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NAVAL OPERATIONS IN THE AEGEAN BETWEEN THE
 7TH SEPTEMBER, 1943 AND 28TH NOVEMBER, 1943.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 27th December, 1943, by Vice-Admiral Sir ALGERNON U. WILLIS, K.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Levant.

*Levant.
 27th December, 1943.*

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the attached report of Naval Operations in the Aegean between the 7th September, 1943 and 28th November, 1943.

(Signed) A. U. WILLIS,
*Vice-Admiral,
 Commander-in-Chief.*

GENERAL REPORT ON AEGEAN
 OPERATIONS.

EVENTS LEADING UP TO OUR ENTRY INTO THE
 AEGEAN.

The possibility of capturing the island of Rhodes and subsequently opening up the Aegean (Operation "Accolade") had been under active consideration since January, 1943. Outline plans were drawn up but the requirements of the advance in North Africa and later the invasion of Sicily ("Husky"), prohibited the allocation of forces necessary to mount such an operation.

2. In April, Force Commanders and their staffs were assembled in Cairo to plan for "Accolade" to take place shortly after the landing in Sicily, when an Italian surrender was considered possible. By the middle of June, however, it became apparent that assault shipping, craft and air forces would not be available and the Naval Force Commander and staff were sent to Algiers to plan "post-Husky" operations in the Central Mediterranean.

3. Following our successful landings in Sicily with unexpectedly small losses of assault shipping and craft, an attempt was made to plan and mount "Accolade" using such forces as were available in the Middle East or were earmarked for India. Once again, it became necessary to call on General Eisenhower to make up deficiencies, particularly in long range fighters, and, as a result, "Accolade" was cancelled by decision of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, at the Quadrant Conference.* The Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East informed the Chiefs of Staff on 31st August that the only operations which could be mounted from Middle East were:—

- (a) Small Scale Raids.
- (b) Sabotage and Guerilla operations by Resistance Groups.
- (c) Unopposed "walk-in" to areas evacuated by the enemy.

PHASE I.

Surrender of Italy to the opening of the German Air Offensive.

8th to 26th September, 1943.

4. When it was known that Italy had surrendered, it was decided to take advantage of this situation by encouraging the Italian garrisons to hold such Aegean islands as they could against the Germans, and to stiffen their resistance by sending in small parties of British troops. Between 8th and 16th September, Castelloriso, Kos, Leros, Samos, Kalymnos, Symi and Stampalia were all occupied by small detachments of Raiding Force troops accompanied by Civil Affairs Officers. Fairmile motor

Admiralty footnote :

* Quadrant Conference—the British-American conference held at Quebec in August, 1943.

launches and caiques of the Levant Schooner Flotilla manned by Royal Naval crews provided the transport.

5. In Rhodes our emissaries were unable to prevent the Italian Governor surrendering the island to the Germans after a short resistance. (There were 30,000 Italian and 7,000 German troops in the island.) The combined service mission waiting at Castelorusso and the 234 Infantry Brigade waiting to proceed to Rhodes were therefore held available to reinforce the British forces in the other islands.

6. During this phase our naval forces, consisting of six Fleet destroyers of the 8th Destroyer Flotilla, 2 Hunt class destroyers, 1st Submarine Flotilla, 6 motor launches, 4 L.C.F.* caiques and 8 R.A.F. high speed launches and pinnaces were employed on:—

(a) Building up British forces and supplies in the islands.

(b) Intercepting enemy shipping proceeding from the Piraeus to the Dodecanese.

7. By 28th September, the following had been landed:—

2,700 men, 21 guns, 7 vehicles, 450 tons of stores and ammunition.

8. Acting on air reconnaissance, on reports from agents in the Piraeus area and from Italian reporting posts and L.R.D.G.† patrols in the Cyclades, destroyers carried out sweeps in the Aegean by night, retiring to the southward or lying up in Leros during the day. On 18th September, H.M.S. FAULKNER (Captain A. K. Scott-Moncrieff, D.S.O., R.N.), H.M.S. ECLIPSE (Commander E. Mack, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.) and H.M.S. QUEEN OLGA (Lieutenant-Commander G. Blessas, D.S.O., R.H.N.) sank a 3,000 ton merchant vessel and a 1,200 ton merchant vessel north of Stampalia and damaged the escort vessel, which put into Stampalia and was captured by one of our patrols assisted by the Italian garrison. This convoy was carrying specialist personnel and supplies to Rhodes. On 23rd September, H.M.S. ECLIPSE sank a 2,500 ton merchant vessel off the S.W. point of Rhodes which had landed reinforcements in Rhodes and was returning to the westward. An ex-Italian torpedo-boat was driven ashore and later destroyed by the R.A.F.

9. Prior to the Italian surrender, the Germans had made preparations to take over the entire military administration of Greece as from 6th September and had disposed sufficient forces on the west coast of Greece, the Peloponnesus, Melos, Crete, Scarpanto and Rhodes, to ensure the retention of their control in these key positions. In the period immediately following the surrender, the Germans were in no position to undertake seaborne operations, owing to the lack of shipping, escort vessels and landing craft, which they had to obtain from the Italians or transfer from other areas. By the middle of September, however, they had collected enough craft to despatch raiding forces to the Cyclades to evacuate the Italian garrisons and such food

and war material as they could lay their hands on. With the exception of Syra they established observation posts only and did not garrison the islands in force.

