

THE BATTLE OF CRETE: HITLER'S AIRBORNE GAMBLE

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## ABSTRACT

THE BATTLE OF CRETE: HITLER'S AIRBORNE GAMBLE, by MAJ Maria Biank,  
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As Adolf Hitler conquered most of the European continent in 1939-1941, the small island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea became vital to future operations in the Mediterranean region for both the Axis and Allied powers. If the Allies controlled Crete, their air and sea superiority would not allow the Germans a strategic military foothold in the region. For the Germans, Crete would secure the Aegean Sea for Axis shipping, loosen Great Britain's grasp in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and provide air bases to launch offensives against British forces in Egypt. Therefore, the central research question is: Did the results of the German campaign in Crete justify its execution? The operational results of the German campaign in Crete and the strategic advantages gained from its success did not justify the execution of the battle. Although Germany's conquest of Crete achieved all of the strategic advantages, Hitler did not accomplish the strategic objectives set forth at the beginning of the campaign. Crete was not used as a staging base from which to engage the British in offensive operations against the Suez Canal or North Africa. German losses to the highly trained air corps were staggering and Hitler never again employed parachutists on a large-scale airborne operation. Future war efforts were deprived of this elite, highly mobile striking force. Hitler did not capitalize on the hard fought victory in Crete by using the island as a stepping-stone, ultimately controlling the eastern Mediterranean region because he was hypnotized by the invasion of Russia.

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## ACRONYMS

CREFORCE      Forces on Crete

NZ              New Zealand

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As Adolf Hitler conquered most of the European continent from 1939 to 1941, the island of Crete in the eastern Mediterranean Sea became strategically important to both Germany and Great Britain. For the Germans, possession of Crete would secure the Aegean Sea for Axis shipping, loosen Great Britain's grasp in the eastern Mediterranean, and provide air bases to launch offensives against British forces in Egypt. The Balkan region, as well as Crete, was also important to Germany as Hitler set his sights on Russia. Control of the Balkans would provide a secure right flank for his invading forces and protect the oilfields in Romania, which provided fuel for his war machine.

The British also deeply desired to keep control of the island after the Allied evacuation of Greece in order to retain some influence in the area. With the fall of France in 1940, the Allies no longer had influence in Western Europe. Economically, the British wanted to protect their oil interests in the Persian Gulf area. Allied control of Crete with their air and sea superiority would deny the Germans a strategic military foothold in the region. In short, the possession of Crete was vital to the defense of the eastern Mediterranean for both the Axis and Allied powers. By April 1941, the Germans were in control of the Balkan peninsula and Great Britain had a strong presence in Egypt. Clearly, whoever controlled Crete would have a strategic advantage in future operations in the eastern Mediterranean.

It was never the intention of Adolf Hitler to engage in military operations in Crete. His Italian counterpart, Benito Mussolini, brought him to Crete through his ill-

conceived attack out of Albania into Greece during the winter months of 1940 to 1941. On 6 April 1941, the Germans attacked both Yugoslavia and Greece. Their objective was to deny the British use of bases to launch attacks against the Balkans. Another objective was to “bail out” Italy’s disastrous operation against Greek defenses. The German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece was a spectacular success. It reduced the threat of Allied air attacks from Greece against the German interests in the Balkans. The Germans also gained the strategic advantage of airbases, which gave them increased control in the eastern Mediterranean. It is from this vantage point that possession of Crete became strategically more important than had been heretofore envisioned. German possession of Crete would further deny the British use of airbases to launch attacks against the Balkans and would also protect Axis shipping to North Africa and conversely, be a detriment to Allied efforts in North Africa.

Because of this, the small island became a significant strategic location. Desiring to secure Germany’s southern flank during an invasion of Russia, Germany began the first large-scale airborne invasion in the history of warfare--Operation *Merkur* in May 1941. As a result of the German victory in Crete, Germany gained control of the entire Balkan area and eastern Mediterranean. However, Hitler’s response to the victory was somewhat of a mystery. The battle was the end of the Balkan campaign, not the beginning of new ventures in the Mediterranean. Having defeated the Allies in a fierce battle, in particular Great Britain, Hitler turned away from the strategic potential of Crete and became engaged in a lengthy campaign with the Soviet Union.

In the following pages, world events leading to the Battle of Crete and how the Germans and the Allies prepared for the battle will be examined. The battle for Crete



embodied ferocious fighting and the results had far-reaching effects for both the Germans and the Allies. The central focus of this paper is to determine whether the results of the German invasion of Crete justified its execution in the wider context of the Second World War.

## CHAPTER 2

### SETTING THE STAGE

Prior to April 1941 the armed forces of Hitler's Third Reich had defeated and occupied a significant portion of Europe. In a series of well-planned and executed military operations, the German armed forces had completely overwhelmed and defeated the armies of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands in the summer of 1940. These quick and overwhelming German victories in the West practically eliminated Great Britain's influence on the continent and particularly in the Balkans. After the fall of France in June 1940, Hitler was confronted with a threefold strategic dilemma: turn away from Great Britain and concentrate on Russia; conduct an air and sea attack against Great Britain only after several months of force and equipment buildup; or consolidate a new order in Europe through diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> Conducting campaigns against Great Britain and Russia was both risky and dangerous propositions. Diplomacy would prove even more tenuous.

Initially, Hitler's goal was to gain Britain's cooperation through diplomacy, rather than going to war. However, Colonel Hermann Burkhart Mueller-Hillebrand, adjutant to the Chief of Army General Staff from October 1940 to April 1942, stated after the war, "Hitler's hope that the collapse of France would induce Britain to end a presumably hopeless war and to make political concessions proved false."<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Winston Churchill, rejected holding discussions with Hitler. During the period 8 August to 31 October 1940, Great Britain was locked in a life-and-death struggle with the Luftwaffe over the skies of the English Channel. The strategic goal of the Germans was to destroy the Royal Air Force, which would give the Luftwaffe mastery of

the skies and allow the German Army to begin a land invasion of Great Britain. As it turned out, the Battle of Britain ended in failure for the Luftwaffe, which led first to the postponement and later cancellation of Operation *Sea Lion*, the land invasion of Britain.<sup>3</sup> Hitler and his advisors knew they could not diplomatically settle with Great Britain. Therefore, Hitler decided to attack England indirectly by increasing the number of theaters she had to fight in.<sup>4</sup> Thus, he and his staff would consider attacking Great Britain not in her homeland, but rather eliminate her power in the very heart of her empire, the Mediterranean Sea.

In the Mediterranean, Great Britain still possessed strong military bases located at Alexandria, Gibraltar, and Malta (appendix A). These bases were important militarily and economically because they protected the Middle East trade routes, which passed through the Suez Canal. In particular, since 1940 Gibraltar was a strategic naval base on the southern tip of Spain guarding the narrow entrance to the western Mediterranean from the Atlantic Ocean. Gibraltar was one of the main staging bases for transporting supplies and equipment to Malta and Egypt. After the fall of France and Italy's declaration of war, Great Britain and Italy fought for control of the Mediterranean waters. The goal for both countries was to protect lines of communications for troops in North Africa and Egypt.

Hitler's military advisors recommended that a strategy in the Mediterranean be pursued. In particular, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, Commander in Chief of the German Navy, was a strong proponent of eliminating British operating bases in the Mediterranean Sea. Raeder's end state for a Mediterranean campaign was to destroy the British naval fleet and to control the region. Not convinced of American neutrality, Raeder did not want a two-front war with Great Britain and Russia, reinforced by the United States.

Rather, he envisioned the elimination of Great Britain as the strategic goal for Germany to pursue after the fall of France.<sup>5</sup> Although the Mediterranean was considered a traditional Italian theater of war, Italy was not strong enough to control its vast waters in a timely manner and would need Germany's aid and leadership.

Raeder was very persistent and constantly raised issues to Hitler. He first talked to the Fuehrer on 26 September 1940 about a Mediterranean campaign plan, which became known as Operation *Felix*.<sup>6</sup> His plan involved attacking the Straits of Gibraltar, invading Libya, and capturing Egypt. The Luftwaffe would play a decisive role by bombing the British navy, the Suez Canal, and other British strong points in the Mediterranean. Once successful, Germany would gain control of the Mediterranean from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Suez Canal.<sup>7</sup> In turn, Germany and Italy would control the waters and the skies, protecting commercial shipping for southeastern Europe, which was important for oil exports to Italy and Germany. According to the plan, the British presence in North Africa would become vulnerable to attacks by both the German and Italian armed forces. Success in the Mediterranean would bring additional raw materials from Egypt and the Sudan to support the war effort.

With this plan, Germany made several assumptions.<sup>8</sup> First, the attack against Gibraltar relied heavily on Hitler's ability to build an anti-British alliance with Spain. It would be necessary for Spain to bend to German diplomatic pressure and to enter the war against Great Britain. Hitler assumed Spain would enter the war on the side of the Axis powers because Germany supported Generalissimo Francisco Franco, now head of the Spanish state, during the Spanish Civil War (1936 to 1939).<sup>9</sup> Franco owed Germany his country's allegiance as a sign of his gratitude during the war. Ultimately, Hitler wanted

free movement through the Spanish territory to Gibraltar, giving the Axis powers a decisive advantage in the theater. On 7 December 1940 Franco rejected the concept of the Gibraltar campaign because Spain was too weak to enter any war as she recovered from internal strife.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, Franco was cautious about entering a war against Great Britain when he was not convinced she was defeated.<sup>11</sup> Franco's rejection closed the western Mediterranean region to Hitler as a viable option for further operations.<sup>12</sup>

The second assumption in Germany's Mediterranean strategy was that the Balkans could be controlled through diplomatic efforts. Although Hitler's diplomatic strategy met with initial success from late 1939 until early 1941, the ethnically diverse and historically volatile Balkan region would continue to be a problem.<sup>13</sup> Territorial issues in the Balkans plagued Hitler's diplomatic team. The situation was a constant give-and-take situation of land assets among small nations. The last assumption for a successful Mediterranean strategy was the ability of the German Navy to hold and capitalize on the territory gained in the Mediterranean region.<sup>14</sup> The German Navy was far inferior to the Royal Navy in ships and personnel and would undoubtedly have difficulty in maintaining such a large theater of responsibility.

Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe, supported Raeder's campaign plan for the Mediterranean. Both generals saw opportunities in seizing French North Africa, which would provide military support to Italian operations in Libya and threaten the British in Egypt.<sup>15</sup> It was important to Germany's strategy to dominate the Mediterranean because British military presence would be reduced.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Raeder's Mediterranean plan was only a small piece of a larger vision that included capturing the Azores, Canaries, and Cape Verde islands in

the Atlantic, enabling Germany to gain control of the Mid-Atlantic region.<sup>17</sup> Raeder believed that once Germany established dominion over the Mediterranean, it would be doubtful that an attack on Russia would be necessary.<sup>18</sup>

Hitler was initially “excited” about Raeder’s plan, but he did not entirely share Raeder’s view of Mediterranean domination.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the German Army High Command was concerned that an attack on Gibraltar could provoke Great Britain to occupy territory in Spain and Portugal. The negative consequence of a Mediterranean strategy was that the Mediterranean would become a major theater of war at a time when Germany was still struggling with what path to pursue--invading Russia or attacking mainland England.<sup>20</sup> In response to Germany’s attack on Gibraltar and British troop movements, Germany would have to position forces in North Africa. These events would expand the war and take German forces from other potential fronts, such as the Russian front. Additionally, the Army High Command was concerned that Russia could attack Germany if she were occupied in the Mediterranean because a majority of Germany’s available Panzer and motorized forces would be engaged in the Mediterranean.<sup>21</sup> Even with these shortfalls, preparations for the capture of Gibraltar appeared on 12 November 1940 in Fuehrer Directive Number 18, stating that one of the four objectives was “to take the Straits of Gibraltar via Spain.”<sup>22</sup> However, in the end Hitler rejected Raeder’s Mediterranean strategy and continued to set his sights on war with an old adversary, Russia.

The other strategic consideration for Germany in the summer of 1940, after Hitler’s victory over France, was Russia. Although Russia and Germany signed the Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939, it was more a “marriage of convenience” than a

permanent agreement.<sup>23</sup> Hitler merely signed the agreement to protect his rear flank when he attacked France. From the very beginning of the pact, friction and ideological differences existed between the two countries.<sup>24</sup> Communist Russia had an ideological vision of dominating the world through revolution. Hitler wanted to eliminate Germany's old adversary because he saw his own countrymen as a Germanic master race and the people of Russia as a lesser one. Since the publication of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's aim was to conquer the vast Russian frontier and use her unlimited resources to enhance Germany's military and economic power and strength.<sup>25</sup> Hitler had legitimate concerns, based on ideological differences, that Russia might attack Germany, while he was eliminating British presence in the Mediterranean. For example, Hitler felt threatened when Joseph Stalin occupied Finland and the Baltic states and continued his political activities in the Balkans.

Additionally, Hitler believed that Great Britain continued her defiance against the Third Reich because she hoped for Russian intervention and ultimate victory. Hitler saw invading Russia as another way to attack the British indirectly and ultimately defeat them. On 31 July 1940, General Franz Halder, Chief of the German Army High Command General Staff, wrote in his personal diary that Hitler said, "Russia is the factor on which Britain is relying the most. . . . With Russia smashed, Britain's last hope would be shattered. . . . Decision: Russia's destruction must therefore be made part of this struggle. Spring 1941."<sup>26</sup> After months of discussions with Hitler's staff, Fuehrer Directive Number 21 issued on 18 December 1940 called for preparations for an attack on Russia no later than 15 May 1941.<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, Hitler's decision was to pursue a Russian strategy rather than conquer the Mediterranean with Raeder's methodical campaign plan. Hitler decided not to attack and destroy England and not to systematically attack her Mediterranean empire. Instead, he believed that by invading Russia, he would eliminate a potential ally for Great Britain. The German campaign for invading Russia became known as Operation *Barbarossa*.

As Hitler was faced with different strategic options in the summer of 1940, Benito Mussolini, the dictator of Italy, examined his own strategic position. From an economic perspective, Italy was a large country with a populace requiring imports for survival. Therefore, it was within Italy's national interests to command the Mediterranean Sea, thereby securing shipping lanes for the import of foods and other products. Thus, pro-British actions taken by the Greek government threatened Italy and made Mussolini strategically uncomfortable because of this threat.<sup>28</sup>

For example, the Royal Navy used Greek ports as staging bases for operations in the eastern Mediterranean and was especially successful against the Italian Navy. Mussolini believed that Greek representatives gave information to Great Britain regarding the location of his submarines. His logic seemed sound because four submarines were lost in Greek waters during this time.<sup>29</sup> Of further concern to the Duce was the island of Corfu. If it became a British base, the industrial base of northern Italy could be threatened by a British attack.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Italy was interested in invading Corfu to protect herself against the British, as well as securing bases throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Additionally, Mussolini desired to become a key player on the world stage and hoped for the military successes that Hitler enjoyed.<sup>31</sup> Mussolini's



ambition and ego drove him to make deliberate blunders, which greatly influenced Hitler's strategic plan in the Balkans.

Prior to invading Russia, Hitler was reluctantly dragged into a campaign in the Balkan peninsula. In the Balkans, Hitler wanted to secure Greece and Yugoslavia diplomatically rather than militarily.<sup>32</sup> He was aware of the importance of the Balkans and, therefore, wanted the area to remain quiet. The Balkans were a lucrative target not only because of their economic importance, but also because domination of the Balkans would greatly enhance the security of Germany's southern flank into Russia and deny Great Britain a foothold on the Balkan peninsula. Protecting German territories and denying access to Great Britain was important because of Great Britain's presence in North Africa, where she was protecting her Suez Canal interests at Sidi Barrani against the Italian armed forces.

Germany's domination of the Balkan states could provide the German Army and Navy with both "land barriers" and "maritime bases."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, a German military strategy in the Balkans was both ground and naval based. Germany assumed responsibility for the "land barriers," such as the continent of Europe, while leaving Italy responsible for Greece, Yugoslavia, and the Mediterranean. Choosing diplomacy, Hitler warned Mussolini on several occasions to stay out of the Balkans, because he did not want the Axis powers to become involved in a conflict as he prepared forces for an invasion of Russia. During their meetings in the summer and fall of 1940, Mussolini agreed that peace in the Balkans should be the policy of the Axis powers. Yet during meetings between Joachim von Ribbentrop, German Foreign Minister, and Mussolini on 19 September 1940, just six weeks prior to Mussolini's invasion of Greece, Italy was

warned once again to stay out of Greece and Yugoslavia.<sup>34</sup> However, Hitler did have a lapse in judgment in April 1940 when he told Mussolini, through the German Ambassador in Italy, that he could “improve his strategic position in the Mediterranean” if Mussolini found circumstances desirable.<sup>35</sup> This was an opportunity Mussolini exploited when Italian forces invaded Greece on 28 October 1940.

