

Stampalia on 7th October. The continued delay was certainly due to our naval and air offensive against shipping and German key points. Heavy toll was taken by British and American air forces, who, although handicapped by the lack of airfields, and operating from very considerable distances, kept up a ceaseless offensive under trying conditions.

207. Nevertheless, in spite of all we could do, the enemy continued methodically to consolidate his position in the smaller islands. Naxos and Paros were occupied on 12th October, and on 15th October Simi, which we had evacuated two days before after heavy dive-bombing raids had made the position untenable, was occupied by the enemy. The German Air Force was well dispersed; its heavy bombers were concentrated at Eleusis, its fighters at Kalamaki and Argos, its dive-bombers at Megara and Marizza, and from these bases constant attacks were made on Leros. Delayed-action bombs put Portolago Bay, on Leros, temporarily out of action on 16th October, and on 17th and 18th October, Castelrosso was bombed for the first time since our occupation.

208. On 26th October, air activity against Leros and Samos increased in intensity, but there was still no movement from the enemy's invasion fleet. The enemy concentrations remained in the Cos and Calino areas, and further considerable concentrations were seen in the Piraeus and at Khios; but from the middle of October onwards the bad weather which set in probably contributed to the postponement of the attack.

209. Up to the end of October, operations in the Aegean had been controlled by Middle East Command through the 3rd Corps Headquarters (Force 202) and the 234th Brigade (Major-General Brittorous) on Leros, but recent developments obviously justified the establishment of a separate command to take over operations in that sphere. On 1st November, Major-General Hall was appointed G.O.C. Aegean, with the specific task of holding Leros and Samos in order to cause as much damage as possible to the enemy's lines of communication in the Aegean. In addition, he was given command of all British, Allied and Italian land forces in the Aegean, including and north of Rhodes, Scarpanto and Crete, as well as of naval personnel in shore establishments not under Commander-in-Chief, Levant, or Senior British Naval Officer, Aegean, in that area. General Hall and Brigadier Tilney, who was to take the post of Fortress Commander, Leros, arrived at Leros on 5th November, and from that date Headquarters, Aegean, started to control operations.

210. After discussion with Major-General Brittorous, who relinquished command of the 234th Brigade, General Hall decided to make Samos his headquarters. He remained on Leros long enough to see the defences of the island organised to his satisfaction and to clarify relations with the Italians there, and since the re-organisation of the island's defences was proceeding satisfactorily, he was able to leave for Samos about midnight on 11th November, leaving Brigadier Tilney in command on Leros.

211. It was unfortunate that at this time a planned extensive air effort against enemy

bases and shipping was limited by the weather and the temporary unserviceability of our Cyrenaican landing grounds owing to rain. The enemy, on the other hand, taking full advantage of the proximity of his air bases, was able to make our reinforcements of Leros difficult. The dropping of flares at night hindered unloading operations on certain occasions, and the laying of minefields also added to our difficulties; in spite of all this enemy activity the strength of the Leros garrison was built up to the strength of a brigade. The original garrison, which had arrived between the 17th September and the 2nd October, was the 234th Brigade Headquarters, and the 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers, with a company from the 2nd Royal West Kents, the remainder of the battalion being on Samos. This was reinforced by 4th November by the 4th Buffs, although their Headquarters Company was lost at sea, and early in November the 1st King's Own completed the Brigade.

212. From the beginning of November, some increase in enemy preparations was observed. On 3rd and 4th November, landing craft and escorts were reported in Lavrion, and on the 5th aircraft reconnaissance showed them moving eastwards. Between then and the evening of 10th November when they arrived in the Cos/Calino area they moved only by day under heavy fighter protection, dispersing and lying up during the night, first in the Paros/Naxos area and later in Amorgos, Levitha and Stampalia. Every effort was made by the Royal Navy and R.A.F. to intercept the force, but our efforts met with small success due by day to the heavy scale of enemy fighter protection and by night to the difficulty of spotting the craft, which were probably beached and certainly camouflaged in the many bays available. During the afternoon of 9th November, our troops moved to their battle stations to await the enemy attack.

213. The island of Leros consists of three mountainous regions connected by two narrow necks of land, neither of which is much more than a thousand yards in breadth, and so indented is the coastline that no point on the island is more than a mile from the sea. The northern and southern mountain areas are both penetrated by a valley which runs roughly from North to South, so that an easy natural course is afforded to the main road; the central mountains alone are continuous, and here the main road has to skirt the coast to avoid the hills. There are practically no possibilities of movement across country; the mountains are steep, stony and scored with ravines. The lower and flatter areas, which are intensely cultivated, are cut up into small fields by low rubble walls, which are a constant barrier to movement.

214. The main problems of the defence were the same as on Cos. We were certain to suffer from inferiority in the air—in particular, single-engined fighter cover was impracticable and the available bomber forces including some diverted from Italian operations, were obviously not sufficient for the task of neutralising all the German air bases simultaneously. Moreover, the topography of the island made it easy to split any defence and to isolate sectors. To meet the threat of invasion, the island was divided into three sectors, within each of which all troops, including the Italians,