forces withdrew once again, clearing the sea lanes between Greece and Crete. Schuster dispatched a German convoy carrying a battalion from the 5th Mountain Division, elements from the anti-aircraft regiment, wheel vehicles, antitank guns, 5 tanks and many needed supplies. The convoy movement was delayed by poor weather. At 2300 hours, as the German convoy sailed around Cape Spatha, approximately 20 miles from Suda Bay, it was sighted by a British naval task force taking supplies to Canea. The British immediately opened fire and sank or damaged most of the Italian escort vessels and/or transport ships. Initially it was feared that most of the 2330 men on the convoy had died, but official reports indicate that only 309 men perished. When Schuster learned about the destruction of the first convoy he immediately recalled a second convoy he had dispatched.

In response to the British naval attack, on 22 May the Luftwaffe launched an all out effort to destroy the British Navy. The British Navy losted two cruisers and four destroyers sunk and two battleships, two cruisers and three destroyers severely damaged. For the first time in history a naval force was dominated and driven from the seas by an enemy air force.⁸

THE CAPTURE OF MALEME

On the night of 20-21 May occurred one of the most unexplain-

able events of the battle for Crete. After the defeat of the tank counterattack, LTC L. W. Andrew, Commander of the defense forces on Hill 107, warned his superior, Brigadier J. Hargest, that the forces on Hill 107 might have to withdraw. "If you must you must."⁹ responded Brigadier Hargest, and in the early morning hours of 21 May, the New Zealand defense forces were withdrawn to unprepared positions on the reverse slope of the Hill 107. According to Allan Clark:

In effect this decision meant giving up the airfields, and the ground that commanded it. It also meant the final abandonment of the men fighting to the west.....By this one move the whole balance of force on the island was altered.¹⁰

While the New Zealanders, on Hill 107, withdrew to their new positions, Gericke positioned a force of approximately 200 men on the northern slope of the hill. At first light on 21 May the Germans launched their attack, and after several hours of hard fighting the Germans successfully cleared the hill of all enemy resistance.¹¹ The way was now open for the Germans to reinforce the airborne assault forces.

At 1600 hours, 21 May, the first aircraft landed at the Maleme Airfield with the lead elements of the 5th Mountain Division. Although, the Germans controlled Hill 107, the New Zealanders continued shelling the Maleme Airfield. However, subsequent close air strikes destroyed the enemy's artillery. With the arrival of the 5th Mountain Division units the Germans controlled the battle for Crete with the flow of reinforcements and supplies through the Maleme Airfield. On 22 May General J. Ringel, Commander of the

5th Mountain Division, landed with the remaining elements of his division and assumed command over all German forces on the island.¹²

COUNTERATTACK

The night of 22-23 May the New Zealanders made one last attempt to defeat the Maleme airhead. The counterattack force consisted of two battalions supported by three light tanks. The counterattack scheduled for 0100 hours was delayed because of confusion with the order as to the actual time to launch the counterattack. The counterattack was finally launched at 0330 hours. Almost immediately, the New Zealanders lost the element of surprise when they met unanticipated pockets of German resistance. The New Zealander's advance was also impeded by mines, barbed wire and boobytraps that they had implaced to cover their withdrawal.

The tanks supporting the counterattack ran to problems from the very beginning. The lead tank was destroyed by German antitank fire, and the second broke down with maintenance problems. The third tank stayed with the inoperable tank rather than continue the attack. The two attacking infantry battalions pushed their attack to the eastern slope of Hill 107 and within sight of the Maleme Airfield, but with arrival of dawn came the Luftwaffe air strikes that stalled the counterattack. By noon on 23 May, the counterattack was ordered to withdraw to the New Zealand lines. The defeat of this weak, uncoordinated counterattack sealed the final fate of Crete. ¹³

RETREAT AND EVACUATION

With each passing day the German forces grew stronger. On 26 May those elements of the 5th Mountain Division that had moved south of Maleme and crossed the mountains attacked Canea and Suda Bay. Prior to the German attack on Canea, Freyberg had cabled Wavell on 25 May that the situation on Crete was deteriorating. Freyberg's subsequent daily situation reports painted a picture of such gloom and despair that on 27 May Wavell ordered him to abandon Crete. Freyberg ordered his forces in and around Canea and Suda Bay to fight a delaying action to the southern coast of Crete and assemble for evacuation at Spkakia. Those Australian's at Retimo would have to withdraw to Plaka Bay. The forces at Heraklion would be evacuated using the jetty located in the Heraklion Port.

