

CRETE

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CRETE

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*Official History of New Zealand
in the Second World War 1939-45*

CRETE

by
D. R. HAYN

WAR HISTORY BRANCH
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PREFACE

Preface

IT is now six years since I undertook to write this history and four years since I felt I had a sufficient command of the evidence to begin a first draft. Meanwhile new facts have kept on appearing and frequently the treatment of particular detail has had to be modified; less often, a more general conclusion has had to be reconsidered. The exigencies of a daily profession, moreover, made it impossible to bring to the task the continuity of reflection ideally desirable but so seldom the fortune of the historian in these nagging times. And this was a particularly unlucky circumstance, since the battle of [Crete](#) was, and I fear will remain, one of the most baffling and controversial of the late war.

Far more trying, however, was the fact that I, a very junior and ignorant subaltern in that battle, was forced by the nature of the historian's role not merely to try and discover what happened and present it in a lucid and logical way, but also, by considering the decisions taken and the alternatives possible, to imply or express judgment on the actions of men immeasurably my betters in courage, military capacity and experience: among them men under whose command I had served and whose personal friendliness to me in times past reinforced the loyalty a junior officer owes to his commanders long after the temporary ties of discipline have been severed; among them also men of whom death during or since the war has deprived us and whose testimony, if we had it, might make plain a great deal that is obscure.

The only possible course seemed to be to treat loyalty to the truth of the facts so far as they could be ascertained as overriding. The historian's is also a duty and men who died generously for theirs would be the last to reproach another for trying to do his. I hope therefore that this history will be read as one written in the earnest belief that nothing should be set down in malice; and I hope also that the reader will keep it in his mind, as I have tried to keep it in mine, that the commanders whose actions are being subjected to such close consideration took their decisions in grim conditions of urgency; that they were pitifully lacking in equipment which later in the war would have been considered essential; that much now clear was then hidden;

that the time to ponder the facts which is the privilege of the historian and his readers was not theirs; and that consequences which seem to us inevitable because we know they took place were, even for those who then predicted them correctly, uncertainties of an inscrutable future.

Many parts of this book have been written and rewritten with the most anxious consideration lest inaccuracy steal in or lest by faulty emphasis injustice should lay an ambush. Even so, wrong reasoning or hasty presumptions may still lurk beyond immediate detection.

That such blemishes are not as numerous as they might have been is largely due to the invaluable help of Mr. W. E. Murphy. In acting as the filter to me of information from New Zealand he very soon made himself an authority on the battle, saved me from countless errors of detail, and many times, by adducing considerations overlooked or insufficiently weighed, compelled me to modify a conclusion. In particular, the book owes to him the excellent appendices which appear under his name. Without the help of the General Editor and such an assistant, the difficulties of writing a history 12,000 miles away from one's main sources might have proved insuperable.

My debt, indeed, to the whole of the [War History Branch](#) staff is too considerable to admit specification; but I cannot dismiss it without a grateful acknowledgment to Mr. [M. B. McGlynn](#), who supplied two appendices, of which the one dealing with prisoners and escapers reveals so impressively the stubborn, loyal courage of many British, Australians, Greeks, [Cretans](#) and New Zealanders, and to Miss P. M. Lissington who prepared the very thorough index.

Help from persons outside the [War History](#) staff was freely given. To acknowledge it all would be impossible; but I cannot forgo the pleasure of recording the indispensable aid, often agreeably accompanied by generous hospitality, given by [Lord Freyberg](#). Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Puttick, Major-General L. M. Inglis, Major-General Keith Stewart, Major-General W. G. Gentry and Brigadier R. C. Queree have taken great pains in considering the various drafts and have offered searching criticism of which I have done my best to take advantage. And I am much indebted to Brigadier L. W. Andrew, Brigadier G. Dittmer, and Colonel D. F. Leckie for the readiness with which they drew on their recollections. Other New Zealanders to

whom I am obliged in various ways for help are Mr. Geoffrey Cox, who supplied the material for the appendix on Crete News; Mr. W. G. McClymont, who compiled the invaluable narrative of events which was the basis of my own book; Mr. Wynne Mason, formerly Staff Captain of 5 Brigade; and Mr. Angus Ross, the historian of 23 Battalion.

In England there have also been many who lent willing aid: in particular, Brigadier H. B. Latham of the Cabinet Office who put his records at my disposal and offered valuable criticisms in proof; [Mr. Winston Churchill](#), who through the good offices of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall allowed me to see proofs of Volume III of his [The Second World War](#); Major-General 'Bob' Laycock who dispensed information and hospitality with equal liberality; Colonel E. E. Rich, on whose compilation for the War Office, [The Campaign in Crete](#), I have leaned heavily in the earlier sections of this work; Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. D. Young, DSO, RE, Mr. Evelyn Waugh and Mr. Anthony Cheetham, all of whom provided information without which it would have been almost impossible to do justice to the role of the Commandos in the concluding stages of the battle; Mr. Jack Wills who, having been GSO 1 to Major-General Weston in the battle, was able to throw helpful light on some of the more obscure phases and gave useful details about the role of MNBDO; and the late Christopher Buckley to whom I owe help by correspondence and discussion.

Finally, I should like to express my gratitude to the New Zealand Government which, through the High Commissioner's Office in [London](#), has afforded me courteous assistance at all times and which, besides making the whole enterprise possible, arranged for my passage to New Zealand in 1948 and so gave me the opportunity of interviewing in person many of the chief actors in the drama.

[oxford](#)

February 1953

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CHAPTER 1 – CRETE TILL THE EVACUATION OF GREECE

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I

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ON the morning of 20 May 1941 the British forces in Crete and their Greek allies stood by their arms to meet the German invasion, expected since the fall of Greece and now at length about to begin. Thirteen days later, on 1 June, the evacuation of these forces was as complete as the heroism of rearguards and of the Royal Navy could make it; while the capitulation or dispersal of those who had had to be left behind ended organised resistance. Between the two dates took place one of the bitterest battles of the war, one notable on many counts and not least because it marked the first and, for good reasons, the last time that the enemy used parachute and airborne troops on the largest scale. It was a battle in which the New Zealand Division played a conspicuous part; and of that part this book attempts the history.

To make such a history intelligible the historian must do more than merely relate the course of the fighting. For, just as a move in chess is conditioned by what has gone before and is seen in its full implications only through its consequences, so this battle arose out of and was largely determined by circumstances that long preceded it; and its outcome involved far more than local success or failure.

But the task of tracing causes backwards is as infinite as that of tracing their consequences; and, unless limits are accepted, both are ultimately vain. In both the historian must address his judgment to the problem of what is immediately relevant. The preliminaries of this history will therefore be confined to a summary account of Crete's strategic situation in the Mediterranean, the increasing importance of this during the early stages of the war, the political and strategic decisions which led to our occupation of it, the topographical features of the island itself which determined the dispositions of the defence and helped to determine the outcome of the battle, and the state which defensive preparations had reached when the first of the troops evacuated from Greece began to arrive.

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II

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Crete, the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean and the largest in the Aegean, occupies a central position in the Eastern Mediterranean. To the west, its nearest neighbours are Malta and Sicily; to the east, Cyprus and Syria beyond. Towards it from the north-west, and some fifty miles away, stretch the fingers of the Peloponnese, the most southerly point of which, Cape Malea, is only sixty miles from Cape Spatha, the northernmost point of Crete. North, also, is the island-speckled entrance to the Aegean proper, which Crete masks and to which it is the key; while less than one hundred miles to the north-east lie Rhodes and the Dodecanese and beyond them Turkey. Some two hundred miles south is Cyrenaica and the desert coast, which ends eastward in the Nile delta's fringe and Alexandria.

This central position has made Crete an island of strategic importance for so long as history records ambition and ambition has had ships. That position helped to make the Minoan civilisation which flourished there between 3000 and 1400 BC and is still survived by the ruins of its capital, Knossos. Since then Achaeans, Dorians, Romans, Arabs, Venetians and Turks have all fought in turn to control an island, the possession of which has usually coincided with the zenith of the controlling power, and the loss of which has marked that power's lapse. And, when the nineteenth century found the islanders demanding a voice in their own destiny, the sea-powers of a world grown immensely wider than that touched by the fleets of the legendary Minos watched one another jealously. A stalemate of these jealousies at first overcame the deference to national aspirations then becoming fashionable and, by the Treaty of London in 1830, Crete was given to Mahomet Ali. It was not till 1913 that the political situation was propitious to native hopes and union at last effected with a Greece already free.

About this very time developments of air power had begun in Europe which were in time to double the strategic importance of Crete; ironically enough, for it was from Crete that Daedalus and Icarus first flew. By the outbreak of war in 1939 this importance was patent to anyone who could read a map. To the bombers of

whatever power possessed it all the surrounding lands were accessible; and from its air bases the passage between the East and West Mediterranean could be made perilous.

So long as [Germany](#) had no access to the [Mediterranean](#) and so long as the countries of South-Eastern Europe were neutral, the potentialities of [Crete](#) as a sea and air base were partly obscured; and in so far as they were realised they could not be put to use by either side. For the British the salient facts were that [Suda](#) harbour was the largest in the Eastern Mediterranean; and, if events were ever to allow this, a refuelling base could be established there which would save a long trip to and from [Alexandria](#) for ships operating in neighbouring waters.

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III

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It was obvious, however, that if [Italy](#) were to enter the war the situation would change for the worse. The war would then have reached the [Mediterranean](#) in a more immediate sense. And in Axis hands [Crete](#)'s potentialities could be exploited to the detriment of the whole Allied position in this vital sea. As early as 25 April 1940, therefore, the British Chiefs of Staff considered a proposal for the seizure of [Crete](#) as soon as [Italy](#) should become a belligerent, and by May, in spite of the [Greek Government](#)'s belief that any Italian attack on the island could be repelled by the British [Navy](#) and Cretan volunteers,¹ the British and French were going ahead with plans for occupation;² plans which, one may note, concentrated on denying facilities to the enemy rather than on use of those facilities by the Allies themselves.³

The [Greek Government](#) was not long in seeing that it would need more than naval assistance if war were to develop between [Italy](#) and [Greece](#), and on 21 May gave the Allies leave to land troops anywhere in the island in that event. By 30 May the Allied plan for doing so was ready. So quickly, however, did the collapse of [France](#) follow [Italy](#)'s entry into the larger war on 10 June (the former the cause of the latter, not vice versa) that when [France](#) made her armistice with [Germany](#) on 22 June the basis of the plan was gone while doubts about its adequacy were still being canvassed.

July and August passed in arguments for and against occupation by a British force. At first it was the arguments against that seemed the stronger: the British did not wish to be the first to violate Greek neutrality and in any case did not have the troops available. And so on 27 July the existing plan was cancelled.

During September evidence of projected Italian action against [Greece](#) grew strong enough for the Greeks to invite discussions between their own and British service attachés. But all that emerged from these discussions, which began on 4 October, was that though 'no promises could be made' a British battalion then or

¹ Athens to FO, 18 May.

² General Wavell to Admiral Cunningham, 15 May; Cs-in-C to COS, 21 May; WO to ME, 7035.

³ WO to ME, 15 May; C-in-C Mediterranean to Admiralty, 17 May.

a brigade later might be made available from the Middle East; that the Greeks would resist any British landings made before Italy declared war; and that the existing garrison consisted of little more than an infantry division. The Middle East Commanders-in-Chief, however, could hardly have been much disturbed by this: for, according to a message sent by them on 25 September 1940 ¹ to the Chiefs of Staff, the Greek garrison might be expected to hold out for quite a long period; and, while they thought that Suda Bay, Canea, Candia (Heraklion), Merabello Gulf and Sitia should be protected whatever the cost, they thought that our most immediate form of help would have to be from the air—backed later perhaps by the Fleet Air Arm—and that even this help, like that of troops, would be limited.

On 9 October War Cabinet decided that the Secretary of State for War (Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden) should himself go to the Middle East. Meanwhile the situation grew continually more tense, and by 21 October the Chiefs of Staff Committee found itself considering a suggestion from the Joint Planning Staff that our growing strength in the Middle East and Graziani's reluctance to take the offensive in North Africa might make it possible 'to earmark and prepare a small force and move it to reinforce Crete in the event of Greece becoming involved in war'. Their decision then was that assistance to Greece would have to be confined to this possibility, and a telegram was sent to the Commanders-in-Chief to ask whether and when, in the event of an Italian invasion of Greece, a force could be sent to Crete.

October the 28th brought matters to a head. For on that day the delivery of the Italian ultimatum, its rejection by the Greeks, and the Italian invasion of Greece succeeded one another. Reactions were prompt. The Defence Committee met the same day and agreed to do everything possible to help Greece defend Crete and secure our use of Suda Bay as a naval base and advanced aerodrome; and it decided to authorise the Commander-in-Chief Middle East to send there as soon as possible

troops to the strength of a brigade with 'some field and AA guns'.

The same day General Headquarters Middle East conferred to see what could be done, finally deciding to send a reconnaissance party to [Crete](#) by air. Subsequent action would depend on its report, but meanwhile 2 Battalion, the [York](#) and Lancaster Regiment, was to be at six hours' notice as from 6 p.m. 29 October to embark and 2 Battalion, the Black Watch, was to stand by. The codeword for the projected operation was to be ACTION.

¹ Cs-in-C to WO, 25 Sep. It is interesting to notice that this message mentions the possibility of parachute attack.

But, though the Italian invasion of [Greece](#) thus produced a sense of emergency both in [London](#) and the [Middle East](#) and was bound to eliminate the last Greek scruples, ¹ it also raised the threat of yet a further call on British troops and materials already overtaxed by existing tasks. The possibility of a force being ultimately required for [Greece](#) itself would now have to be considered.

At the meeting in [Alexandria](#) on 28 October the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean had announced his intention of establishing a naval base in [Suda Bay](#). A convoy was to leave [Alexandria](#) the following day carrying guns to be mounted there and naval personnel to man them. And at the same conference the Senior Air Staff Officer promised to see whether a few fighters could not be provided.

Reports from the island soon indicated that anti-aircraft defences and ground troops would be needed if the naval base were to be defended, and as the authority from the Chiefs of Staff for sending a brigade had now been received and the Greek attitude was welcoming, 2 Yorks and Lancs were ordered to move on 30 October. The occupation of the island was planned to take place in two phases of which this was to be the first, ACTION. The second, ASSUMPTION, was to consist of the move of Headquarters 14 Infantry Brigade, 2 [Black Watch](#), HQ 52 LAA Regiment, ² 151 HAA Battery, ³ 156 LAA Battery, 42 Field Company, and attached troops. These, a total of 2500 men, were to move some time after 4–5 November.

Meanwhile, both in the [Middle East](#) and [Cairo](#) brains were being much exercised

on the best way of helping [Greece](#). On 1 November the Secretary of State for War reported from [Cairo](#) on the action already taken in regard to [Crete](#), adding that Italian invasion hardly seemed likely till [Greece](#) had been overrun, that the island was very vulnerable to air attack, that British air squadrons could be ill spared from the desert, and that if they were sent they would be subject to heavy losses on the ground. His conclusion was that the defence should rest mainly on the [Mediterranean Fleet](#), that to make sure of [Suda Bay](#) and encourage the [Cretans](#), however, we should be prepared to reinforce up to the strength already planned for in troops and AA, and that we should not further deplete the air forces in North Africa. This appreciation presumably reflected the opinion of the Commanders-in-Chief; and, it is interesting to notice, Middle East Joint Planning Staff also thought that the use of a whole brigade might be necessary in the

¹ The Greeks at once became strongly in favour of a British naval base at [Suda Bay](#): Gambier-Parry to Dill and Wavell, 2 Nov.

² Light Anti-Aircraft.

³ Heavy Anti-Aircraft.

case of a Greek collapse. Even if the mainland were German-occupied, they declared, and [Suda Bay](#) usable only by night, [Crete](#) was so important that its occupation ought to be ensured. ¹

Back in [London](#) the wider aspects of assistance to [Greece](#) were being discussed. At the Chiefs of Staff conference on 2 November Sir John Dill opposed the despatch of an expeditionary force to [Greece](#) and advocated securing [Crete](#) as a naval and air base; and an appreciation was asked for from the Joint Planning Staff. This appreciation was ready on 4 November. It opposed the movement to [Greece](#) of forces vital to the security of Egypt but thought [Crete](#) ought to be kept available to ourselves. The Chiefs of Staff endorsed this view the following day.

The point is an important one. For if this line of action had been adhered to in the circumstances later to develop, the focus of British attention would have been

Crete, and the troops sent to Greece might have been sent instead to Crete with consequences that can now be only the subject of conjecture.

Meanwhile, policy having been decided for the present in its broad lines, the problem became one of making Suda Bay, in the Prime Minister's words, 'a second Scapa'.² With this aim the question of how to supply anti-aircraft artillery and on what scale was under discussion during most of November. At the Chiefs of Staff meeting on 8 November a suggestion for collecting the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation (hereafter abbreviated to MNBDO) for service in Crete was already being considered, and at their meeting of 11 November it was proposed to invite the Vice-Chiefs of Staff to review the production plans for AA with a view to meeting the needs of Crete and the MNBDO.³

The plan at this stage was that immediate reinforcements in AA should be found from the Middle East and later replaced from the United Kingdom. Two types of defence were considered: the case of minimum defence where only occasional use of Suda Bay by the Fleet was envisaged; and the case of the Fleet having unrestricted access. For the first it was thought the minimum defence must be 24 HAA guns and 24 LAA guns, with two 6-inch coast defence batteries; for the second 32 HAA, 24 LAA and various supporting defences.

¹ ME JPS Paper 30, 30 Oct. In the event a brigade would have been hopelessly little.

² PM to General Ismay, 3 Nov.

³ The Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation was a Royal Marine formation intended to help build, defend, and operate a fleet base to be set up at short notice wherever required. It included a landing and maintenance group to build docks, roads, and storage facilities; a defence group with coast, anti-aircraft and searchlight batteries; and a land defence force including light artillery, machine-gunners, and riflemen. Only about a quarter (some 2200 men) of the total establishment was sent to Crete. This included the landing and maintenance group, anti-aircraft and searchlight units, and other details

The actual position at this time in [Suda Bay](#) was that there were 8 HAA and 12 LAA guns, a number of naval guns for coast defence, and the two 15-inch guns of HMS Terror. Because of the presence of the latter and the quiet prevailing, the Chiefs of Staff decided on 20 November that the 6-inch guns of MNBDO need not be sent and recommended that the 16 HAA and 12 LAA needed to make up the smaller complement should be sent from the [Middle East](#).

General Wavell, however, had his own shortages; and these no doubt lay behind his message to the War Office of 26 November, which recommended that no more AA be sent to [Crete](#) for the time being and that the allocation of AA in the [Middle East](#) should be his responsibility with the advice of the Interservices Committee, on the general understanding that as much as possible be sent from the [United Kingdom](#).¹

The Prime Minister now called for definite proposals, and on 1 December the Chiefs of Staff again considered the matter. They provisionally earmarked 32 HAA and 36 LAA guns for [Crete](#) early in 1941. These, with the coast defence guns already in the island or to be directed there, they thought would be enough without the 6-inch batteries of MNBDO. And here for the time being the matter rested, with [Suda Bay](#) very far from being a Scapa Flow.

In January General Wavell, amid his many preoccupations, found time to counsel that the policy of holding [Crete](#) in all circumstances should be maintained even if [Greece](#) gave way to the new pressures threatening her. By February the threat of a German invasion of [Greece](#) was becoming increasingly probable, and the concern of the higher command for [Crete](#) became correspondingly acute. On 10 February the Joint Planning Staff recommended that our best response for the moment was to carry through a plan for reducing the Italian [Dodecanese](#), strengthening [Crete](#), and assisting the Greeks by naval and air action. [Mr. Churchill](#) was of similar mind. On 11 February he told the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East that, failing a satisfactory agreement with the Greeks, an attempt must be made to salvage as much from the wreck as possible. At all costs [Crete](#) must be kept and any Greek islands which could be used as air bases must be taken.

It is no part of this book to discuss the decision to send an expeditionary force to [Greece](#). It will suffice therefore to say that after much anxious discussion the

decision to do so was taken. Before we turn to the larger strategic scene, however, and trace

¹ The Prime Minister disagreed with the first of these propositions.

the consequences of this decision as they affected the build-up of the defence of [Crete](#), it will be best to follow the progress of events in [Greece](#) down to its evacuation and the end of that campaign.

On 6 April [Germany](#) invaded [Greece](#) and [Yugoslavia](#). The almost immediate collapse of the insufficiently prepared Yugoslav armies enabled the Germans to drive down on to the left flank of the Allied line in [Greece](#). Most of the British Expeditionary Force— [6 Australian Division](#), the New Zealand Division, 1 Armoured Brigade and attached troops—was already in [Greece](#). But even had it been fully deployed, and even if the swift penetration of the exhausted and ill-equipped Greek divisions on the left had not made its own positions untenable, the Expeditionary Force could hardly have turned the scale. As it was a series of rearguard actions became necessary almost at once. The force withdrew by way of [Olympus](#) to a line on [Thermopylae](#) and finally, after the surrender of the Greeks, to the beaches whence evacuation began on 24 April. ¹

¹ See volume [Greece](#), NZ War History, for a complete account of this campaign.

CRETE

IV

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It is now time to turn to [Crete](#) itself, towards which all these events were tending. And justice to those responsible for the defensive preparations after the first landing of troops on 1 November, as well as to those who were finally to fight the defensive battle, makes a summary account of the island's topography essential at this stage: for [Crete's](#) physical features not only helped to determine the pace and character of defensive preparation but also governed directly and indirectly the conditions in which the battle was fought and so affected its course and outcome. ²

[Crete](#), then, is an island about 160 miles long from west to east and about 36 miles wide between north and south. Four mountain ranges dominate its horizons: in the west the Levka Ori (White Mountains), rising to over 8000 feet; in the centre the Psiloritis Mountains, also over 8000 feet; east of these again the Lasithi Range which rises to upwards of 7000 feet; and in the extreme east the [Sitia](#) Ranges, which at their highest are almost 5000 feet.

The position of these mountains determines the direction and fall of the rivers, the character of the coastlines, the forest and vegetation, and even to some extent the climate. The main watershed is on the whole nearer to the south coast, with the result that the harbours there are few and small, have little hinterland and are exposed to sudden winds of gale force. Their anchorages, moreover, are limited in value because of the rapid increase in depth off shore. A further consequence is that most of the streams flow to the north coast, cutting steep valleys as they go and offering serious obstacles to lateral communication.

The descent to this north coast is, however, more gradual and along the coast itself are strips of plain, especially near [Canea](#). On the north coast, too, are the best harbours: [Suda Bay](#), the largest in the eastern Aegean and one of the safest; [Retimo](#); and [Heraklion](#), the best equipped port in the island. In the neighbourhood of these ports existed in more or less embryo state the airfields and landing grounds which were to be the prizes of the battle.

The importance for an island of its harbours needs little emphasis and it will be of advantage to discuss them more closely. [Suda Bay](#), with its main wharf and concrete pier along which ran a Decauville railway, could deal with two ships at a time directly. Its quays, however, could take only lighters and small boats. Across the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#) from [Suda Bay](#) lies [Canea](#), the capital of Crete. Its small harbour could take only small vessels and ships had to be discharged by lighter.

[Retimo](#), thirty miles farther east, is the third largest town, but its harbour could be used only by coastal vessels. Only in fair weather could larger vessels enter, and even then they had to discharge one at a time and by lighter. A further thirty-five miles to the east is [Heraklion](#). Its harbour could take four ships up to 3000 tons alongside the jetty, could unload three by lighter, and could tie up a further three or four to the mole.

Apart from these only the two south coast fishing ports of [Sfakia](#) and [Tymbaki](#) need be mentioned; and that only for their inadequacy. They were suitable for nothing but fishing boats—a fact of considerable significance for the battle. It meant that troops on [Crete](#) had to be supplied from the north coast ports, which were far more vulnerable to air attack and the voyage to which would put a far greater strain on the [Navy](#).

At the outset of the fighting the airfields were in an even rarer state of development. ¹ They consisted of two aerodromes—one at [Maleme](#) and the other at [Heraklion](#)—with a landing strip at [Retimo](#) and another under construction at [Kastelli Pediada](#). At [Maleme](#) construction was still going on when battle broke out, and only fighters could operate from it. [Heraklion](#), also under construction, could be used by all types of aircraft.

It followed that even if aircraft should be available for defence, as in the event they were not, the air effort would be hampered by the inadequacy in both numbers and condition of the airfields. There was the further difficulty that they were all on the north coast of the island, the one most vulnerable to attack. And the [Mesara Plain](#), the most promising flat tract of country in the south, could not be developed in the time that might be counted on.

Communications were as primitive, a fact of no less prime importance. For

airfields might help determine the amount of air protection; ports how fast troops, equipment, and supplies could be landed; but it was communications which would govern not merely the distribution of what was landed but the efficiency with which battle, once joined, could be fought.

Thus the fact that the important roads, like the ports and airfields, were in the north not only determined the enemy's probable objectives but forced the defenders to concentrate in a few quarters at a shallow depth from the coast. Even so, the roads along which they could move were so few that the enemy had no difficulty in keeping a continual air cover.

The same inadequacy in roads made it inevitable for the defence to be divided into sectors from which it would be impossible to concentrate the whole force should attack come in any single quarter; and should attack come in all quarters the various sectors could be cut off from one another with relative ease. There was only the one lateral east-west road, and along it at considerable distances from one another were strung out the main vulnerable points: [Maleme](#), [Suda Bay](#), [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#), each in some way vital. For only by holding the airfields could the defence prevent the enemy from bringing his full strength to bear, and it depended for its supplies on the ports.

Again, the road itself, though the best in the island and having a metalled surface, was markedly inferior by the standards of Western Europe. It could not take more than one line of heavy traffic at a time (even had that traffic been available); it had frequent sharp bends, especially where it cut through hills; none of its bridges was safe for vehicles over seven tons; and for the greater part of its length it was vulnerable from the sea.

There were other disadvantages. There was no mesh of subsidiary roads running parallel with the main road which might have relieved the pressure of traffic; and its scope was shallow since the roads running south were few and bad. Of these latter the principal ran south from [Canea](#), [Retimo](#), and [Heraklion](#) respectively and might be expected to block or bottleneck as soon as battle put pressure on them.

Even of the roads that did run south not all went right across the island. Those that did so were [Maleme](#)–Palaiokhora, a poor road leading to a small bay accessible

only to small boats; [Vrises– Sfakia](#), also poor quality but because of its tactical position of great importance in the outcome; [Heraklion– Tymbaki](#), potentially important and for similar reasons; and the road from [Merabello Gulf](#) to Ierapetra, far too removed from the actual operations to be of much account in the upshot.

There was no hope of supplementing roads by railways. Only three narrow-gauge lines existed. And these were purely local and of no use to the defence. Telephone and telegraphic facilities were little better. Even in normal battle conditions where troops have their full complement of signal services, the presence or absence of civilian fixtures is important. Where, as in [Crete](#), the defence is well below the normal establishment of trained men and supplies, poverty in such arrangements becomes serious. [Heraklion](#) and [Canea](#) alone had automatic systems and the main line ran along the main coast road, like it vulnerable. Of radio transmitters there was one at [Heraklion](#) and there were four at [Canea](#). For electric power the island depended on [Lake Aghya](#), with power stations at [Canea](#), [Heraklion](#), [Retimo](#), Ierapetra and [Sitia](#).

Climate need not detain us: clear skies and bright sun characterise the early summer, and April and May of 1941 were to be no exception. The weather could usually be relied on to be good for flying—for those who had aircraft. The nights were clear but cold, a trial to troops who had no blankets.

The forest and vegetation were those characteristic of a rugged island in [Mediterranean](#) waters. Along the slopes that led down to the northern coast vineyards and groves of olive or almond trees were plentiful. These latter were invaluable throughout both the preparatory period and the battle for the cover they gave against enemy reconnaissance and ground strafing. The vineyards often offered good fields of fire; but after the first days this was an advantage which belonged to the defence only when they were not themselves attacking.

Finally, it should be added that the country between [Maleme](#) and [Canea](#) over which the main battle was fought was mainly a series of ridges running down towards the sea, and separated by narrow and deep gullies or sometimes by a broader valley. These offered many advantages for a withdrawing action; but they made it necessary, when a counter-attack was to be launched, for the main reliance to be put on the coast road. And, owing to the pattern of the enemy landings, the

danger of outflanking was always present.

² For fuller account see Naval Intelligence Report on [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) (1944), Geographical handbook series.

¹ Report on Air Operations in [Crete](#), by Gp Capt G. R. Beamish.

CRETE

V

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Such then were the conditions and the country which the first British troops found when they landed on 1 November. A summary account of the defensive preparations made by them and their successors up till the evacuation of Greece must now be given. Such an account will be most intelligible if we begin with the successive commanders, their orders and their plans. These were in the main affected by two major external circumstances, themselves fluctuating: the strategic role of the island as conceived in a continually worsening situation (and one worsening always more swiftly than was expected); and the resources available for carrying out this role in its various changing conceptions.

The prevailing strategic conception in November 1940 was that the island should be built up into a 'second Scapa'. Accordingly, when Brigadier O. H. Tidbury was appointed on 3 November to command the forces already in the island or about to move there, his orders were to defend the naval fuelling base at Suda Bay and, in co-operation with the Greek forces in the island, to prevent and defeat any attempt by hostile forces to get a footing.

This being his task, it was natural that he should concentrate on the first part of his orders and dispose his force in and around Canea and Suda Bay; his strength was not great enough to do more. Hardly had he done this, however, when the Chiefs of Staff agreed to Greek proposals that we should undertake the defence of the whole island and thus free Greek troops for use on the Albanian front. Plans were then set in train to reinforce the island with Anzac troops in Egypt.

But resources in the Middle East—with the desert offensive already pending and in early December due to be launched—were in too much demand for diversion to Crete to be contemplated. General Wavell himself visited the island on 13 November and carried away the impression that 'a small force is quite sufficient for Crete at present'. That this view was influenced by the prospects of fighting in the desert is probable enough, and it was reinforced by the anxiety of the Commander-in-Chief

Mediterranean to avoid the difficulties of transporting and maintaining larger forces. In the upshot Tidbury had to content himself with the addition of 2 Black Watch, 50 and 51 Middle East Commandos,¹ and the prospect of further AA reinforcements.

Operationally Brigadier Tidbury had appreciated that any attack would most probably be airborne, with Suda Bay for its objective, and that landings might be expected at the Maleme, Retimo, or Heraklion airfields. Such an attack would raise the problem of communications in its most acute form, and the Brigadier favoured concentrating his force on Suda Bay and leaving the defence of the

¹ 2 Black Watch arrived on 19 Nov, 50 Commando on 26 Nov, and 51 Commando towards the middle of December.

airfields to the local Greeks. If Maleme were to be defended, a separate and independent force would be needed.

Even for this limited role, which was all he considered his limited force capable of, Tidbury favoured a policy of night and day digging on defensive positions. On 8 January, however, he was succeeded by Major-General M. D. Gambier-Parry, MC, a change of command which must have entailed further delays to any forward policy.

No fresh operational line followed a second visit by General Wavell on 17 January, and the attention of the new commander seems to have been engrossed by plans for the administrative build-up which would be an essential preliminary to any enlargement of the garrison. Nor was he allowed much time even for that. On 2 February he was recalled to command 2 Armoured Division in the Western Desert, leaving Lieutenant-Colonel C. H. Mather, CO 52 LAA Regiment, in charge until the arrival on 19 February of his successor, Brigadier A. Galloway.

The new commander's instructions gave him a sufficiently complex task: he was to be Fortress Commander, Suda Bay, and to command all British personnel in Crete. He was to defend Suda Bay as an advanced fuelling base, in co-operation with the local Greek forces; he was to be responsible for the operations then projected against the Dodecanese; he was to hurry on with the completion of an administrative base which could accommodate the increase of the garrison to a

division if deterioration of the situation in [Greece](#) should make it necessary. The defence of the island as a whole was not mentioned in his directive. ¹

He, too, was to have less than a month in which to shoulder these responsibilities. For the situation in [Greece](#) drew him off on 7 March to become BGS of W Force (the expeditionary force to [Greece](#)). And in Crete Lieutenant-Colonel Mather resumed command.

Time was running out, but the situation from a planning point of view became no clearer. On 17 March OC Signals Creforce reported that, because of the ill-defined operational policy, he could have no clear signals policy. His report suggests that, on the island at least, the current view was scarcely dynamic: [Crete](#) was regarded as an [RAF](#) and [Navy](#) transit base with the [Army](#) in the static role of garrison troops and air defence.

The situation was improved somewhat by the appointment on 19 March of Brigadier B. H. Chappel to command 14 Infantry Brigade. But as he remained in doubt whether or not his commitments included the defence of [Heraklion](#), his original directive can hardly have been very clear.

¹ DCGS to OC British Troops in [Crete](#), 16 Feb.

He and his perplexity were soon to be relieved. The Vice-Chiefs of Staff had decided on 4 January to send at least the AA component of MNBDO to the [Middle East](#), and on 2 April Wavell told the Chiefs of Staff that he had decided to establish it at [Suda Bay](#) and develop [Suda Bay](#) as a fleet base and not just a base for refuelling. For the movement of troops and aeroplanes occasioned by events in [Greece](#) had enhanced the port's importance, while because of the German aerodromes in [Bulgaria](#) it was impossible to create a base farther to the north. He went on to say that because resources had been lacking defences so far were thin. And he concluded that Major-General E. C. Weston, who commanded the MNBDO, should have his command extended to take in all the military units of the garrison.

The defence measures taken up to this time, apart from the administrative, may be summarised as follows: by 12 February a defence scheme for [Suda Bay](#) was in

operation; by 13 March [Suda](#) Island had telephones and a mine-spotting post and was equipped as a Forward Observation Post against a seaborne landing; by 19 March [2 Black Watch](#) had been sent to [Heraklion](#) to guard the aerodrome; on 27 March an exercise for the defence of [Maleme](#) was undertaken, and on 31 March there was a further exercise against parachute attack on [Maleme](#). Finally, on 10 April an exercise was conducted against parachute attack on [Galatas](#).

Thus, it is plain, the occupying garrison had come by March to appreciate correctly the kind of attack to be expected and some likely targets, even although the garrison had increased very little since Tidbury's time.

General Weston had learnt of the destination of MNBDO and his own role as GOC [Creforce](#) on his arrival in [Cairo](#) on 29 March. He at once set off for Crete. On 15 April he submitted his appreciation. It saw the defence as involving two problems: defending the fleet and air bases as things were; and defending the island against invasion in the event of German victory in [Greece](#). And, naturally enough in a worsening situation, it concentrated on the second aspect. [Suda Bay](#) and [Heraklion](#) were both vital since the enemy's possession of either would nullify to us the advantages of holding the other. Even without holding [Greece](#) the enemy could attempt an invasion with airborne forces; with [Greece](#) in his hands he could invade by sea as well.

Weston therefore thought the defence required an infantry brigade at [Heraklion](#), with a detachment at [Retimo](#) and a second brigade group for the [Suda- Maleme](#) sector. Headquarters [14 Infantry Brigade](#) should be organised separately from [Creforce](#) and able to function independently as a brigade headquarters. Any Greek troops available should be used to defend the eastern end of the island and to help at [Retimo](#). Aircraft would be needed and so full-scale airfields should be constructed, sited with an eye to the weaknesses of the ground defences. And large quantities of supplies would be needed.

Now that the loss of [Greece](#) was already inevitable these recommendations, sensible as they were, hardly went far enough, even had there been time or resources to implement them. But Middle East Joint Planning Staff, which had now begun to take a belated interest, was hardly more prescient. In a paper issued on 21 April and designed to consider the forces required to defend the island should [Greece](#)

be overrun, attack was considered imminent but likely to be deferred till airborne invasion could have the support of simultaneous invasion by sea. This would hardly be before three or four weeks after the British forces had evacuated [Greece](#).

The planners appreciated that a garrison of three brigade groups would be needed, composed of fresh and fully equipped British troops. A further brigade group should be sent at once and artillery to bring the group already there up to strength. Troops evacuated from [Greece](#) to [Crete](#) should be sent on to Egypt as soon as possible to simplify maintenance problems. All prisoners of war should also be evacuated. A recommendation of General Weston's that three further HAA batteries as well as the AA of MNBDO should be sent, and that 156 LAA Battery already on the island should be retained, was approved. [Royal Air Force](#) fighter strength should be raised to three squadrons during the evacuation and not allowed to drop below two thereafter. Two months of reserve supplies should be sent at once. And the command should be British.

But by this time the enemy offensive in the [Western Desert](#) was forcing General Wavell back to the Egyptian frontier, and there was mopping up still to be done in Italian East Africa. He therefore decided to send no more troops to [Crete](#) for the present, except for one mountain battery when available. When evacuation from [Greece](#) was complete the question would be reconsidered. But AA reinforcements to raise the garrison to six HAA and three LAA batteries and reserve supplies for two months were to be landed as soon as possible.

This decision or, more fairly, the shortage of troops that dictated it, was probably responsible ultimately for the presence of the New Zealand Division in the battle of Crete. For events were to move too swiftly from now on and there would be no better opportunity of bringing in fresh troops, however bad the present occasion might be.

Meanwhile General Weston's own position was none the clearer. He had been warned of the impending evacuation of [Greece](#) and had flown again to [Crete](#) on 21 April; but by 25 April the garrison was still under Brigadier Chappel. Rear HQ of W Force was also there. Was MNBDO to take over the whole defence? ¹ Wavell replied at once. Weston was to command both MNBDO and 14 Brigade. And on 27 April a formal order gave him command of all British troops. Three days later the task of the

defence was at last seen and stated as a whole 'to deny to the enemy the use of air bases in Crete.'

¹ General Weston's report; GS to BGS, 25 Apr.

CRETE

VI

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All this time the build-up had been going on, rather too slowly. When General Wavell came on 13 November the garrison consisted of HQ [14 Infantry Brigade](#), 2 Yorks and Lancs, 52 LAA Regiment, 151 HAA Battery, 156 LAA Battery, 42 Field Company RE, and [189 Field Ambulance](#). Wavell came to the conclusion that a larger force was unnecessary at this stage (even though the Greek garrison was now to be withdrawn) and plans for moving in Australian and New Zealand forces were cancelled; [2 Black Watch](#), however, and perhaps some more AA would be sent. After that there would be no more infantry for [Creforce](#), and the defence was to be planned on the basis of two or at most three infantry battalions.

The 2nd Black Watch was duly sent and disembarked on 19 November. Meanwhile the Greek garrison had begun to leave for the mainland and their departure occasioned a request from [Creforce](#) for another British battalion. This was refused. Instead, [50 Middle East Commando](#) was sent, arriving on 26 November, with the dual role of raiding the coast of North Africa and the [Dodecanese](#) and assisting the defence of the island.

Though no further infantry was promised, the possibility that [Greece](#) itself might be overrun was not left out of account, and Wavell told the Chiefs of Staff that administrative arrangements would be made for the maintenance of up to one division in addition to the garrison. This was later modified, and a conference at [Middle East Headquarters](#) on 26 November considered the case of a division which would include the garrison: it was decided to send to [Crete](#) a reconnaissance party to determine the amount of covered space required to accommodate 60 days' reserve supplies for this division, it being assumed that the division would have attached eight HAA batteries, eight LAA batteries, and one CD battery.²

² Report of conference, 26 Nov. CD, coast defence.

From this time till the evacuation of Greece and the arrival of MNBDO, though plans for the reinforcement of Crete were continually discussed,¹ the only important alterations in the order of battle that in fact took place were the arrival of 51 Middle East Commando in the middle of December and the exchange of 1 Battalion, the Welch Regiment, for 50 Middle East Commando in March. Meanwhile, up till the middle of December, withdrawal of Greek troops continued until by that time fewer than a thousand were left; and the question of arming irregulars to replace them, though argued, remained undecided, being all the less urgent in appearance for the fact that there were no weapons with which to arm them.²

Such then was the strength of the garrison measured in terms of units. The build-up in guns was hardly better. Ever since the decision had been taken on 28 October to secure Suda Bay as a naval base, the Chiefs of Staff had been concerned with the problem of providing the island with AA and CD. The obstacles, of course, were a slowly expanding production, great need at home and in the Middle East great shortage, complicated by the necessity to defend the base at Alexandria and the Suez Canal.

The minimum envisaged by Middle East HQ in November and approved by the Chiefs of Staff was 32 HAA guns, 24 LAA guns, and 72 searchlights. When evacuation from Greece took place and the situation was far more threatening than the one foreseen in November, the actual armament was 16 HAA guns, 24 LAA guns (mobile) and 12 LAA guns (static), and 24 AA searchlights. This was later to be reinforced by a further 16 HAA guns from MNBDO. Even so the anti-aircraft defence was nothing like what would have been required to put any serious check on the German Air Force, then in its prime and in undisputed control of the air.

In the event, the need for coast defence guns was to prove of less importance. But they, too, were scarcely adequate for what might have been. They consisted of 15 Coast Defence Regiment with one battery of two 12-pounders, two batteries of two 6-pounders, and two batteries of two 4-inch guns. The arrival of MNBDO added two batteries each of two 4-inch guns.

Administrative preparations went on concurrently with the rest. The difficulties of administration were to play a considerable part in both the early and later stages of the campaign and became apparent from the beginning. Local supplies were

found inadequate even for the first troops to arrive, as Brigadier Tidbury in his

¹ The basis of the garrison envisaged seems to have been fairly constant at a strong brigade capable of reinforcement by a further brigade.

² The last Greek troops left on 4–5 February.

despatch of 10 November was soon to confirm. ¹ And the same report dwelt on the shortage of transport, of labour and of storage.

After 23 November, when ultimate reinforcement to the strength of a division was contemplated, planning and construction of a suitable base became the garrison's main preoccupation: for without it the reception of large reinforcements, if ever they became available, would not be possible. Planning even for this, however, was not made any easier by the absence of a clear operational plan as the difficulties of the OC Signals already referred to show. ²

The reconnaissance party sent to [Crete](#) to examine the potentialities for a base reported on 14 December that the plain between [Suda Bay](#) and [Canea](#), though with few suitable buildings and outside the existing defence scheme for the area, was the only possible site. It would require the laying of a Decauville railway, a good deal of roadwork, and the erection of 336,000 square feet of covered accommodation. And there was little local labour and practically no civilian transport. ³

The reconnaissance party recommended a plan which entailed the fullest use of existing buildings, and this was approved. The maintenance tonnage of the existing force was to be reduced from the 350 tons a day estimated by the reconnaissance report to 300 tons, and the difference between this amount and the 500 tons a day which was the maximum to be spared would go towards the stocking of the base. ⁴

By 6 January Tidbury was able to report that all sites except that of the hospital (it was part of the plan to make this one of 600–800 beds) had been decided, that 4000 square feet of the workshop site were already in use, and that work on the Decauville track had begun. The building of huts, the laying of ammunition standings, and work on other storage facilities had been held up by transport

shortage and bad roads.

These handicaps to progress were felt throughout the preparatory period, but in spite of them progress was made and by the end of March the administrative base for a single division was reported to be 80 per cent complete. There was still uncertainty about just what the strength of the defence was likely to be, and on 18 April Middle East HQ ordered that the island should be stocked for a figure of 90 days' supplies for 30,000 men; but on 25 April it was ruled that this figure would be temporary and that when the

¹ Creforce Despatch No. 1.

² See page 13.

³ Report on reconnaissance for a base in the area Suda– Canea; report on Suda Bay area.

⁴ Decisions on Crete Base, 20 Dec. The reconnaissance had estimated Suda Bay's capacity at 550 tons a day.

critical situation in Greece had passed the figure would revert to supplies for 20,000 men, the garrison's normal strength.

The prospect of having to deal with supplies on this scale and men in these numbers now raised the question of transport in an even more acute form, and Brigadier Chappel, the commander of the moment, sent an appreciation to GHQ Middle East which stressed the need for more MT. ¹ But this was only one of his difficulties. Apart from those already glanced at, there was still the major shortcoming that, although progress with the divisional base had struggled so far, nothing had been laid down on the question of how the division if it arrived was to be disposed. And so no work had been either done or projected on its accommodation, in spite of repeated attempts by CRE ² to get the succession of commanders to decide locations for camps. The larder was ready but not the means to accommodate its defenders. ³

¹ Mechanical transport.

² Commander Royal Engineers.

³ Report on visit to [Crete](#) by ADW (E & M) 20–30 Mar.

CRETE

VII

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Since the absence of fighter defence proved so major a factor in the enemy's success, this preliminary chapter may close with an account of the developments in the air defence in these early months of the 'build-up'.

From the first [Crete](#) was envisaged as being an air base as well as a naval one. And as early as 13 November the Chiefs of Staff, accepting a policy of holding [Crete](#) 'whatever happens on the mainland', had foreseen that if the Germans overran [Greece](#) the island would be subject to air attack. They knew therefore that air defence was vital. But from shortage of aircraft—all available planes had to be sent to [Greece](#) in the event—the consequence of their foresight has to be looked for mainly in the concentration on AA defence that has already been revealed.

Indeed, the contrast between the desirable and the possible is implicit in the whole preparatory period. On 4 January, for example, the Joint Planning Staff accepted a memorandum from the Chief of Air Staff which ran: 'The foundation on which we should base our assistance to [Greece](#) is [Crete](#), which must be held at all costs. Strong air forces established there would both delay the German advance through [Greece](#) and be well sited for covering our air support to [Turkey](#).' But, as the Interservices Report points out, neither staff nor machines were available in the [Middle East](#) and [RAF](#) policy, no doubt for this reason, was never clearly defined. ⁴

⁴ Interservices Committee Report, I. 18.

In consequence, by 27 March the [RAF](#) still had 'no permanent fighter commitments in [Crete](#)' and still had not settled the problems of co-ordination with the [Fleet Air Arm](#) and [Army](#). With the former it had not amalgamated or harmonised its supply arrangements and with the latter it had not co-operated on the problems of siting and defending aerodromes. The garrison commanders could get no clear directives on airfield policy; and the OC [RAF](#) was a flight lieutenant equally without

directive on his tasks and his needs.

Thus the situation found by Wing Commander Beamish on 17 April when he arrived ¹ to take command of the [RAF](#) on the island was far from reassuring. There was only one squadron. The only planes there were at [Maleme](#) and belonged to 805 FAA ² Squadron. Their primary role was to provide fighter defence for [Suda Bay](#). But the squadron was operating at a reduced strength and consisted of a mixed force of Fulmars, Gladiators and Brewsters, of which the last could be flown only in an emergency. ³

Of the two aerodromes, [Maleme](#) and [Heraklion](#), only the latter could be used for all types of plane. Construction was still going on at both. At [Retimo](#) the aerodrome was no more than a landing strip; and at [Pediada Kastelli](#) there was a landing ground. The fact that the [RAF](#) was responsible for the construction of its own airfields, and the absence of co-ordination with the military in the initial stages, were all the more important because it was the position of these aerodromes that largely determined the dispositions of the defence.

At [Maleme](#) also was 252 AMES ⁴ in full operation and feeding information to a Gun Operations Room at [Canea](#), ultimately developed to control the fighter and AA defences of [Suda Bay](#) area but still without [RAF](#) controllers or operations officers, being served by FAA staff. And there was no R/T ⁵ between Gun Operations Room and aircraft. A second (220) AMES at [Heraklion](#) was in the final stages of erection but its Gun Operations Room was not yet complete. These deficiencies and shortcomings were to some extent offset by an efficient Greek observer system, which reported to a centre in [Canea](#) from which reports were relayed to the [Canea](#) Gun Operations Room.

Staff also, Beamish found, was inadequate, though he was able later to improve it from the evacuated personnel arriving from

¹ Presumably a direct consequence of Weston's report on 15 April which recommended that fighters and bombers should be located there and full-scale operational aerodromes constructed with due regard to ground defence.

² Fleet Air Arm.

³ Gp Capt Beamish, Report on RAF Operations in Crete.

⁴ Air Ministry Experimental Station.

⁵ Radio telephony.

Greece. Maintenance, too, was unsatisfactory. There were stocks of fuel and ammunition at both **Maleme** and **Heraklion** but there were no spares or repair facilities. The main **RAF W/T** ¹ station was at **Heraklion**, and there was one telephone line between **Heraklion** and the Gun Operations Room in **Canea** and another from **Canea** GOR to **Maleme** and the two AMES. Communications generally were poor and the shortage of materials precluded much hope of bettering them.

By 21 April, if we are to judge by JPS Paper 49 which recommends the retention of the existing two **RAF** fighter squadrons and their reinforcement by a third, the situation had somewhat improved. But theirs may have been a somewhat academic view and we shall probably do better to follow Beamish's account. His force seems to have been increased almost at once by the basing of Sunderlands of **230 General Reconnaissance Squadron** at **Suda Bay**. These were intended to assist in evacuating troops from **Greece** to **Crete** and from **Crete** to Egypt. Further reinforcement came with the move out of **Greece** of the squadrons that had been operating there. No. 30 Squadron, with 14 Blenheims I, arrived on 18 April and was subsequently supported by **203 Squadron** from Egypt with nine Blenheims IV. And between 22 and 24 April came the remnants of 33, 80, and 112 Fighter Squadrons, all in a low state of serviceability which on **Crete** could hardly be remedied. Among them they could muster at the most 12–14 Hurricanes and about six serviceable Gladiators. All of these were engaged in the protection of convoys from **Greece** and so had little chance of preparing for an attack unless it should be most improbably delayed.

Thus, whatever the reasons and however good, it could not be said that the six months since British troops had first landed on **Crete** had been put to good use. The existing garrison was quite inadequate to sustain an attack of the kind that might

now be expected. No carefully prepared plan or scheme of defence on the scale required existed. The armament in anti-aircraft and coast defence was below the scale that had from the first been contemplated. Transport was scarce and the roads were still bad. Signals communication was, to say the least, sketchy. Supplies had not been accumulated on the scale that was bound to be necessary. Accommodation for even fresh and fully equipped troops scarcely existed. Aerodromes were not developed and, more important still, the planes were not available to use them.

¹ Wireless telegraphy.

CRETE

CHAPTER 2 – BRITISH AND GERMAN PREPARATIONS 25 APRIL - 19 MAY

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CRETE

I: NEW ZEALAND ARRIVALS FROM GREECE

I: New Zealand Arrivals from Greece

AT four o'clock in the morning of 25 April 1941 the first convoy of New Zealand troops, on the [Calcutta](#), [Perth](#) and [Glengyle](#), left [Porto Rafti](#), a beach not far from [Athens](#). The greater part of the infantry of 5 Brigade were aboard (21, 22, 23 and 28 Battalions), the Rear and Main Headquarters of 2 NZ Division, and 5 and 6 NZ Field Ambulances. From almost all of these elements were missing, some still with units of the rearguard, some left on the beach in the confusion of the embarkation. ¹

Only less serious than the loss of men—perhaps more serious, since many of those not evacuated made their way out of [Greece](#)— was the loss of equipment. For GHQ Middle East had ordered that arms should not take precedence over men, ² and some embarkation officers and naval officers appear to have treated the order so literally as to demand that the troops leave even their rifles. Luckily men and officers resisted an order which would be absurd to any trained soldier and few came away without the personal weapons they had so grimly carried the length of [Greece](#). But though the battalions evacuated this night and afterwards were to land in [Crete](#) with at least their rifles and a fair complement of Bren guns (lacking AA tripods), ³ weapons heavier than these had for the most part to be sacrificed. The artillery and transport were to be sorely missed.

Few troops at this time could have been so much concerned with where they were going as with what they were going away from, and the continual attacks of the [Luftwaffe](#) together with the

¹ This account treats only of the evacuation of NZ troops. It should be borne in mind that the [Navy](#) had also to take off the other components of W Force, and that of these 19 Aust Bde and many British troops were also to be landed in [Crete](#) and ultimately take part in the battle.

² C-in-C Med to Fleet, 4.20 p.m., 24 Apr.

³ 23 Bn, for example, brought out 31 LMGs, two A-Tk rifles, 26 SMGs, two 2-inch mortars, and 499 rifles. One man reached [Crete](#), 'with 500 rounds, 6 Bren magazines, a Bren gun, his rifle and a shovel'.—Lt- [Col D. F. Leckie](#), diary, 25 Apr. Similarly, 5 Fd Regt reached [Crete](#) with more small arms than its establishment.—Maj W. D. Philp. 28 Bn, besides its Brens and mortars, brought away its four W/T sets.— Lt-Col G. Dittmer.

formidable hospitality of the [Navy](#) were enough for the moment and for the average soldier. But, however great the appearance of chaos inevitable to evacuation, there lay underneath it an effective enough plan. Already on 17 April a Joint Planning Staff committee had met in [Athens](#) and it had been decided that, because of the shortage of shipping, a large proportion of the evacuated force would have to be landed in [Crete](#) so as to give the ships engaged a quicker turn-round. ¹ In consequence orders had been issued for the provision in [Crete](#) of tentage, blankets, and drill uniform for 30,000 men and camps for 50,000. General Weston had begun to prepare the camps as soon as he took command.

Thus, when the first convoy arrived in [Suda Bay](#) about two o'clock in the afternoon of 25 April, there was some sort of organisation ready to receive the troops it carried. As they came ashore, in an assortment of small craft, they were ordered by the shore authorities to dump their Bren guns and mortars where they would become part of a general dump for future reallocation. ² Then, harried by shore authorities whose zeal did not permit the unit officers time to sort out their own men, ³ the troops streamed back towards the camps prepared for them. On the way 1 Battalion, the [Welch Regiment](#), dealt them out cigarettes, oranges, chocolate, and the hot tea always prescribed for emergencies and almost always there.

The New Zealand camp, Camp A, was about half-way between [Canea](#) and [Perivolia](#) and, like the rest, a camp only by courtesy. It was no more than a bivouac area. Cooking utensils, so far as they existed, were petrol tins, and there was scarcely any messing equipment. And so the first day of the evacuation—not yet thought of as the first day of a new campaign—ended with weary troops straggling in till late at night to wrap themselves in the one blanket which, if they were lucky, was waiting for them. ⁴

That night no New Zealand units were evacuated from [Greece](#). But next night,

that of 26 April, the [NZ Divisional Cavalry](#)—RHQ, A and B Squadrons, less about 150 left behind—the major part of 4, 5 and 6 NZ Field Regiments, 7 NZ Anti-Tank Regiment, 27 Machine Gun Battalion, [7 Field Company](#) and 5 Field Park Company, and the [Provost Company](#), embarked from [Rafina](#) (C Beach) and [Porto Rafti](#) (D Beach). And a group which had

¹ Supplement to [The London Gazette](#), 18 May 1948, Admiral Cunningham's Despatch; Supplement to [The London Gazette](#), 2 Jul 1946, General Wavell's Despatch.

² Not all the battalions did this and their reluctance was justified in the sequel. See [page 28](#).

³ 28 Bn was apparently lucky: 'We did move by Coys and foregathered at Refreshment Point. We thought the people who supplied the refreshments the best ever.'—Lt-Col Dittmer.

⁴ [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 26 Apr, says there were 4000 men on that date with no groundsheets and very few blankets. And the Cretan nights were cold.

been left behind on the night of 24 April and had meanwhile crossed by TLC ¹ to [Kea Island](#) was picked up. Two transport vessels were engaged in the operation: the [Glengyle](#) evacuated [Rafina](#) with three destroyers— [Nubian](#), [Decoy](#), and [Hasty](#)—in support; and the [Salween](#) evacuated [Porto Rafti](#), supported by the destroyers [Kandahar](#) and [Kingston](#) and the cruiser [Carlisle](#).

The plan on this occasion was for the transports to go direct to Egypt and for the naval vessels to go to [Crete](#), returning thence to convoy duties. The greater part of the artillery were meant to have gone aboard the [Glengyle](#) and the [Salween](#). They would thus have reached Egypt and been available for service in North Africa. This plan bad weather to some extent frustrated: at [Porto Rafti](#) the only craft available to take the men between shore and ship were three caiques and a TLC (which was busy till midnight in collecting troops from [Kea Island](#)). In a choppy sea many troops were unable to make the difficult climb to the decks of the transports. The naval

vessels had to use their own boats and take the troops aboard themselves. Thus only a portion of 4 and 5 Field Regiments came to board the Salween, and the remainder, boarding the naval vessels, ended up in [Crete](#) instead of Egypt. At Rafina the plan was more successful, [6 Field Regiment](#) and the greater part of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment boarding the [Glengyle](#) and arriving safely in Egypt. Some 700 troops—200 of them New Zealanders—were left behind.

Of [27 MG Battalion](#), the greater part of HQ Company and parts of 1, 2, 3, and 4 Companies embarked on the Salween. Those that did not come off in naval vessels and were ultimately made up into the MG company that fought on Crete. In much the same way a large part of the Divisional Cavalry left on the Salween for Egypt; about 150 men, of A and B Squadrons, were left behind, however, and one whole squadron, C Squadron, was in the [Peloponnese](#). The main body of [7 Field Company](#), on the other hand, apparently came off in naval vessels, for it landed on Crete.

On the same night another evacuation was taking place at [Navplion](#) in the [Peloponnese](#). Here the New Zealand troops involved were a section of 4 RMT ² and a medical group. This convoy endured a severe grueling from the [Luftwaffe](#); and the medical group, after being sunk with the Dutch transport [Slamat](#) and picked up by the destroyer [Diamond](#), was again sunk with that ship, was picked up by the destroyer [Wryneck](#), and was again sunk. Only one member of the group survived. The RMT section was luckier and reached [Crete](#) on the afternoon of 27 April.

¹ Tank Landing Craft.

² Reserve Mechanical Transport Company.

Meanwhile the convoy from [Rafina](#) and [Porto Rafti](#) left about three in the morning of 27 April, and the section of it bound for [Crete](#) arrived there after the usual hammering from the air about ten o'clock that night, while the [Glengyle](#) and the Salween went on to [Alexandria](#), where they arrived two days later.

From NZ Division there were now still in [Greece](#) the large party that had been left behind on C Beach from the previous night, 4 Brigade, 6 Brigade, and Battle HQ of the Division. Fourth Brigade was scheduled to depart on the night of 27 April from

D Beach at [Porto Rafti](#), and there at the due time appeared the cruiser [Ajax](#) and the destroyers [Kingston](#), [Kimberley](#), and [Havock](#). The last named was then sent to C Beach at [Rafina](#) to pick up the troops left there, while the others proceeded to embark Brigade HQ, elements of [27 MG Battalion](#), the three battalions (18, 19, and 20), some of [7 Field Company](#), part of [4 Field Ambulance](#), 4 RMT, and the beach embarkation staffs. [Havock](#) meanwhile embarked those who had remained at C Beach. ¹

The convoy seems to have got off to a quicker start than its predecessors and reached [Suda Bay](#) before ten o'clock on the morning of 28 April. The troops then disembarked and made their way to the camp at [Perivolia](#), where they found the blanket issue was exhausted.

Last of the Division to leave [Greece](#) were Battle HQ of NZ Division, three troops from C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, part of [6 Field Company](#), 6 Brigade (24, 25, and 26 Battalions), and [4 Field Ambulance](#). These, together with elements from the British, Australian and Greek forces, were embarked at [Monemvasia](#) aboard the [Ajax](#) and four destroyers—[Havock](#), [Hotspur](#), [Griffin](#) and [Isis](#)—and, leaving about a quarter to four in the morning of 29 April, reached [Crete](#) about eight o'clock the same morning.

At this stage [General Freyberg](#) ² and his staff believed that the whole division was to go back to Egypt. They knew that 5 Brigade was on the island but thought that the halt there was only a stage in its return. When the convoy reached [Suda Bay](#), therefore, [General Freyberg](#), his GSO 1, and his AA & QMG went ashore in order to arrange their own onward passage to Egypt by air and to take the opportunity thus afforded of visiting 5 Brigade. In their absence ashore the New Zealand troops who had crossed

¹ Some of these had made their way to D Beach and embarked on [Ajax](#); others commandeered a boat and, leapfrogging from island to island, reached [Crete](#) on 8 May.

² [Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg](#), VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Greek); born [Richmond, Surrey](#), 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914–16; commanded 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–18; GOC

2 NZEF Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand 17 Jun 1946–15 Aug 1952

with them were transferred to two transports, the [Thurland Castle](#) and [Comliebank](#), and at midday these two ships joined others in convoy and set off for Egypt, which they were to reach on 2 May.

The troops from the New Zealand reinforcement camp near [Athens](#) had been engaged by a German advanced guard at [Kalamata](#) that same night while waiting for the ships to come and take them off, and although they had counter-attacked and taken 180 prisoners, their evacuation had thus been prevented. When morning came they had no course but to surrender. Apart from these and various small parties who had been left behind or cut off, the whole of the New Zealand Division was now free of the mainland. Men were to come filtering through to [Crete](#) by various hazards in the weeks to follow, but there could be no serious additions to the strength evacuated.

The remarkable feature about the operation of which this is only a summary and partial account was its success—as an evacuation. That so large a proportion of the expeditionary force, with outnumbering German columns close on their heels and the [German Air Force](#) in command of the sky, should have got out at all says much for the organisation that underlay the embarkation, for the troops who took part in it, and above all for the [Navy](#) that made it possible at such cost to its own men's endurance and its ships.

But, this said, the evacuation had its less fortunate aspects. The individual accidents, the confusions of detail, were inevitable in a combined operation carried out by night and in grave difficulties. But it was unlucky that orders for the abandonment of weapons were so strictly interpreted by embarkation staffs, and it would have been worse if the troops had not evaded the order wherever possible. And it was unfortunate, too, that men of the first convoy to reach [Crete](#) were not allowed to retain these weapons. More serious still was the misfortune that landed so many artillerymen and other specialised troops in [Crete](#), where the effort to evacuate them was to be an additional burden on the administration and where ultimately a large proportion of them were to be wastefully used fighting as infantry.

And most serious of all was the misfortune that a whole infantry brigade—6 NZ Brigade— should have been shipped off to Egypt so incontinently when its presence with its two sister brigades would later have proved so welcome.

For these misfortunes the divisional command was not responsible. Headquarters NZ Division had no part in making the plans for evacuation and, indeed, had no inkling of the role in store for the Division. It was not until 30 April that [General Freyberg](#) learnt that any of his troops were to take part in the defence of Crete. ¹

¹ [General Freyberg's report](#); statement by Col K. L. Stewart.

CRETE

II: DISPOSITIONS OF NEW ZEALAND FORCE

II: Dispositions of New Zealand Force

In spite of some preliminary uncertainties ² General Weston seems to have felt himself definitely in command on 26 April. So far as he knew, moreover, the troops then being evacuated from Greece were in transit only and would eventually be replaced by fresh troops from Egypt, presumably 6 British Division. ³

Till shipping was available for the onward move of the evacuated troops it was obvious that he must not only make the best provision he could for their reception but also utilise them to help make good the gaps in the defence; for, with Greece in enemy hands, invasion was already a threat and might soon become something more. As soon, therefore, as Brigadier James Hargest, ⁴ commander of 5 NZ Brigade, visited Creforce HQ on 26 April he was given the task of defending the Maleme sector. And on the afternoon of that day an order was issued designed to knit the new arrivals into the whole scheme of defence. ⁵

The details of this order were to be modified by the arrival of further troops and by the later change in command; but it is interesting in so far as it reflects the situation as seen by Weston at this time and because it embodies an outline appreciation of vulnerable points which did not alter.

The order states that the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East had decided Crete was vital to our operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and was to be held at all costs; that the Greek Government also favoured defence and intended to co-operate; and that Maleme, Suda Bay, and Heraklion were essential to the defence, while the retention of Retimo was at least desirable. Airborne attack was clearly envisaged as the most likely—hence the importance of the airfields—but seaborne invasion was possible also. Middle East HQ intended itself to use the airfields as much as possible; but air support would be limited till evacuation from Greece was complete and the air force reorganised.

In these circumstances the order allotted the defence of the Suda Bay area and

² See p. 16.

³ It is not clear that Weston knew this, but it seems reasonably likely that he would have been told. [The London Gazette](#), 2 Jul 1946.

⁴ Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; Member of Parliament 1931–44; Otago Mounted Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 2 Bn, Otago Regt); commanded 5 Bde May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. [Sidi Azeiz](#) 27 Nov 1941; escaped Mar 1943; killed in action, [France](#), 12 Aug 1944.

⁵ [Creforce](#) Operational Instruction No. 5, 26 Apr.

New Zealand contingent; [Heraklion](#) and the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#) to [14 Infantry Brigade](#); and the south-east approaches to [Suda Bay](#) to [6 Australian Division](#). Retimo would be the responsibility of Greek forces.

While these orders were being prepared and issued the New Zealand troops already on the island were being organised under Hargest's command. He formed a headquarters staff, delegated command of his brigade to Lieutenant-Colonel Falconer (CO [23 Battalion](#)), ¹ received his verbal orders from [Creforce](#), made a reconnaissance as far as [Maleme](#), and decided his dispositions. The units under his command were sorted out and issued with rations and blankets; those units which had left equipment at [Suda](#) returned to collect it, only to find that some of it had already disappeared and that the scepticism of those who refused to part with their hard-kept weapons had been bitterly justified; ² medical arrangements were put in train, a party of about fifty New Zealand nurses from [Greece](#) carrying on their work at [7 General Hospital](#) while New Zealand MOs and their ADMS arranged for an MDS ³ to be opened up by HQ Company, [6 Field Ambulance](#).

These arrangements inevitably took up the whole of 26 April and it was not till the following day that the troops were able to move into their sectors. According to Operational Instruction No. 5 they were to go to the [Platanias](#) area, take it over from

1 Welch, and develop it as soon as possible from a living into a defensive area. Accordingly, by 9 a.m. 27 April advanced parties were reporting in, and by the end of the day all units were in position, with Brigade HQ established at [Platanias](#) and NZ Force HQ at [Ay Marina](#). The four battalions (21, 22, 23, and 28) faced west with orders to 'deny the advance of enemy landing parties from the west'.⁴

Back at [Creforce](#) HQ, however, an attempt was being made to tidy up sectors and simplify commands. In consequence, 5 Brigade HQ received orders that same day to take over the defence of [Maleme](#) airfield itself and the AMES south of it by 2 p.m. on 28 April, thus permitting two companies of 1 Welch stationed there to rejoin their battalion; this order also sent 2 Yorks and Lancs and a composite battalion formed from evacuated British troops to

¹ Brig A. S. Falconer, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born [Mosgiel](#), 4 Nov 1892; tobacconist and secretary; Otago Regt 1914–19 (BM 2 NZ Inf Bde); CO 23 Bn May–Aug 1940 and Mar–May 1941; commanded 7 and 5 Inf Bdes in [UK](#), 1940–41; NZ Maadi Camp Jun 1941–Oct 1942; 5 Div (in NZ) Dec 1942–Aug 1943; Overseas Commissioner, NZ Patriotic Fund Board, Nov 1943–Feb 1945.

² 'Of the Bren guns and mortars left in the wharf shed, 28 Bn received back less than it left there.'—Lt-Col Dittmer.

³ MO, Medical Officer; ADMS, Assistant Director of [Medical Services](#); MDS, Main Dressing Station.

⁴ Brig Hargest's diary, as copied from original by [Maj A. Ross](#).

[Heraklion](#).¹ The 22nd Battalion was therefore warned that it was to move and the necessary transport was borrowed from 1 Welch and the RASC.

Administrative arrangements went forward, meanwhile. A supply dump was arranged for at [Ay Marina](#) and HQ NZASC moved into the olive groves near the village; 5 [Field Ambulance](#) also moved to [Ay Marina](#) and set up an MDS; 6 [Field Ambulance](#) continued to operate its MDS at the [Perivolia](#) camp and set up another at

the junction of the [Canea- Galatas](#) road.

On 28 April, while 4 Brigade was still making its way towards [Crete](#), 5 Brigade continued the reshuffle occasioned by the move of [22 Battalion](#) to [Maleme](#). This complete, the brigade settled down to tackle its defensive tasks, a pattern of training was swiftly devised, and the hard skeleton of discipline and organisation once again asserted itself.

A notable feature in this process was the reorganisation of the ASC and artillery. Since the former was without transport for its normal role it had to be diverted to the primary task of the soldier. And so the 1100-odd men not employed on ASC duties had been formed into infantry companies under Major [McGuire](#) ² by 28 April and given sectors in the [Ay Marina](#) area to defend against paratroops. The artillerymen had similar readjustments to make: by 28 April there were assembled round [Ay Marina](#) about two-thirds of 4 and 5 Field Regiments, about 80 men and officers of [6 Field Regiment](#), 90 of [7 Anti-Tank Regiment](#), and almost the whole of HQ New Zealand Divisional Artillery and 1 Survey Troop. ³ None of the regimental commanders had landed on [Crete](#) and most of those trained in administration had gone with them to Egypt. But the most grievous deficiency was in guns. All of them had had to be left behind in [Greece](#), though much of the portable equipment had been brought off. ⁴ But the men remained, and now began the process of organising them into infantry companies which was to culminate in the formation of Oakes Force some days later. ⁵

By 29 April New Zealand Force was already taking a more formidable shape. Brigadier Puttick, ⁶ who had commanded 4 Brigade in [Greece](#), had reached [Crete](#) on 28 April with his

¹ [Creforce](#) Operational Instruction No. 7, 27 Apr.

² [Lt-Col W. A. T. McGuire](#), ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born NZ 22 Dec 1905; police officer and motor engineer; OC Div Amn Coy Oct 1939–Oct 1941; OC NZ Base ASC 1941–44.

³ 'NZA on [Crete](#)', W. E. Murphy.

⁴ Thus 5 Fd Regt brought off all its dial sights and clinometers.

⁵ See p. 54.

⁶ Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); [Wellington](#); born [Timaru](#), 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Brigade 1914–19 (CO 3 Bn); commanded 4 Bde, Jan 1940–Aug 1941; 2 NZ Div ([Crete](#)) 29 Apr–27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941–Dec 1945.

brigade and now took command of the whole force. Brigadier Hargest had returned to the command of 5 Brigade. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) ¹ had left [20 Battalion](#) to take command of 4 Brigade. Supply problems were more or less under control. Fourth Brigade was resting and reorganising in [Perivolias](#) camp and preparing to take up defensive positions next day. Fifth Brigade, already in position, was settling into its unit areas, the men trying with the very few tools they had to prepare defences. The artillery and ASC contingents were being organised and taking over sectors as they did so; the engineers— [19 Army Troops Company](#), 5 Field Park Company, and [7 Field Company](#)—had also been allotted infantry roles east of [Galatas](#). Divisional Signals, with a strength of seven officers and 180 other ranks, were controlling signals at NZ Force HQ, with a rifle company not far away. Divisional Cavalry and the personnel of [27 MG Battalion](#) were collecting and organising. And on the medical front a similar process was going on, the nursing sisters having now departed for Egypt. Fourth Field Ambulance was reported safe in Egypt.

¹ [Maj-Gen Sir Howard K. Kippenberger](#), KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Wellington](#); born [Ladbrooks](#), 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; [1 NZEF](#) 1916–17; CO 20 NZ Bn, Sep 1939–Apr 1941, Jun–Dec 1941; commanded 10 Bde ([Crete](#)) May 1941; 5 Bde, Jan 1942–Jun 1943, Nov 1943–Feb 1944; 2 NZ Div, 30 Apr–14 May 1943 and 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; 2 NZEF Prisoner of War Reception Group in [UK](#), 1944–45; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

CRETE

III: DEFENSIVE DECISIONS

III: Defensive Decisions

The decision to evacuate Greece had at once made the question of whether Crete should or could be held a vitally important one. The attitude of the Defence Committee was made plain on 17 April in a message to General Wavell which authorised him to proceed with his plans for evacuating Greece, ordered him in redistributing his forces to provide for the holding of Crete, and stressed the importance of establishing there strong elements of the Greek army together with the Greek King and his government. The political advantages of having a Greek government in being on Greek soil seemed hardly less important than the strategic issues involved.

On the same day RAF HQ Middle East assured the Air Ministry that the best air protection possible would be provided, and on 22 April Air Marshal Longmore himself flew to Crete to estimate the chances of providing effective fighter defence. On 24 April he was back in Egypt and reported to the Chief of Air Staff that one squadron of Hurricanes, with 100 per cent reserve of pilots and 100 per cent rate of replacement, ought to be able to keep Suda Bay open for the Navy. But he thought it questionable whether the squadron could in fact be kept up to strength, what with the demands in North Africa and the wastage there would be on the spot; and the squadron itself was still only an idea. The fighter strength in fact there was as has been described. ¹

Meanwhile the attack itself became more and more likely. On 27 April the War Cabinet Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee presented an appreciation. According to this, attack was certain and soon; as soon in fact as the conclusion of operations in Greece freed the German army to support it. It would probably be made by sea and air simultaneously. Two hundred transport aircraft were being collected in Bulgaria and 100 more in the heel of Italy. The area from Larisa to Athens was being stocked up with fuel and supplies. An air-landing division was already in the Balkans and the aerodromes round Athens were available. As many as 3000 fully equipped troops could be carried in the first wave and, if gliders were used, the number could be raised to 4000. And the necessary ships could be assumed to be available. ²

In this view the Prime Minister at the [War Cabinet](#) meeting in [London](#) on 28 April concurred. The enemy no doubt wanted to use [Crete](#) and Rhodes as air bases to beat us out of the Eastern [Mediterranean](#) and attack our surface ships off [Libya](#)—both useful preliminaries for a further attack on Egypt itself. Though at this meeting the Prime Minister showed himself doubtful of our ability to hold [Crete](#) against a prolonged attack, his message on the same day to General Wavell showed him in his usual pugnacious temper: a stubborn defence was necessary and the invasion promised some good killing of parachutists.

None the less and properly enough, there were still doubts whether the effort to hold the island should be made. The Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Portal, thought that if the [Navy](#) attached great importance to holding the island the risk of keeping forces for its defence should be taken; otherwise it would be better to keep the fighters in Egypt; and evidently it was felt more information was required, as the Chiefs of Staff decided to ask for General Weston's appreciation of the situation, for Admiral Cunningham's plans, for the probable date when MNBDO would arrive, and for a report on the state of the evacuated troops.

Wavell had already been asked by the Prime Minister in his message of 28 April for a report on forces and plans, and on 29 April Admiral Cunningham was asked for the information already specified. In a further message of the same day from the Admiralty he was asked what importance he attached to holding [Crete](#), bearing in mind its nuisance value to the Germans, the limited extent to

¹ See pp. 19– 21; see also p. 50.

² JIC 181. The substance of this was passed on in a War Office telegram to General Wavell on 29 April.

which a [Suda Bay](#) only weakly defended by AA could be used, and the risks for Egypt of dispersing fighters and AA; and the message went on to point out that if by concentrating planes and AA in Egypt and the desert [Benghazi](#) could be regained, the importance of holding [Crete](#) would not be so great.

To this message Cunningham replied on 1 May with an appreciation that may have decided the matter. He pointed out that the [RAF](#) force in [Crete](#) would make no difference to what happened in the desert but might make the difference between keeping and losing Crete. He thought only that scale of defence which would allow [Suda Bay](#) to be used as an occasional night refuelling base was justified, but that it was necessary to deny the island's use to the enemy as long as possible; for in enemy hands its aerodromes would increase the difficulties of supplying [Malta](#) and would enable him to bring larger air forces to bear on the coast of North Africa; while its naval facilities would enable him to operate light craft against [Cyprus](#). Cunningham concluded, therefore, that we should maintain on the island a force strong enough to keep the enemy out until adequate AA and air defences could be established, but that, so far as the latter was concerned, the needs of North Africa must be considered prior. He added that it was not proposed to send the whole of MNBDO and that a proportion of its AA armament might be retained in Egypt.

It is curious that, while Cunningham felt and expressed in this message an uneasiness about supplying [Crete](#), he seems not to have grasped that the only scale of defence which could keep [Suda Bay](#) would have to be one which could deny the whole of the island to the enemy, and that, since adequate air and AA defence were essential to any successful defence, it was hardly reasonable to speak of maintaining a force there sufficient to hold the island till adequate air and AA defence could be provided.

But, whatever the outcome of these considerations, arrangements had to proceed meanwhile on the assumption that the island was to be held, and the Prime Minister's message of 28 April to General Wavell had not indicated any doubts that the Chiefs of Staff might feel. Indeed it seems likely that they expected that whatever reply they got from Admiral Cunningham would be in favour of a stand. They therefore now began to consider whether General Weston, a Marine, had the right kind of experience to fit him for such a difficult command. In a message of 29 April they put this question to Wavell and asked him to report if he thought a change necessary. ¹ The same day Wavell, in response to a request for

¹ COS to General Wavell, 29 Apr; CIGS in 64174 to Wavell on 30 Apr definitely suggested that [General Freyberg](#) take over.

a report on the state of the troops from [Greece](#), telegraphed to the War Office that besides the standing garrison there were at least 30,000 troops from [Greece](#) and that these were being disposed to defend the vital points: [Suda Bay](#), [Canea](#), [Retimo](#), and [Heraklion](#); that MNBDO would reach [Crete](#) in the first fortnight in May, and that he himself was going to visit [Crete](#) the following day. He added that there was still the possibility that the threat to [Crete](#) might be a cover for a projected attack on [Syria](#) and [Cyprus](#).

On 30 April Wavell duly flew to [Crete](#) and there gave [General Freyberg](#) command of all the troops in [Crete](#), including at the request of the [Greek Government](#), which had arrived on 23 April, command of all Greek troops. In reporting this to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff on his return to Egypt next day he made it clear that his visit had impressed him with the difficulties ahead. He was struck by the enemy's complete air superiority and far from confident that he could prevent a landing on the scale envisaged by the appreciation of the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee. ¹ He hoped to repair the complete lack of field artillery on the island by sending some at once, but saw clearly that all three services were going to be heavily committed.

The figures for the probable scale of air attack had in fact been relayed to General Wavell on 29 April and were impressive enough: the enemy was estimated to have about 285 long-range bombers in the [Balkans](#) and about 30 in Rhodes; about 60 twin-engined fighters which would not need extra petrol tanks; about 270 single-engined fighters which would need extra tanks if based north of the [Corinth Canal](#); and 240 dive-bombers with a similar limitation. But both dive-bombers and single-engined fighters could operate from Rhodes without extra tanks.

Wavell, while he agreed that early and simultaneous attack by land and sea was probable, repeated in an answer to this appreciation on 1 May his view that the whole threat might be merely a cover plan for operations in [Cyprus](#), [Syria](#) or [Iraq](#), and went on to dispute the figures which he considered excessive, being based on establishment. His own information suggested that the numbers of aircraft actually available would be smaller: 150 single-engined fighters, 40 twin-engined fighters, 150 long-range bombers, and 100 dive-bombers.

On 2 May the Chiefs of Staff were confronted with a further view, that of the [New Zealand Government](#). [General Freyberg](#), as in duty bound, had informed the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr. Fraser—he left for Egypt on 3 May—of the situation, and had said that the island could not be held unless with full support from

¹ See [p. 31](#) and next para.

the [Navy](#) and Air Force. He had pointed out that there was no artillery, not enough tools, little transport, and inadequate reserves of equipment and ammunition. In the opinion of the New Zealand Government either the troops should be supplied with adequate means to defend the island or the decision to hold it at all costs ought to be reconsidered. ¹

Faced with this clear alternative the Chiefs of Staff decided to postpone decision until they had had an appreciation from General Wavell. ²

Wavell's appreciation came with his next message and was not reassuring. The defence of [Crete](#), he said, was a difficult problem for all three services. As the ports and aerodromes were in the north aircraft and shipping were exposed to the enemy attack; the only good road ran along the north coast and so was also vulnerable; there were no good roads north and south and no harbours in the south, though if time permitted something might be developed; transport was very short; food for the civilian population would have to be imported in considerable quantities; and if the towns were heavily bombed and we could not provide air protection a political problem might develop. At least three brigade groups would be required for an effective garrison and a considerable number of AA units. The garrison in fact consisted of three British regular battalions, five New Zealand battalions, one Australian battalion, and two weak composite battalions from [Greece](#). There was no artillery and the AA was inadequate. Greek troops were mostly unarmed and untrained and their morale in many cases doubtful. There were no modern aircraft.

Nevertheless, all these difficulties were being tackled and if time allowed would be overcome. But the air, he foresaw, would always be a difficult problem. ³

On the following day the Chiefs of Staff again deliberated. They ended by

deciding that they must reach a decision soon, and, no doubt to have the material for it, they instructed the Joint Planning Staff to include a consideration of policy for the defence of [Crete](#) in an appreciation of policy in the [Middle East](#) and [Mediterranean](#) then being prepared. At the same time they asked General Wavell for an appreciation of the defence of [Crete](#) taken in relation to the whole [Middle East](#) situation and viewed in two aspects: as a fuelling base and as an island which had to be

¹ PM NZ to PM UK, 2 May; Documents, Vol. I, No. 394.

² It ought perhaps to be said that every such delay made the decision more inevitable; for with every day that passed evacuation of the island became more difficult—if it was not already too late.

³ Wavell to CIGS, 2 May.

denied to the enemy. Thus even at this date it seems to have been possible for them to believe that the two cases were in some essential respect different.

Meanwhile [Mr. Churchill](#) did his best to reassure the New Zealand Government. Every effort would be made to re-equip the troops, particularly in artillery. Some guns were already being sent and General Wavell was strong in this respect. The same message stressed the defence of [Crete](#) as one of the most important elements in the defence of the [Middle East](#), and explained what were the difficulties of the [RAF](#) and how hard it was to send them aircraft and personnel. The disposition of such air forces as were in the [Middle East](#) was to be at the discretion of the Commanders-in-Chief on the spot. ¹

It was at this stage, too, that the problem of whether or not to arm the Cretan population came up again. But that question brought its difficulties: danger to the Government was feared; and, perhaps more important, the weapons might not be available. The [Greek Government](#) itself and the Greek King meanwhile were reported by Sir Michael Palaret, the British Minister to [Greece](#), to be determined to stay on as long as possible, though disturbed at the totally inadequate scale of the British air forces.

From now on the question of whether or not to try and hold [Crete](#) seems to vanish from the records. The problem became one of means only. It seems to have been regarded as impossible to evacuate the troops who had arrived in [Crete](#) from [Greece](#)—the stimulus of defeat was apparently needed for the [Navy's](#) ungrudging response to emergency to be fully called upon. Since they were there and since there was a shortage of troops elsewhere, the prospect of replacement lapsed.

Circumstances so largely deciding the question of the ground garrison, there was still the inadequacy of air force that Sir Michael Palairret had drawn attention to. Air Marshal Portal was emphatic that it would be dangerous to maintain an active air defence over the island at the expense of the [Western Desert](#) and elsewhere. The soundest course was to rely on AA, dispersion and concealment, and at the same time to maintain a ground organisation which would permit aircraft to fly in from Egypt if seaborne attack was attempted. The Chiefs of Staff decided to wait for the views of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Air Marshal Longmore.²

The Chiefs of Staff may have had before them at this meeting a spirited message from [General Freyberg](#) to [Mr. Churchill](#) sent on 5 May. [Freyberg](#) expressed confidence in the ability of his

¹ PM to PM NZ, 3 May; Documents, Vol. I, No. 396.

² Air Marshal Portal's last point throws some light on the decision not to destroy the airfields. See [p. 51](#).

troops to deal with airborne attack alone, though the combination of airborne and seaborne attack would be a different matter. But he felt that, provided he got artillery and transport and a few extra fighters, it ought to be possible to hold the island.

Air Marshal Portal's view was strengthened on 8 May when Longmore gave further particulars of the Cretan airfields. Their state was such that casualties would be high from lack of repair facilities; and lack of cover made dispersion of aircraft difficult. He was against the permanent stationing of squadrons but thought that the

airfields might be used as advanced landing grounds for fighters. And he stressed the losses incurred in [Greece](#).

The Chiefs of Staff had also considered a proposal for the dropping off in [Crete](#) of twelve tanks from the convoy then on its way to the [Middle East](#). But it was decided that the better course was to have tanks sent from the [Middle East](#) and replace them there from the convoy. This was the advice given to General Wavell in a message sent on 9 May. The same message suggested that there were two courses of action possible on the initial parachute landings: the defenders might either lie low till the enemy was committed or they might go all out to destroy him at once. In either case additional troops and a few tanks should be provided if possible from Egypt for counter-attack purpose. Further suggestions were for dawn attack by air against emplaning points, a naval feint, rapid repair of aerodromes to enable reorganisation of our own air force at a later stage, and the use of dummy aircraft and defences on the aerodromes. ¹

Wavell replied next day that he had already arranged for the sending of six I tanks and fifteen light tanks which should reach [Crete](#) within a few days, that he had reinforced the island with artillery and was sending additional equipment and reinforcements of army and staff officers. In a further message the same day he referred the War Office to Admiral Cunningham's appreciation of 1 May ² for the naval situation, and went on to give his views about that on the ground and in the air. The main threat was in the air, where the enemy would be able to maintain a very heavy attack without slackening his operations elsewhere. Wavell himself, on the other hand, having already had heavy losses in [Greece](#) and the [Western Desert](#) and having [Iraq](#) as a fresh commitment and [Syria](#) as a possible one, ³ would have to maintain a strong air defence at his base in Egypt. Until he got reinforcements he could not give [Crete](#) adequate fighter protection, and he foresaw serious interruptions to his use of its naval and air bases. What allocation

¹ COS 101 to Cs-in-C ME and Med, 9 May.

² See p. 32.

³ The campaign in [Iraq](#) began at the end of April; that in [Syria](#) on 8 June.

of fighters he would be able to make when reinforcements did arrive would depend on the situation in [Cyrenaica](#), Egypt, [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#). But he thought that there was a reasonable chance of keeping [Suda Bay](#) open for the [Navy](#) with a squadron of Hurricanes, given 100 per cent reserves in pilots and 100 per cent replacement rate for machines; though, if the enemy really concentrated, he had little doubt but that the harbour could be made untenable.

Meanwhile the existing air defence was supplied by the mixed squadron of Gladiators, Hurricanes and [Fleet Air Arm](#) aircraft. Some fighters it would be advisable to maintain on the island for political reasons; but full fighter protection could not be justified if our policy was only to hold the island.

General Wavell went on to give the present garrison, and to repeat that the minimum garrison necessary was three brigade groups and that he hoped to relieve the Anzacs eventually with British formations, which might themselves be relieved ultimately by the 11,000 Greek troops on the island, though the Greeks needed three months' training and re-equipment

The tendency to think in terms of 'eventually' was continued in his approach to the question of armament. Guns and tanks were being sent; but for anti-aircraft defence three heavy and two light batteries would eventually be required in addition to the 16 HAA and 36 LAA then in the island and the MNBDO armament intended for it. But at present AA could not be diverted from other vital needs.

Tension by now was rapidly mounting. One of the questions much debated was whether or not the [Greek Government](#) and King should stay and for how long. General Wavell and the Foreign Office thought he should stay; [General Freyberg](#) favoured his going; the Chiefs of Staff agreed with [Freyberg](#) on the ground that his presence was bound to be an embarrassment; the Defence Committee concurred with Wavell; the King himself favoured departure since his going would be less exposed to criticism if it took place before attack than after. Responsibility was in the end left to General Wavell, and the King stayed. ¹

The Prime Minister in these days was able to devote some of his energies to the problems of the defence. He rather favoured at one point a plan for letting the enemy take the dromes and then fiercely counter-attacking with tanks and assault parties, and Wavell reported on 12 May that he had sent a special officer to present Mr. Churchill's views on SCORCHER (the code-name for the expected operation) to General Freyberg. ²

¹ See Appendix II.

² PM's minute to First Sea Lord, CIGS, and CAS, 10 May.

Mr. Churchill was also concerned about tanks for the defence and on 13 May suggested to Wavell that twelve more should be sent. But Wavell did not think more could be got there in time. Those already being sent were to arrive that evening and this ought to be enough. Further evidence of the Prime Minister's anxiety was his suggestion at the Defence Committee meeting of 14 May that Admiral Cunningham should be told that SCORCHER was prior even to interrupting enemy supplies to Tripoli; and the First Sea Lord undertook to warn Cunningham of the operation's supreme importance.

On the same day the Prime Minister told General Wavell that all the evidence pointed to SCORCHER taking place any day after 17 May and that enemy preparations were going forward very deliberately. Reinforcements sent now might well arrive in time, and even if they were late would be useful in case the enemy won a bridgehead. In this message also he dwelt on his hope that the three Commanders-in-Chief were working in close concert. And he returned to the theme on 15 May, saying that the scale of threatened attack impressed him more and more and that he hoped all possible reinforcements had been sent.

To this General Wavell replied that he had done his best. Amongst other reinforcements he had sent 16 light tanks and six I tanks, 18 AA guns and 17 field guns, and a battalion of troops. Further, he was preparing a small force of one or two battalions to land on the south coast as a reserve. He had concerted plans with the other two Commanders-in-Chief on 12 May. He knew the job was going to be

hard, but the troops and their commander were stout-hearted and the enemy would find that SCORCHER would burn his fingers. ¹

At this point we may leave the higher strategy, with the decision— now irreversible and perhaps more enforced by events than clearly taken—that the attempt to hold [Crete](#) should be made. From now on it was for General Wavell anxiously watching to prepare whatever help there might still be time to send, for Admiral Cunningham to make his naval dispositions in whatever way seemed best to shield the island from attack by sea, and for Air Marshal Tedder ² to provide what help he could by air reconnaissance and the bombing of the Greek airfields from which any invasion must take its start.

¹ Wavell to PM, 15 May.

² Air Marshal Longmore returned to the [United Kingdom](#) early in May and was succeeded by his deputy.

CRETE

IV: GENERAL FREYBERG TAKES COMMAND

IV: General Freyberg Takes Command

i

On 28 April General Wilson arrived from Greece and received a message from General Wavell that Crete was to be denied to the enemy and that the troops evacuated there must be used to defend it until they could be taken off. Wavell went on to say that he was assuming that large-scale seaborne landings were not probable but that airborne landings were possible; that the RAF would not be able to reinforce with aircraft for some time; that the MNBDO must be reckoned as part of the military situation; and that reliable Greek troops must be used as much as possible. Wilson was therefore to consider with General Weston and General Mackay¹ what the essential permanent garrison ought to be.²

General Wilson's appreciation was that seaborne attack was not difficult and could be covered from the air in a way that would make it hard for the Navy to interfere. He therefore thought a combined sea and air invasion not improbable. Weston concurred and added that it was open to the enemy to build up a landing from unlimited resources and, given our difficulties in reinforcement, the reduction of the garrison would be only a matter of time.³

Wilson's view of the points that must be held and the garrison needed is also interesting. Heraklion and its airfield, Canea, Suda Bay, and Maleme would all have to be held at all costs; for without them the defence could not be reinforced. To do this three brigades each of four battalions would be required; and there should be a motor battalion as well. All this was exclusive of MNBDO which would be wanted for Suda Bay itself. These figures Wilson considered a bare minimum, even if the seaborne attack were thought unlikely. To use a smaller garrison would be to court disaster. And he stressed the need for more AA (a further HAA battery, a further LAA battery, and a searchlight battery); the weakness of signals in personnel and equipment; the difficulties of an administrative system which would have to contend with bad roads, shortage of MT and poor port facilities; and the scant usefulness of

the southern beaches.

In fine, holding the island was a dangerous commitment unless all three services were ready to face the strain of maintaining an adequate force. An immediate decision was necessary.

This same day Wilson was present at a meeting in [Canea](#) where the attitude of the Greek authorities was made clear. The Greek

¹ Maj-Gen Sir Iven Mackay, GOC 6 Aust Div. He left [Crete](#) on 29 April.

² Mideast to [Creforce](#), 28 Apr.

³ Appreciation by General Wilson and Appendix C to it.

Prime Minister presided and present, besides Wilson, were General Weston, Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac, Rear-Admiral Turle, and Group-Captain Beamish. The Greeks explained that their forces amounted to 11,000 men, divided into eleven battalions. None of these was well equipped and many were untrained. The Greeks were eager for their troops to come under British command, which would arm and feed them. They also wanted the feeding of the island's civilian population—445,000—to be a British commitment. And they were not impressed by the information that the High Command proposed to station two squadrons on the island and further cover it by long-distance operations from Egypt against German bases and communications. ¹

On 30 April General Wavell himself arrived by air and at once summoned a conference of all the senior commanders. We may quote [General Freyberg](#) for what took place:

We met in a small villa between [Maleme](#) and [Canea](#) and set to work at 11.30. General Wavell had arrived by air and he looked drawn and tired and more weary than any of us. Just prior to sitting down General Wavell and General Wilson had a heart-to-heart talk in one corner and then the C-in-C called me over. He took me by the arm and said: 'I want to tell you how well I think the New Zealand Division has done in [Greece](#). I do not believe any other Division would have carried out those

withdrawals as well.' His next words came as a complete surprise. He said he wanted me to take command of the Forces in [Crete](#) and went on to say that he considered [Crete](#) would be attacked in the next few days. I told him that I wanted to get back to Egypt to concentrate the Division and train and re-equip it, and I added that my Government would never agree to the Division being split permanently. He then said that he considered it my duty to remain and take on the job. I could do nothing but accept. With that over we sat down round the table on the flat-topped roof in the open air under an awning. 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](#) aerodrome. Our object was to deny the enemy the use of [Crete](#) as an air and submarine base. ²

Two other points that emerged may be summarised here. There would be no additional air support, though Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac said he was asking for some Glenn Martin planes; and the C-in-C undertook to discuss with Admiral Cunningham the question of naval action against seaborne attack.

¹ Minutes of meeting, 28 Apr. The Greek units appear to have been partly locally formed and partly evacuees from the mainland, or troops from the mainland who were temporarily stationed in [Crete](#) at the time of the evacuation.

² [General Freyberg](#)'s report to NZ Minister of Defence, p. 2.

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[General Freyberg](#) had now to take stock of his new command. What he had already seen of it was not encouraging: his own troops were weary and reduced to their personal weapons, while their organisation had been badly jolted by the confusion of the evacuation. He could assume that the rest of the troops from [Greece](#) were in a similar condition.

His first problem was that of a Headquarters. Force HQ in [Canea](#) he found in

chaos. It was in the middle of moving to a Battle HQ in a quarry above [Canea](#); but now the change in command meant that General Weston's own staff would be moving with him to his new command, that of [Suda Bay](#) defences and MNBDO. Apart from Colonel Keith [Stewart](#),¹ now to be his Brigadier General Staff, and a few signals personnel, [General Freyberg](#) had no one. This situation he had to remedy as best he could by recruiting suitable officers, British, Australian, and New Zealand, from those now on the island.²

But there was much else to be done. He had to glean from questioning, from maps, and from what personal reconnaissance he could spare time for, some notion of the island's geographical character. And this as we have seen was not reassuring. [Crete](#) 'faced the wrong way with its three aerodromes, two harbours, and roads all situated on the north coast of the island.... Had it been possible to spin [Crete](#) round the story of the defence would probably have been the story of a successful siege.'³

With a rough idea of the general problem, he next turned to the garrison. 'It was not unusual to find that the men had no arms or equipment, no plates, knives, forks, or spoons, and they ate and drank from bully beef or cigarette tins. There was no unit transport and no tools for most of the battalions. The morale of some of the odds and ends was low.'⁴

At the end of this survey he was in a better position to appreciate the force of the message on 29 April that had given the War Office

¹ [Maj-Gen K. L. Stewart](#), CB, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); [Wellington](#); born [Timaru](#), 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; [1 NZEF](#) 1917–19; GSO 1 2 NZ Div, 1940–41; Deputy Chief of General Staff, Dec 1941–Jul 1943; commanded 5 Bde, Aug–Nov 1943, 4 Armd Bde, Nov 1943–Mar 1944, and 5 Bde, Mar–Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944–Apr 1945; commanded 9 Bde (2 NZEF, [Japan](#)) Nov 1945–Jul 1946; Adjutant-General, NZ Military Forces, Aug 1946–Mar 1949; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949–Mar 1952.

² Australian Corps HQ and 6 Aust Div had been evacuated to Egypt almost complete. Thus there were few Australian senior officers and these were mostly required for operational duties with 19 Aust Bde.

³ General Freyberg's report, p. 4.

⁴ Ibid, p. 4.

view about the probable scale of attack. ¹ The outstanding features of this have already been given. ²

General Freyberg's response was immediate. He at once wired to General Wavell in order to introduce 'a little reality into the calculations for the defence of Crete.' He pointed out the total inadequacy of his force and insisted that, though it could fight and would fight, without the full support of the Navy and RAF it could not hope to succeed. If this support were not immediately available the question of holding the island ought to be reconsidered. And he warned Wavell that his engagement to the New Zealand Government made it his duty to report to it the present situation of his division. ³ True to his word he wired the same day to Mr. Fraser, passing on the appreciation he had received and adding that there was no evidence that naval forces would be present in the strength required, while the RAF forces then on the island were quite inadequate. ⁴ The action taken by the New Zealand Government on this has been referred to above. ⁵

But, as a good commander, Freyberg was concerned that his uneasiness should travel only upwards for the ultimate strengthening of the defence and not downwards where it might have communicated itself to the troops under him; and as a positive move to strengthen their morale, he issued on 1 May a special order of the day: ⁶

The withdrawal from Greece has now been completed. It has been a difficult operation. A smaller force held a much larger one at bay for over a month and then withdrew from an open beach. This rearguard battle and the withdrawal has been a great feat of arms. The fighting qualities and steadiness of the troops were beyond praise.

Today, the British forces in Crete stand and face another threat, the possibility of invasion. The threat of a landing is not a new one. In England we have faced it for nearly a year. If it comes here it will be delivered with all the accustomed air

activity. We have in the last month learned a certain amount about the enemy air methods. If he attacks us here in [Crete](#), the enemy will be meeting our troops on even terms, and those of us who met his infantry in the last month ask for no better chance. We are to stand now and fight him back. Keep yourselves fit and be ready for immediate action. I am confident that the force at our disposal will be adequate to defeat any attack that may be delivered upon this island.

On 2 May came a reassuring response from General Wavell, in a message full of concern. The Commanders-in-Chief all thought the War Office appreciation exaggerated, though the scale of attack

¹ WO 54141, 29 Apr, apparently sent to [Creforce](#) as well as to [Middle East](#).

² See p. 33.

³ [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 1 May.

⁴ [Freyberg](#) to PM, 1 May; Documents I, No. 388.

⁵ See pp. 33–4.

⁶ [General Freyberg](#) also tried to redeem the island's isolation from world news by establishing a troops' newspaper, *Crete News*, edited by 2 Lt G. S. Cox. See [Appendix I](#).

was likely to be heavy. Naval support would be forthcoming. The RAF situation was more difficult but the [United Kingdom](#) was making every effort to send reinforcements. Guns, tools, and other requirements would be sent as soon as possible, and Wavell was doing his best to arrange the relief of New Zealand troops so that the Division could be reformed. But resources were strained to the limit and relief might be easier if [General Freyberg](#) would agree to New Zealand reinforcements then in Egypt being used to take over guard and line of communication duties in the [Western Desert](#). The nub of the message came at the

end: orders to hold [Crete](#) were most definite and, even if they were altered, it was doubtful if there would be time for evacuation before the attack came. ¹

Wavell did his best to redeem his promises. 'The C-in-C Middle East did everything that was humanly possible to get us every available bit of equipment, artillery, and defence stores. They did their utmost to send us every bit of equipment they had. [Libya](#) was of course a constant worry and [Iraq](#) was boiling up. General Wavell had told me at the conference at [Canea](#) that he was at his wits' end for aircraft.'²

iii

Now that he had made his attitude clear [Freyberg](#) could only hope that his warnings would take effect. Meanwhile he set about building up the defence with what resources he had. The important question was that of dispositions. He had no reason to quarrel with previous appreciations of what were the vital points: they were the three airfields and [Suda Bay](#) area. It was clear also that the long distances between these, the transport shortage, and the inadequacy of all kinds of communication would make it necessary for all four of these sectors to be semi-independent. This is reflected in [Creforce](#) Order No. 3 which announces [General Freyberg](#)'s accession to command and divides the garrison into four: Brigadier Chappel is confirmed in command of the [Heraklion](#) sector with [14 Infantry Brigade](#) (less 1 Welch), [7 Medium Regiment RA](#) (with rifles and no guns), [2/4 Australian Battalion](#), and two Greek battalions; the central or [Retimo](#) sector goes to Brigadier G. A. Vasey, commander of [19 Australian Brigade](#), with all Australian troops other than [2/4 Battalion](#), and two Greek battalions; General Weston takes over [Suda Bay](#) defences, with under command

¹ Mideast to [Creforce](#), 2 May; Documents I, No. 392. The message reflects Wavell's anxieties. Pressed as he was for troops, it was perhaps all the easier for him to accept the view of Middle East Intelligence about the scale of attack. The War Office estimate turned out to be correct, but meanwhile it was hardly possible for [General Freyberg](#) to make any further protest. He had stated his view. The responsibility lay with General Wavell and the War Office, whose orders he had no choice but to carry out.

MNBDO, all AA, searchlight, and coast defence units in [Crete](#); in the [Maleme](#) and [Galatas](#) sector Brigadier Puttick becomes commander of NZ Division with its two brigades; and in Force Reserve, under [General Freyberg's](#) direct command, are 1 Welch, 1 [Rangers](#), and composite battalions 'as available'. ¹

This was succeeded by [Creforce](#) Operation Instruction No. 10, dated 3 May and issued on 4 May. Since it establishes the pattern of defence as it was to remain with only minor changes until the outbreak of fighting, it will be best to quote its dispositions in full and then summarise the changes which took place later in those sectors where NZ Division was not directly concerned. The New Zealand dispositions will be treated in greater detail later. ²

Creforce Operation Instruction No. 10 Ref. Map of [Crete](#) 1: 300,000

3 May 1941

5. HERAKLION SECTOR—

Comd Brig Chappel

Tps 14 Inf Bde less 1 Welch

7 Med Regt RA (rifles)

2/4 Aust Bn

156 Lt AA Bty, less two tps (in support)

One tp and one sec 7 Aust Lt AA Bty (in support)

One sec B Bty 15 Coast Regt (in support)

Two Greek Bns

6. RETIMO SECTOR—

Comd Brig Vasey

Tps 19 Aust Bde HQ

2/1 Aust Bn

2/7 Aust Bn

2/11 Aust Bn

1 Aust MG Coy

Two Greek Bns

Left boundary all incl: armyro ([Georgeoupolis](#), B 3340)— askifou, B 2362).

7. SUDA BAY SECTOR—

Comd Maj-Gen Weston

Tps MNBDO

1 Welch

NH ³

2/8 Aust Bn ⁴

151 Hy AA Bty

234 Hy AA Bty

¹ [Creforce](#) Order No. 3, 30 Apr.

² See [pp. 53– 72](#).

³ [Northumberland Hussars](#). An anti-tank unit now serving as infantry.

⁴ Two rifle companies only, with an improvised headquarters.

129 Lt AA Bty

7 Aust Lt AA Bty, less two tps and one sec

304 S/L Bty

15 Coast Regt, less one sec Base Sub Area

1 Greek Bn

6. MALEME SECTOR—

Comd Brig Puttick

Tps NZ Div

4 NZ Bde

5 NZ Bde

Oakes Force

Two tps 156 Lt AA Bty (in support)

One tp 7 Aust Lt AA Bty (in support)

Three Greek Bns

9. **Force Reserve.** 1 Welch in **SUDA BAY** sector and 4 NZ Bde less one bn in **MALEME** sector are in **Force Reserve**. They will be administered by respective sector Comds, but will be kept concentrated and ready to move at short notice on orders from Force HQ. Comd 1 Welch will be in close touch with Comd 4 NZ Bde. ¹

At **Heraklion** the main changes in strength that took place before 20 May were additions to the garrison. After the arrival of MNBDO on 10 May C Battery, less two sections, was sent there. Six light tanks of **3 Hussars** and two I tanks, all from the convoy which reached **Crete** on 14 May, were also despatched to **Heraklion**. The 2nd Leicesters which arrived from Egypt on 16 May were given to **Heraklion** and became its mobile reserve. And 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders which reached **Tymbaki** on 19 May were also intended for the **Heraklion** garrison. Moreover, with the arrival of MNBDO, **14 Infantry Brigade** Signals were free to join their parent headquarters.

In the **Retimo** sector **19 Australian Brigade** set up its headquarters about a mile west of **Georgeopolis** and the sector was divided into two groups, an east group at **Retimo** and a west group at **Almiros (Armyro) Bay**. The garrison was reinforced on 8 May by **2/8 Australian Battalion** and on 10 May with X Battery of MNBDO Coast Defence, and later with two of the I tanks that arrived on 16 May.

It is evident from a message sent by **General Freyberg** on this day that to have

been able to make this reorganisation gave him considerable encouragement.² He reports that so far as was possible in the present situation reorganisation would be complete by the end of the day, and that he realised there could be no question of

¹ [General Freyberg](#) hoped ultimately to have a full brigade group in each sector and another in reserve.

² [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 3 May; Documents I, No. 395.

relief until the attack had been dealt with. But he had by this time seen all the officers and NCOs of [Creforce](#) and found their morale high. Provided the [Navy](#) gave full support he felt all would be well, and in the meantime every day without attack enabled the defence to strengthen its position.

iv

None the less, there were pressing problems of all kinds. By no means the least was that of maintenance. A force of 30,000 British troops and 11,000 Greek, together with 15,000 Italian prisoners and a population of 400,000, which even in peacetime could not be fed from the island's own resources and which had not yet got in its harvest, had somehow to be supplied. Moreover, if the inadequacies of the defence were to be built up, additional warlike stores and reinforcements had to be got in. The various other pressures on the [Middle East](#) command, the shortage of shipping, and the inadequate port facilities would of themselves have made this difficult enough. But, to make it more so, the [Luftwaffe](#) very quickly redeployed itself on the Greek airfields and began at once to subject shipping to persistent attack both at sea and at its moorings in [Suda Bay](#). The air defence, weak to begin with, was soon little better than useless; while the AA defence, even had it been at maximum strength, would have been unable alone to protect the harbour. At first it was found possible to clear up to 700 tons a day through [Suda](#). But as air attack increased only ships capable of 30 knots—destroyers and cruisers—and so able to get in and out by dark were of use. And these, even if they came two a night, could hardly manage more than 100 tons a day. It was already 19 May and 13 ships lay damaged in the harbour before the AA could be organised into an umbrella defence

adequate to protect two vessels.

But between 20,000 and 30,000 tons a month were required to maintain the force. ¹ This was more than [Suda Bay](#) could handle; the other north coast ports could not help much and those on the south coast still less. Had transport aircraft been available they might have helped out; plans to use them were frustrated by the fact that they were not. Coastal shipping offered no solution because of the lack of both vessels and crews.

Moreover, there were still further difficulties even when ships were got to the dockside. In the face of air attack the task of unloading was a dangerous one and volunteer stevedores from the Australian and New Zealand engineer units did most valuable

¹ [General Freyberg's report](#), p. 10; [Creforce to Mideast](#), 17 May.

work. Finally, the transport to distribute supplies landed was woefully short and, though trucks were sent as fast as they became available in the [Middle East](#), though 231 MT Company was brought to its full strength of 94 vehicles, and though the MNBDO pooled the transport it had brought with it, the shortage lasted until the end.

Despite all these difficulties, by the time battle began 60,000 rations and 10,000 gallons of POL ¹ had been dumped at [Heraklion](#); 40,000 rations and 5000 gallons of POL at [Retimo](#); and 80,000 rations and 5000 gallons of POL at [Maleme](#). All units, moreover, had been ordered to hold three days' reserves of rations. ²

Another serious problem was that of signals communications. The rapid increase in the garrison put a far greater strain on an already inadequate system. What could be done was done. The signals of MNBDO amalgamated with those of 52 LAA Regiment and took over the [Suda Bay](#) sector. Out of the seven officers and 180 ORs of New Zealand Divisional Signals who had come to [Crete](#), signals for both [Creforce](#) HQ and NZ Division had to be found. Request for reinforcement was made but not complied with by the time battle began. With 20 May conditions became such that not even the most heroic efforts on the part of men and officers could prevent constant breakdowns in communication.

Medical arrangements were another difficulty. The only equipped units were 7 [British General Hospital](#) and 189 Field Ambulance which were already on the island when evacuation from [Greece](#) began. A welcome addition was 1 Tented Hospital, Royal [Navy](#), which arrived from Egypt on 10 May and was set up at [Mournies](#). The medical units from [Greece](#) had been able to bring away their portable first-aid equipment only. By the time battle began eleven ambulance cars had arrived but, though these did good work, in the face of the casualties to come they were bound to prove inadequate. And there were only 660 beds available.

A further worry was the presence of large numbers of troops who had been evacuated from [Greece](#) without weapons, or who were attached to no particular unit or whose specialist qualifications made it undesirable that they should be used in infantry operations for which they had no special aptitude. It was important from the supply point of view that these should be evacuated as soon as possible; the more especially as, having no special role in the work of preparing the defence, they were likely to get into mischief with the civil population.

Most of the New Zealand troops concerned were of the specialist type and belonged to the artillery, engineers, or service corps. At

¹ Petrol, oil, and lubricants.

² Report on Supply and Transport Services in [Crete](#), 4 Jun 1941.

first the plan seems to have been to evacuate them all, and those of them not absorbed into units engaged in the defence were sent to the transit camp to await the arrival of shipping. The departures of these will be dealt with later. Meanwhile it may be enough to say that though some of the unattached and unarmed troops were taken off in response to [General Freyberg's](#) appeals to [Middle East](#), enough remained to complicate the questions of supply and discipline. And although many of them were to do good service in dealing with parachutists landing in the Base areas when the time came, against this must be offset the problems presented by unformed bodies of troops in the withdrawal and evacuation.

Finally there were the problems arising from the presence of the Greeks

themselves. Not only had the Greek civil population to be provided for. The 11,000 Greek troops on the island had to be integrated into the defence scheme. They were for the most part untrained, ill-equipped, and unorganised. They had no transport, and they were armed with five different types of rifle and an average of less than 20 rounds of ammunition per man. A Greek army headquarters had to be formed and a General Staff. And Freyberg had to drain off from his own inadequate forces officers and NCOs to cope as best they might with the language difficulty and to try and help bring the force into shape.

Nor did the presence of the King himself make matters much easier; for his personal safety had to be provided for and was to prove a continual source of worry to [General Freyberg](#) before the battle and during the days that followed its opening.

1

v

From the first it had been apparent that the garrison's deficiencies were more in material and supplies than in men. When, therefore, General Wavell cabled on 7 May offering to make 16 Infantry Brigade available if shipping allowed but suggesting that it would probably be best to equip the unarmed troops already there, [General Freyberg](#) agreed and said that reinforcement in men was not a first priority.

None the less some reinforcements did arrive before the battle and it will be convenient to summarise these here. On 10 May came 1 Light Troop RA with four 3·7-inch howitzers; this troop was put under command of 4 NZ Brigade. The same day arrived the main body of MNBDO: HQ [2 AA Regiment](#), [Royal Marines](#); A HAA Battery (eight 3-inch guns), C HAA Battery (eight 3-inch guns), X CD Battery (two 4-inch guns), Z CD Battery (two 4-inch

¹ See [Appendix II](#).

guns), a signals company; a survey section; half a landing company; half a transport company; a section of a boat unit; and 1 Tented Hospital RN. Apart from C Battery, which went to [Heraklion](#) less two sections, and X CD Battery, which went to [Georgeoupolis](#), these guns and personnel were distributed round the [Maleme](#) and

Suda Bay sectors.

A second echelon of MNBDO arrived on 15 May, consisting of 23 LAA Battery, without guns, the HQ of 11 S/L Regiment, and a searchlight battery.

In his reply to General Wavell [Freyberg](#) had stressed the fact that he had plenty of gunners but a deficiency in guns, ammunition, tractors, and signal equipment. Wavell appears to have responded by sending about 100 guns. But of those that arrived some came without instruments, some without ammunition; and some of the ammunition that did arrive lacked fuses. When all was sorted out and cannibalisation practised as far as could be, the total came to 49 field guns with three to four hundred rounds per gun. These were distributed to the various sectors under arrangements made by Colonel J. H. Frowen, the CRA [Creforce](#).¹ A large proportion went to the [Maleme- Canea](#) section.

In the same message [General Freyberg](#) had also asked for Vickers machine guns, Bren guns, rifles and bayonets, mortars, and ammunition to match. These, though never in superfluous quantities, arrived on a scale not far from sufficient. Along with the 30 per cent of weapons taken from troops embarking for Egypt, they were enough to arm 102 Anti-Tank Regiment,² 106 Regiment RHA, 7 Medium Regiment, 7 NZ Field Company, [5 Field Park Company](#), and [19 Army Troops Company](#) as infantry. In addition these arms went to help equip a New Zealand [Composite Battalion](#) and various other ad hoc forces.

But, apart from these reinforcements in weapons and more or less specialist personnel, the chief addition to the garrison consisted of [2 Leicesters](#), which, as has been seen, went to [Heraklion](#) to replace 1 Welch, and 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who did not however arrive until 19 May. And the promised tanks also appeared, though in insufficient numbers.

Wavell had first mentioned these to [General Freyberg](#) in his message of 7 May, suggesting that if carefully concealed they might intervene effectively. [Freyberg](#) had welcomed the proposal but had reminded General Wavell of the need for spares, technical personnel to repair them, and POL; and he had pointed out that the shore installations could not lift heavy tanks. In the event 16 light tanks

¹ Formerly CO 64 Med Regt RA.

² Northumberland Hussars.

of C Squadron, [3 Hussars](#), and six I tanks of B Squadron, 7 Royal Tank Regiment, were with difficulty got ashore by 15 May. ¹ Three further I tanks of 7 RTR were ordered to [Crete](#) and landed at [Tymbaki](#) on the south coast on 19 May. These latter went first to [Heraklion](#) and thence by sea to [Suda](#), where they were in time to play a part in the rearguard.

Of the light tanks six were sent to [Heraklion](#) on 18 May; the rest were to go to 4 NZ Brigade, but by 19 May three were still in ordnance being repaired. Two of the I tanks were sent to [Heraklion](#), two to [Retimo](#), and two to [Maleme](#). In these areas they were dug in and camouflaged. They were to be held in reserve for counter-attack.

vi

In the Greek evacuation the prime concern of the [RAF](#) in [Crete](#) was the protection of convoys and the reception of airmen. This over, the next problem was to evacuate all those for whom there was no role. By 9 May this had been done and the garrison was left at a strength of five squadrons, very weak in men and machines, and the two AMES. The squadrons mustered only 36 aircraft in all, 24 at [Maleme](#) and the rest at [Heraklion](#). Most of these were unserviceable, and soon those that could be flown were in the air only because others had been cannibalised. Crews and ground staff, moreover, were already very tired, in low spirits and without kit. There was no chance to rest them, for enemy air activity kept all at high pressure.

Such defensive measures on the ground as were possible were hurried forward. As there were no military forces to spare from the garrison for the landing ground at [Pediada Kastelli](#), trenches were dug across it to make it unfit for use, and for those parts of the others not required similar action was taken. At the three operational aerodromes, [Maleme](#), [Heraklion](#) and [Retimo](#), dumps of food and ammunition were

established, and at the first two a number of protective pens were dug, though shortage of labour and constant enemy air interruption made progress slow. Communications were improved and co-ordinated so far as time and resources in men and materials permitted. No AA guns could be spared for [Retimo](#) but twenty 40-millimetre Bofors were divided between the other two, and each was given a number of [RAF](#) machine guns; none of these latter were available for [Retimo](#) and it had to rely for such protection on the army.

¹ War Diary C Sqn, 3 H and WD B Sqn, 7 RTR. Lt Roy Farran, [Winged Dagger](#) (Collins, [London](#)), p. 84, says the light tanks were of an old type and from the Western Desert, 'battered, ancient hulks'. There were no proper cooling systems for the guns and wirelesses could not be fitted in time for the embarkation.

By 13 May [General Freyberg](#) was signalling to [Middle East](#) that there were only six Hurricanes left but that he had expectations of ten more. In the circumstances [Middle East](#) would have to take over the main task of reconnaissance and the remaining fighters would have to be employed against enemy attack. But after 13 May enemy attacks increased in intensity, and though the expected ten Hurricanes arrived on the 17th they were not able to redress the heavy odds. Day after day the troops on the ground saw them go up against an enemy hopelessly superior in numbers. It soon became apparent to both [Freyberg](#) and Beamish that to keep the few aircraft that were left would be a vain sacrifice of men and machines. Accordingly they decided to fly those that were left out to Egypt. And on 19 May the surviving three Hurricanes and three Gladiators at [Heraklion](#) and the one Hurricane at [Maleme](#) flew away. ¹

No one, even of the troops whom this decision left without air support, would dispute that it was just; for if stronger forces could not be put up against the [German Air Force](#) there was nothing to be said for continuing the useless sacrifice of brave men and valuable machines. What is more disputable and obscure is the failure to destroy the airfields and evacuate the ground troops. According to Group Captain Beamish the intention was that the [RAF](#) should return in greater numbers and at a later stage. And although no document is available in which this is unequivocally stated, it seems clear that the view of the Chiefs of Staff was ultimately responsible.

The result was that although every soldier near [Maleme](#) could see a case for destroying that airfield, it was obstructed but not destroyed. And, as events were to confirm, not to destroy the airfields was to make them more difficult to defend. ²

While in these preparatory days the tiny air force in [Crete](#) was doing a suicidal best to check enemy attacks in the air over the island, bomber forces from Egypt had been engaged in a more strategic role. On each of the nights between 13 and 19 May, Wellingtons had been over the airfields on the mainland or on the islands where the enemy was massing his air fleet for the invasion; and on the morning of 17 May Beaufighters had been similarly engaged. These attacks caused damage; but the numbers of aircraft employed were pitifully small and there was no question of their causing any serious check to the enemy's plans.

¹ Report on Air Operations in [Crete](#), Gp Capt Beamish.

² A letter from the Air Historical Branch of the Air Ministry, dated 26 Nov 1949, states that the responsibility for the decision not to destroy [Maleme](#) airfield cannot be assigned on evidence available; but the apologetic tone of COS (41) 358, 6 Jun 1941, suggests that the Chief of Air Staff was ultimately responsible and this accords with the view expressed by Air Marshal Portal at COS (41) 161, 5 May. See [p. 35](#). COS 358 dwells on the difficulties of effective demolition, but there seems little doubt that these could have been overcome if a clear policy for demolition had been laid down.

vii

The [Navy](#) had no sooner completed the embarkation of 50,000 troops from [Greece](#) than it had to turn its attentions to the defence of [Crete](#) and the role it was to play there. One of its tasks was to convoy the supplies and men that had to be got ashore in the build-up period. Against all the difficulties and with the aid of strenuous efforts on the part of Captain J. A. V. Morse, ¹ Naval Officer-in-Charge at [Suda Bay](#), it managed to run in 15 ships between 29 April and 20 May and offload some 15,000 tons of supplies. And it got [2 Leicesters](#) safely ashore at [Heraklion](#) on the night of 15 May, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders at [Tymbaki](#) on the night of 18 May.

Besides this, however, it had to take its own measures against the expected attack; for the garrison on land depended on it for dealing with invasion by sea. The most probable date for invasion was thought at first to be 17 May. As [Suda Bay's](#) anchorage potentialities were limited by the heavy day-bombing raids, [Alexandria](#) had to be the base of operations—420 miles from [Suda](#). The plan was to keep part of the Fleet at sea ready to meet whatever might turn up, and part in port against the possibility that the forces at sea might run short of fuel.

The most likely landing places were thought to be [Canea](#), [Retimo](#), [Heraklion](#), [Kisamos Bay](#) and [Sitia](#). On 15 May Admiral Cunningham had one force (Force C) at sea ready to deal with [Sitia](#); another (Force D) ready for landings west of [Retimo](#); a third (Force B) ready to attack enemy forces north-west of [Crete](#) or support Force D; and Force A, which included the battleships [Queen Elizabeth](#) and [Barham](#), west of [Crete](#) and ready to cover the others.² In reserve at [Alexandria](#) were the battleships [Warspite](#) and [Valiant](#), the aircraft carrier [Formidable](#) (with only four serviceable aircraft), the cruisers [Orion](#) and [Ajax](#), and a number of destroyers. The forces at sea would carry out sweeps at night, a submarine was to operate round [Lemnos](#), the minelayer [Abdiel](#) was to lay mines between [Cephallonia](#) and [Levkas](#),³ and seven MTBs were to operate from [Suda Bay](#). There would also be some air reconnaissance, though meagre.

¹ Later Vice-Admiral Sir Anthony Morse, KBE, CB, DSO; Flag Officer, [Malaya](#), 1945–46.

² Composition of naval forces from 15 to 20 May:

Force A: 2 battleships, 5 destroyers.

Force B: 2 cruisers, 2 destroyers.

Force C: 2 cruisers, 4 destroyers.

Force D: 2 cruisers, 4 destroyers.

³ Two islands west of [Greece](#) on the Italian shipping route.

CRETE

V: PREPARATIONS OF 2 NZ DIVISION: 30 APRIL-19 MAY

V: Preparations of 2 NZ Division: 30 April-19 May

i

With General Freyberg's appointment as GOC Creforce, command of his Division devolved upon Brigadier E. Puttick, the next senior officer of the Division present on the island. This appointment was confirmed on 2 May and dated from two days previously, when it had in fact begun. Under Brigadier Puttick Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry¹ was to serve as GSO 1, and the other staff appointments essential to a functioning Divisional HQ were duly made at the same time. The new headquarters had at once to get to grips with its administrative and tactical problems. Administratively, it was necessary to get out immediately to the battalions the ammunition that Creforce HQ made available, to get the supply system organised, to build up the ration reserve at Ay Marina, to do what could be done to provide the newly arrived 4 Brigade with blankets and supplies, to go ahead with the organising of signals communications, and generally to restore and get into action that whole complicated nexus of functions without which a military formation cannot operate.

On the tactical side there were the dispositions to be considered. The background of these is best considered in the light of Brigadier Puttick's appreciation, drawn up after the event but no doubt a true reflection of his views at this time. Airborne attack was to be expected any time after 14 May. Landing from the sea would follow. To control Maleme airfield and any other places where aircraft might land was of prime importance. Since the AA guns were sited on and round the airfield they would probably soon be put out of action. It must therefore be commanded by available infantry weapons and artillery. These weapons would have to be stepped back from the aerodrome according to their range, and in this way could be sited so as to cover the beaches as well. So sited and distributed, they would be less vulnerable to air attack and would break it up in some degree. Since the troops using shorter-range weapons like the rifle would have to be close to the aerodrome, they must be supported by other units farther back who could prevent

parachute troops from forming up behind them and attacking. All that concealment and defensive

¹ Maj-Gen W. G. Gentry, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Bronze Star (US); Lower Hutt; born London, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; commanded 6 Bde Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff (in NZ), 1943–44; commanded NZ Troops in Egypt, 6 NZ Div, and NZ Maadi Camp, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; commanded 9 Bde (Italy) 1945; Deputy Chief of General Staff, Jul 1946–Nov 1947; Adjutant-General, Apr 1949–Mar 1952; Chief of the General Staff 1 Apr 1952–.

measures like digging and wiring could give in the way of protection must be sought to the fullest possible limit.

Making the initial positions as strong as possible was the more necessary for three reasons: for movement the defence would have to rely largely on its legs and, therefore, once on the move would not be able to take with it weapons that could not be manhandled; entrenching tools were so scarce that once prepared positions were left new ones would be very difficult to dig; the enemy's air superiority was so great that any movement by day would be subject not only to observation but to so much interference as to make it virtually impossible.

None the less troops must be made available for immediate counter-attack against the landing areas, and at the same time be far enough away not to come under the heavy fire to which these landing areas were bound to be initially subjected. At the same time these same troops, or other troops, must be so disposed as to be able to protect the coast between Canea and Maleme; and the road between these two points must be kept open.

Besides Maleme and the coast, the area that seemed most vulnerable was the stretch of low country between Alikianou and Galatas. Landings in this area could threaten a drive through to Canea or north-east to the coastal road.

By the time Brigadier Puttick was able to get out and reconnoitre his sector on 1 May some defensive pattern already existed. Fifth Brigade was disposed between Ay Marina and Maleme. Fourth Brigade was completing a move from the transit camp

into defensive positions west of [Canea](#) but east of 5 Brigade. [Oakes Force](#), formed from miscellaneous artillery and ASC units during the previous few days and put under the command of Major Oakes, MC, ¹ on 29 April, had a defensive area between [Galatas](#) and the coast road. Other assorted units were reorganising in the general area and being allotted various roles in the defence. ²

The immediate result of Puttick's reconnaissance was two important modifications to the existing situation. [Oakes Force](#) would take over the main part of the sector which had been intended for 4 Brigade and would hold roughly the line [Galatas](#) to the sea. Fourth Brigade, thus freed, would be taken back into divisional reserve, leaving only one battalion forward holding the line south of [Oakes Force](#). In its reserve role the brigade would have the task of counter-attack towards 5 Brigade or towards the open area that lay south-east of [Galatas](#); if called upon by

¹ [Lt-Col T. H. E. Oakes](#), MC and bar, m.i.d.; born England, 24 Mar 1895; Royal Artillery (ret'd); CO 7 Anti-Tank Regt May–Nov 1941; killed in action 30 Nov 1941.

² Since the general picture of the dispositions was to be settled within a few days into its more or less final form, details are left to that stage.

[Creforce](#) to do so it would have the secondary task of defending [Canea](#)'s outer perimeter. Thus from the start the necessity of having a strong counter-attack force ready was clearly seen.

Puttick's reconnaissance had also convinced him that the main body of 5 Brigade was lying too far back. Moreover, as Brigadier Hargest pointed out, [21 Battalion](#) was too weak—it had suffered severely in [Greece](#)—for the role of counter-attack in support of [22 Battalion](#) at this time assigned to it. He therefore ordered that [23 Battalion](#) should take over this task. At the same time he recommended Brigadier Hargest to dispose his Vickers machine guns in two groups so as to cover the airfield and the beaches; and his two 3-inch mortars with one covering the northern limits of the airfield and one the south. For he expected landings on the aerodrome, the beaches, and the water.

Already on 30 April Lieutenant-Colonel [Andrew](#),¹ CO 22 Battalion, had begun to question the prospects for unity in action at [Maleme](#) where there was no unified command: the AA defending the airfield was controlled from the Gun Operations Room at [Canea](#); the Royal Marine gunners were responsible to General Weston at [Canea](#); and the [RAF](#) and Royal [Navy](#) troops there were under the control of their own senior commanders. No doubt he spoke of his doubts to Brigadier Puttick during the reconnaissance, for the latter, in a note to Brigadier Hargest, says: 'The AA guns at the aerodrome seem to me to be horribly exposed. Unless they are dug in and screened by bushes, etc., I'm afraid they won't last long.' And he spoke of discussing this question with [Creforce](#) or General Weston.²

The next two or three days were taken up with moves that arose out of these modifications. Fourth Brigade moved into its reserve position with HQ at [Karatsos](#) on 2 May, and on 3 May its 18 and 19 Battalions went into [Force Reserve](#). As a sign of the progress being made with re-equipment it is worth noting that at least one of the battalions, the 19th, now had a full complement of rifles and pistols as well as 36 Thompson SMGs, 32 Brens, two 3-inch mortars, and 50 grenades.

[Oakes Force](#) by 2 May was already well on its way to reaching brigade strength, at least in men, and so much the better able to take over the task left to it by 4 Brigade's departure into reserve. In the course of these days it was organised into three battalions:

¹ [Brig L. W. Andrew](#), VC, DSO, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Ashhurst, 23 Mar 1897; Regular soldier; Wellington Regt, 1915–19; CO 22 Bn Jan 1940–Mar 1942; commanded 5 Bde 27 Nov–8 Dec 1941; Area Commander, [Wellington](#), Nov 1943–Dec 1946; Commandant Central Military District, Apr 1948–Mar 1952.

² See pp. 100– 1 for further discussion of this problem.

1 Battalion under Major [Philp](#); ¹ 2 Battalion under Major [Lewis](#); ² and 3 Battalion under Major [Sprosen](#). ³ The line they occupied now ran not merely from the coast to [Galatas](#) but beyond [Galatas](#) to the road from [Canea](#) to [Alikianou](#). ⁴

A further development was the decision to close 5 Brigade up towards [Maleme](#) in order to facilitate immediate counter-attack in support of 22 Battalion. For this purpose [21 Battalion](#) was to move from round [Dhaskaliana](#) to an area south-east of the airfield; [23 Battalion](#) was to move into the area vacated by [21 Battalion](#); and [28 Battalion](#) into the room of [23 Battalion](#) at [Platanias](#). The [Divisional Petrol Company](#) took over the vacated Maori positions. The 19th [Army Troops Company](#) fighting as infantry, which had been put under 5 Brigade command and sent to [Modhion](#) on 30 April, was to be strengthened by the addition of [7 Field Company](#) and remain in static defence in the [Modhion](#) area. The role of immediate counter-attack would fall to both 21 and 23 Battalions. And to strengthen this concentration on the airfield further machine guns were added. On 2 May an MG Company had been formed from the various parties that had landed from [Greece](#). Apart from eight guns which were with 4 Brigade and four guns under Lieutenant [MacDonald](#)⁵ which were with 5 Brigade, there were still another four guns. The detachment with 4 Brigade was left, but the rest of the company (Captain [Grant](#)⁶), except for four guns sent to [22 Battalion](#), was now put under command of [23 Battalion](#) with guns sited to command the airfield and the coast. The whole move was complete by eight o'clock on the evening of 3 May.

The same day brought two Greek regiments at [Alikianou](#) and a third at [Kastelli](#) under command of NZ Division, and each of the New Zealand battalions was ordered to supply an officer to assist with their training. The presence of these regiments with the Division is duly recorded in [Creforce](#) Operation Instruction No. 10.⁷

The publication of this order, which would reach recipients only 4 May, did little more than confirm arrangements and dispositions

¹ [Lt-Col W. D. Philp](#), DSO, ED; [Palmerston North](#); born [Christchurch](#), 5 Apr 1905; PWD foreman; CO 4 Fd Regt Mar–Dec 1943; 6 Fd Regt Aug 1944–Feb 1945; wounded 22 May 1941.

² [Maj H. M. Lewis](#); [London](#); born [Wanganui](#), 27 Dec 1908; company secretary.

³ [Lt-Col J. F. R. Sprosen](#), DSO, ED; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 20

Jan 1908; school-teacher; CO 4 Fd Regt Apr–Jun 1942, Sep–Oct 1942; 5 Fd Regt Oct–Nov 1942; 14 Lt AA Regt Nov 1942–Jun 1943, Dec 1943–Nov 1944; 7 A-Tk Regt Nov–Dec 1944; wounded 24 May 1941.

⁴ A detailed account of final dispositions is at pp. 68–9. See also map, p. 158.

⁵ Capt H. J. MacDonald; Whangaruru South, North Auckland; born Napier, 9 Aug 1908; sheepfarmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶ Lt-Col J. L. Grant, ED; Christchurch; born Timaru, 19 Mar 1908; master butcher; CO 2 Bn NZ Scottish Regt.

⁷ The order, like many other contemporary references, calls them battalions. But so far as their rudimentary organisation went they seem to have been regiments of two battalions each.

already made. But it enabled Division to issue its own operation order on 5 May.

¹ A summary of it will give a clearer position of the New Zealand front at this time.

The Division consisted of 4 Brigade, 5 Brigade, Oakes Force, Russell Force (formed on 4 May from the 200-odd men of the Divisional Cavalry on Crete, 2 Echelon Divisional Supply, and the Divisional Petrol Company, all under Major Russell, ² OC C Squadron), 1 Greek Regiment, 6 Greek Regiment, and 8 Greek Regiment. In support, but not under command, were two troops of 156 LAA Battery and one troop of 7 Australian LAA Battery.

Of these, 4 Brigade was to remain in Force Reserve except for 20 Battalion which, together with the eight MGs and an engineer detachment, was to remain under command and make up Divisional Reserve. Fifth Brigade had the specific task of preventing the enemy from gaining control of Maleme airfield and defending the area between the west bank of the Tavronitis and the area east of Ay Marina. The brigade would be supported in this by the three troops of LAA.

Oakes Force was to hold the line that ran from the coast near Staliana Khandia to Cemetery Hill and prevent any advance east of this. It also had an appropriate

section of coast to guard against attack from the sea. [Russell Force](#) had the task of holding a road junction near [Lake Aghya](#) and preventing any advance eastwards; and it was to counter-attack at once any airborne troops landing within a thousand yards east or west of the road junction. Of the three Greek regiments, 1 Regiment was to remain at Kisamos [Kastelli](#) and defend the area between [Kastelli](#) and Nopiya against air or sea invasion, being joined there as soon as possible by 6 Regiment from [Alikianou](#). The 8th Greek Regiment was to remain in the [Alikianou](#) area and attack any airborne troops landing within 1500 yards to the north of that place.

The [Divisional Reserve, 20 Battalion](#) and the MG detachment, was to remain south-east of [Galatas](#) and be ready to move at an hour's notice.

These dispositions may fairly be said to have been dictated by three main considerations: the nature of the expected attack, the forces available for defence, and the ground to be covered.

To take the first one first: the expected attack might come by air or sea separately or, in the worst case, simultaneously or close together. It followed that [Maleme](#) airfield, the sea coast, and any

¹ Operation Order No. 5, 5 May.

² [Lt-Col J. T. Russell](#), DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; 2 i/c Div Cav 1941; CO 22 Bn 7 Feb–6 Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

flat ground suitable for a landing place must be covered; and the obvious method of doing so was to secure the high ground that commanded these areas.

For this purpose, to move to the next point, only the equivalent of two brigades was available, since 4 Brigade was to form Force Reserve. Yet some reserve had to be held back for immediate counter-attack at divisional level.

Finally, the area to be defended was determined on its eastern limit by the presence of General Weston's [Suda Force](#) and on its northern limit by the sea. But the western and southern limits were in some sense arbitrary and determined only

by the amount of manpower Brigadier Puttick possessed. The airfield had to be held, but farther west than this the troops available simply could not stretch; and this was to be a fundamental weakness in the upshot. Similarly to the south it was only the fact that on the one hand the hills after a certain distance became too difficult for landings, and on the other that the troops could not be spread any further on the ground, that forced the defence to take the pattern it did.

In short, the garrison had somehow to be so disposed as to cover [Maleme](#) and the AMES; the coast between [Maleme](#) and [Canea](#); the vital hills round [Canea](#), which would be a valuable secondary barrier for [Canea](#) should [Maleme](#) fall or get cut off, and which would cover the low ground to their west; and the low country between [Galatas](#) and [Maleme](#).

In the circumstances Puttick could claim to have made a fair attempt at the impossible. The weaknesses in the scheme—a single line of communication towards [Maleme](#); the open ground west of [Maleme](#); the fact that the [Alikianou](#) valley could be covered only from the hills and that by too few troops; the weakness in reserves—will be sufficiently apparent in the sequel. It is unlikely that they were not already present to the minds of Puttick and his commanders.

ii

Although the main pattern of the defence was now established some important developments were still to take place, and it will be best to summarise them first from the divisional point of view before going on to treat the sectors in detail.

The most important developments were in the [Galatas- Alikianou](#) sector. Here there were weaknesses of both organisation and disposition which it was obviously desirable to temper. The first moves to do so came on 13 May when the Greek authorities gave Brigadier Puttick the right to supervise the dispositions of the Greek regiments. The two concerned in this sector were 6 and 8 Regiments. The 8th was now told to take up positions in the hills east of and overlooking the [Alikianou-Canea](#) road; its left flank would cover the road junction just east of [Alikianou](#) and leading into the village from the main road; its centre would be based on the hill east of and across the road from [Episkopi](#); and its right would hold the high ground south-east of the power station at [Aghya](#). The regiment's role would be to cover by

fire the flat areas to the north and west and also to help if necessary in guarding the Italian prisoners in the camps at [Skines](#) and [Fournes](#). A boundary with [Russell Force](#) was also laid down by which the [Aghya](#) reservoir became a Greek responsibility. ¹

The 6th Greek Regiment by 13 May had already been placed in a position south of [Oakes Force](#). ²

On 13 May also was issued NZ Division Operation Instruction No. 6. This attempted to meet the weakness of organisation by forming a new brigade, 10 Brigade. It would come into existence at six o'clock next morning and would consist of [20 Battalion](#), [Oakes Force](#), and [6 Greek Regiment](#). Under command would be two MG platoons and one troop of [5 Field Regiment](#), which had by now been equipped with three 75-millimetre howitzers. The commander was to be Lieutenant-Colonel A. S. Falconer of [23 Battalion](#); but in the upshot Falconer as the senior officer took over [4 Brigade](#), the senior formation, and [Colonel Kippenberger](#) took 10 Brigade.

This new arrangement meant that the whole front line from the coast through the [Galatas](#) hills was now under a single command. But there was still a weakness in this sector. Between [6 Regiment](#) and [8 Greek Regiment](#) lay a wide gap. Puttick seems to have felt that, since he had no forces to put there, he must rely on the fact that the gap gave access only to very hilly country on the south-east, and that to the east deep penetration was barred by [2 Greek Regiment](#) and the units of [Suda Force](#).

Perhaps as a final effort towards getting cohesion on this front [8 Greek Regiment](#) was also put under 10 Brigade command on 15 May. [Kippenberger](#), indeed, had already expressed concern about the isolation of [8 Greek Regiment](#) and had argued that it was 'only a circle on the map.... and that it was murder to leave such troops in such a position'. He had been answered that 'in war murder sometimes has to be done'. ³

There was one other weakness in the defensive system that gave Puttick great concern at this time. This was the ground west of

¹ For the role of [Russell Force](#) see pp. 70– 1. See also map facing p. 133.

² For a more detailed account of this line see p. 70 and map facing p. 133.

³ *Infantry Brigadier* (Oxford University Press), p. 50. In fact, though isolated, the regiment played a not unimportant part in the action; and it can be argued that Puttick's action in leaving it where it was justified itself.

Maleme airfield. The troops of 5 Brigade were not numerous enough to extend far enough west to cover this ground effectively, and yet it was clear that it might prove a dangerous assembly area. The obvious force to use for holding it was **1 Greek Regiment**; for where it was already placed, at Kisamos **Kastelli**, it was too isolated to be effective, while **Kastelli** itself might be assumed too remote from the main objectives to be important.

But before **1 Greek Regiment** could be moved the permission of the Greek authorities had to be obtained; and tools and time would be needed if it was to be effectively entrenched in a new position. The permission was duly obtained, but not till 13 May. By this time Puttick had his doubts about the wisdom of the move at so late a stage. ¹ He conferred with **General Freyberg** and they agreed that the battalion had better stay where it was; for the attack was thought imminent, there was no transport with which to move the unit swiftly to its new position, too few tools for it to get dug in quickly, and no wire with which to protect the new entrenchments.

iii

It is now time to examine the three brigade sectors in rather closer detail and to notice any significant changes that took place in their strengths or dispositions between this period and the opening of the battle. We may begin with 4 Brigade which, as has been seen, had begun to move back into reserve on 2 May.

Though 4 Brigade, as mobile reserve to **Creforce**, might expect to be sent on a counter-attack mission in almost any direction, it was obvious none the less that it must be dug in where it stood against initial attack. At this time **19 Battalion** was in the area of **Karatsos** with **20 Battalion** south-west of it. The 18th Battalion was in

reserve still farther back and holding a line from the beach west of 7 General Hospital south to the [Alikianou- Canea](#) road. Brigade HQ was in the [Karatsos](#) area until 7 May, when it moved back to a new position about two miles west of [Canea](#) and close to the main coast road. From then on the daily routine of the battalions settled down and consisted mostly of digging and infantry training. An addition in strength came with the disembarkation on 10 May of 1 Light Troop RA which had four 3.7-inch howitzers. These guns were sited in the area south of [Karatsos](#).

Then on 12 May 4 Brigade lost [20 Battalion](#), which moved with a platoon of machine guns to positions east of 7 General Hospital,

¹ The invasion was expected for any day on or after 14 May.

no doubt preparing to come under command of 10 Brigade. Here the battalion was joined by the Brigade Band and the Kiwi Concert Party on 14 May.

Fourth Brigade Operation Instruction No. 7 of 16 May gives a clear idea of the brigade's composition, task and dispositions. ¹ As well as 18 and 19 Battalions it now included the light tanks of C Squadron, [3 Hussars](#), 1 Light Troop RA, and a platoon of machine guns. A third battalion, 1 Welch, was to come under command whenever [Creforce](#) saw fit and complete the brigade's infantry strength.

The brigade's counter-attack role was now definitely stated: it might have to counter-attack towards [Heraklion](#), and unit commanders were required to reconnoitre not only round [Maleme](#) and [Alikianou](#) but east of [Canea](#) to the area of [Almiros Bay](#) and [Retimo](#). In addition, [19 Battalion](#) was informed that it would have to carry out any counter-attacks to the north of [Suda Bay](#) and so, presumably, in the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#). These instructions show clearly how difficult it was for the senior commanders even at this late stage to predict where the main weight of the attack was to come.

In accordance with this view of their probable role the battalions were warned that, though they must be dug in against air attack and be ready to fight from their positions, they must not open fire on aircraft unless located and attacked or unless aircraft were about to land. In this way they would avoid being pinned down too

soon. The artillery likewise, though sited to cover the beaches, was told that its primary role was counter-attack and quick movement. And a touch of optimism, if not fantasy, is introduced with the statement that troop-carrying transport was available to lift the whole brigade.

These orders were further amplified by 4 Brigade Operation Instruction No. 8, issued now for [Brigadier Inglis](#),² who had come from Egypt in response to a signal sent by [General Freyberg](#) on 11 May and who arrived on the 17th to take over 4 Brigade. The 18th and 19th Battalions were to detail a company each for immediate counter-attack against enemy landing in the areas south-east of them. These companies were to counter-attack on the initiative of their commanders.

The only further developments on the brigade front between now and the opening of battle were of minor importance. B

¹ See map facing p. 133.

² Maj-Gen [L. M. Inglis](#), CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Greek); Dunedin; born [Mosgiel](#), 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn, Jan–Aug 1940; commanded 4 Inf Bde, 1941–42 and 4 Armd Bde, 1942–44; commanded 2 NZ Div, 27 Jun–16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun–31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, [Germany](#), 1947–50.

Company 18 Battalion was sent to guard the residence of King George near Transit Camp A on 18 May. Next day 12 Platoon, under Second-Lieutenant [Ryan](#),¹ was detached to escort the royal party to another house south of [Perivolia](#) and was replaced in B Company by a composite platoon from HQ Company. And the OC of 1 Light Troop RA, who had already refused four offers from [19 Battalion](#) of infantry support, suddenly decided at this eleventh hour that he might require it after all. The request did not reach [19 Battalion](#) till six o'clock on the evening of 19 May. It was too late that night, but a section was detailed to go at first light and was to be followed by two more sections later in the morning.²

The moves of 3 May³ established the units of 5 Brigade in very much the positions they were to occupy until battle began. The main activity in the interim was one of feverish preparation. Trenches were being dug, wire erected, and mines planted. At first and last light the troops stood to, and the day between these times passed rapidly enough for the men with tactical exercises, counter-attack training, and intervals of hard digging with the few shovels that could be found.

Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew took advantage of the airfield's proximity to fly low over 22 Battalion area on 7 May and submit it to an enemy's eye inspection. He returned to exhort his men to even greater efforts of camouflage. The day after this, arrangements were made for SOS signals between 22 and 23 Battalion should all else fail. On 10 May Brigadier Hargest, after a reconnaissance beyond the Tavronitis made by his Brigade Major, Captain Dawson,⁴ began to urge Division to provide a battalion for the open area beyond the river. It was this request which led Puttick to consider 1 Greek Regiment's position, but when this solution broke down it was decided that 23 Battalion must take over the additional task of repelling any landings on the beaches west of the Tavronitis; and a section of 21 Battalion was sent with a week's rations to a high point west of the river

¹ Maj W. H. Ryan, OBE, Order of King George I and Greek Silver Cross; Mangaia, Cook Islands; born Auckland, 1 Jun 1911; civil engineer; 18 Bn and Armd Regt; CO 20 Armd Regt, Oct–Dec 1945.

² Reports by Capt C. L. Pleasants and Pte W. H. Bishop. For the consequences of this tardy precaution see pp. 150–2.

³ See p. 56 and map facing p. 97.

⁴ Lt-Col R. B. Dawson, DSO, m.i.d.; Lower Hutt; born Rotorua, 21 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; 23 Bn; BM 5 Bde, May–Sep 1941, Jan–Jun 1942; BM 6 Bde 1942–43; Senior Tactics Instructor, Royal Military College, Duntroon, Jul 1943–Jan 1946; CO 3 Bn, 2 NZEF Japan, Jun 1947–Oct 1948; Director of Staff Duties, Army HQ, Nov 1949–Dec 1952.

from which the country to the north could be observed. In the event of the

landings it would report back by telephone. ¹

Hargest was still concerned, as well he might be, at the mixed nature of the command at [Maleme](#). On 11 May he convened a meeting of the brigade's commanding officers and the senior officers of the other services. There is no record of the proceedings or of those present and no important change seems to have resulted. It is safe to infer from it only Hargest's uneasiness.

On 12 May there was set up in the brigade area a Field Punishment Centre that was to play later a not unimportant part. Situated just north-east of [Modhion](#), its orders were to join up with [23 Battalion](#) when warned of attack; failing warning, it was to help defend the guns in the area. Meanwhile Lieutenant [Roach](#), ² the OC, and his 17 guards compounded his prisoners—'plonk artists, bashers up, and some guilty of robbery and assault' ³—and set them to work making roads and carrying ammunition.

Even at this late stage able-bodied men were still prized and so when 5 Brigade Band arrived on 14 May, though as a band its presence seemed untimely, its members were promptly given rifles and formed into a defence platoon for Brigade HQ under the Bandmaster, Lieutenant [Miller](#). ⁴ More immediately welcome were the two I tanks from 7 RTR which arrived on the same day and were ensconced that night in prepared positions south of the airfield.

At this time the attack was expected for about 16 or 17 May and the tempo of digging and wiring was hotter than ever. Brigadier Puttick arrived on 15 May to spur the work on, and Brigadier Hargest stopped all leave to the same end. By now he felt some confidence in what had been done so far. 'We should now be ready to receive the enemy; our defences are nearly as good as we can make them but material promised us has not come to hand— wire and carriers, etc. With it and a few days we shall be ready.' ⁵

To the troops on the ground without access to high-level intelligence reports the signs of invasion impending were becoming plain. [Suda Bay](#) was being bombed heavily and daily—the real cause of the lateness or non-arrival of promised materials. And on the evening of 13 May [Maleme](#) itself got its first serious battering. On 15 May there was another exceptionally heavy

¹ Neither of these attempts to cope with the problem was practical. 23 Bn's responsibility was later cancelled, no doubt because it was seen to be fantastic. The observation post was not heard from after 20 May—no matter for surprise.

² Maj W. J. G. Roach, MC; Suva; born Levin, 12 Oct 1909; bank officer; 2 i/c 21 Bn Oct 1943–Mar 1944; wounded 22 Nov 1941.

³ Report by Lt Roach.

⁴ Capt C. C. E. Miller; Invercargill; born Temuka, 23 Mar 1906; salesman.

⁵ Brig Hargest's diary.

attack in which Private M. W. Curtis ¹ rescued the pilot of a shot-down Gladiator while it was under fire—a deed which won him the admiration of all who saw it and for which he was later awarded the MM.

But while the troops speculated about when the attack would come and promised themselves revenge for Greece, the local commanders were still worrying about the naked territory west of the Tavronitis. One of the roles allotted to 21 Battalion was to strengthen the south flank of 22 Battalion where it ran along the bank of the river, moving up as a whole battalion if necessary. Accordingly the CO of 21 Battalion, Major Harding, MC, ² reconnoitred and decided to place one platoon overlooking the river and keep another ready to move there. Thus the whole battalion would have a nucleus on which to build if the need arose. The first platoon duly moved into position on 17 May. During this same period also, officers of 23 Battalion reconnoitred routes to 22 Battalion area to prepare for carrying out their counterattack role.

The artillery situation improved a little in this time of waiting. The first step was the organisation in the second week of May of two troops of gunners from the unarmed men of 5 Field Regiment, who till this time had been assisting 5 Brigade

with defence work. On 11 May these two troops, under Captain [Beaumont](#),³ took over three Italian 75-millimetre howitzers and two British 3.7-inch howitzers and towed them to 5 Brigade with trucks borrowed from 1 Light Troop RA. On 13 and 14 May the two troops got into position, A Troop with the 3·7s (Captain [Williams](#)⁴) in [21 Battalion](#) area, and B Troop with the 75s (Lieutenant [Cade](#)⁵) in [23 Battalion](#) area.

A third troop (C Troop under Captain [Snadden](#)⁶), with four French 75-millimetre guns, came up on 16 May and were partly manhandled and partly towed by Bren carrier into a position on a commanding hillside about half a mile north-west of [Modhion](#). Such a position was all the more desirable in that the guns, for

¹ S-Sgt [M. W. Curtis](#), MM; [Greymouth](#); born [Greymouth](#), 18 Oct 1917; motor mechanic.

² Lt-Col [E. A. Harding](#), MC; [Dargaville](#); born [Dargaville](#), 4 Dec 1893; farmer; actg CO 21 Bn 20 Apr–17 May 1941; CO 33 Bn ([Maadi](#)); 1 North Auckland Bn. Harding handed over command of 21 Bn on 17 May to Lt-Col J. M. Allen.

³ Capt [G. M. Beaumont](#); [Greymouth](#); born Dunedin, 19 Sep 1908; civil engineer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁴ Capt [L. G. Williams](#), m.i.d.; [Silverstream](#); born [Christchurch](#), 2 Jun 1909; draughtsman; wounded and p.w. 22 May 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

⁵ Lt-Col [G. P. Cade](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Hawera](#), 10 May 1909; Regular soldier; CO 4 Fd Regt 29 Dec 1944–12 Jan 1945; 6 Fd Regt Feb–Mar 1945; Director RNZA [Army HQ](#).

⁶ Maj [J. P. Snadden](#), MC; [Wellington](#); born [Te Kuiti](#), 24 May 1913; salesman; 2 i/c 5 Fd Regt Mar–Oct 1944; twice wounded.

lack of instruments, would have to fire over open sights—the sights themselves being improvised from wood and chewing gum. ¹

For C Troop the problem of observation posts did not arise. A and B Troops were sited for indirect fire. Eventually the two troop commanders selected an OP on Point 107, in [22 Battalion's](#) area, and managed to cajole enough wire to rig a telephone line from it to B Troop and thence to A Troop.

The composition, locations, and role of 5 Brigade are all set out in 5 Brigade's Operation Instruction No. 4 of 18 May. As there were no important developments between then and battle, a summary of the document will give a fair picture of the situation when battle began.

Besides the four infantry battalions (21, 22, 23, and 28 Maori) there were under command [7 Field Company](#) (Captain [Ferguson](#)²) and [19 Army Troops Company](#) (Captain [Anderson](#)³), fighting as infantry and guarding the road north of [Modhion](#). Major [Langbein](#)⁴ was at first in command of the whole detachment but was evacuated about a week before battle and succeeded by Captain Ferguson. The Field Punishment Centre has already been mentioned. In addition, there were by now three platoons from 1 MG Company: one of these with four guns and mountings was located with [23 Battalion](#); the other two (one without mountings) with four guns each were with [22 Battalion](#). Finally, and also under command, there were the three troops of [27 Battery](#).

In support, but still not under command, were a troop and a half of 156 LAA Battery (six guns), one troop of 7 Australian LAA Battery (four guns), and a troop of C HAA Battery, RM (two 3-inch guns). And the [Royal Marines](#) also had two 4-inch guns from Z Coast Defence Battery, the primary task of which was to sink enemy ships or boats landing troops and which were sited on the north-west ridges above the airfield. Finally, there were two I tanks dug in above the airfield. These were to emerge and mop up whenever a major landing should begin. Three light tanks had not yet arrived but were hoped for.

¹ See map facing p. 97, for dispositions. Colonel Frowen, CRA [Creforce](#), had ordered the guns of C Troop to be sited on the beach. But [Maj M. A. Bull](#), who commanded 5 Fd Regt in [Crete](#), and Maj W. D. Philp, who now commanded 27 Bty to which the three troops belonged, used their discretion to select what was undoubtedly a better site.

² Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson, DSO, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 27 Apr 1912; warehouseman; OC 7 Fd Coy May 1941; CO 18 Armd Regt Dec 1943–Jan 1944; 20 Armd Regt Jan–May 1944; 18 Armd Regt Jul 1944–Feb 1945; wounded 6 Dec 1943.

³ Lt-Col J. N. Anderson, DSO, m.i.d.; Te Awamutu; born Okaihau, 15 Apr 1894; civil engineer; OC 19 Army Tps Coy May–Jun 1941; 5 Fd Pk Coy Sep 1941–Oct 1942; 6 Fd Coy Oct 1942–Jul 1943; CRE 2 NZ Div Sep 1942, Apr–Jul 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; Engr Trg Depot, Maadi, Jan–Aug 1945.

⁴ Maj C. Langbein, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Nelson, 12 Oct 1894; engineer; OC 19 A Tps Coy 1941–42; Engr and Ordnance Trg Depot Aug 1942–Apr 1943.

