

control of the island. The mission left Haifa by sea on 8th September (the day on which the armistice with Italy was announced) and went to Castelrosso, which capitulated to a small detachment of the Special Boat Squadron on 10th September. Meanwhile, the very scanty warning of the Italian collapse which I had received was cut still further by the weather. The first attempt to drop two officers by parachute on Rhodes, on 9th September, failed, so that the Germans got an extra day in which to organise their positions on the island and to undermine the morale of the Italians. It was not until the night of 9th-10th September that Major the Lord Jellicoe and another officer were dropped by parachute and established contact with Admiral Campione, the Italian Governor, whose spirit was clearly affected by the delay and by the fact that the Germans were already present whilst we were not.

190. At 1715 hours on 11th September, information reached me that Campione had lost heart, had refused permission for us to enter the island and did not wish to have any further dealings with us. The 234th Infantry Brigade was in the meantime being prepared for operations, but, owing to the limitations of shipping and the time taken to collect it, the brigade could not be ready to sail until 18th September. The urgency was such that this delay was unacceptable, and one battalion was ordered to embark in motor launches and Royal Air Force launches for transit to Rhodes, while preparations for the mounting of the remainder of the brigade went on as fast as possible. It was, however, imperative that we should have a guarantee of unopposed entry into the port of Rhodes and an unopposed occupation of an airfield either at Marizza or on Cos before the expedition could be launched, since a landing against opposition was out of the question. Before anything could be done, the German commander, Von Kleeman, had taken advantage of Campione's weakness and indecision, and the Germans assumed undisputed control of Rhodes.

191. The positive nature of the enemy's reaction in Rhodes, and our inability to restore the situation, made it necessary to revise completely our planning for the Aegean. Hitherto all the plans which had been made involved the employment of considerable forces, and had as their first objective the capture of Rhodes. Future plans would, of necessity, have to be made on a smaller scale and, since it was essential to act quickly, they would have to be improvised.

192. German resources in the Aegean had been stretched to the limit by their recent take-over in Rhodes and Crete, and there was a possibility that by a rapid move we could obtain control of other Aegean islands, notably Cos, and by so doing partially neutralise the recent enemy successes over the Italians, enhance our prestige throughout the Middle East, and act as a diversion for the operations in Italy.

193. General Eisenhower had already made it clear that little material support, especially in the air, could be given by North Africa to such an undertaking, and had emphasised that the campaign in Italy must not be prejudiced by any other operation in the Mediterranean. There was, however, a good chance that,

even with the limited resources at our disposal, the occupation of such islands as Cos, which had an airfield and landing grounds, Leros, where there was an Italian naval base, and Samos could be undertaken, since the garrisons seemed likely to welcome the prospect of a British occupation.

194. With the limited number of German aircraft based on Greece and Crete at this time, and with our own fighters based on Cos, the possibility of major seaborne or airborne German operations was slight, and with the aid of the loyal garrisons of Cos and Leros, who were thought to be reasonably well equipped for ground and air defence, there was every prospect of maintaining ourselves in these islands until an attack could be launched on Rhodes from the Middle East.

195. I therefore decided on the despatch of small forces to Cos, Leros and Samos, to act as stiffening to the Italians. Cos and Samos were secured by the detachment of the Special Boat Squadron which had occupied Castelrosso, and troop movements began, both by sea and air, on 15th September. Sea transport was almost entirely limited to Royal Navy destroyers going direct to Leros, or to small coasting vessels going as far as Castelrosso; thence the journey to the islands had to be made in small sailing ships. Owing to the shipping difficulties, the limitations of port capacity and disembarkation equipment, and our inability to break down Bofors guns and heavy equipment into small loads, troops could take with them only their personal weapons, rifles, mortars and Bren guns. No anti-tank, field or anti-aircraft guns could be taken, nor could any transport other than jeeps be sent. Reliance for such equipment had to be placed on the Italian equipment already in the islands, which, in the case of Leros especially, was thought to be reasonably up-to-date and effective. This regrettably was not the case. The defences of Leros were not at all well developed, much of the anti-aircraft material was out of date, and the system of fire control was deplorable; certain natures of ammunition were in short supply, and motor transport was always inadequate. The defences of Cos were on an even lower scale.

196. For the first few days the transport of troops went on without opposition, and in addition to the occupation of Cos, Leros and Samos, the islands of Simi, Stampalia and Icaria were occupied on 18th September. Air transport was used to reinforce Cos by day, troops being landed at Antimachia airfield, while destroyers went direct to Leros, the reinforcements to Samos going thence in small local craft.

197. Cos was easily the most important of these islands to us, since it possessed an airfield from which single-engined fighter aircraft could operate over the Aegean and could cover an attack on Rhodes when the time arrived for that operation to be resumed. By comparison with the facilities at Rhodes, this airfield at Antimachia was a poor one, and it was not considered possible, even from the start, to hold Cos in strength without Rhodes, for which Cos was to be a preliminary step. The island, about thirty miles long and nowhere more than seven miles wide, is the most fruitful in the Aegean; water