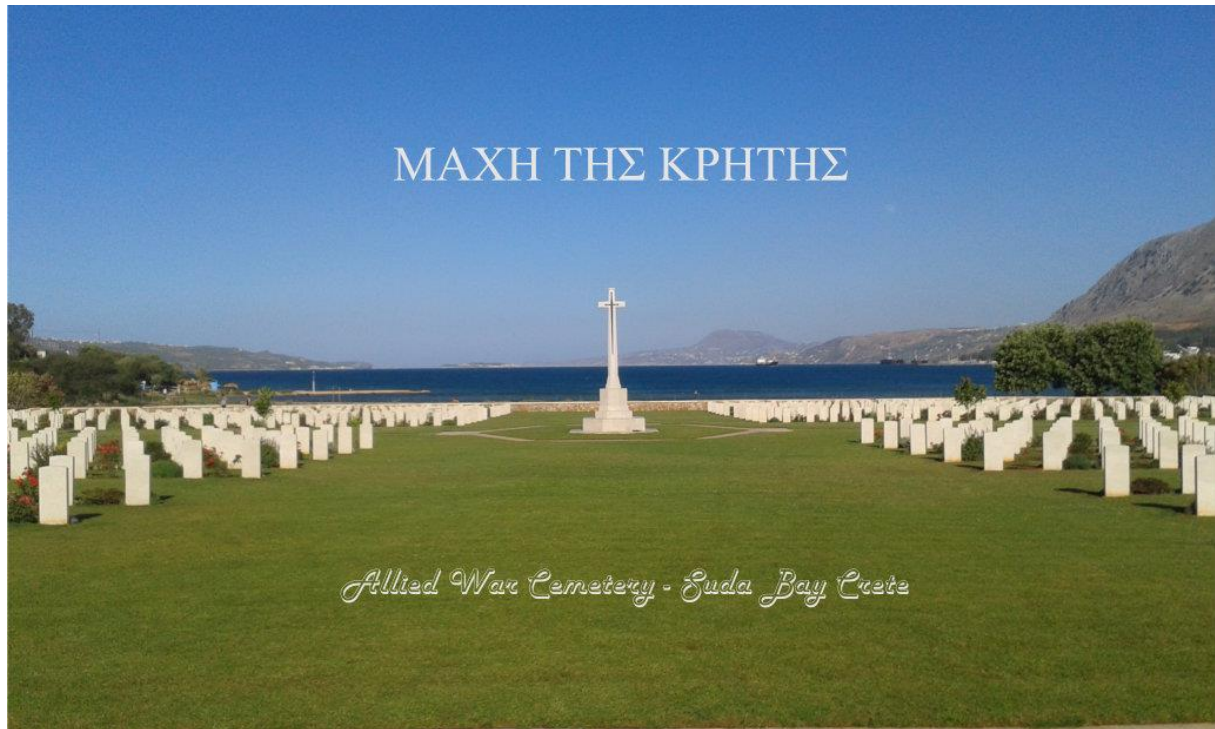


# The Battle of Crete

## A Summarised History



Courtesy J Yiannakis

### OUTBREAK of WORLD WAR TWO

The news that Britain was at *war* was broken by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain at 11:15am on Sunday 3 September 1939. In a 5-minute broadcast on the Home Service, he announced that as Hitler had failed to respond to British demands to leave Poland, he had little choice but to declare war. Shortly thereafter on the same day, also during a radio broadcast, at 9:30 pm Prime Minister Robert Menzies advised the Australian people that Australia was now also at war.

Because Australia was a self-governing British dominion at the time, if Britain was at war, Australia was duty-bound to support Britain. Accounting for the time difference between Britain and Australia, Prime Minister Menzies' declaration of war came just over an hour after Britain's declaration.

Whilst at that time Australia was not directly threatened by the events in Europe, it nonetheless contributed to naval, land and air forces which were to become deeply involved in the European and Middle Eastern conflicts.

During Menzies' wartime prime ministership (1939–1941), Australia sent Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) aircrews and several Royal Australian Navy (RAN) ships to fight for Britain. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) did not engage in combat until 1941, when three divisions joined the fight in the North African and Mediterranean zones of conflict, most famously halting Germany's Afrika Korps at Tobruk, in North Africa.



**Largs Bay**

Bill Taylor notes that his contingent departed from Fremantle for the Middle East on 6 June 1940 on the Largs Bay, a passenger/cargo steam ship operated by the Commonwealth of Australia. (Largs Bay was later requisitioned as troop transport in August 1941).

**Bill Taylor- Personal Histories.**

**Note:** Transportation of troops to Europe and the Middle East began 20 April 1940.

When Italy occupied Albania in April 1939, Britain and France promised to assist Greece should it be invaded. On 28 October 1940, Italian forces crossed the Albanian border and invaded Greece. France was by this time under German occupation, so Greece turned to Britain for help. Although under threat of invasion itself, Britain agreed to provide assistance in the form of four squadrons of Royal Air Force (RAF) fighters and bombers, and 4,200 personnel. In addition, Britain would also take responsibility for the defence of Crete, 300 kilometres south of the Greek

mainland. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill deemed Crete strategically important to the defence of Egypt, and wanted the island defended at all costs.

The Greek armed forces, assisted by the Royal Navy, the RAN and the RAF, fought valiantly in defence of their homeland, and by the end of November 1940 had reclaimed their lost ground and launched a counter-offensive. German leader Adolf Hitler was forced to help Italy and began preparations for the occupation of northern Greece via Bulgaria. Hitler was planning to invade the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa) in May 1941. He wanted to eliminate the possibility of British bombers, based in northern Greece disrupting his invasion of Russia. On 13 December 1940, Hitler issued a directive for the occupation of the entire Greek mainland (Operation Marita).