The tasks of the brigade were threefold, and in view of the importance of subsequent events in the sector the relevant part of 5 Brigade Operation Instruction No. 4 may be quoted in full:

- a. 5 Inf Bde will maintain a defensive line running east and west from [Platanias](#) to Tavronitis River, with special regard to the defence of [Maleme](#) aerodrome.
- b. In the event of the enemy making an airborne or seaborne attack on any part of the area, to counter-attack and destroy him immediately.
- c. The whole essence of the bde's work is a spirited defence.

The order then deals with the method by which these tasks were to be carried out. The 28th Battalion was to remain round [Platanias](#), patrolling the area and being ready to prevent enemy advances towards [Canea](#) or through the hills south of [Platanias](#), and to counter-attack. The Engineer Detachment was likewise to remain in position, patrolling the beach and road in its area and preventing enemy movement on these. The 23rd Battalion was to hold its positions and be ready to counter-attack towards the beach, towards [Maleme](#) aerodrome, or towards the area held by the Engineers.

The 21st Battalion was to remain in position ready, should the enemy organise movement from west of the Tavronitis, to move up to the line of the river from the left flank of [22 Battalion](#), south as far as the gully south-west of [Vlakeronitissa](#); as a preliminary move to this end two platoons and a mortar were to take up a holding

position along the river flank. But the battalion also had the alternative role of replacing [23 Battalion](#) if it went forward, and being ready from that position to launch a further counter-attack to the beach or the airfield.

The primary task of [22 Battalion](#) was the 'static defence' of the airfield. It was therefore to cover the airfield and approaches with fire, withholding mortar fire until landing had actually taken place. If a major landing were made, support and reserve companies were to be used for immediate counter-attack.¹ The enemy expelled, the battalion would resume its positions. Support from [23 Battalion](#) could be called for by telephone, or failing telephone, by Very light (white-green-white).

The order also laid down the task of the MG Company: the platoon with [23 Battalion](#) would cover the beach to its north, the east edge of the airfield and, if necessary, the airfield itself. The two platoons with [22 Battalion](#) would cover the west and forward edges of the airfield and, if necessary, the airfield itself; they would also cover the beaches to the west and east and the bed of the Tavronitis.

¹ In fact, Lt-Col Andrew did not feel able to spare a company from manning his large perimeter and so had no reserve company. See p. 98.

One troop of [27 Battery](#) (A Troop) from its position with [21 Battalion](#) was to bring fire from its 3·7s to bear on the airfield, the beaches east and west of it, the area to the west, and the bed of the Tavronitis. B Troop, with its Italian 75s, would cover from [23 Battalion](#) area the airfield, the areas east and west of it, and particularly the beach areas as far west as [Kolimbari](#).¹ C Troop, the French 75s, near the FPC, would cover as wide an arc of beach and roads as their open sights permitted.

The order also announced that twenty Bren carriers were expected, of which it was hoped to give four to [22 Battalion](#)—in addition to three 1 Welch carriers already with the unit—two to [23 Battalion](#), and three to [21 Battalion](#). Their tasks would be covering and searching work in the battalion areas. The remaining eleven would be split into two detachments under brigade command, of which one with six carriers would hide up in the 21st Battalion's area for the support of counter-attack and for southward searching, while the other detachment with five carriers would hide up in

the NZE area ready to attack to the beaches or search to the south and east. ²

The order also stressed the necessity of thorough concealment in the preliminary stages and of controlled fire against enemy aircraft only after troops' landings had obviously become imminent. Any lull in aircraft attack was to be used for mopping up.

It will be seen from these orders and from an inspection of the map that the brigade plan was dictated by the dual character of its task: the defence against invasion by sea and invasion by air. The threat of the former made Hargest dispose his forces in such a way that every part of the long coastline between [Platanias](#) and [Maleme](#) was covered. At the same time he tried to have counterattack reserves, in the form of 21 and 23 Battalions, more or less immediately available against an attempt upon the airfield; while he kept [28 Battalion](#) near him at [Platanias](#) as a less immediate reserve. In the upshot, however, the distance between [Platanias](#) and [Maleme](#), the enemy's predominance in the air, the faultiness of communications and the fact that the enemy's landings were sufficiently scattered to distract the two counter-attack battalions, were to make the strung-out defence of 5 Brigade a serious shortcoming.

¹ [Kolimbari](#), however, was well out of range to B Tp's guns.

² The full number never reached 5 Bde. Those with 22 Bn had no opportunity for useful action and had to be disabled and left behind when the battalion withdrew. None seem ever to have reached 21 Bn. Those with 23 Bn were used for communications and transport of wounded and those with 5 Bde seem to have been similarly used.

v

Tenth Brigade came into existence on 14 May and grouped together under command [20 Battalion](#), [Oakes Force](#), and 6 Greek Regiment. ¹ Artillery support was to be provided by the three 75-millimetre howitzers of F Troop 28 Battery, which were sited near [Karatsos](#) under 10 Brigade command.

The role of 10 Brigade was to hold a defensive position, facing west and running

from the cape of Kolimvithra southwards via [Red Hill](#) and [Pink Hill](#) to the hill south of [Cemetery Hill](#) at 069533. ² It had also to defend the coast between grid 10 and [Cape Ay Marina](#). The details of this position will be more closely examined with the composition of the units holding it.

[Oakes Force](#) had been formed from gunners without guns and drivers without trucks in the early days of May and organised into three battalions, commanded by Major Philp, Major Lewis, and Major Sprosen. The ground that it occupied at this period was much what it was to defend in the actual fighting. Its right flank rested on the sea about a mile and a half west of 7 General Hospital. From there it followed a ridge south-west to [Red Hill](#), and thence to [Ruin Hill](#). At [Ruin Hill](#) it turned east to take in [Wheat Hill](#), and then went south again to include [Pink Hill](#), south-east of [Galatas](#). A continuation of the line was projected beyond [Pink Hill](#) and south-east to [Cemetery Hill](#) (also called [Searchlight Hill](#)), but on 2 May this part of the line was still unoccupied. The occupied line, in an arc to the north-west from [Pink Hill](#), was held at this date by 3, 2, and 1 Battalions of [Oakes Force](#), counting north in that order.

At this time 1 Battalion of [Oakes Force](#) consisted of men from 4 RMT, [7 Anti-Tank Regiment](#), [1 Survey Troop](#), [6 Field Regiment](#), and part of [5 Field Regiment](#); 2 Battalion of men mostly from [4 Field Regiment](#); and 3 Battalion of men from [5 Field Regiment](#) and the [Divisional Ammunition Company](#).

Between 7 and 8 May [Oakes Force](#) was badly depleted by the withdrawal of certain elements for evacuation to Egypt. Thus all the men from [7 Anti-Tank Regiment](#), [1 Survey Troop](#), [6 Field Regiment](#), and the [Divisional Ammunition Company](#) went back to transit camp and were ultimately embarked. ³ The force was

¹ 20 Bn, however, was operationally at the disposal of Division and, on 13 May, had been relieved by 6 Gk Regt, moving to a reserve position. [Russell Force](#) and 8 Gk Regt came under command of 10 Bde on 15 May.

² The names [Red Hill](#), [Pink Hill](#), [Cemetery Hill](#), [Ruin Hill](#), [Wheat Hill](#), and [Ruin Ridge](#) will occur frequently. They were given to the main features in 10 Bde area by [Col Kippenberger](#) and Maj F. L. H. Davis (GSO 2, NZ Div) on 14 May or by the troops on the spot. For their locations see map facing p. 133.

³ See p. 79.

further reduced by the withdrawal of artillerymen to form the troops of artillery that went to 4 and 5 Brigades. And it lost its commander, Major Oakes, who left with the unarmed parties to be evacuated; a serious loss, since his spirit and energy had been of great value to a force which without tradition as a unit or experience as infantry was bound to depend more than most on the personality of its commander.

Reorganisation was therefore necessary and was complete by 15 May, the force—from now on officially called the Composite Battalion—being now much weaker in numbers and even more mixed in character, the subdivision into three battalions being tacitly dropped.

The command after the departure of Major Oakes devolved upon Major H. M. Lewis. The force kept its tripartite organisation, the sub-units being: RMT Group or 1 Company, commanded by Captain [Veale](#),¹ with about 270 officers and men of 4 RMT and some officers attached from [4 Field Regiment](#); [4 Field Regiment](#) Group or 2 Company, commanded by Captain [Bliss](#),² and about 200 strong; Mixed Group or 3 Company, commanded by Major J. F. R. Sprosen, and made up of some 250 men from the [Divisional Petrol Company](#) under Captain [McDonagh](#),³ about 140 men from 2 Echelon Divisional Supply Company, under Captain [Boyce](#),⁴ and about 150 men of [5 Field Regiment](#) under the direct command of Major Sprosen.⁵

The RMT Group was responsible for the sector extending from the sea to [Red Hill](#); [4 Field Regiment](#) Group's line carried on along the forward or west slopes of [Red Hill](#) south to [Ruin Hill](#); the Mixed Group held [Ruin Hill](#) with 2 Echelon Divisional Supply, [Wheat Hill](#) with the group from [5 Field Regiment](#), and [Pink Hill](#) with the [Divisional Petrol Company](#).⁶

Work had been going on in these positions ever since Oakes Force had been taken over; and indeed work had been done before then by 1 Welch, on [Red Hill](#) for example—although the trenches dug by these latter were to prove dangerously wide when the time to use them came. But the work was hampered by the scarcity of

¹ Maj L. H. Veale, ED; [Wellington](#); born [Christchurch](#), 1 Nov 1911;

insurance clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² Maj H. C. Bliss, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 22 Sep 1914; dairy farmer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³ Capt W. G. McDonagh, m.i.d.; born Ireland, 13 Oct 1897; motor engineer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁴ Capt A. H. Boyce; Seddon; born Blenheim, 8 May 1905; shepherd; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁵ This bare statement of the theoretical organisation ought not to be allowed to give an exaggerated impression of coherence: the tie between the components of Sprosen's group was very loose and he does not seem to have known that the two ASC groups were under his command. And, in general, there was not enough time before battle or any opportunity during battle for the battalion's organisation to function effectively.

⁶ See map, p. 158.

wire and digging tools, and in the early days the men had spent the greater part of their time in the elementary infantry training which they needed so badly. Fortunately, from about 11 May onwards, wire became more plentiful, and in one night, despite lack of pickets or experience, the battalion succeeded in erecting a barrier that ran along the whole front. Tools never became plentiful, however—at the last moment, for example, 4 RMT got seven picks and five shovels, all well worn.

On the left of the line occupied by the Composite Battalion was 6 Greek Regiment, who relieved 20 Battalion on 13 May and whose positions ran from the south of Pink Hill, south-east across Cemetery Hill to the south-east side of the Alikianou- Canea road. It seems to have moved into position in this area before 12 May; for 19 Battalion staged a demonstration company attack on 12 May to assist in its training. This training was all the more necessary in that the Greeks had seen only four weeks' service, had fired no rounds from their ancient rifles—when battle began they had three rounds per man—and were even shorter of other equipment

than the [Composite Battalion](#). Their positions cost [Colonel Kippenberger](#) a good deal of concern: he spent much time in trying to assist them, and on 15 May elements of [20 Battalion](#) were sent over to help them with their wiring. This enabled a barrier to be put up from the junction with the Divisional Petrol Company at [Pink Hill](#), south-east to the stream on the other side of the [Alikianou- Canea](#) road.

The supply of ammunition improved a few days before the battle but not all of it was distributed to the companies before battle began.

The position of [8 Greek Regiment](#) in relation to the rest of 10 Brigade has already been discussed, and its tactical dispositions will be dealt with more fully when the time comes to treat of its part in the actual fighting. It will perhaps be enough here to reaffirm its isolation from the rest of the brigade, and to add that in training and equipment it was if anything worse off than the other Greek regiments.

One more unit in 10 Brigade remains to be discussed, the Divisional Cavalry. This unit had moved to the area of Lake [Aghya](#) in the first week of May and taken up positions facing south-west, with left flank on the lake and right flank to the north-west of the lake. Here Major Russell regrouped his force into three squadrons, A, B, and C. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) visited them on 17 May. Considering that they had neither the weapons nor the men to carry out their task of commanding the west end of the [Alikianou](#) valley, he told Russell that if when the attack came he found that he could not effect anything he was to fall back via the high ground and rejoin the main position of the brigade.

vi

The account of the situation in the brigade sectors is now complete. But a word must be said about the position of 1 Greek Regiment at Kisamos [Kastelli](#). This force was too remote from the main position to be easily knit into the main force, and it is true that the events to take place in its sector could hardly affect the battle. None the less, as the regiment had been given a party of New Zealand officers and men to help with its training as early as 5 May and as it had some heavy fighting, some brief account of it seems necessary at this point. When Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry and [Colonel Kippenberger](#) visited Kisamos [Kastelli](#) on 6 May they found the regiment some 1000 strong and Major [Bedding](#),¹ who was in charge of the New Zealand

party, doing his best to get them organised—not the easiest of tasks since most of the Greeks had been soldiers for only a fortnight. Then came tentatives to move the force to positions west of the Tavronitis; but finally it was decided to leave it at [Kastelli](#) with the instruction that if it had to retire it was to go south into the hills and then east to join 6 and 8 Greek Regiments.

Bedding soon had his force organised into two battalions, A and B. A Battalion, with 500 men and 300 rifles, held the sector from the Factory as far as the Beach Road but excluding it, and from the coast to the main road, including it. B Battalion, with the same number of men and rifles, held the sector from the Petrol Dump to White Road, which it included, and from Rock Point south to the Platanos road. It was also B Battalion's task to destroy the petrol dump if a landing were successful and to hold the pass across the hills to the west. ²

In addition to these two battalions there was a mobile reserve formed by the New Zealand party and a group of the local gendarmerie, who were well armed, well officered, and well trained—'worth the two battalions put together in action'. ³ And Bedding

¹ [Maj T. G. Bedding](#), ED, m.i.d., MC (Greek); Pahautanui; born Eketahuna, 18 Nov 1909; secondary school physical instructor; p.w. 24 May 1941.

² See map, p. 290.

³ Report by Maj Bedding. Bedding wrote: 'There was a military college at Kalembare some 18 miles away with some 400 Officer-Cadets in training for both [Army](#) and Gendarmerie. I applied through General Heywood for 34 third and fourth year cadets to act as CSMs and Platoon Sergeants. A month later I met in Prison Camp at [Canea](#) one of the Instructors who told me that although the invasion was expected within a fortnight, selection was made by written examination—he actually being engaged in marking papers when the Paratroops landed.'

had also sponsored the formation of a local Home Guard which, organised by a veteran of the Venezelist fighting, one Kondopirakis, watched the coast and did night

patrolling.

Ammunition was a great difficulty, and since supplies that were obtained did not fit the rifles the troops had only three rounds a man. The same was true of the ammunition that was obtained for some antique machine guns acquired from [2 Greek Regiment](#). Moreover, the shortage of rifles was never made up beyond 600; for by the time more became available it was too late to collect them.

vii

The foregoing may suffice for a general picture of the position in the brigade sectors. But how these would fare once battle was joined largely depended on the organisation in the rear. For on this they had to rely both before and during the battle for their supplies, their information, and their orders. To complete the picture of the general situation of the New Zealand Division as it developed up to the outbreak of battle, therefore, some space must be devoted to the activities not only of Divisional HQ but of its supporting troops and services and the problems with which they had to struggle.

So few were the guns that the account already given of the artillery under the various brigades need scarcely be amplified. Nor need we dwell further on the engineers with 5 Brigade. But something must be said of NZE Headquarters itself and of 5 Field Park Company. The former, under Major Hanson, MM, ¹ who had been appointed CRE to the Division on 29 April, was active in the early days of May carrying out a coastal reconnaissance, making a variety of mines and Molotov cocktails to help out the meagre munition supplies of the troops, and building a Battle HQ for Division. This latter was complete by 14 May, and NZE HQ itself moved from [Galatas](#) to the same neighbourhood three days later.

Apart from NZE HQ and the group with 5 Brigade, the only other New Zealand engineers to arrive from [Greece](#) were some men of [6 Field Company](#) and the greater part of 5 Field Park Company. There were too few of the former for it to be worth while holding them in [Crete](#) and they left on the Rodi for Egypt on 9 May. The 5th Field Park Company had a preliminary period

¹ [Brig F. M. H. Hanson](#), DSO and bar, OBE, MM, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born

Levin, 1896; resident engineer Main Highways Board; Wellington Regt in First World War; commanded 7 Fd Coy, NZE, Jan 1940–Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div May 1941, Oct 1941–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, 2 NZEF, 1943–46; wounded three times; Deputy Commissioner of Works.

acting as infantry in the early days after their arrival and later did various jobs for 4 Brigade. But on 13 May they were put under the orders of the Chief Engineer **Creforce**. Here their sections did a miscellany of tasks, which included the preparation of a headquarters for the naval staff, work on a tunnel scheme, a base line survey for AA and naval guns, and a share in the attempt to make some coastal vessels fit for supply voyages round the coasts.

For one further important task volunteers were recruited from all the New Zealand engineer units. As air raids increased in intensity it became more and more difficult to ensure sufficient unloading in **Suda Bay**, civilian stevedores proving inadequate in morale. Accordingly, Australian and New Zealand help was asked for and given. In this difficult and dangerous work the volunteers served with a cheerful courage and efficiency that was beyond praise.

The organisation of even an approximately efficient signals system was not the least of the problems that the Division had to face at the outset. Here the difficulty was not so much one of men as of equipment. The supply of this was so meagre that upwards of a hundred men were sent back to Egypt with the Rodi; for, had they remained, they would have had to be used as infantry, a role for which their specialised training both unfitted them and made them too valuable.

By 3 May those that were to remain had been organised into two main parties. One party, 45 men under Major **Grant**¹ and Lieutenant **Ambury**,² took over **Creforce** Signals; 42 men under Captain **Pryor**³ and 2 Lieutenant **Foubister**⁴ made up the second party and took over Divisional Signals. A system which worked as well as shortages and enemy control of the air would permit was devised. Brigade and battalion signal stations were at almost full strength; there was communication by wireless between Force and Division (No. 9 set), between Division and 4 Brigade (No. 9 set), between Division and 5 Brigade (No. 11 set), and between 5 Brigade and **22 Battalion** (No. 18 set). Communication by line was relatively complete: thus, to take 5 Brigade as the most important, Brigade HQ had direct line to **28 Battalion**,

¹ Col R. L. C. Grant, OBE, m.i.d.; Pakistan; born Leeston, 25 May 1906; telegraph engineer; CO 2 NZ Div Sigs Sep–Nov 1942, Jun–Dec 1943, Mar–May 1944, Jun 1944–Jan 1945; CSO NZ Corps 19–27 Mar 1944; serving in United Nations Military Observer Group, Pakistan.

² Maj C. R. Ambury, m.i.d.; Paremata; born New Plymouth, 18 Sep 1910; electrical engineer; 2 i/c Div Sigs Jan–Apr 1945; twice wounded.

³ Col C. G. Pryor, OBE, m.i.d.; Whangarei; born Beckenham, Kent, 2 Aug 1907; telegraph engineer; CO 2 NZ Div Sigs Dec 1943–Mar 1944; CSO NZ Corps 9 Feb–19 Mar 1944.

⁴ Lt-Col R. W. Foubister, OBE, m.i.d.; Papakura MC; born Palmerston North, 20 Mar 1910; Regular soldier; CR Sigs 2 NZ Div 1945; Camp Commandant, Papakura.

and through it to 21 Battalion and 27 Battery. For despatch riders there were by the time battle began two or three motor cycles to each brigade and at Division.

This organisation was not established without struggle and to establish it at all heroic efforts had to be made at making do. Its weaknesses were considerable and serious, partly because it was so difficult to replace scarce material once it had been put out of action and partly because of the conditions in which the battle was to be fought. These things will become sufficiently evident when the time comes to treat of the fighting.

Little has been said as yet of the medical services, and this seems an appropriate place for a brief sketch of their development up to the beginning of the battle. When the first troops were being evacuated from Greece the only equipped medical units already on the island were 7 British General Hospital, on an open peninsula rather more than two miles west of Canea, and 189 British Field Ambulance at Khalepa, a suburb north-east of Canea. The 7th General Hospital had 600 beds, and as the time went on and the urgency became great 189 Field Ambulance was also fitted out by means of various improvisations as an emergency

hospital. The only subsequent arrival to be reckoned more or less strictly as a hospital was 1 Tented Hospital RN, with 60 beds, which came from Egypt on 10 May and was set up at [Mournies](#).

The evacuation of [Greece](#) brought reinforcements in the shape of field ambulances and field hygiene sections. These were: 4 Light Field Ambulance, [168 Light Field Ambulance](#), [2/1 Australian Field Ambulance](#), [2/2 Australian Field Ambulance](#), [2/7 Australian Field Ambulance](#), 5 and 6 New Zealand Field Ambulances, 48 British Field Hygiene Section, 2 Armoured Division Field Hygiene Section, and 4 New Zealand Field Hygiene Section.

It is only the New Zealand units that concern us here. But it should be remarked of the other new arrivals that they, like the New Zealand units, were all very badly off for all kinds of equipment and brought with them only what their devoted members had been able to carry out of [Greece](#).

With the New Zealand units had come the matron and 51 nurses of 1 NZ General Hospital. As soon as they arrived they put themselves at the disposal of 7 General Hospital, which in these early days was overwhelmingly busy with the flood of wounded from the Greek campaign. But it was clear that for all their courage and usefulness [Crete](#) was too advanced a position for them, and that they might be an embarrassment in the battle to come. They were evacuated accordingly by the Ionia on 29 April and reached Egypt safely, though not without attention from enemy aircraft.

The 5th Field Ambulance soon after its arrival moved to Ay Marina and set up an MDS to serve 5 Brigade, 4 Field Hygiene Section moving with it. Here both remained until 17 May, when they moved to a more forward position at [Modhion](#). Even in the daily superintendence of the troop's health there was much for them to do: malaria had to be guarded against and the conditions— shortage of the tools with which to dig latrines, for example—made it necessary to put even more than the usual emphasis on questions of routine hygienic discipline.

The 6th Field Ambulance had at first established two MDSs, one at [Perivolia](#) for the reception of walking wounded and the other not far from 7 General Hospital, to which it was of considerable assistance and for which by 11 May it was providing a

convalescent depot.

The New Zealand force also supplied help to the higher organisation. On 7 May Colonel [Kenrick](#)¹ was appointed DDMS [Creforce](#). Colonel [Bull](#)² took his place as DDMS NZ Division, and Major [Elliott](#)³ was made DADMS. They had much to worry them: among other things the problem of inadequate hospitalisation and inadequate supplies. But they were able to do a good deal, and the situation became somewhat easier with the departure of a hospital ship taking off wounded on 5 May and again on 16 May.

Wherever one turns, in fact, at this stage of the preparations for battle one encounters this same problem, supply. We have already seen how much it governed what could be done in the forward sectors, and it was as prominent in the perplexities of Division as it was in the minds of those at [Creforce](#) HQ and in the messages of [General Freyberg](#) to General Wavell.

At first supplies of clothing and blankets had been at least as urgently required as supplies of more warlike stores. But with the establishment of a clothing dump at [Ay Marina](#) on 27 April and issues of clothing to the brigades on 30 April and from 5 May

¹ [Brig H. S. Kenrick](#), CB, CBE, ED, m.i.d., MC (Greek); [Auckland](#); born [Paeroa](#), 7 Aug 1898; consulting obstetrician; [1 NZEF](#) 1916–19, infantry officer 4 Bn; CO 5 Fd Amb Dec 1939–May 1940; acting ADMS 2 NZEF Egypt, Jun–Sep 1940; ADMS 2 NZ Div Oct 1940–May 1942; DMS 2 NZEF May–Sep 1942, Apr 1943–May 1945; Superintendent-in-Chief, Auckland Hospital Board.

² [Brig W. H. B. Bull](#), CBE, ED; [Wellington](#); born [Napier](#), 19 May 1897; surgeon; CO 6 Fd Amb Feb 1940–May 1941; ADMS 2 NZ Div May 1941; p.w. 28 May 1941; DGMS, [Army](#) HQ.

³ [Lt-Col J. K. Elliott](#), OBE, ED; [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 24 Aug 1908; surgeon; RMO 18 Bn Sep 1939–Dec 1940; DADMS 2 NZ Div Dec 1940–Nov 1941; surgeon 1 Gen Hosp Nov 1941–Jun 1943; CO 4 Fd Amb Jun 1943–Apr 1944; Orthopaedic Consultant (NZ) Jun 1944–Mar 1945.

onwards—5 Brigade getting first preference because there was still thought to be some prospect that the others might be evacuated— anxieties began to turn more and more on tools, ammunition, and weapons, though the question of rations also could never be neglected.

As early as 30 April [Creforce](#) was able to make a stock of grenades, 3-inch mortar bombs, and small-arms ammunition available, and these were passed on as quickly as possible to battalions. To facilitate such distribution the A/Q, Major [Peart](#),¹ set up his headquarters in [Galatas](#) on 1 May, along with DADOS (E), Major [Kelsey](#).² Headquarters of the ASC was at [Ay Marina](#), where also was the DID,³ the latter intent on its task of building up a dump of 60,000 rations in the area and another dump of 20,000 in the area of [22 Battalion](#). In this it was successful, and it had succeeded besides in dumping three days' rations with each unit by 14 May. The fact that only a very few trucks were available for these purposes makes the accomplishment all the more creditable.

The arrival of such artillery as the Division was to get has already been dealt with. On 4 May the Division received its allotment of 2800 coils of wire, 5800 pickets and 200 shovels, and these were shared out to battalions as fairly as might be, the supply to be supplemented by later allotments, of which enough did reach the various sectors for each unit to have the protection of some wiring.

Hopes were high at one stage for 35 Bren carriers for the divisional sector. But an untimely raid on [Suda Bay](#) brought the number down in actuality to ten. Supplies of machine guns and small-arms ammunition never really came up to necessity, though fortunately the weapons and ammunition captured from the enemy in the early days of battle made a useful supplement.

The weakness in transport was to some extent remedied by the allotment to the sector on 17 May of 36 15-cwt. trucks and seven motor cycles. The latter were of use mainly for despatch riders, while of the former four were retained at Divisional HQ and the others distributed. They proved of very great use at awkward moments in the battle but were, of course, too few to make the troops independent of marching.

¹ Lt-Col [J. N. Peart](#), DSO, m.i.d.; born [Collingwood](#), 12 Feb 1900; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn Nov 1941–Mar 1942; CO 26 Bn 1 May–20 Jun 1942,

29 Jun–4 Sep 1942; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

² Col J. O. Kelsey, MBE, m.i.d.; born [New Plymouth](#), 22 Nov 1904; sales manager and accountant; COME 2 NZEF 1941–42; ADOS 1942–45; DDOS NZ Corps Feb–Mar 1944.

³ Detail Issue Depot—moved to [Galatas](#) area, 14 May.

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In any battle much of what happens is explicable only if we take into account not only the strength and plans of each side but also what each side took to be the strength and plans of the other. This is the province of military intelligence. It has already been shown that in [Crete](#) the defence had appreciated with considerable success the probable landing places of the invasion and the manner of it. But it seems worth while at this point to consider how widespread among the troops before the battle was this estimate of the enemy's intentions.

In fact, if inference from unit war diaries is safe, the enemy's general intention was broadly known at a very early stage. On 30 April the war diaries of 5 Brigade, HQ NZA, and [23 Battalion](#) all record information from [Creforce](#) that the enemy was assembling troop-carriers, bombers, and gliders for the invasion of [Crete](#) and that this invasion might be expected for 1 or 2 May. A message from [General Freyberg](#) to the troops on 1 May also warned them to 'be ready for immediate action', and this he reinforced in subsequent addresses to the officers and NCOs of the various brigades in which he stressed the inevitability of attack. A [Creforce](#) instruction,¹ passed on by Division,² indicated that the attack would be by both land and sea, and a similar instruction from 5 Brigade emphasized the airborne aspect of the coming assault.³

Nor was what had already been learnt about the methods of enemy paratroops neglected. [Creforce](#) sent out useful reports on this subject and typed notes, no doubt based on the [Creforce](#) reports, were issued by Division on 13 May to the brigades. These notes recommended swift counter-attacks, the rounding up of paratroops on the aerodromes before the arrival of their airborne supports, and the swift

movement of troops to any threatened locality. The kinds of topographical feature that were important were enumerated and the basic principles useful for training emphasized.

So far as 5 Brigade was concerned at least, these notes were accompanied by a visit from Brigadier Puttick, who again dwelt on the probable character of the attack and warned everyone to be alert and ready to counter-attack.

The attack by this time was expected for any day between 17 and 19 May by an intelligence report communicated to the battalions on the 16th. According to it the enemy forces available were 11 Corps and 22 German Air Force Division; ⁴ there would be an airborne

¹ Creforce Operation Instruction No. 10, 4 May.

² Divisional Operation Order No. 5, 5 May.

³ Operation Instruction, No. 3, 4 May.

⁴ Names of enemy formations and units are in italics.

force of some 25,000 to 35,000 men and a seaborne force of 10,000 men. The first attack would be launched by 100 bombers and heavy fighters. Then 600 troop-carriers would follow up and there would be successive waves of paratroops. The seaborne attack would be escorted by the Italian navy. And the objectives of the enemy would be *Maleme*, *Canea*, *Retimo*, and the *Aghya* valley.

May the 17th came and went without invasion. Lest anyone become optimistically sceptical 5 Brigade warned its units next day that the enemy was nearly ready with his preparations. But 18 May also passed without attack. When on 19 May it still had not come there were some among the more sanguine, both in the front line and back in *Cairo*, who thought the attack would not come at all. But their doubts were not shared by General Wavell and were to have but a very short life.

It will be seen from all this that the nature and strength of the invasion was not

only appreciated with remarkable accuracy, but that by the time the battle was to begin there was little chance that even the obscurest fatigue man could be ignorant of what he was about to face. Thus whatever else the enemy might have in his favour he would not be able to claim surprise; nor should the defence be able to use it as excuse. Unluckily, however, though an accurate appreciation of enemy intentions is always invaluable and was so on this occasion, its full value largely depends on the defence's having time and material with which to prepare counter-measures. And in these respects, as has already been shown and as will appear only too often in the sequel, the defence was bitterly handicapped.

ix

Little now remains to be said of Divisional HQ itself. From its formation on 30 April with Brigadier Puttick in command and Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry as his GSO 1, it had been trying to grapple with a thousand problems and at the same time build itself out of little or nothing into the smooth-running engine needed to operate a fighting machine. The main features of this process will have already emerged from the narrative so far. The machine in action we shall see in the subsequent story. But for the sake of tidiness it will be convenient to give at this point a short account of its dealing with one of the problems that dogged its early days: that of evacuating the troops who would not be required in action.

At first it had been the understanding at [Creforce](#) that the troops from [Greece](#) would be evacuated to Egypt at the earliest opportunity and discussions were begun at Force HQ on 28 April on that assumption. Even after it became clear that this was too much to hope, so far as New Zealand Division was concerned the idea seems to have persisted that there would be a substantial reduction in the numbers remaining. ¹

No records of the conferences in which the problem must have been discussed are extant, however, and the underlying policy is best inferred from what in fact took place. The first step was a warning order sent out to the brigades on 1 May that all unarmed artillerymen would be under three hours' notice to move from 2 May. And on the following day most of those in this category began to make their way to Transit Camp A; while the Divisional Troops Supply Officer and a small advance party went to [Suda](#) Bay to await the first ship. At this time there were evidently

expectations still of a large-scale evacuation, for one document dated 4 May gives the strength of the Division on that date as 8300, but records the New Zealand strength expected for 14 May as 4500.

On 8 May there were further movements of unarmed or specialist troops towards the transit camp, notably of the Divisional Ammunition Company from [Oakes Force](#), HQ Divisional Supply Column, and 1 Echelon Divisional Supply and J Section. On the same day HQ ASC were also awaiting a movement order, and those of Divisional Signals who had not been allotted tasks received theirs.

Embarkation took place on the two following days on the [Rodi](#) and [Belray](#), which sailed on 9 May, and on the [City of Canterbury](#), which sailed on 10 May. These three vessels evacuated the unarmed men of [4 Field Regiment](#), [1 Survey Troop](#), the spare elements of Divisional Signals, [7 Anti-Tank Regiment](#), HQ NZA, elements of Divisional Supply, and HQ ASC. They reached Egypt without major mishap. A further evacuation took place with the departure of the [Nieuw Zeeland](#) on 14 May carrying the Divisional Ammunition Company and all the remaining elements of Divisional Supply, except 1 Echelon which was left in the transit camp and 2 Echelon which had stayed with 10 Brigade. This ship also arrived safely in Egypt. As it turned out, there were to be no further evacuations, and on 19 May the men of 1 Echelon Divisional Supply were organised for defence under Captain W. S. Page of 44 RTR, along with other miscellaneous troops left in the transit camp.

¹ WD A/Q 2 NZ Div.

CRETE

VI: GERMAN PREPARATIONS

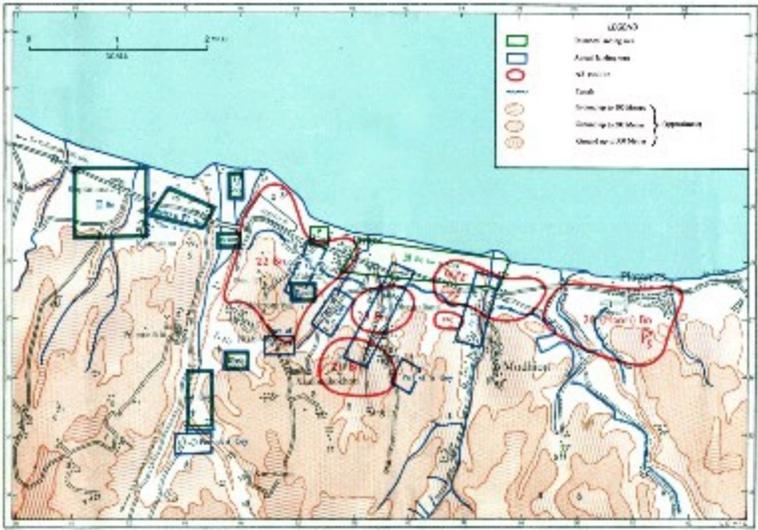
VI: German Preparations

All the features that made Crete valuable to the British made it desirable for the Germans to drive them out. Nor were there only negative reasons. As 12 Army Strategic Survey puts it: 'If the English were driven from it the Constanza- Corinth-Italy sea-route—vital for the Axis—would be safe, the British fleet would be completely shot out of the Aegean, the British power in the Levant would be appreciably weakened, and our air force would have an excellent base for attacks on Egypt and the Suez Canal.'¹

Indeed, on 26 October 1940, when the operations staff of the German High Command had first considered the implications of the expected Italian attack on Greece, General Jodl had taken the line that such an attack would certainly lead to a British occupation of Crete and that therefore the Italians should seize the island at the same time as they launched their invasion of the mainland. But there was no time for this to be attempted.² And the day before, on 25 October, General Halder had supported the view that the desert supply problem could never be solved until Alexandria was a German base, and that this in turn depended on mastery of the Mediterranean and possession of Crete by means of air landing.³

The British occupation of Crete caused the Germans concern, for they now feared bombing attacks from Cretan bases on the Roumanian oilfields. Plans were therefore considered for occupying continental Greece and establishing air bases which could be used to counter those of the British; and by the end of the year these were extended to envisage an occupation of the whole of Greece. But in April 4 Air Fleet, which was responsible for the operations against Yugoslavia and Greece, had come to the conclusion that Crete itself was of such importance that it should be invaded. Conferences took place between the CGS of the German Air Force, the CGS of 11 Air Corps, and the GOC of 7 Air Division. And on 15 April as a result of these General Löhr,⁴ GOC 4 Air Fleet, submitted a plan to Goering who in turn submitted it to Hitler.⁵

In the preliminary discussions with Goering, Student ⁶ himself had talks with Goering and his CGS on 20 April, and on 21 April with Hitler. ⁷ In Student's conception the capture of Crete was a stepping stone. From it Cyprus would be invaded, and then Alexandria and the Suez Canal. So far as Crete itself was



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

¹ 12 Army's Campaign in the Balkans: A Strategic Survey.

² General Greiner's Entwürfe, Vol. 1, p. 167.

³ General Halder's diary.

⁴ Col-Gen Alexander Löhr; then aged 56; C-in-C 4 Air Fleet; C-in-C 12 Army, 1942; C-in-C Army Group 'E', 1944; tried in Yugoslavia for complicity in mass murders of Yugoslav civilians and executed 27 Feb 1947.

⁵ Report by 4 Air Fleet. General Student claims credit for the idea of a parachute attack and says that Hitler was at first reluctant but was finally convinced. This is not necessarily inconsistent with the account given above; for the CGS of 11 Air Corps would naturally put forward the idea of his commander, General Student. See 11 Air Corps battle report and proceedings at the trial of General Student.

⁶ Col-Gen Kurt Student; then aged 51; GOC [11 Air Corps](#); C-in-C [1 Para Army](#), Feb 1944; C-in-C [Army Group 'H'](#), Nov 1944; foremost in developing parachute and air-landing techniques; badly wounded in [Holland](#), 1940; organised rescue of Mussolini, 1943; tried at Luneburg and sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment; sentence quashed two months later.

⁷ Interrogation of General Student, 1945. See Supplementary Note to EDS/Apprec/1/ Supp III, Developments in the [Balkans](#).

concerned [Hitler](#) was convinced—it is not clear that he believed in the operations to follow, though Student claims that it was only the heavy losses in [Crete](#) that brought about their cancellation.

On 25 April [Hitler](#) issued Directive 28: 'An operation to occupy the island of [Crete](#) (Operation MERCURY) is to be prepared with the object of using [Crete](#) as an air base against [Britain](#) in the Eastern [Mediterranean](#).'

At this stage [22 Airborne Division](#) was to be used; but on 28 April it was decided that, to avoid delay to the invasion of [Russia](#), a mountain division should be used instead. [Seventh Air Division](#) would supply the paratroops, and [11 Air Corps](#) would be used as it was not required for the first stages of the invasion of [Russia](#). The attack on [Crete](#) was to take place on 17 May, support would be given by [8 Air Corps](#),¹ and a sea invasion would be launched concurrently with the aid of Admiral South-East.

There were difficulties, however. Greek airfields and ground organisation were inadequate and would have been so even without such damage as the withdrawing British force had been able to inflict. The trained units which would normally have been responsible for creating that efficiency on the ground without which efficiency in the air is impossible were earmarked for [Russia](#). [Fourth Air Fleet](#), therefore, was dependent on civilian and prisoner-of-war labour for much of what had to be done.

Then, again, the meagre Greek railways had been made useless by the Germans' own bombers or by the retiring British. Sea traffic was the only practicable alternative for supply; for the roads were poor and the bridges often blown, while all air transport that could be spared from [Russia](#) was needed for the attack itself. Even supply by sea was difficult. There was little tonnage, especially in tankers, and

harbourage was inadequate.

The individual formations also had their problems. Eighth Air Corps was to provide fighter and bomber support for the attack. But while getting itself into a state of readiness it had other tasks: protection of supply ships, sea reconnaissance, and preparatory raids on Crete. Its success in these tasks was considerable, though perhaps less than might be expected when the British weakness in aircraft and AA is taken into account.

Unlike 8 Air Corps, 11 Air Corps was able to give all its attention to preparations for the main attack. As it would have to carry through the actual landing of glider troops, paratroops, and airborne forces, considerable preliminary concentrations were

¹ Commanded by General (later Field Marshal) Wolfram Freiherr von Richtofen; then aged 46; GOC [8 Air Corps](#); GOC 1 Air Corps, 1941–42; C-in-C [4 Air Fleet](#), 1942; C-in-C 2 Air Fleet, 1943–44.

necessary; the more especially as 7 Air Division, the chief component, was not in [Greece](#) when the decision to invade was taken.

The Commander of 7 Air Division, Lieutenant-General Suessmann, ¹ had been sent to [Bulgaria](#) on 26 March along with the staff of the division. Under him was 2 Parachute Regiment which he was to have ready for an attack on Lemnos. This proved unnecessary, and in the event the regiment was used for the descent on the [Corinth](#) Canal on 26 April. By 2 May it was concentrated, with a battalion of 3 Parachute Regiment, near [Corinth](#).

On 20 April the rest of the division was still in [Germany](#), and so were the corps troops of [11 Air Corps](#). Advance elements left for Roumania within the next week and by 8 May the whole force was concentrated there. Thence it moved by road and under [12 Army](#) command down to [Attica](#), the last detachments arriving by 14 May. In Attica the troops were stationed about the airfields from which the invasion was to take off.

The normal infantry component—as distinct from paratroops—of 11 Air Corps, 5

Mountain Division and elements of 6 Mountain Division which were already in [Greece](#), were allotted to General Student. These were stiffened by an armoured unit and a motor cycle battalion from 5 Armoured Division, by an engineer battalion and two AA units.

Under command of [11 Air Corps](#) also were nine bomber groups specially adapted for transport duties and one for glider operations. These groups, after action in [Greece](#) or [Yugoslavia](#), had been withdrawn to [Germany](#) early in May for refitting and reservicing. But by 14 May they were again concentrated round [Athens](#) with a total of about 500 serviceable Junkers 52.

While [4 Air Fleet](#) and its two corps were busy with their preparations, the sea component of the invasion also had its preliminary measures to take. Admiral South-East's main task was to get together the vessels which would ferry arms, men, and supplies to the support of the troops landed by air. To this end he succeeded in assembling two flotillas of motor vessels or caiques which were to carry the first wave of heavy arms and supplies; two steamer flotillas which were to take further heavy weapons, tanks and AA; and a number of German and Italian minesweepers.

By 14 May the troops had been assembled and were ready for action. But the ground and supply organisation without which they could not function was not yet complete. The first necessity was the seizure, allotment, and preparation of airfields. Those on

¹ Lt-Gen Wilhelm Suessmann; then aged 50; served in [Poland](#) and in [Norway](#), where he had to swim from the sinking Bluecher in Oslo Fiord; killed when his glider crashed on the island of Aegina, 20 May 1941.

the mainland had fallen automatically when W Force evacuated [Greece](#); those on the islands had next to be taken over: Kithera and Antikithera as AA bases; Melos for supply and air-sea rescue; and [Scarpanto](#) as a Stuka base. The airfields were then allotted to the formations, [11 Air Corps](#) getting [Corinth](#), [Megara](#), [Tanagra](#), [Topolia](#), [Dadion](#), [Elevisis](#) and [Phaleron](#), of which the last was later transferred to [8 Air Corps](#).

The High Command had estimated that the battle would be of ten days'

duration. Major-General Seibt, in charge of supplies at [11 Air Corps](#), accordingly planned for the provision of 2,500,000 gallons of fuel and lubricant, a sufficient quantity of rations, medical equipment, jumping gear, and the thousand and one other items required. All this had to be brought from bases in [Germany](#), and as the troops moving south monopolised the damaged and difficult roads it was necessary to use sea transport for the last stages of the journey. It was not until 17 May that unloading at [Piraeus](#) was complete. Moreover, two of the fuel ships had to come from [Italy](#) and this was a further cause of delay. Only intense effort got the last of the fuel to the airfields on 19 May. The result was that the invasion date had to be postponed to the 20th.

German military and air intelligence had been active in this interim. As soon as the conquest of [Greece](#) was complete it became imperative that as much as possible should be found out about the garrison and defences of Crete. For this purpose two reconnaissance units of [8 Air Corps](#) were ordered to keep continuous watch on shipping movements round the island, to discover what shipping was in the ports, and to locate the [RAF](#) stations. A third reconnaissance unit, from [11 Air Corps](#), was to ascertain the whereabouts of airfields, fortifications, artillery positions, and troop locations. At the same time agents were set to work to get similar information and prisoners taken in [Greece](#) were interrogated.

As a result the Germans built up the following picture. The garrison they appreciated to be the equivalent of a British division of two infantry brigades, one artillery regiment, and an unknown number of troops evacuated from [Greece](#). Because shipping movements always took place at night, they could not decide whether troops were being evacuated or whether such movement as took place was connected with supply only. They seem to have suspected that some evacuation was going on.

The three main airfields were identified without difficulty, though the number of aircraft using them was overestimated. Anti-aircraft defences were considered to be strong round [Canea](#), [Suda](#) Bay, and the airfields; but photographic reconnaissance revealed little in the way of fortification. Nor do the dispositions of the defending infantry seem to have been located with any accuracy.

The attitude of the Cretan population was also of some interest. The High

Command, with a characteristic German misjudgment of immaterial forces, was inclined to believe that the Greeks either sympathised with the Axis or, for the sake of better terms, would at least be neutral. According to [11 Air Corps](#) an attempt was even made on 10 May to make contact with pacifist circles on the island through the intelligence service of Admiral Canaris.¹ This does not seem to have succeeded; but even so the attitude of the [Cretans](#) as it was actually to reveal itself must have come to the enemy as something of a shock.

The plan that lay behind these preparations was not reached without argument. At first two alternatives were canvassed, one favoured by [4 Air Fleet](#) and the other by [11 Air Corps](#). The first favoured concentration of both [7 Air Division](#) and [5 Mountain Division](#) on the [Maleme- Canea](#) sector. This would have the advantage that always goes with concentration of forces: it would mean that if the defence proved stronger than was expected there would be strength enough to deal with it; and it would enable [8 Air Corps](#) to devote all its effort to the protection of the ground forces in a single area.

General Student, however, favoured simultaneous descents at the seven most important points, of which four were [Maleme](#), [Canea](#), [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#). The advantage of this would be that, if the landings succeeded, the main centres of defence would have been seized.

There were, of course, disadvantages in both proposals. If the first plan met difficulties and the attack was held up in the hills, the defenders would have the opportunity to use their airfields in the east of the island. But the second plan had the weaknesses implicit in any dispersion of forces; and not only would the troops on the ground be divided into a number of different and widely separated groups which could not give one another mutual support, but the air effort of [8 Air Corps](#) would be divided as well.

The High Command of the [German Air Force](#) finally adopted a plan which aimed to have the best of both. The [Maleme- Canea](#) sector would be occupied and consolidated during the morning of the first day, and in the afternoon the eastern sector— [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#). In this way [8 Air Corps](#) could bring its full weight to bear at one time in each sector, while all the airfields would be denied to the defence.

Available to carry out this plan were the following:

- (i) **11 Air Corps**. This consisted of a reconnaissance unit; ten groups of transport aircraft; the **Assault Regiment**;
-

¹ 'Operation Crete' (Battle Report of **11 Air Corps**), pp. 10–11.

7 Air Division with its three parachute regiments and divisional troops; 5 Mountain Division with three mountain regiments (one from 6 Mountain Division); and corps troops consisting of an armoured battalion, a motor-cycle battalion, and two AA batteries.

- (ii) **8 Air Corps**. This consisted of three groups of Dornier 17 bombers; two groups of Junkers 88 bombers; one group of Heinkel III bombers; three groups of Stuka dive-bombers; three groups of fighter-bombers; three groups of fighters; and two reconnaissance units. ¹
- (iii) Admiral South-East. Under his command were two flotillas of motor vessels and two of steamers; two destroyers; twelve torpedo boats; speedboats and minesweepers.

Eleventh Air Corps had a total of about 22,750 men available for landing. Of these, 750 men from the élite **Assault Regiment** were to land by glider, 10,000 were to land by parachute, 5000 were to be airborne, and 7000 were to go by sea (2000 of them paratroops and the remainder from 5 Mountain Division). The various transport groups of aircraft gave a total of about 500. And in addition to these were 70 or 80 gliders with an appropriate number of Junkers 52 adapted to tow them.

To support these **8 Air Corps** had a total of about 650 aircraft: 280 bombers, 150 dive-bombers, 90 twin-engined fighters, 90 single-engined fighters, and 40 reconnaissance aircraft.

The roles of the formations were laid down in accordance with the general plan. Eleventh Air Corps was to operate in two waves, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The first wave was to occupy the airfield at **Maleme** and the defence positions round **Canea** and **Suda Bay**. The second was to seize the airfields at **Retimo** and **Heraklion**. This would enable airborne troops to land on the captured airfields on the second day. The attacks on **Canea** and **Suda Bay** would neutralise the control of the defence at the centre and pin down any reserves concentrated there. Once the

first paratroops had been landed they would be reinforced by further parachute descents, by landings from transport aircraft of airborne troops, and by seaborne troops. Eventually the whole 11 Air Corps would be ashore.

Eighth Air Corps had the tasks of preliminary air reconnaissance and softening attacks. On the morning of the actual invasion it was to renew these preparatory attacks, destroy what remained of

¹ Also under command 4 Air Fleet were aircraft for minelaying in the Suez Canal, sea reconnaissance and sea rescue.

the RAF, and neutralise the ground defences. It was also to protect the landings of the first and second waves of 11 Air Corps and support them in their ground fighting. Finally, it was to cover the seaborne troops and destroy any British naval forces in Cretan waters.

The preparatory attack by 8 Air Corps had already begun on 14 May with the object of destroying the RAF, silencing the AA batteries—especially the one on the cruiser York in Suda Bay—and preventing the movement of shipping. By 19 May this policy had been largely successful: the RAF had withdrawn its few aircraft and shipping could move only by night. Suda Bay was full of sunk vessels and much badly needed equipment had been lost. ¹ But the AA batteries were still in action.

For the main battle on 20 May 8 Air Corps had its timetable worked out with the greatest possible precision and detail. Fighters and bombers were to protect the approach of the transport aircraft, their unloading of paratroops and their return, against attack from the air. British ground defences were to be kept down and weakened by bombing, dive-bombing, and strafing until just before the first invasion wave arrived. And special instructions were issued for co-operation thereafter between ground forces and fighters. The whole complicated operation was worked out to the most meticulous standards of German staff planning.

The ships under Admiral South-East also had a role which was considered essential. For it was thought that communications between the mainland and Crete should be established as soon as possible so that heavy weapons, motor transport,

and supplies could be brought in at an early stage. It was calculated that [Suda Bay](#),

¹ List of ships sunk or damaged in [Suda Bay](#) between 27 April and 27 May 1941:

Warships

18 May	Corvette Salvia	Damaged by bomb
20 May	Minesweeper Widnes	Bombed and beached
22 May	8-inch cruiser York	Sunk by bomb (severely damaged by E-boats 26 March)
c. 23 May	A-S whaler Kos 23	Sunk by bomb

In addition five motor torpedo boats were sunk by aircraft, destroyed, or beached in [Suda Bay](#) between 23 May and 2 June.

Merchant Ships (by bomb unless otherwise specified)

29 Apr	Greek ship Konistra	3537 tons	Sunk
	Greek ship Elsi	1433 tons	Sunk
3 May	British SS Araybank	7258 tons	Sunk (salvaged after war)
14 May	British SS Dalesman	6343 tons	Sunk (salvaged by Germans and recovered after war)
16 May	British SS Logician	5993 tons	Sunk (salvaged after war)
	Greek ship Kythera	1070 tons	Sunk
	Greek ship Nicolaou Ourania	6397 tons	Sunk
17 May	British tanker SS Eleonora Maersk	10,694 tons	Sunk (salvaged after war)
	Greek ship Themoni	5719 tons	Sunk
27 May	Greek ship Antonios	1187 tons	Sunk

[Canea](#), and [Heraklion](#) would not be clear of mines until the third day. This was why the two motor flotillas were collected; for it was planned to avoid using the

ports and to reinforce the paratroops on the first and second days by landing on the coasts. One flotilla was to reach the open coast west of [Maleme](#) on the afternoon of 20 May and the other was to land troops on the coast east of [Heraklion](#) on 21 May. Each was to carry a mountain battalion, as well as heavy weapons and supplies.

The preparations for mounting this formidable assault took longer than was originally expected, and so the intended date of 15 May had first to be changed to 17 May and then to the 20th. By the evening of 19 May all arrangements were complete, the paratroops duly briefed were bivouacked not far from the aircraft which were to drop them next day on the other side of the water, the aircraft themselves were all in readiness, and only the dawn had still to be waited for.

CRETE

CHAPTER 3 – FIRST DAY OF BATTLE: 20 MAY

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CRETE

I: MALEME AND 22 BATTALION

I: Maleme and 22 Battalion

i

The dawn of Tuesday, 20 May, like many earlier dawns on [Crete](#), gave back to the twisted olive trees their daytime grey and revealed beneath them men standing to their arms. As the light increased the noise from the company areas of cooks preparing breakfast grew louder, and the troops, the end of stand-to approaching, began to feel in their pockets for the cigarettes they would roll and soon be smoking. The air attacks that also came with the daylight seemed no more than an assurance that this day would pass like others. So at stand-down men merely grounded their weapons, lit their cigarettes, and sniffing the air from the company kitchens or cocking a wary eye upwards prepared circumspectly to join breakfast queues with their dixies. It would be another day of sunlight, of route marches with a swim at the end of them, of putting final patches to the defences, or of rehearsing company tactics on the olive-clad hillsides. There was scepticism enough for those who declared that today would be the day.

Nevertheless, it was the day. Already by half past seven the attack from the air was intense enough for those in the vital areas between [Canea](#) and [Maleme](#) to realise that something unusual was on the way. By eight o'clock there was no longer room for doubt. Swarms of enemy fighters and bombers were in the air, battering and bespattering the areas chosen for landing. More significant still, a sight new to all those who saw it but impossible to misinterpret, gliders came sweeping in towards [Maleme](#), the [Aghya](#) reservoir, and [Canea](#).

The cry of 'Gliders!' had hardly passed from mouth to mouth when the gliders themselves had circled swiftly in and disappeared from the view of all but those who overlooked their landing places, and who now, with no time to waste on wonder, looked down the sights of their weapons to see if a bullet fired had reached its mark or to fix the target for a second.

One portent succeeded another. Hard on the heels of the gliders came the Junkers 52 transports—some of them already hovering hugely over the threatened areas and disdaining the small-arms fire that came crackling up at them, others coming straight in from the sea, ominous and purposeful. The whole air throbbed with them, and in and out among them snarled the fighters, strafing the ground so heavily that it was almost impossible to move except in short starts and rushes. And then, stranger even than the gliders, the air over [Maleme](#) and [Galatas](#) and in the [Prison Valley](#) was suddenly full of different-coloured parachutes, each supporting its man or its canister of weapons and supplies. In spite of all the innocent associations of such a display of colours—a ballroom at the height of the dance's gaiety when the balloons are released from a balcony on the circling couples below—the sight was inexpressibly sinister. For each man dangling carried a death, his own if not another's.

Even as they dropped they were within range and the crackle of rifle fire and Bren guns rose to a crescendo Wildly waving their legs, some already firing their Schmeissers, the parachutists came down, in the terraced vineyards, crashing through the peaceful olive boughs, in the yards of houses, on roofs, in the open fields where the short barley hid them. Many found graves where they found earth. Others, ridding themselves of their harness, crept cautiously in search of comrades, only to meet enemies. East of the airfield or in [Galatas](#) they were, more often than not, in the middle of the defenders and few were to escape. But where they landed out of range—as in the [Aghya](#) plain or west of the Tavronitis—there was the chance to collect more weapons and ammunition from the canisters, to organise in their sections, to attack. The day had indeed begun.

ii

These were the enemy of the first wave, that attacking the sector from [Canea](#) to [Maleme](#). Eleventh Air Corps had been divided into three groups: [Group West](#) to attack [Maleme](#), [Group Centre Canea](#), its environs, and [Retimo](#); and [Group East Heraklion](#). [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) would be attacked by the second wave, not to land till the afternoon.

[Group West](#)'s ground forces consisted of the [Assault Regiment](#) ¹ (less half a

If the landing places tabulated are compared with the map it will be seen that the main weight of the [Assault Regiment](#) was to be so distributed round the airfield that a heavy converging attack could quickly be brought to bear. The plan also allowed for exploitation by the glider parties of their superior speed in coming into action. Thus Major Braun's glider party, landing just south of the Tavronitis bridge, was to seize it and prevent its destruction. It would then be used to bring up the paratroops landed farther west. Similarly 3 Company of Major Koch's party, landing at the Tavronitis mouth, was to destroy the AA positions there and thus ease the way for the transport aircraft. And 4 Company, if successful in taking Point 107, would have secured the feature which

¹ A group consisted of four squadrons, each of 12 Ju52s together with additional aircraft for HQ personnel, supply, and reconnaissance.

² 1 and 2 Coys of I Bn were employed elsewhere than [Maleme](#). Exact figures for the strength and armament of the Assault Regt are not available. A company appears to have been about 150 strong, with four companies to a battalion. The existence of a IV Bn and therefore of 15 and 16 Coys is exceptional, and it is not clear whether in this case the two extra companies were organised on an infantry company pattern. All the infantry were heavily armed with automatic weapons.

the enemy must have seen from the first was the key to the whole position.

Since the paratroops would require more time and freedom to form up, their landing places were evidently intended to be far enough away from the defence to provide these conditions. II Battalion, south of [Kolimbari](#), would be able to afford protection to the west until Meindl wanted them for the main attack on the airfield; and once they were involved in this, protection to the west would fall to Muerbe detachment.

Similarly IV Battalion, landing west of the Tavronitis and out of range to the main defences, would be quickly available to give artillery support for the main attack. Protection from the south would be provided by 16 Company, which was to move towards Palaiokhora as soon as it was safely landed. ¹

The enemy also assumed that the area east of the airfield would be as clear of defenders as that west of it proved to be. Thus by dropping III Battalion there he hoped that it would be able to form up without difficulty, send its main body to attack the airfield from the west, and send out other forces east to make contact with [Group Centre](#).

Such, then, was the plan for [Group West](#). The operation was to begin with the glider landings at 7.15 a.m. or by our time at a quarter past eight. ²

iii

The map of intended and actual landing areas will reveal the strength and the weaknesses of this plan. III Battalion, landing east of the airfield, was bound to get into trouble with [23 Battalion](#) and the auxiliary detachments which, apparently unknown to enemy intelligence, were strong there. II and IV Battalions, landing well west of the Tavronitis, would find no opposition directly beneath them and would be able to form up with relatively little difficulty. The role of the glider troops of I Battalion was more hazardous. Success would depend partly on surprise, partly on the luck with which they landed initially—whether in view or not of [22 Battalion](#).

The enemy had, however, the advantage of one circumstance that must have been a blessing, partly unconvenanted. This was the condition of the AA defence on the airfield, which the plan reveals to have been the main objective.

¹ The objectives of the flank guards may seem odd. The most likely explanation is that the enemy feared that reinforcements might come by [Kastelli](#) or [Palaiokhora](#) once [Maleme](#) was revealed as a main objective. Though not strong, the flank guard would be able to delay such reinforcements and give warning of their approach.

² To reconcile the two time systems, all German times as given in enemy sources will hereafter have an hour added.

The airfield was defended by the six mobile Bofors and the four static Bofors of 156 LAA Battery RA, and 7 LAA Battery RAA; and the two 3-inch AA guns of C HAA Battery, [Royal Marines](#). The effective plan range of the Bofors did not exceed 800

yards, and to cover the area effectively they had to be sited close to the airfield. Complete concealment was impossible. Consequently the enemy had the gun sites plotted with reasonable accuracy and they were subjected to a heavy pounding for days beforehand. Moreover, although the lie of the land made it relatively easy for the guns to be so disposed that they could deal with air attacks coming in from the sea, they were inevitably very vulnerable to attacks made overland from the south and south-west. And it was from these quarters that attack usually came.

The two 3-inch guns were sited on a hill about 300 feet high and had difficulty in engaging aircraft which flew in at heights of from 300 to 600 feet—a task for which guns of this calibre are in any case unsuited.

Finally, there was some confusion in the orders—the absence of local unity of command has already been mentioned—if we are to judge from the various reports and war diaries. The most probable explanation seems to come from Captain Johnson ¹ OC C Company of [22 Battalion](#). He says that for several days he and Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew had been pointing out that some of the AA guns were very badly sited and had been suggesting that they should be withdrawn to less vulnerable sites. They had also requested that some of the guns be asked to play a silent role until the troop-carriers appeared. The orders from Force HQ for both these actions to be taken arrived about 3 a.m. on 20 May and it was then too late for any to be moved. But the order for silence may have been misunderstood and may be responsible for a widespread impression that not all the guns came into action.

iv

For the ground troops, then, in the general area of 5 Brigade the air bombardment began shortly after six o'clock in the morning, varying in intensity in different places but reaching its maximum on [22 Battalion](#). The first phase, violent as it was, was not so exceptional that it might not have been the regular morning tattoo; for, as Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew says: 'The enemy air force had "drilled" us into expecting his bombing at the same time each

¹ Maj S. H. Johnson, ED; [Auckland](#); born [Whangarei](#), 5 Oct 1910; school-teacher p.w. Nov 1941; NZ Regular Force 1947–.

morning.' ¹ After the end of this first phase, about half past seven or a little before, ² there was a lull and the troops stood down and began their breakfast.

Breakfast had hardly finished, however, when the second and more intense phase of the air attack broke out, about ten minutes to eight. The whole of the area occupied by 5 Brigade forward battalions was savagely worked over; and although the airfield itself, for obvious reasons, was not bombed, its perimeter took the heaviest pounding of all, until the rising clouds of dust and smoke, themselves visible for miles, made visibility in the immediate neighbourhood very restricted.

It was not only the bombers that were so busy. To the men on the ground the air seemed full of fighters and fighter-bombers and many a man that day felt as if particular planes had been told off to give him particular attention. Movement outside cover was so difficult that in the course of a hundred yards a runner might have to go to ground a dozen times. And even within deep gullies or covered by the kindly olives a man outside his slit trench stood more than a sporting chance of being hit by the hailing machine-gun bullets.

While this attack was still at its maximum, and under cover of it, the first gliders came in to land. Both their numbers and the exact time of their landing are difficult to ascertain precisely, because the defending troops were prevented by the dust or the rough character of the ground from exact observation and because memories differ. New Zealand eye-witnesses say between forty and one hundred came down in the [Maleme](#) area; while a calculation based on the fact that the Germans at this time used 15 gliders for a company favours the probability that about fifty were used at [Maleme](#). The higher figure must certainly be an exaggeration for which the excitement, the bad visibility, and double counting would sufficiently account. Of these fifty gliders at least three landed south and east of the airfield, while the rest landed near the mouth of the Tavronitis or along its bed.

Eleventh Air Corps states that one group of gliders landed at the time ordered—by our reckoning 8.15 a.m.—and another a quarter of an hour later. Reports from [22 Battalion](#) men vary between 8.25 and 9.15. It is likely enough that there was some margin between the landing of the first glider and the last, and it is probably safe to say that the landings took place between a quarter past eight and a quarter past nine, most of them being over by nine o'clock.

¹ Report by Lt-Col Andrew.

² Various times are given and no doubt are approximately true for particular areas. But 7.30 a.m. may be taken as a useful average.

The main landing place, the bed of the dry Tavronitis, was well chosen. Much of it was dead ground to the troops on the slopes above, and in some cases the crews—ten to a glider—were able to form up and either go straight towards their objectives or take up positions on the high ground west of the river. One crew landed more or less on top of a machine-gun post and destroyed it. Others, as will be seen, were able to put the AA guns on the west edge of the airfield out of action. Those that landed east and south were fewer and less dangerous.

Nothing in the German orders suggests that the paratroops were to be landed later than the gliders. The same zero hour is given for the whole [Assault Regiment](#). It is probable enough, however, that within the regiment different units had different times; and it is possible that the glider troops, whose specific tasks may well have had a time priority, were landed earlier than the paratroops and were able to give them some covering fire. At all events the bombing had not ended and it was still only a quarter past eight when the big Junkers 52 began to drop their loads, each between twelve and fifteen men from heights of from 300 to 600 feet; and west, south, and east of the airfield the first wave of paratroops landed.

Paratroops, like glider crews, landed with weapons. But whereas the glider troops could go into action as a formed body as soon as they got themselves and their heavier weapons out of the glider, the parachutists landed as individuals, depending for the most part on the Schmeissers and grenades that they carried, and needed time before they could collect and fight as a team. Their heavier equipment, moreover, had to be got from separately dropped canisters and so there was an initial period of vulnerability—perhaps ten minutes, though not always as long. The defence took full advantage of this and the still more vulnerable moments before landing, when the parachutist still dangled and wriggled in his parachute and floated downwards. All accounts agree on the slaughter that took place at this stage. Nevertheless, enough survived, particularly to the west of the airfield and out of

small-arms range, for a strong attack to develop quickly against the [Maleme](#) positions.

In the broad sense the pattern of the enemy landings followed the plan already tabulated, though exceptions will be noted; but the collisions with the defenders that followed soon forced many adjustments to the original programme.

The gliders of Lieutenant Plessen's 3 Company came down at the river mouth, according to plan, and overwhelmed the AA crews there. ¹ But an attempt to develop the success into an attack on the airfield itself failed 'against strong enemy opposition'. ² Plessen himself was killed while trying to make contact with the other glider troops to the south.

Major Koch, with the HQ of I Battalion and 4 Company, had less success. Their gliders landed along the south-east and south-west slopes of Point 107 and the crews could not give one another the necessary support. They lost heavily to the defenders dug in above them and Koch himself was severely wounded. Only remnants made their way to the area of the road bridge where they joined the main body. The 'tented camps' on which they had been directed were found to be more or less empty.

The nine gliders of Braun's detachment—carrying a party from Regimental HQ and elements of III Battalion—were landed according to plan directly south of the road bridge in the bed of the Tavronitis. There they came under heavy fire from D Company [22 Battalion](#), and Braun was killed. None the less his men managed to seize the bridge intact and overrun some MG posts on the east bank. The Regimental HQ party seems to have hived off at this point, or not long afterwards, and established itself in Ropianiana to the west of the bridge.

While these glider landings were going on the paratroops also had begun their descent. II Battalion landed south of [Kolimbari](#) according to plan and, as the area was undefended, was subjected to no interference. One of its companies, 6 Company, was sent west to guard the pass near Koukouli and had severe fighting with [Cretans](#) en route. The detachment put down east of [Kastelli](#) under Lieutenant Muerbe at once ran into bitter fighting with 1 Greek Regiment and lost its commander and 53 killed, the remainder being wounded and taken prisoner. ³ This

left 5, 7, and 8 Companies at General Meindl's disposal for the support of the glider troops in the Tavronitis.

In addition to these three companies he could rely on some support from 13, 14, and 15 Companies of IV Battalion. These three companies landed west of the Tavronitis, and therefore without ground opposition. Many of their heavy weapons and

¹ Lt R. B. Sinclair, who commanded 22 Bn's 15 Platoon on this front, says that the crews of the four Bofors in his area had rifles but no ammunition, and that their commander had rejected his proposal to put them in positions where they would have tied in with his defences. Capt Johnson, OC C Coy, says that although these four guns may have been knocked out by glider troops the other AA guns in the area kept on firing till guns or crews or both were knocked out.

² [11 Air Corps Report](#). The German reports usually describe all opposition as strong, even where we know it to have been negligible or non-existent. In this case the stout reaction of 15 Platoon probably deserves the description.

³ See [p. 173](#).

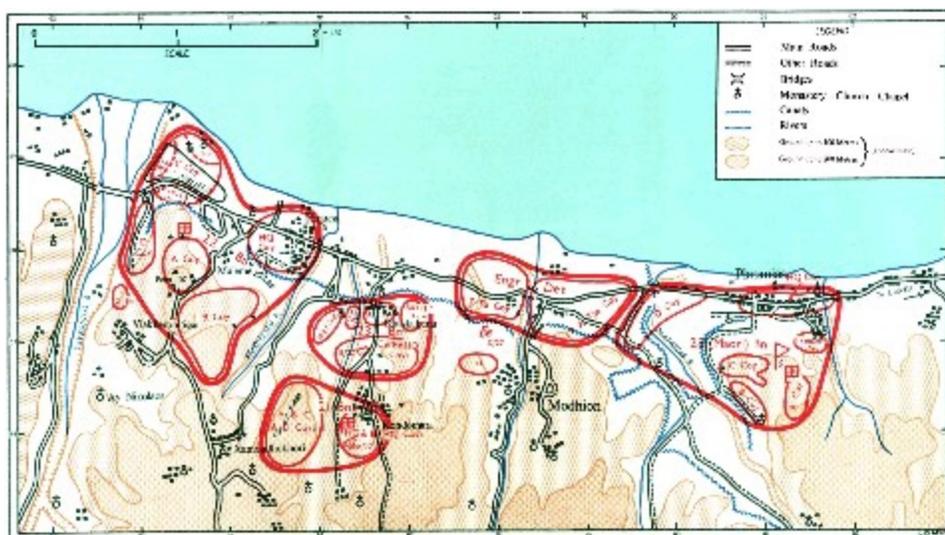
motor cycles had been damaged in landing, but enough were salvaged to make the unit a valuable aid in the attack. The battalion's fourth company, 16 Company, made its way south on landing to the serpentine at Voukolies and established itself there as a flank guard, though constantly troubled by [Cretans](#).

Thus Meindl had no great reason to be dissatisfied with the initial situation of his forces to the west of the aerodrome. The weakness of his plan, however, had lain in the division of his forces. If anything went wrong with the landing of III Battalion to the east of the airfield it would be difficult for him to pull his regiment together. And something had indeed gone wrong. The battalion was duly landed on the rising ground south of [Maleme- Platanias](#) road which had been assumed to be free of enemy. Here its companies at once found themselves in a hornet's nest, for these slopes were held by the reserve battalions of 5 Brigade— [21 Battalion](#), [23 Battalion](#),

and the NZE detachment. Two-thirds of the battalion were killed along with all the officers; and the remainder, though of considerable nuisance value, were able neither to launch the intended attack on the airfield from the east nor to make their way east to join [Group Centre](#).

Meindl had jumped at half past eight and taken command. He must at once have appreciated that, since Koch had failed to seize Point 107, the best prospect of progress lay in exploiting the success at the road bridge and trying to develop it into an attack which would take Point 107 from the north-west. At the same time he evidently felt that a flanking move from the south might be worth attempting. He could assume that his own flanks to the west and south were reasonably safe and, in any case, if he were to get on with his task would have to do so. It is not known how soon he had news of III Battalion, but obviously his best course was to press home the attack from the west with or without support from the east. For forces with which to launch it he had Braun's group already engaged; the remnants of Koch's group if they had yet begun to make their way down into the riverbed; the remains of Plessen's company from the river mouth, which cannot have had many casualties; 5, 7, and 8 Companies from II Battalion; and the heavy weapons of IV Battalion with 15 Company as well.

He therefore sent 8 Company and the available troops of IV Battalion to support Major Braun at the bridge by attacking on either side of it; and ordered 5 and 7 Companies under Major Stentzler to cross the river south of [22 Battalion's](#) left flank and thence attack north-east towards the heights below Point 107.



MALEME, 5 Brigade, 20 MAY



MALEME, 22 BATTALION, 20 MAY

It is now time to turn to [22 Battalion](#).¹ As [Maleme](#) was so important and as, owing to the difficulty of movement, the shortage of reserves, and the early breakdown of communications, the story

¹ See map. The platoon of 21 Bn on the Tavronitis bed to the south will be treated for this day as part of 22 Bn.

of the unit on 20 May is very much one of companies and platoons fighting in isolation, it will be necessary first to go into considerable detail about their dispositions.

The 22nd Battalion, then, on the day the battle opened had a strength of 20 officers and roughly 600 other ranks. It consisted of Battalion HQ and five rifle companies; for Headquarters Company fought as a rifle company. Battalion HQ was a little to the north of Point 107 and had with it a small reserve consisting of a platoon of A Company and miscellaneous HQ personnel. This, with the two I tanks and the carrier platoon, was the only reserve available to Colonel Andrew.

The greater part of Headquarters Company was posted round [Pirgos](#)¹ village under Lieutenant [Beaven](#).² But its carrier platoon under Captain [Forster](#)³ had been put directly under battalion command and was stationed in the olive trees near the

Maleme- Vlakheronitissa road; and its pioneer platoon under Lieutenant Wadey ⁴ was at the AMES near Xamoudhokhori, so far away as to be in effect independent.

A Company, commanded by Captain Hanton, ⁵ held Point 107 and the high ground central to the battalion's position. B Company, commanded by Captain Crarer, ⁶ held the ridge which ran east of the Maleme- Vlakheronitissa road, and one of its platoons straddled the road between Point 107 and Vlakheronitissa. C Company, under Captain Johnson, was disposed round the perimeter at the edge of the airfield, with 13 Platoon on the north between the airfield and the sea, 14 Platoon on the south along the road and canal, and 15 Platoon west from 13 Platoon to the road bridge.

D Company, commanded by Captain Campbell, ⁷ held the east bank of the Tavronitis from and including the road bridge south to a point just south-west of Point 107. No. 18 Platoon was stationed to cover the road bridge, 17 Platoon held the south wing of the company position, and 16 Platoon was between these two

¹ Maleme and Pirgos were two separate villages, but were frequently confused by the troops so that Pirgos is often called Maleme in reports. Throughout what follows the attempt is made to preserve the distinction.

² Maj G. G. Beaven; Auckland; born Palmerston North, 12 Apr 1910; clerk, NZR; wounded 22 May 1941.

³ Capt J. F. Forster, m.i.d.; Greymouth; born Hobart, 19 Sep 1915; clerk.

⁴ Capt M. G. Wadey; Wanganui; born NZ 3 Apr 1913; plumber; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁵ Maj S. Hanton, ED; Wanganui; born Forfar, Scotland, 6 Aug 1908; printer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁶ Lt-Col K. R. S. Crarer, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born Wellington, 24 Nov 1909; accountant; seconded to British Army.

⁷ Col T. C. Campbell, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Waiouru](#); born Colombo, 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO 22 Bn Sep 1942–Apr 1944; commanded 4 Armd Bde Jan–Dec 1945; Area Commander, [Wellington](#), 1947; Commander of [Army Schools](#), Apr 1951–.

but higher up the north-west slopes of Point 107. About half a mile south of 17 Platoon and also on the east bank of the Tavronitis was a platoon of [21 Battalion](#).

Also under command were two platoons of [27 MG Battalion](#). One, under Second-Lieutenant [Brant](#), ¹ had a section with two MMGs on improvised mountings so sited in D Company area as to cover the road bridge and part of the riverbed; and the second section had two unmounted MMGs sited not far away but higher up so as to cover the airfield. The other platoon, under Second-Lieutenant [Luxford](#), ² had one section on the east edge of the airfield covering it and the beach and the second on a spur near [Maleme](#) village from which it could cover the same targets. Both platoons were short of ammunition, the first having enough for only about seven minutes' rapid fire.

Two 3-inch mortars covered the airfield also, both without base-plates and both short of ammunition. And the two I tanks, also under command, were hidden north of Battalion HQ, ready for counter-attack towards the airfield.

In the battalion perimeter, but not under command, were the ten Bofors guns sited round the airfield, the two 3-inch AA guns sited near Point 107, and the two 4-inch naval guns of Z Battery RM, both sited on the slopes above D Company's right centre.

vi

As soon as the landings began the battle broke up into a number of separate actions in separate areas, and Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, handicapped by hopelessly bad communications, found it more and more difficult to operate his battalion as a unit. Our best hope of offering an intelligible account of the day's events is therefore to take each group separately, distinguishing D Company along the bed of the Tavronitis; C Company on the airfield; Headquarters Company fighting round [Pirgos](#); and Battalion HQ with A and B Companies in the general area of Point

To Captain Campbell, the commander of D Company, parachutists and gliders seemed to arrive simultaneously, the latter coming down 'with their quiet swish, swish, dipping down and swishing in'.³ Most gliders landed in the riverbed, although odd ones came down in the company area. The paratroops, however, tended to land both in the company positions and on the high ground west of the river. The gliders were those of Major Braun and Major Koch, while the paratroops belonged to II and IV Battalions.

¹ Maj P. A. M. Brant, m.i.d.; Malaya; born Durban, South Africa, 3 Jul 1907; Regular soldier; wounded 20 May 1941; Captain, 1 Bn Fiji Inf Regt, Malaya.

² Lt M. B. Luxford; Hastings; born Wanganui, 14 Mar 1913; grocer.

³ Interview with Capt Campbell (Dec 1945).

Of the gliders six were counted in 17 Platoon area and few of the crews lived to congratulate themselves. Paratroops landing inside the perimeter met equal severity.¹ But one glider landed close to Corporal Bremner's² MMG section and caused casualties, among them Brant, the MMG platoon commander. Nevertheless, while ammunition lasted—not long—the machine guns were able 'to get some juicy shooting in among the gliders in the riverbed'.³

Where gliders landed, as many did, too far from the defenders' lines or defiladed, the crews were a more difficult target as they made for cover. And paratroops landing on the far side of the river were mostly out of effective small-arms range. A suggestion from D Company that the two 4-inch naval guns should undertake targets across the river was rejected on the ground that the guns were sited for targets at sea.⁴ D Company therefore had the exasperation of seeing the enemy take over Polemarkhi and Ropianiana virtually unmolested.

Meanwhile Braun's glider party at the bridge had forced back the two sections of 18 Platoon holding that flank to a new line on the canal where there were prepared positions. This was the only part of D Company's line that was strongly attacked, and

the enemy kept infiltrating men across the riverbed under cover of the bridge pylons so as to drive a wedge between D Company and C Company.

Unfortunately, this area round the bridge was vulnerable as well as valuable. The bridge was a D Company responsibility and Campbell had one section of 18 Platoon north of it. But its positions here were too far forward to give a good field of fire and yet could not be brought back to a better line without basing it on the [RAF](#) administrative buildings and encampments. The presence of these and of large numbers of [RAF](#), [FAA](#), and [RM](#) personnel in the vicinity made it difficult for Campbell and Johnson to make the most efficient joint arrangements for tactical defence. Requests by Andrew that these miscellaneous troops should come under his command had been refused. Some arrangement seems to have been made just before the battle for the [RAF](#) men to have

¹ 2 Lt J. W. C. Craig, OC 17 Platoon, says that [General Freyberg](#) in a lecture a few days before the battle had advised the men to stay in their positions and 'not to rush out when the paratroops come down'. No doubt if [Freyberg](#) said this he did not mean it to be taken as encouragement of a passive attitude, and for the most part it was understood as it was meant. Some troops, however—not in Craig's platoon—seem to have taken it as a justification for staying put when aggressive action was obviously called for.

² [Pte E. R. S. Bremner](#); born NZ 10 Feb 1919; truck-driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³ Interview with Capt Campbell. Lt Craig is critical of the MMG performance, but has probably not made enough allowance for shortage of ammunition and a range limited by makeshift mountings (Feb 1948).

⁴ Report by 2 Lt Craig.

infantry training and be given infantry positions. But it was too late and, although the armed men among them did do some fighting, no clearly concerted plan is discernible. ¹

The result was that Braun's glider force was able to get a strong foothold in this

quarter very early in the attack, and one which Meindl appreciated and exploited with speed and determination.

South of D Company there was also trouble. Paratroops and at least two gliders had landed near the positions of the [21 Battalion](#) platoon. For the most part these were faithfully dealt with— 17 dead Germans were counted near one glider—or at least met a reception that discouraged aggressive behaviour. But Lieutenant Anderson,² the platoon commander, was killed, and Sergeant [Gorrie](#)³ who took over could not make contact with 21 or 22 Battalion because of enemy parties in between. He therefore posted his men a little farther south of D Company and decided to stay there till dark, doing as much damage as possible. This was a useful decision, for in the course of the afternoon he broke up two enemy attempts to cross the river. Had it not been for this platoon Major Stentzler's two companies might have come into action against the south flank of [22 Battalion](#) much earlier than they did and pressed with more determination. As it was, though no precise story of Stentzler's movements can be given, it seems likely that he was forced to detour farther to the south and then come north-west again, taking undefended [Vlakheronitissa](#) on the way.

No doubt because of the firing caused by all this, Campbell felt uneasy about his left flank. But 16 Platoon reported that it had checked a thrust into the company area from this quarter,⁴ and for the rest of the day he was not unduly troubled. The right flank remained his major worry. He could not telephone Battalion HQ because his telephone had been put out of action by a bomb; but he sent runners to warn HQ of the threatened thrust across the bridge. Of the two sent only one came back.

In the afternoon D Company's right flank became more and more uncomfortable and at one point Campbell decided to call upon the [RAF](#) personnel in the neighbourhood for help; for by a previous arrangement they were to have assembled in a nearby

¹ Reports by Lt-Col Andrew, Maj J. Leggat, Capt Johnson, Capt Campbell, and Lt T. R. Hawthorn.

² [Lt H. R. Anderson](#); born [Dargaville](#), 24 Mar 1908; estate agent; killed

in action 20 May 1941.

³ Capt W. A. J. Gorrie, MM; [New Plymouth](#); born Bedford, England, 4 Mar 1895; cartage contractor; wounded May 1941.

⁴ 16 Platoon may have mistaken the attempts of the 21 Bn platoon to make contact for enemy infiltration.

wadi as reinforcements. They were not to be found, however, ¹ and the enemy continued to infiltrate from the right and give trouble.

Yet by about three o'clock D Company was reasonably happy. No. 18 Platoon, though reduced to nine men, was holding on in its canal positions; 17 Platoon had adjusted its own positions by moving higher up the slopes; and 16 Platoon in the centre had disposed of a possible enemy attempt to infiltrate from the south. The troublesome features of the situation were that the forward platoons were more or less isolated from Company HQ, and Company HQ itself had been quite out of touch with Battalion HQ even by runner since midday; that the volume of MG and mortar fire from the west on the company positions was getting steadily heavier; and that the threats from the flanks might at any time become serious.

On C Company front the situation, though worse, was not altogether dissimilar. When the day began the company had been reasonably strong with 117 rifles, 7 Brens, 1 MMG, 6 Browning MGs, and 9 tommy guns. The troops were all well dug in. No. 13 Platoon, between the north end of the airfield and the sea, was sited to repel beach landings and cover the airfield itself with fire; 14 Platoon, between the south edge of the airfield and the canal, was to cover the airfield with fire and deal with attacks from the south-east and south-west; 15 Platoon, on the west edge of the airfield, had 13 Platoon as its right boundary and the road bridge as its left. Its task was to defend the airfield against attacks from the west.

Neither the company commander nor his platoon officers were quite happy about these dispositions, however. There was too much dead ground on the front of 15 Platoon, and yet it had been impossible to cross the riverbed and take this in without spreading the front still farther and accentuating the existing difficulty that it

would be very hard for the three platoons, separated by the flat expanse of airfield, to give one another mutual support. And there was also the radical weakness already discussed at the road bridge between C Company and D Company.

The battle began for C Company, as for the others, with the second phase of the bombing. So intense was this round the airfield that from C Company HQ it was impossible to see more than a few yards for the dense clouds of dust and smoke. This no doubt explains why no gliders were seen.

¹ They seem to have got drawn into fighting on their own account. See p. 109.

When the bombing ceased—having killed five men and wounded one in 14 Platoon and Company HQ—and visibility returned, parachutists could already be seen landing towards [Pirgos](#) in the east and in larger numbers west of the Tavronitis. Scarcely had the first dropped when the defence found that enemy, no doubt Lieutenant Plessen's glider troops, were already active against the two flanks of 15 Platoon. Lieutenant [Sinclair](#), ¹ the commander, gives some impression of what it was like. 'Of course the fight was on. We were all more or less pinned to our positions, and as I was fired on from S.E., S., S.W., W., N.W., and N.E. it was a queer show....' ²

It was on 15 Platoon, in fact, that most of the pressure at this stage came in C Company. The front was some 1500 yards long and Sinclair had only 22 men. Apart from the fire he describes, there was very persistent firing from a drain near the south-west corner of the airfield, and from this we may guess that the enemy—having pushed back the section of 18 Platoon—had already secured a lodgment east of the road bridge. No. 15 Platoon must have given a good account of itself, however, since the attempt at an assault on the airfield after taking the AA guns was repelled. ³

There was nothing the company commander could do to help. All telephone lines had been cut during the bombing, and when they were relaid they were at once cut again. No runner could have crossed the flat, fire-swept airfield.

By ten o'clock it seemed to Captain Johnson that the enemy was infiltrating

through the north flank of 15 Platoon towards 13 Platoon. He asked the CO for permission to counter-attack with the two I tanks which were dug in not far from his own HQ. But Andrew, anxious to conserve his trump card for a more desperate situation, refused.

To Sinclair the morning did not seem to be going so badly. His later comment no doubt reflects his spirits at the time: 'Plenty of good targets and an interesting attack provided all the diversion one needed.'⁴ But about eleven o'clock he was hit through the neck, and though he was able to carry on for about an hour— mainly throwing grenades at a petrol dump so as to set off a stack of RAF bombs in front of him—the noonday heat was too much for him and he fainted from loss of blood. In an obscure situation

¹ Capt R. B. Sinclair, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 3 Jan 1918; clerk; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Jul 1941; invalided to NZ Nov 1941; served 22 (Mot) Bn, Italy, 1944.

² Report by Lt Sinclair.

³ The gallantry of L-Cpl J. T. Mchaffey in this action should be recorded. According to Sinclair, he jumped on a grenade and thus prevented it from hitting several of his comrades. He lost both feet and died in consequence.

⁴ Report by Lt Sinclair.

the most credible interpretation of events seems to be that at about this time his southern section was cut off—PWs were seen being marched off from this area by Captain Campbell—and that some of his northern posts were also overrun, but that because his centre held out till towards dusk and because 13 and 14 Platoons kept up steady fire the enemy was not able to make further progress.¹

It was still mid-morning when other worries developed for Captain Johnson. At about eleven o'clock the thrust from the bridge area threatened to cut him off from D Company. The enemy was in possession of the RAF camp and could be seen advancing towards Battalion HQ behind what appeared to be a screen of PWs.

Johnson therefore sent a section of 14 Platoon under Lance-Sergeant [Ford](#)² to try to outflank this force and link up with Battalion HQ. Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, however, ordered the section to withdraw with the words 'look after your own backyard—I'll look after mine.'³

There was a new job waiting for Sergeant Ford when he got back. He was to cross the airfield with two men and order the commander of 13 Platoon, Sergeant [Crawford](#),⁴ to take action against the north-easterly movement of the enemy from 15 Platoon's northern flank. Ford and one of his companions succeeded in getting across the airfield. But it was impossible for anyone to get from the positions of 13 Platoon to the help of 15 Platoon. The enemy in the [RAF](#) camp area was bringing too heavy a flanking fire across the front.

In the earlier part of the afternoon the situation on C Company front did not greatly change, and the most notable event was the arrival at Company HQ of an English officer from 156 LAA Battery and about eight of his men. These men—except two bomb casualties—hastened to join the strength of the company and were duly armed. A little later they were to join, at their own earnest request, a counter-attack with 14 Platoon. But, as this attack was important for its effect on Andrew's view of his battalion's situation, an account of it is best left until Battalion HQ comes to be considered. It will be sufficient to say now that after this attack had failed C Company, like D Company, was cut off from contact with Battalion.

The third company isolated from Battalion HQ was Headquarters Company with three officers and about sixty men. But in its case

¹ Sinclair states that 8 men of his platoon were killed and 15 wounded (including himself).

² [WO II F. K. Ford; Gisborne](#); born [Auckland](#), 26 Jun 1913; clerk; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ Report by Capt Johnson.

⁴ [Cpl J. McM. Crawford; Gisborne](#); born [Glasgow](#), 10 Apr 1910;

carpenter.

isolation began with the battle. For the landing began with the descent of several gliders, no doubt part of Major Koch's group, between the two. These were reinforced almost at once by five plane-loads of parachutists, probably from 9 Company of III Battalion. With these a small field gun was also dropped. A second group of parachutists arrived about half-way through the morning. All these had heavy losses both in the descent and in the fighting that at once followed. But the survivors, well armed with automatic weapons, were a force to be reckoned with; they quickly took advantage of the cover afforded by the vineyards and were able to establish strongpoints in disconcerting places. Thus one party set up a post in a brick house between Headquarters Company's south-west flank and Company HQ and made communications between the two almost impossible.

The gap between Company HQ and the section post of Sergeant [Matheson's](#)¹ platoon on this south flank was too wide, presumably because the men did not have the same experience in infantry tactics as those of an ordinary rifle company. And the two posts were without automatic weapons.² The result was that both were soon overrun,³ although the enemy could make no headway against the village and the main positions. Indeed, he seems to have made no really formidable assault, and the chief trouble came from snipers and small parties who kept wandering about in order to make contact with one another.

For Lieutenant Beaven, too, contact was a prime concern. His only friendly visitors during the day were a party of men from A Troop, [7 Australian LAA Battery](#), and a runner from Wadey's pioneer platoon. The Australians, driven off their guns, presumably by the glider detachment, had swum along the coast and were now incorporated into the company, where they did good work with the field gun which the enemy had dropped.

¹ [WO II J. Matheson](#); born [Scotland](#), 16 Jun 1905; tinsmith; died of wounds 20 May 1941.

² The only three LMGs with HQ Coy were with the northern sections and covered the beach.

³ The following account is by one of the platoon: `... just before 8 a.m.... over comes the Hun with Stukas, Junkers, and gliders, not mentioning the 109s. My section was stationed between the canal and Maleme [Pirgos] village, towards the drome.... Well, after Jack and I had half an hour's pot shooting the birds as they hit the ground, I issued my section with 150 rounds per man. No machine guns, no hand grenades, 8 rifles, and 2 bayonets.... We had lost most of our section by this time as the Hun had got my two front trenches with hand grenades. The next to get his packet was poor old Jack. He just said "The dirty Bs have got me" as he fell into my arms. I was just dragging him under the covered L of the slit trench when a greasy Hun drilled him with a burst from a Tommy gun and then gave me two hand grenades.'— Sgt J. Woods. (Woods was cut off and spent four days prowling and sniping in enemy lines before being captured.)

The runner from the pioneer platoon, Private Wan, ¹ had left the AMES about three o'clock with another runner, Private Bloomfield, ² the latter carrying a message. Bloomfield was killed on the way, and Wan had not been able to recover the message. It could hardly have been more than what Wan was able to tell: that the pioneer platoon had shot up a glider without being themselves attacked and that they had not been able to make contact with Battalion HQ.

Beaven was now so worried about the lack of news that he decided to send Wan with another message to Battalion. The message gives a useful picture of the situation on the front: ³

Paratroops landed East, South, and West of Coy area at approx 0745 hrs today. Strength estimated 250. On our NE front 2 enemy snipers left. Unfinished square red roof house south of sig terminal housing enemy MG plus 2 snipers. We have a small field gun plus 12 rounds manned by Aussies. Mr. Clapham's two fwd and two back secs OK. No word of Matheson's pl except Cpl Hall and Cowling.

Troops in HQ area OK.

Mr. Wadey reports all quiet. No observation of enemy paratroops who landed approx 5 mls south of his position.

Casualties: killed Bloomfield.

wounded Lt Clapham, Sgt Flashoff, Cpl Hall, Pte Cowling, Brown.

Attached plans taken off Jerry.

1650 hrs

G. Beaven, Lt OC HQ Coy

Finally, however, Beaven decided he had better wait till dark before sending this message. By then it was too late.

An attempt was made to get in touch with B Company. But the runner sent failed to return and a patrol sent after him met an enemy patrol, failed to get through, and had to return with casualties.

It is now time to see how the situation was developing with the central group of the battalion, A and B Companies and Battalion HQ. The two companies, although they had been heavily pounded by the bombing and had their share of trouble from the paratroops and glider crews in the area, were not at first in the front line in the same sense as were the other companies nor so heavily engaged. In the afternoon the effect of Stentzler's activities from the south-west began to be felt, with his 5 and 7 Companies

¹ Pte F. M. Wan; Wanganui; born Hawera, 8 Mar 1918; railway porter; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941; released 20 Jan 1945.

² Pte G. Bloomfield; born Scotland, 14 Aug 1908; carpenter; killed in action 20 May 1941.

³ Wan was later captured but concealed the message in his boot and brought it out from prison camp with him at the end of the war.

probing the south front of B Company and trying to find a way north between A and B Companies. But, in the early afternoon, these pushes were being held without great difficulty and there is no evidence that Stentzler had yet begun to exert all possible pressure when darkness came. No doubt he was nervous himself of being

attacked in the flank by [21 Battalion](#).

Battalion HQ had come in for a particularly heavy share of the bombing. Headquarters itself was not hit, though Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew received a nick from a splinter while forward observing. 'The immediate countryside, before densely covered by grape vines and olive trees was bare of any foliage when the bombing attack ceased and the ground was practically regularly covered by large and small bomb craters.'¹ While the bombing lasted the dust cloud was too thick for good visibility. Just as it began to settle the watchers from Battalion HQ saw the gliders coming in, the nearest landing about 100 yards to the north and another on the road from [Maleme](#) to [Vlakheronitissa](#). The parachutists followed, and the battalion staff had a panoramic view of the landings all round them. They soon ceased to attend to it, however, when they observed a party of enemy about 700 yards away towards [Pirgos](#) trying to bring a small gun into action. With timely rifle fire they were able to put a stop to this.

Soon there were more serious worries. The battalion telephone lines, which shortage of tools and time and the difficult character of the country had made it impossible to dig in,² had been cut by the bombing; and no doubt what the bombing had missed was looked after by the enemy on the ground. This isolated Battalion HQ from its more distant companies and made it dependent on its single No. 18 wireless set for communication with Brigade HQ. To make matters worse the set itself temporarily failed soon after the landing of the glider troops, and it was not till about ten o'clock that the landing of hundreds of paratroops in the area could be reported.

Within the battalion therefore the CO was from the first dependent on runners, at all times a slow and clumsy means of communication. In these particular circumstances the runner had the additional handicap that his route was endangered by snipers, and even if he succeeded in getting through he was bound to have lost time in detours or in fighting. Yet, while runners were still getting through to all companies except HQ Company—where

¹ [Sgt F. N. Twigg](#), Bn 'I' sergeant.

² Lt-Col Andrew thinks that they would have had to be dug in to a

depth of six feet if they were to escape damage from the bombs.

Andrew himself tried and failed—the situation was not so bad. Its chief defect in the early stages was that Andrew could at no time rely on having an up-to-the-minute knowledge of the general situation of the battalion. In the later stages its disadvantage was to prove well-nigh decisive; for, unable to get runners through at all, he was to reach a quite misleading view of the position of some of his companies.

In the morning, however, one thing soon became clear enough. The main enemy concentrations were to the west of the Tavronitis. Accordingly, before half past ten Andrew asked Brigade HQ to have the area Ropianiana-Tavronitis searched with artillery fire and sent his Intelligence Officer to the detachment of 4-inch guns of Z Battery RM with the request that they should engage the mortars and MGs which were by this time harassing his battalion area. The 4-inch guns were unable to do this because of their siting; but A and B Troops of [27 Battery](#), on the basis of the order relayed from 5 Brigade HQ and a message from their OP on Point 107, were able to bring down effective fire in spite of unpleasant investigations by enemy aircraft. Soon C Troop was also active but, because it had to rely on direct observation, its targets were found east of the airfield.

By the time these guns were brought to bear, however, the enemy attacks were already well under way, and something of Andrew's concern can be seen in his message to Brigade HQ at 10.55 a.m. that he had lost communication with his companies and that he would like [23 Battalion](#) to try and contact Headquarters Company. ¹ At this time he seems to have estimated that 400 paratroops had landed: 150 west of the river, 150 east of [22 Battalion](#), and 100 near the aerodrome.

As the morning wore on [RAF](#) and FAA ground staff who had been driven out of the area near the road bridge came filtering back and were followed up the slopes towards Point 107 by small enemy parties. According to some observers the enemy were driving these men demoralised in front of them and using them as a screen. It seems safer, however, to take the more conservative explanation favoured by Major [Leggat](#) ²—then second-in-command of [22 Battalion](#)—that the inexperienced [RAF](#) and FAA men exaggerated the forces behind them. At all events Leggat relates that on

one occasion during the morning he went to investigate a few shots and found a demoralised [RAF](#) party. Suspecting that the MG fire troubling them came from an isolated sniper, he went

¹ See p. 124

² [Lt-Col J. Leggat](#), ED; [Christchurch](#); born [Glasgow](#), 19 Dec 1900; schoolmaster; GSO 1 (SD) [Army HQ](#); headmaster [Christchurch Boys' High School](#).

forward with others from Battalion HQ, crossed the wire, and was 'fortunate enough to find the machine-gunner with a stoppage.'¹

Shortly after midday [22 Battalion](#) told 5 Brigade that the enemy was using a 75 and heavy machine guns from west of the Tavronitis, and under cover of this he seems to have been making further probes up the ridge on the right of D Company. About this time also A Company began to feel pressure from the south-west, while in C Company 13 Platoon made its attempt to help 15 Platoon.

In the early afternoon these pressures grew stronger. About four o'clock—or perhaps earlier—mortar fire from the [RAF](#) administrative area forced Battalion HQ to move about 200 yards south-west of its first location and just inside B Company area. The artillery officers from the OP on Point 107 had long since found themselves hopelessly out of touch with their guns owing to the breakdown of communications. They therefore joined [22 Battalion](#) as infantry and their two officers, Captain L. G. Williams and Lieutenant G. P. Cade, were given command of the [RAF](#) and FAA men.

A message sent by Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew to Brigade at 3.50 p.m. indicated his growing anxiety. His left flank had given ground—either an allusion to adjustments in D Company area or a mistake for his more seriously endangered right flank—but he still thought that the situation was in hand, although he again asked for contact to be made with Headquarters Company because he needed reinforcements.

All this time, in fact, in common with the rest of his battalion, he had been

expecting [23 Battalion](#) to come to his support in its counter-attack role, and flares had been sent up—at what time is not clear—to indicate that it was needed. ² The non-appearance of this support was generally assumed to be due to the difficulties of movement under the vigilance of the numerous enemy fighter planes. Finally, at 5 p.m. Andrew asked Brigadier Hargest for the counter-attack by [23 Battalion](#) to be put in and was told shortly afterwards that this could not be done as [23 Battalion](#) was itself engaged against paratroops in its own area. It was at this point that Andrew decided he could wait no longer but must resort to the last card in his hand: the two I tanks and 14 Platoon.

¹ Report by Maj Leggat. The evidence of Capt Johnson and Lt Hawthorn among others suggests that at least in the early part of the day the [RAF](#) and FAA were used as a screen. But it must not be thought that the men of the RM, [RAF](#), and FAA who had weapons gave up their positions without a struggle. For examples of the contrary see 'Air Operations in [Crete](#)', Enclosure C, Report by [Pilot Officer Crowther](#). But many were unarmed and unorganised and were rather a burden on the defence.

² Attempts to get in touch by means of flag signals were also made without success, according to Sgt Twigg.

Accordingly, at a quarter past five, the two tanks with 14 Platoon in support moved off down the road about 30 yards apart, making for the Tavronitis bridge. Almost at once the second tank found that its two-pounder ammunition would not fit the breech block and that its turret was not traversing completely. It therefore withdrew. The leading tank went forward until it reached the riverbed, passed under the bridge from the southern side and went north about 200 yards. There it bellied down in the rough bed of the river and, its turret having jammed, was abandoned by its crew. ¹

No. 14 Platoon, under Lieutenant [Donald](#), ² consisted of two sections of New Zealanders and a third section made up of the six men from 156 LAA Battery whose officer had begged to be allowed to take part. They accompanied the two tanks, deployed towards the left. They met withering fire from the front and from the left. With one tank turned back and the other out of action, they had no course but to

withdraw. This they did. The English officer was killed and Donald, himself wounded, brought back only eight or nine men from his gallant platoon, most of them also wounded.

Captain Johnson reported to the CO that the counter-attack had failed and asked for reinforcements. His own position was rapidly worsening. No. 15 Platoon and the west section of 13 Platoon had been overrun. No. 14 was now practically destroyed. Company HQ with its cooks, stretcher-bearers, and runners could not hope to hold the inland perimeter of the airfield long. Johnson therefore told Andrew that he could probably hold on till dark but would then have to be reinforced. Andrew replied that he must 'hold on at all costs'.³ From this time communications between the two were cut and no runners got through.

Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew now had to make up his mind what to do. He again got in touch with Brigade HQ by wireless and told Brigadier Hargest that the counter-attack with tanks had failed. He said he had no further resources and that as no support from [23 Battalion](#) had come he would have to withdraw. Hargest replied: 'If you must, you must.' But at this time, according to Andrew, by 'withdrawal' he did not mean withdrawal right away from the airfield but only as far as the ridge held by B Company. And presumably Hargest understood him in this sense.

¹ Capt Campbell says the enemy later used its gun against D Coy, but it is more likely to have been one of their own infantry guns.

² Lt-Col H. V. Donald, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Masterton](#); born [Masterton](#), 20 Mar 1917; manufacturer; CO 22 Bn May–Nov 1944, Mar–Aug 1945; wounded four times.

³ Report by Capt Johnson.

This conversation seems to have taken place about 6 p.m., and in the course of it or another conversation about the same time Hargest told Andrew that he was sending two companies to his support— A Company of [23 Battalion](#) and B Company of [28 Battalion](#). These two companies, Andrew understood, were to be expected very shortly.¹

While waiting for them to come Andrew would have had leisure to contemplate what must have seemed a very grim situation. He had had no contact with Headquarters Company all day, and since paratroops had been seen to land in its area in considerable numbers there seemed grounds for assuming that the company had been overrun. A Company, though it had had fighting, was on the whole intact. B Company also was intact but was threatened with a thrust from the south-west. C Company had lost at least part of 13 Platoon, 14 Platoon was almost destroyed, and it seemed probable that 15 Platoon was wholly lost. D Company had been out of touch since midday and according to at least one report had been wiped out. Colonel Andrew could therefore count certainly on only two out of his five companies.

The tactical situation seemed to answer this apparent weakness in forces. The enemy had torn a hole at the road bridge and could be expected to reinforce success from the ample strength that he had built up undisturbed across the river and out of range. The line of the airfield north of the bridge was destroyed with the loss of 15 Platoon. If D Company had been wiped out there was nothing to prevent the enemy crossing the Tavronitis at any point along its length. And the attack from the south-west against B Company front suggested that if the battalion remained in its present positions it might be cut off by morning.

Moreover, mortars and machine guns were by now out of ammunition or knocked out. The tanks and the infantry reserve were gone. There was no sign of reinforcement, unless the two companies from 23 and 28 Battalions arrived soon.

In such a situation Andrew evidently felt that if he did not use the cover of darkness that night to adjust his positions he could not hope to withstand the renewed attack that was bound to come the following day; for if the enemy had been able to make such progress against his full battalion, starting from scratch, what might he not be able to do with his forces fully organised on the ground and the tactical advantage against a battalion reduced to less than half its strength?

Considerations such as these were in Andrew's mind when he spoke to Brigadier Hargest of limited withdrawal after the failure

¹ 'I expected the coys almost immediately from the gist of the message.'—Lt-Col Andrew.

of the counter-attack with tanks. By nine o'clock that evening, when the two supporting companies had still failed to appear, his mind was made up. He would withdraw to a shorter line based on B Company ridge. Between nine o'clock and nine-thirty, therefore, he again spoke to Hargest on the 18 set—by this time so weak that this was the last message he was able to pass—and 'told him I would have to withdraw to "B" Coy ridge.'¹ What Brigadier Hargest replied is not recorded. He can hardly have grasped the full implications of the proposed move, though they should have been clear enough to a commander familiar with the ground, and seems to have accepted Andrew's view without feeling that the situation called for further action on his own part.

Andrew was in the HQ of B Company when he took this decision. Messages about the projected move were sent out to all the other companies by runner, including C, D, and Headquarters Companies. The runners to the last three did not get through.²

Meanwhile Captain [Watson](#),³ OC A Company of [23 Battalion](#), had left [23 Battalion](#) about dusk and taken his company via [21 Battalion](#), the AMES and [Xamoudhokhori](#), making for [22 Battalion](#). Captain [Rangi Royal](#)⁴ of [28 Battalion](#) had also set off with B Company, but for reasons to be explained below arrived too late to affect the situation.⁵

Between nine and ten o'clock Watson reached B Company ridge and found [Battalion](#) HQ there. At this point the narrative is confused. Watson says he was told that D Company had been wiped out and that he was to take over its position. But [22 Battalion](#) sources suggest that it was A Company's positions he was ordered to take over, and the fact that he was given Lieutenant [McAra](#)⁶ of A Company [22 Battalion](#) as guide lends colour to this.⁷ If so, the likely explanation seems to be that, if D Company had got Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew's message and come back, Andrew would have placed them in the positions formerly occupied by A Company; but that, since the failure of D

¹ Lt-Col Andrew. The ridge was also called RAP Ridge and Eastern Ridge. The time given is Andrew's, but see [p. 134](#).

² Maj S. Hanton, OC A Coy, recalls receiving a message that the reserve companies of 23 and 28 Bns were arriving by 9 p.m. and that A Coy was to retire to the RAP ridge. Lt Luxford, OC MMG Platoon, received a message about 9.30 p.m. to withdraw to B Coy HQ. (27 MG Bn WD.)

³ Lt-Col C. N. Watson, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Tinwald, 8 Jan 1911; school-teacher; CO 26 Bn 20–29 Jun 1942; CO 23 Bn 29 Jun–15 Jul 1942; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁴ Maj R. Royal, MC and bar; Wellington; born Levin, 23 Aug 1897; civil servant; served in NZ Maori Bn in First World War; 28 NZ (Maori) Bn 1940–41; 2 i/c 2 Maori Bn and commanded Maori Training Unit, Rotorua, 1942–43; CO 2 Maori Bn May–Jun 1943; wounded 14 Dec 1941.

⁵ See p. 116.

⁶ Lt E. J. McAra; born Dunedin, 5 Apr 1906; commercial artist; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁷ Sgt Twigg, who helped guide the company, also says it was to A Coy's positions.

Company to appear seemed to confirm his belief that it had been wiped out, he now gave up hope of it and decided to use Watson's newly-arrived company in its stead. And this in its turn suggests that in spite of the withdrawal of A Company to B Company ridge, Andrew had not entirely given up hope of holding Point 107. ¹

At all events Captain Watson and Lieutenant McAra duly set about placing the platoons. As 8 Platoon was being put into position there was a burst of fire which killed McAra and wounded several others, including Lieutenant Baxter, ² second-in-command of the company, who had been anxious to go into action with his old platoon. Shortly afterwards the resolute Sergeant Gorrie made his way into the lines of the newly-posted company, bringing with him the platoon of 21 Battalion which had been doing such good work all day farther down the Tavronitis. ³

Meanwhile a further conference had been going on at [22 Battalion HQ](#) on B Company ridge. Now that Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew had made his limited withdrawal the drawbacks of the new position had become all too apparent. Point 107 had previously been the centre of his defensive system, screened by the companies round the perimeter. It was now, held by Watson's company, no more than an outpost. If that company failed to hold it when attack began again next day, the enemy by taking it would overlook B Company ridge which was now the main position. B Company ridge itself afforded little natural cover and there were not the tools, even if there was enough time before daylight, for new defences to be dug. Exposed to the inevitable strafing and bombing next day from the air as well as fire from the enemy's ground forces, A and B Companies would probably have to endure heavy casualties as soon as it was light. And once it was light it would be impossible to extricate them. Moreover, there was still no sign of B Company [28 Battalion](#), while the silence of the other companies seemed every hour to confirm Andrew's fears for them.

It is in such terms that we must explain his next decision: to withdraw to 21 and 23 Battalions while he still had the cover of darkness. His mind made up, he asked Watson, who had meanwhile come back to report, to provide a guide to [23 Battalion](#) and use his own company to cover the withdrawal.

Captain Watson agreed to do so, went to warn his men of their new role, and returned to [22 Battalion HQ](#) about midnight in

¹ Lt-Col Andrew may have intended to use Watson's company as a temporary screen.

² [Capt B. Y. W. Baxter](#); [Lower Hutt](#); born [Timaru](#), 15 Mar 1907; wool clerk; wounded 20 May 1941.

³ Out of 25 all ranks in Gorrie's platoon, three were wounded, one missing, and one (Lt Anderson) killed.

time to see the troops move out. ¹ About two hours later Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, who had remained to see the area clear, told him he might also pull out his

company. This Watson did, 8 Platoon carrying its wounded.

vii

The first phase of the battle for Maleme virtually ends with this decision. From now on it was a question of recovering vital positions instead of keeping them, of counter-attacks difficult to mount instead of holding on in prepared defences. Ultimately, in fact, the withdrawal from Maleme was to entail the loss of Crete.² It would be unjust to Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew to suggest that he should have foreseen this as clearly as the advantage of hindsight enables us to see it ten years later. None the less, he had been given a position to defend which he must have known to be of the greatest importance. And it is necessary to consider whether there was not some other course he could have adopted.

The withdrawal falls into two parts: that from Point 107 and that from B Company ridge. Was the first necessary? When he made up his mind to leave Point 107 Andrew thought that he could count certainly on only two companies, A and B. This, as will be seen in the sequel, was to despair of the others too soon. True, runners had failed to get through; but it was not unprecedented for companies to be cut off and yet continue fighting. Had he remained where he was it should have been possible to push through patrols during the darkness, find out the true state of affairs with HQ, C and D Companies, bring in what remained of them, and build up a new tactical position on Point 107.

Again, even had he been right in thinking his outlying companies destroyed, he still had A and B Companies almost intact and he had been told that there were two further companies on the way to reinforce them. Even if, when Hargest had first promised these, in the late afternoon, Andrew had assumed their almost immediate arrival, he must presumably have learnt when he spoke to the Brigadier again about nine o'clock that they had not left till dusk.³ They might be delayed, but to assume that they would not get through at all was surely being too pessimistic. And if their arrival could thus be counted on, then he could expect to have four

¹ The members of the carrier platoon were in this withdrawal, their Bren carriers having been rendered useless.

² As events turned out; but it should be remembered that had [Maleme](#) not fallen, the enemy might still have been able to switch his uncommitted forces to [Retimo](#) or [Heraklion](#) and perhaps won an airfield there.

³ cf. p. 112, note 2, message received by Maj Hanton.

reasonably strong companies with which to hold a narrower perimeter based on Point 107.

That this new perimeter would have been exposed to powerful attacks by ground and air forces next day is certain. And it might well have been completely cut off from 21 and 23 Battalions. But there would have been good hope of counter-attack, and so long as it held out the enemy could not have secure possession of the airfield or give his undivided attention to driving farther east.

But, even supposing the case for withdrawing from Point 107 had been stronger than in retrospect it now seems, it is hard to see how a withdrawal to B Company ridge would improve matters. If, as his placing of Watson's company suggests, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew intended to put the two reinforcing companies on Point 107 as they arrived and hold A and B Companies on B Company ridge, this seems a much weaker plan than to concentrate his whole force on and around Point 107 itself.

In fact, however, now that he had made his first move he was forced to consider a second: withdrawal to 21 and 23 Battalions. As we have seen he decided in favour of this; and indeed it is likely enough that he could not have held out next day with B Company ridge as the basis of his defence. But since he had first retired to it Watson's company had arrived, and he might have taken this as increasing the probability that Royal's company would also appear. There was still time to change his mind and go back to Point 107. The only two companies which seemed to have got his orders were with him; to have reversed these orders would not have been difficult. If the other companies were not wiped out or had not received the orders they would be none the worse for the change in plan. Even if they had received them and were planning to join him later, they would have had no difficulty in finding him.

Failing such a reversal of plan, he had no course but to go on withdrawing; and how unfortunate for the future of the defence that course was, the story of the events that followed will make plain in due time. But it would be unfair to pass on from this isolation of alternatives open to Andrew without a reminder of the hard conditions in which he had to make his choice.

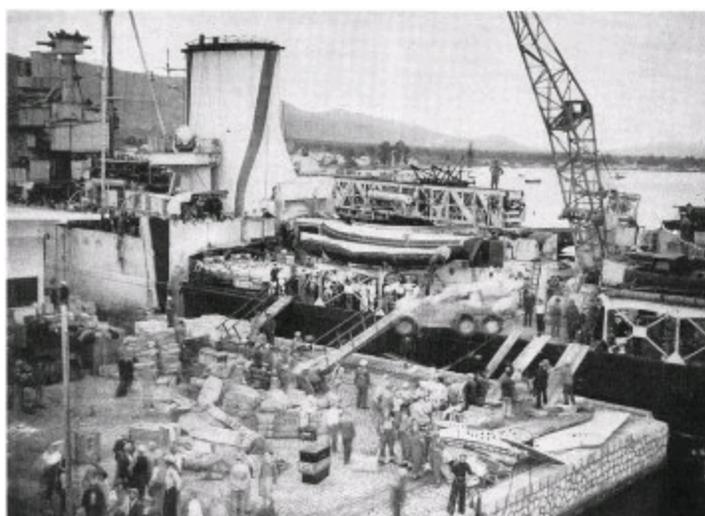
He had spent a most exacting day trying to control a battle where all the circumstances were inimical to control. Communications within his battalion had failed him almost completely; and outside it they had proved extremely bad. He and his HQ had been severely harassed by bombing and strafing throughout the day to an extent for which neither training nor experience had prepared them.¹ The enemy attack itself was of a kind still novel and from the start induced the feeling—and the reality as well—of enemy all round the perimeter and inside it also. The battle had begun with an enemy breach in the defence. The support he had expected and counted on from 21 and 23 Battalions had failed to materialise and this meant a radical departure from the original battle plan. His own counter-attack with the treasured tanks and 14 Platoon, all that he had to call reserve, had completely failed. He had been unable, through this same shortage of reserves, to give any help to his sorely tried companies. And, finally, he seems not to have been able to impress upon Brigadier Hargest the full difficulty of his predicament. In such circumstances, and exhausted in mind and body, he saw his situation in a blacker light than the facts warranted.

The non-appearance of B Company [28 Battalion](#) all this while was most unfortunate; for had it arrived at the same time as A Company [23 Battalion](#) it might have helped to dispose Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew to more sanguine views. What had happened to it?

Captain Royal, like Captain Watson, received orders to set off at dark and report to [22 Battalion](#), ready to assist if required. The company left [28 Battalion](#) about seven o'clock with eight and a half miles to go and made its way along the main coast road as far as [23 Battalion](#). Just before getting there it met two enemy machine-gun posts, carried them at the bayonet point, and with the loss of two killed disposed of about twenty enemy. At this stage the company was joined by Lieutenant [Moody](#)² with a small party from [5 Field Ambulance](#) which [22 Battalion](#)

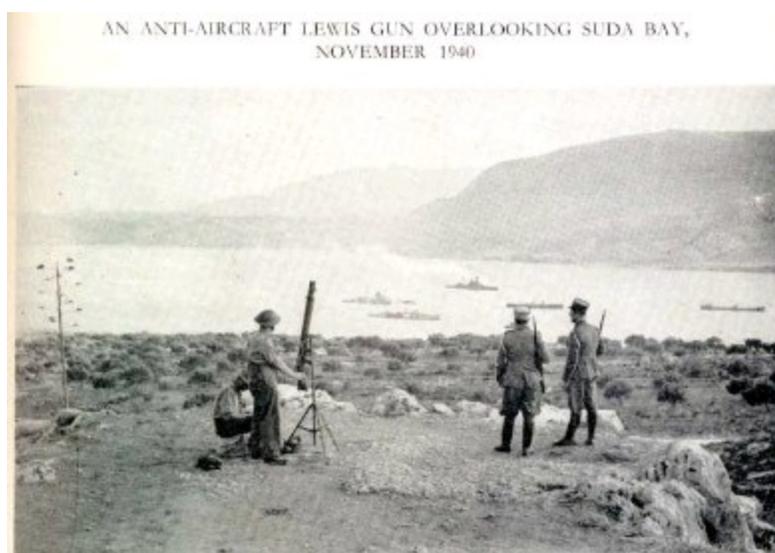
had asked for earlier in the day.

At 23 Battalion the combined party picked up Private Schroder³ as guide and followed the route already taken by A Company. On the way they met various stragglers who said they had been ordered to retire to 23 Battalion. At Xamoudhokhori they took the right-hand road instead of the left-hand track. Instead of taking them to B Company this led them to Pirgos, through which they passed, getting no reply to their shouts for 22 Battalion. Eventually, moving west along the main road, they found themselves on the east edge of the airfield. They could see Germans



LANDING STORES FOR THE BRITISH GARRISON IN 1940

LANDING STORES FOR THE BRITISH GARRISON IN 1940



AN ANTI-AIRCRAFT LEWIS GUN OVERLOOKING SUDA BAY, NOVEMBER 1940



General Sir Archibald Wavell, GOC-in-C Middle East, during his visit to Crete in November 1940

General Sir Archibald Wavell, GOC-in-C Middle East, during his visit to [Crete](#) in November 1940

NEW ZEALANDERS FROM GREECE ENTER SUDA BAY



NEW ZEALANDERS FROM GREECE ENTER SUDA BAY



MARCH TO THE TRANSIT CAMP

The officers at the head of the column are Major R. L. C. Grant (left) and
Capt D. M. Burns, Adjutant Divisional Signals

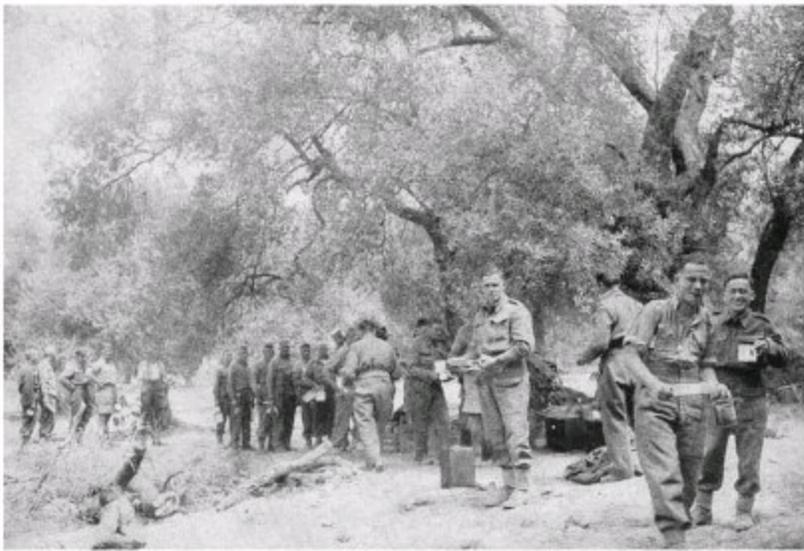
MARCH TO THE TRANSIT CAMP

The officers at the head of the column are Major R. L. C. Grant (left) and Capt D. M. Burns, Adjutant Divisional Signals



MEAL-TIME UNDER THE OLIVES

MEAL-TIME UNDER THE OLIVES



CLEANING UP
CLEANING UP

MEN OF 19 ARMY TROOPS COMPANY RESTING



MEN OF 19 ARMY TROOPS COMPANY RESTING



A GROUP OF 20 BATTALION ON THE DAY OF ARRIVAL

From left to right the officers in the foreground are : Lt M. G. O'Callaghan, Capt C. Wilson (back to camera), Lt J. D. Aiken, Lt G. A. Brown, Maj J. T. Burrows (back to camera), Lt D. J. Fountaine, Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger, Capt D. B. Cameron, Capt M. C. Rice (standing), 2 Lt N. J. McPhail (standing), 2 Lt C. H. Upham (holding mug), Lt R. L. D. Powrie

A GROUP OF 20 BATTALION ON THE DAY OF ARRIVAL

From left to right the officers in the foreground are: Lt M. G. O'Callaghan, Capt C. Wilson (back to camera), Lt J. D. Aiken, Lt G. A. Brown, Maj J. T. Burrows (back to camera), Lt D. J. Fountaine, Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger, Capt D. B. Cameron, Capt M. C. Rice (standing), 2 Lt N. J. McPhail (standing), 2 Lt C. H. Upham (holding mug), Lt R. L. D. Powrie



5 NZ INFANTRY BRIGADE HQ AT PLATANIAS

Back row: Lt D. M. McFarlane (holding helmet), Capt R. B. Dawson, Maj E. A. Harding, Lt-Col L. W. Andrew, Lt-Col A. S. Falconer, Capt N. L. W. Uniacke
Front row: Capt G. H. Heal, Brig J. Hargest, Lt-Col G. Dittmer, Capt W. W. Mason

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NEW ZEALANDERS IN A VILLAGE STREET
NEW ZEALANDERS IN A VILLAGE STREET



7 GENERAL HOSPITAL WEST OF CANEA, SHOWING RED CROSS
GROUND SIGN
7 GENERAL HOSPITAL WEST OF CANEA, SHOWING RED CROSS GROUND SIGN



GERMAN PARATROOPS PREPARING TO EMPLANE ON A
GREEK AIRFIELD
GERMAN PARATROOPS PREPARING TO EMPLANE ON A GREEK AIRFIELD



THE LANDING AT
MALEME

THE LANDING AT MALEME



Wrecked Junkers 52 troop-
carriers

Wrecked Junkers 52 troop-carriers

'For each man dangling
carried a death, his own if
not another's.' Page 89



'For each man dangling carried a death, his own if not another's.' page 89

A crashed German glider



A crashed German glider



Junkers 52s dropping
paratroops

Junkers 52s dropping paratroops



A dead paratrooper
in 19 Battalion area

A dead paratrooper in 19 Battalion area



LOOKING TOWARDS CANEA FROM THE WEST
LOOKING TOWARDS CANEA FROM THE WEST



SMOKE CLOUDS OVER CANEA AFTER BOMBING
SMOKE CLOUDS OVER CANEA AFTER BOMBING



SMOKE PALL OVER SUDA BAY
SMOKE PALL OVER SUDA BAY

GENERAL FREYBERG WATCHES THE LANDING FROM HIS
BATTLE HEADQUARTERS



GENERAL FREYBERG WATCHES THE LANDING FROM HIS BATTLE HEADQUARTERS



TROOPS OF 5 GERMAN MOUNTAIN DIVISION READY TO
EMBARK FROM GREECE IN JUNKERS TROOP-CARRIERS AND
IN CAIQUES

**TROOPS OF 5 GERMAN MOUNTAIN DIVISION READY TO EMBARK FROM GREECE IN JUNKERS
TROOP-CARRIERS AND IN CAIQUES**





AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF MALEME AREA AND AIRFIELD
AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF MALEME AREA AND AIRFIELD



INFANTRY
COUNTER-
ATTACKING
MALEME AIR-
FIELD

INFANTRY COUNTERATTACKING MALEME AIRFIELD

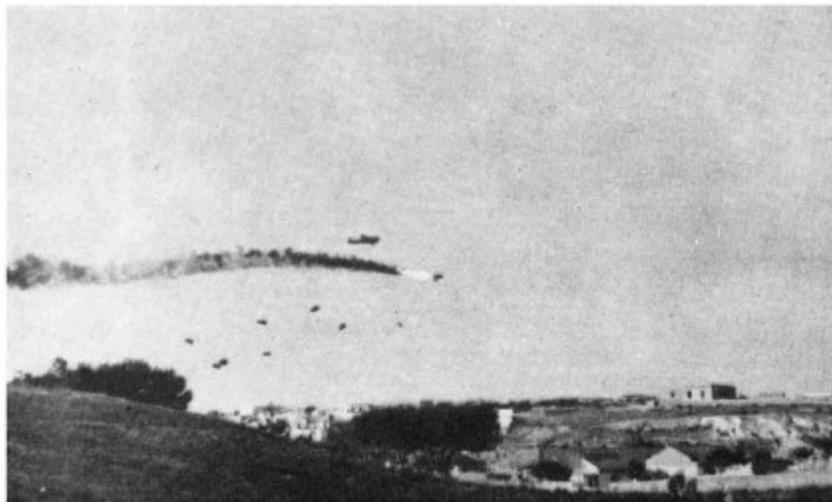




JUNKERS TROOP-CARRIERS BURNING AT MALEME
JUNKERS TROOP-CARRIERS BURNING AT MALEME



CRETE NEWS



ACK-ACK FIRE SCORES A HIT AT HERAKLION
ACK-ACK FIRE SCORES A HIT AT HERAKLION



BOMBING AT HERAKLION

Bombing at Heraklion

¹ It should be borne in mind throughout that this was 1941 and the Division's second campaign. Experience had not yet had time to remedy the deficiencies of training in peace. In this sense also, the Germans were better prepared.

² [Capt R. F. Moody](#), MBE, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 15 Oct 1915; medical practitioner; medical officer 5 Fd Amb Dec 1939–May 1941; p.w. May 1941.

³ [Pte S. W. J. Schroder](#), DCM; Koiterangi, Hokitika; born Hokitika, 20 Dec 1913; driver; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

lying about in the gunpits and had a grenade thrown at them. Justly incensed, they debated whether they should attack, but decided they must stick to their task and join [22 Battalion](#). The guide finally found the original Battalion HQ, by this time empty. They therefore came back through [Pirgos](#) to [Xamoudhokhori](#) and there met Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew emerging from a gully with part of B Company. With this party they made their way back to [23 Battalion](#), having increased their numbers en route from 114 to 180.

It has been indicated that Andrew accepted a pessimistic view of the fate of his other companies. The day's events on this front must now be rounded off with an account of each of them.

At last light D Company were not altogether displeased with the day's operations, in spite of the lack of communication with Battalion HQ. The nine survivors of 18 Platoon on the canal were still in position. No. 17 Platoon had only about a dozen men left unwounded, but these were still full of fight, though their ammunition supplies were lower than their spirit. No. 16 Platoon had had only light casualties.

Captain Campbell knew there were enemy on his left and right, but for the time being at least—especially after dark—these seemed content to count the day's evil sufficient. Like the rest of his company he expected to take part in a general counter-attack. A story brought by a marine that the battalion had gone he did not believe, and he had solved the food problem by breaking into a ration dump. Water was a serious difficulty because the enemy lay athwart the only source of supply.

It was while searching for water that Campbell and his CSM discovered that the battalion had gone. This revelation and the shortage of ammunition and water was a shock to the men and dashed their spirits. It also altered Campbell's view of the situation: he had to decide whether to follow or to stand fast in the hope that his positions might be used as the pivot of a counter-attack from the south, this being one of the tentative plans considered before the battle. After interrogating wounded he met in the battalion area he found that none of them knew the new location. He concluded that the withdrawal was a complete one and decided he must follow suit.

His plan was to send the remnants of 18 Platoon, under Sergeant [Sargeson](#),¹ south to the coast through a gap in the hills with the worst of the wounded. Having got there Sargeson was to turn

¹ Lt A. M. Sargeson; [Hawera](#); born [Hawera](#), 9 Jun 1915; clerk.

east along the coast in the hope of being picked up.¹ No. 17 Platoon under Lieutenant [Craig](#)² was to go south along the Tavronitis and turn east round the flank of Point 107. No. 16 Platoon, with Company HQ and a mixed party of [RAF](#) and RM, were to make their way east along a track known to Captain Campbell.

The plan, like most plans, worked out only in parts. Sargeson got his party

safely through to the coast and turned east to [Sfakia](#) in time to be embarked. Craig found the enemy astride his route in force. He turned back and tried to go east from his original position. But the enemy had followed Campbell on to Point 107 and was too strongly posted for a party short of ammunition to be able to force a way through. Craig decided to wait in the hope that daylight would reveal a way through. His reading of the situation was that the enemy was not really well established. Unluckily morning found him surrounded, except for one of his sections which he ordered to slip away and which made good its escape. The remainder of the platoon, with no more than twenty rounds of ammunition and some wounded, could only surrender.

Campbell's party consisted of 80 or 90 men, of whom 26 were D Company and the rest RM and [RAF](#). They went due east and passed a party of enemy who had lain up for the night and among whom the CSM tossed a grenade 'for good luck'. On the [Maleme– Vlakheronitissa](#) road they met Captain Hanton of A Company, who had sent his platoons ahead and then lost contact with them.

Shortly afterwards—about four o'clock—a runner arrived from C Company with a message for Battalion HQ. Campbell sent him back with orders that Captain Johnson should withdraw his company and join D Company. This therefore seems a good point to take up the story of C Company.

At the end of the day 13 Platoon still held the beach and C Company HQ, with the few survivors from 14 Platoon, still held a copse on the inland side of the airfield. 'The surviving men were in excellent heart in spite of their losses. They had NOT had enough. They were first rate in every particular way and were as aggressive as when action was first joined.'³ Their fire power was still strong, as two Junkers 52 found in the late afternoon when

¹ Campbell says this plan for the wounded had been formed before the attack. He cannot now understand why, since there had been no talk of evacuation or of [Sfakia](#) as its port.

² [Maj J. W. C. Craig](#), MC and bar; [Auckland](#); born [Gisborne](#), 22 Aug 1911; accountant; p.w. 21 May 1941; escaped Jul 1941; served with MI 9 (A Force) in [Greece](#); recaptured Jan 1942; escaped ([Italy](#)) Sep 1943; served

³ Capt Johnson.

they came in to try a landing and were forced out to sea again by a fusillade from all weapons.

But by 4.20 a.m. Captain Johnson, having sent out patrols which found only enemy on the site of Battalion HQ and having tried continually and vainly by other patrols between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. to get in touch with A, B, and D Companies, concluded that the battalion had withdrawn. He knew that while he held his position he could stop any aircraft from landing on the aerodrome. But he also knew that his small force could not withstand the inevitable dawn attack. Already the Germans shared the airfield with him, holding the western edge formerly defended by 15 Platoon and the bridge end of the southern edge. Their patrols, of about ten men each, were active from dark till midnight all round his positions, on the airfield itself, and on the road towards [Pirgos](#). Johnson therefore decided he must withdraw his men while there was still time. His own account gives a good idea of his method:

- (At 0420 hrs when I ordered withdrawal I despatched a runner to advise 13 Pl of a) this order. At the same time I ordered every man to remove his boots and hang them about his neck.
- (The wounded men who were unable to move were made as comfortable as b) possible in sheltered positions and provided with food and water and informed that we were about to depart.
- (At 0430 hrs we moved off in single file, the wounded interspersed along the line c) of our march, through the southern wire of the copse, past the snoring Germans on our right, through the vineyards which separated C Coy from A Coy's reserve platoon and HQ area up to A Coy's deserted HQ, on to the road, up the hill past a grounded glider, until we reached the forward boundary of B and A Coy's position.
- (By this time it was getting light and there was no sign of any opposition so I gave d) orders to put on boots and then we struck east across country towards where I hoped the 21 Bn was situated. On this stage of our journey we picked up two or three sleeping members of 22 Bn who were unaware that any withdrawal had taken place.
- (By 0600 hrs we arrived in a small wooded area at the same time as the German e) planes began their morning attack. Here we met HQ Coy under command of Lt Beaven and D Coy under Capt T. C. Campbell. The few German troops on this

feature were erased and we stayed put until the worst of the air activity ceased....

It will be seen from Johnson's last paragraph that Headquarters Company had by this time joined Captain Campbell. They had spent a lively enough afternoon in skirmishes round [Pirgos](#) but 'at no time during the night or day had [Maleme](#) village been occupied by the Jerries. A few had come through and a few stayed, but only the dead ones.'¹ At dusk the enemy had begun to gather

¹ Cpl N. N. Fellows. [Pirgos](#) village is meant.

in strength at the post they had captured in the morning. The sergeant armourer, J. S. [Pender](#),¹ and Corporal [Hosking](#)² were able to bring into action a small field gun which the enemy had dropped by parachute. '... when we heard Jerry collecting in this blind spot I spoke about I put twelve rounds into them which quietened them down quite a bit; they were cheeky as hell, shouting out to each other and giving orders, but the field gun quietened them down except that the orders turned to squeals and yells which was very good.'³

At 10.50 p.m. Hosking and another soldier set off on a reconnaissance into the B Company area. They got there safely but found no B Company. After returning to report this they set off again and found that Battalion HQ was also vacated. At 1 a.m. Lieutenant Beaven, in the light of this information, began to consider whether he should not withdraw, though loath to do so without orders. Eventually he decided that he must not risk being cut off the next day, and so about three in the morning the company moved out, taking with them their stretcher cases. Shortly afterwards they met Captain Campbell and D Company.

Now that Headquarters, C and D Companies were together, some sort of position had to be manned against the dangers of daylight. Campbell knew the area and led the party to a little valley where trees gave shelter against air observation. Here they waited till the morning blitz had passed its peak. But they had had the bad luck to rouse [21 Battalion](#)'s suspicions—suspicions expressed in bullets. Rather than stay any longer, they decided to cross by companies to [21 Battalion](#); and this in the course of the morning they managed to do.

Two further groups of [22 Battalion](#) remain to be accounted for: the wounded at the RAP and the pioneer platoon at the AMES. At the time of withdrawal the RAP contained about 160 wounded (among them some Germans), about 70 of whom were walking wounded. Captain [Longmore](#),⁴ the MO, had been busy all day at his own RAP and at another near the FAA camp. He was ordered in the late afternoon to move east with his patients. With the stretcher cases on boards, and guided by the Intelligence Officer, the party went about half a mile and then stopped to await further orders from Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew. By daylight no orders

¹ [WO II J. S. Pender](#); Kawau Island, [Auckland](#); born [Sydney](#), 18 Apr 1895; fitter engineer; NZ MG Corps, 1914–18.

² [S-Sgt H. P. Hosking](#); [Palmerston North](#); born Feilding, 24 Apr 1917; watchmaker.

³ Letter from Sgt Pender, 20 Oct 1941.

⁴ [Maj L. H. V. Longmore](#); [Christchurch](#); born NZ 18 Nov 1909; medical practitioner; RMO 22 Bn Dec 1940–May 1941; p.w. 21 May 1941; repatriated Nov 1943; medical officer, 1 Gen Hosp Apr–Oct 1944; Repatriation Group ([UK](#)) Oct 1944–Dec 1945.

had come. The Intelligence Officer set off to get stretchers. He reached the [21 Battalion](#) lines but then decided that the wounded could not be brought safely across the exposed and fireswept ridges.

Longmore and his patients waited on. The German wounded made a circle of RAP gear and the party sat inside it, unmolested by the enemy air force. Attempts were made to contact [22 Battalion](#) and [23 Battalion](#) but they failed. At 5 p.m. the party was captured.

The pioneer platoon under Lieutenant Wadey remained where it was all day and all night, and its further adventures had best be taken up in the next phase of the story.

CRETE

II: THE OTHER BATTALIONS AND 5 BRIGADE HQ

II: The Other Battalions and 5 Brigade HQ

i

The preceding account has shown [22 Battalion](#) conducting its battle in isolation and yet continually expectant of counter-attack by one or both of the two units—21 and 23 Battalions—for which that role was intended. The failure of the counter-attack to eventuate largely accounts for the situation in which Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew found himself at the end of the day, and no doubt contributed to the state of disheartenment in which he made his decision to withdraw, even if it cannot be taken as justifying that decision. It will be necessary therefore to take each battalion in turn and see why no counter-attack took place.

The 21st Battalion had been given three roles, each one excluding the other two. It was to move to the Tavronitis in the event of attack, or to take over the positions of [23 Battalion](#) should it move to counter-attack in support of 22 Battalion, or to remain and fight in its original positions. Just what conditions were to determine which course to be adopted is not now clear. No doubt Lieutenant-Colonel Allen ¹ considered that he was to hold himself ready to carry out any one of the three and decide, according to the situation or according to subsequent orders from Brigadier Hargest, which was the action required. ²

The orders for [23 Battalion](#) were less complicated. Lieutenant-Colonel [Leckie](#) ³ was to hold his own positions and be ready to come to the support of 22 Battalion if called upon. The onus for providing the counter-attack therefore seems to lie more

¹ Lt-Col J. M. Allen, m.i.d.; born [Cheadle](#), England, 3 Aug 1901; farmer; MP (Hauraki) 1938–41; CO 21 Bn 17 May–28 Nov 1941; killed in action, 28 Nov 1941.

² It is possible also that the orders may have been verbally expanded though we have no evidence of this, both principals being dead.

³ Col D. F. Leckie, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Invercargill](#); born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1897; school-teacher; served in Canterbury Mounted Rifles Regt, [Anzac Mounted Division](#), 1916–19; CO 23 Bn Aug 1940–Mar 1941, May 1941–Jun 1942; commanded 75 Sub-Area, Middle East Force, Aug 1942–Mar 1944; wounded 25 May 1941.

specifically on [23 Battalion](#); and this is what one would expect. For it was the stronger battalion and had indeed been placed where it was because [21 Battalion](#), much under strength from the casualties it had suffered in [Greece](#), was considered too weak to shoulder alone the task of counter-attack for which it had originally been brought forward. Why, then, did [23 Battalion](#) not counter-attack?

On the morning of the battle the battalion was disposed on either side of the road which ran from the main coast road to [Kondomari](#) and the positions of [21 Battalion](#). East and west across the front lay the canal, and the bulk of the battalion had its company lines immediately south of this canal. On the extreme west of the battalion position was Headquarters Company 1, ¹ with the battalion mortars and a platoon of MMGs under Lieutenant MacDonald. Between Headquarters Company 1 and the Sfakoriako river was D Company. Between the Sfakoriako and the road was A Company. Right of the road were B Company and Headquarters Company 2. South of all these and in the centre of the battalion position was C Company. ² The RAP and Battalion HQ were in a gully on the southern edge of C Company. A Battle HQ had been prepared in the area of Headquarters Company 1 but the nature and direction of the attack prevented it from being used. Good observation towards [Maleme](#) ³ could be had from the high ground held by Headquarters Company 1, and there was observation from a high feature a hundred yards west of Battalion HQ. This feature was occupied by signallers and the Intelligence section.

From these points, and in spite of a much more intense bombing and strafing than usual, the landing of gliders and parachutists over [Maleme](#) was observed and reported, though there was no communication with [22 Battalion](#) after seven o'clock, no doubt because the lines were cut. By the time the turn of [23 Battalion](#) itself came all troops were at their stations and as far as possible under cover from the air. Shortly after nine o'clock Leckie reported to Brigade HQ that parachutists were landing between his battalion and [22 Battalion](#) but that so far all was well. In half an

hour landings were taking place within the battalion's own perimeter. In fact the greater part of the Assault Regiment's III Battalion must have come down there.

The first lot seemed to curl over us and land on the `drome, the second lot seemed to go over the back of us towards 21 Bn and we began shooting though most of these were out of our range.

¹ HQ Coy was divided into two groups, 1 and 2. For all these dispositions see map facing p. 97.

² 23 Bn company commanders were: Capt. C. N. Watson (A Coy), [Capt J. B. Gray](#) (B Coy), [Maj H. H. Thomason](#) (C Coy), Captain I. O. Manson (D Coy).

Suddenly, they came amongst us. I was watching the 21 Bn area and a pair of feet appeared through a nearby olive tree. They were right on top of us. Around me rifles were cracking. I had a Tommy gun and it was just like duck shooting. ¹

Paratroops landed everywhere in the battalion positions. All companies were at once briskly engaged and without having to move from where they were did terrible havoc. The excitement was tremendous. Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie himself killed five from his HQ in the gully, while the Adjutant, Captain [Orbell](#), ² accounted for two without getting up from his packing-case desk. The battalion's losses at this stage were slight, though it was in these first few minutes that Mayor [Fyfe](#), ³ the second-in-command, was killed.

As soon as those actually within the positions had been dealt with the companies sallied out to despatch those who had landed outside the perimeter. D Company cleared the area west of the Sfakoriako, A Company the road to its front, B and Headquarters Company 2 the north-east flank, and C the area to the immediate east. These operations were very successful. Thus 15 Platoon of C Company, under Lieutenant [Thomas](#), ⁴ killed thirty enemy for the loss of one killed and two wounded.

The counter-attack for which he might be called upon made the fortunes of [22 Battalion](#) a matter of prime interest to Leckie. Soon after the invasion began a party of signallers had been sent into position on the western slopes of the battalion area

by a plan prearranged with [22 Battalion](#), and their task was to make contact by means of visual signals. This, however, they were unable to do. Nor were the flares sent up by [22 Battalion](#) observed. But the observation posts reported that [22 Battalion](#)'s Headquarters Company seemed to be holding strongly, and Headquarters Company 1 could see that runways on the airfield were all covered by fire. The fact that the enemy, as observed through binoculars, evidently did not care to move in the open suggested that [22 Battalion](#) was firm.

During the morning, therefore, Leckie was able to content himself with local patrolling and cleaning-up operations and with using his machine guns and mortars to check any enemy movement in the

¹ Report by Capt Watson.

² [Maj R. M. S. Orbell](#); [Greymouth](#); born [Oamaru](#), 17 Feb 1915; shipping clerk; wounded 18 Aug 1942.

³ [Maj T. Fyfe](#); born [Pakanui](#), 3 Oct 1892; school-teacher; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁴ [Lt-Col W. B. Thomas](#), DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d., Silver Star (US); [London](#); born [Nelson](#), 29 Jun 1918; bank officer; CO 23 Bn Jun–Aug 1944, Oct 1944–May 1945; twice wounded; wounded and p.w. May 1941; escaped Nov 1941; [Hampshire Regt](#), 1947–.

[Maleme](#) area. His counter-attack routes to [22 Battalion](#) had all been reconnoitred, and whenever the orders to move should come his troops were ready to carry them out.

At 2.25 p.m. there came a message from Brigade HQ which gave a positive endorsement to his waiting policy:

Glad of your message of 1140 hrs. Will NOT call on you for counter-attacking unless position very serious. So far everything is in hand and reports from other units satisfactory.... ¹

The reason for this surprising message will be discussed when the situation is considered from the point of view of Brigadier Hargest.² For the moment it suffices to explain why Leckie made no move to the support of 22 Battalion. It should be added that although 23 Battalion could make no contact with 22 Battalion by visual signals, the Intelligence OP reported that 22 Battalion's Headquarters Company seemed to be holding out; and when Leckie sent his 17 Platoon to try and get in touch with it, the platoon could not do so because Headquarters Company was firing on all movement.

Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, however, knew nothing of this message. About five o'clock he had called for the counter-attack but had been told by Hargest that 23 Battalion was too busy with its own paratroops. Half an hour later Hargest had told him that two companies were being sent.

In consequence Leckie got orders in the late afternoon to send a company. Accordingly, Captain Watson set off with A Company about dusk.³ The rest of the battalion, in high fettle and with casualties of only seven killed and 30 wounded against perhaps as many as 200 enemy killed in the air, in the trees and on the ground,⁴ settled down for the night, confident of the morrow.

ii

The message sent by 5 Brigade to 23 Battalion at 2.25 p.m., the failure of 23 Battalion to see Andrew's flares, and the fact that Hargest evidently thought that Captain Watson's company and Captain Royal's would be all the reinforcement required by 22 Battalion sufficiently explain why 23 Battalion did not carry out the attack for which it had been prepared. The fact that it did not do so also helps to explain the actions of 21 Battalion on 20 May.

¹ 23 Bn WD. Line communications between 23 Bn and Bde HQ were cut during the morning and at 2 p.m. were still so. These messages therefore were presumably passed by LO.

² See p. 135.

³ See p. 112.

⁴ [11 Air Corps](#) estimates that 400 out of 600 men in III Bn were killed, including the CO, [Maj Scherber](#). But all these would not have fallen to 23 Bn.

Lieutenant-Colonel Allen had disposed his rifle companies along the vineyard ridge west of [Kondomari](#) and the Sfakoriako. Battalion HQ and Headquarters Company were in [Kondomari](#) and on the ridge to the south of it. In addition the battalion had, as has been seen, a platoon of A Company on the east bank of the Tavronitis and an observer detachment overlooking [Kastelli](#). ¹

The arrival of the gliders over [Maleme](#) found [21 Battalion](#) at breakfast, the early morning strafing having apparently died down. All those not already in position at once took post and watched the parachutists landing 'away to the west'. ² Some had landed closer, however, and about half past eight the troops became engaged with a group of about fifty who had come down north-west of D Company. These were followed an hour later by a string of a score or more who dropped round Battalion HQ and north towards [23 Battalion](#). Of these one was taken PW, two were wounded, and the rest killed.

In these circumstances Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, having himself accounted for one parachutist, had to decide which of his three roles he was to adopt. There was no sign at this stage of [23 Battalion](#) counter-attacking, nor did there seem occasion for it to do so. He had no reason as yet to think his battalion was needed on the Tavronitis. And it seemed likely that the paratroops who had already landed would be followed by others. He therefore decided to hold his battalion where it was but to send a second platoon of A Company held ready for the purpose to the Tavronitis, clearing the villages of [Xamoudhokhori](#) and [Vlakheronitissa](#) on the way. From its progress he would be able to judge how things were going to the west. The platoon left at 11.30 a.m.

With the beginning of the battle the line to Brigade HQ was cut and, as the battalion had no wireless, communication from then on must have been by runner to [23 Battalion](#). It was perhaps by this means that Brigade HQ learnt at 1.45 p.m. that

[21 Battalion](#) had dealt with all the parachutists dropped in its area, and that it was reconnoitring to the south where others had been seen to drop.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the platoon from A Company returned. It had cleared [Xamoudhokhori](#) with the loss of one man, but had failed to reach [Vlakheronitissa](#), after losing casualties in the attempt. No doubt Major Stentzler's 5 and 7 Companies, reinforced by parachutist and glider stragglers, were by this time making their preliminary probes into the southern outskirts of

¹ See pp. 62–3. This detachment consisted of a section under a sergeant. It was cut off as soon as battle began, kept trying to make its way round the enemy flank and join the main force, and eventually succeeded in joining the withdrawal towards [Sfakia](#).— Pte L. R. Stone, letter dated 4 Apr 1948.

² 21 Bn WD.

[22 Battalion](#)'s perimeter and had left a strong detachment in [Vlakheronitissa](#) to guard their own flank. As these two companies together made up a force comparable in strength with that which had already made a breach at the road bridge, it is not surprising that the commander of the platoon from [21 Battalion](#) could do no more than post a standing patrol east of the village to prevent any infiltration eastwards.

Unfortunately Allen did not draw the correct inference from the presence of such a force in [Vlakheronitissa](#). He presumably thought that his platoon on the Tavronitis was cut off, or destroyed, or had joined [22 Battalion](#). Yet he might well have considered that the situation had now arisen where he might make the move to the Tavronitis envisaged in his orders. No doubt it would have been a difficult operation with the enemy planes as strong in the sky as they were that day; and he had perhaps heard from [23 Battalion](#) that its counter-attack would not be called for, a circumstance which implied that Brigadier Hargest, in touch with Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, saw no reason for concern.

Even so, Allen might have argued, Hargest presumably knew nothing of the presence of this force round [Vlakheronitissa](#). He can hardly be blamed for not having

so argued but, had he done so and at once attacked with his battalion, he would have given Stentzler's force a severe jolt and by making contact with [22 Battalion](#) might have so altered the situation that Andrew's withdrawal would not have taken place.

Meanwhile a message had come through from the AMES that small parties of enemy were operating in that quarter, and a second patrol was sent under Lieutenant [Smith](#)¹ to mop them up. The patrol met no enemy and returned according to orders about seven o'clock.

In this kind of patrolling the battalion passed the day, an occupation varied by the experience of a severe dive-bombing towards evening. This visitation was no doubt due to the solicitude of Major Stentzler, who could not have felt happy about the presence of a large body of troops within striking distance. Even the presence of the patrol east of [Vlakheronitissa](#) disturbed Stentzler, as we may infer from the fact that it had to return after dark to avoid being surrounded.

Of the platoon on the Tavronitis Allen had of course no news, and he was not to learn till the following morning of the various vicissitudes it had been through.

¹ [Capt H. H. W. Smith](#); Matatoki, [Thames](#); born Waitotara, 11 Jan 1914; farmer; p.w. 29 Nov 1941.

From the local point of view then, [21 Battalion](#) had not had a bad day. It is all the more to be regretted that a force which was so close to the critical area, and itself relatively free of trouble at the very time of crisis for [22 Battalion](#), could not have been put to more effective use.

iii

This account of the three forward battalions cannot be complete until the situation at 5 Brigade HQ has been more closely scanned. But it will be well, before turning to this, to conclude the story from the point of view of the units engaged by relating what happened to those lying farther back from the main battle area.

The 28th Battalion was grouped forward of [Platanias](#) so as to cover the beach

and road in that area. The most westerly of its positions was held by D Company—a road bridge about a mile west of [Platanias](#) and the area on either side. Back along the road was Headquarters Company, grouped about the village itself; while A, B, and C Companies ¹ held the slopes just south of [Platanias](#). ²

Being farther from the scene of the main landings, [28 Battalion](#) saw less action than the other battalions of 5 Brigade this day. Not till about the middle of the morning did it get its chance. First a glider and then a troop-carrier crash-landed on the beach about half a mile west of D Company. Before crashing they were already being attended to by all the Bren guns within range, by the three-inch mortar with [28 Battalion](#), and by C Troop of [27 Battery](#). Both aircraft were set on fire but not before some of the enemy that landed with them escaped: for, about an hour later, enemy were observed collecting in a building about 600 yards in front of the NZE positions. C Troop was called upon and scored at least one direct hit. But the enemy remained in the area, and at half past two Captain [Baker](#), ³ second-in-command of D Company, took out two platoons to deal with them. His account of what followed gives a good idea of the conditions and the spirit in which this operation, typical of many in these days, was carried out:

One platoon from C Coy. under 2/Lt. Ready [[Reedy](#)] moved with myself, while the second platoon being No. 17 D Coy. led by 2/Lieut. F. R. Logan, was on our left. The area between D Coy. and the house occupied by the enemy was for the most part quite bare and therefore considerably exposed to any likely attack from the air. To minimise the risk I instructed all men

¹ 28 Bn company commanders were: Capt E. Te W. Love (HQ Coy), [Capt L. J. Bell](#) (A Coy), Capt R. Royal (B Coy), [Capt A. T. McL. Scott](#) (C Coy), Maj H. G. Dyer (D Coy).

² See map facing p. 97.

³ [Lt-Col F. Baker](#), DSO, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Kohu Kohu, [Hokianga](#), 19 Jun 1908; civil servant; CO 28 Bn Jul–Nov 1942; twice wounded; Director of Rehabilitation.

and their section commanders that they were to keep at least 15 yard intervals between them and in the event of enemy air attack were to lie on the ground until the planes were actually above them. We had not covered the first 100 yards when the first enemy fighters commenced to machine-gun us and by the time we were within 250 yards of the house we were receiving some attention from approximately twelve planes, which continued to circle and machine-gun us each time they came round. However we pushed home the attack which was contested by the glider troops, the platoon from C Company moving in very extended order along the beach area while 2/Lieut. Logan with his platoon on the inland side swung in an arc and finally captured the house. The enemy who were located in patrols in the sandy area around the house having lost some seven or eight men in the fighting and realising that their case was hopeless surrendered. Prisoners taken comprised two officers ... and eight other ranks. These men were marched back immediately ... and it gave a great fillip to morale of the men with me to see the terror exhibited by these Germans when they commenced to receive attention from their own fighter aircraft....

This was the main event of the day on the front of [28 Battalion](#), though there were minor excitements elsewhere like the landing of two paratroops near Battalion HQ—followed by their swift capture. The adventures of B Company under Captain Rangī Royal, who set off at 7 p.m. to the support of 22 Battalion, have already been described.

iv

The other infantry defences in 5 Brigade sector consisted of two groups: the NZE Detachment— [7 Field Company](#) (Captain J. B. Ferguson, who also commanded the whole detachment), which held both sides of the main road east of [23 Battalion](#), and [19 Army Troops Company](#) (Captain J. N. Anderson) which held a similar area from east of [7 Field Company](#) to D Company of [28 Battalion](#)— and the [Field Punishment Centre](#), which was located south of [7 Field Company](#) and about half a mile west of [Modhion](#).

About the same time as the landings on [23 Battalion](#), between a hundred and a hundred and fifty parachutists landed on the west flank of [7 Field Company](#). These

met with much the same fate as those in [23 Battalion](#) area, though some survived long enough to give the engineers a day's hunting. The 19th [Army](#) Troops were too far west to receive more than a sprinkling and towards evening sent over thirty men to assist [7 Field Company](#).

The Field Punishment Centre was commanded by Lieutenant Roach. The prisoners were without rifles, though a store was kept for issue in case of attack. When the enemy arrived the men were having breakfast—cooked in kerosene tins and eaten from bully-beef tins. 'I think it's it,' said Sergeant Hulme. ¹ 'Get rifles, grab gear and move to 23 Bn as in orders,' said Roach. ²

The prior plan had been to move along the canal and join B Company. But parachutists were dropping in that direction and so Roach decided to make for the southern companies of 23 Battalion. More parachutists then began to land there also. Roach decided to hold the nearest high ground. He divided his men into three sections, each under an NCO, and they settled down in time to see more paratroops drop over the [Aghya](#) plain and 'thank Christ they were not coming here.' ³

Then two parachutists dropped about half a mile south-west of [Modhion](#), and while Roach was watching them through his glasses they began to drop in large numbers all over his own area—forty yards west of it, then on top of it, then from a hundred to two hundred yards south of it.

Those who had weapons were by this time firing and those who had not were busy stripping the dead enemy. Once the paratroops were all landed and the obvious targets dealt with, Roach ordered out short patrols with orders 'into them'. On one of these, five enemy were killed and five captured. Besides the valuable addition of three spandaus to the unit's fire power, this encounter yielded an aerial photograph showing positions of the defence in the area, including those of C Troop and its ammunition dumps. A recent change of camp by Lieutenant Roach had apparently eluded the enemy reconnaissance and may have saved the guns from an unpleasant attack.