Initially, the Germans did not realize that the British were preparing to evacuate Crete. Not until the Luftwaffe sighted the British evacuation ships did the Germans manuevere their forces to block the evacuation. On 31 May the Germans finally deployed forces to Spkakia to stop the British evacuation. By this time, however, the British Navy had suffered heavy losses and the evacuation effort was in its final stage.¹⁴

The evacuation of the Retimo defense forces was very poorly orangized. Of the five Australian battalions, two battalions retired to Spkakia, but they arrived too late to be evacuated. One battalion moved to Heraklion and was evacuated with the members of the Heraklion defense force. The remaining two battalions never

received the evacuation orders and were subsequently captured by the Germans.

The evacuation of Crete saved an estimated 16,000 allied soldiers. However, because of severe losses to the British fleet the evacuation was stopped, leaving 14,000 soldiers stranded on the island. At the end of this four day evacuation period the British Navy losses included four damaged cruisers, four destroyers sunk, seven destroyers damaged and 2000 personnel casualties.¹⁵

Upon completion of a battle, an operation, a campaign, or a war, the statisticians and historians begin to tally up the losses in men, aircraft, tanks and/or ships. It is human nature that when compiling one's own losses the minimum losses are recorded. Conversely, when counting the enemy's losses the higher estimates are more readily accepted. The number of German and British casualties suffered in the battle of Crete remains today a matter of debate and conjecture. After comparing numerous references the official history of the Australian Army in World War II appears to have the most accurate data.

Thus the effort to hold Crete cost the British force about 15,900 men of whom about 4,000 were killed or wounded; the Germans claimed also 5,255 Greek prisoners, and they released 14,000 Italians. The German Fourth Air Fleet reported the loss of 3,986 killed or missing, of whom 312 were air crew; and 2,594 wounded; 220 German aircraft were destroyed. The German troops who were killed were almost all highly-trained fighting men, more than 3,000 of them from the 7th Air Division---a crippling loss to this skilled formation.¹⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Alan Clark, Fall Of Crete, pp.59-68.
2. Ibid. pp.71-74.
3. Dietrich Brehde's War Diary, p.4. Cited with special permission of Mr. Brehde.
4. Gavin Long, Greece, Crete and Syria; Australia In The War Of 1939-1945, pp.224-226.
5. Clark, p.68.
6. Long, pp.226-227.
7. Clark, pp.100-101.
8. David Thomas, Nazi Victory Crete 1941, ppl23-184
9. Clark, pp.73-74.
10. Ibid. p.75.
11. Brehde, pp.4-6.
12. Long, pp.239-254.
13. Clark, pp.123-134.
14. Ibid. pp.156-174.
15. Thomas, pp.237-241
16. Long, p.316.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

With the capture of Crete, Hitler accomplished one more step in his strategy of eliminating the British from the Mediterranean. However, one must ask what can be learned from this campaign? Was the battle for Crete really necessary? Were the strategies correct, and the operational objectives clearly defined? What could the senior leaders have done to alter the battle's outcome or reduce the loss in lives?

Strategic Level of War

After a review of the previously listed definitions for the three levels of war, the most obvious lesson learned is that the British fought this campaign without a strategy. The decision to reinforce Greece and Crete was based upon emotional pride rather than military reality. Some historians have contended that England entered this campaign to maintain her prestige and reputation as a trustworthy ally. England was still sensitive to the breach of national honor that resulted from her failure to intervene on Hitler's occupation of Czechoslovakia.¹ The British never developed a strategic plan to defeat the Germans. Australian Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey, describes this lack of a British strategy:

The outstanding lesson of the Greek campaign is that no reasons whatever should outweigh military considerations when it is prepared to embark on a campaign, otherwise failure and defeat are courted. The main

principles that must be satisfied are that the objectives to be secured should be fully understood, the means to achieve the objectives should be adequate and the plan should be such as will insure success.²

From the German standpoint, Hitler's Directive NO 18 outlined the strategy for the Greek campaign and for eliminating the British from the Mediterranean. This plan also addressed Hitler's objectives of protecting the vitally important Romanian oil fields and preparing support bases for Germany's invasion into Russia.³ Prior to Germany's invasion of Greece, Hitler's strategic plan suffered two major setbacks. On 6 November, 1940, the British attack on the Italian Naval Fleet at Taranto, Italy, destroyed all hopes of the Italian Navy controlling the Mediterranean Sea. The other setback occurred in December 1940 when Francisco Franco, Dictator of Spain, refused the Germans free passage through Spain for an attack on British controlled Gibraltar.⁴

