

75. Early in the forenoon, Convoy A.N.31, which was making for Suda Bay was ordered to turn back, as it was realised that it had no chance of reaching Crete under present conditions of air attacks.

76. Vice Admiral 1st Battle Squadron with Force A, less FORMIDABLE and escort, had been operating north west of Alexandria during the night 26th/27th May and at daylight on the 27th May were steering towards Kaso Strait to cover the return of ABDIEL, HERO and NIZAM. Vice Admiral 1st Battle Squadron's force now consisted of QUEEN ELIZABETH, BARHAM, JERVIS, JANUS, KELVIN, NAPIER and HASTY. At 0858 this force was attacked by 15 JU.88s and H.E.111s who appeared from the direction of the sun. BARHAM was hit on "Y" turret and two of her bulges were flooded by near misses. A fire was started in BARHAM and this necessitated the force steering down wind to the south until the fire was extinguished two hours later. Two aircraft were shot down and one was seen to be damaged by gunfire. At 1230, on receipt of instructions from the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Vice Admiral 1st Battle Squadron shaped course for Alexandria, arriving there at 1900.

77. In a message timed 0824 of 27th May (0/67808 of 27th May), General Wavell informed the Prime Minister that he feared we must recognise that Crete was no longer tenable and that troops must be withdrawn as far as possible. The Chiefs of Staff (No. 118) replied that Crete was to be evacuated forthwith. Our troops in the Heraklion sector were still holding out, though it appeared only a matter of time before the enemy launched a major attack against them.

78. The Navy could claim to have prevented any seaborne invasion of Crete and to have kept the Army supplied with essential reinforcements of men and stores. The Royal Air Force, owing to circumstances beyond their control had so far been unable to give any direct help to the Navy. The fleet had inflicted considerable losses on the German troop-carrying convoys and had destroyed a number of enemy aircraft. Twenty enemy aircraft had been shot down for certain, with 11 probables. At least 15 aircraft appeared to have been damaged. But the losses and damage sustained by the fleet had been severe. Officers and men had been subjected to prolonged strain from the constant bombing. Little rest could be given, as a formidable task lay before the Fleet—the evacuation of some 22,000 men from Crete to Egypt.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 14th September, 1941, by Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, G.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean.

Mediterranean.

14th September, 1941.

THE BATTLE OF CRETE.

PHASE IV—THE EVACUATION OF BRITISH AND IMPERIAL TROOPS FROM THE ISLAND.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the attached reports of the Evacuation of Crete,

carried out between 26th May and 1st June, 1941.

2. The evacuation followed without intermission on the Battle of Crete when the fleet had sustained such severe losses and threw a final and almost intolerable strain on the light forces, most of whom had been operating at sea almost continuously since the beginning of Operation "Lustre" on 4th March, 1941.

3. Only one of the evacuations, that from Heraklion (paragraphs 6 and 7)†, could be made from a port with any facilities at all. All the remainder had to be taken from the small open beach at Sphakia (paragraphs 18 to 24, 31, 33, 34, 45 and 46) to which access from the land was difficult and slow. This, together with the disorganisation resulting from the events previously described, led to a constant fluctuation in the forecast of numbers to be embarked and made both the organisation and performance of the evacuation most difficult.

4. In view of the confusion and uncertainty of the situation in Crete and the extemporary nature of the arrangements for the embarkation, Major General J. F. Evetts, C.B., C.B.E., M.C., was sent from the General Headquarters, Middle East, to act as Military Liaison Officer on my staff. His judgment and co-operation were invaluable.

At the same time an organisation was set up in the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean's offices for the co-ordination of fighter protection at sea. Group Captain C. B. R. Pelly, Royal Air Force, was sent from the Headquarters, Royal Air Force, Middle East, to undertake this organisation which, under his able management, pulled rapidly into shape and undoubtedly saved us many casualties.‡

5. The first day of the evacuation was not encouraging. In the evacuation of Heraklion, Rear Admiral H. B. Rawlings, O.B.E., the Rear Admiral Commanding, Seventh Cruiser Squadron, was faced with many difficult decisions. It was unfortunate that H.M.S. AJAX was not retained with Force B and much overcrowding thereby avoided, but the slight nature of her damage was not apparent to the Rear Admiral Commanding, Seventh Cruiser Squadron. Subsequent examination in harbour of damage sustained by H.M.S. AJAX revealed that the reports given to the Commanding Officer at the time were exaggerated and the ship could have well carried on with Force B.

6. The actual embarkation from Heraklion was most expeditiously carried out and reflected credit on all concerned both ashore and afloat.

* Footnote: Operation "Lustre" was the transport of the Army to Greece.

† Footnote: References are to paragraphs in the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean's narrative.

‡ Footnote: Air Ministry comment:—The general air situation remained much the same with one important difference. The bulk of the troops were evacuated from bays in southern Crete during the hours of darkness and it was possible to provide some limited fighter cover to ships which, by first light, had proceeded some way towards the Egyptian mainland. Even then, the ranges from our airfields and the small number of aircraft available allowed no margin in hand to deal with changes in the routing or timing of naval operations which were necessitated by enemy action.