Shortly after this a patrol from [7 Field Company](#) under Lieutenant [Hector](#) ⁴ passed through in search of an enemy mortar. It had not gone far when it ran into enemy fire and Hector was killed.

The rest of the day passed for the FPC at a slightly less hectic tempo in dealing with snipers, evacuating prisoners and wounded, collecting enemy equipment from the containers dropped, making contact with the other forces in the area, and a move after nightfall into a position closer to [7 Field Company](#) so as to prevent infiltration.

¹ [WO II A. C. Hulme](#), VC; Pongakawa, [Te Puke](#); born Dunedin, 24 Jan 1911; farmer; wounded 28 May 1941.

² Report by Lt Roach.

³ Ibid.

⁴ [Lt J. R. M. Hector](#), m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 17 May 1913; civil engineer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

For the gunners of A, B, and C Troops the day had more hazards and excitements than usually fall to the lot of the artillery. A and B, not being dependent on direct observation, were skilfully hidden and were not discovered by the enemy air force, but C Troop had to be sited more or less openly so as to be able to use open sights and so took its full share of the bombing and strafing with which the battle began. Once the parachutists began to land in the areas east of [Maleme](#) all three troops had to look to their personal defence as well. This was not necessarily easy, as they were badly off for personal weapons; thus of the eleven men on one gun in B Troop only one had a rifle. At this stage the scene at B Troop as described by the Battery Commander, Major W. D. Philp, may be taken as not untypical:

Lts. Gibson and Francis get to work with a rifle each and I frantically try to tell Lt. Gibson that he is firing too high and also that there are three blokes under one tree just where he is firing. The Troop Riflemen are still below ground and so we raise them and organise them along the front ledge of our position. After the first excitement ... they settle down to a little duck shooting, another load of Parachutists having toppled out. Troop Bren Gun is back at Cookhouse and so I go and send Bdr. Tyler and the gunners up. Return to B.H.Q. and send Gnrs. Cantlon and Marshall off

with our Bren and they do excellent work. B.H.Q. now receive a "carrier" load right in our front garden and we get into the fun. One Hun is only about 25 yds away in grape vines. A few rounds are fired but he may be lying "doggo". Gnr. McDonald sets our anxiety at rest by coming up from opposite direction walking straight up to Hun and saying, "You'd look at me like that, you bas.... would you?" with appropriate action. Another poor devil gets his on the wing. His 'chute catches in an olive tree and he finishes up by leaning on a rock wall, head on hands almost as if he had been meditating by the wall when death caught up to him. Dead Germans everywhere—' chutes caught in trees and still fluttering in the wind....

But to defend themselves against these enemy on the ground was only a secondary task for the gunners. Their prime concern was to fire their guns. This became difficult from the first because of the failure of the line to the OP. Heroic efforts to mend it were made by Sergeant [McLeay](#)¹ of B Troop and others, but it was impossible and he and his party were constantly distracted into fighting along the way.

The line between A and B Troops, however, was still intact and the two troops agreed to engage targets by map reference.

¹ [Sgt K. A. McLeay](#), MM; born [Napier](#), 22 May 1918; clerk; wounded Nov 1941; lost at sea (SS Chakdina) 5 Dec 1941.

This was not unsuccessful, and when later requests came through by devious means from [22 Battalion](#) for searching fire to the west of the Tavronitis they were accurately complied with.

The gunners of C Troop, excellently placed for observation as they had to be, also did worthy execution against troop movements east of the airfield,¹ concentrations in houses, and aircraft and gliders landing on the beach. But their position was an exposed one. Before long at least one enemy gun was brought to bear on them from near [Maleme](#), and Captain Snadden, the troop commander, was wounded. Moreover, enemy fighters soon discovered the troop's positions, and their attentions were so persistent that C Troop had either to fire while themselves under fire from the air or remain silent. They chose to fire and kept on firing.

The account of the position as it was with the various units actually engaged is now complete and it is time to turn to 5 Brigade HQ. From Battle HQ in a gully south of [Platanias](#), Brigadier Hargest's staff saw the gliders come in low overhead and then veer west towards [Maleme](#). The Brigade Major, Captain R. B. Dawson, at once reported them to Divisional HQ and found that they had also been seen from there. Reports soon came from [22 Battalion](#) that there had been glider landings in their area, and similar reports about the passage of gliders and parachutists came in from the other battalions. By 9.20 a.m., when the line—except for that to [23 Battalion](#), the NZE detachment and the artillery—failed,² the situation seemed in hand. Wireless contact was then sought and established about 10 a.m. with [22 Battalion](#), though subject to interruption at both ends of the link.³

At eight minutes past ten Brigade HQ reported to Division by telephone that the landing of parachutists was general; that the Bofors guns were still in action over the airfield; that large numbers of parachutists in front of [23 Battalion](#) were being engaged; that [7 Field Company](#) was engaging parachutists between its lines and

¹ The most gratifying shoot of the day occurred when a detachment of paratroops was observed in close formation near [Pirgos](#). The first round from Capt Snadden's guns landed in the middle of the column.

² Reports about the exact time when line to 22 Bn failed and the time when wireless contact was made are contradictory. The above is based mainly on the reports of Capt Dawson and of [Capt W. W. Mason](#), Staff Captain, 5 Bde HQ. It seems likely enough that one or two early messages about the landings were got through by line and that there was then a short delay after the failure of line while wireless contact was made. The main point is that the first soon failed and that the second grew weaker as the day wore on and the batteries began to run down.

³ It seemed to 5 Bde that they got special attention from the enemy aircraft every time a wireless message was passed.

the sea; that wrecked gliders and a large aeroplane were reported on the

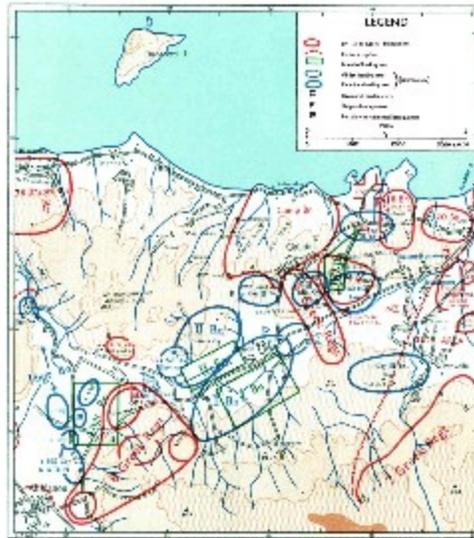
aerodrome; and that the 'situation [was] well in hand'. ¹ A further report twenty minutes later told Division that wireless contact had now been made with [22 Battalion](#) and that the main enemy activity appeared to be directed against the area held by it.

Brigadier Hargest had been in [Platanias](#) village when the invasion began and had had to dash and crawl through a storm of machine-gun fire from enemy aeroplanes in order to reach his Battle HQ. When he reached it he took up an observation post in a slit trench from which he could observe [Maleme](#). He was confident that the brigade would hold its positions and took the breakdown in communications as the sort of mishap inevitable in battle.

At 10.30 a.m. he was able to pass on to [27 Battery](#) the request for searching fire in the Tavronitis area and to watch the unsuccessful attempts of enemy planes to silence the guns. True, the report from [22 Battalion](#) at 10.55 that communications with companies had gone must have been disturbing, but the Brigadier no doubt interpreted it as cheerfully as was natural to one of his sanguine temper and concluded that it was only temporary and that, sited as they were for all-round defence, the companies would be able to hold their own against the isolated parties to whom the interruption would be due. And his confidence would have been encouraged by the report from [23 Battalion](#) at 11.40 that its area was well under control. A similar report to similar effect from [21 Battalion](#) at 1.45 p.m. may have made him hope—if so, by a mistaken assessment of the force of the enemy attack in the different areas—that what two of his battalions had been able to do the third would also manage. All that he himself could do he evidently felt he was doing, and although [22 Battalion](#) reported shortly after noon that they had been bombed and were being harassed by guns and heavy machine guns from the west, at least his guns were doing all in their power to retaliate.

By 2 p.m., however, communications with [23 Battalion](#) had broken down in their turn and there was no news from the others. Yet the tenor of the message sent to [23 Battalion](#) at 2.25 p.m. to the effect that it would not be needed for the counter-attack unless the position became very serious does not suggest any great perturbation; though it is just possible that captured maps brought in about two o'clock and indicating a projected enemy thrust eastwards towards [Canea](#) may have

made Hargest anxious to hold on to his reserve as long as possible, the more so if he believed, as he may well have done, that there were more waves of paratroops to follow. Confidence in the general situation, however, seems



Galatas, intended and actual landing areas of 3 Parachute Regiment, 20 May

¹ The reference to gliders and a plane on the drome was mistaken.

the more likely and simpler explanation, and is borne out by the attitude of his staff as instanced by an entry in Captain Dawson's day-to-day narrative for 2 p.m.: 'Meanwhile things were confused but we did not feel that they were bad. We realised that 22 Bn was taking a hammering but we thought that the situation could be coped with'. ¹

This confidence ought to have been more difficult to sustain as the afternoon went on. At 2.55 p.m. came a report from Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew that his Battalion HQ had been penetrated and at ten minutes to four his report that his left ² flank had given way and his request that Headquarters Company should be contacted because he badly needed reinforcements. Again, as we have seen, ³ about five o'clock Andrew asked Hargest to order the counter-attack and was told after a pause that **23 Battalion** could not carry it out because it was busy with paratroops. ⁴

It was during this conversation, apparently, that Andrew told Hargest that if no support were coming from without he would have to counter-attack with the two I

tanks. And it may be that Hargest had such confidence in this local reserve that he thought nothing more would be necessary.

If so, Andrew's next message for him, some time after 5.45 p.m. and probably about six o'clock,⁵ must have been a severe disappointment: the local counter-attack had failed. But even before this and while the local counter-attack was going on, the Brigadier had evidently felt some assistance must be sent: for at 5.15 Brigade HQ reported to Division that two companies were being sent to the airfield.⁶

Although Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew assumed that these two companies would arrive almost immediately, their actual time of departure was not till about half past seven, and it is a reasonable assumption that the orders given—by telephone to [23 Battalion](#) and verbally to [28 Battalion](#)⁷—did not stipulate for an immediate move. It is not the time of their departure, however, that is so puzzling: co-ordinated movement even on this scale was very

¹ Report by Capt Dawson (Dec 1946).

² Perhaps a slip for 'right'; see [p. 109](#).

³ See [p. 109](#).

⁴ This is odd, since 23 Bn had informed 5 Bde at midday that the situation was under complete control. Perhaps, after hearing from Lt-Col Andrew, Hargest was able to make contact with Lt-Col Leckie or had reason to believe that the situation had deteriorated since the midday message. Telephone seems to have been restored then or soon afterwards.

⁵ 'No news from "I" tanks ...'—Bde WD entry for 5.45 p.m. Lt-Col Andrew says he was told of the coming of the two companies between 5.30 and 6 p.m., presumably when he reported the failure of the counter-attack.

⁶ NZ Div Intelligence log.

difficult so long as day lasted. What is puzzling is that the force employed should have been so small.

It would be another matter if Brigadier Hargest had hastened to increase the strength of the reinforcement when he learnt about six o'clock that the counter-attack had failed and Andrew first began to speak of withdrawal. But he did not do so; nor does he seem to have considered that any special action was called for after his last conversation with Andrew between 8.30 and 9.30 p.m. The optimism implicit in this inaction is to be found also in a message sent from 5 Brigade HQ to Division that night at 9.45. According to this [23 Battalion](#) and [7 Field Company](#) were reported to be 'tired but in good fettle'; there were 'hundreds of dead Germans in their areas'. All units would be keeping a sharp watch on the beach that night. The 23rd Battalion's casualties were seven killed and 30 wounded. Nothing was known of casualties in the other units beyond the fact, reported by [22 Battalion](#) at six o'clock, that its casualties had been severe. The message went on to say that a company from [23 Battalion](#) and another from [28 Battalion](#) had been sent to help [22 Battalion](#), the first being expected to arrive at 8.45 and the second at 9 p.m. Communications with [22 Battalion](#) had been lost at 8.30 p.m. In general, the situation was 'quite satisfactory'. ¹

If Hargest, although he knew that the local counter-attack with tanks had failed and that Andrew was considering a limited withdrawal, regarded the situation as 'quite satisfactory', we can see why he did not feel called upon to launch a major counterattack with 21 and 23 Battalions. But how he could possibly take such a view remains completely puzzling. Since he himself did not survive the war to explain what he did and what he left undone, no satisfying solution is available.

The absence of an explanation for what was done, however, hardly absolves the historian from the necessity to consider the action taken in the light not only of its results but also of what might have been the results of a different course. And as the events of this twenty-four hours were largely to determine the development of the whole battle for [Crete](#), it is particularly necessary to pause and recapitulate the main points of the day's action with an eye to suggesting the courses open to Brigadier

Hargest and scrutinising the course he did take in the light of the defence he would probably have advanced for it.

¹ NZ Div WD. It is interesting that the message mentions that communications with 22 Bn had been lost at 8.30 p.m. If this time is right, as seems likely, and if communications were not subsequently restored, Lt-Col Andrew is mistaken in thinking his last conversation with Brig Hargest took place between nine and half past. And the optimism of Brig Hargest is all the less explicable.

Already before noon Hargest was reporting to Division that the main enemy activity appeared to be directed against [22 Battalion](#). Nothing that happened subsequently could have given him grounds for departing from this appreciation, and indeed, since [22 Battalion](#) commanded the airfield and the airfield was the obvious objective, nothing could be more likely than that the appreciation was correct.

Again, by early afternoon Hargest knew that [21 Battalion](#) had disposed of the paratroops in its area and that [23 Battalion](#), though more heavily attacked, also had its situation well in hand.

It would have been natural, therefore, from midday on, to discover Brigadier Hargest issuing or preparing to issue orders to either or both 21 and 23 Battalions to proceed to the support of [22 Battalion](#), where the obvious *Schwer punkt* of the enemy's effort lay. Yet, instead, he issues at 2.25 p.m. a message to [23 Battalion](#) to the effect that he will not call upon it to counter-attack unless the position is very serious.

The only inference one can draw from this is that, although he knew the main attack was directed against [22 Battalion](#) and that the enemy was in force west of the Tavronitis, he thought it necessary to defer using his reserves as long as possible, and that he did not think the situation was as yet very serious.

The case for keeping [23 Battalion](#) where it was rests mainly no doubt on the fact that the same intelligence which had predicted the airborne invasion so accurately had also foretold an invasion by sea. The 23rd Battalion had a coastal defence role, and presumably Hargest did not want to move it to a position where it

would be unable to carry this out unless he was absolutely forced to. And, if he was going to move it, the somewhat confusing battle plan for [21 Battalion](#) laid down that it was to replace [23 Battalion](#). With communications as bad as they were this might have been a difficult reshuffling of forces to carry through; even so, the most that can be said is that hesitation to embark on the manoeuvre was natural.

Again, at 2.25 p.m. Hargest does not seem to have realised that [22 Battalion](#) was already in jeopardy—there is no evidence to show that he was yet aware of the breach at the Tavronitis bridge.

Finally, the fact that [23 Battalion](#) at least still had a good deal of mopping up to do, and the grave difficulties involved in moving large formed bodies of troops in daylight under complete enemy air superiority, also favoured a policy of waiting until the situation had become clearer and the need for counter-attack more indisputable.

When all this has been said, it is still difficult to see the wisdom of sending a quite gratuitous message to the effect that the counter-attack would not be called for unless the position grew very serious.

As the afternoon proceeds the case becomes more difficult. By 2.55 p.m. Andrew had reported the penetration of his HQ area. By 3.50 he was reporting that his 'left flank' had given way but that the position was believed to be in hand. Even if we assume that Andrew did not put his predicament as strongly as he might have done, this ought surely to have forced Hargest to reconsider his counter-attack policy so far. If he did reconsider it, he did not alter it.

Then, about five o'clock, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, having already put up flares in vain, got in touch with Hargest once more and asked for counter-attack by [23 Battalion](#). The reply was that [23 Battalion](#) could not counter-attack because it was engaged against paratroops. Unless we assume that Hargest in his unrecorded telephone conversations with Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie formed an exaggerated estimate of the importance of the mopping-up operations then going on in [23 Battalion](#) area, it is hard to explain why he should have answered Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew with what was in effect a repudiation of the battle plan which had been formed expressly to meet the situation that had now arisen. In fact, he seems to have had afterthoughts; for the message by which Division learnt of the plan to send

forward Watson's and Royal's companies was received at 5.15 p.m., and so we may assume that it was after the above conversation that Hargest decided to send them.

Two companies, however, and those not sent till dark, were a sadly inadequate force to send to the help of the sector that was not only the worst beset but the most important.

Hargest's next news of the [Maleme](#) front was Andrew's report that the counter-attack with tanks had failed. In the same conversation—about six o'clock—he also learnt that Andrew, his reserve gone and no counter-attack having come, might have to consider withdrawal. He replied by agreeing to that withdrawal if it had to be.

These conversations seem crucial to the interpretation of Hargest's attitude. But no record of them survives and Hargest did not discuss them with his staff. We are dependent for information about them on the recollection of Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, and he can throw no light upon the conclusions Hargest drew from them. Moreover, with weak signals, the forward troops under heavy attack, and a confusing situation, full allowance must be made for the possibilities of misunderstanding, never so rich as in time of battle.

Yet the minimum that Brigadier Hargest could have gathered was that the situation was bad. The counter-attack with tanks had failed, there was no further reserve, and the local commander had mentioned withdrawal as a possible contingency. The inference that, even with the extra two companies and even if he held on, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew would have to meet a heavier attack next day without having the tanks available as a counter-stroke ought surely to have been inescapable.

It is difficult to resist the view that Hargest's wisest course at this time would have been to issue a warning order to [23 Battalion](#) and perhaps [21 Battalion](#), to have gone forward to [23 Battalion](#) and seen for himself the situation there, to have joined Watson's company and gone through with it to Andrew's HQ. ¹ Once there he could have summed up the situation, raised the spirits of the beleaguered battalion, called up one or both the other battalions to restore the line of the Tavronitis, and if all went well ordered them to launch a night counter-attack across the river. The Assault Regiment had by now lost one of its battalions more or less completely and

the others were in a very battered state.²

Again, at half past eight or somewhat later, Andrew got in touch with Hargest by the last effort of the No. 18 set and, though the messages were weak, 'told him I would have to withdraw to B Coy ridge.' A glance at the map should have told Hargest that such a course was tantamount to giving up the position. Then, if ever, was the time for some such course of action as that already suggested.

Instead, he sent the message to Division that has already been recounted—a message which gives no indication that Andrew was contemplating even a local withdrawal, though this news would surely have been thought of the greatest importance.

This fact—that his message does not mention withdrawal—and the fact that his staff also had no inkling of what might be in the wind suggest that either Hargest had not understood Andrew's intentions or that he believed the arrival of the two companies would be enough to restore Andrew's confidence and prevent him from

¹ The problem of where he is to be is always a difficult one for a commander. Had he gone forward he would have been for a long time out of touch with both Division and his forward commanders. As will be seen, other senior commanders found the problem as baffling. At a later stage in the war no experienced commander when in doubt would fail to realise that going forward was the only safe course.

² In Andrew's view the most even a force of two battalions counter-attacking on 20 May could have done would have been to restore the situation. Even this would have been better than nothing; but both General Student and General Ringel agree that the [Assault Regiment](#) could not have withstood a battalion counter-attack at this time.

withdrawing. Even if this is so, however, he at the least failed to appreciate the significance of the failure of the counter-attack with tanks and greatly overrated the power of two extra companies to alter the situation. And, finally, he had missed the most important fact of all, that now was the time to strike with all the force he had.

Looked at in this light the factor that probably weighed most with him, the need

for the battalions to be in a position to carry out their coastal roles, dwindles to its true importance. For if the airfield were lost the enemy could build up his invasion independently of the success or failure of the seaborne expedition. And unless the defence counter-attacked at once, not merely to restore the original position but to hit the enemy's build-up across the Tavronitis the hardest blow possible, it would be only a matter of time before the airfield belonged to General Meindl.

In short, Brigadier Hargest misread the situation. That he did so can be blamed partly on the fact that he was still tired from the campaign in [Greece](#); on his being over-impressed with the success of [23 Battalion](#) and too ready to believe that [22 Battalion](#) would have equal success in weathering the storm; on the circumstance that this was a kind of battle new to him and one where hours counted, not days; and on the fact that communications were peculiarly bad and advice from a trained Intelligence staff quite absent. But the conclusion is inevitable that he began with a battle plan which gave his battalion commanders too much choice of role with too little guidance on which roles were prior, that in the battle itself he failed to give his commanders firm directions, that he would have been better able to deal with the breakdown of communications had he taken up beforehand an advanced HQ much closer to [Maleme](#), the vital point, and that once things had begun to go wrong his wisest course would have been to go forward as far as possible to see for himself what the situation was.

CRETE

III: CANEA-GALATAS SECTOR

III: Canea-Galatas Sector

i

To the attack in the [Canea- Galatas](#) sector the enemy planned to devote the first wave of [Group Centre](#). The second wave was to take [Retimo](#) in the afternoon and then divert troops westwards to the support of the first wave already attacking [Canea](#) and [Suda](#).

The troops available for the first wave were the remaining half of I Battalion of the [Assault Regiment](#)—1 and 2 Companies ¹—

¹ Since 3 and 4 Companies of I Bn were at [Maleme](#) these are the only two companies of I Bn remaining.

landing by glider; and 3 Parachute Regiment, which would be accompanied by the [Parachute Engineer Battalion](#) and elements of the [Parachute MG Battalion](#) and of the [Parachute AA MG Battalion](#). Headquarters of 7 Air Division to which these forces belonged would travel with this wave, as would Lieutenant-General Suessmann—the division's commander. The object was the capture of [Canea](#) and [Suda](#). Strong forces of [8 Air Corps](#) were in support, and it was hoped that the attack would not only destroy the defending forces in the area but would eliminate the defence headquarters and thus put an end to co-ordinated resistance in the whole island.

The plan was that the two companies of I Battalion, the Assault Regiment, should land by glider and destroy the two AA batteries which the enemy considered most dangerous to landings in the [Canea](#) area: one on the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#) and the other about a mile south of [Canea](#). ¹

To carry out this attack on the two AA batteries the glider groups were organised into two detachments. One detachment, under the command of Captain Altmann, was to attack the Akrotiri battery, flying in 15 gliders. The second

detachment, under the command of Lieutenant Gentz, was to attack the battery south of [Canea](#) as well as the wireless station in the same area.

The parachutists of 3 Parachute Regiment under their commander, Colonel Heidrich,² were to land on either side of the road from [Alikianou](#) to [Canea](#). There were four parachute battalions in all: I, II, and III Battalions of 3 Parachute Regiment and the Parachute Engineer Battalion. Of these I and II were to land south-west of the prison on the road about two miles south of [Galatas](#), were to drive east towards [Suda](#)—bypassing [Canea](#)—and link up with Altmann's glider force. III Battalion was to land east and north-east of [Galatas](#), to capture the 'tented camp' two miles west of [Canea](#)³ and the villages of [Karatsos](#) and [Galatas](#), and then attack [Canea](#) from the west. The Engineer Battalion (three companies and a Parachute MG Company) was to land north of [Alikianou](#), act as rearguard to the other three battalions, seize the [Aghya](#) power station and the [Alikianou](#) road-bridge, and investigate the tented camps at [Fournes](#) and [Skines](#) which were believed to contain Italian prisoners of war.

¹ See map facing p. 151.

² Lt-Gen Richard Heidrich; then aged 45; Comd 3 Para Regt; GOC 7 Air Div, 1943; GOC 1 Para Div, 1943; GOC 1 Para Corps, 1944; high award for defence of [Cassino](#). The Division was to meet him again at [Cassino](#) and elsewhere in [Italy](#) as GOC 1 Parachute Division. His son was to achieve a certain fame as a leader of Italian partisans.

³ This was 7 General Hospital.

It may prove helpful if this plan is set out in tabular form and with slightly more detail:

Gliders		
Unit	Commander	Intended landing area
HQ 7 Para Div	Gen Suessmann	Prison Valley
Coy I Bn Assault Regt	Capt Altmann	Akrotiri Peninsula
Coy I Bn Assault Regt	Lt Gentz	AA Bty and W/T station south of Canea
Paratroops		

HQ 3 Para Regt	Col Heidrich	Prison Valley
I Bn (1–4 Coys)	Capt von der Heydte	Prison Valley
II Bn (5–7 Coys) ¹	Maj Derpa	Prison Valley
III Bn (9–12 Coys)	Maj Heilmann	East and north-east of Galatas
13 Coy (infantry guns) ?		Prison Valley
14 Coy (A-tk guns) ?	?	Prison Valley
Engineer Bn	Maj Liebach	Valley north of Alikianou
3 Para MG Coy	?	Valley north of Alikianou
4 Para AA MG Coy	Lt Matthies	South-east of Galatas.

The working out of the plan in action—so far as it did work out in action—determined the initial pattern of the fighting in this sector, and so a beginning will be made with what happened to these forces when they reached the ground.

It was Altmann's intention to seize a number of tactically important points east of [Canea](#) (and presumably on the Akrotiri Peninsula) at the same time as he attacked the AA battery, which was his main objective. But during the approach flight his force lost its cohesion and the towing aircraft came under AA fire when they reached Akrotiri. The gliders cast off and came down dispersed and unable to find their allotted landing points. Several gliders were damaged on rocky ground, and there were heavy losses in killed and wounded from the first. The crews were too scattered to give one another support. The AA position they were to attack proved a dummy. The area was strongly held by the Northumberland Hussars. The glider troops held out as best they could in isolated groups, but after a few days the remnants were forced to surrender through lack of supplies. They had had 48 killed and 36 wounded.

Lieutenant Gentz was luckier. Of his nine gliders one was lost through breakdown in the approach flight. Three landed in [Canea](#), but their crews managed to make their way to the main body, which had landed near a troop of 234 HAA Battery at 8.15 a.m. Except for seven prisoners, the gun crews were killed in a stubborn engagement. But a counter-attack prevented Gentz from following up his success with an attack on the wireless station farther south. Instead, on the orders of Colonel Heidrich—with whom he had

¹ 8 Coy was to arrive by sea. See p. 143, note 2.

wireless contact—he withdrew his force during the night and broke through past [Perivolia](#) to 3 Parachute Regiment, reaching it early on the morning of 21 May with three officers and 24 men out of the ninety-odd with whom he had left [Greece](#).

The Headquarters party of [Group Centre](#) had also elected to travel by glider. The glider carrying General Suessmann, however, lost its wings early in the flight and crashed on Aegina. All its occupants were killed. The other four gliders landed according to plan something under a mile east of the [Aghya](#) reservoir. ¹ Command of 7 Air Division passed to Colonel Heidrich, who also retained command of 3 Parachute Regiment.

The glider attack had not therefore been notably successful, though its nuisance value was considerable for days afterwards and the fear of similar landings to follow may have played its part in holding down troops in back areas. But the main brunt of the attack lay with the parachute troops proper of 3 Parachute Regiment.

I Battalion was heavily fired on as it came down, but made a fairly successful landing in the flat country just south of the prison and east of the [Canea- Alikianou](#) road. Here the commander, Captain von der Heydte, formed up his battalion. The prison was taken at once and the battalion then thrust into the heights to the east. Though harassed by flanking fire from [Galatas](#) and without heavy weapons, the attack carried as far as [Perivolia](#), meeting little serious opposition from the poorly armed Greeks of 6 Greek Regiment. At [Perivolia](#) the battalion found 11 Company of III Battalion, which had been wrongly put down here instead of at [Galatas](#). Thus reinforced, the thrust was carried through to [Mournies](#). But here strong counter-attacks, presumably by 2 Greek Regiment and the miscellaneous troops thereabouts, halted it. The Germans therefore fell back on [Perivolia](#), having taken 200 prisoners during the morning.

II Battalion with 13 Company and 14 Company—the two heavy companies—was in reserve. The battalion crossed over the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#), where AA fire upset the formation of the transport aircraft. But the main body was dropped north of the area between the Prison and [Aghya](#). One of its companies was put down to the north-east

of this area at the request of its commander, Lieutenant Neuhof, and found itself in strongly held territory. It at once attacked up the slopes towards [Galatas](#). Neuhof was killed and the attack failed with heavy losses. No. 14 Company took several hours to get its guns into action, and some had to fight their way out from among the defenders by whom they

¹ [Sgt R. A. Davison](#), who was attached to [8 Greek Regiment](#), reports that one glider crash-landed near [Aghya](#) reservoir and that its occupants were all killed.

found themselves surrounded. The reception met by the whole battalion may be gathered from the following account by Karl Neuhoff, at that time a company sergeant-major in II Battalion:

The moment we left the planes we were met with extremely heavy small arms fire. From my aircraft we suffered particularly heavy casualties and only three men reached the ground unhurt. Those who had jumped first, nearer to [Galatas](#), were practically all killed, either in the air or soon after landing. The survivors rallied to a position near the prison where we became organised, collected equipment, and formed up for an attack up the hill to the north towards [Galatas](#). Approximately 350 men of my battalion had survived the initial landing and organising period.

III Battalion—9, 10, 11, and 12 Companies—had an unlucky start. Major Heilmann, his HQ, and 9 Company were landed wrongly along the [Alikianou- Canea](#) road south-east of [Galatas](#) instead of east of that village. Here they were in the middle of positions held by Greeks and New Zealanders. Only by a violent effort in which their machine pistols and grenades proved very useful were they able to seize one of the heights south-east of [Galatas](#).¹

Meanwhile, 10 Company which had been correctly put down north-east of [Galatas](#) 'immediately attacked the tented camp 2 km West of [Canea](#), seized it and hoisted the swastika flag. 500 prisoners were taken.'² The rest of the company's adventures were known to the enemy only through the accounts of survivors. For Lieutenant Pagels, the company commander, decided in the face of counter-attacks that he must break through to his regiment; on the way he was ambushed and killed

with most of his company.

The other two companies, 11 and 12, were also unlucky, but less so. No. 11 Company landed near [Perivolia](#), where it joined I Battalion. Its commander and a few others, who had landed correctly north of [Galatas](#), were killed in an attack towards it. No. 12 Company also landed wrongly, with I Battalion. Instead of seizing [Karatsos](#) according to plan, it had to support I Battalion.

No. 4 AA MG Company came down somewhere south-east of [Galatas](#) and under heavy fire got three or four 20-millimetre guns into action in support of the scattered operations of III Battalion. The commander of the MG battalion dropped with the company and was wounded. Four of its officers were killed. But the company managed to resist counter-attacks by tanks and even to destroy several—according to 11 Air Corps.³

¹ Probably [Cemetery Hill](#).

² Report by [11 Air Corps](#). This does not explain that the 'tented camp' was 7 General Hospital and that most of the prisoners were patients. See [p. 148](#) for a fuller account of the episode.

³ The only tank casualty during the day was a light tank of [3 Hussars](#) hit through the cupola.

The Engineer Battalion, with 3 Parachute MG Company and a platoon of anti-tank guns in support, was put down correctly north of [Alikianou](#), south of Kirtomadhó and close to [Lake Aghya](#). They had to free themselves from their harness and the abundant cactus while under fire from Greek troops and civilians. By the time they had done so they found that the Greeks had acquired German weapons. 'The ranges on both sides of the dropping area are held by Greek soldiers and partisans, ably led by some British officers.... Thus the battalion is surrounded in its own landing area.' By midday, however, some semblance of order was restored and the commanders had their companies in hand. No. 2 Company then began its attack towards [Alikianou](#). Some progress was made at first, but determined resistance by the Greeks—women and children among them and armed mainly with shotguns—halted the

Germans, after heavy casualties, about half a mile from the road-bridge. ¹

Meanwhile 4 Company had failed to advance south of [Alikianou](#) or to capture the power station. About half past twelve it was directed to support 2 Company by attacking the ridges east of the road. In this, too, it failed and with considerable losses.

At 2 p.m. seven transport aircraft brought arms and ammunition, all of which fell into the Greek lines. But this disappointment to the enemy was mitigated by the capture of the power station which took place shortly afterwards. This and the fact of a successful landing were the only successes for the battalion that day.

Colonel Heidrich himself had landed near the prison about nine o'clock with his regimental signals. He must quickly have appreciated that the plan had gone awry and that the hills to the east and those round [Galatas](#) were vital. I Battalion could deal with the former without much alteration of plan; but it was clearly pointless to send II Battalion in the same direction. He therefore put 5 Company under III Battalion and deployed 6 Company and II Battalion HQ south of the prison to protect his right flank. ²

With 5 Company, probably part of 9 Company, and 12 Company he seems then to have attacked [Pink Hill](#). ³ This attack failed, and

¹ This account is based on an article 'Parachute Engineers in the Battle of [Crete](#)', in *Wie Wir Kampfen* (1944), the [German Air Force](#) handbook, as well as on [11 Air Corps](#) Report.

² 7 Coy had already been destroyed. [11 Air Corps](#) Report makes no mention of 8 Coy, but according to the operation order of 3 Para Regt it was to be landed by sea near [Maleme](#) and was to 'reach the regiment as quickly as possible.'

³ CSM Neuhoff thus describes the attack: 'In the afternoon between 1400 and 1500 hours we advanced to attack the hill of [Galatas](#). We proceeded, without opposition, about half way up the hill. Suddenly we ran into heavy and very accurate rifle and machine-gun fire. The enemy had held their fire with great discipline and had allowed us to approach well

within effective range before opening up. Our casualties were extremely heavy and we were forced to retire leaving many dead behind us.... This first attack on [Galatas](#) had cost us approximately 50 per cent casualties about half of whom were killed.'

in the afternoon he was forced to bring in 6 Company and II Battalion HQ as well. Better progress resulted and after dark, because of a temporary withdrawal by the defence, the enemy took possession of the hill.

ii

With the enemy on the ground and the rough pattern of his landings apparent, the point of view can be switched to that of the defence. And on this first day [General Freyberg's](#) forces in the general area of [Canea- Galatas](#) were to be found fighting in many different places. As by the end of the day it was sufficiently clear that the [Galatas](#) area held by 10 Brigade was to be the main front, it will be convenient to dispose of the subsidiary—in some cases literally ephemeral—fronts first.

Broadly, these may be summed up as three: the area round [Canea](#) held by [Suda Force](#) and [2 Greek Regiment](#); the area of [18 Battalion](#) and [7 General Hospital](#); and that held by [19 Battalion](#) and [1 Light Troop RA](#).

The opposition on the first front came initially from the glider troops of Captain Altmann and Lieutenant Gentz. The fate of Altmann's men has already been described from enemy sources, and it remains only to add that though a few parties survived the attention of the [Northumberland Hussars](#) and the gunners in the area and lingered for a few days about the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#), they could never be more than a nuisance and in due course ceased to be even that.

Gentz's glider company had overwhelmed the troop of 234 HAA Battery about eight o'clock. It was some time before Major H. V. Wolstenholme of the same unit was able to complete a reconnaissance and then gather a party of [Royal Marines](#) for counter-attack. But by the afternoon this had been done and about four o'clock the enemy had been driven off the guns. ¹ Inasmuch as this glider party had managed to keep the guns of the troop out of action while the parachutists were landing, it had

done the enemy good service.

The only other actions of importance on this front were due to those paratroops of 3 Parachute Regiment who had landed out of their intended areas and perhaps to the eastward thrust of I Battalion. Thus a party variously estimated at between twenty and forty landed east of Platanos in the area of Transit Camp A. The camp contained about 700 soldiers and sailors from many different units and ships. Its commander was Captain W. S. Page, RTR, and the New Zealand element in it, under Captain [Hook](#),²

¹ WD 52 LAA Regt. (Compiled after the battle from notes.)

² [Capt G. A. Hook](#); Hastings; born Marton, 10 Jan 1905; motor mechanic; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

came mostly from 1 Echelon of the Divisional Supply Column. Some confused fighting followed the parachute landing, and much enterprise was shown by various small parties of the defence in seizing enemy weapons and going into action. Most of the enemy were killed and the remainder made their way westward, though isolated paratroops and perhaps a few surviving glider troops remained in the area to make themselves a nuisance to communications in this vulnerable headquarters area.

Another parachute party had landed close to the house in which the King of [Greece](#), guarded by B Company of 18 NZ Battalion, had been staying until the day before. This house was a little north of the transit camp and, in the course of the fighting that followed an attack by the paratroops, B Company had a busy day patrolling and fighting in general concert with the men from the transit camp. The attack was broken up, and because of their help in what was assumed to have been an attempt to capture the King the troops from the transit camp were dubbed by General Weston 'The Royal Perivolians'.

The King had in fact moved on 19 May to a house about two miles south of the transit camp, escorted by 12 Platoon of B Company under Second-Lieutenant W. H. Ryan. His subsequent adventures fall outside the main narrative and are dealt with separately in Appendix II.

One other group on the [Suda Force](#) front saw some ground action this day. The 2nd Greek Regiment, with a party of five New Zealand instructors under Major H. G. [Wooller](#)¹ attached, held a position running south from the southern exit of [Mournies](#) to the hills and then west along the northern slope of these. Most of the enemy paratroops landed outside the regimental area. In fighting with about thirty who landed inside the area, the regiment's few rounds of ammunition were used up and [Wooller](#) spent a good part of the day trying to obtain more. In the end he secured a truckload of grenades and, armed with these, the Greeks made a substantial advance from [Mournies](#) in the direction of [Perivolias](#), where the first paratroops—presumably from 11 Company—had been despatched by civilians with axes and spades but where reinforcements from I Battalion had found their way later.

In the evening this part of the front was considerably strengthened by the advent of [2/8 Australian Battalion](#) which General Weston had ordered at 4.30 p.m. to move from [Georgeopolis](#),² where it could effect nothing, into the [Mournies](#)

¹ [Maj H. G. Wooller](#), m.i.d., MC (Greek); [Auckland](#); born [Waihi](#), 18 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; 2 i/c 19 Bn and Armd Regt 1942–44; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

² For dispositions at [Georgeopolis](#) see map, p. 177.

area. It took up its new positions about eight o'clock between [2 Greek Regiment](#) and the Royal Perivolians and dug itself in.

At the end of the day, therefore, in the [Suda Force](#) area there had been no serious alteration in the general position, except for the potential threat west of [Mournies](#) and the move by [2/8 Australian Battalion](#) to help check it.

iii

The next area in which there was fighting on any scale this first day was that of [18 Battalion](#), 4 Brigade HQ, and 7 General Hospital.¹ The whole of [18 Battalion](#), except for B Company on its royal escort duty, was disposed on either side of the [Canea- Maleme](#) road about half a mile west of the turn-off from the main road that

ran to [Galatas](#). The commander, Lieutenant-Colonel [Gray](#),² had three companies forward and astride the main road and one in reserve.³ The positions took full advantage of the cover given by the olive groves but there were big gaps between the company areas.

For Lieutenant-Colonel Gray the first warning that this was not to be like other days was the sight of a number of gliders whose disappearance towards [Canea](#) was followed by the arrival of about a dozen Junkers 52. Corporal [Howard](#),⁴ then with D Company, gives a description which is typical for what many men saw that morning:

... through the trees I saw large troop-carrying planes lumbering through the air while from their bellies dropped little dots which were steadied in their descent by the sudden billowing of parachutes. The Blitz was on. Soon the sky was full of airy mushrooms and, as they descended, ME fighter escorts roared overhead—just overhead too, for they skimmed the tree tops, the roar of their engines was intended to distract us.... I took up position at the base of a tree and opened fire with tracers on the dangling figures descending.... Shooting was general and as parachutists reached the ground, 150–200 yards away on tussocky ground and in vineyards, they provided fairly good marks. Many were shot before they got clear of their envelopes. Very few survived in our area.

Colonel Heidrich's 10 Company and the strays from other paratroop companies were not numerous enough to provide serious

¹ 20 Bn, in reserve to the west of 18 Bn, was too far away from the paratroop landings to be much troubled at this time.

² [Brig J. R. Gray](#), ED, m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO 18 Bn Sep 1939–Nov 1941, Mar–Jun 1942; comd 4 Bde 29 Jun–5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

³ 18 Bn company commanders were: [Capt A. S. Playle](#) (A Coy), [Maj W. H. Evans](#) (D Coy).

⁴ [Cpl E. A. Howard](#), MM; born [Scotland](#), 28 Dec 1906; petroleum technologist; killed in action 21 Jul 1942.

opposition and indeed were mainly preoccupied with their task of seizing the 'tented camp'. Operations were thus mostly of the mopping-up sort. For Battalion HQ they began briskly with a dash into action led by Gray:

... gathering up everybody at Bn HQ, even to the cook, we went up on the ridge in the direction of the enemy. Arrived there, one saw the parachutists still descending and the last planes just turning away to go home. The parachutists dropped from an average height of about 300 feet, and took about half-a-minute to come down. Many had reached the ground. They were dropping on a ridge about 700 yards or so away, among olive trees, and there was an intervening ridge between ours and theirs.

Down and on to the next ridge. There we stood for a few moments shooting at the last ones in the air. Then on again to get in among them. I looked round. My batman, George Andrews, the RSM, and Cpl Dick Phillips, one of the orderly room clerks were with me. I felt the others were coming. There was nothing for it but to go on and trust to the rest following.

I saw a parachute hanging in a tree and detected a movement round the left side of it. Fired quickly with my rifle—every officer in the battalion had a rifle. Then advancing very softly and quickly up to the parachute I looked round the side to see a Hun lying on the ground beside a gaily coloured container fastened to the parachute. He moved, so I shot him at once to make sure, and then moved cautiously from cover to cover.

I shot another hiding behind a tree, and wounded him. He was very frightened, but I told him to lie still and he would be looked after. Took his pistol away and gave it to Dick Phillips who was just on my right. No sooner had I handed it to him than he was shot through the knee. Two Huns about 30 yards away hiding behind a tree were shooting at the two of us. Two careful ones immediately despatched them both. There were plenty of bullets flying round but one had no time to bother about them. I saw George Andrews sitting on the ground taking careful aim at some cactus bushes behind us. "Steady on George," I said, "You will be shooting one of our own chaps." "No bloody fear, it's a Hun," he said, and fired, "Got him." ¹

Once Gray had satisfied himself that all was going well, he returned to his HQ. Here he was found in the middle of his morning shave by Brigadier Inglis and his Brigade Major. They told him that 7 General Hospital had been attacked and that they had ordered A Company of his battalion, which happened to be the nearest company, to clear out the enemy. Upon this Gray sent a second company and two Bren carriers to take part in this movement on the left.

The enemy with whom Gray and his men had been dealing were probably for the most part from 10 Company who had been landed

¹ Lt-Col Gray, letter to J. G. McLean, 24 Jul 1941.

too far west or who were acting as flank guard for the main body directed on the 'tented camp'. ¹

In the morning, about the same time as the air attack broke out elsewhere, 7 General Hospital and 6 Field Ambulance were both subjected to a severe bombing and strafing attack which lasted for about an hour and a half. At the end of it, about half past nine, paratroops had been landed and suddenly appeared in the two areas.

In 6 Field Ambulance the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Plimmer, ² and his second-in-command, Captain Lovell, ³ were both ordered to surrender. Unarmed, they were both shot at. Plimmer was hit and died soon afterwards. The staff, which numbered about a hundred, and the patients, of whom there were about forty, were then rounded up and put under guard in the MDS clearing with its Red Cross flag.

Meanwhile 7 General Hospital, which had had several tents destroyed in the bombing, was similarly attacked. Patients—some of whom, perhaps as many as twenty, were killed—and staff were driven out and herded over to 6 Field Ambulance. Among them were some bed patients—although a number of bad cases were allowed to remain, the choice probably depending on the temper of the individual parachutist. ⁴

At 6 Field Ambulance patients from both places were held under guard. By this time they numbered about 300 in all. Permission was given for the burial of

Lieutenant-Colonel Plimmer. Food from a small dump was distributed. Some water was also given out. Once during the morning a carrier—no doubt from 18 Battalion—appeared but, unable to effect anything in the confusion of enemy and prisoners, turned back again to report. Not long after a tank came on the scene. But it too withdrew.

The enemy must have used this pause to consider their position. It could hardly have seemed cheerful. Whether they were able or not to communicate with the rest of their battalion, they must have realised that something was wrong. They were isolated and had probably already begun to feel pressure from 18 Battalion. They had a large body of sick and wounded prisoners on their hands. In this situation their best course was to try and make their way back to the main body near Galatas, taking their prisoners.

¹ See Appendix III for a discussion of the question whether the enemy was genuinely mistaken in his belief that this was a military installation.

² Lt-Col J. L. R. Plimmer; born Wellington, 28 Feb 1901; medical practitioner; 2 i/c 6 Fd Amb Feb 1940–May 1941; actg CO 6 Fd Amb May 1941; killed in action 20 May 1941.

³ Lt-Col A. A. Lovell; Tanganyika; born England, 10 Feb 1910; medical practitioner; medical officer, Fanning Island, 1940; 6 Fd Amb Aug 1940–Dec 1941; 1 Gen Hosp Dec 1941–Nov 1944; OC NZ Mil Hosp (UK) 1944–46.

⁴ Some orderlies managed to remain with the bed patients.

Accordingly, not long after midday, they began to shepherd their charges in the general direction of Galatas. But this was also the general direction of 19 Battalion's right flank. On the way the column was fired on. One of the guards was wounded. Three members of 6 Field Ambulance staff were killed and one wounded. A party from D Company was soon encountered and in the engagement that followed most of the guards were killed. A few patients were also wounded, but by 5 p.m. the survivors were all rescued and they spent the night with 19 Battalion.

Not all the patients and staff had gone with this party. Captain Lovell and Lieutenant [Ballantyne](#)¹ and two NCOs had been escorted to 7 General Hospital to treat a wounded German. Meanwhile [18 Battalion](#) appeared on the scene and rescued the others. A new dressing station was set up, with equipment salvaged from the old one, in a culvert under the main road. The General Hospital was also re-established by officers and orderlies who had escaped or remained hidden. The new location was in caves by the shore. Operations were carried out all night by Major [Christie](#)² and Captain A. Gourevitch, and next day the rest of the patients and staff returned. By 23 May faith in its protection had recovered sufficiently for a [Red Cross](#) to be displayed, and the enemy did not molest either ambulance or hospital any further.

iv

For [19 Battalion](#), closer to the dropping area, the day was not easy. There were only four companies—B Company had been lost at the [Corinth Canal](#)—and although the battalion was part of [Force Reserve](#) its positions were important from the first as a support to 10 Brigade. The companies were disposed south and south-east of [Karatsos](#), between the village and the [Alikianou- Canea](#) road. Farthest west was D (Taranaki) Company; C (Hawke's Bay) Company was a little south-east of D; A ([Wellington](#)) Company adjoined C still farther to the east; and Headquarters Company held the eastern flank³

Also in the area were two troops of artillery. F Troop of 28 Battery was in A Company area about 200 yards west of [Karatsos](#) church. And on the south side of the [Alikianou- Canea](#) road was 1 Light Troop RA.

¹ [Capt D. A. Ballantyne](#), m.i.d.; Hastings; born [New Guinea](#), 1 Sep 1911; medical practitioner; medical officer 6 Fd Amb May 1940–May 1941; p.w. May 1941.

² [Col H. K. Christie](#), CBE, ED; [Wanganui](#); born [Invercargill](#), 13 Jul 1894; surgeon; surgeon 1 Gen Hosp Mar 1940–Apr 1941; OC surgical team, [Greece](#) and [Crete](#); in charge surgical division 1 Gen Hosp, Aug 1941–Jun 1943; CO 2 Gen Hosp Jun 1943–Oct 1944.

³ 19 Bn company commanders were: [Capt C. E. Webster](#) (HQ Coy), Capt C. L. Pleasants (A Coy), [Capt H. S. Budd](#) (C Coy), Capt D. K. McLauchlan (D Coy).

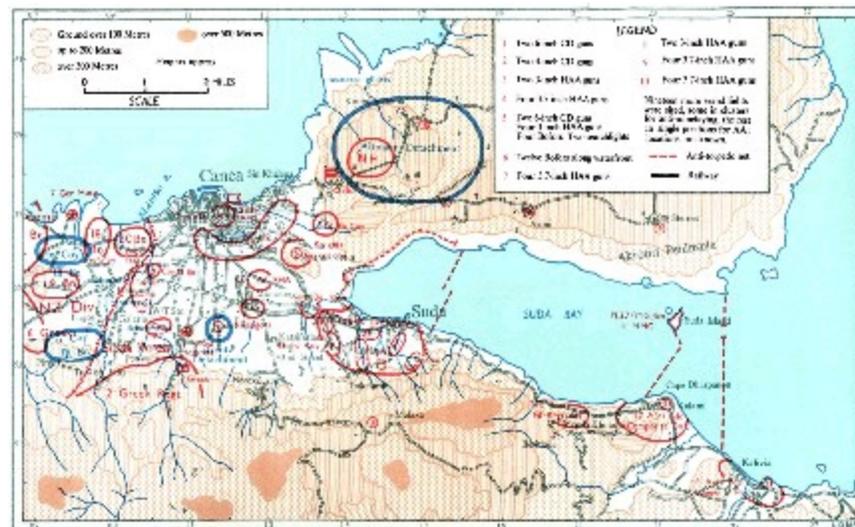
Accounts of the numbers of parachutists landing vary from one hundred to four hundred. If we allow for double counting and the speed with which they were brought under control, 200 seems a probable maximum. ¹ To the commander of 14 Platoon in C Company, Lieutenant Cockerill, ² who was in a good position to observe, it seemed that the greater number landed south of the [Canea- Alikianou](#) road; and this is likely enough in view of the German story that, although III Battalion was to have landed east of [Galatas](#) and taken [Karatsos](#), only 10 Company was correctly landed, the others being dropped too far to the south and east. We may surmise that elements of all four companies landed actually in [19 Battalion](#) area but the main body of the battalion outside it.

Of those who were correctly put down very few must have survived the fusillade that began while the parachutes were still dropping and continued throughout the earlier part of the morning. By 10 a.m. all four companies of [19 Battalion](#) were reporting their area clear.

For F Troop the silent passage of a glider overhead while the gunners were at their breakfast was the first intimation that this was to be no ordinary day. A party at once set off for the observation post on [Cemetery Hill](#). It had covered only 200 yards when it was forced to ground by paratroops landing all around. The party 'put in some fairly sporting work with their one and only rifle.' ³ But when news came that the Greeks had been forced off [Cemetery Hill](#) and the observation post was therefore in enemy hands, there was nothing for it but to return to the guns. Here the rest of the gunners were found armed to the teeth with enemy weapons and busy dealing with snipers. The guns themselves, deprived of their observation post, could now be fired only over open sights at whatever tempted attention. Enemy parties visible from about half past nine on the hills to the south came under this heading. An abortive attack on the gun positions themselves yielded eleven prisoners.

1 Light Troop RA was less fortunate. Its position south of the [Canea- Alikianou](#) road was well suited to the troop's role—to fire on the beaches and the prison area

in support of 4 Brigade. Indeed, no better site was thought to be available for this purpose. But the site also invited parachutists, being low-lying. Major Blackburn,⁴ commander of 19 Battalion, had been worried about the troop's



SUDA AREA. Enemy Landings, 20 May

¹ 19 Bn reported 155 killed and buried and 9 PW for this day.

² Capt K. C. M. Cockerill; Wellington; born Dannevirke, 15 Feb 1911; school-teacher.

³ Report by Maj J. L. Duigan.

⁴ Lt-Col C. A. D'A. Blackburn, ED, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born Hamilton, 8 May 1899; public accountant; CO 19 Bn Apr–Jun 1941; 1 Army Tank Brigade (NZ) 1942–43; CO 1 Army Tank Bn Jan–May 1943.

position because of this and because it lay outside the perimeter of his battalion and so lacked infantry protection. He had no choice, however, but to accept the assurances of the troop commander, Captain J. Dawney, that no alternative site would permit the troop to carry out its role.¹

The troop's position—taken up on 17 May—was a roughly rectangular clearing, bounded on the west and east by olive groves, on the north by the road, and on the

south by a stream. The guns were dispersed among the trees but by 20 May were still not completely ready for action. ²

As soon as he found Captain Dawney determined to keep to his position, Blackburn had offered him infantry protection. The offer was refused, however, until about six o'clock in the evening of 19 May. Blackburn thereupon ordered A Company to provide the protection and Captain [Pleasants](#) ³ decided to send 8 Platoon. By this time the platoon commander, rather remissly, thought it too late to do more than reconnoitre and arrange for one section to move in at first light next day and a second to follow after breakfast.

About six o'clock next morning the first section duly arrived, and as soon as the aerial bombardment slackened the men joined the breakfast queue. The rations were in their hands but not in their mouths when the landing began. The paratroops seemed to them to land mainly along the road or north of it, and the section had quickly to alter its targets from transport planes to enemy on the ground. At first a ditch along the west side of the clearing made a useful trench; but fire from the right flank made this untenable and, after casualties, the men of the section were forced back to slit trenches in the clearing itself where they hoped to get support from the gunners.

From here it was obvious that the gunners, too, had suffered casualties and that little or no support would be forthcoming from the survivors, who had gone to earth somewhere. The conduct of one n.c.o., however, was outstanding. One saw him extract the breech blocks from at least two of the howitzers nearest to where we were, dumping them down in holes as far away from the guns as was possible under the circumstances. After this he took shelter with us for a few minutes and said that the rifle he was carrying he had retrieved from one of our fallen comrades. As they were lying in the olive trees on the prison side this n.c.o. must have been there and it is possible that he managed to get round all the guns and disarm them. It was apparent, also, from the way in which he spoke

¹ Maj Duigan.

² [Pte W. H. Bishop](#), A Coy 19 Bn.

³ Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Fiji; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn and Armd Regt Jul 1942–Mar 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep–Oct 1944; 5 Bde Nov 1944–Jan 1945, May 1945–Jan 1946; twice wounded Commander Fiji Military Forces, Mar 1949–.

regarding the rifle, that the gunners were entirely without personal weapons. It was not surprising therefore that we were not receiving any support from them. ¹

Meanwhile the enemy fire got heavier and the section found itself reduced to six men. When finally the enemy 'got close enough to trundle egg grenades at us', they decided to withdraw to the south-east corner of the clearing. Here they found the troop's GPO and a dozen or so gunners.

Attempts by reconnaissance upstream to locate any missing having run into strong crossfire, the party, gunners along with infantry— now reduced to four—made their way downstream and by about midday had managed to cross the road, hand over the gunners to Headquarters Company, and get back to A Company. Captain Dawney himself, along with another party of gunners, had already found his way to F Troop. Of the four guns three remained out of action, but the enemy seems to have been able to use the remaining one against F Troop.

News of 1 Troop's disaster could not reach 19 Battalion until the survivors began to come in. For line communications had been cut at the outset. Moreover, the men of 19 Battalion had not had long in which to congratulate themselves on their first success. Further aircraft came over between eleven o'clock and midday and dropped containers and more troops. A and D Company sent out patrols which cleared out about twenty of the enemy near Karatsos. Other parties were sent to locate and take over the dropped equipment, dealing with isolated groups of Germans as they did so. In spite of this single snipers began to give trouble, and the enemy had machine guns and mortars in action to which the battalion's three-inch mortar proved a fairly effective counter.

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon before communication to 4 Brigade was restored; and by this time some pattern could be discerned in the enemy's doings. The slackening air attack suggested that he was consolidating, and the flares

sent up to show his aircraft what were his positions were helpful to the defending troops as well. Thus the battalion was able to conclude and report to Brigade that the main attack seemed to be directed from an east-west line roughly along the heights between the prison area and [Perivolia](#): A smaller attack appeared to be developing towards the [Canea- Alikianou](#) road where 1 Light Troop RA had been. North of the battalion's positions patrols were clearing the enemy from between [Karatsos](#) and the sea. The battalion's own casualties were between fifteen and twenty men. This message also informed 4 Brigade of the fate of 1 Light Troop RA.

¹ Pte Bishop.

A written message sent at 4 p.m. to Division summarises the situation on [19 Battalion](#) front at what was roughly the end of the first phase of its fighting. About 100–150 enemy had been put out of action. An enemy party of perhaps 200 men was attacking the slopes held by A Company and Headquarters Company. Another group in even greater strength was attacking Cemetery Hill. But the ammunition position was satisfactory and patrols were engaging enemy north of [Karatsos](#). ¹

▼

The main enemy landings had taken place between [Galatas](#), the Prison, and [Alikianou](#). Here in the next few days there were to be a front and fighting second in importance only to [Maleme](#), with 10 Brigade the front line of the defence. It will be best to dispose first of the outlying units which by reason of distance and lack of communication were virtually outside the control of the brigade commander.

The 8th Greek Regiment was in difficulties from the start, cut off from 10 Brigade by the landings in the Prison area and the eastward thrust of I Battalion, and threatened on its left and front by the [Parachute Engineer Battalion](#). Attached to the Greeks were a party of New Zealand instructors led by Major Wilson ² of [20 Battalion](#). Wilson had decided beforehand that when battle began it would be best for the New Zealanders to concentrate separately; for there was reason to fear that otherwise the Greeks would disregard their own officers and, as the New Zealanders knew no Greek, the system of command would be dislocated. ³

Accordingly, Wilson had his supplies dumped at the pumping station on top of a hill half a mile south of the reservoir. On the morning of 20 May all of his men hurried to this point—which we now know to have been a German objective—all, that is, except Lieutenant Brown ⁴ and Sergeant Smith, ⁵ who were both cut off and remained with the Greeks.

Thus the battle began with the New Zealanders at the pumping station and the Greeks in their three companies lining the ridges south of the road to [Alikianou](#) and overlooking it. The Greeks were too strung out to fight as a battalion—their HQ was in a

¹ It was probably these patrols that dealt with 10 Coy's party withdrawing from the hospital.

² Capt C. Wilson, m.i.d., MC (Greek); born England, 25 Aug 1907; insurance clerk; killed in action 21 May 1941.

³ According to Lt K. L. Brown and [Sgt R. A. Davison](#).

⁴ [Maj K. L. Brown](#), DSO, m.i.d., MC (Greek); [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 22 Nov 1915; salesman.

⁵ [WO II L. V. Smith](#), Gold Medal of George I (Greek); [Raglan](#); born [Otorohanga](#), 6 Sep 1913; carpenter; wounded Nov 1941.

schoolhouse north of the road. About 250 of them, who had arrived the previous night and had neither arms nor training, scattered inland when the paratroops came down. None the less, as we have seen, the Greeks fought well in their separate companies, acquired some German weapons and held on all day, inflicting severe casualties and what amounted to a local defeat.

The enemy attacks in the afternoon, at both ends of the Greek front, brought fierce fighting on either side of the road. In the battle round [Aghya](#) itself the commander of the regiment, two majors, and most of the staff were killed; and not

far away the enemy managed to get possession of the pumping station hill. But when dark came the Greeks still held the ridges, the [Alikianou](#) road-bridge, and [Alikianou](#) itself.

The New Zealanders with [8 Greek Regiment](#) were unlucky. Lieutenant Brown, who fought alongside the Greeks all day was captured next morning. ¹ Sergeant Smith made his way out next day. Major Wilson's party were surrounded at their rendezvous, the pumping station, and forced to spend the day and night there, unable to rejoin the Greeks or take any important part in the fighting. On 21 May Wilson attempted a sortie and was killed. Shortly afterwards his companions were captured.

It is clear from Brown's account and the developments at a later stage that [8 Greek Regiment](#) continued to hold the main portion of the ridges. The more northerly ridges were lost during the night. For Major Liebach, commander of the Engineer Battalion, got orders to send at least a strong company to Colonel Heidrich and decided that the best way of doing this was to break through with his whole battalion. No. 1 Company, with machine pistols, grenades and flame-throwers, set out after dark and 4 Company followed. Between them they cleared the heights south of [Aghya](#). No. 2 Company and 3 Parachute MG company disengaged and came on behind. Thus the whole battalion was able to break through to Heidrich at his HQ near [Mandra](#).

The enemy makes no further mention of fighting in this sector till 23 May, and there are no Greek accounts available. It may be assumed that after the enemy had gone the Greeks, with the additional weapons they had acquired, manned the greater part of their line once more. Heidrich was in no position at this stage to dispute this. He needed all his strength for [Galatas](#) and was satisfied so long as no attack was made on his south flank. Thus elements of [8 Greek Regiment](#) and partisans held on and supplied

¹ Lt Brown escaped next day from a German ADS when it was attacked by Greek partisans. He could not get back to the Greeks but managed to work his way out to the south-east and eventually got back to [Canea](#). In the hills Sgt Smith joined the platoon escorting the King of [Greece](#) to the south coast. See [Appendix II](#).

the opposition when the enemy later tried to cut his way to the coast by this route. It was not till 26 May, when a full regiment was brought to bear, that he made any progress. ¹

vi

Another outlying force was the Divisional Cavalry in the hills north of [Lake Aghya](#). They were about 190 in number and were divided into three squadrons under Major John Russell. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had from the first felt uneasy about their isolated position and had ordered Russell to withdraw to the main body of 10 Brigade whenever the situation seemed to warrant it. ²

On the morning of 20 May the troops were about to stand down for breakfast when they saw the troop-carriers go in over [Maleme](#) and others, preceded by gliders, flying straight across the [Aghya](#) valley, emptying out their parachutists as they went. Most of these landed out of range, and when they formed up attacked east and not west. So the Divisional Cavalry had to content themselves with potshots at strays. On the plain where the main landings took place there was plenty of cover and, once grounded, the paratroops were hard to see.

To Major Russell staying where he was seemed pointless. His men had no long-range weapons and so could not damage the enemy in the valley. Still less could he support [8 Greek Regiment](#); for an open space strongly held by enemy lay between, even if it had been practicable to move an organised body of men over it under an enemy-thronged sky. And soon at this distance it seemed as if Greek resistance, at least at the prison end of the front, had been overcome. The telephone line to Brigade had been cut half an hour after the landing, there was no wireless, and a runner sent out returned wounded with the report that it was impossible to get through by the direct route.

Russell determined to use the discretion given him and by striking into the hills north of him to make his way round into [Galatas](#).

In the early afternoon the force set out and, after a long and rugged climb and some unpleasant moments in the approach to the front line held by the [Composite](#)

Battalion, eventually found its way into **Galatas**, meeting on the way a patrol sent out to bring it in.

vii

The line held by the 1400 men of **6 Greek Regiment** under Major Gregarius ran from the Prison- **Galatas** road ³ to Cemetery Hill and thence across the valley to the Turkish fort. The troops

¹ See pp. 321– 3.

² General Puttick says that this was a divisional order.

³ See map facing p. 133.

were ill-armed ¹ and, though ammunition had arrived some days before the battle and been distributed to companies, there is some doubt whether it had been issued to the men. Whether or not it had been issued, however, the length of the line, lack of training, and weakness of armament sufficiently explain the disaster that quickly overtook the regiment. With I Battalion attacking hard on the south flank, 11 Company in the rear, 12 Company to the front, and 9 Company on top of the positions—all troops heavily armed and highly trained—defeat was inevitable. The defending forces south of the **Canea- Alikianou** road and in the valley between it and the Turkish fort were overwhelmed. Some no doubt made their way east to **2 Greek Regiment** or into the hills towards **8 Greek Regiment**. Others reached **Galatas** or **19 Battalion** and were to reappear. But as a unit **6 Greek Regiment** ceased to exist.

North of the **Canea- Alikianou** road on **Cemetery Hill** was the regiment's HQ. Here there were about thirty Greeks being trained in field engineering by a party of New Zealand sappers, and here also was Captain **Smith** ² of **23 Battalion** with a further party of New Zealand instructors. The Greek trainees had only about ten rounds of ammunition each, and when the parachutists began to drop this supply was quickly exhausted. For this reason an attempt by Smith to rally the Greeks and counter-attack could not be carried through. Without ammunition there was nothing

that the defence could do, and Smith therefore collected all those who had not already melted away and led them back into the area of [19 Battalion](#). Here Major Blackburn gave them an area in which to reorganise, and they obtained some German ammunition which approximately fitted their weapons. That night, when two [19 Battalion](#) companies went forward to counter-attack, the Greeks were able to replace them in the battalion perimeter.

Another group of Greeks made its way into [Galatas](#), about 200 strong. Their condition may be gauged from an account by Captain [Bassett](#),³ Brigade Major to 10 Brigade. 'Here I found hundreds of Greeks in flight, rallied and railed at them and turned them back down the valley; but they showed that they only had three rounds each which they blazed at high-flying planes. That bloody Colonel had not issued his ammunition, and his dump was captured at once.'⁴

¹ See p. 70.

² [Capt H. M. Smith](#), ED, MC (Greek); Dunedin; born Dunedin, 26 Apr 1906; journalist.

³ [Maj B. I. Bassett](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM 10 Bde May 1941; BM 4 Bde Aug 1941–Jan 1942, Jun–Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

⁴ Letter by Capt Bassett, 3 Jun 1941.

Eventually Bassett 'Rallied some in the village and put them under a hero, Captain Forrester, a young blond Englishman (Queen's Regiment) who had trickled in the night before to liaise and report back. He nonchalantly forgot about reporting back in person until our scrap there finished a week later.'¹

Since this was the end of [6 Greek Regiment](#), the part played from now on by those Greeks who remained in action will be treated in relation to the main narrative of 10 Brigade.

The remainder of the 10 Brigade front was held by the Composite Battalion in its three main groups: the RMT group between the coast and the northern slopes of [Red Hill](#); a central group which consisted of two companies formed from [4 Field Regiment](#) and 2 Echelon of the Divisional Supply Company, and which held [Red Hill](#) and [Ruin Hill](#); and a mixed group from [5 Field Regiment](#) on [Wheat Hill](#) and the [Divisional Petrol Company](#) on [Pink Hill](#).²

As it was in the sector of this last group that the main fighting of the day took place, the other two sectors may be dealt with first. A sprinkling of enemy landed in the lines of the RMT but were quickly eliminated, their weapons making a desirable addition to the defenders' fire power. The 4th Field Regiment on [Red Hill](#) acquired neither enemy nor spoil, but the Divisional Supply Company on [Ruin Hill](#) was able to enjoy some long-range shooting at paratroops in the prison area and had a few strays nearer at hand to dispose of as well. On [Wheat Hill](#) the men of [5 Field Regiment](#) had only a few intruders to silence and, apart from some forward patrolling, spent most of the day watching the enemy form up in the prison area and expecting orders for a counter-attack.

The day passed so easily for these two northern sectors because the enemy's main landings were to the south and south-east. For the most southern group of the [Composite Battalion](#), the [Divisional Petrol Company](#), it was another matter. The company had four sections disposed from the foot of [Wheat Hill](#) to the [Prison-Galatas](#) road, with two sections on [Pink Hill](#) itself which was to prove a key position. Wire had been erected about fifty yards in front of the forward posts and the troops mostly occupied trenches dug by their predecessors, [1 Welch](#). In armament the company was weak: the rifles were without bayonets and five fewer than the men who needed them, and besides rifles there were

¹ Ibid. [Capt M. Forrester](#) was attached to the Greek Military Mission.

² See map, p. 158.

their own HQ was too exposed and so themselves withdrew, establishing a new HQ with the [Composite Battalion](#) near [Ruin Ridge](#) and north of [Galatas](#).

After rallying the Greeks and handing them over to Captain Forrester, Bassett then went back with a patrol of eight men to [Pink Hill](#) to see what could be done about the gap on its left made by the withdrawal of [6 Greek Regiment](#). Meanwhile the impetuous Lieutenant Neuhof had launched his newly-landed 7 Company against [Pink Hill](#) and [Divisional Petrol Company](#). And probably part of 9 Company was also active in the same area. Casualties to the defence were severe as the enemy drive was backed up by mortar fire from the prison area. But German casualties appear to have been even more so, and 7 Company did not survive this day as a company.

As soon as battle began Captain W. G. McDonagh, the commander of the Petrol Company, made a circuit of his positions, 'very cheerful, saying "This'll be a good shot", "The duck season's a bit late boys, but it's good shooting now", and similar

¹ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 57.

remarks which cheered the men up considerably. He was an inspiring commander.' ¹ On his way back from this tour of encouragement McDonagh was mortally wounded. Lieutenant [Macphail](#), ² who took over from him, was severely wounded shortly afterwards. Lieutenant [Jackson](#) ³ then took command, but was wounded in his turn. At this point Captain [Rowe](#), ⁴ the Brigade Supply Officer, arrived. He had heard that McDonagh had been wounded and had asked [Colonel Kippenberger](#)'s permission to go and help. His arrival was timely; for by now all the Petrol Company officers were out of action and most of the NCOs. Rowe therefore assumed command.

The position was critical. The first attack by 7 Company direct on [Pink Hill](#) had been beaten off. But there was still a gap on the left of the Petrol Company where the Greeks had fallen back and the Germans were forcing their way forward. Bassett, after driving some enemy out of Battle HQ, worked his way across the gap to make contact with the right-hand post of [19 Battalion](#). He was in time to see a counter-attack by Forrester's reorganised Greeks. 'But suddenly Forrester began tooting a tin whistle like the Pied Piper, and the whole motley crowd of them surged down

against the Huns yelling and shouting in a mad bayonet charge which made the Jerries break and run.’⁵

‘This steadied what Greeks were left’, Bassett continues, ‘and we stretched a thin line of outposts across which I patrolled three times that day.’

This line of outposts consisted of one Greek party pushed out from [Pink Hill](#) by Bassett and another rallied in [19 Battalion](#) area by Lieutenant [Wildey](#),⁶ and extended from the [19 Battalion](#) right to join up with Bassett's party. Bassett and his own patrol returned to [Pink Hill](#) to thicken up the defences there.

It was against this reconstituted line and mainly [Pink Hill](#) that Heidrich launched 5 Company and what there was available of III Battalion—probably part of 9 Company, 12 Company, and Battalion HQ—in the attack described earlier. The force did not prove strong enough, and 6 Company and II Battalion HQ had to be brought in as well. In this third attack, during the late afternoon, some of the Petrol Company's posts on the right flank were forced

¹ CSM C. E. James.

² [Maj I. C. Macphail](#); Opapa, Hawke's Bay; born [Glasgow](#), 22 Jun 1907; sheepfarmer; wounded and p.w. 28 May 1941; repatriated Oct 1943.

³ [Lt E. J. Jackson](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Greymouth](#), 4 Mar 1906; company representative; twice wounded.

⁴ [Capt H. A. Rowe](#), MC; [Piha](#); born [Hokitika](#), 12 Aug 1914; salesman; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁵ Letter by Capt Bassett, 3 Jun 1941.

⁶ [Maj P. B. Wildey](#), m.i.d.; [Dunedin](#); born [Dunedin](#), 13 Oct 1913; mining student; 2 i/c 8 Fd Coy 1942; OC Engr and Ordnance Trg Depot 1943.

back onto [Wheat Hill](#). But a small party on [Pink Hill](#) itself held on stoutly and

inflicted heavy casualties. Although the hill's head was bald and their positions were very vulnerable to the constant mortaring from the prison area, this party stayed till dusk. By then so many were wounded and killed and links with the rest of the company so weak that CSM [James](#),¹ the local commander, decided to withdraw in the hope of reorganising and reoccupying the hill at dawn. During the night he and Captain Rowe carried out this plan, sparing as they did so a party for clearing-up operations in [Galatas](#) where a few paratroop snipers still lingered. The enemy followed up their withdrawal and occupied the hill.

The firm stand of the Petrol Company and the energy and initiative shown by Bassett, Forrester and Rowe had been the chief factors in preventing what might have been a breakthrough. But by late afternoon the flank on the left of the Petrol Company was still very weak, and it was fortunate that the enemy pitted his main attack against the Petrol Company. His opportunity was soon gone. For just before dusk, while the fight for [Pink Hill](#) was still at its height, Russell brought in his Divisional Cavalry. The three squadrons were hastily put into position between [Pink Hill](#) and [Cemetery Hill](#), leaving the latter as a sort of no-man's-land and linking up with the Petrol Company on the right and [19 Battalion](#) on the left. Thus a dangerous weak spot—the Greeks whom the Divisional Cavalry thus strengthened had very little ammunition left and 'though they did not seem to mind charging were obviously incapable of holding ground'²—was eliminated and the worst of the day could be accounted over.

Before leaving 10 Brigade, however, it will be necessary to look at the day's events as they were seen from 10 Brigade HQ, now with the [Composite Battalion](#). At 10.45 a.m. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had reported to Division that his line of communications was cut, that [6 Greek Regiment's](#) left flank had been severed and that the Greeks had withdrawn to reorganise, that there was no news of the Divisional Cavalry or of [8 Greek Regiment](#)—though a Greek reported the latter to be withdrawing—and that the enemy were attacking up the Prison–[Galatas](#) road. His own intention was to clear the high ground of enemy and hold on. A message sent at the same time to 4 Brigade reported enemy parties in [Galatas](#) and the despatch of patrols to clear them out.

These parties in [Galatas](#) were no doubt stubborn paratroops who, cut off from their main body, had ensconced themselves in houses. They gave trouble

sporadically throughout the day, though

¹ WO II C. E. James, EM; Wellington; born Ashburton, 2 Jun 1903; linesman; wounded and p.w. 28 May 1941.

² Infantry Brigadier, p. 56.

a patrol of about thirty men from the RMT under Lieutenant Carson ¹ was sent to deal with them. But the patrol's primary object was to help in the hospital area, and it did not come to Galatas itself until late in the morning. When it did so, however, it was with great spirit, and although there was a recrudescence of trouble that evening in the village—perhaps due to remnants of 10 Company—Carson's patrol and detachments from 5 Field Regiment and the Petrol Company were enough to deal with it.

By midday the signalmen had cleared the line to Division, and a signal sent at 2.15 p.m. said that the brigade was holding out in all its positions except those of 6 Greek Regiment who were weak and short of ammunition. 'A vigorous counter-attack would clear the prison.'²

By this time Kippenberger saw that the prison area was the enemy's chief point of concentration and that this was the place and now the time to counter-attack—a view that was shared by most other officers on the spot. At the same time he knew that his own poorly trained and miscellaneous force could hardly supply the kind of counter-attack required and had enough to do holding its line.

When a fresh enemy attack came in during the afternoon Kippenberger 'pressed again for infantry with which to counterattack and was told that something would be done.'³ While he waited, all that he could do was hold on and take advantage of any such opportunity as the arrival of the Divisional Cavalry to improve his position. Meanwhile reports reached him from 19 Battalion that the enemy was making a landing ground near the prison. This report he passed on to Division, but about that time line communications to Division again broke down and he was without news of what Brigadier Puttick proposed to do. At 7 p.m. he sent off by runner or liaison officer a signal which summarises the situation at the end of this phase:

Div Cav Det arrived without loss and is in Galatos. No word of 8/Greeks. 6/Greeks have disappeared. Landing at 1700 hrs mainly stores but prisoner says many more tps will arrive tonight.

Blackburn reports position intact but small parties in rear not disposed of.

Pressure on my left has been increasing. Left Coy has retired 200 yds causing next Coy to come back. Casualties abt 60 incl 4 off and are continuing steadily. Rations & ammo alright water short. Loss all on left.

Can carry wounded to [Maleme](#) Rd if trucks can be sent up.

¹ [Maj W. N. Carson](#), MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 16 Jul 1916; warehouseman; died of wounds 8 Oct 1944.

² NZ Div WD. [General Kippenberger](#) says that he had already spoken to Brig Puttick by telephone and urgently asked for 20 Bn and as many other infantry as could be spared.

³ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 57.

If no counter attack can be mounted to clear prison area where enemy are clearing landing field suggest that after dark I should withdraw to shorter line N-S astride [Maleme](#) (Coast) road retaining contact with Blackburn.

Wire to you has been down for two hours and enemy are at present within short range of exchange.

Please advise position and instruct. Don't think this line would hold against serious attack tomorrow.

Have had to thin out beach defence. ¹

ix

The preceding section has shown that [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had no doubt from

about midday onwards that a strong counter-attack on the prison area was called for. This view was also shared by others farther back, among them Brigadier Inglis.

On the first day of this anomalous battle a headquarters was as likely to be engaged in direct conflict with the enemy as any of the units it commanded, and after the first bombing and strafing 4 Brigade HQ received a share of parachutists. While these were being dealt with, at 10 a.m. a message came from [Creforce](#), whose reserve 4 Brigade was, that a battalion was to be sent south of [Canea](#) to clear up enemy there—no doubt Lieutenant Gentz's glider party. This message could not be complied with, however, because 18 and 19 Battalions were already fully occupied and 1 Welch, the brigade's other battalion, was not in the immediate area.

Moreover, about this time or shortly afterwards, Inglis moved his HQ to the same position as that of [18 Battalion](#). The move was not due to trouble from parachutists—Inglis had himself despatched one of the last of them in a nearby vineyard—but to shortcomings in the original position. The preliminary air attack had cut the telephone lines, observation was poor, and runners and liaison officers had too far to go. By moving to [18 Battalion](#) area Inglis could use the uncut telephone lines there, had much swifter personal contact with Division and his units, gained a good observation post on an adjoining hill, and secured immediate control over at least one of his battalions.

He was not long established in his new position and it was about eleven o'clock when Brigadier K. L. Stewart, Brigadier General Staff, visited him with the news—already given to Brigadier Puttick—that 4 Brigade, less 1 Welch, was to revert to the command of Division.

The significance of this decision on [General Freyberg's](#) part is considerable. It meant that he was reducing his [Force Reserve](#) to

¹ NZ Div WD. This last item no doubt refers to the detachment of Carson's patrol from the RMT group.

one battalion, 1 Welch, although intelligence sources which he had every reason to consider reliable had led him to expect landings still to come at [Retimo](#) and

Heraklion. If he now released 18 and 19 Battalions for divisional use, it must have been due in part to his recognition that they were already engaged and ought to be given a chance to clear up the enemy they had in front of them, and in part to a recognition that it would not be in practice an easy matter to move them to the fronts where landings were still expected. But it can hardly be doubted that in releasing them **Freyberg** also intended **Puttick** to use them.

This at least was the view taken by **Inglis** when he had had time to appreciate the general situation. By the early afternoon he had grasped that the main landings were in the prison and **Maleme** areas and had learnt from **Robin Miller**,¹ a war correspondent, who had just returned from 5 Brigade HQ, that all was not well at **Maleme**. He decided that the immediate necessity was to clear and secure the prison and **Alikianou** areas by a counter-attack with 4 Brigade. From the ground thus won he thought that if the situation at **Maleme** continued to degenerate he could push on that night over the hills by a route previously reconnoitred and surprise the enemy on the 5 Brigade front. Whether or not the second part of this plan proved necessary, he was prepared to attempt the first part in daylight with 18 and 20 Battalions. The 19th Battalion would have to stay where it was, being already committed, and 1 Welch—whose mortars he would borrow to compensate for the lack of artillery—could replace the two attacking battalions.

With this plan **Inglis** went to **Puttick**. **Puttick** did not agree with it but said that he would consult **General Freyberg**. This in due course he did, apparently by telephone, and some time later informed **Inglis**, who had returned to his own HQ, that **General Freyberg** did not approve the counter-attack.²

Thwarted in his larger plan **Inglis** turned to the local situation. About four o'clock he learnt that 1 Light Troop RA had been overcome and decided on immediate counter-attack. He ordered **18 Battalion** to send a company with a 3-inch mortar detachment and a Bren carrier as escort. Three tanks from C Squadron, **3 Hussars**, were to give support; but, since neither **18 Battalion** war diary nor that of C Squadron mentions tanks as taking part, it may be assumed that the orders did not reach the tanks in time.

¹ **Capt R. T. Miller**; **New York**; born **Auckland**, 3 Apr 1917; reporter.

² The foregoing is based on a letter from General Inglis to [General Kippenberger](#), dated 12 Feb 1951. General Puttick does not recall being pressed to counter-attack the [Prison Valley](#) except by Colonels Gentry and [Kippenberger](#) and Maj Bull. It is therefore possible that General Inglis is mistaken.

Late in the afternoon C Company of [18 Battalion](#) set off. In the lead was Lieutenant [Herdman](#) ¹ with two Bren carriers. The 3-inch mortar detachment brought up the rear. The company soon ran into machine-gun and mortar fire from the left of the road and Major [Lynch](#), ² the commander, ordered deployment to the left. Herdman, who had been left to watch the road, nosed forward in a Bren carrier. An enemy heavy machine gun fired and knocked out the carrier. Herdman was killed.

The main body of the company met stiff opposition from enemy who seemed bent on advancing downstream towards [Canea](#). A stalemate followed till dark. The company then withdrew, bringing two prisoners in exchange for two killed.

Unsatisfactory in result though this engagement was, it had been the first aggressive action shown by the defence that day, apart from merely holding positions and mopping up initial landings. It is now time to see why Puttick was so reluctant to unleash his reserve in an attack on the scale that Inglis and [Kippenberger](#) had both thought necessary, and to follow out the action that he did finally decide on.

x

At the beginning of the battle Puttick had under his command only 5 Brigade and 10 Brigade, 4 Brigade being in [Force Reserve](#). The only reserve at his own disposal was [20 Battalion](#). About 11 a.m. this situation was radically altered by [Freyberg](#)'s orders that 4 Brigade—less 1 Welch—was to revert to divisional command. True, [Freyberg](#) issued no instructions on how it was to be employed; but before the battle he had continually stressed the need for immediate counter-attack. This reduction of his [Force Reserve](#) to no more than a battalion evidently implied that he regarded the western sector as vital, whatever might still be to come in the [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) sectors, but was leaving the question of how and where

counter-attack was to take place to the commander on the spot, who was presumably in a better position to decide.

Puttick now had under his control two further battalions. Before we consider how he might have used them we must examine the situation as he would have seen it at the time. On the 5 Brigade front all reports were cheerful all day. Only at 5.15 p.m. was there a hint of trouble when Brigadier Hargest reported that he was sending two companies to support [22 Battalion](#). But the

¹ [Lt J. K. Herdman](#); born [Scotland](#), 18 May 1905; car salesman; killed in action 20 May 1941.

² [Lt-Col R. J. Lynch](#), MC; born [Waihi](#), 24 Oct 1909; sales manager; CO 18 Bn 29 Jun–15 Jul 1942; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942; died of wounds while p.w. ([Italy](#)) 26 Sep 1942.

despatch of such a slender force when Hargest had 21, 23 and 28 Battalions available did not suggest there was anything serious the matter.

Thus, on the information he had, Puttick had no reason to believe that his reserve might be needed immediately by 5 Brigade. On the [Canea](#) front, too, in so far as the forces under his command were affected, Puttick could not by the end of the morning have felt there was any need for concern. The 10 Brigade front, on the other hand, presented quite a different picture. By 11 a.m. he knew that a formidable landing had been made in the [Prison Valley](#); that the enemy had promptly begun to attack towards [Galatas](#); that [6 Greek Regiment](#) had crumpled; and that there was no word from [8 Greek Regiment](#) or the Divisional Cavalry.

It was at this time that the first representations began to be made to Puttick that he should counter-attack with 4 Brigade. They were made in turn by Brigadier Stewart, Brigadier Inglis, and [Colonel Kippenberger](#). And other officers also put forward the same point of view. As the time passed they grew stronger. At 2.15 p.m. [Kippenberger](#), who had already put the case by telephone, again urged that 'a vigorous counter-attack would clear the Prison.' Yet Puttick still hesitated. What were his reasons for not launching the counter-attack?

Brigadier Puttick had three battalions—18, 19, and 20—at his disposal, almost the whole reserve to [Creforce](#). If he committed them now he might have nothing left for the future and what he considered to be the real dangers: adverse developments at [Maleme](#), the cutting of the coast road behind 5 Brigade, an eastward thrust to [Suda Bay](#) which might bypass 10 Brigade, and fresh landings by air or sea. The last seemed a very real danger; for, so far as Intelligence knew, by no means all the enemy's paratroops had been dropped, and if he did not keep a strong force under his hand the next landings might turn the scale at [Maleme](#) or attack his denuded rear area. And, again, an attempt at invasion by sea seemed certain, the three battalions all had a role in the defence of the coast, and it would be dangerous to commit them elsewhere till this particular threat was over.

Moreover, Puttick believed that the [Galatas](#) front was only a foundation for the real front at [Maleme](#) and that so long as 10 Brigade held fast it was doing all that was necessary. There was no need to take the ground now occupied by 3 Parachute Regiment, and if it were taken the troops engaged had not the tools with which to dig in and hold it. If the destruction of the enemy and not the seizing of the ground were the object of counter-attack it could not be compassed; for the enemy, having nothing vital to defend, could hold on long enough to inflict maximum casualties and then fall back on the hills. The attacking force would then find itself exposed to the full onslaught of the enemy air force and in a weak position to defend itself against a return attack by a reorganised and perhaps reinforced enemy.

Again, any attack, at least in daylight, requires heavy support by covering fire, and practically none was available. Nor was there any protection by AA or by the [RAF](#) against the enemy's overwhelming air strength. Thus counter-attack by day at least was certain to mean heavy casualties with no guarantee of success. ¹

These considerations were weighty, and it was easier for local commanders to urge the need for counter-attack than it was for Puttick to make a decision, fraught, whichever way he decided, with perilous possibilities. On the other hand, not to counterattack meant leaving the enemy with the initiative at a moment when time was his friend and not the defence's. For if the enemy was allowed to consolidate and build up in the [Prison Valley](#) without major molestation, the ultimate result could not really be in doubt, whether or not the sea invasion took place. True, the general

situation had not developed and it was not yet possible to see where other emergencies might arise. Still, here in the valley was possibly an opportunity to strike hard and destroy an enemy who might not have evaded the blow as easily as Puttick believed. The fact that Colonel Heidrich himself regarded counter-attack as inevitable shows that not only the more aggressive spirits on the side of the defence considered attack the best course.

Had 4 Brigade counter-attack been decided, that afternoon could have been used for reconnaissance, the preparation of detailed orders, and the like. Instead, any chance there may have been was lost. The report of a landing ground being constructed in the [Prison Valley](#) induced Puttick to take more active measures.

xi

This report reached Division at half past five. If true, it was clearly of vital importance. With a landing ground there the enemy would become independent even of success at [Maleme](#) and, rushing in troops by air, could build up a force strong enough to cut the coast road and isolate 5 Brigade.

Influenced by this and by his fear that 10 Brigade with its scratch units might not be able to stand up to prolonged attack, Puttick

¹ The foregoing approximately summarises the point of view of General Puttick as expressed in discussion with the author in 1948 and in a paper written in 1951.

decided that a counter-attack must take place 'as there is the threat of attack from area of reservoir where enemy are clearing an area for landing tp carrying planes.'¹

The immediate orders were given to Brigadier Inglis over the telephone, and no copy survives. They were probably in effect the same as the confirmatory written orders which were issued at 6.20 p.m. and reached 4 Brigade at half past eight. They ran as follows:

10 Bde reports construction of landing ground in PRISON area 0553. 4 Inf Bde

will counterattack with one bn Lt tks and carriers to clear prison area of enemy. When attack completed 19 Bn will come under comd 10 Bde to hold posn on left of 1 COMP on line previously held by 6 Gk Bn down to incl rd [CANEA-ALYKIANOU](#). 20 Bn comes under comd 4 Inf Bde forthwith except for coy protecting NZ Div which comes under comd Div. ²

Puttick did not expect much from this attack beyond assistance to 10 Brigade morale and a cautionary lesson to the enemy. ³ Yet the orders show that destroying the landing ground and clearing the Prison area were the objects, and it is difficult to see how Puttick could have expected a single battalion and a few light tanks to achieve them when the enemy was estimated to have 1500 troops in the valley and might be expected to defend his landing ground tenaciously.

Unfortunately, there was at this time no line communication with [Colonel Kippenberger](#). The result was that preparations had to go forward for an attack which was not only too weak in weight but which had to be organised and launched without the knowledge of the commander on the spot, whose co-operation was essential.

The order clearly envisages the employment of [19 Battalion](#), and Inglis explains why it was the one selected and why he agreed to its use. This was not the large-scale attack he had been calling for, but, in his view, a local one with a limited objective. The 19th Battalion was nearest the spot, knew the ground and knew where the enemy was supposed to be working. And there would not have been time for either 18 or [20 Battalion](#), between getting the orders and dark, to prepare a night attack. 'Moreover, I was still nourishing hopes of a brigade counter-attack being laid on next day and did not want to have one of my free battalions dispersed or pinned down in the morning after a night attack. The obvious course, therefore, was to have the operation laid on

¹ NZ Div Intelligence log. It should be noted that the report about the landing ground appears to have been without foundation.

² 4 Bde Int log.

³ General Puttick's paper, 1951.

by 19 Bn or so much of it as Blackburn thought necessary or could spare.’¹

On receipt of the order Inglis issued his own, timed 6.20 p.m. and brought to 19 Battalion by Major Sanders,² the Brigade Major, at half past six:

¹ Letter from General Inglis, 12 Feb 1951.

² Lt-Col G. P. Sanders, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born England, 2 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn 14 Jun–3 Jul 1944; 27 (MG) Bn Nov 1944–1945; 27 Bn (Japan) 1946; Director of Training, Army HQ, Aug 1949–.

CRETE

4 NZ INF BDE O. INSTRUCTION NO. 9 TO O.C. 19 BN

4 NZ Inf Bde O. Instruction No. 9 to O.C. 19 Bn

1. Enemy are preparing what appears to be a landing ground 1000x to the west of the Prison 0553.
2. 19 Bn will counter attack this area forthwith with
 - (1) Bn if situation permits.
 - (2) Two Coys if Bn Comd considers that one coy should be left in present posn.
3. One tp **3 Hussars** will come under comd 19 Bn for the operation.
4. After clearing the landing ground 19 Bn with under comd one tp **3 Hussars** will take up a defensive posn covering the landing ground but with bulk of forces North of rd khandia-aghya 0352. ³

Major Blackburn had four companies—only three of them rifle companies—with which to carry out this order. With the agreement of Major Sanders he decided he could afford to use only two—thus accepting the second of the alternatives allowed him by Brigadier Inglis. To use more would be to endanger 10 Brigade's left flank too seriously. He determined therefore to attack with A (**Wellington**) and D (Taranaki) Companies, filling the gap left by the former with the Greeks who had come into the battalion area that morning, and the gap left by D Company with a platoon from C (Hawke's Bay) Company, the mortar platoon, and a party from Battalion HQ.

This was an important decision; for it meant that the attack would go in at half the strength contemplated by Puttick. Blackburn should not be blamed; for he had the authority of the brigade order, and his reasoning about the importance of his own defensive position was correct. The fact is that a counter-attack at even battalion strength was in any case too little.

It will have been remarked that the brigade order envisaged the employment of a troop of C Squadron, **3 Hussars**. Its seven light tanks had been stationed since their arrival on 19 May in the angle between the road to **Galatas** and the road to **Karatsos**. When the landings began one troop under Lieutenant **Farran** ⁴ had gone to

³ A copy was sent to **3 Hussars**.

⁴ Lt-Col R. A. Farran, DSO, MC; served in 7 (British) Armd Div, 1942, and 2 Special Air Service Regt, 1944–45.

block the Galatas road, while the other under Sergeant Harris blocked the Karatsos road. The static personnel had remained to guard the laager perimeter and at one stage picked off some 10 Company paratroops escorting hospital patients. ¹

Both troops had some encounters with enemy during the day and inflicted casualties, at the price of one tank damaged by anti-tank fire. When evening came Farran was ordered to support A and D Companies of 19 Battalion, while the rest of the squadron went into reserve near 4 Brigade HQ.

At 19 Battalion it was decided that Farran's three tanks should attack along the Galatas-Prison road, while the infantry would first move west from 19 Battalion area through 10 Brigade's posts north of Galatas and then attack southwards. The infantry objective was, on the map, a line running a thousand yards from the prison westwards. Their real task, it was understood, was to find and attack the landing ground wherever it was to be found. Zero hour for leaving 19 Battalion area was 7.15 p.m.

Since the original order reached Major Blackburn at half past six, the plan had had to be arranged hastily and there was no time to consult Colonel Kippenberger. There was little time for detailed orders—the OC 9 Platoon had about 15 minutes to prepare his men ²—and this, with the vagueness of the original order, may explain a certain haziness about the precise objective. ³

In the dusk, and presumably at 7.15 p.m., both companies set off, A Company under Captain Pleasants on the right and D Company under Captain McLauchlan ⁴ on the left.

Meanwhile Farran's three tanks had arrived in Galatas and Colonel Kippenberger learnt from them that they were to attack at half past eight. This was his first notice that the counter-attack was to take place. About the same time he was given to understand, by some wrong report, that 19 Battalion was under his command. ⁵ He thereupon went across to 19 Battalion HQ, arriving about nine o'clock, told Blackburn

of the change in command, and discussed the position with him. They concluded that the left flank

¹ WD C Sqn, 3 H.

² Report by Lt C. Weston.

³ 'There was some confusion as to the objective, and Col. Blackburn stated that the 2 Coys were to reach the W edge of the olive groves N of the Prison and remain there to deal with another landing in the morning.'— 10 Bde Report. 'Three light tanks of the Third Hussars came into the village. These people said they were going to attack at 8.30 p.m. but were not at all clear what their objective was.'— [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 57. Capt Pleasants, OC A Coy, said his orders were to prevent the making of the landing ground but speaks of having 'no set objective to go to'.

⁴ Maj D. K. McLauchlan; Sydney; born Gisborne, 22 May 1911; insurance clerk; actg 2 i/c 19 Armd Regt Jul 1942–Jan 1943; OC Bde Tps, 4 Armd Bde.

⁵ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 57. [General Kippenberger](#) does not give the source, and unless orders had been changed the report must have been mistaken; for 19 Bn was to come under command only after completion of the attack.

was dangerously thin as a result of the attack, that the attack itself had begun too late and was too weak to be successful, and that the companies would be very exposed and vulnerable to air attack in the morning. [Kippenberger](#) therefore decided to cancel the attack and sent out patrols to warn the companies.

By this time, however, the two companies had got well on their way and the patrols failed to find them. Control even within the attacking companies was difficult to maintain. Darkness was coming on, there was no wireless contact, the country was close, and flanking men were unable to keep touch between platoons, let alone between companies.

D Company on the left, after passing north of [Galatas](#) and then turning south, ran into trouble from small pockets of paratroops presumably in the [Pink Hill](#) area, which the Divisional Petrol Company would by this time have vacated. In dealing with these pockets they killed about twenty enemy, destroyed two mortars and three LMGs, and lost several killed and wounded.

These mortars and machine guns had been holding up Farran at the road block just outside [Galatas](#). Their destruction enabled the tanks to get through and push south-west along what seems to have been the more westerly of the two tracks leading from [Galatas](#) to the prison. This route brought them across the front of A Company which had come southwards on the left of Ruin Hill, losing contact with D Company in the darkness and in the confusion of D Company's encounter with the paratroops.

When Captain Pleasants met the tanks he decided that in the darkness and without a fixed objective there was no point in going on. He was no doubt confirmed in this view when he discovered shortly afterwards that 9 Platoon, which had been his right-hand platoon, was not to be found and runners sent out could make no contact. ¹

About ten o'clock D Company, which had in the meantime been joined by part of Carson's patrol, met A Company. The two company commanders thereupon decided to form a strongpoint where they were (about 800–1000 yards north of the prison according to Pleasants), giving cover to the tanks, and to carry on the attack at dawn. It was not until the early morning that one of the patrols sent out by [Kippenberger](#) succeeded in finding the two companies

¹ Weston pushed on with 9 Platoon till it was clear he had lost contact with A Coy Thinking to find the others in the morning, he decided to make for the hills to the south-west, reached them, and lay up next day. In the late afternoon he joined in an encounter between Germans and Greek guerrillas and was fired on by both. One of his sections got into difficulties and he sent on the others, remaining behind himself to help. When he reached the section, however, he found the men had been either killed, captured, or dispersed. He therefore made his way back to 10 Bde alone, except for a PW he took en route. The other survivors got back on 23 May after difficult adventures.

and passing on the order for the cancellation of the attack. And further developments will be best treated under the events of 21 May.

xii

The end of the day's fighting on the [Canea- Galatas](#) front has now been reached and this provides a suitable point to summarise the position of both sides.

It is enough to recall General Suessmann's plan to see that the reality had turned out to be very different. The glider force had achieved only a very small part of its intention. One of its companies was practically destroyed with nothing done; and the other, reduced to a third of its strength, had been driven off the guns it had captured and was now making its way back to the main body. I Battalion had effectively failed to get further than [Perivolia](#) in its thrust towards [Suda](#). II Battalion had landed scattered and with heavy losses. Unable to co-operate as a battalion with I Battalion's drive to the east, it had been bogged down in operations around [Galatas](#). And III Battalion, which should have taken [Galatas](#) and [Karatsos](#) and then pushed on to attack [Canea](#), had failed in all three cases. Its only success, the capture of the 'tented camp', had been temporary and resulted in the total loss of the company concerned. Finally, the Engineer Battalion had been repulsed at [Alikianou](#).

True, failure in the landing programme had been partly responsible, and Colonel Heidrich had adjusted himself resolutely to the altered situation. He had grasped quickly that [Galatas](#) and the heights about it were the key to the defence and that major attack towards [Canea](#) was impossible while these remained untaken. He had therefore gathered together the odd companies from II and III Battalions and, [Cemetery Hill](#) owing to the withdrawal of [6 Greek Regiment](#) being already in his hands, had concentrated on seizing [Pink Hill](#). Here bad luck dogged him. For the withdrawal of the last posts of the Petrol Company after dark enabled Major Derpa of II Battalion to effect a lodgment and, had this been maintained, the situation would have looked ugly for 10 Brigade. But Derpa evacuated the hill again because of an unexplained misunderstanding—perhaps because of the arrival of the two companies of [19 Battalion](#) and the light tanks—and there was no chance of the

Germans getting possession of the hill again that night.

The day thus ended with Heidrich in a state of some nervousness. He must have felt that the initiative now lay with the defence and that a heavy counter-attack was inevitable. Of his regiment I Battalion was battleworthy but exhausted and was too far away at [Perivolia](#). II Battalion had had very heavy casualties. III Battalion was dispersed and in part destroyed. The Engineer Battalion, reasonably strong but too distant in the altered situation, he had already recalled.

Heidrich therefore withdrew I Battalion from [Perivolia](#) to help form a defensive front south of [Galatas](#). With it and the Engineer Battalion, he believed he was just strong enough to hold his present positions. ¹

In preparing to meet a counter-attack in strength Heidrich was assuming an opponent of his own temper, and one who would act promptly and forcefully on the simple principle that the initiative should be seized as soon as opportunity offered. Brigadier Puttick, however, reasoning in the way that has already been discussed and hesitating to strike the full counter-blow for fear of depleting his reserves against contingencies that were still remote, let the opportunity pass, if it existed. And so at midnight—except for the two-company attack by [19 Battalion](#), itself defensive in conception even if the landing ground it was intended to destroy did not exist—the initiative which Colonel Heidrich had relinquished had not been seized. Such a chance would not recur.

xiii

The account of the situation on the New Zealand Division front at the end of 20 May is now complete except in one respect: the events at Kisamos [Kastelli](#), defended by [1 Greek Regiment](#) and its New Zealand instructors under Major Bedding, have not yet been dealt with. They have had to be left till this stage, not because they fit more aptly here than elsewhere, but because from the first this sector was so isolated that its story, wherever placed in the history of the battle as a whole, must be an isolated episode. ²

The parachutists who attacked [Kastelli](#) came from the detachment of II Battalion, the [Assault Regiment](#), which had been detailed under Lieutenant Muerbe

to land just east of the town, to reconnoitre it, and to provide protection for the main force against attack from the west. The detachment landed in two parties, one north and south of the main road just outside the town and the other farther to the east. The Greeks in [Kastelli](#) at once sallied and, greatly assisted by Bedding and his men, by 11 a.m. had reduced the enemy still fighting to a single group.

¹ It now appears that by evening the German units in the [Prison Valley](#) west of [Galatas](#), after 540 casualties, had a remaining strength of 1260. (I Bn 3 Para Regt 520; II Bn 590; HQ and Medical 150.) On either side of the [Alikianou- Canea](#) Road east of [Galatas](#) and considerably scattered were 30 men of the Assault Regt, 200 of III Bn and 80 of the MMG Bn—310 survivors out of 1060. The Engineer Bn and 3 Coy Mtn Bty in the [Alikianou](#) area had lost 150, still had 590, but were temporarily isolated.

² See map, p. 290.

In a dash led by Bedding this group too was disposed of and by midday the immediate front was clear. The enemy had lost 48 killed and 28 prisoners, by our account. By their own they lost 54 killed and 20 wounded. The Greeks lost 57 killed and 62 wounded, partly through failing to use cover. One New Zealander was wounded.

CRETE

IV: RETIMO, HERAKLION, AND CREFORCE

IV: Retimo, Heraklion, and Creforce

i

Before we turn to consider the situation as it appeared to [General Freyberg](#) at [Creforce](#), it will first be necessary to give a brief summary of events as they developed on the two remaining fronts, [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#). It will be remembered that the German plan was to attack these two objectives in the afternoon of 20 May, when [8 Air Corps](#) would be able to bring to the support of the landings a striking power that would have been impossible had they been carried out at the same time as those in the [Galatas](#) and [Maleme](#) sectors.

For the attack on [Retimo](#) it was thought that two battalions of 2 Parachute Regiment—I and II—would be enough, since only weak resistance was expected. The main task completed, part of this force was to turn west and attack [Suda Bay](#). The assault on [Retimo](#) itself was to begin at 4.15 p.m.

The defence awaiting this onslaught was less negligible, however, than the plan allowed for. The [2/1 Australian Battalion](#) was in position on Hill A, ¹ a strong feature immediately east of the airfield, and on the ridge which runs west from Hill A and south of the airfield. The battalion was supported by six guns and a strong platoon of machine guns. The [2/11 Australian Battalion](#) held Hill B, at the end of the western continuation of the ridge, and was supported by two guns and a weak platoon of machine guns. From these positions the two battalions commanded the beaches, the airfield, and the coastal plain.

In addition to the two Australian battalions there were four battalions of Greek troops, some armed with American rifles and the others with an assortment of Greek. Their ammunition averaged ten rounds per man. Of the four battalions, [4 Greek Battalion](#) was posted on the ridge. The others were in reserve south of Pigi. ²

Two I tanks of [7 Royal Tank Regiment](#), stationed in the Wadi Pigi, completed

the force. Lieutenant-Colonel I. R. Campbell, DSO, simultaneously commanded his own 2/1 Battalion and the whole force.

The German plan was to attack in three groups: I Battalion, less two companies but with an MG company and heavy weapons, was to land east of the airfield and take it; III Battalion, with two artillery troops, an MG company and heavy weapons, was to land between [Perivolia](#) and the Platanes River and capture [Retimo](#); HQ 2 Parachute Regiment, with two companies (presumably from I Battalion) and a platoon from each of the heavy companies— 13 and 14—was to land between the airfield and the Platanes River and act as reserve.

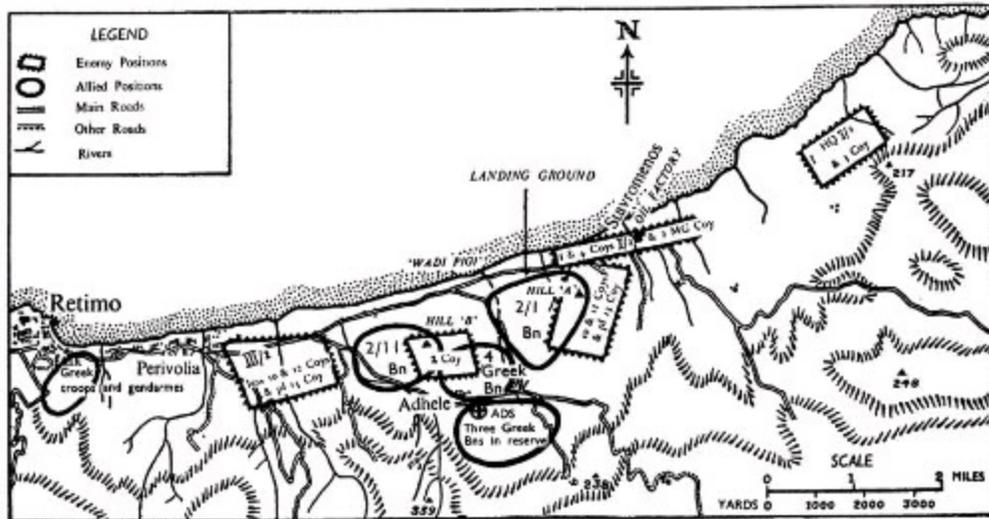
At about quarter past four, after a heavy bombing which inflicted few casualties, the parachutists began to drop. But by bad timing the three groups did not arrive simultaneously. I Battalion was the first and seems to have attacked with three infantry companies instead of two. But of these only one, together with the MG Company and Battalion HQ, landed east of the airfield and so much so as to be temporarily out of the battle. The other two suffered an opposite error and found themselves under heavy fire on the east edge of the airfield. Major Kroh, the battalion commander, hastily gathered what troops he could east of the airfield, picking up en route two companies of III Battalion which had also been wrongly put down, and made for the airfield.

In consequence he was able to put in a strong attack and 2/1 Battalion was hard pressed. A counter-attack by the tanks failed with the ditching of them, and after dark some of the enemy forced their way onto Hill A and the east edge of the airfield, capturing the tank crews. But 2/1 Battalion was able to make good its defence.

The second enemy group had got off to a delayed start and arrived an hour late. Nos. 9 and 11 Companies were put down correctly, as were the artillery and heavy weapons. Only remnants of 10 and 12 Companies, landing in Major Kroh's area, were able to join him. But the rest of the battalion made towards [Retimo](#) according to plan, taking [Perivolia](#) en route. Advance parties got as far as [Retimo](#) itself before being driven off by Cretan police. The battalion commander thereupon decided to withdraw and form a strongpoint at [Perivolia](#).

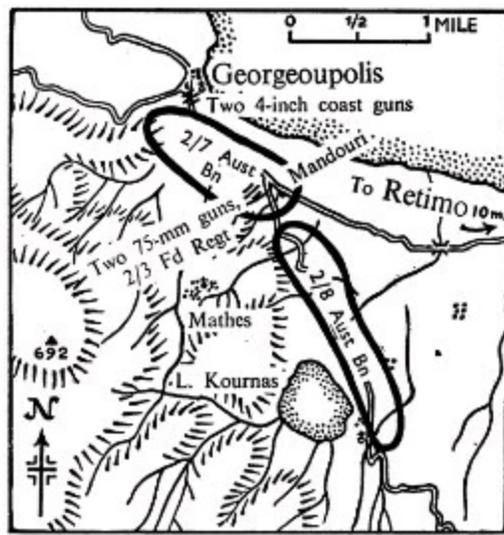
The third group was unfortunate. It landed on strong positions south of the main road, probably in the area of 2/11 Battalion. No. 2 Company of I Battalion and the heavy weapons were destroyed and the regimental commander found himself with a few men north of the road and surrounded.

Things had therefore gone well on the whole with the defence. The two Australian battalions had inflicted heavy losses—2/11



RETIMO, 20 MAY

Battalion buried 400 enemy on 21 May—and still held their positions; 4 Greek Battalion after initial shakiness had fought well. In the opening stages communications to Creforce had been cut; but later they seem to have been restored since Campbell was able to get through a request for reinforcements. The request had to be refused and Campbell set about planning two dawn attacks for the morrow.

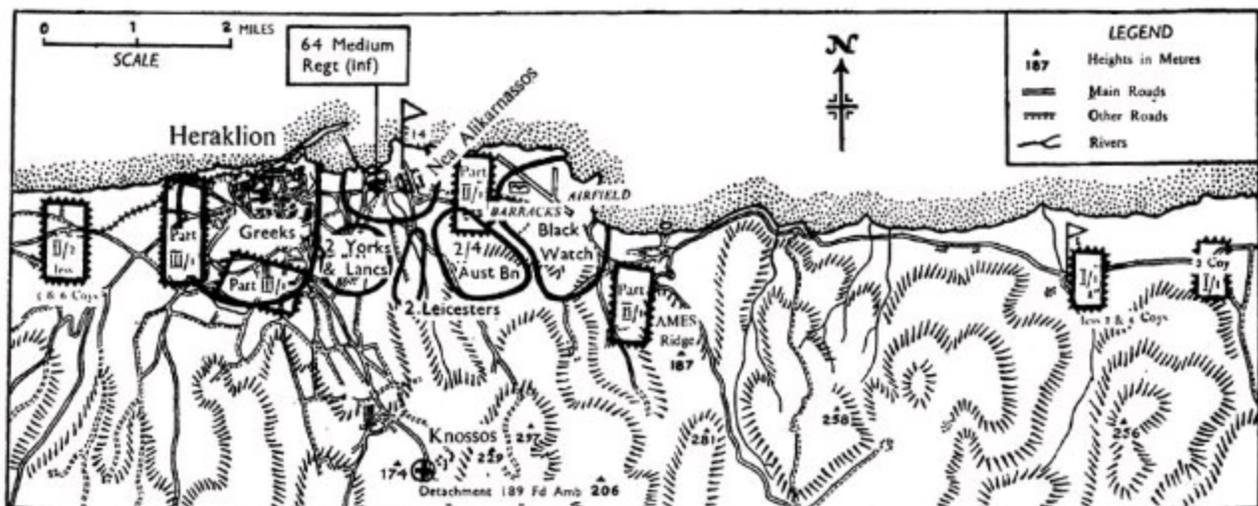


GEORGEOUPOLIS, 20 MAY
GEORGEOUPOLIS, 20 MAY

ii

At Heraklion also, the day's work was by no means unsatisfactory. Here the enemy's plan was to attack with 1 Parachute Regiment, supported by II Battalion of 2 Parachute Regiment. As at Retimo, the attack was to begin at 4.15 p.m.

To meet it 14 Infantry Brigade had four infantry battalions: 2/4 Australian Battalion, 2 Black Watch, 2 Leicesters, and 2 Yorks and Lancs. In addition there were 7 Medium Regiment RA acting



HERAKLION, 20 MAY
HERAKLION, 20 MAY

as infantry, a Greek garrison battalion, and two Greek recruit battalions.

The supporting artillery was sited south-east of the airfield. There were ten Bofors guns round the airfield and an I tank hidden at each end. Six light tanks of 3 Hussars were stationed south-east of it.

The German plan was for all four attacking battalions to land simultaneously with fighter protection: I Battalion was to seize the AMES—guarded by a platoon of Black Watch—and protect the east flank of the main assault; II Battalion was to capture the airfield; III Battalion was to take Heraklion town; and II Battalion of 2 Parachute Regiment was to land west of Heraklion and protect the west flank of the battalion attacking the town.

But dust on the Greek airfields, delays in refuelling, and casualties from the morning's operations made a punctual and simultaneous start impossible. And their limited range prevented the fighters from remaining in the air long enough to give protection to latecomers. The shortage of aircraft—presumably caused at least in part by the morning's casualties—made it necessary to leave 600 of the assaulting force behind. And the bombing of the defences, here as at Retimo, inflicted few losses.

Of I Battalion, only 3 Company was put down at the right time, 4 Company did not start at all, and 1 and 2 Companies with Battalion HQ were three hours late. Even so 2 Company was put down too far east. None the less the battalion was able to take the AMES and form a protective screen—aided in both tasks by the fact that the Black Watch guard had wisely decided by first light to rejoin its main body and the fact that the landings were out of range to the defence.

II Battalion of 1 Parachute Regiment had planned to operate in two groups east and west of the airfield. They were late in arriving and did not arrive together. The east group—5 and 8 Companies—was fiercely welcomed by 2 Black Watch and by dark was reduced to 60–70 men. The west group—6 and 7 Companies and an AA MG Company—encountered even severer justice and lost over 300 killed and over 100 wounded. An immediate counter-attack by tanks and infantry was largely responsible.

The regimental commander, who had been put down late and east of the AMES, assuming that II Battalion had taken the airfield pushed forward a detachment of I

Battalion to its support. By the time this reached the east edge of the airfield, however, the defence had cleared not only the airfield itself but all the main features of the area on the eastern front, except for parties of snipers. There was nothing for the new arrivals to do but collect themselves on the high ground to the east.

III Battalion, attacking [Heraklion](#), arrived late and spread out west and south of the town. Some parties got into [Heraklion](#) itself and fighting between these and the Greeks, 2 Yorks and Lancs, [2 Black Watch](#), and [2/4 Australian Battalion](#) continued there throughout the night; but the main body was unable to break in and had to disengage to the south-west and dig in. II Battalion of 2 Parachute Regiment, less two companies, landed without contact and screened the western flank.

iii

For [General Freyberg](#) the day had been anxious. Standing on the hill outside his HQ, he had watched the early morning blitz develop into a major landing operation of a kind new even to his rich military experience. Throughout the day his main problem was to try and deduce from the confused and belated evidence what the enemy's main objective was. For, though the general plan was apparent, there was no guarantee that it had not already been altered or would not alter as the attack developed. The events of the earlier part of the morning as reconstructed from the reports that did come in confirmed the impression that could be got from watching the landings: the main concentrations were west of [Maleme](#) and in the [Prison Valley](#). And it was no doubt largely in response to this picture of the attack, and to his realisation that 4 Brigade was already in part engaged, that [General Freyberg](#) put 18 and 19 Battalions under command of Brigadier Puttick. Even so, however, he knew at this stage that there were other enemy forces still uncommitted, and prior knowledge suggested that as well as the sea invasion there were airborne attacks on [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) still to come. No doubt he hoped that the forces at both places would be able to deal with any further air landings, and in any case he still had 1 Welch for dealing with the unforeseen.

It was not, in fact, until the operation order of 3 Parachute Regiment issued on 18 May had been captured and its contents translated that night that [Freyberg](#) was able to get a clear view of the enemy's intentions. This order not only gave the objectives of 3 Parachute Regiment in detail but summarised the enemy plan of

attack for the whole island. And the plan it revealed was very much the one we have seen being put into action: **Group Centre** was to take **Canea** in the morning and **Retimo** in the afternoon; **Group West** was to take **Maleme** and join up with **Group Centre**; and a further group was to come by sea and land west of **Maleme**.

The actual course of the day's fighting had been somewhat different, and by the time that **Freyberg** read this enemy order it was clear enough that the German attack had misfired. **Canea** and, so far as he knew, **Maleme** were still in our hands. The enemy was by now known to be attacking at **Heraklion** and **Retimo**, but there was nothing to suggest that he had been successful.

None the less, the picture given by **Freyberg** towards midnight in a message to General Wavell was a sober one: the day had been hard but so far as was known the defence still held **Maleme**, **Heraklion** and **Retimo** aerodromes and the two harbours, though by a bare margin. Large numbers of paratroops had been killed and the fighting heavy. The air attack had been on a scale of great severity and communications were proving extremely difficult. But the troops all realised how vital was the issue and they would fight it out. The enemy had so far failed to gain any of the objectives outlined in the captured operation order.

But the inadequacy of communications was even greater than **Freyberg's** message indicated and, sober though his report was, the true situation if he had been able to know it he would have found more sobering still. For at the very time he was sending this message **22 Battalion** was making its withdrawal from **Maleme** and leaving it open for occupation by the enemy. With no knowledge of this **Freyberg** could feel reasonable confidence that the situation was still in the balance and that, provided the **Navy** did its part in smashing the invasion by sea, his forces were disposed as well as their numbers made possible for whatever assaults the enemy might launch next day. Had he known that there was already this gaping hole at the most vulnerable point of his defence, it can hardly be doubted that already that night he would have tried to use the hours of darkness to save **Maleme** while there was still time.

¹ For the defence dispositions see map, p. 176.

² Correctly Piyi, although called Pigi by the Australians. The error arose because of defective printing in the maps used.

CRETE

CHAPTER 4 – THE SECOND DAY: 21 MAY

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CRETE

I: THE MALEME SECTOR

I: The Maleme Sector

i

To General Student on the evening of the first day the situation had not seemed encouraging. He must have an airfield if he were going to reinforce with troops, guns, and supplies on the scale required and at once; for the plan for seaborne support had been altered and the flotilla was not expected until the evening of the second day; and, even then, only when [Suda Bay](#) was clear. But only at [Maleme](#) had enough progress been made to warrant hopes of getting an airfield. And even here comparative failure—failure in terms of enemy plans, though success in relation to the hopes of the defence—would make it impossible to land 5 Mountain Division on 21 May, as had been intended.

Student's plan, in fact, had risked serious weaknesses. He had committed the whole of his glider-borne force and, except for a few companies, the whole of his parachute force. And he had committed them, not in one overwhelming blow which might confidently be expected to secure at least one airfield, but in four separate sectors, with three different airfields for objectives. The result was that he had dispersed his effort and, if he did not secure an airfield, would be dependent for reinforcement on the dubious chances of landings by sea.

His only chance now was to make [Maleme](#) his *Schwer punkt*. He had to make 'a very grave decision. I decided the whole mass of the reserve of the parachutists would be put into action at the aerodrome of [Maleme](#). That was a critical night for me. If the enemy had made a united all-out effort in counter-attacking during that night from the 20th to the 21st or in the morning of the 21st, then the very tired remnants of the Sturm [Assault] Regiment suffering from lack of ammunition could have been wiped out.'¹

¹ Proceedings at the trial of General Student. 'The whole mass of the reserve of the parachutists' is somewhat grandiloquent. Student could

produce no more than three companies of paratroop infantry and a company and a half of anti-tank troops. Later, on 24 May, he was to be able to raise a further four companies for [Heraklion](#). But these were probably not available on 21 May.

Once General Student, in an ugly situation, had decided to devote everything to [Maleme](#), [11 Air Corps](#) and [8 Air Corps](#) got their orders accordingly. Eleventh Air Corps was to reinforce Group West by parachute on a scale sufficient to secure the occupation of [Maleme](#) airfield—a euphemism for the largest scale possible—and as soon as the airfield was occupied the landing of 5 Mountain Division was to begin. This complete, the drive towards [Canea](#), junction with [Group Centre](#), and the seizure of [Suda Bay](#) were to follow. Eighth Air Corps would abet these operations by protecting the landings, neutralising the defences, supporting the land forces, reconnoitring the seas round [Crete](#), and by being ready to attack any warships detected.

In case reinforcement by air should fail, it seemed essential also that 1 Motor Sailing Flotilla, which had reached Melos on the night of the first day, should be directed to reach [Maleme](#) before dark on 21 May, apparently because only thus could the heavy weapons travelling by the convoy arrive in time to support the eastward thrust and the mountain troops sailing by sea be there. But reconnaissance had reported British warships south-west and south-east of [Crete](#) on 20 May and 'the authorities in Rome', still smarting no doubt from their defeat at [Cape Matapan](#), refused to order the Italian fleet to sea. There was nothing for it; with or without the Italian fleet, the flotilla must put to sea, and at ten o'clock, [8 Air Corps](#) having reported the sea north of [Crete](#) clear of British ships, it did so. ¹

Student did not know at this stage that [22 Battalion](#) would withdraw, and plans were based on the assumption, based on intercepted wireless signals, that the defence force consisted of three New Zealand battalions with artillery and tanks and was established afresh in [Maleme](#) and [Pirgos](#) and the ridges south of these, but that between [Pirgos](#) and [Platanias](#) the ground was generally undefended. ²

Summarised, the enemy's plan was to fly in ammunition for the troops already at [Maleme](#), to land the remainder of the available paratroops and attack with them, and as soon as the airfield was taken to fly in a battalion of 5 Mountain Division. In

case this should not be possible, III Battalion 100 Mountain Regiment of 5 Mountain Division was to go with 1 Motor Sailing Flotilla.

Ammunition was the first care. At first light single aircraft landed on the beaches west of the Tavronitis, one of them returning with

¹ Report by [4 Air Fleet](#).

² This last is a curious mistake on the part of the enemy Intelligence; for the same mistake the day before had cost the whole of III Bn, Assault Regt. A possible explanation is that the whole of 5 Bde was thought to be concentrated in the immediate area of [Maleme](#) and that the destruction of III Bn had been too thorough for a more accurate picture to be got back.

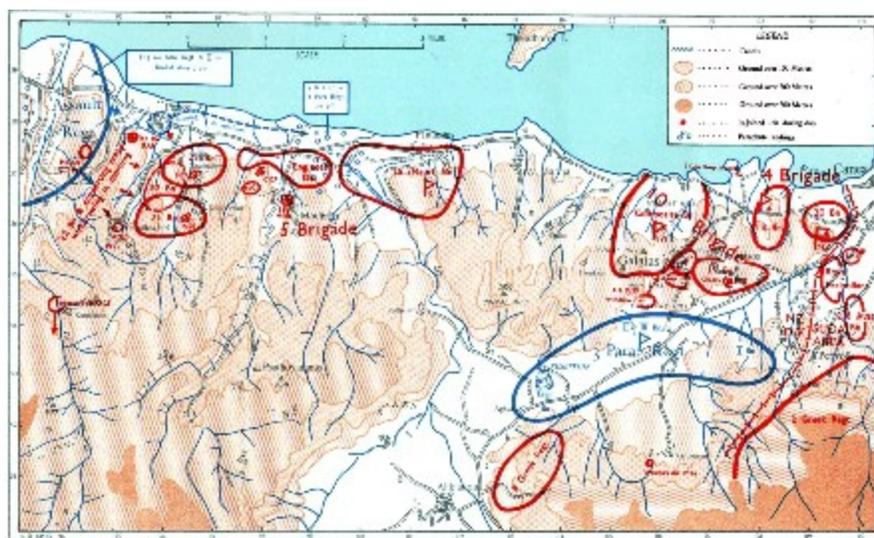
the wounded General Meindl. A single Junkers 52 also managed to land on the airfield and unload ammunition for the troops there; but, as it was fired on by machine guns and artillery, the enemy decided he could not yet land the mountain troops. None the less the commander of 100 Mountain Regiment, Colonel Utz, ¹ was ordered to embark his HQ and II Battalion in troop-carriers at Tanagra and be ready to force a landing from four o'clock onwards.

The next stage was the actual assault. This was once again to be made from the west and east. That from the east would come from a fresh landing of paratroops—5 and 6 Companies of 2 Parachute Regiment, which had not taken part with the rest of II Battalion in the [Heraklion](#) landings—east of [Pirgos](#). The western attack would be made by the [Assault Regiment](#), aided by a company and a half of the Parachute Anti-Tank Battalion and another company of 2 Parachute Regiment—presumably one of the two companies of I Battalion which had not landed at [Retimo](#). These reinforcements to the [Assault Regiment](#) were to be put down west of the airfield in the early afternoon. ²

Eighth Air Corps was to assist by strong attacks on [Maleme](#) and [Pirgos](#) and on the New Zealand guns covering the airfield. With the reinforcements landing in the west would come Colonel Ramcke, ³ Meindl's successor as commander of [Group West](#). The air attacks were to begin at 3 p.m. and end an hour later. The ground operations would then begin.

Pending the beginning the two groups which had pushed into 22 Battalion area during the previous day and night—one under Captain Gericke operating from the Tavronitis bridge and the other under Major Stentzler coming up from the south-west—stabilised on a line from the east edge of the airfield, through Point 107 and the height one kilometre south-east of it. We must no doubt discount as exaggerated the following details from 11 Air Corps Report: 'The enemy, N.Z. sharpshooters, held their strongly organized and well camouflaged defensive localities with the utmost determination. Repeated counter attacks by the New Zealanders were repulsed.'⁴

Most probably Gericke's and Stentzler's two groups were by this time in need of a rest, and the artillery and machine-gun fire from



NEW ZEALAND DIVISIONAL AREA and Enemy Landings, 21 May

¹ Lt-Gen Willibald Utz; then aged 48; Comd 100 Mtn Regt; GOC 100 Light Div, 1943; GOC 2 Mtn Div, 1945.

² Some paratroop reinforcements were landed in the early morning, according to CSM F. Teichmann. These were probably small parties from the Assault Regt which had not been landed on 20 May.

³ Gen Bernhard Ramcke; then aged 52; assumed comd Assault Regt, 21 May; Comd Ramcke Bde (North Africa), 1942; GOC 2 Para Div, 1943; GOC Brest garrison, 1944; volunteered as paratroop at age of 51; wounded at

Alamein; captured four days after **Brest** fell; received highest honour for his defence of this port.

⁴ But various small detachments of the withdrawing 22 Bn companies, RN, RM, and **RAF** had clashes with the enemy.

the lines of 21 and 23 Battalions made any further move eastward uninviting. Moreover, now that **22 Battalion** had withdrawn, it would be obvious enough to the local enemy commanders that a pause for reorganisation and reinforcement was necessary before further progress could be tried; while a counter-attack would naturally be expected.

ii

This pause provides a convenient opportunity to return to the 5 Brigade front and see how it was responding to the situation created by **22 Battalion's** withdrawal.

Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew and his party had reached the lines of **23 Battalion** some time between midnight and two in the morning. ¹ Brigadier Hargest had to be informed, and Major Leggat, the second-in-command, set off at once. The next thing, pending orders from Hargest, was to make advance preparations for action at daylight. Accordingly, at 2 a.m. a message was sent to Lieutenant-Colonel Allen at **21 Battalion**, asking him to come at once to a conference at **23 Battalion** HQ. The same message was sent to Major Philp of **27 Battery**, reaching him by telephone about half past two.

The conference itself took place about 3 a.m. and the chief persons present were the three battalion commanders. Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie appears to have presided. No detailed record of what followed remains, nor can the memories of the surviving participants yield much. Only the decision reached is certain: the commanders resolved 'to hold our positions next day' ²; **22 Battalion** would reorganise.

This decision, however, was too fateful to pass without comment. For now was the last chance to counter-attack to regain the lost positions before the enemy could reorganise and reinforce. The enemy in **23 Battalion** area did not exist as an

organised force, [21 Battalion](#) had come under no serious pressure, and only [22 Battalion](#) was very much the worse for the previous day's fighting.

No doubt the severity of the last twenty-four hours' experience would make Andrew dubious of the prospects for the success of a counter-attack. But it might have been expected that Leckie himself and Allen would have seen at once the danger of the airfield now open to the enemy and the fact that if counter-attack was to take place it must take place at once. There was still time to get the two relatively fresh battalions organised for attack at daylight, if not before. Together they would have been strong enough to go

¹ Lt-Col Allen's report. [23 Bn](#) reported the withdrawal to Bde HQ at 2 a.m. by telephone.

² [21 Bn](#) Report.

forward and give the enemy a hard knock at worst, and at best regain Point 107. And [22 Battalion](#) could have taken over the rear.

Here, again, it is to be regretted that Hargest had not made [23 Battalion](#) his advanced HQ the previous day or earlier. As it was, the vital decision had to be taken by his juniors. And they, too impressed perhaps by the fact that [22 Battalion](#) had withdrawn and by the force and rapidity of the enemy's onslaught, were caught off their judgment, forgot the policy of immediate counter-attack on which the whole defence plan rested, and thought in terms of how to hold their present positions.

Indeed, this attitude was shortly to receive endorsement from Brigadier Hargest also. For Leggat now returned to say that Hargest was informing Division of the withdrawal and that he or someone else would come to [23 Battalion](#) as soon as possible. Andrew thereupon borrowed a Bren carrier and himself set out for 5 Brigade, apparently reaching it about 5 a.m. There Hargest told him to get together as much of his battalion as he could and fit it into the line with [21](#) and [23 Battalions](#). There was no hope of pulling the battalion out of the line to reorganise.

Brigadier Hargest, learning of the conference's decision, may well have felt that

the verdict of the men on the spot must be respected, even if it were not too late to alter it. But it seems surprising that he did not now feel that the time had come for him to go forward and see for himself. Instead he sent back with Andrew his Brigade Major, Captain Dawson.

The opportunity for counter-attack not having been accepted, all energies turned to reorganisation. The very circumstances which had made counter-attack so promising also favoured this so very much second-best course: the enemy was in no state to offer serious interference. And during the morning and early afternoon the parties from the missing companies came in to [21 Battalion](#) lines, accompanied by numbers of RM, [RAF](#), and FAA personnel. The last to arrive were Lieutenant Wadey's pioneer platoon, Wadey himself with a leg broken in the bombing of the AMES.

The 22nd Battalion was brought up by the new arrivals to a strength of 250 and divided into two companies, of which one, mainly D Company and Headquarters Company, was to remain with [21 Battalion](#) while the other—made up from the other three companies—was to thicken up the line of [23 Battalion](#). With them were about forty men of the [Fleet Air Arm](#), [RAF](#) and RM. ¹

Reorganisation went on until about two o'clock. But already by 11 a.m. Dawson had been able to report to 5 Brigade HQ that the

¹ Lt-Col Andrew says they had 'put up a good show' on 20 May.

job was in hand. ¹ So far this day activity of a directly hostile character had come mainly from Lieutenant MacDonald's MG platoon ² and from [27 Battery](#). An inviting target had presented itself at about eight o'clock when the single aircraft landed on the airfield, and this was damaged before it took off again. ³ A second which came down on the beach east of the airfield was riddled with bullets and had a direct hit from a [23 Battalion](#) mortar bomb. From now on the planes preferred to land west of the airfield.

For the guns of the three artillery troops things had become much more difficult. A and B had been deprived of their OP at [Maleme](#) and, although a new one was contrived at [23 Battalion](#), communications were difficult, especially to A Troop. All

were harassed by aircraft—C Troop most seriously because of its exposed position.

Two Bofors captured at [Maleme](#) had been brought into action against the [23 Battalion](#) area and C Troop. The guns of the defence could not bring direct fire on to them in return but they could fire on the general area of the airfield and did so, joining in the attack on the enemy plane which landed at eight o'clock. As we have seen, the Germans did not feel able to risk landing 5 Mountain Division until they were silenced. ⁴

As the morning went on the earlier quiet became less marked, though most of the activity came from artillery and mortar exchanges. Shortly before three o'clock Captain Dawson, who had come forward again to replace the cut telephone with a wireless set, reported some action at the road junction east of [Pirgos](#). The enemy—perhaps survivors from those who had jumped in that area the day before—had seized some houses there.

iii

But the main attack was still to come. The [Assault Regiment](#) needed reinforcements before moving forward. These—two and a half companies of paratroops—arrived, presumably by an accelerated plan, in the early morning. ⁵ CSM Teichmann arrived with 'the second wave of parachutists' about eight o'clock in the morning.

These must have taken time to form up. And the Assault Regiment when it did move forward went very cannily. [Maleme](#)

¹ He was struck by the numbers of enemy dead in 23 Bn area. 'Even around Bn HQ there were bodies everywhere, every 10–12 yds. One stepped over them as one went through the olive groves. And some very good looking fellows there were, too.'

² About half of the two MG platoons on [Maleme](#) had got back with the withdrawal. But they had had to leave their guns as these were bolted to their mountings and there were no tools to unbolt them. The men from now on fought as infantry.

³ According to [11 Air Corps Report](#) a plane landed at 7 a.m. This is probably the same plane, in spite of the time discrepancy.

⁴ Maj Philp had made arrangements after the early morning conference for any aircraft landing on the airfield to be attacked by 27 Bty.—Report by Maj Philp.

⁵ 5 Mtn Div WD reports that parachute anti-tank troops were dropped then.

and [Pirgos](#) were both bombed about three o'clock and the attack then formed up to go in. Yet the capture of [Maleme](#) village is not claimed till 6 p.m. and [11 Air Corps Report](#) says that eastward movement from the village was noted. As all organised parties from [22 Battalion](#) were clear by daybreak, one must assume either that the enemy invented the opposition to justify a slow and cautious advance or mistook the fire from [23 Battalion](#) area and [27 Battery](#) for fire from a garrison in the village, unless Cretan civilians, as is not impossible, aided by [22 Battalion](#) stragglers gave more trouble than has been recorded. The most satisfactory explanation probably lies in a combination of all three. ¹

But the enemy did not limit his attack to the two villages of [Maleme](#) and [Pirgos](#). B Company and Headquarters 2 Company of [23 Battalion](#) had an hour's furious battering from the enemy air force in the middle of the afternoon, and Leckie ordered C Company to be ready to support them in the ground attack that was bound to follow. As soon as the strafing stopped the enemy infantry came in near the [Pirgos](#) crossroads. The two [23 Battalion](#) companies broke them up with Bren, spandau and rifle fire, the attack was a complete failure and, according to reports at the time, the enemy left about 200 dead in or in front of the scanty barbed-wire defences.

Simultaneously with this advance by the Assault Regiment, 5 and 6 Companies of 2 Parachute Regiment had jumped between [Platanias](#) and [Pirgos](#). Once again, however, [11 Air Corps](#) had been let down by its Intelligence and the two companies found themselves in a hornets' nest. Many landed in the forward positions of 19 [Army Troops](#), where they were roughly handled:

Our fellows behaved well and did some sound destruction. Every man who could handle a rifle did his bit. Officers—cooks—bottle-washers—all were in it. Unfortunately we only had one Bren on the strength but the two chaps using it did a magnificent job. ²

Some of the Engineers were between the canal and the main road and many of the paratroops dropped between them and the main positions south of the canal. But these forward sections managed to rejoin the others, though not without excitement:

At one stage I stopped for a minute or two to see how things were going and a Hun dropped not ten feet away. I had my pistol in my hand—what for I can't imagine—and without really knowing what I was doing I let him have it while he was still on the ground. I had hardly got over the

¹ CSM Teichmann says that a solitary New Zealand sergeant caused five or six casualties to the reinforcing paratroop party as it crossed the Tavronitis bridge and that the party was also fired on from houses on the airfield. The sergeant in question was probably [Sgt J. Woods](#) of HQ Coy 22 Bn, who was prowling in the area at the time. See [p. 105](#), note 3.

² Report by Capt J. N. Anderson.

shock when another came down almost on top of me and I plugged him too while he was untangling himself. Not cricket, I know, but there it is. ¹

The Engineers, after tactical withdrawals, managed to get the better of this engagement. The Maoris were no gentler with their share of the enemy, the rest of 5 and 6 Companies. D Company of [28 Battalion](#), in whose territory the landing came, were at this time divided. Captain Baker, the second-in-command, had gone out at one o'clock to deal with an enemy-held house about a mile to the east, and had taken with him 17 Platoon and part of 18 Platoon. By 3.35 p.m. he had sent back nine parachutists and was after still more. He was about to assault the house itself when 20 fighters began to strafe his force. In taking cover he was cut off from his men. He assumed they had fallen back and withdrew with his runner, learning en

route that a large number of parachutists had come down not far away. Soon he was forced by enemy fire to take cover in a drain and then 'we were surprised to see moving in from the sea a huge concentration of troop carrying planes.' At first these planes made for [Maleme](#), but then 'apparently having filled the aerodrome commenced to land along the beach until finally they had landed right down past where we were taking cover. ²

C Troop at once switched fire on to those planes landing on the beach and Baker witnessed the result. They 'gave a first class exhibition of gunnery and accounted for the six planes nearest to us in a matter of moments. Certainly in practically all cases they were set on fire before the occupants had the chance of alighting and out of these six planes I saw only twenty men who ever left that beach.'

Baker and his runner were surprised shortly after by a single enemy. 'He grasped my runner's rifle, threw it away, fired a shot over my head as I lay in the drain and called upon us to surrender. More by good luck than anything else I was able to get my hand on my revolver and rolling off my stomach drew it and shot him in the process, killing him outright.' After an encounter with three further enemy in which Baker killed two and drove off the third, he decided to wait till dusk and then, finding himself cut off from his company, made his way to the Engineer Detachment.

In this operation twelve aircraft had disgorged paratroops above 19 [Army](#) Troops and another twelve over the general area of D Company. There was fierce fighting in the Maori territory. The RSM and Battalion HQ, part of C Company, the reserve platoon of B Company, and a party from Headquarters Company which

¹ Report by Capt Anderson.

² Report by Capt Baker.

included the mortars and pioneers, were all engaged as well as D Company. Major Dyer's ¹ account conveys something of the action:

At this stage Jim Tuhiwai came to me in some excitement saying that there

were many parachutists in area (F) who were shooting our people up. I ran over to the mill race and saw a German in the mouth of a filled-in well at (E) firing a tommy gun. Told Tuhiwai to lie on the bank and shoot at him and calling to a soldier to run out with me and we would rush the man from either side. We did that. As we got to him he crouched down shamming dead. I told the Maori to bayonet him. As he did so he turned his head away, not bearing the sight. Tuhiwai had now joined us and we rushed out among the Germans scattered every 15 or 20 yds.... One at about 15 yds instead of firing his tommy gun started to lie down to fire. I took a snap shot with a German Mauser. It grazed his behind and missed between his legs. My back hair lifted, but the Maori got him (I had no bayonet). We rushed on.... Some tried to crawl away. A giant of a man jumped up with his hands up like a gorilla, shouting "Hants Oop!" I said: 'Shoot the bastard' and the Maori shot him. That was because many others were firing at us and a Spandau from further off. Suddenly bullets spluttered all round my feet.... ²

By 6.50 p.m., except for a single machine gun which a patrol set out to stalk, the enemy in the Maori area were wiped out. Eleventh Air Corps reports that 5 Company lost all its officers and NCOs and that Lieutenant Nagele, the commander of the force, managed with great difficulty to make his way after dusk to the outskirts of [Pirgos](#) and there establish the 80 men of 6 Company which was all he could muster.

iv

Thus neither the assault from the west nor that from the east was a success. Yet our withdrawal had in effect given the enemy the airfield and this meant that, risking the artillery fire, he was able to land an airborne mountain battalion. It was urgently needed; for counter-attack had been expected throughout the day and, though it had not come by day, the night seemed bound to bring it. The paratroops were tired and without the reinforcement might not have been able to hold.

It was about five o'clock when the Junkers 52 came in bringing RHQ of 100 Mountain Regiment and II Battalion. As Baker's story shows, these landings took place along the beach as well as on the airfield. Nor does his account of the losses seem exaggerated in the light of [11 Air Corps Report](#): 'A number of JUs remained shot to pieces or burnt out on the beach and on the airfield.'³

¹ Lt-Col H. G. Dyer, m.i.d.; born [Hamilton](#), 7 Mar 1896; school-teacher; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1941–May 1942; comd 9 Inf Bde 1943.

² Report by Maj Dyer. The letters in parentheses refer to a sketch map not reproduced.

³ 5 Mtn Div WD says about 20 aircraft were destroyed.

Colonel Ramcke landed during the afternoon and reached the battle area about seven o'clock. Two hours later he had briefed himself and given his orders. They had the dual purpose of holding against counter-attack and preparing another thrust. II and IV Battalions of the [Assault Regiment](#) would maintain their forward positions, aided by a company of II Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, and would reorganise. Colonel Utz would use the rest of II Battalion to defend the airfield from the south and west. As soon as the units expected next day arrived he would deploy them for an enveloping attack round the south. This attack would have for its objective Monodhendri, the commanding hill three miles south of [Ay Marina](#).

▼

The forward units of 5 Brigade began the day by fitting 22 Battalion into their front. The main pressure from then on came against [23 Battalion](#)'s sector. Though the failure of Nagele's paratroops and the gingerly deliberation of the [Assault Regiment](#) took the sting out of the enemy's attacks, they had the coast road as their axis, and this meant that at most times of the day [23 Battalion](#) had some enemy pressure to contend with. The day opened indeed with a skirmish in the rear when a surprise dawn assault by a group of paratroops in about platoon strength seized the hill beside [23 Battalion](#) HQ. But a spirited counter-attack by Lieutenant King's ¹ 14 Platoon remedied matters. Twelve prisoners were taken, the rest having been killed. A Nazi flag was also acquired which proved a useful bait for enemy airborne supplies, not the least valuable catch being a mortar which, in the hands of Lieutenant W. B. Thomas, put one of the enemy's captured Bofors out of action.

This was an isolated action. The main pressure was from the west. The enemy

probably wanted to try to clear the high ground south of the main road so as to help the forces attacking along it. And he was especially anxious to get rid of the mortar and machine-gun posts in Headquarters Company area, for these could still bring fire on the airfield. He therefore put in several strong probes; but, although supported by continual fire from aircraft, machine guns, mortars, light guns and the captured Bofors, all the attacks were beaten off. At one stage, indeed, in the late afternoon, a withdrawal was made from the forward slope where the mortars and machine guns were sited; for the enemy had by now pinpointed the positions and ammunition was exhausted. But Leckie hastened to re-equip the machine-gun platoon with captured weapons, and a new line was held above the old positions and covering them.

¹ Capt R. K. King, MC; England; born NZ 20 Feb 1909; school-teacher; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

vi

At 5 Brigade HQ, meanwhile, a more realistic appraisal of the situation was possible for Brigadier Hargest. At 4 a.m. he had passed to Division the news of the withdrawal from [Maleme](#). As the morning wore on the situation became at once more reassuring and more grim. On the one hand, although there was always the likelihood of a further flare-up, a new line was being held, [22 Battalion](#) had come out less damaged than might have been expected, and the enemy did not seem to be following up very swiftly. On the other hand there had been further landings west of [Maleme](#), the airfield was in enemy hands, and the only obstacle to his landing aircraft there was now the fire our few guns and the machine guns and mortars could bring to bear. The implications of this were so clear that the imperative necessity for counter-attack was beyond dispute. The only question was when and in what strength.

Two things are axiomatic about counter-attack: it should be made with all possible speed and with all possible force. It becomes necessary, therefore, to consider under these two heads the discussions and decisions which took place this day and which concluded in the operation which was the chief event of 22 May. In such a consideration the views and problems of Brigadier Puttick and [General](#)

[Freyberg](#) are as much involved as those of Brigadier Hargest; but it will be clearer if the situation as it was seen by each of these commanders is treated separately. A beginning may be made with Hargest, whose horizon was naturally the most restricted.

The first evidence we have of his views comes from a telephone conversation he had with Division at 11.15 a.m. Counter-attack was being discussed and Hargest said that he thought it would have to take place at night, for machine-gunning from the air forbade large-scale movement by day. This seems to imply that from the first he envisaged other troops than the forward units of 5 Brigade taking part, unless he felt that even they would not be able to make an organised attack because of the danger from the air. Since this air menace was the chief argument against daylight attack and thus imposed delay when speed was urgent, it requires closer examination.

On the whole, the argument seems a valid one. It is true that on 22 May [21 Battalion](#) was able to make a substantial advance by day and in spite of the enemy air force; but the main attack that morning by 20 and 28 Battalions was to be checked largely because of the severe strafing from the enemy's aircraft, and the relative calm on the [21 Battalion](#) front was probably due to the fact that the enemy thought the coastal sector the one that needed protection. Had [21 Battalion](#) continued to attack throughout the day, the enemy would no doubt have concentrated much more drastically against it.

Again, on 27 May, 5 Brigade was to deliver a successful counterattack; but this was suddenly organised and suddenly delivered and took place, besides, at a stage of the battle when the enemy's effort in the air was noticeably slackening.

The likelihood is, therefore, that had Hargest ordered his forward battalions to counter-attack by day on 21 May all the enemy's air power would have been brought to bear very quickly and, though the New Zealanders might have been able to make progress, the weight of air attack would in the end have been too much.

Similarly, since the enemy's [8 Air Corps](#) had been given the task of preventing the movement up of reserves, it is unlikely that the forward movement by day of units in the rear would have been permitted—as indeed is apparent from the

attention that we shall later see given to harassing a move by 2/7 Battalion. The 28th Battalion might have got forward early and relatively unmolested because it did not have far to go; but even this would have been risky.

The case for postponement of the counter-attack until night thus seems reasonably strong. And, given the postponement, it was perhaps natural that Hargest should ask for fresh troops with which to carry it out. For, by his understanding of the position, 22 Battalion had been badly hit, 21 Battalion was under strength from the beginning, and 23 Battalion was already committed to holding the line at its most hard-pressed part.

There remains the question of the force in which the counterattack was to go in. Brigadier Hargest, in the same telephone conversation with Division, said that 28 Battalion and a further battalion would be enough. And his only request, in addition to that for the extra battalion, was for 120 men to replace 28 Battalion and protect his line of communication against a thrust from the south. He made this request because he had only the Brigade Band to protect his HQ and because many marked maps taken from prisoners indicated that the enemy contemplated a thrust from the south up to the coast road, and because the beach near [Platanias](#) had still to be covered against invasion from the sea.

Yet, had he grasped how all-important was the recapture of [Maleme](#) and how essential and urgent was a full-scale and successful thrust to the airfield, he would probably have pressed Division for two battalions instead of one and would have judged that everything else, even communications, was subordinate to the supreme objective. But since Division does not seem to have stressed the vital importance of the counter-attack or to have doubted the adequacy of a counterattack by two battalions, it would not be just to hold the junior commander, with his necessarily more restricted view, entirely responsible—although one wonders whether, if Hargest had set up his HQ at 23 Battalion, he might not have been better placed to see how things were and take appropriate action. ¹ And lastly, it is always possible that even the two-battalion counter-attack might have been successful had it not been for the unlucky delays that were still to occur. ²

His seniors, as we have seen, did not dispute Hargest's views about the necessity to wait till dark and the force that would be needed. Puttick did not go

forward to 5 Brigade HQ to discuss the question directly. For he believed it was better to stay at his own HQ where he could keep in touch with the other brigades and [Creforce](#) HQ; and, given the situation on 10 Brigade front, the threat of invasion and all the other problems on his hands, the advantages of this course are plain. Yet 5 Brigade's was now the vital front, and had Puttick gone forward he might have been better able to judge for himself whether Hargest was right.

Even without such a visit, however, it is odd that he accepted so readily Hargest's estimate of the force necessary to secure success—or, rather, reduced that estimate, since he refused the extra 120 men asked for to replace [28 Battalion](#). His argument, of course, was that he had not the troops to spare. The 28th Battalion was the only unit in 5 Brigade free to take part. Tenth Brigade was fully engaged and likely to remain so. Of 4 Brigade, [19 Battalion](#) having a front to hold, only 18 and 20 Battalions were left. The 20th was already earmarked to go forward with [28 Battalion](#). This left only [18 Battalion](#) as reserve against fresh emergencies on 10 Brigade front and invasion by sea. Because of this last threat, even the departure of [20 Battalion](#) ought to be made good if the coastal defences were to be maintained.

There is force in this argument and it may be the familiar temptation to hindsight which prompts a doubt. In the long run the island would be lost if the airfield remained in enemy hands. There was a case therefore for relying on the efficiency of the [Navy](#) to dispose of the invading flotillas and throwing [18 Battalion](#) into the counter-attack also. Here, however, Puttick cannot be held responsible for not taking such a risk, since so important a decision would naturally have to rest with [General Freyberg](#). It should be remembered that at all levels from Division upwards

¹ He did, however, send Capt Dawson to ascertain the forward situation.

² It is fair to add that a three-battalion counter-attack would have been more difficult to mount over a narrow frontage in the dark and in country unfamiliar to the units.

the impression prevailed that the sea attack was the one most to be feared.

The question brings us to the attitude of [General Freyberg](#). He held a conference in the afternoon with Brigadiers Puttick, Inglis, Vasey, and Stewart. It was decided that a two-battalion counterattack would be enough and that the counter-attack would have to take place by night. No doubt the views of Puttick and of Hargest, as related by Puttick, counted for a good deal in these decisions. Both before [Crete](#) and in the campaigns that were to follow it [Freyberg's](#) practice was to let his commanders conduct their own battles, and on the whole this normally sound policy worked well. And, indeed, the need for him to give personal attention to the difficult administrative position and his many other preoccupations would have left him little time to consider departing from that practice now. But it is possible to regret that he did not make this occasion the exception and intervene in favour of adding more weight to this crucial effort.

That he did not do so was presumably due to the concern he felt for the defence against invasion by sea. Yet he had at his disposal, apart from the New Zealand Division, the following forces round [Canea](#), [Suda](#) and [Georgeopolis](#):

[19 Australian Brigade](#) (2/7 Bn and half of 2/8 Bn: about 1000)

1 Welch (854 of a regular battalion)

[1 Rangers](#) (417)

[Northumberland Hussars](#) (279)

Royal Perivolians (about 700)

106 RHA (307)

[2/2 Australian Field Regiment](#) (554)

[2/3 Australian Field Regiment](#) (300)

16 Australian Inf Bde [Composite Battalion](#) (443)

17 Australian Inf Bde [Composite Battalion](#) (387)

RM Unit (300)

Dock defence force (RN, RM, Australian and NZ, about 600).¹

Of these, 2/8 Battalion was already part of the line and the dock defence force would be wanted where it was. Many of the rest were badly armed (if at all) and badly organised, and all of them had one role or another in the defence scheme. Yet none were very seriously engaged and, had [Freyberg](#) had the staff and officers, it might have been just possible to make a radical reorganisation of the coast defences—in spite of the lateness of the hour, the

¹ Strengths of units are those which seem most likely among the alternatives in official British and Australian sources.

inadequacy of the communications and the motley nature of the force—by which 1 Welch, the only full-strength and properly organised battalion, might have been released to stiffen the counter-attack.

But concern for the sea invasion and perhaps failure to realise how much stronger the enemy hold on the airfield had grown during the afternoon prevailed. It was decided that 20 and 28 Battalions should do the counter-attack and [2/7 Australian Battalion](#) should be brought from [Georgeopolis](#) to replace [20 Battalion](#).

Indeed, uneasiness about the sea invasion more than rivalled worries about [Maleme](#). Inglis recalls that as he was leaving [Creforce](#) a message came in, as nearly as I can remember, the following words: "Enemy attempting seaborne landings beaches west of [Canea](#) tonight. [Navy](#) informed."¹

This will have occasioned the following signal sent at 7.50 p.m. to NZ Division:

Reliable information. Early seaborne attack in area [CANEA](#) likely. Duke [NZ Div] remains responsible coast from west up to excl [KLADISO R](#). Corn [1 Welch] forthwith to stiffen existing defences from incl [KLADISO R](#) to incl [KHALEPA](#).²

The strength of the counter-attacking infantry having been decided there was still the question of support. Artillery support was apparently left to Lieutenant-Colonel [Strutt](#),³ of [2/3 Royal Australian Regiment](#), who was appointed CRA of the Division that day, to arrange. A troop of light tanks from [3 Hussars](#) was to move up

with the infantry. [Creforce](#) arranged with GHQ Middle East that the airfield should be bombed between midnight and two o'clock in the morning. ⁴ And the [Navy](#) would be active in the waters north of [Crete](#), watching to intercept the sea invasion.

vii

It was about 7 p.m. when Puttick arrived back at his own HQ from [Creforce](#) with plans for the counter-attack. These were passed on to 5 Brigade HQ by telephone; and Puttick, thinking that someone from Division should go forward to clear up any obscure points and no doubt thinking that with the invasion by sea imminent it would be inadvisable for him to leave the centre of his command, decided to send Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry. Accordingly, about 8 p.m. Gentry set off, meeting Major G. W. Peck, commander of C Squadron [3 Hussars](#), at a rendezvous en route. From here they went on together to 5 Brigade HQ.

¹ Letter from General Inglis, 12 Feb 1951.

² NZ Div WD.

³ [Brig H. W. Strutt](#), DSO; AIF.

⁴ 'This was great news as we had not seen a British plane since attack began.'—5 Bde WD.

They found Brigadier Hargest with his Staff Captain, Lieutenant [Mason](#), ¹ the Brigade Major being away at [23 Battalion](#). A rough plan was ready. 'Although tired Brig Hargest was by no means despondent and no doubts were expressed about the plan which I thought was simple and straightforward. It was clearly recognised that success depended on the attack being carried out under the mantle of darkness.'²

At the conference which followed, besides Brigadier Hargest and Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry, there were present Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt, Lieutenant-Colonel [Dittmer](#) ³ of [28 Battalion](#), and Major Peck. The plan was considered in detail. It was decided that the troop of three light tanks should lead, moving along the road; that

20 Battalion on the right would carry the attack as far as the airfield; and that 28 Battalion on the left of the road would thrust through as far as the Tavronitis. The two battalions would form up 300 yards west of the Platanias River and their start line would be the village half a mile farther west. Zero hour would depend on the time 20 Battalion arrived; but it was thought that 'it would be safe to count on 20 Bn being able to advance by 0100 hrs.'⁴

The first objective was to be Pirgos village. Having taken it the troops would rest for 30 minutes and reform before passing on to their final objectives. To avoid confusion about bombing targets—an optimistic precaution—a system of recognition signals with the RAF had been arranged and Peck lent his tank so that the necessary Very cartridges could be taken forward.

No formal operation order appears to have been issued, its place being taken by 'Notes for C.O's.'⁵ This paper reads as follows:

1. Starting Time for Advance 0100 hrs 22 May 41
2. Starting Time for Attack 0400 hrs 22 May 41
3. Line of Advance: 20 Bn on right of rd, but when past MALEME CEMETERY and on to AERODROME, the left of the Bn. will move under the terrace, 100 yds left of the rd.
4. 28 Bn to move to left of rd, and when nearing objective will make certain its left is on top of KAVKAZIA HILL (107).
5. On completion of task, 20 Bn. will move back to ridge in front of

¹ Capt W. W. Mason, MC; London; born Wellington, 21 Mar 1910; schoolmaster; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

² Statement by Brig Gentry. It seems from this that Hargest's estimate of the force required had not been altered by the enemy landings that had taken place since the morning.

³ Brig G. Dittmer, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Maharahara, 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; Auckland Regt 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn); CO 28 NZ (Maori) Bn, Jan 1940–Feb 1942; comd 1 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) Apr 1942–Aug 1943; 1 Div, Aug 1942–Jan 1943; Fiji Military Forces and Fiji Inf Bde Gp, Sep 1943–Nov 1945; Camp Commandant, Papakura

Military Camp, 1946; Commandant, Central Military District, 1946–48.

