

THE BATTLE OF CRETE

NARRATIVE BY THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF,
MEDITERRANEAN

The narrative of the Battle of Crete is divided into four phases:—

Phase I—Building up Suda into a port capable of supplying the needs of the Army.

Phase II—Naval dispositions to meet the expected attack.

Phase III—The attack on Crete.

Phase IV—The evacuation of the British and Imperial forces from the island.

Phase I

BUILDING UP SUDA INTO A PORT CAPABLE OF
SUPPLYING THE NEEDS OF THE ARMY.

Operation "Demon," during which over 50,000 troops had been evacuated from Greece, was completed on 29th April, 1941. Some 25,000 of these troops, the majority of whom had no equipment other than rifles, were being re-organised in Crete. A large number was useless for defence purposes and were awaiting removal.

2. The facilities for unloading supply ships in Suda Bay were poor. The harbour was being subjected to frequent air attack which caused heavy casualties among the ships unloading. The problem of keeping up supplies was causing anxiety, but strenuous efforts on the part of the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Suda, were going some way towards solving the various local difficulties.

3. During the period from 29th April to 20th May, some 15,000 tons of Army stores were off-loaded from 15 ships, whilst eight ships were sunk or damaged in the harbour by air attack. The scale of enemy air attack was so heavy, and our fighter protection so thin, that the running of convoys in and out of Crete was being carried out at considerable risk.

4. It had been intended to set up the complete M.N.B.D.O.* in Crete. The M.N.B.D.O. A.A. guns had been installed at Suda but the danger of losing ships through enemy air action was considered too great to allow any further M.N.B.D.O. storeships to be sent to Crete.

5. On the night 15th/16th May, GLOUCESTER and FIJI embarked the 2nd Battalion of the Leicester Regiment, with their full equipment, at Alexandria, and landed them at Heraklion. During the night 18th/19th May, GLENGYLE, escorted by COVENTRY, WATERHEN, VOYAGER and AUCKLAND took 700 men of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders from Alexandria to Tymbaki.

Phase II.

NAVAL DISPOSITIONS TO MEET THE
EXPECTED ATTACK.

6. Although intelligence suggested that an attack on Crete was very likely, the exact date of the attack could not be forecast. It was thought that the most probable date for the attack to begin was about the 17th May. The use of Suda Bay as an anchorage by day was limited, on account of heavy air raids. It was, therefore, necessary to operate forces from

Alexandria, which is 420 miles from Suda. A force was to be held in reserve at Alexandria as an attack might start at a time when our forces at sea were getting short of fuel. Although the first airborne attack on Crete did not take place until the 20th May, naval forces had to be kept ready at sea from the 14th May onwards.

7. The object of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, was to prevent the enemy landing in Crete from the sea. The most likely places for an enemy seaborne landing were thought to be Canea, Retimo and Heraklion whilst Kissamo Bay and Sitia were possibilities. On the 15th May forces were at sea, to the south of Crete, ready to move to any threatened point. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean signalled his intentions as follows:—

(a) Force C (R.A.D. in DIDO with KANDAHAR, NUBIAN, KINGSTON, JUNO and COVENTRY) was to be available to deal with Heraklion and Sitia.

(b) Force D (NAIAD, PHOEBE and two destroyers) would deal with any landing west of Retimo.

(c) Force B (GLOUCESTER and FIJI) would deal with enemy forces north west of Crete, or support Force D.

(d) Force A (Vice Admiral 1st Battle Squadron, in QUEEN ELIZABETH with BARHAM and five destroyers) was to take up a position to the westward of Crete so as to act as cover to the other forces.

(e) *In reserve at Alexandria.* WARSPITE, VALIANT, FORMIDABLE, ORION and AJAX and remaining available destroyers.

(f) The general idea was for night sweeps to be carried out as follows:—

(i) Force B to sweep the west coast of Greece from Matapan;

(ii) Force D to sweep from Anti Kithera to Piraeus;

(iii) Force C to sweep from Kaso towards Leros.

(g) All forces were to retire from their sweeps so as to be close north of Crete by dawn. Subsequently they were to retire to the south of Crete.

(h) The submarine RORQUAL was to operate in the vicinity of Lemnos.

(i) A flotilla of M.T.B.s was based at Suda Bay.

(j) ABDIEL was to lay a minefield between Cephalonia and Levkas, to interrupt enemy communications through the Corinth Canal.

(k) Appropriate air reconnaissance was arranged, but it was very thin.

(l) The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, would control the operation from Alexandria but the Senior Officers of the various forces were informed that they were expected to take independent action to intercept any enemy forces reported.

8. FORMIDABLE was reduced to only four aircraft serviceable and was unable to provide fighter protection to our forces until the 25th May. This shortage of aircraft in FORMIDABLE was due to losses and wear and tear during the recent operations "Tiger" and the Tripoli bombardment. There were still a few shore-based fighters in Crete but they were being rapidly reduced by enemy air action and could not be of any assistance to the fleet. The

* Footnote: M.N.B.D.O.—Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation, the personnel of which were Royal Marines.