Mussolini’s exploitation of Hitler’s guidance in April 1940 may not have been the only incident where Mussolini received direction from Hitler. Possibly a secret agreement occurred between Hitler and Mussolini, where the former actually gave the Duce a “green light” to invade Greece during a meeting on 4 October 1940 at the Brenner Pass.<sup>36</sup> However, there were certain conditions that Hitler presumably wanted met in accordance with an Italian-led invasion. The campaign would have to coincide with Italian operations in Egypt against the British and the fall of Mersa Matruh, as well as involve the conquest of the entire Greek mainland and the occupation of the island of Crete.<sup>37</sup> In theory, the campaign plan called for the two operations to be staggered, with the Egyptian campaign kicking off a few days prior to the Greek one.

However, there was one point of disagreement--Crete. Although counseled by the Germans to make “a ‘lightning like’ occupation of Crete” prior to an invasion of the Greek mainland, Mussolini’s planning staff ultimately rejected the idea.<sup>38</sup> The staff believed that the British were too consumed with events in North Africa to be concerned with future operations in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Further, although the British had superiority on the seas, the staff gambled that the British would not want to risk troop carriers from Egypt to build up and support a base in Crete. Finally, the Italians were concerned about attacking an island without staging bases in the near vicinity. They could

not afford to lose any ships undertaking a seaborne attack on the island. The Italian staff was extremely confident in its campaign plans, predicting that either Egypt or Greece would fall first.<sup>39</sup> With great enthusiasm, Mussolini invaded Greece on 28 October 1940. Three days later, showing a serious miscalculation by the Italian planning staff, Great Britain landed troops on the island of Crete.<sup>40</sup>

On 13 September 1940, the Italian Army in North Africa successfully invaded Libya against the British. Hitler sent a senior officer to North Africa to analyze the situation and the potential for sending a military contingent to assist the Italians with operations. Although Italy overextended her lines of communications in Africa and continued operations in Greece, Mussolini refused to accept Hitler's offer of assistance. On 9 December 1940, the British Army in Libya launched a counteroffensive. The Italian Army crumbled with the city of Bardia and the strategic port of Tobruk fell within a month. Moreover, the British were successful in cutting off the retreating Italians as they headed for Tripoli, the capital of Libya. In two months, the British would gain 400 miles of territory and take 130,000 prisoners of war.<sup>41</sup>

The results of Italian operations in North Africa began to foretell the truth about the state of Mussolini's forces, which were not an effective modern army. By the end of 1940, Italy's sphere of influence in the Mediterranean was severely reduced. The campaign in North Africa was not going well. In the eastern Mediterranean, the Greek Army, which was reinforced by Great Britain, was able to defend her boundaries successfully against the Italian attacks. By March 1941, the Italian military operations had failed miserably and had come to a standstill. With overextended supply lines, incompetent field commanders in Egypt, and a simultaneous campaign in Greece, it

became increasingly clear to Hitler that Mussolini was failing to stabilize his theater of responsibility.<sup>42</sup> Because of Mussolini's miscalculations and military failures, Hitler would be forced to send the Afrika Korps to North Africa, under the command of General Erwin Rommel in February 1941 to avert disaster. Hitler would also prepare plans to enter the fiasco in Greece and to rescue his fellow dictator.

Mussolini's military failures in Greece and North Africa compelled Hitler to enter a conflict he did not desire. Therefore, Hitler conducted military operations in the Balkan peninsula, ending his policy of controlling the area through diplomatic measures and upsetting his strategy for the region. Mussolini's miscalculations had three potential repercussions for Germany. First, German military involvement could bring about unwanted action by Russia in the region, upsetting Hitler's plan to invade her. Second, having to rescue Mussolini and attacking Great Britain via the Mediterranean (vice her homeland) caused Hitler to fight a larger Balkan campaign than he originally intended. Hitler's goal since July 1940 was to invade and quickly destroy Russia.

Third and most importantly, with Mussolini's failures, Great Britain had an opportunity to become involved on the continent again. Along with the quick occupation of Crete, the British transferred airplanes from North Africa to southern Greece within one week of Mussolini's invasion.<sup>43</sup> The Ploesti oil fields in Rumania, supplying the bulk of fuel for the German war machine, were now in jeopardy of being bombed by the British. Besides oil to keep the war machine running, the Balkan region also offered other resources to the Germans, such as agricultural and industrial items. The Balkans provided southeastern Europe with over 50 percent of their agricultural and livestock needs.<sup>44</sup> Greece and Yugoslavia provided 45 percent all-aluminum ore for German industry, while

Yugoslavia provided German industry with 90 percent of tin, 40 percent of lead, and 10 percent of copper.<sup>45</sup> Thus in both military and economic terms, if Great Britain had staging bases in the eastern Mediterranean, the oil fields and railroads which transported agricultural and industrial items out of the Balkans could be struck by the Royal Air Force. Losing this vital line of communication would seriously degrade the German war economy.

Realizing the importance of protecting the Balkan region, Hitler concluded alliances with the pro-German governments of Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria to secure the passage of German forces through Yugoslavia to Greece. In an effort to assist the Italians, to restore the reputation of the Axis powers, to eliminate British dominance in the southeastern section of Europe, and to secure his southern flank, Hitler directed his efficient and highly successful war machine to complete its conquest of the Balkan peninsula.<sup>46</sup> Hitler's armed forces commenced military operations against Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941 and in eleven days defeated Yugoslavia with relative ease.<sup>47</sup> Hitler's next military objective was the conquest of Greece.

Fuehrer Directive Number 20, which had already been signed back in December 1940, specified the general operational plans for Germany's attack against Greece. The offensive was code named Operation *Marita*. The directive listed those salient features concerning the significance of the operation; namely, to aid Mussolini's Greece fiasco and to prevent Great Britain's establishment of air bases in the Balkans, which could threaten the Ploesti oil fields in Romania or Italy as well (appendix A). Fuehrer Directive Number 20 listed the Aegean coast and the Salonika basin as initial objectives. The Luftwaffe was further given the mission "to seize British bases on the Greek islands by

parachute and airborne landings.”<sup>48</sup> It is in this directive that the first inkling of an airborne invasion of the island of Crete could occur.

Within approximately one week after Yugoslavia’s surrender to Germany, the combined operation of both army and Luftwaffe forces attacked the Greek Army along the Greek-Albania-Yugoslavia borders. Although reinforced by four British Commonwealth divisions from the North African front, the Allied forces were unable to repulse the strong German attack.<sup>49</sup> Mainland Greece was forced to surrender to the Third Reich by the end of April. German blitzkrieg tactics, similar to those used against France in May and June of 1940, appeared to render the German armed forces as almost unbeatable. The collapse of mainland Greece precipitated the seaborne evacuation of British, Greek, and Allied forces to the island of Crete.

Hitler’s plan to rescue Mussolini and to reduce British presence in the eastern Mediterranean was successful but came at a cost. First, the German offensive required staging troops and equipment in Bulgaria and Romania, which alarmed the Russians at a time when Hitler was trying to mask the German force buildup in the east. Second, Hitler would attack Great Britain in her Imperial Empire, not in England--his original intention. Third, Germany seized territory that was not necessary for the Russian invasion and negated the spheres of influence originally drawn between Germany and Italy. Fourth, the invasion was not the result of Raeder’s meticulous Mediterranean plans, but rather the result of military failures and “diplomatic miscalculations” by the Italians.<sup>50</sup> Even with these costs, Hitler’s goal was to split British forces between North Africa and Greece, which hopefully would diminish her overall combat power and squeeze out her presence in the Mediterranean. Although Hitler’s strategy for the Balkans was convoluted and

depended on too many outside factors, the Italian failure in Greece completely compromised and threw off Hitler's strategic plan.<sup>51</sup> With the Allied seaborne evacuation, which was similar to Dunkirk, the Greek, British, and other forces escaped from the mainland to Crete. Almost overnight, the small island immediately became a strategic location in the eastern half of the Mediterranean Sea for Germany as well as for Great Britain.

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<sup>1</sup>Alan Clark, *The Fall of Crete* (London: Cassell & Co., 1962), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Herman Burkhardt Mueller-Hillebrand, *The German Campaign in the Balkans, 1941: A Model of Crisis Planning*, Foreign Military Studies (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1950), 2.

<sup>3</sup>Code names for German operations will be italicized.

<sup>4</sup>Charles B. Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy and Spain in World War II* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 31, 35-40.

<sup>5</sup>Mueller-Hillebrand, 5.

<sup>6</sup>Burdick, 46.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>8</sup>Charles Cruickshank, *The Politics and Strategy of the Second World War: Greece 1940-1941*, ed. Noble Frankland and Christopher Dowling (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1976), 73-74.

<sup>9</sup>Burdick, 3, 44; and Thomas E. Griess et al., eds., *The Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean*, The West Point Military History Series (Wayne, NJ: Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1984), 91.

<sup>10</sup>Burdick, 103-104.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 104, 115; Mueller-Hillebrand, 7; and Cruickshank, 91.

<sup>12</sup>Burdick, 114-115.

<sup>13</sup>Cruickshank, 23-24.

<sup>14</sup>Griess, 91.

- <sup>15</sup>John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 139.
- <sup>16</sup>Burdick, 51.
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 50, 65.
- <sup>18</sup>Cruickshank, 74.
- <sup>19</sup>Keegan, 139; and Cruickshank, 189.
- <sup>20</sup>Mueller-Hillebrand, 3.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>23</sup>Hanson W. Baldwin, *The Crucial Years 1939-1941: The World at War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 306.
- <sup>24</sup>Mueller-Hillebrand, 6.
- <sup>25</sup>Baldwin, 305-306.
- <sup>26</sup>Franz Halder, *The Halder War Diary: 1939-1942*, ed. Charles Burdick and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 244.
- <sup>27</sup>Baldwin, 307.
- <sup>28</sup>Cruickshank, 27.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup>Keegan, 144.
- <sup>32</sup>Cruickshank, 23-24.
- <sup>33</sup>Keegan, 143.
- <sup>34</sup>Cruickshank, 31.
- <sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>36</sup>Martin Van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy 1940-1941: The Balkan Clue* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 33-39; Keegan, 143; and Cruickshank, 38-39.
- <sup>37</sup>Van Creveld, 37-38.



<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 37, 39.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>40</sup>Griess, 92.

<sup>41</sup>Keegan, 148.

<sup>42</sup>Clark, 8.

<sup>43</sup>Keegan, 134.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Karl Gundelach, "The Battle for Crete 1941," in *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View*, ed. H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 101.

<sup>47</sup>Griess, 92-93.

<sup>48</sup>Gundelach, 101.

<sup>49</sup>Keegan, 149.

<sup>50</sup>Clark, 9.

<sup>51</sup>Cruickshank, 75.

## CHAPTER 3

### STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF CRETE

As the fourth largest island in the Mediterranean, the island of Crete dominates the entrance into Aegean Sea and the southern approach to the Turkish Straits. Located sixty miles from the Greek mainland in the eastern Mediterranean, 460 miles from Egypt, 240 miles from Libya, and 600 miles from the Suez Canal, Crete in 1941 offered a unique strategic location for both Germany and Great Britain. At 160 miles long with a width that varies between seven and one-half miles to thirty-five miles, Crete was an unusually long, narrow island with hills and high mountains located in the central and eastern part of the isle. In the western area, the Madara Mountains climb to an elevation of 8,100 feet and have a commanding view of the surrounding area. The climate is generally arid and in April and May extremely hot. The location, geography, and climate combined to affect military operations in May 1941.

Because of its location, Crete's Suda Bay was of significant value. Although the south coast had no suitable harbors for naval vessels in 1941, on the north coast, Suda Bay provided one of the best ports in the Mediterranean. It was surrounded by hills, which could provide protection for naval vessels from attacking aircraft and would provide excellent positions for anti-aircraft guns.<sup>1</sup> The two other ports on the north coast at Heraklion and Retimo only provided anchorage for very small ships and were not suited for military naval vessels. Additionally, there was already an airfield at Heraklion and Allied forces constructed two additional airfields at Maleme.<sup>2</sup> Because of the ports

and airfields on the north coast, most Allied and German military troops and equipment would be concentrated in these areas (appendix B).

The key towns of Maleme, Canea, Retimo, and Heraklion were located on the north coastline. The road infrastructure connecting these towns was generally poor, but was the best on the island. The majority of the roads ran along the north coast, close to the sea, and was susceptible to air attack. In particular, there was only one major road on Crete connecting Suda Bay with Canea, Retimo, and Heraklion, but it was not well constructed and very narrow in several places. Additionally, the bridges along the road were not strong enough to hold the weight of military equipment, such as tanks and transport vehicles.<sup>3</sup> North-south roads were nonexistent and resembled mountain trails. There were many logistical challenges because the condition of the roads leading from the ports hindered the transport of equipment and supplies to the rest of the island. From an operational perspective, the major towns of Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion would be key German objectives because the major airfields were located near these towns. The Allies would also place their defensive positions in these areas to protect the airfields against airborne and seaborne landings.

Crete provided unique geographical advantages because it was large enough to build several airfields for all types of aircraft, which could range from single engine fighters to troop carriers and bombers. Another advantage was command and control of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, with Suda Bay providing excellent anchorage and protection of naval assets. An advantage for the Germans was that their key operational objectives of Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion on the north coast faced occupied Greece and their staging bases. Despite these advantages, Crete also offered several

disadvantages. For example, a railway system did not exist, while the primitive road infrastructure prevented the quick transport of supplies, equipment, and troops. Further, during the evacuation, the mountain trails seriously hindered the Allies' ability to retreat to the south coast for embarkation. Additionally, Allied communications back to Egypt were unreliable because there was no suitable harbor on the south coast to transmit messages to Cairo, hindering the execution of the battle. Thus, the geography and lack of infrastructure proved to be more of a liability for the Allied defensive forces than for the invading Germans.<sup>4</sup> Based on geography and infrastructure, the strategic and operational advantage rested with Germany.

A map of the Mediterranean Sea and a brief review of the military situation in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations in 1941 will indicate why Crete had become so strategically important (appendix A). Adolf Hitler was now eager to add Crete, "the crowning glory" of the Balkan campaign, to his already impressive list of stunning conquests for two reasons: protection and offensive bases.<sup>5</sup> The strategic location of Crete was extremely important in protecting key German resources and denying England a key location. If the British increased forces on Crete, the island could act as an air base for the Royal Air Force to carrying out bombing missions against the Ploesti oil fields in German controlled Romania. The importance of these fields cannot be overstated. In the early part of the Second World War, Germany was starved for resources and received most of its oil from Romania. In the words of Burkhart Mueller-Hillebrand, adjutant to the Chief of the Army General Staff in 1941, the Ploesti oil fields "were absolutely vital to Germany for the further conduct of the war."<sup>6</sup> In addition to securing the Ploesti oil fields from air attacks, the conquest and occupation of Crete would secure the Aegean

Sea for Axis shipping, loosen Great Britain's grasp in the eastern Mediterranean, and provide air bases for attacks against British forces in Egypt.<sup>7</sup>

Offensively, Crete as a German military base would significantly restrict the movement of the powerful British Navy in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the morale factor that the capture of Crete would cause, the airfields of Crete would provide excellent bases for Germany to conduct military operations in the eastern Mediterranean. Possession would also provide a convenient base from which to conduct future ground operations in North Africa and against the Suez Canal. It is important to note that General Erwin Rommel was beginning his initial offensives against the British forces in North Africa concurrently with the German offensives on the Balkan peninsula. Keeping the sea lanes of communication open to German forces in North Africa would become paramount to success. In examining these strategic advantages it is not difficult to understand why Crete was now important to Germany's further war plans. In fact, Hitler realized the strategic importance and selected an offensive against Crete over an attack on the important island of Malta. Even though Malta was a British stronghold and could influence German operations in Libya and North Africa, Crete with its potential for larger airfields and good anchorage was the greater prize.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the British under the leadership of their Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, sought to retain Crete under the control of Allied armed forces. Since France had fallen under German domination, it was quite evident that Britain's influence in western Europe was eliminated. It was now through the Balkans and Crete that Britain would frantically attempt to hold on to her only remaining area of influence on the European continent, which her presence in the eastern Mediterranean lent great assistance

in accomplishing. Just as the Germans were vitally concerned about their oil interests in Romania, Great Britain also had oil interests located in the Persian Gulf. The British hypothesized that by keeping Romanian oil from German consumption, Germany would be defeated. The goal of “tightening the ring” around Germany could in part be accomplished by denying vital resources, such as oil, from the Wehrmacht.<sup>10</sup> British leadership predicted the lack of resources would put the German army out of action and cause Germany to fall by 1942.<sup>11</sup> British strategists were also convinced that the retention of Greece and Crete was vital to the defense of the eastern Mediterranean to protect their logistical operations to North Africa.<sup>12</sup> The British leadership also understood if Germany captured Crete they could hinder the oil flow from the Persian Gulf coming through the Suez Canal.