⁴ Statement by Brig Gentry.

⁵ 23 Bn WD.

MALEME VILLAGE with posts thrust forward to command the AERODROME.
Thence approximately along line of rd to Pt 107.

6. 28 Bn as soon as task is finished and it has handed over to 20 Bn will withdraw to its location at [PLATANIAS](#) by covered routes.
7. 21 Bn will occupy a line from Pt 107 back to wireless station.
8. Bde Report Centre at Old Bde H.Q. PLATANIAS VILLAGE. Headquarters, 5 Inf Bde, FIELD, 21 May 41.
W. W. Mason Lt
Lieut.
S.C.
5 Inf. Bde.

This was meant, so far as Captain Mason recalls, for the commanders of 20 and 28 Battalions and was intended to confirm verbal orders. A copy was sent to [23 Battalion](#), however, at 10.45 p.m. in Peck's tank. ¹ After it had gone Captain Dawson, on his way back from [23 Battalion](#), rang from the Engineer Detachment's HQ and was told by Hargest to return to [23 Battalion](#) and brief Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie. Dawson, 'a little perturbed at having to return immediately when an LO had already departed', did so and 'warned 23 Bn about "mopping up role" after the attack passed through immediate position.' ² It seems clear, therefore, that Hargest had decided as an afterthought that [23 Battalion](#) should assist the counter-attack in this way.

Through the double source of Captain Dawson and the liaison officer [23 Battalion](#) learnt of the plan about midnight. The 21st Battalion records getting orders at 12.40 a.m., and so it may be assumed that orders on the same lines were passed on to it.

There are some minor inconsistencies in the sources about starting times and start lines, but these can all be reasonably explained and may be passed over here. The weaknesses in the plan, of which the main lines have already been set forth, need to be dwelt on a little further.

The arguments for the counter-attack's being confined to two battalions need not be recapitulated. But three fresh points emerge from the plan as now formulated. In the first place, the fact that the plan provides for 28 Battalion's return to the [Platanias](#) area suggests that Hargest merely envisaged a restoration of the status quo and did not see that, even if Point 107 and the airfield were recovered, the ground farther west would also have to be cleared—a task which could hardly be performed without the Maoris' co-operation. For the second weakness, the fact that the timing depended on the prompt arrival of 20 Battalion, Hargest can hardly be held accountable: he did not know that 2/7 Battalion would be late and that 20 Battalion was to stay till it arrived. But it is strange that he did not make more provision against the third:

¹ The W/T set taken to 23 Bn that afternoon by Capt Dawson had been put out of action by air attack.

² Statements by Capt Mason and Lt-Col Dawson.

that there were bound to be strong enemy pockets between [Platanias](#) and [Maleme](#) and that these would cause fighting and consequent losses and dispersion before the true objective was approached. ¹

However faulty the plan, the stage was now set. If the counterattack succeeded it might still be possible to hold Crete. If it failed, it was only a matter of time before the island belonged to the enemy.

¹ There were no troops to spare at Bde HQ but parties might have been sent out from 23 Bn and NZE. Lt-Col Dittmer stressed the danger at the conference and urged an early start to allow for it. By then, of course, it was too late for any clearing-up activity.

CRETE

II: GALATAS AND CANEA FRONTS

II: Galatas and Canea Fronts

i

Daylight of 21 May found the Germans of 3 Parachute Regiment defensively disposed in accordance with Heidrich's appreciation that a counter-attack was to be expected, and that with only I Battalion and the Engineer Battalion fit to fight he had not the strength to get in first with a spoiling blow. His troops spent the day alert for any movement on the part of 10 Brigade and keeping the front under defensive fire. The Engineer Battalion settled in its positions about the reservoir and the men in general, 'much weakened as the result of losses and the rigours of the fighting, dug themselves in.'²

Unfortunately 10 Brigade of itself was not strong enough to seize the initiative that Heidrich thus temporarily relinquished. The day began with the cancellation of the attack that A and D Companies of 19 Battalion were about to launch from the strongpoint in which they had settled down the night before. A message was got to them just as they were about to set out and the two companies returned without mishap.

At this time the 10 Brigade front was reasonably stable. Right of Pink Hill the night had not altered the situation. Pink Hill itself was now a no-man's-land. For the enemy had quitted it the night before as we have seen; and the Petrol Company, returning at dawn, manned its original line in such a way as to exclude the crest, which was too exposed to be easily tenable.³

The withdrawal of the enemy from Pink Hill had brought relief to the Divisional Cavalry from the plunging fire with which they had been troubled in the earlier part of the night. Apart from a morning exchange of grenades between opposing patrols, their right flank was to remain quiet. Their left flank was, however, another story. Before we turn to this it need only be said that the threat to the rear of the brigade line, which enemy snipers and parties

² 11 Air Corps Report.

³ Even so Capt Rowe found himself holding a front of about 1000 yards with about 130 men.

in Galatas had occasioned, was disposed of during the night by parties from the Divisional Cavalry, 5 Field Regiment, and the Petrol Company.

The left flank of the Divisional Cavalry and the right flank of 19 Battalion—still under 10 Brigade command—soon began to have a good deal to endure from the mortars and machine guns of enemy parties ensconced on Cemetery Hill. At Major Russell's request D Company of 19 Battalion was sent to assist the Divisional Cavalry, and during the morning it took up a position on the left of the Cavalry and astride the road which ran southward along the eastern slopes of Cemetery Hill. From here it was planned that there should be an attack against the enemy posts on Cemetery Hill itself.

The main force of this local counter-attack was to be D Company 19 Battalion. Lieutenant Farran's troop of light tanks were to give support; and the mortar platoon of 19 Battalion, assisted by F Troop of 28 Battery, was to give covering fire. C Squadron of the Cavalry was to help with infantry and fire support.

The need for preliminary reconnaissance, and bad communications, meant that the attack could hardly go in before midday. But by half past eleven the tank troop had left its squadron area and about midday infantry and tanks set off. Behind them Major Duigan ¹ of F Troop set up a precarious OP in an olive tree, calling out his fire orders to a gunner with a telephone below.

The part played by the tanks does not seem to have been much more than a preliminary spraying of enemy positions and the attack was predominantly an infantry affair. Captain McLauchlan of D Company attacked with two platoons forward and one in reserve. Heavy fire from machine guns and mortars enforced a pause at the foot of the hill, but the company commander pushed forward his reserve platoon—16 Platoon—and this, together with 17 Platoon, drove on to the top of the hill, those of the enemy left alive to withdraw falling back before the bayonets

and the resolute men who bore them.

No. 17 Platoon had been intended to remain on the crown of the hill. But as the attackers halted there under the walls of the cemetery, 'the mortars opened. The hill was completely bare, with no cover, and their range and observation were excellent. Poor devils were blown up all around us and we had to pull off carrying fellows with their chests blown in and bloody stumps where their fore-arms had been.'²

¹ Maj J. L. Duigan, ED; Gisborne; born Wellington, 8 Jun 1910; insurance inspector p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² Letter from Capt Bassett, 3 Jun 1941.

The exposure to the enemy's fire had been all the worse because the troops had no tools with which to dig in, and this withdrawal was the only course possible As Bassett says in the letter already quoted: ' [Cemetery Hill](#) became No Man's Land. Every time Jerry tried to occupy it and overlook us, we wiped him off it, and it deserved its name.'

The fighting had been bitter while it lasted. The 19th Battalion had lost five killed and several wounded, the Divisional Cavalry one killed and four wounded. But it brought considerable relief to the defence; for five mortars were destroyed and ten light machine guns—some of whose crews fought to the last man—were captured. And the enemy did not try to hold the hill again. ¹

This was the principal action on 10 Brigade front for the day, and elsewhere along it things were comparatively tranquil; though this tranquillity did not exclude constant trouble from enemy mortars and recurring attentions from the enemy air force whose harassing presence, or the threat of it, should be taken for granted at all points in this narrative.

The pause was used to strengthen the line in whatever ways were possible. Captain Smith and Captain Forrester continued to reorganise and hold together the remnants of [6 Greek Regiment](#). The main body was put in reserve in [Galatas](#) ready to be used in support of the Divisional Cavalry if called for, while a platoon was put

into the line between the Cavalry and [19 Battalion](#).

Major Duigan of F Troop did his best to set up an observation post which would enable him to bring down more effective fire on the prison area, an obvious danger centre. But shortage of telephone wire defeated one attempt while another ended when D Company withdrew from [Cemetery Hill](#). The guns did the best they could, however, by firing from map references whenever the infantry called for support—a difficult business 'as the only instrument for measuring line and range off the map was a 9 inch protractor'. ² Severe dive-bombing attack which forced the guns to keep quiet while the Stukas were overhead, strafing, and punctilious attention from enemy mortars did not make it easy to maintain the concentration required for the use of this inadequate instrument. Ammunition, moreover, had to be rationed. All things considered, it is scarcely surprising that the guns did not make any appreciable progress in their efforts to silence the enemy mortars and that an enemy observation post on Mount Monodhendri or one of its subordinate features could not be eliminated.

¹ Lt A. R. Lawson, OC 17 Platoon, took a patrol to [Cemetery Hill](#) that night, found none of his own men left behind, met no live enemy, and acquired a base-plate for an enemy mortar captured during the day's attack.

² Report by Maj Duigan.

Thus when last light came the position had altered little from what it had been when the day began. But, however satisfactory this might seem from a narrowly defensive point of view, it could not be so considered in any larger sense. Time was on the side of the enemy, as indeed could be inferred from the fact that during this day he managed to land some more paratroops, though not many, and 300 containers of supplies. A decisive battle was about to be fought at [Maleme](#); and this lodgment by 3 Parachute Regiment, even if it did no more, was pinning down forces which might otherwise have taken part.

Yet to Heidrich the situation must have seemed dark enough. He was hemmed in by 10 Brigade, the Australians and 2 Greek Regiment, with [8 Greek Regiment](#) still far from subdued. The ground he held was not easily defensible and he had

hundreds of wounded on his hands. The failure of the initial plan and the heavy casualties would have leavened any optimism. Among his troops the same misgivings must have been felt even more strongly and the evidence of CSM Neuhoff, though perhaps a little exaggerated, shows that there were some heart searchings:

.... It was particularly noticeable that a very large proportion of our casualties had been shot in the head. This fact and the controlled fire and discipline of the enemy led us to believe that we were up against a specialist force of picked snipers, of whose strength we had no accurate idea but which we judged to be far greater than ours.

... we were expecting the enemy to counter-attack... We had suffered heavy casualties and had encountered opposition far greater than anticipated or ever before experienced. Our Commanding Officer wished to retire to a better defensive position in hilly wooded country to the south-west of the prison.... It was eventually decided to remain in our original positions and we were greatly relieved when the expected counter-attack did not eventuate.

In 10 Brigade morale was still high and even the ad hoc units of the [Composite Battalion](#), inexperienced as infantry, were in good heart, especially where they had been most heavily engaged. Only on the right flank perhaps, where the men had had little to do but sit in their trenches under the continual strafing and mortar fire, were there some signs of a feeling of futility. But this would have disappeared fast enough if the counter-attack that everyone was waiting for had been ordered.

ii

Of the activity elsewhere on the New Zealand front this day little need be said. For 18 and 20 Battalions it passed mainly in patrolling and cleaning up remnants of opposition surviving from the day before's landings. The expectation of an enemy landing that night was reflected in arrangements for beach OPs and beach patrols, and the former unit used its B Company, back (except for one platoon) from its duties as royal bodyguard and with a good day's fighting behind it, for probing south as far as [Galaria](#) in order to give some protection to the south-east flank of [19 Battalion](#).

The comparative quiet in the brigade area gave an opportunity for the signallers to repair lines cut by bombing or paratroops. So far as [20 Battalion](#) was concerned, the main event of the day was the arrival from Division at half past five of orders for the counter-attack. But as this development will be dealt with in detail in the next section, it seems best to make a minor sacrifice of chronology and leave the discussion until later. ¹

iii

The discussion of developments on the [Maleme](#) front and of the plans for counter-attack in that sector will already have made it clear that the main preoccupation of Brigadier Puttick and his HQ on 21 May was with the night's counter-attack and the threat of invasion by sea. ² This meant, as has been seen, that there was little or no attention to spare for the [Prison Valley](#), no attack on a large scale against Heidrich seems even to have been considered, and the front between [Galatas](#) and [Perivolia](#) remained uncoordinated. No doubt at the time the twin considerations of counter-attack at [Maleme](#) and defence against invasion by sea seemed overriding; yet it is impossible not to regret that another day was allowed to slip by without seizing the opportunity of Heidrich's weakness to bring up one or two fresh battalions and launch an attack which would destroy a threat in the centre of the defence—and a threat which time could only make more dangerous.

iv

For the troops under command of [Suda Force](#) the day was comparatively easy; for the enemy now realised that it was only from his [Maleme](#) and [Galatas](#) lodgments that he had any hope of a successful land assault on [Canea](#). It was all the more unfortunate that the threat of the sea landing was to keep scattered round [Canea](#) these elements of the defence force when the [Navy](#) was in due course to deal faithfully with the sea invasion, while the true danger,

¹ See pp. 212– 15.

² There were, of course, more routine matters: line to [Creforce](#) was cut by bombing in the morning and had to be repaired; the [Provost Company](#)

was busy with a traffic point and a PW cage; the [Postal Unit](#) was trying to get mail forward to the units; unsuccessful efforts were being made to get supplies to the forward units of 5 Bde; the Intelligence section was trying to sort out captured information.

that from Ramcke's and Heidrich's concentrations, was allowed to go on growing, the latter practically unmolested and the former inadequately attacked.

These were responsibilities, however, above the province of the units themselves, and 1 Welch, the only full-strength, fully-equipped battalion in the area, went on with mopping-up operations. [Northumberland Hussars](#) did the same. And 2/8 Australian Battalion, having established itself the night before in its [Mournies](#) positions, was able to clear [Perivolia](#) in co-operation with 2 Greek Regiment.

If [Suda Force](#) had little to contend with on the ground at this time, the enemy made up for it by his air activities. Continual bombing and machine-gunning disrupted communications and made all movement dangerous; in particular, communications between 252 AMES and the Gun Operations Room were severed and as a result the AA guns had to function individually instead of in concert. Even so, they already had so much to do that overwork was proving too much for some and barrels were becoming useless.

CRETE

III: RETIMO, HERAKLION, AND CREFORCE

III: Retimo, Heraklion, and Creforce

i

At [Retimo](#) the first day's fighting had split the enemy into two main groups, one east of the airfield and on Hill A and the other round [Perivolia](#). Against the first of these [2/1 Australian Battalion](#) launched its attack at first light, but was thrown back by a strong counter-attack and heavy mortar fire. The Australians soon returned, however, in a second attack which used every man they could find, and by ten o'clock they had driven the enemy off Hill A and recaptured the guns there. The enemy fell back to the oil factory at Stavromenos and formed a strongpoint, harassed by Greek troops who had moved up to support the Australians.

Against the second enemy group round [Perivolia](#), Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell's plan was to send a Greek battalion and elements of [2/11 Australian Battalion](#). The Greeks, however, in the course of their attack from the south, met strong enemy fire in Wadi [Perivolia](#) and had to make a wide detour. This, and the fact that the Australians were themselves held up before Platanes by an enemy force strongly backed by machine guns, spoilt the timing of the operation. The artillery was not very effective, as our Italian guns fired too many 'duds'.

Yet by the end of the day Campbell still had both enemy groups bottled up and the airfield was in no immediate danger. Enemy parties infiltrating from the south and west had been checked, and one of them, after overrunning an ADS at Adhele, was ambushed at Pigi. The beaches in front of Hills A and B had been cleared and the commander of 2 Parachute Regiment taken prisoner. The only dark spots were the shortage of ammunition and the fact that the concentration of enemy at [Perivolia](#) had cut off communication to the west.

ii

Much as at [Retimo](#), the enemy at [Heraklion](#) had been split in two. Since

[Heraklion](#) was thought more valuable than [Retimo](#), however, the enemy air force made more effort to assist the ground troops by bombing and dropping supplies. But the bombing was not intense; and an unintended share of the supplies fell to the defenders.

During the night the enemy east of the town—I Battalion and remnants of II Battalion of 1 Parachute Regiment—had assembled east of the airfield and tried to break through to the survivors of II Battalion still holding on at the airfield itself. This our artillery and I tanks played a large part in thwarting, and the day's fighting forced the enemy back to a height south-east of the airfield. Areas within the defence perimeter were cleared and surviving paratroops rounded up. Supplies were dropped during the late afternoon; but the situation on this flank was still sound when darkness came.

The second main enemy body now consisted of III Battalion of 1 Parachute Regiment and two companies of II Battalion of 2 Parachute Regiment. Colonel Brauer, who commanded the whole force, had ordered this group to attack the airfield, no doubt hoping to bring everything to bear on what was the main objective. But the message did not get through, and Major Schultz, who commanded III Battalion, renewed the attack on the town. There was some severe fighting. At one point the enemy got as far as the harbour, and the Greeks, through shortage of ammunition, were wavering. But a platoon of Leicesters and a platoon of Yorks and Lancs came to the rescue, and with their aid and captured weapons the Greeks drove the enemy back to their start line.

iii

A signal sent by [General Freyberg](#) to General Wavell some time late on the afternoon of 21 May shows that he saw that the main danger lay in the [Maleme](#) quarter. After briefly recounting the situation at [Heraklion](#) and [Retimo](#) as he then knew it, and explaining the defence steps taken at [Suda](#), he goes on to express doubts about [Maleme](#). He reports the further paratroop landings of the day, says that he hopes to strengthen the position there during the night—no doubt an allusion to the projected counterattack—but says that the situation there is far from clear and perilous as well. ¹

This concern for [Maleme](#) was sound enough and, taken with his worry about the sea invasion of which he now had almost certain warning, probably accounts for his not pressing [Puttick](#) to launch an attack on [Heidrich's 3 Parachute Regiment](#). He probably felt that if the main threat at [Maleme](#) could once be dealt with, the destruction of [Heidrich's force](#) would then be inevitable. No doubt it was for similar reasons that he did not press on [General Weston](#) the need for a co-ordinated front between [2/8 Australian Battalion](#), [2 Greek Regiment](#) and [10 Brigade](#). The lack of one was to prove unfortunate; but had the attack on [Maleme](#) been successful it would never have been felt.

Another reason for not interfering with [Puttick's policy](#) at this time would be his concern for the safety of the sea coast. Here also, although it may be regretted that more confidence was not shown in the [Navy](#) or that some attempt was not made to organise the forces in [Suda](#) area in such a way as to free at least 1 [Welch](#) for aggressive action, it is not difficult to understand how a commander, who knew sea invasion was almost certain and knew how easily it could happen that the enemy flotillas might slip past the watching fleet in the dark, felt that he could not afford to leave his shores unguarded. None the less, it was at [Maleme](#) that success or failure in the defence of [Crete](#) was to be found; and it was the rival priorities of protecting the shores and counter-attacking the airfield that made failure in the latter the outcome.

Meanwhile, however, the moves had been decided and the necessary arrangements had to be put through. At 8.10 p.m. confirmatory orders went out to the formations concerned. The [19th Australian Brigade](#), [2/8 Field Company RAE](#), and [B Company Australian Field Ambulance](#) were to move into the area north of [Stilos](#). The [2/7 Australian Battalion](#) and one [Australian MG Company](#) were to replace [20 Battalion](#), coming under [4 Brigade](#) command on arrival at [Canea](#) bridge; [2/3 Regiment RAA](#) and a section of [106 Anti-Tank Battery RHA](#) were to come under command of [NZ Division](#), to which [Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt](#) was now [CRA](#); [2/3 Regiment](#) was to be in positions from which it could shell [Maleme](#) as soon as possible. And the head of the column was to reach [Canea](#) by 9 p.m.

¹ C. 265, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 21 May. The signal is not timed but was probably sent in the evening.

These were not [Freyberg's](#) only problems. Such news as reached him by wireless from [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) was not discouraging, but as each of the two places was more or less cut off, the question of replenishing their supplies and ammunition gave him great concern. Accordingly, he had to signal Middle East HQ and ask if aeroplanes operating from Egypt could help.

More unusual among the worries of an harassed commander was that caused by the presence of the King of [Greece](#). The King had had a narrow escape the day before and this made it obvious that he would have to be evacuated. He and his Prime Minister were therefore sent overland towards the south coast under the escort of a platoon of B Company of [18 Battalion](#) which, as [Freyberg](#) explained in a message to Wavell, he could ill spare. By this time the royal party was out of touch even by wireless, and anxiety for its safety was not to quit the background of [Freyberg's](#) mind until he had news of its safe disembarkation in Egypt. ¹

Even the arrival of reinforcements at [Tymbaki](#) on the south coast brought its difficulties. ² The 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders had been guarding the [Mesara Plain](#) against parachute landings, but from the way the battle was going it must already have been clear that no such landings were likely. The battalion would have been useful in the [Canea](#) sector, but there was no hope of getting there now and the best that could be arranged was for it to reinforce [Heraklion](#) if it could get through.

iv

There remained the great question of the invasion by sea. Intelligence, which had been prolific and detailed in its warnings, proved itself—as so often on the larger aspects of this battle—to be exact. Admiral Cunningham, fully apprised, had disposed his naval forces for some days beforehand so as to keep a close watch on the neighbouring waters, a task of anxiety and danger; for, like the troops on land, the ships at sea could not expect to have any air cover. ³

As soon as the attack on 20 May was reported Cunningham ordered his forces at sea to move up towards [Crete](#), keeping for the time being out of sight of land. During the morning he sent a further signal to the effect that Force D (the cruisers

¹ See [Appendix II](#).

² [General Freyberg](#) says that [Creforce](#) had no prior notice that they were to be landed there.

³ The summaries of naval actions in this narrative are based on Admiral Cunningham's Despatch, Supplement to [The London Gazette](#), 21 May 1948, and on his [A Sailor's Odyssey](#) (Hutchinson, [London](#), 1951).

was to pass through the Antikithera Channel at ten o'clock that night and sweep eastward and then south so as to be off [Canea](#) at seven next morning; Force C (the cruisers [Naiad](#) and [Perth](#), with the destroyers [Kandahar](#), [Nubian](#), [Kingston](#) and [Juno](#)) was to pass the Kaso Strait east of [Crete](#) at ten o'clock likewise, sweep round Stampalia, and be off [Heraklion](#) at seven next morning; Force B (the cruisers [Gloucester](#) and [Fiji](#)) was to pass close off Cape Matapan at four in the morning of 21 May and then join Force A 1 (the battleships [Queen Elizabeth](#) and [Barham](#) and five destroyers) 50 miles west of [Crete](#); the anti-aircraft cruiser [Calcutta](#) was to follow Force C through the Kaso Strait and join it off [Heraklion](#); Force E (the destroyers [Jervis](#), [Nizam](#) and [Ilex](#)) was to bombard [Scarpanto](#) airfield that night and withdraw south before daylight, when it would be joined by the AA cruiser [Carlisle](#) from [Alexandria](#).

These orders were modified at 6 p.m. on 20 May because it was feared that convoys might slip through in the darkness. Instead, Forces C and D were ordered to establish patrols north of Crete. Nothing happened during the night, however, except that Force C met with about six Italian motor torpedo boats in the Kaso Strait and forced them to retire, damaging four, while Force E bombarded [Scarpanto](#).

Thus on 21 May Cunningham still had strong naval forces in the neighbourhood of Crete. Force A 1 was 60 miles west of the Antikithera Strait and moving east to meet Force B and Force D, which had sighted nothing on their night patrols. Force C, now joined by [Calcutta](#), was withdrawing south through the Kaso Strait to a rendezvous with Force E. And [Carlisle](#) was on its way from [Alexandria](#) to join Force C

and Force E. All these ships were to keep south during the day and repeat their sweeps that night.

The enemy's early morning reconnaissance, however, detected their presence. Bombers from [Attica](#), [Scarpanto](#) and Rhodes went into the attack. Force A, Force C, and Force D were severely attacked in the morning and afternoon. In Force C the destroyer [Juno](#) was sunk and in Force D the cruiser [Ajax](#) was damaged. The enemy lost four aircraft certainly shot down and perhaps four more.

With our ships thus heavily engaged, the enemy decided there was little likelihood they would venture into the waters north of [Crete](#) before dark; and he calculated that 1 Motor Sailing Flotilla, carrying a mountain battalion, part of [2 AA Regiment](#), and heavy weapons, would be able to get from Melos to [Maleme](#) while it was still daylight. The convoy was therefore ordered to set off.

Our reconnaissance aircraft detected these craft and their torpedo-boat escort. Forces B, C, and D began to close in through the Kithera and Kaso Straits. Head winds slowed the enemy down and frustrated hopes of reaching [Crete](#) before nightfall. At 11.30 p.m. Rear-Admiral Glennie's Force D (now Dido, Orion, [Ajax](#), [Janus](#), [Kimberley](#), [Hasty](#) and [Hereward](#)) met the flotilla of steamers, caiques and a torpedo boat about 18 miles north of [Canea](#). The engagement that followed lasted for two and a half hours. As a result of it at least a dozen caiques, one or two steamers, a small pleasure steamer, and a steam yacht were sunk or left burning. The torpedo boat [Lupo](#), escorting the flotilla, was severely damaged. ¹

News of this action must have reached the German Admiral after midnight. Fearing a similar fate for the second flotilla which had by this time also put to sea, perhaps in the hope of making a dawn landing, he ordered it to return at once to [Piraeus](#). Whether not all of the ships got the order or whether some of the surviving vessels from the other flotilla had gone astray is not now clear; but the enemy's losses in his combined operation were not yet over.

At daylight Rear-Admiral King's Force C (now [Naiad](#), [Perth](#), [Calcutta](#), [Carlisle](#), [Kandahar](#), [Kingston](#) and [Nubian](#)) was sweeping north-west from [Heraklion](#), and at 8.30 a.m. its search was rewarded by the sight of a single caique with German troops on board. [Perth](#) sank it while [Naiad](#) took on the large number of enemy

bombers which were by this time overhead. At 10.10 a.m., when the force was 25 miles south-east of Melos, the torpedo boat *Sagittario* with four or five sailing vessels was sighted to the north. These were engaged, but the *Sagittario*, though hit, managed to create a thick smoke-screen behind which a large number of caiques were glimpsed.

Some of these were sunk; but ammunition was running low and Admiral King, taking this into account and the fact that his maximum speed was 20 knots, decided it would jeopardise his whole force to go farther north. He therefore withdrew.

Thus the *Navy* completely frustrated the enemy's attempt to reinforce by sea, and the airborne troops had to do without the tanks and heavy weapons which would have given them overwhelming preponderance at this stage of the battle. This naval victory thus faithfully realised was won at great cost. The details of Admiral Cunningham's losses will be dealt with under the events of 22 May.

¹ In his despatch Admiral Cunningham stated that the flotilla was thought to be carrying about 4000 troops, a figure that is repeated in *A Sailor's Odyssey*. German records, however, show that the flotilla carried III Bn 100 Mtn Regt, heavy weapons groups, and part of 2 AA Regt (total strength, 2331), of whom 320 or 324 were lost. The *Lupo* remained on the scene and picked up survivors.

CRETE

CHAPTER 5 – THE THIRD DAY: 22 MAY

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CRETE

I: THE COUNTER-ATTACK AT MALEME

I: The Counter-attack at Maleme

i

'When on the 21st of May all the reserves had jumped and conquered the aerodrome of **Maleme**, from that time the battle of **Crete** was won for **Germany**.' This summary statement, made by General Student at his trial, is true enough in so far as it fixes on the capture of the airfield as the vital stage in the conquest of the island. But even one so sanguine as Student would hardly have expressed himself so categorically at the time of which he speaks. ¹ Rather he must have felt on this evening of the second day's fighting that a most important gain had been made and that, if it were exploited with energy and without serious mistakes, the odds in favour of victory were high. Moreover, even the limited optimism legitimate to a clear-headed commander whose prestige was deeply engaged does not seem to have been shared by **Hitler**, Goering, or the commander of **4 Air Fleet** in **Athens**. For Löhner refused to let Student go to **Crete** on 22 May and quoted an order from Goering to stop him; while Student himself says that **Hitler** and Goering, much disturbed by the heavy losses on 20 May, thought that he must be suffering still from an old head wound. ²

The differences of view extended further. Fourth Air Fleet was uneasy about troop concentrations reported at Palaiokhora by reconnaissance aircraft and thought to be directed on **Maleme**, and was worried also about **Kastelli**. Student, with a truer grasp of the essential, scouted both anxieties. ³

There were other worries, more serious but of only relative importance. The absence of heavy anti-tank weapons was regrettable; but that evening the enemy could still hope this would

¹ See 5 Mtn Div WD for this day: 'On the evening of the second day of the invasion the situation seemed to be balanced on a knife-edge. If II/100 Mtn. Regt. had landed with light casualties the defences of **Maleme** airfield

would be considerably strengthened. A heavy concentrated British counter-attack would force the defenders to fight for their lives’.

² Proceedings at trial.

³ [11 Air Corps](#) and [4 Air Fleet](#) Reports. The Palaiokhora story remains unexplained. Perhaps the aircraft had mistaken German flank guards for British troops.

be remedied by the arrival of the sea convoy. The spotters had been notably unsuccessful in detecting the whereabouts of the camouflaged guns of the defence, and [8 Air Corps](#) was finding it difficult to give the required close support to the ground troops because the mixed character of the fighting and the defenders' use of captured recognition signals made the situation very confusing. And the presence of what was thought to be the greater part of the Fleet from [Alexandria](#) in Cretan waters tended to distract the German air force from the land battle.

This was the background of the orders laid down for 22 May. Eleventh Air Corps would continue landing 5 Mountain Division on [Maleme](#) and would consolidate possession of the airfield itself. Preparations would be made for attacks against [Canea](#) and [Suda Bay](#), and supplies of weapons, ammunition, and other necessities were to be got forward.

Eighth Air Corps was to attack the British fleet, especially north of [Crete](#), from dawn onwards and to patrol the sea between [Crete](#) and North Africa. It would also support [11 Air Corps](#), especially in the west, by attacking gun positions, tanks, and centres of resistance; by keeping watch over the whole island to prevent troop movements and the bringing up of reserves; and by denying the use of all airfields to the [RAF](#). Operations by fighters and Stukas from [Maleme](#) itself would have to be considered.

Admiral South-East was to try to reinforce Melos with AA so that it could be used as a supply base, and was to investigate the potentialities of Kithera for the same purpose; and he was to prepare for the transport of tanks by sea to [Maleme](#).

These orders lay little stress on [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#). Evidently [4 Air Fleet](#) and

11 Air Corps realised that the main effort must now go to Maleme. The eastern sectors must be counted on to do no more than hold their ground. Indeed, 11 Air Corps expressly states that the plan to land part of 5 Mountain Division at Heraklion now lapsed and that the role of the forces here and at Retimo was 'to hold down the opposing enemy forces by fire and so prevent the use of the airfields'. The 3rd Parachute Regiment, moreover, at Galatas was 'to pin down the enemy and later join in the attack by Group West.'

The Italians were by now more forthcoming. An offer by the commander in the Dodecanese—anxious to follow the example set by the Duce in the battle of France—to share in the assault was accepted after reference to Goering. The Italians were asked to deal with the east end of the island which, being undefended, was no doubt thought within their military capacity. ¹

¹ There was an interval between the offer and its realisation. See p. 393, note 1.

The orders indicate reasonable optimism but no great expectation of immediate progress. Student's views, however, were more enterprising. He himself wanted to move his Battle HQ at once to Maleme, but permission was refused on the ground that this would unbalance his command of the ground forces as a whole. Instead, General Ringel, ¹ commander of 5 Mountain Division, was given Group West and plans were made for him to arrive during the day. ²

Though unable himself to be present, Student ordered the attack towards Canea to begin on 22 May and at the same time provided for the protection of the airfield. His zeal was due for disappointment. He had made the mistake of assuming that because the counter-attack had not come yet it would not come at all. 'The hope of Corps H.Q. to gain ground rapidly, on 22.5, in direction Chania, was not fulfilled. On 22.5. at 0600 hrs. the enemy attacked unexpectedly from Pyrgos towards Maleme, with the support of tanks.' ³

ii

After Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry had left 5 Brigade HQ about 11.30 p.m. on 21

May and set off back towards Division, Brigadier Hargest went down to the schoolhouse at [Platanias](#), there to meet his attacking battalions. Here Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer, who had meanwhile sent his B Company under Captain Rangī Royal to sweep the [Platanias](#) valley and then strengthen the flank of the attack by joining the Engineer Detachment on the high ground south of the main road, reported for orders. Having got these, he formed up his men and shortly before midnight they were waiting on their start line.

But there was no sign of [20 Battalion](#), and Hargest had to solace himself in the time of waiting by watching the fires and gun-flashes at sea and drawing from them the obvious inference that the [Navy](#) was dealing with the sea invasion. It is not now clear whether Hargest knew by this time the reason for the delay in the arrival of [20 Battalion](#). Gentry had explained to him that the battalion, as soon as it had been relieved by the Australians, would come forward in the Australian transport. But the signal from [Creforce](#) which informed Puttick that the invasion was to be expected for this night, and which moved him to order [20 Battalion](#) to stay in position until relief had actually taken place, did not reach him

¹ Gen Julius Ringel; then aged 52; GOC 5 Mtn Div; GOC 69 Corps, Apr 1944; GOC 18 Corps and 18 Military District, Jun 1944.

² He had been intended to arrive on 21 May but aircraft were not available in time. —5 Mtn Div WD.

³ [11 Air Corps](#) Report.

till 9.15 p.m., after Gentry had gone forward to 5 Brigade. Thus Hargest would not have known how firm and specific were the orders for the relief of [20 Battalion](#). ¹

Gentry on his way back to Division also saw the signs of the naval action and, like everyone else watching that night from the shore, did not doubt that the [Navy](#) would carry out its undertakings. But like Hargest he also felt concern over the non-appearance of [20 Battalion](#), which he had expected to meet along the road. Accordingly, when he reached Division he rang 4 Brigade. Brigadier Inglis then told him that Puttick's orders were that [20 Battalion](#) was not to move until the Australian

battalion arrived; and it had not arrived. Gentry at once stressed the importance of getting [20 Battalion](#) forward as close as possible to the starting time.

There was little need, however, to impress this point on Inglis who, like Gentry, felt that the naval battle which had taken place lessened the need to wait for the Australians. Indeed, two requests for permission to move [20 Battalion](#) had already been put to the Divisional Commander that evening to the same effect. But Puttick had received his instructions from [Freyberg](#) that [20 Battalion](#) was to wait for relief and so he would not be budged. ²

Meanwhile all those who were watching the fight at sea and were rightly exultant at the likelihood of naval victory were not to know that, although the invasion had been successfully intercepted, the threat of it, by detaining [20 Battalion](#) so long, had served the enemy well. To trace precisely how this came about it will be necessary to turn to the adventures of the Australians who were to carry out the relief.

Brigadier Vasey had got his orders verbally from [Creforce](#) during the afternoon and they had been subsequently confirmed by written orders. The relieving force was to reach [Canea](#) about 9 p.m. and was expected to take over from [20 Battalion](#) about ten o'clock.

Unfortunately [2/7 Battalion](#), although it left [Georgeopolis](#) reasonably on time, was bombed severely along a great part of the route. In consequence the battalion was split, A and B Companies going ahead and the other three getting held up. There were further delays in [Canea](#) through misdirection and difficulties over passwords. According to the second-in-command of the battalion it was about 8 p.m. when he arrived with A and B Companies, and he brought in the remaining three companies about 10 p.m. ³ Had

¹ In his narrative Hargest says: 'I did not know that the 20th had to be relieved by Australians, then embus and come 6 miles to me. I was not told till very late.' But he gives no times and the explanation given above is probably substantially correct.

² Statement by [General Freyberg](#) to [General Kippenberger](#).

³ Letter from [Maj H. C. D. Marshall](#), former CO 2/7 Aust Bn, dated 24 Aug 1949.

this been so, however, it would have been in accordance with the original plan and there would have been no occasion for the delay that in fact took place. It seems safer to accept the account of Major [Burrows](#),¹ the commander of [20 Battalion](#), who says that it was about 1 a.m. when the two Australian companies had completed their relief—a time which implies arrival about midnight.

While waiting for relief Burrows had asked for permission to move off before the Australians arrived, since they were late. This permission was refused by Division for the reasons already explained. And so, for fear of an invasion that the [Navy](#) was even then engaged in frustrating, precious time was lost.

When the two Australian companies arrived Burrows sought Brigadier Inglis' approval to go to 5 Brigade, leaving the companies of [20 Battalion](#) to follow him as relieved. This Inglis readily granted; for [20 Battalion](#) had had no time to reconnoitre the ground over which it was to attack, and both officers were anxious that at least Major Burrows should get his orders from Brigadier Hargest in time for him to consider them carefully before the battalion arrived.

Evidence for the time at which Burrows reached 5 Brigade HQ varies. Fifth Brigade war diary says 1.30 a.m., but Burrows says 2.15 a.m. and this seems the more likely. On his arrival he got his orders. The 20th Battalion was to attack along the north side of the main road and there were to be two definite stages in the counterattack: the first being the attack on the airfield, which involved an advance of three miles on an average frontage of about 500 yards, and cleaning up all the enemy posts between the forming-up point and the airfield; the second was the move to the high ground which the Maoris were to have taken.

About a quarter to three the first two companies of [20 Battalion](#), C and D, arrived. As there was still no sign of the rest and it was impossible to wait longer if the attack was to get anywhere before daylight, 'there was no option but to put in the attack with the 2 Coys only'.² Burrows conferred briefly with Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer of [28 Battalion](#), issued his orders to C and D Companies, and left instructions

for the other companies to follow on behind in a mopping-up role. Up till this time [28 Battalion](#), still waiting for [20 Battalion](#), was just west of the [Platanias River](#); for opposition was expected almost from the outset and both battalions would have to move together.

¹ [Brig J. T. Burrows](#), DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Greek); [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn Dec 1941–Jun 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942–Jul 1943; commanded 4 Bde 27–29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul–15 Aug 1942; 5 Bde Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; 6 Bde Jul–Aug 1944; Rector Waitaki BHS 1945–49; Commandant Southern Military District Nov 1951–.

² Report by Maj Burrows.

Meanwhile Brigadier Hargest, seeing that his plan was likely to be thrown out by the delays, felt doubtful whether it could be carried through at all. 'I rang Div HQ and asked must the attack go on— "It must" was the reply, and on it went—Too late.'¹

In making this suggestion Hargest was probably looking at the situation solely from the point of view in his own sector. He does not seem to have realised that [Maleme](#) was now the vital point for the defence of the whole island; and indeed it may be that [Creforce](#) and Division are to blame for not having made this clear to him. It was one of the misfortunes of the battle consequent on the lack of an efficient divisional Intelligence organisation and the inadequate direct personal contact between commanders, that officers were often without a general picture of the battle of which their own engagements were part.

At all events Puttick was right in insisting that the attack go on, although it is perhaps a pity that even at this late hour he did not compensate for the lateness of the attack by adding another battalion to its weight. However slender the chances of success now, those chances still existed. To cancel the attack would have ensured that there was nothing next day to prevent the enemy pouring in further reinforcements and perhaps breaking through the front of the weary forward battalions. To go on meant that there was still a hope of success; and even if Puttick did not gain all he hoped, he would at least have done something to blunt the

enemy's appetite for immediate battle and to reinforce the front line. And this was in fact to be the main result.

The only real point for argument, therefore, is whether or not [Freyberg](#) and [Puttick](#) should have released [20 Battalion](#) before the relief. As events turned out it was disastrous not to do so. But in a fair view it will be remembered how much importance naturally attached itself to the invasion by sea, and how difficult it must have been for a commander responsible for the defence of the coast to assume confidently that the [Navy](#) would be able to find and destroy the convoys sneaking across in the dark from the mainland.

iii

At about 3.30 a.m. the attacking force crossed the start line. North of the main road went the two [20 Battalion](#) companies, D on the right and C on the left. Battalion HQ was near C Company, and a Bren carrier accompanied the advance until the ground became too difficult. About an hour behind followed the three companies

¹ Brig Hargest, Narrative, p. 7.

that had been delayed, B Company behind D Company, A behind C, and Headquarters Company bringing up the rear. ¹

South of the road went [28 Battalion](#), D Company leading on the right and A Company on the left. In the second wave were Headquarters Company and Battalion HQ behind D Company, and C Company behind A Company. B Company, with Captain Royal, had already and unwittingly gone ahead of the attacking force and was by this time holding positions in a reserve area of [23 Battalion](#). ²

On the road itself were Farran's troop of three tanks, with a section of Maoris from C Company to help them keep pace and protect them from Molotov cocktails. And touch between the battalions was maintained by the inner flanks meeting at this point.

The advancing force soon found that its progress would have to consist of a

series of actions. Along its whole front [20 Battalion](#) kept meeting pockets of enemy armed with machine guns, no doubt survivors from those dropped the day before. There was no time to organise set attacks against these, and for the most part the New Zealanders dealt with them by headlong charges. Thus D Company within half an hour of starting came up against a strongpoint in a house. A sharp grenade fight followed and ended with the taking of some prisoners. And as the battalion got closer to [Pirgos](#) and the aerodrome the opposition became denser and the volume of machine-gun fire greater. For this stage we may take the account of Captain [Upham](#)³ of C Company as typical:

Went on meeting resistance in depth—in ditches, behind hedges, in the top and bottom stories of village buildings, fields and gardens on road beside drome. The wire of 5 Bde hindered our advance. There were also mines and booby traps which got a few of us. We did not know that they were there.

There was T.G. and pistol fire and plenty of grenades and a lot of bayonet work which you don't often get in war. The amount of MG fire was never equalled. Fortunately a lot of it was high and the tracer bullets enabled us to pick our way up and throw in grenades. We had heavy casualties but the Germans had much heavier. They were unprepared. Some were without trousers, some had no boots on. The Germans were helpless in the dark. With another hour we could have reached the far side of the 'drome. We captured, as it was, a lot of MGs, 2 Bofors pits were overrun and the guns destroyed. The PWs went back to 5 Bde.

The 28th Battalion, moving on the left of the road and over territory where the Engineer Detachment and [23 Battalion](#) had

¹ 20 Bn company commanders were: [Capt A. I. Garriock](#) (B Coy), Lt D. J. Fountaine (C Coy), Capt H. O. Jefcoate (D Coy).

² See map facing p. 219.

³ [Capt C. H. Upham](#), VC and bar, m.i.d.; Conway Flat, Hundalee; born [Christchurch](#), 21 Sep 1908; Government land valuer; wounded May 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

already dealt out heavy punishment to the enemy, at first met less opposition than [20 Battalion](#) and moved forward steadily, taking casualties chiefly from snipers. As they got closer to [Pirgos](#), however, the opposition became much fiercer and casualties correspondingly heavier.

Meanwhile the remaining hours of darkness had been swiftly passing. It was already daylight when the tanks and leading elements of [28 Battalion](#) (which Royal's B Company had by now joined) reached the crossroads north of [Dhaskaliana](#), where Captain Dawson was waiting in a Bren carrier. 'The tanks were one behind the other on the rd just East of rd junc and to my mind at the time were very dubious about the whole show. They halted. They appeared to have been fired on from the same area as I had been in the afternoon.'¹

Dawson decided at this point to go and see if he could find [20 Battalion](#). He was unable to do so and decided instead to go back and report to Brigadier Hargest. 'It was well after daylight by then and my impression was that we could not accomplish much with the attack from then on—because of the strafing from the air that was going on. Situation seemed unstable and unsatisfactory.'²

It must have been shortly after Dawson's departure that the tanks ran into trouble, apparently in the outskirts of [Pirgos](#). Daylight found the troop, according to Lieutenant Farran, on the outskirts of ' [Maleme](#) village'—no doubt a confusion with [Pirgos](#). There were now hundreds of enemy aircraft overhead. The leading tank got too far ahead of the other two and was fired on by two 'anti-tank guns'.³ One of these guns the tank was able to knock out. In the interchange of fire, however, it was itself holed and set on fire. Sergeant Skedgewell, who commanded the tank, his gunner, and his driver were all wounded—Skedgewell and the gunner mortally. But, hit though he was, the driver managed to get the tank away and put out the fire.

Meanwhile the other two tanks had been beset by enemy fighters and Farran's tank, in trying to take cover in some bamboo, broke a bogey. Moreover, the guns in this tank appear to have jammed and he was unwilling to let his third tank go on alone. He talked with Major Burrows, who said the infantry would carry on. The tanks were to follow when ready.⁴

Eventually with the aid of fitters, whom Farran had to fetch from Squadron HQ

about three miles back, a bogey from the first tank

¹ Report by Capt Dawson.

² Ibid.

³ So [Winged Dagger](#). But they may have been Bofors.

⁴ Report by Maj Burrows.

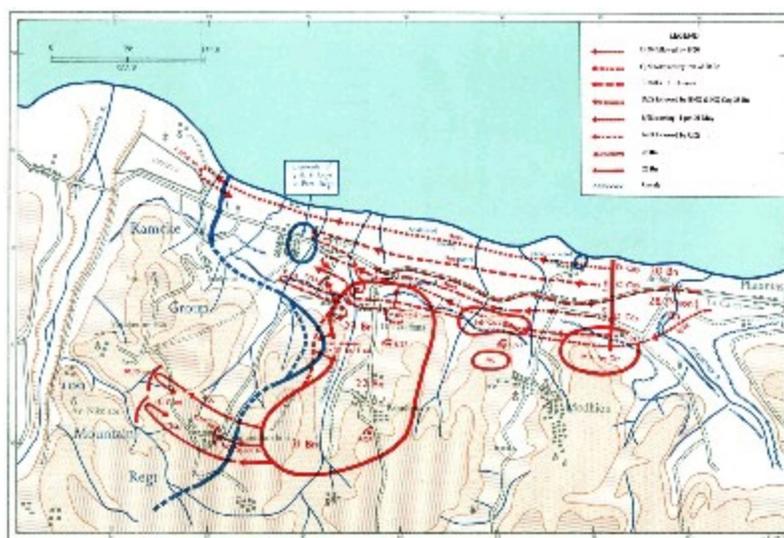
was transferred to the second. By this time the infantry were a long way forward and it was no doubt considered too late to send the reserve tanks to their support ¹ or for Farran's tanks to follow on. The next orders in fact received by Farran were for covering withdrawal.

While this was going on C Company of [20 Battalion](#) entered [Pirgos](#) and fought a bitter series of house-to-house actions there. In the course of the fighting they destroyed two Bofors guns. This engagement slowed them up and put them out of alinement with D Company on their right, which was closely followed now by B Company. By daylight, in spite of steadily increasing opposition, D Company was closing on the aerodrome. There was only one officer by now who was not a casualty—Lieutenant Maxwell. ² When he realised this he decided to contact Battalion HQ for information and further orders. He did so and was told by the Adjutant to carry on with the advance. He returned to the company and overtook it near the edge of the airfield:

We reached the clear part of the `drome all right—there were stacks of aircraft, some crashed, some not—I remember P. Amos saying 'I've carried this anti tank rifle all this way and I am going to have one shot.' He fired two shots into one aircraft and made a mess of it.

Broad daylight—at this time we had come under most intense mortar and MG fire with the clear ground of the `drome in front of us. I pulled the Coy back about 100x [yards] back into the cover of some bamboos. ³

Close behind D Company was B Company, and its commander, Captain Rice,⁴ disturbed by the withdrawal of D Company, sent a message to Battalion HQ to report it and ask for orders. Burrows ordered him to hold his ground and stop D Company from any further withdrawal. But shortly afterwards Rice reported heavy fire from his right flank. Burrows had to make up his mind quickly. Though it was by now quite light it was not easy for him to see exactly what the situation was. The two forward companies were scattered over a wide area. He knew that C Company, the nearest to him, had its main body about half a mile from the airfield. About D Company he was less clear, not knowing that before their withdrawal they had got as far as the aerodrome. And he knew that his three rear companies had almost caught up and were having some brisk fighting with the many enemy posts that had been missed by the leading companies. He knew that losses had been heavy and could see for himself that, even if the battalion were



MALEME COUNTER-ATTACK, 21-22 MAY

¹ According to the Intelligence sergeant of 20 Bn, J. Sullivan, a Bren carrier had been sent back by Maj Burrows to ask for tank support when the tanks stopped.

² Capt P. V. H. Maxwell, DSO; Christchurch; born Londonderry, 14 Feb 1906; manufacturer's representative; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ Report by Capt Maxwell.

⁴ Capt M. C. Rice, MBE; born Invercargill, 8 Jul 1904; town clerk and company secretary; killed in action 22 May 1941.

at full strength, further progress would be difficult now that daylight allowed the German planes to fly low over the front and machine-gun everything that moved. And he now heard firing forward on the right which suggested that the enemy was counter-attacking on D Company.

He therefore correctly appreciated that it would be impossible to carry the first phase of the original plan any further, since it would involve crossing the open ground of the airfield in broad daylight. He decided that his only course was to carry out a modified form of the second phase: to try to get what remained of the battalion in behind [28 Battalion](#) and eventually, if the Maoris had taken it, to get on to the high ground overlooking the aerodrome.

Burrows therefore sent out runners to order the various companies to carry out this movement. The message did not reach all of them, however, as they had become too scattered in the fighting. It did reach Maxwell but in a garbled form, so that he understood he was to withdraw towards the start line and did so with all of D Company he could find. Parts of Headquarters Company joined them on the way.

While Maxwell was withdrawing, Lieutenant Upham of C Company and Sergeant [Kirk](#) ¹ were on the way to warn him of the new plan. On the airfield they found some New Zealand dead. 'The mortar and MG fire on the open ground was heavy and we were lucky to get back alive. When we reached the drome, the planes were landing (some leaving drome too) and the parachutists were jumping out and getting straight into the battle for the Germans were counter-attacking on the right flank.' ²

But though they found no D Company they did find some of B Company, who had missed the orders, and were able to bring them in. The main body of B Company got back also, covered by A Company, one of whose platoons had reached the airfield; but Captain Rice was killed.

Major Burrows, with the remains of his three companies, now set about putting himself in position behind the Maoris. In doing so he found himself in [23 Battalion](#)

territory.

iv

The Maoris, like [20 Battalion](#), were overtaken by daylight as they approached [Pirgos](#), having been joined en route by a party from A Company of [23 Battalion](#) and another from C Company of

¹ [Capt V. D. Kirk](#), DCM; Blackball; born Blackball, 17 Sep 1915; winchman; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

² Report by Capt Upham.

[22 Battalion](#). The enemy poured out of the houses in confusion as the Maoris attacked and Burrows bears witness to their invaluable work. Like C Company of [20 Battalion](#) to their right—but apparently bypassing the village—they drove their way through the machine-gun posts with bayonet and grenade and, in spite of all the difficulties and the aircraft constantly harassing them, got through to the stream bed beyond. From here they were able to bring fire to bear on the village street. But every effort to probe further forward or leftwards to the higher ground met fierce opposition.

We must get forward and get above and round the Germans whose bullets and mortar bombs were cracking round us. We could at times see German machine gunners running up through the trees. We collected in small groups and worked forward. Men were hit, men were maimed. The din of the fight was incessant. There seemed to be German machine guns behind all the trees. If we could silence one or two immediately in front we might break through. ¹

In the desperate fighting that went on about this time Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer was himself conspicuous. At one point he came across some of his men whom the heavy enemy fire had forced to ground. 'Call yourselves bloody soldiers,' he said and went forward. His example was not lost. The men got to their feet and the attack went on. ²

All the élan and gallantry of the Maoris and their commander could not get them to the final objective, in spite of charges like that described in the following words of Major Dyer:

The red Nazi banners erected on poles before they came at us. The Maoris in a scattered mob under the trees going forward crying 'Ah! Ah!' and firing at the hip. The huns with their fat behinds to us going for their lives down the gully and then our job to hold the Maoris in. When one considers what the Maoris had been through and the position and state we were all in and think of the spontaneous nature of that charge—the ancestral fighting urge was a truly magnificent thing. ³

v

Here, to get a complete picture of the attack, we must leave the Maoris at the furthest point of their thrust—a line from east of [Pirgos](#), southward across the canal, to a point west of [23 Battalion's](#) front line—and turn to [21 Battalion](#). ⁴

¹ Maj. H. G. Dyer; from a eulogy on [Lt W. H. McKay](#) who was mortally wounded while charging an enemy post on this day. McKay died some months later while a prisoner of war.

² Report by Capt C. M. Bennett.

³ From a letter to Lt-Col Bennett, 3 Jun 1949.

⁴ 21 Bn company commanders were: [Capt F. A. Sadler](#) (A Coy), [Capt A. J. B. Dixon](#) (C Coy), [Capt A. C. Trousdale](#) (D Coy).

The orders of [21 Battalion](#) were to hold a line from Point 107 to the AMES. Although 'Notes for C.O.'s' is not clear on the point, Brigadier Hargest seems to have intended that [21 Battalion](#) should carry out the necessary movement when [20 Battalion](#) and [28 Battalion](#) had taken their objectives. ¹ Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, however, either misunderstood the orders or decided—correctly—that he would not be able to reach the line without fighting for it. He therefore drew up a careful plan. Headquarters Company was to take the first objective, the AMES and the approaches

to [Xamoudhokhori](#); A Company was to take the second objective, [Xamoudhokhori](#) and the junction of a road and stream north-west of it; B Company's was the third objective, the ridge at the north end of the [Xamoudhokhori– Vlakheronitissa](#) road; C Company would take the fourth, [Vlakheronitissa](#) itself and the slopes north-west of it; and D Company was to complete the assault by carrying it to the final objective, the valley of the Tavronitis. ² Zero hour was to be 7 a.m.

Duly at 7 a.m. the leading company set off. By half past eight it had seized the AMES. A Company then took over and by 10 a.m. had captured [Xamoudhokhori](#) against strong opposition. By mounting a machine gun in the clock tower Lieutenant [Yeoman](#) ³ gave the company a chance to reorganise and it moved forward on the left of the road, losing its commander, Captain [McClymont](#). ⁴ It was then held up, and a patrol sent round to the south-west in an attempt to outflank the enemy had its commander, Lieutenant [Southworth](#), ⁵ killed.

It was now B Company's turn. It tried to advance along the right of the road but, after clearing out one enemy pocket, was held up by machine-gun fire from the commanding ridges to the north. C Company then took over and tried to get through on the left. It failed to make much progress, and so D Company, the only one still uncommitted, was sent in on the left. After its main body had made substantial progress, passing through [Vlakheronitissa](#) but not clearing it, the forward elements of D Company [22 Battalion](#), which was attached to D Company of [21 Battalion](#), got as far as their old positions overlooking the Tavronitis.

¹ Brig Dittmer believes that this was the intention.

² The order itself is somewhat obscurely phrased and was probably amplified in verbal discussion. The above is a probable interpretation.

³ [Capt A. A. Yeoman](#), m.i.d.; Katikati; born [Whakatane](#), 24 Feb 1914; dairy farmer; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Capt R. B. McClymont](#); born Rongotea, 30 Aug 1906; public servant; killed in action 22 May 1941.

⁵ Lt W. G. Southworth, m.i.d.; born Christchurch, 30 May 1918; school-teacher; killed in action 22 May 1941.

For an ambitious attack by a weak battalion against an enemy strongly established on high ground this was good progress; the more so as it was daylight and the enemy had complete air superiority. But when, at 11.30 a.m., Allen learned that 20 and 28 Battalions were held up, he was obviously right in deciding to push his attack no further but to stabilise where he was. He therefore withdrew D Company to the battalion's original positions and ordered A and B Companies to hold where they were unless a strong counter-attack developed, in which case they were to withdraw south-east of the AMES.

Two hours later he had further news of the situation on his right. The 23rd Battalion had been forced to give some ground. ¹ He therefore consolidated by using C Company to close the gap between Headquarters Company at the AMES and D Company in its original area. He hoped to hold [Xamoudhokhori](#) and the ground won beyond it as a suitable jumping-off place for any further attacks towards Point 107.

But about 3.30 p.m., as he came back from arranging this with D Company, he met A, B, and Headquarters Companies retiring. The first two had been attacked and had withdrawn according to orders. Headquarters Company had decided to come also, leaving a platoon at the AMES.

At this point occurred an odd interlude. A German in British battle dress appeared, bearing a white flag. His reception may be gathered from Allen's terse comment: 'Sent a Hun with a flag of truce about his business. He was demanding surrender!'

It was now about a quarter to four. The day's gains could not be retaken now that the forward companies had withdrawn and the whole plan been thrown out by the blocking of the other two battalions. This new enemy pressure might well be the prelude to a full-scale attack. Allen therefore reformed his battalion on Vineyard Ridge from which it had set out that morning. Had he known that II Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, fresh troops who had arrived the day before, was on his front he might have felt that his troops had done well. And had he known that I Battalion of the same regiment, arrived that same day, was to begin that afternoon a thrust

round to the south, he would have seen even better reasons for caution.

vi

Of all the battalions on the front in the earlier part of the day [23 Battalion](#) was the least engaged. It will be remembered that

¹ This was probably only some temporary setback.

Captain Dawson had been sent the night before to inform Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie of his mopping-up role. ¹

In fact, [20](#) and [28 Battalions](#) progressed so short a distance beyond the [23 Battalion](#) front line that there was little mopping up to be done. There remains the question of whether it would not have been wiser for Hargest to have added [23 Battalion's](#) strength to that of the other two. On the whole it may be regretted that he did not. The extra weight given to the attack might have given it the force to break through during the morning when opposition first began to harden. Alternatively, had [23](#) and [28 Battalions](#) been sent in together there would not have been the same compulsion to delay attack until [20 Battalion](#) arrived, that battalion could have followed up as reserve battalion, and the attack itself could have got off to an earlier start and had the advantage of a longer period of darkness.

However that may be, such operations as [23 Battalion](#) did carry out this day were local affairs intended to prevent enemy encroachments or regain areas already lost. The only exception recorded is the part played by elements of A Company (and of C Company [22 Battalion](#)) in the advance of [28 Battalion](#).

The first of the day's tasks was the recapture of the machine-gun and mortar area evacuated the previous day. This was carried out at daybreak by 17 and 18 Platoons of D Company. By now only two of the machine guns were able to fire and both were damaged. There was a good deal of trouble from enemy mortars and 'too many Huns crawling about in the vines.'² But the morning passed well enough, no doubt because the enemy was still fully occupied in holding back the Maoris. The afternoon was to be busier.

In the afternoon it became clear that no further progress could be made by the counter-attack. A and D Companies of [28 Battalion](#) were held up at the eastern outskirts of [Pirgos](#); and B and C Companies, which had swerved left to try to bypass the village, had not been able to advance more than about half a mile before being pinned down by machine-gun fire from the eastern slopes of Point 107 and from the area west of [Pirgos](#). In [20 Battalion](#) the bulk of A, B, and C Companies had crossed to the south of the road and taken up positions behind the Maoris and inside [23 Battalion's](#) perimeter.

¹ Leckie's recollection is that the battalion's actions this day were on its own initiative. But Brig Hargest in a lecture said that the battalion was 'to come in behind and do the mopping up'. And this accords with Dawson's account.

² Capt H. J. MacDonald, 27 MG Bn.

Already during the morning a message from [23 Battalion](#) HQ had been sent to acquaint Brigadier Hargest with the situation. According to this [21 Battalion](#) was still making progress towards Point 107, [28 Battalion](#) was roughly speaking in the position already described, and [20 Battalion](#) had been forced to pull back from its forward positions. Enemy pressure on the right flank was heavy and with enemy guns ranged on the road junction it was impossible to get into [Pirgos](#). The RAP was overworked with wounded from both sides and the supply of medical dressings exhausted. In the opinion of Lieutenant-Colonels Leckie and Andrew the counterattack could not succeed without more infantry, artillery, and air support. ¹

No such support was of course forthcoming. Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer, who had gone forward with the companies trying to outflank [Pirgos](#), remained with them until he thought he sufficiently understood the enemy position. He then came back to [23 Battalion](#) HQ, ² hoping to be able to get help from 22 and 23 Battalions in the launching of a further attack. He found, however, that there was little that could be done. Artillery support was very thin, and the two other battalion commanders felt that with the failure of the organised counter-attack the best course now was to hold

on to what ground they had and stop the enemy infiltration that was constantly going on.

A little before or shortly after this informal conference, the two Maori companies before [Pirgos](#) found the fire on their positions too heavy and so moved farther south towards the [23 Battalion](#) area. The ultimate position seems to have been that [28 Battalion](#) held the gap between [21 Battalion](#) on the left and [23 Battalion](#) on the right, getting there in time to launch a counter-attack which cleared up an ugly situation on [21 Battalion](#)'s right flank. And the three companies of [20 Battalion](#) stiffened the right of [23 Battalion](#). This is a rather schematic account since there was a good deal of intermixture of sub-units, but if due allowance is made for this fact it will serve to give a picture of the front as it now stabilised.

viii

With the end of the counter-attack the initiative passed once more to the enemy, and he tried to compensate himself for the frustration of his own plans for a breakthrough that day. On the right Captain Gericke of the [Assault Regiment](#) rapidly followed up the withdrawal of the two Maori companies and made his way into [Pirgos](#).

¹ The entry in 5 Bde WD is timed 3.5 p.m.; but the context suggests that the message was sent off during the morning and no doubt the runner carrying it was late getting through.

² Dittmer does not remember the time, but it seems to have been in the late afternoon.

Behind him and on the airfield a further two infantry battalions of 5 Mountain Division—I Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment and I Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment—had arrived and were being deployed for an advance on the south of the main front; 95 Engineer Battalion, a parachute artillery battery of six guns, and the HQ of 5 Mountain Division, with General Ringel, were already landing or on the way. To receive them the landing strip 'littered with burning and broken-down aircraft was cleared again and again with the help of captured tanks by a landing commando

supplied by Air Commander [11 Air Corps](#).'¹

The enemy did not stop at recovering lost ground, but pressed forward. Developments on [21 Battalion](#) front have already been recounted. In the area of D Company [23 Battalion](#) some penetration was made, but the RSM of the [Maori Battalion](#), Ace [Wood](#),² rushed one enemy post at the head of a bayonet charge. 'This happened about 10–15 yards from the most easterly post of my platoon, unknown to two of my men until they heard the yells of the Maoris as they rushed.'³ And other parties in the same area were driven off by Captain Mark [Harvey](#),⁴ commanding 23 Battalion's D Company, with some of his men.⁵

Farther to the right the enemy attacked the road junction north of the [23 Battalion](#) area and held by B Company but were driven off. Enemy machine-gun posts had also been established on the ridge west of the road from [Pirgos](#) south to [Xamoudhokhori](#), and all the Maori efforts to silence them proved vain. Mortar fire soon came to reinforce the machine guns. The machine-gun fire of the defence had been weakened by direct hits which destroyed Lieutenant MacDonald's last two guns, but he withdrew his men to the reverse slope of his ridge and still kept going with a captured spandau. Here, along with a party of Maoris, he awaited an attack which the enemy were evidently preparing under cover of their machine guns. Two Maoris were posted at the top of the ridge to observe. The rest fixed bayonets.

The attack began with a bursting mass of flame from the grenades the Huns threw on to the top—shook us up a bit. Then they came over.

There was no order but we stood up and charged forward, the Maoris yelling at top. The
Gouns

[Germans] appeared to stand aghast. It was most exhilarating; I seemed to be as light as a feather. The
Gouns

let

¹ [11 Air Corps](#) Report. There is evidence that PW were forced to assist.

See Proceedings at the trial of General Student.

² Capt A. C. Wood, DCM; Wakefield; born Nelson, 24 Aug 1916; Regular soldier; wounded 11 Jul 1942.

³ Statement by Lt G. H. Cunningham, OC 18 Platoon, 23 Bn.

⁴ Maj M. D. Harvey, ED, m.i.d.; Palmerston North; born Dunedin, 29 Feb 1904; salesman; wounded 25 May 1941.

⁵ 'Mark Harvey was on my right; a brave officer, collecting his men and encouraging them under fire.'—Maj Dyer.

out a shriek or two and the rest bolted down hill like rabbits, over stone walls, plunging through vines. Very soon the MGs opened up, together with the mortars, and we got back quickly. ¹

All the battalions engaged had their taste of hand-to-hand fighting that day, and there were several affrays as sharp as the one that MacDonald describes; but neither the historian scanning the reports long after the event they describe nor the survivors to whom those events are still a vivid memory would hesitate to award to the Maoris of [28 Battalion](#) the credit for the most conspicuous élan and valour shown on that hard day.

Finally the darkness came, the infiltrating enemy parties fell back to a line which occasional soaring signal lights roughly indicated, and the battalions settled down where they were to wait for daylight and the renewal of battle, the newcomers of 20 and 28 Battalions grimly solacing themselves for their own losses by the sight of all the enemy dead. ²

ix

Behind the main fighting the day had not been without its excitements. Captain Baker of D Company [28 Battalion](#) had found himself at daylight in the Engineer area with a sergeant and about eight men. The others of his company, who had been

with him the day before and like him had been cut off by the descending paratroops, had made contact with their battalion as it passed through and had joined in the counter-attack. Baker now set about following but met elements of [20 Battalion](#) returning and gathered from these that [28 Battalion](#) would also be coming back. He therefore returned to his original D Company position. Here he learned that there was an enemy concentration on his south flank and he set about attacking it. The 19th [Army](#) Troops joined him and the engagement ended with the enemy's surrender. 'There were 65 live ones, mostly wounded, and 9 Spandaus besides a lot of Tommy Guns etc.'³

After this Baker's men returned to their company area and had an uneasy night holding back enemy attempts to infiltrate from the south. The Engineer Detachment passed the rest of the day without any serious engagements and was joined at dusk by those members of [20 Battalion](#) who had gone back on the north of the road towards [Platanias](#) in the morning. These men had re-formed on finding that the rest of the battalion had not withdrawn from the forward area, and had returned in about company strength to try and stop

¹ Report by Capt MacDonald, 27 MG Bn.

² [Pte M. C. Rennie](#) of 20 Bn counted from one point alone 80 paratroops dead in their harness.

³ Report by Capt J. N. Anderson, NZE.

the gap north of [Pirgos](#). But the enemy had followed up too fast and they were able to get only half of the way before being held up.

The Field Punishment Centre spent the day cleaning up isolated posts in its area and co-operating with C Troop of [27 Battery](#). 'When we put a shot in there, you get everyone who runs out', an order from Captain Snadden, gives the keynote of their activities.

The guns themselves had done their best to support the counterattack. But A, B, and C Troops of [27 Battery](#) were without communications to the attacking battalions,

had no forward observation officers and, since the timetable had been upset from the start, could not do much to help. 'A and B Troops bashed the aerodrome once more but were in the dark re our own troops after a while and so held fire until a definite location of our troops was supplied.'¹ Moreover, stocks of ammunition were very low, and of the three trucks of ammunition got forward to 5 Brigade by Lieutenant [Dyson](#),² DAQMG to Division, one was set on fire. C Troop got one load which had to be manhandled up the hill by the exhausted gunners. A and B Troops had to go without.

Somehow or other, however, the guns managed to keep up their pounding of the airfield, and by this time the enemy, intent on landing his mountain troops, was desperately anxious to silence them. A and B Troops were still unlocated by the [Luftwaffe](#), but the enemy's planes kept up a continual bombing and machine-gunning of suspected areas. The 27th Battery HQ had hardly moved from its schoolhouse when this received a direct hit. B Troop had managed, by the devotion of Lieutenant Cade and Sergeant McLeay, to keep an OP going on the open hillside. By the end of the day casualties from ground and air fire had reduced the strength of C Troop by half. A and B Troops had suffered less, but as ammunition grew scarcer the three troops had begun to consider whether they would not have to destroy their guns and fight as infantry.

It is doubtful whether the four 75-millimetre guns of C Troop 2/3 Regiment—all that was available to reinforce the [Maleme](#) front—got far enough forward in time to support the counter-attack. The detachment of the Australian MG Company came up safely to 5 Brigade during the day but met with disaster when going forward that night to reinforce the front. 'They ran clean into a Hun attack and in five minutes lost everything they had—vehicles, guns, ammunition.'³

¹ Report by Maj Philp.

² [Maj R. H. Dyson](#); [Auckland](#); born [Christchurch](#), 4 Dec 1917; public servant; CO 5 Fd Regt Aug–Dec 1945; NZ Regular Force.

³ Narrative of Brig Hargest.

A characteristic feature of war is notoriously the difficulty a commander has in knowing what is happening once battle is joined. In Crete, because of the cutting of telephone wires and the shortage of wireless sets, this was more pronounced even than usual. Once a commander had committed his forces he could do little but wait, dependent for news on the imperfect reports of wounded and stragglers and unable for lack of reserves and transport to strengthen weak points or pursue an advantage. Nor did he have the guns, the tanks, or the aircraft to remedy the lack of other resources. This was true in some degree at every level of command. Thus, for example, on 20 May Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew had virtually to leave his companies to command themselves, while the company commanders in their turn could do little to co-ordinate the fighting of their platoons. On the higher levels, Brigadier Hargest, Brigadier Puttick and [General Freyberg](#), in default of leaving their HQs and the apparatus of command to seek information for themselves, had to suffer the same helpless impatience.

This counter-attack of 22 May was no exception. Success was the only hope for a prolonged defence of [Crete](#); failure would confirm the enemy in the possession of the airfield and make ultimate defeat inevitable. Yet, once the two battalions had crossed the start line, there was almost nothing Hargest could do to help them. Day found him anxiously waiting for news, and some news there was, though not as yet from his own front. At 7.30 a.m. he learnt that the seaborne invasion had been defeated at sea. Cheering though this news was, it must also have had an ironic ring. The delay at the start had not proved necessary, then. Its importance, however, would have been underlined shortly afterwards. For Captain Dawson next came in to report that the tanks and 28 Battalion were still short of [Pirgos](#). He did not think much could be accomplished now that the enemy aircraft were strafing in such numbers.

It was this news which probably lay behind a message sent to Division about this time: the attack had passed the crossroads and was going on, the [RAF](#) had not bombed [Maleme](#) according to promise, and the artillery reinforcements—2/3 Regiment RAA—had not yet passed [Platanias](#).

The return of Farran's tanks would have strengthened forebodings of failure. And

the fact that the Brigadier did not send them back and did not call upon the remaining three tanks of the squadron indicates that it was now too light and seemed too late for him to help the infantry with armour.

For a while there were other distractions. Not long before eight o'clock Brigade HQ was severely attacked by Messerschmitts and an ammunition truck was set alight. Then aircraft could be seen landing on the airfield, and this would have been enough to suggest that it was not in our hands, even without reports from returning troops that the attack had met with only partial success. Yet there was still hope and at 10 a.m. Hargest reported to Division that some forward progress was being made but that resistance was getting stronger.

But Hargest was a man of buoyant spirit, and the fact that progress was being made at all after such a late and confused beginning tempted him to dally with the idea that the air traffic at [Maleme](#) might indicate not further landings but evacuation. It is difficult otherwise to explain his message to Division of 10.42 a.m.: 'Steady flow of enemy planes landing and taking off. May be trying to take troops off. Investigating.'¹ Although about this very time the enemy were observed to land two AFVs and some motor cycles, wishful thinking died hard and at 11 a.m. another signal to Division said: 'From general quietness and because eleven fires have been lit on drome it appears as though enemy might be preparing evacuation. Am having further investigations made. Do any other reports from other sources show further evidence of this?'²

The reply from Division was non-committal. 'No other indications as you suggest but it is possible.' Whether to give the evidence for what was already considered to have been over-optimism or with a last flicker of the same tendency, Brigade HQ reported at half past twelve that men had been seen to run towards planes before they took off.³ And it may be that Brigade still flirted with the idea that the counter-attack, the victory at sea, and the heavy losses of planes in landing—the wrecked aircraft strewn about the airfield and beaches were visible from Brigade HQ—had reduced the enemy to despair of success.

These messages, however, may do no more than suggest a possibility that had to be considered. Certainly, Brigadier Hargest was tenacious of hope, and in a message at 11.50 a.m. confidence is much to the fore: 'Reliable reports state

aerodrome occupied by own troops line now held EAST side of drome.'⁴ Nothing could better illustrate the disadvantages of bad communications. Had wireless contact with the forward battalions or even good line

¹ NZ Div WD. Capt Dawson and others disagreed with Brig Hargest on this interpretation.

² Ibid.

³ 5 Bde WD. The men seen running towards the planes were no doubt unloading parties.

⁴ NZ Div WD.

been available, the Brigadier would never have been forced to rely on the confused reports of stragglers and wounded which must have underlain this message.

Meanwhile Division had been testing the possibility of an enemy withdrawal by sending out fighting patrols on 10 Brigade front. The patrols found no sign of any such intention, and men from [20 Battalion](#) who had made their way back, when interrogated on the point, showed themselves convinced that the enemy so far from evacuating was landing men and stores.¹

Perhaps the main interest of this confusion, however, is as an illustration of the weakness of the divisional Intelligence organisation at this time. In later battles the commander's staff would have been able to tell at once, from the general framework of their information about the enemy and his intentions, that this was a canard and ought to be ignored.

At Brigade HQ Hargest's exasperation at the paucity of reliable news and the confusion thus made possible decided him to send Captain Dawson forward once more in a Bren carrier with the last available No. 18 set. His message to Division of 1.25 p.m. reports this and indicates that optimism was now on the wane: 'Recent messages make position confused. M [the Brigade Major] going to investigate. Tps

NOT so far forward on left as believed. Officers on ground believe enemy preparing for attack and take serious view. I disagree but of course they have closer view. Will visit your HQ when M returns.'²

No better idea of the kind of difficulty Hargest was up against can be given than Dawson's own account of what followed:

Left Bde in Bren Carrier with last W/T set and wireless operator and driver. Also some rations and amn. We were caught in [Platanias](#) village by Messerschmits. The set was riddled and was useless; bailed out into coast side of road onto open ground but planes strafed us there also snipers from direction of coast. We then dashed for North side of road into a wheat field. Planes then strafed us there, and set fire to the wheat field which we had to vacate. This lasted approx. 40 mins. Then inspected carrier—it would go—found driver but couldn't find W/T operator—looked for him for a short while and shouted for him but no luck. Then as set was no good decided to get on up to 23 Bn.

The driver and I then went on in a series of dashes and bail outs to 23 Bn with ammunition and some rations. We turned the corner at the rd junction at about 40 mph much to the amusement of some 23 Bn people who could see us. It was then 1600 hrs.

After this things became very confused round that rd junction. 23 Bn were reporting that motor-cycles tps were about there also an A-Tk gun and possibly one bofor gun trained down the rd. The carrier had one half broken track already so I decided to return to Bde by foot after dark.

¹ NZ Div Intelligence log. Entry at 2.40 p.m.

² NZ Div WD.

As the afternoon wore on Hargest must have been able to form a clearer picture. Thus at 3.5 p.m. he got the message—itsself several hours out of date—to the effect that [20 Battalion](#) had withdrawn owing to pressure on the right flank, that [28 Battalion](#) was holding positions from [Pirgos](#) across the front of [23 Battalion](#), and

that [21 Battalion](#) was still attacking and making progress. Again, the despatch of elements of the returned companies of [20 Battalion](#) to hold the right of the road east of [Pirgos](#) indicates that he was aware of the existence of a dangerous gap there. But at this stage of the battle we can only guess at the degree of knowledge he had about the whole situation.

One other concern of the Brigadier's must be mentioned before we leave him in the middle of his perplexities and turn to the other sectors. Enemy parties which were filtering through from the south, and which had been sent by Heidrich to try and cut the coast road, had already begun to establish themselves in the hills round and south of [Ay Marina](#). This was a most serious threat. Hargest therefore asked Division to have 10 Brigade make an attack westward to check this development. At 5.50 p.m. Division told him that the attack had been ordered and would go in between 6.45 and 7.15 p.m.

CRETE

II: THE CANEA-GALATAS FRONT

II: The Canea-Galatas Front

i

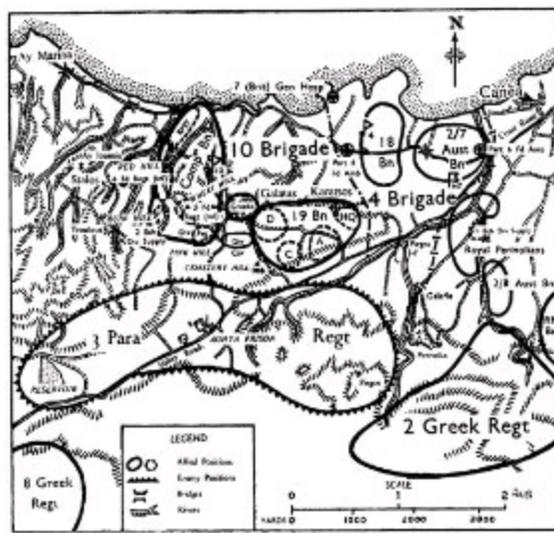
The general tenor of enemy orders for 22 May and the emphasis on the role of [Group West](#) suggest that Heidrich's 3 Parachute Regiment in the Prison area was not expected to make any major move. But Heidrich was not the man to wait passively until [Group West](#) could fight its way through to him. He formed a battle group from parts of III Battalion of 3 Parachute Regiment and the Engineer Battalion and put it under command of Major Heilmann, the commander of the former. ¹ Its role was to advance from the [Prison Valley](#) north towards [Stalos](#), to deny us the use of the coast road, and to establish contact with German troops east of [Maleme](#). This was the move that Hargest had feared from the first.

Of the activities of the troops remaining under Colonel Heidrich's command, German sources give little information beyond the statement that the general situation remained unchanged, that positions were maintained, and that supplies were dropped as required.

¹ NZ Div was to meet him again with 1 Parachute Division at [Cassino](#), still serving under Heidrich.

ii

Tenth Brigade sources give a fuller picture of the day's doings. In the [Composite Battalion](#) the main activity was a result of the orders from Division already mentioned to send out strong patrols and see if there was any sign of the enemy's proposing to evacuate. Three patrols were sent out from Major Veale's RMT group on the



CANEA-GALATAS SECTOR, 22 MAY
CANEA-GALATAS SECTOR, 22 MAY

right flank. Their task was to go along the coast road and then south to clear the valleys east of [Ay Marina](#) and the village of [Ay Ioannis](#). The patrol to which this latter task was assigned— Captain Veitch's ¹—encountered a party of 40 enemy in the village and drove them out, returning with seven prisoners of whom one was an officer. The other two patrols do not seem to have made any serious contact.

¹ [Capt J. Veitch](#); born [Scotland](#), 2 Feb 1901; bus driver; died of wounds while p.w. 3 Jun 1941.

Major Bliss sent out two patrols from the central group of the [Composite Battalion](#), one under Captain [Nolan](#) ¹ and the other under Lieutenant [Dill](#). ² But neither patrol met with any enemy.

From the south of the battalion front a patrol from Divisional Supply went out in conjunction with another led by Lieutenant Carson. Little fresh information seems to have been derived though there was much speculation about enemy movement observed towards dusk which some interpreted as suggesting evacuation and others as a preliminary massing for attack. The most likely explanation is that it was Heilmann's battle group on its way north. Perhaps as a cover for this move, mortaring had become even heavier on the front, so heavy indeed that after dark two sections of the Divisional Supply Company had to retire to the reverse slope of [Ruin Hill](#) and there dig in as best they might without tools. Later on Dill, now back

from his patrol, brought a platoon of gunners to their support.

Colonel Kippenberger had little faith in reports of evacuation and decided to carry on with the plan he had formed for clearing the ground lost on his left the first day. Such an attack would in any case answer the purposes of a fighting patrol. The task naturally fell to 19 Battalion, whose troops were the freshest and who were well placed to carry it out. The attacking companies were to make for the Turkish fort, do all the damage they could, and then return to their original positions. The three guns of F Troop 28 Battery, assisted by two mortars, would give what support they could. And 18 Battalion was to help on the left flank by putting a platoon into Galaria.

The attack began at 3 p.m. with A Company on the right and Headquarters Company on the left. The platoon from 18 Battalion duly got into Galaria. But the enemy showed no intention of giving ground without fighting for it. His machine-gun posts hung on stoutly and his aircraft were very active in support. Consequently A Company found itself unable to make much headway and unable also to get round the enemy flanks. At 5 p.m. it returned, having lost four killed and three wounded in exchange for an estimated ten casualties inflicted. Two hours later Headquarters Company returned. They had got within 200 yards of the objective but found it too strongly held to warrant making an assault. They brought back a captured mortar and three captured machine guns and claimed to have destroyed others.

¹ Capt S. T. Nolan, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born Onehunga, 14 Aug 1905; motor trimmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² Lt J. P. Dill, m.i.d.; born England, 30 Aug 1915; fur merchant; died of wounds while p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

On the part of the front which had hitherto seen the hottest fighting, that held by the Divisional Cavalry south-east of the Prison- Galatas road and by the Divisional Petrol Company north-west of it, the morning was quiet enough. But in the afternoon the defence was heavily bombed and towards evening enemy patrols became active. Then about seven o'clock, after heavy mortar fire and more attacks from the air, the enemy made a strong attack on the ground held by the battle-worn Petrol Company. This attack seems to have had some initial success. The enemy got some troops

onto the top of [Pink Hill](#), which since the previous day had been a no-man's-land, and from there was able to cover the assault on the Petrol Company's centre. 'A breach was made in the centre but [Cpl N. M. Stewart](#), who had been in reserve with about 30 men of the night-watching patrols, rushed into the breach and drove the enemy back about 100 yards.' ¹

To [Colonel Kippenberger](#) the situation looked dangerous and he hastily called up half the [Composite Battalion](#) reserve, about twenty-five men of [4 Field Regiment](#) under Lieutenant [MacLean](#), ² and sent them in to help. He himself, with Lieutenant Carson and Carson's patrol—a similar small force—moved quickly round to [Wheat Hill](#) so as to counter-attack the enemy on his left flank.

There then occurred one of the most striking incidents of the whole battle:

There was a beautiful opening for Carson, and I was waiting for him to line his men up before giving him the order to charge, when a most infernal uproar broke out across the valley. Over an open space in the trees near Galatos came running, bounding, and yelling like Red Indians, about a hundred Greeks and villagers including women and children, led by Michael Forrester twenty yards ahead. It was too much for the Germans. They turned and ran without hesitation, and we went back to our original positions. ³

Captain Forrester and his Greeks deserve another quotation for this act of valour, and this time we may quote from an interview with a member of Carson's patrol:

Then came a terrific clamour behind. Out of the trees came Capt Forrester of the Buffs, clad in shorts, a long yellow army jersey reaching down almost to the bottom of the shorts, brass polished and gleaming, web belt in place and waving his revolver in his right hand. He was tall, thin-faced, fair-haired, with no tin hat—the very opposite of a soldier hero; as if he had just stepped on to the parade ground. He looked like ... a Wodehouse character. It was a most inspiring sight. Forrester was at the head of a crowd of disorderly Greeks, including women; one Greek had a shot gun with a serrated-edge bread knife tied on like a bayonet, others had ancient weapons—all sorts. Without hesitation this uncouth group,

¹ Report by CSM C. E. James.

² Maj G. MacLean; Wanganui; born Wellington, 13 Nov 1915; farmer; twice wounded.

³ Infantry Brigadier, p. 59.

with Forrester right out in front, went over the top of a parapet and headlong at the crest of the hill. The enemy fled. ¹

The Greeks who took part in this charge were mainly from [6 Greek Regiment](#) and Forrester had been holding them in reserve behind the Petrol Company since he had first collected and reorganised them. In the German assault Forrester—'one of the coolest men I have ever met' ²—had recognised the kind of crisis for which he had been waiting and had at once launched his counter-stroke. The civilians in his force had apparently joined in as the charge got going.

The line thus restored and the Petrol Company still in good heart—Captain H. A. Rowe, its commander, was indignant at the idea that his men might have been dislodged and reported to [Colonel Kippenberger](#), 'Div Pet are, and will remain, in their original positions' ³—[Kippenberger](#) decided to put this whole part of the line under the command of Major Russell, thus making sure that both sides of the vital road were under a single tactical command, [Russell Force](#). The Greeks reassembled behind [Galatas](#) under Forrester.

There were two other counter-attacks that day in which Greeks also figured. One took place on the right flank of the Divisional Cavalry and appears to have been intended to deal with a German attack coming in on the south-east side of [Pink Hill](#), no doubt at the same time as the one which troubled the Petrol Company. This time it was the detachment of Greeks under Captain H. M. Smith that was involved. At first there was a delay because Smith's signal to charge was misunderstood. But then the Greeks went forward, about a dozen civilians joining in.

... they surged around and went on with great enthusiasm—at the trot or steady jog yelling 'area' or something like that which I was told was the Evzone's war cry. It

was very effective and the whole show was the most thrilling moment of my life. ⁴

The attack does not seem to have met much opposition and it carried forward almost as far as the old front line near [Pink Hill](#). Here Russell decided to leave the Greeks for the night.

The other Greek counter-attack was probably connected with this and may have been seen by Russell as part of the same general operation. Its occasion was the presence of a group of Germans in some houses on the crest of [Pink Hill](#) itself. These had been left behind and isolated when Forrester's wild wave had carried back the main body of attacking enemy. It was clearly a breach of

¹ Report by [Dvr A. Q. Pope](#) of 4 RMT Coy.

² CSM James.

³ Report by Capt Rowe.

⁴ Report by Capt Smith. (The word used by the Greeks must have been Aera—the battle cry of the Evzones.)

no-man's-land etiquette for them to remain, and Russell ordered his RSM, G. T. [Seccombe](#), ¹ to encourage their departure, assisted by a party of about fifty Greeks. Lieutenant MacLean and a platoon of [4 Field Regiment](#) and some men from the Petrol Company were to help.

Seccombe got off to a slow start because his orders had to be interpreted and then discussed by the Greeks taking part, all of whom had views of their own to contribute. Eventually the 'Ayes' had it and the whole party rushed up the hill after the RSM. The attention of the enemy was distracted towards the remonstrances being fired into their position by the Petrol Company, the Greek attack came as a complete surprise, and all the enemy were killed.

By now it was dark and the Germans on this front seem to have had enough for the day. No doubt Heidrich felt that while the defence remained so spirited it would

be impossible to effect anything more with his weary and depleted force. He had already gambled on the assumption that the counter-attack which had not yet come would never come by sending off Heilmann's battle group. It would be best to remain elsewhere on the defensive till the more promising situation at [Maleme](#) brought him relief and reinforcement.

iii

Now that the isolated parties of paratroops had all either been disposed of or had found it prudent to make their way through to join the main body, there was little happening on the 4 Brigade front, beyond patrolling and the move to [Galaria](#) in support of [19 Battalion](#)'s probe to the Turkish fort. By daylight 2/7 Australian Battalion was safely in the position formerly occupied by [20 Battalion](#). And the machine guns of the Australian MG Company were with the brigade until the middle of the afternoon, when they came under command of 5 Brigade.

iv

Nor were there any notable developments in the tactical situation on the front of [2/8 Australian Battalion](#) and [2 Greek Regiment](#). An attempt was made to co-ordinate the command in this area more effectively. At 6 p.m. Brigadier Vasey obtained from [General Freyberg](#) the command of both units and the sector they were defending. He himself was to come under command of NZ Division. It was too late by this time, however, to do anything on

¹ [Capt G. T. Seccombe](#), DCM, m.i.d.; Upper Hutt; born [Whangarei](#), 27 Oct 1915; Regular soldier; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

this day to remedy the unsatisfactory character of the position here: the fact that there was little or no contact between the Greeks and the Australians and a gap of about 1000 yards. The day was spent in patrolling.

That no more was done seems regrettable now. For the Greeks and the Australians might have given considerable support to the attack by [19 Battalion](#) towards the Turkish fort. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had indeed asked Brigadier Puttick to

arrange for the Australians to launch a simultaneous attack towards the Turkish fort, but Puttick had limited his action to providing some support from his own command—the occupation of [Galaria](#) by 18 Battalion. No doubt he felt that 2/8 Battalion, not being under his command, lay outside his province. As it was, the attack by [19 Battalion](#) seems to have taken place without the knowledge of 2/8 Battalion or [2 Greek Regiment](#), although both were considerably nearer (than [19 Battalion](#)) to the Turkish fort.

✓

On the front held by [Suda Force](#), General Weston's command, there were no major developments. The 1st Welch had patrols out in the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#) rounding up the last remnants of glider troops. The allotment of 2/8 Battalion and [2 Greek Regiment](#) to Brigadier Vasey and NZ Division made some rearrangement necessary within [Suda Force](#) itself, and so 2/2 Australian Field Regiment, a company of Rangers, and troops from 23 LAA Battery RM, now took over the defence of the [Canea](#) plain. The members of a Royal Marine searchlight battery were also turned into an infantry battalion and given a defensive position to the south of [Canea](#).

These arrangements rather suggest that too defensive an outlook had been establishing itself. It may be that [Freyberg](#), reading the consequences of the counter-attack's failure at [Maleme](#), was anxious to keep some troops in reserve for the hard battles that were bound to follow the enemy's continued reinforcement through [Maleme](#). On the other hand, the sea invasion had been beaten and there could now be little likelihood of further parachute landings in the [Maleme](#) area; and had some of these forces now defending [Canea](#) Plain been added to 2/8 Battalion and [2 Greek Regiment](#) for an all-out attack on the Turkish fort area, an unsteady flank might have been cleared and a stronger position established for eventual defence. Alternatively, had they been used to reinforce 10 Brigade, it might not have been yet too late to demolish Colonel Heidrich and 3 Parachute Regiment. But all eyes were on [Maleme](#) now.

CRETE

III: THE DECISION TO WITHDRAW 5 BRIGADE

III: The Decision to Withdraw 5 Brigade

At [Creforce](#) HQ and Division the hours passed anxiously on 22 May while the commanders waited for firm news of the counterattack and tried to weigh up the significance of the reports that reached them. By the middle of the afternoon it had become sufficiently clear that the attacking battalions had failed to establish themselves on their objectives. It was obvious to [General Freyberg](#) that the enemy was pouring in reinforcements of men and material and 'quickly building up a formidable force.'

[Freyberg's](#) report continues:

The vital question was whether we could attack and dislodge the enemy from the [Maleme](#) Aerodrome area.... The enemy had absolute air superiority; not only could he bomb any movement but he could call upon about 400 fighter ground-strafters with cannon guns which would, and in fact did, prevent any movement during the hours of daylight. We had counter-attacked by night and succeeded, but our success had been temporary only as we were bombed off again as soon as it was daylight. On the other hand the possession of [Maleme](#) landing grounds was vital....

But if we had to regain [Maleme](#) and if we could not make the necessary moves by day, any counter-attack must be again by night. And if it was not too late it must be the coming night.

What forces were available? Some reserve must be kept in hand in case of failure, and whichever force was to be employed for the counter-attack must be capable of reaching the scene that night. In practice, the only troops available were 5 Brigade which, however weary, was on the spot; 18 and 2/7 Battalions of 4 Brigade; and 1 Welch. For 10 Brigade was already fully engaged, 2/8 Battalion had an important part in the line and, even if it could have been relieved quickly enough, was only two companies strong.

At 5 p.m. [Freyberg](#) called a conference and gave his orders for a fresh counter-attack. Fourth Brigade was to be brought forward and apparently 5 Brigade was also to take part, though the main thrust would presumably have had to come from [18 Battalion](#) and [2/7 Battalion](#).

But the opportunity was now lost and the future belonged to the enemy. When Puttick—who favoured a further attack by 5 Brigade—returned to Division he found that the position had altered for the worse. There was ‘considerable enemy movement’ on 10 Brigade front and ‘the road between 4 and 5 Inf Bde HQs was commanded by an enemy detachment including a MG.’¹ From Division he went to 4 Brigade HQ, where a Bren carrier was standing by to take him on to [Platanias](#). But at 4 Brigade HQ he learnt of ‘a strong enemy attack against [GALATAS](#) from the direction of the Prison, while enemy movement from South to NW of galatas

¹ NZ Div Report, para 97.

indicated the probability of important enemy forces attempting to cut the canea–maleme

road behind or East of 5 Inf Bde. This road had always been commanded by enemy MG and mortar fire on several occasions.’¹

These were important considerations: an enemy breakthrough either north to the main road or north-east through [Galatas](#) would have made the situation of 5 Brigade untenable; to commit further forces west of [Platanias](#) would involve the risk of having them also cut off along with 5 Brigade. Finally, Brigadier Hargest—no doubt in a discussion initiated by telephone or wireless from 4 Brigade HQ—‘represented that his troops had been severely attacked, were considerably exhausted, and certainly not fit to make a further attack.’²

The sequel shows that Hargest underrated at this stage the stamina and spirit of his battalions. The operations of [23 Battalion](#) on 25, 27 and 28 May, those of [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#) on 26, 27 and 28 May, and the conduct of [21 Battalion](#) throughout, sufficiently show that the troops were more than ready to do all that could be asked

of them. And this is to select only the more conspicuous instances.

None the less Puttick, who now turned against the idea of further attack, was probably right in doing so. The enemy strength at [Maleme](#) was great enough for such an attack to have little chance of success even if every possible reinforcement had been contributed. There was still a chance, however slender, but to have pursued it would have been little better than gambling and failure would probably have destroyed any hope of orderly withdrawal.

Accordingly, Puttick got into touch with [Freyberg](#) by telephone and discussed the new situation, urging that 5 Brigade should be withdrawn from the exposed position. It was clear to [Freyberg](#) that such a move would mean a sacrifice of territory unlikely to be regained. But to replace 5 Brigade with 18 and 2/7 Battalions was not worth attempting. For what the five battalions now on the [Maleme](#) front could not hold could hardly be held by two.

In effect, then, to withdraw 5 Brigade was to accept the loss of [Maleme](#). The third crisis of the battle had been reached—the first being the assault on [Maleme](#) on 20 May and the second the failure of the counter-attack. And the second and the third were both consequences of the first.

There seemed no help for it, however, and [Freyberg](#) told Puttick to discuss the situation at Divisional HQ with Brigadier Stewart who would have authority to decide on the action to be

¹ NZ Div Report, para 97.

² Ibid, para 98.

taken. Puttick, therefore, instead of going on to 5 Brigade, returned to Division. There, at 9 p.m., ¹ he and Stewart met and decided to withdraw 5 Brigade, Brigadier Hargest's view as expressed on the telephone no doubt being a powerful consideration. And indeed it is clear from other sources that by now Hargest saw the situation more darkly. Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry 'had R/T conversations with Brig Hargest during the evening, though I cannot remember now what was said except

that he was pessimistic.' ² And if, as seems likely, the time 2107 hours is right, and the time 1107 wrong, for an entry in 5 Brigade war diary which reports Hargest as telling Division by wireless that 'they should withdraw that night', we get a further glimpse of the circumstances in which a decision was taken—a decision which as Stewart now comments 'virtually amounted to accepting the loss of Crete.' ³ Nor, all things considered, is it easy to see what other decision was possible.

A warning order was sent by wireless to 5 Brigade at 10.30 p.m. 'Prepare withdraw tonight 22/23 May 28 Battalion to old posn remainder in rear of 28 Battalion details later. 32 vehicles being forwarded Strutt ⁴ as rd clear. Sending you all spare trucks and at least 10 3 ton lorries salvage all possible.' ⁵

The final orders for the withdrawal were worked out in detail by Gentry by 12.15 a.m. on 23 May and sent forward to all brigades concerned by special despatch rider. They ran:

Estimated enemy has 5 bns with heavy mortars and some motor cyclists vicinity MALEME aerodrome. An attack on 10 Bde front this afternoon by two enemy coys was repulsed with heavy loss.

Aust Bde came under comd Div 2200 hrs tonight.

5 Bde will withdraw night 22–23 May to defensive posn along coast between former posn held by 28 Bn and North and South line through 046572.

20 Bn and 22 Bn come under comd 4 Bde on arrival both moving to posn occupied by 20 Bn on 21 May. 20 Bn taking over from 2/7 Aust Bn who reverts to comd Aust Bde on completion of handover.

10 Bde will move right flank fwd to hold former FDLs including 047572 and hill 046559.

7 Fd Coy and 19 Army Tp Coy will move to area of sq 0656 coming under comd 10 Bde on arrival.

10 Bde will supply guides to meet these parties on the main road.

5 Fd Amb will move to area South of rd junc 077563.

Arty to be in depth in infantry localities about squares 0356 and 0456.

¹ NZ Div Report.

² Statement by Brig Gentry.

³ Statement by Brig Stewart.

⁴ That is, 'under Lt-Col Strutt'.

⁵ 5 Bde WD.

Comd 5 Bde may move one Bn to area SE of 28 Bn provided that area between 28 Bn and eastern boundary adequately held.

All moves to be completed before daylight if possible.

32 vehicles are being supplied for CRA. Two motor ambulances and one 3 ton lorry for wounded. All other spare trucks and lorries available being forwarded. ¹

The effect of the most important paragraphs in this order may be briefly summarised. Fifth Brigade's new front line was to be forward of [Platanias](#) and its battalions were to be disposed along the main coast road to link up with the slightly modified line of 10 Brigade. Fourth Brigade was to regain [20 Battalion](#) and take over [22 Battalion](#), which should thus get a chance to carry out the reorganisation it so badly needed.

The advantages of the plan were that the line was shortened, the safety of the line of communication secured, and the junction between [Group West](#) and Colonel Heidrich's force, if it was to be made at all, would have to be made by means of a long detour to the south. Moreover, Puttick would have the advantage of holding a single front. The shortcomings of the plan are equally plain. It meant that the enemy could now build up without interference even from our artillery and therefore must inevitably become strong enough in time to force a continuation of the withdrawal.

CRETE

IV: RETIMO, HERAKLION, AND CREFORCE

IV: Retimo, Heraklion, and Creforce

i

At [Retimo](#) the enemy made no attempt on 22 May to reinforce, and the spirit among the defenders was briskly offensive. Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell had planned two attacks, one to the east and one to the west. The eastern attack began at dawn with a junction between two companies, each less a platoon, of 2/1 Australian Battalion and a Greek battalion just south of the Stavromenos oil factory. The factory was then bombarded by such mortars and guns as could be brought to bear and at 6 p.m. Australians and Greeks began a converging attack. But the latter made no headway and the Australians were held up fifty yards short of their objective. The attack was eventually called off and the Australians were ordered back to guard the airfield, while the Greeks remained to contain the beleaguered enemy.

Meanwhile, in the west [2/11 Australian Battalion](#) had once more set out to attack [Perivolia](#). All day the men tried to get forward under heavy air attack but were held up by heavy machine-gun fire. A simultaneous attack by Greek forces coming up from the south forced the enemy into a church but failed with heavy losses to take the church itself.

Once again therefore Campbell had to postpone his hopes till the following day. But by now one of the two I tanks which had been recaptured with the airfield had been got going again and men from a carrier company began to train with it so as to take part in the next day's attack.

ii

At [Heraklion](#) the decision of the [German High Command](#) to concentrate on [Maleme](#) had also had its effects. The onslaught from the air was noticeably reduced. Supplies were dropped and some light guns, but most of this fell as manna into the

hands of the defence. Towards evening, however, there was further strafing of the airfield and finally more parachutists came down—about 300 of them west of the town and about 500 west of the airfield.¹ Of the first party, a strong force dug itself in astride the road to [Retimo](#) about two miles west of the town.

Our own troops were far from inactive. Patrols from 2 Yorks and Lancs mopped up south of the town and were busy all day; and west of the town Greek troops did good work cleaning out machine-gun posts. The Greek barracks at the west end of the airfield was finally cleared during the day while patrols from the Black Watch, aided at first by two I tanks which soon broke down, cleared the east end.

The 2nd Leicesters and [2/4 Australian Battalion](#) patrolled to the south of their positions, and the former with the aid of the guns forced the surrender of a fairly large body of enemy.

The only serious danger to the general position at this stage was in the east, where the Germans, mindful no doubt of their orders to deny us the use of the airfield, held on strongly to positions from which they could enfilade it. It was not possible to muster a force strong enough to drive them out, but two companies of [2 Leicesters](#) were sent to reinforce the Black Watch in case they should attack.

iii

[General Freyberg's](#) reactions to the main battle in the [Maleme](#) area on 22 May have already been dealt with in the section dealing with the decision to withdraw. About [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) he

¹ This is according to British reports. Enemy records do not confirm the dropping of more parachutists here until 24 May, but [4 Air Fleet](#) report mentions that weapons, ammunition, supplies and dressings were dropped 'where required'. So the British observers may have been mistaken.

felt less serious concern. Wireless contact seems to have been working well enough for him to know that the situation in both sectors was in hand and he was able to give a reasonably cheerful account of them to General Wavell. The fact that the enemy had cut road communications between [Canea](#) and [Retimo](#) and perhaps

between [Heraklion](#) and [Retimo](#) was causing him some worry, but he hoped that the [Retimo](#) garrison would be able to clear up the situation provided there were no further landings. He had by now ordered 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to concentrate on [Heraklion](#), but because the position there was so much less grim than at [Maleme](#), he had done so not to reinforce the garrison there but in the hope of bringing the battalion by road to the support of his main front.

Indeed, his main problem was how to reinforce this. At 2.10 p.m. he signalled to Wavell asking that the battalion of Queen's Royal Regiment, which he hoped would be sent from Egypt as reinforcements, be put ashore at [Suda Bay](#) since too much loss of time would follow if it were to land at [Tymbaki](#) according to plan.¹ But back came the reply that, after consultation with the [Navy](#), General Wavell had decided it was impossible to land any troops in [Suda Bay](#), and there was nothing for it but to try and hold on with what troops were already there. It is evident from this message that Wavell, not yet realising how desperate the situation was, still had hopes that the enemy might not be able to go on standing up to his losses; and he promised relief when the situation allowed it. More concrete was his statement that he was trying to arrange for a commando to land in the south and cross the hills northwards to help. And if [Freyberg](#) thought the situation at [Maleme](#) was really grave he would try and arrange for [RAF](#) fighters to strafe the front early next morning and land within the defence perimeter when their ammunition and petrol were exhausted. He advised [Freyberg](#) to consider whether it would not be possible to move troops from [Retimo](#) to [Canea](#), replacing them with troops from [Heraklion](#), and in [Heraklion](#) making good the loss by replacements from [Tymbaki](#).

There was scant comfort in all this for [General Freyberg](#). The addition of a commando to his force would not turn the battle; nor would a raid by fighters, however cheering the sight of the [RAF](#) might be for his men. Still, he must take such heart from it as he could, at the same time doing his best to ensure that the true situation was seen plainly at GHQ Middle East.

Accordingly, late that night he set out to explain the position. He had already reported that he was trying to have three I tanks

¹ O. 474, [Creforce](#) to Mideast. 16 Inf Bde HQ and 2 Queen's left

brought by sea that night from [Heraklion](#).¹ In the same message he had briefly explained that 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders had not yet reached [Heraklion](#), that withdrawal to a new line had become necessary, and that the administrative situation was becoming difficult. He now went on to amplify these statements.

At [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) the situation was reasonably satisfactory. But the former was probably cut off from the latter and from [Canea](#). None the less, he had ordered the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to close on [Heraklion](#), with which they were already in touch, and try to make their way from there by road to [Suda](#).

At [Maleme](#) the enemy had kept on landing troop-carriers, not only on the airfield but on the beaches and in the area to the west. In three hours during the afternoon 59 had been counted landing, and this rate of 20 an hour might be taken as an average for this day and the preceding day. [Freyberg](#)'s intention of attacking the aerodrome area that night had been frustrated by a thrust up to the coast road which would cut off the troops on the [Maleme](#) front. He had therefore decided he must secure his defence by withdrawal to a shorter line. But this meant that [Maleme](#) could now become an operational airfield in enemy hands and within a very short distance of [Suda Bay](#).

Nor was this the only danger. Some small German parties were reported to have been landed by sea on the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#) already that day. It had to be remembered that all the routes used by the defence were vulnerable to landings by sea or parachute.

Taking everything into account, he had been forced to decide on the shorter line. But the enemy would soon be equal in numbers and his own troops could not fight without rest. None the less they would fight all the same if they could be maintained. But this would have to be done by using [Suda](#). For [Tymbaki](#) and [Sfakia](#) were the only ports open in the south, and only the road to [Tymbaki](#) was complete, while there was not transport to enable the use of either.²

It will be seen from this message that [Freyberg](#) was mainly concerned, apart from the immediate operational situation which had forced the withdrawal, with the

problems of reinforcement and maintenance. At this time he evidently knew that 2 Queen's was on the way but felt that it would not be of immediate use unless it were landed where it could at once be brought into action. This would be possible only if it landed at [Suda Bay](#); and this

¹ 4738, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 11.15 p.m., 22 May.

² C. 268, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 23 May (Situation at 10 p.m., 22 May).

in its turn was impossible because of the enemy control of the air. ¹ Even if it had been possible we may doubt whether a single battalion would have been enough, and must assume that stronger forces could not be got together in time. ²

The maintenance problem, which had now become so pressing, [General Freyberg](#) dealt with at greater length in a message sent the following morning, and it will be convenient to defer treatment of it until a later chapter. ³

iv

It is evident from the messages sent about this time that although [Freyberg](#) was still painfully conscious of the fact that his communication routes were vulnerable to sea landings, the danger was much less acute than it had been. This was largely due to the [Navy's](#) successful operations during the previous night and these have already been described. ⁴ But the [Navy's](#) losses had been heavy, and full credit cannot be given to its men for the part they played at sea unless we make clear in what difficult circumstances that part was played.

When we left the Fleet Force D had destroyed or dispersed the vessels of the enemy's 1 Motor Sailing Flotilla, and Force C, under Rear-Admiral King, after making contact with what must have been 2 Motor Sailing Flotilla leaving Melos, had withdrawn because ammunition was running low and because the speed of the force was the speed of its slowest vessel, HMS Carlisle.

Force D after its engagement with the enemy convoy took a further sweep to the east and north but met with nothing further. At 3.30 a.m. its commander, Rear-

Admiral Glennie, turned west, giving his ships a rendezvous for 6 a.m. about 30 miles to the west of Crete. His original orders from the Commander-in-Chief [Mediterranean](#) had been, if there were no developments during the night, to work to the northward; but there had indeed been developments, and the force was so low in AA ammunition that he felt it might not be able to deal with the air attack that must certainly be expected if it were caught by day in northern waters. Accordingly the force sailed to the west, and it was not till it had already left the Aegean that it received an amplifying order from the Commander-in-Chief by which it was to join Force C and sweep in search of convoys within 25 miles of Melos.

¹ All the fast warships that might have made landing at [Suda Bay](#) possible were otherwise engaged.

² Even if the units were available the necessary fast shipping was not.

³ See pp. 273– 4.

⁴ See pp. 207– 9.

This was the reason why Force C found itself alone when it encountered 2 Motor Sailing Flotilla near Melos. Had the two forces been together they might have felt justified in pressing home an attack, relying on their combined AA power to deter bombing attack. Withdrawal did not save Force C, however, from this: the force was under continual bombing attack from 9.45 a.m. till 1.15 p.m., with the result that [Naiad](#) had two turrets put out of action and her speed reduced to 16 knots, while Carlisle was also hit.

Finding his force isolated under this severe attack, the commander of Force C called on the main body west of [Crete](#), Force A 1, for help and made towards the Kithera Channel. The commander of Force A 1 answered the call for support at 12.25 p.m. by making for the Aegean. It was by this time without Force D which, because of its ammunition shortage, had been ordered back to [Alexandria](#). But it had been joined by Force B which had made no contact during the night, had found itself at daylight about 25 miles north of [Canea](#) and, after a bombing which lasted from 6.30

to 8 a.m. and in which [Fiji](#) and [Gloucester](#) were both hit, had joined the main body at half past eight.

The whole of this force was also rather short of ammunition, [Gloucester](#) being reduced to 18 per cent, [Fiji](#) to 30 per cent, [Dido](#) to 25 per cent, [Orion](#) to 38 per cent and [Ajax](#) to 40 per cent. [Valiant](#) and [Warspite](#) were best off, with 66 per cent and 80 per cent respectively.

It was a serious weakness with which to face what was to be a punishing day. The first casualty was [Greyhound](#). About the time of the junction with Force C, she was returning from the sinking of a large caique when she was hit by two bombs. At 2.6 p.m. she sank. When she was hit, 15 minutes before, [Kandahar](#) and [Kingston](#) were sent to pick up survivors. At 2.2 p.m. [Fiji](#), and five minutes later [Gloucester](#), were sent to give [Kandahar](#) and [Kingston](#) AA support. The men from [Greyhound](#) swimming in the water and the ships trying to rescue them were alike bombed and machine-gunned continuously.

Force A 1 now closed with Force C—at only 18 knots as [Warspite](#) had been hit and her 4-inch and 6-inch batteries put out of action—to help, and its commander told the commander of Force C that [Fiji](#) and [Gloucester](#) were very short of HAA ammunition. Accordingly the commander of Force C ordered both to withdraw.

At 3.30 p.m. both [Fiji](#) and [Gloucester](#) were seen coming up astern of Force A 1 at high speed with enemy aircraft overhead. Twenty minutes later [Gloucester](#) was hit, set on fire, and immobilised. The air was too hot with enemy planes for [Fiji](#) to be able to help, and the commanders of Force A 1 and Force C decided they could not risk the battle fleet to go back and support her.

Air attack continued for the rest of the afternoon with a break after ten minutes past three. But it was renewed at 4.45 and [Valiant](#) was hit by two bombs, though without serious damage. By this time both forces were withdrawing to the southwest, Force C almost out of HAA ammunition.

The next casualty was [Fiji](#). With [Kandahar](#) and [Kingston](#) she had lost sight of the main fleet and was 30 miles due east of it when she fell victim to a lone Me 109. A single bomb dropped alongside and the engines were crippled. Other bombs followed and at 8.15 p.m. the ship heeled over. [Kandahar](#) and [Kingston](#) lowered

boats and rafts and then withdrew to wait till dark. They then returned and rescued 523 men. At 10.45 they set off to join Force C.

Meanwhile Force A 1 had been joined during the afternoon by 5 Destroyer Flotilla from Malta— Kelly, Kashmir, Kipling, Kelvin and Jackal. As soon as he learnt at 7.28 p.m. that Fiji was sinking, the commander of Force A 1 sent 10 Destroyer Flotilla— Stuart, Voyager and Vendetta—which had left Alexandria the preceding day and was now en route to join him, to the rescue.

It was by now dark and the day's losses were complete: two cruisers and one destroyer sunk (Gloucester, Fiji and Greyhound), two battleships and two cruisers damaged (Warspite, Valiant, Naiad and Carlisle). The fleet claimed two enemy aircraft certainly shot down, six probably shot down, and five damaged.

But the day's work was not yet over. The commander of Force A 1 received orders at half past eight to send Decoy and Hero to the south coast to pick up the King of Greece, and on his own account sent 5 Destroyer Flotilla to patrol inside Kisamos and Canea Bays. Kipling developed steering trouble almost at once, but Kelly, Kashmir, Kelvin and Jackal carried on without her. In Canea Bay the first two met a caique full of troops and damaged it badly with gunfire. They then bombarded Maleme and withdrew. As they did so they met a second caique and this they set on fire. Kelvin and Jackal after investigating some shore lights withdrew independently.

Meanwhile 14 Destroyer Flotilla— Jervis, Ilex, Nizam and Havock—were patrolling off Heraklion, where they were to have been joined by Ajax and Orion who were on their way back to Alexandria with the rest of Force D. But at 10.30 p.m. the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean received a message from the commander of Force A 1 reporting on the ammunition situation. From this message the Commander-in-Chief understood that the battleships were out of pom-pom ammunition. He therefore decided to withdraw all forces to Alexandria.

The other naval activities of the day that ought to be mentioned are those of the Abdiel, which laid mines during darkness between Cephalonia and Levkas, and of the Rorqual which did the same in the Gulf of Salonika. And it was this night also that the Glenroy sailed from Alexandria for Tymbaki with HQ 16 Infantry Brigade, 900 men of the Queen's Royal Regiment, and 18 vehicles. Escorting her were

Coventry, Auckland and Flamingo.

CRETE

CHAPTER 6 – THE FOURTH DAY: 23 MAY

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CRETE

I: THE WITHDRAWAL OF 5 BRIGADE

I: The Withdrawal of 5 Brigade

i

About four o'clock on the afternoon of 22 May General Ringel had received his orders to take command of all forces in [Crete](#) and fly to [Maleme](#) at once. His instructions from General Löhr, commander of [4 Air Fleet](#), were to secure [Maleme](#) airfield, to clear [Suda Bay](#), to relieve the paratroops at [Retimo](#), to make contact with [Heraklion](#), and to occupy the whole island.

About 8 p.m. he and his HQ landed on the beach west of [Maleme](#) — [Maleme](#) airfield itself still being under shellfire. He made himself acquainted with the general position and found that I Battalion, 85 Mountain Regiment, had been advancing since 4 p.m. from Point 197 (about four miles south of Point 107) in an easterly direction, with Mount Monodhendri (Point 259) as the ultimate objective. It was expected to reach Point 229 (Mount Psathoyiannos) about ten o'clock. I Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment was following up. The main body of II Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, was in the area of Kamisiana and Point 295, but elements of it were also engaged on protective duties.

Since effective contact could not yet be made with any of the other groups under his command, Ringel's orders issued that evening confined their scope to the reorganisation of the reinforced [Group West](#) and preliminary preparations for an intensified drive towards [Canea](#). He defined the task of his force as first of all to secure the airfield and by neutralising the defence's guns to permit further troops to land unhampered.

For this purpose he formed three battle groups. The first consisted of 95 Engineer Battalion under Major Schaette. It was to relieve II Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment of all protective duties and to cover [Maleme](#) from the west and south by clearing [Kastelli](#) and Palaiokhora. The second group consisted of all the paratroops and was under Colonel Ramcke, who now reverted to the command of

the [Assault Regiment](#). His task was to assemble the paratroops and form them into a strong battalion under regimental command. With this he would cover the airfield against attack from the east and co-operate with the third group in the attack towards [Canea](#).

The third group consisted of Colonel Utz's I and II Battalions of 100 Mountain Regiment and I Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment. On it the enemy's main hopes now rested. Its task was to drive east in conjunction with [Ramcke Group](#), and to continue the enveloping movement round the south flank that had already begun. By this manoeuvre Ringel hoped to eliminate the New Zealand artillery, join up with Heidrich's [Group Centre](#), and cut the coast road near [Ay Marina](#).

ii

Had 5 Brigade remained in its forward positions another twenty-four hours it seems likely that the enemy plan might have brought about the result which Brigadier Hargest feared and cut off the brigade. And if the second counter-attack had been carried out the net would have had a still larger yield. But, as we have seen, orders were already on the way that night for 5 Brigade to withdraw. They reached Hargest about 1 a.m. At roughly the same time Captain Dawson got back over the hills from [23 Battalion](#). This was fortunate; for, owing to the destruction of the last No. 18 set, there was no wireless communication forward. The route was dangerous and familiar to few; no one had a better chance than the resolute Dawson—weary though he was—of getting through in the dark. So, while the Brigadier arranged transport for the evacuation of [5 Field Ambulance](#), Dawson drew up the withdrawal orders.

An hour later the orders were ready and with Lieutenants [Chinchen](#)¹ two liaison officers, Dawson set out. Two light tanks which had been ordered to cover the evacuation of [5 Field Ambulance](#) from [Modhion](#) left at the same time. Once on the main road, the tank commander was told by troops there that the enemy had an anti-tank gun and a machine gun covering the [Platanias](#) bridge. Dawson was sceptical, having crossed the bridge without difficulty two hours before. But he could not persuade the tanks to take his party forward. He therefore left the tanks³ and walked on with the two LOs. At first he was going to ford the stream and avoid the bridge; but to save time and

¹ Maj M. P. Chinchon, MC; born Hokitika, 29 Aug 1915; journalist; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

³ This is based on Dawson's report. [3 Hussars](#) WD says: 'Farran and Childs sent fwd a mile to hold a bridge while leading bns withdrew. This left two tanks in hand as another had been ditched and SL's tank not returned.' According to the same source the squadron's task for 23 May was to prevent infiltration down the main road or between the road and the beach.

because 'water too cold' he used the bridge. There was no enemy there, and the party went on, apprising the Engineer Detachment of the withdrawal en route ¹ and reaching [23 Battalion](#) in the early dawn.

His arrival is described by Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie:

... Capt. Dawson arrived at 23 Bn HQ very exhausted. It was full daylight. He said he had some 'very surprising news' for me. My remark was, 'What! Have they tossed it in?' (Wishful thinking, I'm afraid; but I did feel that we had made a mess of them the day before. And the morning was so quiet and peaceful with not even a plane in the sky, as yet.) Dawson said, 'We are to retire to the [Platanias](#) R line. Will you get in touch with all Bns. The withdrawal was supposed to start half-an-hour ago.' I gave Dawson my blanket and told him to have a sleep. I would wake him up in good time. We had phone communication to Jim Burrows and John Allen. Jim said he would inform Dittmer. ²

By about 5 a.m. all the battalion commanders except Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer had reached [23 Battalion](#) HQ for a conference. ³ The orders were bald enough. The battalions were to withdraw at 5.30 a.m., ⁴ each providing its own protection. The route was to be over the hills south of the coast road, and defensive positions were to be taken up by 10 a.m. The 28th Battalion was to hold its original front. The other units were all allotted new positions in the same general area—except for [20 Battalion](#) which was to move back to the [Canea](#) area and come once more under the command of 4 Brigade.

The order to withdraw came as a surprise to the battalion commanders. 'None

of the unit representatives present considered they would have any difficulty in disengaging, as the enemy was so quiet at this stage. All were of opinion that we could hold the position.’⁵ Yet the withdrawal was necessary. The last chance of counter-attack was already gone. For 5 Brigade to be left where it was would have been to invite disaster. And the enemy quiescence on which Leckie comments was deceptive; for the move round the south flank was already under way.

iii

It remained now to carry out the orders. Among those present had been the commander of 1 Company [27 MG Battalion](#), and he set off at once with all except Lieutenant MacDonald's platoon to take up a new position at [Ay Marina](#).

¹ NZE warned 5 Fd Amb and 4 Fd Hyg Sec in [Modhion](#).

² Letter from [Col D. F. Leckie](#), 12 Apr 1951.

³ Maj Burrows had sent a sergeant, before leaving his own HQ, to warn Dittmer of the conference. For some unexplained reason this message did not reach him in time.

⁴ If Dawson was right and the withdrawal should already have begun, this must have been a fresh time arranged on the spot.

⁵ Letter from Col Leckie.

Meanwhile Dittmer had learned from one of his officers that the [23 Battalion](#) companies on his right were about to withdraw. Leaving orders for his company commanders to report to his HQ he hurried to [23 Battalion](#) HQ, about a thousand yards away. Here he discovered that not only was the withdrawal to take place but that [28 Battalion](#) was to be rearguard. ‘I went extremely rude about being left in such a manner but had little time to go into the reason for it. I knew that enemy would see other units going over high ground to East and then 28 Bn would catch it.’

It is not difficult to sympathise. A daylight withdrawal was an extremely disagreeable thing to have to contemplate, and withdrawal was not temperamentally congenial to a man of Dittmer's fighting spirit. But it was necessary none the less, and the unfortunate failure of the news to reach him in good time was the sort of mishap that, although it never fails to infuriate its victim, is inevitable in the haste of battle.

Time was needed for the orders to get down to companies and platoons. But about 6.30 a.m. the main body of [23 Battalion](#), led by Major [Thomason](#)² and accompanied by Captain Dawson, left the area. C Company under Lieutenant W. B. Thomas followed half an hour later, acting as rearguard to the battalion. A platoon of D Company came out separately and Headquarters Company 2 withdrew with [21 Battalion](#). Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie, who had stayed behind to see that all his men got safely away, buried the battalion's payroll and finally came out alone, overtaking a platoon of [21 Battalion](#) near [Modhion](#).

Leckie left without his Medical Officer, Captain [Stewart](#),³ however. For, although the walking wounded in [23 Battalion](#) RAP had gone back before full daylight, Stewart still had some sixty stretcher cases under his charge. These men came from 20, 22, 23, and 28 Battalions. The Medical Officer of [22 Battalion](#), Captain Longmore, had been taken prisoner along with the rest of his RAP on 21 May; Captain [Gilmour](#)⁴ of [20 Battalion](#) had no facilities; Captain [Mules](#)⁵ of [28 Battalion](#) had been wounded; and Captain Moody, who had come back with the survivors of [22 Battalion](#), belonged to 5 Field Ambulance.

Stewart took the hard decision that it was his duty to remain with those of the wounded who could not be moved and see that



AY MARINA
AY MARINA



A GERMAN MACHINE-GUNNER COVERS THE ADVANCE
Theodhoroï Island in the background

A GERMAN MACHINE-GUNNER COVERS THE ADVANCE
Theodhoroï Island in the background

'THE GALATAS HEIGHTS' FROM THE ALIKIANOU-CANEA ROAD LOOKING NORTH-EAST

The feature on the left is Pink Hill, on the right Cemetery Hill. Galatas lies behind the centre feature.



'THE GALATAS HEIGHTS' FROM THE ALIKIANOU- CANEA ROAD LOOKING NORTH-EAST

The feature on the left is **Pink Hill**, on the right **Cemetery Hill**. **Galatas** lies behind the centre feature



THE CHURCH AT GALATAS
German graves in foreground

THE CHURCH AT GALATAS
German graves in foreground



FARRAN'S DISABLED TANK IN A GALATAS STREET
FARRAN'S DISABLED TANK IN A GALATAS STREET



GERMANS ENTER GALATAS AFTER THE ATTACK
Farran's tank on left
GERMANS ENTER GALATAS AFTER THE ATTACK
Farran's tank on left



A BRITISH DESTROYER HIT BY A BOMB
The depth-charges have exploded. The ship is probably the Nubian, which subsequently reached Alexandria

A BRITISH DESTROYER HIT BY A BOMB

The depth-charges have exploded. The ship is probably the [Nubian](#), which subsequently reached [Alexandria](#)



Brigadier Hargest during the battle

Brigadier Hargest during the battle



Brigadier G. A. Vasey, commander of
19 Australian Infantry Brigade, the
morning after his return from Crete

**Brigadier G. A. Vasey, commander of 19 Australian Infantry Brigade, the morning after his
return from Crete**

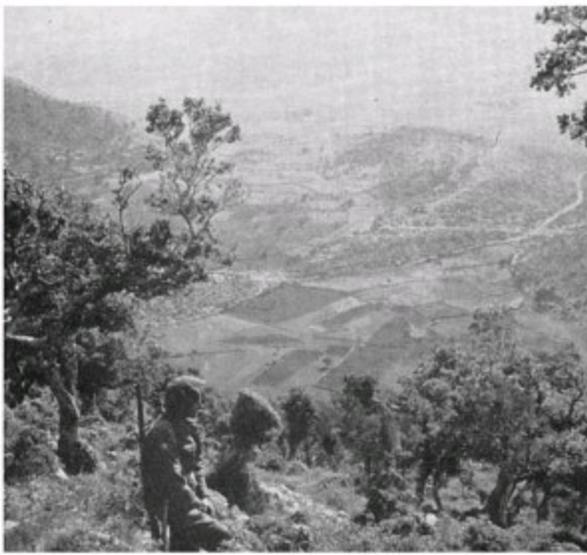


THE WITHDRAWAL FROM STILOS

A Bren carrier shelters under a tree from air attack

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM STILOS

A Bren carrier shelters under a tree from air attack



Askifou Plain from the north

Askifou Plain from the north



Filling water-bottle from a well

Filling water-bottle from a well



Pushing a truck over the bank at the end of the retreat

Pushing a truck over the bank at the end of the retreat



SAPPERS AFTER THE MARCH OVER THE MOUNTAINS

SAPPERS AFTER THE MARCH OVER THE MOUNTAINS



A RAVINE LEADING DOWN TO SFAKIA

A RAVINE LEADING DOWN TO SFAKIA



MOVING DOWN TOWARDS THE BEACH

MOVING DOWN TOWARDS THE BEACH



SFAKIA
SFAKIA



SFAKIA FROM THE AIR An arrow marks the beach
SFAKIA FROM THE AIR An arrow marks the beach

THE VILLAGE OF SFAKIA AND THE BEACH AT THE TIME OF THE EVACUATION



THE VILLAGE OF SFAKIA AND THE BEACH AT THE TIME OF THE EVACUATION



CREFORCE HQ CAVE AT SFAKIA
CREFORCE HQ CAVE AT SFAKIA

INSIDE THE CAVE Pte T. Hall, General Freyberg (centre), Capt
J. A. V. Morse, RN



INSIDE THE CAVE Pte T. Hall, General Freyberg (centre), Capt J. A. V. Morse, RN



HMAS NIZAM RETURNS TO ALEXANDRIA WITH TROOPS
FROM CRETE

HMAS NIZAM RETURNS TO ALEXANDRIA WITH TROOPS FROM CRETE



ON BOARD A DESTROYER
ON BOARD A DESTROYER



BACK IN EGYPT
BACK IN EGYPT



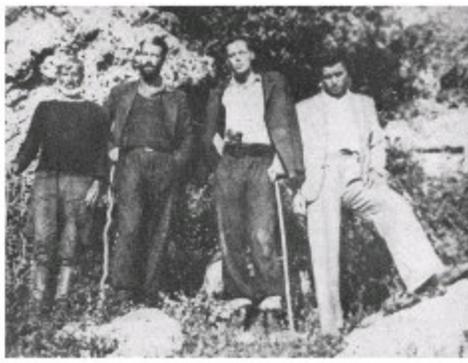
Vice-Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, C-in-C Mediterranean, and Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser, Prime Minister of New Zealand, meet returning troops

Vice-Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, C-in-C Mediterranean, and Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser, Prime Minister of New Zealand, meet returning troops



Brigadier E. Puttick and Brigadier L. M. Inglis
(Photograph taken shortly after Crete campaign)

Brigadier E. Puttick and Brigadier L. M. Inglis (Photograph taken shortly after [Crete](#) campaign)



Staff-Sergeant T. Moir (second from left) who returned to Crete in February 1943 to help escapers, shown with two Cretans and an English airman. He was captured shortly after the photograph was taken

Staff-Sergeant T. Moir (second from left) who returned to Crete in February 1943 to help escapers, shown with two Cretans and an English airman. He was captured shortly after the photograph was taken



Ravines in mountainous country crossed by escapers

Ravines in mountainous country crossed by escapers



The cove where the Royal Navy picked up Moir's party

The cover where the Royal Navy picked up Moir's party

¹ Statement by Brig Dittmer, 1950.

² Maj H. H. Thomason, MM, ED; Motueka; born Ngatimoti, Nelson, 9 Oct 1896; estate manager and orchardist; wounded 29 May 1941.

³ Capt R. S. Stewart; Gore; born NZ 17 Mar 1906; medical practitioner; RMO 23 Bn May 1940–May 1941; p.w. 23 May 1941.

⁴ Capt W. L. M. Gilmour; born Scotland, 19 Dec 1914; medical practitioner; RMO 20 Bn Jan–Nov 1941; killed in action 30 Nov 1941.

⁵ Capt C. M. Mules; Dargaville; born Woodville, 24 Oct 1909; medical practitioner; RMO 28 Bn Nov 1940–May 1941; wounded 21 May 1941.

they were properly treated by the enemy; for at that time it was by no means certain that the Germans would follow the usages of war with regard to prisoners as punctiliously as they did on the whole in the Mediterranean theatre.

Captain Griffiths,¹ the 23 Battalion chaplain, decided for similar reasons to remain with Stewart. And their two orderlies, Privates Walsh² and Buchanan,³ also elected to stay, as did Corporal Collie,⁴ a medical orderly from 20 Battalion. To the two officers fell the grim task of explaining to the wounded that capture was

inevitable.

Meanwhile [23 Battalion](#) had gone on its way and, after some casualties from air attack en route, reached the [Platanias](#) area about eight o'clock. It was at once put into line west of [Platanias](#) ridge and ordered to hold it until the other battalions passed through. C Company, the battalion rearguard, came back by a different route, along the line of the canal, and was in time to assist at an engagement near [Platanias](#) bridge.

Shortly after [23 Battalion](#), [22 Battalion](#) moved out and went through [Kondomari](#) over the hills towards [Platanias](#). Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew and his adjutant checked the men through as they set off in two groups. There were some casualties on the way, but the battalion reached the [Platanias](#) area without major mishap and Andrew reported to Brigade HQ at 8.27 a.m. From here he went on to Division, where he received his orders: the battalion, now rather more than 200 strong and divided into two companies under Captains Hanton and Campbell (who had been with [21 Battalion](#) but had brought his group out separately), was to take up a position east of the Engineer Detachment—now in new positions near [Ay Marina](#).

The 21st Battalion received the order for withdrawal from Major Harding, who may have represented Lieutenant-Colonel Allen at the dawn conference. It was decided that Headquarters Company should act as rearguard to the battalion, Allen remaining with it, and that the others should go ahead under Harding. Captain [Hetherington](#),⁵ the RMO, preferred to stay behind with the 70 wounded in his RAP, and the chaplain of [22 Battalion](#), Captain

¹ [Rev R. J. Griffiths](#), MBE; Waimate; born [Gisborne](#), 26 July 1905; Presbyterian minister; p.w. 23 May 1941.

² [Pte J. E. Walsh](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Auckland](#), 27 Jan 1915; NZR employee; p.w. 23 May 1941.

³ [L-Cpl W. T. F. Buchanan](#), MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 17 Apr 1917; lorry driver; p.w. 23 May 1941; escaped Nov 1941.

⁴ L-Cpl A. F. Collie; Bayswater, Southland; born Otautau, 7 Oct 1913; dairy assistant; p.w. 23 May 1941; repatriated Oct 1943.

⁵ Capt O. S. Hetherington, MBE; Rotorua; born Thames, 3 Apr 1903; medical practitioner; RMO 21 Bn Jan 1940–May 1941; p.w. 23 May 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.

Hurst,¹ decided to stay and help. The main body was clear of the position by 6.30 a.m. and Headquarters Company followed half an hour later. Both groups came under fire along the way and had casualties, but they reached [Platanias](#) about half past eight or shortly afterwards. The battalion then reformed and took up positions on the high ground south-east of [Platanias](#).

The three companies of [20 Battalion](#) had not had time to reform as a unit, and Major Burrows ordered the platoons to march with the units to which they were attached and to reorganise when they had reached their destination. This they did; but only A Company was sent on to join 4 Brigade again, the remainder being held back to help defend the [Platanias](#) line. Of those already in [Platanias](#) since falling back the day before—Headquarters Company and D Company—it will be more convenient to speak later.²

Dittmer had gone back to his battalion from [23 Battalion](#) HQ meditating his plans for the withdrawal and rearguard. When he reached his own HQ and found his company commanders waiting he issued his orders carefully. The main body was to move out, guided by the Intelligence Officer, Captain [Bennett](#),³ as soon as possible. Their departure would be covered by a rearguard party, consisting of an officer and section from each company, the whole group being commanded by Major Dyer.⁴

It was some time after six o'clock when the main body left. It met no opposition and reached the [Platanias](#) area about half past eight. As orders were to occupy the old position with whatever assistance could be found, the Intelligence Officer used the troops he had as well as he could and, within a quarter of an hour, had them manning a line.⁵

The rear party, meanwhile, was having a more difficult time. Major Dyer's orders

had been to keep the enemy off until the troops had time to reach [Platanias](#) and man the line. He resolved to take about three hours over his task and to reach [Platanias](#) between half past nine and ten o'clock.

An enemy advance began almost as soon as the main body had begun to move. The Bren guns of the rear party at once opened up and the enemy was checked. Dyer then sent back his two centre sections. As they were taking up an intermediate position

¹ [Rev W. E. W. Hurst](#), m.i.d.; Stratford; born Moira, Northern Ireland, 17 May 1912; Anglican minister; p.w. 23 May 1941.

² See pp. 257– 9.

³ [Lt-Col C. M. Bennett](#), DSO; [Wellington](#); born [Rotorua](#), 27 Jul 1913; radio announcer; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Nov 1942–Apr 1943; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁴ According to some sources 18 Platoon of 23 Bn, under Lt G. H. Cunningham, came out with the Maori rearguard. Dittmer has no recollection of this. Lt MacDonald's MG detachment—with the German MG—did, however, travel with 28 Bn.

⁵ 5 Bde's plan seems to have envisaged 28 Bn as moving out first and taking up positions through which the other battalions could pass. But delays in starting and the absence of Lt-Col Dittmer from the conference no doubt caused the change in plan.

the enemy followed up with fire from mortars and machine guns. The two outside sections then fell back into line with the centre sections. This manoeuvre was repeated with variations to a second and a third intermediate position. At each pause two sections had to cover the retirement of the other two; and at each pause there was firing not only from the front but from the flanks. Dyer was especially concerned for his sea flank, for there the enemy was pressing hard and using captured Bofors viciously.

At the third pause—which seems to have been on the high ground between [Kondomari](#) and [Modhion](#)—Dyer found Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer who, with a platoon of about thirty men, had halted there to support the rear party. ‘It looked as though we were likely to be cut off, and under the circumstances, we felt the greatest admiration for our C.O. who had given us a tough task and then stayed back to see the job through.’¹

The party made two more stages, encountering en route much less machine-gun fire than before. At the last stage they found themselves getting covering fire from their comrades at [Platanias](#). But by this time the enemy had advanced level with them along the axis of the coast road and had brought up guns with him—perhaps Bofors—as well as machine guns, and these proved very troublesome. The rear party were forced to wade south along the river for some distance. Then one last dash was made up a slope almost destitute of cover and, although seven or eight men were hit, the greater number got over the crest and back inside their own front line. The time is difficult to establish but may have been as late as 2 p.m.

iv

While the forward battalions were making this withdrawal, the troops east of them had also had to be on the move. The Engineer Detachment and the [Field Punishment Centre](#) had been able to make their way out before daylight and had gone on to the area of [Ay Marina](#). One outlying picket of 19 [Army Troops Company](#) failed to get the order but, finding the others gone, managed to extricate itself and, moving south through the hills, rejoined its unit at [Sfakia](#)—a considerable feat.

The men of the [Field Punishment Centre](#) were reluctant to sacrifice their captured spandau machine guns and a heavy load of ammunition. They got them as far as the road but decided they would need help to get them any farther. Three men therefore went into enemy-held territory and impressed a donkey. Donkey carrying the machine guns and men the ammunition, they set off

¹ Report by Maj Dyer, the main source of this part of the account.

again, by now only three as the others had gone on. Enemy fire soon forced

them south into the hills and they decided to come on [Platanias](#) from the south. As they approached they found themselves in the middle of a minor battle, mounted two of their spandaus, and assisted in the capture of 20 enemy. By late afternoon they were back with [22 Battalion](#), their parent unit, to be welcomed by Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew with: 'What have you been pinching this time?' But spandaus and prodigals were a welcome addition to the battalion strength. ¹

The story of the artillery is less fortunate. Major Philp had got his orders from 5 Brigade at 4 a.m. This did not leave him time to organise the removal of his guns, even had there been transport to get them out in the dark. Thus A Troop had to leave both its 3·7 howitzers and B Troop its three Italian 75s. A few men from each troop stayed behind to disable them. C Troop had less distance to go and had four trucks to assist in towing its four guns. But one truck went over a steep bank and the other was found to have no towing attachment. Two guns had therefore to be 'spiked' and left behind. The remaining two were got safely to positions at [Ay Marina](#) chosen by Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt.

Without artillery, the gunners of A and B Troops and HQ [27 Battery](#) now became infantrymen and went into line alongside the [Maori Battalion](#). At this stage, it is worth noting, Strutt had in support of 5 Brigade the following guns: two French 75s from C Troop; his own four 75s (Italian) from 2/3 RAA Regiment; two Bofors from 156 LAA Regiment; two two-pounders from 106 RHA; and perhaps two French 75s from 2/3 RAA Regiment. All these were in position round [Platanias](#) and [Ay Marina](#) at this time.

▼

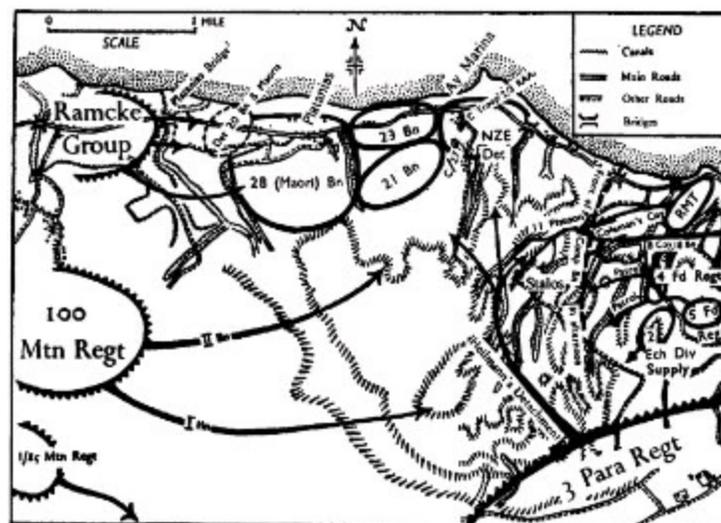
By ten o'clock that morning the new line had been established just west of [Platanias](#) and the main bodies of the battalions were all settled in. The Maori Battalion had taken over its old positions—from [Platanias](#) bridge south-east in a curve covering [Platanias](#)— as it came in; and on the high ground to its east were 21 and 23 Battalions. Farther east, in the [Ay Marina](#) area, were the Engineer Detachment with the remnants of 1 MG Company and the guns. And [22 Battalion](#) was a little farther to the east of the engineers.

The vital point in the front line at this stage was the '[Platanias](#) bridge', about a

mile west of [Platanias](#) itself. In the original system this bridge was the responsibility of D Company of the

¹ Pte L. G. J. Follas.

[Maori Battalion](#). ¹ And at daylight on 23 May Captain Baker and about fifteen men of D Company had been in the area. But when Baker saw the Engineer Detachment withdraw and learnt from it that there was to be a general withdrawal to the east of the



PLATANIAS AND STALOS, 23 MAY
PLATANIAS AND STALOS, 23 MAY

[Platanias](#) River, he decided to take his small force back to Brigade HQ and ask for orders. After some changes of plan he was finally ordered to collect elements of Headquarters Company and D Company of [20 Battalion](#)—60–70 men and officers—who had come back that morning from the counter-attack, and with them and his own party return to the D Company area and be ready to hold on there for the next twenty-four hours. He found these men at breakfast and divided them into two platoons.

But meanwhile the enemy had been moving fast. Using captured [RAF](#) trucks from [Maleme](#) and bringing with them mortars, they had come along the road; and no doubt it was this advance that had given the Maori rearguard so much worry about being outflanked.

Lieutenant Farran and Squadron Sergeant-Major Childs had been on guard at the bridge from about four in the morning to cover the withdrawal. What they understood to be the last party of

¹ It is odd that no arrangements seem to have been made for the demolition of the bridge. Perhaps hope of moving westward across it once more had not been entirely given up.

28 Battalion came through them some time before 8.45. ¹ According to Farran, his orders had been to fall back on **Platanias** when the Maoris were all through and so, with the enemy infantry advancing and some anti-tank fire troubling him, he withdrew his two tanks to the other two tanks of the squadron which had been ordered to cover the right flank of the brigade. Farran's two tanks were now ordered to cover the beach.

In this interval which left the bridge uncovered the enemy had kept coming forward, and while Baker was still organising his force to occupy the area word reached him that there were about 200 enemy already in the old D Company positions and that they were getting mortars ready to open fire. It is not clear at what time this happened. The 28th Battalion war diary reports that at 11.5 a.m. about 100 Germans approached the bridge bringing up what looked like a mortar; that five minutes later they attempted to cross the river south of the bridge dragging a field gun; and that at 11.30 the gun was set up on the east side of the bridge but was withdrawn owing to attentions from our artillery. ²

It seems likely, however, that these reports refer to later enemy concentrations than the one reported to Captain Baker. At all events, Baker at once decided to attack, though he was short of automatic weapons and had no supporting arms. He began to filter his force forward under such cover as there was. His men had not gone far and were about 900 yards from the river in low, flat open ground when they came under mortar fire and concentrated fire from machine guns. None the less they managed to reduce the gap to about 500 yards before the fire became intolerably intense.

Baker decided that to go on would be suicidal. He therefore ordered a

withdrawal to the positions formerly prepared by D Company's reserve platoon. The order was passed forward section by section and, when he thought all ranks had safely withdrawn, including the wounded Captain [Garriock](#)³ who had commanded one of the ad hoc platoons, he himself followed under cover of the smoke from houses which had been set on fire by mortars.

While he had been waiting, the troops had come under heavy mortar and machine-gun fire in their new positions. 'We were not there very long before Jerry turned all his fury loose at us. Mortars and MG, the Mortar fire was terrific, I think it was the

¹ The tanks helped cover the withdrawal of 5 Fd Amb during the night; although [3 Hussars](#) WD does not mention this.

² This would be one of the guns that fired on the rear party of 28 Bn as they approached the river south of [Platanias](#) bridge about 11 a.m.

³ [Capt A. I. Garriock; Christchurch](#); born Helensburgh, [Scotland](#), 15 Apr 1911 traffic officer; wounded 23 May 1941.

hottest hour I had during the war. We were simply being blasted out of the place.' ¹ The men therefore continued to fall back and many of them went on to their original battalion area. Baker himself, unable to find them and seeing that Captain Tui Love ² of Headquarters Company [28 Battalion](#) was holding a line across the road, went through and reported to Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer, who put him in command of A Company.

But the attack had been more successful than Baker knew. Lieutenant [Markham](#)³ managed to get a detachment within 100 yards of the bridge, where the enemy had a gun in the middle of the road and busy mortars and machine guns on both sides. 'My section had no dug positions and they brought very heavy Mortar fire to bear on us. We were able to put the gun temporarily out of action by killing or disposing of the crew....' ⁴ Lieutenant P. Maxwell also got a section as far forward as the riverbed and captured a Bofors. He then got in touch with Markham, who pointed out a column of enemy coming up the road with more field guns. The two officers

considered their position: they had few men with them and among those few casualties were steadily occurring; ammunition was short; and the enemy was reinforcing. They decided to withdraw and were confirmed in this by the arrival of Baker's message. In falling back they failed to find Baker and appear to have helped the Maori Headquarters Company in the outskirts of [Platanias](#).

This probably happened late in the morning. The enemy was cautious from now on, and it is not till 2.20 p.m. that [28 Battalion](#) war diary mentions him again. At that time enemy parties were reported to be digging gun emplacements along the main road about 500 yards west of the bridge. A quarter of an hour later concentrations were reported in the stream bed and at five minutes to three enemy were seen laying wire between the bridge area and a house on the beach, probably a local HQ. Then at 3.22 a gun from [Maleme](#) began to shell A Company and trucks brought up infantry and material. An assault seemed imminent.

It was about this time that the defence were heartened by their first sight of the [RAF](#). At five minutes to four a bomber was seen to attack the airfield and five minutes later three more. Six planes at least were observed to be on fire and transport aircraft appeared to be leaving the airfield.

¹ [Sgt H. W. Kimber](#).

² Lt-Col E. TeW. Love, m.i.d.; born Picton, 18 May 1905; interpreter; CO 28 (Maori) Bn May–Jul 1942; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.

³ [Maj P. G. Markham](#); Little River; born [London](#), 8 Sep 1908; farm manager.

⁴ Report in 20 Bn war diary, probably by Lt Markham.

Meanwhile our own artillery had begun to shell the German concentrations at the bridge. Already during the early morning the retiring gunners of [27 Battery](#) had been delighted to hear two six-inch naval guns at [Suda Bay](#) shelling [Stalos](#) as a likely enemy headquarters. As soon as they themselves were in position they set about getting their two surviving guns into action, their difficulty being that they had no

way of calculating where their shells were likely to land. But early in the afternoon an Australian troop went into position nearby and, correcting the elevation of his own guns by means of the Australian OP, Lieutenant [Boyce](#)¹ was able to come into action.² Soon after, however, an enemy mortar scored a direct hit on one gun and set fire to the ammunition. In spite of the danger Corporal [Buchanan](#),³ a newcomer from 4 Field Regiment, shovelled earth over the flames and put out the fire. But from then on the Australian OP was too busy serving its own guns and the second gun had to remain silent.

Counter-battery fire was not the only danger to the artillery. By this time enemy parties were filtering in from the south and at one time during the morning a sudden enemy sally took the two Bofors in Strutt's little group. But they were successfully retaken.

The Australian guns continued to work hard all afternoon. At one stage a message to 5 Mountain Division records that the parachute artillery battery had fired three times its ammunition establishment. Even so it had not been able to silence the Australians who, besides shelling [Pirgos](#), drove an enemy party in company strength out of the bridge area, silenced two enemy guns that came into action in the same neighbourhood, and destroyed one of two motor cycles that came to rescue them. In fact it seems likely that the enemy's failure to mount a full-scale assault on the front that day may in large measure be due to the guns.

It was not only near the bridge that the enemy was trying to get forward, and there was plenty of work for the defending infantry. On the right, between the road and the sea, were B and C Companies of [20 Battalion](#)—each about 40 strong—which Brigadier Hargest had decided must join in the defence instead of going back to their original area. These combined with Maori detachments in the same area to break up several enemy attempts to get through along the beach, and Lieutenant Rhodes,⁴ mortar

¹ [Capt A. H. Boyce](#); [Wellington](#); born [Napier](#), 10 Feb 1910; bank officer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² Capt Snadden, the commander of the gunners, had gone away

temporarily to get orders and medical attention for his four wounds. He came back later.

³ Sgt M. J. Buchanan, MM; born Auckland, 5 Mar 1913; Regular soldier; wounded 30 Nov 1941; lost at sea (SS Chakdina) 5 Dec 1941.

⁴ Capt G. A. T. Rhodes, m.i.d.; Taiko, Timaru; born Timaru, 20 Oct 1914; farm cadet; twice wounded.

officer of 20 Battalion, did good execution with his single mortar and two Maori mortars—one complete, one without a base-plate, and one without a firing pin. An enemy effort to retaliate by bringing up a gun was thwarted by a spirited attack led by Captain Love of 28 Battalion.

South of the road and in the hills there was less direct contact but—as everywhere else that day—much trouble from enemy mortars, captured Bofors and enemy aircraft. The 23rd Battalion alone had 35 wounded, who were cared for in an improvised RAP by the RQMS, W. H. Dalton. ¹

As the day wore on it became apparent that the enemy was preparing an outflanking attack from the south in addition to the frontal attack that had been threatening all afternoon. ² Parties of enemy were seen making their way south-east from Pirgos into the hills, and A Company of 28 Battalion during the afternoon 'carried on snap-shooting practice with occasional good grenade throwing against small parties of enemy who had moved up on the southern and south-western side of the Company area and finally took cover in caves below our position.' ³ The 23rd Battalion felt similar pressure on the left flank and was forced to strengthen it with an additional company; while farther to the east the Engineer Detachment found its positions threatened from the south, where an enemy party had established itself in a farmhouse not far away and caused 14 or 15 casualties.

vi

It was clear to both Brigadiers Hargest and Puttick that 5 Brigade was in a dangerous position. Its withdrawal and a move forward by the Composite Battalion of 10 Brigade ⁴ had improved the situation from that of the day before. None the

less, the enemy was obviously stronger and more aggressive, and 5 Brigade was still too far forward to be proof against a strong attack from the south at its point of juncture with 10 Brigade. Already at eleven o'clock that morning Puttick was discussing the situation with [General Freyberg](#), and the upshot was his decision to withdraw 5 Brigade after dark into [Divisional Reserve](#).

Hargest also was coming to see that further withdrawal was inevitable. At 1.10 p.m. he reported to Puttick that the enemy had crossed the bridge with mortars and guns and that the front

¹ [Capt W. H. Dalton](#), m.i.d.; [Ashburton](#); born [Ashburton](#), 21 Mar 1913; company secretary.

² II Bn 100 Mtn Regt had reached the [Platanias](#) River at noon, two kilometres south-west of [Platanias](#), and no doubt crossed it lower down.

³ Report by Capt Baker.

⁴ See [p. 265](#).

line was just west of [Platanias](#). The 23rd Battalion was forming a second line and he hoped to be able to hold out on this at least till nightfall. ¹ There is no record of Puttick's reply, unless it may be inferred from the fact that at 2.30 Hargest was making arrangements with [23 Battalion](#) which envisaged the strengthening of this second line and its prolongation south. The troops forward of it would probably withdraw into it at dusk. And again at 2.50 p.m. he signalled to Puttick that a new line running through ' [Platanias Hill Village](#)' was being prepared and that he proposed to withdraw to it at dusk 'if can hold out that long'. The Engineer Detachment had been ordered to be ready to come forward and assist. He ended by asking what relief Puttick proposed to give and stated his strength in men to be 600.

2

To this—and perhaps later unrecorded messages—Puttick replied by special despatch rider at 3.15 p.m.: 5 Brigade was to withdraw that night but not, except for

reconnaissance parties, before 8.45 p.m. Detailed orders reached 5 Brigade at 5 p.m. Their substance was as follows: the New Zealand Division would hold a line running from the coast at [Staliana Khania](#) south to Point 98·4, from there south-east to [Ruin Hill](#), and thence south-east again via [Cemetery Hill](#) and the feature immediately west of the Prison to the Turkish fort. ³

The right of this line would be held by 4 Brigade with the [Composite Battalion](#) and the Divisional Cavalry under command and, also under command, two 75s from 5 Brigade and a machine-gun detachment of six guns from 10 Brigade. The left of the line would be held by [19 Australian Brigade](#). The boundary between the brigades, inclusive to 4 Brigade, would be the Prison– [Canea](#) road. Fifth Brigade was to go into reserve east of [Karatsos](#) in much the same area as that originally held by 18 and 20 Battalions.

To this Hargest in an untimed message replied that the order would be carried out at 10 p.m. The Brigadier pointed out that his units would need a day to reorganise, that some of [20 Battalion](#) had been kept in the line instead of returning to 4 Brigade, and that he would like to keep the Engineer Detachment for at least another day. And since he speaks of [22 Battalion](#) as being with 4 Brigade, he was evidently unaware that Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew had returned on Puttick's orders to support the Engineer Detachment near [Ay Marina](#).

¹ NZ Div WD.

² Ibid.

³ NZ Div OO No. 6, 3.15 p.m., 23 May. The order gives map references, not place-names. It seems more convenient for the reader to substitute the latter for the former. See [p. 267](#) for further comment.

The estimate of unit strengths given in this message shows as well as any figures can the hard fighting the brigade had had: [21 Battalion](#) was down to 170, 22 to 110, 23 to 250, and the Engineer Detachment to 300. ¹ No statement is made about the number of wounded but they must have been numerous, and Hargest was anxious that at least one or two medical officers should be sent up together with

medical equipment. And in a message at 7.15 p.m. he asked for ambulances to be sent up at nine o'clock.

vii

No copy of Hargest's order to his units for the withdrawal is available, but no doubt it went out to the battalions by runner soon after the divisional order was received, and there must have been further communication between the two commanders since arrangements were made by which the six-inch guns at [Suda Bay](#) were to begin firing on enemy-held territory from midnight on.² The tanks of [3 Hussars](#) were to act as rearguard.³

Both 20 and 28 Battalions effected their withdrawal safely and were settled in their new areas before daylight. The 21st Battalion followed them, and after it came [23 Battalion](#). The atmosphere of the move is well conveyed in the narrative of Lieutenant Thomas, then commanding C Company [23 Battalion](#):

We withdrew under orders soon after midnight, carrying our wounded on improvised stretchers down the steep cliff face and then along a difficult clay creek bed to the road. Then we marched until nearly dawn. I was very impressed by the continued discipline of the men. Mile after mile we trudged. Everyone was tired. All were vaguely resentful, although none of us could have put a finger on the reason. Those who could bear the strain better carried the rifles and bren guns of those who were fatigued. Len Diamond, a rough and lovable [West Coast](#) miner with a difficult stammer, raised a smile whenever things seemed a bit much.⁴

Difficulties for the wounded did not end with arrival at the road. Two of the three trucks assigned to [23 Battalion](#) had been shot up and the last had to be crammed. This delayed the move, and C Company [23 Battalion](#), which was co-operating with two tanks and some [28 Battalion](#) Bren carriers in doing the rearguard, had some worried moments when the enemy began to follow up. But the company put up road blocks and was safely back in its allotted area by 4 a.m.

¹ For strengths of units on 20 May see [Appendix IV](#).

² In the event this could not have been very effective as the enemy began to drop flares near the guns and they ceased fire after 18 rounds. WD [Suda Area](#).

³ C Sqn WD. According to this, withdrawal was to begin at 9 p.m.

⁴ Report by Lt W. B. Thomas.

While these units were on the move the Engineer Detachment also withdrew, and got back without trouble. Captain Snadden— back again in spite of his wounds— got out the two guns of C Troop and parked them for the night near the point where the road to [Galatas](#) branches from the coast road—the [Galatas](#) turn-off, as it was usually called. Moreover Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt was able to report to Divisional HQ at 10.30 p.m. that he had brought back a total of four French 75s, four Italian 75s, two Bofors, and two two-pounders, a feat the more satisfactory as most of these had been reported lost at one stage or another of the day.

