

destroyed. General Freyberg now abolished the separate Maleme sector and put the New Zealand troops who had formerly occupied it under General Weston, Royal Marines, the commander of the M.N.B.D.O.

63. I had meanwhile been sending to the island such reinforcements as were available and could be transported. By this time no merchant ship had any chance of survival within 50 miles of the island, and the only means of sending reinforcements was by fast warship which could reach Suda Bay under cover of darkness, disembark their troops and get clear of the island before dawn. This limited both the number and type of troops that could be sent, even if such reinforcements had been available. It was, for instance, impossible to send any more guns by this method. As already stated in para. 48, the reinforcements available were in any case extremely limited, in all three battalions (2nd Battalion the Queen's, 2nd Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 1st Battalion Leicester Regiment) and two battalions of Layforce, a body of specially picked troops who had been sent out from the United Kingdom for combined enterprises. Headquarters 16th Infantry Brigade and 2nd Queen's set out for the island, but the ship in which they were being transported was hit during the passage and had to return to Alexandria. Of the reinforcements sent, the Leicesters and Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were landed at Tymbaki on the south of the island and the former regiment and part of the latter made their way overland to the Heraklion sector; the remainder of the reinforcing units were landed at Suda Bay.

64. 26th May proved the critical day. Our line west of Canea was broken and driven back on Suda Bay, so that a considerable portion of the base area fell into enemy hands. Suda Bay became no longer tenable. All troops were much exhausted and the enemy air bombing was as intensive as ever. The enemy had by this time landed some 30,000 to 35,000 troops on the island. Early on the morning of 27th May General Freyberg decided that evacuation was inevitable, and reported to me accordingly. In view of the situation he described and the impossibility of sending further reinforcements, I gave orders for the withdrawal of our garrisons from Crete.

65. Meanwhile the troops at Heraklion had had considerable fighting but had never been seriously pressed. The enemy had, however, continued to land troops in a valley to the east, outside the range of our defences, and was gradually accumulating a large force there. The whole of the garrison, except those wounded who could not be moved, were evacuated by cruiser and destroyer on the night of 28th-29th May. At the moment of embarkation there were many indications that an attack was about to come in from the force which had been built up to the east, and which had been joined by tanks and additional troops landing from the sea near Matea.

66. It is impossible at present to relate the full story of events at Retimo. Headquarters, 19th Australian Brigade, had been summoned to Suda Bay area early in the battle and the command passed to Lieut.-Colonel I. Campbell. Communication by land had been blocked by the enemy detachment described above; the

garrison had no cyphers and was unable to communicate except by W/T in clear. General Freyberg reported that he was unable to communicate to the defenders the decision to withdraw and asked that an aeroplane might be sent to drop orders on the garrison. The aeroplane never returned and it is now known that the orders were never received. The 2/1st and 2/11th Australian Battalions under Lieut.-Colonel Campbell held their position until 31st May, when, after gallant fighting, they were overwhelmed by greatly superior forces including tanks. Most of the garrison became prisoners; a few escaped to the hills and small parties reached Egypt some weeks later.

67. The remains of the troops from the Maleme—Canea—Suda Bay area withdrew south across the island to Sphakia. The withdrawal was covered in the early stages by Layforce, 5th New Zealand Brigade and 19th Australian Brigade, the two latter working as one force. 4th New Zealand Brigade, some light tanks of 3rd Hussars, some guns and a battalion of Royal Marines also covered the retreat, which, in spite of very great difficulties was carried out with much bravery and determination, under the direction of General Weston. This withdrawal by troops who had already endured six days of the sternest fighting imaginable was a magnificent performance. The only blot on the story of the defence of Crete was the indiscipline of a certain proportion of the disorganized and unarmed elements of the force whom it had not been possible to evacuate before the attack. When the withdrawal to the southern beaches began, they much hampered both the retirement and orderly embarkation.

The road ends some miles short of the beach and thence there are only rough paths down to the beach. The climb from the beach to the high ground above, which was held by the rearguard troops, took a minimum of two hours.

68. The first evacuation from Sphakia took place during the nights of 28th-29th and 29th-30th May, when the wounded and non-fighting troops were mostly embarked. On 30th May the enemy made contact with the rearguard, but was repulsed and made little further effort to interfere with the re-embarkation.

The Navy had sustained heavy losses in ships during the passage to and from Crete, and it had been decided that the evacuation must end on the night of 31st May-1st June. The embarkation during the last two nights was carried out under conditions of considerable difficulty, rations and water were limited and the troops, scattered in various hiding places during the day to shelter from enemy air attack, were difficult to collect for embarkation. I ordered General Freyberg to return to Egypt on the night of 30th-31st May, and he and his staff were taken off by flying boat. General Weston remained in command and was taken off on the following night. It is regretted that a considerable number of troops had to be left behind, including an Australian battalion and the bulk of Layforce, who had all fought most skilfully and gallantly to the end.

Out of the total of 27,550 Imperial troops on the island at the beginning of the attack, 14,580 were evacuated (7,130 out of 14,000 British, 2,890 out of 6,450 Australians, 4,560 out of 7,100 New Zealanders). What proportion of the 13,000 casualties were killed and wounded cannot yet be determined.