The British, with their imperial presence, committed military forces in the Mediterranean long before the start of the Second World War. Egypt, in particular, was a staging area for troops from across the British Empire.<sup>13</sup> This was evident by a powerful Royal Navy, which patrolled the entire Mediterranean. However, the presence of the Luftwaffe, in an attempt to secure Axis shipping lanes in the eastern Mediterranean, wrecked havoc against British convoys and naval operations. British battleships *Warspite* and *Barham* were torpedoed off the coast of Crete on 16 March 1941, while the aircraft carrier, *Formidable*, was hit with a 3,000-pound bomb at the end of the month.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Germany possessed control of the air in the eastern Mediterranean, which threatened Allied ships. Moreover, British ships passing through key shipping lanes within range of the Germans would have to travel under the cover of darkness. Most importantly, these actions by the Luftwaffe negated Great Britain’s use of shipping lanes

and trade routes east of Crete.<sup>15</sup> As long as the island remained under Allied control, it was the Allies who would possess both naval and air superiority in the area. Thus, because of its location, Crete played a key role in Great Britain's strategic stake in the eastern Mediterranean.

In short, the possession of Crete represented an important strategic advantage for both Germany and Great Britain in carrying out air, naval, and ground offensive operations. With the Germans in control of the Balkan peninsula and the British Empire forces in control of Egypt and the Suez Canal, it became quite clear that Crete could serve either side, not only as a convenient stepping stone to use primarily as an air base, but also as a naval base for the distinct purpose of carrying out offensive warfare. The country that controlled Crete could clearly influence military operations in the eastern Mediterranean and as a result would possess a marked strategic advantage. As the strategic potential of Crete became clear, Germany and Great Britain positioned forces in the eastern Mediterranean.

In 1941, Germany had forces dispersed from France to Norway and from Yugoslavia to Greece. Many of these forces were earmarked for the invasion of Crete, but were not in the vicinity of Greece at the end of April 1941. The German armed forces spent the first two weeks in May receiving forces and equipment at their staging bases in Greece. Paratroopers and support personnel moved by rail from Norway and Romania while equipment arrived from France.<sup>16</sup> General Kurt Student, commander of the XI Flieger (Air) Corps, a unit comprised of the 7th Flieger Division and the 22nd Air Infantry Division, was the brainchild behind an all air invasion of Crete. However, the appointment of task force commander did not fall to him. Instead, in Fuehrer Directive

Number 28, Hitler for the “first and only time . . . delegated absolute command to one service over the other two in a unified project and therewith divested himself of direct responsibility.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, for Operation *Merkur*, the airborne invasion of Crete, the air force would command and control the operation, while the army and navy acted as subcomponents. Further, Hitler gave command to Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe, an officer who early in the war had earned Hitler’s complete trust. Goering, choosing to remain in his office in Berlin and knowing he could not command and control from there, ordered Luftwaffe Chief of Staff, Major General Hans Jeschonnek, to oversee the operation. Goering also delegated operational command to General Alexander Loehr, Commander in Chief of the 4th Air Fleet, who was ultimately in control of the campaign (appendix C).<sup>18</sup>

Under Loehr, General Wolfram von Richthofen, commander for the VIII Air Corps, represented the air component. Admiral Karl Georg Schuster of Naval Command Southeast, also known as “Admiral Southeast” in written orders, commanded the small naval component. Student was in command of the land forces including his own 7th Flieger Division, as well as the 5th Mountain Division. Because of logistical problems, Student’s organic 22nd Air Infantry Division, which guarded the Ploesti oil fields in Romania, could not arrive in Greece in time for the invasion.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Goering suggested using the 5th Mountain Division because it was already on the Greek peninsula. Although it was unusual for the air force to command land and naval forces, the importance of air power for a successful campaign in Crete was paramount. Therefore, the German command structure throughout the campaign was surprisingly simple, allowing plans and decisions to be made quickly and smoothly.<sup>20</sup>



As Germany massed forces in Greece for their assault on Crete in the spring of 1941, British forces were located throughout the Mediterranean, including Tobruk, Cairo, Suez Canal, Alexandria, Mersa Matruh, and Malta. Most of the Allied units on Crete derived from remnants of the Greek Army and the British Expeditionary Force evacuated from Greece on 24 to 29 April 1941. They were a motley crew of demoralized soldiers from different units and from different Commonwealth countries: New Zealand, Australia, and Great Britain. They were defeated and humiliated during the retreat and evacuation, and arrived in Crete as fragments of former units, missing leaders, equipment, supplies, uniforms, and weapons. The British initially occupied Crete in November 1940 with one battalion of troops and naval equipment located at Suda Bay. However, the evacuees coming from Greece would soon increase that number to almost 40,000.<sup>21</sup> Such a large force gave the perception of superiority for the Allies, but the soldiers on Crete did not constitute a highly trained and combat effective unit.

General Bernard Freyberg took command of these composite forces, known as CREFORCE, on 30 April 1941, about three weeks prior to the German airborne invasion of Crete. He was the seventh commander in six months.<sup>22</sup> The command structure for the defense of Crete was convoluted and bureaucratic. The army, navy, and air force fell under independent commanders, who were located in Cairo at the British Middle East Command Headquarters. Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell, British Commander in Chief in the Middle East, was Freyberg's boss, while the Royal Navy element fell under Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, and the Royal Air Force was under the control of Air Marshall Sir Arthur Longmore. These officers were of equal rank and individually were subordinate to the War Cabinet located in London. With this command structure,

Freyberg was not a commander in chief of the island; he was merely an overseer of troops. For example, when he requested joint support from the other services, his request first went to Wavell as the Commander in Chief in the Middle East, who would then coordinate with the other two service chiefs for resolutions. This type of bureaucratic resolution took valuable time from Freyberg as he prepared Crete's defenses and faced logistical challenges. Most importantly, it meant that operational unity of command within the Middle East Theater was not centralized on defensive preparations in Crete or on execution of the battle during the German invasion. The lack of unity of command between the leaders of the strategic and operational levels of war would cause further problems (appendix D).

Churchill, as the political leader of England, saw the strategic importance of holding and defending Crete. As early as October 1940, when it became evident that the Italians were to invade Greece, he perused a map of the eastern Mediterranean and stated, "One salient strategic fact leaped out upon us--CRETE! The Italians must not have it. We must get it first--and at once."<sup>23</sup> He communicated this importance to his Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, on 29 October 1940 that a defense of Crete warranted "large-scale action" at the "expense of other sectors" in the Middle East.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, British forces occupied Crete on 1 November 1940, but they were not prepared or equipped to defend against a large invasion force. Wavell, however, did not support British involvement in either Greece or Crete because he did not view Germany as a credible threat in the region.<sup>25</sup> Even after the Italian invasion, Churchill continued to cite accurate intelligence and urged his theater commander about the necessity of holding Crete "at all costs".<sup>26</sup> But Wavell was not convinced. Reinforcing Churchill's strategic

stance pertaining to Crete, however, the Joint Planning Staff in London on 11 February 1941 recommended to Wavell that the island be strengthened militarily with troops and equipment.<sup>27</sup> Wavell's challenge was to free up other forces within his command because they were supporting missions throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East. British soldiers were located in North Africa, Iraq, and Syria. Therefore, there were limited resources and operational problems within his command, making it difficult to provide a large military garrison to the defense of Crete. In any event, Wavell did expand Britain's initial battalion size force and naval base on Crete to a presence of about 2500 soldiers, sailors, and airmen by the time Greece fell in April 1941.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, Wavell's other operational concerns overshadowed Crete. For example, the Middle East Command was also planning a secret counteroffensive against the Italians in the Western Desert of North Africa, which kicked off in December 1940. The success of the campaign required the service chiefs to determine future actions in Libya, but no discussion was made regarding Crete.<sup>29</sup> Despite their Prime Minister's continued prodding, there simply was no interest, particularly in the army, regarding the future fate of Crete. Therefore, Wavell failed to understand that Crete was strategically important to Great Britain. This lack of harmony between the political leader and the theater commander would continue to plague the force buildup and defense of Crete.

The acquisition of Crete would provide a unique strategic position for both Germany and Great Britain. Crete by itself was not important; however, what the Germans and Allies could do *from* Crete was very important to the strategic setting of early 1941. The island provided staging bases from which future operations in the Mediterranean, North Africa, Middle East, and Southern Europe could be influenced.

Therefore, whoever controlled Crete would potentially command the seas and skies of the eastern Mediterranean. Crete's future and who controlled it were uncertain in the spring of 1941 as both the Germans and the British prepared for invasion.

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<sup>1</sup>Alan Clark, *The Fall of Crete* (London: Cassell & Co., 1962), 18.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Singleton-Gates, *General Lord Freyberg VC* (London: Tonbridge Printers Ltd., 1963), 148.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Battle of Crete: May 20–June 1, 1941*, Special Bulletin No. 35 (Washington, DC: War Department, 15 October 1941), 2; and George E. Blau, *The German Campaigns in the Balkans* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 123.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Jablonski, *Air War*, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday & Co, Inc., 1979), 16.

<sup>6</sup>Herman Burkhardt Mueller-Hillebrand, *The German Campaign in the Balkans, 1941: A Model of Crisis Planning*, Foreign Military Studies (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1950), 4.

<sup>7</sup>Karl Gundelach, "The Battle for Crete 1941," in *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View*, ed. H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 103.

<sup>8</sup>*The Battle of Crete*, Special Bulletin No. 35, 8.

<sup>9</sup>Donald S. Detwiler, *World War II German Military Studies*, vol. 13 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979), 120.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), 16.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>14</sup>*Air Operations: March 16–April 15, 1941 Inclusive*, Air Bulletin No. 20 (Washington, DC: War Department, May 20, 1941), 11.

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

<sup>16</sup>Walter Ansel, *Hitler and the Middle Sea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 206.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 204; and see also Blau, 142.

<sup>18</sup>Ansel, 204.

<sup>19</sup>Gundelach, 103; and Blau, 126.

<sup>20</sup>*The Battle of Crete*, Special Bulletin No. 35, 18.

<sup>21</sup>Ansel, 81; *The Battle of Crete*, Special Bulletin No. 35, 4.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Cruickshank, *The Politics and Strategy of the Second World War: Greece 1940-1941*, ed. Noble Frankland and Christopher Dowling (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1976), 164.

<sup>23</sup>Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, vol. 2, *The Second World War*, Chartwell ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 534.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>Clark, 12.

<sup>26</sup>Winston S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, vol. 3, *The Second World War*, ed., Chartwell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 66.

<sup>27</sup>Clark, 13.

<sup>28</sup>Ansel, 81.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

## CHAPTER 4

### PREPARATIONS FOR INVASION

As the Germans prepared for an all-airborne invasion of Crete, the first of its kind in the history of warfare, they were confident in the employment of airborne forces because of prior training and operational use. Hitler's initial airborne successes evolved during the interwar period and focused on the employment and doctrinal foundations of airborne operations. In fact, the Russian airborne program influenced the Germans. By 1939, both countries possessed the technological and doctrinal development necessary to employ large-scale airborne forces. This intensive development and training influenced Hitler to use airborne troops as a strategic striking force to seize key positions and to prevent forward movement of his neighbor's forces. While possessing air superiority, he launched his forces without warning against small countries, such as Denmark, Norway, Belgium, and Holland.

During the period from 1919 to 1939, the development of airborne operations evolved. The Russians began aggressive tests and experiments in 1930. During maneuver exercises in 1935 and 1936, the Russians demonstrated to other nations how to drop battalions and regiments of airborne forces. In a seemingly dangerous maneuver, paratroopers climbed out of the hatch of an airplane, crawled to the wings, and slid off the wings of the aircraft.<sup>1</sup> The Soviets also performed an elementary heavy drop with a motorcycle and a "wheeled box" containing soldiers. Overall, the initial Soviet model exceeded that of other nations and inspired the Germans to develop their own airborne training program and doctrine.

Capitalizing on the innovations of the Soviets, the Germans quickly produced effective doctrine on the training and employment of paratroopers on the battlefield. Specifically, the development of procedures and training, as well as equipment design and production began in earnest from 1936 to 1937. During these two years, unprecedented progress was made. The Germans incorporated the Italian parachute, the *salvatore*, using a static line, requiring less work from the individual and allowing for low altitude drops.<sup>2</sup> They improved upon the *salvatore* by developing a reserve parachute to increase safety. They also institutionalize their training by establishing a German Parachute Training School in Stendal, sixty miles west of Berlin. Volunteers were taken from existing units and were required to go through very rigorous training, regardless of rank. Afterwards, the soldiers attended 16 days of physically demanding training at airborne school, where they were required to perform six jumps and pack their own chutes.<sup>3</sup> Tactical training, such as actions on the objective, rally points, and airfield seizure, were conducted at the unit level. Such rigorous training produced an elite group of paratroopers facilitating the organization of special airborne units.

In 1937, the first German parachute battalion was organized and began validating doctrine, tactics, and techniques. The battalion began practicing night jumps, landing away from the objective, conducting movement to contact, and engaging the enemy. The primary means of transport was the Junker-52, a three-engine commercial aircraft capable of carrying twelve to thirteen fully equipped soldiers or the equivalent weight for ammunition and supplies.<sup>4</sup> Paratroops were lightly armed with a pistol, four to six grenades, extra ammunition, and a three-day supply of food.<sup>5</sup> In 1941, larger weapons, such as automatic rifles, machine guns, and mortars, were placed in weapons containers

and dropped separately using a different color parachute.<sup>6</sup> Parachutists landed on or near an objective, found their weapons, and consolidated forces to carry out the mission.

The father of the German airborne, General Kurt Student, understood that lightly equipped troops would require prompt link-up with follow-on forces in order to be successful in battle.<sup>7</sup> Understanding the limitation of airborne forces, Student did not assign his paratroop units tasks for which they were ill equipped. These tenets became early doctrine for the employment of German paratroopers. Above all, inherent in their doctrine was the exploitation of surprise, which supported Hitler's new kind of warfare.

Airborne operations fit perfectly within the tenets of blitzkrieg warfare, where it was important to strike first decisively, using the element of surprise. Massive defensive positions, such as the Maginot Line, blocked Germany's borders, and important islands, such as Crete, could serve as strategic staging bases for military forces. Airborne operations, therefore, gave Hitler the capability to take troops beyond obstacles, attack objectives or seize key terrain that could not be captured any other way.<sup>8</sup>

By the time of the Crete operation, the XI Flieger (Air) Corps was comprised of the 7th Flieger Division and the 22nd Air Infantry Division. The XI Flieger Corps fell under the operational control of the Luftwaffe because the air force focused on the ground battle as part of its overall mission.<sup>9</sup> The 7th Flieger Division was comprised of 4,500 trained paratroopers and consisted of supporting troops transported by gliders from signal, artillery, and engineer elements that possessed antitank and antiaircraft weapons.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the 22nd Air Infantry Division (12,000 soldiers) was specially trained in air land operations, which extended the capabilities of the XI Flieger Corps.<sup>11</sup>



Previous airborne operations bolstered the German General Staff's confidence in planning for Crete. For example, during Hitler's invasion of Denmark and Norway in 1940, paratroopers and air landed soldiers were used together for the first time in the history of warfare.<sup>12</sup> In both countries, paratroopers seized airfields while air landed soldiers consolidated the airheads and moved out to exploit their surprise attack. The attack established the tenet of simultaneously using the principle of surprise and air superiority in airborne operations.<sup>13</sup> The opposing forces met with some resistance, but because of the element of surprise and air superiority of the Luftwaffe, they quickly overcame the defenders.

Although the surprise invasion of Scandinavia was a success, the first real test of airborne employment against determined opposition came with the airborne assaults on Belgium and Holland in 1940. The goal of the airborne assaults was to strike decisively at key targets, facilitating the invasion of follow-on forces. In Belgium, glider troops were used to seize three bridges over the Albert Canal and to capture the fortress at Eben Emael. The paratroopers seized two of the three bridges while the defenders blew up the third one. Nine gliders landed on the roof of the Eben Emael fortress and succeeded in destroying the defensive positions. Because the Germans surprised the defenders, they were in control of Fort Eben Emael within 24 hours of its assault.<sup>14</sup> This allowed the follow-on forces to move quickly through the key area controlled by the fortress.