Perhaps the most difficult task of the evening fell to 5 Field Ambulance. It waited for ambulances until 3 a.m., when two arrived. These were loaded with wounded, and a party of those able to walk set off about this time also. Of the eight trucks which were to have come up, some were destroyed when the road was shelled by the enemy and others were appropriated by marching troops in the absence of the drivers who had abandoned them. Volunteer drivers had to be fetched from [5 Field Ambulance](#) and found only three trucks that could be used. These three took off a full load at 4 a.m.; at half past five, as dawn was breaking, Captain [Coutts](#) ¹ arrived with fresh trucks, which were enough to take the rest of the patients and the skeleton staff which had been left with them. In all 135 patients were brought out. A new position was established for the MDS in that vacated by [6 Field Ambulance](#).

For the time being, and for the first time since the battle began, Brigadier Hargest and his battalions were out of the fighting. It was not to be for long.

¹ Maj P. E. Coutts, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 4 Dec 1903;

salesman; OC 1 Amn Coy Oct 1941–Jan 1943, Feb–Oct 1945; 18 Tk Tptr
Coy Jan 1943–Mar 1944.

CRETE

II: THE CANEA-GALATAS FRONT

II: The Canea-Galatas Front

i

For 10 Brigade 23 May was relatively quiet. Colonel Heidrich's men were very short of ammunition; ² and no doubt he felt there was little point in launching further attacks when help was on the way, and when he had detached a large part of his force under Heilmann to try and cut the coast road.

The movement of enemy carrying parties on the high ground west of the 10 Brigade front gave the defence good grounds for suspecting that the enemy was attempting to cut the road

² 5 Mtn Div WD contains an urgent appeal from Heidrich for ammunition supplies from [11 Air Corps](#) to be arranged.

and envelop 5 Brigade. It became urgent to push the right flank far enough forward to thwart this, and the important events on the front that day arose from the necessity.

The danger was in fact acute. Battle Group Heilmann—about 150 officers and men—had seized [Stalos](#) shortly after dawn and handed it over to 1 Engineer Company to hold; and the three battalions of 100 and 85 Mountain Regiments which had begun their right hook the evening before had made substantial progress. II Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment was, as we have seen, operating well to the north in conjunction with [Ramcke Group](#) and by midday was about two kilometres south-west of [Platanias](#). The outflanking threat therefore came less from it than from I Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment, which by ten o'clock in the morning was not far from Padhelari.

Although Brigadier Puttick had no detailed knowledge of the enemy intention it was a fair inference that some such movement would be attempted, and he had

ordered Colonel Kippenberger to advance the right flank of the Composite Battalion by a thousand yards.¹ Even so there was still a dangerous gap between the rear of 5 Brigade and the right of 10 Brigade. Accordingly Puttick arranged for 4 Brigade to release B Company of 18 Battalion and send it to clear out a strong enemy pocket reported near Ay Marina and, by establishing a line of posts on the high ground south of the coast road, to cover the line of withdrawal for 5 Brigade.² And, later on, when Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew reported to Division, he was ordered to take the two companies that now constituted his battalion into the Ay Marina area for a similar purpose.

Kippenberger told the two right-hand groups of the Composite Battalion to push forward and cover the ridges south of Ay Marina. Major Veale on the right therefore sent out Lieutenant Coleman³ with a company. As this advanced westwards it learnt from Greek civilians that the enemy was in Stalos. Coleman then decided to go ahead with an advance party of 15 men. He was soon pinned down by enemy fire. He therefore told his main body to fall back and took cover with his own party behind a stone wall. Ahead on a forward slope were two enemy machine guns, and for the best part of an hour he and his men engaged these with rifles and a captured spandau, eventually accounting for both.

Meanwhile B Company of 18 Battalion came forward and met Coleman's party in a wadi north-east of Stalos. Coleman took

¹ NZ Div Report, para 109.

² Ibid, paras 109–11.

³ Maj D. F. Coleman, OBE, m.i.d.; Mariri, Nelson; born Christchurch, 5 Mar 1913 farm manager.

Major Evans,¹ OC B Company, to the high ground and showed him Stalos. Evans decided to attack. He set up the 3-inch mortar which the company brought and selected 11 Platoon to make the attack. The platoon took up its preliminary positions and about 11 a.m., after a bombardment by the mortar, it attacked, one section

going south of the village, one north of it, and the other into the village itself.

The attack went very well and the enemy was driven out of the village, leaving behind at least five dead and two machine guns.² One house, however, kept on holding out with a machine-gun post. As the platoon was about to deal with this one also, an order came forward from [Major Evans](#) for the platoon to withdraw; for [Evans](#) had by now come to the conclusion that the enemy in the area was about 200 strong and so too much for his force. The platoon therefore reluctantly let go its grip and fell back to its original positions.

The German 1 Engineer Company in [Stalos](#) makes much of the fighting it had that day and 11 Platoon must have given the enemy a sharp shock with its spirited assault. Nor, although he had thought it prudent to bring the platoon back, did [Evans](#) take too static a view of his role from now on. He sent a patrol round to the north-west of [Stalos](#) which had some contact with enemy parties, and it was doubtless the presence and activity of his vigorous company that made the enemy chary of any serious attempt at carrying out the original plan and cutting the coast road.

At the same time as Coleman's party, another little force under Captain Nolan had set out from the centre group of the Composite Battalion. It met no enemy and remained forward all day, thus making a second link in the chain of outposts. The south terminal was supplied by Lieutenant Carson's patrol, which did a good deal of skirmishing with enemy machine-gun posts before it met heavy opposition from the direction of [Signal Hill](#), and eventually crossed the front northwards to come out on the coast road near [Ay Marina](#). At the end of the day it returned to [Composite Battalion HQ](#).

ii

Back at 10 Brigade HQ [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had been able to make a tour of most of the [Composite Battalion](#) front during the morning and had been 'forced to the reluctant conclusion that it was in no condition to meet the heavy attacks that must come soon.'³

¹ [Maj W. H. Evans](#), ED; born NZ 7 Mar 1899; schoolmaster; killed in action 24 May 1941.

² See map, p. 257.

³ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 60.

The battalion had been under fire from air and ground weapons for three days and had had numerous casualties without opportunity to retaliate effectively; the command organisation was too weak for the battalion to function as an effective whole; it was very short of officers and those it had were not trained for infantry fighting; the rank and file were, like their officers, mainly drawn from artillery and service units and so also lacked the background of training which would have given them confidence in the severe fighting that was imminent; and, as most of the fighting till now had been on the south of the front, they had not been able to acquire by actual experience of their own quality—for they were good material—the faith in themselves which training had not given them. So, partly because circumstances had left them too long in a passive role and partly because they were conscious of their shortcomings in infantry skill, some of the men were by this time rather dispirited. ¹

[Kippenberger](#) reported this state of affairs to [Puttick](#) at midday and it was decided to relieve the [Composite Battalion](#) that evening with [18 Battalion](#). The new arrangements were part of Operation Order No. 6 which we have already encountered in connection with the withdrawal of 5 Brigade. ² Their result was that 10 Brigade now came under 4 Brigade, although [Kippenberger](#) remained in command of all the forward troops defending the [Galatas](#) line. The [Composite Battalion](#) was to withdraw to [Ruin Ridge](#), just north-west of [Galatas](#), and [18 Battalion](#) was to take over the positions it vacated. South of [Galatas](#) [Russell Force](#)—the Divisional Cavalry and the Petrol Company—were to remain where they were and, with them, the Greeks under command. But the Petrol Company, which had lost many men by this time, was reinforced by a platoon of [4 Field Regiment](#) under Lieutenant [Dill](#)—till now employed on the front of the Divisional Supply Company. [Dill's](#) was to be a difficult assignment; for he was given the task of holding the crest of [Pink Hill](#), which after the first day's savage fighting had been allowed to become a no-man's-land.

The 19th Battalion was to remain in the positions it had held throughout the battle but it reverted to the command of 4 Brigade. The machine-gun detachments also came under command and were allotted to [18 Battalion](#). Except for the addition of two 75s from

¹ By no means all; and in conjunction with trained infantry most of the separate detachments fought extremely well, as will become apparent in the accounts of the subsequent fighting.

² See [p. 262](#). It may be remarked that NZ Div OO No. 6 envisaged considerable forward adjustment of 4 Brigade and 19 Brigade positions from those held on the [Galatas](#) line on 23 May. In the event the line was to remain more or less unchanged. The new ground would probably have had to be fought for and there was neither time nor strength for the task.

5 Brigade, artillery arrangements stayed as they were, with F Troop 28 Battery giving what support it could. [Kippenberger's](#) HQ moved to the eastern exits of [Galatas](#), and with it Captain Forrester's force of Greeks.

None of the new adjustments could be carried out till after dark. Till then there was the usual mortaring and strafing on the front, with an ominous increase in the former. In the south [Russell Force](#) was often engaged with enemy patrols from the Prison area and the machine guns and artillery were busy taking on enemy parties in the [Prison Valley](#) and near [Signal Hill](#). These activities stepped up as the day went on and, in a signal from 10 Brigade to Division at 7.50 p.m., were interpreted as boding an attack next day. ¹

But, although [18 Battalion](#) would not be able to relieve the [Composite Battalion](#) till after dark, preliminary reconnaissance was possible; and so during the late afternoon Brigadier Inglis and Lieutenant-Colonel Gray came forward. '... Inglis came up with his dispassionate, calm efficiency, and we sat under an olive tree with cannon and machine-gun bullets and planes flying all around us, and coolly summarised the situation.' ² Inglis foresaw that there were bound to be gaps in the defence of the long new frontage that [18 Battalion](#) would have to hold, but thought that these could be covered by the [Composite Battalion](#) on [Ruin Ridge](#). It could

counter-attack any enemy who got through the gaps and restore the position.

Gray was disturbed about the length of his front, none the less— it was about twice the normal front of a battalion—and seems to have decided to shorten it by leaving out [Ruin Hill](#). The result was that, when [18 Battalion](#) moved forward at 9.45 p.m. and took over from the [Composite Battalion](#), [Ruin Hill](#) was not included in the line. The withdrawal of the Supply Company with the rest of the [Composite Battalion](#) to [Ruin Ridge](#) left it undefended. Now that the junction of [Group West](#) and [Group Centre](#) could be no more than a matter of hours and would enable the enemy to launch a far more formidable infantry assault on the [Galatas](#) line than anything experienced so far, the consequences of leaving a vital feature unmanned were bound to be serious.

iii

On the remainder of the [Canea- Galatas](#) front the only important developments were connected with readjustments of position. For 4 Brigade the relief of the [Composite Battalion](#) meant that 18

¹ NZ Div WD.

² Letter from Capt Bassett, 3 Jun 1941.

Battalion was to move up to what from now on would be the main front line; but the new positions of the companies will be better dealt with under the events of 24 May.

Now that there was a prospect of the main battle coming closer to the sector held by [2/8 Australian Battalion](#) and [2 Greek Regiment](#), it was felt that a more serious effort must be made to co-ordinate the activities of the troops in this area, and during 23 May a conference took place at the headquarters of the Greeks with this object. Major-General Weston, under whose command [19 Australian Brigade](#) still was, Brigadier Vasey, Major A. S. Key, the commander of [2/8 Battalion](#), and presumably the Greek commander, were all present. The plan was that [2/7 Battalion](#), which was to return that night from [Divisional Reserve](#) to Vasey's

command, would move in on the right of 2/8 Battalion and link up with 19 NZ Battalion; 2/8 Battalion was to move forward about 1500 yards from [Mournies](#) and take up a new position, with its left flank on the northern outskirts of [Pirgos](#) and its right flank linking with 2/7 Battalion at the junction of the Prison- [Canea](#) road and the creek that ran through [Pirgos](#). The 2nd Greek Regiment, by moving into the area of [Perivolia](#), would extend the line south to the hills.

Clearly these new arrangements for the sector were an improvement; yet it may be regretted that they came so late and still bore a somewhat passive stamp. The sea invasion was known to have been defeated the previous morning and, although it may have been thought necessary to keep 2/7 Battalion in reserve to assist or renew the counter-attack at [Maleme](#), a perhaps better course would have been to transfer it to the left of the [Galatas- Perivolia](#) line then. If this had been done a determined effort could have been made to clear the enemy from the general area of the Turkish fort and establish a continuous front from the left of the Divisional Cavalry.

The two Australian units duly carried out their moves, 2/8 Battalion in the late afternoon and 2/7 Battalion beginning after dark and ending after midnight. For some reason, however, [2 Greek Regiment](#) did not move into [Perivolia](#), perhaps because the Greeks were more intent on destroying an enemy post on their left, a task they successfully carried out during the day. For them the day closed with the return of Major Wooller from [Canea](#), where he had been able to collect 100 rifles and 12 machine guns. In what daylight was left, the company which was to use these weapons was formed up to train for an attack next day in co-operation with the Australians on an enemy-occupied hill.

All enemy pockets round [Canea](#) itself had by now been wiped out and so there was no fighting for the infantry under Weston. For the AA forces, however, there was plenty to do. All the guns were regrouped so as to produce an umbrella defence over [Suda](#) harbour and special arrangements were made to render concealment and surprise more effective. The enemy bombing which enforced these arrangements continued, setting fire to part of [Canea](#) and to an oil tanker in [Suda Bay](#). Its present severity and worse to come decided Weston to move his headquarters to the area of the Sanatorium near [Suda](#).

CRETE

III: RETIMO, HERAKLION, AND CREFORCE

III: Retimo, Heraklion, and Creforce

i

At [Retimo](#) during 23 May the general situation did not greatly alter. In the eastern sector there was a truce from midday till one o'clock to allow dead and wounded to be brought in. At the end of it 70 German wounded had come in to the Australian ADS at Adhele, and about the same time a German envoy from the oil factory came forward to demand surrender on the ground that a German victory had taken place in all the other sectors. The demand was refused and the refusal emphasized by the shelling of the oil factory shortly afterwards. On the 24th there were 252 Germans in the Australian ADS.

In the western sector 2/11 Battalion beat off a German attack from [Perivolia](#), and in a sustained attack by about fifty German aircraft two companies lost 39 men.

The enemy himself remained on the defensive and, as his aircraft landed only supplies and not reinforcements during the day, the high command evidently still thought that the main effort would prove more profitable elsewhere. And in fact, though the paratroops could no longer hope to capture the airfield, they were doing good service by containing troops which might otherwise have been used to reinforce the [Canea](#) front. For Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell's force, cut off from [Canea](#), were in a sense themselves beleaguered.

ii

Although at [Retimo](#) the enemy had become reconciled to a policy of containment, at [Heraklion](#) this day's activities suggested that his forces there might not be sufficient even for this. But reinforcements of paratroops were not yet available and only supplies could be dropped. So his main aim of depriving us of the use of the airfield could not be successful and, though machine guns could fire on it, a Hurricane from Egypt succeeded in landing during the early afternoon. Then in the

late afternoon a further six Hurricanes appeared while a bombing raid was in progress, and a dogfight took place, after which the Hurricanes landed, four of them damaged. ¹

The garrison had correctly appreciated that the main threat was from the east. In the morning therefore, two companies were sent east to raid the German positions, and the guns were used to harass them. The two companies returned towards evening with the report that the enemy were not numerous but were strongly armed.

Meanwhile two tanks arrived about midday, having fought their way through from [Tymbaki](#), and reported that 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were approaching. According to [General Freyberg's](#) plan, both tanks were sent on to [Suda Bay](#) by lighter.

The Germans by now were showing signs of exasperation at their failure to make better progress, and at 7 p.m. sent an ultimatum which threatened the destruction of [Heraklion](#) town unless the Greeks surrendered. Although the Greek population had been somewhat affected by the bombing already endured, their leaders refused this ultimatum but took the precaution of evacuating the civilians.

Apart from these there were no other notable developments, and when the day ended the defence could at least consider that the position had not altered for the worse.

iii

At [Crete](#) HQ [Freyberg](#) was doing his best to keep General Wavell apprised of all developments. Even if he had not been himself aware of the importance of the battle, there was encouragement from without. The day began with a message from [Mr. Churchill](#) to the effect that the eyes of the world were on the battle and that great things turned on it. From Wavell also came cheering words: the world was being given a splendid example by the courage and resolution of [Freyberg](#) and his troops. There was evidence that the Germans themselves were meeting great difficulties, and Wavell would do and was doing his best to help the defence.

Indeed, from the time the battle had begun and it was too late to attempt more

than small-scale help, a conviction of the importance

¹ For the role of these aircraft see p. 243. The solitary Hurricane was later destroyed on the ground by six Messerschmitts.

of [Crete](#) seems to have overtaken everyone. On 21 May [Churchill](#) had told the Defence Committee that [Crete](#) should be regarded as a key post in the [Mediterranean](#); and he judged from [Freyberg](#)'s attitude that the defence would be able to hold out if reinforcements could be landed on the south coast and if the [Navy](#) could stop a landing by sea.

As we have seen, the [Navy](#) was able to do so. But the cost had to be carefully counted and, when the Chiefs of Staff met on 22 May, Admiral Pound told their Committee that if damage continued on the same heavy scale the invasion could not be stopped. No solution seemed to offer, however, and the Chiefs of Staff decided to call on the Commanders-in-Chief Middle East for their view of the situation.

By 23 May it had become clear to the Defence Committee that the enemy had gained a foothold, and [Mr. Churchill](#) telegraphed to General Wavell that the battle must go on so as to gain time in the [Western Desert](#). He hoped that Wavell was reinforcing the island every night to the greatest possible extent. And at other meetings the possibility of sending Beaufighters either from home waters or from [Malta](#) to the assistance of the Fleet was canvassed.

So far as [Freyberg](#) was concerned the need for air help was the most immediate. He answered Wavell's offer of the day before to send fighters which could strafe until their petrol and ammunition were exhausted, if the situation were serious enough to warrant it, by saying that the position at [Maleme](#) was indeed serious and that all possible air help should be sent. ¹

Wavell responded by sending two flights, each of six Hurricanes, with orders to land at [Heraklion](#). Of the first flight only one reached [Heraklion](#) and was destroyed, as we have seen. The rest were shot up by a British naval barrage en route, with the result that two were lost and three had to return to base. Of the other flight, four were damaged on arrival and had to return to Egypt next morning and one of the

remaining two was shot up and burnt out on the ground. ²

In addition to this twelve Blenheims made the long flight from the mainland in the afternoon and bombed [Maleme](#), while a further force of Blenheims and Marylands bombed and machine-gunned it in the evening. Ten Junkers 52 were claimed destroyed and others damaged. ³ But these attacks, though they were carried out with

¹ C. 267, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 23 May.

² Gp Capt Beamish, Report on Air Operations over Crete. According to Brig Wills, GSO 1 [Suda Force](#), RM volunteers tried to fly out the last of the Hurricanes when evacuation came but were shot down.

³ A message from 5 Mtn Div to [11 Air Corps](#) at 9 p.m. reports that six aircraft had been destroyed by the afternoon raids. Another entry says no damage was caused by the night raid.—5 Mtn Div WD. [4 Air Fleet](#) Report claims two Blenheims shot down.

devotion and did their share of damage, could not have any serious effect on the land operations. Nor were the strategic attacks conducted on other nights against airfields in [Greece](#) itself likely to produce much more decisive results.

There was one other respect in which aircraft proved themselves useful, although not as useful as they might have been had our air transport been as well developed for military purposes at this stage of the war as was the enemy's. Supplies of stores had been dropped the night before at [Heraklion](#) and at [Retimo](#). But those for [Retimo](#) landed in the sea. By now [Freyberg](#) was seriously concerned for its situation: it was cut off by road, and a company of Rangers sent during the day from [Canea](#) had failed to get through. And so he asked the [RAF](#) to try again that night to drop stores and medical supplies.

Apart from this and the operational position, with which he kept Wavell in as full touch as bad communications and a fluid and confusing situation permitted, [General](#)

Freyberg's most anxious thoughts were given to the problem of supplies as a whole. Two messages sent on the morning of 23 May show clearly what were his difficulties.

1

The first of these dealt with an inquiry from GHQ Middle East about the possibility of developing the ports in the south of Crete, defending them against the enemy air force, and using them for the landing of supplies. Freyberg pointed out in reply that there was not time to construct the facilities required for ships to be able to discharge on the quays, but that it might be possible for them to discharge by lighter if Middle East could provide the shipping, the protection against aircraft and submarines, the transport and the lighters. There were two ports that might be used in this way: Selino Kastelli (Palaiokhora) and Ay Galene. But the former was the only one with a road to the beach, and if the other were to be used four miles of road would have to be built. Again, Tymbaki could take a small discharge of tonnage during the hours of darkness; or, if the Navy thought either Sfakia Bay or Sudsuro Bay possible, motor transport could probably be got to them. In all cases the enemy's command of the air would have to be taken into account.

Until one of these could be developed into a protected anchorage, however, General Freyberg indicated that he thought it better to go on using Suda Bay, where ships could come alongside and where anti-aircraft and anti-submarine defences already existed.

¹ Q. 32 and Q. 33, Creforce to Mideast.

His second message dealt with the maintenance problem more generally. Counting British troops, Greek troops, and Greek civilians together, he had 128,000 mouths to feed in the Suda Bay sector, 65,000 in the Retimo sector, and 290,000 in the sector which included Heraklion and the territory east of it; a total of nearly half a million. The only transport were the 150 15-cwt trucks, 117 carrier vehicles of miscellaneous other kinds, and seven ambulances which had to serve the whole British force, with its artillery; and a very few trucks and carts which had to serve the Greeks. And even this scanty number was continually dwindling through air attack and the lack of repair facilities.

The problem was further complicated by the state of the roads. The lateral road through [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) could not be relied upon because of the enemy troops in both places. The road to Selino [Kastelli](#) was no longer open. The only other road fit for motor transport was that from [Heraklion](#) to [Tymbaki](#) and that could serve only [Heraklion](#). To serve [Suda Bay](#) he was trying to get the road to [Sfakia](#) in a fit state. He doubted whether a road could be got through from [Retimo](#) to [Ay Galene](#).

Thus it was clear that [Suda Bay](#) would have to go on being used at least in part; and if the southern beaches were to be used more transport would have to be provided and more lighters.

[Freyberg](#) then turned to the question of existing supplies. [Suda Bay](#) sector had rations only for 10 days, [Retimo](#) for 18 days, and [Heraklion](#) for 14 days. Even so, this assumed a reduced scale of rationing and the scale was now two-thirds. Thus early supplies were needed, and picks, shovels, and wire were also required for the preparing of defensive positions.

He concluded that, big convoys being out of the question with the enemy so strong in the air and ground defences so weak, [Middle East](#) must somehow contrive a method of supplying the island by small but frequent deliveries.

▼

Meanwhile the [Navy](#), as always, was doing its best to help. At eight minutes past four that morning Admiral Cunningham had decided, as we have seen, that he would have to withdraw all his naval forces to [Alexandria](#), except [Glenroy](#) and her escort with its battalion of men from the Queen's Royal Regiment. By daylight this policy was being put into action and all the naval forces were making southward except for [10 Destroyer Flotilla](#), which was searching for survivors from [Fiji](#), and two ships from Force A 1, [Jaguar](#) and [Defender](#), which were on their way to [Suda Bay](#) with urgently needed ammunition.

Of the ships making their way south only [5 Destroyer Flotilla](#) met trouble. [Kelly](#), [Kashmir](#) and [Kipling](#) were travelling together when, at 7.55 a.m., 24 dive-bombers appeared and attacked. [Kelly](#) and [Kashmir](#) were sunk and the enemy aircraft machine-gunned the survivors swimming in the water. Undeterred, [Kipling](#) closed in

to pick up survivors and, in spite of six high-level bombing attacks, got 279 aboard. She then resumed her course south and, though between 8.20 a.m. and 1 p.m. no fewer than 40 aircraft attacked her and dropped 83 bombs, by eight o'clock next morning she was 50 miles from [Alexandria](#). There her exhausted fuel was replenished by Protector from [Alexandria](#) and she made the rest of the voyage in safety.

Jaguar and Defender reached [Suda Bay](#) without mishap and the ammunition was got ashore in the dark that night. The career of Glenroy with her reinforcements was more chequered. At 11.27 a.m. Cunningham decided that the odds in the air were too great for her and her escort and ordered her back, planning to get the reinforcements to [Crete](#) by means of the [Abdiel](#) or fast destroyers. This order was countermanded at 4.51 p.m. by the Admiralty, which urged upon Admiral Cunningham the necessity of getting the reinforcements ashore that night if possible. In the upshot, however, it became obvious that even if Glenroy did proceed she would arrive too late. Accordingly she was ordered back to [Alexandria](#). The troops already on [Crete](#) would have to carry on for another twenty-four hours unaided.

Behind these changes of plan lay an interchange of signals between Cunningham and the Admiralty which reveals the full seriousness of the dilemma. At 1.40 p.m. Cunningham signalled that the operations of the preceding four days had been a trial of strength between the [Navy](#) and the [German Air Force](#), and that there was nothing for it but for the [Navy](#) to admit defeat so far as the coastal area was concerned. Losses were so heavy that there could be no justification for continuing the attempt to prevent invasion by sea. The only aircraft carrier, the Formidable, could not be used because she had only five serviceable fighters, and without air cover the odds were too great.

To this the Admiralty replied that His Majesty's Government considered success vital and that reinforcements were absolutely necessary. It was for this reason that the risk to the Glenroy would have to be accepted.

In a later message on 23 May, however, the Admiralty accepted Cunningham's view, though not without qualification. It stressed once more the importance of the battle and said it was vital that the sea invasion should be held off for another day or two to give the [Army](#) a chance of dealing with the enemy landed by air. It

therefore indicated that Jaguar and Defender, when they had landed the ammunition for [Suda Bay](#), ought to attack the shipping in Melos unless some still more important target were found at sea.

To this Cunningham replied that the withdrawal of his forces had been forced on him by the fact that all his ships were in need of refuelling and were running out of AA ammunition. Four of his six remaining cruisers were damaged and would have to be repaired, and several of the destroyers were in a similar condition. As the centre of operations was 400 miles from base at [Alexandria](#), it was out of the question to get any powerful force there that night. The two destroyers, Jaguar and Defender, would not have time to reach Melos before daylight after they had landed their ammunition and, if they did go, would not have the fuel with which to come back. All he could do would be to order them to deal with any landing attempts near [Maleme](#) and send out another force of cruisers and destroyers from [Alexandria](#) the following day. He was also sending off some army reinforcements to [Suda Bay](#) that night by the [Abdiel](#).

vi

The difficulties of the [Navy](#) and its need of air cover were not lost upon Air Marshal Tedder, and during the afternoon he signalled to the Chief of Air Staff asking for the rest of the Beaufighter squadron, of which two had already arrived in an unserviceable condition. In reply the Air Ministry told him that all the Beaufighters in [Malta](#) were to be sent to Egypt and that 15 more were being sent from the [United Kingdom](#) in the next few days. They were to be used solely for the protection of the Fleet.

Tedder's next message throws further light on the whole difficult situation. He explained that his main problem was how to provide adequate air support. His two night attempts at bombing [Maleme](#) had been ineffective because the aircraft could not tell which was friend and which was enemy. He had therefore risked day operations by sending Blenheims from the [Western Desert](#) to attack [Maleme](#) and Hurricanes to [Heraklion](#). His two Beaufighters were covering a disabled destroyer. He was using Wellingtons for night supply, and would be attacking [Scarpanto](#) and [Maleme](#) with them that night.

But, the Fleet being withdrawn, the enemy could now use ships by day and there was little hope that the Blenheims could stop them. He would have to concentrate what force he had against troops being landed or already there, and the outlook was not bright. For the few sorties that the Hurricanes might make from [Heraklion](#) would be costly, while Blenheims or Marylands operating from North Africa were at the limit of their range. The only fighters with the requisite range were Beaufighters, and when he got those promised he proposed to use them primarily to cover the Fleet but also to attack air and sea transport. Even so, this meant switching almost the whole of his effort in the air from the [Western Desert](#) to Crete.

It will be seen from all this what difficulties faced General Wavell in carrying out his instructions to reinforce the island. The day ended with his hoping to land two commando battalions that night at Selino [Kastelli](#) and have them marched over the hills to the north. The prospect for a solution of [General Freyberg's](#) difficulties was not bright.

CRETE

CHAPTER 7 – THE FIFTH DAY: 24 MAY

CHAPTER 7

The Fifth Day: 24 May

I: The Canea-Galatas Front

i

In the course of 23 May the enemy had become still stronger. His priority had been artillery rather than infantry, and I and II Batteries of 95 Mountain Artillery Regiment, with 95 Anti-Tank Battalion (twenty 50-millimetre guns, of which eight were motorised), were brought over; 55 Motor Cycle Battalion had also arrived. And in the evening of the same day 'the long awaited transfer of fighters to [Maleme](#) airfield could take place.'¹

During 23 May, also, General Ringel had made sure that his writ would run with Colonel Heidrich by promulgating an order to the effect that from now on West and Centre Groups were both under his command and would be known collectively as Ringel Group. In spite of his gathering strength, however, his orders for 24 May, issued at 8 p.m. on 23 May, were not notably enterprising. Although in his opinion the defence had only 'a handful of well-placed infantry in his forward line',² Ringel laid it down that his group would do no more than secure the positions it had already reached, pushing forward level with [Platanias](#) on the left flank and centre and on the right thrusting towards the [Canea– Alikianou](#) road and the [Galatas](#) heights in order to make a final junction with Heidrich's 3 Parachute Regiment.

Thus [Ramcke Group](#) would keep the positions it had already reached and patrol south-east towards [Stalos](#). Colonel Utz with his three mountain battalions would advance astride the [Canea– Alikianou](#) road until he reached the high ground near [Galatas](#). He would keep two of his battalions north of the road and one south of it, and would leave a protecting force near [Alikianou](#). He would make contact with Heidrich's force at [Stalos](#) and south of [Galatas](#).

The two batteries of 95 Artillery Regiment and the two batteries of parachute artillery, grouped under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Wittmann, were to give their main support to Ramcke

¹ Report by 4 Air Fleet.

² 5 Mtn Div WD. The [Platanias](#) area would be intended.

Group and help him deal with any counter-attacks; but they were also to give all possible help to Colonel Utz.

In the rear, 95 Engineer Battalion was to take [Kastelli](#) ¹ and the newly arrived 55 Motor Cycle Battalion, with two troops from 95 Anti-Tank Battalion, was to go south through Kandanos and take Palaiokhora. The remainder of the anti-tank battery would be under divisional command. ²

The support of dive-bombers for the main fronts was being asked for and Utz would also be getting a troop of heavy infantry guns. Meanwhile reconnaissance was to be carried out all over the front, and particularly on the south flank, to see if any gaps could be found in the defences.

The fact that 5 Brigade had withdrawn during the night enabled this programme to be improved upon to some extent. Patrols from [Ramcke Group](#) were sent out during the morning towards the high ground at [Platanias](#) and reported 'weak enemy forces' which withdrew when the patrols approached. Captain Gericke and a paratroop force then went forward through [Platanias](#) and [Ay Marina](#) to link up with any of 100 Mountain Regiment or 3 Parachute Regiment they might find there. Once this was done Colonel Ramcke was able to regroup his forces, this being his first opportunity of doing so. Reorganised, his group consisted of [Gericke Battalion](#) (three strong companies), [Stentzler Battalion](#) (four strong companies), [Stolz Battalion](#) (two strong companies), and an anti-tank troop with six 50-millimetre guns and twenty machine guns.

Meanwhile in the centre II Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, had joined up with Heilmann's battle group in [Stalos](#), the coast road had been blocked, and patrols were being sent west towards [Galatas](#). By the end of the day Utz had established his HQ near [Lake Aghya](#) power station; II Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, was in the area north of Troulous; and I Battalion was near Point 116 ([Ruin Hill](#)). I Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment had reverted to regimental command as Colonel Krakau, the

commander of the regiment, had landed in the early morning and III Battalion during the day. A fresh battle group was to be formed from these two battalions, but meanwhile I Battalion was to remain at [Episkopi](#) and protect the south flank—a task the more necessary because patrols had reported that [Alikianou](#) was held and that advance farther south was blocked.

¹ For further developments at [Kastelli](#) see pp. 289–92.

² Ringel thus dispersed two battalions away from the main front. But he probably wanted to take [Kastelli](#) as soon as possible in order to land armour by sea; and the enemy had already shown symptoms of nervousness about [Palaiokhora](#), presumably fearing that reinforcements from Egypt might be landed there and take the main attack in the rear.

ii

While the enemy was making these cautious forward movements, the New Zealand units had been resorting themselves. When the morning came the units of 5 Brigade were back in Divisional Reserve: Brigade HQ was south of the main road about half a mile east of [Evthymi](#), and [23 Battalion](#) was in the same area. North of the road was [21 Battalion](#). The 28th Battalion had spent the last part of the night close to the main road, but moved half-way through the morning to a position between [23 Battalion](#) and [2/7 Australian Battalion](#). Cheering news for Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer and his Maoris was a message from [General Freyberg](#) that he intended to inform New Zealand of 'their splendid conduct and dash during the operations of the last few days.'¹

The 22nd Battalion, in the fork of the Prison– [Canea](#) and [Maleme](#)– [Canea](#) roads, had the task of protecting Divisional HQ, and nearby was the Engineer Detachment.

In these new positions the battalions were to reorganise and to be ready by 8 p.m. to take up any one of four possible roles: anti-parachutist, beach protection, counter-attack, or defence in the line. The day was therefore a busy one for unit commanders and the rest the men had looked forward to only relative. It was at last possible to draw rations, but they were not plentiful and it was forbidden to light

fires.²

During the morning the Engineer Detachment was savagely strafed. Shortly after this the detachment was split. By Puttick's orders [19 Army Troops Company](#) came under command of [19 Australian Brigade](#) and moved to the [Perivolia](#) area; [7 Field Company](#) was put under [4 Brigade](#) and given a reserve position in support of [20 Battalion](#). The going of these two units was warmly regretted by [5 Brigade](#) which had had good reason to appreciate their fighting qualities. 'They had been an excellent fighting unit under Ferguson. Whenever I passed through their area, which was quite often, there was no restlessness. They were solid. They went out and dealt with the enemy without asking if they had to, did the job and then reported what they had done.'³

The other ad hoc infantry unit which had served [5 Brigade](#) well was the [Field Punishment Centre](#), prisoners and guards alike. But the unit was by now dissolved. The sight of their own units in the withdrawal had been too tempting for the men. They had one by

¹ NZ Div WD.

² From the first day of battle to the last few fighting troops had a hot meal.

³ Capt Dawson.

one slipped away and, back with their own battalions, they could be sure of a welcome and not too many questions.¹

For the remains of [27 Battery](#) the pause meant reorganisation. After seeing his guns out of [Ay Marina](#), Captain Snadden had been ordered to hospital by Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt to have his four wounds attended to. Lieutenant [Gibson](#)² then took over the troop and was told to get his two guns into a position from which they could support [4 Brigade](#). He spent 24 May and part of the evening reconnoitring sites and getting his guns to them. One gun he placed between [Galatas](#) village and the turn-off and the other on the coast road about a mile west of the turn-off. A truck had to

be borrowed to tow them in and it was late at night before all was ready. 'Tired as they were,' says Gibson, 'the men did not have to be told to dig in. Experience is the best teacher and by the first streaks of daylight slit trenches had been dug and the guns had been dug in and camouflaged.'³

The battery itself was under the command of Captain Beaumont who had taken over from the wounded Major Philp. From the gunners not employed with Gibson's two guns—the only guns left in the battery—Beaumont was ordered to provide crews for six [Breda](#) heavy machine guns which were to be distributed in twos to 4, 5, and 19 Brigades. The crews were duly formed and sent off. The rest of the gunners were formed into an infantry detachment under Beaumont and put under command of 20 Battalion.

Captain Duigan of 28 Battery now took under his command C Troop [2/3 Australian Field Regiment](#) (Captain Laybourne-Smith), and its four Italian 75s were sited that night just east of the road from [Galatas](#) to the coast, not far from one of Gibson's guns, with an observation post near that of F Troop on the right front of [18 Battalion](#). The three 75s of Duigan's own F Troop also moved during the night to fresh fire positions some 300 yards north of the original site, which had become exposed to the enemy's view from ground and air; a fire the previous afternoon, started by burning propellant charges, had swept the surrounding trees clear of cover.

The detachments of [27 MG Battalion](#) which had served with 5 Brigade now had no guns. Some of the men saw action during the day with 4 Brigade, but late that night Captain Grant got them

¹ In return for their services all the prisoners were pardoned when the Division reassembled in Egypt.

² [Capt N. McK. F. Gibson; Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 16 Jul 1916; public accountant; wounded 20 Jul 1942.

³ Report by Lt Gibson. It may be remarked that the enemy reports contain frequent reference to the skill with which the defence camouflaged its guns. Special sorties flown to locate them more often than not failed to

do so.

all together—45 men all told—and they were attached for the time being to Divisional Signals so that Brigadier Hargest could keep in touch with them. Two guns and some ammunition were expected to be available next day.

iii

Owing to the cautious character of General Ringel's plans, the enemy put in no serious attacks on [19 Australian Brigade's](#) front on 24 May. No doubt it was felt to be imprudent to press too hard on this flank while [Galatas](#) was still held. The two Australian battalions, however, did not feel compelled to wait for an enemy initiative and they did a good deal of patrolling and had some minor skirmishes in consequence. The 2/8 Battalion was treated to some bombing and strafing and had 16 casualties. In the lulls from this the battalion commander modified his company positions to tactical advantage. And by the end of the day the battalion had acquired some home-made base-plates for its mortars and an Italian machine gun—presumably one of Beaumont's Bredas.

This battalion also provided covering fire for the local attack by [2 Greek Regiment](#) against two hills near the Turkish fort. The attack went in at 5.30 a.m., two companies strong. The left-hand company gained the lower slopes of its objective but the right-hand company was less successful. Fighting was very fierce and many Germans were killed by Greek grenades and bayonets. Greek casualties were also severe. At five o'clock that evening there was still fighting going on; but Major Wooller and the Greek commander decided that it was too late for success any longer to be hoped for and they withdrew the two companies. ¹

iv

Fourth Brigade had its new role laid down in a brigade operation order issued at 12.50 that morning. It was to be in its defensive line by 5 a.m., with [18 Battalion](#) on the right and, under [18 Battalion](#) command, a two-pounder from 106 RHA and six medium machine guns. In the centre were the [Composite Battalion](#), stepped back from the front line after its relief by [18 Battalion](#), and the Divisional Cavalry. On the

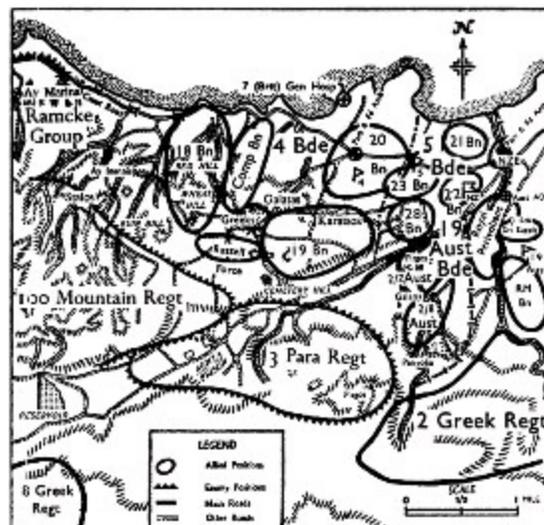
left was [19 Battalion](#) with the other two-pounder. The 20th Battalion was in reserve and its primary task was to counter-attack in support of [19 Battalion](#).

For artillery support the brigade had the two guns of C Troop, three guns of F Troop, and the four guns of C Troop 2/3 Field

¹ A number of civilians took part in the attack, and the Germans later destroyed [Mournies](#) in reprisal and shot all the Greek male civilians they could catch in the area.—Maj Wooller.

Regiment. This was meagre for a front which was now the main one. But there were no more guns to be had, and infantry and gunners alike had by now come to accept a shortage of weapons and ammunition as an inevitable feature of the battle.

A word may be said about the system of command. Brigadier Inglis, as commander of 4 Brigade, was in command of the front. He decided to keep his HQ back near the [Galatas](#) turn-off, whence he would be able to control the movement of reinforcement and keep a special eye on the north sector of the front. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) he left forward in the [Galatas](#) area as a sub-area commander, instead of returning him to the command of 20



GALATAS, 24 MAY

GALATAS, 24 MAY

Battalion. The reason for this was his desire to have a strong commander on the spot to look after the [Composite Battalion](#) and co-ordinate its actions with those of

the other units. 'In the result I think this compromise worked as well as any other that

would have been practicable under the circumstances—mainly because Kippenberger and I had complete confidence in each other.' ¹

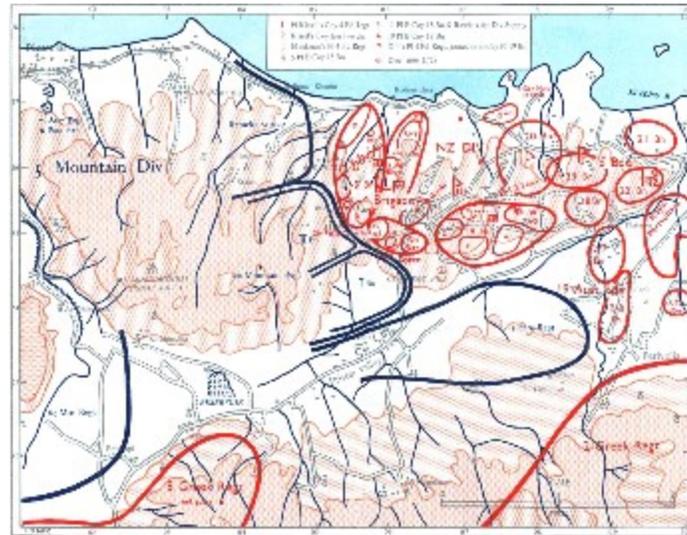
The frontage held by 18 Battalion at first light on 24 May extended from the coast to Wheat Hill and excluded, for the reason already explained, Ruin Hill. D Company held the right flank as far south as the northern slopes of Red Hill; C Company was in the centre from Red Hill to the northern slopes of Wheat Hill; Wheat Hill itself was held by A Company. B Company, which had come in from its forward patrol late the night before, was in reserve behind D Company, and Headquarters Company was also in reserve in the same area.

When daylight revealed it clearly to them, the defenders could not have relished the new situation. Wheat Hill was partly overlooked by the undefended Ruin Hill, and Red Hill completely so. This would have been bad enough even in a well-dug position. But the weapon pits which the companies inherited and which had been dug long before the evacuation from Greece were of an old-fashioned type, about six feet wide and, as the Composite Battalion had already found, very vulnerable to mortars. While it was still dark the company commanders had set their men to work trying to improve them, but what the Composite Battalion with more time had not been able to effect 18 Battalion could not do in the space of a very few hours. The position had to be accepted for what it was, although there was some resiting of section posts during the morning.

There were other shortcomings. The front, some 2500 yards, was poorly wired and in such close country it was too long even for a full-strength battalion. For a weak and partially equipped battalion, with bad communications and the slenderest artillery support, its length was a particularly serious difficulty. In addition, the area in front could not be easily swept with fire. The ground was too broken, and the frequent olive trees and vineyards gave cover for advancing infantry and restricted the defence to very short fields of fire. Nor was the length of front and the consequent opportunity for infiltration compensated for by depth; for the defence had to be stretched to cover the front even as well as it did. Finally, the fact that Ruin Hill overlooked so much of the line made it difficult for runners to keep touch

between companies and platoons—although, to begin with at least, there was telephone communication between companies and Battalion HQ.

On the rest of the front the situation was much what it had been before. The Petrol Company was still on the lower slopes of **Pink Hill**, supported by Lieutenant Dill's platoon of gunners



GALATAS, 25 May

¹ Letter from Maj-Gen Inglis, 12 Feb 1951. **Kippenberger's HQ** was now in an uncompleted building about 150 yards north-east of **Galatas**.

on the crest. Left again was the Divisional Cavalry and left of the Cavalry four companies of **19 Battalion**—D, C, A, and HQ Companies in that order—facing south-west and south towards the Prison– **Canea** road.

The **Composite Battalion** was by now back on **Ruin Ridge**, north of **Galatas**. The 6th Greek Regiment, with several officers and about 360 men, was disposed about **Galatas**, though about sixty Greeks under Lieutenant Michel had remained in the line with the Divisional Cavalry. The 20th Battalion had moved in the early hours of the morning to a position east of the road from the coast to **Karatsos** and was in reserve there.

Morning on the brigade front was one of great tension and feverish preparation for what was expected to be a formidable onslaught and one that would come soon.

Air attacks were frequent, mortaring and machine-gun fire increased throughout the day, and there was a good deal of movement to be seen in both the Prison area and that of the coast road. At 10.50 a.m. Division warned the brigades that the enemy had light armoured vehicles and ordered road blocks with anti-tank mines to be established. And [18 Battalion](#) saw what seemed to be tanks, but were more probably gun tractors, coming down the road from [Maleme](#). Enemy parties were also seen from time to time on the high ground to the front and were dispersed by artillery fire.

There were two false alarms during the morning. The Petrol Company was reported to be in trouble, and Captain Bliss's group was ordered to the rescue but found all comparatively quiet. ¹ A similar disturbance resulted in the Supply Company being sent out to counter-attack past [Wheat Hill](#). Again no enemy was met with. Some of the Supply Company, seeing [Ruin Hill](#) undefended, went forward to reoccupy it but were called back. Both these alarms probably had their origins in enemy probing patrols.

Air attacks shortly after midday were so heavy that they seemed to be the prelude to the ground assault, and once an attack was thought to be developing up the road from the Prison; but the time passed and the expected did not happen.

Afternoon came and went in the same uneasy fashion. The first result of this enemy preparation was a strong probe about two o'clock at the southern end of the [18 Battalion](#) line. No attack developed from it, however, and it was beaten off by mortar fire.

Then, about four o'clock, the enemy came forward in a more determined fashion, after artillery preparation by 95 Artillery Regiment, which had settled itself in round [Platanias](#) and [Ay Marina](#), and under cover of heavy machine-gun fire from Ruin

¹ Bliss's men remained forward and one company—Capt Nolan's (less Lt MacLean's platoon)—was put into the line on the right of the Petrol Company.

Hill where I Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment had established posts. This particular action is probably the one described in 5 Mountain Division war diary as 'a reconnaissance in force'. The pressure was so heavy on [Red Hill](#) and the positions of C Company were so exposed that at one point the forward sections had to fall back.

As soon as Gray heard of this local withdrawal he at once called up a platoon of B Company from reserve and took it forward, only to find that the enemy had already withdrawn. No doubt fire from the flanks of the gap had made their situation too uncomfortable and they had recalled that their role was after all one of reconnaissance. At all events they reported back that [Galatas](#) was strongly defended and as a result, with the approval of General Ringel, Colonel Utz decided that the assault would have to be deferred till next day after 'a thorough softening up by Stukas.' ¹

A second episode of a similar type took place at dusk in the same area. There is no entry in the enemy reports to account for it, but it was presumably a reconnaissance in force also and intended to amplify information already obtained. ² This time C Company again gave ground and Gray again sent in a counter-attack. The transport platoon of Headquarters Company under Second-Lieutenant [Copeland](#) ³ carried this out, aiming not merely at the recapture of lost positions but at the seizure of an outlying feature of [Red Hill](#) which had not been included in the defensive system but which was now seen to be essential. The platoon was successful, and by midnight the whole of [Red Hill](#) was again in the hands of [18 Battalion](#).

Meanwhile, however, Gray had realised the implications of his failure to man [Ruin Hill](#). He now decided that the enfilading fire from this feature would make [Red Hill](#) itself untenable in the face of the serious assault that was bound to come. Accordingly, he rearranged his dispositions so as to hold a line just east of Red Hill while making the hill itself untenable to the enemy. B Company, one of the reserve companies, he moved onto the north end of [Murray Hill](#)—the next ridge to the east—and its three platoons, 5, 10, and 11, were put on the forward slopes. C Company he moved back to the south end of [Murray Hill](#) between 10 Platoon of B Company at the south end and 5 and 11 Platoons at the north end. D Company stood fast in its original positions

¹ 5 Mtn Div WD.

² The enemy may, however, have hoped to secure [Red Hill](#) or part of it as a jumping-off place for the main attack next day.

³ [Capt O. B. Copeland](#); Waimauku, [Auckland](#); born [Waiuku](#), 26 Dec 1912; farmer; wounded and p.w. 25 May 1941.

from the coast to the church near [Ay Dhimitrios](#). A Company also stayed where it was in the [Wheat Hill](#) area. And Headquarters Company, now the only company in reserve, was disposed to the east of [Murray Hill](#). The main result of this was that [Red Hill](#) was no longer defended except by fire.

When the attack on [Red Hill](#) had first begun Gray had called on [Colonel Kippenberger](#) for assistance. [Kippenberger](#) replied by sending the gunners still under Captain Bliss and Captain Boyce's Supply Company group.

Bliss's gunners had been organised into two companies, one under Captain Nolan and the other under Captain [Kissel](#). ¹ Of Nolan's company only one platoon—Lieutenant MacLean's—was available, the others being in the line on the right of the Divisional Petrol Company where they had been put during the morning. Kissel had two platoons, the third—Lieutenant Dill's—being on [Pink Hill](#) between the Divisional Cavalry and the Petrol Company.

MacLean's platoon reached Lieutenant-Colonel Gray during the evening and was at first placed in the gully behind [Red Hill](#) but, when the positions were readjusted, was fitted into the right of C Company on [Murray Hill](#) and just in the rear of 5 Platoon B Company. By this time Kissel's two platoons had arrived; one of them was placed on [Ruin Ridge](#) with the [Composite Battalion](#) while the other went into reserve near [18 Battalion HQ](#). Bliss himself became second-in-command B Company. ²

With the exception of MacLean's platoon, all these gunners arrived and had to be posted in the dark; and the same was true of Boyce's Divisional Supply Company. This also was split: a detachment of about 16 men under Lieutenant [Rawle](#) ³ had already moved into position on [Murray Hill](#) at 2 a.m., an hour before they were

joined by 11 Platoon of B Company; the remainder of Boyce's men reinforced C Company.

Thus fitted after a patchwork manner into the line, these reinforcements tried to use the very little time that was left to get some sleep. It was nearly dawn, they were exhausted after the urgent confusions of the night, they mostly had no trenches or tools with which to dig them, they were not trained infantrymen, and there had been no time for them to learn much of the situation to their front or on their flanks. Yet, though they had five hard days behind them and days that looked no more promising to come,

¹ [Capt L. M. Kissel](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Auckland](#), 2 Apr 1906; schoolmaster; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² B Coy had lost its commander, [Maj Evans](#), to a mortar bomb during the day's fighting and was now commanded by Capt Noel Smith.

³ [Maj R. E. Rawle](#), MC; [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 2 Aug 1911; civil servant; OC Div Supply Coy 1944–45; wounded 25 May 1941.

they took what sleep they could and prepared stoically enough for another battle.

Elsewhere on the [Galatas](#) line there was no important action and the enemy contented himself with minor patrols. All was set for the next day's fighting, the enemy clear about his own plans for an attack in the [18 Battalion](#) sector, and the defence foreseeing it but unable to do more than what has already been recounted.

▼

To Brigadier Puttick, although the day had been got through without a major attack, the situation could not have seemed cheerful. The enemy was now at liberty to land as many men and supplies from his relatively unlimited resources in [Greece](#) as he had aircraft to carry; and his troops already on the ground west of [Canea](#) were free to join forces and to concentrate against a single front in what might prove

overwhelming force. Puttick, on the other hand, was running short of ammunition—the 72 three-inch mortar bombs which were all he had left were distributed that day—and only small-arms ammunition was reasonably plentiful; he had lost two and a half troops of guns in the withdrawal; he was bedevilled by bad communications—to his rear the enemy bombing constantly cut the lines and kept the signals units busy with mend and makeshift answers to recurring emergencies, and the bridge on the coast road out of [Canea](#) had been made impassable to heavy traffic. But worst of all was the fact that his fighting units were being steadily depleted by the casualties of each day's fighting and there was no way of making good the losses. The total of killed, wounded, and missing was already 20 per cent of the divisional strength and a much higher percentage of the strength of each fighting battalion. ¹

In addition, the tactical situation was not one that promised much rest or relief even for units not now in the line. A message sent by Division to the three brigades at 7.45 p.m. sufficiently sets the tone:

Owing to possible difficulty of communications during an enemy attack comd Cake [4 Brigade] may call on Wuna [5 Brigade] to send Bena [[23 Battalion](#)] to replace Oggi [[20 Battalion](#)] in the event of its being necessary to employ Oggi. Bena will make the necessary reces forthwith. Kela [[28 Battalion](#)] will recce with a view to counter attack Southwards on front Ruck [19 Brigade] under orders Duke [NZ Division]. ²

¹ Thus a message from NZ Div to [Creforce](#), 2.45 a.m., 24 May, says that the strengths of 5 Bde were about 230–280 a battalion.—NZ Div WD.

² NZ Div WD.

In [Suda Area](#) command the ground fighting was now over; the air attack, on the other hand, had been stepped up to a furious maximum, with heavy bombers flying over [Canea](#) in swarms and reducing the town to a flaming ruin.

The fact that the main battle was now on the [Galatas](#) line made it obvious that

the defence of [Suda Area](#) must be rearranged to take account of this. That the threat was from the west was all too plain. Accordingly, a second defensive line was formed along the line of the river which runs south through [Mournies](#). On the right of this line were the Royal Perivolians, at the confluence of the two streams north-east of Platanos; in the centre was S Searchlight Battery of the [Royal Marines](#); round [Mournies](#) was 2/2 Australian Field Regiment; and in reserve at the W/T station was 106 RHA with 250 riflemen. ¹ This mixed force, about 2000 strong, was put under command of Lieutenant-Colonel A. F. Hely, RHA, and known as [Suda Brigade](#).

At the same time it was still felt that [General Freyberg](#) should have some reserve which was not committed to any specific defensive role, and so 1 Welch, 1 [Rangers](#), and [Northumberland Hussars](#) were withdrawn into [Force Reserve](#).

¹ See map p. 332.

II: Other Fronts and Creforce

i

May the 24th was to be the last day of the defence of [Kastelli](#), and so it seems proper to resume here the account of the isolated force of [1 Greek Regiment](#) and Major Bedding's party of New Zealanders, whom we left on 20 May triumphant over Lieutenant Muerbe's detachment of parachutists and in full control of the immediate front. ²

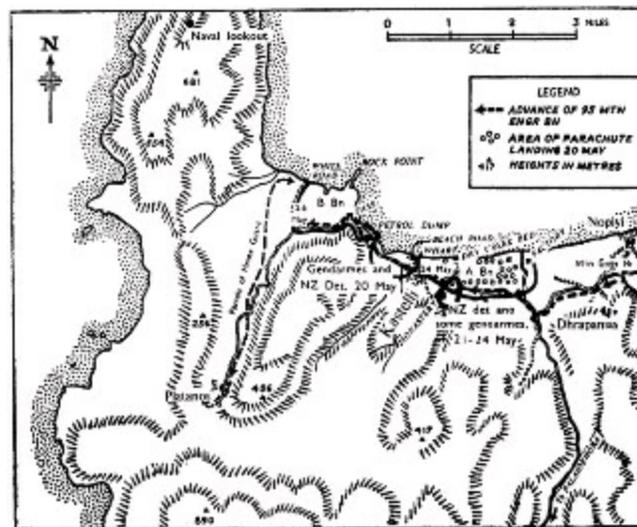
At the end of that first day's fighting Bedding had 28 prisoners on his hands, 15 of them wounded. Because of the angry bearing of the Greeks he had to place guards from his own men over the Germans, whom he put in the local jail, and make careful arrangements that they got fed.

These arrangements settled, he could turn to his other problem—communications. Telephone lines had been cut and he was troubled about what course he should next pursue. In the meantime, however, there was nothing for it but to distribute captured weapons and

² See pp. 173–4. The following account is based on a report by Maj Bedding. Bedding puts the fall of **Kastelli** as 26 May but evidence for 24 May is overwhelming.

continue clearing the area. At least the first day had been satisfactory enough.

On 21 May there was still no news except what meagre information could be gleaned from the **BBC**. Bedding pondered whether the best course might not be to make for **Maleme** with one battalion of Greeks, leaving the other to guard **Kastelli**. But one battalion might not be enough for this latter purpose which was, after all, his prime task. And it seemed risky to chance the long march under hostile aircraft to **Maleme** without knowing what his tired and ill-equipped battalion would have to face when it



KASTELLI, 20-26 MAY

KASTELLI, 20-26 MAY

got there. He therefore decided to stay where he was and prepare his defences to meet an attack from the east as the most probable quarter. Accordingly he arranged for night patrols west of the town, disposed his men and weapons as effectively as he could, reduced the ration scale, and settled down to wait for attack. An attempt on the part of Sergeant **Adams**,¹ Corporal **Friend**,² and two **Cretans** to make contact with **Canea** that night by caique failed

¹ WO II R. A. Adams; Patea; born Patea, 16 Sep 1909; taxi driver and

motor mechanic; wounded and p.w. 24 May 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.

² Cpl J. Friend; Grey Lynn; born England, 18 May 1913; rigger.

when the rudder was lost and the party was forced to return— perhaps luckily as, with the Navy about, it was not good for caiques to be at sea in the dark.

Till now the enemy had been mainly interested in clearing the road to Palaiohora against the possibility of reinforcement reaching that port; so far as Kastelli was concerned he seems to have felt that he was not strong enough to try to clear it and must in any case concentrate against Maleme. The responsibility of covering the road from Kastelli to Maleme had been left to a company of 95 Engineer Battalion and some paratroops about 70 strong. And these forces were too weak to attempt an assault.

By 23 May, however, it had become plain that if a port was to be got for landing armour it would have to be Kastelli. By this time, too, the enemy felt himself able to divert a force strong enough to take it. The 95th Engineer Battalion was therefore ordered to go to a point about seven kilometres east of the town and join the paratroops there. A troop of anti-tank guns would be sent to reinforce them as soon as 95 Anti-Tank Battalion arrived. Some heavy machine guns would also be sent. The attack would begin on 24 May and would be preceded by a dive-bombing at 9.30 a.m.

The dive-bombing duly occurred and was lucky enough to hit Major Bedding's HQ. In the excitement of the raid the Greek guards, who had by now relieved the New Zealanders, took cover and the German prisoners escaped and procured weapons. As Bedding and Second-Lieutenant Baigent ¹ were leaving their HQ to rally the Greek troops against the attack to which they guessed this bombing was a prelude, they were surprised and captured by the escaped prisoners. When this was discovered by Lieutenants Campbell ² and Yorke ³ they organised a rescue attempt. The attempt failed and Campbell was killed.

The enemy on the ground had followed up the dive-bombing. By midday they had reached the outskirts of the town and by the middle of the afternoon had taken

it, thus thwarting an attempt on the part of Bedding to persuade his present captors and former prisoners that their best course was to surrender.

In this engagement the enemy, without stating their own losses, claim to have inflicted casualties of over 200 killed and wounded,

¹ [Capt L. R. Baigent](#), MBE; Linton MC; born Wakefield, 23 Nov 1906; Regular soldier; p.w. 24 May 1941; wounded ([Germany](#)) 9 Apr 1945. Bedding had given Baigent the acting rank of second-lieutenant as he was 'the best fitted to command the group of Greeks covering the road.' This appointment was officially confirmed after the war as being from 20 May 1941.

² [Lt R. D. Campbell](#); born [Perth](#), 2 Dec 1908; bank clerk; killed in action 24 May 1941

³ [Capt H. L. Yorke](#), m.i.d.; [London](#); born [Oxford, Canterbury](#), 3 Feb 1910; surveyor and civil engineer.

and so the Greeks, though ill-armed and ill-trained, must have fought bravely.

Fighting continued just beyond the town, according to German sources, for at least two more days, denying the enemy the use of the jetty, and fierce and fiercely resented guerrilla warfare was maintained in the neighbourhood until even later. The Germans concentrated on getting the port clear for shipping but it was not until 27 May that they were able to land some light tanks. The importance of this delay for the defence of [Crete](#) is obvious.

ii

May the 24th brought no major change on the [Retimo](#) front. For the defence it was a disappointing day. A company of Rangers, which [General Freyberg](#) had sent the day before from [Canea](#) in an attempt to make contact, attacked the German forces round [Perivolia](#) from the west at dawn but, being few and without heavy weapons, failed to break through, and finally returned to [Canea](#). The 2/11 Battalion and the Greeks had planned to attack these same positions from the east in the

afternoon with the support of a tank. But the tank was used in the morning to hold back an enemy move south-west from the oil factory and the driver was wounded. Without its support an infantry attack seemed useless, and so there was nothing for it but to postpone action till the following day.

At [Retimo](#) the enemy air force had done no more than drop supplies and strafe. But [Heraklion](#) was thought important enough for more active measures. The appearance of the Hurricanes the previous day had caused some alarm, and further steps were now taken to deny us the use of the aerodrome. A battalion was organised from the parties of 7 Air Division which had for one reason or another not so far been sent to Crete. It consisted of two heavy companies and two rifle companies. [Heraklion](#) town was bombed in the early morning and intermittently throughout the day—no doubt in reprisal for the rejected ultimatum. After the bombing began the fresh troops which had been raised, along with their supplies, began dropping west of the town about eight o'clock in the morning. The main body arrived just as 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were trying to fight their way in from the south. In consequence the Highlanders failed to get to the garrison and had to withdraw.

In his main object the enemy was frustrated. The new arrivals had been intended to reinforce the enemy west of the town and then close on the group to the east of the airfield. But the junction could not be effected.

iii

[Freyberg's](#) messages to [Middle East Headquarters](#) for 24 May show that in spite of bad communications [Creforce](#) was still in a position to give a fairly accurate picture of the situation in the various sectors. He was still in touch with [Heraklion](#) by cable and so was able to report the fresh landings and the failure of 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to get through. To [Retimo](#) there was only communication by wireless and this was handicapped by the absence of codes; but his report to [Middle East](#) on the day's operations shows that the wireless was still operating well enough for him to be kept informed of the difficulties there. With the western/sector he was naturally in more immediate touch and his reports to General Wavell make it clear that, while the day's operations had brought no major change, he was well aware of the trial to come. And all his messages stress the ferocity of air attack on the front

line and on [Canea](#) and its environs.

One message in particular sets out to give Wavell a clear idea of the whole position. ¹ It assesses the total casualties of the defence in all sectors at 1909 and explains that three-quarters of these had been inflicted on the New Zealand Division. The total of enemy losses he calculated at 3340, more than a thousand being killed. But, though the enemy's losses were thus so much higher, he pointed out that his own men were very tired and that the scale of air attack was far greater than anything he had ever visualised. He did not believe that the enemy would ever again use his parachutists in a similar operation. ² But the battle continued and a further attack was to be expected in which the enemy would use heavy bombs to try and blast his way through. Tired though they were, the troops could be counted on to do their best; but the result would be in the balance and any help that could be given to reduce the enemy's air superiority would be of the greatest value.

Some help in the air did come and on that day. Five Hurricanes operating from North Africa with extra fuel tanks attacked enemy positions at [Heraklion](#), and that night an attack was made on [Maleme](#) by eight Wellingtons. But, however successful such attacks might be, they were on too small a scale to affect the enemy's control of the air or to interfere seriously with his plans.

There was hope, too, of land reinforcement. The 16th Infantry Brigade HQ and 2 Queen's had, it is true, turned back to [Alexandria](#) the day before. But it was now planned to send [Layforce](#), a commando brigade of two battalions under Colonel R. E. Laycock. The major part of the force embarked on [Isis](#), [Hero](#), and [Nizam](#),

¹ C. 272, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 24 May.

² A prediction that the rest of the war vindicated.

which left [Alexandria](#) at 9.30 a.m. The rest of the force, about 200 strong, embarked on [Abdiel](#). The original plan was for this force to be landed at [Kastelli](#). When [Freyberg](#) learnt of this he at once signalled that [Kastelli](#) might now be in enemy hands and that, even if it were not, there was little prospect of [Layforce](#) being able to join up with the main front. He suggested instead a landing at [Sfakia](#).

In the end the main body tried to land on the south coast and, foiled by bad weather, had to return to [Alexandria](#). The [Abdiel](#) party landed late that night at [Suda](#).

[Freyberg](#)'s private view of the situation at this time was even grimmer than these sober messages suggest. 'At this stage I was quite clear in my own mind that the troops would not be able to last much longer against a continuation of the air attacks which they had had during the previous five days. The enemy bombing was accurate and it was only a question of time before our now shaken troops must be driven out of positions they occupied. The danger was quite clear. We were gradually being driven back on our Base areas, the loss of which would deprive us of our food and ammunition. If this heavy air attack continued it would not be long before we were driven right off our meagre food and ammunition resources. I really knew at this time that there were two alternatives, defeat in the field and capture or withdrawal. Without tools, artillery and transport we could not readjust our rearward defences.'¹

iv

To the Chiefs of Staff in [London](#), waiting for a general appreciation from Wavell, it was still possible to take a rosier view, and they telegraphed to the Commanders-in-Chief that if only we could hold out the enemy's drive might yet drag to a halt. They therefore urged the sending of the maximum amount of reinforcement.²

Meanwhile, however, General Wavell was sending the expected appreciation which was not to reach its destination till early the following morning. In this message Wavell explained that [Suda](#) Bay was essential both to us and the enemy and that therefore our main object was to prevent its falling into enemy hands. He estimated the enemy forces in the area west of [Canea](#) at one airborne division and about 3000 paratroops. Our own forces in the area were roughly equal in numbers but were under considerable strain and very tired. The enemy had control of the air and could support his ground forces by continuous and heavy bombing. The

¹ [General Freyberg's Report](#), p. 40.

only immediate prospect of reinforcing the defence was to land about 500 commandos on the south coast that night. ¹

The administrative situation also was unsatisfactory. There was only about ten day's supply left of standard rations, though of some items there was supply for a longer period. And there were similar shortages in ammunition, tools, and medical supplies. So long as the enemy's control of the air remained what it was, these supplies could be replenished only by fast ships at night.

On the other hand the enemy was also in administrative difficulties. He had little or no land transport and had lost a good many of his transport aircraft. Unless he could take [Suda Bay](#) and use it as a supply base, his situation was bound to become very awkward. If he took it, however, we should ourselves be deprived of our chief supply port and, although it would be possible for us to withdraw on to [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#), we should in the end run out of supplies and ammunition and be forced to the difficult and dangerous resort of evacuation.

Meanwhile the [Navy](#) could not operate in the Aegean by day and the [RAF](#) could hardly hope, if the enemy began to supply his forces by sea, to stop him doing so. We should be able to continue the defence only if we could prevent the enemy exploiting our situation by making other landings, if we could reinforce our troops already there, and if we could avoid giving further ground. At least the vital importance of the island was realised and the Commanders-in-Chief thought themselves justified in using forces from elsewhere, not excepting the [Western Desert](#), in its defence. ²

The fact that in the contest between the [German Air Force](#) and the [Navy](#) the ships had been worsted and had had heavy losses was reflected in the reduced scale of the Fleet's Aegean activities. The only ships abroad on 24 May on business connected with [Crete](#) were [Abdiel](#), [Isis](#), [Hero](#) and [Nizam](#). And of these only the first succeeded, as we have seen, in landing her quota of troops, supplies, and ammunition. If the Commander-in-Chief was right in thinking that the defence depended on our ability to reinforce, the situation was far from promising. But

already, in fact, events in [Crete](#) itself were moving at too fast a pace. If a large enough body of reinforcements had been available on this night, if there had been ships to transport them and the harbour to take them, it might still have been possible to rush them up to the line. It was the last opportunity.

¹ In fact only 200 were landed and at [Suda Bay](#).

² O. 67118 and O.67119, C-in-C to WO, 24 May.

CRETE

I: THE CANEA-GALATAS FRONT

I: The Canea-Galatas Front

i

In the course of 23 May the enemy had become still stronger. His priority had been artillery rather than infantry, and I and II Batteries of 95 Mountain Artillery Regiment, with 95 Anti-Tank Battalion (twenty 50-millimetre guns, of which eight were motorised), were brought over; 55 Motor Cycle Battalion had also arrived. And in the evening of the same day 'the long awaited transfer of fighters to [Maleme](#) airfield could take place.' ¹

During 23 May, also, General Ringel had made sure that his writ would run with Colonel Heidrich by promulgating an order to the effect that from now on West and Centre Groups were both under his command and would be known collectively as Ringel Group. In spite of his gathering strength, however, his orders for 24 May, issued at 8 p.m. on 23 May, were not notably enterprising. Although in his opinion the defence had only 'a handful of well-placed infantry in his forward line', ² Ringel laid it down that his group would do no more than secure the positions it had already reached, pushing forward level with [Platanias](#) on the left flank and centre and on the right thrusting towards the [Canea– Alikianou](#) road and the [Galatas](#) heights in order to make a final junction with Heidrich's 3 Parachute Regiment.

Thus [Ramcke Group](#) would keep the positions it had already reached and patrol south-east towards [Stalos](#). Colonel Utz with his three mountain battalions would advance astride the [Canea– Alikianou](#) road until he reached the high ground near [Galatas](#). He would keep two of his battalions north of the road and one south of it, and would leave a protecting force near [Alikianou](#). He would make contact with Heidrich's force at [Stalos](#) and south of [Galatas](#).

The two batteries of 95 Artillery Regiment and the two batteries of parachute artillery, grouped under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Wittmann, were to give their main support to Ramcke

¹ Report by 4 Air Fleet.

² 5 Mtn Div WD. The [Platanias](#) area would be intended.

Group and help him deal with any counter-attacks; but they were also to give all possible help to Colonel Utz.

In the rear, 95 Engineer Battalion was to take [Kastelli](#) ¹ and the newly arrived 55 Motor Cycle Battalion, with two troops from 95 Anti-Tank Battalion, was to go south through Kandanos and take Palaiohora. The remainder of the anti-tank battery would be under divisional command. ²

The support of dive-bombers for the main fronts was being asked for and Utz would also be getting a troop of heavy infantry guns. Meanwhile reconnaissance was to be carried out all over the front, and particularly on the south flank, to see if any gaps could be found in the defences.

The fact that 5 Brigade had withdrawn during the night enabled this programme to be improved upon to some extent. Patrols from [Ramcke Group](#) were sent out during the morning towards the high ground at [Platanias](#) and reported 'weak enemy forces' which withdrew when the patrols approached. Captain Gericke and a paratroop force then went forward through [Platanias](#) and [Ay Marina](#) to link up with any of 100 Mountain Regiment or 3 Parachute Regiment they might find there. Once this was done Colonel Ramcke was able to regroup his forces, this being his first opportunity of doing so. Reorganised, his group consisted of [Gericke Battalion](#) (three strong companies), [Stentzler Battalion](#) (four strong companies), [Stolz Battalion](#) (two strong companies), and an anti-tank troop with six 50-millimetre guns and twenty machine guns.

Meanwhile in the centre II Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, had joined up with Heilmann's battle group in [Stalos](#), the coast road had been blocked, and patrols were being sent west towards [Galatas](#). By the end of the day Utz had established his HQ near [Lake Aghya](#) power station; II Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, was in the area north of Trolous; and I Battalion was near Point 116 ([Ruin Hill](#)). I Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment had reverted to regimental command as Colonel Krakau, the

commander of the regiment, had landed in the early morning and III Battalion during the day. A fresh battle group was to be formed from these two battalions, but meanwhile I Battalion was to remain at [Episkopi](#) and protect the south flank—a task the more necessary because patrols had reported that [Alikianou](#) was held and that advance farther south was blocked.

¹ For further developments at [Kastelli](#) see pp. 289–92.

² Ringel thus dispersed two battalions away from the main front. But he probably wanted to take [Kastelli](#) as soon as possible in order to land armour by sea; and the enemy had already shown symptoms of nervousness about Palaiokhora, presumably fearing that reinforcements from Egypt might be landed there and take the main attack in the rear.

ii

While the enemy was making these cautious forward movements, the New Zealand units had been resorting themselves. When the morning came the units of 5 Brigade were back in Divisional Reserve: Brigade HQ was south of the main road about half a mile east of [Evthymi](#), and [23 Battalion](#) was in the same area. North of the road was [21 Battalion](#). The 28th Battalion had spent the last part of the night close to the main road, but moved half-way through the morning to a position between [23 Battalion](#) and [2/7 Australian Battalion](#). Cheering news for Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer and his Maoris was a message from [General Freyberg](#) that he intended to inform New Zealand of 'their splendid conduct and dash during the operations of the last few days.'¹

The 22nd Battalion, in the fork of the Prison– [Canea](#) and [Maleme– Canea](#) roads, had the task of protecting Divisional HQ, and nearby was the Engineer Detachment.

In these new positions the battalions were to reorganise and to be ready by 8 p.m. to take up any one of four possible roles: anti-parachutist, beach protection, counter-attack, or defence in the line. The day was therefore a busy one for unit commanders and the rest the men had looked forward to only relative. It was at last possible to draw rations, but they were not plentiful and it was forbidden to light

fires.²

During the morning the Engineer Detachment was savagely strafed. Shortly after this the detachment was split. By Puttick's orders [19 Army Troops Company](#) came under command of [19 Australian Brigade](#) and moved to the [Perivolia](#) area; [7 Field Company](#) was put under [4 Brigade](#) and given a reserve position in support of [20 Battalion](#). The going of these two units was warmly regretted by [5 Brigade](#) which had had good reason to appreciate their fighting qualities. 'They had been an excellent fighting unit under Ferguson. Whenever I passed through their area, which was quite often, there was no restlessness. They were solid. They went out and dealt with the enemy without asking if they had to, did the job and then reported what they had done.'³

The other ad hoc infantry unit which had served [5 Brigade](#) well was the [Field Punishment Centre](#), prisoners and guards alike. But the unit was by now dissolved. The sight of their own units in the withdrawal had been too tempting for the men. They had one by

¹ NZ Div WD.

² From the first day of battle to the last few fighting troops had a hot meal.

³ Capt Dawson.

one slipped away and, back with their own battalions, they could be sure of a welcome and not too many questions.¹

For the remains of [27 Battery](#) the pause meant reorganisation. After seeing his guns out of [Ay Marina](#), Captain Snadden had been ordered to hospital by Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt to have his four wounds attended to. Lieutenant [Gibson](#)² then took over the troop and was told to get his two guns into a position from which they could support [4 Brigade](#). He spent 24 May and part of the evening reconnoitring sites and getting his guns to them. One gun he placed between [Galatas](#) village and the turn-off and the other on the coast road about a mile west of the turn-off. A truck had to

be borrowed to tow them in and it was late at night before all was ready. 'Tired as they were,' says Gibson, 'the men did not have to be told to dig in. Experience is the best teacher and by the first streaks of daylight slit trenches had been dug and the guns had been dug in and camouflaged.'³

The battery itself was under the command of Captain Beaumont who had taken over from the wounded Major Philp. From the gunners not employed with Gibson's two guns—the only guns left in the battery—Beaumont was ordered to provide crews for six [Breda](#) heavy machine guns which were to be distributed in twos to 4, 5, and 19 Brigades. The crews were duly formed and sent off. The rest of the gunners were formed into an infantry detachment under Beaumont and put under command of 20 Battalion.

Captain Duigan of 28 Battery now took under his command C Troop [2/3 Australian Field Regiment](#) (Captain Laybourne-Smith), and its four Italian 75s were sited that night just east of the road from [Galatas](#) to the coast, not far from one of Gibson's guns, with an observation post near that of F Troop on the right front of [18 Battalion](#). The three 75s of Duigan's own F Troop also moved during the night to fresh fire positions some 300 yards north of the original site, which had become exposed to the enemy's view from ground and air; a fire the previous afternoon, started by burning propellant charges, had swept the surrounding trees clear of cover.

The detachments of [27 MG Battalion](#) which had served with 5 Brigade now had no guns. Some of the men saw action during the day with 4 Brigade, but late that night Captain Grant got them

¹ In return for their services all the prisoners were pardoned when the Division reassembled in Egypt.

² [Capt N. McK. F. Gibson; Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 16 Jul 1916; public accountant; wounded 20 Jul 1942.

³ Report by Lt Gibson. It may be remarked that the enemy reports contain frequent reference to the skill with which the defence camouflaged its guns. Special sorties flown to locate them more often than not failed to

do so.

all together—45 men all told—and they were attached for the time being to Divisional Signals so that Brigadier Hargest could keep in touch with them. Two guns and some ammunition were expected to be available next day.

iii

Owing to the cautious character of General Ringel's plans, the enemy put in no serious attacks on [19 Australian Brigade's](#) front on 24 May. No doubt it was felt to be imprudent to press too hard on this flank while [Galatas](#) was still held. The two Australian battalions, however, did not feel compelled to wait for an enemy initiative and they did a good deal of patrolling and had some minor skirmishes in consequence. The 2/8 Battalion was treated to some bombing and strafing and had 16 casualties. In the lulls from this the battalion commander modified his company positions to tactical advantage. And by the end of the day the battalion had acquired some home-made base-plates for its mortars and an Italian machine gun—presumably one of Beaumont's Bredas.

This battalion also provided covering fire for the local attack by [2 Greek Regiment](#) against two hills near the Turkish fort. The attack went in at 5.30 a.m., two companies strong. The left-hand company gained the lower slopes of its objective but the right-hand company was less successful. Fighting was very fierce and many Germans were killed by Greek grenades and bayonets. Greek casualties were also severe. At five o'clock that evening there was still fighting going on; but Major Wooller and the Greek commander decided that it was too late for success any longer to be hoped for and they withdrew the two companies. ¹

iv

Fourth Brigade had its new role laid down in a brigade operation order issued at 12.50 that morning. It was to be in its defensive line by 5 a.m., with [18 Battalion](#) on the right and, under [18 Battalion](#) command, a two-pounder from 106 RHA and six medium machine guns. In the centre were the [Composite Battalion](#), stepped back from the front line after its relief by [18 Battalion](#), and the Divisional Cavalry. On the

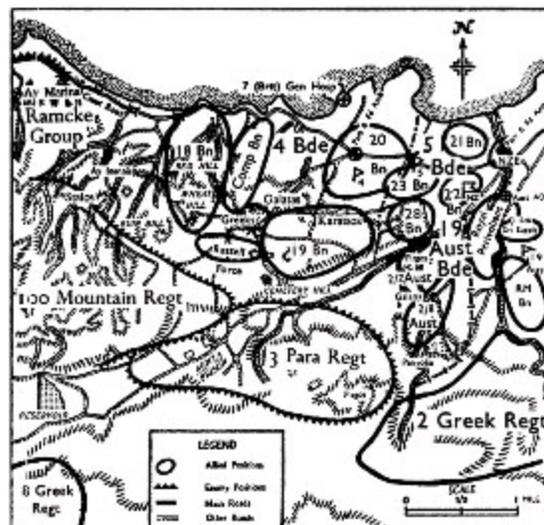
left was [19 Battalion](#) with the other two-pounder. The 20th Battalion was in reserve and its primary task was to counter-attack in support of [19 Battalion](#).

For artillery support the brigade had the two guns of C Troop, three guns of F Troop, and the four guns of C Troop 2/3 Field

¹ A number of civilians took part in the attack, and the Germans later destroyed [Mournies](#) in reprisal and shot all the Greek male civilians they could catch in the area.—Maj Wooller.

Regiment. This was meagre for a front which was now the main one. But there were no more guns to be had, and infantry and gunners alike had by now come to accept a shortage of weapons and ammunition as an inevitable feature of the battle.

A word may be said about the system of command. Brigadier Inglis, as commander of 4 Brigade, was in command of the front. He decided to keep his HQ back near the [Galatas](#) turn-off, whence he would be able to control the movement of reinforcement and keep a special eye on the north sector of the front. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) he left forward in the [Galatas](#) area as a sub-area commander, instead of returning him to the command of 20



GALATAS, 24 MAY

GALATAS, 24 MAY

Battalion. The reason for this was his desire to have a strong commander on the spot to look after the [Composite Battalion](#) and co-ordinate its actions with those of

the other units. 'In the result I think this compromise worked as well as any other that

would have been practicable under the circumstances—mainly because Kippenberger and I had complete confidence in each other.' ¹

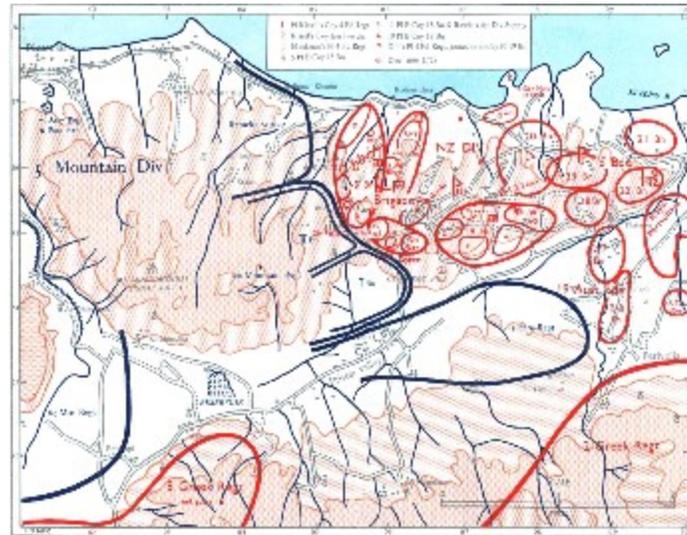
The frontage held by 18 Battalion at first light on 24 May extended from the coast to Wheat Hill and excluded, for the reason already explained, Ruin Hill. D Company held the right flank as far south as the northern slopes of Red Hill; C Company was in the centre from Red Hill to the northern slopes of Wheat Hill; Wheat Hill itself was held by A Company. B Company, which had come in from its forward patrol late the night before, was in reserve behind D Company, and Headquarters Company was also in reserve in the same area.

When daylight revealed it clearly to them, the defenders could not have relished the new situation. Wheat Hill was partly overlooked by the undefended Ruin Hill, and Red Hill completely so. This would have been bad enough even in a well-dug position. But the weapon pits which the companies inherited and which had been dug long before the evacuation from Greece were of an old-fashioned type, about six feet wide and, as the Composite Battalion had already found, very vulnerable to mortars. While it was still dark the company commanders had set their men to work trying to improve them, but what the Composite Battalion with more time had not been able to effect 18 Battalion could not do in the space of a very few hours. The position had to be accepted for what it was, although there was some resiting of section posts during the morning.

There were other shortcomings. The front, some 2500 yards, was poorly wired and in such close country it was too long even for a full-strength battalion. For a weak and partially equipped battalion, with bad communications and the slenderest artillery support, its length was a particularly serious difficulty. In addition, the area in front could not be easily swept with fire. The ground was too broken, and the frequent olive trees and vineyards gave cover for advancing infantry and restricted the defence to very short fields of fire. Nor was the length of front and the consequent opportunity for infiltration compensated for by depth; for the defence had to be stretched to cover the front even as well as it did. Finally, the fact that Ruin Hill overlooked so much of the line made it difficult for runners to keep touch

between companies and platoons—although, to begin with at least, there was telephone communication between companies and Battalion HQ.

On the rest of the front the situation was much what it had been before. The Petrol Company was still on the lower slopes of **Pink Hill**, supported by Lieutenant Dill's platoon of gunners



GALATAS, 25 May

¹ Letter from Maj-Gen Inglis, 12 Feb 1951. **Kippenberger's HQ** was now in an uncompleted building about 150 yards north-east of **Galatas**.

on the crest. Left again was the Divisional Cavalry and left of the Cavalry four companies of **19 Battalion**—D, C, A, and HQ Companies in that order—facing south-west and south towards the Prison– **Canea** road.

The **Composite Battalion** was by now back on **Ruin Ridge**, north of **Galatas**. The 6th Greek Regiment, with several officers and about 360 men, was disposed about **Galatas**, though about sixty Greeks under Lieutenant Michel had remained in the line with the Divisional Cavalry. The 20th Battalion had moved in the early hours of the morning to a position east of the road from the coast to **Karatsos** and was in reserve there.

Morning on the brigade front was one of great tension and feverish preparation for what was expected to be a formidable onslaught and one that would come soon.

Air attacks were frequent, mortaring and machine-gun fire increased throughout the day, and there was a good deal of movement to be seen in both the Prison area and that of the coast road. At 10.50 a.m. Division warned the brigades that the enemy had light armoured vehicles and ordered road blocks with anti-tank mines to be established. And [18 Battalion](#) saw what seemed to be tanks, but were more probably gun tractors, coming down the road from [Maleme](#). Enemy parties were also seen from time to time on the high ground to the front and were dispersed by artillery fire.

There were two false alarms during the morning. The Petrol Company was reported to be in trouble, and Captain Bliss's group was ordered to the rescue but found all comparatively quiet. ¹ A similar disturbance resulted in the Supply Company being sent out to counter-attack past [Wheat Hill](#). Again no enemy was met with. Some of the Supply Company, seeing [Ruin Hill](#) undefended, went forward to reoccupy it but were called back. Both these alarms probably had their origins in enemy probing patrols.

Air attacks shortly after midday were so heavy that they seemed to be the prelude to the ground assault, and once an attack was thought to be developing up the road from the Prison; but the time passed and the expected did not happen.

Afternoon came and went in the same uneasy fashion. The first result of this enemy preparation was a strong probe about two o'clock at the southern end of the [18 Battalion](#) line. No attack developed from it, however, and it was beaten off by mortar fire.

Then, about four o'clock, the enemy came forward in a more determined fashion, after artillery preparation by 95 Artillery Regiment, which had settled itself in round [Platanias](#) and [Ay Marina](#), and under cover of heavy machine-gun fire from Ruin

¹ Bliss's men remained forward and one company—Capt Nolan's (less Lt MacLean's platoon)—was put into the line on the right of the Petrol Company.

Hill where I Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment had established posts. This particular action is probably the one described in 5 Mountain Division war diary as 'a reconnaissance in force'. The pressure was so heavy on [Red Hill](#) and the positions of C Company were so exposed that at one point the forward sections had to fall back.

As soon as Gray heard of this local withdrawal he at once called up a platoon of B Company from reserve and took it forward, only to find that the enemy had already withdrawn. No doubt fire from the flanks of the gap had made their situation too uncomfortable and they had recalled that their role was after all one of reconnaissance. At all events they reported back that [Galatas](#) was strongly defended and as a result, with the approval of General Ringel, Colonel Utz decided that the assault would have to be deferred till next day after 'a thorough softening up by Stukas.' ¹

A second episode of a similar type took place at dusk in the same area. There is no entry in the enemy reports to account for it, but it was presumably a reconnaissance in force also and intended to amplify information already obtained. ² This time C Company again gave ground and Gray again sent in a counter-attack. The transport platoon of Headquarters Company under Second-Lieutenant [Copeland](#) ³ carried this out, aiming not merely at the recapture of lost positions but at the seizure of an outlying feature of [Red Hill](#) which had not been included in the defensive system but which was now seen to be essential. The platoon was successful, and by midnight the whole of [Red Hill](#) was again in the hands of [18 Battalion](#).

Meanwhile, however, Gray had realised the implications of his failure to man [Ruin Hill](#). He now decided that the enfilading fire from this feature would make [Red Hill](#) itself untenable in the face of the serious assault that was bound to come. Accordingly, he rearranged his dispositions so as to hold a line just east of Red Hill while making the hill itself untenable to the enemy. B Company, one of the reserve companies, he moved onto the north end of [Murray Hill](#)—the next ridge to the east—and its three platoons, 5, 10, and 11, were put on the forward slopes. C Company he moved back to the south end of [Murray Hill](#) between 10 Platoon of B Company at the south end and 5 and 11 Platoons at the north end. D Company stood fast in its original positions

¹ 5 Mtn Div WD.

² The enemy may, however, have hoped to secure [Red Hill](#) or part of it as a jumping-off place for the main attack next day.

³ [Capt O. B. Copeland](#); Waimauku, [Auckland](#); born [Waiuku](#), 26 Dec 1912; farmer; wounded and p.w. 25 May 1941.

from the coast to the church near [Ay Dhimitrios](#). A Company also stayed where it was in the [Wheat Hill](#) area. And Headquarters Company, now the only company in reserve, was disposed to the east of [Murray Hill](#). The main result of this was that [Red Hill](#) was no longer defended except by fire.

When the attack on [Red Hill](#) had first begun Gray had called on [Colonel Kippenberger](#) for assistance. [Kippenberger](#) replied by sending the gunners still under Captain Bliss and Captain Boyce's Supply Company group.

Bliss's gunners had been organised into two companies, one under Captain Nolan and the other under Captain [Kissel](#). ¹ Of Nolan's company only one platoon—Lieutenant MacLean's—was available, the others being in the line on the right of the Divisional Petrol Company where they had been put during the morning. Kissel had two platoons, the third—Lieutenant Dill's—being on [Pink Hill](#) between the Divisional Cavalry and the Petrol Company.

MacLean's platoon reached Lieutenant-Colonel Gray during the evening and was at first placed in the gully behind [Red Hill](#) but, when the positions were readjusted, was fitted into the right of C Company on [Murray Hill](#) and just in the rear of 5 Platoon B Company. By this time Kissel's two platoons had arrived; one of them was placed on [Ruin Ridge](#) with the [Composite Battalion](#) while the other went into reserve near [18 Battalion HQ](#). Bliss himself became second-in-command B Company. ²

With the exception of MacLean's platoon, all these gunners arrived and had to be posted in the dark; and the same was true of Boyce's Divisional Supply Company. This also was split: a detachment of about 16 men under Lieutenant [Rawle](#) ³ had already moved into position on [Murray Hill](#) at 2 a.m., an hour before they were

joined by 11 Platoon of B Company; the remainder of Boyce's men reinforced C Company.

Thus fitted after a patchwork manner into the line, these reinforcements tried to use the very little time that was left to get some sleep. It was nearly dawn, they were exhausted after the urgent confusions of the night, they mostly had no trenches or tools with which to dig them, they were not trained infantrymen, and there had been no time for them to learn much of the situation to their front or on their flanks. Yet, though they had five hard days behind them and days that looked no more promising to come,

¹ [Capt L. M. Kissel](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Auckland](#), 2 Apr 1906; schoolmaster; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² B Coy had lost its commander, [Maj Evans](#), to a mortar bomb during the day's fighting and was now commanded by Capt Noel Smith.

³ [Maj R. E. Rawle](#), MC; [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 2 Aug 1911; civil servant; OC Div Supply Coy 1944–45; wounded 25 May 1941.

they took what sleep they could and prepared stoically enough for another battle.

Elsewhere on the [Galatas](#) line there was no important action and the enemy contented himself with minor patrols. All was set for the next day's fighting, the enemy clear about his own plans for an attack in the [18 Battalion](#) sector, and the defence foreseeing it but unable to do more than what has already been recounted.

▼

To Brigadier Puttick, although the day had been got through without a major attack, the situation could not have seemed cheerful. The enemy was now at liberty to land as many men and supplies from his relatively unlimited resources in [Greece](#) as he had aircraft to carry; and his troops already on the ground west of [Canea](#) were free to join forces and to concentrate against a single front in what might prove

overwhelming force. Puttick, on the other hand, was running short of ammunition—the 72 three-inch mortar bombs which were all he had left were distributed that day—and only small-arms ammunition was reasonably plentiful; he had lost two and a half troops of guns in the withdrawal; he was bedevilled by bad communications—to his rear the enemy bombing constantly cut the lines and kept the signals units busy with mend and makeshift answers to recurring emergencies, and the bridge on the coast road out of [Canea](#) had been made impassable to heavy traffic. But worst of all was the fact that his fighting units were being steadily depleted by the casualties of each day's fighting and there was no way of making good the losses. The total of killed, wounded, and missing was already 20 per cent of the divisional strength and a much higher percentage of the strength of each fighting battalion. ¹

In addition, the tactical situation was not one that promised much rest or relief even for units not now in the line. A message sent by Division to the three brigades at 7.45 p.m. sufficiently sets the tone:

Owing to possible difficulty of communications during an enemy attack comd Cake [4 Brigade] may call on Wuna [5 Brigade] to send Bena [[23 Battalion](#)] to replace Oggi [[20 Battalion](#)] in the event of its being necessary to employ Oggi. Bena will make the necessary reces forthwith. Kela [[28 Battalion](#)] will recce with a view to counter attack Southwards on front Ruck [19 Brigade] under orders Duke [NZ Division]. ²

¹ Thus a message from NZ Div to [Creforce](#), 2.45 a.m., 24 May, says that the strengths of 5 Bde were about 230–280 a battalion.—NZ Div WD.

² NZ Div WD.

In [Suda Area](#) command the ground fighting was now over; the air attack, on the other hand, had been stepped up to a furious maximum, with heavy bombers flying over [Canea](#) in swarms and reducing the town to a flaming ruin.

The fact that the main battle was now on the [Galatas](#) line made it obvious that

the defence of [Suda Area](#) must be rearranged to take account of this. That the threat was from the west was all too plain. Accordingly, a second defensive line was formed along the line of the river which runs south through [Mournies](#). On the right of this line were the Royal Perivolians, at the confluence of the two streams north-east of Platanos; in the centre was S Searchlight Battery of the [Royal Marines](#); round [Mournies](#) was 2/2 Australian Field Regiment; and in reserve at the W/T station was 106 RHA with 250 riflemen. ¹ This mixed force, about 2000 strong, was put under command of Lieutenant-Colonel A. F. Hely, RHA, and known as [Suda Brigade](#).

At the same time it was still felt that [General Freyberg](#) should have some reserve which was not committed to any specific defensive role, and so 1 Welch, 1 [Rangers](#), and [Northumberland Hussars](#) were withdrawn into [Force Reserve](#).

¹ See map p. 332.

CRETE

II: OTHER FRONTS AND CREFORCE

II: Other Fronts and Creforce

i

May the 24th was to be the last day of the defence of [Kastelli](#), and so it seems proper to resume here the account of the isolated force of [1 Greek Regiment](#) and Major Bedding's party of New Zealanders, whom we left on 20 May triumphant over Lieutenant Muerbe's detachment of parachutists and in full control of the immediate front. ²

At the end of that first day's fighting Bedding had 28 prisoners on his hands, 15 of them wounded. Because of the angry bearing of the Greeks he had to place guards from his own men over the Germans, whom he put in the local jail, and make careful arrangements that they got fed.

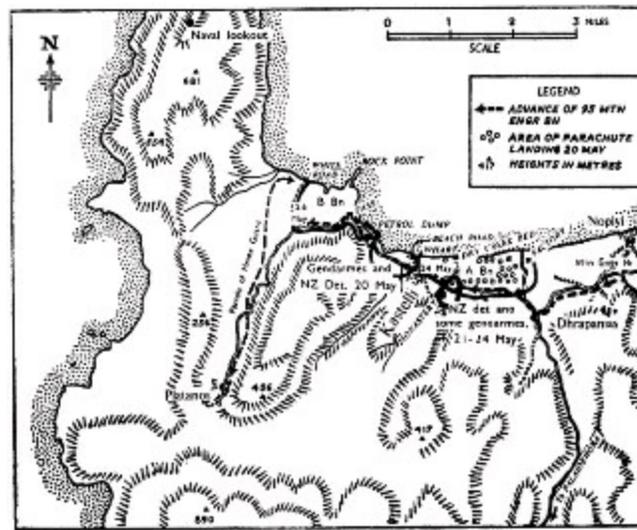
These arrangements settled, he could turn to his other problem—communications. Telephone lines had been cut and he was troubled about what course he should next pursue. In the meantime, however, there was nothing for it but to distribute captured weapons and

² See pp. 173–4. The following account is based on a report by Maj Bedding. Bedding puts the fall of [Kastelli](#) as 26 May but evidence for 24 May is overwhelming.

continue clearing the area. At least the first day had been satisfactory enough.

On 21 May there was still no news except what meagre information could be gleaned from the [BBC](#). Bedding pondered whether the best course might not be to make for [Maleme](#) with one battalion of Greeks, leaving the other to guard [Kastelli](#). But one battalion might not be enough for this latter purpose which was, after all, his prime task. And it seemed risky to chance the long march under hostile aircraft to [Maleme](#) without knowing what his tired and ill-equipped battalion would have to face

when it



KASTELLI, 20-26 MAY

KASTELLI, 20-26 MAY

got there. He therefore decided to stay where he was and prepare his defences to meet an attack from the east as the most probable quarter. Accordingly he arranged for night patrols west of the town, disposed his men and weapons as effectively as he could, reduced the ration scale, and settled down to wait for attack. An attempt on the part of Sergeant [Adams](#),¹ Corporal [Friend](#),² and two [Cretans](#) to make contact with [Canea](#) that night by caique failed

¹ [WO II R. A. Adams](#); Patea; born Patea, 16 Sep 1909; taxi driver and motor mechanic; wounded and p.w. 24 May 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.

² [Cpl J. Friend](#); Grey Lynn; born England, 18 May 1913; rigger.

when the rudder was lost and the party was forced to return— perhaps luckily as, with the [Navy](#) about, it was not good for caiques to be at sea in the dark.

Till now the enemy had been mainly interested in clearing the road to Palaiokhora against the possibility of reinforcement reaching that port; so far as [Kastelli](#) was concerned he seems to have felt that he was not strong enough to try to clear it and must in any case concentrate against [Maleme](#). The responsibility of covering the road from [Kastelli](#) to [Maleme](#) had been left to a company of 95 Engineer

Battalion and some paratroops about 70 strong. And these forces were too weak to attempt an assault.

By 23 May, however, it had become plain that if a port was to be got for landing armour it would have to be [Kastelli](#). By this time, too, the enemy felt himself able to divert a force strong enough to take it. The 95th Engineer Battalion was therefore ordered to go to a point about seven kilometres east of the town and join the paratroops there. A troop of anti-tank guns would be sent to reinforce them as soon as 95 Anti-Tank Battalion arrived. Some heavy machine guns would also be sent. The attack would begin on 24 May and would be preceded by a dive-bombing at 9.30 a.m.

The dive-bombing duly occurred and was lucky enough to hit Major Bedding's HQ. In the excitement of the raid the Greek guards, who had by now relieved the New Zealanders, took cover and the German prisoners escaped and procured weapons. As Bedding and Second-Lieutenant [Baigent](#) ¹ were leaving their HQ to rally the Greek troops against the attack to which they guessed this bombing was a prelude, they were surprised and captured by the escaped prisoners. When this was discovered by Lieutenants [Campbell](#) ² and [Yorke](#) ³ they organised a rescue attempt. The attempt failed and Campbell was killed.

The enemy on the ground had followed up the dive-bombing. By midday they had reached the outskirts of the town and by the middle of the afternoon had taken it, thus thwarting an attempt on the part of Bedding to persuade his present captors and former prisoners that their best course was to surrender.

In this engagement the enemy, without stating their own losses, claim to have inflicted casualties of over 200 killed and wounded,

¹ [Capt L. R. Baigent](#), MBE; Linton MC; born Wakefield, 23 Nov 1906; Regular soldier; p.w. 24 May 1941; wounded ([Germany](#)) 9 Apr 1945. Bedding had given Baigent the acting rank of second-lieutenant as he was 'the best fitted to command the group of Greeks covering the road.' This appointment was officially confirmed after the war as being from 20 May 1941.

² Lt R. D. Campbell; born Perth, 2 Dec 1908; bank clerk; killed in action 24 May 1941

³ Capt H. L. Yorke, m.i.d.; London; born Oxford, Canterbury, 3 Feb 1910; surveyor and civil engineer.

and so the Greeks, though ill-armed and ill-trained, must have fought bravely.

Fighting continued just beyond the town, according to German sources, for at least two more days, denying the enemy the use of the jetty, and fierce and fiercely resented guerrilla warfare was maintained in the neighbourhood until even later. The Germans concentrated on getting the port clear for shipping but it was not until 27 May that they were able to land some light tanks. The importance of this delay for the defence of Crete is obvious.

ii

May the 24th brought no major change on the Retimo front. For the defence it was a disappointing day. A company of Rangers, which General Freyberg had sent the day before from Canea in an attempt to make contact, attacked the German forces round Perivolia from the west at dawn but, being few and without heavy weapons, failed to break through, and finally returned to Canea. The 2/11 Battalion and the Greeks had planned to attack these same positions from the east in the afternoon with the support of a tank. But the tank was used in the morning to hold back an enemy move south-west from the oil factory and the driver was wounded. Without its support an infantry attack seemed useless, and so there was nothing for it but to postpone action till the following day.

At Retimo the enemy air force had done no more than drop supplies and strafe. But Heraklion was thought important enough for more active measures. The appearance of the Hurricanes the previous day had caused some alarm, and further steps were now taken to deny us the use of the aerodrome. A battalion was organised from the parties of 7 Air Division which had for one reason or another not so far been sent to Crete. It consisted of two heavy companies and two rifle companies. Heraklion town was bombed in the early morning and intermittently

throughout the day—no doubt in reprisal for the rejected ultimatum. After the bombing began the fresh troops which had been raised, along with their supplies, began dropping west of the town about eight o'clock in the morning. The main body arrived just as 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were trying to fight their way in from the south. In consequence the Highlanders failed to get to the garrison and had to withdraw.

In his main object the enemy was frustrated. The new arrivals had been intended to reinforce the enemy west of the town and then close on the group to the east of the airfield. But the junction could not be effected.

iii

Freyberg's messages to [Middle East Headquarters](#) for 24 May show that in spite of bad communications [Creforce](#) was still in a position to give a fairly accurate picture of the situation in the various sectors. He was still in touch with [Heraklion](#) by cable and so was able to report the fresh landings and the failure of 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to get through. To [Retimo](#) there was only communication by wireless and this was handicapped by the absence of codes; but his report to [Middle East](#) on the day's operations shows that the wireless was still operating well enough for him to be kept informed of the difficulties there. With the western/sector he was naturally in more immediate touch and his reports to General Wavell make it clear that, while the day's operations had brought no major change, he was well aware of the trial to come. And all his messages stress the ferocity of air attack on the front line and on [Canea](#) and its environs.

One message in particular sets out to give Wavell a clear idea of the whole position. ¹ It assesses the total casualties of the defence in all sectors at 1909 and explains that three-quarters of these had been inflicted on the New Zealand Division. The total of enemy losses he calculated at 3340, more than a thousand being killed. But, though the enemy's losses were thus so much higher, he pointed out that his own men were very tired and that the scale of air attack was far greater than anything he had ever visualised. He did not believe that the enemy would ever again use his parachutists in a similar operation. ² But the battle continued and a further attack was to be expected in which the enemy would use heavy bombs to try and blast his way through. Tired though they were, the troops could be counted on to do

their best; but the result would be in the balance and any help that could be given to reduce the enemy's air superiority would be of the greatest value.

Some help in the air did come and on that day. Five Hurricanes operating from North Africa with extra fuel tanks attacked enemy positions at [Heraklion](#), and that night an attack was made on [Maleme](#) by eight Wellingtons. But, however successful such attacks might be, they were on too small a scale to affect the enemy's control of the air or to interfere seriously with his plans.

There was hope, too, of land reinforcement. The 16th Infantry Brigade HQ and 2 Queen's had, it is true, turned back to [Alexandria](#) the day before. But it was now planned to send [Layforce](#), a commando brigade of two battalions under Colonel R. E. Laycock. The major part of the force embarked on [Isis](#), [Hero](#), and [Nizam](#),

¹ C. 272, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 24 May.

² A prediction that the rest of the war vindicated.

which left [Alexandria](#) at 9.30 a.m. The rest of the force, about 200 strong, embarked on [Abdiel](#). The original plan was for this force to be landed at [Kastelli](#). When [Freyberg](#) learnt of this he at once signalled that [Kastelli](#) might now be in enemy hands and that, even if it were not, there was little prospect of [Layforce](#) being able to join up with the main front. He suggested instead a landing at [Sfakia](#). In the end the main body tried to land on the south coast and, foiled by bad weather, had to return to [Alexandria](#). The [Abdiel](#) party landed late that night at [Suda](#).

[Freyberg](#)'s private view of the situation at this time was even grimmer than these sober messages suggest. 'At this stage I was quite clear in my own mind that the troops would not be able to last much longer against a continuation of the air attacks which they had had during the previous five days. The enemy bombing was accurate and it was only a question of time before our now shaken troops must be driven out of positions they occupied. The danger was quite clear. We were gradually being driven back on our Base areas, the loss of which would deprive us of our food and ammunition. If this heavy air attack continued it would not be long

before we were driven right off our meagre food and ammunition resources. I really knew at this time that there were two alternatives, defeat in the field and capture or withdrawal. Without tools, artillery and transport we could not readjust our rearward defences.’¹

iv

To the Chiefs of Staff in [London](#), waiting for a general appreciation from Wavell, it was still possible to take a rosier view, and they telegraphed to the Commanders-in-Chief that if only we could hold out the enemy's drive might yet drag to a halt. They therefore urged the sending of the maximum amount of reinforcement.²

Meanwhile, however, General Wavell was sending the expected appreciation which was not to reach its destination till early the following morning. In this message Wavell explained that [Suda Bay](#) was essential both to us and the enemy and that therefore our main object was to prevent its falling into enemy hands. He estimated the enemy forces in the area west of [Canea](#) at one airborne division and about 3000 paratroops. Our own forces in the area were roughly equal in numbers but were under considerable strain and very tired. The enemy had control of the air and could support his ground forces by continuous and heavy bombing. The

¹ [General Freyberg's Report](#), p. 40.

² COS 115 to Cs-in-C, ME and Med, 24 May.

only immediate prospect of reinforcing the defence was to land about 500 commandos on the south coast that night.¹

The administrative situation also was unsatisfactory. There was only about ten day's supply left of standard rations, though of some items there was supply for a longer period. And there were similar shortages in ammunition, tools, and medical supplies. So long as the enemy's control of the air remained what it was, these supplies could be replenished only by fast ships at night.

On the other hand the enemy was also in administrative difficulties. He had little

or no land transport and had lost a good many of his transport aircraft. Unless he could take [Suda Bay](#) and use it as a supply base, his situation was bound to become very awkward. If he took it, however, we should ourselves be deprived of our chief supply port and, although it would be possible for us to withdraw on to [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#), we should in the end run out of supplies and ammunition and be forced to the difficult and dangerous resort of evacuation.

Meanwhile the [Navy](#) could not operate in the Aegean by day and the [RAF](#) could hardly hope, if the enemy began to supply his forces by sea, to stop him doing so. We should be able to continue the defence only if we could prevent the enemy exploiting our situation by making other landings, if we could reinforce our troops already there, and if we could avoid giving further ground. At least the vital importance of the island was realised and the Commanders-in-Chief thought themselves justified in using forces from elsewhere, not excepting the [Western Desert](#), in its defence. ²

The fact that in the contest between the [German Air Force](#) and the [Navy](#) the ships had been worsted and had had heavy losses was reflected in the reduced scale of the Fleet's Aegean activities. The only ships abroad on 24 May on business connected with [Crete](#) were [Abdiel](#), [Isis](#), [Hero](#) and [Nizam](#). And of these only the first succeeded, as we have seen, in landing her quota of troops, supplies, and ammunition. If the Commander-in-Chief was right in thinking that the defence depended on our ability to reinforce, the situation was far from promising. But already, in fact, events in [Crete](#) itself were moving at too fast a pace. If a large enough body of reinforcements had been available on this night, if there had been ships to transport them and the harbour to take them, it might still have been possible to rush them up to the line. It was the last opportunity.

¹ In fact only 200 were landed and at [Suda Bay](#).

² O. 67118 and O.67119, C-in-C to WO, 24 May.

CRETE

CHAPTER 8 – THE SIXTH DAY: 25 MAY

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CRETE

I: THE ATTACK ON GALATAS

I: The Attack on Galatas

i

Although General Ringel had not felt strong enough to launch a general assault on 24 May, the day had not been wasted. More mountain troops landed at [Maleme](#), among them III Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment and RHQ. The 95th Mountain Reconnaissance Battalion, an AA MG company, a signals unit, and a cycle company made up the rest. III Battalion was apparently at once hurried off to [Alikianou](#), where the opposition seemed formidable enough to hold up for the time being a planned drive through the mountains to relieve the [Retimo](#) paratroops and cut off [Suda Bay](#).

On the main front the paratroop artillery and 95 Artillery Regiment had taken up positions near [Platanias](#) and [Ay Marina](#) from which to support the general assault on the [Galatas](#) line; and the infantry units had completed their preliminary reconnaissance.

At 7.15 p.m. on 24 May Ringel issued his orders for the next day. The attack was to be twofold. [Krakau Group](#)—I and III Battalions of 85 Mountain Regiment—would take [Alikianou](#) and the area east of it. It would then push on south of [Suda Bay](#) and ultimately cut the road from [Canea](#) to [Retimo](#). But the main thrust would be carried out by 100 Mountain Regiment ¹ and Ramcke's paratroops. The first would capture [Galatas](#) and the high ground south of it. The second would attack simultaneously on the front north of [Galatas](#) but would leave a strong force in reserve. Heidrich's paratroops would advance south of the Prison- [Canea](#) road, keeping contact with 100 Mountain Regiment on the left and 85 Mountain Regiment on the right. ² The 95th Artillery Regiment would support Ramcke's paratroops and the left of 100 Mountain Regiment, though ready to support the right flank of the Division as well if necessary. The 95th Reconnaissance Battalion and 95 Anti-Tank Battalion would be in position to follow up the attack.

¹ Only I and II Battalions were present. Out of III Battalion, which was to have come by sea, only an officer and 35 other ranks succeeded in reaching [Maleme](#). The [Navy](#) sank or turned back the rest.

² Ringel apparently expected Heidrich to do no more than pin down 19 Bde and prevent it attacking 100 Mtn Regt in flank.—5 Mtn Div WD.

The orders also provided for the clearance of the areas west and south of [Maleme](#). The 95th Engineer Battalion was to look after [Kolimbari](#), [Kastelli](#), [Platanos](#) and [Topolia](#), while 55 Motor Cycle Battalion took [Palaiokhora](#) and held it against any attack.

The units in the main attack were recommended to avoid frontal assaults wherever possible and to bypass [Canea](#) in favour of a swift onward drive to [Retimo](#). The latter provision indicates the enemy's concern for his troops at [Retimo](#); the former suggests that Student's criticism of Ringel's tendency to prefer encircling movements which would save blood but not time may have had some substance. ¹

Air support, which 100 Mountain Regiment had already said would be necessary, was also arranged. There were to be heavy attacks on [Alikianou](#) and [Galatas](#) at 8 a.m., and again on [Galatas](#) at 12.45 and 1.15 p.m.

Zero hour for the attack on [Alikianou](#) was to be 8 a.m. and for that on [Galatas](#) 1.20 p.m. This latter was left so late in order to ensure that artillery support and co-operation with the flanks would not be lacking. ²

These orders set the stage for the day of 25 May. And as progress now warranted his presence Student himself arrived at Ringel's HQ early that morning. The attack was not likely to lack élan with him to spur it, and shortly after his arrival he visited the [Assault Regiment](#), his chosen favourites. ³

ii

Among the defenders of the [Galatas](#) line no one deluded himself that the day would be anything less than a grinding test. Brigades were warned, and in turn warned their battalions, that a determined attack was to be expected. Fourth

Brigade already had its authority to call direct on 5 Brigade for support and at 6.20 a.m. was warning Brigadier Hargest that [23 Battalion](#) might be wanted that morning. And the remaining tanks of C Squadron, [3 Hussars](#), had come under command at 3 a.m.

Indeed there were good grounds for uneasiness. On the main front the opposition consisted of two relatively fresh battalions of mountain troops, the remains of the [Assault Regiment](#)—reorganised and strengthened with artillery—and what was left of 3 Parachute Regiment, perhaps two battalions. In addition the enemy had the support of an artillery regiment and all the air attack the sky could find room for. And he had reserve troops to follow up.

¹ Proceedings at trial of General Student.

² 100 Mtn Regt to 5 Mtn Div, 6 p.m., 24 May.—5 Mtn Div WD.

³ 'In all planning, the greatly diminished fighting strength of the paratroops had to be taken into consideration.'—5 Mtn Div WD.

Against this powerful force the New Zealand Division had in the front line where the blow was to fall only one reasonably fresh battalion, [18 Battalion](#); and this was down to a strength of about 400. The rest of the line was patched up with non-infantry ad hoc formations; and, although the men in these units were of excellent human material, they were untrained as infantry and had already been in the line ever since the battle began six days before. The 19th Battalion, although not in the main path of the assault, could not be moved without creating a gap, and the same was true of the two Australian battalions—of which one, it should be remembered, was only two companies strong. In immediate reserve there were only the 'infantry' of [5 Field Regiment](#) and the RMT group from the [Composite Battalion](#); for the rest of that battalion were by now part of the front line. The 20th Battalion, much under strength and tired from severe fighting near [Maleme](#), was in second reserve near the [Galatas](#) turn-off. The 23rd Battalion and the 28th could be called on from 5 Brigade; but both had had days of heavy fighting and their share of casualties.

There would be no air support. And the artillery, few in guns and low in ammunition, suffered from bad communications and poor observation. Finally, as has already been seen, there were dangerous weaknesses in the dispositions of [18 Battalion](#).

The enemy had probably spent a good part of the night in getting his guns, mortars, and machine guns into position. Even before daylight there had been desultory concentrations of fire from the machine guns against the front line, and some idea of their number may be gained from the fact that a patrol sent out at 4 a.m. from B Company of [18 Battalion](#) met fire from 18 counted machine guns. ¹

But the morning passed and the expected attack did not come. As they waited the defenders had to endure a continued and severe drubbing from machine guns, mortars, artillery and aircraft. D Company [18 Battalion](#) alone had 19 casualties; and this though the men were in trenches, if poor ones. But there was at least some chance to retaliate: the enemy was still building up for his attack on the north flank and D Company did good execution on parties advancing along the coast road. More still might have been done if it had not been for the shortages which were the plague of the battle. Thus at one stage during the morning Lieutenant-Colonel Gray found his supply of mortar bombs down to ten and had to borrow thirty more from [Colonel Kippenberger](#), the last he had. What they could do, however, the mortars did, ably

¹ Report by Lt R. F. Lambie, OC 5 Platoon. The patrol, led by L-Cpl Harrison, returned with all four members wounded, after putting out of action two or possibly three MGs.

seconded by the artillery and machine guns. Those of the latter with Lieutenant Rawle, on the right of C Company, did particularly good work in keeping the enemy off the forward slopes and crest of [Red Hill](#).

There was no lack of good cover for the enemy's mortars and machine guns, however, in the olives, on [Ruin Hill](#), on reverse slopes, and in the network of gullies to the west. And as the day went on their fire moved towards a peak which coincided with the first probing attacks by the infantry. Pressure began to develop,

and it became apparent that the main thrust could be expected anywhere between the right flank of [Russell Force](#)—which had been having trouble near [Pink Hill](#)—and the right flank of 18 Battalion, the positions held by D Company. In fact, by about two o'clock in the afternoon, if not earlier, all the forward companies of [18 Battalion](#) and the Petrol Company were under attack.

In this early stage the Petrol Company, aided by enfilade fire from the Divisional Cavalry, was able to prevent enemy progress in the [Pink Hill](#) area. The attack against A Company [18 Battalion](#), to the right of the Petrol Company, occasioned some stern fighting. The enemy's design was probably to get possession of [Wheat Hill](#) so as to bring fire to bear on [18 Battalion's](#) positions on [Murray Hill](#) and those of the [Composite Battalion](#) on [Ruin Ridge](#). For the time being their thrust was held, but as the afternoon wore on it grew dangerous enough to make Gray send Captain Bliss with a detachment of men from the Supply Company to A Company's support.

Although some approach was also made against the front of C Company in the centre of the line it was beaten off by 15 Platoon, and it may have been no more than an attempt to pin the company down while the more serious attack on [Wheat Hill](#) was going in. For if the latter were effective, C Company's position could be made untenable by a drive in from its southern flank.

The attack in the northern section of [18 Battalion's](#) line, like that on [Wheat Hill](#) in the south, was pushed hard and may have had the same object of isolating the centre. On the other hand, the fact that the fighting here was very fierce may merely be attributed to the presence of Ramcke's paratroops. At all events the attack was serious enough during its first hour for Gray to send up a reserve platoon of gunners under Captain Kissel. As this platoon came forward it ran into trouble on its own account and lost casualties to a machine-gun fusillade. But meanwhile D Company seemed to have beaten the enemy off temporarily and Kissel's platoon installed itself on the forward slopes of [Murray Hill](#), to the left rear of D Company.

All was not really well, however, on the D Company front. The assault had begun with a sudden intensification of machine-gun fire and an equally sudden cessation of air attack. The front positions were on forward slopes, and as the enemy had also begun to use Bofors against them, Captain [Sinclair](#),¹ who commanded the company, went out to see how it was with his men. 'I could shout

and then get a man to hear me and see him turn his head round and signal he was all right.' If we add to the intensity of small-arms fire necessary to produce such a storm of sound the fact that shells and mortar bombs were bursting at the rate of perhaps twenty a minute on the battalion front,² we get some conception of the volume of fire.

At 3 p.m. Sinclair observed enemy moving in a re-entrant near [Red Hill](#) but, as he attempted to have fire brought down on them, was himself wounded. From this point he was succeeded in command by Second-Lieutenant Robinson.³ Robinson, finding his forward platoons hard pressed, attempted to reinforce them with his reserve platoon and men from Company HQ. But before he could finish doing so he was killed by a grenade and the attempt broke down.

It must by now have been about four in the afternoon and the enemy had begun to throw in his full weight. A frontal attack on the D Company positions coincided with the attack from Red Hill towards the left rear. A runner with the news reached Gray almost at once. He hastily collected some twenty to thirty men— military police, batmen, intelligence staff, clerks, storemen, gunners and men from the Supply Company. The scene is well described by R. T. Bishop,⁴ a corporal in the carrier platoon which, about twelve men strong, was holding a forward slope behind D Company. Some D Company posts at the seaward end of the line had just been overrun and had surrendered when Gray 'hove in sight armed with rifle and bayonet and leading perhaps 20 men and yelling to Don Company "No surrender. No surrender." Sergeant Scott asked if we were to join in but was told to wait for the second wave. However, he took half a dozen men with him and left almost immediately, the rest of us following. We had just got to the top of the ridge when we met the CO coming back, Sgt Scott and others having been killed.'

¹ [Capt R. S. Sinclair; Te Awamutu](#); born Bellshill, [Scotland](#), 22 Apr 1911; accountant; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

² 'I estimated the mortar bursts at six a minute on one company sector alone.'— [Infantry Brigadier](#), pp. 63–4. No doubt some of these bursts were from shellfire.

³ 2 Lt D. L. Robinson; born [Wellington](#), 17 Jan 1909; assistant town clerk; killed in action 25 May 1941.

⁴ [Sgt R. T. Bishop](#); Papatoetoe; born Hampden, 16 Nov 1908; herd tester; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

The gallant and hopeless counter-attack had failed. Its members were few and motley, the enemy numerous and better armed. All it may have done was to hold the enemy back a little longer. The greater part of D Company was already beyond rescue. Only eleven men under the quartermaster-sergeant got away.

Captain Bassett gives a good impression of the scene:

In the afternoon he came again in full blast against Gray's right and as our wire to him was cut by bombs I offered to go through and check up. It seemed an easy job, but I was no sooner out than flights of dive-bombers made the ground a continuous earthquake and Dorniers swarmed over with guns blazing incessantly. It was like a nightmare race dodging falling branches, and I made for the right Company and got on their ridge, only to find myself in a hive of grey-green figures so beat a hasty retreat sideways until I reached Gray's HQ just as he was pulling out. I had to admire the precise way he was handling the withdrawal—he greeted me with 'Thank God Bassett, my right flank's gone, can you give us a vigorous counterattack at once', and I promised to put in the two 20th Companies and he insisted on my taking a signaller with me in case I got hit. A bomb landed amongst us and after the scatter I couldn't find his hide-out, so set [off] back alone, all the time feeling a bullet drilling me in the back from the ground or through the head from the air. My way led through the town, and I found all our sectors undergoing the same massed attack.

A nest of snipers penetrated into the houses, pelted at me and a Stuka keeping a baleful eye on me only (or so it seemed), cratered the road as I scuttled. I reached [Kip](#) breathless, the officers were with him, and within a minute rushed off to lead their companies in. ¹

Before Bassett's return [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had heard that D Company was in

difficulties and had ordered Gray to counterattack with Headquarters Company and Bliss's gunners. But there had been no time for Gray to do more than organise the emergency counter-attack already described, and the only chance now lay in the two companies which had been organised from the remnants of 20 Battalion's B, C, and D Companies. These two companies, commanded by Captain [Fontaine](#)² and Lieutenant O'Callaghan,³ had been sent up that morning by Brigadier Inglis and were in reserve, about 140 men strong, under the olives just north of [Galatas](#).⁴ They had been bombed and strafed during the afternoon for the best part of an hour but had had no casualties.

Bassett's return confirmed that the situation was desperate. If the enemy broke through on the right flank he would have the shortest route to [Canea](#). [Kippenberger](#) therefore ordered the two commanders to rush their two companies to the right of Ruin

¹ Letter from Capt Bassett, 3 Jun 1941.

² [Col D. J. Fontaine](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Westport; born Westport, 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO 20 Bn 21 Jul–16 Aug 1942; 26 Bn Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jun–Oct 1944; comd NZ Adv Base Oct 1944–Sep 1945; wounded 19 Nov 1941.

³ Lt M. G. O'Callaghan; born [Hamilton](#), 31 Jan 1917; law student; killed in action 25 May 1941.

⁴ This left only A Coy, part of HQ Coy, and the attached NZE still free in 20 Bn.

Ridge. 'Fontaine and O'Callaghan ran out, stooping under the stream of "overs". They got into position, finding the Composite Battalion nearly all gone though it had only been getting "overs", and hung on grimly. For the rest of the evening it was a comfort to hear their fight going steadily on.'¹

This move left [Kippenberger](#) without further reserves. And reserves were already needed. For a determined attack on A Company had now begun to make

headway. Twice runners had been sent from [Wheat Hill](#) to get permission to withdraw. Twice the permission was refused.² But finally the pressure was too great: A Company and its attached troops began to fall back. This left C Company and the supporting platoons of B Company alone.

Soon Major Russell reported that he, too, was hard pressed. The flanking fire his men and also Lieutenant Dill's platoon on Pink Hill had been bringing down on the main German attack had been so successful that special artillery concentrations had been called for by the enemy to deal with them. And I Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment was also trying to force a way to [Galatas](#) through his positions.

The telephone system had been almost destroyed by bombing and there was no line to 4 Brigade. So, as soon as Bassett had given his message about D Company, [Kippenberger](#) sent him on to report to Brigadier Inglis and urge all possible reinforcement.

Already there was a trickle of stragglers, a sinister symptom. The RAP was full of wounded and trucks were running the gauntlet to get them away. And hardly had Bassett gone when it became clear that A Company had been forced off [Wheat Hill](#). This left in the foremost line only C Company and small groups like Lieutenant Rawle's and the platoons of B Company. Here the weight of attack had been steadily increasing, though the machine guns in Rawle's detachment and the riflemen in B Company did splendid work keeping down any frontal attacks across [Red Hill](#). But with right and left flanks torn open by the going of D and A Companies and with fire pouring in from three sides, and especially from Ruin Hill, it was obviously impossible to hold out much longer. About

¹ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 64. The passage quoted is perhaps unjust to the Composite Bn. Only 5 Fd Regt 'infantry' and the RMT group had been on [Ruin Ridge](#), and mortar bombs and shells were landing so thickly that one wounded man was wounded twice more as he went back. Unluckily, Maj Sprosen—whom [General Kippenberger](#) describes as 'brisk, cheerful and resolute throughout'—had been wounded and was not there to grip the men together. Even had he been there he would probably have withdrawn once A and C Coys of 18 Bn fell back, as was already happening. Moreover, the 20 Bn companies went to the right of [Ruin Ridge](#) and would not have encountered most of the Comp Bn in any case.

² Ibid. A description of the situation in this area may be quoted from the same page. 'I went a few hundred yards forward to get a view of Wheat hill, and for a few minutes watched, fascinated, the rain of mortar bursts. In a hollow, nearly covered by undergrowth, I came on a party of women and children huddled together like little birds. They looked at me silently, with black, terrified eyes.'

7 p.m. Major Lynch, commander of C Company, felt the situation was desperate and sent a message by runner to Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, asking permission to withdraw. Gray, whose own HQ was in imminent danger of being overrun, sent the runner back: Lynch was to hang on for another hour if possible. It was a quarter of an hour before the runner found Major Lynch, who was up in the forward trenches with a rifle. By this time the enemy seemed to be everywhere around the company. To remain any longer Lynch saw would be to throw away his company. He therefore arranged a covering party, who held off the enemy almost at arm's length, and the company withdrew in good order.

Meanwhile the enemy had also got behind the B Company positions. No. 11 Platoon was almost wiped out and the survivors of 5 and 10 Platoons had no choice but to retire, with mortar bombs bursting about them and machine-gun fire all around. ¹ The various detachments of gunners and Divisional Supply in the same area, in similar danger, had to do the same.

By holding on so long there is little doubt that these resolute troops prevented a breakthrough in the centre which would have overwhelmed Battalion HQ and might have carried on with even more serious results. Even so the position was bad enough. The withdrawal was now general and in danger of becoming a rout. Some found their way back towards [Galatas](#). Others fell back on [Ruin Ridge](#) and were rallied by Gray near a stone wall that ran alongside the road north from [Galatas](#). As some of C Company came up Colonel Gray halted them: "Ah, C Company, we'll make a stand." And make a stand we did.' ² As soon as this was organised Gray went off to find [Colonel Kippenberger](#).

[Kippenberger](#) had meanwhile also been trying to dam the tide. 'Suddenly the trickle of stragglers turned to a stream, many of them on the verge of panic. I walked in among them shouting "Stand for New Zealand!" and everything else I

could think of. The RSM of the Eighteenth, Andrews, came up and asked how he could help. With him and Johnny Sullivan, the intelligence sergeant of the Twentieth, we quickly got them organised under the nearest officers or N.C.O.'s, in most cases the men responding with alacrity. I ordered them back across the next valley to line the ridge west of Daratsos where a white church gleamed in the evening sun. There they would cover the right of the Nineteenth and have time and space to get their second wind. Andrews came to me and said quietly that he was afraid he could not do any more. I asked why, and he pulled up his shirt and showed a neat

¹ Sgt A. Voss reports that a member of 11 Platoon threw himself on a grenade and so saved lives at the expense of his own.

² Report by E. T. Pritchard.

bullet hole in his stomach. I gave him a cigarette and expected never to see him again, but did, three years later, in Italy. A completely empty stomach had saved him.' ¹

While Kippenberger was intent on rallying the troops who had fallen back, the reinforcements called for through Captain Bassett and swiftly sent by Brigadier Inglis had begun to come on the scene. Already at 7 p.m. 4 Brigade had warned 5 Brigade that the line was being heavily attacked. By half past seven 23 Battalion had been ordered forward from 5 Brigade to take over in the former 20 Battalion area, near the Galatas turn-off. The 21st Battalion then came forward into the former 23 Battalion positions, and 28 Battalion was ordered to stand by ready to help at dusk. About the same time Brigadier Hargest's HQ staff were posted along the main coast road to collect and reorganise stragglers.

While he was waiting for 23 Battalion to arrive Inglis considered the situation. The line was temporarily gone, in so far as it had been held by 18 Battalion and the Composite Battalion. His reserve was already in use, except for about a company of 20 Battalion and such reinforcing parties as could be scraped together from his own Brigade HQ. He at once set to work having these latter organised, and as a result an officer and 14 men from J Section Signals were hastily sent forward, the Brigade

Band, the pioneer platoon of [20 Battalion](#), and the [Kiwi Concert Party](#). All these were promptly put into an improvised line along the stone walls north of [Galatas](#), at the western edges of which there were already snipers. The 20th Battalion's A Company with its attached gunners, under Captain [Washbourn](#),² took up a position on the right of Fountaine's and O'Callaghan's two [20 Battalion](#) companies, which had been pulled back some distance from Ruin Ridge to straighten the line.

Soon A Company of [23 Battalion](#) was also on the spot and it took over the gap between the odd detachments—which also included 20–25 men from [5 Field Regiment](#) under Captain [Cowie](#)³—just to the north of [Galatas](#) and the [20 Battalion](#) companies. There was once more a continuous front from [Galatas](#) to the sea.

Having overrun D Company ridge [Ramcke Group](#), for some unstated reason, decided to halt on a line there.⁴ The stout defence put up by the two [20 Battalion](#) companies and the odd parties rallied in the area, and the fact that the paratroop units were under strength, probably discouraged them from the

¹ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 65.

² [Capt G. W. Washbourn](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Timaru](#), 13 Jul 1916; bank clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ [Capt G. R. Cowie](#), ED; [Wellington](#); born [Petone](#), 26 Aug 1896; clerk; [Wellington Regt](#) 1916–20; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁴ [Ramcke Group to Ringel Group](#), 7.50 p.m.—5 Mtn Div WD.

risks of pushing further forward in frontal attack against forces whose strength they had not been able to reconnoitre. And it was already getting late.

No such pause occurred, however, farther to the south, where II Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment seems to have been attacking on the main part of [18 Battalion](#) front and that of the Petrol Company, while I Battalion attacked from the south-west towards [Pink Hill](#) and the Divisional Cavalry front.

Once the attacks on [Russell Force](#) front began to gather weight it became difficult, and indeed impossible, for Major Russell to command it as a whole. Telephone lines began to be cut and control could not extend at best much beyond the range of a runner and at worst beyond that of a commander's own voice. As a result, in the later part of the day's fighting, the assortment of units and detachments in [Russell Force](#) had to function more or less independently.

Foreseeing that [Pink Hill](#) was going to be important and how dangerous it would be if the enemy were to get hold of it, Russell had decided in the early afternoon that the Greeks he held in reserve under Captains Forrester and Smith would not be enough to supply the counter-attacks that would probably be necessary and had asked for two platoons to be sent up from [19 Battalion](#). Accordingly 7 Platoon of A ([Wellington](#)) Company, under Lieutenant [Scales](#),¹ and 15 Platoon of C (Hawke's Bay) Company under Lieutenant [Carrier](#),² were sent up to him. These two platoons Russell held in reserve for some time, and about four o'clock they were heavily dive-bombed and suffered eight casualties. Then, either believing that [Pink Hill](#) was already in enemy hands or that an attack on it was about to make dangerous headway, Russell decided to commit his reserve. He therefore ordered 7 Platoon to go through [Galatas](#) and establish itself on [Pink Hill](#), while 15 Platoon went forward to the right flank positions of the Divisional Cavalry and worked its way onto [Pink Hill](#) from there. The Greek detachments were to co-operate with 7 Platoon.

No. 15 Platoon duly went forward to the right-hand squadron of the Cavalry, but before it could make any further progress Germans were seen moving through the olive trees to the front. The Cavalry and 15 Platoon at once opened fire, and one section of 15 Platoon led by its corporal advanced, throwing grenades. The enemy were driven back and did not again come forward, although a good deal of small-arms fire from the south-west—no doubt supporting fire for II Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, from

¹ [Capt R. B. Scales](#); [Palmerston North](#); born [Dannevirke](#), 27 Jan 1915; salesman; wounded 25 May 1941.

² [Maj J. D. Carrier](#); [Ruhotu](#), [Taranaki](#); born [England](#), 28 Jan 1911; hostel manager.

I Battalion—kept coming in overhead. Not long afterwards Russell ordered the platoon to withdraw.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Scales' 7 Platoon had divided into two parties, one—under Scales—going round the western slope of [Pink Hill](#) and the other—under Sergeant Rensch¹—the eastern. This second party ran into difficulties with enemy machine guns, but eventually the platoon collected near the brow of the ridge and settled down to hold the position, in conjunction with Lieutenant Dill's platoon of gunners whom they had found still in occupation. There was no sign of the Greek detachment whose help Scales had been led to expect.

At this time the Petrol Company with the various supporting detachments was still holding on to the west of [Pink Hill](#). About the middle of the afternoon Carson's patrol had come forward to help stiffen the line. Hardly had it arrived when there was an attack by thirty Stukas which weakened the right flank badly.² Into the gap Lieutenant Carson took his patrol and the whole force stayed grimly put against attacks of increasing intensity. Even after [18 Battalion](#) had withdrawn they stayed on, the runner sent to warn them of the retirement having been killed on the way.

The consequence of [18 Battalion](#)'s withdrawal was that the Petrol Company was now coming under heavy fire from the right as well as the front. But Captain Rowe and his men battled stoutly on in defence of their positions until a message came by telephone— this line must have been one of the few that remained uncut— from Major Russell to the effect that [18 Battalion](#) had withdrawn and that he himself was so hard pressed that he would have to withdraw also; but he would try to hold on for a time so that the Petrol Company could withdraw first. About the same time men who had been sent out earlier to try and make contact with [18 Battalion](#) returned with confirmation of Russell's news. And Carson's patrol, who had found the wounded runner from [18 Battalion](#), also brought in the burden of his message. They found the Petrol Company 'virtually surrounded, with fire seeming to come from all sides.³

Clearly there was no time to be lost if the Petrol Company was not to be completely cut off by the south-east thrust to [Galatas](#). Captain Rowe and CSM James quickly decided to use the left flank on the lower slopes of [Pink Hill](#) as a pivot and to

swing back their line right of it in extended order. In this way they could keep

¹ [WO I D. W. Rench](#); m.i.d.; Pakaraka, Bay of Islands; born [Napier](#), 2 Aug 1914; farmer.

² This was probably part of the dive-bombing attack which struck the two 19 Bn platoons, killed many civilians, set several houses in [Galatas](#) on fire and wrecked telephone communications.

³ Report by [Dvr A. Q. Pope](#).

a front facing [Wheat Hill](#), in enemy hands since the withdrawal of [18 Battalion](#), and might cover [Galatas](#) against attack from the west. The manoeuvre was carried out with a skill very creditable to troops untrained in infantry tactics. But when [Galatas](#) was reached Rowe found there were no troops west of [Galatas](#) to which he could hitch his right flank and so screen the village. There seemed nothing for it but to continue withdrawing.

This move had been carried out in co-operation with Captain Nolan's two platoons of gunners and Carson's patrol, and the troops involved mostly managed to make their way back safely through [Galatas](#) or round its outskirts.

Already before this had happened the Greek detachment under Forrester and Smith, which had been broken up by machine-gun fire before it could come to the support of Scales' platoon on [Pink Hill](#), had been ordered to form a screen across the western front of [Galatas](#); but reports reached Captain Smith that the Germans were in the northern outskirts of [Galatas](#), and accordingly Major Russell ordered the Greeks to fall back on [19 Battalion](#).

As [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had by now realised that this threat of outflanking was also endangering the whole of [Russell Force](#) he ordered Russell to withdraw, and it was no doubt in consequence of this that Russell telephoned Rowe. Soon after this conversation Russell evidently felt that it would be too risky to keep his companies forward any longer, and so the Divisional Cavalry also made their way back towards [Karatsos](#) and [19 Battalion](#).

This left only Dill's gunner platoon and Scale's 7 Platoon still forward. Dill himself had gone out to the furthest point of a spur to watch the attack developing and in this exposed position remained with machine-gun fire landing all around him. Sergeant Norman Hill ¹ who had gone forward with him expostulated. 'Even though he was my superior officer I could not resist swearing at him and telling him what a damned fool he was. As a matter of fact he turned to me and stated, "If a man believes he will be hit, he will."' (I think he believed this as his conduct throughout the campaign bore this out.) It was then that he actually was hit.

Scale's platoon and the remainder of the gunners had all this while been defending their position vigorously against the attack, which was by now coming from the south-east as well; for I Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment, had joined in in earnest and had been attacking since ten minutes past six. In the hard fighting Scales was wounded in the arm, one of Dill's sergeants was killed and Private A. McKay, ² who a little while before had driven off

¹ Sgt N. H. R. Hill; Kaikohe; born Otaki, 13 Jan 1916; civil servant; twice wounded.

² Pte A. F. McKay; Timaru; born NZ 11 Aug 1905; plasterer; wounded 25 May 1941.

a German machine-gun crew from the brow of the hill by hurling grenades, was wounded.

Finally the Divisional Cavalry were observed to have withdrawn and Scales saw that he must get his men away from what was now a hopelessly isolated position. Dill had already been dragged down to the road by Sergeant Hill and then, with the help of the crew of one of the 106 RHA two-pounders, carried to the outskirts of Galatas. Hill went on to get help from the RAP and found it evacuated. He returned to Dill, found he had been wounded a second time, and again went for help. He was followed by Scale's platoon and Dill's surviving gunners. As they went through Galatas the Germans came in behind them. It was now impossible for Sergeant Hill to get back. The survivors of the defence of Pink Hill—out of 23 men in 7 Platoon only 12 came off Pink Hill—made their way towards 19 Battalion. There seems little

doubt that the remainder of the brigade owed much to the stubborn bravery with which they had defended the key feature entrusted to them. For by now the defence had had a chance to reorganise, it was approaching dark, and the enemy effort for the day was almost spent.

It remains to describe the fate of the guns. Of the two guns in C Troop, the more northerly had been about a mile west of the [Galatas](#) turn-off under the command of Lieutenant Gibson. When most of the withdrawing infantry had passed his position Gibson decided he must save his gunners also; to save the gun was impossible without transport. He therefore disabled the gun and went back with his crew until he met Captain Beaumont and the gunners with [20 Battalion](#). These he joined in their position on the right of the new line.

The other gun, commanded by Lieutenant A. H. Boyce, was half-way between [Galatas](#) and the turn-off. About the time of the withdrawal Boyce had gone to discuss the situation with C Troop 2/3 Field Regiment RAA. He returned to find that a passing officer had ordered his men to spike the gun and withdraw. Assuming Boyce himself to have become a casualty, they had obeyed. He therefore took them to the Australian position, where they joined a defence platoon Major [Bull](#)¹ was organising, and he himself took command of an Australian gun.

The Australian troop had done good work all day bringing down fire on the right flank. Eventually the enemy aircraft located them and gave them special attention but the guns kept on firing. They were still firing over open sights with their four Italian 75s

¹ [Maj M. A. Bull](#), ED; [Timaru](#); born [Christchurch](#), 14 Oct 1907; schoolmaster; 2 i/c 5 Fd Regt Feb–May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; Rector [Timaru Boys' High School](#).

when the Germans reached the outskirts of [Galatas](#). At point-blank range, with each gun firing on its own commander's orders, they did a great deal to save the situation.

.... I got instructions to report to 4 Bde HQ near the Galatos turn-off. There was heavy air activity and going alone across country even was difficult. As I went Jerry

started to shell—not bomb—Galatos. The bursts were—believe it or not—a brilliant peach colour. I never saw anything like it before or since. It was crumbling some of the houses about the NW corner, but not collecting any military target. I got my instructions, and then it appeared clear by the row that something was going on in Galatos itself, so I bolted up to the guns to see if they were all right. When I got to C Troop RAA, stragglers were starting to come through them and from the ridge you could see Germans on the outskirts of Galatos. The only thing to do was to protect ourselves so we hauled the guns up to the ridge. It wasn't very difficult to persuade the stragglers to lie down along the ridge to form a sort of firing line on each side of the guns. It was all very primitive but it seemed the only thing to do. There was a little potting but no one in the position got hit. Our gun fire was gloriously accurate using the open sights and gun control, and very soon all Jerries hastened out of sight. ¹

F Troop, 28 Battery, though it was unable to bring down fire on the right flank, had also had plenty to do all day. Its telephone line to [Galatas](#) exchange was continually being cut and the signalmen under Bombardier [Khull](#) ² had a difficult time trying to keep it in repair. But whenever they had communication to the observation post, they fired by its reports and, when they had not, they relied on registered targets. Finally, darkness came and the guns of both troops had to fall silent.

¹ Report by Maj Bull.

² [Bdr E. M. Khull](#); [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 12 Oct 1912; joiner; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

CRETE

II: THE COUNTER-ATTACK FOR GALATAS

II: The Counter-attack for Galatas

Back at Galatas Colonel Kippenberger had barely had time to take comfort from the restoration of a line on his right and the news that further help was on the way from 23 Battalion when a message reached him of attack on Major Russell's front. The position seemed critical. So far as he knew Russell Force had not yet withdrawn. The enemy had entered Galatas, however, in the wake of 18 Battalion and the whole left flank held by Russell Force was therefore in danger. Worse, the enemy might still before nightfall renew his thrust and by debouching from the village deny 18 Battalion a badly needed chance to reorganise. Successful breakthrough in the centre would enable him to drive north for the coast road and cut off the restored right flank.

Then, a little before eight in the evening, two tanks appeared. Major Peck had learnt at 7 p.m. that Galatas had fallen and at



COUNTER-ATTACK AT GALATAS, 25 MAY

once sent Lieutenant Farran to block the eastern exit, while two other tanks under Captain A. J. Crewdson went to block the entrance to Karatsos. Close behind Farran's tanks came C and D Companies of 23 Battalion.

Here was a chance for the anvil to hit the hammer. A hard blow now would give [Russell Force](#) the opportunity to disengage and would check the enemy for at least the hour or so needed till dark. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) acted quickly.

Farran stopped and spoke to me and I told him to go into the village and see what was there. He clattered off and we could hear him firing briskly, when two more companies of the Twenty-third arrived, C. and D., under Harvey and Manson, each about eighty strong. They halted on the road near me. The men looked tired, but fit to fight and resolute. It was no use trying to patch the line any more; obviously we must hit or everything would crumble away. I told the two company commanders they would have to retake Galatos with the help of the two tanks. No, there was no time for reconnaissance; they must move straight in up the road, one company either side in single file behind the tanks, and take everything with them. Stragglers and walking wounded were still streaming past. Some stopped to join in as did Carson and the last four of his party. The men fixed bayonets and waited grimly. ¹

There was a pause while the two companies organised for the attack. Then Farran returned, after having gone well into the town and sprayed each side of the road with machine-gun fire. 'The place is stiff with Jerries,' he said. ² Would he go in again with the two companies? Certainly he would; but the corporal and gunner of his second tank had been wounded. Could they be replaced? [Kippenberger](#) called for volunteers among the troops standing by.

Volunteers came forward and from among them two were chosen. Private [Lewis](#), ³ a machine-gunner attached to [23 Battalion](#), became commander of the tank. Private E. H. [Ferry](#), ⁴ a driver from 4 Brigade HQ, became gunner—for as a school cadet he had learned how to handle a Vickers. The wounded men were dragged out and Farran gave his new recruits a brief course:

This one-pipper bloke was a man of action, he gave us many words of instruction and a few of encouragement, finishing up in a truly English manner 'Of course you know you seldom come out of one of these things alive.' Well, that suited me all right—it seemed a pretty hopeless fight with all these planes knocking about and a couple of my bosom friends had been knocked. ⁵

¹ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 66.

² [Ibid](#), p. 67.

³ [Lt C. D. Lewis](#), m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born NZ 25 Oct 1913; draughtsman.

⁴ [Cpl E. H. Ferry](#); [Palmerston North](#); born [Wanganui](#), 1 May 1917; civil servant.

⁵ Letter from [E. H. Ferry](#), 5 Apr 1948.

The extra time got by this delay was not wasted. [Kippenberger](#) sent his batman to warn Lieutenant-Colonel Gray of the counterattack and tell him to join in. Captain Bassett, as indefatigable as his opposite number, Captain Dawson of 5 Brigade, went as well.

I ... found that amazingly virile warrior, John Gray, who no sooner grasped Kip's message than he fixed his own bayonet, and jumping out of the ditch cried 'Come on 18th boys, into the village.' And blow me if most of the line didn't surge out after him. ¹

Gray formed up these survivors of his battalion—at this stage a few dozen strong—on the eastern edge of the village. Here they were joined by a further party from Headquarters Company 20 Battalion, including the Bren carrier platoon. These men had been mustered by Major Burrows and had come forward from 4 Brigade with Bassett and Lieutenants [Bain](#) ² and [Green](#). ³ They now found Gray 'personally directing operations and undaunted by all the enemy fire power from the ground as well as air going on round him.' ⁴ Gray told them they were to clear the village with the bayonet —'not a very bright prospect as the Jerries seemed to have MGs and Mortars everywhere. There was a terrific amount of fire coming from the village.' ⁵

Other stout soldiers joined in. 'I found the fair Forrester bare-headed, with only a rifle and bayonet, itching to go, and that great lump of footballing muscle William Carson, with a broad grin, licking his lips saying "Thank Christ I've got a bloody

bayonet.”⁶ For Driver [Pope](#)⁷ and about six men of Carson's patrol who had found their way out shortly before from the Petrol Company's lines, to see an attack preparing was to join it. And all sorts of men who had got cut off from their units and found themselves in the vicinity would not be left behind. The spirit of such men, the flower of those left from the day's fighting, may be dwelt on, if only to set off the less creditable—and indeed less typical—straggling that had taken place when the line broke. A quotation from Lieutenant Thomas of [23 Battalion](#) will illustrate:

I rejoined my platoon. Their numbers seemed greater. Looking closer in the gloom I made out several unfamiliar faces.

‘We've got some reinforcements, Sir,’ said Sgt Templeton. ‘These chaps are from the 18th and 20th and want the chance of a crack at the Hun.’

A tall Lance-Corporal stood up. ‘Is it OK, Sir?’ a little anxiously. ‘The bastards got my brother today.’

¹ Letter from Capt Bassett, 3 Jun 1941

² [Capt F. J. Bain](#); Waipara; born NZ 16 Mar 1916; warehouse assistant; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³ 2 Lt S. J. Green; born [Invercargill](#), 6 Jan 1910; commercial traveller; killed in action 25 May 1941.

⁴ Report by [Sgt H. W. Kimber](#), 20 Bn.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Letter from Capt Bassett, 3 Jun 1941.

⁷ [Dvr A. Q. Pope](#); [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 16 Nov 1920; horsebreaker; wounded (twice) and p.w. 29 May 1941; escaped Apr 1945.

While this was happening the two [23 Battalion](#) companies stood in two files on either side of the road, bayonets fixed. They had come forward through men demoralised in the withdrawal—losing their commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie, wounded on the way—but were themselves thirsting 'to get stuck into the Huns'.

The plan, for lack of time, was simple. C Company, under Captain Mark Harvey, was to attack on the right of the road, D Company under Captain [Manson](#),¹ on the left. And for the platoon commanders the orders were no more complex, as Captain Harvey's to C Company will show:

D Company will be attacking on the left of the road and we have two tanks in support but the whole show is stiff with Huns. It's going to be a bloody show but we've just got to succeed. Sandy, you will be on the right, Rex on the left. Now for Christ's sake get cracking.²

By now Farran was back with his second tank and its novice crew It was time to be off. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) gave his orders. He was not to go farther than the village square. 'Now get going.'

It was not quite dark. Farran set off in the first tank towards the village, 200 yards away. The second tank followed. Behind came the infantry, marching at first and then at a run. All of C Company went up the road, and one platoon of D Company. The other two—16 and 18—swung left and came in from the flank. It was between eight o'clock and a quarter past.³

Almost at once there arose above the jabbering of small-arms fire a shout that swelled and spread into a savage clamour and left a memory that still vibrates in the minds of all who heard it.

... as the tanks disappeared as a cloud of dust into the first buildings of the village the whole line seemed to break spontaneously into the most blood curdling of shouts and battle cries. Heaven knows how many colleges and schools were represented by their 'hakas', but the effect was terrific— one felt one's blood rising swiftly above fear and uncertainty until only an inexplicable exhilaration quite beyond description surpassed all else, and we moved as one man into the outskirts.

¹ Maj I. O. Manson; Invercargill; born Otautau, 9 Jul 1905; clerk; 2 i/c 20 Bn Apr–Jul 1942.

² Report by Lt Thomas.

³ According to a message from [Colonel Kippenberger](#) to HQ 4 Bde at half past eight, the attack began at 8.10 p.m. The message read:

2 Coys 23, 2 tanks, remnants 18 under Gray commenced attack on Galatos at 2010. Hard fighting in progress. No report back.

Have line of 1 Coy 23 and 2 pls 20 from EFI North and 1 Coy 20 abt Galatos main rd junction with gap on left. Don't know position N. of road. Have 2 Coys 23 (weak) in hand and cannot do more than complete line indicated.

Recapture position requires serious c/attack say at dawn. Tanks not returned.

⁴ Report by Lt Thomas. Again, Lt-Col Gray says in a letter dated 24 Jul 1941: 'I shall never forget the deep throated wild-beast noise of the yelling charging men as the 23rd swept up the road.' And [Cpl H. M. Adams](#) of 18 Bn: 'It was quite dark now and suddenly from [Galatas](#) 400 yards away we heard the most ungodly row I have ever heard—our chaps charging and yelling and screaming to put the wind up them, cat-calls and battle cries, machine guns, rifles, hand grenades all going at once.'

The infantry charging down the main road soon found themselves under fire from the front and from both sides. Enemy signal lights called desperately for mortar support and the mortar bombs were not long in following. At first the New Zealanders stopped to clear the houses of enemy as they passed them. But they soon saw that by doing so they were losing momentum. So they charged on, ignoring the fire from their flanks, firing steadily to the front, and arrived at the main square, the enemy's mortar bombs by now bursting harmlessly behind them.

At the square the tanks had already preceded them. The leading tank was knocked out there. The second halted and turned back. An altercation with Lieutenant Thomas who had by now come up followed; for Private Lewis had been

slightly wounded, had lost his grip of the speaking tube to the driver, and so lost control of the tank as well. But the tank now turned again and went on in front of the infantry once more. It then got stuck in a gutter and was heavily handicapped by a partly jammed traverse. The street in front seemed quiet, and the fighting sounded as if it were behind. So the tank turned back once more.

Meanwhile the infantry had found Lieutenant Farran lying wounded with his wounded crew in the square. A fierce battle began in the square itself. A German seized a C Company cook by the throat and began to use him as a shield against the bayonets of the others. Private Kennedy, of Sergeant Dutton's ¹ 13 Platoon, finished off the German with a butt stroke.

But fire was coming from the other side of the square and the enemy was gathering. The New Zealanders decided to charge.

The consternation at the far side was immediately apparent. Screams and shouts showed desperate panic in front of us and I suddenly knew ... that we had caught them ill-prepared and in the act of forming up. Had our charge been delayed even minutes the position could easily have been reversed. By now we were stepping over groaning forms, and those which rose against us fell to our bayonets, and bayonets with their eighteen inches of steel entering throats and chests with the same ... hesitant ease as when we had used them on the straw-packed dummies in [Burnham](#). One of the boys just behind me lurched heavily against me and fell at my feet, clutching his stomach. His restraint burbled in his throat for half a second as he fought against it, but stomach wounds are painful beyond human power of control and his screams soon rose above all the others. The Hun seemed in full flight. From doors, windows and roofs they swarmed wildly, falling over one another to clear our relentless line. There was little aimed fire against us now. ²

¹ [Sgt C. H. Dutton; Motueka](#); born England, 24 Jan 1913; butcher and farmer; p.w. May 1941.

² Report by Lt Thomas.

The square carried, the charge went on. More enemy appeared in the narrowing

lane, fired and fell. Then Thomas himself was hit simultaneously by a bullet in the thigh and a grenade. His sergeant had already fallen. The platoon, led by Private [Diamond](#)¹—‘Come on, you blokes, let's get stuck into the bastards and be done with it.’—went on. As he lay on the ground Thomas could hear Farran calling behind him: ‘Good show New Zealand, jolly good show, come on New Zealand.’

By now the only other two officers in C Company, Captain Harvey and Lieutenant Rex King, had both been wounded—Harvey with a bullet in the mouth, King with a bomb in the face and legs. D Company which had thrust in from the flank was in hardly better case, with only Lieutenant Connolly² and Lieutenant [Cunningham](#)³ still standing.

With so few officers to control the charge, the men were by now tending to lose direction and the fighting became ever more confused. By now Gray and his men had also reached the square and helped [23 Battalion](#) destroy a machine gun that was holding up the advance. Lieutenant Bain led the platoons of [20 Battalion](#) in a bayonet charge—‘nothing short of a 25 pounder would have stopped him.’⁴ He was wounded; and in the same charge Lieutenant Green was killed.

Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, Lieutenant Macdonald⁵ (the 18 Battalion signals officer), Lieutenant [Lambie](#)⁶ and some members of 5 Platoon patrolled beyond the square and encountered machine-gun fire and grenades at the schoolhouse some distance beyond it. Macdonald was wounded and the patrol returned to the square to try and get help from the tanks, which were unable to give it. The schoolhouse itself was eventually dealt with by Sergeant A. C. Hulme, who went forward alone and with a series of grenades so discomfited the enemy that the counter-attack was able to get on. When at last the fighting died down only one strongpoint at the south-west exit of the village still held out.

The surviving officers now began to reorganise their troops for the enemy counter-attack that might still follow. But, though the enemy had the troops for it, he seems to have been too dazed

¹ [Pte L. A. Diamond](#); born NZ 25 Jul 1911; labourer; wounded May 1941; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

² Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly, m.i.d.; Ashburton; born NZ 13 Aug 1910; petrol serviceman; CO 23 Bn Apr–May 1943, 1944; twice wounded.

³ Maj G. H. Cunningham, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 5 May 1910; stock agent; twice wounded.

⁴ Report by Sgt Kimber.