10. Apart from Rhodes, the Italians' attitude was co-operative in the islands visited by us, though their fighting value was low. It was considered that even if Leros were reinforced by such British troops as were available and Kos airfields developed and defended adequately, we should not be in a secure position to continue operations in the Aegean until Rhodes was in our possession. Accordingly on 22nd September the Chiefs' of Staff approval was obtained to mount "Accolade" before the end of October with such forces as were available in the Middle East and could be spared from the Central Mediterranean.

PHASE II.

The Start of the German Offensive.

26th September-12th October.

11. With the arrival of large enemy air reinforcements from France and the Russian front and the proved inefficiency of the A.A. defences of Leros, as shewn by the sinking of H.M.S. INTREPID (Commander C. A. de W. Kitcat, R.N.) and H.M.S. QUEEN OLGA in Leros harbour on 26th September, operations of our surface forces in the Aegean were restricted to sweeps during the dark hours with forces who retired to the south-eastward to obtain fighter cover from Cyprus during the day. On 1st October all available Fleet destroyers were sailed to Malta as escort to H.M. Ships HOWE and KING GEORGE V, leaving us with the Hunts whose speed and endurance made it difficult for them to operate far into the Aegean and still be clear by daylight. As a result, H.M.S. ALDENHAM (Lieutenant-Commander J. I. Jones, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.R.), H.M.S. MIAULIS (Commander C. Nikitiades) and H.M.S. THEMISTOCLES (Lieutenant-Commander N. Sarris, R.H.N.) who were patrolling off Kaso Strait on the night of the 2nd/3rd October, were short of fuel and in no position to take action on an aircraft report of an enemy convoy sighted off Naxos and believed on all available intelligence to be bound for Rhodes. They were ordered to withdraw to Alexandria for fuel. This convoy, in fact, carried an invasion force which was landed on Kos at 0500 on October 3rd and captured the island in spite of stubborn resistance from the British battalion, who received small assistance from the Italian garrison.

12. No surface force was available to interfere with the landing, but submarines on patrol were ordered to proceed to the Kos area to attack invasion shipping, and on 4th October the 12th Cruiser Squadron, consisting of H.M. Ships AURORA, flying the broad pendant of Commodore W. E. Agnew, C.B., D.S.O., R.N., PENELOPE (Captain G. D. Belben, D.S.C., A.M., R.N.), SIRIUS (Captain P. W. B. Brooking, D.S.C., R.N.) and DIDO (Captain J. Terry, M.V.O., R.N.), with five Fleet destroyers sailed from Malta at high speed to be available for operations in the Aegean. From the night of 5th/6th onwards a force of cruisers and destroyers patrolled

Admiralty footnotes:

* L.C.F.—large landing craft converted to mount A.A. guns for air defence in combined operations.

† L.R.D.G.—Long Range Desert Group.

close off the Kaso or Scarpanto Straits ready to act on any enemy reports which might be received, retiring to the south-eastward by day.

13. H.M. Ships SIRIUS, PENELOPE, FAULKNER and FURY (Lieutenant-Commander T. F. Taylor, R.N.) entered the Aegean on the night of 6th/7th October when reconnaissance indicated that enemy reinforcements were arriving from the westward, and assisted by an enemy report from H.M. Submarine UNRULY (Lieutenant J. P. Fyfe, R.N.) received at 0630 on 7th, they located and sank an enemy convoy consisting of an ammunition ship, an armed trawler and six landing craft. This encounter delayed the retirement of our force, which was attacked in daylight in the Scarpanto Strait by J.U. 88s and 87s, H.M.S. PENELOPE being hit by an unexploded bomb and her speed reduced to 23 knots. (The destruction of this convoy probably prevented the enemy from making an immediate assault on Leros.)

14. A force under H.M.S. CARLISLE (Captain H. F. Nalder, R.N.) carried out a sweep on the nights of 7th/8th and 8th/9th October to intercept any further enemy forces attempting to reach the Dodecanese from the Piraeus. No sightings were made and at 1215 on 9th October, when the force was proceeding south through Scarpanto Strait, it was heavily attacked by J.U. 87s and although the escorting Lightnings shot down 15 enemy aircraft and ships accounted for three more, H.M.S. PANTHER (Lieutenant-Commander Viscount Jocelyn, R.N.) was hit and sunk and H.M.S. CARLISLE was hit aft and was towed to Alexandria by ROCKWOOD.

15. It now became apparent that our forces could not enter the Aegean to intercept enemy shipping and be clear again by daylight, and that further attempts would lead to unacceptable losses, more especially as the Lightning Squadrons were withdrawn to the Central Mediterranean. Accordingly the policy was adopted of operating destroyers only as an anti-invasion force, and using cruisers to provide A.A. and fighter direction during approach and retirement from the Aegean and for operations in such areas they could reach during the night.