In Holland, the mission of the paratroopers was to seize key airfields north of Rotterdam and three important bridges in the cities of Rotterdam, Moerdijk, and Dordrecht.<sup>15</sup> The secondary mission was for the paratroopers to hold the airfields, to block roadways and railways, and to deny the freedom of movement by the Dutch army

reserve. By holding these key objectives an “airborne carpet” was established, which allowed mechanized forces to pass through and accomplish other tasks.<sup>16</sup> Not only was the invasion an overall tactical success, but also it strategically eliminated the Dutch theater of operations.<sup>17</sup> General Albert Kesselring, commander of the German Second Air Force during the Netherlands campaign, described the airborne invasion as “a small military masterpiece” from which the German airborne division learned many lessons.<sup>18</sup>

Lessons learned from the campaigns in Belgium and Holland reinforced initial German doctrine. First, paratroopers by necessity were lightly armed and equipped, and therefore had limited offensive capability against fortified defenses. The initial attack at the bridge in Dordrecht failed because the element of surprise was lost and paratroopers were not equipped to fight the defenders.<sup>19</sup> Thus, during future German airborne battle preparations, it was imperative for the German General Staff to consider the element of surprise. Second, if surprise were lost, then it would be necessary to reconsider where to deliver the paratroopers. Student used the terms direct or indirect methods of paratroops.<sup>20</sup> Direct method was when troops were delivered on top of or adjacent to the objective, while indirect method referred to the delivery of troops away from the ultimate objective. The third lesson learned from the Belgium and Holland invasions was the necessity for paratroopers to link-up quickly with ground forces, which were more heavily equipped and armed. Therefore, it was necessary for military planners to restrict the objectives of paratroopers to those that could be held by lightly armed forces until ground troops re-supplied and relieved them.

The success of these operations justified the German airborne proponents’ assertion that airborne warfare was an effective and strategic combat tool, enhancing

combat power and rapid employment of troops. The use of airborne warfare could also be successful in meeting the strategic and tactical goals of Nazi Germany. Additionally, the successes and lessons learned influenced the military leadership to consider airborne operations in future battle plans. Thus, prior successful airborne operations gave the German advisors experience and confidence as they planned for the invasion of Crete.

With the Nazi victory in Greece at the end of the April 1941, the Germans began planning for further operations in the eastern Mediterranean. However, a key strategic difficulty for German plans was the Royal Navy because it possessed naval superiority throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>21</sup> The enemy's strong navy and their own weak one deterred Germany from planning a seaborne offensive.<sup>22</sup> Instead, their goal during Operation *Merkur* was to rely on the Luftwaffe to neutralize the British Navy. With destruction of the Royal Navy and pre-bombardment of the island, the Germans would be able to transport troops, equipment, and supplies to Crete.

Therefore, on 21 April 1941 Goering and Student proposed to Hitler an all air invasion of Crete resulting in Fuehrer Directive Number 28, Operation *Merkur*.<sup>23</sup> Directive Number 28, signed on 25 April, ordered the Luftwaffe to plan for an assault with the end result of "using Crete as an air base against Britain in the Eastern Mediterranean."<sup>24</sup> The original execution day was 15 May, which left the Germans with only three weeks to coordinate and to prepare for the first air occupation of an island.<sup>25</sup> The lack of time seriously impeded Germany's preparedness for the operation. The logistics of the operation were overwhelming. For example, the expectation of Hitler was to use forces already on hand in Greece, however, as stated in chapter three, members and equipment of the XI Flieger Corps were scattered across Europe.<sup>26</sup> Some men and

equipment did not arrive in Greece until 14 May, one day prior to the original start date of Operation *Merkur*.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, after the Yugoslavian and Greek campaigns, the XI Flieger Corps sent Junker-52s to Germany in early May for maintenance and retrofit. They returned to the limited Greek staging bases on 14 May.<sup>28</sup> There were almost 23,000 men and over 500 aircraft that required facilities, lodgment, and food.<sup>29</sup> The shortage of space caused many aircrews to be separated from their support personnel because the airfields could not accommodate all the personnel and assets required for the invasion.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to these challenges, the most serious logistical issue facing the task force commander, General Alexander Loehr, was the lack of fuel. The fuel was transported by sea from Italy, but three tankers were held up in the canal at Corinth because a collapsed bridge blocked the way. After German divers freed a small passage for the ships to travel through, the tankers arrived at their destinations very late on 17 May. The following day, fuel from the ships began to arrive at the airfields and for the next two days the support personnel fueled over 500 aircraft.<sup>31</sup> The delay in the fuel delivery caused the Crete operation to be postponed by five days.<sup>32</sup> Even on the morning of the first day of battle, 20 May, crews fueled aircraft earmarked for participation on Crete. As aircraft returned to Greece after their mission, re-fueling was done by hand, truck to plane, which was a very slow process and contributed to the delay of follow-on waves during the battle.

Besides logistical concerns, other issues also abounded due to the lack of time allotted for preparations. For example, the transport pilots did not have aerial photos of the drop zones until 19 May, one day prior to execution. The German intelligence predicted that two brigades and an unknown number of evacuees occupied the island.<sup>33</sup> It

further disseminated that the Allies were demoralized and worn out from the evacuation. Additionally, the Germans failed to conduct thorough aerial reconnaissance and were, therefore, unaware of the camouflaged defensive positions around Maleme, Suda Bay, Retimo, and Heraklion.<sup>34</sup>

During the final days before the invasion, the Germans experienced the unexpected. As rehearsals began on the airfields, the soldiers and aircrews encountered an enemy besides the Allies--nature. Due to the extremely arid conditions of southern Greece, a dust cloud formed over the airstrip when aircraft took off and the dust did not clear for almost twenty minutes.<sup>35</sup> At this rate it took the German squadrons almost an hour to form for flight vice only a few minutes.<sup>36</sup> The support personnel sprinkled the airfields with water but it had little affect on controlling the dust. On execution day, the dust created from aircraft taking off slowed down the air operation over Crete, which caused a piecemeal effect on the delivery of forces to the battle.

As preparations on land continued at a chaotic pace, naval preparations were considered an afterthought to the original plan. By the second week in May, Loehr was concerned about re-supply to the island and amphibious landings on the beaches because of the powerful Royal Navy. However, Student did not see the necessity of a seaborne operation supporting the air invasion.<sup>37</sup> General Julius Ringel, commander of the 5th Mountain Division, was a supporter of seaborne re-supply because many of his soldiers were to arrive by sea. Seaborne transport finally entered the operational plan in the late planning stages on 16 May. Because of the strength of the British Navy, the Luftwaffe would have to master the skies in support of a seaborne reinforcement. As the sea operation developed, early transport of troops, tanks, and artillery were hastily added into

the plan as light and heavy combat echelons. These two flotillas planned to land west of Maleme and east of Heraklion. In hindsight, the sea operation was seen as a good back up plan to the air operation, but at the time of its conception, it was not considered as such.<sup>38</sup>

With such short notice, finding suitable transport challenged the mountain troops. Since the German Navy was very weak and practically non-existent in the Mediterranean, officers of the 5th Mountain Division were forced to find boats from the local population. What they found were small crafts such as motor-sailers, caiques, and yachts. The motor-sailers were two-mast boats with wooden hulls designed for fishing. Most of the small boats were past their prime, but still in fair condition. In only a few short days, the Germans finalized plans for a seaborne reinforcement mission on 16 May; located motor-sailers and caiques from the local population by 17 May; loaded the sea craft on 18 May; and set sail to their staging bases on islands in the Aegean Sea on 19 May, with an arrival on Crete scheduled for 21 May. The Maleme Flotilla set sail from Piraeus comprised of about 24 caiques and motor-sailers, while the Heraklion Flotilla set sail from the tip of Attica with about 30 sea craft.<sup>39</sup> As a further example of improvisation during the planning of this mission, the Germans did not think through how the soldiers would get from ship to shore with only a few rafts and pontoons available. Because the Germans gave themselves a very short time to prepare for the invasion of Crete, they faced many challenges and improvised several facets. Their initial plan involved several assumptions and three courses of action.

As German soldiers prepared for the Crete campaign, German military advisors continued to solidify the invasion plan, making several assumptions. First, the German Navy could not assist with the invasion of Crete in a conventional way. The second

assumption was that the Italian Navy suffered defeats by the Royal Navy and was considered unreliable. Finally, the most important assumption was that the Luftwaffe could not be destroyed by Great Britain. The entire operation hung on the assumption that the air operation would be successful in capturing the airfields on the first day of battle.<sup>40</sup> Other alternatives, such as the enemy demolishing the airfields, which could prevent the landing of reinforcements, were not considered. Therefore, the weight of the operation fell to the parachutists' successful capture of the three airfields. The courses of action the Germans quickly considered before the invasion were done under these critical assumptions.

The Germans considered three courses of action for the assault of Crete. The first course of action was Student's ambitious plan to assault the island at seven different objectives at the same time.<sup>41</sup> In such a move, the entire island would be taken with one decisive action. However, the operational disadvantage was that German paratroopers and mountain infantry would be widely dispersed, creating an environment which would make it difficult for the elements to link up with their flanks.<sup>42</sup> Goering rejected this first ambitious plan. The second course of action was to occupy the western end of the island, capturing the surrounding area from Maleme's airfield to the small village of Canea, near Suda Bay (appendix B). Once the airfield was secured, reinforcements would arrive by air, and the airborne infantry troops would then fan out from the assembly area to the rest of the island. The advantage of this course of action was that the Germans could quickly gain control of a small area using a large number of forces. This is also important if stiff resistance was encountered. However, this option was risky because troops moving along the northern coast would be susceptible to enemy gunfire from the mountain ranges. This

option also left the other two airfields in the hands of the Allies to land aircraft for re-supply or to demolish them.

The final course of action, which was a compromise of Student's initial plan and the second option, called for attacking four objectives in two waves: Maleme and Canea (Suda Bay) in the morning, and Retimo and Heraklion in the afternoon. Once the airfields were seized and secured, and the British Navy neutralized, reinforcements would be brought in via the sea.<sup>43</sup> Although Goering had limited intelligence on the strength of the Allied defense, he selected the third course of action, four objectives in two waves, because it maximized Germany's strengths and reduced the risks found in the other two options.

As the Germans quickly put their invasion plan together in a few short weeks, the Allies had six months to prepare Crete for invasion from either the air or by sea. In November 1940 when the British landed its first element of troops, General Sir Archibald Wavell, British commander of Middle East Command, considered Crete as a secondary priority. With the Italians in North Africa and Greece, unrest in Syria and Iraq, Wavell's command was overstretched in accomplishing their priorities. However busy his forces were, this did not mean that Crete as a military garrison should be entirely neglected until needed.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, the time was not well spent fortifying the island. Despite Winston Churchill's belief that Crete was strategically important in October 1940, Middle East Command Headquarters did not produce a general plan for defense and evacuation of the island should it come under attack.

During the six months that Great Britain occupied Crete prior to the invasion, there were seven commanders.<sup>45</sup> This shows a lack of priority for Crete from Middle East



Command Headquarters. However, Wavell did give the first commander of the island, British Brigadier O.H. Tidbury a clear mission. He was to defend Suda Bay, and prevent and defeat enemy forces from occupying the island.<sup>46</sup> After conducting a foot reconnaissance, Tidbury understood that Maleme was isolated due to terrain features. Therefore, the defense of the western part of the island required the flexibility of an independent force. From his reconnaissance, Tidbury accurately predicted the German airborne assault locations at Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion, with the main effort at Suda Bay. He also assumed that there would be other landings at Retimo and Heraklion airstrips. With Tidbury in command of the island, there was great potential to develop his vision of defense into a bona fide ground defense plan. Unfortunately, resources were scarce and Wavell replaced Tidbury two months later in January 1941.<sup>47</sup> Future commanders did not possess the same vision and urgency.

The commanders after Tidbury did not establish and implement a defensive plan. Instead, their goal was to establish an administrative infrastructure necessary to support a large military garrison.<sup>48</sup> Succeeding commanders were not in charge long enough to make significant changes to the garrison forming on Crete or to solidify defensive plans. There simply was no ownership of Crete by the revolving door of commanding officers. For example, obstructions were not built on the beaches to guard against an amphibious landing. The airfields at Maleme and Retimo did not have a defensive plan, nor was the Royal Air Force located on the island until the evacuation of Greece.<sup>49</sup> There was no buildup of equipment to dig defensive positions, such as tools to dig trenches. Very little was done to improve the inadequate road infrastructure and the communications system internal to the island or back to Middle East Command. The sixth commander, Major

General E. C. Weston of the Royal Marines took command at the beginning of April 1941 and surmised that the situation was very grave. He requested two more brigades, more aircraft, and supplies from Middle East Command, but did not receive them.<sup>50</sup>

There was, however, one bright spot in the defensive position of Crete--Suda Bay. Since November 1940, the Royal Navy used Suda Bay as a refueling base. The British Marines of the Mobile Bases Defense Organization were able to establish a defensive plan for the harbor, placed a few anti-aircraft guns, and dug trenches in the hills.<sup>51</sup> In short, the British did not take the advantage of time to fortify Crete. Rotating seven commanders in six months did not allow a commander to have ownership of the defensive plan for the island. Once the British Expeditionary Force was sent to Greece in March 1941, it was too late to buildup Crete as a true military base.

The defensive measures on Crete during the six months prior to the airborne invasion were mediocre at best. Air defenses were practically non-existent and most of the artillery was lost or abandoned on Greece. Small improvements were made to the three key airfields at Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion, but by May 1941 they were not considered modern airfields.<sup>52</sup> In the far western part of the island, the British established an auxiliary airfield, although unfinished, which could provide additional support to the three main airfields.<sup>53</sup> Suda Bay was fortified well with medium artillery sent from Egypt before the occupation of Greece to protect British naval assets.<sup>54</sup> Other equipment such as tanks and artillery were received from Egypt, but generally they were old, unreliable, and in short supply.<sup>55</sup> Weapons were in terrible condition with many missing sights and lacking fuses for the ammunition. There was such a disparity of ammunition that some weapons had as few as three rounds per gun or as many as 400 rounds.<sup>56</sup>

The garrison on Crete also lacked supplies to build and camouflage defensive positions. For example, entrenching tools and barbed wire were not available to the soldiers. Since the majority of the garrison arrived from Greece, soldiers, such as the 5th New Zealand Brigade, were told to leave their entrenching tools behind. Many troops left them in sheds.<sup>57</sup> However, once in Crete, the “e-tool” was in short supply as the garrison prepared its defenses for invasion. In place of the entrenching tool, troops were forced to use lids from mess cans to dig slit trenches.<sup>58</sup>

Such was the state of the military garrison on Crete when General Bernard Freyberg, awarded the prestigious Victoria Cross for bravery during World War I, became the seventh commander of the island on 30 April 1941; three weeks prior to the German assault. His New Zealand Division fought the rearguard action during the retreat and evacuation of Greece. He found himself in Crete with more than half of his division and his remaining troops evacuated to Egypt in order to reconstitute. Freyberg envisioned the rest of the division would also return to Egypt, but Wavell made a personal trip to Crete to inform him that Churchill had selected him to be the new commander of the island. He reluctantly complied and met with Wavell and the outgoing commander to discuss the situation. Freyberg later wrote, “The only subject on the agenda was the defence of Crete. There was not very much to discuss. We were told that Crete would be held. The scale of attack envisaged was five to six thousand airborne troops plus a possible seaborne attack. The primary objectives of this attack were considered to be Heraklion and Maleme aerodromes. Our object was to deny the enemy the use of Crete as an air and submarine base.”<sup>59</sup>

Thus, Freyberg visualized the battlefield where his units denied all sea and air landings, deterred the main effort of the enemy, and countered that main effort. However, his tactical problem was a difficult one to solve. The airfields and beaches on Crete were located very close together. Freyberg saw the tactical problem in two ways: airborne attacks as extensions of seaborne landings or seaborne landings as extensions of airborne attacks.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, Freyberg assumed the enemy would conduct a combination of a sea and air invasion.

He developed two courses of action to prepare the island's defenses. The first option was dispersal of forces at each airfield with the additional responsibility for the beaches in the vicinity of each airfield. This provided defense against airborne attacks and guarded against amphibious assaults along almost the entire coastline of Crete. One disadvantage was the twelve-mile stretch of beach west of Canea that his soldiers would have to defend. The second course of action was concentration of his forces at Suda Bay and at the three airfields of Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion. Using a mobile reserve, Freyberg could commit it to decisive operations and counterattacks against the German main effort. The disadvantages of the poor roads and communication infrastructure could hinder the mobility of the reserve force. Freyberg selected the first course of action, the dispersal of his forces.<sup>61</sup> In the three weeks before the assault, his forces intensified their preparations for defensive positions, and trained on defensive measures to repel against airborne assaults.<sup>62</sup>

One of Freyberg's most serious challenges was the lack of air support he expected to receive from the Royal Air Force. The air support for the defense of Crete was ineffective because the island was too far away from British staging bases in North

Africa. When Freyberg took command, there was only a small contingent of Hurricane pursuit aircraft, Gladiators, and Blenheim bombers on the island. The small contingent of aircraft was in terrible condition and no match against hundreds of German planes massing on staging bases in southern Greece. Due to the German aerial bombardment of Crete, by mid May only sixteen aircraft remained operational.<sup>63</sup> On 19 May, Freyberg ordered these remaining aircraft to return to bases in Egypt. As the Germans launched their assault the next day, the Allies were left to defend Crete without any air support, which seriously hindered their ability to protect the island.