⁵ Capt D. H. St.C. Macdonald; Hamilton; born Auckland, 15 Jul 1915; shop assistant; wounded and p.w. 27 May 1941; repatriated Oct 1943.

⁶ Capt R. F. Lambie; Wellington; born Ashburton, 4 Feb 1911; salesman.

for further fighting and preferred to wait for daylight to bring the accustomed support from artillery and aircraft.

Major Thomason had come up to replace Leckie in command of 23 Battalion, and Colonel Kippenberger showed him where the line ran and put him in charge of Galatas. Thomason accordingly left C Company to hold the village, placed A Company on the right flank, D Company between it and C Company, Headquarters 2 Company on the left, and B Company in reserve.

So ended one of the fiercest engagements fought by any New Zealand troops during the whole war. Its success against superior forces had fully justified Kippenberger's sudden and bold decision. Although Russell Force whom it was largely intended to help had already withdrawn, a breathing space had been gained and the line was secure for a few hours more.

But with this day's fighting 10 Brigade no longer existed as a formation. The Composite Battalion had never been thought of as more than a static unit, incapable of manoeuvre and unsuited to attack; the stabilised situation in which it could have been used again as a holding force was not to be granted in the days to follow. The Petrol Company and the Divisional Cavalry were for the moment out of the picture, having come in on 19 Battalion. That battalion itself, which had fought so well since

the first day under its imperturbable commander, Major Blackburn, properly belonged to 4 Brigade. ¹ Moreover, by this time all New Zealand units were so reduced in numbers that there was no need for more than two brigades. Colonel Kippenberger, therefore, 'more tired than ever before in my life, or since', set off to report to Brigadier Inglis at 4 Brigade HQ.

¹ 'One day ... Major Duigan was offered a plate of stew at 19 Bn HQ by Maj Blackburn. This HQ was such a hot spot that Duigan was very glad to finish the plate and leave. Maj Blackburn was a very cool customer, spending his time sniping the Boche with a Jerry MG when not otherwise engaged.'—
Report by Maj J. Duigan.

CRETE

III: THE DECISION TO FORM A NEW LINE

III: The Decision to Form a New Line

i

During the afternoon it had become clear to Brigadier Puttick that the situation was steadily altering for the worse. There had been heavy air attacks on the forward troops, on [Canea](#), and on all the roads. This might have been endured as it had been for six days already; but casualties had been mounting and, although morale was still astonishingly good, the forces in the line were too few for the ground, had inadequate artillery support and none from the air, were patchwork in organisation, and from lack of reliefs were growing exhausted.

Even so, had the day been got through successfully, there would have been a case for hanging on yet another day. But the enemy's late-afternoon success—which was probably no great surprise to Puttick—made it obvious that, if the Division was to keep an unbroken front, the line would have to be shortened. The only way was to withdraw the forward units to make a line with the right flank of [19 Australian Brigade](#). If either 4 or 5 Brigade could hold this, the other might be withdrawn for reorganisation and rest.

Puttick's idea was that 5 Brigade should man the new line. At the same time, however, he realised that the units of the two brigades were now very mixed and that to disentangle them would not be easy. Accordingly, when Brigadier Inglis asked by a telephone message relayed through 5 Brigade at 10 p.m. for Puttick to come forward to 4 Brigade HQ as soon as possible. Brigadier Puttick—unable through other preoccupations to go himself—at once sent Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry, giving him 'outline instructions for the withdrawal of 4 Bde' and leaving him 'to tie up the detailed arrangements.'¹

The situation as it appeared at Divisional HQ between Gentry's departure at 10.15 p.m. and his return is well seen in two messages sent by Puttick about eleven o'clock, one to Force HQ and the other to General Weston. Both were sent while

Brigadier Stewart, who had come from Force HQ, was still at Division. Their burden was the same: the [Galatas](#) line had been broken, ² Puttick was trying to form a new line north from the Australians, the Australians had already been warned to adjust their line accordingly, and he hoped to form a second line in support along the river immediately east of Divisional HQ. His own HQ was to move about midnight to a position near that of 19 Brigade HQ.

The message to General Weston adds the detail that Brigadier Inglis was establishing the new front line 'possibly through rd incl South of Hospital.' But this must have referred only to the immediate emergency and did not imply that 4 Brigade was to man it. For one paragraph says: 'Elements of 4 Brigade (stragglers in and possibly complete units) may assemble north of right flank of your Marines on the river to reform, but this depends partly on plans arranged at 4 Bde HQ.' Evidently a good deal was being left to the discretion of Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry and the commanders on the spot; but, short of going forward himself and

¹ Statement by Brig W. G. Gentry.

² Puttick does not seem to have known as yet that the enemy had been checked at [Galatas](#), and in the message to General Weston he says that enemy were reported in [Karatsos](#). But even had he known of the counter-attack's success he would no doubt still have favoured withdrawal.

leaving his HQ at a difficult time, there was nothing else Puttick could do.

ii

Back at 4 Brigade HQ Inglis had warned Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer that he would probably have to counter-attack with 28 Battalion, had gone off to inspect the northern half of his sector, and had then come back to send the message requesting Puttick's presence and to hold a conference of his commanders.

By this time Inglis had had a chance to sum up the situation and he did not find the prospects for counter-attack good.

The front was far too wide for a single bn in a night attack; the terrain was cut

across by vineyards and small ravines lying at angles to the line of advance; the Maoris did not know the ground; the rolling features made identification of the objective almost impossibly difficult; even if 28 Bn were to make the objective, it was a certainty that it would leave a lot of unmopped enemy in its rear, for it had not enough men to cover the area. ¹

On the other hand, to decide against counter-attack would be to take a decision vitally affecting the battle. It was for this reason that Inglis had called for Puttick; for it was just possible that he could produce some reinforcement that might make counter-attack more feasible.

Meanwhile the battalion commanders had assembled in 4 Brigade HQ, 'a tarpaulin-covered hole in the ground ... with a very poor light.' ² When [Colonel Kippenberger](#) arrived he found Brigadier Inglis, Major Burrows, Major Blackburn, and Major Sanders (the Brigade Major) seated round a table. Dittmer arrived soon after, having already had time to consider his probable role. Gentry had not yet arrived.

Brigadier Inglis put the case for the counter-attack in order to draw the views of his commanders. All realised that if the attack were not feasible [Crete](#) was lost. And all knew how difficult it was. [Kippenberger](#) said it could not be done without two fresh battalions. Dittmer, as the battalion commander affected, could hardly say as much. He said it was difficult. Inglis continued to press: "Can you do it, George?" Dittmer said, "I'll give it a go!" ³

At this point, while the commanders looked in silence at the map, Gentry 'lowered himself into the hole.' ⁴ The circumstances were altered by his arrival. For, had Puttick been able to come,

¹ Letter from Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis, 15 Mar 1951.

² [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 69.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ This account is based on [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 69, and the letter from

Inglis already cited. The fact that 28 Bn was considered to be the last fresh battalion, in spite of its hard days of fighting, shows how hard pressed the other battalions were and shows also how resilient was the spirit of the Maoris.

the decision would have lain with him. Now Inglis saw it would have to be his own. He asked Gentry for his views about counterattack. The answer was against: the Maoris were the last fresh battalion. If they were used now a line could not be held next day.

This opinion bore out Inglis' own doubts and he decided that the counter-attack could not take place. Then could [Galatas](#) be held? Obviously it could not. It was outflanked, it was an obvious target for concentrated bombing and, apart from the fact that it still contained many civilians, the houses were too flimsily built to offer much protection against the bombing.

If [Galatas](#) was sacrificed, then the rest of the line would have to go. In fact there was no alternative to the plan already favoured by Puttick—and presumably now explained by Gentry—for withdrawal to a line running from the Australian right flank to the sea.

There was still the question of which brigade was to man this new line. Gentry passed on Puttick's view that it would have to be 5 Brigade, and it was clear enough to those present at the conference that this was correct. For of 4 Brigade [18 Battalion](#) was temporarily disorganised and exhausted; [20 Battalion](#) was still split and had had no pause since the [Maleme](#) counter-attack in which to knit itself together again; and only [19 Battalion](#) was reasonably strong and fit to fight as a whole next day. Fifth Brigade, on the other hand, in spite of the heavy fighting it had seen, had at least had some sort of rest since the withdrawal from [Platanias](#). True, [23 Battalion](#) had just fought in [Galatas](#) and had had losses; but it was still a unit and strong enough to fight again next day. The 21st Battalion was reduced in numbers even from the under-strength state in which it had begun battle on 20 May; but it had had a relatively quiet day. The 22nd Battalion was thought to be hardest hit of all but would be useful as a reserve. And [28 Battalion](#), for all its exploits so far, was as spirited and reliable as ever. ¹ Moreover, 23 and 28 Battalions were forward already.

By the time these conclusions had been reached and the conference broke up it was after midnight. Gentry returned to Division where he found Brigadier Puttick and, with him, Brigadier Stewart. They approved the general line taken at the conference, and a confirmatory order was sent out by special despatch rider at 2.35 a.m. After giving a brief account of the loss and recapture of [Galatas](#) and stating that renewed attack could be expected next day, the order went on to give the new line and dispositions. The

¹ The total casualties for the 5 Bde battalions in killed, wounded, and missing up till the morning of 25 May are recorded in a message from Div HQ to [Creforce](#) at 11.50 a.m.: 21 Bn, 100; 22 Bn, 261; 23 Bn, 133; 28 Bn, 142. In addition, 7 Fd Coy had lost 13 and 19 [Army Troops](#) 46.

line was to run from the coast of the peninsula east of the old 7 General Hospital, southwards over the hill about a mile east of [Karatsos](#), and then down the stream that ran along the front of [19 Australian Brigade](#). That brigade would hold the left sector up to and including the Prison- [Canea](#) road. Fifth Brigade would hold the line to the right of this and up to the coast. It would have under its command, as well as its own units, C Squadron of [3 Hussars](#), the Divisional Cavalry, [7 Field Company](#), a company from [20 Battalion](#), and [19 Battalion](#). The 5th Field Regiment with nine 75s would be in support. The 18th Battalion, the Composite Battalion, and [20 Battalion](#) would reform behind this line under the command of 4 Brigade. ¹

Either before or after the despatch of these orders but presumably with full knowledge of the plan, Major J. N. Peart, A/Q to Division, called at 4 Brigade HQ and saw Brigadier Inglis. They both then went on to 5 Brigade HQ to discuss detailed arrangements.

Though Brigadier Hargest was disappointed at not securing the rest for his battalions which he had hoped, there was nothing for it but to accept the situation. He borrowed A Company of 20 Battalion to strengthen his own [21 Battalion](#) and asked Inglis to wait and see the new positions established as he himself was not acquainted with the ground. This Inglis agreed to do; but as his brigade staff had been more or less dispersed by the emergency calls made on them during the day, he had to ask Peart to assist his Brigade Major by arranging for dispersed elements

of 4 Brigade to be directed into a concentration area as they crossed the bridge west of Canea.

Before the new line was manned the various units affected were to have a busy night moving out of the forward areas and into their new positions; but these movements can best be treated when the time comes to give an account of the situation at first light next morning.

¹ O. 176, NZ Div to 4, 5, and 19 Bdes.

CRETE

IV: OTHER FRONTS AND CREFORCE

IV: Other Fronts and Creforce

i

Although the enemy on the Australian front was not very active at this stage, aggressive plans being suspended until [Galatas](#) should be taken, Brigadier Vasey was aware of the hard pressure against 4 Brigade and anxious to do anything possible to relieve it. The attack by [2 Greek Regiment](#) the previous day had failed to drive the enemy from the high ground, and in a conference on 25 May at the Greek HQ it was decided that [2/8 Australian Battalion](#) should try to seize the two hills which were the hub of his position. Such an attempt if successful might do much to relieve the pressure round [Galatas](#). The attack was therefore planned for that evening ¹ and the plan was that 2/8 Battalion, having taken the two hills, would swing right and advance about a thousand yards to link up with the New Zealand front.

When news reached 19 Brigade, however, about two hours before dusk, that 4 Brigade's front was still unbreached it was decided to cancel the attack. This was as well. If such an attack were to be made at all the time for it was earlier in the battle. Withdrawal from now on was inevitable, and a forward move would have wasted lives and exhausted energies that were going to be severely taxed before the battle was over.

The 2nd Greek Regiment itself seems to have had little to do on this day, and the arrival of a party from [8 Greek Regiment](#) with the news that it was still fighting, though so short of food and ammunition that it might have to break off action, had a depressing effect; so much so indeed that Major Wooller set off that evening to report the general situation to [Creforce](#) and see if any further supplies could be obtained. For he rightly felt that if [2 Greek Regiment](#) threw in its hand the way would be open to the enemy to work round the flank and cut off the New Zealand Division.

ii

It now appears, however, that the report from [8 Greek Regiment](#), though it may not have exaggerated the difficulties the Greeks were meeting, painted too black a picture when it suggested they might abandon the battle. And, since the resistance they continued to offer had an important influence on the main front, it is necessary to pause here and give an account of it. Unfortunately, owing to the absence of material from Greek sources, such an account has to be based largely on German versions of the fighting; but from these it should be possible to infer a story in its main lines reliable.

It has already been seen that the Engineer Battalion of 3 Parachute Regiment failed in an attempt to take [Alikianou](#) on 20 May; and that Colonel Heidrich felt his situation so serious that night that he ordered the battalion to close under cover of darkness so as to establish itself in positions from which it could cover his rear and at the same time act as his reserve.² But from this day on communications between [8 Greek Regiment](#) and [Creforce](#) practically ceased;

¹ General Puttick remembers nothing of this and was presumably not informed.

² See pp. 143 and 173.

while the evidence of Lieutenant K. L. Brown, who had been captured on 21 May and escaped the same day, suggests that the enemy had by this time got into [Alikianou](#) and [Fournes](#) and that the only part of [8 Greek Regiment](#) still holding out was on the ridge east of the road between [Alikianou](#) and [Aghya](#).

It seems likely, however, either that Brown was misled by his Greek informants or that the Germans in [Alikianou](#) and [Fournes](#) were only scattered parties of parachutists, who soon found it prudent to withdraw on to their main body or were dealt with by Greek soldiers and civilians.

At all events Heidrich found himself with enough to do in these first three days without attempting aggression elsewhere than on the [Galatas](#) front, and we may assume that in this respite the Greeks—soldiers and civilians—had time to reorganise themselves for defence. It was not till 23 May that General Ringel had

made enough progress on the [Maleme](#) front and had enough troops to decide the time had come for a drive through [Alikianou](#) which would emerge south of [Suda Bay](#) and cut off all the British troops defending [Canea](#) and the areas west of it. The operational diaries of Ringel's group for 23 May therefore show a considerable interest in [Alikianou](#).

A reconnaissance report—probably air—at 1.30 p.m. on that day reports scattered enemy at [Alikianou](#), while a report from 100 Mountain Regiment in the middle of the afternoon says that nothing was known of the situation there. It is evident, however, from a situation map for the evening, that I Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment was already probing in that direction. But there was not enough time and too great a distance had to be traversed over rough country for any collision to be expected that day.

Till now only I Battalion had been available and had been operating under the command of Colonel Utz, commander of 100 Mountain Regiment. But on the morning of 24 May Colonel Krakau, the commander of 85 Mountain Regiment, had arrived, with III Battalion close behind him. The plan was that the two battalions, and II Battalion as soon as it arrived, should be directed towards [Alikianou](#) to carry out the original flanking scheme. And while Krakau was taking over his regiment, Utz was either still in charge of I Battalion or was relaying to General Ringel its reports about [Alikianou](#). Thus at 4.45 p.m. he reports that [Alikianou](#) is occupied by enemy, while a report late that night says that enemy troops are dug in there in the strength of about two companies with heavy weapons, with civilians taking part. The strength of the obstacle was such that reconnaissance to [Fournes](#) was impossible—a patrol leader had already been killed in [Alikianou](#)—but the evidence was that both [Fournes](#) and [Skines](#) were occupied.

In these circumstances I Battalion, 85 Mountain Regiment, evidently decided that it would be more prudent to defer attack, protective posts facing the village were established, and patrols were sent out to see if a route could be found round the flanks. It seems a fair inference from all this that [8 Greek Regiment](#) and its civilian auxiliaries were still holding the line, and with enough vigour to deter the enemy from a forward move until it could be made in overwhelming strength. Thus it can safely be said that the Greeks by their stoutness in this obscure part of the front had delayed a dangerous thrust.

General Ringel, however, was anxious that his ambitious right hook should be brought off, and his orders for 25 May were that I and III Battalions of 85 Mountain Regiment should take [Alikianou](#) and the area east of it, including the high ground. From there they were to push on to [Ay Marina](#), two kilometres south of [Suda](#). To ease their attack there would be heavy air bombing of [Alikianou](#) in the early morning.

Had the two battalions of 85 Mountain Regiment struck direct at [Alikianou](#) on 25 May there is little reason to doubt that they would have broken through the badly armed Greeks without much difficulty. But whether because Colonel Krakau overrated their strength and was deterred into timidity by his lack of artillery and fighter support, or for whatever other reason, his drive on this occasion was below the standards later associated with good German regimental commanders. By the beginning of the afternoon his own HQ had got no farther than [Episkopi](#), I Battalion was somewhere on his left, and III Battalion was in Koufos. He was still sending out reconnaissance patrols to find the Greek flanks, and he seems to have been disproportionately distressed over the failure of two promised Stuka bombings on [Alikianou](#) to eventuate. At the end of the afternoon he had no change to report.

It is no depreciation of Greek courage, however, to say that Krakau's lack of initiative prevented an ugly threat from developing more rapidly. For the Greeks were badly armed and could hardly have withstood a determined attack. They were well aware of this but remained none the less in position, and by doing so frightened the enemy into time-wasting and futile flanking movements in mountainous country.

iii

The fact that the main front had now begun to move so much closer to [Canea](#) was not without its effect on [Suda Area](#). For the growing improbability of invasion from the sea or further air landings was now replaced by a strong likelihood that before long the units under General Weston's command would be drawn into the ground fighting.

Accordingly the arrangements of the previous day were modified and embodied in a formal order. ¹ [Suda Brigade](#), constituted as we have seen, ² was to hold the

defensive line of the [Mournies](#) River from the Prison– [Canea](#) road to the hills south of [Mournies](#). In this way a secondary defence line was created which, extended next day by the reserves of 5 Brigade, would run from the hills in the south to the coast. Should the forward troops have to withdraw there would be a screen through which they could pass.

[Northumberland Hussars](#) and [1 Rangers](#) now came as a single command under Major D. R. C. Boileau of the latter unit. They were to be known as [Akrotiri Force](#) and were to establish a stop line across the isthmus of Akrotiri, with the further task of dealing with any seaborne or airborne landings on the peninsula.

The 1st Welch under Lieutenant-Colonel A. Duncan was to act as reserve to [Creforce](#) and was to exchange places with [1 Rangers](#), which till then had been holding St. John's Hill in an anti-parachutist role. And the [Suda Area](#) provost, the Greek gendarmerie, and any other Greek forces in the area were to take over the local protection of [Canea](#) against parachutists.

Finally, various changes were made in the positions of the AA units round [Canea](#), largely as the result of the bombing of the town which went on relentlessly and continually throughout the day.

It is interesting to notice that so much consideration was still being given to the possibility of sea invasion or airborne landing. Thus General Weston, at a time when the obvious need was for a compact reserve striking force which could be brought to bear quickly, used [Northumberland Hussars](#) and [1 Rangers](#), among the best troops available, to create a stop line which was of little importance and gave them a secondary role which they were most unlikely to have to play. And the result was that [Suda Area](#) was in effect without a reserve at all.

iv

At [Retimo](#) the garrison still had plenty of spirit and tried yet another early morning attack on the enemy positions at [Perivolia](#). But the results were again disappointing. The supporting tank was ditched and 2/11 Battalion had to postpone the assault for a further day while it was recovered. Advantage was taken of darkness to move a 75-millimetre gun from the eastern sector to

¹ Suda Area Operation Instruction No. 15, 4 a.m. 25 May; WD Suda Area, Appx 38.

² See p. 289.

support the next day's attempt. In the eastern sector itself no attack was launched, though the enemy was made uncomfortable by fire from the guns and a captured enemy mortar.

The enemy at Heraklion still had enough initiative to try a further attack on the town from the west. But this was beaten off by 2 Yorks and Lancs, which had taken over the town's defence from the Greek forces while these latter, reorganised into two battalions, were given the task of defending Knossos hospital and the road to Knossos. An encouraging development was the arrival of an advance party during the morning from 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Before midnight the whole battalion had come in and was able to relieve 2 Leicesters, who now went into reserve. The reinforcement was welcome as ammunition was running low.

v

Although 25 May was no less anxious a day for General Freyberg than any of the days that had preceded it, such news as reached him while daylight lasted did not seem to give any very special grounds for anxiety. Communications, owing to the move of Force HQ and of many of the subordinate headquarters, and the undiminished severity of the bombing, were worse than ever; but so far as the evidence went, until late in the day the troops in the forward sector were holding their own. Thus Freyberg was able to report to Wavell during the morning that in spite of a local withdrawal on the right flank the situation there was satisfactory. ¹ And a further report covering the situation up till 9 p.m. speaks of a land battle going on, synchronising with a heavy attack from the air, but shows no special signs of alarm. ²

A personal message to General Wavell written late that night began to the same effect but was interrupted to give more drastic news. To quote General Freyberg:

On the night of Sunday 25th I sat writing my cable to the C-in-C after having watched a savage air attack on the forward troops by dive bombers, heavy bombers, and twin-engined fighters with machine guns and cannon guns. This is what I had written:

Today has been one of great anxiety to me here. The enemy carried out one small attack last night and this afternoon he attacked with little success. This evening at 1700 hrs bombers, dive bombers and ground straffers came over and bombed our forward troops and then his ground troops launched an attack. It is still in progress and I am awaiting news. If we can give him a really good knock it will have a very far reaching effect.

¹ O. 513, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 11.47 a.m., 25 May.

² I. 85, HQ Crete to Mideast, 11.15 p.m., 25 May.

While I was writing the above the following message came in from Brigadier Puttick:

Heavy attacks about 2000 hrs have obviously broken our line. Enemy is through at Galatos and moving towards Daratsos. Right flank of 18 Bn was pushed back about 1600 yds 1800 hrs and 20 Bn moved forward and 23 and 28 Bns were moved to 4 Bde assistance. Tanks were also moved forward towards 18 Bn area to assist in restoring line. Hargest says Inglis is hopeful of establishing a line.

Am endeavouring to form a new line running north and south about 1200 yds west of Div HQ linking up on south with Wadi held by Australians, who have been warned to swing their right flank back to that line. A second or support line will be established I hope on the line of the river, from the right of the Marines on that river past the bridge at the road junct thence down the river to the sea.

Reports indicate that men (or many of them) badly shaken by severe air attacks and TM fire. Am afraid will lose our guns through lack of transport. Am moving my Div HQ about midnight 25/26 to near 19 Aust HQ for the moment. Am exceedingly doubtful on present reports whether I can hold the enemy tomorrow (26th).

On receipt of this I struck out the last sentence of my draft telegram (see underlined) and added in its place:

Later: I have heard from Puttick that the line has gone and we are trying to stabilise. I don't know if they will be able to. I am apprehensive. I will send messages as I can later.

This message I sent off there and then at 2 in the morning. ¹

Once he had told Wavell of the change for the worse, [Freyberg's](#) next thought was to reassure Brigadier Puttick and encourage him for what was to come. His message went at 4 a.m.:

Dear Puttick,

I have read through your report on the situation. I am not surprised that the line broke. Your battalions were very weak and the areas they were given were too large. On the shorter line you should be able to hold them. In any case there will not be that infiltration that started before. You must hold them on that line and counter-attack if any part of it should go. It is imperative that he should not break through.

I have seen Stewart and I am sending this by G 2 who will tell you my plan.

I hope we shall get through tomorrow without further trouble.

[B. Freyberg.](#) ²

It must have been also in the early morning that Major Wooller reached [Creforce](#) and reported on the state of 2 and 8 Greek Regiments. [General Freyberg](#) says he 'made it clear that the Greeks were about to break.' And, according to Wooller, [Freyberg](#) promised food and ammunition 'but pointed out that if we could

¹ [General Freyberg's Report.](#)

² Brigadier Puttick's 'Report on Operations in [Crete](#)', [Appendix A.](#)

keep the line intact for 24 hours, the matter would not be so vital. I gathered from this that consideration must have been given to withdrawing the force from Crete.' ¹

No doubt Wooller was right and [General Freyberg](#) had seen the writing on the wall. Brigadier Puttick's message must have made clear to him what was indeed the case: that with penetration of the [Galatas](#) line and the enforced withdrawal to a new one the character of the fighting had radically changed. There was now little or no hope of a counter-offensive which could retake the lost ground. From now on steady withdrawal was the best that could be hoped for. But whether or not this was the case, the plans already being put into action were the only ones practicable this night—there would not have been time to get fresh troops from [Suda](#) area forward and into position on strange ground. And so relief of 5 Brigade was not for the time being possible.

vi

Black day as 25 May had turned out to be, it had had for [Freyberg](#) and his troops one redeeming feature. [Middle East](#) had carried out its promise to provide all possible help in the air. And although that help was very far from being enough to turn the scale in the land fighting, the troops had been greatly cheered by seeing a force of Marylands, Blenheims, and Hurricanes attack [Maleme](#) aerodrome at ten o'clock in the morning and two further attacks by Blenheims in the afternoon. As [Freyberg](#) reported, this was a 'great tonic for all personnel.' Nor was this the limit of the [RAF's](#) help or attempted help. A force of Hurricanes and Blenheims had set off at dawn to attack the airfield but had failed to find it because of smoke and mist. And that night four Wellingtons bombed both [Maleme](#) and the beaches.

Besides affording help in the air, General Wavell was also doing his best to land reinforcements. Further commandos—D Battalion and HQ [Layforce](#)—had attempted to land off the south coast the night before, but the weather was too bad, their boats were washed away, and they were forced to turn back for [Alexandria](#), arriving there at 7.15 p.m. As they returned a further force sailed for [Crete](#), this time 2 Queen's and HQ [16 Infantry Brigade](#), which had had to turn back on 23 May. ² As on that occasion they were aboard the [Glenroy](#).

As well as escorting or carrying these troops, the [Navy](#) was still active in all possible ways. The [Abdiel](#), which had brought the advance party of 200 commandos on the night of 24 May, left

¹ Report by Maj H. G. Wooller.

² See p. 293.

early in the morning of the 25th with walking wounded from [Suda Bay](#). [Ajax](#), [Dido](#), [Kimberley](#), and [Hotspur](#) had carried out a sweep north of [Crete](#) the same night and, after failing to reach [Maleme](#) in time to bombard it before daylight, had withdrawn to the south again. The [Navy](#) was to repeat the sweep on the night of 25 May, [Hotspur](#) and [Kimberley](#) having been relieved by [Napier](#), [Kelvin](#) and [Jackal](#) from [Alexandria](#). And at midday a battle squadron, consisting of [Queen Elizabeth](#), [Barham](#), [Formidable](#), [Jervis](#), [Janus](#), [Kandahar](#), [Nubian](#), [Hasty](#), [Hereward](#), [Voyager](#), and [Vendetta](#), left [Alexandria](#) to attack [Scarpanto](#) aerodrome which was known to be one of the operational bases in use against [Crete](#). In this attack the twelve [Fulmars](#) which the [Formidable](#) now had were to bomb the airfield, assisted by some [RAF Wellingtons](#).

vii

To us who now know what the true situation was in [Crete](#) and how at this very time [General Freyberg](#) was being forced to admit to himself that the problem was now no longer one of holding [Crete](#) but of saving his force from capture, there is a certain irony in considering the state of mind in [Cairo](#) and in [London](#), where distance and the time lag in communications justified hopes which had no ground in reality.

The irony must have been even more present to [Freyberg](#) when he read such a message as General [Wavell's](#) sent on 25 May, [Wavell](#) having just returned from [Iraq](#). General [Wavell](#) complimented [Freyberg](#) on the splendid fight he and his troops were making and went on to say that its results for the whole situation in the [Middle East](#) would be profound. The enemy had lost a large percentage of his trained troops and the survivors must be weary and dismayed. Instead of an easy win they were

confronted with the prospects of a costly defeat. In aircraft, too, the enemy's losses had been heavy. And Wavell went on to promise maximum effort by the [RAF](#) and a further cable about reinforcements. To [Freyberg](#) it must have been already clear that no support the [RAF](#) was likely to be able to give and no reinforcements the [Army](#) was likely to be able to spare would turn the scale.

In London the Chiefs of Staff were still discussing the situation in the light of the military and naval appreciation they had received from Middle East HQ. The Prime Minister thought that Admiral Cunningham should be prepared to take greater risks and that if the seaborne landing could be held off for another three days the battle would be won. Admiral Pound, however, thought it was difficult to tell Cunningham to accept heavy losses indefinitely unless everything possible were done to help him. Could not main Beaufighters be sent to his help?

They could be sent, said Lord Portal. But they would first have to have their secret night-fighter apparatus removed and could hardly come into action before 31 May. Even so, it had to be remembered that they were not fitted for fighting in the tropics, that they had no rear gunner and so were an easy target for fighters, and that they could patrol over [Crete](#) for an hour at a time only. To do even this a whole squadron would be needed operating from Egypt. And because of lack of spares there it would be difficult to keep them serviceable. He concluded that they should be sent only if their presence was likely to make a substantial difference to the outcome. ¹ It was eventually decided that none should be taken from Fighter Command.

In the upshot a further telegram was sent to Wavell which indicates a certain discontent with his appreciation. Unless more effective action was taken than that appreciation envisaged, the Chiefs of Staff pointed out, the enemy would be able to reinforce with troops and supplies. The Commanders-in-Chief must therefore co-ordinate measures at once to clear up the position, and the [Navy](#) and the [RAF](#) must take whatever risks were necessary to prevent reinforcement by sea, whether it was attempted by night or by day. If [RAF](#) reconnaissance showed any vessels congregating at Melos or putting to sea, then the [Navy](#) must be ready to operate north of [Crete](#) even by day. Considerable losses might be probable and there was nothing except experience to show how long they might have to be endured. But they would have to be accepted. ²

Except for a report from Air Marshal Tedder on the attacks he had already been able to put in against [Maleme](#) and on his plan for trying single Hurricanes with long-range tanks—a desperate expedient, as he realised—and a report from Wavell which gave strengths and dispositions as they had been before the [Galatas](#) breakthrough, still unknown to him, the Chiefs of Staff were to learn no more that day. Not till the morrow were they to know how radically the situation was now altering for the worse.

¹ COS (41) 189.

² War Office to C-in-C, 25 May.

CRETE

CHAPTER 9 – THE SEVENTH DAY: 26 MAY

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CRETE

I: THE LINE EAST OF GALATAS

I: The Line East of Galatas

i

AT 9 p.m. on 25 May General Ringel issued his orders for the next day. The attack was to continue. Ramcke's paratroops in the north, 100 Mountain Regiment in the centre, and 3 Parachute Regiment south of [Galatas](#) would advance 'slowly and methodically' eastward. The 85th Mountain Regiment would be joined by II Battalion, which had arrived during the day, and would also have under its command I Battalion of 141 Mountain Regiment, borrowed from 6 Mountain Division. Thus reinforced, Colonel Krakau was to renew the attempt to cut through by way of [Alikianou](#).

Considerable importance was now attached to this flanking movement. General Student says that the order for it was the only one he gave Ringel during the operation, ¹ though nothing could have accorded better with Ringel's own temperament and the training of his troops. No doubt both commanders thought that the final outcome was no longer uncertain, that the flanking technique might save further heavy losses and might prove a quick means to the relief of [Retimo](#). To ensure good progress 85 Mountain Regiment would bypass [Alikianou](#) and seize the high ground east of it, while to intimidate any opposition in [Alikianou](#) itself, the village would be dive-bombed during the morning.

These orders were issued before the counter-attack on [Galatas](#); but they had been generally phrased and no local events on the front were likely to disturb them.

ii

To begin with, at least, the fresh advance the orders enjoined was not difficult; for, after withdrawing during the night, the New Zealand battalions were now back on the new line. The right of this line was held by [21 Battalion](#) Group ([21 Battalion](#) with A Company of [20 Battalion](#), the Divisional Cavalry, and 7 Field

¹ Proceedings at Student's trial. Ringel's own belief in the old German Army maxim 'Sweat saves blood' would ensure a sympathetic agreement.

Company under command); its sector ran from the sea to the main coast road, which it included. South of the coast road was 19 Battalion and south again was 28 Battalion, whose positions extended as far as the Prison– Canea road, linking up with those of 2/7 Australian Battalion. In reserve east of 21 Battalion and on either side of the coast road was 23 Battalion; and 22 Battalion, somewhat to the south of 23 Battalion, constituted a second reserve. The 18th Battalion and all of 20 Battalion except A Company had withdrawn to a position east of the transit camp, where they were reforming. ¹ C Squadron of 3 Hussars had done the rearguard in the night's withdrawal and was by daylight stationed near the coast road and east of 21 Battalion. The squadron by this time had only five tanks, of which two needed repair. One of the two cannibalised the other and the squadron then had four.

Because the enemy was advancing cautiously the morning began quietly. It was half past ten before 100 Mountain Regiment reported Karatsos clear and about 11 a.m. before Ramcke's paratroops were at Evthymi. From this latter quarter the first action came, on the front of 21 Battalion.

That battalion was in no very cheerful position. The front was bare of cover and the ground stony. It was already getting light when most of the troops got into position, and there was little time to dig in even had there been tools to do it with. A merciless pounding from the air could be expected to begin almost at once, and the men scraped what holes for themselves they could with bayonets and helmets or built up low sangars with stones.

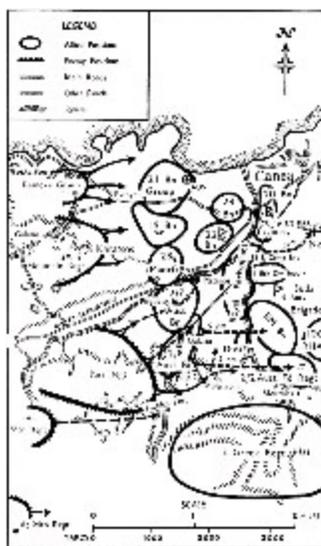
Headquarters Company and 7 Field Company held the right between the coast road and the sea; A, B, C and D Companies, now organised into one company, and C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry held the left, covering the road and the area immediately south of it. In reserve to the right flank were A and B Squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry and in reserve to the left was A Company 20 Battalion. To the right front was the former 7 General Hospital, outside the line and tenanted only by those patients for whom evacuation had been impossible. ²

The morning began with the usual flight of reconnaissance planes overhead. Then, according to one observer,³ a truck with a Red Cross flag, followed by a motor cycle similarly draped, drove up to the hospital. (Not long afterwards a machine gun opened up on **7 Field Company** from the right flank, and a little later a captured

¹ See map, p. 332.

² See p. 357.

³ **Lt G. A. Lindell**. Battle Report of **11 Air Corps** says that Group Ramcke contrary to orders penetrated 'the defended tented camp 2 km. west of Chania [**Canea**].' Evidently the belief still officially prevailed with the enemy that the hospital was an encampment.



CANEA, 26 MAY

New Zealand medical orderly came through from the hospital under a white flag to say that unless a machine-gun post in line with an ADS behind the **21 Battalion** front were removed the ADS would come under fire. The company commander duly shifted the weapon, the orderly returned, and in the subsequent fighting the ADS was respected.)

Shortly after this, about half past nine, the enemy tried to get round the right flank by way of the beach. The Divisional Cavalry from their reserve positions

frustrated this, though one enemy machine gun remained in position and was an annoyance throughout the day.

Meanwhile action began to develop along the axis of the road as well. A platoon of Headquarters Company which appears to have been badly briefed withdrew without orders and before fighting had really begun. One man, however, Sergeant [Bellamy](#),¹ grasped the importance of defending the road and refused to follow the others. Instead, he mounted his Bren gun in a rough sangar, kept up fire on all enemy movements, and undismayed by his solitude and the fierce fire he received in return, stayed at his post till he was killed.

Dive-bombers had not been long in appearing, their attentions supported by a growing volume of mortar fire from the paratroops. This was difficult for the men to endure in their exposed positions and about 11.30 a.m. Captain Ferguson of [7 Field Company](#) decided that his men on the forward slope of the ridge were suffering unreasonable casualties. He therefore brought them back to the reverse slope. This move isolated the other forward platoon of Headquarters Company, whose left flank had already been opened by the earlier withdrawal. Sergeant W. J. Gorrie, the platoon commander, decided to stay on; but eventually enemy air attack became so troublesome and the threat of a full-scale attack so imminent that Gorrie also moved his men to the reverse slope.²

This minor withdrawal was thought by Lieutenant-Colonel Allen to have been the result of an attack and he at once came forward with reserves to counter-attack. It is not clear whether he found it necessary to do so and the probability is that he did not. At all events the situation was stable again by a quarter past one.

South of [21 Battalion](#) Group, [19 Battalion](#) and [28 Battalion](#) had a not dissimilar morning. The ground in their area, too, was stony, and tools and time were short; though the Maoris had the slight

¹ [Sgt H. H. Bellamy](#); born Maungawhare, 7 Jun 1907; labourer; killed in action 26 May 1941.

² One aircraft came over so low and cheekily that the crew dropped hand grenades on the platoon positions.—Sgt Gorrie.

advantage of having previously done some work on their positions, the machine-gun and mortar fire and the bombing and strafing from the air were very trying. But no major attack developed during the morning, and indeed [28 Battalion](#) had no contact with ground troops at all except for a patrol of 25 enemy which was driven off by A Company.

In fact the enemy planned to put in his main attack in the late afternoon when the sun would be behind him and Stuka support would be available. For some reason the attack did not come in full force, however, and 5 Mountain Division war diary records that at 5.45 p.m. the forward area was ordered to be left clear till nightfall to prevent German bombs falling on German troops. This precaution was probably taken because a battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment had been heavily bombed by mistake this same day. ¹

Such attack as there was tried the forward battalions sorely enough. Mortar and shell fire was severe all afternoon and at 1.45 p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Allen reinforced the forward ridge with a section from A Company [20 Battalion](#) and a squadron of Divisional Cavalry. The rest of the [20 Battalion](#) company he held in reserve for counter-attack. Meanwhile a large number of enemy had been observed emerging from [Galatas](#) and Allen went over to his left flank. He was held up there by severe air attack till 5 p.m.

While he was away wounded men had been filtering back through the reserve positions of [23 Battalion](#) and, as often in war, brought alarming rumours. According to one, the enemy had broken through [7 Field Company](#). Major Thomason passed this report to 5 Brigade with the information that he had sent two companies forward on either side of the road and that the remainder were standing by. Brigade HQ endorsed his action and added: 'Restore the line at all costs.' To make sure that this was done Brigade also ordered [22 Battalion](#) to move north-east across the main road and help counter the enemy advance.

The consequences illustrate the dangers of moving bodies of troops by daylight in this battle. Both units were caught by low-flying aircraft. The 22nd Battalion had ten casualties; and C Company of [23 Battalion](#), with thirty casualties, was so severely hit that it had to be replaced by Headquarters 2 Company. The recollections

of a private from Headquarters 2 Company give a vivid impression:

As we were making our way up a small gully 'C' Coy were coming down causing a lot of congestion. A Hun fighting Messerschmitt crossed

¹ See p. 362.

this gully firing his guns. I felt the heat of the bullets pass my face and the leaves were dashed from the tree under which I was crouched. 'Damn it all,' I thought, 'this is no place for mother's little boy now that bloody squarehead knows we are here.' So I was out of the gully, crossed the road and made my way up among the olive trees to our rendezvous, and it's just as well I did for that darn plane came down the gully a few minutes later (not across it as it did the first time) and cleaned up fifteen men. ¹

Meanwhile Allen had returned to his HQ, where he found Thomason and was able to reassure him that the right flank was holding and the rumour false. His message to 5 Brigade at 5.45 p.m. sums up the situation:

Right flank has caused me considerable anxiety all day. Have had to counter attack once and regained lost ground. Since then have reinforced once; and am standing by to reinforce again. If I have to do so I shall have used all my reserves, but at present line is holding. Left flank position all right but a good deal of Mortar fire coming over. 19th Bn have withdrawn Coy from ridge in front of me.

J. M. Allen, Lt-Col.

Unnecessary though the move of the reserves had turned out to be, such are the chances of war that it might easily have proved providential. For had the enemy attack been full-strength, Allen's thin screen could hardly have stood it unaided.

iii

South of [21 Battalion](#) also the afternoon had proved more exciting than the morning. The 19th Battalion's mortars got a good target when the enemy moved out of [Galatas](#), no doubt to put in the late-afternoon attack. Although the mortars broke

up the grouping of these troops some did manage to get to close quarters by using the cover of trees; and a shower of grenades forced 5 and 6 Platoons of Headquarters Company to withdraw from their inadequate trenches to a new line about 150 yards back. The territory thus temporarily abandoned was made uncomfortable for the enemy by fire from D Company.

Then at 2.45 p.m. 14 Platoon of C Company counter-attacked and regained part of the lost ground. A quotation from a report by the platoon commander, Lieutenant Cockerill, gives an idea of the conditions:

With Bert Ellis, my senior corporal ... I made a quick recce of the area and it is interesting to note that the German aircraft had so little to do that they chased Ellis and me over a hill firing all the time until we managed to shelter over the brow, and the two aircraft, M.E. 110s, turned round and chased us up the other side. We managed to hold this position

¹ Quoted by [Maj A. Ross](#) in history of [23 Battalion](#).

although the fire was fairly heavy and constant. One interesting part here was that I saw a German reconnaissance unit mounted on a motor cycle attempt to run the blockade down the centre of the road. With Bren guns trained on it from every angle, this unit literally disintegrated.

At 4.45 p.m. Headquarters Company reoccupied the whole position. 'From then on it was just a case of sitting and taking it as long as possible. We were mortared heavily and had a good few casualties.'¹

At half past six [19 Battalion](#) was able to report to 5 Brigade:

Hill SOUTH of EFTHYMI has been re-taken and is now occupied by us. Forward Coys report enemy formations with mortars and field pieces moving EAST along road and in direction our left forward Coy. Am using Reserve Coy which I understand is coming forward; also one PI at present with Div. Cav. Casualties estimated 30.

No serious attack developed, however, and the probability is that the enemy was using the rest of the day to get forward his troops and guns for a big attack on the

morrow.

For [28 Battalion](#) the day was fairly quiet, so far as actual fighting went, until about eight o'clock. Here on the extreme left of the battalion front where B Company, the reserve company, had been put in to fill a gap, mortar fire suddenly became very heavy and the forward platoons of B Company—10 and 12—had to retire. As soon as the fire slackened, however, Captain Rangi Royal sent in his reserve platoon, together with the sections that had retired, and this counter-attack restored the line.

The tanks of [3 Hussars](#) had had their share in the day's activities. As well as supporting the move forward of [23 Battalion](#), one tank had helped [19 Battalion](#) from the north side of the main road until it was located by aircraft and 'retired along the road hotly pursued by ME 110.'² At 5.5 p.m., from the rear HQ of [23 Battalion](#), the OC of the tank troop concerned reported to 5 Brigade:

1705 hrs. Have advanced down road as far as cutting with road block. Shot up Bosche patrol far side of cutting could see nothing else. Light tanks can accomplish very little on this road. I was unable to get off it and aircraft fire was very heavy. At the moment one tank is missing.

A. J. Crewdson.

Twice during the remainder of the day Brigade asked that the tanks should continue to cover the road until further orders, using all available cover.

¹ Report by Capt Pleasants.

² 19 Bn WD.

So long as [Galatas](#) held, the enemy had attempted no serious attack on the positions held by [19 Australian Brigade](#) and 2 Greek Regiment. But, now that [Galatas](#) no longer offered a threat to the flank of any advance, there was a chance that a

strong push by 3 Parachute Regiment might break through and endanger all defending troops to the north of the breakthrough. Accordingly, at half past nine on the morning of 26 May, General Ringel ordered Colonel Heidrich to advance his right wing and try to make contact, to find out just where the southern flank of the defence was, and to go forward in close touch with 100 Mountain Regiment.

A heavy bombing and machine-gunning of the front in the morning heralded the impending attack, and at half past ten, supported by mortar fire, in it came. The point was well chosen. It was at the junction, or rather at the failure to join, between 2/8 Battalion and [2 Greek Regiment](#). The enemy worked his way through the gap with machine guns and so managed to pin down the two Australian platoons in [Pirgos](#).¹ The threat to these two platoons increased and at midday Captain C. J. A. Coombes, commanding B Company on this flank, ordered them to withdraw across the stream behind them and guard the rear of 11 Platoon, stationed between [Pirgos](#) and [Perivolia](#). Enemy fire intensified and parties infiltrating behind B Company threatened the whole position, but the Australians held on.

By mid-afternoon the assault seems to have become general along the whole battalion front; according to [11 Air Corps Battle Report](#) it began at 3 p.m., after preparatory fire by heavy weapons, and advanced in a north-easterly direction. In the late afternoon 2/8 Battalion was ordered back to its original positions outside [Mournies](#) and at about 5 p.m. it withdrew, B Company being much troubled on the way back by enemy parties in the outskirts of [Perivolia](#). Enemy pressure then began to be felt by 2/7 Battalion, and at 6.30 p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Walker reported that all his companies were firing. His left rear was now open and the enemy, following up, entered [Perivolia](#) and [Galaria](#). A mistaken impression that the Maoris on his right had withdrawn was corrected by reference to 5 Brigade at 7 p.m. Half an hour later Walker reported penetration of two of his companies and that he was taking counter measures.² Meanwhile 2/8 Battalion fitted its three companies among the force of Marines by [Mournies](#). By nine

¹ The more southerly of the two places called [Pirgos](#) in this neighbourhood.

² 19 Aust Bde WD.

o'clock they were in position, strengthening the still-exposed left flank.

Of [2 Greek Regiment](#) no more was heard. This was probably its last day as an organised force, though some speculation about its doings may be founded on German reports. During the day, however, nothing much besides mortar fire seems to have troubled it. Towards evening Major Wooller was warned by Colonel Fiprakis, the commanding officer, that it would be better for him to withdraw with his New Zealand party as the regiment would disband next day.

v

It remains to give an account of the artillery, now reduced to a total of eight guns: three belonging to F Troop 28 Battery, which had withdrawn the night before; one to C Troop [27 Battery](#), which had been got out finally with F Troop; and four to C Troop of [2/3 Australian Field Regiment](#). By dawn these eight guns were ready for action once more in new positions, this time on the east bank of the [Mournies River](#) and not far south of the junction between the main coast road and the road from the Prison to [Canea](#).

Owing to persistent attack by low-flying planes, it was impossible for F Troop 28 Battery to set up an OP on the west bank of the stream. There was telephone communication with the Australian troop which did have an OP. But the guns did not have a very satisfactory day: close support to the battalions was too difficult as firing had to be mostly by map reference; ammunition was scarce; and enemy aircraft were very troublesome. Moreover, dysentery was afflicting some of the officers and men, while all alike had begun to feel the effects of nights spent in hard work and no sleep, days when the urgency of battle and the ceaseless worrying of aircraft had denied the sleep lost by night. Food, too, had been very short for a long time now and a man who had had a cup of hot tea since the first day of battle could count himself fortunate.

To make matters worse, as it grew towards evening and the enemy began to work his way in closer, machine-gun fire at long range was added to the trials of the gunners. And so things continued until darkness came.

The troubles beginning to make themselves felt with the gunners were by no means peculiar to them. The infantry were no better off. It is all the more credit therefore to the forward troops that the fight they were putting up made a strong impression on the enemy. Thus CSM Karl Neuhoff of 3 Parachute Regiment says:

At 1400 hours we ran into trouble once again when we were held up by an enemy strongpoint just east of the British hospital. For two hours we attacked with everything we had, including mortars and machine-guns but could make no progress in the face of a very determined defence. At 1600 hours after having suffered further heavy casualties we desisted in our efforts to dislodge the stubborn defenders and no further progress was made until after dark when the enemy appeared to disengage....

And a report in 5 Mountain Division war diary for this day describes the 'enemy' in these terms:

The enemy is offering fierce resistance everywhere. He makes very skilful use of the country and of every method of warfare. Mainly snipers, MG nests, and positions partially wired and mined. Shellfire has so far come only from the western outskirts of [Canea](#) for the most part. Armed bands are fighting fiercely in the mountains, using great cunning, and are cruelly mutilating dead and wounded. This inhuman method of making war is making our advance infinitely more difficult. ¹

But, though throughout 26 May the enemy was thus being held, the front could not be expected to stand up indefinitely to the weight of men and weapons now put against it. And, while the forward troops were busy dealing with the enemy to their front, in the rear hard decisions which had to reckon with the larger situation were being taken.

¹ The charges of mutilation apply to the [Cretans](#) and are probably exaggerated.

CRETE

II: THE DECISION TO WITHDRAW

II: The Decision to Withdraw

i

Once General Freyberg learnt that the Galatas line was broken and that 2 Greek Regiment was about to break up, he had to abandon his hopes that the enemy might yet be given 'a really good knock'. His first thought was for the preservation of the new line, and in his letter to Brigadier Puttick, written at 4 a.m., he expressly says: 'You must hold them on that line and counterattack if any part of it should go. It is imperative that he should not break through.'²

Major Saville, who carried this letter, met Brigadier Puttick at 5.40 a.m., as Divisional HQ was settling into its new location near the wireless station. In amplification of the letter Saville said that Puttick and General Weston were to have a joint HQ near Suda, and that Brigadier Inglis was to report to General Freyberg at once.

It is not clear how Freyberg envisaged this joint command as functioning; but he wanted Inglis because he intended to form a brigade from 1 Welch, Northumberland Hussars and 1 Rangers, and to put Inglis in command of it. This intention he explained to General Weston at a conference which took place in the new

² For full text see p. 326.

Creforce HQ not far from Suda docks, and at which the Naval Officer-in-Command, Captain Morse, and Group Captain Beamish were also present. The plan was that this new brigade was to be withdrawn from Suda Area and was to relieve 5 Brigade that night.¹

While he was thus providing for the immediate security of the new line, General Freyberg had now concluded that the loss of Crete was only a matter of time. After

the conference he sent off a message to General Wavell which reveals his view of the general situation. The troops had reached the limit of their endurance and the position was hopeless whatever the Commanders-in-Chief might decide. The force on [Crete](#) was too ill-equipped and too immobile to stand up against the concentrated bombing. Once the [Canea](#) sector was reduced the disposal of [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) by the same methods would certainly follow. Except for the Welch Battalion and the newly-arrived commando, the troops were no longer capable of offensive action. [Suda Bay](#) was likely to be under fire within twenty-four hours. Casualties had been heavy and most of the guns, lacking transport, had been lost. If withdrawal and evacuation were decided upon at once it would be possible to bring off a certain proportion of the troops, though not all. If, however, the [Middle East](#) position was such that every hour counted, he would continue to try and hold out. ²

ii

At Divisional HQ early that morning Brigadier Puttick had also foreseen that further withdrawal would sooner or later be inevitable, and a letter written by him at 2.45 a.m. to Brigadier Hargest shows that he and Brigadier Stewart had been discussing the situation in these terms:

My Dear Hargest,

I think you and Inglis have done splendidly in a most difficult situation. All I have time to write now is to say that in the unfortunate event of our being forced to withdraw, we must avoid [CANEA](#) and move well south of it towards [SUDA](#). Brig. Stewart says he will in that event try to organise a covering force across the head of [SUDA Bay](#) through which we would pass, south of the Bay, of course. This information is highly confidential to you but will indicate a line to follow in event of dire necessity.

Would you kindly pass one copy to Inglis.

Good Luck,
Yours ever,
E. Puttick.

¹ A particular reason for holding present positions was that two destroyers with further commando reinforcements and supplies were expected in [Suda Bay](#) after dark.

² C. 276, [Creforce](#) to Mideast.

Any doubts Puttick felt about the possibility of a prolonged stand were confirmed in the course of the morning. For in conference with Vasey and Hargest he found that the consensus of opinion was that the New Zealanders, and the Greeks on the left of the Australians, were now so exhausted that the present line could not be held much longer. In the morning Vasey himself seemed confident enough that his own brigade could keep its positions; for Hargest describes a visit by Vasey to 5 Brigade HQ at 11.30 a.m.: 'Tall good looking a soldierly type. He was to be my comrade for one week and a good one. He said his troops were fresh and had not been engaged and could hang on indefinitely.'¹

At this stage Puttick did not know of the command intended for Inglis or the proposed relief of 5 Brigade. Inglis himself had spent the earlier part of the morning handing over to Hargest and had then gone on to Division to find 4 Brigade. At Division, which he reached about noon, he learnt that he was wanted at Force HQ. There were further delays while a truck was found and he then went on. At Force HQ [Freyberg](#) told him he was to take over the new brigade. Inglis suggested that to add 1 Welch to 4 Brigade might be the better course, but the suggestion was not accepted, [General Freyberg](#) thinking that 18 and 20 Battalions were spent.

It had been arranged that the commanders of the units in the new brigade were to meet Brigadier Inglis at Force HQ, but only Major Boileau of the Rangers had arrived. After a wait of some time it was decided that Inglis would return to Division and that the unit commanders would come to him there. Accordingly Inglis went back to Division, arriving about half past two. At this time it was his understanding that he and his new brigade would be under Puttick's command.

The return of Brigadier Inglis with the news that 5 Brigade would be relieved that night and the implication that the Division would have to try to hold the same line next day disturbed Brigadier Puttick; for his talks with the brigade commanders

had led him to think that the line was too weak in the flanks to be able to hold out so long. Because Main [Creforce](#) HQ had been sent off farther east under Brigadier Stewart, and [General Freyberg](#) was acting from an Advanced HQ with almost no staff and without wireless or telephone communication to Division,² Puttick's only chance of discussing the situation with [Freyberg](#) was to go to Advanced

¹ Brig Hargest's diary.

² It would take a long time to lay line. There was only one truck for [Creforce](#) Signals to move their wireless sets, charging plant and operators; and enemy aircraft would cause delays. The probability is that it was late afternoon before there was signal communication between [Creforce](#) and Division.

[Creforce](#) HQ himself. There was no truck and he decided to go on foot. His main purpose was to put to [General Freyberg](#) the dangers of trying to hang on for another day and the arguments for moving the whole force back to [Suda](#) that night.

He seems to have had little doubt that he would be able to bring [Freyberg](#) round to his point of view. For, presumably in consequence of a warning order from Division, at 2.20 p.m. the Brigade Major of 5 Brigade was calling a conference of commanding officers for three o'clock and Hargest's instructions to the Brigade Major say: 'In the warning order tell units we are working with Australians and a British covering force. The night's operation should be an easy one.' Clearly, withdrawal was the subject of this conference.

But when Puttick reached [Creforce](#) HQ about a quarter past three he found [General Freyberg](#) adamant that the line must be held: the enemy must be kept well clear of [Suda Bay](#) until the supplies and reinforcements had been disembarked.¹ At the same time [Freyberg](#) told him that he had decided to drop the idea of a joint HQ and to put General Weston in command of the forward area. Puttick and the New Zealand Division would be under Weston.

Brigadier Puttick now set off for his own HQ, taking with him Lieutenant-Colonel Duncan, the commander of 1 Welch, whom he had found at [Creforce](#). Duncan was

acting for the commanders of the [Northumberland Hussars](#) and [1 Rangers](#) as well and was anxious to discuss the night's operation with Brigadier Inglis. The two officers travelled in Duncan's car; but, even so, because of attentions from enemy aircraft it was 4.30 p.m. before they reached Divisional HQ.

During Puttick's absence things had altered for the worse. A signal sent by Major Peart, the AA & QMG, to [Creforce](#) at 4 p.m. summarises the situation as it had developed in the interval:

Ruck [19 Aust Bde] reports enemy working round his left flank Wuna [5 Bde] reports situation dangerous counter attacking with one bn Comd Duke [NZ Div] had left on foot to visit you before situation deteriorated. Is it possible form rear line with fresh troops in event withdrawal being forced. ²

The message represented the situation in a worse light than it actually was, although this could not have been known at Division. Meanwhile a further message from 19 Brigade must have come in;

¹ Moreover the loss of [Suda Bay](#) was bound to follow soon upon further withdrawal and this in turn would make evacuation inevitable; but for evacuation [General Freyberg](#) had as yet no permission from higher authority.

² O. 181, NZ Div to [Creforce](#). Presumably sent by W/T since code-names are used.

for at 4.45 p.m. Puttick, having no signals communication with General Weston, signalled to [Creforce](#):

Ruck [19 Bde] reports situation on left very unsatisfactory inform Lift [[Suda Bay Sector](#)] urgently. ¹

As this message indicates, Brigadier Vasey had begun to take a darker view of the situation. Indeed, he was beginning to think in terms of withdrawal; for about five o'clock he visited 5 Brigade HQ and said that the situation on his left flank was critical. Since bullets from machine guns firing from his left rear were already landing

near 5 Brigade HQ and Divisional HQ, this was not difficult to believe. He told Brigadier Hargest he believed he would have to withdraw and asked him when he was going to do the same. Hargest replied that he had no orders to do so.²

Telephone between Division and the two brigades was working, and Puttick says that between 4.40 and 5.30 p.m. both brigadiers, and especially Vasey, made strong representations to him in favour of withdrawal.³ It is not difficult to understand and sympathise with him in his predicament. His own reading of the situation quite early in the day had been that withdrawal would be necessary. The two brigadiers who were in the best position to know the strength of the front now supported this view. Freyberg's plan for the relief of 5 Brigade by the new brigade assumed not only that 5 Brigade would be able to hold on till nightfall but that 19 Brigade would be able to hold its positions next day. If Vasey's present worry was well founded this might very well prove impossible.⁴ Moreover, the fact that Ingiis was still waiting for the unit commanders other than Lieutenant-Colonel Duncan to appear, and had still received no explicit orders from General Weston about his night's role, could not have given Puttick any great confidence that the proposed relief would take place at all.

On the other hand, Weston was now in command of all forward troops and Puttick could hardly use his own discretion, especially as he knew that Freyberg hoped to hold the line for another twenty-four hours by means of a relief.

At length, Puttick decided that he must put the various considerations before Weston and, since he had no direct contact with him by wireless or telephone, to do so by messenger. Accordingly, he began to write the following report, timed 5.30 p.m.:

¹ O. 182, NZ Div to Creforce.

² Report by Capt Dawson.

³ Diary of Events, HQ NZ Div, and statement by General Puttick, 1951.

⁴ Though the main weight of the enemy's force—Ramcke's paratroops, 100

Mtn Regt, and part of 3 Para Regt—was directed against 5 Bde, Brig Vasey would be aware that 2 Gk Regt was crumbling and his falling back on to the [Mournies](#) line could not give any long guarantee against the danger of being outflanked.

1. Right and left bdes report total inability to hold their fronts after dark to-day. There has been penetration on right of right bde and on left of left bde.
2. Air attack has been so severe, they report, that the men are completely unable to put up further resistance on a line just in rear, such as the one held by your tps. ¹
3. There have been no signs of the O.C. tps to form the new force under Inglis, except the Welch, and the indications are that they would not be available in the fwd area until after midnight at the earliest. To attempt to hold a fwd line with them would in my opinion prejudice the possibility of holding a line further back behind which the fwd tps could reform.
4. I suggest the Welch hold a line as cov.[ering] posn. through KHRISTOS 1553—TSIKALARYA 1552 with the commando extending the line to the South to block the road at AY MARINA.
5. Subsequent movements must be decided later.
6. Presumably rations &c., fwd of the line mentioned in para 4 would be cleared under your or Force arrangements, and all units instructed to take all possible food with them.
7. Force H.Q. has been asked by W/T to send B.G.S. here at once. ²

Puttick had not time to finish this message; for at 5.45 General Weston himself and his GSO 1, Lieutenant-Colonel J. Wills, appeared. ³ Puttick read the message to him instead. He underlined its arguments verbally, pointing out that the forward troops might have been forced out of their positions before the relief came up, that the relieving brigade would become needlessly involved in the forward area and would therefore not be available to stabilise the new line near [Suda](#), and that all the time pressure on both forward brigades was growing. He might have added that, since pressure was so strong on the left flank, it would be very difficult to get the right brigade away if the line were held for another twenty-four hours.

At this stage Weston evidently decided to hear Brigadier Vasey's opinion for himself:

About 1800 hrs Gen. Weston rang me from HQ NZ Div and I informed him of the situation and told him that I considered it was not possible for me to retain my present posn or the line of a wadi about 1000 yards in the rear of it until dark on the

27 May, i.e., for a period of about 30 hrs, and that I considered it necessary for me, in conjunction with the NZ Div to withdraw to a shorter line east of SUDA BAY. Gen Weston stated he was unable

¹ The action at [42nd Street](#) next day and subsequent engagements suggest that the brigadiers were underrating the resilience of their troops; and till now the enemy had launched no night attacks. But another day in the line might have made withdrawal much more difficult. The second line referred to in this paragraph is presumably that held by [Suda Brigade](#), on to which part of 19 Bde had already retired.

² The signal calling for the BGS has not survived. It was presumably O. 183.

³ Weston's object in coming was to ascertain the local situation before ordering Force Reserve forward.—Statement by Brig Wills, 1951.

to give a decision on this, but he would represent the matter to [Gen Freyberg](#). ¹

Weston was now about to set off to consult [General Freyberg](#). Inglis decided that this was his chance to get his own position clarified:

As Weston was about to go, I tackled him about the 'new brigade'. He was hurried and worried, and very short with me; but I gathered that he intended to use these troops himself and not through me. In any event, neither then nor at any other time did he give them any orders through me, and I did not attempt to make confusion worse confounded by giving them any myself. ²

After Weston's departure—about 6.10 p.m. (although Brigadier Wills says at least 7 p.m.)—Brigadier Puttick found himself in much the same position as before: pressed by his brigadiers to withdraw but without authority to do so. Meanwhile both Brigadier Vasey's flanks were reported under attack, with the enemy making progress on the left—i.e., southern—flank. Brigadier Hargest, although the fighting on his own front had by now died down, could not but be alarmed for the situation of his brigade should 19 Brigade be overrun or forced back. From 9 p.m. onward both brigadiers were in constant telephone communication with Puttick and asking for

orders. In one of these conversations Puttick expressly told Vasey, who said he would be forced to withdraw shortly, that he must not do so without orders, but that if line communication failed and the tactical situation demanded it he must, before moving, inform 5 Brigade HQ on his right and [Suda Brigade](#) in his rear. ³

The anxiety of Brigadier Puttick at this stage may be imagined. His brigadiers were pressing him for orders to withdraw. His superior officer had felt unable to accept responsibility for the decision. He himself had no authority to order withdrawal, though he agreed with the brigadiers that it was inevitable and considered it tactically expedient. Further delay might make it altogether impossible. Yet his only course seemed to be to wait for further news from General Weston or [General Freyberg](#). To emphasize the urgency of the situation, enemy machine-gun fire from the flank kept passing over his HQ.

Time passed and there was still no news from Weston, with whose HQ direct communication did not exist, or from [Creforce](#). Between eight o'clock and ten Puttick sent off at least one more

¹ Operations of AIF in [Crete](#), Brig G. A. Vasey.

² Letter from Maj-Gen Inglis dated 16 May 1951. In another letter Inglis confirms this account and adds that as [General Freyberg](#) might still have told Weston to use him he therefore decided to wait on at Division for the next move.

³ NZ Div Report, paras 174, 177; statements by General Puttick.

message asking for orders. There was no reply. At 10.15 p.m. he tried again:

No reply received to our O 182 and O 183 did comd Lift [[Suda Bay](#) sector] return to visit comd Raft [[Creforce](#)] late afternoon after visiting Duke [NZ Div] reply urgently. ¹

At 10.15 p.m. also, a signal which had been sent at ten minutes past ten was received from [Creforce](#). It may have been an answer to one of the earlier signals or

may have been merely a routine confirmation of orders already issued verbally. In either case it was hardly helpful:

You are under command Lift who will issue orders.

In his report General Weston says that after his visit to NZ Division he told [General Freyberg](#) that Brigadier Puttick and the brigadiers did not think they could hold for another day and were urgent for withdrawal that night. This was at 'approximately 0930' hours. By this he presumably must have meant 9.30—that is, 2130 hours. ² [General Freyberg](#) remained firm that there should be no withdrawal. He decided to relieve the New Zealanders with [Force Reserve](#) and to go on holding the line with [Force Reserve](#), 19 Brigade, and [Suda Brigade](#). ³

In the course of his talk with Weston [General Freyberg](#) apparently got the impression that 5 Brigade was ready to stand fast until relieved but that 19 Brigade might withdraw. [Freyberg](#) therefore 'at once sat down and wrote an order that the Australians were to continue to hold their line.'⁴

The lateness of the meeting between [Freyberg](#) and Weston goes some way to explain why Weston did not communicate with Puttick earlier. What remains puzzling, however, is that it was 1.10 a.m. before he sent a despatch rider with [General Freyberg's](#) decision. The only explanation possible—that he assumed Puttick would hold on until he got orders to withdraw—is lame: for he must have known that Puttick was waiting to hear the results of his conference with [General Freyberg](#) and that, unless express orders about holding

¹ This was O. 185. O. 183 and O. 184 have not survived. O. 183 was probably the message asking for the BGS and sent before General Weston's visit. O. 184—if a mistake in serial numbering is not involved—was presumably a request for orders.

² This is confirmed by Brig Wills, who says that they had to walk some distance to their transport and were delayed. [General Freyberg's](#) report says the meeting was at 10.15 p.m.

³ So General Weston's report. Wills confirms that [General Freyberg](#)

would have no withdrawal. He adds that [Suda Bde](#) itself had become involved in the fighting during the afternoon and that [1 Rangers](#) and [Northumberland Hussars](#) were also engaged in dealing with infiltration. This was why it was difficult to communicate with them and why their COs did not come to NZ Div HQ.

⁴ [General Freyberg's Report](#), p. 47. There was, of course, no question of 19 Bde moving independently of orders, and the impression given by General Weston was wrong. In [The AIF in Crete](#), p. 3, Brig Vasey adds that [Freyberg's](#) order was to hold the wadi 1000 yards east of present positions. Similar orders were apparently sent to [Suda Bde](#).

on reached Division, there was a strong probability that withdrawal would be ordered. The result, whatever the explanation of the delay, was that Puttick was left without an explicit reply to the strong case he had put forward, and was left without information about whether [Force Reserve](#) was going to carry through the relief that his own arguments had opposed.

iii

Meanwhile, back at Division Brigadier Puttick, referred by [Creforce](#) to General Weston for orders and yet having no communication with him, pressed by a situation which clearly was worsening, and urged by the two brigadiers who were in the best position to judge the danger, decided that there was nothing for it but to withdraw—with or without orders. The new line which he had already suggested to General Weston was that running through Khristos and Tsikalaria to [Ay Marina](#). It was chosen off the map by Puttick as the only line which would be short enough, would give some protection to the left flank, and would still cover [Suda Bay](#) against infantry assault. From this point on it will be called [42nd Street](#), the name by which it became known to the troops and which it owed to the fact that the 42nd Field Company RE had been working there before the invasion.

While Puttick was waiting, Major Peart had gone to 5 Brigade HQ:

Eventually about 9.30 a representative from Div—Major Peart—came and said that Brig Puttick could not get permission for me to go or move, but I was to do so with Vasey. ¹

It is not now clear what was the precise significance of this visit. The probability is that Peart was asked to go and explain that, although orders had not yet arrived, withdrawal would probably take place and would have to be carried out in conjunction with 19 Brigade. Evidently 5 Brigade went on to make some preliminary arrangements.

At least we went ahead and arranged timings, warned bns and 19 Aust Bde. Then to the best of my knowledge we got orders from Div not to pull out at the arranged time but to await further instructions. No one knew the reason why. We waited 1–2 hours. Then we got the word to go by telephone from Div. ²

As Brigadier Puttick says no time was fixed for withdrawal until he gave his final orders to the brigadiers by telephone, the most likely explanation is that Hargest and Vasey had arranged to co-ordinate their withdrawal movements should the enemy break

¹ Report by Brig Hargest. This was written in Egypt after the event.

² Report by Capt Dawson.

through and communications break down. The times to which Captain Dawson refers were probably contingent on some such extremity.

The time was fixed when, at 10.30 p.m., Puttick issued his orders to the two brigadiers by telephone. The withdrawal was to take place at half past eleven. And before sending the order Puttick gave Captain Robin Bell, ¹ the Force Intelligence Officer, who happened to be at Division just then, a message for General Weston:

Duke [NZ Div] urgently awaits your orders. Cannot wait any longer as bde comds represent situation on their front as most urgent. Propose retiring with or without orders by 1130 hrs [11.30 p.m.] 26 May to line North and South through KHRISTOS 1553.

Now that the decision was taken Brigadier Inglis asked Puttick for orders about his own course of action. It seemed clear, after Weston's visit and his subsequent

failure to send further orders, that Inglis' services were not being called on for [Force Reserve](#) and so Puttick sent him back to resume command of 4 Brigade and to put it in a position in reserve to the new line. ²

It was now necessary that Divisional HQ should itself set about moving. Major Peart arranged for 1000 rations to be dumped where the troops could pick them up as they withdrew. The remainder of the rations were loaded on trucks and sent to [Stilos](#).

While these arrangements were being made and when the withdrawal had already begun, about 10.45 p.m., Brigadier Vasey's Brigade Major rang and read over the telephone [General Freyberg](#)'s orders that 19 Brigade was to hold on till dark next day. As Vasey says:

Discussion with NZ Div on receipt of this order showed that Div had received no similar order and that they were withdrawing to the [SUDA BAY](#) area as previously arranged. That HQ had no knowledge of being relieved in their present position by any other tps. Consequently I decided that to remain in my present positions with the Greeks dispersed on my left flank and the NZ's withdrawn from my right flank would only result in 7 and 8 Bns being captured... This decision was reinforced when after the first message to 7 Bn I received information that the withdrawal of that Bn had already commenced and that they were being followed up closely by the enemy.

³

¹ [Lt-Col R. M. Bell](#), MBE, m.i.d.; Waipawa; born Penang, 16 Jan 1907; sheepfarmer; IO 2 NZ Div 1940–41; GSO 3 (I) 1941–42; GSO 2 (Air) 2 NZ Div and [NZ Corps](#), 1944; twice wounded.

² Report by Maj-Gen Inglis, 16 May 1951. Inglis cannot recall when Lt-Col Duncan left Division but Maj Gibson of 1 Welch reports that he returned to the unit about dusk.

³ AIF in Crete. Vasey no doubt means that Div HQ had no confirmation that Force Reserve was to relieve 5 Bde or any information of the time at which this was supposed to happen.

This agrees substantially with Brigadier Puttrick's account, except that Puttick takes full responsibility for countermanding [General Freyberg's](#) order:

In any case the tactical situation had so altered since the issue of the order by the C-in-C that it could only be observed at the expense of sacrificing 19 (Aust) Inf Bde. The withdrawal of both brigades had already commenced, moreover, and the utmost confusion would have resulted had an attempt been made to cancel the movement. ¹

The decision to withdraw thus confirmed, arrangements went ahead as before. Shortly before midnight the main body of Divisional HQ moved off for [Stilos](#). Puttick and Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry went in search of General Weston.

¹ NZ Div Report, para 176.

CRETE

III: THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE BRIGADES AND THE MOVEMENT OF FORCE RESERVE

III: The Withdrawal of the Brigades and the Movement of Force Reserve

i

Although much of the movement that resulted from the order to withdraw took place after midnight, it will be more easily followed if it is treated as part of the story for 26 May. We shall begin with the right flank, 5 Brigade.

The story is tangled and the most that can be attempted is a probable reconstruction of orders and events. Much of the tangle is due to the fact that, in circumstances considered at Brigade HQ to be of great urgency, there were really three different courses of action mooted during the day, that they were discussed for the most part with Brigadier Puttick over the telephone, and that they could not have been easy for Brigadier Hargest to keep clearly separate in his mind.

Thus Puttick's message of 2.45 a.m. had spoken of the possibility of withdrawal towards [Suda Bay](#) and had envisaged in that event a 'covering force' to be arranged by Brigadier Stewart. This covering force, as we now know but as was not known to Hargest, would have consisted of the commandos already arrived and of those due to arrive that night.

A second course of action became likely when Brigadier Inglis returned from Force HQ to Division and reported that [General Freyberg](#) was organising [Force Reserve](#) as a brigade and intended it to relieve 5 Brigade that night, leaving 19 Brigade in position.

But a third possibility arose when the two brigadiers found the situation worsening and began to urge on Puttick withdrawal that night to the [Suda Bay](#) area. This was in effect the first plan, with the difference that while the brigadiers seem to have continued to assume the presence of a covering force, the divisional

commander did not, but was rather thinking of a defensive line. This would have become clear to the brigade commanders when they got their final orders at 10.30 p.m.; but by this time warning orders would have gone out to battalion commanders, and they seem to have withdrawn still under the impression that they could look forward to a day out of the line.

In the morning Hargest called a conference for nine o'clock. No record of what passed survives but the probability is that he mentioned the possibility of withdrawal that night. If so, an entry in [22 Battalion](#) war diary for 10.15 that evening—that withdrawal began on the lines of the plan 'considered that morning'—would be explained. An earlier entry—for 11 a.m.—in the same diary also suggests that withdrawal was discussed. The entry states that the unit had received orders to be ready to withdraw that evening and company officers had begun to reconnoitre routes. None of the other battalion war diaries has any similar entry for this time.

At 2.20 p.m., however, a fresh message went out to the battalions on Hargest's instructions, calling a conference for three o'clock. The message to [19 Battalion](#) is probably typical:

19 Bn

Conference of COs at Bde HQ at 1500 hrs. Note: We are working with the Australians and a British Covering Force—the night's operation should be an easy one. R. B. Dawson, Capt. ¹

It is possible that when this message was sent out Brigadier Inglis had already returned to Division, and the news he brought with him of [General Freyberg's](#) intentions had been passed by telephone to Brigadier Hargest. Whether this is the case or not, it seems likely that Puttick at this time was reasonably confident he could convince [Creforce](#) of the necessity for withdrawal to the [Suda](#) area, that he had told Hargest, and that Hargest was now calling a conference to find out what his commanders thought of the forward situation and whether they could hold on till dark and to explain the probable withdrawal. ² No record exists of what took place at the conference; but [21 Battalion](#) war diary records that the Intelligence Officer left to reconnoitre the route back to [Suda](#) at 3 p.m. and, if we allow a certain approximateness about the time, this would seem to have been a consequence of

the conference.

¹ 5 Bde WD.

² Brig Hargest was evidently very sure there would be withdrawal. And he seems to have envisaged, no doubt after discussion with Brig Puttick, an operation in which [Force Reserve](#), instead of relieving 5 Bde in its present positions, would hold a line near [Suda](#) through which 5 Bde and 19 Bde would pass.

The general feeling in 5 Brigade HQ that withdrawal was likely must have increased as a result of Brigadier Vasey's visit at 5 p.m. For the Australian commander's earlier optimism had changed. He was now certain that he would be forced to withdraw—not so much because of the fighting on his actual front, one may infer, as because of the threat to his left flank. Hargest replied that he himself was still without orders; but his expectation of orders must have remained. For 5 Brigade war diary records that at 6.50 p.m. [19 Battalion](#) was told that withdrawal was probable. The battalion was told to hold on till further instructions. The 21st Battalion was also told to hold on. ¹

The main events at Brigade HQ for the remainder of the evening are clear enough in spite of some minor confusions about time, probably due to the fact that war diaries were for the most part compiled a good while after the events with which they deal. At 9.30 p.m., if we accept Hargest's time, but perhaps an hour earlier, Major Peart called at Brigade HQ and apparently explained that withdrawal was very likely but that Division was still without firm orders. No doubt he discussed various administrative arrangements. Captain Dawson then drew up a warning order which gave the general setting of the coming operation:

A line is being formed two miles West of SOUDA at approx the junct of two converging roads. Beyond this line all tps must go. Units will keep close together, liaise where possible to guard against sniper attack. 5 Bde units in general will hide up in area along road between SOUDA and STYLOS turn-off. Hide up areas for units will be allotted by 'G' staff on side of road after passing through SOUDA. Bde HQ will close present location 2300 hrs and travel at head of column. Will then set up

adjacent to STYLOS turn-off. A dump of rations boxes already opened is situated near the main bridge on main [CANEA](#) road also some still at DID. Help yourself. It is regretted that NO further tpt is available for evacuation of wounded. It is desirable that MOs should travel with tps. There is possibility of a dump of amn being on roadside near Main Ordnance dump. Take supplies as you pass.

R. B. Dawson TOO 2215 ²

The despatch of this order would mean that all units could get on with essential preparations so that nothing would delay them when the actual order to move was sent. The order itself is interesting because it clearly indicates that at 5 Brigade HQ it was assumed

¹ Taken literally, the entry would show that only 19 Bn was told that withdrawal was probable. But whoever made the entry may have unintentionally omitted to record the giving of the same information to 21 Bn.

² 21 Bn WD. 5 Bde also has an interesting entry for 8 p.m. to the effect that runners advised bns that the Bde would be withdrawing through two English bns to a line at [42nd Street](#). If this time is correct—5 Bde WD is unreliable in times—it might mean that Capt Dawson had sent out an earlier warning order. In substance, even if the time is wrong, it can hardly be a summary of the order above. More likely, it is wrongly timed and summarises the final order to withdraw.

there was no question of the withdrawal ending in the occupation of another line. Puttick's idea by this time was that the Division should itself man the [42nd Street](#) line; but this does not seem as yet to have been understood at 5 Brigade HQ.

This misunderstanding, so far as 5 Brigade HQ was concerned, must have been cleared up when Puttick issued his orders by telephone at 10.30 p.m. The withdrawal was to take place at 11.30 and the destination was the line at [42nd Street](#). ¹

ii

It was inevitable, however, that there should be some confusion among the

battalion commanders between a warning order which envisaged hiding up along the road between [Suda](#) and [Stilos](#) with other troops holding a covering line, and an order which called for the line itself to be held. And this will account for some misunderstanding in the sequel.

Brigade HQ probably moved off at 11 p.m., the time given in the warning order.² The first battalion to move was [22 Battalion](#), which followed Brigade HQ, leaving one of its companies under Major Leggat to guard the bridge at the junction of the main road and the Prison– [Canea](#) road.³ The 23rd Battalion followed shortly afterwards, having been told off to guard the main bridge while the troops passed through. Presumably, as soon as it arrived Leggat's company was able to leave.⁴

For the forward battalions disengagement was a trickier matter. The 28th Battalion started to thin out at half past ten, immediately after getting the warning order. By 11.30 p.m., when it would have had the final order, all companies had checked in at a central assembly point. The battalion had been instructed to bypass [Canea](#) and keep off the roads leading west and south-west from it. Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer therefore took his unit across country and reached [42nd Street](#) without incident.

The 19th Battalion also left at half past eleven and made for a point approximately two miles west of [Suda](#). The 21st Battalion Group was the last to leave. With a heterogeneous group Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, a meticulous commander, was leaving nothing to chance and had worked out a careful schedule which took a longer time to operate. The battalion seems to have used the main road at least part of the way, for the Divisional Cavalry passed through [23 Battalion](#), no doubt at the bridge, at 1 a.m.⁵

¹ No record of the order survives but this was clearly its main content.

² 5 Bde WD says 9.30 p.m., which is plainly wrong.

³ 22 Bn WD, also unreliable about times, says 10.15 p.m.

⁴ Leggat's company missed the guides near [Suda](#) and continued to march

on towards [Stilos](#), where it arrived in the early morning of 27 May.

⁵ Div Cav WD.

C Squadron, [3 Hussars](#), covered the withdrawal and, missing the route, found themselves in [Canea](#). There they were put on the right road and came safely on to [Suda](#), arriving at 5.15 a.m. The 23rd Battalion had probably preceded them from the bridge, once all the infantry were through; on reaching [Suda](#) it got orders to go to [42nd Street](#).

With [3 Hussars](#) had gone Captain [Dutton](#), ¹ Adjutant of 21 Battalion, who had found a truck. He alone of the brigade records meeting [Force Reserve](#): 'On my way back thro' [Canea](#) I met a Coy Welch Bn going fwd—uncertain about the situation but going fwd.'

A quotation from Brigadier Hargest may suggest something of the atmosphere of the withdrawal.

All arrangements had been made and at about 10.30 we moved each Bn on its route with the Australians on our flanks to the south. The going was terribly hard, the roads had been torn up, vehicles burned across them, huge holes everywhere—walking was a nightmare. Our guide lost us with result that we went through [Canea](#) itself, transformed from a pleasant little town to a smouldering dust heap with fires burning but otherwise dead. ²

iii

Brigadier Vasey had received authority from Brigadier Puttick to issue a warning order for withdrawal to [Suda Bay](#) and he did so about 9 p.m. Then came the final order by telephone. ³ Vasey then warned not only the battalions but [2 Greek Regiment](#) on his flank and [Suda Brigade](#) in his rear.

Then, a quarter of an hour later, came the order from [General Freyberg](#) already mentioned, the discussion with Brigadier Puttick, and the decision to carry on with the withdrawal. Clearly, no other course was by this time possible.

Accordingly, the battalions carried on with the plan already arranged in consultation with 5 Brigade and reached the [Suda](#) area about 3 a.m. Here they settled down for the time being to rest.

iv

Fourth Brigade had gone into reserve when 5 Brigade took over the front on the night of 25–26 May. It now consisted of [18 Battalion](#), [20 Battalion](#) (less the company forward with 21 Battalion Group), and the remains of the [Composite Battalion](#). All three were in a battered state.

¹ [Capt G. A. Dutton](#); Katikati; born [Stirling](#), Otago, 27 Jun 1910; school-teacher; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

² Letter from Brig Hargest, 1941.

³ In AIF in [Crete](#) Vasey says 11 p.m.; but 2/8 Bn WD records getting its orders from 19 Bde at 10.45 p.m.

Moreover, a double confusion arose over the whereabouts of the units of the brigade and over the question of command. The night before Brigadier Inglis had agreed to stay forward and assist Hargest with the take-over of the front line. To prevent the troops of 4 Brigade from getting too widely dispersed while he was thus preoccupied, he asked Major Peart to sort out the men of the three battalions as they crossed the bridge west of [Canea](#) and concentrate them in an area where he would be able to find them next morning. When he came back to Division next morning to look for 4 Brigade, he got orders at once to report to Force HQ and so was not able to locate his units. It was afternoon before he could get a message to his Brigade Major, warning him that he and the 4 Brigade staff might have to take over [Force Reserve](#) and ordering him to arrange for [Colonel Kippenberger](#) to take command of 4 Brigade.

When [Kippenberger](#) received this news he was with [20 Battalion](#) in a bivouac area in the rear of 5 Brigade. He at once chose a staff and set about finding [18 Battalion](#) and the [Composite Battalion](#).

The 18th Battalion, presumably on orders from Division, had at first assembled in the area behind 5 Brigade. It was soon found that this was overcrowded and the battalion was ordered to move to the old transit camp area. But this again was unsatisfactory, for the new area was just behind the front line of 19 Brigade. Accordingly, Division ordered the battalion to yet a third area south-east of the wireless station.

The [Composite Battalion](#), in spite of having been employed piecemeal over so many parts of the front on 25 May, and in spite of lacking the trained unity of an infantry battalion, was surprisingly successful in reforming during the morning at the transit camp. Small parties attached to other battalions or independent kept coming in most of the night and early morning.

Somewhere about midday Lieutenant-Colonel Gray and Major Lewis had reported to [Colonel Kippenberger](#) and pointed out the location of their two units. He ordered them to send him liaison officers and to stay where they were. ¹

Gray took the order from Division to move to the wireless station area as countermanding this. He may have assumed that Division would inform [Colonel Kippenberger](#); if he did send further messages to [Kippenberger](#), no record of them has survived. The upshot in either case was that [18 Battalion](#) set off for the new area and the [Composite Battalion](#), on Lieutenant-Colonel Gray's orders, followed. This had unfortunate results. For [Kippenberger](#) was now completely out of touch, and there was no chance of 4 Brigade

¹ At this time the two units were presumably still in the transit camp area and had not yet received the Divisional order to move to the area of the wireless station.

operating as a single organisation until much later when contact between all three units and their HQ could be restored.

Moreover, the new move had to take place in broad daylight at a time when the enemy's aircraft were more active than ever. One enemy air attack killed the commander of A Company [18 Battalion](#), Captain [Lyon](#), ¹ and caused about a dozen

casualties among his men. These air attacks broke up the unity of the march and in consequence B Company and part of D Company overshot the new assembly area and continued westward towards [Kalivia](#).

Still later [18 Battalion](#) was ordered to continue to withdraw to the east of [Suda Bay](#). Thus most of the day was spent in a cheerless, harassed and dispirited trudge, brightened only by a glimpse of [General Freyberg](#) on the back of a motor cycle:

... Andy Provan driving the cycle flat out and Tiny on the back holding tight with one hand and the other holding his hat on his head. ²

He stopped and gave the men an encouraging word—'told us to be careful to keep our rifles and keep together and things.... I know the mere sight of him pulled me together a hang of a lot.'³

The [Composite Battalion](#), having followed [18 Battalion](#), was similarly plagued by enemy aircraft, and in the resulting confusion tended to break up into small groups under individual officers and NCOs, most of whom were to do good work in the hard days that followed ensuring that the men for whom they were responsible held together.

[Colonel Kippenberger](#) continued the vain search for his two missing units by runners and expeditions on his own account. The 20th Battalion itself spent the day resting and preparing for whatever might next be expected of it. By early afternoon it looked battleworthy once more and had been reinforced by the arrival of two of its members who had just reached [Canea](#) that day from [Greece](#) by rowing boat.

v

The eight guns of F Troop 28 Battery and C Troop 2/3 Regiment RAA, after an unpleasant day of attention from enemy aircraft, were ordered to withdraw about the same time as the brigades. They were to go back through [Canea](#) and [Suda](#) to a crossroads where they would find a staff officer with further instructions. The surviving gun of C Troop [27 Battery](#) could not be moved and had to be abandoned; the other seven duly got away. But when the staff

¹ Capt W. G. J. Lyon; born London, 15 Feb 1898; MP (Waitemata) 1935–41; served in 1914–18 War; killed in action 26 May 1941.

² Lt C. A. Borman, Div Sigs.

³ Cpl H. M. Adams.

officer was found at the crossroads the orders he gave were for the two troops to make south towards the coast. This they did and towards dawn lay up at [Stilos](#).

vi

This day of general withdrawal is perhaps a favourable point to take up the story of the medical services, whose difficulties increased with every day of the battle and had been made particularly acute by the loss of most of the RMOs of 5 Brigade.

The 5th Field Ambulance had been evacuated from [Modhion](#) in the early hours of 23 May and had proceeded thence to the former site of [6 Field Ambulance](#). In the same move its stretcher cases were taken on to the improvised hospital being run by 189 Field Ambulance in [Khalepa](#), a suburb of [Canea](#). The 5th Field Ambulance itself made a further move the same day to the original site of 7 General Hospital. On 24 May about 200 further wounded who had come in during the interval were cleared to 7 General Hospital, [189 Field Ambulance](#), 1 Tented Hospital RN at [Mournies](#), ¹ and [6 Field Ambulance](#).

Towards evening of 25 May casualties from the heavy fighting at [Galatas](#) began to pour back, most of them going to 6 Field Ambulance. For by this time machine-gun and mortar fire were striking in the [5 Field Ambulance](#) area, and at 7 p.m. the ADMS of Division (Lt-Col Bull) arrived and ordered a withdrawal to Nerokourou. This order applied also to 7 General Hospital.

The staff and more lightly wounded were to walk. All the remaining patients of [5 Field Ambulance](#) were to be taken back during the night by the four trucks available, which would make three trips. Delays made only two trips possible before daylight.

This meant that there were still about twenty stretcher cases left, together with Major S. G. de Clive Lowe,² Lieutenant R. F. Moody, Padre [Hiddlestone](#),³ and 14 orderlies. Three truck drivers volunteered early on 26 May to try and get them out. Only one driver got through and an enemy motor-cycle patrol arrived about the same time. The driver, [Jenkins](#),⁴ escaped by climbing down a cliff. Patients and staff were captured.

The 6th Field Ambulance had also got orders to withdraw, though after [5 Field Ambulance](#). It had already admitted a good many

¹ This small 60-bed hospital found accommodation for over 400 patients.

² Maj S. G. de Clive Lowe, m.i.d.; England; born NZ 27 Feb 1904; medical practitioner; medical officer 5 Fd Amb Mar–May 1941; p.w. May 1941.

³ [Rev J. Hiddlestone](#), MBE, ED; Tasman, [Nelson](#); born [Christchurch](#), 19 Mar 1893; Baptist minister; p.w. May 1941.

⁴ [L-Cpl B. Jenkins](#); [Gisborne](#); born [Gisborne](#), 3 Sep 1914; taxi proprietor; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

wounded from the day's fighting when Major [Fisher](#),¹ the commander, was told to evacuate his 250 walking wounded to 1 Tented Hospital RN. The 100–150 stretcher cases would have to be left behind. Early in the morning of 26 May, therefore, the Ambulance split up: the stretcher cases remained behind under the care of Lieutenant Ballantyne, Padre [Hopkins](#),² and 20 orderlies and were later captured; the walking wounded went to the Naval Hospital and most of them were evacuated in the destroyers that brought in commando reinforcements on the night of 26 May; while the staff went on to [Nerokourou](#) and new tasks there.

No. 7 General Hospital, unable to evacuate its 300 stretcher cases, had to leave them in the caves under the care of a small medical staff. The walking wounded and the rest of the staff went off to [Nerokourou](#) on foot.

At [Nerokourou](#) an MDS was established and worked through the day of 26 May, with both field ambulances and the surgical team from 7 General Hospital all assisting. Then DDMS [Creforce](#) (Col Kenrick) ordered [2/1 Australian Field Ambulance](#) to establish a temporary hospital at [Kalivia](#), and as the medical units at Nerokourou were to move back as part of the general withdrawal, they were ordered to send their patients to [Kalivia](#). The seriously wounded were sent there in trucks while the walking wounded went on foot. Eventually some 530 patients collected there, and when next night it was obvious that further withdrawal was inevitable, some of these were taken south in trucks while some set out on foot. About 300 had to be left behind, many of them New Zealanders, in the charge of an Australian medical officer and some orderlies.

vii

When Lieutenant-Colonel Hely, who commanded [Suda Brigade](#), learnt that 5 and 19 Brigades were to withdraw, he realised that this left him no alternative but to withdraw also from the brigade positions along the [Mournies River](#). For, like the Australians, he had no contact with the Greeks on his left, and if he remained he would be surrounded next morning. Towards midnight, therefore, he gave his orders for withdrawal. After this movement had begun, an order from [General Freyberg](#) on the same lines as that sent to Brigadier Vasey reached him. But compliance was now out of the question: his troops were already on the move and, in any case, to

¹ [Col W. B. Fisher](#), OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born [New Plymouth](#), 21 Jan 1898; Superintendent, Waipukurau Hospital; RMO 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1939–Aug 1940; 2 i/c 5 Fd Amb Aug 1940–May 1941; actg CO 6 Fd Amb, May 1941; CO 21 Lt Fd Amb (NZ) Nov 1941–Dec 1942; 6 Fd Amb Feb 1943–Aug 1944; CO 1 Gen Hosp Aug 1944–Feb 1945.

² [Rev H. I. Hopkins](#), m.i.d.; [Temuka](#); born Dunedin, 30 Aug 1908; Anglican minister; p.w. May 1941.

stay would have been suicidal once 19 Brigade had gone. The withdrawal proceeded.

General Weston's report states that he learnt of the relief role intended for [Force Reserve](#) at 9 a.m. when he saw [General Freyberg](#).¹ At [Creforce](#) it was evidently understood that Brigadier Inglis would command this relief, and as we have seen he spent the afternoon waiting for the unit commanders to appear at the rendezvous, Divisional HQ. According to Brigadier Wills, line communication to [1 Rangers](#) and [Northumberland Hussars](#) from [Suda Area](#) HQ was established for only a short time that morning, then cut. Runners had difficulty in locating them and both units were busy with infiltrating enemy. Thus only Lieutenant-Colonel Duncan got the order to go to NZ Division.

Duncan returned to his unit about dusk. The battalion had been concentrated, ready for a move, about half past three by his orders. He now told his officers that there were two possible roles in store: either withdrawal to a defensive position at [42nd Street](#); or an advance to defensive positions west of the [Canea](#) crossroads bridge. Major J. T. Gibson of [1 Welch](#), who was present and who supplies this information, says that Duncan told him that 'it was being strongly urged that we should carry out the first task.' From this it seems a reasonable inference that Duncan had learnt at Division of Puttick's belief that nothing short of complete withdrawal to [42nd Street](#) was practicable. He may well have known also that General Weston had set off to [Creforce](#) to get a decision.

Gibson also says that [1 Rangers](#) and [Northumberland Hussars](#) were placed under command and that the two commanding officers reported to [1 Welch](#) HQ and remained there waiting for orders.² These did in the end come, although there is some doubt about the time. Weston says that [Force Reserve](#) 'had already been warned by me to be in readiness to move by 2030 hrs, but owing to blockage of roads, and the difficulty of moving during daylight, some delay occurred in getting the orders through to the battalions concerned who did not move until late that night.'³ The [Rangers](#)' war diary records that orders to move and take over from the New Zealanders

¹ If the war diary of [1 Rangers](#) is correct he must have had some earlier intimation; for according to this the unit received a warning order at 8 a.m.

that it was to take over some NZ positions and with 1 NH would be under command of 1 Welch for the operation. The diary adds that COs and OCs had great difficulty in contacting higher authority and getting detailed orders which would enable daylight reconnaissance.

² This seems to confirm that General Weston did not intend to use Brig Inglis.

³ Report by General Weston, para 27.

were received at 8.30 p.m. from [Suda Bay Area](#), and this is probably a confusion with Weston's warning order. ¹

The actual order must have been much later, as indeed is suggested by Weston's account already quoted. Captain J. N. Hogg of the Rangers is reported by Captain A. R. W. Low as having said orders arrived at 10 p.m. Major Gibson says 'it was certainly not any earlier than 2200 hrs and probably considerably later that we received a message brought in by our Motor Contact Officer ordering us to carry out the 2nd task, i.e., to occupy the positions WEST of CANEA BRIDGE.' This is supported by a witness from Northumberland Hussars who says 'the C.O. got his orders at 11.30 and we moved out at 0015. We thought we should have got orders earlier.'²

It looks therefore as if Weston did indeed send a warning order at 8.30 p.m. but did not send off his final orders until after he had seen [General Freyberg](#) and returned to his HQ in [42nd Street](#). It would be later still by the time these orders got to the battalions. The result was that [Force Reserve](#) was not in position when 5 Brigade withdrew and was still coming forward when Captain Dutton passed through [Canea](#). This is borne out by Gibson's statement that 1 Welch moved at 12.30 a.m. and got into position at 2.30 a.m.; as also by the Rangers' war diary which says the battalion did not get settled in until 4.30 a.m.

Meanwhile the message which Brigadier Puttick had sent by Captain Bell reached General Weston very late, if it reached him personally at all. For Bell, leaving Division before half past ten, went first to Weston's [Canea](#) HQ only to find that this had now moved to [42nd Street](#). Bell showed the message to Lieutenant [Kempthorne](#),³ who was GSO 3 (Intelligence) for [Suda Area](#), in case anything should

happen to himself, and then went on to look for General Weston in [42nd Street](#). After great trouble in getting there he found the new HQ. 'I can remember having difficulty in getting access to General Weston personally that night. I think Weston was asleep when I arrived but my message was certainly delivered, if not to General Weston himself then to his GSO 1.'⁴ Bell then went on to [Suda Point](#) and reported the situation to [General Freyberg](#).

By now Puttick and Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry were also on their way to see General Weston. En route, about 1.45 a.m., they met a

¹ The diary adds that the unit began moving up to new positions near 1 W and NH on receipt of the order.

² Statement by [Maj J. M. Pumphrey](#). Brig Wills says that the order to move forward was issued 'about 10 or 11 at night.' (Statement to author, 1951.)

³ [Lt-Col J. H. Kempthorne](#), m.i.d.; [Rotorua](#); born [New Plymouth](#), 11 Mar 1912; school-teacher; BM 6 Bde Apr 1943–Jan 1944; wounded 8 Dec 1943.

⁴ Report by Capt Bell. Lt Kempthorne also came prepared to pass the message but arrived so late that Brig Puttick seems to have been before him. Neither Bell nor Kempthorne remembers the times.

despatch rider with a message from Lieutenant-Colonel Wills. The message was timed 1.10 a.m. and read:

Brig. Puttick,

GOC in C has ordered that 4 [sic] NZ Div ¹ must hold fast positions tonight 26/27 May until relieved by 1 Welch, NH and [1 Rangers](#). These latter units received orders to move about 2000 hrs and they should move about Midnight.

It is not easy to see why Weston should have waited so long before sending this message. The move of his headquarters might help to explain, but can scarcely justify, delay in a case of such urgency. He knew that Puttick and his brigadiers

thought withdrawal inevitable; and he knew that Puttick must have been anxiously waiting for the decision that he had gone to [General Freyberg](#) to get. Nor do his own words to Puttick help to clarify the situation. For, about 2.15 a.m., when Puttick found him asleep in his new HQ and asked why orders had not been sent, 'Gen Weston replied that it was no use sending orders as Div Comd had made it very clear that NZ Div was retiring whatever happened. Div Comd replied that the retirement could not have been avoided but that orders were necessary so that he would know where to retire to and how best to co-operate with other tps.'²

It is difficult to believe that Weston can have meant what he said to have been taken literally; for if he had really believed that the retirement would take place whatever happened, his action in sending [Force Reserve](#) forward would be quite incomprehensible. To find an explanation of his actions we must assume that his words on this occasion were prompted by exhaustion.

Even so, however, we are left with two puzzles. For it remains inexplicable that Weston did not at once signal to Puttick when he learnt from [General Freyberg](#) that there should be no withdrawal; and that he left it till 1.10 a.m. before he sent not only the necessary orders but the information that [Force Reserve](#) was to move about midnight. The death of General Weston makes it unlikely that a satisfactory explanation can now be found.

The conversation between Weston and Puttick was necessarily brief.³ Puttick went on to inform him that 5 Brigade and 19 Brigade had been ordered to form a defensive line along [42nd Street](#). Weston replied that he already had troops on or near this line and would not require the two brigades. Puttick said that an attack in force would probably develop shortly after dawn and that the help of the brigades would be found very necessary. On this Weston agreed that they should man the line as ordered and said that he

¹ Presumably a loose way of saying 5 Bde.

² Diary of Events, compiled by Brig Puttick.

³ General Puttick comments that the conversation lasted 'at least 15

minutes'.

himself would order their further retirement when the situation made it desirable. Puttick offered him any assistance he needed and the services of his own staff, but the offer was declined. ¹

Meanwhile Lieutenant-Colonel Hely had also arrived and General Weston ordered him and Brigadier Puttick to report to [General Freyberg](#). On his way to do so, at 3 a.m., Puttick met Brigadiers Hargest and Vasey. He hurriedly discussed the situation with them—it was urgent that no time should be lost in seeing [General Freyberg](#)—and told them to choose their brigade positions in co-operation with each other. He then left for [Creforce](#), arriving at 4 a.m.

General Weston had realised that [Force Reserve](#) was now in an ugly situation and would have to be recalled. 'Some difficulty was found in getting D.R.'s to take this message but two were despatched about 0130 hours. These D.R.'s have since been interviewed and the fact that the message was delivered to the Welch HQ has been established. The D.R.'s arrived back at [Suda Sector H.Q.](#) at 0345 hours.' ²

If Weston is right in saying the time of despatch was 1.30 a.m., then the message must have been sent before Puttick's arrival at a quarter past two. If so, it was presumably sent on the receipt of the message carried by Captain Bell and, since the order of 1.10 a.m. for Brigadier Puttick could hardly have been sent if he had been known to be already withdrawing, the not unlikely inference would follow that Bell arrived between 1.10 and 1.30 a.m.

The alternative explanation is that Weston is wrong in his recollection of the time and that the message was sent about 2.30 a.m. If so, Weston must also be wrong about the time of the return of the DRs. But, whatever time it was sent and in spite of the subsequent testimony of the despatch riders, it can hardly be doubted that the message failed to reach Lieutenant-Colonel Duncan; and indeed it is strange that a message of this importance was not given to a staff officer who would realise how vital it was that it should reach the proper quarter.

If Duncan had in fact received the order it is inconceivable that he would have disobeyed it. General Weston suggests that he may have received it and decided

that there was not time before daylight to carry it out. But, apart from the fact that Weston says the despatch riders were back before 3.45 a.m., it seems most unlikely that Duncan would not have taken the risk of having his force

¹ Diary of Events, compiled by Brig Puttick. It is not clear what troops General Weston was thinking of. Brig Wills thinks that he probably meant to use the commandos, an RM searchlight unit, the docks operating unit, and some Australian gunners.

² General Weston's Report. Brig Wills says that duplicate messages were sent by separate DRs to each unit of [Force Reserve](#). He thinks one DR got through to 1 Welch but too late for withdrawal to be possible.

caught by enemy aircraft on the roads at dawn rather than accept the certainty of being encircled. Major Gibson specifically says that no order to withdraw was received.

At all events and whatever the explanation, this was the unluckiest confusion of all the confusions on that trying and unhappy day. Its consequences for [Force Reserve](#) will appear in the sequel.

CRETE

IV: OTHER FRONTS AND CREFORCE

IV: Other Fronts and Creforce

i

It will be remembered that General Student and General Ringel attached great importance to the outflanking movement which was to pass through [Alikianou](#) and go on towards [Ay Marina](#). The enemy's object was partly to cut off the troops in the [Canea](#) sector and partly to relieve his own hard-pressed force at [Retimo](#).

Attempts to get this movement going had been hitherto thwarted by the presence of Greek opposition across the proposed line of advance. But after the fall of [Galatas](#) the Greeks probably moved back into the hills and the enemy himself began to attack with more determination.

As a result [Alikianou](#) was taken in the course of the morning. III Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment pushed on east of it as far as the hills south-west of Varipetron. It should have been relieved there by I Battalion, which was then to push on to Malaxa with II Battalion following.

Unluckily for this scheme and luckily for the defence, I and III Battalions were severely attacked by their own bombers during the early afternoon and this had an adverse effect on progress and morale. Then I Battalion encountered 'stubborn enemy resistance'. This and the hard going prevented the regiment from getting more than a few kilometres beyond Varipetron. The breakthrough to [Ay Marina](#) and Malaxa had again to be postponed.

Had this thrust been begun earlier and with more energy, and had not the remnants of the Greek forces and the Cretan civilians put up the resistance they did, grave consequences might have followed for [General Freyberg's](#) main body.

At the same time the enemy was building up another threat on the former front of 6 and 2 Greek Regiments. In the morning of 26 May Colonel Jais, commanding 141 Mountain Regiment, was ordered to begin advancing south of Colonel Heidrich's

3 Parachute Regiment. To do so he had I Battalion complete and elements of his other two battalions. His object was to cut the main coast road at [Suda Bay](#). He began to move in the middle of the afternoon and by evening had reached [Pirgos](#). No opposition was met, and it may be inferred that any Greek forces still in the area were making for the high country farther to the south.

ii

At [Retimo](#) the Australians, unaware of the deteriorating situation on the main front, made yet another attempt on 26 May to reduce the German strongpoint in [Perivolia](#). The 2/11 Battalion set off at dawn, accompanied by a supporting tank. But their usual ill luck dogged them and the tank's machine gun broke down almost at once. The battalion had to withdraw, postponing its attack for another twenty-four hours.

By 11 a.m. the tank's machine gun was repaired. It was too late to renew the [Perivolia](#) attack, and so instead the tank was used in support of an attack on the factory in the eastern sector. In this engagement B Company of 2/1 Battalion took 80 prisoners, 40 of them wounded. A further enemy party to the east, about 80 strong, was attacked and contained by Cretan gendarmerie. To make the morrow's plans more certain the troops dug out the second tank and trained a crew that night.

During the afternoon also the Quartermaster of 2/1 Battalion succeeded in making his way back from [Suda](#). Unfortunately, as he had left during the previous afternoon, he knew nothing of the latest developments in the situation there. [Retimo](#) force therefore continued to expect reinforcement and guessed nothing of the evacuation which was by now being planned. In this ignorance of the true situation they felt no reason to be dispirited and were embarrassed only by a shortage of supplies, which their possession of 500 prisoners seriously aggravated.

iii

The enemy at [Heraklion](#) was still intent on concentrating his forces in the eastern sector if possible and continued his attempt to do so into daylight of 26 May. The route followed was to the south of the defence, and one concentration in the course of the morning forced a minor Australian withdrawal. A more serious

development took place on the front of the newly arrived Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Early in the morning the enemy surrounded the forward elements of this battalion, and an attempt by [2 Leicesters](#) to counter-attack in the afternoon was frustrated by an ambush and by low-flying fighter aircraft.

This was the only serious aggression by the enemy, however. He dropped more stores in the eastern sector during the morning, and was in the main content to hold the Knossos road from the south and build up in the east.

iv

The morning began for [General Freyberg](#) with his decision that, whatever the Commanders-in-Chief might decide, the position was hopeless and his message to General Wavell to that effect sent at half past nine. Unfortunately Wavell was away in [Alexandria](#) when this message arrived, discussing the situation with Admiral Cunningham, Air Marshal Tedder, General Blamey, and the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr. Fraser. Available to this meeting were the opinions of Brigadier Falconer, who had left [Crete](#) on the [Abdiel](#) in the early morning of 24 May and who had stressed the effect on the troops of continuous and unchecked air attack.

Wavell began a message to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff on his way back to [Cairo](#). In it he explained how difficult it was to reinforce when there was so little hope of merchant vessels sent to the north of [Crete](#) getting through that the only chance of sending troops there was by destroyer. Even to send reinforcements to the south coast, warships or fast troopships of the Glen class were necessary. This meant that it was impossible to land transport or tanks at [Suda Bay](#), and only limited numbers of infantry could be sent. The upshot of the conference had been that existing plans to send three battalions in the next few days could not be improved on, without undue risk to warships and robbing forces in the Western Desert to a degree too dangerous to be contemplated. There was little that could be done to counter the enemy's air attacks, but all that could be done to help would be. It now seemed doubtful whether a permanent hold on [Crete](#) could be retained.

On arrival at his HQ Wavell found the message sent from [Freyberg](#). He therefore continued his own message by sending a copy of it and of his own reply to [General Freyberg](#). This reply was to the effect that [Freyberg](#) had done well to withstand the

attack so long; and that if he could continue to hold on the effect on the whole position in the [Middle East](#) would be all the greater. He went on to ask if, with the reinforcements that had reached him during the previous night and with 1 Welch, it might not be possible to push the enemy back or at least relieve the sector in greatest danger. If, however, it was impossible to hold [Suda Bay](#) after 27 May, he suggested that [Freyberg](#) should use his freshest forces to cover his withdrawal on the night of 27 May, join up with the troops at [Retimo](#), and block the enemy's further progress to the east. In this way it might be possible to hold out for some time still. If [Freyberg](#) would send the outline of proposals for carrying out such a plan, he himself would do his best to help. Meanwhile he was sending General J. F. Evetts, a tank expert, by Sunderland and hoped that [Freyberg](#) would send him back a liaison officer by this plane. ¹

This telegram did not reach [General Freyberg](#) until late that night. Meanwhile the day's events that have already been followed in detail had done nothing to alleviate his anxieties. How he viewed the situation late that afternoon may be gathered from a situation report sent to General Wavell: the front to the west of [Canea](#) had been penetrated and men were falling back in disorder; he was trying to form a line which would cover [Suda Bay](#) until the supplies and men due that night were disembarked; but any stabilisation could only be temporary, and he would have to aim at getting some supplies dumped at [Stilos](#) with the ultimate plan of falling back on [Sfakia](#) and [Porto Loutro](#). ²

In the evening, about a quarter past ten, [General Freyberg](#) went to Weston's new headquarters in [42nd Street](#). There he informed General Weston of his plans which assumed that, after the relief of 5 Brigade by [Force Reserve](#), the troops would stand on their present line till the evening of 27 May. As a result Weston's staff began to prepare an order for withdrawal which was completed by 3 a.m. The more important provisions of this order were to the following effect:

All troops were to withdraw to [Sfakia](#), with [Layforce](#) (the newly arrived commandos) doing the rearguard. Withdrawal would begin on the night of 27 May, and the last to leave the [Suda](#) area would be [Force Reserve](#), an RM battalion, and the RHA.

After hearing the news of [Freyberg's](#) plans Weston told him that the Australians

of 19 Brigade meant to withdraw that same evening, although the New Zealand troops were standing fast.³ It was this information which moved [General Freyberg](#) to send his direct order to Brigadier Vasey. Having sent it, he went to [Suda Bay](#) to make sure that his arrangements about transport, which had been difficult to provide, were carried through.

At [Suda Bay](#) the commandos—the rest of A Battalion and D Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. D. Young—arrived about midnight on board [Abdiel](#), Hero and [Nizam](#), the whole force being under the command of Colonel R. E. Laycock. [Freyberg](#) met them and explained that it was no longer possible to hold the island and that they were to help cover the withdrawal to [Sfakia](#). As the

¹ O. 67110, General Wavell to CIGS, 26 May.

² Original not available. Extract from [General Freyberg's Report](#), p. 45.

³ [General Freyberg's Report](#). There was, of course, no question of 19 Bde withdrawing without Puttick's orders. General Puttick comments: 'I cannot imagine how Weston could get this idea in view of my plain talk with him.'

main body of forward troops was still in contact with the enemy, they would not take up their rearguard task until the following day, 27 May.

Because transport was short and because their new role would demand mobility, the commandos were told to jettison their radios, motor cycles and heavy equipment, keeping only weapons, ammunition and rations. A Battalion was then sent forward to join Lieutenant-Colonel F. B. Colvin's party which had taken up positions the night before in the [Suda Docks](#) area. D Battalion marched east along the coast road until dawn found it near the turn-off to [Stilos](#). Here it lay up in the olive groves. Colonel Laycock himself reported to General Weston near [42nd Street](#).

Meanwhile [General Freyberg](#) had been arranging for ten tons of supplies that had come with the convoy to go to [Retimo](#)—his staff's plan for sending them by caique having failed with the engine of the caique. Eventually the [Navy](#) lent a motor

landing craft. This hid up in a cove near [Suda](#) Point and prepared to set off in the darkness of next night.

Now that all plans seemed to be working satisfactorily, [Freyberg](#) returned to his HQ where he expected to find a reply from General Wavell to his signal sent that morning. The reply was there but he 'did not derive much comfort from this helpful advice which indicated complete ignorance of the strength of the [Retimo](#) road blocks and the latest reports of a German sea landing at Georgiopoulos.'¹

[General Freyberg](#), realising from Wavell's last signal that the tactical and administrative situation was not understood in Egypt, at once sent off his reply. [Retimo](#) was without ammunition, was very short of food, and was cut off on all sides by road. In his own sector the guns were all lost through shortage of tractors. His fighting strength was very low in contrast with his ration strength. His force could not continue to function as such without air support. The [Retimo](#) plan was out of the question and the only hope was to withdraw to selected beaches, hiding up from the enemy's aircraft by day and marching by night. Even so, survival depended on the landing of supplies at [Sfakia](#) at once. His plan was therefore to withdraw to [Sfakia](#), fighting a rearguard as he went. Since the bulk of his force were not front-line troops and were now in a deteriorated state, he would like General Wavell to try and spare more commandos to cover the withdrawal. The garrison at [Retimo](#) would have to be moved at once.

¹ [General Freyberg's](#) Report, p. 49. The sea landing seems to have been no more than a rumour.

This was, of course, a just view of the position, and was to be rendered more so by the withdrawal of 5 and 19 Brigades. Even if a junction could have been effected with [Retimo](#) no prolonged resistance there could have been made. Moreover, arrangements already made, including the orders now being prepared by Weston's staff, presupposed withdrawal to [Sfakia](#). Miscellaneous bodies of troops were already on the way there, rumours of evacuation having spread around. And, finally, had he changed his plans in accordance with Wavell's suggestions, the only possibilities for evacuation would have been by [Retimo](#) itself or by withdrawal to the southern ports. The first alternative would have exposed the [Navy](#) to all the dangers of air attack;

the second would give the withdrawing force a much more difficult march and would offer the enemy an even better chance to cut the route of withdrawal.

Even to try to defend [Canea](#) and [Suda](#) until the following night, as [General Freyberg](#) at this stage still hoped to do, was taking a big risk; for he knew that with the Greek regiments scattered there was little except the difficulty of the country to prevent the enemy from cutting the road south to [Sfakia](#).

▼

Back in London General Wavell's telegram had roused the Prime Minister to alarm, and at 1.35 in the morning of 27 May he cabled Wavell that victory was essential and that he must keep hurling in reinforcements. But, even before this, the convoy taking 2 Battalion of the Queen's Regiment— [Glenroy](#), [Stuart](#), [Coventry](#) and [Jaguar](#)— had been forced to turn back. It had been attacked by torpedo bombers and the [Glenroy](#) had been damaged—a cargo of petrol catching fire from machine-gun fire and one of her landing craft having to be cut adrift. The delays had been such that there was not enough time left to reach [Crete](#), land troops, and return under cover of dark. The misfortune was less than it seemed. Another battalion could not now have affected the result and would have complicated the evacuation.

The attack on [Scarpanto](#) airfield by the [Formidable](#)'s twelve aircraft did not come off at full strength, as four proved unserviceable. The other eight had some success and 1 Battle Squadron then withdrew. In the early afternoon of 26 May it was attacked by aircraft and [Formidable](#) was hit twice by dive-bombers. [Nubian](#) also was hit and lost her stern. While the Vice-Admiral was preoccupied by the bombing and the damage to the [Formidable](#), a signal reached him to detach [Nubian](#), [Kandahar](#), and [Janus](#) for a raid that night on [Melos](#), and [Ajax](#) and [Dido](#) for a feint through the [Kaso Strait](#). The bombing and the delay it caused decided the Vice-Admiral to cancel both operations. Instead he detached [Formidable](#) with an escort to go back to [Alexandria](#), while the rest of the force continued at sea.

Something of the strain of this and kindred operations can be seen in Admiral [Cunningham](#)'s message this day to the Admiralty. He explains that the cautionary note in his previous appreciations was not due to the fear of losses as such but to the fear of crippling the Fleet. Experience was already enough to show what the

scale of losses in future operations was likely to be. In three days the Fleet had had two cruisers and four destroyers sunk, two cruisers and four destroyers seriously damaged, and one battleship put out of action for several weeks. And now he had just learnt that Formidable and [Nubian](#) were hit and returning. All these operations and losses under undisputed enemy control of the air were having their cumulative effect on men who had been stretched to their utmost ever since February. Even so, he was having the north coast of [Crete](#) swept nightly and had so far stopped the enemy getting reinforcement through by sea. To prevent it by air was impossible without long-range aircraft, and so far those asked for from the [United Kingdom](#) had not appeared.

Cunningham had indeed reason to be proud of his Fleet. And in spite of the continuous effort men and commander had already put forth, they were able to nerve themselves to yet further strain in the crisis still to come.

Air Marshal Tedder, too, was doing his best. During the night of 25 May four Wellingtons had bombed [Maleme](#) airfield and beaches. On 26 May six Hurricanes returned to attack by daylight and were followed at dusk by a force of Blenheims and Marylands. These attacks did some damage, though of course they were not on a scale to affect the military situation to any serious extent.

CRETE

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CRETE

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I: Force Reserve and 42nd Street

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ON 26 May the enemy had gone on reinforcing. III Battalion of 141 Mountain Regiment had been landed and rushed forward to join I Battalion near [Pirgos](#)—the two battalions now made up [Jais Group](#). There were other arrivals: the heavy infantry guns of 100 Mountain Regiment; the rest of I and II Batteries of 95 Artillery Regiment; more of 95 Reconnaissance Unit to join the part already in action towards [Meskla](#); and medical reinforcements.

Orders had been issued by General Ringel at 9 p.m. on 26 May. Next day Utz's 100 Mountain Regiment was to push on towards Kharakia and the southern outskirts of [Canea](#), with Ramcke's paratroops conforming on the left. On the right Heidrich's paratroops would also advance and conform with [Jais Group](#) on their right. Still farther south 85 Mountain Regiment would move on [Ay Marina](#) and thence to [Stilos](#) and Megala Khorafia. And on the extreme right 95 Reconnaissance Unit would be directed from [Meskla](#) on [Neon Khorion](#).

The main emphasis was on the roles of 141 and 85 Regiments; for Ringel had great hopes that these two would cut off [General Freyberg's](#) main force. 'Outflanking moves might take a long time, but they promised to gain us victory sooner in the end.' And again, 'a concentric attack was planned for 27 May, to tie down the main enemy force at [Canea](#), while our forces to the south cleared the way east.'¹

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The enemy was of course wrong in thinking that the main force was still in the [Canea](#) area, though had it not been for Brigadier Puttick's withdrawal the night before this might have been the case. But [Force Reserve](#) was still there and was to have an unhappy fate.

Force Reserve had moved forward after midnight and taken up positions in the early hours of the morning, still under the impression

¹ 5 Mtn Div WD.



FORCE RESERVE, 27 MAY

that the left flank was continued by the Royal Perivolians of Suda Brigade and beyond Suda Brigade by 19 Brigade. The 1st Welch Battalion was west of the Kladiso River: C Company, the pioneer platoon, and a three-inch mortar covered the right front from the sea to the south of the Maleme- Canea road; on the high ground just to the south of C Company was B Company with the AA platoon; south again was D Company straddling the Prison- Canea road. A Company was in reserve behind C Company and north of the Maleme- Canea road. Battalion HQ was close to the same road a little west of the Kladiso bridge. The battalion was about 700 strong.

The 1st Rangers, perhaps 400 strong, occupied undug positions to the left rear of D Company 1 Welch. Northumberland Hussars, under 200 in strength and also in undug positions, were east of the Kladiso.

Before dawn and after it patrols were sent out by 1 Welch and 1 Rangers to make contact with the Royal Perivolians. They found no one. Shortly after daylight aircraft appeared and strafed the force heavily but ineffectively for an hour. An attack on the forward positions followed. Enemy mortars and machine guns killed or

wounded many, and the fighting was the more severe because the enemy had infiltrated the forward defences before first light.

To Lieutenant-Colonel Duncan it became increasingly clear that not only were there no supporting troops on his left but that the enemy was there instead. He therefore sent off his Motor Contact Officer to report to General Weston. The officer did not return and may not have got through.

After midday the attack had become so heavy that Duncan decided he could not with an open flank hold out much longer. He must withdraw to the line of the Kladiso. He reported his intention to General Weston in a message which seems to have failed to get through. In trying to carry the intention out, his companies came under heavy fire and some of them did not come back—either because they could not or because the order had not reached them. He decided that the second position could not be held either. He therefore sent Major Gibson—on whose report this account is mainly based—to take back B and D Companies, which had managed to cross the river, and form a line west of [Suda](#).

Gibson's detachment set off and on the east side of [Canea](#) met 300–400 men—some from the other two units but many from all quarters. All these tried to get through to [Suda](#) but found the road already cut. By making use of all cover and taking offensive action when molested, most of them were able to reach [Suda](#), helped no doubt by the enemy's preoccupation with [42nd Street](#).

The other companies—A and C of 1 Welch and perhaps elements of the other two units—were cut off with the commanding officer. They fought on as long as they could, and at least one party of a dozen men under a sergeant, just east of the former position of [6 Field Ambulance](#), was still fighting next morning. ¹ An eye-witness account conveys the spirit of their resistance:

One incident was that of a Bren gun team. Fired bursts all day, drawing MG and mortar fire. Then must have run short of ammo. One man got out and in full view of the Germans walked 100 yds round the hillside —walked with no intention of hurrying though bullets were hitting the bare hillside. We could see every strike at his feet and above him on the slope. He got into a gunpit, emerged with two Bren mag carriers and walked back at the same pace—bullets and mortars. Then gun

went into action again.... Patients cheered the inspiring sight. ²

The main body of [1 Rangers](#) had been attacked at 8 a.m. Eventually the enemy came round the right flank, seized some high ground and consolidated with machine guns. The left flank remained open. Thus exposed on both sides the battalion remained in position till midday when it got orders, presumably from Lieutenant-Colonel Duncan, to withdraw towards [Suda](#). This withdrawal was carried out in small parties, most of which seem to have got through to [Suda](#) in the action already described. The commanding officer, however, the adjutant, and some others made for [Akrotiri Peninsula](#), presumably with the intention of crossing [Suda](#) Bay by boat. They were cut off. On arrival at [Suda](#) the main body got orders from General Weston's HQ not to attempt to reorganise but to push on in small parties towards [Sfakia](#). ³

Thus the last resistance west of [Canea](#) ended and the way into the town lay open to the enemy. He for his part had appreciated by early afternoon that this was the case and so diverted 100 Mountain Regiment towards [Suda](#), leaving the seizure of [Canea](#) itself to Ramcke's paratroops. This took place towards evening.

The resistance put up by [Force Reserve](#) had prevented the enemy from bringing his full weight to bear on [42nd Street](#) early in the day, ⁴ but this hardly compensates for what was one of the unluckiest strokes of the whole campaign. The train of misunderstandings and accidents which led to it has already been as fully examined as the evidence available allows. But it can hardly be doubted that it would not have come about if it had not been for [General](#)

¹ Reports by Lt A. T. B. Green and Gnr. J. R. Rowe.

² Report by Capt R. S. Sinclair, then in 6 Fd Amb's old site.

³ The above is based on 1 Rangers WD. No doubt the survivors of Northumberland Hussars and 1 Welch were also ordered to make for Sfakia without reorganising.

⁴ Battle Report of 141 Mtn Regt says: 'Supplies could not be brought up

from the dump at Maleme airfield because the Maleme- Suda road was not entirely in German hands.'

Freyberg's decision to put General Weston in command of the whole forward sector. Yet the reasons for doing so were strong. All the New Zealand commanders were very tired, except Brigadier Inglis, and he had been earmarked for the command of Force Reserve. Moreover, [General Freyberg](#) hoped to withdraw the New Zealand Division behind the cover of [Force Reserve](#) and reorganise it; for this task Brigadier Puttick's services were essential. Since the troops left forward were to be mainly English it was desirable that they should have an English commander, and General Weston, whom [Freyberg](#) had already good cause to regard as a brave, loyal, and resolute officer, was the obvious man. Such a move had the additional advantage that he knew the ground and would be able to go on controlling [Suda](#) port for which his own men, the MNBDO, would be responsible. ¹

The result was, however, that at a critical point of the battle Australian and New Zealand troops came under a commander whose experience was of regular British marines and who would have little understanding of Dominion troops and their special capabilities and outlook.

Thus General Weston cannot have realised that, if Brigadier Puttick thought the situation demanded it, he was quite prepared to take the responsibility of ordering withdrawal without specific orders from above—however reluctant he was to take such a course. Nor does Weston seem to have realised the necessity for keeping his subordinate in touch with his plans; for it is not possible otherwise to account for his failure to apprise Puttick of the result of his discussions with [General Freyberg](#) or, again, his failure to keep Division informed of the exact movements and timings of Force Reserve. To some such basic misunderstanding, increased perhaps by the fact that General Weston was a Royal Marine and not an infantry officer, by the extraordinary weakness of communications and by his lack of staff, and to all the standard difficulties of a battle in a state of flux, we must attribute many of the confusions of this period. Had wireless or line communication between [Suda Area](#) HQ and HQ NZ Division existed, the whole story might well have been different and many of the misunderstandings of the day would not have occurred. What in fact happened is the story of very tired and very harassed men, driven by extremely

heavy pressures, and not fully acquainted with one another's difficulties and intentions. In such circumstances a certain strain between forward and rear HQs is inevitable.

¹ General Freyberg's comments on Lt-Col Rich's narrative 'The Campaign in Crete'.

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At [42nd Street](#) the line was manned by 19 Brigade on the right and 5 Brigade on the left. Some way behind, at [Suda Docks](#), was A Battalion of [Layforce](#); for Lieutenant-Colonel Colvin had been directed by General Weston at dawn to hold a rearguard position there. ¹ Presumably the plan was that the two forward brigades should fall back through this commando battalion after nightfall.

After learning from [General Freyberg](#) about 4 a.m. that Weston was to organise and command the withdrawal, Brigadier Puttick had gone on to join his own HQ at [Stilos](#). General Weston himself was informed of this role about 6 a.m.

In fact, however, the special circumstances made it inevitable that the rearguard should be carried out mostly by the collaboration of the two brigadiers:

I was able to have little influence on the rearguard operations until Thursday [29 May], owing to the extreme difficulty of movement on the road, the difficulty of locating rapidly moving H.Q. and the fact that any D.R. who left his M.C. unattended for the shortest time had it stolen. The fact that the rearguard actions were efficiently and successfully conducted was due mainly to the excellent cooperation between N.Z. and Aust. Brigadiers and Col. Laycock. ²

The 19th Brigade, having a shorter distance to go, had reached [42nd Street](#) by about 3 a.m. The last of 5 Brigade did not arrive till at least an hour later. Brigadier Vasey and Brigadier Hargest reported to General Weston as soon as they arrived and then, with Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry, reconnoitred the territory. On Puttick's instruction they were to decide their forward positions in collaboration, and they chose defensive localities for the battalions as best they could in the dark. The units then moved in, the plan being for unit commanders to work out company areas as

soon as daylight made this possible.

But this plan does not seem to have reached the unit commanders before daylight came. Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer, for example, had disposed his unit under the impression that this was to be a rest area and that there was a covering force out in front. Once his companies were under cover, however, he began to feel uneasy and felt more so when he failed to locate Brigade HQ. About 8 a.m. he met Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, who shared his doubts. An encounter with General Weston made them still more uneasy:

A General wearing a rain coat, I think, and not known by either Officer Commanding, approached and asked as to what units the two O.Cs belonged,

¹ Brig Wills says that the searchlight unit of MNBDO was also there, together with the docks operating unit and some Australian troops—probably gunners without guns.

² Report by General Weston.

and when told he replied that they should be on their way back. O.C. 28 Bn replied that they were ordered to be where they were and that they were going to stay there until they received further orders from their own formation. The General informed the two O.Cs. that they were fools to stay where they were and asked where Bde HQ was. When informed that the O.C. did not know he turned and moved NE. We were so astonished that we did not think of asking who he was. ¹

The incident suggests that Weston believed that A Battalion of [Layforce](#) and the miscellany of troops in [Suda](#) would be able to manage the rearguard. Whatever its precise explanation, it illustrates the confusion prevailing on the front. General Weston, in spite of having seen [General Freyberg](#), [Puttick](#) and [Hargest](#), seems not to have grasped the necessity for 5 Brigade's presence. Hargest was under the impression that he had put his brigade into the line and that they knew attack was to be expected; and the battalion commanders believed that there was a covering force in front.

The battalion commanders, however, decided to act not upon their beliefs but upon their doubts. They found Major Blackburn of [19 Battalion](#) and arranged to put their battalions into a defensive line. They also concerted the plan—to which the commander of [2/7 Battalion](#) also agreed—that if the enemy got to close quarters they would open fire and charge.

The upshot of these arrangements and those already made by the two brigadiers was that [19 Brigade](#) was on the right of the line and [5 Brigade](#) on the left. The [19th Brigade](#) had [2/8 Battalion](#) from the coast to the left of the main road and [2/7](#) carrying the line on to the left. The [19th NZ Army Troops Company](#) was in reserve.

On [5 Brigade](#) front [21 Battalion](#) Group held the right flank, linking up with [2/7 Battalion](#). The order of units thence southwards was [28 Battalion](#), [19 Battalion](#), and part of [22 Battalion](#).² Such an account, however, gives too schematic a picture. Units had become mixed up during the night march and the attempt to sort them out was not complete by the time the need for action came.³

Both brigades were thoroughly tired by now. The [19th Brigade](#) had had its share of fighting and air alerts; and the units of [5 Brigade](#) had been fighting or on the move by day and night almost without intermission since the battle began a week before. The men were all hungry, thirsty, and desperately in need of sleep. So now, having dug themselves holes against air attack and eaten such hard rations as they had brought with them, they mostly

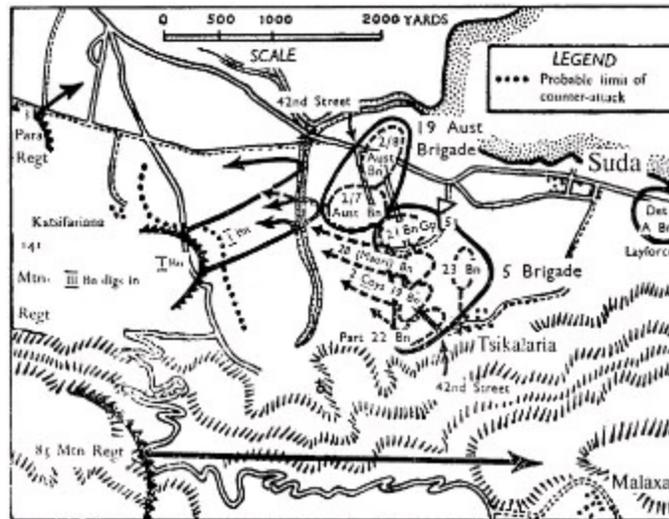
¹ Statement by Lt-Col Dittmer. Lt-Col Allen also reports this incident and adds that General Weston (whom, unlike Dittmer, he so identifies) said [21 Bn](#) should withdraw towards [Retimo](#).

² Of [22 Bn](#)'s two companies one had gone on towards [Stilos](#), unaware that a line was to be held. See [p. 352, note 4](#).

³ See map, [p. 376](#).

prepared to bed down, after first looking about to see what had happened to

friends in other companies, not seen in many cases for days and, if not seen now, perhaps never to be seen again.



42ND STREET, 27 MAY
42ND STREET, 27 MAY

In this area the first thought of each man was to have a wash which we hadn't managed to have for some seven or eight days and to drink gallons of water which had also been very short. We redistributed the available ammunition and managed to get some washing done as, by this time, our clothes were literally sticking to us. There was very little aircraft action here and the majority of chaps, always prepared to dive for cover, wandered round seeing who was still on deck and who wasn't as most of the chaps hadn't seen each other since the action started at Darratsos. Yarns were being swapped, washing was being done and bodies were being washed when, without any warning whatsoever, the enemy opened up with spandau fire from about three hundred yards ¹

The enemy had indeed arrived. Jais Battle Group of 141 Mountain Regiment had set off at dawn to cut the coast road west of [Suda](#). I Battalion in the lead had passed through Katsifariana

¹ Report by Lt Cockerill, 19 Bn. Other reports mention that air attack did take place. If so, it probably coincided with the ground attack or was on a smaller scale than usual. From this time on enemy air attack was less concentrated and less effective, perhaps because poor airfields, and the strain on maintenance staff and crews, were beginning to tell.

about nine o'clock, brushing aside slight opposition—no doubt from Greeks. It then lost contact with Regimental HQ. III Battalion went forward in turn, in time to report that the remnants of I Battalion were falling back before heavy counter-attacks.

Apparently I Battalion had been working its way at an angle across the front, unaware that it was held. The companies, probably well spread out, bumped the whole line more or less simultaneously and a fierce fire-fight, backed on the German side by mortars and soon by strafing and bombing as well, broke out. The foremost elements of the enemy then began to fall back, with the result that they became more dense about the hinge of the two brigades and in the area of 5 Brigade.

Major W. V. Miller, commanding the right company of 2/7 Battalion, had sent forward a patrol to keep the advancing enemy under observation while he planned a counter-attack. He sent word to Captain St.E. D. Nelson, commander of the left company, asking him to join in. When the shooting started he signalled his company forward to the patrol and engaged the enemy. 'It took a few minutes to establish superiority of fire and after this was effected the enemy broke and ran.'¹ Nelson had meanwhile come up on the left and both companies charged.

On 5 Brigade front the plan already formed by the battalion commanders was at once put into action. Bayonets fixed, the troops charged forward with an élan almost incredible in men who had already endured so much. The Maoris took the lead, the units to right and left soon following. Captain Baker's account gives a fair impression:

... As soon as B Company clambered up the bank I waved my men forward and was able to keep them under control while section commanders got their men together.

B Company were subjected to deadly fire as soon as they commenced to move forward and by the time they had moved to 50–55 yards they were forced to the ground where from the cover of trees, roots, and holes in the ground they commenced to exchange fire with the enemy, who had likewise taken up firing positions as soon as the attack commenced. I therefore gave immediate orders for A Company to advance. We moved forward in extended formation through B Company

and into the attack. At first the enemy held and could only be overcome by Tommy-gun, bayonet and rifle. His force was well dispersed and approximately 600 yards in depth and by the time we met them their troops were no more than 150 yards from [42nd Street](#). They continued to put up a fierce resistance until we had penetrated some 250–300 yards. They then commenced to panic and as the troops from units on either side of us had now entered the fray it was not long before considerable numbers

¹ Letter from Maj Miller to Lt-Col Walker (CO 2/7 Bn in [Crete](#)), 2 Oct 1949. Miller says that the enemy had been looting an abandoned supply depot and were taken by surprise.

of the enemy were beating a hasty retreat. As we penetrated further their disorder became more marked and as men ran they first threw away their arms but shortly afterwards commenced throwing away their equipment as well and disappearing very quickly from the scene of battle.... ¹

The other companies were as ardent as A and B. Dittmer had difficulty in getting D Company back into reserve and holding on to Headquarters Company; while his Adjutant, his Intelligence Officer, and his RSM had already 'got away to a flying start'. ²

This example fired the units on either side. The two forward companies of [21 Battalion](#) Group—Captain Trousdale's ³ A Company and A Company of [20 Battalion](#) under Captain Washbourn—'went straight in'. The reserves, Headquarters Company and 7 Field Company, as impetuous and eager as those of [28 Battalion](#), were off before Lieutenant-Colonel Allen could stop them. Fearing that his remaining reserve, the Divisional Cavalry, might do the same (and justly, for some of them did), he hastily gave orders that they should put some troops where the other reserves had been. Then he himself followed the advance.

The 19th Battalion, on the left of [28 Battalion](#), had D (Taranaki) Company forward and 14 Platoon of C (Hawke's Bay) Company. In concert with the Maoris these rushed forward, but found fewer enemy on their front and could not press on so far because of machine-gun fire coming from the hills to the south.

Still farther to the left [22 Battalion](#) also charged. And even some of [23 Battalion](#), the reserve unit, hearing the uproar and led by Sergeant [McKerchar](#),⁴ hastened into the battle.

Accounts of how far the attack was carried and what numbers of enemy were killed vary. A conservative estimate of the former is about 600 yards. And whatever the exact number of enemy killed, the figure was astonishingly large—large enough to make the German authorities inquire afterwards into allegations that their wounded had been bayoneted. The 21st Battalion reported 70 dead on its front when all was over as against 21 killed and wounded of their own. The Maoris claim 80 killed on one part of their front against four of their own killed and ten wounded. The Australians estimated that 200 Germans were killed; [2/7 Battalion](#) lost ten killed and 28 wounded. Over the whole front the enemy can hardly have lost fewer than 300 men, and [I Battalion](#) of [141 Regiment](#) was virtually finished in this its first action.

¹ Report by Capt F. Baker, OC A Coy.

² 'Statement by Lt-Col Dittmer.

³ [Lt-Col A. C. Trousdale](#), MC; [Howick, Auckland](#); born [Canada](#) 20 Oct 1895; estate agent; commanded 1 Bn North Auckland Regt Aug 1942–Jul 1943; CO 21 Bn Jun–Jul 1944; comd NZ Adv Base Jul–Aug 1944; comd [Freyberg Wing](#), 2 NZEF PW Repatriation Unit ([UK](#)) 1944–45; wounded 22 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Lt F. J. McKerchar](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1917; grocer's assistant; killed in action 17 Dec 1943.

The experience was salutary. Colonel Jais decided that the prudent course was to keep clear for the time being of the wounded lion and take literally his orders to make for the head of [Suda Bay](#). He therefore withdrew the remnants of [I Battalion](#) to the high ground along the road from [Canea](#) to [Katsifariana](#). And in the afternoon he sent [III Battalion](#) forward to cut the coast road which its machine guns and the advanced parties of [I Battalion](#) had already been harassing. By the middle of the

afternoon the road was cut, but patrols sent towards [Suda](#) were soon forced back by fire from 19 Brigade.

So successful had been the aggressive response of the two brigades to his first approach that even by nightfall the spirit at Jais' HQ was still far from offensive. Jais was worried about the gaps in the defensive front that he had formed and he had fears for his right flank. He was convinced there was a superior force in front of him — 'This enemy force was launching counter attack after counter attack to restore its situation'¹ And ammunition, because of the stand of [Force Reserve](#), did not come up until late evening. He therefore satisfied himself by building up a 'firm defensive position' which, according to him, 'beat off despairing enemy counter-thrusts with no difficulty' before and after midnight.

Reports from 5 and 19 Brigades confirm the enemy's more cautious attitude, although mortars and machine guns were troublesome and 19 Brigade had from time to time to discourage infiltrating infantry—no doubt patrols trying to get into [Suda](#).

The really disturbing thing for the defence was the sight of enemy parties moving across the hills on their left flank—presumably the left elements of 85 Mountain Regiment. One of these parties entered the village of Tsikalaria on the extreme flank of the [42nd Street](#) line. This was going too far. A counterattack by D Company of [23 Battalion](#) expelled the interlopers and was rewarded by the discovery of a dump of beer and gin.

The constant procession across the southern flank occasioned a series of signals to 5 Brigade HQ during the afternoon. No action beyond the kind of local counter-attack already mentioned could be taken against it; for the guns had missed the guides the night before and were far on the road south. If the brigades stayed where they were that night they would be cut off next day and would run the risk of a much heavier frontal attack as well. The 19th Brigade, indeed, thought that a big attack might come before

¹ Report by [Col Jais](#). The counter-thrusts, in so far as they were not the imagination of his forward troops, were no doubt mere feints to cover withdrawal.

dark, the pressure on its front and along the axis of the main road seeming likely at any time to mount to full strength.

The two brigadiers, however, were not at all sure what course was expected of them. 'Neither Comdr 5 NZ Bde nor myself received any orders as to the future withdrawal of our forces, though we were aware that the whole of the garrison was withdrawing to [SPHAKIA](#) where it was hoped to re-embark.'¹ This statement rather suggests that copies of the order for withdrawal issued at 3 a.m. had not reached 5 and 19 Brigades. It may be, however, that the order had reached them but that the two brigadiers felt the situation had been seriously modified by the elimination of [Force Reserve](#) which had been meant to do the rearguard, and that further orders from General Weston were called for. If Weston had intended to issue further orders to meet the new situation, it can only be assumed that he was not able to get back to [42nd Street](#) once he had left it, because of the stream of traffic.

In the absence of General Weston they had to reach their own arrangements. During the day they found Lieutenant-Colonel Colvin, the commander of A Battalion [Layforce](#), at [Suda Docks](#). His orders from Weston were that [Layforce](#) should delay the enemy on the road to [Sfakia](#).

D Battalion meanwhile was about four miles from [Suda](#), and its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Young, had been sent out by Colonel Laycock to reconnoitre for a suitable delaying position. He eventually found one at Babali Hani. Young was also ordered to put a company at dusk to cover the main road where it turns south to [Stilos](#). This seemed a bad tactical position and Laycock protested but was overruled by Force HQ.²

The two brigadiers, apparently thinking that the main body at least of A Battalion would cover their withdrawal through [Suda](#), decided to go out that night, 5 Brigade making for [Stilos](#) and 19 Brigade for [Neon Khorion](#), where 2/7 Battalion would guard the road from [Stilos](#) and 2/8 Battalion the road from [Kalivia](#). To try and make sure of the turn-off from the coast road, Brigadier Hargest would strengthen the commandos there with another two companies.

This decided, there remained the usual problem of disengaging. It was the more

difficult because the enemy became rather more active towards evening. The following from a report by Captain J. P. Snadden, who had walked from the hospital with his arm in

¹ AIF in [Crete](#), by Brig Vasey.

² Report by Lt-Col Young.

a sling and attached himself to 5 Brigade (where he was to command two companies of [23 Battalion](#) as well as a platoon of gunners before the day was out), gives an idea of the conditions:

His mortars were searching blindly and collected a few of our men. One bomb killed two and wounded five Sigs personnel of 5 I.B. [Inf Bde] H.Q. who were sheltering in a slit trench. Though there was little food there was water in two good wells but these involved some risk as Jerry had his mg laid on fixed lines to their approaches and fired up the olive lanes at odd intervals The scrap raged pretty fiercely towards evening and Jerry advanced in mass two or three times on our right, but bayonet charges by Aussies on the right rotated him somewhat and firing settled to blind sniping again. The Aussie M.G's dealt out a fair wallop every time Heine collected as he was trying to advance straight up the road.

According to the plan 19 Brigade was to begin moving at 9 p.m., [2/8 Battalion](#) first and [2/7 Battalion](#) a quarter of an hour later. The whole brigade was expected to be clear by ten o'clock and then 5 Brigade was to move in the order of Brigade HQ, [28 Battalion](#), [22 Battalion](#), [19 Battalion](#), [21 Battalion](#) Group, and finally [23 Battalion](#) which would do the rearguard. Units were to begin thinning out at dusk in preparation for the move. And [28 Battalion](#), which was to leave first, was to pay for that privilege by providing the two companies for the stand at [Beritiana](#).

The wounded were a difficulty. Since there were too few trucks to make a general plan possible, the units were left to do the best they could. The 21st Battalion Group still had a truck, and Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, to shorten the trip, ordered it to take the wounded to [Retimo](#), thinking the road open. Fortunately Hargest met it and directed it towards [Sfakia](#). The 23rd Battalion discovered some

abandoned trucks, which two volunteers from Headquarters Company repaired under fire, and was thus able to evacuate its casualties as well as some Maoris and Australians. The fate of the rest must be inferred from Brigadier Hargest's words:

.... we loaded our wounded and sick on to lorries and pushed them off as far as we could. Poor chaps, little could be done for them but move them—the seriously wounded we had to leave. ¹

A curious incident occurred as 2/8 Battalion was about to withdraw. An escaped prisoner brought news that the enemy was aware of the intended withdrawal. The two Australian commanders decided to go on with their plan. But when the time came it was still fairly light and the enemy had become very active, bringing down a good deal of automatic fire. They therefore changed their minds and put their timing back an hour.

¹ Letter from Brig Hargest.

As a result 2/8 Battalion did not move until 10 p.m. The New Zealand battalions seem to have begun to leave about the same time or a little after, except for [23 Battalion](#). The time when 2/7 Battalion left is difficult to decide. According to the second-in-command, Major H. C. D. Marshall, it left at 10.15 p.m. But [23 Battalion](#) sources say that the enemy was pressing forward and making it difficult to disengage. In order to put a stop to this 2/7 Battalion put in a counter-attack, and as a result [23 Battalion](#) was able to withdraw about eleven o'clock, its last company, D Company, still under fire from machine guns on fixed lines. The German sources, though inclined to turn the merest exchange of fire into a counter-attack, do something to confirm this story.

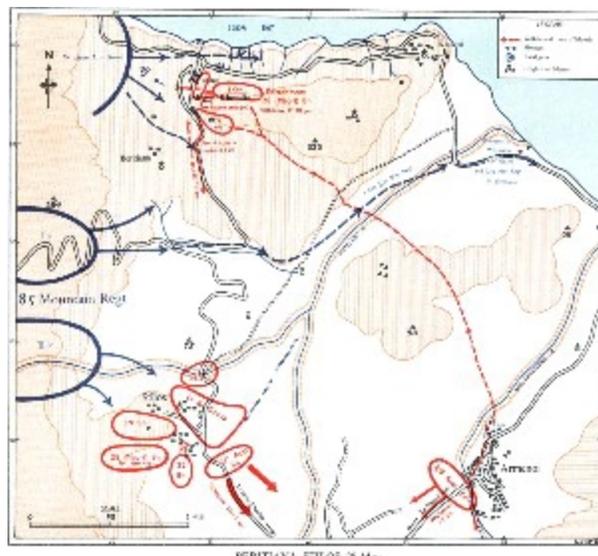
Eventually at some time after midnight all the units of both brigades had passed through A Battalion [Layforce](#), Brigadier Hargest watching his men go past from a Bren carrier on the [Suda](#) road. They had a weary march before them, and to get an idea of it we cannot do better than resort to Snadden's account of how he and his gunner platoon fared:

Tired as we were, the thought of early relief spurred us on and we burned up

the pavement of the excellent motor road which led round [Suda Bay](#). Soon however we broke off on to a much rougher going and started climbing. Throughout there was silence broken only by the tramp of feet. Our greatest hardship was the lack of water and the fact that we could not smoke. Over the rise and down into a huge valley, the road getting worse all the time. At the bottom we see lights. These turn out to be burning stumps of olive trees which glow hotly in the breeze which fans them. What can have been the tragedy here? We strike a bridge just before we begin climbing again. A plane is heard overhead— 'Keep still'. A yellow flare lights up the whole countryside and we are a huddled column on the roadway. How long does it take to burn out? It seems an age but it shows one thing—a well. The flare out, in we go 'Boots and all'. To hell with planes. Two I tanks roll forward towards our friend. Up more hills and really we think we must be climbing the main ridge. Somewhere about 0300 hrs 28 May we doss down on a stony ridge overlooking the road and sleep the sleep of the just.

In much the same way all the battalions went on towards [Stilos](#), [28 Battalion](#) dropping A and B Companies—about company strength when combined—at [Beritiana](#) under the command of Captain Rangı Royal. As they arrived at [Stilos](#) in the hours before dawn they were put in position by the brigade staff.

By 6.30 a.m. the weary troops had collected their rations from the DID—'a sparse handout of grub, one can of B.B. [bully beef] per five men and six biscuits'.¹ Sanguine spirits now hoped that



BERITIANA- STILOS, 28 May

¹ Capt Snadden.

the screen of troops in front might prove effectual and that the mirage of rest they had so long been pursuing might become a reality.

CRETE

II: BEHIND 42ND STREET

II: Behind 42nd Street

i

While the two brigades at [42nd Street](#) kept their line unbroken, behind the front the various headquarters were struggling against chaotic conditions and hopelessly inadequate communications to make the withdrawal orderly and arrange for its protection. What the one road of withdrawal was like may be gathered from [General Freyberg's](#) description:

The road from [Suda Point](#) over [Crete](#) to [Sphakia](#) traversed steep hills and went through mountain passes to one of the most inhospitable coastlines imaginable and was well described by someone that night as the 'via dolorosa'. There were units sticking together and marching with weapons—units of one or other of the composite forces which had come out of the line—but in the main it was a disorganised rabble making its way doggedly and painfully to the South. There were the thousands of unarmed troops including the [Cypriots](#) and [Palestinians](#). Without leadership, without any sort of discipline, it is impossible to expect anything else of troops who have never been trained as fighting soldiers. Somehow or other the word [Sphakia](#) got out and many of these people had taken a flying start in any available transport they could steal and which they later left abandoned on the road to give away to the enemy what was taking place Never shall I forget the disorganisation and almost complete lack of control of the masses on the move as we made our way slowly through that endless stream of trudging men.

Just south of [Stilos](#) the HQ of NZ Division, which had broken up during the march, established its nucleus about 4 a.m. An hour later came a message from 5 Brigade: could the guns be sent up? The only reply possible was that 5 Brigade was under General Weston's command and that the guns could not be traced. Fourth Brigade and its units, all that was now under divisional command, took time to locate, but eventually Brigade HQ, [18 Battalion](#), [20 Battalion](#), and Major Leggat's company from [22 Battalion](#) were found. C Squadron of [3 Hussars](#) also turned up,

having missed 5 Brigade in the withdrawal. It was put under command of 4 Brigade.

Fourth Brigade HQ had moved along with 20 Battalion in the night, Brigadier Inglis having learnt en route from Brigadier Puttick that the brigade was to go on to Stilos. The 18th Battalion had spent the night south-east of Suda, and its commanding officer had been awakened by Major Lewis with the news that the Composite Battalion had been ordered to move towards Sfakia. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray reasoned correctly from the weakness of the brigade that no active role was intended for it and that similar orders had probably been meant for him. He decided to continue south and reached Stilos about 9 a.m.; his B Company, which had overshot the turn-off and gone on to Kalivia, caught up with the battalion about midday. Leggat's 22 Battalion company was located also during the day, but rather later.

The 5th NZ Field Park Company, which had been near Canea throughout the earlier phases, had worked from the beginning at various engineering jobs and had done a good deal of patrolling in liaison with 1 Welch. On 26 May it had got orders to withdraw, and late on the 27th it began its march from Suda, keeping on till eleven o'clock that night. The 7th Field Company and 19 Army Troops were forward at 42nd Street all day.

The Composite Battalion was still no more than a collection of groups: the Petrol Company, the Supply Column, 4 RMT, and those members of 4 and 5 Field Regiments who had been fighting as infantry or who had been in 27 or 28 Battery and had lost their guns. At Stilos these groups halted by the DID and had a meal—for some of them the best they were to have till the end of the war. And here the gunners sorted themselves into two groups, Major Bull leading one and Major Bliss the other—Major Lewis had gone forward and was out of contact. A third party of gunners was with Captain Snadden in 5 Brigade.

As if the confusion of troops, more or less unattached, now passing through Stilos or halting near it were not enough, enemy aircraft were soon overhead. Strafing and bombing went on all day, at their worst about 6 p.m. and continuing till an unusually late hour. ¹ Three trucks, a petrol dump, grass and trees were set on fire.

During the morning—perhaps because no one seemed to know where General Weston was and the situation was so confused— NZ Division asked under whose command 5 Brigade was. [Creforce](#) replied that if Weston could not be found [Creforce](#) itself would control the forward brigades. For [Freyberg](#) seems at this stage to have planned to get Brigadier Puttick to prepare a defence line farther south.

Division had an intimation of this at 10 a.m. when an LO brought orders from [Creforce](#) for Division to provide an anti-paratroop force on the [Askifou Plain](#) and a flank guard for the [Georgeoupolis](#) road. The precaution was prudent. Everything depended on keeping the line to [Sfakia](#) clear. So Puttick now gave 4 Brigade

¹ 'Many remarked that the German Pilots were only after the "overtime".'—WO II E. T. Pritchard.

verbal orders to guard the plain, protect the [Georgeoupolis](#) approaches, and establish control posts at the north entrance to the plain where New Zealand stragglers could be collected.

At 3.30 p.m. [General Freyberg](#) himself visited Division, ordered Puttick to move his HQ to the plain, and explained that [Creforce](#) would look after the brigades, failing General Weston. Then, later in the afternoon, Weston appeared.

At 7.15 p.m. Division's written orders to 4 Brigade provided for a company to be posted about three miles east of [Vrises](#) and to stay there till General Weston ordered it to retire. Meanwhile 4 Brigade had produced its own orders for the move to the plain: the move would begin at half past eight, Brigade HQ leading and [20 Battalion](#), [18 Battalion](#), and [3 Hussars](#) following in that order. Guides would be awaiting their arrival and the brigade would keep up its role throughout 28 May. ¹

These arrangements complete, Divisional HQ itself set off at 8.45 p.m. Hardly had it gone when an LO arrived from 5 Brigade with a message timed 6.30 p.m. This reported the day's fighting and said that 5 and 19 Brigades intended to continue to withdraw that night in conjunction with [Layforce](#). Artillery to cover the move and trucks for the wounded were urgently needed. Fifth Brigade's next HQ would be [Stilos](#).

Evidently Brigadier Hargest still felt that his best hope of getting what he needed was from Brigadier Puttick. Indeed it is hard to see where else he could apply; for he had had no contact with General Weston since early morning and did not know where [Suda Area](#) HQ was. The only remedy for this would have been for Weston to have given explicit orders that morning about the further conduct of the withdrawal or to have made some definite statement about where he could be found if he could not again get forward.

With Division gone, all Major Peart could do was show the LO where ammunition and rations were dumped and send the message on to Puttick. ²

ii

Apart from 5 and 19 Brigades, with which he had lost touch, the only organised units under Weston's command were A and D Battalions of [Layforce](#). Even so, A Battalion was at [Suda](#) and almost as much out of reach as the brigades. D Battalion had been ordered to find a delaying position some way to the south;

¹ 4 Bde Op Inst No. 10, 5.20 p.m.

² At 9 p.m. C Sqn was ordered, as it passed through Div HQ, to send a tank back to 5 Bde, and did so.

A Battalion would hold the enemy round [Suda](#) as long as possible and then pass back through D Battalion. As an extra precaution D Battalion was to leave a company where the road turned off south at [Beritiana](#).

Lieutenant-Colonel Young found that the only suitable place for his main delaying position was Babali Hani. It was well to the south and so less likely to be outflanked by enemy cutting across the hills to the rear; it was less impossibly narrow than any alternatives farther north; and although the two withdrawing brigades could hardly be expected to get farther south than Neon Khorion on the night of 27 May, it was no doubt assumed that A Battalion would still be providing cover, although it was supposed to leave [Suda](#) on the night of the 27th.