16. The loss of Kos airfields, besides finally destroying our hopes of fighter cover for our surface forces, greatly increased the difficulties of supply as it prevented the passage and unloading of merchant ships and heavy lift ships which were urgently required to provide heavy A.A. defences and to improve the transport situation in Leros. The capture of Rhodes became increasingly important for the continuation of our operations.

17. On 9th October, a meeting was held at Tunis, attended by General Eisenhower, the First Sea Lord (Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, Bt., G.C.B., D.S.O.) and all Commanders-in-Chief in the Mediterranean and Middle East, including the Commander-in-Chief, Levant, Admiral Sir John H. D. Cunningham, K.C.B., M.V.O., to consider the situation, and it was finally decided that our resources would not allow us to mount Operation "Accolade", but that we should try to hold Leros and Samos as long as supplies could be maintained.

PHASE III.

We build up Leros and Samos whilst the Germans prepare to invade.

12th October-5th November.

18. On their return from Tunis, the Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, at a meeting presided over by the Foreign Secretary and attended by the First Sea Lord, confirmed the decision to hold Leros and Samos, using all means in their power to do so, and at the same time decided that it would be impossible to recapture Kos with the forces at their disposal. Approval was given for the use of four Italian submarines (ZOEAL, ATROPO, CORRIDONI, MENOTTI) and H.M. Submarines SEVERN (Lieutenant-Commander A. N. G. Campbell, R.N.) and RORQUAL (Lieutenant-Commander L. W. Napier, D.S.O., R.N.) to assist in running supplies. Preparations were made to run a vessel of the Turkish ferry type through to Leros with heavy vehicles during the November non-moon period. This latter venture was subsequently abandoned.

19. On 14th October, Vice-Admiral Sir Algernon U. Willis, K.C.B., D.S.O. relieved Admiral Sir John H. D. Cunningham, K.C.B., M.V.O. as Commander-in-Chief, Levant.

20. Intelligence now suggested that the enemy would stage an invasion of Leros from Kos and Kalymnos with the 4,000 troops believed to be already there, as soon as he could transfer additional shipping and landing craft from the Piraeus. Our surface forces were therefore employed in conjunction with air reconnaissance and striking forces, to prevent the arrival of such shipping. A striking force was kept almost continuously available in the area, which was employed on anti-shipping patrols, bombardments of ports and harbours in Kos and Kalymnos islands. It was hoped by a display of activity to induce the enemy to believe we were capable of exerting greater naval strength in the area than was actually the case.

21. Reports at noon on 15th October showed an enemy convoy of two merchant ships and two landing craft off Naxos proceeding to the eastward and H.M. Ships BELVOIR (Lieutenant J. F. D. Bush, D.S.C., R.N.) and BEAUFORT (Lieutenant-Commander Sir Standish O'G. Roche, Bt., D.S.O.) were ordered to intercept and destroy it. They were reported and heavily attacked by J.U. 88s and J.U. 87s though fortunately without incurring damage, and the convoy was diverted to the northward, thereby evading our force who had to withdraw to the southward due to lack of fuel. H.M. Ships PHEOBE (Captain C. P. Frend, R.N.), FAULKNER (Captain M. S. Thomas, D.S.O., R.N.) and FURY who entered the Aegean at dark, continued to search, but made no sighting and had to withdraw from the Aegean before daylight. At 1300B on 16th October, H.M. Submarine TORBAY (Lieutenant R. J. Clutterbuck, R.N.) sighted the convoy to the northward of Levitha and sank one of the merchant ships. During the night of the 16th/17th, H.M.S. HURSLEY (Lieutenant-Commander W. J. P. Church, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.) and H.M.S. MIAOULIS (Commander E. Boudouris, R.H.N.) searched Kos roads and the east side of Kalymnos, setting a small merchant ship on fire in Port Vathi, sinking an E-boat and a landing craft and setting a sloop

on fire in Port Akti. This was a very spirited close range action. On the following night H.M. Ships J E R V I S (Captain J. S. Crawford, D.S.O., R.N.) and P E N N (Lieutenant-Commander J. H. Swain, D.S.O., R.N.) bombarded Port Kalymnos and set a merchant ship in the harbour on fire. This was evidently the second ship of the enemy convoy.

22. The above enemy losses, with the addition of the damage of four F-lighters on the 18th and 20th by Mitchell aircraft of the U.S.A.A.F. and Beaufighter aircraft of the R.A.F. and torpedoing of a 600 ton merchant ship and a lighter by motor torpedo boats on the night 19th/20th, reduced the chances of the enemy being in a position to invade Leros for the time being and our naval forces then concentrated on the reinforcement and supply of Leros and Samos during the non-moon period.

23. The supply of the garrison at Leros had by this time (18th October) become unsatisfactory. An organisation was being set up for supply by caique through Casteloriso and through Samos, but owing to various difficulties, only very small quantities of supplies had so far reached Leros by either of these methods, though supplies to Samos were going well. Some supplies were being put into Leros by air, but this was falling off owing to shortage of transport aircraft. Supply by submarine could not start for a week and these would only provide a proportion of the tonnage needed to maintain the garrison, much less build up a reserve. The situation was complicated by the fact that the reinforcement of the garrison of Leros, which then consisted of one battalion and one company of infantry plus various details making about 1,200 in all, was dependent to a considerable extent on the creation of a regular supply service.