Britain became aware of the German preparations, but an offer of additional military aid was declined by Greek Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas on the grounds that it might give Germany the pretext for invading Greece. Metaxas died in office on 29 January 1941. His successor, Prime Minister Alexander Koryzis, was equally reluctant to provoke the Germans, but following a meeting with a British delegation on 22 February, accepted an offer of 100,000 troops, artillery, tanks, and additional aircraft.

The promised troops, collectively known as Lustre Force, included the 6th Australian Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the British 1st Armoured Brigade. They were to help form a line of defence across northern Greece. Only a portion of Lustre Force was in position when Germany commenced Operation Marita. On the morning of 6 April 1941, the German 12th Army, consisting of 10 divisions supported by 1,000 aircraft of the German 8th Air Corps, launched its attack on Greece.

The Greek Army valiantly resisted the attack, but German armoured and motorised units, supported by aircraft and artillery, soon overwhelmed, or outflanked the forward defences. On 9 April 1941, Greek forces in eastern Macedonia capitulated. A number of British, Australian and New Zealand units had meanwhile reinforced the Greeks in central Macedonia. Further German advances in northern Greece threatened to outflank a line of defence based on the Olympus-Vermion Mountains and the Aliakmon River, forcing the withdrawal of the Greek divisions in Albania and western Macedonia.

A fighting withdrawal of the Allied forces in central Macedonia commenced on 12 April 1941, but the speed of the German advance threatened to overwhelm the Greek divisions, which lacked motorised transport. The British commander of Lustre Force, Lieutenant-General Henry Wilson decided to pull his troops back 200 kilometres to a position where the mainland narrowed to a 50-kilometre-wide mountainous neck. Here he would establish a new defensive position – the Thermopylae Line – named after the nearby historic site where the Spartans tried to hold back an invading Persian army in 480 BC.

Australian and New Zealand units fought a series of rear-guard actions with German ground forces and were subjected to repeated air attack as they withdrew to the Thermopylae Line. The last units reached the new defensive position on 20 April 1941. The New Zealanders were deployed across the coastal corridor on the right flank, and the Australians were on their left, tasked with holding the Brallos Pass. It was hoped that the Greek army retiring from western

Macedonia would hold the Delphi Pass and the coastal corridor on the left flank, but it was cut off by German forces, and on 21 April surrendered. Lustre Force now had to be evacuated.

Orders for the evacuation of Lustre Force (Operation Demon) were issued on 22 April 1941 – the same day that the troops holding the Thermopylae Line came under German artillery fire and air attack. Several beaches on the south coast of Greece were selected as evacuation points by the Royal Navy, and a phased withdrawal of Allied troops from the Thermopylae Line commenced on the night of 23 April. The first of the nightly evacuations to Crete, and later Egypt, occurred on 24 April. That same night the rear-guard parties, including the Western Australians of the 2/11th (City of Perth) Battalion at Brallos, conducted a fighting withdrawal from the Thermopylae Line. Amongst their number were eight of the ten Indigenous men from the south-west of Western Australia, who had enlisted in the 2/11th Battalion in 1939.

#### **APRIL 21ST 1941**

We are now in a forward position on Brallos Pass overlooking the road to Lamia. We are in positions vacated by other troops.

Alec Todd found a Bren gun left behind, so our section now has 2 Bren guns. I am section Bren Gunner and Bob Sadler is my No. 2. We are still dug in on Brallos Pass tonight and can see a long way. All we can see is miles of German transport light coming our way, not a very encouraging sight at all.

#### **APRIL 23RD 1941**

We have now pulled back to Brallos village to a new line. Have been bombed several times by Stuka dive bombers and they have very little opposition apart from our small arms fire. They have a screaming attachment and it is rather demoralising when they dive and drop bombs. We have been told to hold here until 9.30, but we have been bombed and shelled most of the day.

The Germans are so close now our artillery is firing at point blank range and we are copping plenty back.

Things are pretty grim now and we are pulling back to board trucks in the dark. As we load ourselves on trucks we can see cigarette lights behind us.

#### **Bill Taylor - Personal Histories**

On 26 April 1941, German paratroops landed astride the Corinth Canal, and the following morning enemy ground troops entered Athens. Rapid German advances and air superiority forced the cessation of the large-scale evacuations on the night of 28/29 April, leaving thousands of Allied troops stranded on the mainland, the Peloponnese, and outlying islands.

Some 62,600 British Commonwealth servicemen and women went to Greece with Lustre Force, including 17,125 Australians and 16,720 New Zealanders. Over 900 were killed. Nearly 14,000 were captured and became prisoners of war. The Royal Navy, assisted by ships of the RAN and the Merchant Navy, evacuated over 50,000 British, Australian, New Zealand and Greek troops, as well as several British civilians.



## Crete – The Air Assault

In the last week of April 1941, three airfields on the north coast of Crete became the focus of German attention. It was realised that British bombers operating from these airfields could potentially strike the Rumanian oilfields, which provided fuel for Germany's war effort. Conversely, if German bombers were based on Crete they could operate more effectively against British assets in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. The commander of the German 11th Air Corps, General Kurt Student, proposed that the airfields be captured by airborne assault. On 25 April 1941, Adolf Hitler authorised Operation Mercury – the invasion of Crete.