Orders along these lines were given to Colonel Laycock by General Weston or Lieutenant-Colonel Wills some time before dawn, and three I tanks which had apparently come from [Heraklion](#) were put under his command. [Suda Area](#) HQ itself passed most of the day moving south. It can hardly have reached [Neon Khorion](#) much before midday, and at half past six it moved again for a position not far from [Vrises](#). It moved again during the night and arrived at [Sin Ammoudhari](#) at 7 a.m. Since General Weston could not get back along the roads, had no signals, and had a staff which was exiguous and untrained for such operations, there was nothing he could do to control the rearguard. The only way to have done so would have been to be with it. And once he had gone south this was impossible.

iii

Little is known of the actions of A Battalion, [Layforce](#). It began its withdrawal from [Suda](#) shortly after the two brigades and went on towards Babali Hani. Captain Baker says he was overtaken by a company of commandos on his way to [Stilos](#) and that their commander complained that their training had never envisaged an operation of this kind. Indeed, Laycock had already pointed this out to General Weston and [General Freyberg](#), and explained that his men were armed only with rifles, tommy guns, and Brens.

In the event the enemy seems to have cut off a good part of A Battalion north of [Stilos](#), though many of them got back to [Sfakia](#). The battalion was so disorganised by the withdrawal and its failure to disengage completely, that daylight found no covering force in front of 5 Brigade at [Stilos](#) except the 'Spanish Company' and Captain Royal's two companies at [Beritiana](#); somewhere between [Beritiana](#) and [Stilos](#) also were two of the [Layforce](#) I tanks and the light tank sent back by C Squadron.

D Battalion, meanwhile, had reached Babali Hani about midnight and Lieutenant-Colonel Young put his men into the area which they were to occupy. In this way the detailed defensive plan for this position could be worked out at dawn with the minimum delay.

iv

At [Retimo](#) the garrison's bad luck was now moving into the ascendant. An attempt by the [RAF](#) to drop supplies during the night had failed because there were no flares for recognition signals and the pilots could not locate the airfield. The attack on [Perivolia](#) broke down again because one tank lost a track on a mine, while the other was hit by an anti-tank shot and set on fire. Previous experience had shown that the stronghold was too well defended for infantry alone and so the attack was called off. The two companies which had made it were pinned down all day in front of the German outposts which they had almost reached and were attacked from the air as well. They could not be extricated till nightfall. Thus the last hope, had Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell known it, of breaking through to join up with the main force round [Canea](#) and [Suda](#) was gone.

Unaware of this, however, he once again pondered his determination to eliminate the enemy post. This time he decided he must try a night attack, and so plans were made for it to be put in at three o'clock next morning.

But it was not only communication by aircraft and land that had failed. Wireless messages to and from [Creforce](#) had to be in clear and it was too risky to send evacuation orders even in guarded language. Moreover, when Force HQ left [Suda](#), [General Freyberg](#) was still without authority to order evacuation and without details of how evacuation could take place if it were authorised. He had arranged the night before for the MLC (Motor Landing Craft) to try and get through with a share of the supplies that had come with the commandos. Lieutenant R. A. Haig, RN, who commanded the vessel, was waiting near [Suda](#) Point with the intention of trying to get through to [Retimo](#) on the night of 27 May. [Freyberg](#) therefore thought there would be time to get the evacuation orders through to him for [Retimo](#). We shall see in the sequel how here, too, misfortune played its part.

▼

[Heraklion](#), too, was troubled by poor communications among its other problems. Unable to get direct touch with [Creforce](#), Brigadier Chappel sent a message through [Middle East](#). The enemy was posted in strength so as to cut the roads leading west and south of the town and had strongpoints on the high ground to the south-east. From these positions he commanded all the positions of the defence, which must

take in the town of [Heraklion](#) as well as the airfield now that the Greek forces, after heavy casualties, had had to withdraw to the Knossos area. Enemy strength in automatic weapons was increasing daily while the garrison was running steadily more short of ammunition. It was clear that the enemy was building up for an eventual attack. The only courses open to the defence were to hold on in the present positions; to try and clear the roads to the west if that seemed advisable; to open the road to the south; to try and clear the high ground to the south; or to attack the enemy positions in the south-east. Chappel proposed to continue holding where he was and then, if supply policy made it desirable, to clear the western or southern roads.

But the pace of events elsewhere was to solve his problems in a way not to be foreseen when he drew up this appreciation. Middle East HQ sent him his orders for evacuation on the night of 28 May. A warship would arrive about midnight and would have to be clear by 3 a.m. on 29 May. Rear parties which covered the evacuation and could not be got off by sea that night would have to go south to [Tymbaki](#).

From now on Brigadier Chappel had only to hold his perimeter, keeping his own counsel about the plans for evacuation until the time came to organise the troops in preparation for it.

vi

For [General Freyberg](#) this was a trying day. He had been forced to act as if evacuation were to take place before he had received General Wavell's authority to do so. Most of the day he was still waiting for that authority to come. Then there was the worry about the disappearance of General Weston and what consequences this might entail for the two brigades still at [42nd Street](#). And he was full of concern for the garrison at [Retimo](#).

As soon as it was possible he sent off a message to General Wavell, at 11 a.m. The situation in the battle area was obscure, but the enemy was thought to be held up north-west of [Suda](#) and the [Layforce](#) rearguard was in readiness east of [Suda](#). Most of the troops from the Base area, some troops who had come back from the main front, and some of the wounded were back in the area of [Stilos](#) and [Kalivia](#). Those still at the front were under heavy pressure and enemy aircraft were

everywhere active. There was really no choice about what must be done and he urged an immediate decision in favour of evacuation so that plans could be made. ¹

This was followed up by a further message in the early afternoon to report that a seaplane had landed in [Suda Bay](#) behind 42nd Street, and that 5 and 19 Brigades were out of touch but might be able to fight their way out after dark. His own HQ was to move to [Sfakia](#) that night and, though he was still waiting for orders, his hand was being forced. There were rumours of enemy landing trucks in [Almiros Bay](#), and he suggested that [Middle East](#) should land parties to protect [Porto Loutro](#), [Sfakia](#), [Frango Kastelli](#) [Frangokasterion], [Ay Galene](#), and [Tymbaki](#). Rations should also be landed. ²

In fact, General Wavell was himself waiting for orders from [London](#). At 9.30 a.m. he had telegraphed to the Prime Minister reporting collapse on the [Canea](#) front, a temporary line at [Suda Bay](#), and no possibility of reinforcement. He explained that the enemy air superiority had made prolonged defence and administration impossible, and reported just having received a message— no doubt that sent at 3 a.m.—that [General Freyberg](#) considered the only chance for his forces was to withdraw to the southern beaches by night, that [Retimo](#) was cut off and short of supplies, and that [Heraklion](#) was almost surrounded. He ended by saying that it would now have to be accepted that [Crete](#) could be held no longer and that the troops would have to be withdrawn in so far as that was possible. ³

This message elicited a response from [London](#) at 7.30 p.m. It ordered Wavell to evacuate [Crete](#) at once, giving the saving of men an absolute priority over that of material. Admiral Cunningham was to prevent any landings by sea that might interfere with the evacuation. ⁴

But already Wavell had accepted the inevitable, and at 3.50 p.m. he sent a further message to the CIGS explaining that he had ordered the evacuation of [Crete](#) according to whatever opportunity there was.

A copy of the message to [General Freyberg](#) is not available, but it is plain enough what it must have contained: the order to evacuate, and perhaps some details of the ships available and the times. The order reached [Freyberg](#) 'during the afternoon'.

As soon as [Freyberg](#) received this his first thought was for [Retimo](#). He at once wrote a message for Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell which ran as follows:

¹ O. 661, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 11 a.m., 27 May.

² O. 662, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 3 p.m., 27 May.

³ General Wavell to War Office for PM, 9.30 a.m., 27 May.

⁴ War Office to Commanders-in-Chief, 7.30 p.m., 27 May.

We are to evacuate crete. Commence withdrawal night 28/29 May leaving rear parties to cover withdrawal and deceive enemy. If liable to observation move only by night and lie up by day. Embark plaka bay east end night 31 May/1 Jun. Essential place of embarkation be concealed from enemy therefore you should be in embarkation area and concealed by first light, 31 May. Make best arrangements you can for wounded. Most regrettable we can do nothing to help in this matter. Hand prisoners over to Greeks. This goes to you by hand of Lieut Haig RN, Comd MLC. Acknowledge receipt of this in clear by wireless tomorrow. We will be on move tonight. You and your chaps have done splendidly. Evacuation is due to overwhelming air superiority in this section. Cheerio and good luck to you. ¹

Unluckily for Campbell's gallant force and [Freyberg](#)'s hopes, the liaison officer who was given this vital order to take to Lieutenant Haig at [Suda](#) Point got there only to find that the MLC had already gone. All that Haig could tell Campbell on arriving that night was that he had orders to report next to [Sfakia](#). From this the most that Campbell could infer was that evacuation was probable and that in part at least it would take place from the south coast.

Meanwhile [Freyberg](#) reported to Wavell that the orders to [Retimo](#) had been sent on and that they had been told when to expect the ships and where. He himself hoped to have troops at [Sfakia](#) for protection purposes next morning. The Naval Officer-in-Command was separately informing Admiral Cunningham about the numbers to be taken off, the beaches from which they would go, and the times they

would be there.

This was in hand, and the Naval Officer had reported that the plan was to embark 1000 men on the night of 28 May; 6000 on the night of 29 May; 5000 on the night of 30 May; 3000 on the night of 31 May—all these from [Sfakia](#)—as well as 1200 of the [Retimo](#) garrison from [Plaka Bay](#) on this last night.

vii

With the universal recognition that there was now nothing for it but to evacuate, one more phase of the battle for [Crete](#) had ended. For the [Navy](#) this meant a reorientation of plans. From concentrating on preventing invasion, it would have to turn to the problem of finding ships to transport or escort troops across the hazardous seas between the beaches and [Alexandria](#).

The change of plan found [Glenroy](#) and her escort already on the way back, and [Abdiel](#), [Nizam](#), and [Hero](#) likewise. [Ajax](#) and [Dido](#), after their night sweep of the north coast, were also making for home. On the way out to [Crete](#) was a convoy of two supply ships

¹ O. 665, [Creforce](#) to [Retimo](#), 27 May.

with escort. And Force A under Vice-Admiral [Pridham-Wippell](#)—[Queen Elizabeth](#), [Barham](#), [Jervis](#), [Janus](#), [Kelvin](#), [Napier](#), [Kandahar](#) and [Hasty](#)—was bound for the [Kaso Strait](#) to cover [Abdiel](#) and her consorts. They had been attacked at 8.58 a.m. by 15 enemy aircraft and [Barham](#) had been hit and a fire started. The fire was put out and at 12.30 p.m. the new orders reached them. They then changed course for [Alexandria](#), getting there safely at 7 p.m.

Till now the [Navy](#) had been operating without fighter cover except for the one occasion when the aircraft of the [Formidable](#) had been available. From now on there was some prospect of a slight relief from these hard conditions. Air Marshal [Tedder](#) promised that he would try and put fighters into the air but said that, because of the distance from his bases, cover would be only meagre and inadequate. To co-ordinate what protection was possible with the movements of the fleet, an [RAF](#) liaison officer

was attached to Admiral Cunningham's HQ.

Over Crete itself the [RAF](#) continued to do what it could. After another night raid Blenheims and Hurricanes came back by day and shot three Junkers 88 down over the sea. At dusk more Blenheims attacked [Maleme](#) airfield and a further attack by night was made by Wellingtons.

CRETE

CHAPTER 11 – WITHDRAWAL AND EVACUATION

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CRETE

I: THE NINTH DAY: 28 MAY

I: The Ninth Day: 28 May

i

There was jubilation at General Ringel's HQ on the evening of 27 May and no great disposition to examine the claims of the forward troops too narrowly. Indeed the advance had been considerable: [Canea](#) was in Ringel's hands and [Suda](#), in effect cut off, would soon be his also. Even discounting the claims made by Ringel on behalf of 85 Mountain Regiment to have taken [Armenoi](#), Megala Khorafia and [Stilos](#), and to have reached [Neon Khorion](#), I Battalion had got its main body very close to the [Stilos](#) turn-off and II Battalion was established on Point 444, about three miles east of the road running south to [Stilos](#). There may even be some foundation for the more forward claims: a member of Colonel Laycock's staff reports that while D Battalion was lying up on the main road short of the [Stilos](#) turn-off about a company of enemy appeared and, after some fighting, made off again. ¹ But it seems unlikely that any but the smallest patrols could have got across the [Stilos](#) road or to [Neon Khorion](#) on that crowded day without being observed.

However that may be, the pursuit was now on and Ringel determined at once to exploit the day's successes and hasten to the relief of [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#). He does not yet seem to have realised that these two objects were not identical. For his orders for 28 May were: 'Ringel Gp will pursue the enemy eastwards through [Retimo](#) to [Heraklion](#) without a pause. First objective [Retimo](#) and the relief of the paratroops fighting there.'

He designed to carry out this intention with his freshest forces. Heidrich's paratroops were given the relatively easy task of clearing the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#)—where the cut-off troops the previous day had made the enemy fight for his progress—and then taking over its coastal defence. Ramcke's paratroops were to clear [Canea](#) and then take over coastal defence as far as [Maleme](#).

¹ Pte A. Cheetham's statement to author.

For the main pursuit as he saw it, Ringel formed an advance guard under Lieutenant-Colonel Wittmann, commander of 95 Artillery Regiment. It was to consist of the greater part of 95 Motor Cycle Battalion, [95 Reconnaissance Unit](#), two troops of 95 Anti-Tank Battalion, some mobile artillery and motorised engineers. This force was to be ready to move off before dawn and its task was to drive through to [Retimo](#) and thence to [Heraklion](#). Detachments to protect the right flank were to be left west of [Alikambos](#) and at [Episkopi](#).

The 85th Mountain Regiment was to push across the road south of the [Stilos](#) turn-off and go on via [Armenoi](#) and [Episkopi](#) to [Retimo](#); 141 Mountain Regiment, with a third battalion which had arrived from [Greece](#) that day, was to go via Kalami and Vamos towards [Retimo](#), and 100 Mountain Regiment was to follow. But at [Alikambos](#) and [Episkopi](#) it was to relieve the flank guards and take over the protection of the whole area to the west and south of Cape Dhrapanon. It was also to clear the road from [Armenoi](#) as far as [Sfakia](#) and [Porto Loutro](#).

The importance of Ringel's failure to appreciate the direction of the withdrawal needs no underlining. Had he realised that [General Freyberg's](#) main force was already moving south towards [Sfakia](#), he could easily have brought strong forces to bear and still spared enough to get through to [Retimo](#). But the enemy's military intelligence throughout this campaign was conspicuously bad, and he must have been to some extent misled by the constant overestimate of opposition that his battalion commanders' reports contain. Even so, it is surprising that with complete command of the air he was not better informed. No doubt the practice our troops had gained in both [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) at speedy disappearances from the roads when aircraft were heard, and their compulsory habit of making main moves at night, made it more difficult for the enemy reconnaissance planes than might have seemed possible.

At all events the success of the evacuation was to owe much to Ringel's faulty intelligence service and his tendency to over-caution —a tendency criticised by General Student. ¹

It will be remembered that the most northerly troops by the morning of 28 May were the rearguard detachments at [Beritiana](#): the Maori force under Captain Royal, consisting of A and B Companies of [28 Battalion](#) and, with their 130 men, about the strength of one strong company; and the party from [Layforce](#).

¹ A footnote may suffice to record the landing of an Italian regiment at [Sitia](#) on 28 May, too late to affect the issue.

According to Colonel Young this was E Company, the Spanish Company, of [Layforce](#).

The commandos, whom Captain Royal found at [Beritiana](#) when he arrived, were guarding a road bridge and the high ground west of it. Royal decided to leave them in position, and as he had little doubt that the whole force would sooner or later be cut off and surrounded he arranged an all-round defence, putting one of his companies on the high ground east of the road and the other to cover the southern flank of the whole position. These arrangements were complete before dawn.

About 5 a.m. the Canadian captain who commanded the [Layforce](#) detachment reported that 'the Spanish element', about sixty men, had disappeared. ¹ Royal therefore sent his reserve, two platoons of B Company under Second-Lieutenant [Pene](#), ² to replace them.

Hardly was this move complete when a general attack was made against the front. From their positions on the height the Maoris could see that the road from [Suda Bay](#) was 'lined with enemy transport and troops, light armoured vehicles and field guns.' ³ This was Wittmann's advance guard and [95 Reconnaissance Unit](#) which had been ordered to clear the pass. But there was another danger farther south. I Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment had sent a company across the road and round the rear of the Maori position to capture the bridge at Kalami, while the main body of the battalion came out on the [Stilos](#) road about two miles to the south.

After the fighting had been going on for some time the Canadian captain and a

runner came to report that the rest of his detachment had fallen back.⁴ This had taken place after the enemy had laid down a heavy fire from guns and mortars. The enemy followed up, driving down the road towards [Stilos](#) and capturing a number of commandos on the way.⁵ At about the same time an enemy company was seen making its way down the Kofliaris Valley towards [Stilos](#)—most likely a company of 95 Reconnaissance Unit sent to outflank the Maoris from the east. Thus Royal's force was virtually surrounded.

As soon as the opposition at [Beritiana](#) developed General Ringel had ordered I Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment to come north up the road and take it in the rear. In these orders Ringel expressly told the regiment not to let itself be drawn south. [Retimo](#) was

¹ They may have joined A Battalion as it passed through. Since a commando company was 105 all ranks this would leave about 40 men.

² [Capt R. Pene](#); [Rotorua](#); born [Whakatane](#), 1 Feb 1912; foreman, Maori Affairs Dept.

³ Report by Capt Royal.

⁴ It should be remembered that the commandos were lightly armed and not trained for this kind of defensive action.

⁵ The enemy claims to have captured a British battalion along the road. A large part of A Bn was evidently cut off between [Beritiana](#) and [Stilos](#).

still the objective, and 100 Mountain Regiment would come along later and attend to the protection of the south flank.

When the Canadian captain had reported the departure of his men—he and his runner stayed on with Captain Royal—Royal withdrew his forward troops behind the ridge which they had been manning, and posted a Maori and two Australians, who had joined him the night before, on the right flank with orders to cover the forward slope of the ridge. This they did very effectively.

But Royal could see that he would have to leave before long if his force was not to be overrun. ¹ About half past ten he sent out his wounded under Sergeant Pitman, ² with men to carry those who could not walk. They were to throw away their weapons and try to persuade the enemy to let them through. After the wounded were gone the main column, including Pene's two platoons, set off across country. Royal went in front to choose the route and A Company was rearguard. The route was arduous because they avoided mapped tracks and kept as far as possible under cover. One canal had to be swum seven times. They crossed the Kofliaris Valley under heavy machine-gun fire and climbed up its south side. They then headed south-east over the ridges and came out in the Mesopotamos Valley. Here they rested half an hour before going on. Just before they entered Armenoi they were met by bursts of machine-gun fire. Royal formed his men into two columns with tommy-gunners in front and Bren gunners in the rear, and they charged through the village. No doubt the enemy there were weak advance patrols and did not have the stomach to tackle the determined Maoris.

From Armenoi Royal led his men on, still south-east, towards Kaina. The enemy was hot on his heels, and at one point the column halted while the rearguard turned on the pursuers and checked their ardour. Then the column went on again and climbed over more hills under machine-gun fire. Passing Kaina, it reached the main south road about a mile north-west of Vrises at 6 p.m. Casualties for the day had been one killed and six wounded, the latter being all brought out safely.

iii

At Stilos the battalions of 5 Brigade had bedded down after they had got their rations and prepared for the sleep they desperately needed. It is difficult to give an accurate picture of the way the battalions were disposed. But 21 Battalion Group seems

¹ The sight of a lizard which he took to be a tuatara, and which was facing south, reinforced the considerations favouring withdrawal.—Capt Royal.

² S-Sgt T. Pitman; Ruakaka, North Auckland; born Whangarei, 11 Nov 1910; labourer.

to have straddled the road just north of the village, with 23 Battalion to its front and mainly on the west side of the road. The 19th Battalion was north-west of the village and 28 Battalion west of it. The 22nd Battalion was south-east of 28 Battalion and close to the village. ¹

Two of the few remaining officers of 23 Battalion, Lieutenant Norris ² of A Company and Lieutenant G. H. Cunningham of D Company, felt uneasy and decided to reconnoitre a little while their men settled down. It was fortunate that they did so, for their inspection revealed a party of enemy emerging from a wadi bed about 400 yards to their front. The alarm was immediately given:

In great haste the troops of the two companies, many of whom had already dropped off to sleep, were summoned to the top of the ridge. They reached the stone wall and began firing from behind it just when the leading elements of the enemy were approaching some 15 yards away. One of the first to arrive and open fire was Sgt Hulme who after the enemy had been repelled the first time was to be seen sitting side saddle on the stone wall shooting at the enemy down on the lower slopes. His example did much to maintain the morale of men whose reserves of nervous and physical energy were nearly exhausted. ³

Meanwhile, support was given from 21 Battalion Group, and 19 Battalion had also heard the alarm and come up with a company on the left:

There was a terrific scramble up to the ridge and in places the ascent was almost precipitous. On getting to the top of the ridge we came under fairly heavy mortar fire and there were, unfortunately, quite a few casualties. Some of the enemy had advanced to within 20 to 30 yards of the stone wall which ran right along the ridge like a backbone of a hog's back and these, of course, were sitters if one cared to take the risk of looking over the wall which, of course, we had to do. ⁴

Finding no way forward to the front, the enemy now sent a party out towards the left who crept close up to the wall and began to throw grenades across. A

section of [19 Battalion](#) was sent to deal with this party and arrived in time to despatch an enemy officer and about six men who stood up at the wall with a machine gun. Eventually the attack was beaten off.

The enemy troops in this engagement belonged to II Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment, which came south when it reached the road and indeed must have laagered the night before only a mile or two from the [Stilos](#) positions. The fighting seems to have impressed the battalion since the language of the regimental report is stronger even than usual. 'The strong enemy force at Stylos was taken by surprise by this unlooked-for attack on his withdrawal

¹ See map facing p. 383.

² [Capt P. T. Norris](#), MC; born NZ 18 Apr 1914; law student; wounded 27 Jun 1942; killed in action 17 Dec 1942.

³ 23 Bn history. For this action, and for his part in the counter-attack at [Galatas](#), Hulme was awarded the VC.

⁴ Lt Cockerill, 19 Bn.

route. A terrific struggle developed, including bloody hand-to-hand fighting.' ¹

At 7 a.m., while the engagement was still going on, there was a brigade conference at which it was decided to extend the line to the left by moving across A Company of [20 Battalion](#) and the Divisional Cavalry. By 8 a.m. this movement was complete, but meanwhile the fighting had spread to the right flank as well and [Layforce](#) I tanks could be seen engaging enemy vehicles away to the front. ²

The new developments put Brigadier Hargest into some anxiety. After the conference at 7 a.m. a despatch rider was sent to Division with a report on the situation and a message asking Brigadier Vasey to come forward. Shortly after he left, the liaison officer who had been sent the night before came back from Division. He brought an answer, timed 5.20 a.m., to the message sent by 5 Brigade the preceding evening:

We were informed yesterday by Comd Raft [[Creforce](#)] that operations for the withdrawal fwd units were under comd Maj Gen Weston and NOT us owing to difficulty communications. Impossible despatch Tp Arty now. We have arranged for 4 Inf Bde to move to ASKIPLIO PLAIN for protection against airborne landings and to hold northern exit to plain where there is strong posn but 4 Inf Bde very weak and dispersed partly against parachutists. Understand amn and rations also supplied to you from DID south of STYLOS. Major Leggat has only 30 men and has joined 4 Inf Bde. Location remainder 4 Inf Bde unknown. All other tps moving through here have been ordered to SPAKIA. As soon as light enough establishing an HQ close to southern exit ASKIPLIO PLAIN. ³

Brigadier Hargest answered at once:

Received your note at 0735 hrs. My position is now serious.

We held line yesterday subjected to heavy bombing and heavy ground attack which we repulsed.

Extracted ourselves last night arrived here before dawn. Left two companies at top of pass at [Beritiana](#) but owing to infiltration from the right they are cut off.

No other tps except 19 Aust Bde are of any use to us.

We will endeavour to hold small position here today and move back tonight but owing to exhausted state of tps this will be very difficult.

We will do our damndest but look to you to give us all the assistance you can.

We would still like you to send up the guns.

Reported that great number of Italian prisoners moving along road from rear towards us—estimated 1000. ⁴

¹ Report by 85 Mtn Regt.

² Col Laycock spent part of the night with A Bn, sleeping just south of the turn-off to [Stilos](#). He left early in the morning to visit D Bn and found the

enemy had cut the road. Fortunately, the three I tanks had just joined him and with their help he broke through. Laycock adds that the tanks were in support of [Layforce](#) and not under command and that they could not operate off the roads.—Letter to author, 17 Sep 1951.

³ NZ Div WD.

⁴ Ibid.

The column of Italian prisoners referred to in this message added a touch of painful farce to the situation. They were troubled by mortar fire from the Germans and at the same time got very unfriendly looks from the New Zealanders. Eventually Hargest let them through because of their nuisance value. Trigger fingers itched as they passed on and finally disappeared with loud shouts towards the enemy front.

Meanwhile Brigadier Vasey had come forward in answer to Hargest's message. He had already seen General Weston about four o'clock that morning and told him that the two brigades intended to lie up that day and go on after dark. Weston does not seem to have been able to improve on this programme but took the opportunity to enlighten Vasey on the role and organisation of [Layforce](#).

After the two brigadiers had conferred, the battalion commanders were called together about 9 a.m.:

At 9 we met. The alternatives were simple. Would we risk staying and becoming engaged in battle and so surrounded or would we march out in daylight in view of the Hun planes and their ground strafers.

The C.O.s were divided. Vasey was for marching.

I put the question to each in turn.

Can you fight all day and march all night tonight if we can extricate ourselves?

The answer was, 'No.'

Well, we'll march at 10.

Vasey agreed to cooperate. His troops were well on the way there. He would hold a side road. ¹

Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer indeed had objected. 'OC 28 because of two of his Coys being at junct of the coast and [STILOS](#) rds stated at Conference that the remainder of his Bn would take a dim view of pulling out and leaving A and B Coys high and dry.' ² But Hargest said they were cut off in any case and he was trying to get a message through to them.

This message went off by despatch rider at 9.15 a.m.:

You will withdraw forthwith moving back under as much cover as possible on both sides of road. Move back via main [STYLOS](#) Rd if possible to rejoin parent unit. Parent unit is moving back from [STYLOS](#) via main road some time today. ³

According to both Brigadier Hargest and Captain Dawson, some carriers and a tank were also sent off about this time to try and relieve the rearguard; and the despatch rider probably went with

¹ Brig Hargest's diary.

² Statement by Lt-Col Dittmer.

³ 5 Bde WD.

them. ¹ This attempt to get through to [Beritiana](#) failed, not surprisingly since the enemy now had many troops and guns along the road.

Meanwhile arrangements went ahead for the withdrawal of 5 Brigade. The 2/7 Battalion, from its positions south of [Stilos](#), was to cover the rear of the withdrawal while 2/8 Battalion went south from [Neon Khorion](#) to strengthen D Battalion at Babali Hani. While 2/8 Battalion was getting into position 5 Brigade HQ would hold the Babali Hani crossroads in front. The 5th Brigade units would pass through this screen and reassemble behind 2/8 Battalion; 2/7 Battalion would then follow.

Although his men were exhausted, Hargest had good hopes that if he could get them clear they would be able to march as far as [Vrises](#) and hide up there before the heat of the afternoon set in. At 10 a.m. Brigade HQ moved off, passed through [2/7 Battalion](#) and then [Layforce](#), and reached the crossroads. The battalions followed at intervals, [21 Battalion](#) Group covering them until they had passed through [22 Battalion](#) and then itself following. Just before withdrawal began [23 Battalion](#) sources report that the enemy again began to attack and it was thought that a counter-attack would have to be launched. But at the critical moment 'shouts, hahas and yells were heard from the rear of the Germans who suddenly ceased attacking and withdrew in some confusion.'² According to this account the new arrivals were a strong party from Captain Royal's detachment who had been sent back with the wounded. Royal, however, says that he had told the escort and the wounded to throw away their weapons. We must assume either that they had acquired fresh weapons on the way or that they had been joined by parties from [A Battalion](#) or by men who had had to fall out on the march but who were now ready to make a further bid for freedom.

In spite of the difficulties of getting the companies back from their deployed positions, all went well and soon the column was on the march, the troops marching in single file on each side of the road with the sections well spread. Hargest rode up and down in a Bren carrier to see that all was going well. He then went on ahead to the crossroads and waited:

At last they came, fast but together, keeping to the sides of the road— thirsty, almost exhausted, but they kept on—they knew the issue. We spelled

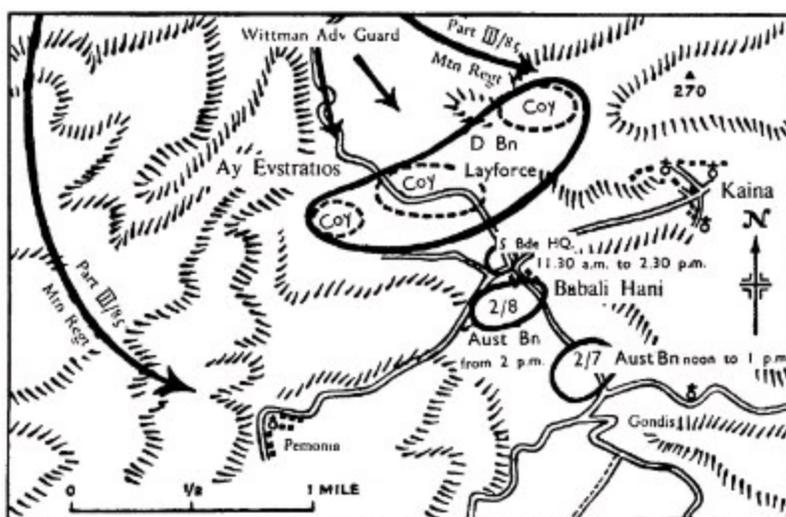
¹ The tank probably belonged to [3 Hussars](#) and the Bren carriers may have been Australian. II Bn, 85 Mtn Regt, claims two tanks knocked out near [Stilos](#), and it is likely that one was this tank and the other a Bren carrier. They were probably either knocked out by guns or immobilised by mechanical breakdown in the course of their mission towards [Beritiana](#).

² 23 Bn history

them at water points and the promise of a long rest heartened them. They were

magnificent. ¹

After a brief rest south of the crossroads the battalions moved on towards Vrises. The last to arrive was 21 Battalion Group which passed the control post at the crossroads at 1.40 p.m. Then 2/7 Battalion came back and 5 Brigade HQ was relieved by 2/8 Battalion, which had been assembled about a mile to the south and now came forward to assist Layforce.



BABALI HANI, 28 MAY
BABALI HANI, 28 MAY

The road thus sealed behind them, 2/7 Battalion and 5 Brigade marched on towards Vrises. The feeling among the men was beginning to spread that this day and march were also to be long ones. 'We are tired and our feet are sore but by now we realise that this is going to be some job and nobody talks much but settle down doggedly to conserve energy and keep up with the party.'² The stragglers from the parties which had gone on before were grim enough evidence that the going would be hard.

iv

Layforce's D Battalion was disposed just north of the Babali Hani crossroads. There were no digging tools and the men had to make sangars for themselves out of stones taken from the walls thereabouts. Owing to the absence of the Spanish Company (E Company), Lieutenant-Colonel Young had only four companies

¹ Report by Brig Hargest.

² Report by Capt Snadden.

to cover a front of 2500 yards—the width of the valley which he was trying to block. Even stretching his front as far as possible he could cover only about 1000 yards. He therefore put A and D Companies on the right of the road, with a front of about 500 yards and the right flank fairly secure because it rested on rising ground. B and C Companies he put to cover about 500 yards on the left of the road, with their left flank more or less open. In reserve he put a troop of A Battalion which Colonel Laycock had put under his command that morning, together with one of the I tanks. ¹ The 2/8 Battalion was in reserve.

From midday onwards there was a good deal of mortar fire, and then, about half past one, after the withdrawing troops had passed through, came the first attack. It fell on C Company, the company just west of the road. For half an hour the enemy tried to break through and everywhere he was repulsed. Then the fighting died down again. About half past three heavy mortar and machine-gun fire heralded a second attempt, again on the left flank but threatening to move round it as well. Young used every man he could to extend his flank and asked 2/8 Battalion to assist with its two companies. These, a counter-attack by B Company, and the I tank which kept making sorties up the road, enabled the line to hold. It had been touch and go; for now that the Australians were committed Young had only the troop from A Battalion in reserve.

The first enemy attack had come from the joint force of Wittmann Battle Group and II Battalion, 85 Mountain Regiment failure forced the committal of the whole Wittman Battle Group in the second attack. 'The enemy's actions pointed to his intending to hold his positions at all costs at least until the evening and then withdrawing under cover of darkness. He even made small counter-attacks from time to time, and often the fighting came to close quarters. Observation was too poor for our artillery to be effective, and our tanks had not yet arrived, and so we had to desist from attacking, as it would have been too costly under the circumstances.'²

The enemy now planned a two-battalion attack by 85 Mountain Regiment at

dusk. But the attack arrived too late. For during the afternoon the defence had received its orders to withdraw at dark and about 9.15 p.m. the battalions began to pull out. Their stubborn stand had made the withdrawal of 2/7 Battalion and 5 Brigade a much less hazardous affair than it would otherwise have been.

¹ A commando battalion was organised into HQ and five companies, each of four troops. The strength of a troop was 25, of a company 105, and of the battalion 605. There were three Bren guns to a troop and four tommy guns. There were no heavier weapons.

² Report by Wittmann advance guard.

v

Babali Hani was the last engagement fought on 28 May and the last defensive position to be held north of the [White Mountains](#). But to the troops making for the south coast these mountains were an obstacle so formidable as almost to rank as a second enemy. From [Stilos](#) to the [Askifou Plain](#)—the next main halting place—is a distance of only about 15 miles by road. But a glance at the map will show that that road leads upwards all the way; from less than 300 feet above sea level round [Stilos](#) it climbs until it passes, by constantly more tortuous zigzags, hairpin bends and serpentines, through mountains which are not the highest of the range but which are, at the crown of the pass, over 3000 feet.

For fresh men even in peacetime to cross this barrier would have been an exacting march. It came now as a cruel culmination to a battle which had ended in defeat; and not to be able to cross it was to become a prisoner. For two days and two nights men had been streaming over it, some crammed into the few vehicles that were still functioning, the rest marching, stumbling, and at times reduced to crawling on hands and knees. The natural savage grandeur of the mountain road was overprinted with the chaos of war. Every yard of the road carried its tale of disaster, personal and military. The verges were strewn with abandoned equipment, packs cast aside when the galling weight had proved too much for chafed skin and exhausted shoulders; empty water bottles; suitcases and officers' valises gaping their glimpses of khaki linen and pullovers knitted by laborious love in homes that

the owners might not live to see again; steel helmets half buried in the dust; all the grotesque and unpredictable bric-a-brac of withdrawal, the personal property treasured till it became an impediment and then discarded so that its owner could keep up with his desperate urge for life.

Every here and there, too, were trucks which had gone on as long as they could, heavily overloaded, and then had broken down for lack of petrol, leaving their occupants to bundle out and, without their packs, trudge upward on foot. Other trucks had crashed over steep cliffs in the dark and lay on their backs below the road, wheels in the air like the legs of tumbled beetles. Others again, their metal scored and scarred, lay at the side of the road where they had been pushed after the bomb or the bullets had struck them.

These things were the commonplaces of the withdrawal, scarcely calling for a glance from the men who trudged by, heads down and shoulders stooped, each one intent on enduring the thirst that tormented every mile of the march, on eluding the enemy aircraft that swooped from time to time and raked the road, and above all on climbing the vast range with its interminable series of disappointing false crests that were crossed only to reveal a further and higher ridge above. From each individual purgatory of parched mouth, panting lungs, straining back and raw feet there were few who could look out with more than apathy at the occasional corpse that from beside the stony path looked up at the sky with unclosed eyes, at last resting.

By day the road was not so crowded. The need for sleep and the fear of enemy aircraft kept many prostrate in the olive groves or whatever shelter could be afforded by rocks and scrub. Only a few knots and bunches of men, whose anxiety to reach the sea was greater than their fear of bombs, kept climbing in the sweat and dust of the day. At dusk, however, the troops, some in organised groups and taking pride from one another's company, others alone or in twos and threes, their units lost and themselves reduced to the anarchy of isolation, stirred from their shelters and made their way to the road. And as the night wore on an occasional flare from an enemy aircraft would reveal, as far as an eye could reach, the long column winding like the road from darkness into darkness and at such a moment stationary, waiting to see whether a bomb would follow and where it would fall.

In such a time men revert to what their natures have kept below their training.

Trucks would pass ruthlessly along the column, ignoring the appeals of wounded men who would not fall out while their legs assured them that they might still be free. Or sometimes a truck would stop and one of its occupants would gruffly get out to make room for a man on foot whose condition was so bad that the passenger could not bear to ride while he walked. And of those who marched some went stonily on, ignoring the appeals of companions who could go no further; while others showed an awareness of something greater than their own exhaustion and did their best to struggle forwards, a wounded companion slung on a blanket or a broken stretcher between them. And time and again the sight of a man stumbling along with an arm round the neck of each of two comrades who took turns carrying his rifle stressed its echo of Calvary.

Over this terrible pass on the night of 27 May 4 Brigade and the various units of the [Composite Battalion](#) had gone on already, men like Lieutenant-Colonel Gray of [18 Battalion](#)—with that stamina which owes its strength to concern for others—marching back and forth along the column of their units, infusing strength by example and somehow carrying their men forward as a unit still, ready if the need came to throw off weariness yet again and fight as an organised force. ¹ The 20th Battalion, too, had been like itself: ‘... along came the 20 Bn with Kip marching under extreme difficulties at the head of them. It was really good to see a unit still under perfect control, retiring in an orderly and well organised manner thanks to Kip's good discipline (no rabble or rafferty rules about this outfit).’ ²

The men of the [Composite Battalion](#) did not have the advantage that the infantry battalions possessed; for their unit had been formed only for the defensive action at [Galatas](#) and they were not trained infantry. At the beginning of the march the battalion had virtually broken up into its component groups. But the officers and the NCOs who led these groups behaved with great devotion, and the men under them stuck loyally to the road even when the supreme test of the [White Mountains](#) loomed before them. Thus Major Veale, sending the men with bad feet on in front, collected the rest of his group and before starting told them: ‘Tonight you're going to march as you've never marched before. I'll set the pace and you've got to keep up.’ When they reached the top of the pass at 2.30 a.m. on 28 May they had marched for more than seven hours, stopping five minutes in each half hour.

In much the same way the gunners also crossed, having disabled and

abandoned their guns at the foot of the pass. Here again individuals like Major Bull, to mention only one, showed the resolution of the good commander in adversity and succeeded in keeping the pattern of discipline that in such times dissolves so quickly and leaves the breeding ground for panic.

vi

Towards this terrible crossing, after they left [Stilos](#), the men of 5 Brigade were headed. Few of them had any idea of the distance that still lay between them and the sea or of the demands that the [White Mountains](#) had yet to make on them. Their minds were set rather on the immediate problems: whether they would get the promised rest at [Vrises](#), whether there would be a chance to fill

¹ HQ Company of 18 Bn with five men from A, B, and C Coys, was detached from the main column at [Vrises](#) about 1 a.m. [Capt A. S. Playle](#), the commander, had orders to guard the flank road to [Georgeoupolis](#) until he got instructions from General Weston to withdraw. He left a small detachment in [Vrises](#) to keep contact with Force and with his remaining 50 men took up a position about two miles from the village. During the morning of 28 May he reconnoitred to [Georgeoupolis](#), found 42 Field Coy about to blow a bridge and on the other side of it a number of broken-down trucks. Before the bridge was blown he was able to fetch a party of men who salvaged two trucks. During the afternoon he was warned that the main bridge at [Vrises](#) was to be blown at 10 p.m. He therefore moved his company at 8 p.m. closer to [Vrises](#) and waited till the bridge was blown. As all troops seemed to have gone through he concluded his orders from General Weston had failed to get through and so took his company south in the trucks, joining 18 Bn again on 30 May.

² Report by [Sgt H. W. Kimber](#).

their water bottles, whether and how soon they might have to fight again.

On they went, past men who had fallen out and now sat on the verges of the road with head in hands or lay sprawled a little to the side. For all their weariness the units kept together, marching briskly and passing small groups less inured than themselves but still struggling to get on. About 3 p.m. they came to [Vrises](#)—a row of

brickdust', as Captain Snadden describes it, after days of bombing. There they were able to drink all they could drink and fill the water bottles that had to be so carefully nursed along the march. There, too, the enemy aircraft which had not troubled them so far that day appeared and kept them alert as they lay wherever there was grass and shelter.

But the rest was not to be for long. At half past five Brigadier Hargest issued a new movement order. Brigade HQ, 19 and 23 Battalions were to leave at 6 p.m., 28 Battalion at 6.15, 21 and 22 Battalions at 6.30. On reaching [Amigdhalokorfi](#), at the top of the pass over the [White Mountains](#), 23 Battalion was to take up a line through which the other units would pass. It would hold that line till further orders. The two Australian battalions would also be passing through and ultimately British troops would probably take over. Meanwhile every effort would be made that night to get the head of the brigade to [Sin Ammoudhari](#).

Of all the troops who crossed the [White Mountains](#) none had a more gruelling time than 5 Brigade. Few men in it could say they had had anything like a night's sleep since the battle began nine days before. Almost the whole of the brigade had been engaged in the fighting on 26 May, 23 Battalion on 25 May as well. The night of 26 May had been spent on the march back to [42nd Street](#), the day of 27 May in the fighting there. Then they had marched all night, only to find themselves fighting again on the morning of the 28th. Since then, apart from the rest at [Vrises](#), they had been marching again. And now before them lay the [White Mountains](#). To men in the last stages of exhaustion, sleepless and weary from fighting and marching, marching and fighting, it was to be a supreme test of endurance.

We pass all sorts and conditions of folk. Among some Greek airmen a very pretty blonde, a Greek nurse, looking strangely incongruous in all this wild assemblage. The road gets worse and it is little more than a cart track. We are near the summit of the foothills but it is not till dusk that we reach the foot of the Pass. Halts are infrequent. There is still a trail of littered equipment, arms and vehicles and occasionally a 'stiff 'un'. We seem to be standing in a treadmill and the world goes past us. We are senseless to all feeling. ¹

¹ Report by Capt Snadden.

In these days of grim withdrawal after withdrawal and forever being brought to bay, Brigadier Hargest had found in himself resources of energy which he lavished in care and concern for his men. The night of this march was one which he would not easily forget.

Never will I forget it. As the sun fell the men struggled upwards lame and sleepy even after their rest but the road surfaces were galling them. Near [Vrises](#) there is a huge incline, steep and ending in a pass—near it was a rocky eminence which had been prepared for demolition by the RE. Just after we passed some fool ordered its explosion and up went the road in front of our tired troops and the Aust. ¹

No doubt the road was blown by one of those errors that are explicable enough in the haste and confusion of withdrawal—a time too rigidly adhered to, a mistaken belief that all the troops to come have crossed. But to the troops on whom it forced a serious detour it was a maddening exasperation; for by now each man was reckoning his stamina in terms of yards, of the next large rock, or the top of the next rise, or the next halt at which he had promised himself a pull from his water bottle. And here, by what would seem the act of a lunatic, were hundreds of yards of difficult extra going thrust upon them. Thus [21 Battalion](#) Group, which reached the demolition at 9.45 p.m., had not finished getting round it till half past eleven. Moreover the demolition, besides adding hours to the agony of the marching men, meant that no more vehicles could cross. From now on they would have to be destroyed at the foot of the pass.

Here at the foot of the pass was the last well until the other side was reached. For all the troops who had already passed, the few wells had been prayed for long before they were reached. And at them the observer could soon have seen whether the troops there were units still under discipline or men broken into a mere aggregate of individuals. There had been ugly scenes at times where the latter was the case. If the original lifting device—a long pole—was still in place things were not so bad. Water bottles could be filled quickly and a turn could be had without waiting too long. But in many wells the pole was absent and men had to fill their bottles by lowering them on equipment straps or pull-throughs tied together, a clumsy and slow operation. The circumference of the well mouth would be crowded with parched troops and others pressing behind them for a place; and the water often would

hardly have reached the rim when overeagerness or a jostling rival would have spilt it.

With organised units like those now passing, however, it was different, and there were officers and NCOs to see that each man had his turn, especially as this well was the last.

¹ Report by Brig Hargest.

The water here is dirty and tastes of petrol, giving us all the hiccoughs. We drink and fill our bottles. We rest for half an hour and then start our climb. It seems endless. We have been warned that our bottles must last for the whole of the next day. The average is half a bottle per man and we are to spend the next day at the top of the pass as rearguard. The going is rough. At one halt a man lights a cigarette and a Sgt. gives him the sharp end of a tin hat over the ear. He curses as his smoke is knocked out and over into the gorge. We climb up and up and below us spreads the country we have traversed at such speed. At some forgotten hour in the night we are halted. ¹

The responsibility of battalion officers and NCOs in this march lay heavy on them. They had the advantage that they had to keep themselves going in order to give an example to their men and so had little time for the debilitating luxuries of self pity. But they had also to be, as it were, simultaneously at the head of their men to set the pace and at the rear to see that no straggler was lost through lack of incitement to go on. And going up and down the columns they had to support the sight of the terrible condition of the men who had fought under them so enduringly in the long days and nights that lay behind. How harrowing this was may be gathered from the description by Lieutenant Cockerill:

Unfortunately during this march many men dropped by the wayside. For a time the troops helped their comrades along who were too weak to make the grade but it was quite obvious that this would prove to be impossible for the distance and they were made as comfortable as they could be on the side of the road with one or two water bottles. I have no doubt that most of these were picked up although some did escape into the hills. Lots of the men, through not having been able to bathe and

wash their clothes, found that the chafing was becoming very serious and, in very many cases, we could see the humour in soldiers walking along with arms over their shoulders and no trousers on.... It was pitiful in some cases to see the men come in, especially in one or two cases, more or less on their hands and knees.

Eventually, after many weary hours, discipline and determination conquered. Each battalion in turn reached the top of the pass. The 23rd Battalion left the column and took up a defensive position as best it could in the dark, with D Company on the left of the road, Headquarters Company, A Company, and the detachment of gunners under the indefatigable Captain Snadden on the right. 'We have never slept on such boulders but it might as well be a feather bed; it makes no difference.'

The other units marched on through the night and down the other side of the pass, reaching the [Askifou Plain](#) at dawn, the Maori Battalion impressing all who were there to see it with the untroubled unison of its march.

¹ Report by Capt Snadden.

vii

Fourth Brigade's units had taken until midday of 28 May to forgather in the [Askifou Plain](#) and take up their anti-paratroop role. The light tanks arrived there shortly after daylight. During the morning Division warned Brigadier Inglis that his battalions were to guard the northern entrance to the plain and might have to go on doing so as late as darkness on 30 May. The 18th Battalion was therefore put into position at the north end. Fourth Brigade at 4.40 p.m. issued a formal order to 18 and 20 Battalions. The brigade was to remain in position until 5 Brigade had passed through. It was expected to begin doing so that night. The main body of [18 Battalion](#) was to remain near [Sin Kares](#), but a detachment of about fifty men was to be sent after dark to hold the head of the pass about a mile west of [Kerates](#). This detachment would remain there until ordered to move by 4 Brigade HQ. From 11 p.m. it would have a light tank under command. The 20th Battalion was also to remain in its present positions but was to reconnoitre the southern exit from the plain and be ready to move there on getting orders from Brigade HQ.

An order to the commander of C Squadron was also sent at 5.8 p.m. covering his part in the rear detachment. One of the remaining four light tanks was duly sent but, presumably because of a change in orders, neither the [18 Battalion](#) detachment nor the tank went out until dawn next morning.

viii

[Creforce](#) HQ had established a control post at the south end of the plain, and here officers were trying to break the continuous stream of stragglers into groups of about fifty. So far as was possible the officers of the former [Composite Battalion](#) were still trying to keep their men together, a task of almost superhuman difficulty with so many men on the road and all the confusion of many mixed troops withdrawing in various stages of exhaustion. Darkness very often broke up the groups that were formed by day but none the less they kept some semblance of unity, Majors Bull and Bliss being prominent among the officers; and other groups like [5 Field Park Company](#), the RMT, the Petrol Company, and the Supply Column also managed more or less to keep together.

The only guns by now were those of C Troop 2/3 Regiment RAA which had been got as far as the [Askifou Plain](#) and were put under command of 4 Brigade. Those of F Troop 28 Battery had had to be put out of action at the foot of the [White Mountains](#), there being practically no ammunition to make it worth while towing them farther. From the time they had overshot the forward brigades at [42nd Street](#), there would have been little hope of getting them back against the stream of retreat even had the ammunition been available or communications permitted the passage of orders.

ix

The New Zealand medical units which had moved to [Kalivia](#) during the night of 26 May had had to move again on the night of the 27th in order to get as far as possible on the road towards [Sfakia](#). The trucks carrying stretcher cases went straight through to [Imvros](#), where a main dressing station was established by 3 p.m. on 28 May and under Lieutenant-Colonel Twhigg's ¹ able direction soon became a very efficient unit. ² Two walking wounded collecting posts were also set up: one about a mile south of [Imvros](#) under Captain [Lomas](#), ³ and the other under Captain A. C. Rumsey of [189 Field Ambulance](#) at the end of the formed road. Both were staffed

from 5 and 6 Field Ambulances.

The trucks passing along the roads had improvised [Red Cross](#) flags from red and white hospital blankets and these were respected by enemy aircraft. But when they attempted to go back over the pass and collect more wounded from Lieutenant-Colonel Bull's dressing station at [Neon Khorion](#), they found that they were unable to do so because of the demolition already mentioned. Even had they been able to get back, however, they would have been too late; for Bull, his small staff, and some thirty seriously wounded men were captured during the afternoon.

The walking wounded who kept filtering across the pass all night and day were mostly scattered in the hills at the northern end of the [Askifou Plain](#), though there were some sheltering under trees at many points between there and [Imvros](#).

Meanwhile arrangements were going ahead for the evacuation of wounded that night, when [Creforce](#) had decided that they and medical staffs should have priority. Preliminary arrangements were made by Major Fisher with Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt and Lieutenant-Colonel W. E. Cremor, now in charge of embarkation, while Major

¹ [Brig J. M. Twigg](#), DSO, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Dunedin, 13 Sep 1900; physician; CO 5 Fd Amb May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. Dec 1941; repatriated Apr 1942; ADMS 3 NZ Div Aug 1942–Apr 1943; DDMS 2 NZEF (IP) Apr 1943–Aug 1944; ADMS 2 NZEF ([UK](#)) Oct 1944–Feb 1946.

² Members of [2/2 Australian Field Ambulance](#) joined this MDS later and were of great assistance.

³ [Maj A. L. Lomas](#), MC, m.i.d.; [Hamilton](#); born [Wanganui](#), 30 Jun 1916; medical practitioner; RMO ASC Jan 1940–Jun 1941; OC Maadi Camp Hosp Jun 1942–Apr 1943; DADMS 2 NZ Div Aug 1943–Apr 1944.

Christie and Major [Palmer](#) ¹ reconnoitred the beach—it could be reached only by a precipitous goat track from [Komitadhes](#)—and found that [Creforce](#) HQ had arranged for an assembly area about two miles from the embarkation point and that [189 Field Ambulance](#) had established an RAP there.

x

When he reached [Sin Ammoudhari](#) on the morning of 28 May Brigadier Puttick's first concern had been for 5 Brigade. But there was nothing he could do to provide them with the guns they needed and little he could do to help in any other way.

Late in the morning the operational directive which [Creforce](#) had drawn up the day before ² was received, and no doubt it was as a result of this that 4 Brigade was given its orders to hold the north of the pass.

The first reliable news of 5 Brigade seems to have come from General Weston, who visited Division at 3 p.m. and reported that 5 Brigade was making a daylight withdrawal to [Vrises](#). Puttick was able to inform him in return of 4 Brigade's dispositions and also to offer him any help in his power, including the loan of his staff. Weston took advantage of this offer only so far as to borrow Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt to organise dispersal areas on the hills above [Sfakia](#) and the despatch of parties to the beach.

At 9 p.m. Division moved farther south and just below [Imvros](#). Before the move a further discussion was held at which it was decided that both 18 and 20 Battalions would move next morning to the south end of the plain and cover the further withdrawal of 5 Brigade. But the plan of leaving a rear detachment of 18 Battalion was adhered to.

xi

General Weston had been able to force his way upstream against the traffic as far as Brigadier Vasey's HQ at [Neon Khorion](#) very early on the morning of 28 May, and was there given a picture of the general situation as then known and the plans of the two forward brigadiers.

There was little Weston could now do but rejoin his HQ, which had gone on to [Sin Ammoudhari](#) and had arrived there at 7 a.m. During the day it moved on to [Imvros](#), attending among other things to the extemporisation of a battalion of [Royal Marines](#) to

¹ Maj G. B. Palmer, m.i.d., Greek Silver Cross; Seacliff; born England, 6 Feb 1909; medical practitioner; medical officer 5 Fd Amb Nov 1939–Aug 1941; DADMS 210 British Military Mission Nov 1941–May 1943; 2 i/c 1 Conv Depot May 1943–Oct 1944; OC Det 1 Conv Depot Oct 1944–Mar 1945.

² See p. 413.

carry out the tasks laid down in [Creforce](#)'s operational directive which Weston no doubt received on his return. Now that the brigades were coming back into a single area there was for the first time a prospect of his being able to carry out the role of co-ordination assigned to him when withdrawal began; and it was in preparation for this that he visited Brigadier Puttick's HQ during the late afternoon.

xii

At three o'clock in the morning of 28 May Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell's Australians at [Retimo](#) had once more attacked [Perivolia](#). In spite of the fact that the Greek troops helping to cover the two companies of 2/11 Battalion opened fire against orders and thus gave the enemy the alarm, the attack went well and the Australians fought their way right through the village, killing about eighty enemy and destroying a number of machine-gun posts. But all the officers of D Company except one became casualties and the company withdrew. B Company, the other company engaged, was thus left isolated and was forced to withdraw also.

Meanwhile [General Freyberg](#) had discovered with chagrin that Lieutenant Haig had left the night before, too soon for the message about evacuation to reach him. ¹ At 8.25 on the morning of 28 May, therefore, he signalled General Wavell that the orders had not got through and that there was no cipher by which so important an instruction could be passed by wireless. He asked that his message of the day before, of which he gave Wavell the text, be dropped to the garrison, preferably by day, together with £1000 in drachmae in case they should be useful. He also explained that, as his own HQ had moved to [Sfakia](#), he was not yet in wireless contact with [Retimo](#) and was not certain that he would be able to establish it and be able to send messages even in the garbled code that was safe enough for less important signals. And so he asked that [Middle East](#) should also relay by wireless in

¹ In a letter dated 3 Jan 1952 [General Freyberg](#) describes Lt Haig as 'a young man of great courage' and is emphatic that Haig was in no way to blame for the misfortune. Haig's was not the only landing craft still working in [Suda Bay](#). Another one made over to [Suda Island](#), probably this night, and took off a detachment of some 30 men of 27 (MG) Bn under [Lt A. T. B. Green](#), with four Vickers guns, which had been guarding the boom defences of the harbour for more than a fortnight. When a dinghy pulled in with three New Zealanders aboard, 'a wounded CSM of the Maori Bn and two ASC', [Green](#) refused to believe their story that 'the Div was moving to [Sphakia](#) to evacuate.' The landing craft came at last, took them aboard, and set sail westwards with instructions that the detachment was to 'lay down the defences for the evacuation' at [Sfakia](#). The craft broke down off [Maleme](#) and was shelled but was soon repaired and by dawn reached the west coast, where it was run ashore to await nightfall, the party dispersing inland. But two Stukas found this and another landing craft farther north and sank them both, and patrols of mountain troops rounded up most of the troops, killing one and capturing the rest.—Capt [Green](#) and [Pte B. B. Carter](#).

further message to the effect that an aeroplane would be dropping something at 1.2 p.m. ¹

When the wireless at [Sfakia](#) was working [Freyberg](#) also had the code message sent out to [Retimo](#) from there. But from the time of the break in communication the night before, [Retimo](#) was unable to pick up any further signals from [Creforce](#), perhaps because of the mountain barrier that lay between the two. ²

Wavell meanwhile had received [Freyberg](#)'s signal and replied that he would pass it on to [Retimo](#) together with the money, but that nothing could be done till early next morning. Wireless contact between [Middle East](#) and [Retimo](#) was now re-established and the second code message passed with the comment that it was probably too late since the time was by now 6 p.m. Wavell therefore asked [Freyberg](#) to prepare another code message by which [Retimo](#) could be warned that messages and money would be dropped before seven o'clock next morning.

In a second message General Wavell sent a code which could be used in clear for messages between [Creforce](#) and [Retimo](#) and a copy of which would be dropped

to [Retimo](#) with the other messages next morning. Acting on the first of these two instructions—which must have reached [Creforce](#) very late since the reply is dated 29 May—[Creforce](#) replied in guarded language with a message for [Retimo](#) to the effect that messages were being dropped before breakfast. [Retimo](#) was asked to acknowledge receipt of the message to [Middle East](#).³

This message was not received at [Retimo](#), and the result was that the garrison still had no news of the evacuation or their part in it.

xiii

At [Heraklion](#) on 28 May Brigadier Chappel held a conference and gave his orders for the evacuation so that his officers could get on with their preparations. These included aggressive patrols to blind the enemy to what was afoot.

The orders to go had been none too soon. The enemy flew in a substantial number of reinforcements during the morning, dropped more supplies, and showed signs of offensive intentions. No doubt he was well posted with news of the victories elsewhere on the

¹ O. 671, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 28 May. Presumably a message about evacuation was to be dropped and the aircraft would fly from Egypt. It is odd that the time should be so precise.

² O. 142, Jigg [[Retimo](#)] to Raft [[Creforce](#)], dated 28 May, suggests that [Creforce](#) could still receive [Retimo](#) messages. It runs: 'Cancel our O. 141. Sailor Haig arrived Okay but Smith remaining Junk.' The full meaning is not now clear, though it evidently refers to Lt Haig's arrival at [Retimo](#) by sea.

³ O. 674, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 29 May. No time is given. As there is another O. 674, sent later, this message is probably wrongly numbered for O. 673.

island and was preparing an attempt to show the expected relieving troops that he had not been idle either.

According to plan Chappel's troops began to withdraw through an inner perimeter held by 2 [Leicesters](#) at 10 p.m. Unfortunately the presence of strong enemy forces between the British and the Greeks prevented news of the withdrawal being got through to the latter. It is doubtful whether any Greek troops could have been taken off, however, as the shipping programme allowed for only 4000 and there were 4200 British troops.

Orion, [Ajax](#), Dido and six destroyers had been on their way from [Alexandria](#) since morning and had run into air attack from five o'clock in the afternoon. [Ajax](#) received some damage and was ordered back to [Alexandria](#) after dark, but the rest of the ships were off [Heraklion](#) at half past eleven. The destroyers then entered the harbour and ferried troops to the cruisers. By 3 a.m. all were aboard, except for the wounded who had to be left behind and a detachment guarding a road block, and the convoy sailed.

[xiv](#)

Early on 28 May [General Freyberg's](#) staff on [Creforce](#) issued the formal evacuation order, addressed to General Weston with copies to the other parties affected. It confirmed that all troops were under Weston's command for operational purposes while it assigned to [Creforce](#) HQ responsibility for evacuation arrangements. It laid down the evacuation programme already sent to Admiral Cunningham: 1000 to be taken off that night; 6000 the following night; 3000 on the night of 30 May; and 3000 on the night of the 31st.

The order assumed that 5 and 19 Brigades, both probably exhausted, would with [Layforce](#) withdraw through the [Askifou Plain](#) area now occupied by 4 Brigade; and it therefore stated that they should be withdrawn straight to the assembly area if the tactical situation allowed. In preparation for this Weston's [Royal Marines](#) were to be put into a defensive position south of the plain and [Layforce](#), or part of it, should be put under command of 4 Brigade.

The enemy could be expected to make contact with 4 Brigade in the afternoon of 29 May. The brigade would therefore hold him off till dark that night and then it was hoped that, with [Layforce](#), it could withdraw straight to the beaches, where [Layforce](#) would revert to Weston's direct command. This forecast would have to be

reviewed as the situation developed.

The enemy was expected to follow up 4 Brigade's withdrawal and so bump against the Royal Marine positions at the south end of the plain on 30 May. The Marines would have to hold him off till dark that night. As that same night was the night when it was hoped to embark 5 and 19 Brigades, the Marines and [Layforce](#) would also have to hold a delaying position on 31 May. They would disengage after dark and be embarked that night.

It had been laid down that fighting troops would embark first and that the wounded and those who had fought longest would have priority. There was a chance that the programme might be expedited and the need for a delaying position between the south end of the plain and the sea not arise. ¹

On the same day the DA & QMG of [Creforce](#), Brigadier G. S. Brunskill, issued an instruction on embarkation arrangements. By this General Weston was made responsible for the flow of troops to the beach and for the establishment of a suitable assembly area. It laid down that only organised parties travelling from the assembly area by a specified route were to be embarked and that parties given particular tasks on any one night should have priority of embarkation the following night. It allotted numbers for that night's embarkation: 200 wounded, 10 seamen, 100 RAF, 50 Cypriots, 640 Coast Defence AA, and fighting troops not required for defence—all in that order of priority. And it concluded with some administrative arrangements about transport and walking wounded.

While his staff were issuing these orders [General Freyberg](#) and Brigadier Stewart were still on their way towards [Sfakia](#), which [Freyberg](#) was very anxious to reach so as to use the [RAF](#) wireless there for contact with General Wavell. He reached the advanced HQ which had been set up by Colonel Frowen in a cave some time during the morning.

There was a worrying time at first. The RAF wireless was short of batteries and the naval and military sets still surviving had not yet arrived. No contact could be made with [Middle East](#). Eventually, however, messages could be got through, and the first to be sent dealt with the problem of getting orders to [Retimo](#).

By midday enough news from the front had filtered through for [Freyberg](#) to be

able to report on the tactical situation. He explained that it had been impossible to disengage completely and it seemed unlikely that they would be able to hold out until the night of 31 May. Only the New Zealand and Australian infantry were able to form military bodies capable of fighting; and an optimistic view of their numbers would be under 2000, with three guns (limited to 140 rounds of ammunition) and three light tanks to support them. There were large numbers of unarmed stragglers,

¹ [Creforce](#) Operational Instruction, 28 May. (No time given.)

but he proposed to concentrate on embarking armed troops next night—which he feared might be the last night possible. Any left over he would tell to make their way west towards [Porto Loutro](#) and Franco [Kastelli](#) (Frangokasterion). He asked that everything possible should be done to expedite the embarkation. ¹

In the evening [General Freyberg](#) dictated a message which Lieutenant [White](#), ² his Personal Assistant, was to take off that night. In this message [Freyberg](#) stressed the role of the enemy's aircraft in the defeat of the defence. It had thwarted all counter-attacks, broken up defence positions, and made tanks incapable of effecting anything. The ground troops of the enemy and his parachutists had all been dealt with effectively enough, but the enemy's strength in aircraft prevented any permanent result. [General Freyberg](#)'s own troops were disorganised on arrival from [Greece](#) and the Greeks had been without adequate equipment. But the troops had fought well and could not be blamed for the failure. The difficulty was now that of the evacuation and [Creforce](#) was hampered by lack of transport, communications, and staff.

Having dictated this message [Freyberg](#) set off in the closing stages of the evening to visit General Weston and Brigadier Puttick.

xv

On the beach itself preparations were being made for the embarkation of the 1000 men. There were to be four destroyers—[Napier](#), [Nizam](#), [Kelvin](#) and [Kandahar](#)—and these arrived about 10 p.m., bringing extra boats to help with the embarkation and a supply of rations. All walking wounded in the assembly area— some who had

walked right across the island in spite of severe wounds—were got forward, about 300 in all. There was some scrimmaging and jockeying for place by the stragglers who had managed to evade the control posts, but all the wounded except about seventy were got on board, together with 800 men from the [Suda Area](#), including the [RAF](#) contingent. At 3 a.m. the destroyers sailed.

Behind them there was still work to do. Not all of the rations brought were of much use—there were cases of matches and bags of flour—but everything had to be moved under cover before daylight brought the enemy reconnaissance aircraft. This took time; but when dawn came the beach was clear once more.

¹ O. 672, [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 1.10 p.m., 28 May.

² [Maj J. C. White](#), MBE, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Dunedin, 1 Nov 1911; barrister and solicitor; PA to GOC 1940–45.

CRETE

II: THE TENTH DAY: 29 MAY

II: The Tenth Day: 29 May

i

The rearguards had been lucky to disengage successfully at [Stilos](#) and Babali Hani on 28 May. For, apart from the fact that 85 Mountain Regiment and Wittmann's advance guard were preparing to encircle the latter position, 141 Mountain Regiment reached Vamos during the afternoon and sent a company south through [Vrises](#) to take the Babali Hani position in the right flank; and 100 Mountain Regiment was also now arriving. It was fortunate for 5 Brigade, 19 Brigade, and D Battalion that they were clear on the other side of the [White Mountains](#) by next morning. ¹

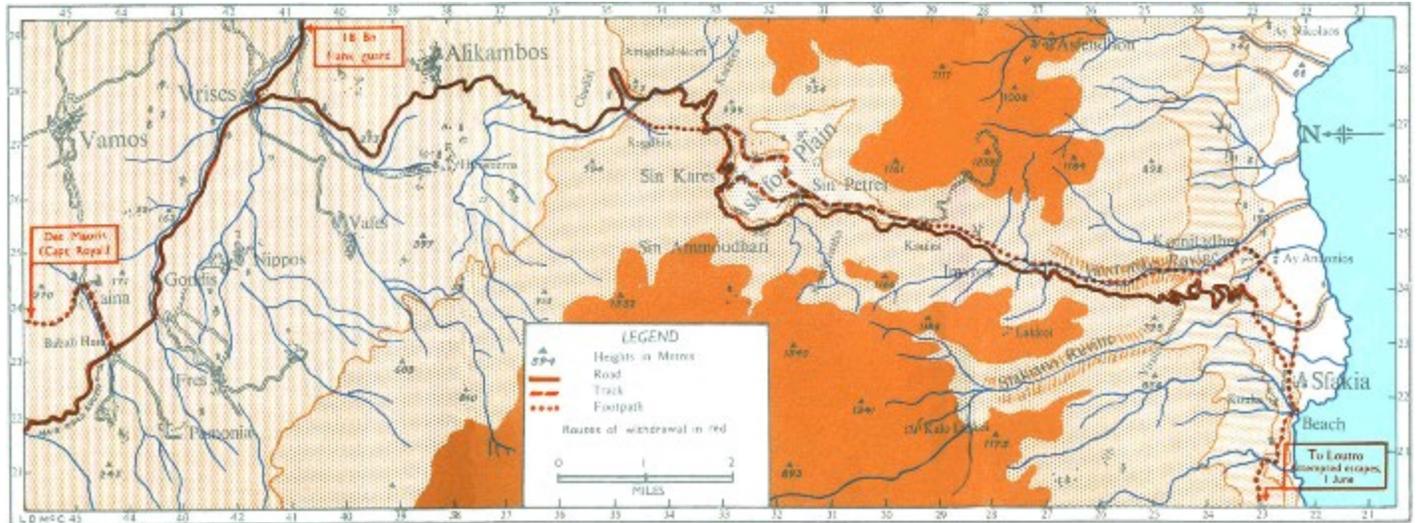
The relative peace from air attack on 28 May was also something to be grateful for and may be attributed largely to the causes which had already been diminishing the enemy air effort for a day or so, though in part to General Ringel's infatuation with [Retimo](#). For on 29 May Ringel's forces were ordered to continue carrying through the orders issued on the night of the 27th. The advance guard, 85 Mountain Regiment, and 141 Mountain Regiment were therefore to go no farther south but to push east and then north towards [Retimo](#). Only 100 Mountain Regiment was spared for operations in the south where the true opportunity for frustrating evacuation lay.

ii

With [23 Battalion](#) covering the road in a strong natural position at [Amigdhalokorfi](#) and the two Australian battalions to the immediate rear, there was no immediate danger on the morning of 29 May that the enemy might rush the [Askifou Plain](#). As a further precaution A Company of [18 Battalion](#), supported by one of C Squadron's light tanks, had been sent to cover the entrance to the plain about a mile west of [Kerates](#). From here it would also be able to aid the withdrawal of [23 Battalion](#) when the time came.

For the first time since the withdrawal began the various commanders were now

able to meet and confer about plans for the final stages. The main conference, at which General Weston, the three brigade commanders and Brigadier Stewart were all present, took place in the early afternoon. Here it was decided that 4 Brigade should concentrate at the southern exit from the plain and hold it till nightfall, when it would retire to the beaches;



WITHDRAWAL ROUTES TO SFAKIA
WITHDRAWAL ROUTES TO SFAKIA

¹ 2/8 Bn and D Bn had followed 5 Bde and 2/7 Bn and passed through 23 Bn in the early morning of 29 May. 2/7 Bn was by now just south of 23 Bn. 2/8 went to [Kerates](#); D Bn went to the [Imvros](#) area. General Laycock says the three I tanks had run out of petrol on 28 May. They were therefore disabled and abandoned.

5 Brigade would also concentrate and move to a dispersal area near [Komitadhes](#); [Layforce](#)—D Battalion and remains of A Battalion— would take up a defensive position near [Komitadhes](#) and cover the exit from the [Imvrotiko Ravine](#); 19 Brigade with its three guns would move into a rearguard position near [Vitsilokoumos](#) and be there by nightfall, the Royal Marine battalion, the tanks of 3 Hussars, and the last three Bren carriers of 2/8 Battalion all coming under command.

A timed programme was issued. Fourth Brigade would march to the beach at 11 p.m.; 5 Brigade, except for [23 Battalion](#), would trickle forward from 1 p.m. to 7 p.m. in small parties widely spaced; 19 Brigade would begin the march to its new area at

9 p.m.; the Royal Marine battalion (and presumably [Layforce](#)) would move from its position near Kombroselia at 10 p.m.

The orders also stated that General Weston's HQ and Brigadier Puttick's would both move that night to the beaches west of [General Freyberg's](#) HQ. And it was specified that the orders assumed that embarkation would be completed on the night of 30 May. Should another night be required, 19 Brigade and the [Royal Marines](#) must be prepared to hold the rear for another twenty-four hours.

iii

Fifth Brigade expected no difficulty in carrying out these orders, unless in extricating [23 Battalion](#)—the unit farthest from the beaches and likely to become engaged during the day. Indeed, already at 7.15 a.m. the battalion had reported enemy in the distance, no doubt the forward patrols of I Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment. This news was confirmed by Captain Dawson when he returned from [23 Battalion](#) late in the morning; for, indefatigable as ever, and concerned for the shortage of water in the pass, he had collected every water bottle and container he could lay hands on in [Sin Kares](#), filled them, borrowed a truck and delivered them to [23 Battalion](#).

At 12.30 p.m. Brigadier Hargest reported (still to Division, so strong was habit) that he had ordered [23 Battalion](#) to begin trickling small parties to [Sin Kares](#) at half past five and was sending Dawson forward again at 4 p.m. Probably about the same time he sent further orders to Major Thomason who now commanded the battalion: he informed him of the whereabouts and role of the [18 Battalion](#) detachment, predicted that demolitions would prevent a heavy attack that day, and ordered him to begin thinning out 'about 3 or 4 o'clock' but to keep his forward companies in position till just before dark.

Dawson duly went up again about half past four and found that Thomason would have to be evacuated because of bomb blast and that the command had passed to Lieutenant [Bond](#),¹ the senior of the six remaining officers. The orders Dawson then wrote out were for immediate withdrawal to conform with the arrangements made at General Weston's conference. The companies were to move out in sections as covertly as possible and go to Sin [Ammoudhari](#), where the

wounded and sick—many had dysentery— would be left to wait for transport. The others would go on till met by guides.

The orders were welcome. It was very hot for the weary troops, unable to escape the sun in the baking rocky gorge. Rations were few and water very short. Enemy aircraft had been over and the prospect of bombs among the splintering rocks was not pleasant. And the enemy, about two companies strong, had begun probing, encouraged perhaps by supplies which his aircraft dropped in front of where D Company, with 16 men, held the high ground of Rogdhia.

Headquarters Company in the centre was able to begin pulling out almost at once. For the flanks it was less easy. D Company on the left lost a man killed. On the right A Company and Captain Snadden's gunners, who had the farthest to go, also came under fire.

We have to run the gauntlet for about fifty yards to a protecting bluff. I send the party off in irregular groups and we all get across but not without some 'hurry up'. We pick up a trail of blood leading to a goat track that will shorten our march. Our lungs are bursting and our feet aching and burning after our long rest. The bullets are still singing past but now we hear a new sound. There is an Aussie Bren detachment in action ahead of us and without much trouble we cross the divide and are on our way down towards the sea covered with their protective fire. Going up was bad but coming down was ten times worse. New muscles ached and the soles of our feet seemed to slip and slide inside our boots. Our sox were full of holes. Many of us wrapped our feet in first field dressings.²

Nevertheless, thus aided by covering fire from 2/7 Battalion, the [23 Battalion](#) men were able to get safely down and through Sin Kares, where they found some Royal Marine trucks which took them on south.

While [23 Battalion](#) was making this withdrawal the rest of 5 Brigade had been marching back to its dispersal area.³ This was

¹ [Capt R. L. Bond; Adelaide](#); born [Australia](#), 19 Feb 1908; brewer; 23 Bn 1940–41; enlisted AIF 1942.

² Report by Capt Snadden.

³ 'I remember seeing 28 Bn on this march moving in broad daylight straight down the middle of the road, when most troops were taking cover in the trees or keeping along the sides of the road. They marched well and it was a heartening sight.'—Brig W. G. Gentry.

reached at 11 p.m., A Company being retrieved by 20 Battalion on the way and Major Leggat's party finding its way back to 22 Battalion at the halt. The dispersal area itself was rocky and the only shelter a little scrub. 'The place was literally swarming with men of all sorts and nearly all units who had straggled and were now at a loose end eating up rations and using water that fighting troops needed—down below on the plain (sea coast) it was supposed to be worse.' ¹

iv

Fourth Brigade had begun the day with its units still scattered. The 18th Battalion was at the northern end of the plain, while 20 Battalion and Brigade HQ were at the western edge near Sin Ammoudhari; 19 Battalion was out of touch with 5 Brigade, having overshot its area during the night and—after some confusion which is reflected in 5 Brigade's orders for the day—returned to 4 Brigade command. And the 19 Battalion RSM, who had assumed command of the mortar platoon and had lost touch with the unit, after attaching himself to 18 Battalion, had taken the platoon north with A Company of that unit when it set off to strengthen the rearguard west of Kerates.

The 20th Battalion moved at 7 a.m. to a position at the south exit from the plain. Here it was followed later by the remaining companies of 18 Battalion, by 19 Battalion, and by 19 Army Troops. These units were placed on either side of the road so as to cover the approaches from the plain. Thus the whole brigade was now together and there was only A Company of 18 Battalion still to come.

This company, meanwhile, was waiting for 23 Battalion to pass through from the top of the pass. For so small a force the danger of being outflanked was considerable and it became more so once 23 Battalion was on the move.

Accordingly, at 6 p.m., Brigadier Inglis called for the support of the three guns of 2/3 Australian Regiment.

Once the last of 23 Battalion came through the enemy were not long in following, and A Company was kept busy engaging them until dusk. With so few men—about fifty—it was not an easy front to defend, and although Major Lynch moved his sections about and managed to produce a counter at first for every enemy threat, an enemy machine gun eventually got in behind him and covered the road leading down to the plain. The Australians with

¹ Report by Brig Hargest.



WITHDRAWAL, 29 MAY

their ancient Italian 75s were directed on to the machine gun by Brigadier Inglis, and Lieutenant-Colonel Gray acted as spotter. 'It was the first time I had ever spotted for artillery and Geoff Kirk and I sat on the rocks above the road directing the fire and calling out corrections to the guns. The range, by trial and error, was 3200 yards and they literally rocked it in, firing, I believe, all the 40 rounds which was all they possessed.' ¹

This sturdy little action and the approach of night persuaded the enemy to prudence. At half past eight the 3 Hussars tank withdrew together with the rest of the rearguard, and lower down the road Gray was waiting with trucks for the

infantry. In this exploit the company, weak as it was, a single mortar, a handful of machine-gunners from [27 MG Battalion](#), and the supporting three guns, had held up at least two fresh German companies.

With A Company of [18 Battalion](#) thus successfully disengaged and darkness come, 4 Brigade was ready to carry out its orders and head for the bivouac area allotted to it among the rocks and scrub west of the end of the road. The move began at 9 p.m. with [20 Battalion](#) and Brigade HQ leading, [19 Battalion](#) and [19 Army Troops](#) following, and [18 Battalion](#) bringing up the rear. The march was arduous and a way had to be forced through the stragglers who thronged the road. It was near daylight before the units reached the spot where the formed road ended and the steep goat track down to the beaches began. At this point the men lay down to seek what comfort weariness could give them among the stones.

▼

To Brigadier Vasey fell the grim task of organising the last rearguard. Besides his own two battalions he had under command the Royal Marine battalion, the three guns, a platoon of [2/1 MG Battalion](#) with two guns, the four tanks of [3 Hussars](#),² and three Australian Bren carriers. The tanks and carriers were to delay the enemy as long as possible in front of the defence line and then fall back, the sappers of [42 Field Company RE](#) blowing the road behind them.³

Responsibility for the defence of the new position was not expected to mean fighting until next morning; but there was much

¹ Letter from Lt-Col Gray, 24 Jul 1941. The troop had still, however, a few shells left and this was not its last action. See [p. 441](#). General Inglis' recollection of the range (Nov 1952) is 1400 yards.

² The tank that had been with A Coy 18 Bn now reverted to command. But the tanks were soon to be reduced to three again as the squadron leader's tank broke down at 9 p.m.

³ [42 Fd Coy](#) may not have been guiltless of the demolition at the foot of the White Mountains; but the engineers had done good work all the way

back from [Suda](#) and were to do more next day.

to be done meanwhile. The line had to be reconnoitred and the two Australian battalions withdrawn from the north end of the plain. Accordingly, orders were sent to them both to be clear of [Sin Ammoudhari](#) by 9 p.m. Battalion reconnaissance parties left earlier to study their new positions.

The withdrawal from the north was safely carried through, though 2/8 Battalion at least could see enemy trucks and motor cycles coming down the pass towards them from [Kerates](#) as they moved out. The move to the new positions was greatly hampered by the stragglers on the road who, ironically enough, suspected that these men who were to cover the final stages of withdrawal were stealing a march to get to the boats. It was after three in the morning before they could occupy their positions, with 2/7 Battalion forward, 2/8 Battalion guarding the deep wadi on the left of the road, and the [Royal Marines](#) in reserve.

vi

By the morning of 29 May the greater part of the New Zealand artillery and other components of the [Composite Battalion](#) who had managed to get across the mountains were scattered along the road from the [Askifou Plain](#) southwards. Many—indeed most—of them were organised in small groups under their officers or NCOs; but they were directionless and without orders and threatened to be a serious impediment to the movement of the larger units. To Major Bull belongs the main share of credit for ending this state of affairs. On his own initiative he soon had an organisation going by which the men were got off the roads, sorted into manageable parties, and assembled under fairly good control in the ravine by [Komitadhes](#). There he arranged pickets and got the officers to prepare nominal rolls. Ultimately all sorts of units were represented and the numbers rose to over 3000. The problem of finding rations for such large numbers was not easy but was tackled, and eventually an issue of bully beef from rations dumped on the beach was arranged—three tins per group of fifty men.

vii

Apart from the MDS at [Imvros](#)—which handled 94 of the serious cases in the 24 hours that it was open—there were by now several collecting posts for walking wounded, and British, Australian, and New Zealand medical officers and orderlies had their hands full with the problems of caring for patients, finding rations, and organising the onward transmission of wounded to the collecting post at the end of the road. But by nightfall most of the collecting posts along the road had been cleared and the majority of the 500-odd patients were moving towards or already at the point where they were being concentrated for the final move to the ships. With each party of fifty wounded went a medical officer and five orderlies. Even this turned out to be not enough, so hard and painful was the track.

viii

The preoccupations of General Weston's HQ and Brigadier Puttick's are implicit in what has already been said about the conferences held and the orders issued on this day. Both were much taken up with the superintendence of the various moves of large masses of men in a space continually more confined; and in addition there was much to be done in connection with the arrangements for that night's embarkation.

For Divisional HQ something more was involved. Now that all the forces of the rearguard were close enough together to be susceptible of control and Weston was able for the first time to exercise the authority he had been given when withdrawal was first ordered, there was nothing further for Puttick and his staff to do, and [General Freyberg](#) thought it pointless for them to remain. He therefore sent orders during the day for Puttick to report to [Creforce](#) HQ and for Divisional HQ to embark that night.

In obedience to this order the senior officers set off at 5 p.m. Puttick and Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry went straight to Force HQ and reported there at 7.45. Major [Davis](#),¹ the GSO 2, and General Puttick's ADC waited at the control point on top of the escarpment to meet the marching troops of the HQ who did not leave till 7 p.m.

By a quarter to nine this marching party had reached the control point. There they found that the delay caused by the attentions of enemy aircraft and the crowds of stragglers had cost them their passage that night. Those already on the beach

and organised for embarkation made up the quota the ships could take. There was nothing for it but to go to the [Imvrotiko Ravine](#) and join there the crowds of troops whom Major Bull and the officers with him were still struggling to organise.

Puttick and Gentry meanwhile had stayed at [Creforce](#) HQ until 9 p.m. and then gone down to the beach with several officers from [Creforce](#) staff. When the time came to embark they did so, all unaware that their own marching party had been delayed and had failed to get aboard.

¹ Lt-Col F. L. H. Davis, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Feilding, 23 Jan 1909; Regular soldier; served 2 NZEF ([Middle East](#)) 1940–41, 1945; CO 29 Bn, 3 NZ Div, 1943–44; wounded 15 Apr 1945.

ix

For the garrison at [Retimo](#) this was a sombre day. About 8 a.m. the naval detachment which had been operating the wireless reported that both [Canea](#) and [Heraklion](#) had gone off the air and, although contact was gained during the day with [Alexandria](#), there was no information to be had, presumably because of security difficulties and the absence of ciphers. The few cases of ammunition and chocolate dropped by aircraft from Egypt at first light were of little help—especially as they were mostly smashed in landing. ¹

In the evening parties of enemy were seen. At half past nine the Greeks reported about a thousand Germans closing in on the right flank and rear. Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell ordered them to hold on, but against this opposition they were unable to do so and by 11 p.m. had had to withdraw. The 2/11 Battalion was then ordered east to replace them, leaving a company in its old positions, and was on the move till dawn. Midnight brought further reports that about 300 enemy on motor cycles had entered [Retimo](#) from the west during the afternoon. Rations were due to run out next day. No message or supplies had come from [Heraklion](#) although the road was thought to have been clear during the earlier part of the day. There was no communication with [Creforce](#). Signals made to sea in the hope that naval forces might appear brought no result. The prospect for the next day was grim.

Less than half an hour after the convoy of ships evacuating the [Heraklion](#) garrison had put to sea there was a failure in the steering gear of the Imperial, caused no doubt by a near miss from a bomb the day before. The commander of the squadron decided that the only chance was to have [Hotspur](#) take off her troops and sink her, if the squadron was to get as far south as possible before daylight. By 4.45 a.m. this had been done and just after daylight [Hotspur](#), with 900 men on board, rejoined the squadron.

The squadron was now an hour and a half behind time and it was sunrise before it could turn south through the Kaso Strait. At 6 a.m. the air attacks began. They were not to stop till 3 p.m., when the squadron was only 100 miles from [Alexandria](#).

In the middle of the Kaso Strait [Hereward](#) was hit and lost speed. The commander of the squadron decided he must leave

¹ No dropped messages seem to have been found.

her. She was last seen making for [Crete](#), the enemy aircraft about her like wasps and the ship's guns replying.

Arrangements had been made for fighter cover from the Kaso Strait onward and the time had been corrected to allow for the delay. But though the fighters appear to have come at the right time they did not find the ships.

By 7 a.m. Decoy and Orion had both been damaged and the speed of the squadron reduced to 21 knots. At last at noon two naval Fulmar fighters found it. But already the damage was serious. The captain of the Orion had been mortally wounded. Dido and Orion had both been hit, Orion twice. Both had a turret out of action and Orion's lower conning tower was also gone; and there had been heavy casualties among the packed troops on board.

Other attacks followed in the afternoon but none so dangerous. And at 8 p.m. the ships reached [Alexandria](#), Orion with only ten tons of fuel left and two rounds of 6-inch HE ammunition.

At Creforce HQ the Retimo garrison was still causing General Freyberg great anxiety. During the morning Middle East reported that it had so far been unable to get contact with Retimo but that it was dropping a message by air. This message began by explaining that it was too dangerous to send anything in clear and it then lapsed into code, of which the effect was probably that the garrison should go south to Plaka Bay. Creforce was asked to relay this, if possible, to make assurance doubly sure.

To this Freyberg replied that he had no communications with Retimo and that he doubted if this message would be understood. He suggested that another aircraft be sent to reconnoitre for the force and drop another message. He then gave a code version of a suitable message to the effect that a warship would arrive for them on 31 May.¹

This message was indeed sent by Hurricane. The Hurricane did not return and so it was not known whether or not the message had been received. It had not. Freyberg's worry is reflected in his report that day on the recent developments. After describing the loss of Force Reserve, the defence of 42nd Street and the subsequent withdrawal actions, and reckoning the effective strength of his brigades at less than 700, he went on: 'Am anxious regarding Retimo garrison and will be grateful if you can assure me if orders for their withdrawal have reached them from GHQ ME. Also would welcome ME information regarding Heraklion.'²

¹ O. 675, Creforce to Mideast, 6.53 p.m., 29 May.

² General Freyberg's Report, p. 61.

That evening Freyberg received orders for his own evacuation. 'You yourself will return to Egypt first opportunity.'¹ As he had not yet made his plans to hand over to General Weston and was anxious not to leave his men until the last possible moment, he decided not to take this too literally. He would wait till next day.

In Egypt there were conflicting views about how many men were still to be taken off and how much risk should be taken in the attempt. Captain Morse had signalled from [Creforce](#) on 28 May that anything up to 10,000 troops would be ready to embark on the night of 29–30 May. From this and from [Freyberg's](#) message about the tactical situation—the one saying that an optimistic view of the number of fighting troops he had would be 2000—it was finally inferred that 10,000 would still have to be embarked and that only 2000 of these would be in organised parties. ²

The other question was graver. During the day Admiral Cunningham, Air Marshal Tedder and General Blamey conferred and concluded that the danger was too great for more Glen ships or cruisers to be risked but that destroyers would keep on trying till the night of 30 May. They would send or try to send four destroyers that night. But it would be the last. ³

A message sent to the Admiralty by Admiral Cunningham at 1.5 p.m. gives the background of this decision. The Admiral explains that his losses for the preceding day and till noon of this were three cruisers and a destroyer damaged, of which the last should probably be reckoned lost; that the force which had had these casualties had probably evacuated 4000 men from [Heraklion](#), to whom there had been 500 casualties; that the force carrying out the preceding night's evacuation from [Sfakia](#) was being bombed at the time of signalling; that a Glen ship ([Glengyle](#)) and cruisers were due that night at [Sfakia](#) to take off 6000 more and were already being shadowed by enemy aircraft; and that with meagre air protection further casualties to men and ships would have to be expected next day. The question had to be faced whether it was worth while to go on evacuating men in close-packed ships which were bound to be heavily bombed; and whether it was justifiable to go on accepting a scale of loss and damage to the Fleet which might, if continued, render it incapable of operating.

As against this he pointed out that not to accept these risks for

¹ O. 68540, Mideast to [Creforce](#), 29 May.

² NOIC [Suda](#) to C-in-C Med, noon, 28 May; [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 1.10

p.m., 28 May; Admiral Cunningham's Despatch, 4 Aug 1941.

³ O. 18491, General Wavell to C-in-C Med, 2.30 p.m., 29 May; C-in-C to Creforce, 7.11 p.m., 29 May; Admiral Cunningham's Despatch.

the sake of the jeopardised troops would be to fly in the face of all tradition and would be very bad for prestige. He concluded that, though he felt it his duty to put these objections, he was prepared to go on as long as there was a ship left to him. ¹

The message was discussed that day by the Defence Committee and alarmed its members enough to make them signal Cunningham that he should turn back [Glengyle](#), though letting the other ships go on. The signal reached Cunningham too late for a change of plan and he telegraphed back accordingly. He added that he hoped for better fighter protection next day and was sending three extra destroyers for escort though not for convoy. This was approved. ²

The three extra destroyers— [Stuart](#), [Jaguar](#) and [Defender](#)—left that evening to escort the returning convoy next day and to help by taking off troops from any ship damaged. Moreover, the evidence from officers by now evacuated indicated that a further attempt next night would be worth while; and so it was decided to send four more destroyers for the night of 30 May.

Meanwhile the ships which had left [Alexandria](#) the night before — [Glengyle](#), [Phoebe](#), [Perth](#), [Calcutta](#), [Coventry](#), [Jervis](#), [Janus](#) and [Hasty](#)—after a single and unsuccessful attack by a bomber during the morning, arrived off [Sfakia](#) about half an hour before midnight on the night of 29 May.

The ferrying of troops by means of the [Glengyle](#)'s landing craft and two assault landing craft brought by the [Perth](#) then began. By 3.20 a.m. about 6000 men were aboard and the convoy sailed for [Alexandria](#).

¹ C-in-C Med to Admiralty, 1.5 p.m., 29 May; Admiral Cunningham's Despatch.

² DO (41) 36; Admiralty to C-in-C Med, 7 p.m., 29 May; C-in-C Med to

Admiralty, 9.47 p.m., 29 May; Admiralty to C-in-C Med, 1.5 a.m., 30 May;
Admiral Cunningham's Despatch.

CRETE

III: THE ELEVENTH DAY: 30 MAY

III: The Eleventh Day: 30 May

i

May the 29th had been another good day for General Ringel. The advance guard reached [Retimo](#) during the afternoon and relieved the paratroops at [Perivolia](#). It was then decided to wait till next day for the two tanks which had arrived at [Kastelli](#) before going on.

The 100 Mountain Regiment, meanwhile, after its check above the [Askifou Plain](#), was content to follow up the withdrawal during the night and claim the capture of the empty plain next morning.



SFAKIA, 30 MAY

ii

Foremost in the rearguard which 100 Mountain Regiment had now to deal with were the three tanks of C Squadron and the Australian Bren carriers. Behind these were the 42 Field Company sappers, ready to blow the roads as the armoured vehicles fell back. At 6.45 a.m. came the first clash. About two companies of enemy

with light AFVs appeared. The tank commanded by Corporal Summers at once opened fire. His first bursts had disposed of perhaps a dozen enemy when the guns jammed. He withdrew and Sergeant-Major Childs' tank came into action, but it was soon hit in the petrol tank and immobilised. The armour then withdrew behind the first demolition, which the sappers blew at 8.55 a.m. In this brush the carrier crews had helped the tanks by dismounted action from fire positions on either side of the road.

One Bren carrier crew now took up a second dismounted position just north of [Imvros](#) and left of the road, while another covered the right. The tanks with their longer-range machine guns gave covering fire from the southern outskirts of the village. The enemy took time to come forward, and meanwhile a section of Royal Marines got established about a mile and a half south of [Imvros](#).

About ten o'clock the new position was attacked and the enemy moved in cautiously to within a hundred yards of the Bren crews, who held their fire, waiting to be sure of not firing on stragglers. Once sure, they opened up, doing a good deal of damage before they withdrew under cover of the tanks. The [Royal Marines](#) had in the meantime fallen back, and after about half an hour more the tanks were too hard pressed and had to come back to the vacated Marine positions. The second and third demolitions were then blown.

Even without the infantry support which could have given the flanks some cover, the tanks and carriers were able to go on using the same tactics and hang on until at last they were again forced back by mortar fire—though not before they had by a feigned withdrawal caught the enemy exposed on the road and caused about forty casualties.

The enemy now became more cautious and tried outflanking. But the armour held on behind a further demolition until a new move was necessary. The wounded tank could go no farther and had to be destroyed. The other two and the carriers fell back to a final position. By 5 p.m. the two tanks were fit for nothing more and Major Peck reported to Brigadier Vasey. Vasey decided that both tanks and carriers would have to be wrecked and left. This was done at 5.45. The crews left for the dispersal area.

This coolly fought action had prevented the enemy coming up against the main positions much earlier and great credit is due to those who took part. In fact their resistance and the demolitions seem to have destroyed the enemy's stomach for a frontal advance, and Colonel Utz, early in the afternoon, began to call for dive-bombers and motorised artillery. The call for air support got through too late to be complied with that day; and the guns were too far back to be got forward till 31 May.

1

The enemy was now right up against the main delaying position where 2/7 Battalion barred the road, with the Royal Marine battalion behind to give the defence depth. Seeing no promise in a frontal attack Utz decided he must try the flanks.

Here, too, he was to be frustrated. Vasey had foreseen that an attempt might be made to penetrate down the Sfakiano and Imvrotiko Ravines on the left and right of the road, and had posted 2/8 Battalion to cover the former and [Layforce](#) to cover the latter. When the first enemy party appeared, about 2 p.m., it ran into fire from the Australians and from New Zealand troops bivouacked in the neighbourhood. Twenty-five enemy dead were later counted. ²

The 20th Battalion also had a brush with a party which seems to have filtered through from another part of the [Sfakiano Ravine](#). [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had been ordered by General Weston to take his battalion down to the beach and bring back rations for the rearguard. Two companies had reached the ravine at the bottom, close to Force HQ, and two more were following down the hill when firing broke out from the north end of it. Brigadier Inglis observed through his glasses about fifty enemy with mules, a mortar, and several machine guns. He at once sent Lieutenant [Purcell](#) ³ to halt the two rear companies of [20 Battalion](#) and get them to return the enemy fire. Meanwhile [Kippenberger](#) was himself taking action to block the ravine and put some of his men where they could command it from the western shoulder. To effect these two purposes he sent Captain Washbourn, with A Company, up the ravine bed and Captain Fountaine, with C Company, up the cliffs on its west side.

... Upham's platoon was slowly climbing up the steep 600-foot hill west of the ravine. The men were weak and very weary but they kept slowly going, and we could see that Upham was working round above the Germans still in the bottom of the ravine and pinned down by Washbourn's company and by fire from the eastern bank. Two

hours after they had

¹ The foregoing account is based on C Sqn [3 Hussars'](#) war diary and that of the Bren carrier platoon concerned.

² A company of I Bn 100 Mtn Regt was also sent to try the east flank but made little progress and apparently no contact with [Layforce](#).

³ [Lt-Col H. A. Purcell](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born Dunedin, 18 Jan 1915; seed salesman; CO 20 Armd Regt Dec 1943–Jan 1944, May 1944–Mar 1945; wounded 19 Dec 1944; Chief of Staff, Southern Military District, 1951–.

started the climb there was another sharp outburst of firing. It lasted about a minute, there were then some single shots, and then silence. A little later Upham's platoon started to come back and then a message came that all twenty-two of the enemy party had been killed, completely helpless under his plunging fire. ¹

Apart from some mortar fire during the day which gave 23 and 28 Battalions trouble and forced them to change their positions, there were no further serious excitements and the enemy reserved most of his dash for reports to higher headquarters.

iii

Behind the defensive screen the problems of the night's evacuation were being busily canvassed. [General Freyberg](#) held a conference at 9.30 a.m. which General Weston, Brigadiers Vasey, Inglis and Hargest all attended. He told them that four destroyers would come that night and each would take 500 men. The ships would have to be clear by 2 a.m. Both 4 and 5 Brigades were to go but, as room could not be found for all, one battalion would have to remain. The battalion to stay was to be from 5 Brigade and Hargest was asked to nominate it. He chose [21 Battalion](#).

... I sent for Col. John Allen 21st and told him, 'I have to choose, John, your Bn with its attached troops is the strongest, you yourself are the youngest CO and the freshest ... you have to stay.'

He took it like a man. ²

The laconic note in Lieutenant-Colonel Allen's report suggests that this interview took place at 2 p.m. '1400 hrs. Went to Bde HQ. 21 Bn placed under 19 Aus Bde. Went to their HQ and saw the Brigadier (Vasey) who asked me to get the Bn disposed tactically. This I did' ³

At the conference [General Freyberg](#) had instructed Brigadier Inglis to take charge of the embarkation that night, impressing on him the need to keep the beach under firm control. Inglis decided to use [18 Battalion](#) for this purpose and went with Gray to reconnoitre the beach and the route to it. On his return to Force HQ he was met by Captain Morse with a signal from Admiral Cunningham to the effect that no more than 250 troops were to be taken off in any one destroyer, because the ships would be exposed to air attack next day and the risk of casualties on a crowded boat was too great.

¹ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 75. The figures given for the enemy party by Brig Inglis and [Col Kippenberger](#) are not necessarily irreconcilable. The original party probably broke up and Upham's platoon would have dealt with one portion of it. For this and earlier actions in Crete Upham was awarded the VC.

² Letter from Brig Hargest. The account of the conference is based on a report by Brig Inglis which differs from Brig Hargest in some minor particulars.

³ 21 Bn Report.

Inglis then went to [General Freyberg](#) for fresh orders. 'He said, "You and your HQ must go. The C.O. and HQ of each 4 Bde Bn and 28 Bn must go. Hargest and the rest of his Bde will have to stay till tomorrow night.'" ¹

Brigadier Inglis at once dictated the following warning order, timed 2.25 p.m.:

1. Force H.Q. directs that the following Tps only embark tonight:
 - (a) H.Q. 4 Inf Bde strength 70

(b) H.Q. and part 19 and 20 Bns strength in each case 230

(c) H.Q. and part 28 (Maori) Bn strength 230

(d) 18 Bn strength 234.

2. Balance of 19, 20 and 28 (Maori) Bns will be placed under Comd Lt-Col Burrows and is expected will be embarked tomorrow night.

3. H.Q. of each Bn must be embarked tonight.

4. Units will organise forthwith parties to be embarked tonight.

5. Orders for the move to the beaches will be issued shortly.

G. P. Sanders, Maj BM

iv

The grim news came as a relief to Brigadier Hargest. 'I obeyed with a light heart—no need now to ask Allen to stay. We were all staying.'² He called his commanders together and told them that, except for **28 Battalion**, the whole of 5 Brigade would have to stay another twenty-four hours. Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer at once objected. His battalion had fought the campaign as a unit and as a unit it should meet whatever came next, whether it was embarkation or being left behind. He spoke like a good battalion commander but Hargest had his orders and had to enforce them. The protest was overruled.

At 7.45 p.m. General Weston sent out a further order:

I propose to leave on top storey the following under Vasey:—

19 Inf Bde

R.M.

21 NZ Bn

I should be glad if Comdr 5 NZ Bde would bring down with him for duty on the ground floor his two remaining Bns. The remnants of 4 NZ Bde under Lt Col Burrow[s] will be brigaded with 5 NZ and known as 4 Bn.

One Bn is immediately reqd for protection of western gully which has been giving a lot of trouble today.

This plan, in so far as it affected 21 Battalion Group, was modified soon after, however, and the battalion again came under

¹ Report by Maj-Gen Inglis. The author has not been able to trace the signal from Admiral Cunningham.

² Letter from Brig Hargest.

the command of 5 Brigade. Orders were given for the battalions to remain where they were for the night— 23 Battalion posting a platoon to cover the ravine—and to move down into positions covering the beach at 5 a.m. next day.

Meanwhile more encouraging prospects for next night's embarkation were opened by a message from Weston at 8.5 p.m.:

Shipping is being laid on tomorrow night for a proportion of fighting troops. Advantage can only be taken of this if you hold on to present positions tomorrow. Am confident you will do this.

The valley and heights on your left will need attention. Suggest at least one company each side of ravine.

It had been a difficult day for all the battalions and they badly needed cheering news. Food and water had been hard to come by. All the troops had been tried to the limit and had then had to summon up reserves they hardly knew they had in order to face the disappointment of no evacuation that night, the doubts about evacuation next night, and the knowledge that even if it came they would have to endure between now and then another twenty-four hours with the threat of infiltration always present and a further call to battle always possible. But they acquitted themselves well in these adversities as in all those that had gone before. The spirit which had overcome exhaustion and carried the men of 20 Battalion up the steep slope to counter the threat from the flank, like the spirit which animated Lieutenant-Colonel Allen when he received his orders to join the last rearguard, was characteristic of all that was best in the Division in this campaign and in many another to follow.



As commander of 4 Brigade and as officer responsible for the night's embarkation, Brigadier Inglis was to get one more unpleasant shock before the day was out. During the morning engine trouble forced one of the four destroyers coming from Alexandria—the Kandahar—to turn back; and in the afternoon Kelvin, damaged by a near miss, was also ordered to return. News of this reached Captain Morse during the afternoon, after Inglis had issued his orders for the embarkation of 1000 men. Brigadier Inglis, when he knew, determined that he would make no change in his orders but would somehow or other get the thousand men aboard.

Daybreak had found the battalions of his brigade, like those of 5 Brigade, in their dispersal areas on the escarpment. Here 18 Battalion was now joined by its Headquarters Company which had hived off at Vrises to give flank protection. The battalion spent the day resting, a rest disturbed only by the necessity of sending B Company to the east bank of the ravine when the enemy's penetration threat arose during the afternoon. The 19th Battalion—now reduced to a strength of 213—rested also.

The 20th Battalion's only movements during the day arose from General Weston's orders about bringing up rations from the beach,¹ and the operation against infiltrating enemy already described. It was while Colonel Kippenberger was in the neighbourhood of Creforce HQ that he received the evacuation instruction for that night. He protested at Major Burrows' being left behind instead of himself and was 'sharply overruled'—for General Freyberg had expressly said that unit commanders must go.

Kippenberger was left to contemplate one of the unhappiest situations a commander can be confronted with: the prospect of having to move off to safety leaving some of his men behind.

... I went back to the valley and with a heart as cold as stone sat down to consider the position. I had 306 men, including the Kiwi Concert Party and 4 Brigade Band. I decided that the Concert Party and band must stay, which left about 40 to remain from the Twentieth. These were apportioned between companies and I told them to make the selection any way they liked. I decided that Markham should be the officer

to stay but, when a deputation of subalterns came to point out that he was married and to push their own claims to be left, selected [Rolleston](#) instead. I had to turn down very emphatically some urgent appeals to be left with the rear-party. ²

Meanwhile C Company had come back from its stiff climb. Captain Fountaine explained the new situation to his weary men and asked for volunteers to stay behind.

... There was a gasp and then Grooby, the C.S.M., stepped forward. He was followed at once by Fraser, the C.Q.M.S., and by Kirk and Vincent, the two sergeants, and then the remaining forty men. The N.C.O.s insisted on staying and after much argument lots had to be drawn for the men. ³

At 3.15 p.m. more explicit instructions went out. The numbers to be evacuated from each battalion—230 men—were repeated. All those to be left behind were to come under command of Major Burrows and to expect evacuation next night. Those due to embark were to begin moving towards an assembly area near [Creforce](#) HQ at once and to be there by eight o'clock. Precautions were to be taken to ensure that only those authorised should go, and 18 Battalion's orders to provide a picket for the beach were confirmed. ⁴

Accordingly, [18 Battalion](#) moved down to the assembly area about four o'clock and stayed there till half past eight. It then went to

¹ General Weston had given this order without reference to Brig Inglis, who had already ascertained that all rations had been taken from the dump by stragglers. He therefore cancelled Weston's order to 20 Bn.

² [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 75.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴ 4 NZ Inf Bde Op Inst No. 13.

authorised units could come.

The 19th Battalion followed and reached the assembly area an hour after [18 Battalion](#). Seventeen men who had lost touch rejoined on the way and made up the authorised number. But there were others in the area who were not able to make contact. At last the time to embark came, at about midnight, and the men began to be ferried aboard.

The account given by [Colonel Kippenberger](#) is typical for the events and feelings of that night:

The afternoon wore miserably on, but at last there was nothing for it but to say good-bye and go. I spoke as reassuringly as I could to the rear-party, shook hands with Jim, and went off very sadly.

We had a tramp of some miles to the beach, the last part lined with men who had lost their units and were hoping for a place with us. Some begged and implored, most simply watched stonily, so that we felt bitterly ashamed. There was a cordon round the beach with orders to shoot any man who tried to break in. I had to count my men through. We were the last unit to pass, and on the principle that there is always room for one more, I bullied the cordon officer into letting me take Frank Davis, with some of [Divisional Headquarters](#) as well. I had Brian Bassett with me and just before embarking found that John Russell was in an A.D.S. on the beach and insisted on taking him also. ¹

Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer had made his preparations early and nominated the officers to stay behind. Company commanders were to divide their men into those to go and those to stay. Major Dyer and Captain Rangi Royal, both men who had already shouldered ugly tasks in the days that now lay on the other side of the White Mountains, were to command the rear party.

At 6 p.m. those to embark set off and dispersed on the assembly area under cover from harassing enemy aircraft. After dark they went down in parties of fifty, were checked through the cordon, and eventually went aboard. Typical of the pride of the battalion is the story of A Company's toilet that morning:

... on the morning of the 30th, by a pooling of resources the personnel of my

Company Headquarters numbering, I think, seven, had all managed to change. One man had managed to locate a safety razor with an ancient well-used blade, another had sufficient water in his water-bottle, a third provided a brush, while my steel helmet was used as the shaving mug. It had been hard work as none of us had shaved for some few days and I think we all balked when it came to shaving the upper lip. The proportion of moustaches in the Battalion was high when we eventually reached Egypt. ²

¹ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 76. Frank Davis was GSO 2, NZ Div. John Russell was the man whose Divisional Cavalry had fought so well all through the battle at [Galatas](#).

² Report by Capt Baker.

The marching personnel of Divisional HQ who had been left behind the night before had spent the day in the [Komitadhes](#) Ravine. During the day Major Davis got authority to move 50 of his men and 50 from Divisional Signals to the beach in case there should be room on the ships. Fortunately for them, the ship commanders were able to make room for 400 more than the quota of 1000 and, by the intervention of Brigadier Inglis and [Colonel Kippenberger](#), the whole party was embarked. By Inglis' authority also, it is pleasant to record, a number of wounded and the men of C Squadron [3 Hussars](#) were also got aboard. ¹

With the last boat to leave the beach went the last of the 18 Battalion cordon and its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Gray.

vi

Apart from Divisional HQ many other groups had been collected into the [Komitadhes](#) Ravine. Major Bull's party was continually increased by other parties coming in and was organised as well as possible in the circumstances. A member of the embarkation staff had told Bull that word would be sent when parties were needed at the beach, and until then he kept the area picketed. He also organised ration parties to forage for food—though they found none. On such a mission in the village Second-Lieutenant Allison ² was offered embarkation by a beach officer but

refused on the ground that it was his duty to return and report. 'This action had immense moral effect, since some officers and NCOs were already voicing extremely undisciplined and self centred views.'³

The magnitude of the refusal is not difficult to appreciate. For such a chance of embarkation offered release from a grim situation. These were men who, mostly from no fault of their own, had been cut off from their units and had done their share of fighting in most cases. They must now have felt lost, despairing, and unfairly excluded from the organised embarkation. There was little information and no strong reason to hope that the boats would come again or that, if they came, what had happened before would not recur: the infantry organised in their brigades and with brigadiers to look to their interests would be taken off; the troops from specialised arms or services, without a high-ranking spokesman, would once more be left behind; and left behind to the certainty of long years cut off from their comrades and the war they had come to fight, languishing in prison camps.

¹ WD C Sqn. Force HQ also passed through the cordon to go on board the two flying boats which arrived that night.

² Capt D. C. Allison; [Auckland](#); born [London](#), 4 May 1918; Regular soldier; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³ Report by Maj Bull.

For the New Zealander, whose habit of seeing for himself and deciding by what his own spirit and intelligence tells him makes him such a formidable fighter, but also makes him impatient of sitting down passively to await for an undesirable fate, such a prospect was exceedingly difficult to bear. And so it is hard not to sympathise with questioning murmurs that met Major Bull's policy. On the other hand, that policy was founded on the discipline which makes men soldiers as well as fighters and holds them together in good times and bad. If we cannot withhold sympathy from those who grumbled we cannot fail to give it to Bull and those who helped him. The firmness and lack of solicitude for self which they showed is beyond praise.

There were still other groups of gunners and others from the former [Composite](#)

Battalion who had missed the control point and had gone into the **Sfakia** area—parties with Major Bliss, Lieutenant Coleman and other officers. These found that only the infantry units were being embarked and Bliss therefore dispersed them with orders to reassemble next night. This was unlucky for they missed the chance which arose when the ships took more than their quota.

vii

The morning of 30 May was made even gloomier for **General Freyberg** than it need have been by a miscalculation of the number of men taken off the night before. It was thought that because of delay in getting off wounded only 3500 men had been embarked, and this belief is reflected in the situation report sent to General Wavell at 9 a.m. In this **Freyberg** also explained the operations of the previous day and the position as it was at the time of despatch with all the troops withdrawn behind Brigadier Vasey's rearguard. And in another message sent about the same time he pressed for every effort to be made to embark the maximum number of troops, not only that night but on the night of 31 May as well. Then he discovered the mistake about the numbers embarked the night before and telegraphed again to General Wavell that the number was now thought to be 6500. It was probably after this, at 1.30 p.m., that he sent a further message pleading for one last lift the next night which would take up to 7000 men and expressing despair at the idea that these men who had fought the rearguard so gallantly should be left behind. ¹

To these messages Wavell replied that everything possible was being done to effect a rescue, that Mr. Fraser and General Blamey were being consulted and their agreement to every decision taken

¹ **Creforce** to Mideast, O. 678, 679, 680, and one without serial number, all untimed in the available versions.

could be assumed, that Brigadier Vasey was to be embarked that night if possible, and that risks far beyond the justifiable were being taken to carry the evacuation through.

In the hope that Mr. Fraser might be able to bring additional pressure to bear,

[General Freyberg](#) also sent him a signal at 2.50 p.m. asking him if he could get more ships to take part in the following night's evacuation. Fraser's part in these arrangements is dealt with below. ¹

Further messages from [Middle East](#) confirmed that destroyers were on their way to carry out the night's evacuation and that flying boats would come during darkness to pick up [Freyberg's](#) own party. He was ordered to make sure that he came by warship should bad weather prevent the flying boats from arriving.

There was now little more that [Freyberg](#) could do. After handing over the command to General Weston he sent one final appeal to General Wavell: he begged him to do everything possible to provide ships next night for the evacuation of the gallant British, New Zealand, and Australian troops who had carried the weight of the fighting. ² This done, he had made his final plea. And he had done his best to get into communication with [Retimo](#), though without result. There was nothing for it now but to wait for the Sunderlands to arrive.

At 8.45 p.m. the party to go back to Egypt by air gathered in the caves of the RAF HQ. It consisted of [General Freyberg](#) himself, Group Captain Beamish, Brigadier Stewart, and key men from the various headquarters. In due course the Sunderlands landed on the water, the party went down and passed through the entry to Brigadier Inglis' cordon. As it did so [Freyberg](#) ordered Inglis to join the party. Inglis demurred and was in his turn 'sharply overruled'. About eleven o'clock all were aboard the flying boats, which then set off.

My feelings can be imagined better than described (says [General Freyberg](#)). I was handing over a difficult situation with the enemy through in one place almost to the beaches from which we were to make our last attempt to get away the remnants of the fighting force that still held out, tired, hungry, and thirsty on the heights above. ³

viii

Thoughts for the fate of the garrison at [Retimo](#) made this departure all the more bitter for [General Freyberg](#). And indeed this was the last day of the battle for Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell

¹ See p. 448. Documents, Vol I, No. 435; British War Cabinet narrative, Chap IV, para 68.

² O. 684, Creforce to Mideast, 7 p.m.

³ General Freyberg's Report, p. 63.

and his men. At daylight they saw enemy trucks moving east through [Perivolia](#) and drew the only conclusion possible. The main force round [Canea](#) must have been driven south or overrun.

But Campbell's orders were still, so far as he knew, to hold the airfield. He decided that he and his men must fight on. It could not be for long. The enemy was well equipped with heavy machine guns, mortars, guns, and light tanks. The defence had enough rations for a day only, were short of ammunition, and were outnumbered by troops who, compared with themselves, were fresh.

C Company of 2/11 Battalion from its positions near [Perivolia](#) tried to contain the enemy but was soon overrun. The enemy's next move was to advance along the main road with guns and a tank until they reached the airfield. Other columns, also with armour, worked their way into Pigi. The defence was virtually surrounded and the ridge which it held was being steadily shelled.

Campbell saw that he could offer no further effective resistance. The choice lay between surrender and escape to the hills and the south coast. The latter course would be impossible as an organised movement. The only clue to the evacuation port was Lieutenant Haig's orders to take his MLC to [Sfakia](#). There was no guarantee that evacuation would still be going on. In such uncertainty Campbell could hardly commit his battalions to the hills and expect the [Cretans](#), however loyal, to provide them with food and shelter. Nor could he expect to break contact in daylight, even if it had been possible with defective communications to organise such a withdrawal.

The same objections applied to withdrawal by battalions, with the added disadvantage that the force would be even easier for the enemy to dispose of piecemeal.

The alternative, then, was surrender. Before he decided to take that bitter course, Campbell concurred when the CO 2/11 Battalion (Major R. L. Sandover) informed him that he was giving his men the choice of surrendering or dispersing. So Campbell's 2/1 Battalion surrendered more or less intact, while most of Sandover's dispersed, some of its officers and men to be captured at last by the Germans, others by one means or another to reach Egypt, and all of them to incur a lasting debt to the generous courage of the [Cretans](#) who shared meagre supplies with them and risked burnt homes and slaughtered menfolk. So ended one of the most gallant episodes in the defence of Crete.

ix

On 30 May the [Navy](#) had two forces at sea. Returning from [Sfakia](#) and the previous night's embarkation was Force D— [Glengyle](#), [Phoebe](#), [Perth](#), [Calcutta](#), [Coventry](#), [Jervis](#), [Janus](#) and [Hasty](#)—with the additional escort of the destroyers [Stuart](#), [Jaguar](#) and [Defender](#), which had joined at 6.45 a.m. On the way to [Sfakia](#) for the next embarkation was Force C— [Napier](#), [Nizam](#), [Kelvin](#) and [Kandahar](#).

Force D suffered three attacks. The first was at 9.30 a.m. and put [Perth's](#) foremost boiler room out of action. The other two attacks got no closer than near misses, probably because the [RAF](#) fighter protection system was now working. Two enemy bombers were shot down.

Force C was less fortunate. [Kandahar](#) developed a mechanical defect at 12.45 p.m. and had to return to [Alexandria](#). In a sudden bomber attack at half past three [Kelvin](#) was damaged and also had to turn back. No replacements could be got from Force D because of fuel shortage and the remaining two ships had to go on alone. They arrived off [Sfakia](#) about midnight and proceeded with the evacuation as we have seen, taking about 1400 men in all.

CRETE

IV: THE TWELFTH DAY: 31 MAY

IV: The Twelfth Day: 31 May

i

By the end of 30 May, except for the [Sfakia](#) rearguard, all organised resistance on [Crete](#) had ended. For news of operations against that rearguard General Ringel depended on liaison officers from Colonel Utz, wireless communication having been outrun. And when a liaison officer finally got through, late in the afternoon of 30 May, his news was not particularly stimulating: 100 Mountain Regiment was held up about five kilometres from the coast and heavily engaged. Outflanking movements were being tried.

Utz considered his position difficult. Deciding that day against frontal attack—for in this he showed himself throughout a Ringel disciple and here had good occasion—he had sent two companies through Lakkoï to attack Point 798 on the west of the road and another company east of the road to seize Point 892. The western thrust 'could not be completed on 30 May because of the unusually difficult going and the steep hills to be negotiated.'¹ The encounter with Australian and New Zealand troops already described amplifies the explanation.

The eastern thrust approached Point 892 but progress was not spectacular, and so Utz decided that on 31 May he must try much wider flanking movements. For these he would use II Battalion while I Battalion contained the central front. At 4.30 a.m. next day, therefore, 7 Company of II Battalion left the [Askifou Plain](#) with orders to make for [Sfakia](#) by way of Point 1186, Point 1173,

¹ Report by 100 Mtn Regt.

and Point 979 on the west of the road; and 8 Company set off with orders to travel via Asfendhon to Ay Andonios (Point 246). In this way it was hoped to hem in the defence from two sides.

Meanwhile the company of I Battalion sent east on 30 May had reached Point 892. It was joined there by a regimental observation post. From this point the whole coast could be observed and Utz was informed that there were strong forces in [Komitadhes](#) and [Sfakia](#). Prudence counselled him to postpone his attack until he could get artillery and dive-bomber support and, because he could not get his plea for these to Ringel in time for an assault that day, he decided he would wait until 1 June. But in the evening he found that he would not be able to get artillery until the afternoon of 1 June, though air support was promised for next morning. Prudence once more intervened, therefore, and he decided he would spend 1 June completing the encirclement of the rearguard and attack only on 2 June.

Apart from the advance of 7 and 8 Companies—neither of which reached their objective—his only exploit for the day was to get a light infantry gun up on to Point 892, a difficult enough feat for those who had to manhandle it.

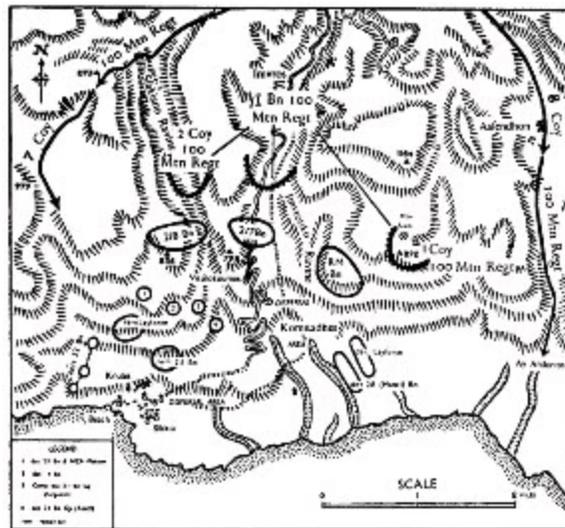
ii

The defence line which was giving Colonel Utz's talents for caution such exercise consisted still of [Layforce](#) on the right guarding the [Imvrotiko Ravine](#), 2/7 Battalion in the centre with the main road as its axis, and the Marine Battalion in reserve; and 2/8 Battalion on the left guarding the [Sfakiano Ravine](#). The last two guns of C Troop 2/3 RAA were on the central ridge, behind the reserve.

The position was naturally a strong one, even though defended by troops who were almost exhausted and whose arms and equipment were less adequate than they had ever been at any point in a campaign distinguished for inadequacy in these respects. Since the enemy was not prepared to try a frontal attack and was waiting for his flank thrusts to mature, there was no direct engagement between the opposing forces. The enemy was content to harass the defending battalions with his machine guns and mortars.

Time was on the side of Utz. For Brigadier Vasey's men its promise was more difficult to read. Time might bring ships and safety. But there was little time left; and if the ships did not come tonight there might not be another chance. The enemy's movement round the flanks had been observed; patrols had reported enemy parties between [Sfakia](#) and Frangokasterion; and the [Navy](#) had reported other enemy

patrols advancing on Porto Loutro from



SFAKIA, 31 MAY
SFAKIA, 31 MAY

the west. There was nothing to be done, however, to counteract these moves, and the main task was obviously to go on protecting the beaches for as long as there was still prospect of evacuation.

Conferring on these matters in the afternoon with General Weston, Vasey suggested that he could best hold the enemy clear of the beach until the night of 1 June—the last when evacuation would be possible, Weston said—by remaining in his present position while Weston made arrangements for beach protection on the east and west. And to this General Weston agreed.¹ Vasey then returned to his own HQ and passed on the news of this plan to the commander of 2/7 Battalion.

iii

Orders the night before for 5 Brigade had been that the units should begin coming down from the escarpment about dawn. The battalions were astir before first light and by 5 a.m. were on their

¹ Report on AIF in Crete.

way down. It was a depressing journey. 'Past burned trucks, piles of documents,

dead men—all the litter of an escaping army was there—everything but food,’ says Brigadier Hargest; and his words are echoed by a warrant officer of [21 Battalion](#): ‘... immobilised vehicles ... a few ambulances ... shot up by hostile aircraft. The smell of the dead in these vehicles was almost overpowering.’ Down on the flat, however, there was at least a well. ‘The men went over and filled themselves and their bottles. Some food was found and spirits rose with the sun.’ ¹

Weston asked Hargest to establish his HQ in the caves where his own HQ was, and Hargest then preoccupied himself with the arrangements for the hoped-for embarkation of his brigade that night and the organisation of an inner perimeter in the meantime. He also had to deal with the continual requests for a place in the evacuation that came to him from the unattached troops in the neighbourhood. The problem was a difficult one. He had 1100 troops of his own, counting those of [20 Battalion](#) who had been left behind the night before. He was determined that these men who had fought together so long and well would go aboard that night. But he was also moved by the plight of these others.

All day I answered pleas to be allowed to come. I pointed out that I was a passenger with my men and that if I took others I must drop some of mine. That I would not do. When men came with rifles and proved their worth I sent them to one or other unit. If they came without rifles I turned them down cold—they were stragglers. Never had I such a day. ²

When Hargest and Weston first met that morning the latter explained his hopes for the night's evacuation, and at 7.30 a.m. the orders were drawn up:

Although the [Navy](#) is doing its best, probably only 2000 will be embarked tonight 31 May. Allocation will be made for fighting tps and is:

NZ—950

Aust—2/8 Bn (200)

British—850

Comds 5 NZ [and] 8 Aust IB [presumably 2/8 Battalion] will however be prepared to increase numbers allocated in para 1 at short notice but too many tps

must not be sent to the beaches so as to avoid disappointment.

There were to be modifications to these arrangements as the day went on. But meanwhile the units were busy carrying out plans for an inner perimeter of defence. At 10 a.m. [21 Battalion](#) got

¹ Brig J. Hargest; [WO I L. Young](#). From first light on 31 May the scanty rations remaining from those dumped by the [Navy](#) on the night of 28 May were issued only on the presentation of a chit signed by an officer and with priority to fighting troops.

² Report by Brig Hargest.

orders to cover the western exits from [Sfakiano Ravine](#). The battalion therefore sent two detachments, one 100 strong under Captain Ferguson of [7 Field Company](#) and another 50 strong under Lieutenant Roach, to guard the spurs which overlooked the ravine. On the left of these a post from the rear party of [20 Battalion](#) had been established. Farther again to the left was a detachment of about fifty men from [23 Battalion](#) under Lieutenant Cunningham. The 22nd Battalion covered the tracks leading west out of [Sfakia](#), [28 Battalion](#) relieved [Layforce](#) and took over the covering of the [Imvrotiko Ravine](#), while [Layforce](#) itself took up fresh positions in the hills immediately north of [Sfakia](#). The net result was that the line had been extended south-west from [2/8 Battalion](#) to the sea.

These movements were the result of a change of plan from that entailed by the orders of the night before. With the enemy attempting as we have seen to circle round the flanks, there is no doubt of the prudence of fresh measures. But they were not carried out without further effort on the part of the troops:

The perimeter had to be held and I put it to the men in consideration of the priority of Embarkation that they would go back up the heights and hold—the strongest at the top, the next strongest on the inner hill features, the weaker in the hollows—noble fellows, they went back up the hillside like ‘redshanks’ and when the GOC asked me how it was going—I was able to point far up on the skyline the troops going to their appointed positions. ¹

General Weston began the day on the assumption that evacuation would take place that night and the night of 1 June also. He expected about 2000 to be taken off on the next lift and as many as possible the night after, when he proposed to leave himself also. Thus we have seen him discussing with Brigadier Vasey the scheme by which Vasey's brigade was to hold the central heights while the other troops behind prevented enemy infiltration into the flanks. And the alterations in the dispositions of 5 Brigade from those prescribed the evening before were concerted with Hargest to the same purpose.

A similar reading of the evacuation prospects is offered by the signals exchanged between General Weston and [Middle East](#) during the earlier part of the day. These signals, it should be added, were sent and received over a single wireless set, the batteries of which were fast running down, and so Weston had not only the anxiety of depending on decisions taken far away but had always

¹ Narrative, Brig Hargest.

to reckon with precarious communications which at any time might cease altogether.

The first message from Weston of which we have a copy was sent at 10.55 a.m. and dealt with rations. He explained that the supply situation was critical and asked for 10,000 rations to be sent that night: a course too difficult for [Middle East](#), for the ships for the night's task had already left, transport aircraft scarcely existed, and the message was not received until 12.55 p.m. on the day the supplies were to be sent.

1

This message evidently presupposed that all troops were not to be evacuated that night and that evacuation would continue. The next makes this assumption even plainer. Weston indicated that he had three alternative plans for further evacuation. By the first, the troops would be taken off from Frangokasterion on the night of 1 June and from [Plaka Bay](#) on the night of 2 June. By the second, evacuation would take place from [Porto Loutro](#) and would be complete on the night of 1 June.

By the third, [Sfakia](#) beach would be used as before and the operation would be for one night only. Which course he proposed to follow General Weston said he would report later; and no doubt it would depend on how the military situation developed.

2

Meanwhile a message evidently reached Weston from Middle East. For at 11.51 a.m. he replies to a signal sent at 6.50 that morning which must have been a request for a report on the numbers still left.³ The reply states that there are still 4000 troops organised for fighting, 3500 organised into formed groups, and 1500 unorganised stragglers—a total of 9000.

At 4 p.m. Weston still believed that two nights remained for evacuation. The lack of definite news worried him, however, and at that time he sent another signal. He repeated the number 9000. Because of the difficulty of getting troops forward at the last minute over hard terrain, he doubted whether the full capacity of the ships had been used the night before—evidently hinting that if they were to be loaded to the full timely warning would be appreciated. And he said that he had every hope that [Sfakia](#) could be used again on the night of 1 June.⁴

But, for reasons to be discussed,⁵ General Wavell had by this time decided that this would be the last night. Some time after 4 p.m. Weston received a signal: 3600 men would be taken that night and there would be no further evacuation thereafter. This

¹ General Weston to Mideast, 10.55 a.m., 31 May.

² General Weston to Mideast, 11.25 a.m., 31 May.

³ General Weston to Mideast, 11.51 a.m., 31 May. The author has not been able to trace the signal from Mideast.

⁴ [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 4 p.m., 31 May.

⁵ See p. 449.

must have been received before 6 p.m.; for in a signal sent at that time Weston explains that the new arrangements meant leaving 5500 men behind, exhausted and short of food. Without some regular supply of rations resistance would be impossible and their only hope would lie in capitulation. What action was he to take? ¹

While waiting for an answer to this appeal, Weston had to go ahead on the basis of what he knew. ² He called a conference at which Brigadier Hargest was present:

'A big ship would take off 3500 tonight, after that nothing.'

We sat stunned by it. We had expected two or three more nights of it but this was to be the end.

We kept it secret and at once arranged to increase quotas. I forced ours up to 1400 inclusive of wounded—we got off 1500 actually, and the staff arranged increases all round.

The situation of the remaining ones was desperate—far more so than they knew, poor fellows. But I could do no more. ³

General Weston's next move was to climb the hill and see Brigadier Vasey. They met at 7.40 p.m. Weston explained what had happened and said that he was allotting 500 extra places to Vasey and his men and 300 to the [Royal Marines](#). This would make the distribution between British, Australian, and New Zealand troops proportionately fair. Fair, but tragically so. But for Vasey the news was not overwhelmingly bad. He would be able to get most of his two battalions off that night instead of having to hold a weakened line for a further day. He allotted the extra places to 2/7 Battalion and his own staff.

Weston had still one unenviable task. [Layforce](#) had been the last troops to arrive. There would be no room for all who had fought. Some would have to stay. The only criterion was the crude one of seniority in the battle. Weston therefore sent for Colonel Laycock. The latter was to nominate an officer to handle the capitulation. He decided it would be Lieutenant-Colonel Colvin, the commander of A Battalion. To him was given General Weston's order:

The position must be considered in the light of the following facts:

1. There are no more rations available and men have had no food for three days.
 2. The wireless set can only last a few hours and the risk of waiting for further instructions from H.Q. M.E. cannot be accepted.
 3. The decision to give priority in withdrawal to fighting troops has reduced numbers below the minimum necessary for resistance.
 4. No more evacuation is possible.
-

¹ [Creforce](#) to Mideast, 6 p.m., 31 May. The author has not been able to trace the signal to which this is a reply.

² It was as well he did. The wireless batteries ran down before he could get a reply.

³ Narrative by Brig Hargest.

5. You will collect as many senior officers as possible and make known to them the contents of this order.
6. You are ordered to make contact with the enemy and arrange capitulation. ¹

▼

The various commanders now began their preparations. Brigadier Vasey sent his Brigade Major to warn [2/7 Battalion](#) and the Royal Marines that they must be ready to leave at 9.15 and 9 p.m. respectively. The [Royal Marines](#) from this point must have ceased to come under his command; for he goes on to say that [2/7 Battalion](#) was ordered to go straight to the beach and embark that night. ²

Fifth Brigade was to supply the beach cordon. Brigadier Hargest allotted the job to [22 Battalion](#) and the remainder of [28 Battalion](#). The following orders were sent out at 4.5 p.m.:

The 28 Bn will withdraw from komitades on receipt of this order and will R.V. in donga [ravine] where main road crosses donga.

You will come under command of 22 Bn and with it form a cordon around the disembarkation beach at sparkion [[Sfakia](#)]. Lieut Chinchin will lead you from donga to sparkion.

I desire to remind you that this job will be hard—you must be ruthless and determined. It will be necessary to be on the beach somewhere about 2115 hrs when you will report to Col Andrews [Andrew].

A similar order was sent at 4.10 p.m. to [22 Battalion](#), together with the information that the only New Zealand units authorised to embark were HQ 5 Brigade, 21, 22, 23, 28 and 20 Battalions in that order, except for the two cordon units which would come last. All New Zealand units were to reach the barrier not later than 10 p.m.

vi

There were still many wounded whose fate had to be considered. The MDS at [Imvros](#) had been cleared on the night of 29 May, except for 40 seriously wounded who were unable to march. With these had stayed behind an Australian medical officer and New Zealand and Australian orderlies. The rest of the medical staff went with the walking wounded. Only slow and painful progress could be made, and daylight of 30 May found the party still some miles from the beach. All that day therefore the men lay up in caves and at dark they set off once more. This time they reached

¹ After the departure of the last ships Lt-Col Colvin passed the order to Lt-Col Young, OC D Bn. He took a copy which the version given above reproduces.

² AIF in [Crete](#), p. 6. 2/8 Bn came under 5 Bde for embarkation and was to follow it, leaving at 9 p.m.

the bottom of the escarpment before dawn. ¹ An RAP was set up and again the wounded hid in caves while the enemy air force machine-gunned their hiding places.

At Force HQ it was decided that patients and medical staff must be given

priority that night, and at 4 p.m. a party of about eighty walking wounded and medical staff again began to creep towards the beach. Another party of 50 men, chosen by ballot from 5 and 6 Field Ambulances and from 1 General Hospital, were supposed to be taken off but lost their places to 5 Brigade HQ. Other small parties did not reach the beach.

vii

Fortunate on this final day was the man who was with his unit and that unit infantry. For others the prospect was bleak. Thus there was no place among those authorised to embark for the artillerymen. Early in the day, at Force HQ, Brigadier Hargest had told Major Bull that his men would have to wait. Hargest was still confident that there would be another night's evacuation and assured Bull that there would then be enough shipping to take everyone. He did, however, suggest that six 'specialists' be selected for evacuation that night. 'In view of its possible effect on the weak morale being shown in some quarters and Brig Hargest's certainty about the 1–2 June evacuation, this offer was declined on the spot.'²

viii

General Weston had learnt during the afternoon of the decision taken in the [Middle East](#) to make this night the last. It is now time to consider how it came about that this decision had to be taken.

On 30 May it had been decided that, while no further cruisers or Glen ships could be risked in further evacuation, four destroyers should be sent on the night of 31 May. When Mr. Fraser learnt of this at [Alexandria](#) on 30 May and understood that this was to be the last night, he urged on Admiral Cunningham and General Evetts (General Wavell's liaison officer with Admiral Cunningham) that at least one additional ship should be sent. The only ship that Cunningham had suitable for the purpose was the cruiser [Phoebe](#). And [Phoebe](#) was even then on her way back from the evacuation of the night before. Cunningham decided that when

¹ General Inglis reports that a few wounded were taken off on 30 May.

she arrived and disembarked her troops the ship's company would be replaced and the ship herself sent back. ¹

The result of these arrangements was that on the morning of 31 May the Navy had two forces at sea in connection with the Cretan operations. The destroyers [Napier](#) and [Nizam](#) were on their way back from [Sfakia](#), while [Phoebe](#), [Abdiel](#), ² [Kimberley](#), [Hotspur](#), and [Jackal](#) were on their way to [Sfakia](#), having left [Alexandria](#) at 6 a.m. The first force, in spite of cover from RAF aircraft during the day, was attacked by bombers about nine o'clock and [Napier](#) was damaged by near misses which reduced her speed to 23 knots.

The news of this attack and the probability that the second force would have similar attacks to endure before it could be back in [Alexandria](#) must have been much in the minds of General Wavell and Admiral Cunningham at this time. And during the morning the latter learnt from Captain S. H. T. Arliss, who had commanded the destroyers in the previous night's operation, that there were still about 6500 men at [Sfakia](#). Cunningham therefore ordered Rear-Admiral King in the [Phoebe](#) to increase the maximum number of troops to be embarked to 3500.

Shortly after this message had been sent Mr. Fraser, General Wavell, [General Freyberg](#)—who had arrived back safely at 3 a.m.—and General Evetts came to Cunningham's HQ in [Alexandria](#). Cunningham describes what passed:

As the result of our deliberations it seemed that Rear-Admiral King's five ships would be able to bring off most of the troops assembled at [Sphakia](#), so a message was sent telling him to fill up to capacity. At the same time I informed the Admiralty that I had called a halt after the evacuation that night, and that even if Rear-Admiral King's ships were to suffer no damage in the operation in which they were then engaged, the [Mediterranean Fleet](#) would be reduced to two battleships, one cruiser, two anti-aircraft cruisers, one minelayer and nine destroyers fit for service. ³

The arguments for a halt in the evacuation are set out in a message from Cunningham to the Admiralty sent on 1 June. Apart from the existing losses to the

Fleet, it would be impossible to go on providing the air support which had been so useful in the latter stages. For Tobruk badly needed all the air cover available. Again, the moon was now full and would permit the enemy to bomb ships and beaches by night. And the troops left on the

¹ Admiral Cunningham's Despatch and [Rt. Hon. P. Fraser's Supplementary Report, No. 453](#) in Documents, Vol I. The latter is the sole source for the part played by Mr. Fraser in the sending of the [Phoebe](#) and is accepted here because initially likely and the only explanation available for the addition of the [Phoebe](#). It may be added that the [Phoebe's](#) crew volunteered to go back without relief and did in fact do so. See Christchurch Press, 12 Jul 1950.

² [Abdiel](#), as a fast minclayer, was especially suitable for these missions.

³ [A Sailor's Odyssey, p. 387](#): See also Documents, Vol I, No. 453, where it appears that the decision to fill the ships to capacity was the result of representations made by Mr. Fraser and [General Freyberg](#).

morning of 1 June would probably have had to capitulate in any case. ¹

Back in London Admiral Cunningham's report that the evacuation was to end that night caused dismay. It reached the Prime Minister and, shortly after getting it, at 10.20 p.m., he rang the Vice-Chief of Naval Staff. In the subsequent conversation he made it clear that 4000–5000 men could not possibly be left behind without further attempt to save them. The Vice-Chief was of similar mind; and he pointed out that in the preceding two days heavy naval losses had been absent, a fact which he attributed to air support. The telephone conversation ended with a request from [Mr. Churchill](#) that proposals be put to the First Sea Lord for a further effort.

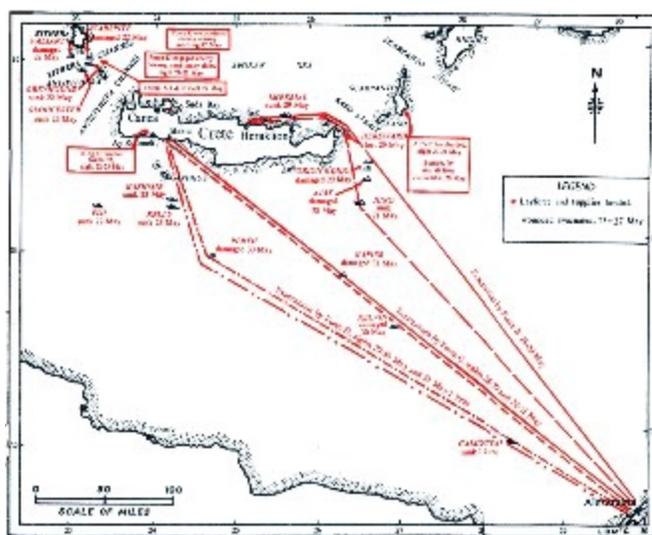
At 10.33 p.m. therefore the Vice-Chief rang the First Sea Lord, who agreed that if the relative immunity of the last two days were due to air support, if this could be continued, and if no new factor arose to change the situation, a further attempt should be made. Accordingly, at 10.47 p.m., the Vice-Chief rang [Mr. Churchill](#) and read to him over the telephone a draft message to Admiral Cunningham. This draft [Mr. Churchill](#) approved. ²

At half past eleven the message was sent. In effect it said that, if there was a reasonable chance of an organised and substantial body of men being able to embark on the night of 1 June, then the Government thought that the attempt to evacuate them should be made. This view assumed that aircraft had contributed to the success of the evacuation so far and would be available on the next occasion also. The message ended by suggesting that if what happened during the day of 1 June indicated a different course as prudent, then the question could be reconsidered.³

To this message Cunningham replied next day, repeating and reinforcing the arguments he had already put forward the day before and reporting that the 5500 men left in Sfakia had been given orders to capitulate.⁴

ix

But this account of the background of the decisions taken in the Middle East has already carried us ahead of events in Crete itself. It is now time to turn back and give an account of the last night of evacuation.



¹ C-in-C Med to Admiralty, 1541 C, 31 May; C-in-C Med to Admiralty, 1043, 1 Jun.

² F/ Crete/1, p. 182.

³ O. 494, Admiralty to C-in-C Med, 11.30 p.m., 31 May.

⁴ C-in-C Med to Admiralty, 2031 and 1043.

As the evening of 31 May came on, the battalions of 5 Brigade called in their outlying pickets and then, when it was dark, closed in on one another and prepared to march. At about nine o'clock they were all on the move towards [Sfakia](#) 'in a solid block and at a slow pace so that none could break in from the Donga to [Sphakia](#).' ¹ By 10 p.m. the head of the column had reached the beach. A quarter of an hour later three motor landing craft that had hidden up all day along the coast appeared and the first lift of men shuffled thankfully aboard. At twenty minutes past eleven the ships themselves—they had survived three attacks by enemy bombers on the way—drew in. For half an hour they landed stores. And then 5 Brigade began to embark.

For Brigadier Hargest it had been a hard day. Since 7 p.m. he had been supervising in [Sfakia](#) and on the beach.

I was exhausted and the continual importuning was terribly hard to resist—I felt it would be easier to stay.... I met others whom I sent to join their units, others who had straggled I turned away. We came to the village where an air raid was in progress so we sheltered, then went in to see the arrangements. They were right so as the shadows fell we sat and waited. Later in the moonlight three small shapes appeared, the MLCs. They came slowly up to the beach and put their prows down. We sat on in perfect peace. Then a dark shape appeared low in the sky. A Hun—no—a Sunderland Flying Boat. It dipped and landed somewhere out of sight.

It was nearly midnight when low shapes slid into view; one, two, three, four, five. The [Navy](#), God bless them. The flash of a signal, an order from the beach master and the men silently pushed aboard the MLCs.

Indeed, so far as things could go well on such a night—when every man capable of thinking of others besides himself was torn between relief at his own departure

and regret for those who must be left behind—they went well for 5 Brigade. One by one the battalions passed through the cordon.

For the Australian and British units things went less well. At 9 p.m. 19 Brigade HQ, its two battalions, and the Royal Marine battalion had begun to move from their defence area. The 2/8 Battalion came in the wake of 5 Brigade; but 2/7 Battalion and the Marines appear to have come down the main track from the escarpment. While they were still some considerable distance from the beach they found this track, a narrow one, blocked with waiting men and officers claiming to be cordon officials and active in challenging identities.

Brigadier Vasey and two of his staff went forward to investigate while the troops waited in the rear. At first all seemed to be going smoothly with the embarkation in front. Then there were delays

¹ Report by Brig Hargest.

before the boats were filled, though the 250 men of 2/8 Battalion got through without difficulty, no doubt because they had arrived early with 5 Brigade.

Fearful that his men might be held up in getting forward to the beach Vasey now sent back his two staff officers to hurry them on. While these two were away the pace began to quicken and by 2.15 a.m. most of 2/7 Battalion seems to have been near the beach in spite of having been continually hampered.

By this time Vasey was in great anxiety. For the [Navy](#) had told him that the last boats would be leaving at half past two. Two large MLCs, each capable of holding 180 men, were to carry out this lift. One of his staff now told the Brigadier that the commander of 2/7 Battalion was on the beach. Vasey therefore concluded that all was well. The two boats were loaded and set off, Brigadier Vasey apparently travelling with them.

It was not till he reached [Alexandria](#) that he discovered the true situation. The officials controlling movement to the beach seem not to have been told that 2/7 Battalion was to embark or that this was the last night. Because the [Navy](#) on previous occasions had been able to embark more than its quota, many extra troops

had been allowed on or near the beach so that if this should happen again advantage could be taken of it. In consequence of these two things 2/7 Battalion had not been able to get forward in time, and no doubt its commander had come forward to see if he could expedite matters. His presence then misled Vasey into thinking the whole battalion was there.

Thus an occasion tragic enough in itself—for whatever happened many fine soldiers would have to be left behind—was made more so by the loss of a battalion which had fought well all the time that it was engaged and which in these last days had held out nobly in a position where on its endurance rested the security of the whole force. ¹

The Royal Marine battalion and some of [Layforce](#) were a little more fortunate. The last boats were in fact held back till 2.45 a.m. By then 100 Marines were aboard, two officers and 25 men of [Layforce](#), and the two officers and 14 men of 2/7 Battalion. The remaining space was taken by those awaiting places, among them Major Bliss and a party of New Zealand gunners who had come down on the chance that there might be places to spare. All in all and counting about eighty walking wounded, about 4000 men were taken off.

While the embarkation was still going on General Weston had appeared and invited Brigadier Hargest to leave with him in the

¹ Two officers and 14 other ranks were embarked.

Sunderland flying boat. Hargest declined unless he could see his men embarked first. Weston ordered him to come. 'You can do no more here; you may be urgently needed in [Cairo](#). I must order you and your staff to come with me. That settled it. We went.' ¹

¹ Brig Hargest.

CRETE

V: THE CAPITULATION: 1 JUNE

V: The Capitulation: 1 June

i

The troops who were embarked in this last evacuation had an uneventful passage and reached [Alexandria](#) at 5 p.m. on 1 June. But the [Navy's](#) trials endured to the last. To give the convoy additional protection the AA cruisers [Calcutta](#) and [Coventry](#) had been sent to meet it early in the morning. Shortly after nine o'clock they were attacked by two bombers and [Calcutta](#) was sunk. [Coventry](#) picked up 255 survivors and returned to [Alexandria](#).

Meanwhile Brigadier Hargest had arrived in [Alexandria](#) about 4 a.m. and gone on by train to [Cairo](#). Here he joined [General Freyberg](#) in consultations with General Wavell, Admiral Cunningham and Air Marshal Tedder, and presumably General Weston. Their prime concern was for those left behind. Already the previous day arrangements had been made for the dropping of rations by aircraft this night and the arrangements were now confirmed. There was nothing more that could be done. Weston had explained that he had left orders behind for capitulation; and in any case, as Cunningham had already told the Admiralty and now repeated in a further message, the shipping situation did not permit another attempt.

All that there was left for [Freyberg](#) and his senior officers to do was to return to their battered Division and begin the painful task of building it up once more for the many hard battles which were still to come, and in which they could hope that with a reconstituted force they would deal the enemy blows as severe as those given him in [Crete](#) but with a better outcome.

ii

Colonel Utz had been promised support from the German Air Force on 1 June but only eight aircraft appeared—four Stukas and four twin-engined fighters—and these attacked [Sfakia](#). As this attack ended the infantry gun on Point 892 began to fire with

notable effect, and 7 and 8 Companies, on their own initiative, began to move forward.

But Lieutenant-Colonel Colvin had his orders from General Weston to capitulate. Early in the morning he had called the officers in command of the various groups and announced his intention, producing the written order as proof that he had been so commanded. Then Lieutenant-Colonel Walker of [2/7 Australian Battalion](#) appeared and, finding he was the senior, Colvin handed him the orders. Deciding that resistance was hopeless, Walker told his men to destroy their equipment and escape if they could. Then, at [Komitadhes](#), he found an Austrian officer and surrendered to him. ¹ To many the news came as a severe shock. Major Bull, who was not present at the conference, sent a representative before he could be finally convinced that it was true. The reaction of the rank and file can be gauged from the following representative samples:

We were ordered to pile arms (after having got rid of the bolts of course) and remove headgear. This caused the best argument I've ever been in—who were we to be ordered to surrender—let those who wanted to do so, do so, we'd go our own way. The only reasoning that clearly showed us how impossible the position was was the crash of mortar bombs immediately below us, a horde of Messerschmitts and a lot of Germans, tommy-gunners, blocking our escape. ²

And again:

God Almighty! what a blow. A Prisoner of War. Me, I had had visions of wounds, death from various causes, including a fight to the finish in the event of a hand to hand go, but a prisoner, never. It was something that I had never reckoned on. The realisation was stupefying, dumbfounding. In all my previous existence and I had then had nearly 35 years of it, [never] had I received news that had knocked me all of a heap as this had.

Well, the next thing was what was to do now. Stay and take the consequences or bugger off into the hills. One could not go straight back into the hills as the Germans were coming down towards us from there. The only safe exit was along the coast towards the East. But then there was the problem of food. The majority of us by this time were thoroughly undernourished and now we had to depend on our

captors to supply us with food. There was nothing left in the food dump and what little I had collected was not going to carry me far. ³

It was not only the New Zealanders who were bewildered and surprised and confronted with this sudden necessity to choose between surrendering according to orders or taking to the hills. Not a few now and still more later, after they had tasted the life of the prison camp, thought like an Australian whom Driver Farley mentions:

'The bastards are not laying hands on me. I'm for the hills,' said one Aussie, and away he went along with a few followers.

Others busied themselves while there was still time with the two disabled MLCs off the beach and these were got going and set off

¹ Draft history of Australian forces in Crete.

² Report by [Gnr A. H. Whitcombe](#).

³ [Dvr C. Farley](#).

to the south, finally managing to reach the coast of North Africa after much hardship and danger. ¹

But the majority, weary and hungry as they were, surrounded and with the definite command to capitulate in front of them, decided that there was nothing for it but to obey. Destroying their weapons they made their way to [Sfakia](#) and surrendered to the enemy's advance patrols. Their captors, still at the honeymoon stage of victory and with that generosity towards a defeated enemy that is more often found among front-line soldiers than anywhere behind the line, shared rations with them and, fantastically enough, played tunes for them on accordions; an idyll interrupted by the arrival of further enemy aircraft bombing and strafing in ignorance of the surrender.

As the afternoon went on the enemy arrived in greater force. I Battalion of 100 Mountain Regiment was sent on towards Loutro in pursuit of stragglers, while the

rest of the force set to work rounding up the prisoners. How many these were it is difficult now to ascertain. Estimates by those on the spot say about 5000; enemy claims for 1 June were 3000, but by 2 June 5 Mountain Division was claiming 6500 and this figure seems not unlikely.

As the prisoners were rounded up they were directed back up the escarpment and along the road towards [Canea](#), even more weary, hungry, and footsore than they had been when they came down it only a few days before; and this time cheered by no hope of reaching the ships and escaping to Egypt to fight another day.

¹ See [Appendix VII](#).

CRETE

CHAPTER 12 – CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 12

Conclusion

i

Now that the tragic story of the battle is complete it may be useful to recapitulate some of the important points which, though implicit or explicit in the narrative, have perhaps been obscured by the length of the narrative or its detail. These can best be reviewed under the broad heads of preliminaries to battle, conduct of the battle, and consequences.

The main shortcomings of the situation that confronted [General Freyberg](#) from the first arose partly from the island's topography, partly from the inadequacy of the preparation and planning that had already taken place, and partly from the special circumstance that most of the force which was to do the fighting had just been evacuated from [Greece](#).

The topography of the island has already been discussed and it will be enough here to repeat that [Crete](#) was 160 miles long by 40 miles deep and that its main road, its best harbours, its chief towns and its airfields all lay in the north, while the ports on the south coast and the roads communicating with them were few and undeveloped.

These facts permit the levelling of an important criticism against the policy of the first months of British occupation. The strategic value of the island had never been disputed and British troops had been landed there as early as October 1940. Why, in the six months between then and the beginning of the invasion, was not something done to develop the south coast ports and the roads to them and to construct less vulnerable airfields?

Part of this charge can be met only by a mea culpa. Middle East Command seems to have been to some extent bemused by the fact that [Suda Bay](#) and the Fleet's needs were the primary concern. And the consequence of this—that [Suda Bay](#) could not be held unless the island was held and that a defence policy for the whole island was needed—seems never to have been fairly and squarely grasped. Had it been, a careful appreciation would surely have been made and a single, energetic

commander with the status and experience that would ensure a hearing, with a definite role and with the men and means to carry it through, would have been appointed.

These essential conditions were never present. Yet, having admitted so much, we should remember also the very heavy burdens General Wavell had to bear at this time: he was overworked and had to assist a staff still not sufficiently experienced or decentralised, he was harassed by operations of the most urgent character which pressed behind one another without interval, he was constantly preoccupied with the problems of active battle areas, of administration, of supply and of [Middle East](#) politics. It is perhaps too much to expect him to have had the prescience to foresee that the quiet island of the 1940 autumn was to be the theatre of such dramatic events in the following May.

Even had the prescience been there and even if the appreciation had been made, it is doubtful whether really effective measures could have been taken to reverse the chief disadvantage of the defence— its vulnerability to attack from the north. To have done so would have meant enlarging the south coast ports, building new roads and airfields, and shifting the administrative and supply centre south from the front line which the north coast, in the event of invasion, must certainly become. Commitments in the [Western Desert](#), in [Greece](#), and in the other active areas of the [Middle East](#) meant that there was a complete insufficiency of engineers, material and transport. ¹ Labour could not be recruited in [Crete](#) itself because the able-bodied men had been mobilised, and to use the old men and boys who were left would have required transport, communications, and staff that were not to be spared. And the shipping was lacking also, especially once the expedition to [Greece](#) had been decided on.

The same defence can be made in principle against criticisms about the strength of the garrison in units and armament. The earlier part of this history should have made it clear that Wavell found it difficult to spare the units he did send. Anti-aircraft weapons, tanks and guns were all woefully short: for the armaments programme was still not yet in full production, losses in [France](#) had still to be made good, and there were all the demands on inadequate resources of which the first volumes of [Mr. Churchill's](#) history give so vivid a picture. There was shortage everywhere; but in the vast areas under Wavell's command the needs were all the more desperate

because he was far from the sources of supply and yet was seldom without a campaign either on his hands or

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Once that had happened Wavell must have seen as clearly as [General Freyberg](#) that the difficulties of holding [Crete](#) in such conditions were most formidable. He must have seen that a force large enough to hold off invasion could hardly be supplied from the northern ports—so inadequate in themselves and so exposed to air attack—without an air force strong enough to match the [Luftwaffe](#) as the [RAF](#) had matched it over [Britain](#) after [Dunkirk](#). Yet not only were the aircraft lacking; there were not enough airfields from which to operate them successfully. For such airfields as there were had been developed with an eye to the assistance of the Greek campaign, not to the defence of [Crete](#) itself. So they were too few, too exposed and far to the north, too undeveloped, and too easily saturated by enemy air attack.

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It does not follow that [Freyberg](#) must be held responsible for the omission. According to him the Chiefs of Staff wanted the airfields left intact against a time when they should be able to send aircraft which could use them. [General Freyberg](#), against his judgment, had to comply. The explanation is consistent with the optimism which existed in quarters remote from the scene and is likely enough, though confirmatory evidence from [London](#) sources is not yet forthcoming.

