

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 Mykoni 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.