24. In these circumstances—at any rate temporarily until the caique service and submarines got going—it was decided that the Navy would have to undertake the supply of Leros with destroyers by night. This proved arduous and trying work for the destroyers who were constantly shadowed and attacked by enemy aircraft during their approach and withdrawal from the island. That the destroyers avoided damage in harbour was due primarily to the careful organisation and good judgment of the Senior British Naval Officer, Aegean (Acting Captain E. H. B. Baker, R.N.) who, by varying the timing of the visits and the unloading ports and by reducing the time of discharge to a minimum, was able on most occasions to frustrate the enemy efforts to locate and bomb our ships whilst they were unloading.

25. During the period 16th to 30th October, the following reinforcements were put into Leros:—

<i>By Surface Craft:—</i>	<i>By Submarine:—</i>
950 men,	17 men,
290 tons of stores,	255 tons of stores,
6 guns,	12 guns,
11 jeeps,	1 jeep.
11 trailers;	

26. As a result of a visit to Leros of senior Army Staff Officers from General Headquarters, Middle East, policy was reviewed by the three Commanders-in-Chief on the 30th October. It was then decided still further to reinforce the island, which the Army considered needed some 1,200-1,300 more troops and additional

guns and equipment to make it reasonably tactically secure and capable of beating off an attempt at invasion by the enemy. This was all the more necessary in view not only of the difficulty of intercepting an assault across the very short distances from the harbours and bays of Kos and Kalymnos islands and the quantity of minefields in the area, but also because of the approach of winter and the strain on the destroyers, for owing to losses, the distance from Alexandria, and other factors, it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a striking force constantly in the area.

27. Every possible means was utilised for passing in these reinforcements, destroyers, submarines, M.L.s., M.G.B.s., M.M.S.s., B.Y.M.S.,* caiques and schooners, and between 31st October and 7th November, the following were put into Leros:—

<i>By Surface Craft:—</i>	<i>By Submarine:—</i>
1,280 men,	33 tons of stores.
180 tons of stores,	
14 jeeps,	
1 trailer;	

28. During this period of build up no contact was made with enemy forces, though our ships carried out occasional bombardments of enemy ports whilst entering and leaving the Aegean. We were unfortunate in that three destroyers were mined to the eastward of Kalymnos, H.M. Ships HURWORTH (Commander R. H. Wright, D.S.C., R.N.) and ECLIPSE were sunk and H.M.S. ADRIAS had her bows blown off. On board H.M.S. ECLIPSE were some 200 military reinforcements for Leros among whom casualties were heavy. Although subject to a considerable weight of air attack both by day and night no ships were sunk by this method, though H.M. Ships SIRIUS and AURORA were both hit and damaged seriously and H.M.S. BELVOIR sustained minor damage from an unexploded bomb.

29. During the last week of October there were clear indications of the mounting of a major assault force in the Piraeus. To overcome the shortage of landing craft, thirteen 60 ft. powered lighters of the I-boat class arrived by rail from the north. Simultaneously a group of three escort vessels of U-J type were sailed from Piraeus to the Cyclades. The loading of several merchant vessels with munitions, guns and supplies suggested preparations for a follow-up convoy.

30. It was not clear if the assault was intended for Samos or Leros, but a series of heavy air raids suggested the former. The sinking of a 1,200 ton eastbound merchant vessel off Anaphi by H.M. Submarine UNSPARING on 29th October made it probable that the operation would be postponed, and this impression was confirmed by the return of a 2,000 ton merchant vessel from Syra to Piraeus on 1st November.

PHASE IV.

Invasion of Leros—3rd November to 16th November.

31. On 3rd November, landing craft and escorts were in Lavrion and agents reported they were carrying out landing exercises. Photographic reconnaissance on 4th November

Admiralty footnote:—

* M.L.—Motor Launch; M.G.B.—Motor Gun Boat; M.M.S.—Motor Minesweeper; B.Y.M.S.—British Yacht Minesweeper.

showed nine landing craft and two escort vessels in Lavrion with a further four landing craft at Zea. They were reported moving eastward on 5th November. Between then and the evening of 10th November when they arrived in the Kos/Kalymnos area, they moved only by day under heavy fighter protection, dispersing and lying up during the night, first in the Paros/Naxos area and later in Amorgos, Levitha and Stampalia.

32. Every effort was made to intercept the force. Beaufighters and Mitchells of 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group attacked it by day, and at night our destroyers often under an attack searched the areas where the landing craft were expected to be lying up, and bombarded harbours in these areas. Our efforts met with small success, due by day to the heavy scale of fighter protection the enemy maintained over the convoy and by night to the difficulty of spotting the craft which were probably beached and camouflaged in the many small bays available. One F-lighter, one landing craft and two caiques remained behind in Amorgos on 9th November, after the rest of the force had sailed, and these were probably damaged by Beaufighters during their attack p.m. on 8th November. H.M. Ships PENN and PATHFINDER (Lieutenant-Commander C. W. Malins, R.N.) sank a caïque (probably a Naval Auxiliary) south of Paros on the night 6th/7th November.

