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THE BATTLE OF CRETE

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on 4th August, 1941, by Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, G.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean.

Mediterranean,

4th August, 1941.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships, the attached reports of naval operations in defence of Crete between 15th May and 27th May, 1941. Reports on the evacuation of troops from Crete will be forwarded later.

2. The object of the operations was the prevention of enemy seaborne landings on the coast of Crete. It was known that airborne invasion of the island was impending; but it appeared almost inconceivable that airborne invasion alone could succeed against forewarned troops, that seaborne support was inevitable and that the destruction of troop convoys would win the day.

3. The Navy succeeded in its object but paid a heavy price for this achievement. The fleet was operating within easy range of enemy air bases and beyond the reach of any protection from our own air force. The fleet fighters of H.M.S. FORMIDABLE were reduced to only four as a result of casualties and unserviceability arising from the recent operation "Tiger."* It was, therefore, useless to send H.M.S. FORMIDABLE to assist.

* Footnote: Operation "Tiger" was the passage of naval reinforcements and a convoy containing urgent military stores through the Mediterranean, covered by Force H as far as the Sicilian Narrows and thence by the Mediterranean Fleet to Alexandria. It took place between the 4th and 9th May, 1941.

So, without air support of any sort, the fleet had to be exposed to a scale of air attack which is believed to have exceeded anything of the kind yet experienced afloat.*

4. The air attack on Crete started on the 20th May, 1941. The sweeps of the Light Forces on the night 20th/21st and during daylight 21st were uneventful except for heavy air attacks and the unlucky loss of H.M.S. JUNO (see paragraphs 14 to 20).† As far as the Navy was concerned, the real Battle of Crete began on the night of 21st/22nd May, with the successful encounter of Force D with an enemy convoy (see paragraph 23). This encounter was skilfully and thoroughly exploited, was a heavy blow to the Germans and an encouragement for our hard pressed troops in Crete.

* Footnote: Air Ministry comment: The R.A.F. in the Middle East had suffered severe losses during the Greek campaign and in Cyrenaica, and fighter strength was so reduced as to be barely sufficient for the defence of the Middle East base itself. The strength of the bomber force was scarcely better. In the face of pressing commitments it had only been possible to spare resources for the construction of two airfields in Crete and these were but moderately equipped. From these airfields, before the loss of Greece, it had been possible to operate a handful of R.A.F. and F.A.A. fighters for the occasional protection of shipping, but now confronted with the German Air Force operating in overwhelming numbers from ample bases in Greece and the adjoining islands, and in view of the dangerous depletion of Middle East air forces as a whole, decision reluctantly had to be taken that the maintenance of fighter forces in Crete merely invited destruction and could not be justified. With this view, the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East were in agreement.

Though every possible effort was made by aircraft based in Africa and in Malta to attack enemy airfields they could make little impression on the overwhelming strength of the G.A.F. Shore based fighter cover to our ships operating to the north of Crete was clearly out of the question.

† Footnote: References are to paragraphs in the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean's narrative.