As the Germans prepared for war in the late 1930s, they were eager to employ airborne forces in order to accomplish their strategic goals. Prior to the operation in Crete, Hitler had organized his elite airborne forces into an air corps with two divisions. As the plans for Crete quickly evolved, airborne troops played the primary role in the invasion. Unfortunately, the Germans gave themselves very little time to plan properly an air operation on the magnitude of Crete. In many ways the campaign preparations were improvised as seen by the serious logistical challenges the Germans faced in the short weeks prior to the invasion. Unlike the Germans, the Allies had six months, but focused their efforts on administrative aspects rather than fortifying Crete.

Ironically, the two commanders, who faced each other on the eve of battle, had witnessed the Russian airborne maneuvers in 1936. In 1936, both Wavell and Student were present as the Russians displayed the employment of their airborne forces. Each general came to different conclusions. Wavell wrote a report stating that airborne “tactical value may be doubtful.”<sup>64</sup> Student returned to Germany inspired and built an airborne training program and a new strategic arm that surpassed the Russian model. The

two commanders, believer and disbeliever in airborne operations, met again in the ferocious battle for Crete.

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<sup>1</sup>Maurice Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle: A History of Airborne Warfare, 1918-1971* (London: William Kimber, 1971), 24.

<sup>2</sup>Tugwell, 23.

<sup>3</sup>John Weeks, *Assault from the Sky: A History of Airborne Warfare* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1978), 32.

<sup>4</sup>Walter Ansel, *Hitler and the Middle Sea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 276.

<sup>5</sup>Department of the Army, Pamphlet, No. 20-232, *Airborne Operations: A German Appraisal* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, October 1951), 12.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Tugwell, 36.

<sup>8</sup>Weeks, 8.

<sup>9</sup>The Luftwaffe resembled more of an army air corps than a modern day air force.

<sup>10</sup>Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare* (Fairfax, VA: Hero Books, 1984), 251.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Weeks, 14.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Tugwell, 57-58.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>17</sup>*Airborne Operations: A German Appraisal*, 18.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Tugwell, 62.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>21</sup>*Battle of Crete: May 20–June 1, 1941*, Special Bulletin No. 35 (Washington, DC: War Department, October 15, 1941), 9.

<sup>22</sup>At this time, the German Navy had not recovered from the debilitating Norway invasion in April 1940, leaving the Germans without a naval presence in the Mediterranean.

<sup>23</sup>Karl Gundelach, “The Battle for Crete 1941,” in *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View*, ed. H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965), 102.

<sup>24</sup>Alan Clark, *The Fall of Crete* (London: Cassell & Co., 1962), 48.

<sup>25</sup>Gundelach, 103.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>27</sup>D.M. Davin, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, ‘Crete’* (Nashville, TN: The Battery Press, INC., 1953), 82; Gundelach, 103; and Ansel, 218.

<sup>28</sup>Davin, 82.

<sup>29</sup>Ansel, 218.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 220-221.

<sup>32</sup>George E. Blau, *The German Campaigns in the Balkans* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 129; and Davin, 83.

<sup>33</sup>Davin, 83.

<sup>34</sup>*Airborne Operations: A German Appraisal*, 5, 20-21.

<sup>35</sup>Edward Jablonski, *Air War*, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday & Co, Inc., 1979), 18.

<sup>36</sup>Ansel, 220, 273.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 268.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 269.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 270.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 260.

<sup>41</sup>Charles Cruickshank, *The Politics and Strategy of the Second World War: Greece 1940-1941*, ed. Noble Frankland and Christopher Dowling (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1976), 167.

<sup>42</sup>Davin, 84.

<sup>43</sup>Cruickshank, 167; and Blau, 127.

<sup>44</sup>Cruickshank, 163.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>46</sup>Davin, 12.

<sup>47</sup>Peter Singleton-Gates, *General Lord Freyberg VC* (London: Tonbridge Printers Ltd., 1963), 147, 148.

<sup>48</sup>Davin, 13.

<sup>49</sup>Cruickshank, 164, 165.

<sup>50</sup>Singleton-Gates, 149.

<sup>51</sup>Cruickshank, 166.

<sup>52</sup>*Battle of Crete*, Special Bulletin No. 35, 3.

<sup>53</sup>Clark, 79.

<sup>54</sup>*Battle of Crete*, Special Bulletin No. 35, 3.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>56</sup>Singleton-Gates, 154.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>60</sup>Ansel, 238.

<sup>61</sup>Cruickshank, 167.

<sup>62</sup>Blau, 123.



<sup>63</sup>*Battle of Crete*, Special Bulletin No. 35, 5.

<sup>64</sup>Tugwell, 25.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE BATTLE OF CRETE

On the eve of the battle, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, and Greece had assembled over 42,000 military personnel to defend Crete.<sup>1</sup> The British contributed the greatest number, 18,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen to protect the island.<sup>2</sup> The New Zealand Division was 7,700 strong, while the Australian Imperial Forces consisted of over 6,500 personnel.<sup>3</sup> Almost 20,000 of the 42,000 soldiers were evacuated from the Greek mainland. Ten thousand of the evacuees were members of the Greek Army, who arrived in Crete very short of equipment, weapons, and ammunition.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, an unknown number of Greek cadets and civilians, possibly ranging to a few thousand, were armed with pitchforks, guns, and knives.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the Allies were numerically superior to the German invaders.

While greater in number, the Allies were not numerically superior in equipment to the Germans because the Allies abandoned most of their equipment in Greece. Nevertheless, General Archibald Wavell reinforced Crete with sixteen light tanks and six infantry tanks, which arrived at Suda Bay on the evening of 15 May.<sup>6</sup> Wavell also offered to send another infantry brigade, but General Bernard Freyberg, the commander of CREFORCE, refused it because the need for equipment and supplies was greater than personnel.<sup>7</sup>

Colossal challenges faced Freyberg as the battle became imminent. First, Freyberg dispersed his forces to defend over seventy miles of coastline, creating autonomous commands, where an independent commander controlled each sector.<sup>8</sup> The

defensive sectors were in reality isolated defensive positions because of unreliable communications, poor road infrastructure, and few motor vehicles. Moreover, Freyberg's reserve consisted of one, undermanned New Zealand brigade and one British battalion, which lacked the mobility to respond quickly to a crisis. Finally, Freyberg's headquarters staff, located in caves near Canea, was thrown hastily together and lacked combat experience.<sup>9</sup>

CREFORCE Order Number 3 issued on Freyberg's assumption of command on 30 April divided the island in four sectors.<sup>10</sup> The sectors included Suda Bay and the three airfields at Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion. Each member of the Allies was responsible for a sector, while the Greek Army was dispersed among the four sectors and provided a supporting role. In the first sector, Freyberg's own New Zealand Division defended the Maleme sector, which included the far west portion of the island. The terrain included the mountain range of Monodhendi, Maleme village and airfield, and the small fishing port of Kastelli (appendix B). Brigadier Edward Puttick commanded the Maleme sector with three New Zealand infantry brigades. In particular, the 5th New Zealand (NZ) Brigade, commanded by Brigadier James Hargest, consisted of the 21st, 22nd, 23rd, and 28th infantry battalions and one Greek regiment located at Kastelli. The force reserve consisted of the 18th and 19th New Zealand battalions from the 4th Brigade and was under the control of Brigadier Lindsay Inglis.<sup>11</sup> Heavy equipment for the sector included ten 77-millimeter and six 3.7-inch howitzers as well as ten light and two infantry tanks.<sup>12</sup> Almost 12,000 soldiers defended the Maleme sector by 16 May.<sup>13</sup>

Major General E. C. Weston of the Royal Marines commanded the Suda Bay sector, which included the village of Galatos and the towns of Canea, Suda, and

Georgeoupolis (appendix B). Almost 15,000 soldiers occupied defensive positions around the bay. The task organization of his sector included the Royal Marines Mobile Naval Base Defense Organization defending Suda Bay, two Australian infantry brigades, 1st Royal Welch as the force reserve, and two Greek regiments (with only 500 rifles for 930 soldiers).<sup>14</sup> In comparison to the other sectors, Suda Bay was well fortified with approximately twenty-six antiaircraft guns of various sizes and approximately eight artillery pieces ranging in size from 4-inch to 12-pounder guns.<sup>15</sup> Since the Suda Bay sector had the majority of fire support assets, other sectors received tanks for support.<sup>16</sup>

The Australians controlled the Retimo sector with a force of only 6,500 soldiers. The Retimo sector, located roughly in the center of the island, began east of Georgeoupolis through the town of Retimo and its airfield, and ended at the village of Stavromenos (appendix B).<sup>17</sup> Overall commander of the sector, Brigadier G. A. Vasey of the 19th Australian Brigade, commanded five infantry battalions, two Greek regiments, and a few miscellaneous units. Approximately fourteen Italian or French field guns, 75-millimeter and 100-millimeter, and two infantry tanks provided fire support.<sup>18</sup> Vasey's counterpart, Brigadier B. H. Chappel of the 14th British Army Brigade, commanded the fourth sector, which encompassed the entire eastern part of the island and included Heraklion airfield. Five British infantry battalions, one Australian infantry battalion, and two Greek regiments comprised Chappel's brigade.<sup>19</sup> The British were responsible for defending the Heraklion sector with over 8,000 soldiers.

The Royal Navy also faced challenges of its own. Under the leadership of Admiral Andrew Cunningham, the Royal Navy commanded the Mediterranean Sea since the air attack on the Italian fleet in Taranto Harbor on 11 November 1940 and the sea

attack at Cape Matapan on 28 March 1941.<sup>20</sup> However, the navy's experience in Norway and the North Sea proved that ships were vulnerable to bombing from the air.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the Luftwaffe's air superiority in the eastern Mediterranean made it increasingly unsafe for the Royal Navy to sail in the Aegean Sea. However, in the battle for Crete, the task of repulsing a German seaborne landing fell to the Royal Navy with Cunningham's large fleet guarding the waters around Crete. Cunningham divided his fleet into three groups. Forces A and B, under Rear Admiral H. B. Rawlings, guarded the area west of Crete with the battleships Warspite and Valiant, and the cruisers Gloucester and Fiji. The second group, Force C, was comprised of the cruisers Naiad and Perth, together with the destroyers Kandahar, Nubian, Kingston, and Juno. Rear Admiral E. L. King commanded Force C and was charged to protect the area off eastern Crete.<sup>22</sup> Rear Admiral I. G. Glennie was in command of Force D, which consisted of the cruisers Dido, Orion and Ajax, together with destroyers Napier, Kimberley, Isis, Janus, Griffin, and Imperial.<sup>23</sup> Force D patrolled the waters off the central north coast of Crete. Cunningham issued the same guidance to all three groups--repel Germany's amphibious landing on Crete.

While the Allies prepared the final land and sea defensive plan, the Germans planned to invade Crete with 22,750 military personnel from the XI Flieger (Air) Corps, VIII Flieger Corps, and 5th Mountain Division. The XI Flieger Corps, commanded by General Kurt Student, was a diverse organization combining land forces and air assets. The land forces consisted of the gliderborne Sturm (Assault) Regiment, 7th Flieger Division with three parachute regiments, 5th Mountain Division with two of its organic regiments and one attached regiment from the 6th Mountain Division, armor and

motorcycle battalions, and two anti-aircraft batteries.<sup>24</sup> The air assets available in XI Flieger Corps consisted of a reconnaissance unit and ten air transport groups, which included about 600 troop carriers and nearly 100 gliders.<sup>25</sup> Each element of the armed forces played a distinct role during the invasion.

The mission of the XI Flieger Corps was to transport paratroops to Crete in two waves.<sup>26</sup> Each wave had separate objectives. First wave objectives were Maleme airfield and the Canea area, and the second wave objectives were the Retimo and Heraklion airfields. The goal was to deny the Allies the opportunity of using the airfields to support their own aircraft, while simultaneously allowing VIII Flieger Corps to attack each airfield with its full complement of aircraft.<sup>27</sup>

General Wolfram von Richthofen commanded the VIII Flieger Corps, which consisted of 280 Junkers 88 and Heinkel III bombers, 150 Stuka dive-bombers, 200 fighters, and reconnaissance aircraft.<sup>28</sup> The VIII Flieger Corps was to conduct the initial air reconnaissance to obtain the Allies' defensive positions and to bomb the drop zones in preparation for the parachutists.<sup>29</sup> During the first two days of the attack, VIII Flieger Corps was to conduct the initial bombardment to destroy the Royal Air Force, to silence defensive positions, to provide close air support, and to cover the flotilla convoys.<sup>30</sup>

Admiral Karl Georg Schuster, Naval Commander Southeast, did not possess German naval assets in his command.<sup>31</sup> As discussed in chapter four, the Germans used captured small civilian boats to transport soldiers and equipment, dividing the flotillas into two convoys. The primary purpose of the flotillas was to reinforce German paratroops with land forces and heavy weapons.<sup>32</sup> Concerned the ports at Suda, Canea, and Heraklion were mined, the Luftwaffe staff intended to land the flotillas on the west

and east coasts of Crete.<sup>33</sup> Due to the strength of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean Sea and the lack of German naval assets, the planning staff was forced to plan night seaborne landings to protect the convoys.

Similar to the four Allied defensive sectors, the Germans divided the island into three quadrants, each commanded by a general officer. Major General Eugen Meindl, commander of the Sturm Regiment, commanded the Maleme area, known as Group West. His forces faced the New Zealand Division with the mission to seize and secure the Maleme airfield. Seizure of the airfield would allow reinforcements and heavy equipment to land. Group Center, under the control of Lieutenant General Wilhelm Sussmann, the commander of the 7th Flieger Division, covered the Canea to Retimo area. Their mission during the first wave was to capture the towns of Canea and Suda, and to eliminate the Allies' command and control headquarters. In the afternoon, the second wave of the 7th Flieger Division planned to take the Retimo airfield and town, thereby providing a reserve airfield for the operation. The third quadrant, Group East, belonged to Lieutenant General Julius Ringel, the commander of the 5th Mountain Division. The mountain soldiers covered the area of Heraklion and eastern Crete. The mission of Group East was similar to the other groups: seize the airfield at Heraklion for follow on troops to occupy eastern Crete. Since the 5th Mountain Division was not an organic asset of XI Flieger Corps, Ringel's mountain soldiers were not trained in air operations before the battle.<sup>34</sup>

After the German victory in Greece, the Luftwaffe began gathering intelligence for the Crete operation. Two reconnaissance units of the VIII Flieger Corps monitored Allied ship movements to and from Crete, and attempted to discern Royal Air Force locations. Additionally, the XI Flieger Corps located Allied airstrips, troops, and

defensive and artillery positions. The Luftwaffe also gained information by interrogating captured Allied soldiers in Greece. After analyzing aerial photos and conducting prisoner interrogations, the Germans developed a misleading picture of the Allied defense of Crete.<sup>35</sup> First, the Luftwaffe underestimated the troop strength on the island. Through analysis, the Luftwaffe determined two infantry brigades, one artillery regiment, and an unknown number of soldiers inhabited Crete in May 1941.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, aerial reconnaissance revealed British naval vessels either delivering supplies or evacuating troops at Suda Bay. Since the Royal Navy moved during the hours of darkness, it was difficult for the Germans to discern Allied intentions. For unknown reasons, the Luftwaffe believed the Allies were evacuating the island not reinforcing it.<sup>37</sup>

Second, the Luftwaffe overestimated the number of anti-aircraft equipment on the island.<sup>38</sup> Although the Luftwaffe correctly identified the critical airfields at Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion, the intelligence staff failed to discover the fortified and well-camouflaged defensive fighting positions on aerial photographs.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the Germans completely miscalculated the involvement of the civilian population. The Germans assumed the civilians would be sympathetic to the Axis side, or at the very least be neutral toward the German invaders.<sup>40</sup> The Germans did not anticipate the Cretans would participate in the Allied defensive plan.