On 29 April 1941, New Zealand Major-General Bernard Freyberg arrived on Crete from Greece and soon assumed command of the garrison, which numbered 5,000 men, and an unknown number of troops evacuated from Greece. Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in the Middle East, informed Freyberg that in the coming days he could expect an attack by up to 6,000 German airborne troops as well as enemy seaborne forces. Freyberg told Wavell that there were not enough men on Crete to hold it. Wavell replied that there was no choice, as there were not enough ships to evacuate them. Nazi propaganda broadcaster Lord Haw-Haw boasted that Crete was an 'island of doomed men.'

Freyberg discovered that he had over 28,000 troops under his command, including 7,500 Greek soldiers, 1,000 Cretan reservists, and 2,500 armed police. The Germans were expected to attack the northern part of the island, and on 3 May 1941, Freyberg ordered that 'Creforce' would be deployed to cover the likely enemy attacks on the airfields at Maleme, Heraklion and Rethymnon, the beaches near these airfields, and the harbour at Souda Bay. Four defence sectors – Maleme, Heraklion, Rethymnon, and Souda – were thus established.

The majority of the Western Australians on Crete were assigned to the Rethymnon sector. These were the officers and men of the 2/11th Battalion, E Troop of the 6th Battery, 2/3rd Field Regiment, and B Company of the 2/7th Field Ambulance. Headquarters and A Company of the 2/7th Field Ambulance was at Georgioupolis, and the 2/2nd Field Park Company was at Souda Bay. Smaller groups of Western Australians were in ordnance, service, and signal corps units on Crete, whilst other individuals were serving in Victorian battalions on the island.

Defending Rethymnon airfield and the beach to its north were the 620 officers and men of the 2/1st Battalion, 660 officers and men of the 2/11th Battalion, two platoons of the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion, artillerymen of D and E Troops, 6th Battery, 2/3rd Field Regiment, a section of engineers from the 2/8th Field Company, two Matilda tanks from the British 7th Royal Tank Regiment, as well as 2,300 soldiers of the 4th and 5th Greek Regiments. The artillery consisted of eight old French and Italian guns with no sights, the under-strength infantry battalions were short of mortars and ammunition, and all units were short of food, water, and medical supplies.

The shortage of weapons, ammunition and stores intensified as the German Luftwaffe gained air superiority, and sank, or damaged the ships trying to resupply the garrison. The situation worsened on 19 May 1941, when the surviving British fighter aircraft were sent back to Egypt, giving the enemy complete control of the skies. On the same day, the Luftwaffe made final preparations for the airborne assault against Crete, which was scheduled to commence on the morning of 20 May.

The enemy assault was to be carried out by the parachute and air landing component of the German 11th Air Corps, elements of which had fought at the Corinth Canal in April. The paratroops of the German 7th Airborne Division, supported by glider-borne troops and paratroops of the 1st Assault Regiment, were tasked with seizing the airfields, the port facilities at Souda Bay, and the island's administrative centre – the port city of Chania.

The air transport component of the 11th Air Corps, now based in Greece, did not have enough aircraft to deploy the 10,750-strong attacking force in a single lift, so the Maleme airfield and Chania would be attacked in the morning, and Rethymnon and Heraklion would be attacked in the afternoon. Once the airfields were secure, German, and Austrian, mountain troops would be landed by air and sea to complete the capture of Crete.

#### **THE PARACHUTISTS ARRIVE**

The afternoon that the parachutists first came over, I together with two other chaps, had been sent to the other side of the village to draw some water. We had a donkey, an old wagon and about fifty-two-gallon tins to fill from a spring. Although jerry planes had been flying over all day except to keep a watchful eye on them, we didn't let them worry us – they were all too familiar by this, and it didn't take us more than the usual time to fill the tins and turn homewards. It wasn't until we were in the village that we realised that something was wrong. Everyone was standing, white-faced, around a dilapidated old bus that ran daily from Canea to the village and had just arrived. A man was talking, and even the usual cheerful kiddies were hushed. Then we saw a remarkable sight – old men of between sixty and ninety, break off, walk into the houses and re-appear with rusty old shot guns, muzzle loaders and even a few old powder and ball percussion-cap rifles, as well as with pitchforks, long poles and wicked looking knives. At that moment, we were the only soldiers in the village and the chap who we understood to be the Mayor or its equivalent saw us and came up to us. Speaking in a halting kind of English he said – “German parachutists have landed!” Then he looked at his people and said, “We are ready!” They were Greeks and proud of it. The Huns might starve them and kill them, but they'll never conquer them – I'm convinced of that!

#### **Frederick Edward White – Personal Histories**

Air assaults on Maleme and Chania commenced on the morning of 20 May 1941, when waves of German fighter aircraft and bombers attacked the Allied ground and anti-aircraft defences. At 8.00am German glider-borne troops landed west of Maleme airfield amidst the dust from bomb explosions, overran an anti-aircraft battery, and reached the western end of the airfield. Other glider-borne troops attempted to seize the high ground (Hill 107) south of the airfield.

German transport aircraft carrying the 3rd Battalion of 1st Assault Regiment arrived at 8.15am and dropped paratroops to the south-east of the airfield. This was directly over the New Zealand 22nd Battalion, with paratroopers descending amidst heavy machine-gun and rifle fire. After several hours of fighting the 3rd Battalion ceased to exist. The 4th (heavy weapons) and 2nd Battalions of the 1st Assault Regiment were safely dropped to the west of the airfield, but a detachment sent to seize the fishing village of Kastelli was killed or captured by Greek soldiers.