33. With the arrival of this force at Kos and Kalymnos on 11th November, the enemy had available a total force of 4 serviceable F-boats, 13 I-boats, 5 Auxiliary Naval craft and a number of armed caiques, and into these he loaded troops and equipment already assembled in these islands.

APPRECIATION ON THE MORNING ENEMY INVASION FLOTILLA REACHED KOS/KALYMNOS (10TH NOVEMBER).

34. Despite the efforts of our destroyers and Air Force, the enemy had, as previously described, succeeded in getting the bulk of his invasion flotilla to its destination. The delays imposed upon him by our activities had at any rate given time to the reinforced Leros garrison to re-organise and prepare for the impending invasion. It was now necessary to decide on the policy for the employment of destroyers in the event of Leros being assaulted from the neighbouring islands.

35. The following factors governed the matter:—

(a) The opinion of the Army Command that the reinforced garrison of Leros should be able to beat off, or at any rate destroy after landing, an initial attack provided that reinforcements in strength and heavy equipment could be prevented from reaching the enemy.

(b) The enemy's complete air superiority in the area, and the heavy scale of attack he could inflict on the ships by J.U. 88s and J.U. 87s with fighter escort. Experience has shown that the enemy had no intention of refraining from attacking ships under way in Turkish waters.

(c) The limited number of destroyers it was possible to maintain in the area over the period of waiting for the invasion to start. Due to the distance from Alexandria or

Limassol ships could only remain in the area for a short period. For example, the Hunts had only enough fuel for one whole night's sortie at high speed and the return journey to Alexandria or Limassol.

(d) The short haul for enemy invasion craft for the actual assault, particularly if, as was expected, they assembled first in the various bays of Kalymnos Island and then moved off to attack at the selected moment.

36. Accordingly it was decided that if Leros was being invaded, destroyers could best contribute by endeavouring to intercept at night and destroy the follow-up convoys, which it was considered would be vital to the enemy. Destroyers were therefore instructed that they should not leave their lying up positions by day in order to intercept invading forces unless specifically ordered to do so by the Commander-in-Chief.

37. Motor launches, motor torpedo boats and motor gun boats were placed under the orders of the Senior British Naval Officer, Aegean. At night the motor launches carried out anti-invasion patrols, whilst the motor torpedo boats and motor gun boats were held at immediate notice in harbour to act on enemy reports. Fuel stocks for coastal forces were established in Samos and in caiques, with small emergency stocks in Leros.

Situation on evening of 10th November.

38. The bulk of the enemy invasion flotilla having arrived at Port Kalymnos and Kos harbour, it was hoped that they would have to spend at least one night there fuelling and preparing to move up to the northern bays of Kalymnos, from which the invasion was expected to be launched.

39. Bombardments of Port Kalymnos and Kos harbour and roads were therefore carried out in bright moonlight on night 10th/11th November respectively by destroyer forces under Commanding Officer, H.M.S. PETARD (Commander R. C. Egan, R.N.) and Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla (Captain M. S. Thomas, D.S.O., R.N.) in FAULKNER. H.M.S. PETARD's force, consisting of H.M. Ships PETARD, ROCKWOOD (Lieutenant S. R. le H. Lombard-Hobson, R.N.) and O.R.P. KRAKOWIAK, spent one and a half hours close off Port Kalymnos and pumped 1,500 rounds of 4-inch into this small harbour. A ship which had been damaged previously was set on fire and capsized, but it is not known whether damage was done to landing craft.

40. Both forces were bombed and H.M.S. ROCKWOOD in PETARD's force, damaged by an unexploded glider bomb, hit in the gearing room. By a fine feat of seamanship, ROCKWOOD was towed by H.M.S. PETARD under constant bombing attack to Losta Bay in the Gulf of Doris, where they arrived by daylight.

41. Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla who had been instructed to proceed with his force on completion of his bombardment remained in the Gulf of Kos so as to be in a position to assist H.M.S. PETARD with H.M.S. ROCKWOOD if required.

42. During 11th, air reconnaissance showed considerable movement of landing craft between

Kos and Kalymnos, and it appeared that preparations to mount the assault on Leros were in train. The afternoon reconnaissance showed a concentration of landing craft in Kos harbour.

43. The enemy intentions were still not clear. As the next force of destroyers could not reach the area until late on the night 12th/13th, it was essential to conserve fuel in Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla's force. He was therefore ordered to move to an anchorage nearer to Kos Channel and to send his two Hunts to attack any landing craft in Kos roads reported by air reconnaissance.

44. Motor Torpedo Boat 307 (Lieutenant J. G. G. Muir, R.N.V.R.) on passage from Casteloriso to Leros was in action with two unknown destroyers off Kalymnos at 0330/12th November, and at 0445/12th the motor torpedo boat force sailed from Alinda Bay at full speed to search for an enemy merchant ship reported 4-5 miles south-east of Leros. No sighting was made, but later when sweeping to the northward, two destroyers were sighted off Pharmacos. These were mistaken for British destroyers.

45. At approximately 0400/12th November Motor Launch 456 (Lieutenant-Commander F. P. Monckton, R.N.R.) on patrol to the east of Alinda sighted and reported enemy forces 12 miles east of Leros proceeding north and later engaged a force of two destroyers and ten landing craft. After a short and gallant action Motor Launch 456 was damaged and forced to return to Alinda Bay where she landed wounded.