While the Germans miscalculated and assumed away important aspects of enemy capabilities and strengths, Allied intelligence was accurate and detailed for several reasons. First, signal intercepts of German transmissions, known as Ultra, played a decisive role in gathering intelligence about the German plans and movements. Fourteen days before the attack, Freyberg knew Student's complete plan, which included both an



air assault and amphibious landing.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Freyberg arranged the defense of the island to repel both air and sea assaults. Second, the Germans could not hide the increased number of troops and equipment heading south from Germany toward Greek staging bases as the Luftwaffe prepared for the Crete operation. The movement of almost 23,000 troops and associated equipment was difficult to conceal. Third, human intelligence also played a role in developing an accurate intelligence picture of the enemy. British spies in Athens and two captured German airmen confirmed reports of an impending invasion of Crete.<sup>42</sup> Accurate and detailed Allied intelligence caused the Germans to lose the element of surprise, which was an important aspect of successful airborne operations.<sup>43</sup>

Prime Minister Winston Churchill was particularly proud of the intelligence gathered by the Allies before the battle.

At no moment in the war was our Intelligence so truly and precisely informed. In the exultant confusion of their seizure of Athens the German staffs preserved less than their usual secrecy, and our agents in Greece were active and daring. In the last week of April we obtained from trustworthy sources good information about the next German stroke. The movements and excitement of the German XIth Air Corps, and also the frantic collection of small craft in Greek harbours, could not be concealed from attentive eyes and ears. All pointed to an impending attack on Crete, both by air and sea.<sup>44</sup>

Churchill warned Wavell of “a heavy airborne attack by German troops and bombers” on 28 April 1941.<sup>45</sup> The expected enemy strength was 3,000 to 4,000 paratroopers delivered in the first sortie, and that there could be up to four sorties a day.<sup>46</sup> At first Wavell responded incredulously, calling the intelligence “rumor” and suggested the real German objective was an attack against Syria or Cyprus.<sup>47</sup> By the first week of May, however, it became apparent as German aerial attacks increased that the island was indeed the objective. As the battle approached, German and Allied intelligence knew that

the fight for Crete would commence on 20 May 1941.<sup>48</sup> For Churchill, Crete provided the Allies with a “fine opportunity for killing the parachute troops.”<sup>49</sup>

The German air attacks on Crete began in early May and slowly increased as airfields were built in southern Greece and bombers arrived from Germany. By 14 May, the intensity of the bombing was immense as the VIII Flieger Corps prepared the battlefield in the surrounding areas of Maleme, Suda Bay, Retimo, and Heraklion. The VIII Flieger Corps attacked antiaircraft guns, communication lines, and airplanes, and diminished ship movement.<sup>50</sup> The effective bombing forced Freyberg to order what was left of the Royal Air Force to return to Egypt on 19 May, leaving the Allies without the protection of air support.<sup>51</sup> The bombardment also limited Allied ship movements to night operations and severed communications between tactical units. Moreover, sunken vessels containing much needed equipment, such as weapons and supplies, filled Suda Bay.<sup>52</sup> However, the pre-battle aerial attack did not succeed in silencing all the antiaircraft batteries on the island, especially those surrounding the airfield at Maleme and Suda Bay.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the first wave of gliders and transport planes would face an intense barrage of antiaircraft fire.

Early in the morning of 20 May, a tremendous aerial bombardment by hundreds of aircraft commenced in order to prepare the landing zones for thousands of German soldiers, who were dropped into Crete by gliders, parachutes, and transport aircraft. During the first wave, gliders landed in the Maleme and Canea areas, designated as Group West. Each glider contained twelve assault troops who landed near their objectives of Maleme airfield and on the beaches of Canea.<sup>54</sup> The assault soldiers’ mission was to seize the airfield, to neutralize ground defenses, and to protect the follow-on parachutists

during descent. Additional gliders arrived in the sector approximately every fifteen minutes in an effort to consolidate forces, but many of the gliders did not land in the pre-planned areas. Once on the ground, soldiers exited the gliders and were met by intense gunfire. The Allied defense hampered the gliderborne troops and they were unable to reduce the ground defenses or to protect the parachutists against Allied attack.

After the gliders landed, the first parachute drops commenced at approximately eight o'clock in the morning. During the first wave, 2000 parachutists arrived in Crete at fifteen-minute intervals, with every two to three parachutes designated as weapons containers and supplies.<sup>55</sup> Three Junker-52s traveling in a "V" formation formed the basic flying structure as the transport planes approached landing zones at a low altitude. Dropped at approximately 350 to 400 feet, parachutists jumped head first with officers and squad leaders in the lead. Weapons and equipment containers were usually pushed out, using different color parachutes. Grey-green or brown chutes signified containers while troops jumped with white or green chutes.<sup>56</sup>

Parachutists, who jumped into the Maleme sector, saw some of the most ferocious fighting of the battle. The elite German Sturm Regiment descended upon the combat veterans of the 5th NZ Brigade in a battle that decided the fate of Crete. Many of the paratroopers did not land in designated landing zones and once on the ground faced heavy Allied fire. In fact, 3rd Battalion parachutists died one of two ways: during the descent or after landing directly on the New Zealand defenders. Landing west of the Tavronitis River and along a dry riverbed in unfamiliar terrain, the 1st, 2nd, and 4th battalions of the Sturm Regiment were widely dispersed and took several hours to consolidate into a combat effective force.<sup>57</sup> The German paratroopers jumped into the

battle lightly armed with pistols and hand grenades. Once on the ground, they faced the challenge of locating their weapons containers while under heavy fire. Because the German forces were dispersed and lightly armed, the elite German paratroopers were pinned down for most of the first day in the Maleme sector by heavy Allied fire from well-trained forces.

Deployed east of the Tavronitis, the 5th NZ Brigade defended Maleme airfield against the German assault regiment. Although the 5th NZ Brigade outnumbered the Germans, the aerial bombardment succeeded in destroying Allied wire communications, which disrupted the command and control network and forced the Allies to use unreliable radio links between battalions and brigade headquarters to communicate. In the afternoon, the 22nd Battalion of the 5th NZ Brigade held off an attack on the airfield by the 2nd and 4th battalions of the Sturm Regiment, but the lack of communications continued to plague the Allies. By the end of the first day, Lieutenant Colonel L. W. Andrew, 22nd NZ Battalion commander, could not communicate with his companies and as a result, he did not understand the tactical situation. In fact, Andrew's companies held the German assault against the airfield and his sister battalions, 21st and 23rd, encountered relatively light fighting throughout the first day of battle. Unable to discern the tactical situation and under increasing German pressure, Andrew ordered his units to withdrawal from around the airfield, weakening the Allied defense of Maleme airfield.<sup>58</sup>

As the Luftwaffe prepared for the second wave of paratroopers to assault Retimo and Heraklion, Student was unaware of the challenges facing the elements of XI Flieger Corps in Maleme and Canea sectors. All but seven troop carriers returned to the staging bases in southern Greece.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the second wave began as scheduled

approximately eight hours after the first gliders touched down in the Maleme sector. This wave was distinctly different from the earlier assault. First, the timing of the bombardment and the paratroop drop was not synchronized because of a fueling delay at the staging bases in southern Greece. Therefore, carriers delivered the paratroopers over the landing zone later than originally planned, allowing the Allies to emerge from shelter and wait for the parachutists to arrive. Unlike the paratroopers over Maleme and Canea, the soldiers jumping at Retimo and Heraklion did not have the pre-bombardment benefits of fighter and bomber support.<sup>60</sup> Second, gliderborne troops did not participate because most were used during the assaults on Maleme and Canea.<sup>61</sup> The results were devastating for the Germans because there were more casualties around the airfields of Retimo and Heraklion than at Maleme airfield.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, the pilots experienced problems similar to those in western Crete. Unable to direct the planes to the proper drop off point, pilots inadvertently dropped the paratroopers in the wrong places. Furthermore, communications with the Luftwaffe headquarters in Athens were unreliable because some of the signal equipment was damaged during the drop. By the end of the day, the Germans failed to seize the Heraklion or Retimo airfields.

Therefore, during the first wave, Group West was unsuccessful in establishing an airhead at Maleme airfield or a foothold at Canea. As parachutists descended to the battlefield, the 5th NZ Brigade slaughtered the elite German forces. Those making it to the ground suffered injuries because of the rocky terrain. Within hours of the first parachute drops, the Germans became isolated throughout both sectors because of injuries and fierce opposition from the 5th NZ Brigade. The paratroopers experienced difficulty in linking up with their weapons containers, which prevented them from

gaining access to heavier weapons and ammunition. Unable to seize the Maleme airfield, the Luftwaffe could not reinforce Crete with troops and firepower. Despite these setbacks, the Germans succeeded in capturing the high ground near Canea.<sup>63</sup> The second wave was less successful than the first. In Groups Center and East, German paratroopers were unable to seize the Retimo and Heraklion airfields, but did occupy some of the high ground in the surrounding areas.<sup>64</sup> In addition to not accomplishing their objectives, German command and control quickly broke down. The 7th Flieger Division commander, General Sussmann and his staff, died shortly after takeoff when their glider disintegrated, leaving the Canea Sector leaderless. General Meindl, in charge of the Maleme sector, was critically shot in the chest after descending to the ground.<sup>65</sup> By the end of the first day, the Luftwaffe failed to accomplish its military objectives, which forced both the Germans and the Allies to face difficult decisions.

On the night of 20 May, critical decisions were made in both the German and Allied commands that decided the fate of Crete. First, the 5th NZ Brigade had the strength in numbers to conduct a night assault and to reoccupy the positions on the airfield, but the brigade commander, Brigadier Puttick, did not order a counterattack. Unknown to Puttick, the Sturm Regiment was exhausted and very low on ammunition.<sup>66</sup> Second, interpretation of intelligence challenged Freyberg's staff. Allied units captured the German operation order for the 3rd Parachute Regiment that listed the objectives of the first two waves into Crete.<sup>67</sup> However, even with this information Freyberg did not see the airfields as crucial German objectives. Instead he assumed that the Germans would parachute more troops or crash-land them onto the island. Unfortunately, Freyberg overestimated the amount of airborne personnel the Germans possessed. Unknown to

Freyberg and his staff, the first and second waves delivered the majority of the 7th Flieger Division on 20 May.

The German staff also faced key operational decisions after the first day of fighting. By early evening, Student's headquarters in Athens realized that the XI Flieger Corps failed to seize any airfields. The situation was desperate and showed the inherent risks in Student's plan.<sup>68</sup> Without an airfield, the Germans could not reinforce the island with personnel and equipment. Student dispersed his forces among three objectives instead of concentrating on seizing one objective and fanning out to the rest of the island. With approximately 550 paratroopers available as a reserve force, Student planned an airborne assault in the vicinity of Maleme airfield for 21 May.<sup>69</sup> Maleme airfield seemed to have the greatest possibility of success because of the slight movement made during the first day of battle.<sup>70</sup> Student's plan also included landing elements of the 5th Mountain Division to begin consolidating forces.<sup>71</sup> Driving east toward Suda Bay, Group West would link up with Group Center to seize the harbor.<sup>72</sup>

On 21 May, the fate of Crete was sealed because of the strong leadership actions taken by the Germans and the timid leadership by the Allies. The German situation called for desperate measures because they were outnumbered two to one.<sup>73</sup> Student rose to the leadership challenge, took an operational risk, and dropped the remaining paratroopers of 7th Flieger Division into the Maleme sector early in the morning. Two companies landed on defenders and were annihilated, while two companies eventually consolidated with the exhausted Sturm soldiers and seized a section of the airfield.<sup>74</sup> However, by the late afternoon, the airfield remained within Allied artillery range. Student decided to take the unprecedented action and crash-landed 800 mountain troops on the airfield.<sup>75</sup> This risky

measure along with Allied inaction seemed to turn the tide for the Germans. VIII Flieger Corps supported the operation with close air support, in an effort to subdue the artillery and provide protection to the mountain troops.<sup>76</sup>

The Allied leadership actions were less bold and decisive. A severe lack of wireless communications and independent defensive sectors hampered Freyberg's ability to command and control the battle.<sup>77</sup> Unaware that the Maleme airfield was partially in German hands and that the 5th NZ Brigade withdrew the night before, Freyberg ordered a counterattack. Although Freyberg had over 6,000 forces at his disposal in the Maleme and Suda sectors, he chose the 20th and 28th New Zealand battalions to conduct the counterattack.<sup>78</sup> The preparations were slow, uninspired, and the force was too small to be effective.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the counterattack forces started too late in the day and did not reach Maleme before the morning of 22 May. A counterattack at dusk might have been more successful because the Germans lost the advantage of close air support.

As the battle raged on the island, battle also raged on the seas during the night of 21 May. British Force D, comprised of three light cruisers and six destroyers, under the overall leadership of Admiral Cunningham, patrolled the waters north of Crete to protect the island against a seaborne attack. While patrolling Cunningham's ships discovered a German convoy of Greek vessels escorted by one Italian destroyer. Cunningham then ordered Force D to ram the German flotilla, resulting in the deaths of nearly 320 Germans and required the convoy to return to Greece.<sup>80</sup> Because of Cunningham's bold actions, few German troops arrived on Crete to reinforce the land forces.<sup>81</sup> However, the cost to the British Navy was immense because protecting Crete exposed them to the full strength of the Luftwaffe. As dawn approached the Luftwaffe attacked the British, immediately



sinking two cruisers and one destroyer. As the air assault continued, the losses for the British Navy became almost catastrophic and Cunningham faced total destruction of his forces. Therefore, the fleet withdrew and returned to its home base in Alexandria, leaving the Allied troops without air and sea support while the Luftwaffe continued to reinforce the island via Maleme airfield.<sup>82</sup>

After the Allied counterattack failed at Maleme, the situation quickly deteriorated west of Canea, while the Allies at Retimo and Heraklion held their defensive positions. By the afternoon of 22 May, Freyberg withdrew the 5th NZ Brigade, leaving Maleme airfield and surrounding area to the Germans. Thus, Maleme airfield became the primary source to receive reinforcements during the remaining eight days of battle. On 24 May, Freyberg realized that Crete was lost and that he had the choice of defeat or retreat.<sup>83</sup> The last hope of an Allied counterattack disappeared when the German 3rd Parachute Regiment attacked north from Prison Valley and breached the New Zealand defensive line near Galatos on 25 May. This forced Freyberg to begin evacuation operations on the south coast at the fishing village of Sfakia. As the controlled evacuation began, the Germans did not realize that the Allied retreat was to the south. Instead of following the Allies, the Germans enveloped the town of Canea and freed the isolated paratroopers. By 28 May, the Allied retreat was in full swing, but the Germans still did not detect it and continued their push eastward to relieve their troops at Retimo and Heraklion.

Freyberg's evacuation order stated that 230 men from each battalion could embark from the small port at Sfakia on the evenings of 29, 30, and 31 May.<sup>84</sup> The 18th NZ Battalion provided a cordon of soldiers at fixed bayonets to assist in an orderly evacuation.<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately, word spread quickly among the Allies of the impending

withdrawal and the retreat became disorderly and undisciplined.<sup>86</sup> Planned as a controlled evacuation, Freyberg ordered anyone attempting to break into the cordon to be shot. Men, displaced from units, begged to be part of the embarkation, but were not included. For those who were evacuated, the Royal Navy's actions were heroic. During the four nights Cunningham's fleet rescued the Allies, over 17,000 troops were disembarked in Alexandria, with damage occurring to one cruiser and two destroyers.<sup>87</sup> Royal Air Force bombers stationed at Mersa Matruh, west of Alexandria, supported the strategic withdrawal.<sup>88</sup>

For the fourth time in a one-year period, the British Navy found itself conducting an evacuation of Allied forces. Heraklion was the site of a daring evacuation on the north side of the island, which was in full range of Luftwaffe power. On the night of 28 through 29 May, Admiral Rawlings successfully embarked 4,000 Allied troops on three warships and six destroyers.<sup>89</sup> With just enough time to pass out of the range of the Luftwaffe, Rawlings' fleet encountered mechanical difficulties on several of the ships, which slowed down the convoy. As a result, at daybreak the naval force arrived within full range of the Stuka dive-bombers, which wrecked havoc on the convoy.<sup>90</sup> The Royal Navy lost two destroyers and two cruisers were severely damaged, while one-fifth of the original force from Heraklion did not arrive at the port of Alexandria.<sup>91</sup>

The fate of the 19th Australian Brigade in the Retimo sector was disastrous. During the final days of the evacuation, Freyberg was unable to inform them of the retreat because communications were lost earlier in the battle.<sup>92</sup> The Australians decisively held the paratroopers until 30 May, when German reinforcements arrived with an armor battalion and elements of 5th Mountain Division. Low on ammunition and food,

and unaware of the retreat and evacuation order, half of the 19th Australian Brigade surrendered while the other half headed for the hills.<sup>93</sup>

The Battle of Crete was a bloody and costly fight for the strategic island in the eastern Mediterranean. The preliminary reports of losses for the Germans and Allies initially were inflated. However, when later examined by historians, detailed research painted a more realistic picture. Approximately 1750 Allied soldiers were killed in action and about 1740 were wounded and evacuated.<sup>94</sup> Over 12,250 Allies became prisoners of war, including 2,000 wounded.<sup>95</sup> The Royal Navy suffered heavy losses with almost 2,000 dead, while Cunningham was left with a fleet comprised of two battleships, two cruisers, and thirteen destroyers.<sup>96</sup> In contrast, the Germans suffered three times as many casualties. In the initial landings alone, the XI Flieger Corps lost about 2500 parachutists and another 500 were wounded.<sup>97</sup> Approximately 600 were lost at sea with the flotillas or in flying accidents.<sup>98</sup> During the subsequent fighting on Crete another 900 died and 2100 wounded.<sup>99</sup> The total German casualties included 4,000 killed in action and 2,600 wounded.<sup>100</sup> The most significant loss for the Luftwaffe was aircraft with nearly 350 planes lost or damaged during the operation. Greater than half of these planes were troop carriers.<sup>101</sup>

In some ways, the fate of Crete was decided before the battle began. The air assets available to the Luftwaffe gave the Germans a thirty-to-one numerical superiority in aircraft over the Allies.<sup>102</sup> However, the Germans planned to capture three airfields on the first day, to bring in reinforcements on the second day, and thus to conquer the island decisively. Nothing went as planned. The Luftwaffe staff based their invasion plans on inaccurate intelligence about the Allied defense of the island. Moreover, Student's plan

dispersed the 7th Flieger Division along seventy miles of coastline, attacking three primary objectives. German forces were isolated, unable to consolidate, and failed initially to seize the airfields that would bring in the necessary troop reinforcements and firepower needed to overcome the numerically superior Allies. Instead of a quick, decisive battle, the Germans were locked into a ferocious fight for the island. Allied units performed heroically given their strength in numbers but inferiority in equipment. The Allies succeeded in inflicting heavy casualties on the Luftwaffe despite the fact that the Germans had the initiative, used elite troops, and possessed air superiority.

