

New Zealand troops which had been landed in Crete by the infantry of the 6th Division, so as to enable the 6th Australian Division and the New Zealand Division to be reorganized, in Palestine and Egypt respectively, as soon as possible. During the early part of May, however, the Royal Navy was fully engaged in the operations necessary for the passage of the convoy mentioned in para. 51 above through the Mediterranean, and was unable to provide the necessary escorts for any large shipping movements between Crete and Egypt. Later, it became obvious that there would be no time to effect reliefs before the German attack developed and that it would be necessary to meet that attack with the troops already in Crete and to defer any question of relief until the German attack had been repulsed. Further, the German attacks on shipping to Crete were so intensive as to make it difficult and dangerous for shipping to approach the island. I visited Crete on 30th April and placed Major-General Freyberg in command. I instructed him to organize the defence of the island with the troops available and with such additional resources as I was able to send him from Egypt.

53. British forces had been first sent to Crete on 1st November, 1940. The force sent was only the Headquarters of an infantry brigade, two battalions, 2nd Battalion The Black Watch and 1st York and Lancaster Regiment, and certain other details. There was then a Greek division in the island; there seemed no immediate threat to Crete, and the only requirement was to secure Suda Bay as a refuelling base for the navy. The defensive arrangements were all made with this end in view. There was at the time no prospect of the island becoming an air base, and the coast defences, anti-aircraft defences and infantry defences, were designed solely to protect the naval anchorage at Suda Bay.

Towards the end of November the whole of the Greek troops in the island were removed. One additional British battalion (1st Welch Regiment) was sent to Crete in February, and orders were issued to prepare a base for one division. Meanwhile an aerodrome was under construction at Maleme, west of Canea, and the landing ground at Heraklion in the east of the island was being improved. With the constant shortage of aircraft in the Middle East, however, it was never possible to station any aircraft permanently in the island. At the end of November a Commando was sent to the island, its object being to carry out raids on the adjacent Italian islands. Otherwise the garrison remained at three battalions until after the evacuation from Greece. During the operations in Greece, however, Suda Bay became of greater importance to the Navy and it was therefore decided to send the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation (M.N.B.D.O.), which had lately arrived in the Middle East, to improve the defence of Suda Bay.

54. In the light of after events, if we had been able to develop the defences of Crete more highly during the early period of occupation, we could have made the enemy's task in seizing it even more costly than it was. The value of the island was fully appreciated, but the constant shortage of troops and material in the Middle East was an effective obstacle to any large-scale defence measures, and any work would have been at the expense of other commitments in the Middle East, which at the time

appeared more important. Engineer units and equipment were always short, and were more urgently required in Greece, in the Western Desert and elsewhere. It was already necessary severely to ration steel for reinforced concrete works in the Western Desert and on the northern frontier of Palestine; and shipping to Crete was always scarce. It has been suggested that local labour could have been employed, but practically all able-bodied men in the island were serving in the Greek forces in Albania, while to collect the inhabitants from the long and poorly developed island a considerable quantity of transport would have been required, and this, as already stated, was the chief difficulty in all theatres in the Middle East.

55. The total troops in Crete when the German attack took place was approximately 28,600. Of these the great majority were in need of rest and reorganisation after the operations in Greece. There was a shortage of equipment of all kinds, and a proportion of the personnel was unarmed. Improvised units were formed from these men and were equipped with such arms as were available. It was intended to evacuate from the island before the German attack all such personnel as could not usefully be employed in the defence; but owing to the shortage of shipping and escorts mentioned above it was only possible to remove a small proportion before the German attack. As an additional embarrassment, there were 16,000 Italian prisoners of war, captured by the Greeks, under guard on the island.

Every effort was made to send stores and material to increase the means of defence; nine infantry tanks, a number of captured Italian guns, a certain amount of transport, and other arms and equipment were shipped. A considerable proportion, however, was sunk on the voyage, as the enemy scale of attack on shipping rapidly increased in intensity. The materials sunk included about half the field guns and more than half the engineer stores required for constructing defences.

56. The island of Crete is about 160 miles long and about 40 miles wide. It is very mountainous and there is only one main road which runs the whole length of the north coast, on which are all available harbours. The roads from north to south are few and poor. It is possible to find landing places in the south of the island, but there are usually no easy exits from them and no communications with the rest of the island. It had always been intended to develop landing places on the south of the island and roads from them to the north, in order to avoid the exposed passage round the north of the island; but there had never been, for the reasons given above, sufficient means to carry this out.

57. General Freyberg disposed his troops in four sectors as follows:—

(a) *Heraklion.*

Commander—Brigadier Chappell.

Two British battalions.

Three Greek battalions.

300 Australian riflemen.

250 Artillerymen armed as infantry.

(b) *Retimo.*

Commander—Brigadier Vasey.

H.Q. 19th Australian Infantry Brigade.

Four Australian battalions.

Six Greek battalions.