46. Between 0600 and 0830/12th November the enemy succeeded in landing both north and south of Alinda Bay with the object of "pinching out" the bay where he would then be able to land heavy support weapons. A further landing was attempted at Blefuti Bay on the north of the island, but was repelled with the loss of two landing craft. It would appear that the Italian C.D.* guns did not open fire until too late, and this coupled with the fact that our close range weapons were sited to cover the more important bays, enabled the enemy to land forces at Palma, Pasti Di Sotto, Grifo and N. Appetici with the loss of only one more landing craft. Landings were counter-attacked and held by our forces, but at 1340B/12 the situation was made more difficult by the landing of parachute troops to the west of Alinda. When darkness fell, H.M. Ships FAULKNER, BEAUFORT and H.M.S. PINDOS (Lieutenant-Commander D. Fidas, R.H.N.) together with Motor Torpedo Boats 315 (Lieutenant L. E. Newell, D.S.C., R.N.Z.N.V.R.), 266 (Sub-Lieutenant J. N. Broad, R.N.Z.N.V.R.), and 263 (Lieutenant A. G. Fry, R.A.N.V.R.) swept in the Leros/Kalymnos/Levitha area to prevent enemy reinforcements reaching Leros, and at 2210, Mount Clido battery, Leros was bombarded from the eastward at the request of the Army ashore. They made no sightings. H.M. Ships DULVERTON, ECHO (Lieutenant-Commander R. H. C. Wyld, R.N.) and BELVOIR were picked up by enemy aircraft whilst entering the Aegean and shadowed, and H.M.S. DULVERTON was hit by a glider bomb at

0145/13th and sunk. ECHO and BELVOIR, after picking up survivors, proceeded. Minesweepers and motor launches which had been sent to Samos from Leros were loaded with reinforcements and ammunition, but since time would not permit their reaching Leros that night, they were held at Samos.

47. During the night 12th/13th November a southerly gale blew up which restricted the operation of light craft on both sides. On 13th November fighting continued ashore, and in spite of very heavy bombing by the enemy and a further parachute landing at 0900B/13th November, which suffered high casualties due to the strong wind blowing, our forces kept the enemy pinned down to the eastern shore in the Alinda Bay area. During the night of 13th/14th November, H.M. Ships FAULKNER, BEAUFORT, and H.M.S. PINDOS after attempting to bombard enemy positions in Leros, left the Aegean owing to shortage of fuel. H.M. Ships ECHO and BELVOIR however bombarded enemy positions on Leros at the request of the Army, and later carried out a sweep in the area without making a sighting. Reinforcements from Samos in the motor launches and minesweepers were turned back by the weather. H.M. Ships PENN, ALDENHAM and BLENCATHRA (Lieutenant E. G. Warren, R.N.) entered the Aegean.

48. At Leros all naval signal publications were destroyed at 0700/14th November when an enemy attack threatened to overrun the naval headquarters and this seriously interfered with communications and therefore with operations. From then on, signalling with the Senior British Naval Officer at Leros had to be done through army channels using army cyphers.

49. During the day of the 14th November, fighting in Leros continued, our forces counter-attacking with some success in the forenoon, but with the growing weariness of our garrison who had been fighting for 48 hours with no real rest under heavy scale air attack, fresh troops and more ammunition were urgently required. These were collected during the night from Samos by H.M. Ships ECHO and BELVOIR. ECHO, by proceeding at 30 knots, managed to land her 250 troops at Portolago before daylight, but BELVOIR with her slower speed was forced to lie up.

50. Enemy positions were attacked from the seaward by H.M. Ships PENN, ALDENHAM and BLENCATHRA who arrived at Alinda Bay at dusk on 14th November. Unfortunately only three enemy caiques were in the bay, but these were engaged and targets ashore, pointed out by our forces, were taken under fire. H.M.S. PENN and her force then patrolled in this area being repeatedly attacked by enemy aircraft including glider bombers. She was searching for landing craft reported by Leros, but failed to find. They had evidently turned back as a result of enemy air reports of H.M.S. PENN's force.

51. Motor torpedo boats again patrolled the area and shortly before daylight they joined H.M.S. ECHO, who was returning from Portolago, in attacking an enemy force which was approaching Alinda Bay, sinking an F-lighter and two landing barges all laden with troops.

Admiralty footnote:

* C.D.—coast defence.

52. Thus, on the morning of 15th November, our forces had been reinforced, whereas the enemy, though possibly reinforced late on the 14th, had been deprived of some of the reinforcements due to arrive on the morning of the 15th. We were, however, owing to the heavy bombing, and the physical condition of our troops, unable to score decisively against the enemy during the day.

53. H.M. Ships PENN and ECHO's forces had been shadowed continuously by aircraft during the night of 14th/15th November, and bombed from time to time, and it was evident that the enemy were making use of air reconnaissance to keep their forces clear of ours; on the night 15th/16th, therefore, H.M.S. PENN and her force were ordered to remain at immediate readiness and to act on enemy reports, hoping thereby that enemy forces would be committed to a landing and that we would be able to intercept them. Owing to breakdown of W/T in Leros, reports of enemy landing craft, relayed through Alexandria, arrived in H.M.S. PENN too late for action to be taken on them, and the dawn sweep ordered by Commander-in-Chief, Levant produced no enemy sighting. In point of fact, had the Commanding Officer of H.M.S. PENN acted as soon as he received the report, it is possible that he might have interfered with the landing craft off the beaches in Alinda Bay.