In the clash for Maleme, bold leadership saved the Germans and defeated the Allies. Student's daring leadership helped turn the tide for Group West near Maleme and established the only German re-supply line into the island. As reinforcements streamed in, the Germans were able to advance east and conquer the island. In contrast, Freyberg's leadership suffered from independent defensive sectors and a lack of communications. Therefore, not knowing the current tactical situation, Freyberg ordered a counterattack on 21 May in the Maleme sector, which failed and caused the New Zealand Division to withdraw from the sector.

Once again Hitler could add another conquest to his plan to overrun all of Europe. The German conquest of Crete, however, was distinctly different from Hitler's other military victories thus far beginning with Poland in September of 1939. Hitler's previous victories were characterized by highly significant military gains at a relatively small cost to his army and Luftwaffe forces. Now for the first time, German losses resulting from the Battle of Crete were staggering. The vast majority of the soldiers killed in action were highly trained paratroopers. Fuehrer Directive Number 31 issued 9 June 1941

reemphasized the strategic importance of Crete to the German war effort. Although this directive was published with the intentions of further developing the war in the eastern Mediterranean, something had gone wrong. Hitler was apparently shaken by the heavy losses that his elite paratroop corps had sustained. In reviewing the events prior to, during, and after the Battle of Crete, Student said:

When I got Hitler to accept the Crete Plan, I also proposed that we should follow it up by capturing Cyprus from the air, and then a further jump from Cyprus to capture the Suez Canal. Hitler did not seem adverse to the idea, but would not commit himself definitely to the project--his mind was so occupied with the coming invasion of Russia. After the shock of heavy losses in Crete, he refused to attempt another big airborne effort. I pressed the idea on him repeatedly, but without avail.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hanson W. Baldwin, *The Crucial Years 1939-1941: The World at War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 282.

<sup>2</sup>D. M. Davin, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 'Crete'* (Nashville, TN: The Battery Press, Inc., 1953), 480.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.; Peter Singleton-Gates, *General Lord Freyberg VC* (London: Tonbridge Printers Ltd., 1963), 151.

<sup>5</sup>Baldwin, 282.

<sup>6</sup>Singleton-Gates, 154.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Baldwin, 285.

<sup>9</sup>Alan Clark, *The Fall of Crete* (London: Cassell & Co., 1962), 103.

<sup>10</sup>Walter Ansel, *Hitler and the Middle Sea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 237.

<sup>11</sup>Singleton-Gates, 156.

<sup>12</sup>Davin, 482; and Singleton-Gates, 156.

<sup>13</sup>Davin, 482.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 484.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 483.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 483-484.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 482.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 481.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas E. Griess et al., eds., *The Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean*, The West Point Military History Series (Wayne, NJ: Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1984), 100.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Clark, 111.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Davin, 84-85.

<sup>25</sup>George E. Blau, *The German Campaigns in the Balkans* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 124.

<sup>26</sup>Davin, 85.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>28</sup>Baldwin, 283.

<sup>29</sup>Davin, 85.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 85-86.

<sup>31</sup>Blau, 124.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Davin, 84.

<sup>34</sup>Blau, 126.

<sup>35</sup>Davin, 83.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ralph Bennett, *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1989), 54, 56.

<sup>42</sup>Blau, 129; and Baldwin, 286.

<sup>43</sup>Blau, 129.

<sup>44</sup>Winston S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, vol. 3, *The Second World War*, ed. Chartwell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 270-271.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.; and Singleton-Gates, 153.

<sup>47</sup>Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, 271, 272.

<sup>48</sup>Baldwin, 286.

<sup>49</sup>Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, 271.

<sup>50</sup>Blau, 129; and Davin, 86.

<sup>51</sup>Baldwin, 285.

<sup>52</sup>Singleton-Gates, 154.

<sup>53</sup>Davin, 86.

<sup>54</sup>Blau, 129.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>*Battle of Crete: May 20–June 1, 1941*, Special Bulletin No. 35 (Washington, DC: War Department, 15 October 1941), 12; and Ansel, 277.

<sup>57</sup>Blau, 129; and *Battle of Crete: May 20–June 1, 1941* Special Bulletin No.35, 12.

- <sup>58</sup>Baldwin, 289.
- <sup>59</sup>Blau, 132.
- <sup>60</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup>Ibid., 127.
- <sup>62</sup>Ibid., 132.
- <sup>63</sup>Baldwin, 288.
- <sup>64</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup>Ibid., 287; and Blau, 130.
- <sup>66</sup>Davin, 182.
- <sup>67</sup>Clark, 100.
- <sup>68</sup>Davin, 182.
- <sup>69</sup>Blau, 133, 135.
- <sup>70</sup>Clark, 100.
- <sup>71</sup>Davin, 183.
- <sup>72</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup>Ibid., 85, 484.
- <sup>74</sup>Blau, 133, 135.
- <sup>75</sup>Ibid., 135.
- <sup>76</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>77</sup>Clark, 103.
- <sup>78</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>79</sup>Ibid., 103-104.
- <sup>80</sup>Baldwin, 291.
- <sup>81</sup>Ibid.



<sup>82</sup>*Battle of Crete*, Special Bulletin No. 35, 15.

<sup>83</sup>Davin, 294.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 434.

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

<sup>86</sup>Clark, 167.

<sup>87</sup>Davin, 520-521.

<sup>88</sup>*Battle of Crete*, Special Bulletin No. 35, 15.

<sup>89</sup>Clark, 172.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 174-175.

<sup>91</sup>Davin, 520; and Clark, 175.

<sup>92</sup>Davin, 438.

<sup>93</sup>Clark, 176.

<sup>94</sup>Davin, 486.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*; and Baldwin, 296.

<sup>97</sup>Davin, 488.

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

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

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

<sup>101</sup>Karl Gundelach, "The Battle for Crete 1941," in *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View*, ed. H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 130.

<sup>102</sup>Baldwin, 285.

<sup>103</sup>B. H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), 161.

## CHAPTER 6

### DID THE RESULTS OF THE GERMAN CAMPAIGN IN CRETE JUSTIFY ITS EXECUTION?

The German invasion of Crete was successful when viewed from the perspective that the operation met its main objective to conquer the island completely by air. Unfortunately for the Germans, miscalculations in intelligence and rushed planning resulted in Operation *Merkur* taking longer than expected and at great cost. The advantages of possessing Crete included denying the British a stronghold in the region, attacking the British in North Africa, and restricting the passage of ships through the eastern Mediterranean. However, there were three reasons why the results of the German campaign in Crete did not justify its execution. First, although Crete was strategically important to Germany, Adolf Hitler did not use the island to fulfill Germany's strategic objectives. Second, offensive operations from Crete were not launched against the Allies in the Mediterranean, especially in North Africa. Finally, after the Battle of Crete, German airborne forces were not used again on a large-scale operation during the Second World War.

When Germany captured the island of Crete in May 1941, Hitler's Third Reich gained all the strategic advantages possession of the island offered. For example, German forces deprived the British armed forces from using the island as a military base from which to launch offensive operations against the Balkans. Of particular importance to Germany were the Ploesti oil fields in Romania. With Crete firmly secured under German control, the Allies were deprived of airfields that might have carried out aerial bombing campaigns over the Balkans and in the eastern Mediterranean. Because Germany

occupied Crete, German shipping was not nearly as vulnerable to attacks from the Royal Navy. Therefore, German security of its shipping routes was enhanced, particularly in the Aegean Sea and in the water routes to Italy, Sicily, and North Africa. Moreover, the Suez Canal was a key future objective for disrupting Allied trade and North African re-supply.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the Royal Navy's operations, although still superior to the German Navy, were somewhat curtailed with Crete in German hands. The German threat to British shipping in the area was vastly increased.

Although Germany's conquest of Crete had strategic potential, Hitler did not use the island to fulfill strategic objectives for which some Germans longed. Admiral Erich Raeder and Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering advocated a Mediterranean strategy, which aimed to eliminate British operations throughout the Mediterranean Sea and to support future operations in North Africa. However, approximately three weeks after the fall of Crete, Hitler launched his summer offensive, Operation *Barbarossa*, against Russia, which commenced on 22 June 1941. Subsequent to his Crete victory and invasion of Russia, Hitler completely failed to pursue further strategic objectives in the eastern half of the Mediterranean Sea. British historian Basil Liddell Hart concluded:

Hitler did not follow up his Mediterranean victory in any of the ways expected on the British side--a pounce upon Cyprus, Syria, Suez, or Malta. A month later he launched the invasion of Russia, and from that time on neglected the opportunities that lay open for driving the British out of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. If this forfeit was mainly due to his absorption in the Russian venture, it was also due to his reaction after the victory in Crete. The cost depressed him more than the conquest exhilarated him. It was such a contrast to the cheapness of his previous successes and far larger captures.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the Allied tactical defeat in Crete was actually an Allied strategic victory in the wider scope of the Second World War. The Allies were forced to evacuate the island,

but during the course of the war, Hitler ignored the strategic possibilities that Crete offered Germany.<sup>3</sup>

Germany's possession of Crete did in fact provide an excellent opportunity for the Third Reich to continue offensive operations against the British in North Africa, with the ultimate German objective of capturing the Suez Canal. With General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps already entrenched in the North African desert, the strategic potential of Crete became magnified. Possession of Crete would provide the Germans with a base from which to support the Afrika Korps logistically as it attempted to dominate all of North Africa, to include Egypt and the vital Suez Canal.

However, Hitler did not understand the importance of the events in North Africa.<sup>4</sup> Hitler's military advisors could not convince him that decisive German victories against Great Britain in Egypt and the Middle East would drive the British from the region. The result, in their estimation, was that the British would not be able to continue the war against the Axis powers.<sup>5</sup> Overriding his advisors, Hitler failed to use Crete as a springboard for future operations.

The capture of Crete could have been significant both politically and militarily for Germany by affecting the course of events in several important nations in the Middle East. The German conquest of Crete was a stepping-stone to the domination of Cyprus, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.<sup>6</sup> An attack on Egypt and the Suez Canal by German forces located on Crete coupled with a coordinated attack by Rommel's forces already in North Africa could have severely damaged the Allied cause. Moreover, with the help of Vichy France in Syria, Hitler could have strengthened his position prior to attacking Iraq or Iran. However, Hitler envisioned the Battle of Crete as an end to the Balkan campaign and did

not see Crete as a larger strategic asset leading to domination of the Middle East or the Suez Canal.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Hitler's military advisors saw an opportunity in the Middle East because of the precarious British political situation. The Middle East was ripe for total domination by Hitler's forces provided that Crete was taken and used to open vital avenues to the East.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no evidence that Hitler wanted use Crete as a stepping-stone and move east toward Cyprus or Suez.<sup>9</sup> Hitler's advisors, especially the Luftwaffe leadership, were unable to persuade Hitler to pursue a Middle East strategy.<sup>10</sup> After the Crete operation Hitler immediately shifted his focus to Operation *Barbarossa*.<sup>11</sup>

Not only did Hitler's interest in Mediterranean ventures wane, but also he became so deeply involved in his campaign on the eastern front that he actually directed military forces to be withdrawn from the Mediterranean for employment against Russia in 1941. Hitler also withdrew aircraft from Greece, which weakened German military strength and allowed the Royal Navy to once again become the dominating influence in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>12</sup> Crete is a classic example of the fitful and whimsical nature of Hitler's strategy, for had he followed up his successes in the Mediterranean, rather than be hypnotized by invading Russia, the invasion of Crete very well might have been worth the cost. In short, Crete had the potential of becoming a formidable German base from which Hitler could release devastating air attacks against lucrative British military targets, but the island was not used as an offensive staging base.

Crete was the last large-scale airborne operation that the Germans were to conduct during the remaining four-year course of World War II. The outcome of the operation in Crete weakened the strategic fighting force of the XI Flieger Corps, especially the elite

7th Flieger Division.<sup>13</sup> For example, Operation *Merkur* highlighted several challenges associated with airborne operations. These challenges included command and control of airborne forces, as well as logistical and financial support. Most importantly, *Merkur* reinforced that lightly equipped parachutists were highly vulnerable to attack at the beginning of an airborne operation until they linked up with heavy ground forces. Because of German experiences in Crete, the Wehrmacht was apprehensive about conducting future large-scale airborne operations.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the results of the Battle of Crete hindered the development of future German airborne doctrine and techniques.<sup>15</sup>

The Wehrmacht losses during the fight for the island convinced Hitler not to employ airborne forces in large numbers again. The loss of Crete caused some very serious misgivings in the Allied camp, while the Germans considered the Battle of Crete their first major setback since they began military operations in 1939.<sup>16</sup> In the initial landings alone, the Germans lost nearly one-third of their elite parachute division.<sup>17</sup> This had a serious influence on future airborne operations. However, it should be emphasized that the Crete losses were slight when compared to what would occur to German forces on the Russian front. Nevertheless, Germany's future war efforts were deprived of this elite, highly mobile strike force, which could seize key positions and prevent forward movement of the enemy.

One direct result of the Crete campaign was that it caused Hitler to doubt the value of future airborne operations in his attempt to overrun the remainder of the European continent. In fact, when Hitler's forces began to experience manpower shortages on the eastern front in October 1941, he employed many of his seasoned airborne troops as regular infantry in Russia.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, in the words of General

Student, "Crete was the grave of the German parachutists."<sup>19</sup> Germany elected not to employ her airborne forces in any major military operation during the remaining years of the war because of the high casualty rates suffered during the Battle of Crete.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Allies had an unexpected victory from Crete because this strategic arm of the Wehrmacht was not employed against them again.

What factors justified Operation *Merkur*? Simply, that Crete was used as a launching pad for future operations against the Allies in North Africa and the Middle East. The results of the German campaign in Crete, however, did not justify its execution. The German conquest of Crete accomplished all of the strategic advantages listed earlier in this paper. However, the student of military history cannot help but wonder why Germany did not follow up its hard-won victory. Additionally, if Germany had pursued a more vigorous military policy in the eastern Mediterranean after Crete, one must also reflect on the quite different thrust the Second World War might have taken. Nevertheless, Hitler chose to abandon the Mediterranean in exchange for the potential territorial gains in Russia.

In reviewing Hitler's summer offensive directed against Russia, the majority of his military might had to be dedicated to his eastern front. The subsequent battles that took place on the Russian front became violent life and death struggles for the Third Reich. As a result of the difficult times experienced with the Russians, the war in the eastern Mediterranean was reduced to somewhat less than a secondary effort for Germany. The island of Crete was never again used by Hitler's forces to precipitate offensive warfare and to gain control of the countries of the Middle East, and most importantly, against the vital Suez Canal.

