

weeks. It is perhaps even now not realised how nearly the breaking point was reached, but that these men struggled through is the measure of their achievement and I trust that it will not lightly be forgotten.

(Signed) A. B. CUNNINGHAM.
Admiral.

*Commander-in-Chief,
Mediterranean.*

THE BATTLE OF CRETE

NARRATIVE BY THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF,
MEDITERRANEAN.

PHASE IV—THE EVACUATION OF THE BRITISH AND IMPERIAL FORCES FROM THE ISLAND.

After a battle which had lasted eight days, it was decided that our troops were not any longer in a position to resist effectively and must be evacuated. So far, the Mediterranean Fleet had already lost two cruisers and four destroyers besides having the aircraft carrier, two battleships, one cruiser and one destroyer virtually out of action. Another five cruisers and four destroyers had suffered minor damage, which did not, however, greatly affect their steaming powers or fighting efficiency. The fleet was now given the task of attempting to evacuate some 22,000 men, mostly from an open beach on the south coast of Crete, 360 miles from the fleet base at Alexandria.

2. Up to date the fleet had been required to operate without fighter protection (except for the brief period on the 26th May, when FORMIDABLE's fighters were available). On the 27th May, a message was received from the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Royal Air Force, Middle East, stating that the Royal Air Force would do all possible to provide some fighter cover for ships but owing to the distance from our bases, the cover would only be meagre and spasmodic (H.Q.R.A.F., M.E. A.458 of 27th May, time of origin 1718 of 27th May). Group Captain C. B. R. Pelly from R.A.F.H.Q., M.E. was attached temporarily to the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean's staff at Alexandria, in order to co-ordinate fighter protection with the movement of fleet units.

3. Throughout the evacuation, great difficulty was experienced in finding out the exact numbers to be removed on each night. This sometimes resulted in the ships not being quite filled to capacity and sometimes in not enough ships being sent.

4. The method adopted in allocating ships was as follows:—

The numbers to be taken off and the embarkation points would generally be signalled by "CREFORCE", the General Officer Commanding, Troops in Crete. The initial estimate of numbers, which proved to be substantially correct, was given by the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Suda Bay. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, after consulting Major General J. F. Evetts, C.B., C.B.E., M.C. (who was acting as his Military Liaison Officer) would decide on the number of ships to be sent.

The original plan for bringing off troops was as follows:—

(a) Troops from the Maleme-Suda Bay area were to come off from Sphakia

(b) Troops from the Retimo area were to come off from Plaka Bay.

(c) Troops from the Heraklion area were to be taken off from Heraklion harbour.

(d) A small number of troops who were cut off to the south of Heraklion were expected to make their way to Tymbaki.

(e) Evacuation was invariably to be carried out at night, usually between the hours of midnight and 0300. This allowed ships to be as far as possible from enemy air bases during daylight hours.

(f) Ashore in Crete, the evacuation was to be covered by troops fighting a rearguard action from the Suda Bay area to the south coast. Major General E. C. Weston, Royal Marines, was placed in charge of the rearguard.

5. It was decided that the main evacuation on the night of 28th/29th May should be from Heraklion. It will be recalled that on the 23rd May the enemy had delivered an ultimatum to the Heraklion garrison to surrender, but this had been rejected by the British and Greek Commanders. During the ensuing days the enemy were re-inforced continuously by troop-carrying planes. In spite of this the garrison held out, delivered counter attacks and inflicted severe losses on the enemy right up to the time of evacuation.

28th/29th May, 1941.

6. At 0600 on the 28th May, Force B, consisting of C.S.7 in ORION with AJAX, DIDO, DECOY, JACKAL, IMPERIAL, HOTSPUR, KIMBERLEY and HEReward, left Alexandria to evacuate the Heraklion garrison. Force B was about 90 miles from Scarpanto at 1700 and from then until dark was subjected to a series of air attacks, consisting of high level bombing, dive bombing and torpedo attack. At 1920 IMPERIAL was near missed but at the time appeared to be undamaged. At 2100 AJAX had a close miss which started a small fire, seriously wounded twenty men and caused slight damage to the ship's side. In view of the need for ships to be fully efficient to carry out the night evacuation and to cope with the almost certain air attacks on the following day, C.S.7, after receiving a report of the damage from AJAX, decided that she should return to Alexandria. Shortly after 2100, C.S.7 gave orders accordingly.

7. After passing through the Kasso Strait and turning to the westward, Force B was attacked by a torpedo plane, without result. The force arrived off Heraklion at 2330. The destroyers immediately entered harbour to embark troops from the jetties and ferry them to the cruiser outside. By 0245 the ferrying was complete and by 0300 KIMBERLEY and IMPERIAL had embarked the rearguard. At 0320 the force proceeded at 20 knots, having embarked the whole of Heraklion garrison, amounting to some 4,000 troops. Twenty-five minutes later IMPERIAL's steering gear failed and she narrowly missed colliding with both cruisers. This could scarcely have happened at a more inopportune time since it was essential to be as far from enemy air bases as possible by daylight. C.S.7 was faced with the difficult decision whether to wait in the hope that the steering gear could be repaired or to sink the IMPERIAL and carry on.