54. Motor torpedo boats, minesweepers and motor launches landed the troops ex H.M.S. BELVOIR at Portolago during the night. H.M. Ships ECHO and BELVOIR left the Aegean short of fuel, and H.M. Ships FURY, EXMOOR (Commander J. Jefferies, R.N.) and O.R.P. KRAKOWIAK arrived to take their place.

55. On the 16th November the situation ashore in Leros became critical as reinforcements received during the night allowed the enemy to overrun our headquarters and positions in the Merviglia area, and though they were driven out again by the reinforcements we had received, the continued bombing and the incessant fighting over nearly five days had so reduced the fighting power of our forces that they were unable to continue the battle and the island surrendered at approximately 1700B.

56. During the night 16th/17th November H.M.S. EXMOOR and O.R.P. KRAKOWIAK, who had been ordered to Samos to transfer the Greek "Sacred" Squadron to Leros, rejoined H.M.S. FURY. H.M. Ships PENN and ALDENHAM's bombardment of the Alinda Bay area had to be cancelled and they bombarded Kos harbour on their way south to join H.M.S. BLENCATHRA, who was towing H.M.S. ROCKWOOD from the Gulf of Kos to Alexandria.

PHASE V.

WITHDRAWAL FROM AEGEAN.

57. Plans were made in mid-October to collect a number of caiques to be available in case it became necessary to withdraw our troops from Samos and Leros. The number of small craft under the orders of the Senior British Naval Officer, Aegean was also increased for general operational purposes and to assist in a possible withdrawal.

58. The course taken by the fighting in Leros, however, prevented any action by these caiques though in the final stages a number of army and naval personnel managed to escape in various craft.

59. After its fall on 16th November, evacuation of such troops as could be got out of Leros was conducted by Lieutenant-Commander L. F. Ramseyer, R.N.V.R., from a caïque, he himself having escaped from Leros by caïque 12 hours after its surrender. Naval craft and a number of R.A.F. high speed launches were used, S.B.S.* patrols being landed to round up British troops still at liberty. An R.A.F. launch and Levant Schooner No. 2 successfully evacuated the L.R.D.G. patrols from Seriphos and Mykonos respectively.

60. Following the fall of Leros it was decided to withdraw Allied forces still remaining in Samos. These consisted of 220 British troops and 380 of the Greek Sacred Squadron. This was successfully carried out by caiques on the night of 19th/20th November; in addition, 8,300 Italian troops, Greek guerillas and civilians were evacuated. This movement was covered by various naval and R.A.F. craft. The majority of these troops together with a number of Italians from the Samos garrison and Greek refugees, were sent by train to Syria, having turned over their arms.

61. The remainder of the British naval and military personnel from Samos and the escapees from Leros found their way south in a variety of craft, including two Italian F-lighters, one towing an L.C.M., two L.C.T.s†, an Italian tug towing a M.M.S., various minesweepers and coastal craft, all of whom arrived in Levant ports by 2nd December. One of these F-lighters which left Leros on 15th November under the command of Lieutenant Stowell, R.N.R., reached Haifa via Samos with 177 German prisoners from Leros still on board on 25th November.

62. The direction of these operations was seriously hampered by the capture of B.Y.M.S. 72 at Kalymnos on the night of 11th/12th November, which resulted in all the codes carried by these small craft being compromised.

63. Following our withdrawal from the Aegean it was decided to reduce the status of Casteloriso to that of an outpost which could be evacuated if a heavy attack developed against it; accordingly on the night of 27th/28th November surplus men, guns and equipment were withdrawn to the Levant by destroyer and L.C.T. without incident.

64. A satisfactory sequel to these disappointing operations was the successful withdrawal of the damaged H.M.S. ADRIAS through Kos Channel and north of Rhodes. She left on 1st December, and reached Alexandria under her own steam on 6th December. Fortune favoured this hazardous passage in that unforeseen circumstances prevented her movements being known to the enemy until she was east of Casteloriso. In the first place a German hospital ship on opposite course passed her

Admiralty footnotes:

* S.B.S.—Special Boat Squadron, an Army unit (see paragraph 71).

† L.C.M.—Landing Craft, Mechanised vehicles; L.C.T.—Landing Craft, Tank.

in the Kos Channel and the enemy searchlight was extinguished during a critical period; later, when north of Rhodes, the ship escaped detection in continuous rain storms.

GENERAL REMARKS ON THE OPERATIONS AS A WHOLE.

Air Cover.

65. Throughout the operations our surface forces were unable to exercise that command of the Aegean to which their superiority to the enemy surface forces entitled them due to the complete enemy command of the air.