The German 3rd Parachute Regiment and two companies of glider troops from the 1st Battalion, 1st Assault Regiment were tasked with capturing Chania and the port facilities at Souda Bay. This German glider force landed on the Akrotiri Peninsula to the north of Chania and was wiped out by the British Northumberland Hussars fighting as infantry. Most of the paratroops tasked with capturing Chania were dropped into a valley (Prison Valley) south-west of the town. The 3rd Battalion of the 3rd Parachute Regiment suffered severe casualties, as did some companies of other German battalions, and only small local gains were made that day.

By mid-afternoon on 20 May 1941, the leading elements of the German 7th Airborne Division and the 1st Assault Regiment had established a tenuous foothold on Crete, but were yet to secure their objectives. A number of transport aircraft had been shot down or damaged, delaying the second phase of the air assault – the attacks on Rethymnon and Heraklion.

The aerial assault on Rethymnon commenced at 4.00pm on 20 May 1941 when German fighter and fighter-bomber aircraft began machine-gunning and bombing the area around the airfield. Defending on the ground were the 2/1st Battalion and the 4th Greek Regiment, elements of which returned fire, shooting down a German fighter. The men of the 2/11th Battalion, located on a hill to the west of the airfield, held their fire as they had been ordered not to disclose their positions.



**Aerial Assault on Rethymnon**

At 4.30pm the first wave of twenty-four transport aircraft flew in low over the sea, crossed the coast east of the airfield, turned west, and began dropping their paratroops. A storm of rifle and machine-gun fire was unleashed on the aircraft and the descending paratroopers. Three more waves of transports followed, dropping their troops progressively westward, and into the fire of the 2/11th Battalion. Five more aircraft were shot down and another was seen to crash into the sea. The air assault was completed within thirty minutes.

German casualties were heavy in the 2/11th Battalion's sector, but a number of paratroops landed further west and began concentrating in and around the coastal village of Perivolia, three kilometres away. Others landed to the east of the 2/1st Battalion and captured four of the 2/3rd Field Regiment's guns, and the eastern end of the airfield. An attempt to dislodge the Germans at the latter position resulted in the two supporting British tanks being immobilised and their crews killed or captured.

Two companies of paratroops attempted to capture Rethymnon town and harbour, but encountered fierce resistance from the Cretan police and were forced to return to Perivolia. Sporadic fighting and mopping up operations in and around each battalion's position continued until nightfall, when both sides sought to secure their positions, recover wounded, and collect weapons and ammunition.

That evening Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Campbell, commanding officer of the 2/1st Battalion, and in overall command of the Rethymnon defence sector, ordered forward a battalion of the 5th Greek Regiment to support a dawn attack on the Germans on his right flank. Major Ray Sandover, acting commanding officer of the 2/11th Battalion, requested that the remaining battalion of the 5th Greek Regiment be placed on his left flank.

Two German parachute battalions, plus support companies, as well as the headquarters of the 2nd Parachute Regiment – some 1,550 officers and men – had been dropped into the Rethymnon sector. About half were killed, wounded, or captured on 20 May. Australian and Greek casualties were comparatively light.

The situation at Heraklion was worse for the enemy. Arriving late and piecemeal, 15 transports were shot down and the three battalions of the 1st Parachute Regiment suffered heavy casualties from well-coordinated defensive fire. The 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Parachute Regiment, dropped well to the west, landed unopposed and took up its assigned blocking position. The airfield, town and port remained firmly in Allied hands.



## The Loss of Maleme Airfield

A fateful error at battalion level, compounded at brigade level, saw the withdrawal of the New Zealand 22nd Battalion from Hill 107 on the night of 20/21 May 1941. This allowed the Germans to occupy the hill and capture the Maleme airfield on the morning of 21 May. That afternoon, a battalion from the German 5th Mountain Division was flown into Maleme.

On the morning of 22 May 1941, three New Zealand infantry battalions attempted to recapture the airfield and Hill 107, but were repulsed. This allowed the Germans to fly in another two battalions of mountain troops. In the process, many transport aircraft were damaged or destroyed by Allied machine-gun and artillery fire as they landed. However, the critical need to reinforce the paratroops outweighed the loss of aircraft. The capture of the Maleme airfield, despite a series of desperate battles involving the New Zealanders, ultimately led to the fall of Crete. This success was however overshadowed by a disaster for the Germans at sea.

Two flotillas of small ships and fishing boats, carrying another battalion of mountain troops, sailed from Greece on 19 May 1941 to reinforce the paratroops at Maleme and Heraklion. The Royal Navy intercepted the Maleme-bound flotilla just north of Chania on the night of 21/22 May. Several boats were sunk, and hundreds of German soldiers drowned. The second flotilla was intercepted by another squadron of warships, including HMAS Perth, off Heraklion on the morning of 22 May. The surviving ships and boats were forced to return to mainland Greece.

At Rethymnon, Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell was unaware that the enemy has seized the Maleme airfield and no longer needed the one his troops were defending. The struggle for control of the Rethymnon airfield resumed at dawn on 21 May 1941. Campbell's first attempt to drive the Germans off the hill on his right flank failed, but a stronger effort at 10.00am succeeded, with the lost guns recaptured. A third attack, at 2.00pm, against the Germans holding the eastern end of the airfield, was equally successful and resulted in the capture of some 50 paratroops. The remaining Germans withdrew and occupied an olive oil factory near the village of Stavromenos, two kilometres to the east.