The German capture of Greece and Crete secured the Axis Powers' southern flank and drove the British Navy from the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. However, after the seizure of Crete, Hitler lost confidence in his airborne forces. As a result of the heavy German airborne losses suffered on Crete, Hitler changed his Mediterranean Strategy and decided not to attack Cyprus, Malta or Gibraltar. After Crete his attention turned to Russia. Ironically, the Germans never developed the Cretean air and naval facilities to support operations as envisioned in Hitler's initial strategy.⁵ History has shown that had Hitler stayed with his original Mediterranean strategy there is a good possibility that Germany could have defeated the British

in both the Mediterranean and North Africa.

Operational Level of War

At the operational level of war, the British defense of Crete could be described as confused with ill-defined objectives. The British recognized the importance of maintaining control of Crete, but they failed to prepare for an adequate defense. It could be said that the British lost the battle for Crete prior to arrival of the first German Airborne troop. According to Allen Clark:

Here, then, were the ingredients of defeat. First, an insoluble strategic dilemma that hung over the situation--- the deadlock between military principle and political necessity. Second, the lack of preparation for the coming engagement, the poor communications, the absence of defensive works, the unbalance of supplies. Third the state of the garrison, the majority of whom had already tasted defeat at the hands of the Germans, and the attitude of their commanders, alternately fatalistic and irresolute.⁶

Had the British senior leaders clearly defined their operational objectives and prepared for the defense of Crete, there is a good possibility they could have held the island. At the operational level the British should have appointed one senior commander who would have been responsible for planning and preparing the islands defenses. Furthermore, anticipating that the Germans would have to attack with airborne forces, the British should have armed the defense forces with heavy anti-aircraft weapons, more and fully operational tanks and additional artillery. To Wavell and his staff, it would appear that the defense of Crete was an afterthought. Had Wavell had greater

foresight, he would have appointed a commander and staff to plan and prepare for the defense of Crete. He would have appointed a commander who exhibited self confidence and could articulate his vision for the island's defense. Additionally, Wavell should have anticipated the critical resupply requirements for the forces evacuated from Greece.⁷

As for Freyberg, once he reluctantly accepted command of the Cretean defense forces he failed to develop a clearly defined defense plan. Freyberg gave conflicting guidance for how he envisioned his forces to defend Crete. His subordinate commanders never had a clear understanding whether they were to fight from their hastily prepared defensive positions or counterattack at the earliest opportunity. Freyberg also failed to specify that, while he had established an operational level reserve, his subordinate commanders were to commit all of their troops to defeat the initial German landings. Furthermore, as evidenced by his communications with the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Freyberg questioned the decision to defend Crete. The lessons learned are that the operational commander must clearly articulate his vision for how he intends to fight the battle. Additionally, a commander must have conviction in his mission. Without personal conviction, he will not have the courage and/or strength of will to overcome adversity.

In comparison to the poor British operational level plan, the German invasion plan had clearly defined objectives. The D-Day assault forces clearly understood the commander's vision for

seizing the airfields at Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion and the Suda Bay Harbor. They all realized that the airfields had to be expeditiously captured to support the landing of the 5th Mountain Division.⁸ This clear understanding of the commander's vision proved invaluable when many of the assault force commanders and junior officers were either killed or seriously wounded. The most significant flaw in the German operational plan was the totally inaccurate enemy situation estimate. As previously noted, the Germans grossly underestimated the size and disposition of the Cretean defense force. The vast majority of the airborne casualties resulted from the assault forces landed directly on or near positions held by the Cretean defense forces.

One of the most critical decisions made during the battle of Crete was Gericke's decision to reinforce Dr. Neuman's Battalion on Hill 107. When Gericke made this tactical decision he had no idea of the importance it would play in accomplishing the operational level objectives. Being out of communications with his higher headquarters, Gericke was unaware of the desperate situations facing the assault forces at Retimo and Heraklion. Gericke made his decision on tactical necessity.⁹ However, as history has shown, the seizure of Hill 107 and the Maleme Airfield ultimately led to the German capture of Crete. This also illustrates how tactical considerations and decisions can transcend the separation between the tactical and operational levels of war.