66. With the help of our submarines and air, and by accepting heavy losses from air attacks by day and latterly with increasing accuracy by night, we were able to interfere seriously with enemy merchant ship convoys to Rhodes and the Dodecanese, but we were unable to stop craft of all types moving by day only with heavy fighter cover and hiding up in out of the way bays and inlets by night. Once again the fact that surface forces cannot exercise their proper functions in restricted waters without air cover, was clearly demonstrated.

Distance of Area of Operations from our Bases.

67. The fact that the centre of the area of operations was 350 miles from our bases in Alexandria and Cyprus had the following adverse effect on the operations of surface forces:—

(a) Operations of the destroyers were limited to two nights in the Aegean at the most, after which they had to return to refuel.

(b) Even when fighter cover was available, long gaps were inevitable, as our fighters usually had to return to base after the first attack owing to shortage of petrol, and it took anything up to 3 hours for reliefs to arrive.

68. It was impracticable to base small craft on Casteloriso or any of the Aegean islands owing to enemy air attack which was very accurate by day, and the policy was for all craft to lie up during daylight.

Command.

69. The question of command was not entirely satisfactory. Policy and major decisions were made by the Commanders-in-Chief Committee in Cairo, but whereas naval operations were conducted by the Commander-in-Chief, Levant from his headquarters, which was combined with that of No. 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group, R.A.F., at Alexandria, the Army appointed a Corps Commander with a Headquarters in Cairo, and the R.A.F. an Air Vice Marshal who, though himself in Cairo, had his operational headquarters in Cyprus. This did not work out well in practice, and finally General Headquarters, Middle East and Headquarters, Royal Air Force, Middle East took over the direct control of operations.

70. On the naval side, experience in the Levant has shown that the best results are obtained by using the normal station operational organisations to the maximum, and that new operational staffs should be limited to those required to enable local naval commanders to exercise operational control in the area of operations.

Operations of Raiding and Reconnaissance Forces.

71. The activities of the Raiding and Reconnaissance Forces merit special mention. When the Axis had been expelled from North Africa the Long Range Desert Group and Special Boat Squadron of the Special Air Support Regiment returned to the Middle East. As it was now necessary for them to cross the sea to continue their activities against the enemy, they were trained on the Levant coast to operate from submarines, Fairmile motor launches and coastal force craft of all types, and a force of caiques and schooners, known as the Levant Schooner Force, was formed under Commander Coastal Forces, Eastern Mediterranean, manned by specially selected officers and men to work with them. These latter craft were fitted with Tank engines giving them a speed of 6 knots and an endurance of 2,000 miles. With the mast down they could be camouflaged so effectively that they could not be spotted when lying up close inshore.

72. These forces were acting over the Southern Aegean throughout the period of operations. They were the first to arrive and the last to leave, and carried out many daring and successful operations in enemy-occupied islands. There is no doubt that forces of this type, well-trained and led, can be of great value both for harassing the enemy and obtaining important intelligence.

Submarine Operations.

73. In common with all other forces operating in the Aegean during this period the submarines were driven hard. Their patrols, which were largely carried out in narrow waters in close proximity to known or suspected minefields, were often considerably prolonged owing to the series of local emergencies which kept developing, and which required the presence of a submarine in the area.

74. In the majority of areas the submarines were subjected to continual surface and air anti-submarine activity, and in addition our own surface forces were always liable to be encountered at night. These factors, coupled with the fact that few torpedo targets were encountered, threw a very heavy strain on all concerned, and particularly on Commanding Officers.

75. It speaks well for the aggressive and determined temper of the First Submarine Flotilla that under these difficult conditions three merchant ships, totalling 7,500 tons, and a 400 ft. floating dock were torpedoed and sunk, and twenty-one caiques and schooners destroyed, mostly by gunfire.

76. The task of the supply submarines was not easy, owing chiefly to dislocation in the working of the ports at Leros. The heavy air attacks which developed at night during moonlight periods, made unloading submarines impracticable at these times.

77. H.M. Submarine SEVERN had to be withdrawn from the supply service after one trip owing to complete failure of her main and auxiliary engines. Of the five Italians, one never left Haifa, and the mechanical condition of the other four was giving rise to considerable concern. They carried out their tasks efficiently and with considerable enthusiasm.

CONCLUSION.

78. These operations were carried out to take advantage of the Italian surrender to obtain a foothold in the Aegean with such forces as were available in the Middle East. We failed because we were unable to establish airfields in the area of operations.

79. The enemy's command of the air enabled him so to limit the operations and impair the efficiency of land, sea and air forces that by picking his time he could deploy his comparatively small forces with decisive results.

80. The naval forces engaged on these operations, cruisers, destroyers, submarines and coastal craft, and the small force of aircraft available to 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group all fought hard and did valiant work under

particularly trying conditions. They achieved considerable success against the enemy and held off the attack on Leros for some time, but not without heavy casualties to our own forces.

81. Had more aircraft been available, especially modern long range fighters, and given more luck, the operations might have been prolonged, but after the loss of Kos, if the enemy was prepared to divert the necessary effort, it is doubtful if Leros could have been held indefinitely without our embarking on a major operation for which no forces were available.

82. It may be, however, that the inroad made in the enemy's shipping resources—which process is still going on—will prove a fatal handicap to him when the time comes for us to embark on an "all in" offensive in the Aegean, with adequate forces.

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