Major Sandover's men spent the morning eliminating pockets of Germans in their sector, as well as a party of 20 paratroops who had overrun the 2/7th Field Ambulance's dressing station at Adhele. At 2.30pm Sandover was ordered to clear the coastal plain to his immediate front. The sweep to the beach resulted in the capture of more Germans, including the commander of the 2nd Parachute Regiment, Colonel Alfred Sturm, and a 37-millimetre anti-tank gun. Having secured the airfield and the coastal strip, Campbell now sought to eliminate the remaining enemy groups – those in Perivolia, and the others in the olive oil factory near Stavromenos.

Perivolia was held by two companies of the 3rd Battalion, 2nd Parachute Regiment, a machine-gun company, and a troop of parachute artillerymen with two recoilless guns. The commander of the 400-strong German battlegroup was Major Erich Schulz. He deployed some of his men in the Church of St. George, located on a hill 300 metres south-west of the town centre, and in three houses on the west bank of the dry Platanes River, 1,000 metres east of Perivolia.

## The Battle for Rethymnon

On the morning of 22 May 1941, two companies of the 2/1st Battalion made three attacks on the Germans in the olive oil factory near Stavromenos but failed to dislodge the paratroops. Campbell decided to starve the enemy out. He ordered the right flank battalion of the 5th Greek Regiment to encircle the factory to prevent the paratroops obtaining food and water.

In the afternoon B and C Companies of the 2/11th Battalion advanced to the Platanes River and forced the German outpost to withdraw. Sandover then ordered the companies, supported by Greek soldiers, and armed civilians, and E Troop of the 6th Battery, 2/3rd Field Regiment, to attack the paratroops in Perivolia. Sandover underestimated the strength of the enemy, and after E Troop's howitzers were silenced by a German recoilless gun, he stopped the attack.

B and C Companies remained in their forward positions to support an attack on the St George's Church on 23 May 1941. The assault, made by the left flank battalion of the 5th Greek Regiment, failed. At 2.00pm German aircraft began bombing and strafing the area held by B and C Companies. The paratroops in Perivolia then launched a ground attack, which was beaten off. C Company sustained twenty casualties and was relieved by A Company that night.

Campbell ordered Sandover to make another attack on Perivolia on the afternoon of 24 May 1941. A and B Companies were to be supported by one of the Matilda tanks, which had been recovered, but the attack was called off when a sniper shot the tank's driver. The attack was re-scheduled for the morning of 25 May but was cancelled when the inexperienced replacement driver drove the tank into a ditch. The tank was recovered during the day, and D Company relieved B Company that night.

The 2/11th Battalion's A and D Companies, supported by the tank and E Troop (now armed with a 100-millimetre howitzer, a 75-millimetre field gun, and a 37-millimetre anti-tank gun), attacked Perivolia on the morning of 26 May 1941. The attack was called off when the tank was damaged by a mortar bomb and A Company started sustaining casualties from machine-gun and mortar fire. Both companies were then attacked by German aircraft.

Campbell met with Sandover on the afternoon of 26 May and informed him that the Germans had abandoned the olive oil factory and escaped eastwards, and that the second tank was being recovered. Both tanks were to be made ready for another attack on Perivolia, scheduled for dawn on 27 May. Sandover ordered C Company to relieve D Company during the night.

The dawn assault, by A and C Companies and the 2/1st Battalion's Transport Platoon, spearheaded by the tanks, reached the eastern edge of Perivolia. However, the assault stalled when one tank was destroyed by gunfire and the other had a track blown off. A and C Companies, despite suffering further casualties from an air attack, were ordered to remain in position until nightfall.

Four failed daylight attacks on Perivolia cost the 2/11th Battalion, 23 killed and 62 wounded. To minimise casualties, Campbell ordered a night attack. B and D Companies were to penetrate the southern defences and occupy the centre of the village. A Company was to move south to cover

the main assault, and C Company was to provide fire support from the eastern edge of Perivolia. If the attack was successful, Sandover would demand the surrender of the Germans.

The night attack on Perivolia commenced at 3.30am on 28 May 1941. D Company managed to fight its way into the centre of the village but withdrew after its commander was killed. D and A Companies fought off a German counterattack as they withdrew, with C Company providing fire support before it too retired. B Company had also entered Perivolia, and remained in the village because its commander did not see the flare signal to withdraw.

B Company was able to occupy several houses in Perivolia, and despite numerous attempts to dislodge them, held on throughout 28 May. Sandover assumed that the company would try to withdraw after dark, so arranged for E Troop to shell the forward German posts at half-hourly intervals commencing at 9.00 pm. By chance, B Company was leaving its houses when smoke shells fell in the middle of Perivolia, and in the resulting confusion within the German camp, the company exited the village and escaped westward along the beach.

The night attack cost the 2/11th Battalion, 11 killed and 34 wounded. Such losses were not sustainable, so Campbell ordered Sandover to cease offensive operations. All units under Campbell's command were now critically short of ammunition, food, and water. Officers and men were exhausted, and the battalions were fast approaching the point where they would no longer constitute an effective fighting force.

Campbell lost radio contact with Creforce headquarters at 11.00pm on 28 May 1941, so was unaware that General Freyberg had received orders to abandon Crete. Nor did he know that the Royal Navy had been tasked with evacuating the garrison at Heraklion on the night of 28/29 May. Campbell should have withdrawn his troops after dark on 28 May and taken them to Plakias Bay for evacuation on the night of 31 May/1 June, but he never received the order.