Another critical operational level decision was General W. von Richthofen's withholding of the Luftwaffe during the British

evacuation of Crete. As noted by Dieter Brehde: "The Luftwaffe could have easily smashed the British evacuation in the south. But General von Richthofen kept his planes back...at this time he already wanted to spare his planes for "Barbarossa".¹⁰ This decision ultimately meant that Field Marshal Erwin Rommel would have to face these same British forces in North Africa.

Tactical Level of War

At the tactical level of war, the British defense of Crete could best be described as one of half-hearted leadership and missed opportunities. Once the German invasion began, Freyberg tried to manage the battle from his command post. Likewise, Puttick and Hargest fought the battle from their command bunkers rather than positioning themselves where they could best influence the battle. As Major General K.L. Steward has written: "A striking feature of the battle, was the tendency for senior commanders to stay at their Headquarters."¹¹

Freyberg's leadership style was one of giving suggestions rather than clear, concise orders. Hargest also followed Freyberg's example of issuing orders that could easily be misconstrued.¹² This was exemplified in Hargest's response to Andrew's comment that he, Andrew, might have to withdraw from Hill 107. This combination of leadership from the rear and comments rather than clear forceful orders set the stage for the New Zealanders unexplainable withdrawal from their commanding positions on Hill 107. As previously addressed, this one tactical movement totally unhinged the defense of the Maleme Airfield and eventually led to

the British defeat on Crete.

From the very moment the German assault forces started to land, the Cretean defenders missed opportunity after opportunity to destroy the invaders. With better leadership and well coordinated, timely counterattacks, there is a great possibility the British could have held Crete. As Ringel reported: "The enemy's stubborn defense could have led to the defeat of our attack if he had grasped the situation at the very first and made use of all his available troops and resources."¹³

Puttick's failure to position any defense forces west of the Tavronitis River contributed significantly to the British defeat on Crete. As previously noted, Puttick formed his own reserve force rather than deploying forces west of the Maleme Airfield and Tavronitis River. Puttick's lapse of judgment allowed Gericke's Battalion to land relatively unopposed.

The German tactical success on Crete can be attributed primarily to the esprit of the German Airborne soldiers, the forward positioning of the German commanders and Gericke's timely decision to reinforce Hill 107. The German capture of Crete is a prime example of how well led soldiers who violently execute their plan can destroy a superior force.

After World War II, the U.S. Army conducted studies on the German invasion of Crete. Listed below are the lesson learned on airborne operations against an island:

1. Control of the air above the island is essential for the successful execution of the airborne landings.

2. Control of the sea around the island is next in importance.
3. The command channels regulating interservice cooperation must be clearly defined and unity of command over both air-born and seaborne forces must be firmly established.
4. The element of surprise is essential to the success of an airborne operation.
5. Other important factors are the intensive collection of intelligence and proper dissemination of information.
6. Airborne tactics must be flexible.
7. Strong reserves, including flying formations must be readily available so that any initial success... can be exploited
8. Individual soldiers must carry light machine guns, recoil-less rifles, rocket launchers, etc., during the descent.
9. The troops must be issued appropriate uniforms. The German paratrooper uniforms proved unsuitable for the hot climate of Crete.¹⁴

In the final analysis, the British lost the battle for Crete because of poor leadership at the tactical level, a lack of preparation and ill-defined objectives at the operational level, and a flawed strategy. Conversely, the Germans won the battle for Crete with the tactical capture of Hill 107. This set the stage for the successful accomplishment of the operational objectives. The most ironic aspect of this battle was Hitler's failure to exploit the capture of Crete. Rather than follow his original Mediterranean strategy, Hitler changed his focus and attacked Russia. With Hitler's change in strategy, the final chapter of human sacrifice for Crete was written, an estimated 8000 men either died or were wounded for nothing.

ENDNOTES

1. Gavin Long, Greece, Crete and Syria: Australia In The War Of 1939-1945, p.192.

2. Ibid. p.193.

3. Alan Clark, The Fall Of Crete, pp.4-5.

4. Ibid. pp.14-15.

5. Dietrich Brehde's War Diary, pp. 4-6.

6. Clark, p.26.

7. Long, pp.316-317.

8. Brehde, pp.4-7.

9. Ibid.

10 Ibid. pp.15-16.

11. Clark, p.77.

12. Ibid. pp.73-77.

13. Long, p.317.

14. Center of Military History, The German Campaign In The Balkins (Spring 1941), pp.141-147.

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7. Thomas, David. Nazi Victory, Crete 1941. New York: Stein and Day, 1973
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1. Brehde, Dietrich. War Diary Notes 1941 (Cited with special permission of Mr. Brehde.)