While Crete was potentially the most valuable strategic asset captured during the Balkan campaign, it remains highly questionable as to what purpose it served.<sup>21</sup> It was almost as though the German airborne invasion and ultimate capture of Crete were carried out in vain. Hitler simply left Crete to wither on the vine. He failed totally to follow up this hard-won victory in the eastern Mediterranean by relentlessly pursuing the Allied armies. However, it is a well-known fact that Hitler's strategy for the conduct of the war was not always determined by logical reason.<sup>22</sup> The highly trained airborne corps was crippled as a result of the losses suffered on Crete and was not employed on another large-scale operation during the war. Dr. Karl Gundelach concluded, "The subsequent role of Crete during the war was a typical example of the axiom that a favorable geographical position need not necessarily be a favorable strategic one, and that it must first be made so by efficient communication as the investment of adequate material resources."<sup>23</sup>

The German operation in Crete appears only to have served to hinder Hitler's ambitious schedule to subjugate all of Europe. The equipment and personnel resources and the time required to prepare for and invade Crete could have been employed in a more beneficial manner in another theater of operation, such as the Russian front. There can be no question that the Allies were decisively defeated during the Battle of Crete. However, this defeat can only be considered a tactical loss for the British since they ultimately evacuated their military forces from the island. When considering the outcome of World War II, the Battle of Crete can be considered a strategic victory for the Allies because "Crete was another step in the great delaying action which the British had fought since Dunkirk."<sup>24</sup>



Crete provided almost no practical benefit for Germany during the remainder of the war. The Allied landings in North Africa culminated in Germany's expulsion from the African continent in May of 1943. This was the final blow for German influence in the Mediterranean theater. In the final analysis, Hitler weakened his hold in the eastern Mediterranean almost immediately following his great Pyrrhic victory in Crete.

Therefore, Crete was only the final operation in Hitler's campaign in the Balkans and the island never served as a stepping-stone to future operations in the Mediterranean and Middle East. In the words of historian Christopher Buckley, "Crete was a poor reward for so much planning, such loss of skilled fighting men and such expenditure of aircraft unless it were a stepping-stone to greater things. The revolt in Iraq and the sinister developments in Syria during that very month pointed the way. But Hitler, never sufficiently alive to the importance of the Mediterranean to the grand strategy of the war, was blind to omens."<sup>25</sup> After intensive preparations and well thought out and executed plans and a hard fought battle, Crete, in the words of Dr. Karl Gundelach "fell into a kind of enchanted sleep for the rest of the war."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>D. M. Davin, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 'Crete'* (Nashville, TN: The Battery Press, INC., 1953), 80.

<sup>2</sup>Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, "How Crete Was Lost--Yet With Profit," *Military Review* 31, no. 6 (1951): 11.

<sup>3</sup>Hanson W. Baldwin, *The Crucial Years 1939-1941: The World at War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 281; and Davin, 299.

<sup>4</sup>Davin, 464.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), 12.

<sup>6</sup>Karl Gundelach, "The Battle for Crete 1941," in *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View*, ed. H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 131.

<sup>7</sup>Davin, 80.

<sup>8</sup>Christopher Buckley, *Greece and Crete, 1941* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1952), 304.

<sup>9</sup>Baldwin, 299; and Davin, 464.

<sup>10</sup>Davin, 464.

<sup>11</sup>Baldwin, 281.

<sup>12</sup>George E. Blau, *The German Campaigns in the Balkans* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 147.

<sup>13</sup>Edward Jablonski, *Air War*, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday & Co, Inc., 1979), 19.

<sup>14</sup>Baldwin, 297.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>16</sup>Buckley, 303.

<sup>17</sup>Department of the Army, Pamphlet, No. 20-232, *Airborne Operations: A German Appraisal* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, October 1951), 21; and see chapter five for more details on German losses.

<sup>18</sup>Blau, 147; and Baldwin, 297.

<sup>19</sup>Donald S. Detwiler, *World War II German Military Studies*, vol. 13 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979), 147.

<sup>20</sup>Davin, 464.

<sup>21</sup>Martin Van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy 1940-1941: The Balkan Clue* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 183.

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

<sup>23</sup>Gundelach, 132.

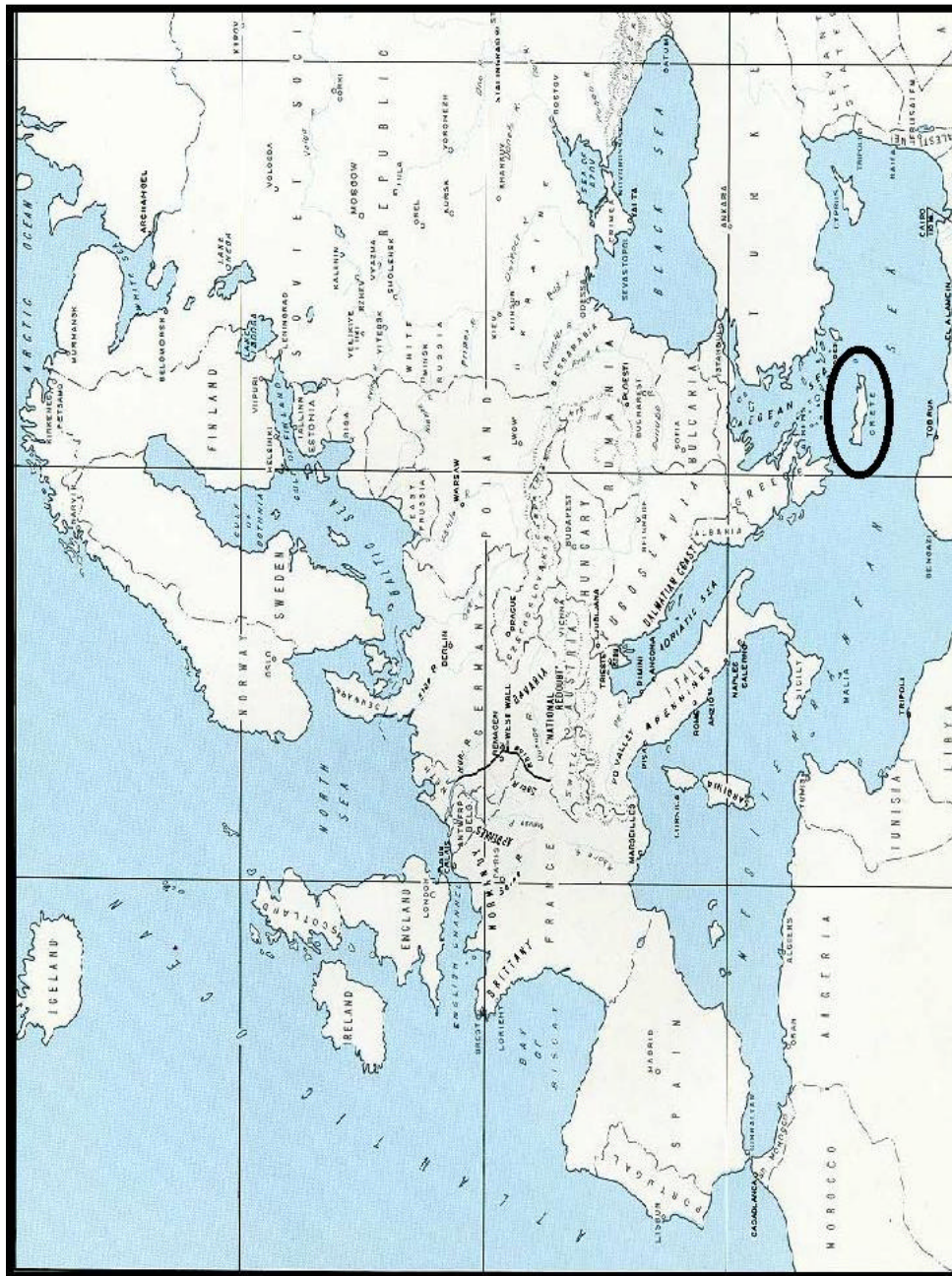
<sup>24</sup>Allan A. Michie, *Retreat to Victory* (Chicago: Alliance Book Corporation, 1942), 54.

<sup>25</sup>Buckley, 304.

<sup>26</sup>Gundelach, 132.

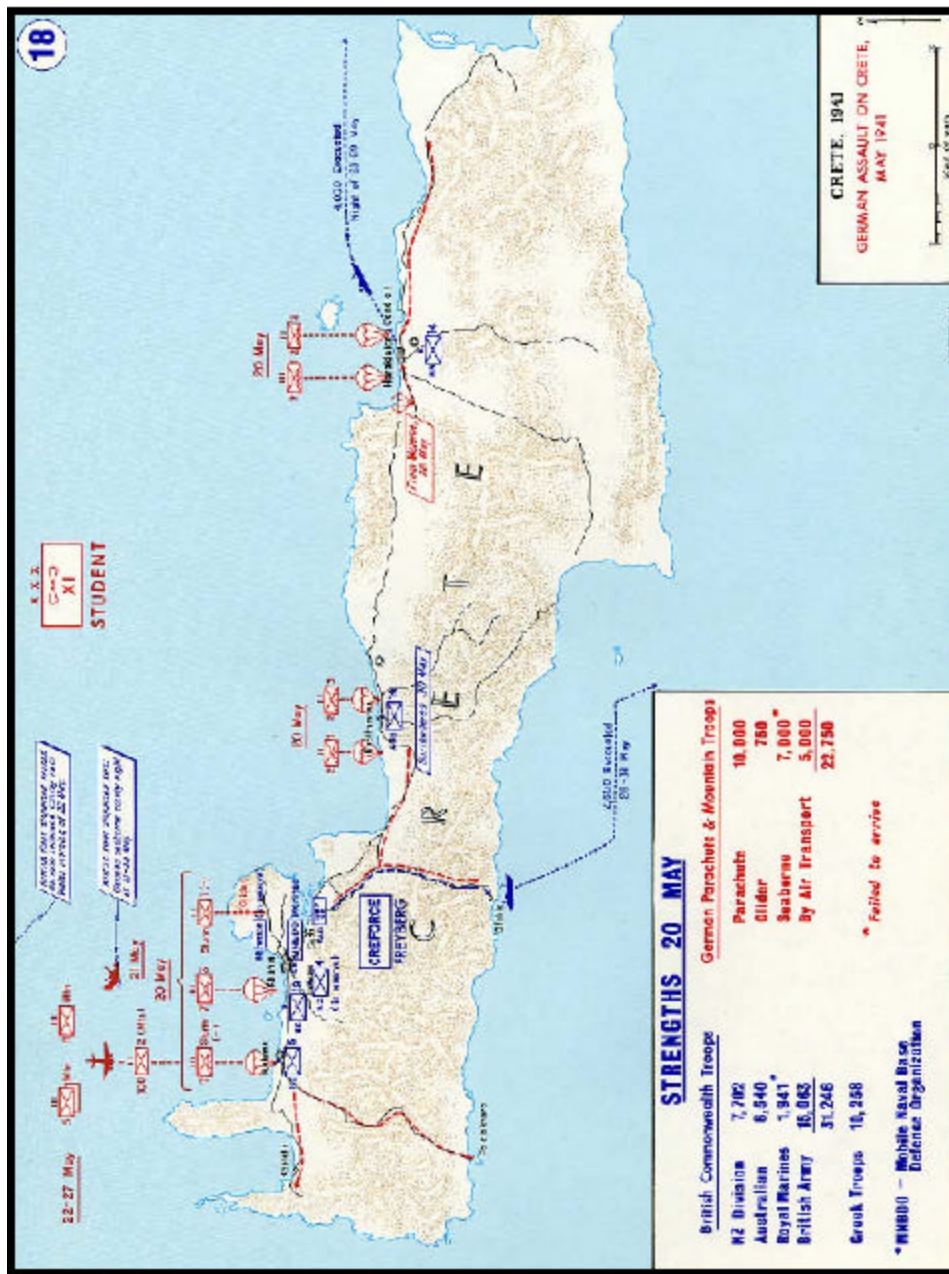
APPENDIX A

MAP OF THE MEDITERRANEAN



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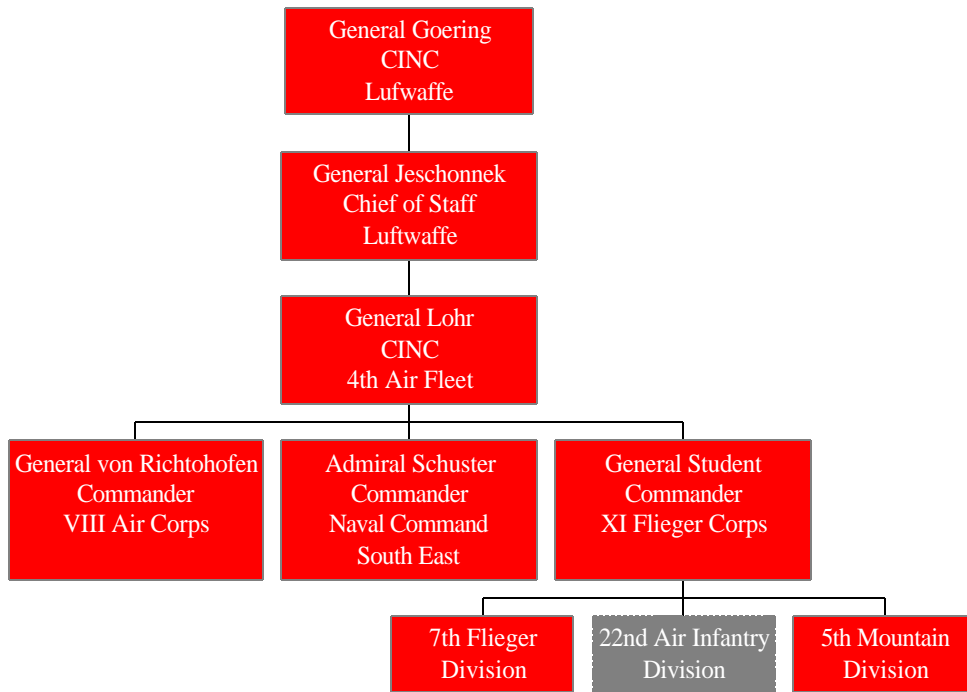
APPENDIX B  
MAP OF CRETE



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APPENDIX C

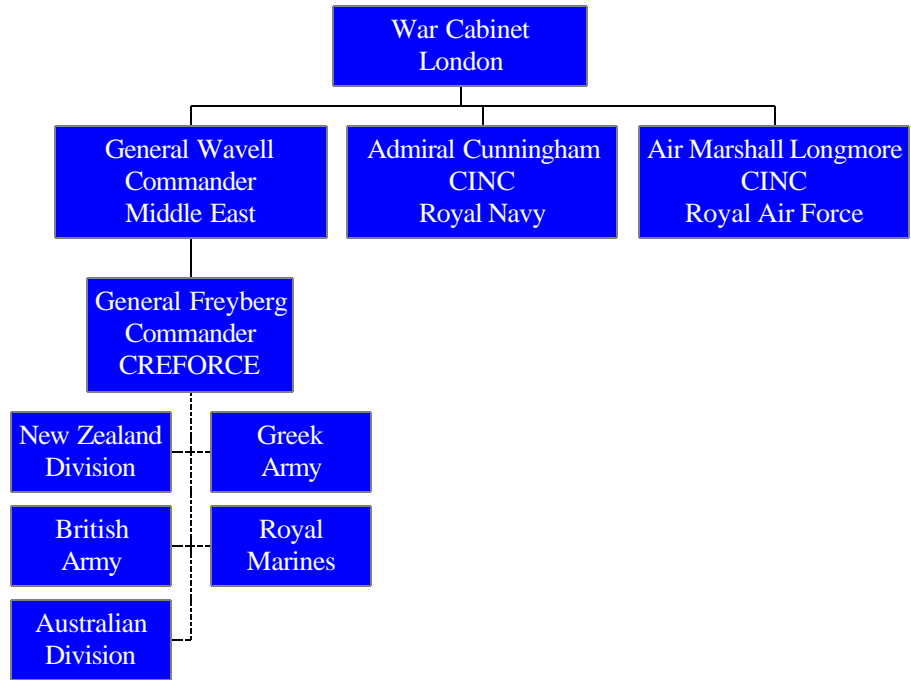
GERMAN COMMAND STRUCTURE



\*22nd Air Infantry unavailable; 5th Mountain Division used for Crete

APPENDIX D

ALLIED COMMAND STRUCTURE



## GLOSSARY

Blitzkrieg. A strategy of “lightning war” relying on the independent operation of mobile armored units striking forward of the main armies to achieve surprise and swift tactical success. The strategy originally developed from use of shock troops to break through allied trench units in the last offensives of World War I.

Flieger. The German word for air or airborne.

Luftwaffe. The air arm of the Third Reich established by Hitler and Goering in March 1935.

Sturm. The German word for assault.

Wehrmacht. German Armed Forces Command. Also known as Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW). It was Hitler’s planning staff for the armed forces.



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