The small fishing village of Sfakia on the coast due south of Souda Bay had been selected as the evacuation point for the other units on Crete. Non-essential personnel had already started their 70-kilometre trek south when Chania fell to German forces on 27 May 1941. The port at Souda Bay fell to the enemy on 28 May, after a new defensive line (42nd Street) was abandoned due to the danger of encirclement. This was not before the Victorian 2/7th and 2/8th Battalions, along with elements of various New Zealand battalions, mauled the German 141st Mountain Regiment in a savage bayonet charge in what became known as the Battle of 42nd Street.

The remaining British, Australian and New Zealand units commenced a fighting withdrawal to Sfakia. The 8th Greek Regiment and armed civilians had helped Creforce escape encirclement by vigorously engaging and delaying the German 85th Mountain Regiment as it tried to move east. The Greek soldiers fought on, unaware that there was no evacuation plan for them.

## The Fall of Crete

At dusk on 29 May 1941, Campbell was informed that a large enemy force was approaching from the direction of Heraklion and the Greek battalion on that flank was retiring south into the mountains. When told that the 4th Greek Regiment was also withdrawing, he ordered the 2/11th Battalion, now just 280-strong, to occupy the vacated position to better defend the airfield. A reinforced C Company was to form an outpost at the Platanes River.

A larger force of motorised mountain troops (Battlegroup Wittmann) reached Perivolia from the German airhead at Maleme on the night of 29 May 1941. Major-General Julius Ringel, commander of the 5th Mountain Division, the overall commander of the German forces on Crete, wanted to pursue and destroy Creforce as it fled south, but had to prioritise the relief of the paratroops and pushed east along the coast to Perivolia. He could thus only assign one regiment of mountain troops to the pursuit of Freyberg and the majority of his men to Sfakia.

On the morning of 30 May 1941, Battlegroup Wittmann, supported by two light tanks, began its attack on Campbell's men. The outpost at the Platanes River came under heavy shell and mortar fire and was forced to withdraw when newly arrived German motorcycle troops threatened to outflank them. When Campbell was told that the attacking enemy force had tanks, trucks, and artillery he correctly assumed that the enemy had captured Souda Bay.

Campbell realised that Crete was lost and that continued resistance was futile. He and Major Ian Bessell-Browne, commander of the 6th Battery, 2/3rd Field Regiment, agreed that surrender was the only sensible option. Sandover believed that his men should be given the option of surrender or escape. Many were denied the option of escape when the battalion position came under direct attack. Sandover and others who did not wish to surrender, discarded, or destroyed their weapons and escaped to the south.

Campbell and the majority of the able-bodied officers and men under his command, together with B Company, 2/7th Field Ambulance, and the wounded, were captured on 30 May 1941. Approximately 1,300 became prisoners of war. Over 130 Australians lost their lives defending Rethymnon. Their sacrifice, as well as that of the Greek troops and Cretan police who had been killed, had not been in vain. The defenders of Rethymnon had contained the Germans in Perivolia, thus forcing Ringel to assign two regiments of mountain troops to the relief of the paratroopers there. In doing so, they bought priceless time for the escape of other units of Creforce.

Between 29 May and the night of 31 May/1 June 1941, when the last organised evacuation occurred, over 11,000 men were evacuated from Sfakia. This brought the total number rescued from Crete by the Royal Navy and the Australian ships Perth, Napier and Nizam between 28 May and 1 June to 18,600 men. On 1 June, the remaining organised units surrendered, and Crete fell to the Germans.





**HMAS Zizam**



**HMAS Perth 1**



**HMAS Napier**

## Evasion and Escape

Reinforcements sent to Crete before and after 20 May 1941 had brought the total number of British Commonwealth and Greek troops on the island to over 42,000. Nearly 18,000 were still on Crete on 1 June. Most became prisoners of war, but hundreds remained at large, trying to avoid capture and hopeful of eventual escape.

Three parties, totalling 241 officers and men, avoided capture at Sfakia on 1 June by escaping in three abandoned landing craft. Nearly all, including five men of the 2/11th Battalion who were at Souda Bay when the German attack began, survived the open sea voyage to Egypt.

Some 200 officers and men from the 2/11th Battalion, the 2/1st Machine-Gun Battalion, and the 2/3rd Field Regiment managed to avoid capture at Rethymnon. Most headed south-east towards Ayia Galini, where landing craft were rumoured to have been abandoned. Others made for Timbakion and Sfakia. Fed and guided by Cretan villagers, the groups safely crossed the mountains and reached the south coast of Crete on 31 May.

Those who went to Ayia Galini found two damaged landing craft on the beach and about 600 British troops awaiting rescue. The new arrivals managed to repair and refloat one craft, and 77 officers and men were selected to sail in the vessel after dark on 2 June. One officer was killed and eight captured when the landing craft was stopped by an Italian submarine later that night. Two officers and 66 men carried on and safely reached Egypt on 5 June. Most of those who remained at Ayia Galini were captured on 6 June.

Sandover and several other 2/11th Battalion officers and men avoided capture and moved back into the mountains. There they were fed and sheltered by villagers who risked execution by the Germans if caught harbouring them. Private Stan Carroll subsequently returned to the coast, found a small boat, and set sail on 11 June. He reached Egypt after an epic eight-day solo voyage and told the authorities that there were more Australian and British troops stranded on Crete. Carroll's efforts resulted in a submarine being sent to Crete to rescue them.



