

57. In Crete, the enemy changed his tactics in the western sector and made a very heavy bombing attack on Canea. The Army force headquarters had to be withdrawn to the naval headquarters at Suda. In the Heraklion area, our troops were still holding out but the Greeks in this sector were getting short of ammunition. The A.A. defences of Suda were by this time seriously reduced by enemy air attacks and casualties in the port to small craft had been heavy.

58. In reply to a request from the Chiefs of Staff (Number 113) for an appreciation, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, said that the scale of air attack now made it no longer possible for the Navy to operate in the Aegean or vicinity of Crete by day. The Navy could not guarantee to prevent seaborne landings without suffering losses, which, added to those already sustained, would very seriously prejudice our command of the Eastern Mediterranean (MIDEAST to TROOPERS 0/67119 of 24th May—time of origin 1815 of 24th May). The Chiefs of Staff (Number 116) replied that unless more drastic naval action was taken than that suggested in the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean's appreciation the enemy would be able to reinforce the island to a considerable extent. The Chiefs of Staff added that it was essential that the Commanders-in-Chief should concert measures for clearing up the situation without delay. In so doing the Fleet and Royal Air Force were to accept whatever risk was entailed in preventing any considerable enemy reinforcement reaching Crete. If enemy convoys were reported north of Crete the fleet would have to operate in that area by day although considerable losses might be expected. Experience would show for how long that situation could be maintained. To this the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, replied (on 26th May) that the determining factor in operating in the Aegean was not the fear of sustaining losses but the need to avoid crippling the fleet without commensurate advantage to ourselves. He pointed out that so far the enemy had apparently not succeeded in landing any considerable reinforcements by sea. With regard to the last part of the Chiefs of Staff message, he pointed out that in three days, two cruisers and four destroyers had been sunk, one battleship had been put out of action for several months, whilst two cruisers and four destroyers had been considerably damaged. Since starting to write this message he had heard that FORMIDABLE and NUBIAN had been damaged. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, also referred to the strain, both to personnel and machinery, in the light craft, who had been operating to the limits of their endurance since the end of February (the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean's message to the Admiralty timed 1834C of 26th May, 1941).

25th May, 1941.

59. The naval situation at daylight on the 25th May was:—

(a) ABDIEL had left Suda at 0240 with some 60 walking wounded and was on her way back to Alexandria.

(b) The force with AJAX had sighted nothing to the north of Crete. There was no time to carry out the bombardment of Maleme, so the force was now withdrawing through the Kaso Strait.

(c) The force with ISIS were on their way to Alexandria, having been unable to land troops in Crete owing to bad weather.

60. Our information showed that Scarpanto aerodrome was being extensively used by the enemy in his operations against Crete. It was, therefore, decided to attack the aerodrome with Fleet Air Arm aircraft* from FORMIDABLE who had now built up her fighter strength to 12 Fulmars, though some of them were of doubtful reliability. Vice Admiral 1st Battle Squadron was given charge of the operation which was to be known as M.A.Q.3. At 1200 on 25th May, Vice Admiral 1st Battle Squadron in QUEEN ELIZABETH, with BARHAM, FORMIDABLE, JERVIS, JANUS, KANDAHAR, NUBIAN, HASTY, HEReward, VOYAGER and VENDETTA (Force A) left Alexandria to carry out M.A.Q.3.

61. During the evening GLENROY sailed again for Tymbaki, taking the same troops that she had set out with on 22nd May (see paragraph 43). She was escorted by D.10 in STUART, with COVENTRY and JAGUAR.

62. AJAX, with her force, had retired to the south of Crete and was to carry out a repetition of her sweep, during the night 25th/26th May, and if time allowed, bombard Maleme. NAPIER, KELVIN and JACKAL left Alexandria to relieve the destroyers with AJAX.

63. ISIS, HERO and NIZAM had been unable to land their troops on the south coast of Crete owing to bad weather. On arrival back in Alexandria, the troops in ISIS and HERO were transferred to ABDIEL, who sailed early on 26th May with HERO and NIZAM for Suda Bay. In addition to these troops, ABDIEL took about 150 tons of ammunition and stores for the Army.

64. Late that night (25th May) the new line which had been formed in the Maleme—Canea sector in Crete was broken by the enemy, after several attacks had been repulsed.

26th May, 1941.

65. The position of naval forces at daylight was:—

(a) Force A was about 100 miles south south west of Scarpanto. AJAX's force was about to join.

(b) ABDIEL, HERO and NIZAM had left Alexandria during the night 25th/26th May for Suda with troops and stores.

(c) GLENROY, escorted by STUART, COVENTRY and JAGUAR had left Alexandria at 2000/25th May and was on her way to Tymbaki, with troops.

(d) AJAX and her force had repeated the sweep she had carried out on the previous night and had again sighted nothing. This force now consisted of AJAX, DIDO, NAPIER, KELVIN and JACKAL and was about to join Force A. HOTSPUR, IMPERIAL and KIMBERLEY having been relieved, were now returning to Alexandria.

66. Between 0500 and 0600, when Force A was about 100 miles south south west of Scarpanto, four Albacores and four Fulmars from FORMIDABLE attacked Scarpanto aerodrome.

* Footnote: A few R.A.F. Wellingtons also attacked this target.