

possible withdrawal of some British troops from North Africa to the Middle East for Aegean operations was raised, General Eisenhower replied that the ability of North Africa to furnish British troops after the completion of the Tunisian campaign depended upon the decisions of the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the course of operations in the Mediterranean, following the planned invasion of Sicily. He declared, therefore, that the movement of troops from North Africa to Middle East should follow, and not precede, these decisions.

180. Nevertheless, although the prospect of obtaining troops from North Africa was uncertain, a detailed plan for a full-scale attack on Rhodes and Scarpanto, and the subsequent occupation of other islands, was produced by 2nd May. The principal feature of the plan was the landing of forces two hundred and fifty miles from their nearest air bases in Cyprus, and still farther from Cyrenaica, and the crux of the operation was the provision of the necessary air cover and adequate air reinforcements. But to offset this difficulty, other large-scale operations would probably be in progress in the Central Mediterranean to deter the enemy from reinforcing the Aegean.

181. The minimum troop requirements for the whole Aegean operation, including garrisons for Rhodes, Scarpanto and other islands, were three infantry divisions, one armoured brigade, two independent infantry battalions, two parachute battalions and corps troops.

182. This plan was produced by No. 2 Planning Staff, which had just been formed in Cairo, and which was composed mainly of officers of the 3rd Corps Headquarters. No. 2 Planning Staff was re-designated Force 292 in June, 1943, when it seemed likely that active operations in the Aegean were to be undertaken and a Force Headquarters would be required to conduct operations in the field. But the uncertainty of Turkey's attitude, the complexities of the political situation in the Balkans, and the needs of Sicily and Italy made detailed planning difficult, and during the nine months from May, 1943, no less than seven plans were produced for the capture of Rhodes, Crete and other islands in the Dodecanese and the Aegean.

183. The scope of each plan varied in relation to the object to be attained, the varying degrees of opposition likely to be encountered and the scale of co-operation of the Turkish Government. The early plans, which envisaged not only the capture of the Dodecanese and Aegean Islands but further operations on the mainland of Greece, had to provide for crushing both German and Italian resistance. Later plans, after the collapse of Italy, dealt only with the capture of Rhodes or Crete held by the German garrisons supported by Fascist elements of the Italian garrisons. In some cases the plans had to be made in the absence of a Naval Planning Section, and consequently were never fully completed.

184. On four occasions a force was assembled and partially prepared to undertake the capture of Rhodes. As the collapse of Italy appeared imminent, the 8th Indian Division was actually embarked and rehearsed in a landing operation at Suez. This rehearsal took place on 24th, 25th and 26th August and the force was to be ready to sail on 1st September. Unfortunately, however, on 26th August I was informed that the transports had received orders to proceed

to India,* and the force was disembarked and returned to its stations; the 8th Indian Division was sent to Italy almost immediately. When, on 8th September, the Italian armistice was announced and an opportunity for seizing the island arose, the shipping and the force which had been specially prepared for a quick seizure of Rhodes had been dispersed.

185. Thus the Italian armistice took me at a complete disadvantage. Owing to the claims of other Commands, a carefully planned and rehearsed operation had just been jettisoned and no urgent action was contemplated in the immediate future, since I was not kept informed of what was afoot and first learned that Italy was discussing terms only a few days before the public announcement that the armistice had been concluded. I therefore had neither time, troops nor shipping to prepare to take advantage of the chances which were thus offered, whilst, even before the Italian capitulation was announced, the movements of German troops in the Aegean and Ionian islands indicated that they were preparing to be attacked there, and that they expected to find the Italians of little fighting value.

186. Events immediately following the armistice showed that German plans to cope with such an eventuality had been well laid, and the attitude of General Vechiarelli, commander of the Italian Eleventh Army, at Athens, who refused to co-operate with us, and whose troops were ultimately disarmed, undoubtedly assisted the Germans to consolidate their positions. The German take-over in Crete was accomplished quite smoothly, and at Scarpanto the newly arrived German Fortress Infantry Battalion had little difficulty in asserting itself.

187. In spite of this, the opportunity for seizing Rhodes before the German garrison there could re-organise and adjust itself to the changed circumstances (provided the Italian garrison could exert itself in our favour) still existed. I therefore decided to despatch the 234th Brigade, a regular brigade which had come from Malta in June, 1943, to the island, to assist the Italians in overpowering the Germans.

188. At this time the German air forces in Greece and the Aegean were not considered sufficiently strong to constitute a major threat to these operations, nor were their land forces on Rhodes of any great consequence, consisting as they did of one division, General Kleeman's "Sturm" Division, six thousand strong, which was outnumbered by the Italians by six to one.

189. The expedition of the 234th Brigade was to be preceded by a small mission whose task was to make contact with the Italian commander in Rhodes and induce him to take over

* It had been agreed at the Washington Anglo-American Conference in May, 1943, that in order to keep up the maximum pressure on the Japanese, a combined operation against the Arakan should be staged later in the year. This operation had been given priority for resources after the main operations against Italy. In view of the possible developments, part of the shipping destined for the Arakan operation was held for a time in the Mediterranean. In order to implement agreed strategy in the Far East, however, it was necessary to release those ships before the end of August. It was considered at the time that the Arakan operations would have been of greater benefit to the War as a whole than the capture of Rhodes. In the event, however, the Arakan operations were later cancelled.