**Preveli Monastery – Crete**

**Courtesy Jessamy Welfare**

On the night of 27/28 July, HMS Thrasher embarked 67 soldiers and sailors, and 11 Greeks from the beach at Preveli. All those rescued, including 25 members of the 2/11th Battalion, had been sheltered by villagers and the monks of the nearby monastery. A naval officer remained on Crete to co-ordinate the evacuation of others known to be hiding in the mountains.

Although at the time we did not think we needed it to last that long but as we went along we learnt different. About 9 O.C on the 1st June we left the island our intentions being to go as far as possible on the petrol then drift till we were picked up. Our petrol ran out about ten o'clock Monday morning. I had better mention here that we had been towing a ship's long boat with the idea that when our petrol ran out a crew would set off and try to make land and send out assistance. Well 8 of the boys set off. Ron and I decided to stick together on the barge which turned out the wisest as the others have not been heard of since most likely they landed in enemy hands. While we were in Crete we heard that Libya was in British hands and you can imagine our surprise when we landed 20 miles behind our lines. Now I'm a little ahead of myself. When the petrol finished and the long boat set off we set about erecting a sail made of four blankets stretched together with string; where the string came from I'm blown if I know but like everything else it just happened to be there. There was a fair breeze blowing with a fair swell which didn't improve the situation as we drifted side on. Steerage was out of the question. The 5th day out our rations of one dry biscuit ceased which didn't make a great difference water being the main thing. Our ration was an egg cup or there about night and morning.

#### **Ronald Pratt - Personal Histories**

Dodging bullets and shrapnel were not the only things the soldiers had to contend with as Ronald Pratt explains.

At 4 O.C in the afternoon they put us on their trucks and set off for Marsa Mariu about 70 miles. We arrived at Hospital about 8 O.C myself not feeling too brilliant; they kept us there that night and the following afternoon we were put on an ambulance train. I must admit it was the most comfortable train I've ever been on. It certainly took plenty of time but the extra comfort was worth it. From the train we were taken to an English Hospital. Here I was informed I had malaria. Well that was on the twelfth. Believe me I wasn't feeling the brightest, my temperature bouncing from 97 to 105 then back again for a couple of days. At present I'm feeling quite well, eating like a horse. The only trouble I'm supposed to stay in bed. Now and again they wake up that I shouldn't be out and I get packed off to bed again.

#### **Ronald Pratt - Personal Histories**

Another submarine, HMS Torbay, was sent to Crete on 17 August, and over three nights took off 130 Allied military personnel, eight Greeks and one Yugoslav from the beach at Preveli. Sandover was amongst those rescued, as were 10 others from the 2/11th Battalion. All were acutely aware that the Cretans had risked their lives for their freedom.

## The Price of Freedom

The German military intelligence believed that the people of Crete would welcome invasion, as a swift victory would end the war between Greece and Germany, allowing them to return to their normal lives. They failed to consider the character of the Cretans, and their long history of resisting invaders. The German paratroops and mountain troops who landed on Crete were therefore stunned by the violence and tenacity of the local resistance.

Most of the Cretan male population of military age was on mainland Greece at the time of the battle, following service on the Albanian Front with the 5th (Cretan) Division of the Greek Army. In their absence, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters took up arms in defence of their homes, villages, and towns.

Many were formed into volunteer units commanded by British Commonwealth or Greek Army officers. Others, armed with ancient rifles or shotguns, were banded together by village heads or the local parish Priest. In numerous cases paratroopers were killed by women or old men armed with knives, sticks or rocks. The Cretans wore no uniforms and as a result many were executed by the Germans, who regarded them as partisans or unlawful combatants.

After the fall of Crete, the Germans singled out villages for reprisals. In some only the men were shot, in others the entire population was executed, and the buildings destroyed. At Rethymnon 110 men were shot. If a woman was found to have a bruise on her shoulder – evidence of having fired a rifle – she was executed. Such actions caused many Cretans to join resistance groups in the mountains.

Despite the risk of losing life or property, many Cretan civilians and clergy selflessly sheltered and fed Allied soldiers. In August 1941, days after HMS Torbay left Preveli, the Germans, having received a tip off about the evacuations, plundered the monastery and imprisoned the monks. The Abbott, Agathangelos Lagouvardos, managed to escape into the mountains. Loyal Cretans later dealt with the small number of traitors who collaborated with the Germans.



TO THE POPULATION AND MILITARY FORCES ON  
CRETE

It has been brought to the notice of the German Supreme Command that German soldiers who fell into the hands of the enemy on the island of Crete have been ill treated and even mutilated in a most infamous and inhuman manner.

As a punishment and reprisal therefore it is announced as follows:

Whosoever commits such crimes against international laws on German prisoners of war will be punished in the manner of his own cruel action, no matter he or she be a man or a woman.

Localities near which such crimes have been perpetrated will be burned down. The population will be held responsible.

Beyond these measures further and sharper reprisals will be held in store.

THE GERMAN SUPREME COMMAND

### Copy of one of the Warning Flyers Aimed at the Greek Civilians on Crete

On 8 May 1945, the war in Europe ended and the German garrison on Crete surrendered. Over 8,500 Cretan civilians died as a result of the German invasion and occupation. Approximately 4,500 had been executed.

BRITISH SOLDIERS!

A whole year you are wandering on mountains and in the caves of Crete living a life of misery.

The Greek inhabitants don't give you any more food [for] they are afraid [of] being shot for favouring the enemy [and] are right to do so.

Your hope your countrymen will come and fetch you from this island has vanished by the success of the German and Italian forces in Africa.

You told the greek [sic] that you are going to be shot [by] surrendering to the german [sic] authorities or being captured [but] that's not right according to the Hague convention you [are] treated as prisoners of war and interned.