With such qualifications as these observations entail, the historian can conclude that the preliminary measures taken on the island in May were reasonable in their character and as effective as could fairly be expected. Few enemy landed without men to oppose them. The men had weapons, knew what to expect, were in good heart, and fought magnificently.

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In contrast at almost all points with the situation of the defence was that of the enemy. True, his plans were laid relatively late—though from the first the Germans had seen the importance of [Crete](#) and had tried to persuade the Italians to seize the island. The inertia of the Italians prevented these persuasions from being effective and the Germans had perforce to wait till [Greece](#) was practically overrun. But, the decision to invade [Crete](#) once taken, they had much in their favour. The only straitening circumstance was that the attack on [Russia](#) had high priority and must not be delayed. That condition had little effect on the battle of [Crete](#) except to quicken the tempo of its planning and compel the use of 5 Mountain Division instead

of 22 Airborne Division which had been specially trained for such actions. Enough troops and ample air forces were available—the troops of the highest quality and the aircraft in such numbers as to have complete control of the sky. Heavy weapons must be lacking till the means could be found to get them across. But since the troops had a very high proportion of automatic weapons and since their aircraft could act as mobile artillery, this was not so serious a disadvantage as it might have been if the defence were not from the first as badly off.

The fault, in so far as there was a fault, lay with the enemy's intelligence and planning. He overestimated the sympathy of [Crete](#)'s civil population, he underestimated the strength and sturdiness of the garrison. Worse still, he failed to locate its concentrations and, while full credit must be given to the excellent camouflage of the defenders, it may be added for the sake of the irony that it was the enemy's very strength in the air that was to help throw out his appreciation. For with strafing aircraft never far off, the defence was careful never to expose itself to observation by day.

Even allowing for these wrong estimates on the enemy's part, however, his plan of attack can hardly avoid disparagement. For it should surely have been assumed that the points which he most wanted to seize were those most likely to be defended. Yet he chose to land his striking force directly on top of them and thus lost his finest troops on a scale which would not have been necessary had he chosen areas farther away from the airfields. Thus had he concentrated the whole of [Group West](#) in the territory west of [Maleme](#), they could have landed and organised without opposition and could still have been able to launch a formidable assault on the airfield during the first day.

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Yet, it will be said, for all the defects in the German plan, it was successful. True, but successful only in its main objective and by a far narrower margin than circumstances really made necessary. If it be remembered that all plans aim to be successful with the minimum of time and loss, and that a plan under which [Canea](#) fell on 27 May and not on 20 May and only after losses in the neighbourhood of 7000 killed and wounded, it will be recognised that the success was too dearly paid for to be spoken of without serious qualification.

The question remains. Need it have been successful at all, given the conditions under which the battle opened? Supposing the enemy had failed at [Maleme](#), would not the whole invasion have collapsed? The answer is doubtful. This was a time and a stage of the war when [Hitler](#) had had no practice in acknowledging failure and when prestige was one of his best weapons. Had his commanders decided on the evening of 20 May that [Maleme](#) was a failure, they might still have switched their effort to [Heraklion](#) or [Retimo](#) and devoted to reinforcement there the resources that were to go in the event to [Maleme](#).

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It may be said at the outset that [Britain](#) deserved to lose it. However justifiable in detail the reasons for pitting an ill-equipped, ill-armed and ill-organised force, without aircraft and without adequate preparation, against a highly trained and equipped force which had all the aircraft it needed and the initiative as well, the side that accepts battle at such disadvantage must attribute more to fortune than to merit if it holds what it set out to hold or gets what it set out to get.

Yet, for all this, the case may be made that [Crete](#) could have been held. Had [22 Battalion](#) not fallen back on the night of 20 May, it can be said, had counter-attack

come on 21 May or earlier on the night of 21 May, the enemy might have been driven off the airfield and the defence reorganised.

The reply must stand on the facts as they were known at the time; and the details have already been discussed. Given the circumstances at every vital stage, different courses from those actually taken have the strength and the weakness of hypotheses. They might have succeeded and it cannot be proved that they would have failed; but, on the other hand, it cannot be proved that they would have succeeded either. And in fact it is probable that things took the course they had to take. Each decision taken was the consequence of the concrete conditions of the battle: lack of artillery, lack of aircraft, and—perhaps most of all—lack of communications. These conditions determined the decisions of local commanders.

Thus at each crisis of the battle each commander could defend the decision he took in the light of what he knew at the time; and that is basically a stronger position than that of us who criticise the decisions in the light of what we know now and support other possible courses of action in the light of what we shall never know.

This is not to deny that criticism is possible. It is to suggest the background against which the critic must scrutinise his own criticism; and to remind speculation that the criticisms made or implied in the course of this narrative are always subject to similar reservations. And, lest the historian seem unwilling to commit himself, he may be permitted to say that, given all the disadvantages against which the commanders had to struggle, he does not doubt that mistakes were made but does not think they were more numerous or more culpable than the mistakes made, say, at [Alamein](#). Only the odds were greater and mistakes correspondingly more dangerous.

One thing at least can be said roundly, in a field where little is certain. Soldiers never fought better than they fought on [Crete](#); and not least among them the soldiers of the New Zealand Division. No blame for the loss of the island can fall on the rank and file. Nor should this be taken as implying discredit to commanders. No men ever held positions of responsibility in conditions more inimical to success than did the senior officers in [Crete](#); and no men ever discharged their responsibilities more devotedly.

Crete, then, fell. The focus of the war shifted elsewhere. The loss of the island and the loss of so many good men was a serious blow. Prestige was hurt when a success was badly needed. And the enemy won a position from which he could threaten the British forces at every point in North Africa and the Levant, and from which he could virtually bar a passage to the Eastern Mediterranean to our convoys.

Against this it is mere speculation to set any delay to the opening of the campaign against Russia; and even should it be proved such a delay was caused by the battle, credit could be claimed only doubtfully since delay to the invasion of Russia was not a motive for the defence of Crete. It is better simply to consider the facts: after Crete the enemy concentrated on attacking Egypt from the Western Desert. Student had argued that from Crete the Germans could go on to seize Cyprus and ultimately Suez. There is no evidence that Hitler was ever persuaded of the need to go further than Crete; and his general treatment of the North African front does not suggest that he ever discerned its true importance. But, in the words of General Student, 'Crete was the grave of the German parachutist'; and the victory of our defeat was that never again, against Cyprus or elsewhere, were the parachutists launched from the air en masse to gain victory at the cost of crippling losses.

CRETE

I

i

Now that the tragic story of the battle is complete it may be useful to recapitulate some of the important points which, though implicit or explicit in the narrative, have perhaps been obscured by the length of the narrative or its detail. These can best be reviewed under the broad heads of preliminaries to battle, conduct of the battle, and consequences.

The main shortcomings of the situation that confronted [General Freyberg](#) from the first arose partly from the island's topography, partly from the inadequacy of the preparation and planning that had already taken place, and partly from the special circumstance that most of the force which was to do the fighting had just been evacuated from [Greece](#).

The topography of the island has already been discussed and it will be enough here to repeat that [Crete](#) was 160 miles long by 40 miles deep and that its main road, its best harbours, its chief towns and its airfields all lay in the north, while the ports on the south coast and the roads communicating with them were few and undeveloped.

These facts permit the levelling of an important criticism against the policy of the first months of British occupation. The strategic value of the island had never been disputed and British troops had been landed there as early as October 1940. Why, in the six months between then and the beginning of the invasion, was not something done to develop the south coast ports and the roads to them and to construct less vulnerable airfields?

Part of this charge can be met only by a mea culpa. Middle East Command seems to have been to some extent bemused by the fact that [Suda Bay](#) and the Fleet's needs were the primary concern. And the consequence of this—that [Suda Bay](#) could not be held unless the island was held and that a defence policy for the whole island was needed—seems never to have been fairly and squarely grasped. Had it

been, a careful appreciation would surely have been made and a single, energetic commander with the status and experience that would ensure a hearing, with a definite role and with the men and means to carry it through, would have been appointed.

These essential conditions were never present. Yet, having admitted so much, we should remember also the very heavy burdens General Wavell had to bear at this time: he was overworked and had to assist a staff still not sufficiently experienced or decentralised, he was harassed by operations of the most urgent character which pressed behind one another without interval, he was constantly preoccupied with the problems of active battle areas, of administration, of supply and of [Middle East](#) politics. It is perhaps too much to expect him to have had the prescience to foresee that the quiet island of the 1940 autumn was to be the theatre of such dramatic events in the following May.

Even had the prescience been there and even if the appreciation had been made, it is doubtful whether really effective measures could have been taken to reverse the chief disadvantage of the defence— its vulnerability to attack from the north. To have done so would have meant enlarging the south coast ports, building new roads and airfields, and shifting the administrative and supply centre south from the front line which the north coast, in the event of invasion, must certainly become. Commitments in the [Western Desert](#), in [Greece](#), and in the other active areas of the [Middle East](#) meant that there was a complete insufficiency of engineers, material and transport. ¹ Labour could not be recruited in [Crete](#) itself because the able-bodied men had been mobilised, and to use the old men and boys who were left would have required transport, communications, and staff that were not to be spared. And the shipping was lacking also, especially once the expedition to [Greece](#) had been decided on.

The same defence can be made in principle against criticisms about the strength of the garrison in units and armament. The earlier part of this history should have made it clear that Wavell found it difficult to spare the units he did send. Anti-aircraft weapons, tanks and guns were all woefully short: for the armaments programme was still not yet in full production, losses in [France](#) had still to be made good, and there were all the demands on inadequate resources of which the first volumes of [Mr. Churchill's](#) history give so vivid a picture. There was shortage everywhere; but in

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CRETE

II

ii

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CRETE

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CRETE

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Yet, for all this, the case may be made that [Crete](#) could have been held. Had [22 Battalion](#) not fallen back on the night of 20 May, it can be said, had counter-attack come on 21 May or earlier on the night of 21 May, the enemy might have been driven off the airfield and the defence reorganised.

The reply must stand on the facts as they were known at the time; and the details have already been discussed. Given the circumstances at every vital stage, different courses from those actually taken have the strength and the weakness of hypotheses. They might have succeeded and it cannot be proved that they would have failed; but, on the other hand, it cannot be proved that they would have succeeded either. And in fact it is probable that things took the course they had to take. Each decision taken was the consequence of the concrete conditions of the battle: lack of artillery, lack of aircraft, and—perhaps most of all—lack of communications. These conditions determined the decisions of local commanders.

Thus at each crisis of the battle each commander could defend the decision he took in the light of what he knew at the time; and that is basically a stronger position than that of us who criticise the decisions in the light of what we know now and support other possible courses of action in the light of what we shall never know.

This is not to deny that criticism is possible. It is to suggest the background against which the critic must scrutinise his own criticism; and to remind speculation that the criticisms made or implied in the course of this narrative are always subject to similar reservations. And, lest the historian seem unwilling to commit himself, he may be permitted to say that, given all the disadvantages against which the commanders had to struggle, he does not doubt that mistakes were made but does not think they were more numerous or more culpable than the mistakes made, say, at [Alamein](#). Only the odds were greater and mistakes correspondingly more dangerous.

One thing at least can be said roundly, in a field where little is certain. Soldiers never fought better than they fought on [Crete](#); and not least among them the soldiers of the New Zealand Division. No blame for the loss of the island can fall on the rank and file. Nor should this be taken as implying discredit to commanders. No men ever held positions of responsibility in conditions more inimical to success than

did the senior officers in [Crete](#); and no men ever discharged their responsibilities more devotedly.

CRETE

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Crete, then, fell. The focus of the war shifted elsewhere. The loss of the island and the loss of so many good men was a serious blow. Prestige was hurt when a success was badly needed. And the enemy won a position from which he could threaten the British forces at every point in North Africa and the [Levant](#), and from which he could virtually bar a passage to the Eastern Mediterranean to our convoys.

Against this it is mere speculation to set any delay to the opening of the campaign against [Russia](#); and even should it be proved such a delay was caused by the battle, credit could be claimed only doubtfully since delay to the invasion of [Russia](#) was not a motive for the defence of Crete. It is better simply to consider the facts: after [Crete](#) the enemy concentrated on attacking Egypt from the [Western Desert](#). Student had argued that from [Crete](#) the Germans could go on to seize [Cyprus](#) and ultimately [Suez](#). There is no evidence that [Hitler](#) was ever persuaded of the need to go further than [Crete](#); and his general treatment of the North African front does not suggest that he ever discerned its true importance. But, in the words of General Student, ' [Crete](#) was the grave of the German parachutist'; and the victory of our defeat was that never again, against [Cyprus](#) or elsewhere, were the parachutists launched from the air en masse to gain victory at the cost of crippling losses.

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CRETE

APPENDIX I – ‘CRETE NEWS’

Appendix I *‘Crete News’*

From the first the troops on Crete were cut off from all the regular sources of information about events in the outer world. There were no newspapers, wirelesses were very few and, in any case, the BBC was difficult to get. Civilian sets found it easier to get German stations and the circumstances were ideal for Lord Haw-Haw's sardonic malice. Armies are at all times forcing-houses for rumour and the Greeks are adept at its propagation. Where facts are few and imaginations active the truth is at a disadvantage.

General Freyberg quickly realised that rumours, defeatist or wildly optimistic, were rife and dangerous. The best counter-attack, he decided, was a troops' newspaper. With the New Zealand Division was Second-Lieutenant G. S. Cox, an experienced journalist in civil life who had already become famous before the war as a foreign correspondent for leading London dailies. General Freyberg summoned him and gave him his orders. He was to produce a paper as close as possible in format and content to the newspapers with which the troops were familiar in peacetime and which they associated with facts and the respect for facts. The first number was to appear as soon as might be, preferably on Monday, 12 May. It was already Wednesday, 7 May, when the interview took place.

By ransacking Canea Cox found a Greek journalist, one Georges Zamyas, who had a case of French type. It had been in Athens, where the French had intended to start a French propaganda newspaper, and Georges had brought it with him to Crete when evacuation took place. The next step was to find a press, paper and compositors. The proprietor of the Canea evening newspaper agreed to let Cox use his presses by night. Paper was promised by Prince Peter, then liaison officer between the Greek and British forces. And the Greek commanding officer promised the services of a Greek compositor, one Alexei, who was then with the Greek forces. Two New Zealand soldiers, Privates Barry Michael and A. Membry, who had been

reporters in civil life, were next acquired and with Lieutenant Cox formed the editorial staff. And a third New Zealander, Private Alec Taylor, who had been a compositor and printer, rounded off the team.

An editorial office was established in a room at 'Fernleaf House', the HQ of more secret activities. The printing shop was a cellar-basement, staffed by an overworked Greek called Niko and two girls. None of the three spoke English. All the type had to be set up by hand and the presses operated by treadle.

The editorial office acquired a wireless and it was decided to rely on the [BBC](#) for news. The paper would be a single sheet, double-sided. A woodblock was cut for the title The Crete News. And an English schoolmaster from Chios, Mr. Graham, was brought in to teach the New Zealanders the rudiments of Greek.

On Tuesday, 13 May, the first issue was ready for press. It was to appear next day, only two days behind [General Freyberg's](#) original schedule. But now troubles began. The printing shop was found to be padlocked and the proprietor had departed with the key for an unknown destination. Apparently he had become jealous of the new eminence of Georges Zamaryas. Cox got some clues to his whereabouts, commandeered a truck, and located him in a [Karatsos](#) café. Here Zamaryas harangued, threatened, and cajoled until the key was produced. With it the truck returned to [Canea](#) only to face the task of finding Alexei who had also disappeared. He was soon run to earth in the Greek barracks and shanghaied back to the printing shop.

All hands now turned to. It soon appeared that there was a deficiency of the letter 'w'. The problem was solved by using the Greek letter omega. By eight o'clock that night paged proofs were ready for correction by flashlight held over the type. This laborious process took two and a half hours. The paper was then ready for machining. The editorial staff took it to the presses and then went off to eat to the accompaniment of an air raid.

They returned to find only six copies printed and no printer. The raid had sent him to the hills and he did not return. Niko and the editors set to work printing the paper themselves. By two o'clock next morning it was ready for distribution.

For the second number three more New Zealanders—Privates I. Bryce, A.

Brunton and J. Gould—were borrowed from 18 Battalion. The paper appeared on 19 May. By this time bombing raids were incessant. The invasion was obviously not very far away.

On 20 May it began. Lieutenant Cox decided further issues were impossible, took up duties with the Intelligence staff at Creforce HQ, and attached his men to the Defence Platoon. There was too much happening that day for anyone to think about newspapers.

But on 21 May the situation round [Canea](#) had become quiet and the journalists began to get bored. Two of them went back to their unit and the rest came to Cox to point out that they would be more usefully occupied in producing the paper than in doing nothing. He himself was unable to promise much help because there was much to be done at Creforce, but he agreed to the resumption of the paper. A staff of four New Zealanders went to work.

For this issue the [BBC](#) was not available. But the news of the world was now in 'their own backyard', and the destruction of the invasion fleet on the night of 21 May won the headlines of the third issue when it appeared on 22 May. Two notices which took the place of editorials may be quoted:

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This number got to the front line by liaison officers, and beyond the front line—Lieutenant Cox was to find copies later in the pockets of enemy prisoners. The next number was planned for Saturday, 24 May. This was the day the enemy aircraft set about the methodical obliteration of Canea. By three o'clock in the afternoon the town was in flames. The composing room, fortunately, had by now been shifted into a cave. But there were worries enough. In the later afternoon when Cox made his way there through blazing streets he found Georges in a state of great anxiety. The paper shed had been hit. A truck was needed to rescue the paper. This problem dealt with, Cox went to his compositors.

The cave was full of sheltering civilians. The bombs kept raining down. But the compositors, including the two Greek girls, went calmly on, although they were at the open end of the cave and in considerable danger. By five o'clock they had the paper set up and the tray containing the type was carried through the streets to the presses. Cox then went back to his duties at Creforce.

Not long afterwards he learnt that Creforce was to move that night to Suda Bay. He set off to find his editorial staff and warn them. There were fires everywhere flaming through the dark. The street in which the presses were was burning from end to end and he could not reach them. There was nothing for it but to turn back. Both men and paper seemed lost.

Half an hour later his men arrived at Creforce. With them were 600 copies of the fourth and final issue. After these had been printed off the building was well alight; and as they left a bomb secured a direct hit on one of the presses. These 600 copies—except for two which are the only copies known to have survived—had to be dumped in the withdrawal when the truck that carried them had to be destroyed.

CRETE

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CRETE

APPENDIX II – ESCAPE OF THE KING OF GREECE – (BY W. E. MURPHY)

Appendix II

ESCAPE OF THE KING OF GREECE

(By W. E. Murphy)

King George of Greece and his Government had come to Crete with the intention of staying as long as possible. The political reasons for this were obvious and were also appreciated by the British Cabinet. While there was still Greek soil unoccupied by the enemy the legitimate government should remain on it.

Nevertheless, it was also clear that the situation might develop dangerously and that in the event of invasion the presence of the King and his entourage might become an embarrassment to the military commanders. To mitigate this, arrangements were set in train early in May for the evacuation of members of the royal family other than the King and Prince Peter, and of all civilian members of his party whose services could be dispensed with. And on 3 May the King, his Prime Minister (M. Tsouderos), Sir Michael Palairret and General Freyberg agreed that when Freyberg decided that the danger had become too acute he would arrange for evacuation of the Royal party, probably by flying boat, and would issue a statement to the effect that this had taken place at his request and for military reasons. ¹

To the head of the British Military Mission to the Greek Government, Major-General T. G. G. Heywood, the wisdom of this decision seemed very doubtful. If the King waited until the first attack before leaving, he would in any case be accused of leaving for timorous reasons and so nothing would be gained by waiting; indeed the only result would be that evacuation would be made more difficult and dangerous. If, on the other hand, the King left before the invasion, he would be able to concentrate outside Crete on the problems of the Greater Greece movement and the organisation of reinforcements and resistance. The front line which Crete would soon become was not the place for a King and Government with such tasks to carry out.

These doubts were communicated on 8 May to General Freyberg, who had been told meanwhile by the Foreign Office that he was responsible for seeing that the

royal party was not exposed to 'undue risk' but that its presence in Crete was important for its effects at home and in neutral countries. ²

Feeling that there was a conflict of considerations to be settled, General Freyberg had a meeting on 9 May with the King, his Prime Minister and Sir Michael Palaret. The General said that for the party to remain after 14 May was certain to mean the exposure of its members to undue risk.

¹ No. 29, Palaret to Foreign Office, 4 May.

² General Freyberg's Report; C. 243, Creforce to Mideast, 10 May.

He brought the others to this view, concluded arrangements for his taking over command of the Greek army, and had letters prepared in which the decision to evacuate the King and Government was to be explained to the people of Crete. On 10 May he sent General Wavell a message which explained the reasons for the course proposed. ¹

Wavell did not agree. On 12 May he replied that he felt very strongly that the King and Government should remain even if the island was attacked. Freyberg therefore signalled back that he would take no action and would assume that Middle East would send him appropriate orders when the time came. ²

Next day Palaret told the Foreign Office that the King would like to know the reasons for opposition to his evacuation. Both the King and M. Tsouderos felt it was better to go before the German attack because this would look less like flight. Palaret himself, however, felt that their departure before attack might have a bad political effect. The Foreign Office concurred. ³

Finally, on 14 May, Wavell told Freyberg that, while he sympathised with his position, both he and the Foreign Office felt the King should remain; when attack became probable General Freyberg should arrange for a safe place in the hills for the royal party whence they could be evacuated to the south coast if necessary. ⁴

Accordingly General Freyberg arranged that the King and M. Tsouderos should

move inside his HQ perimeter, although the King still believed that evacuation was the better solution. This did not alter the view taken by the Foreign Office and the War Cabinet.⁵

On 17 May the King and M. Tsouderos came to look at their new quarters in the HQ perimeter. Their visit coincided with one from the German bombers. While the King and the Prime Minister took the bombing with notable sang-froid they sensibly decided next day that it was unwise to come into an HQ which had probably been located by the enemy. Instead it was concluded that they should move to M. Tsouderos's house south of [Perivolía](#) from which, if need be, they could readily escape into the mountains. Meanwhile B Company of 18 Battalion had taken over the task of protecting the King and deployed during 18 May to defend his existing residence adjoining Transit Camp 'A'. That evening Colonel J. S. Blunt, the Military Attaché, was put in charge of arrangements to embark the King, M. Tsouderos and their parties, in case of emergency, from a rendezvous on the south coast.⁶

The plan for evacuation, if that became necessary, had been drawn up during the day. The royal party (including the King, Prince Peter, M. Tsouderos and ten other persons) would be escorted by 12 Platoon of B Company under Second-Lieutenant W. H. Ryan, while M. Tsouderos, himself a Cretan, would organise a further escort of armed [Cretans](#); a

¹ C. 243, Creforce to Mideast.

² O. 63677, Mideast to Creforce; C. 248, Creforce to Mideast, 12 May.

³ No. 76, Palaret to Foreign Office; 1509, Foreign Office to [Cairo](#).

⁴ O. 64101, Mideast to Creforce.

⁵ No. 82, Palaret to Foreign Office, 14 May; 1563, Foreign Office to [Cairo](#), 15 May.

⁶ Colonel Blunt's report written at sea on 23 May, and covering letter to

Cretan officer would provide guides and mules. The British Legation party would make its way independently to Tsouderos's house. If a serious situation developed both parties would make their way to Ay Roumeli on the south coast, where they could be evacuated by warship or flying boat not earlier than the second night after leaving [Perivolia](#). The guards, New Zealanders and [Cretans](#), would be prepared to fight to cover the retreat over the mountains. ¹

The royal party moved to the new house in the afternoon of 19 May and 12 Platoon took up defensive positions around it. Colonel Blunt, who stayed behind to complete arrangements with Force Headquarters regarding the rendezvous on the south coast, reached the house after dark. The Legation party did not arrive.

Blunt telephoned Force Headquarters first thing in the morning to find out what he could of enemy activity. His questions were answered almost at once by the sounds of a great many aircraft, and not long afterwards he could see the troop-carriers over [Canea](#). Soon paratroops were dropping, some of them no more than half a mile away. On Blunt's advice the party at once made for the mountains, in such haste that a wireless set manned by two British signallers had to be left, together with the mules; the Cretan escort could not be assembled in time, and 12 Platoon 'had to get out in the clothes we stood up in, our web gear, rifles and ammunition and two Bren guns; we didn't have time to roll a blanket or groundsheet.' ²

There were too many in the party for Ryan's liking and he was afraid that this might hamper him in his personal responsibility—to guard the King and ensure at all costs that he was not taken prisoner. He therefore sent one of his sections ahead to clear the way, split the second into two detachments moving well out on either flank, and told his rear section to keep stragglers well back from the King's party. This remained the marching order for most of the journey. ³

The climb was steep and the hills bare to the blazing sun. Aircraft flew low overhead but the party, despite its size (and the conspicuous, beribboned tunic the King wore, which Ryan eventually persuaded him to change), was not molested. Parachutes on a hillside ahead caused a change of direction to the south-east, which

led through the area of [2 Greek Regiment](#), whose patrols fired on the party until Prince Peter managed to stop them. A detachment of Greek troops, probably from this regiment, joined the party during this stage of the climb. The Prime Minister and his civilian group had become separated but it was learned at 11.30 a.m., when a halt was called at a cave, that they were making for the village of Ay Panayia, farther into the hills. The climb had been exhausting, and the King's party rested in the cave while 12 Platoon took up covering positions.

Here there was time to consider the situation. The loss of the wireless set was serious, for Blunt could not get in touch with Creforce and had no

¹ C. 259, Creforce to Mideast, 18 May, and detailed plan of the same date in [General Freyberg's](#) papers.

² Letter from Pte L. A. Renwick. The platoon sergeant, J. F. Seymour, says three Brens were taken. Blunt says that the rearguard opened fire on the enemy but all NZ sources deny this.

³ Letter from Maj Ryan, 3 Sep 1952.

way of knowing whether the arrangements for evacuation had in fact been followed. The King also wanted some papers and valuables he had left behind at the house. So when some mules arrived at three o'clock the royal party, with the Greek detachment and 12 Platoon less one section, made for Ay Panayia, while Blunt himself led the remaining section, under Sergeant Seymour, back down the hillside.

Seymour was given a list of what he was to fetch from the house and was accompanied by a Cretan interpreter. He found the descent, if anything, more tiring than the climb, and at the last crest before the house learned that it had been in vain; for Germans were guarding the house and grounds in more strength than his section could cope with. Wearily the section trudged back to [Mournies](#)—‘a nightmare march’, Seymour says, ‘tired, thirsty and hungry’—and reported to Colonel Blunt, who had still failed to get through to [Canea](#). Blunt had met Major Wooller, the New Zealand liaison officer with [2 Greek Regiment](#), and learned that German troops blocked the way north. There was nothing for it but to head back again into the hills.

Back at Ay Panayia it was decided that the royal party should carry on to the larger village of Therisson, at the head of a formidable ravine and some 2300 feet above sea level, while Blunt, with Seymour's section, made his way back to Suda. Luckily a civil telephone line—at Ay Panayia, or possibly at Mournies; it is not clear which—was found to be still working, and by means of this, about two in the morning, Blunt managed to speak to the Naval Staff at Suda and heard that the C-in-C Mediterranean had been asked to pick up the party, as planned, at Ay Roumeli on the night of 22–23 May.

The King's party had reached Therisson during the night—a cold night for Ryan's men, with no blankets or greatcoats and next to no food—and there Blunt, with Seymour's section, caught up with them at noon on the 21st. Private Renwick had 'happened to acquire' a donkey earlier, and then two more, and so the infantry were relieved of some of their burden when the climb was resumed.

Far below 'the whole area seemed covered with coloured parachutes Several planes were burning on the Airfield and others were landing and taking off' But this scene was viewed with mixed feelings by some members of 12 Platoon and one of them, according to Ryan, 'observed to HM that we were losing a great deal of lawful loot on his account ... The King laughed and said that things were not as good as they seemed and gave the boy his field glasses pointing out different points. The boy remained skeptical, as I did, but the King said that, in his opinion, we were already losing heavily, and the Germans were reinforcing.'

The Cretan guides may have been overawed with the gravity of their charge, for they became, as Blunt put it, 'quite unnecessarily over-cautious.' There was a fair route, after a short climb, by way of the large village of Lakkoi and thence south; but the guides took it upon themselves to avoid all villages and followed a sheep track almost straight up the mountainside. Colonel Blunt speaks highly of the way 12 Platoon stood up to this:

Not realising the ordeal ahead, we set off, the platoon carrying Bren guns, sub-machine guns, and two hundred rounds per man. The climb took nearly six hours. It is not possible to speak too highly of the endurance of the New Zealand platoon during this climb, and during the even worse night which followed, when they were obliged to sleep out in the open without blankets or a proper meal at nearly 7,000

feet altitude and in bitter cold. No man fell out except one who went to sleep during an hourly halt and was not missed until the party moved on. He rejoined later. ¹

Corporal G. Fraser and Private Renwick had a hard time with the donkeys; 'we had to find tracks or make them', writes Renwick. 'Snow made it harder ... it wasn't thick but it had frozen and was hard and slippery. Sore and blistered feet didn't help either.'

The night was spent near a shepherd's hut above the snowline on a western shoulder of the [White Mountains](#). Water had been scarce all afternoon and men sucked snow to quench their thirst. The shepherd killed a sheep and his wife milked others ('this was new to us cow cockies', remarked Seymour), a fire was built, and the sheep roasted over the flames. For the New Zealanders, trying miserably to sleep in rock crevices or huddled round the fire or shivering on picket, this night was cold beyond words, and they could all the more sincerely endorse M. Tsouderos's later tribute to the King of [Greece](#): 'With a majestic simplicity he shared with us all dangers, all privations, all hardships.' ²

The descent next morning to the coast promised to be even harder than the climb and it was out of the question to take the animals. The route crossed a steep ridge and then dropped precipitously to a stream bed far below. So it was decided to send back the mules and donkeys, with some of the automatics and ammunition, in the charge of Sergeant Seymour, who took with him ten men of 12 Platoon whose feet were particularly sore. ³ Sergeant L. V. Smith, also of 18 Battalion, who had been attached to 8 Greek Regiment but had escaped capture and, taking to the hills, had joined the party at Therisson on the 21st, took over from Seymour as platoon sergeant. Blunt also sent back the Greek troops and split the royal party into two, the King's group, with 12 Platoon, going ahead and M. Tsouderos with the civilians and an escort of gendarmes following.

There was still a good deal of climbing on the way south, and in the course of this and the slithering down rocks and screes boots and feet suffered further damage. ⁴

Samaria, a village some 1000 feet above sea level and five miles short of the coast, was reached in six and a half hours. There the villagers, after the King

overcame their suspicion that the party might be German, received

¹ Colonel Blunt's report.

² A draft of a history by the late Christopher Buckley, who interviewed M. Tsouderos and Colonel Blunt when they reached [Alexandria](#).

³ '.... everyone in the platoon really thought that the show on the beach was an easy one and there was no lack of volunteers to rejoin the Battalion below.' —Major Ryan.

⁴ Though at least one man of 12 PI, Pte Hugh Ward, 'found it fairly easy going to the coast.'

them warmly. And there a runner from Major-General Heywood arrived to say that the Legation party was at Ay Roumeli, a few miles farther on. (Palairt and his party had set out on 21 May, reached [Sfakia](#) by road, and then sailed westwards to Skotini, striking inland from there to Ay Roumeli, a mile from the coast.)

From Samaria the way led through a deep ravine, in parts along the bed of a stream which was joined on its herringbone way by many a smaller watercourse—another three hours of difficult going. Then, at Ay Roumeli, Lady Palairt prepared a meal. SOS signals sent out to sea eventually drew an answering flash at 1 a.m. from some miles out, but the rescue ship came no closer. In the end Rear-Admiral Turle and Mr. Harold Caccia of the Legation party put out in the small craft which had brought them along the coast, and in an hour returned with the good news that the signals had come from HMS Decoy.

There had been no intention originally of evacuating 12 Platoon but, with no communications to Creforce and no supplies, Blunt thought it inadvisable to leave Ryan's men on the south coast and considered that they were in no 'fit state to make an immediate return march.' So the platoon was taken off. The embarkation was completed by about 4 a.m. and Decoy, together with HMS Hero, set sail for [Alexandria](#) where they berthed late that night. ¹ Second-Lieutenant Ryan's personal responsibility for the King's safety was now discharged. The King was safe and the

nucleus of his Government intact. And [General Freyberg](#), when he heard of it, was relieved of a grave anxiety.

[Freyberg](#)'s mind had not in the meantime been set at rest by Blunt's contact with the Naval Staff at [Suda](#). He needed a firm assurance from [Middle East](#) that the two parties would in fact be evacuated, and that, in the first instance, he did not get. A message to Wavell on 20 May that the King's party would arrive at Ay Roumeli and the Ambassador's party at [Sfakia](#) in the night 22–23 and morning of 21 May respectively, and asking that both be picked up, had received a curious reply next day that neither party need be evacuated, that premature departure would have a seriously adverse effect on Greek opinion, and that the message should be passed to the Minister for comment. ²

[Freyberg](#) then signalled at greater length on 21 May to explain the hopelessness of trying to safeguard the King and his entourage in [Crete](#) in the prevailing circumstances. The British ambassadorial staff had been bombed throughout the previous day and the consul had actually to be dug out. Moreover, he was now out of touch with both parties and was extremely anxious to learn that adequate arrangements had been made for their safety and that his responsibilities in this respect were ended. A further message on 22 May pointed out again that he was out of touch but believed that the Legation party was at Ay Roumeli and that the signal arranged was an SOS by torch. The first of these two messages had the desired effect. [Middle East](#) replied on 22 May that, if possible, word was

¹ This account of the retreat over the mountains has been compiled from Colonel Blunt's report, Buckley's draft history, and letters from Major Ryan, Sgt Seymour, and Ptes Renwick, Ward, and T. G. H. Howell.

² No. 437, Creforce to Mideast; I. 66093, Mideast to Creforce.

to be got to the two parties that they were to assemble at Roumeli by midnight of 22–23 May, that the signal would be three vertical lights, and that the vessel would call in any case but must leave by 4 a.m. on the 23rd. ¹ Hence, no doubt, the reluctance of the Decoy to venture close in when the SOS signals were received.

Sergeant Seymour and his ten men found the return journey painful and had to take it slowly. About lunchtime on the 22nd a Cretan 'turned up with an old white horse', according to Private Howell, 'and I had a turn on his back.' Renwick was in charge of the donkeys and mules and had to suffer the anger of their three owners when he returned them at Therisson. There the detachment settled down for another cold night in the schoolhouse, but the villagers hospitably provided a hot meal and bedclothes. The detachment eventually rejoined 18 Battalion at [Suda Bay](#). It was not a happy reunion. Their company commander and CSM were dead, together with many good friends of 10 and 11 Platoons which had fought so bravely at [Galatas](#),² and the ranks of B Company were thin.

Back in Egypt after the campaign the King of [Greece](#) showed his good opinion of 12 Platoon by conferring decorations on Second-Lieutenant Ryan and members of 18 Battalion who had served in the royal escort. The good opinion was mutual. The King earned respect and admiration and seemed to the New Zealanders to be, as Renwick says, 'a very fine gentleman, he ate and slept with us and always had a cheery word and a joke ... and never did he show signs of weakening under his heavy and sad burden.'

¹ C. 266 and D. 478, Creforce to Mideast; RN. 66378, Mideast to Creforce.

² See pp. 300– 3.

CRETE

APPENDIX III – GERMAN ATTACKS ON 7 GENERAL HOSPITAL AND 6 FIELD AMBULANCE, 18 AND 20 MAY 1941 – (BY W. E. MURPHY)

Appendix III

GERMAN ATTACKS ON 7 GENERAL HOSPITAL AND 6 FIELD AMBULANCE, 18 AND 20 MAY 1941

(By W. E. MURPHY)

ONE or more aircraft dropped bombs within the area of 7 British General Hospital on 18 May, killing three RAMC officers and two orderlies and wounding a third orderly. Following this isolated raid the hospital was bombed and machine-gunned from the air on 20 May and then overrun by paratroops, who drove out patients able to walk, herded them and the hospital staff into the nearby area of 6 NZ Field Ambulance, and later marched their captives towards Galatas.

The hospital area was considered to be well marked with Red Crosses, and these attacks and their sequel have therefore been widely regarded as intentional breaches of the Geneva Convention. ¹ Respect by the enemy for the Red Cross had elsewhere been the rule in the Balkans campaign, but here it was thought an exception had been made because of the tactical importance of the hospital site. The purpose of this study is to test this viewpoint.

The first question is whether the command of 3 Parachute Regiment, which landed in the Galatas area, knew the encampment was a hospital. The main task of this regiment, from its operation order issued on 18 May and signed by the commander, Colonel Richard Heidrich, was to clear the ground around Canea and then capture the town. Under the heading Objectives, the order includes the following:

3 Bn will immediately make a mass attack and occupy the enemy encampment west of Canea immediately south of the three finger-like promontories. ²

This was expanded by the commanding officer of III Battalion, Major Ludwig Heilmann, into a detailed tactical plan, giving the following Battle Tasks:

9 Coy... will immediately after the landing... attack the enemy in the tent encampment from the east. Objective of the attack: small bay west of hospital barracks...

10 Coy will... attack the enemy in the tent encampment from the south. Objective of the attack: centre of camp.

12 Coy will... jointly with 10 Coy, attack the enemy in the tent encampment from the west.

¹ International Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field, signed at Geneva on 27 Jul 1929, and ratified by [Germany](#) on 21 Feb 1934.

² Translations of enemy operation orders are by the Intelligence Branch of GHQ, MEF.

11 Coy will take possession of Galata [sic], block the coastal road west of the encampment with one platoon, and will cover the landing area and fighting area of the battalion against attacks from the west and south.

Heilmann then gave instructions for the ensuing attack on [Canea](#) and ended with details of administration, which included:

Field Dressing Station: Hospital huts in encampment. In case of severe fighting on the landing ground, dressing station will be in the Daratsos area.

Had Heidrich and Heilmann known the encampment was a hospital they might have expected opposition, ¹ but not on a scale warranting the commitment of a full battalion in the critical opening phase of the landing. But their main purpose would seem to have been well served by having their left flank secured by a hospital area extending from the sea shore at the three promontories to the coast road. Had they respected the [Red Cross](#) there it would in turn have helped protect them. It is hard to see what other tactical importance could have attached, in German eyes, to the area. III Battalion intended to land some distance away from the hospital and no further parachute landings were planned, while the sea landing was not to be made

there, according to the report of [11 Air Corps](#), but on the beach west of [Maleme](#). Heilmann's plan, committing all but one company to the attack at the outset, seems to bespeak his ignorance of the fact that the camp was a hospital. He evidently thought it included a 'hospital barracks' and some 'hospital huts', a view which can be considered alongside what can be discovered of the layout of the hospital.

The hospital consisted of a few buildings, a number of marquees, and an assortment of smaller tents covering a large area of open, almost treeless ground. The chief building, used as the officers' mess, was on a slight eminence on the middle promontory and just a few yards from the beach; this was presumably Heilmann's 'hospital barracks'. A small building east of the track leading to the officers' mess and a hut (the cookhouse) some distance to the west were probably the 'hospital huts'. Red Crosses were painted clearly on the roofs of all three buildings and a large one (estimated at thirty feet by twenty) was marked out in stones on the ground between the mess and the sea. The marquees used as hospital wards were mostly grouped near the cookhouse and a large [Red Cross](#) of cloth was laid out on the ground among them. The Red Crosses were therefore widely dispersed over the area and were large enough to be seen from a considerable altitude; visibility at the time was generally good. None of the tents, however, was marked with the [Red Cross](#), though the one laid out among

¹ The Geneva Convention did not forbid the defence of medical establishments under the protection of the [Red Cross](#). Art. 6 says they 'should be respected and protected by the belligerents' but this is qualified in Art. 8 in that certain conditions shall not deprive them of protection and among those conditions are: '(1) that the personnel ... is armed, and that they use the arms in their own defence or that of the sick or wounded in charge; (2) that in the absence of armed orderlies the formation or establishment is protected by a piquet or by sentries....'

the wards could scarcely refer to anything but the surrounding marquees. A [Red Cross](#) flag flew at the entrance to the hospital, where the track joined the coast road.

This, then, was the hospital, so far as it can be described from eye-witness accounts, diagrams, drawings, and ground photographs. It is hard from this to see

how enemy Intelligence could deem the area a military camp with only two or three buildings in it claiming [Red Cross](#) protection. What about the cross laid out among the ward tents? And why such large crosses, especially as that between the mess and the sea, when the building itself was already distinctively marked?

There is no final answer, of course, to such questions; but something more can be said of enemy Intelligence, which so far appears either careless or stupid, if not wilfully neglectful of the Convention. The chief point here is the size of the hospital. The estimate of Allied strength on which [11 Air Corps](#) acted, from its own report, was about a third of the actual strength in terms of units and for total numbers was considerably less. On this estimate a 600-bed hospital as well as a dressing station just west of [Canea](#),¹ a tented hospital south of the town,² and several minor establishments in one sector alone was no doubt unthinkable. Perhaps this fact alone would decide against any suggestion that the whole area claimed protection.

This surmise cannot be confirmed. Nor can other points which have been raised on one side or other of the case be finally upheld or dismissed. Two of them seem to favour the German side but there is no certainty that either was even so much as considered. Armed bodies of troops—small and infrequent according to the officer commanding the Surgical Division³—passed through the area on their way to and from the beach during the days preceding the landing. And steel helmets were worn in the area by medical staff, walking patients, and visitors; experience during the battle and in later campaigns was that Germans forbade the wearing of steel helmets in areas under [Red Cross](#) protection and regarded the wearing of such helmets as indicating the presence of armed troops.⁴

Other points which have been raised are perhaps more contentious. The tents and other installations were in the open, with no attempt at concealment, yet not far from ground offering fair cover; but other tented camps were similarly sited, especially two large ones for Italian prisoners at [Skines](#) and [Fournes](#). Apart from the brief raid on 18 May, the hospital area was not attacked from the air before the day of the landing; but, again, nor were the other camps. Finally, [11 Air Corps](#) reported the capture of 500 prisoners but did not mention that they were hospital patients and staff. Even here there is possibly an excuse for what seems at first glance a clumsy effort to cover up guilt. The company responsible for the incident (10

¹ From a sketch map sent with a message from 10 Bde to Div HQ at 4.25 p.m., 23 May, and taken from a paratroop sergeant who had landed on 20 May. A dressing station of about company strength on the western outskirts of [Canea](#) is marked on it.

² 1 Tented Hospital, RN, of 60 beds.

³ Lt-Col R. K. Debenham, RAMC.

⁴ The practice seems at that time to have been purely German, finding neither sanction in the Convention nor acceptance among other belligerents, though once discovered as such it was naturally followed by British establishments.

Company of Heilmann's battalion; none of his other companies, caught up in fighting elsewhere, reached the scene) was almost wiped out and its doings, according to the report by [11 Air Corps](#), 'only became known at III Battalion and Regiment after the conclusion of the fighting through reports of a few survivors.'¹ The report was signed on 11 June, only a few days after the end of the fighting, allowing little time for detailed inquiry.

The maps appended to the report mark the hospital area firstly as a tented camp² and later by a conventional sign for a transport area. Evidence probably antedating the start of the battle is provided by the sketch map attached to the message already mentioned in a footnote, which marks the area with an oblong containing the letter 'Z'; this can be taken to represent Zeltlager (tented camp) but fits no known initial for medical establishments.³

So much for the points on both sides; the case remains open. It would be speculative to suggest that all or even the main considerations have been covered or that they have been presented as they appeared at the time. But it is hard to quell the suspicion that German Intelligence, poor in its estimates of Allied strength on the island, was again careless or incompetent in failing to perceive that the whole area claimed [Red Cross](#) protection, even though acceptance of this view would probably have entailed a drastic revision of those estimates.

Certainly the raid on 18 May, whatever the pros and cons of the general case, was careless of the [Red Cross](#), perhaps intentionally, in that it straddled the building east of the track, the roof of which was plainly marked, and it was a matter of luck that the building remained unscathed. Equally certainly the enemy, after 20 May, paid scrupulous respect to the [Red Cross](#) for the rest of the campaign.

It has been mentioned that 10 Company received none of the support intended; furthermore it was widely dispersed and only those elements set down near the hospital and ADS seem to have survived the landing. The hospital and ADS were easily occupied, but snipers and small counter thrusts made 10 Company's situation increasingly precarious, steadily thinning its already depleted ranks. The survivors, not knowing which way to turn, decided to make for the south, where the main front was by then established. There was little else they could do. But they foolishly chose to take with them their prisoners and this body of some 500 men proved

¹ The translation is an official British one but the exact source is not stated. The compiler of the report must surely have found it hard to believe that a single company, isolated from the main front and sorely beset, would have been able to capture such a large number of prisoners. Perhaps he thought they were from supply or transport units.

² The sign first used—an arrowhead inside an oblong—is uncommon but appears on maps for an article in the [Luftwaffe](#) publication, *Wie Wir Kämpfen* (1944). The article deals with the Parachute Engineer Bn in [Crete](#), and of the two maps, both of which use this sign with the legend 'tented camp', the second marks the hospital area as two such camps.

³ The letters 'Zw' inside a double oblong with a small cross above it can mean Sanitätszweigpark (Branch Medical Park), but without the cross above it the symbol would be meaningless.

a fatal encumbrance. With guards to front, rear, and flanks the party moved off, and some of the prisoners naturally gained the impression that they were being used as a screen. This seems unlikely; their captors would have been better without them. The author of the history has aptly remarked of the incidents, some of them nasty, which preceded this move:

'Apart from a few cases of bad behaviour which can be explained as due to the nervous excitability of individuals, the paratroops do not seem to have behaved themselves worse than might be expected of worried men in an awkward position, not sure where the defenders were or where they were themselves.'

CRETE

APPENDIX IV — SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS OF ALL BRITISH AND GREEK FORCES IN CRETE, 20 MAY 1941*

Appendix IV

*SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS OF ALL BRITISH AND GREEK FORCES IN CRETE, 20 MAY 1941 **

	Officers	Other Ranks	Total
Royal Navy	25	400	425
British Army	666	14397	15063
Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation (Royal Marines)	92	1849	1941
Royal Air Force	61	557	618
Australian Imperial Forces	327	6213	6540
Greek Army and Gendarmerie	268	9990	10258
NZ Division	381	7321	7702
	—	—	—
Total	1820	40727	42547

*

CREFORCE ORDER OF BATTLE, 20 MAY 1941

	Officers	Other Ranks	Total
Force HQ	28	90	118 *
Force HQ Signals	3	86	89
CRA, CE, ADST, ADOS, ADMS 20	60		80 *
Naval Staff	3	20	23 *
HQ RAF and Signals	20	75	95
	—	—	—
Total	74	331	405
	—	—	—

Heraklion Sector

Sector HQ			
HQ 14 Inf Bde	10	100	110 *
14 Inf Bde Sigs Sec and Misc dets	3	60	63 *
Naval staff	2	20	

22 *

RAC			
Det 3 Hussars (six light tanks)	3	34	37
Det B Sqn 7 RTR (two I tanks at Heraklion ; three at Tymbaki)	3	30	33
Artillery			
234 Med Bty RA (13 field guns, Italian or French 75- and 100-mm)	10	190	200 *
7 Aust LAA Bty (less one tp and one sec—6 Bofors)	5	100	105 *
One Tp 156 LAA Bty RA (4 Bofors)	3	60	63 *
One Sec 15 Coast Regt RA (two 4" guns)	5	80	85 *
Two Secs C Hy AA Bty RM (four 3" guns)	5	118	123
One Tp 23 LAA Bty RM (LMGs only)	2	60	62
Engineers			
CRE	3	20	23 *
One Sec 42 Fd Coy RE	1	70	71 *
Dets 1017 Docks Op Coy and 1038 Arab Stevedore Coy	2	94	96
Infantry			
2 Leicesters	23	614	637
2 Yorks and Lancs	20	722	742
2 Black Watch	34	833	867
2 Argyll and Sutherland (at Tymbaki)	32	623	655
2/4 Aust Inf Bn	33	520	553
7 Med Regt RA, less one Bty	20	300	320 *
3 Greek Regt	20	1080	1100
7 Greek Regt	20	780	800
Greek Garrison Battalion	20	780	800
Medical			
Coy 189 Fd Amb RAMC	3	50	53 *
RASC	10	150	160 *
RAOC	2	50	52 *
RAF			
220 AMES	1	50	51
Airfield Det and 112 Sqn	16	125	141
	—	—	—
sector total	311	7713	8024
	—	—	—

Central Sector (retimo-georgeoupolis)

Sector HQ			
HQ 19 Aust Inf Bde	7	60	67 *
Signal Construction Sec	2	40	42 *
Australian Signals Details	2	60	62 *
RAC			
Det 7 RTR (two I tanks)	1	11	12
Artillery			
Sec 106 RHA (two 2-pdrs a-tk)	1	15	16
'X' CD Bty RM (two 4" guns)	3	84	87
2/3 Field Regt RAA (14 field guns, Italian or French 75- and 100-mm)	15	175	190
Engineers			
2/8 Field Coy RAE	6	145	151
Infantry			
2/1 Aust Inf Bn	32	549	581
2/7 Aust Inf Bn	31	650	681
2/8 Aust Inf Bn	14	370	384
2/11 Aust Inf Bn	35	610	645
2/1 Aust MG Coy	6	164	170
Medical			
B Coy 2/7 Fd Amb	2	50	52 *
AASC Dets	5	100	105 *
Ordnance			
DADOS Retimo, 2/1 Aust Ord Store Coy and Misc dets	10	140	150 *
Miscellaneous units			
Provost	2	75	77 *
Airfield Sigs Dets (Army, RN, RAF)	1	30	31 *
Minor Australian units	7	120	127 *
Greek Units			
4 Greek Regt	50	2250	2300
5 Greek Regt	50	2250	2300
Gendarmerie	20	780	800
	—	—	—
sector total	252	6478	6730
	—	—	—
Maleme Sector (incl galatas)			
HQ NZ Div	12	84	96

NZ Div Sigs	2	42	44
CRE	2	28	30
RAC			
Det 3 Hussars (ten light tanks)	5	70	75
Det B Sqn 7 RTR (two I tanks)	1	12	13
Artillery			
1 Light Tp RA (four 3.7" hows)	4	83	87
5 NZ Field Regt (less Inf Det)	17	239	256
[27 Bty in support of 5 Bde (seven field guns, French and Italian 75-mm; two 3.7" hows) RHQ and 28 Bty in support 10 Bde (two Italian 75-mm, one German 77-mm)]			
One Tp and Sec 156 LAA Bty RA (6 Bofors)	4	90	94 *
One Tp 7 Aust LAA Bty (4 Bofors)	3	80	83 *
One Sec 'C' Hy AA Bty RM (two 3" guns)	2	60	62
'Z' CD Bty RM (two 4" guns)	3	82	85
One Tp 23 LAA Bty RM (LMGs only)	2	60	62
Infantry			
4 NZ Infantry Brigade †			
HQ and Sigs Sec	10	114	124
18 NZ Inf Bn	27	650	677
19 NZ Inf Bn	25	540	565
20 NZ Inf Bn	27	610	637
One Pl 27 NZ (MG) Bn	1	34	35
5 NZ Infantry Brigade			
HQ and Sigs Sec	10	115	125
7 NZ Fd Coy (as Inf)	3	145	148
19 A Tps Coy (as Inf)	6	210	216
21 NZ Bn	24	352	376
22 NZ Bn	24	620	644
23 NZ Bn	24	547	571
28 NZ (Maori) Bn	29	590	619
2 Pls 27 NZ (MG) Bn	4	107	111
1 Greek Regt (at Kastelli)	30	1000	1030
10 NZ Inf Bde			
HQ and Sigs Sec	6	30	36
NZ Div Cav Det	19	175	194
NZ Composite Bn (Arty and ASC)	37	970	1007

4 NZ Fd Regt 18 Offrs 159 ORs

5 NZ Fd Regt 5 Offrs 100 ORs

NZ Div Sup Coln 3 Offrs 140 ORs

NZ Div Pet Coy 7 Offrs 301 ORs

NZ Res MT Coy 4 Offrs 270 ORs

One PI 27 NZ (MG) Bn	1	32	33
6 Greek Regt	39	1446	1485
8 Greek Regt	39	974	1013
Medical			
5 NZ Fd Amb	8	146	154
6 NZ Fd Amb	8	179	187
4 NZ Fd Hyg Sec	1	30	31
7 Brit Gen Hosp (incl 2 NZ GH att)	21	162	183 *
Patients 7 Gen Hosp	10	100	110 *
NZ Dental Corps	2	7	9
HQ NZASC and DID	4	30	34
DADOS Maleme Sector	1	15	16
Miscellaneous			
NZ att Greek units	9	27	36
NZ Provost Coy		72	72
NZ Entertainment Unit	2	28	24
NZE Postal	1	23	24
RAF			
252 AMES	2	54	56
30 and 33 Sqns	19	210	229
Fleet Air Arm			
805 Sqn	5	50	55 *
	—	—	—
Sector Total	535	11324	11859
	—	—	—
Suda Bay Sector			
Sector HQ (incl HQ MNBDO)	29	223	252 *
Suda Sector Signals (Army)	2	40	42 *
NOIC Suda and Naval Base Details	15	300	315 *
MNBDO Signals Coy	6	220	226 *
Artillery			
'M' Group			

HQ 52 LAA Regt RA	6	70	76 *
151 Hy AA Bty RA (eight 3.7" guns)	8	280	288 *
129 LAA Bty RA (12 Bofors)	9	240	249 *
156 LAA Bty, less two tps and one sec (2 Bofors)	3	60	63 *
One Sec 7 Aust LAA Bty (2 Bofors)	2	40	42 *
23 LAA Bty RM, less two tps (LMGs only)	4	100	104 *
'S' Group			
HQ 2 Hy AA Regt RM	4	7	11
'A' Hy AA Bty RM (eight 3" guns)	10	260	270
One Sec 'C' Hy AA Bty RM (two 3" guns)	3	60	63
234 Hy AA Bty RA (eight 3.7" guns)	8	280	288 *
304 S/L Bty RA (20 lights)	10	300	310 *
Sec 106 RHA (two 2-pdrs a-tk)	1	15	16
15 Coast Regt RA, less one sec (four 6" guns, two 4" guns, two 12-pdr guns, two lights)	25	440	465 *
Engineers			
CRE	2	30	32 *
42 Fd Coy RE, less one sec	4	160	164 *
5 NZ Fd Pk Coy	4	116	120
Crete Composite Coy RE	10	200	210 *
1003 Docks Op Coy	5	121	126
RE Stores Depot	4	80	84 *
Aust Engrs and AASC Stevedores	10	350	360 *
NZE Stevedores	2	50	52
Infantry			
1 Welch (Force Reserve)	23	831	854
1 Rangers (9 Bn KRRC)	16	401	417
Northumberland Hussars	11	268	279
106 RHA	16	291	307
2/2 Aust Fd Regt	34	520	554
Det 2/3 Aust Fd Regt	11	295	306
16 Aust Inf Bde Comp Bn (2/2 and 2/3 Bns)	16	427	443
17 Aust Inf Bde Comp Bn (2/4 and 2/5 Bns)	20	367	387
HQ 11 S/L Regt and 'S' S/L Bty RM	14	350	364
'Royal Perivolians' (Dets misc British units)	30	670	700 *
1 Echelon NZ Div Supply Coln	5	140	145

2 Greek Regiment (500 rifles only)	30	900	930
RASC			
231 MT Coy	10	450	460 *
101 Pet Coy	7	250	257 *
1 Pet Depot	2	50	52 *
Two Supply Depots	10	200	210 *
One Base Supply Depot	5	65	70 *
37 DID	2	30	32 *
Dets 1 and 26 Fd Bakery	2	65	67 *
Misc RASC	10	100	110 *
Det EFI	2	50	52 *
Ordnance			
5 Ind Bde Workshops	4	100	104 *
2 Hy AA Workshops RM	1	25	26
52 LAA Workshops	1	50	51 *
DADOS	30	600	630 *
Ord Offr Docks	30	600	630 *
Ordnance Depot	30	600	630 *
Amn Depot	30	600	630 *
Misc Ord Dets	30	600	630 *
Medical			
4 Lt Fd Amb RAMC	4	100	104 *
168 Fd Amb RAMC	2	100	102 *
189 Fd Amb RAMC, less one coy	6	100	106 *
2 Armd Div and 48 Fd Hyg Secs	2	50	52 *
1 Tented Hospital RN	12	52	64
Dets 2/1, 2/2, 2/7 Aust Fd Ambs	8	210	218
Miscellaneous Units			
MNBDO Landing and Maintenance Unit	12	288	300
MNBDO Pioneer and Labour Group	12	288	300
270 FSS	1	20	21 *
Base Pay and Field Cash Office	5	30	35 *
CMP	4	60	64 *
Suda Island Det	1	28	29
RAF Details	3	33	36

Misc Aust minor units	10	130	140 *
Misc British minor units	25	150	175 *
Pioneer and Labour Units			
606 Palestine Pioneer Coy	3	439	442
1004, 1005, 1007, 1008 Cypriot Pioneer Coys	11	688	699
Misc Pioneers		200	200
	—	—	—
Sector Total	607	14215	14822
	—	—	—
Layforce (landed 24–27 May)	40	760	800 *
	—	—	—
Grand Total	1819	40821	42640
	—	—	—

British Army Total known, and figures for infantry and some other units are accurate. Remainder of figures compiled from establishments and any other available information.

Royal Navy No strengths known. All are estimated.

RAF Strengths accurate, based on detailed **RAF** statements.

Royal Marines Strengths reliable, based on exact disembarkation returns on arrival in Crete.

AIF As for the British Army except that more units are known more or less exactly.

Greek Army Strengths as recorded in **Crete** but these were were probably in most cases estimates.

NZ Strengths almost exactly accurate.

Information as to British and Australian units was kindly supplied by British and Australian Historical Sections. Estimates are marked with an asterisk.

* Includes also Layforce which arrived during operations.

† 4 NZ Bde, less 20 Bn, in Force Reserve; 20 Bn under command 10 NZ Bde but acting NZ Div Reserve.

CRETE

APPENDIX V – CASUALTIES

Appendix V *CASUALTIES*

British Forces

	Killed & Died of Wounds	Wounded	Prisoners of War	Total
Royal Navy (Shore establishments only)	No record.		Slight.	
British Army	612 †	224	5314	6151
Royal Marine	114	30	1035	1179
Royal Air Force	71	9	226	306
Cypriots & Palestinians	9	1	396	406
AIF	274	507	3102	3883
New Zealand	671	967	2180 *	3818
	—	—	—	—
Total	1751	1738	12254	15743
	—	—	—	—

Greek Army No figures available. [11 Air Corps](#) reported 5255 prisoners.

Details of British and Australian casualties have been supplied by British and Australian Historical Sections. Number of wounded prisoners of war is not ascertainable except for New Zealand troops. In their case there were 671 killed and 1455 wounded, the killed being 31 per cent of the total. It is reasonable to suppose that the same ratio was general and that about 1700 wounded (excluding NZ wounded), are included in the Prisoner of War columns. Losses at sea in the evacuation from [Heraklion](#) were an additional 260 to 300, while according to Admiral Cunningham (*A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 389) the [Royal Navy](#) lost well over 2000 dead in the operations around Crete.

German casualties

Reports of German casualties in British reports are in almost all cases

exaggerated and are not accepted against the official contemporary German returns, prepared for normal purposes and not for propaganda.

In his report to the Minister of Defence of 12 September 1941, [General Freyberg](#) estimated the German losses at 4000 killed, 2000 drowned and 11,000 wounded—total 17,000. The estimate of killed was very close. He halved the current estimate of the number drowned and made the assumption that the number wounded bore the usual relation to the number killed (e.g., the NZ figures for [Crete](#) were approximately 3 killed to 7 wounded). On the first day when paratroops were dropped in occupied areas the proportion of killed to wounded was undoubtedly abnormally high, and the number drowned was much lower even than [General Freyberg's](#) apparently conservative estimate.

After the war the Australian Graves Commission counted 4000 German graves in the [Maleme- Suda Bay](#) area and another 1000 at [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#). Admiral Cunningham had reported that there were 4000 troops on the intercepted flotillas. [Mr Churchill](#) (Vol. III, p. 268) estimates that the German losses must have been well over 15,000.

The number drowned appears to have been 324. The Germans maintained a garrison of 20,000 to 30,000 in [Crete](#) for the next four years, of whom several hundred would die of sickness or in accidents in the ordinary course, and there were substantial losses in guerrilla fighting. These would mostly be buried in the German cemeteries and might reasonably be expected to account for a thousand of the graves there. The Cretans have ploughed in the cemeteries, leaving intact the monuments at the entrance to each cemetery

In a report to the War Office dated 15 March 1945, HQ Land Forces, [Greece](#), CMF said, 'German killed in [Crete](#) during 1941 campaign for certain 4000 as counted from graves. In addition approx. 400 washed up after battle either crashed in sea from gliders or sunk by Navy. In addition 450 wounded flown to mainland died and buried in Lonkinia Cemetery. These figures still incomplete and also inaccurate. Many graves still scattered round island and not included and in many big graves impossible to estimate true figure buried. Consider fair overall figure 5000....'

Following are extracts from the daily reports of 12th Army to GHQ ([Greece](#) and

Crete) referring to the losses at sea:

22 May (morning): Light Convoy 'Maleme Gp' (III Bn 100 Mtn Regt) was attacked 8 km north of Cape Spata at 2230 hrs on 21 May by English naval units (cruisers and destroyers). The loss of about 50% of the convoy must be accepted.

22 May (evening): So far 770 men out of a total of 2331 have been rescued from I Light Convoy (Maleme Gp).

23 May (evening): Number of men rescued from I Light Convoy has increased to about 1400.

28 May (morning): The number saved from I Light Convoy has increased to 1665 including 21 Italians. It is expected that this number will be still increased slightly as not all the islands have been searched yet.

The 12th Army QMG Report, dated 4 June 1941, says that the casualties from I Light Convoy were 309 killed.

12th Army's Campaign in the [Balkans](#)—A Strategic Survey (written later) says that 13 officers and 311 other ranks were lost at sea.

The Report of [4 Air Fleet](#), dated 28 November 1941, gives the losses in dead and missing:

(a) Of the troops employed in Crete	Dead	1915
	Missing	1759
From Air Corps VIII and XI flying personnel	Dead	76
	Missing	236
	—	—
Total		3986
	—	—

The Report of [11 Air Corps](#) dated 11 June 1941, which omits the 8 Air Corps losses of flying personnel (20 dead, 107 missing), gives the following figures:

7 Air Div and Corps Troops, 11 Air Corps	Killed	1653
	Missing	1441

	Wounded	2046
5 Mountain Division	Killed	262
	Missing	318
	Wounded	458
Air Command, 11 Air Corps	Killed	56
	Missing	129
	Wounded	90
	—	—
Total		6453
Add 8 Air Corps	Killed	20
	Missing	107
	—	—
Total		6580

If the 2594 wounded are subtracted the total becomes 3986, identical with 4 Air Fleet's total of killed and missing. This suggests that both [4 Air Fleet](#) and [11 Air Corps](#) were working from the same returns, compiling the subdivisions of the total in different format, which is some indication of the care taken by the compilers. Seventeen officers were the only German prisoners evacuated to Egypt. The remainder of the missing were killed.

The total German landed strength, assuming that units were up to establishment, was 23,120, of whom several thousand were not severely engaged. After most careful examination of the details of the fighting, it is estimated that the casualties occurred roughly as follows:

	Killed (incl missing)	Wounded
In the initial landings	2500	500
Flying and sea casualties	600	...
In the balance of the fighting (a more normal ratio)	900	2100
	—	—
Total	4000	2600
	—	—

There are numerous corroborative items in the German unit and formation reports, e.g.: On 4 June 1941 German Army Graves Officer on [Crete](#) reported 98 officers, 1402 other ranks killed, 1204 all ranks missing, of whom he estimated 50 per cent were killed. The War Diary of 5 Mountain Division in an entry of 2 June 1941

gives the division's casualties as 267 killed, 460 wounded, 320 missing. Slight corrections appear in 11 Air Corps' report of 11 June, quoted above. A 5 Mountain Division battle report, circulated throughout 5 Mountain Division on 7 March 1942 for historical and instructional purposes, gives its casualties as 395 killed, 257 missing, and 504 wounded, a total of 1156—118 more than in 11 Air Corps' report.

In the absence of any evidence, or any likelihood, that the German figures are falsified, the figure of 6698 seems to be acceptable, with the proviso that the lightly wounded may not be included. They were not shown in German casualty returns in the First World War, and if the same practice was followed in the Second World War the total might have to be increased by another six or seven hundred.

[†] Including 92 missing.

^{*} Including 488 wounded.

CRETE

BRITISH FORCES

British Forces

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CRETE

GERMAN CASUALTIES

German casualties

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CRETE

APPENDIX VI – UNIT CASUALTIES IN NZ DIVISION

Appendix VI

Unit Casualties in NZ Division

Unit	Killed in Action		Died of Wounds as PW		Total Killed and Died of Wounds	Wounded		Wounded and PW		Total Wounded	Total Killed and Wounded
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs		Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs		
HQ NZ Div		1			1		2			2	
HQ 4 NZ Bde (incl band)		1			1		4		2	6	
HQ 5 NZ Bde (incl band)		2			2	2			2	4	
Div Cav Regt	1	9			10	4	37		9	50	
4 Fd Regt	3	12		2	17	3	22		12	37	
5 Fd Regt	1	18		1	20	3	40	1	21	65	
7 Fd Coy	1	21		2	24	2	20		12	34	
19 A Tps Coy		15		1	16	1	30	1	5	37	
Misc NZ Engrs (HQ, 5 Fd Pk, and 6 Fd Coy)							3		2	5	
2 NZ Div Sigs		4			4		4		4	8	
18 Bn	6	99		3	108	3	111	3	40	157	
19 Bn	2	60		3	65	4	73		40	117	
20 Bn	5	75		6	86	5	124	2	48	179	
21 Bn	4	28		4	36	5	28	1	31	65	
22 Bn	2	60	1	1	64	4	61	2	77	144	
23 Bn	1	50		5	56	8	121	2	56	187	
28 (Maori) Bn	5	65		3	73	7	94		46	147	
27 (MG) Bn		18			18	1	15		13	29	
1 Pet Coy	1	21		3	25	1	40		21	62	
1 Div Sup Coy	1	11			12	1	26		10	37	
4 RMT Coy	2	11			13		22		10	32	

CRETE

APPENDIX VII – ESCAPES

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CRETE

[SECTION]

After the last night of evacuation many Australian, British and New Zealand soldiers avoided surrender at [Sfakia](#) and others escaped from captivity while still in [Crete](#) before removal to [Germany](#). At one time some hundreds were at large in the island, sheltered and helped by the [Cretans](#) in defiance of threats and brutal reprisals by the German garrison. Records are incomplete, but accounts have been obtained of nearly 300 New Zealanders who in various ways, and after surviving great hardships and the adventures of the hunted, got back to Egypt and in most cases rejoined their units. Some returned to [Greece](#) or [Crete](#) to serve with partisans or to assist others to escape; others who escaped were recaptured, but many finally succeeded (often after several attempts) in breaking free from prison camps in [Germany](#), [Austria](#) and [Italy](#).

The stories of these men are summarised in this appendix. There is material in their adventures for many books, and their stories are examples of endurance, courage, and resolution worthy of record.

CRETE

BY BARGE

By Barge

On the day of the surrender New Zealand, Australian, and British soldiers found an abandoned landing barge near [Sfakia](#) which they put out of sight in a sea cavern. They sailed the barge out of the cavern on the night of 1 June; the Germans nearby opened fire but no one was hit. An Australian, Private Harry Richards, was skipper and a New Zealander, Private A. H. Taylor (HQ NZ Div), was engineer. The following morning the barge was damaged when it ran ashore on Gavdhos Island but the damage was soon repaired. Richards appealed for volunteers to stay ashore and lighten the load and ten men stood aside.

When the petrol gave out the men put up a jury mast and sail. The wind dropped and the boat drifted. The food ration was cut down to a small drink of cocoa for breakfast, and even this was soon finished. The men became weak; nerves were on edge and outbursts of unreasoning temper added to their misery. Planes flew over but the soldiers dared not wave in case they were the enemy. On 8 June they saw land immediately to the south. The barge drifted, maddeningly slowly, on to a rocky beach near [Sidi Barrani](#). The escapers stepped ashore right in the middle of a British camp and were given a great welcome.

About sixty were on the barge. The only other known New Zealanders were Drivers J. Chappell and A. G. Noonan (both ASC attached 5 Fd Amb).

One hundred and thirty-seven men, mostly Marines under Major R. Garrett, RM, sailed an abandoned landing barge from [Crete](#) to Sidi Barrani. Two miles out on the first day, 1 June, they picked up a New Zealander, without any clothes, paddling along on a large plank.

This man was Private W. A. Hancox of 1 General Hospital. He and three other New Zealanders had missed the final embarkation by minutes. The following morning they saw a rowing boat drifting two miles off shore. Hancox stripped off and started swimming towards it but, three-quarters of the way out, saw the boat taken

by other soldiers. It was then the barge picked him up; once on it, he could not go back to his friends on the shore.

Seven miles out the men saw bombers attacking the evacuation beach. Air attacks were dreaded but none came; the morning they set out another barge had been bombed and machine-gunned. Fuel ran out and blankets were rigged as sails; often the men had to jump into the water and push the nose of the heavy barge around so that the sails could catch the breeze. Food was rationed to half a tobacco tin of water and a teaspoonful of bully beef a day. During the voyage a British soldier died of exhaustion and a Palestinian committed suicide. On 9 June the barge drifted ashore 15 miles west of [Sidi Barrani](#).

Private Hancox is the only New Zealander known by name to have been in this party. He said there were about eight others. A painting by Peter McIntyre, 2 NZEF Official Artist, illustrates this incident.

CRETE

BY DINGHY

By Dinghy

Private B. B. Carter (27 MG Bn) was caught by the Germans at Kisamos Bay, not far from where he had landed after escaping from [Greece](#) in a fishing boat. A German officer treated him kindly and gave him an easy job in his kitchen. But it did not last long; within two weeks the officer went away and Carter was removed to the prison camp at [Galatas](#). On 1 July he slipped out of camp in the dust of a passing convoy of trucks. Next day he reached [Meskla](#) and joined Private D. N. McQuarrie (18 Bn). ¹

McQuarrie had had a hard time. He was lying wounded in the hospital near [Suda](#) when the Germans arrived. Had it not been for the [Cretans](#) giving them food for two weeks, he and other patients would have surely starved to death. Life was no better at the prison in the [Canea](#) hospital and he saw men dying for want of food and care. Despite the shooting of an unlucky escaper half an hour before, McQuarrie escaped through an obvious gap in the barrier on 18 June; he had not gone far when he heard the fire of tommy guns from the camp. Heading south, he reached [Meskla](#), where he stayed with a friendly family for two weeks. He had plenty of food, sleep and care, but when he saw notices posted in the village threatening [Cretans](#) with death if they helped British soldiers, he moved into the hills where he met Carter.

The two hid for a while. They used to watch a German patrol going to Lakkoi every week in a car driven by a New Zealander; they did not worry because they knew the Germans were after eggs, not escapers. Carter and McQuarrie moved through Lakkoi and Omalo to the coast where two Australians joined them. At Suia the men found a derelict 18-foot dinghy and on 16 July they started to row across the [Mediterranean](#).

The four escapers knew nothing about boats, they had little food, and the dinghy itself was a wreck. They patched it up as best they could: the holes were blocked with socks, but they had to take turns to sit on the biggest hole near the stern while the others bailed water. Lashed oars were the mast and tied blankets

the sail. A gale blew all the way. On the fourth evening the gale stopped and they found themselves just off, [Sidi Barrani](#); in ninety hours they had travelled 400 miles.

Soldiers waded out to help the escapers, but when they grasped the boat the top planking came away. Next day when others tried it out to find how such a broken-down craft had stood up to the long and hard voyage, the dinghy fell to pieces. Both New Zealanders were awarded the MM.

¹ McQuarrie died of wounds in the [Western Desert](#) on 2 Dec 1941.

CRETE

BY CAIQUE

By Caique

After being captured in [Crete](#) and escaping from Kokkinia Prison near [Athens](#), Lieutenants R. B. Sinclair (22 Bn) and Roy Farran (3 Hussars) were given berths on a caique bound for [Alexandria](#) with ten Greeks and three other soldiers. It was a small diesel vessel about thirty feet long with no mast. The Greek skipper had four days' fuel, just enough to reach [Alexandria](#) if everything went well. The chart was a school atlas and their only provisions a sack of crusts and a few onions.

The second night out the relief man at the tiller took the boat well away from its planned course, a serious error when there was so little fuel. Then it was found that someone on shore had stolen three full tins. The course was corrected and on the fourth morning they pulled into an island for fresh water. The same night, while they were going through the straits between [Crete](#) and Rhodes, a sudden storm blew up and for a day and a half the tiny craft battled against the mountainous waves. Thanks to the skill of the skipper the boat rode out the storm. All the fuel had gone, the food also and nearly all the water, which was now rationed to one third of a jam tin a man each day. Makeshift sails were erected but were not much help. Paddling with planks was tried but the men were far too weak. On the seventh day the water gave out. A British seaplane dived over the caique and flew away; everyone was happy, but no rescuing boat came.

By the ninth day the situation was desperate. The men could hardly move, and to speak, at best a croak, was agony. Spirits picked up when the engine was converted to distil fresh water from sea water, bits of wood and oily rags being used for fuel. In an hour enough water dripped through for each to have three mouthfuls. At night they heard ships' engines and lit flares. Three British destroyers approached; the last one edged alongside, and sailors came aboard and carried the men up the gangway. They reached [Alexandria](#) on 10 September 1941. Sinclair was mentioned in despatches.

Acknowledgment: Roy Farran, [Winged Dagger](#) (Collins, [London](#), 1948).

After capture in [Crete](#), escape in [Greece](#) and sundry adventures, Second-Lieutenants J. W. C. Craig (22 Bn) and E. F. Cooper (LAD attached 5 Fd Regt) and Corporal F. B. Haycock (22 Bn) obtained an unauthorised passage in a caique which had been licensed by the Germans to carry 45 liberated Cretan prisoners to their homes in Crete. Once the skipper had cleared the port of [Piraeus](#) (on 26 October 1941) with the approved passengers, he pulled into the bay to pick up the others. The course went past the control point on Chios Island and on to Antiparos, where ships had to stop for examination. The skipper slipped around the point and landed his secret passengers at the house of his fiancée's family. In four days the check was over, the contraband passengers were picked up and finally the boat reached Candia Bay, where the owner's family lived. The shipping check was easily circumvented once more.

The owner, Gramatakikis, after changing the crew and picking up some new passengers—there were now three New Zealanders, three Englishmen, and nine Greeks on board—sent the boat away in the early hours of one morning on its four and a half days' voyage to [Alexandria](#). Not far out, the engine broke down and, when fixed, went only on quarter power. Food, water, and fuel were very low.

By evening on 7 November [Alexandria](#) was in sight, and soon they were at the harbour's entrance after extricating themselves from a minefield. At the port control ship they reported who they were and where they came from, but they were rebuffed by a voice, 'Oh, you will have to wait a while as we have other shipping to attend to.' Cooper tells what happened then: 'We were depressed and the comments were terse. However, the Navy arrived—it looked like the lot of it—led by HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse, then en route to [Singapore](#), followed by cruisers and destroyers. Bert Haycock semaphored the leading ship, using our singlets as flags, and explained that we were prisoners escaping from [Greece](#). The signal came back, "Welcome". We asked permission to follow the Navy through the boom into the port; again the signal was "Welcome". We pulled into line astern of the Prince of Wales and ahead of the Repulse and with this imposing escort chugged into [Alexandria](#) harbour.'

Craig, who later joined Military Intelligence and went on special service operations in [Greece](#) and [Italy](#), was awarded the MC and later won a bar to it.

Cooper and Haycock were mentioned in despatches.

Sergeant J. A. Redpath (19 A Tps Coy), after several vain efforts to get a boat in [Crete](#), led a party over to [Greece](#) where he thought he would have a better chance of escape. The party landed in [Greece](#) on 13 August 1941 near a lighthouse, which unknown to them was occupied by Italians. Fortunately, the enemy opened fire too soon at long range and the escapers were able to take to the hills safely.

Redpath bargained with a Greek for a caique, but the arrival of Italian troops scared the owner, already under suspicion, so much that he refused to have anything to do with the party. After interminable haggling with another boat owner and some forceful persuasion another boat was obtained. Just before the date arranged for departure the owner tried to inform on them but friends came to Redpath's help.

Three days later, on 9 October, the party stole a caique and put to sea in it. The voyage was well planned and conducted. The men were capable, resolute and used to hard conditions, and Redpath was a good leader. On the morning of 11 October two British planes came in low and each dropped a bomb within twenty feet of the boat. Luckily neither bomb exploded. Two days later a German plane bombed and machine-gunned the boat until it ran out of ammunition. The plane came back, but a sandstorm off the land hid the caique completely.

When the North African coast was reached, Redpath went ashore in a dinghy to obtain diesel fuel. The caique berthed at Mersa Matruh and from there Redpath took it along the coast to [Alexandria](#). There were ten Australians, one Englishman, and seven New Zealanders in this party. Besides Redpath, the New Zealanders were Sergeants R. R. Witting (19 A Tps Coy), A. H. Empson and W. H. Bristow (both 18 Bn), Gunner G. E. Voyce (5 Fd Regt), Driver R. S. Barrow (Div Amn Coy), and Private T. Shearer (20 Bn). Redpath and Empson went back to [Greece](#) on special service. Redpath was awarded the DCM and later the MM. Empson, who was awarded the MM, died of sickness in [Greece](#) in 1946.

CRETE

MOIR AND PERKINS

Moir and Perkins

Staff-Sergeant T. Moir and Gunner D. C. Perkins (4 Fd Regt) escaped from the [Galatas](#) prison camp and spent weeks searching the coast for boats. They headed inland, there to find the mountain villages swarming with escaped soldiers. They knew the Germans would soon raid the locality, so they headed for the rugged and sparsely populated west coast. The village folk, though poor, were most hospitable. Moir gives an instance: 'On one occasion, when they discovered us, sleeping off the effects of several liberal draughts of wine taken during the heat of the day, under a grove of olive trees not very far from a village, we were plied with so much food and wine that after three days we managed to continue on our way only by sneaking off during the dead of night during a lull in hospitality. We carefully avoided villages during the next three days until our supply of food ran out.' They roamed the hills for weeks to get the lie of the country, then settled and became attached to two or three villages in a small area.

Moir and Perkins were always on the watch for boats, and many times they set out only to be forced back again by the weather, or by the many reefs on the coast or the wretched condition of their craft. Once they were lucky to escape drowning. The escapers moved freely around the western end of the island and were often chased by the Germans. In one German drive they were machine-gunned from a range of 200 yards and had a hectic game of hide-and-seek with a patrol of eight Germans for the rest of the day.

In April 1942 (not many soldiers were then still free in [Crete](#)) Moir and Perkins followed up separate leads on likely boats. At Mesara Bay there were 14 boats under German guard. Accessories such as oars and sails were kept in a locked shed; the owners slept in the boats but the German guard was away at the entrance to the bay. Moir planned to steal one of these boats. Perkins was then haggling with a man for the hire of a boat and had reasonable prospects of getting it. Moir continued with his plan and Perkins arranged to meet him with his boat in a familiar cove. If Perkins' deal fell through he intended to join Moir's party.

The appointed night was so pitch black that the soldiers lost their way. Next night they met and, amidst much shouting and waving of arms by the owners, selected a good boat and sailed it unchallenged past the German post. By morning they were snug in the cove waiting for Perkins. They waited two days but he did not turn up. They searched all his usual haunts but he could not be found. The wind changed to north-west and to delay longer would be dangerous. The high wind and rough sea gave natural protection from nosing aircraft, and several planes, German and British, flew over them. On the late afternoon of the fourth day, after sailing 300 miles, the party landed on a small beach a few miles west of Sidi Barrani.

Three months later Moir met Perkins in [Cairo](#) and heard his story. Perkins went down on the night arranged, saw no one and thought Moir had got away. He then returned inland and heard when it was too late of the party's departure on the following night. A short time afterwards Cretan friends told Perkins that there were Germans in British uniforms wandering around the district. Perkins traced the men and found, as he had suspected, that they were commandos off a Greek submarine. Perkins and other soldiers on the spot were given a passage in the submarine to Egypt.

There were five New Zealanders, two Australians, and one Englishman in Moir's party. The New Zealanders were Staff-Sergeant Moir, Lance-Bombardier B. W. Johnston (5 Fd Regt), Privates G. G. Collins (20 Bn) and H. W. Gill (18 Bn), and Driver R. W. Rolfe (4 RMT).

Moir went back to [Crete](#) on special service and was captured. Perkins went back also, became a guerrilla leader and was killed in an ambush. Moir was awarded the DCM, Johnston the MM, and Collins a mention in despatches. Moir was later awarded the MM for his special service work.

After his escape Moir worked for Military Intelligence. He went on several special service operations and in February 1943 volunteered to go back to [Crete](#) to collect soldiers in hiding. By May 1943 he was in touch with 51 soldiers and had arranged their escape, but the evacuation date was altered and he had the worry of keeping a large body of men in one place for over a week. The Germans heard of this party, and although the 51 men were taken off, Moir walked into a police patrol containing

an interpreter who was not deceived by his Greek as the usual German patrol would have been. There were 14 New Zealanders in the party which Moir organised and all were mentioned in despatches for their courage and determination in not submitting to captivity. This was one of the final rescue operations from Crete.

After interrogation, Moir was sent off to [Germany](#), marked as a dangerous prisoner. He was cooped up with three other 'bad' prisoners for 32 days in a small cell in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp. They forced the door and an outer window but were caught in the act of getting through the three sets of double barbed-wire fences around the camp. They were then placed in the punishment cells without boots or bedding and allowed only one pair of underpants and a singlet each.

In the next camp Moir and another New Zealander, Bombardier M. J. C. Robinson (4 Fd Regt), volunteered to go to a working camp within striking distance of the Hermagor Pass into [Italy](#). The two broke camp in June 1944 and headed for the coast, hoping to find a boat to take them to southern [Italy](#). When they reached the mountains where the partisans were fighting, the place became alive with German troops. On the seventh night out the escapers were caught while trying to cross a bridge. The river was wide and swift and the bridge had appeared to be unguarded. They were sentenced to solitary confinement and then sent back to the ordinary prison camp.

After a month of near starvation in [Galatas](#) prison camp, Lance-Sergeant G. M. Davis and Signaman M. F. Knight (Div Sigs) broke camp and spent a day foraging for food. The Cretans were so friendly that the night after their return to camp they went through the wire again, this time for good. The first few days were spent with their newfound friends; they then moved to the village of Lakkoi, where great numbers of escapers were hiding in a nearby gorge. The two New Zealanders heard that they were waiting for sea transport to pick them up. This was not true, and as the villagers were finding it hard to feed the men, Davis and Knight moved on to the village of [Meskla](#). An English-speaking Cretan took them into his home and they lived there for the next ten months. Within a few weeks the Germans put in their first big sweep to capture escaped prisoners, but the family hid the two safely in a small gully.

In April 1942 they joined three other New Zealanders—Privates R. Huston and C.

J. Ratcliffe (19 Bn) and Driver J. Symes (Div Pet Coy)— and an Australian in a hideout in caves half-way to [Canea](#), where they lived for a year. Friendly villagers supplied them with food. At times they were forced to raid gardens under the guidance of a Cretan, who directed them to homes of German sympathisers or of people who had plenty. In April 1943 the Germans swooped down on one of the caves just after dawn. Somebody had betrayed them. Davis, Huston, and Ratcliffe ¹ were caught and were sent to prison camps in [Germany](#). The Germans knew that there were six soldiers altogether but they missed the two caves where the other three were hiding.

At that time Moir was going over the island collecting soldiers still in hiding, and shortly after the German raid he located the three survivors. They left [Crete](#) in May 1943.

After a course in sabotage and guerrilla warfare Perkins was landed in July 1943 near Koustoyerako to act as second-in-command to another British agent, Major A. Fielding. He spent some time becoming familiar with the [White Mountains](#) area and set up his headquarters in Selino, on the south-west corner of the range. At this time (September 1943) there was widespread unrest among the [Cretans](#), culminating in the abortive and expensive revolt led by Mandli Bandervas, who retreated from the east end of the island to the west. The Germans then carried out large-scale reprisals all over Crete. Koustoyerako suffered severely, being burnt out on 2 October. The villagers took to the hills and Perkins, better known to the [Cretans](#) as Kapitan Vassilios, formed them into a well-armed organised force about 100 to 120 strong. This force held the area above Koustoyerako while the Germans occupied the area below.

Perkins arranged air drops of supplies and arms from Allied planes. He was especially active in carrying out night raids on German positions, aimed usually at recovering sheep and cattle which had been taken by the Germans. The Germans often sent patrols up into the hills to find out the strength of the guerrillas. On one of these occasions Perkins lured a patrol of twenty men up to Alladha and surrounded them in a stone hut. He crept up, threw a hand grenade in and killed ten. The rest were taken prisoner and shot. In this fight Perkins was wounded, the bullet hitting him in the neck and travelling down his back. A Cretan butcher traced the bullet with his knife and cut it out. He continued his work of organising other bands of guerrillas,

all of which took their orders from him. During this time he was promoted to the rank of staff-sergeant.

He received orders in February 1944 to go to the village of Asigonia and join Major Denis Ciclitiras, another British agent. On the first day of the journey Perkins and his party of four [Cretans](#) fell into a German ambush. Perkins, in the lead, was killed instantly. One of the [Cretans](#), Andreas Vantoulakes, was also killed outright, while the two brothers Seirantonakes, both wounded, threw themselves over a steep cliff and hid at the bottom. The remaining Cretan, Zabiakes, was badly wounded; lying in the open, he held the fifty Germans in the patrol back for three hours until darkness, when he managed to escape and join the other two [Cretans](#).

The Germans took Perkins' body to Lakkoi and buried it just outside their barracks. By his kindness and help to the [Cretans](#) and by his daring exploits against the Germans, Perkins was well known throughout the island. The Cretans kept his grave covered with flowers. Captain John Stanley (Royal Signals), who was also in [Crete](#) on special service, tells of the admiration the [Cretans](#) had for Perkins: 'No other member of an Allied Mission was loved, respected and admired as was Kiwi (Perkins). I know the people in the area that he covered, intimately, and even now when they are talking of the war years his is the first name that comes up—he has grown into a legend that will never be forgotten.' A photograph received from [Crete](#) in April 1951 shows a small girl about to lay a wreath of flowers on Perkins' grave. The following was written on the photograph: 'Grave of the most fearless of fighters ever to leave New Zealand, known to all [Cretans](#) as the famous Kapitan Vassilios. Killed over 100 Germans single handed during the occupation. Led a guerrilla band, and fell from machine gun fire in February 1944, near Lakkoi—the last gallant Kiwi killed in Crete. This man is honoured by all [Cretans](#).' Perkins was awarded posthumous mention in despatches.

Acknowledgment: Auckland Weekly News—article by N. C. R., 2 May 1951, and one by J. W. Bain, 11 Jul 1951.

¹ Ratcliffe escaped later and was reported safe with the Allied Forces on 28 Sep 1944.

CRETE

BY SUBMARINE

By Submarine

As far as is known the largest number of New Zealanders to come off Crete at one time was in the submarine Torbay on 20 August 1941. Sixty two New Zealanders were in the party of 125. A New Zealander who escaped on the Torbay wrote the following account of his final days on the island:

'Eventually, through the Greeks, we learned of the plan to evacuate as many as possible per submarine. For a while we remained in one place while others joined until there were about 22 in the group. On the night of the 18th August the party was led helter skelter to the rendezvous. The day of the 19th was one of many rumours and anxiety as to when the submarine would arrive. In the early hours of the morning we went aboard the Torbay. Just before dawn the submarine submerged out from the coast and remained under water till night. It was a hard day and with so many extra on board, the atmosphere by evening was very sticky and everyone was very weak and limp. The remainder came on board that night. After a good surface crossing we arrived at Alexandria on the 22nd August 1941.'

Sixty-seven soldiers were waiting for the submarine Thrasher when it appeared off Crete on 28 July 1941. A lifeline through the heavy seas helped the men, and when all were on board the submarine turned around for Alexandria, arriving there on 31 July. Three New Zealanders, Sergeant F. Davis and Corporal S. B. Onyon (18 Bn), and Gunner J. Reid (5 Fd Regt), were in the party. Reid was killed in action in the Western Desert on 1 December 1941.

Private L. S. Rosson (19 Bn) and Driver S. N. Loveridge (Div Sup) escaped from Crete on 28 November 1941 in a Greek submarine and were safe in Alexandria four days later.

Early in June 1942 some New Zealanders hiding in a Cretan village were astonished to see four heavily armed British soldiers walking along the street. They soon found out that they were commandos landed on a patrol from a Greek

submarine. On 15 June they and other soldiers were taken on board the submarine (Papanicolas) and four days later were safe in [Alexandria](#).

'I got to hear of a boat,' writes Driver J. F. Kerr (ASC), 'and the five of us in the party managed to get enough money to buy it. One fine evening, loaded with water and provisions, we set sail with a good following wind. We were well on our way to Gavdhos Island when the sea became very choppy, and as luck would have it a plank gave way in the boat. As Gavdhos was a fortified island I decided it was best to start and row back to Crete. There was a bit of panicking about throwing everything overboard. Only the Australian and I could row—we were used to the sea—and it was over to us to put a stop to all this panic. After many hours of hard rowing, including bailing, we got ourselves back to [Crete](#) and while returning the boat to the owner we narrowly missed a patrol boat.

'From here there were only four in the party and we made our way westward to Vauta. After spending many days in this area a Greek known to us as Manos told us he knew where there was a transmitter and receiver. This outfit was carried to an unpopulated hilltop on one of the darkest nights, myself and Ken Payne [Gunner K. J. Payne, 5 Fd Regt] being the only ones allowed to go with it. We weren't even allowed to see it prior to leaving. On arriving at the hilltop I found that it was a German set and, if the batteries had been up, was only capable at the most of sending signals about seventy-five miles.

'We were told about the boats smuggling supplies from the Greek mainland to Crete. Ken Payne and the two Australians were very keen to try their luck on the mainland either by getting a boat or travelling around and down through [Turkey](#). The scheme did not appeal to me but I offered to go and see them off. On arriving at the place we found hundreds of civilians and soldiers waiting for boats, so we climbed up on the ridge to see what was on the other side. Below in a bay we could see at least two boats and it was here that I said goodbye to the three before they left for [Greece](#).

'I returned back in stages to Vauta and on arriving I was, unbeknown to me, politely held prisoner by the [Cretans](#) as they thought I was a German spy and had handed over Ken Payne and the two Australians to the German authorities. It was arranged for a New Zealand signaller to sit concealed on a track while I passed by

with some [Cretans](#). If he knew me he was to break cover and shake hands; if not, he was to stay where he was. I found out later that all of [Crete](#) knew of this little scheme except myself.

'As it was coming winter I made this area a sort of headquarters and spent my time looking around the coast and meeting other New Zealanders. All these I knew quite well but as the Germans were making it so hard for us, everyone was called by a Greek name. At this time I met Tom Moir who told me that Dudley Perkins was at another village very sick with yellow jaundice. I decided to go and see him and we became close friends as he got better. We collected some money to buy a boat. It was gladly given by the [Cretans](#) and came to about 380,000 drachmae. A few days after Tom Moir's party had left [Crete](#), we learnt that a submarine [Papanicolas] had landed some commandos and we set off to find it, which we did and we were taken to Egypt.'

CRETE

BY NAVAL CRAFT

By Naval Craft

On 25 November 1941 a caique officered by the Navy and manned by commandos rescued 86 soldiers from Crete. There were 28 New Zealanders in the party.

Soldiers came to Staff-Sergeant W. G. Penney (17 LAD) in the prison camp at [Galatas](#) and talked over their escape plans with him. Penney himself was keen to escape but first he had to help his comrades. His self-imposed task of escape organiser came to an end and then he was free to go himself. He and three other New Zealanders hid in a cart carrying wood from [Galatas](#) to the hospital. They got clear of the camp but the three others were captured soon afterwards in a wineshop.

Penney's life now was just like that of the rest of the escaped soldiers on [Crete](#), moving from village to village and hoping to find a way off the island. He was in the party of 140 hiding in the rocks at Treis Ekklesies (Three Churches) waiting for the boat that never turned up. ¹ After this he and eight New Zealanders moved around the country as a party.

The other men also had hard and varying experiences and all had to endure the bitter winter in the hills. One had escaped from the last lot of prisoners to be moved from [Galatas](#) camp for shipment to [Italy](#). Another was captured three times before making his final escape on Christmas Eve 1941.

In May 1942 they stole a boat and were picked up by a naval patrol vessel out at sea. They were landed at [Bardia](#) on 25 May. Penney was awarded the MM.

On 6 June 1942 nineteen soldiers, including eight New Zealanders, left [Crete](#) in a small boat and were picked up by a warship in the [Mediterranean](#). They were put ashore at [Bardia](#) on 8 June.

Sergeant D. Nicholls (4 RMT) was free in [Crete](#) for two years. On his return to Egypt in June 1943 he became a special service agent and worked in the [Balkans](#)

and [Italy](#). Nicholls was mentioned in despatches.

The people in the second village where Drivers W. H. Swinburne and F. P. H. McCoy (both Div Pet Coy) stayed became very nervous when the Germans started rounding up escaped soldiers and wanted them to move on. A polite but pointed eviction notice was served on the two New Zealanders and also on an Australian. The local policeman escorted them to the boundary, and apologising for his action, shook hands and wished them a successful escape. At the next stop McCoy became ill with jaundice and had to give himself up for treatment. The other two joined four British soldiers who had news of a coming boat. One was a doctor, an elderly man failing badly in health, and it was clear he had not long to live. He rode on a donkey and was cared for by a batman. After a break of a few weeks during which the doctor died, the party worked its way east across the [Mesara Plain](#) and eventually went down the coast to Treis Ekklisies.

The second day at Treis Ekklisies, a hundred and more escaped soldiers arrived under a guerrilla escort. Here a British agent, Captain 'Monty', had fixed a rendezvous for a boat to pick them up early in January 1942, but bad weather and leakage of the news resulted in the evacuation being called off. In the sorting of the men into travelling parties Swinburne had a Scotsman as a companion. The two went north and settled in the village of Episkopi Pediada, about 20 miles from [Heraklion](#), where a small group of families looked after them until September 1942. Traitors informed on the Scotsman, and the police, great friends of the two, though much distressed were obliged to arrest him. Swinburne, living in another house, was warned in time to get away.

For the next nine months Swinburne and an Australian hid in caves near a river on the south coast. Again a few families in the neighbourhood made themselves responsible for their welfare. In May 1943 the two walked east to the headquarters of a guerrilla band in the Lasithi Mountains. They became members, and although there was no fighting at the time, they did their share of guards, patrols and other work.

At the end of August 1943 Swinburne and 20 others, mostly Greeks, left [Crete](#) in a motor torpedo boat early one morning. At six that evening Swinburne was safe in Mersa Matruh.

¹ See p. 501.

CRETE

VIA TURKEY

Via Turkey

Escaping after capture in [Crete](#) and imprisonment in [Salonika](#), Private E. A. Howard (19 Bn) was for some time sheltered by the monks on Athos Peninsula in [Greece](#). He and four other soldiers searched the peninsula for boats. Twice they set out in stolen craft, but each time the wind changed and blew them back. The party, grown to thirteen, bought a sailing boat for 24,000 drachmae, donated by Greek friends, and crossed to Lemnos, a German-occupied island. Here the boatman left them stranded. As there was little cover, the men split up into smaller parties. After 14 days Howard and his four companions were lucky to find a derelict rowing boat and they immediately pushed off for the Turkish island of Imbros, only twelve miles away. The boat leaked like a sieve and the men not rowing had to spend the 17 hours of the voyage in baling. At Imbros they gave themselves up to the Turkish police who, after a series of interrogations, handed them over to the care of the British Consul.

Howard, who was awarded the MM, was killed in action in the Western Desert on 21 July 1942.

Lance-Corporal W. T. F. Buchanan and Private J. M. R. Brand (both 23 Bn) were captured in [Crete](#) and with fellow-prisoners spent a month tunnelling out of the [Salonika](#) prison camp. They prised open a trapdoor over a cellar, dug three and a half feet down in the ground and tunnelled for thirty feet with a bread knife. Fourteen men altogether went through the tunnel. With five other escapers they walked to Athos Peninsula, where a Greek who had been 17 years in [Australia](#) befriended them. The Greek watched a beach where there were two boats and reported the habits of the boatmen to the soldiers. One night they stole the marked boat and also kidnapped the owner to stop him giving away the escape to the Germans. But his misery and his continual prayer, 'Have mercy, Mother of Christ', induced them to row back and put him ashore.

The boat made ten miles the first night and was allowed to drift the following

day to give the appearance of a fishing craft. At night they set out to pass between the islands of Lemnos and Imbros but a storm blew them well away. They rowed for the island of Samothrace and were about to land when a Greek told them there were Bulgarian troops nearby. They rowed to another part of the island and were again warned away by another Greek. As they turned the boat around, Bulgarian soldiers fired at them with rifles.

The escapers rowed north and landed at Lithos in [Turkey](#). The next three days they covered 30 miles in nine different bullock wagons until they reached Kesan, directly north of the [Gallipoli](#) peninsula. The following day the police handed them over to the Greek consul, who arranged the first step of their journey back to our lines. Brand, who was awarded the MM, was killed in action in the [Western Desert](#) on 17 December 1942; Buchanan later won the MM in [Tunisia](#) and was also mentioned in despatches.

Shortly after arriving in [Athens](#) prison hospital from [Crete](#), Second-Lieutenant W. B. Thomas (23 Bn) nearly had his badly wounded leg amputated but at the last minute the leg was operated on and saved. In August 1941 Thomas and one of the men from his old platoon, Private S. W. J. Schroder, DCM, cut the prison wire and ran for it, but they did not get far. Thomas next tried to escape by hiding in the ration truck but was seen. He then pretended to be dead in the hope that he would be carried out of the camp in a coffin, but by this time the Germans knew him too well. The close watch on him hampered his attempts, so he induced the doctors to pass him as fit to go to a prison camp where his chances of escape would be better.

[Salonika](#) prison was surrounded by a forest of barbed wire and was also heavily guarded. Thomas found it just as filthy and wretched as had many other New Zealanders. He found a weak spot in the barrier—a barrack by the fence corner with a strongly barred and wired door on the roadside. Three nights running he carefully undid the fastenings, and on the fourth he made a clean break. With much difficulty he reached a village where he found WO II R. H. Thomson, DCM (4 RMT) and Private J. C. Mann (18 Bn), who were sick and resting for the winter. He stayed a few weeks with them and then on the way back became so weak that he almost collapsed when he reached the coast. Friendly Greeks nursed him back to health. His life became a succession of excursions for boats and confinements to bed. There was always some compassionate person at hand to care for him. At last he reached

Mount Athos—the Holy Mountain—the famous religious sanctuary of [Greece](#); he had been told that this was the best place to try to get a boat. The monks were good to him; when he was sick, as he often was from his bad leg, they never failed to look after him.

In one attempt Thomas collected a party of two British soldiers, one Russian, and two Greeks and stole a boat. Next day they hid the boat in a sheltered bay where one of the Greeks left them. That night the party made good progress until a sudden storm blew up. The boat, out of control and full of water, was tossed about like a cork by the mountainous seas. The storm continued on the next day and threw them back to the land, ten miles from where they started. Exhausted, and glad to be safe, they slept. The local police sergeant, a personal friend, came by night and told Thomas that he would be back in his official capacity on the morrow to arrest them—he expected not to find them then. Another time Thomas and the two British soldiers stole a boat from an open beach but forgot to put in the bung. Finally he managed to reach [Turkey](#) and was soon back with the New Zealanders.

His escape ended in a pleasant surprise. In May 1942 he walked across the Turkish border into [Syria](#) directly into the outposts of his own battalion, actually from his brother's company.

Acknowledgment: W. B. Thomas, [Dare to be Free](#) (Wingate, [London](#), 1951).

Driver E. F. Foley (4 RMT) hid in the hill village of [Fournes](#) for four weeks until the Germans burnt and ravaged the district in reprisals. He broke through the cordon and from then on had to be on the alert to dodge the relentless German drives. Late in 1941 Foley joined the escapers at Treis Ekklisies waiting for a boat, only to have his hopes dashed when the British special service agent told the party to scatter to safety. In March 1942 Foley unluckily walked into several German soldiers on the road and was taken prisoner.

As soon as he arrived at the port of [Piraeus](#) on 6 April 1942 he gave the guard the slip and was immediately sheltered by a Greek family. Next day he took the 'Metro' to [Athens](#), where the escape organisation arranged a passage for him on a boat bound for [Turkey](#). A mixed party of thirty left from near [Porto Rafti](#) on 2 May 1942 and after seven days at sea (four without food or water) reached [Turkey](#)

safely. Foley was awarded the MM.

Signalman F. Amos (Div Sigs) escaped twice from the [Galatas](#) camp on [Crete](#), reached the [Peloponnese](#) in a caique, and was helped there by Greek villagers. After a series of escapes from Italian troops and pro-Axis collaborators, he lived for eight months in late 1942 and early 1943 in a small hiding place under a flagstone in the floor of a cottage. His Greek friends lowered food down to him and he passed his time learning Greek from a child's primer book. The escape organisation smuggled him by caique to [Turkey](#) in June 1943. He was mentioned in despatches.

CRETE

FAILED

Failed

In the counter-attack on [Maleme](#) aerodrome, Corporal E. N. D. Nathan (28 Bn) was wounded in the hip and an eye. He went on a barge carrying wounded to Egypt, but off [Kastelli](#) enemy planes sank the craft. Nathan swam ashore, hid from a German patrol, and started off for [Sfakia](#). When he arrived there he saw large crowds of soldiers on the beach surrendering to the Germans. His wounds, his long trek, and this last bitter disappointment were too much for him and he collapsed.

A family in a nearby village found him, carried him to their home and looked after him. Nathan stayed with the family for a long time. He learned the Cretan dialect and moved around freely, even among the German soldiers. He was questioned by the [Gestapo](#) but always convinced them that he was a Cretan. The third time he was before the [Gestapo](#), it was definitely proved that he was an escaped soldier. He was badly beaten up when he refused to give the name of the family who had befriended him.

Nathan went to a prison camp in [Germany](#) and acted as an English-Greek-German interpreter. In September 1944 he was repatriated to England from [Germany](#) because of his bad eye and was later mentioned in despatches. After the war he went back to [Crete](#) and married the Cretan girl to whom he was engaged while on the island, the daughter of the family that had sheltered him.

Ten days after they escaped, Privates W. D. Tooke and E. Harland (18 Bn) broke back into the prison camp for extra clothing. The following night they were out again. Tooke then spent nearly five months trying to track down boats and submarines. Once he considered himself hard done by when he lost a card draw for a seat in a small boat, Private D. R. F. MacKenzie (19 Bn) being the winner. He found out years afterwards that he had been fortunate as the boat had landed behind the German lines on the North African coast. Despite this accidental salvation, luck was against him and he was recaptured by a German patrol.

MacKenzie writes:

'A boat with six Greeks was leaving for North Africa and there was room for one soldier. As there were eleven of us, Dean Tooke produced a pack of cards and we cut for the place I was the lucky man.

'The boat, an eighteen footer and well stocked, left on Thursday 18 September 1941 and the voyage was uneventful, it being calm with just enough wind to keep us going. We had no compass, trusting to luck to get there. We first sighted land on Saturday evening, then our next sight was at noon on Sunday when we saw some buildings and a battle in progress, shells were bursting and dust columns from vehicles were rising. We were sailing parallel to the coast, the battle was on our right and we veered to the left, thinking we were passing [Sollum](#) which we had heard was the front line. Late in the afternoon some Blenheims crossed our front from the left and bombed something on our right, so completing the illusion. At midnight we landed. A red flare went up in front of us, the moon was bright and we saw several parties standing at close intervals and a patrol advancing along the beach—they were Germans. They had watched us all day and were waiting for us. The following two days we went from one German post to another. While in one not far from [Tobruk](#), Rommel came in and spoke to the major. I parted from the Greeks at [Derna](#) and was sent to [Benghazi](#), where I met Ted Smith and MacGregor who had escaped from [Greece](#), only to be picked up, like me, by the enemy.'

Private H. N. Dagger (5 Fd Amb) spent three months in [Crete](#), then went over to [Greece](#) and worked his way up to the [Corinth Canal](#) where he met a British officer. The two teamed up together and had many exciting times.

On the island of Hydra they met Sapper J. L. Langstone (6 Fd Coy) and Private R. O. Petrie (19 Bn) and two Englishmen called Joe and Bill. Three of the party made an unsuccessful attempt by boat but bad weather forced them to return. The escapers had to hide in a hole for a week—their food was lemons—while the Italians scoured the countryside for them. Back on the mainland Dagger was captured by Germans, escaped, and made his way to the island of Kithnos. There he fell into the hands of Italians.

In prison Dagger met Second-Lieutenant J. W. C. Craig (22 Bn), Sergeant J. A.

Redpath (19 A Tps), and Captain F. Macaskie (British Army), all special service agents, and Sapper R. E. Natusch (NZE). They had been captured a short time before. Some of the party were shifted to Rhodes; then the others followed, and a month later Dagger was shipped to [Italy](#). During the voyage Natusch made a daring attempt to escape by diving over the side but he was recaptured almost immediately.

Driver P. Brocklehurst (Div Sup) heard from the villagers ('it was uncanny the way the [Cretans](#) received their news by bush telegraph') that two other escaped New Zealanders were coming to the village. They were Drivers W. H. W. Haslemore and W. R. Bullock (both Div Sup). Three other New Zealanders also lived in the district, Corporal S. G. Truesdale and Drivers L. M. Chinnery and J. F. McAnally—all from the same unit, the Divisional Supply Column.

In September 1941 when the Germans started their determined drives, the party had to break up and keep moving from one place to another. In between times they looked for boats. Haslemore and others set off late in 1941 in a lifeboat salvaged from a sunken Italian ship, but the overloaded boat was swamped. Once Haslemore and a Welshman were walking across the hills to their hideout when they saw two New Zealanders picking oranges in an orchard. 'From a distance I recognised one as Ray Stuck [Private R. H. C. Stuck, 23 Bn] whom I knew before the war.' In April 1942 a man who appeared to be trustworthy and who had promised Haslemore and others a boat passage, led them into a German trap.

Constant raids and alarms convinced the villagers that the Germans knew they were sheltering an escaped soldier. The soldier, Private A. W. Gleeson (22 Bn), had been there ten months but now he had to move to a safer place. With his dog, a great companion, he went off to the hills. One day Gleeson badly wanted a smoke, so he went into a wineshop in a close-by village. Too late he saw two German soldiers there. They picked him as an escaped soldier, took him over to their table and gave him wine and food. 'They were decent enough blokes and we had a merry time.'

Driver A. H. H. Lambert (4 RMT) was unlucky with submarines: at [Sfakia](#) he waited a week for one; at another rendezvous the Greek agent, Colonel Papadacos, told him and other escapers that there had been a leakage of news and that it was

not safe to wait any longer. Yet another time he was in touch with an organised party but was away when the submarine made its hurried pick-up, and he was one of the 140 who waited at Treis Ekklesies. In the year that Lambert was free he roamed from one end of [Crete](#) to the other, having many narrow escapes from capture.

Life was hard. 'Anyone left in [Crete](#) felt in the depth of despair and we had little happiness, though there were one or two lighter moments ...' Lambert accepted the cold, the hunger, and other miseries as part of his hunted life. Generally he and his companions had just enough to live on, though there were times when they starved and were glad indeed to eat such things as slugs. Once when desperately hungry they called on the nearest police station and demanded a meal, which was gladly given them. Sickness was an added affliction. Cretan friends nursed him back to health during these hard times. Clothing was fairly easily picked up but was not warm enough for the rigorous winter, and they found it impossible to obtain boots. Their boots quickly wore out and they had to do all their walking on bare feet. Lambert was well treated by the [Cretans](#) and remembers them with affection.

At a village on the western side of Mount Ida Lambert and Lance-Corporal E. T. Goodall (4 RMT) were given up to the police by an informer. The police hated arresting them but had to do so for fear that the informer might betray them also to the Germans. Lambert later escaped in [Greece](#).

WO II R. H. Thomson, DCM, who had been captured in [Crete](#) and moved to [Salonika](#) prison, missed the train drafts to [Germany](#) by using the old soldier dodges of doctors' chits, feigning sickness, or just by being absent when the drafts left. There came a time, however, when he had to go on the train. But he went prepared and from a belt around his middle hung knives, files, and pliers belonging to him and other hopeful escapers.

The cattle truck he was in had an opening covered with barbed wire high up in the side. He cut the barbed wire carefully and tucked in the ends at the bottom. While he was doing this, six soldiers in the next truck sawed a hole through the wood, but when they jumped from the bumper of their truck the guards opened fire and killed four and wounded one; the other made a clean break. From then on two German soldiers rode on the bumper, a few feet away from Thomson, guarding the

sawn hole. The night was full of more stoppings, more shooting, more examinations. When one German was taken off the bumper and the other was out of sight, Thomson squeezed through the opening, dropped flat on the track and lay still until the train was out of sight.

He eventually reached [Salonika](#) and, after being rebuffed by several householders, met four young Greeks who promised to take him in their chartered boat to [Alexandria](#). The day before sailing two Greeks betrayed him and had him arrested by the Germans, who recognised him as an escaped soldier by his army boots.

In his basement cell in the [Salonika](#) prison Thomson was troubled with dysentery and had to go often—under escort—to the latrine at the end of the corridor. He worked out a plan of escape. He developed a limp, carried a boot in his hand, and then at the chosen time hit the guard hard on the back of the head. Instead of collapsing, the guard bellowed, swung around and hit Thomson over the head with his bayonet. In a minute the corridor was full of abusing and punching Germans.

Thomson's hands were tied with wire, and as soon as the officers had left the three guards of his section dashed into the cell and hammered him with heavy sticks. They poured water on the floor to stop him resting and every hour they took him outside and beat him. Twenty or more Germans came along in the morning to look at the Englander Schwein and they cheered and clapped while the three guards rained blow after blow on him.

Thomson was then put on board a train for [Germany](#). The guards were instructed to keep a close eye on him, so they put him in their carriage in a small compartment with a little seat and a window beside it. A guard sat in front of him with his rifle and bayonet at the ready. After a time the Germans closed the door, being content to make sudden and surprise checks on their prisoner. Thomson worked his hands free of the wire, and retied them so that they could be quickly slipped free. He opened the window and closed it; then he waited. He dropped from the train (it was travelling fast over open country) and landed on the jagged stones by the track. Skinned and bruised—his left hip was the only part unhurt—Thomson set out on foot and finally reached [Salonika](#).

Thomson moved slowly northwards from village to village, and when he met Private J. C. Mann (18 Bn) he stayed with him. It was winter, the people were friendly and the two escapers were weak, so they decided to lie up until spring and then continue their journey. It was during this time that Second-Lieutenant Thomas (23 Bn) came and stayed with them for 19 days. Thomas went south and in the end managed to escape from [Greece](#).¹ Four months later the two friends started walking for [Turkey](#). They reached the Struma River, where some smugglers promised to ferry them across to Bulgarian-occupied [Greece](#), but an old man induced the smugglers to hand them over to the police. On the night of their capture they lowered themselves out of the high window of their prison by knotted canvas strips but had the misfortune to walk into the arms of a returning patrol. They worked on the padlock of their next prison and would have escaped if the Germans had not come to collect them.

On the train to [Germany](#) from [Salonika](#) prison, Thomson was tied hand and foot to the seat and had one guard by day and two by night during the ten days' journey. In Germany he was court-martialled and sentenced to eight months in a punishment prison. Thomson was mentioned in despatches.

Acknowledgment: R. H. Thomson, 'Captive Kiwi', radio script broadcast by NZBS.

¹ See pp. 502– 3.

CRETE

SECOND ATTEMPTS

Second Attempts

On 16 April 1945 Driver P. L. Winter (Div Pet Coy) came safely through the American lines in [Germany](#). His first escape, from [Galatas](#) prison camp, had been easy. While two old Cretan women were throwing pieces of bread over the wire to the hungry soldiers, he and Driver H. F. Mace (Div Pet Coy) slipped unnoticed from the camp. A few weeks later the two looked miserably down on the camp; at their lowest in health and spirits they were returning to the imagined security of prison life. A passing Cretan was horrified at this and induced Winter to go with him to the village of [Meskla](#), where he handed the New Zealander over to the care of a family. Mace continued on his way to [Galatas](#), but it was not long before he too was talked out of his intention, though he had to go back to the camp a few months later to get hospital treatment for a bad attack of jaundice.

Winter and Private J. P. Smith (18 Bn) were captured by a German patrol. Back at [Galatas](#) camp the day-to-day round was relieved by the arrival of a shipload of sick and wounded New Zealanders from the battle of Sidi Rezegh in North Africa. At Salonika, en route to [Germany](#), Winter sickened and was left out of the train drafts. He spent his time with the others talking and planning escapes. His chance came when returning from a working party; he dropped from the truck, ran off and hid in a cellar.

The same night he knocked at the door of a cottage to ask the way to the coast. The man of the house guided him back to a building in the city, and just in the nick of time Winter realised it was the police station. He moved along country tracks, was fed and sheltered by the Greeks, and finally reached the small village of Hierissos where, he was told, he could hire a boat passage. This was about April 1942. There were plenty of promises of boats in this and other villages but nothing ever came of them. He then started on a slow trek south. Once he was arrested as a vagabond and jailed for a few days. South of [Olympus](#) he was captured again. A youth acting as his guide took him to the mayor of a village, who, promising to help him, told him to wait in the café until his return. He returned with police and Winter was arrested.

Prison life was callous and brutal. The Italians tied handcuffs around Winter's legs, cooped him in a filthy cell for three days, and then sent him trussed up to the [Larissa](#) concentration camp. The place was indescribably dirty, lice-ridden, overcrowded; the inside guards carried heavy rubber whips. Torture was common. In the special compound Winter met Privates J. D. Ridge (19 Bn) and T. G. McCreath ¹ (20 Bn). Ridge had evaded capture at [Corinth](#) and had been free for some time, while McCreath had jumped the train on the way to [Germany](#). Another New Zealander, Private C. Corney (25 Bn) who had escaped in [Athens](#), joined them here. Soldiers convicted for espionage or sabotage were kept in the main compound with the Greeks, among them Private W. Ditchburn (25 Bn) and Gunner G. F. Mills (7 A-Tk Regt).

¹ Escaped in [Italy](#) in 1943 and was mentioned in despatches.

Winter and an English officer, Captain 'Skipper' Savage, who had been sentenced to 36 years' imprisonment for espionage, planned to escape during siesta time when the guards generally dozed off. On the day chosen they unpicked their way through the twenty feet of the barbed-wire entanglements, and were crawling over the open space to the outer wire when one of the guards woke up and forced them with shots to return the same way. The two were tied to posts and flogged—40 lashes with the heavy rubber whips on their bare backs.

The prisoners were tied in pairs and sent to [Patras](#) for shipping to [Italy](#). The one bright spot was the comfort of meeting more New Zealanders. One of them, Private J. E. Wainwright (25 Bn), was well known for his artistry in annoying the guards. He even went so far as to organise a successful strike. Another New Zealander was Sapper J. L. Langstone (6 Fd Coy) who, passed over as dead by the Germans at [Corinth](#), was nursed back to health by the Greeks. For most of the 16 months he was free he lived in a monastery with Private R. O. Petrie (19 Bn). In September 1942 Winter was shipped to [Italy](#), and on the Italian capitulation in 1943 was sent on to [Germany](#).

Acknowledgment: Narrative (unpublished) by P. L. Winter.

When Winter was returned to the prison camp at [Galatas](#) he heard sad news of his friend, Private J. A. McClements (18 Bn): 'There had been a raid on the village of [Meskla](#) but all the soldiers staying there had been forewarned and had made for the hills. Jim McClements and others lived for a time in a cave, where finally [on 3 September 1941] they were found by the Germans. Jim McClements was at the mouth of the cave cooking over an open fire. There was a shot and those inside rushed out to see Jim, with blood running from a wound in his arm, standing with his hands raised facing a patrol of Germans. Another German fired with a tommy gun and Jim fell to the ground wounded through the chest. He was still alive and when the Germans came up he said, "Don't shoot", whereupon a third German shot him through the head.'

Acknowledgment: Winter's narrative.

Private C. Corney (25 Bn) became skilled in the ways of an escaped soldier during the eight months he was free in Crete. But luck was against him when his broken Greek and strange accent (good enough to pass the ordinary German) gave him away to the Greek interpreter of a patrol. On the way to [Germany](#) his prison convoy stopped at the [Athens](#) transit camp, and from there he escaped with Privates J. R. Stuart and A. H. Zweibruck (19 Bn). In Athens Corney met a baker who said he knew of a submarine calling at the coast. The baker fixed a meeting place where Corney was to be picked up by car. The car took him straight to the Italian police headquarters.

At the ill-famed Averoff prison in which he was held for five months, Corney was annoyed by an Italian medical orderly called '[Bianco](#)', a cripple, whose sadistic amusement was hitting prisoners with his stick. He met Private G. I. T. Tong (19 Bn) here and was distressed to see the large number of running sores on his head and ears. Tong had been free in [Greece](#) for 16 months and the Italian police, thinking that he had something to do with the widespread espionage and sabotage, interrogated and bashed him mercilessly. They forced his arms through the slats of a chair, punched him on the ears with closed fists, and hammered him with a heavy wooden baton until it broke. At Larissa, the next camp, inhumanity and cruelty was still Corney's burden. He was there when his friend, Driver Winter, received 40 lashes for trying to escape; the following morning he saw an Italian sergeant ripping

the bandages off Winter's back and expressing delight at the sight of the lacerated skin. From Patras, Corney was shipped to [Italy](#) to a prisoner-of-war camp. Zweibruck and Stuart were both recaptured and Stuart was later executed by the Italians. ¹

The Cretan family of Kandisachis in the village of Spaniakos looked after Private W. E. Wheeler (19 Bn) for about a year and a half. Soon after escaping from [Galatas](#) camp in June 1941, Wheeler and two other New Zealanders, Gunners E. J. P. Owen and R. A. Gover ² (both 5 Fd Regt) were guided to the village and remained unmolested until September 1941, when large German forces searched the island for escaped prisoners. This and other raids passed the New Zealanders over, thanks to the help given by the [Cretans](#). With raids, informers, and bogus agents, times became hard and the [Cretans](#) a little jittery, as the Germans did not hesitate to shoot, burn, and imprison when they found anybody helping escaped soldiers. Yet all New Zealanders could be sure that a good Cretan was never a traitor.

A ship's captain offered to take a load of prisoners to [Alexandria](#) if they gave him enough money to buy a boat. This was done and the soldiers met at the appointed place. While waiting for darkness, they saw a German spotter plane crash into the sea in front of them and saw the pilot paddling to the shore in a rubber dinghy. Ten minutes later three helicopters whirred to a landing right beside the soldiers. They ran away and were sure that the pilots had seen them and had radioed back. Friends told Wheeler some days afterwards that the skipper had taken the boat to the Greek mainland.

At the end of October 1942 Wheeler went to a cave not far away, in which there were twenty soldiers, to discuss escape prospects. He stayed a day or so, but one morning the Germans made a lightning raid and captured the lot. Wheeler underwent a 24-hour interrogation by the [Gestapo](#). He never left the room; he sat in the same chair, was allowed no rest, and as soon as one of the five questioners stopped another carried on the relentless chain.

Wheeler made three breaks from his German prison camp and was free for about eight weeks each time before he was recaptured. Just before Christmas 1944 he escaped into [Czechoslovakia](#) and was sheltered by a

¹ See p. 518.

² Escaped in [Italy](#) in 1943 and was mentioned in despatches.

family, members of a partisan organisation, until the arrival of the Russians in May 1945. He married a Czech girl; both went to England and from there came home to New Zealand.

In September 1941 a smuggler's boat carried Gunner W. J. Griffiths (5 Fd Regt) from [Crete](#) to [Greece](#) where, he thought, the chances of escape were good. Griffiths had spent four months in [Crete](#) scouring the beaches for a boat, but had had no luck. [Greece](#) was not much better, as he found out: 'Spent some weeks with malaria and lost a good deal of constitution. Then had yellow jaundice and finished up living in a monastery in the mountains to recuperate....'

In June 1942 Griffiths went by sea to [Athens](#) where he lived with a family, moving around freely. A professor from the Athens University obtained a place for him on a boat going to [Smyrna](#) on 23 July 1942. The night before it was to sail, the [Gestapo](#) raided the house and took Griffiths away. He had been betrayed; the one and a half million drachmae reward for the capture of an escaped soldier was too much of a temptation for someone who knew his plans.

After two unsuccessful breaks from German prison camps, Griffiths got away on his third attempt and came through the American lines to safety.

Sergeant A. C. Barker (4 RMT) hid in [Crete](#) until September 1941. He then rowed over to [Greece](#), where he and an Australian who had joined him lay up in a village until May 1942. Three carabinieri surprised them one night when they were taking a walk. They refused to surrender. The carabinieri opened fire and the escapers fired back and killed one. The Italians combed the countryside. The two were swift and elusive in dodging the patrols, but in July 1942 they were betrayed by pro-Axis Greeks.

Barker would not talk, or 'confess' as the Italians put it, and for five days the guards tortured him. They gave him no food or water, tied him to a chair and punched and kicked him throughout the days. The two were moved to [Xilocastron](#) concentration camp, where they lived for three weeks in appalling conditions. In

October 1942 Barker and the Australian appeared before a court which, after a farce of a trial, condemned them to death. The Italians chained them hand and foot for 24 days and then by the hands only for another seven days. On the way to [Bari](#) in a ship, they and other prisoners were chained in gangs of twelve. [Bari](#) prison, where they stayed a month, was filthy and crawling with lice; food was scarce and the prison staff stole much of it. At Sulmona prison Barker and the Australian were put in the dungeons and kept apart from the other prisoners. By this time Barker's sentence had been commuted to 30 years' imprisonment.

In September 1943 the prisoners rioted, the cells were opened, and Barker escaped into the hills near Pratola, where he hid for 20 days. He and two other soldiers found a guide who offered to take them down to our lines. They had a narrow shave once when they were stopped by Germans at Pietro in Valle and forced to dig gunpits along with thirty Italians. On 23 October 1943 Barker came through our lines at Castropignano. He was awarded the MM.

During the fifteen months Driver E. J. A. Phelan (4 RMT) spent in [Crete](#), he made 16 attempts to track down seaworthy boats. Twice he actually set out: the first time the boat sank under him and, on the other, the engine broke down. In a determined effort to catch him, the Germans terrorised the family and relatives of his Cretan friend, a robber in the Robin Hood style.

Phelan and four Australians, heavily armed, overpowered the crew of a large motor vessel and took it out to sea. When they pulled into the island of Gavdhos at dawn to repair the engine, two German planes machine-gunned the boat. German guards chased the soldiers across the island, caught them and sent them back to [Crete](#), where they were grilled by the [Gestapo](#) for four weeks.

His next prison was in [Athens](#). He was not there long before he made a break, reached the hills, and was cared for by a band of fugitive Greeks. They called themselves andartes (guerrillas) but, in fact, were an idle, drunken crowd living by stealing and by sponging on relatives; still, they looked after Phelan and never betrayed him. He was captured again when his fair complexion gave him away.

Phelan was moved to a prison camp in [Germany](#). In the summer of 1943 he determined to escape. This was difficult: he was on the 'black list', was closely

watched, and was not allowed to go out on working parties. He changed identity with another soldier and went to work in a cement factory close to the village of Lidice. The Czech workers there who ran an escape organisation listed him as an intending escaper. The organisation was destroyed when a recaptured Palestinian soldier turned informer. Fourteen of the underground group were shot.

Soon afterwards Phelan escaped on his own and travelled to Prague by a series of local workers' trains. One day he went to a cinema to keep out of the way. A propaganda film was screening and it was so full of Nazi strutting and fiction that Phelan laughed, whereupon a [Gestapo](#) agent sitting nearby arrested him for disrespect to the Reich. His real identity was discovered and back to camp he went for a spell in the punishment cells.

Phelan met another New Zealander, Sergeant B. J. Crowley (4 RMT), and both planned a further escape. Phelan's luck was out when he sickened and went to hospital. Crowley and an Englishman carried on and in the end reached [Sweden](#). Phelan organised another escape party, this time with Driver E. Silverwood (4 RMT) and an English soldier. They made the break on 23 December 1943 and, posing as foreign workers, travelled by train to [Berlin](#). During a bombing raid on the station they slipped unnoticed onto the train to Stettin, and on arrival there dodged the strict check by going out the back of the station. The escapers wandered around the outside of the heavily guarded waterfront looking for Swedish boats. After days of hide-and-seek a friendly Swede smuggled them on his boat and stowed them away until [Stockholm](#) was safely reached. Crowley was awarded the DCM, Phelan and Silverwood MMs.

Driver W. J. Siely (Pet Coy) was shocked by the brutality of the reprisals taken by the Germans on [Cretans](#) suspected of helping escaped soldiers. He hated to think that these people might have to suffer on his account, and although he escaped three times, this thought always made him return to the prison camp.

In October 1941 Siely was moved to Stalag VIII B at [Lamsdorf](#) in [Germany](#), where he posed as a corporal. In the summer of 1943 he helped 32 prisoners to escape from a working party at Stranberg but was frustrated in his own attempt by being arrested as an agitator. After a punishment of seven days in the cells, he was sent to Arbeitskommando 399 at Oberwischstein.

Here he filed the window bar in his billet and was free for four days. At the next working camp (Freiwaldau) he and two other soldiers prised open the trapdoor in the theatre of their Lager and managed to reach Olmutz, in [Czechoslovakia](#), by train before being recaptured by the [Gestapo](#). The next attempt was made at Parschnitz, where he was working on the railway track. On the first favourable opportunity Siely and another soldier went to a nearby shed and climbed through the rear window. Both walked across the Czechoslovak frontier, only to be betrayed by the wife of a Sudeten German whom they had asked for help.

At a cement factory in Munsterburg Siely and a British soldier made careful and thorough plans for escape. On 14 July 1944 they pulled a bar from the window of the washhouse in their billet; they then walked to the railway station and caught the train to Breslau. They travelled by train all the way to Stettin and their forged identity passes were never questioned.

In Stettin they met a Frenchman who hid them in his Lager. Soon they were negotiating with two Swedish seamen for a passage on a boat. On 24 July the Swedes smuggled the two soldiers and two Frenchmen on board and hid them in the airshaft of the main funnel. They stayed there for five days until clear of dangerous waters, when the captain was informed of their presence. The escapers were put ashore at Kalmar, in [Sweden](#), and reached [Stockholm](#) on 1 August 1944. Siely was awarded the DCM.

On 21 December 1943 Private H. A. Hoare (23 Bn), who had been wounded and taken prisoner in [Crete](#), climbed the fence of the Unterbenstatten ([Austria](#)) labour camp in daylight. He crossed the border of [Hungary](#) and within five days was in Budapest. There he was arrested and imprisoned in the old castle at [Szigetvar](#) which had been turned into an internment camp.

When the Germans marched into [Hungary](#) in March 1944, Hoare escaped from the castle but was caught three days later and sent to the prison at Zemun. Although he was most persistent in cutting the barbed wire entanglement, he was always unlucky to be caught in the act. One day Allied bombers came over and destroyed, among other places, the prison camp. When the bombers had finished and the danger was over, Hoare and two other prisoners escaped.

The patriot forces in the locality took the escapers under their wing. Hoare repaid their friendship by serving with them for three months. On 20 July 1944 a plane took him back to Allied lines in [Italy](#). He was awarded the MM.

Private P. E. Minogue (20 Bn) first escaped from a party working at the stables in [Salonika](#).

'One day there were no guards about, so I dropped my broom and walked down the road. I walked very slowly to the corner, then took to my heels and only stopped when out of breath. A few minutes later a woman from a house beckoned me. I went in and she gave me clothes to change into. She went out into the street and beckoned me again. I followed for half a mile when another woman took over. She led me to her home where her family gave me food and money. An hour later the same woman guided me to the house of Madame Lappa and I met two Aussies and three Tommies there. That night I went to a family to stay—their names were Costa and his wife, Koola, and their son, George. It was like heaven, I had everything.

'On the twelfth night George said, "Hurry, get ready, you are going to [Cairo](#)." He led me to another house and I saw the Aussies and Tommies again. Madame Lappa, the brains of the outfit, came and told us we were going on a submarine. She guided us to the outside of the town where she handed us over to two men. These men took us up to the third floor of a big building by the docks. One asked us if we would like coffee or whiskey. We said, "whiskey". He produced a bottle of Scotch and we were drinking a toast to success when we heard "Hands up!" What a shock, there at the door were two [Gestapo](#) men with guns out. I've seen this sort of thing in the pictures but never dreamed it would happen to me.'

Back at [Salonika](#) prison camp Minogue joined his friend, Private P. R. Blunden (20 Bn), and several others who had worked in the stables. They knew they were going to [Germany](#) by train and they prepared for escape by collecting all sorts of handy tools.

'At six when it was dusk we cut a hole in the side of the cattle truck, put a hand through, undid the wire holding the catch and pushed the door open. We argued about who was going first and last, so we cut the cards. There were twelve altogether, I drew fourth place and the train was going twenty-five miles an hour

when I jumped. Peter and I went back to [Salonika](#) to warn the people about the submarine. Next afternoon we saw our friends and were just in time to save twenty soldiers from the submarine fraud.

'Madame Lappa took us to Madame Tousula's home where we stayed for six months. While there we became very friendly with Bill Flint [Private W. Flint, 18 Bn] who was living at another house. Food was soon extremely hard to get in [Salonika](#) and I moved back to Costa and Koola because two in one home was too much of a struggle. Costa and Koola were going short for me and I didn't like that. One day I said I was going to visit Peter; instead I hit the trail out of town. I walked all night. I passed through a village at two in the morning when a Bulgarian grabbed me and handed me over to the police.'

Minogue found out that of the twelve who had escaped Blunden was the only one who was still free. In the camp Minogue took part in digging a tunnel under the barracks of the camp leader (a British sergeant-major). It was almost finished when the guards rushed in and went straight to it. The soldiers were sure that the sergeant-major, a toady of the Germans, had betrayed them. On yet another train journey to Germany Minogue escaped, this time with seven others. He and an Australian named Sid decided to walk down through [Greece](#) and find a boat to take them to [Turkey](#). The Australian insisted on going into a strange village in daylight and the people thought they were Germans posing as escaped prisoners. The Greeks did eventually find out who they were but only when it was too late to do anything. The soldiers were then in the custody of the police and the [Gestapo](#) had been notified.

[Salonika](#) prison closed down and the few prisoners left were locked in cattle trucks for the trip to [Germany](#). The sergeant-major was there—he travelled in the carriage with the Germans—and he suggested that those who wanted to escape should travel in the second truck.

'Late that night we were sawing away when the train suddenly stopped and guards ran up to us and shone torches on the hole. They battened up the hole and took our saw but we still had a file. Once everything appeared settled, we filed the wire off the window. Johnny Leach [Gunner J. J. Leach, 4 Fd Regt] was second through the window. I was about to follow when the train slowed down and, after a

few minutes, stopped. The guards came down the left side, spotted Johnny, and started running. Johnny ran around the back of the truck to the other side up past where we were. Then the guards on the right side saw him; Johnny turned again to run and they shot him in the back. He lay outside our window and we heard him say that they had got him in the back and then had put the boot in. He lived five minutes. They took us out of our truck and put us in the other. And so I landed in [Germany](#).'

Eight months later Flint arrived in the prison camp and Minogue learnt of the happenings in [Salonika](#). Blunden was taken off [Greece](#) a few weeks after Minogue had left Costa's house. Within a short time of this, the [Gestapo](#) raided Blunden's old place and Flint was eventually tracked down. Flint heard that the Greek women, Lappa and Tousula, and also several others were sent to German concentration camps.

'Bill Flint and I were cobblers all through [Germany](#). He would escape, get picked up, do a stretch in the cells, and away again he would go. I know he was away about eight times. We had a final flutter towards the end of the war and managed to come out through Prague and Pilsen.'¹

¹ Blunden received the MM for his escape and Leach, who was killed on 24 Apr 1942, was awarded posthumous mention in despatches.

CRETE

THOSE WHO DIED

Those who Died

In July 1941 Private C. C. Nicholl (19 Bn) and Private W. Gilby, an Australian, saw a boat well out to sea. Thinking that there might be people on it who, like themselves, might want to escape from Crete, they piled their gear on the beach and swam out to it. They grasped the side and in broken English and by signs asked the two Greeks on board to take them to North Africa. The Greeks made no move to pull them in; they talked, then screamed, and finally they picked up sticks and hit the soldiers until they had to break away.

They swam back to the beach but were no sooner there than Nicholl collapsed. Gilby dressed him and watched him during the night. By morning he knew that he would have to get him to shelter and aid. Nicholl was in agony with severe pains in his stomach. They set out over the mountains but Nicholl was too weak and in too much pain to walk any distance. Gilby then carried him for eight miles to a village where there were Germans. The sick man was immediately put to bed. Gilby sat beside him all the time and was with him when he died two days later. ¹ Gilby went back to the prison camp.

In September 1941 Gunner O. Cole (5 Fd Regt), Private F. M. Blank (23 Bn), and four other soldiers hid in a gully when they heard the Germans were making a drive to round up soldiers still free in Crete. The Germans surrounded the gully and the soldiers, seeing that they did not have a chance, came out with their hands up. The Germans lined them up. On a signal from the officer, a guard fired a burst from his tommy gun and shot two of the men. Cole was killed outright, as was also an unknown soldier.

On the morning of 25 August 1941 three escaped New Zealanders lay down to rest in a dry creek bed in Crete. A German patrol surrounded them and opened fire; the escapers surrendered. Gunner R. G. Dry (5 Fd Regt) was badly wounded and the others dressed his wounds. The Germans tied the hands of the two unwounded New Zealanders, Driver C. F. H. Snell (4 RMT) and Sergeant S. H. Richards (19 Army Tps),

and refused their offer to carry Dry between them.

Some of the Germans stayed behind with Dry. The others moved on with the prisoners and came to the top of the ridge. There Snell and Richards heard shots coming from the direction of the creek bed. The Germans who had stayed behind caught up; all the guards then stopped and passed a New Zealand army paybook around from hand to hand. In June 1942 another prisoner of war reported that Dry had been shot and killed while escaping. Dry was awarded posthumous mention in despatches.

On 4 March 1942 Corporal L. D. L. Houghton (23 Bn) was fatally shot while trying to escape from the [Larissa](#) prison camp. Houghton, who had fought in [Crete](#), was recaptured in the vicinity of [Larissa](#) on 17 February 1942.

The Greek Red Cross sent a letter to New Zealand describing his burial and the last honours paid to him:

'He was buried at the [Larissa](#) cemetery. His funeral was accompanied by an Italian brigade [sic] under a N.C.O., two priests and General Artes, the [Larissa](#) president of the Greek Red Cross, as well as the volunteer Red Cross nurses of that town. The Greek Red Cross will put up a cross on his grave with his name and rank.'

Nothing is known about Houghton's experiences while free. He was awarded posthumous mention in despatches.

Captain J. L. Harrison (18 Bn), captured in [Crete](#), escaped on the way to [Germany](#) but was recaptured in 1942 and spent a hard time in the Averoff prison in [Athens](#). He and Corporal F. I. A. Woollams (19 Bn) were put on the *Citta di Genova*, carrying a small number of prisoners and many Italian troops to [Italy](#). On 21 January 1943 she was torpedoed 18 miles off the coast of [Albania](#). Their cabin filled with water in a matter of seconds and Woollams fought his way out against the inrush of water. On deck he looked for Harrison but could not find him in the confusion.

Woollams managed to get a place in a lifeboat already overloaded with Italians and Greeks; the next morning they were picked up by an Italian gunboat. The whole area was searched and all survivors rescued but Harrison was not among them.

Acknowledgment: F. I. A. Woollams, Corintb and All That (A. H. and A. W. Reed, Wellington).

In an Italian prison camp Private A. B. Wright (18 Bn), who had been captured in [Crete](#), made careful preparations for escape. He collected and saved food, had a wire-cutting tool, and copied a map of [Italy](#) and the [Balkans](#). The night of 8 February 1942 was black and stormy and it was snowing—the night Wright was waiting for. He picked a shaded patch of the barbed wire between two searchlights, lay low until the outside patrol had passed, then cut a way through the first fence. An inside sentry spotted him and fired without warning. Wright died almost immediately.

Wright was awarded posthumous mention in despatches.

On 7 February 1943 Private J. R. Stuart (19 Bn) was executed in [Athens](#) by the Italians on the charge of 'political conspiracy, political defeatism, holding of arms and violence against the military.'

Stuart was badly wounded in [Crete](#), but early in 1942 when well enough he escaped in [Athens](#) from a prison convoy bound for [Germany](#). Little is known of his life in [Greece](#). When he was recaptured he was immediately recognised by the Italians as an escaped prisoner who had resisted arrest. In May 1942 an Italian secret policeman stopped Stuart and his friend Tony Handkinson, a civil internee, in an [Athens](#) street. There was a gun fight and the Italian was wounded in the leg. Handkinson was caught at the same time and both stood trial before an Italian military tribunal. They were condemned to death by shooting.

While waiting trial Stuart was locked up in the dreaded Averoff civil prison. He was cruelly treated but bore his suffering with courage and never gave way to despair. Once he and a Commando captain were given 30 lashes for attempting to escape. Another time Stuart and his cell mate, both desperate with hunger, were badly beaten by the guard. Stuart had a severe internal haemorrhage and was left in an underground cell for weeks. After another attempt he was beaten in his cell every two hours and the floor was flooded with water to stop him resting.

Corporal F. I. A. Woollams heard of Stuart when he came to Averoff prison and later had a talk with him. 'When I met him he was still suffering from severely

mutilated hands and arms. He showed me his legs, which were now a queer colour, having been absolutely blue...' The sight of Stuart was saddening. 'Jack Stuart and his mate (in an attempted escape) were now spending their time in and out of hospital. They both looked wrecks, and could only creep about like very old men. Jack was the worst case of the two....'

At dawn on 7 February 1943 Stuart was taken from his cell and shot. The prisoners heard that he was steadfast and died bravely. The Director of Averoff prison saw the execution and told the Swiss Chargé d'Affaires how impressed he was by Stuart's attitude and bravery.

Acknowledgment: Corintb and All That.

¹ On 7 July 1941.

CRETE

NEW ZEALAND SEARCHER PARTY'S INQUIRIES

New Zealand Searcher Party's Inquiries

After the war the New Zealand Searcher Party in [Crete](#) followed up every lead in an attempt to find out what had happened to missing New Zealanders. There were no survivors of the Battle of [Crete](#) still in hiding, and all the evidence collected on missing soldiers convinced the Searcher Party that they must have died.

In the case of Gunner W. Hodgson (5 Fd Regt) the party did not have much to go on. In 1941 there were rumours that Hodgson was alive in [Crete](#), though when escapers from [Crete](#) were questioned they said they had never come across him in the hills. Never at any stage was he reported as a prisoner of war. Further inquiries drew a blank and Hodgson was listed as presumed dead.

Escapers from [Crete](#) in the early part of 1942 said that Private J. H. McGill (19 Bn) was a prisoner of war. In June 1942 another escaper, Private G. M. Orr (19 Bn), reported that McGill had escaped twice but had been recaptured. Private A. R. Grant (27 MG Bn), who escaped from [Crete](#) in May 1943, was with him for a while shortly before he left.

After the war the New Zealand Searcher Party, having made exhaustive inquiries, was convinced that McGill was dead. It was known that in 1943 the enemy combed the hills very thoroughly for escaped soldiers in hiding and shot or captured nearly all of them. It was then that McGill must have lost his life.

Staff-Sergeant W. G. Penney reported in Egypt that he had met Driver J. N. Campbell (ASC attached 5 Fd Amb) and Sapper M. F. Little (7 Fd Coy) in December 1941 at the village of Sata. Campbell had been suffering from shrapnel wounds in the back but Penney said he had completely recovered. Another successful escaper, Private D. M. Catherwood (HQ 4 Inf Bde), reported that he had talked with Little in September of the same year.

At the end of the war there was no sign or trace of either Campbell or Little. The Field Searcher Party visited Sata but was unable to find any clue. The people of the

village, a very small one, could not pick them from the four hundred soldiers who had passed through on their way to [Tymbaki](#). The villagers took out their treasured photographs, letters, notes and souvenirs given them by the passing soldiers, but there was no trace of these two men. The Searcher Party appealed through the two [Heraklion](#) newspapers for information and assistance but again without success.

It was known that the Germans had been ruthless in hunting escaped soldiers about the time (December 1941) the two New Zealanders were last seen, and it seems most likely that they were killed then.

This appendix does not give the names of all soldiers who were free in Crete. So many escaped prisoners moved around the island and so much happened to them that it is practically impossible to trace all of them or relate all their adventures. Lack of records and passage of time are yet further bars. This list of escapes has been made as complete and accurate as possible. Enough has been written to mark these soldiers as men of hope and courage.

CRETE

APPENDIX VIII – EVACUATIONS FROM CRETE

Appendix VIII

EVACUATIONS FROM CRETE

- Ay Destroyers Decoy and Hero embarked King George of Greece, other
Roumeli 'important personages', and a platoon of 18 (NZ) Battalion.
night 22–
23 May
- Suda Bay Destroyers Jaguar and Defender landed stores and ammunition and
night 23– embarked some personnel not required and some wounded, about 60 all
24 May told
- Suda Bay Minelayer Abdiel landed 200 men of Layforce and 80 tons of stores and
night 24– embarked about 50 wounded and four Greek cabinet ministers.
25 May
- Suda Bay Abdiel and destroyers Hero and Nizam landed 750 men of Layforce and
night 26– stores and embarked '930 merchant seamen, some naval people and
27 May others not needed'.
- Heraklion Rear-Admiral H. B. H. Rawlings with cruisers Orion, Ajax, Dido, and
night 28– destroyers Decoy, Jackal, Imperial, Hotspur, Kimberley and Hereward.
29 May Imperial and Ajax damaged by near misses on outward voyage and Ajax
returned to Alexandria. Imperial broke down on return voyage and was
sunk. Hereward sunk by direct hit. Orion received several hits and near
misses. Dido severely damaged. About 600 troops killed or captured
(picked up by Italian torpedo-boats), 280 wounded and heavy Navy losses
including crew of Hereward and Captain G. R. B. Back of Orion killed.
Troops landed—3486 including wounded.
- Sfakia Napier (Captain S. H. T. Arliss) with destroyers Khandahar, Kelvin and
night 28– Nizam—724 troops plus twenty miscellaneous 'including Greeks, women,
29 May children, and a dog.'— Captain Arliss's report.
- Sfakia Vice-Admiral E. L. S. King with cruisers Phoebe, Perth, Calcutta, Coventry,
night 29– Glen ship Glengyle, and destroyers Jervis, Hasty and Janus. Army reported
30 May that 6029 were landed at Alexandria. Perth sustained a direct hit and
several near misses, and four of crew and nine soldiers were killed.
- Sfakia Captain Arliss with destroyers Nizam, Kelvin, Khandahar and Napier.
night 30– Khandahar broke down, Kelvin was damaged by near miss on outward
31 May voyage and both returned to Alexandria. Napier damaged by near miss on
return voyage. Army reported 1510 landed.

Sfakia night 31 May–1 June Vice-Admiral King with cruiser [Phoebe](#) and destroyers [Abdiel](#), [Kimberley](#), [Hotspur](#) and [Jackal](#). Not attacked. Army reported 3710 landed. Admiral Cunningham's despatch says that these ships 'embarked nearly 4000 troops.'

Sfakia nights 30–31 May and 31 May–1 June Sunderland flying boat evacuated 54, including Major-Generals [Freyberg](#) and [Weston](#).

Allowing for men killed on passage and for probable miscounting on disembarkation it is believed that about 17,000 troops were evacuated.

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APPENDIX IX – RETURN VISITS TO CRETE – (BY M. B. MCGLYNN)

Appendix IX

RETURN VISITS TO CRETE

(By M. B. McGlynn)

After the end of the war in Europe a New Zealand party headed by the GOC 2 NZEF, Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, and Major-General H. K. Kippenberger, went to Crete to hold a memorial service. The party, numbering about a hundred, included all those still with the Division who had fought in Crete. The 28th (Maori) Battalion provided the Guard of Honour and 5 Infantry Brigade the band. In the party were Brigadiers W. G. Gentry (Comd 9 Bde), G. B. Parkinson, I. L. Bonifant (6 Bde) and C. L. Pleasants (5 Bde), Colonels T. C. Campbell (Comd 4 Armd Bde), D. J. Fountaine, and F. M. H. Hanson (CRE), Lieutenant-Colonels H. A. Robinson (20 Armd Regt), W. B. Thomas (ex-CO 23 Bn), A. S. Playle (18 Armd Regt), J. I. Thodey (21 Bn), R. Boord (24 Bn), G. P. Sanders (27 MG Bn), H. T. W. Nolan (4 Fd Regt), A. A. Angell (6 Fd Regt), R. W. Foubister (CR Sigs) and E. G. Lewis (ADOS), Majors W. H. Ryan (4 Armd Bde), F. L. H. Davis (21 Bn), J. D. McKerchar (HQ 2 NZ Div) and P. E. Coutts (ASC). The party came from Italy in HMS Ajax, the same ship that had evacuated so many from Greece in the spring of 1941. Forty more New Zealanders, all veterans of the campaign, flew from Egypt. Representatives of the Greek, British, and Australian forces were also present. In addition to the New Zealand guard of honour, there were guards of honour from HMS Ajax and from the British troops in Greece. The official party at the ceremony included Rear-Admiral Alexandris, representing the Prime Minister of Greece, Brigadier Kirwan (RA), representing General R. M. Scobie, GOC Greece, civil and military governors of Crete, the Bishop of Crete, and local authorities. Shipping shortages and hurried timetables prevented a similar memorial service being held on the mainland of Greece.

On 29 September 1945 the party landed in Crete. Widespread interest was aroused by the visit, and the people lining the roads and in the villages overwhelmed them in welcome. The party stopped at Galatas for lunch, also at Armenoi, and at each place there were speeches of welcome, toasts and presentations. The party

went as far as [Maleme](#), where they walked over the old battlefield. Several members visited the neighbourhood of [Sfakia](#). At a special ceremony [General Freyberg](#) was presented with the Freedom of [Canea](#).

Next day a memorial service was held in the cemetery at [Suda Bay](#). The ceremony took place in ideal weather and was attended by about 15,000 [Cretans](#). A great number travelled long distances on foot to be present. The senior chaplains conducted the memorial services and dedicated the cemetery. Before the wreaths were laid on the central cross, [General Freyberg](#) paid tribute to the men who fell in the Battle of [Crete](#):

'History will do justice to the part they played. It will be belated justice. Gallantry in failure, no matter how great it may be, has tardy recognition. May 1941 was a difficult period of the war, certainly our most difficult. We had little equipment and no allies. Looking back on our long and eventful war, the fight to hold [Crete](#) was the hardest and most savage campaign of the New Zealand Division The graves here are of men of the [Royal Navy](#), the [Royal Marines](#), the British Army, the [Royal Air Force](#), the [Australian Imperial Force](#), the Greek Army and the gallant Cretan bands. Most of the graves are of men who had already faced a disastrous campaign in [Greece](#), where they had been forced off the beaches under conditions similar to [Dunkirk](#). When our badly equipped forces were driven from the [Maleme](#) aerodrome and the slopes west of [Canea](#), the bodies of these men lay on the battlefields where they had fallen. We come, before we depart for our homes, in the name of the New Zealand Division and of the [New Zealand Government](#) and of the people of New Zealand, to lay these wreaths on their graves.'

Most of the villages which had helped soldiers also presented wreaths. To the people of these villages and to the others, both in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), who were unable to be present, the Prime Minister of New Zealand sent a special message of gratitude:

'The Government and people of New Zealand remember with gratitude all the Greek people have done to help New Zealand soldiers who were left behind when your country was overrun by the German Army in April and May 1941. We are deeply conscious of New Zealand's debt to the Greek nation for their gallantry and self sacrifice in sheltering many of our men. We shall never forget all you personally and

those associated with you have done for our men during the whole of this war from 1941 to 1945 both in [Greece](#) and Crete. We realise that you have clothed and fed our men when you were in want yourselves and that in doing so you suffered hardship and ran great personal risk. I send sincerest wishes for the happiness and prosperity of your country from your friends and comrades in New Zealand.'

[General Freyberg](#), ending his address, told the people: 'We men of the New Zealand Division will never forget you.'

On 8 July 1949 HMNZS Rotoiti, after exercising with the [Mediterranean Fleet](#), paid a one-day visit to Crete. The ship's company held a memorial service at the cemetery and messages from the Governor-General of New Zealand, [Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg](#), and the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Rt. Hon. P. Fraser, were read. In the short time he was in [Crete](#), the captain was impressed by the high opinion held of New Zealanders: 'The high respect and esteem with which New Zealanders are held in [Crete](#) cannot be believed until one meets the people there and hears from one and all their respect for them as fighters and as men.'

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GLOSSARY

Glossary

Many abbreviations are used in orders, reports, signals, and other messages quoted in this history; others appear in the text and in footnotes.

AA	anti-aircraft
AA & QMG	Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General
A/Q	Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General
ADMS	Assistant Director of Medical Services
ADS	Advanced Dressing Station
ADW (E & M)	Assistant Director of Works (Equipment and Maintenance)
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
AMES	Air Ministry Experimental Station ¹
amn	ammunition
Arty	Artillery
ASC	Army Service Corps
A-tk	anti-tank
Bde	Brigade
BGS	Brigadier, General Staff
BHQ	Battery Headquarters
BM	Brigade Major
Bn	Battalion
Bty	Battery
CAS	Chief of Air Staff
CD	Coast Defence
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CO	Commanding Officer
Comd(r)	command/Commander
COS	Chiefs of Staff
Coy	Company
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery

CRE	Commander Royal Engineers
CSM	Company Sergeant-Major
DADMS	Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services.
DADOS (E)	Deputy Assistant Director of Ordnance Services (Equipment)
DAQMG	Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General
DCGS	Deputy Chief of the General Staff
DDMS	Deputy Director of Medical Services
det	detachment
DID	Detail Issue Depot
EFI	Expeditionary Force Institute
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
FDL	Forward Defended Locality
FO	Foreign Office
FPC	Field Punishment Centre
fwd	forward
GHQ	General Headquarters
Gk	Greek
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GOC-in-C	General Officer Commanding-in-Chief
GOR	Gun Operations Room
Gp	Group
GPO	Gun Position Officer
GS	General Staff
GSO 1	General Staff Officer (1st Grade)
HAA	Heavy Anti-aircraft
HQ	Headquarters
3H	3 Hussars
Hyg	Hygiene
inf	infantry
Inst	instruction
I (Int)	Intelligence
I tanks	infantry tanks
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
JPS	Joint Planning Staff
Ju	Junkers
junc(t)	junction
km	kilometre

LAA	Light Anti-Aircraft
LMG	Light Machine Gun
LO	Liaison Officer
Lt	light
MDS	Main Dressing Station
ME	Middle East also General Headquarters Middle East
Me	Messerschmitt
Med	Mediterranean
MG (mg)	machine gun
MLC	Motor Landing Craft
MMG	medium machine gun
MNBDO	Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation
MO	Medical Officer
MT	Mechanical Transport
MTB	Motor Torpedo Boat
Mtn	Mountain
NH	Northumberland Hussars
OC	Officer Commanding
OO	Operation Order
OP	Observation Post
Op Inst	Operation Instruction
ORs	other ranks
Para	Parachute
Pl	Platoon
PM	Prime Minister (United Kingdom)
PM NZ	Prime Minister of New Zealand
POL	petrol, oil, and lubricants
posn	position
PW	prisoner of war
RA	Royal Artillery
RAE	Royal Australian Engineers
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
RE	Royal Engineers
recce	reconnaissance
Regt	Regiment

RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RHQ	Regimental Headquarters
RM	Royal Marines
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer
RMT	Reserve Mechanical Transport
RQMS	Regimental Quartermaster-Sergeant
R/T	radio telephony
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment
RV	rendezvous
SC	Staff Captain
sec	section
2 i/c	second-in-command
sig(s)	signal(s)
SL	squadron leader (tank)
S/L	searchlight
SMG	sub-machine gun
Sqn	Squadron
TG	tommy gun
tk	tanks
TLC	Tank Landing Craft
TM	trench mortar
TOO	time of origin
tps	troops
tpt	transport
WD	war diary
WO	War Office
W/T	wireless telegraphy
x	yards

¹ Cover description for radar station.

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[BACKMATTER]

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