

fleet was thus compelled to operate close to enemy air bases without any fighter protection whatsoever.

9. The sweeps referred to in paragraph 7 above were carried out on the night 16th/17th May, without result and the forces taking part withdrew to the south of Crete. On the 18th May, arrangements were made to relieve forces at sea. The re-distribution of forces was effected as follows:—

(a) C.S.7 shifted his flag to WARSPITE and left Alexandria at 2000/18th May with Force A1 (WARSPITE, VALIANT, AJAX, NAPIER, KIMBERLEY, JANUS, ISIS, HEReward, DECOY, HERO and GRIFFIN).

(b) Force A was to return to Alexandria on relief by Force A1. When these two forces met, HOTSPUR and IMPERIAL were to be transferred from Force A to Force A1.

(c) C.S.15 in NAIAD, with PERTH, KANDAHAR, NUBIAN, KINGSTON and JUNO was to return to Alexandria, fuel his ships and leave again early on the 19th May.

(d) R.A.D. in DIDO was to return to Alexandria and then leave early on the 19th May with ORION, GREYHOUND and HASTY. He was to be joined by AJAX, HERO and HEReward from Force A1.

(e) GLOUCESTER and FIJI, who were getting short of fuel, were to return to Alexandria, fuel and sail again to join Force A1.

10. During the night 19th/20th May, Tank Landing Craft number A.2 escorted by KOS19* landed three "I" tanks at Tymbaki. These tanks were to make their way to Heraklion for the defence of the aerodrome.

Phase III.

THE ATTACK ON CRETE.

20th May, 1941.

11. The position of our naval forces at sea at daylight on the 20th May, was:—

(a) Force A1 about 100 miles to the west of Crete and shortly to be joined by the force with R.A.D.

(b) The force with C.S.15 had reached the Kaso Strait during the previous night and was now withdrawing to the southward.

(c) The force with R.A.D. had reached the Anti Kithera Strait during the night and was now proceeding to join Force A1.

(d) Force B (GLOUCESTER and FIJI) having fuelled at Alexandria, were on their way to join Force A1.

12. At 0800 on 20th May, 1941, only three weeks after the British withdrawal from Greece, the Germans began their attack on Crete. This took the form of intense bombing of the vicinity of Maleme aerodrome closely followed by the landing of troops by parachute, glider and troop-carrying aircraft. The enemy's main objective appeared to be Maleme but later in the day similar attacks developed at Heraklion and Retimo.

13. As regards our Air Force, the increased scale of enemy air attacks on aerodromes since the 13th May had imposed a very heavy strain on the fighter force in Crete. This force by the 19th May had been reduced to only seven

fighter aircraft fit for operations. No reinforcements were available in Egypt. It had, therefore, been decided to fly all serviceable aircraft back to Egypt on the 19th May, until the scale of enemy attack lessened or reinforcements became available. From the 19th May to the 26th May naval forces operating in the vicinity of Crete were without fighter protection.

14. On learning that the attack on Crete had started, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, at once ordered forces at sea to move up towards Crete, but failing further developments they were to keep out of sight of land. During the forenoon of the 20th May, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean signalled his intentions as follows:—

(a) Force D consisting of R.A.D. in DIDO with ORION, AJAX, ISIS, KIMBERLEY, IMPERIAL and JANUS, was to pass the Anti Kithera Channel by 2200/20th May, sweep Capes Malea—Hydra—Phalconera and be off Canea at 0700/21st.

(b) Force C consisting of C.S.15 in NAIAD with PERTH, KANDAHAR, NUBIAN, KINGSTON and JUNO, was to pass Kaso Strait at 2200/20th, sweep round Stampalia and be off Heraklion at 0700/21st.

(c) Force B consisting of GLOUCESTER and FIJI was to pass close off Cape Matapan at 0400/21st and then join Force A1 about 50 miles west of Crete (position 35° 20' N., 22° 25' E.) at 0700/21st.

(d) CALCUTTA was to pass through the Kaso Strait after Force C which she was to join off Heraklion at 0700/21st.

(e) A new Force E (D.14 in JERVIS with NIZAM and ILEX) was to bombard Scarpanto aerodrome during the night 20th/21st May, withdrawing to the southward before daylight.

(f) CARLISLE who was at Alexandria would sail as soon as ready so as to join Force E 50 miles south east of Crete (position 34° 30' N., 27° 00' E.) at 0700/21st May.

15. As a result of air reconnaissance reports of caiques sighted in the Aegean, Forces C and D were ordered at 1800 to move to the north of Crete, at once. It was then thought that if our forces carried out the sweeps that had already been arranged there was a danger of their missing southbound enemy convoys in the darkness. The night sweeps for Forces C and D were accordingly cancelled. Instead Forces C and D were ordered to establish patrols north of Crete to the west and east of longitude 25° E. respectively. Force C was to cover the vicinity of Heraklion, whilst Force D was to guard the Maleme—Canea—Kissamo Bay area. The Retimo area was to be looked after by local craft from Suda Bay.

16. At nightfall on the 20th May, the situation at Maleme and Canea was reported to be in hand, though about 1,200 of the 3,000 enemy who had landed by air were unaccounted for. In the Heraklion and Retimo area it was known that parachutists had landed, but details were lacking. Boats carrying troops had been reported off Heraklion.

17. During the night 20th/21st, Force C encountered about six M.A.S.* boats in the Kaso

* Footnote: KOS—an armed Norwegian trawler.

* Footnote: Italian motor boats, operating as M.T.B.s.