Don't be afraid! It's to your own advantage [to] announce yourself to the german, Italian and greek [sic] authorities!

THE COMMANDER OF FORTRESS CRETE

### Copy of one of the Warning Flyers Aimed at the British Soldiers

Over 1,750 members of the British Commonwealth ground and air forces lost their lives defending Crete or during their evacuation. Of these, 274 were Australian and 671 were from New Zealand. Of the eight Indigenous men of the 2/11th Battalion who had fought, one was killed during the evacuation from Greece when the transport ship Slamart was struck by dive bombers. On Crete, another was killed in action on 21 May 1941 and the remaining six were captured when the island fell. The Royal Navy lost three cruisers and six destroyers sunk, and over 1,800 personnel killed. The Royal Australian Navy lost four men killed in action when HMAS Perth was bombed on 30 May 1941. In all, 12,254 Allied personnel were taken prisoner, most enduring over four years of captivity. Over 500 Greek soldiers and Cretan police died defending Crete. Approximately 5,000 Germans lost their lives denying Cretans their freedom.

## Remembrance

The peoples of Crete and Australia formed a lasting friendship in 1941 through joint suffering and sacrifice. These bonds were renewed and strengthened with the dedication of the Australian-Cretan War Memorial near Stavromenos on 25 May 1975. Markos Polioudakis, a survivor of the battle and occupation of Crete, led the development of the memorial, erected near the old Rethymnon airfield, to honour those who fell during and after the Battle of Crete.

During his dedication address, Polioudakis affirmed, “This Memorial has been erected to prevent forgetfulness, as a minimal sign of honour to their memories, by the gratitude and love of the people of Rethymnon towards the dead Australian and Greek soldiers, the gendarmes and civilians killed in the battle of May 1941, and towards the civilians executed by the paratroopers in retaliation for the civilians’ participation in the fighting.” The 2/11th Battalion Association members present, returned to Australia with a desire to acknowledge the assistance of the Cretan people during the war. An annual scholarship program was set up for the Prefecture of Rethymnon, which ran from 1976 until 1991, the 50th Anniversary of the battle.

Former 2/11th Battalion soldier Geoff Edwards wished to personally acknowledge the assistance given to him and others by the monks of the Preveli Monastery and the people in the neighbouring villages. In 1953 he established a holiday resort near Margaret River, which he named Prevelly Park. Twenty-six years later he led the construction of a small Greek Orthodox chapel, St. John the Theologian, on the site. It was, and remains, a symbol of his gratitude.



**St John the Theologian Chapel in Prevelly Near Margaret River in Western Australia**

**Courtesy JSD**



**Geoff Edwards and his Wife Beryl – Plaque Located in Front of the Prevelly Chapel**

**Courtesy JSD**

### **Other Memorials in Australia Linked to the Battle of Crete**

The Australian Hellenic Memorial, honouring the Australians and Greeks who died in the Allied campaigns in Greece and Crete in 1941, and the civilians who risked their lives helping Australian and Allied soldiers to safety, was dedicated on ANZAC Parade, Canberra in 1988.

A second Australian Hellenic memorial was opened in September 2011, also honouring the Australian and Hellenic men and women who have fought and died in war and peacekeeping. This memorial is located in Birdwood Avenue, Kings Domain Melbourne and was sponsored by the Australian Hellenic Memorial Foundation in Melbourne. The memorial also represents the 841 Australian servicemen who were killed in Greece and Crete during the Second World War and captures the values dear to both nations: democracy, liberty and peace.

Another memorial in Victoria is the Greek - Australian Memorial located in Hartington Street, Holy Monastery of Axion Estin, Northcote. This is a black and white marble shrine to the war dead of Greece and Australia with sculptures of Greek and Australian soldiers commemorating their joint struggle and sacrifice for peace in World War II.

### **The Battle of Crete Memorial Kings Park Perth Western Australia.**

The recently dedicated (11 May 2024) Battle of Crete Memorial in Kings Park completes the circle of remembrance. It is the only memorial dedicated solely to the Battle of Crete in Australia. It acknowledges bonds of friendship forged in 1941, and provides a place to pay respect, learn and reflect. Its design is centred on a 'broken column', a metaphor for a young life cut short. The base contains a dedication to the defenders and a quote from the Greek general and historian Thucydides. The eucalyptus wreath is also a significant symbol for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.



Around the column are four figures in relief. Facing north, the direction of the attack on Crete, is an Australian soldier. To his left and facing west, is a Greek soldier. The symbolism of a western facing ally is of an enduring connection between both nations. Facing south is a RAN sailor. The positioning of this figure symbolizes the support of Allied naval forces to the troops fighting the ground battle. Facing east is a Cretan woman, acknowledging the local people, who resisted an oppressive invader, sheltered Allied soldiers evading capture, and paid a heavy price in lives in the process. Facing the dawn, this relief greets the new day and the promise of a better future.



**The Battle of Crete Memorial on the Day After the Dedication Ceremony –  
Sunday 12 May 2024**

**Courtesy DRD**

The Memorial honours those Australians and Greeks who lived, fought, and died defending Crete in 1941.

On 4 November 2023, Mr Arthur Leggett OAM, the sole remaining Western Australian to serve in the battle turned the first sod for this Memorial, aged 105. Then on 11 May 2024 he attended the Memorial Dedication Ceremony where he was able to lay a wreath and recite the Ode of Remembrance. Later that day he also attended the Dedication Lunch.

**LEST WE FORGET**



Courtesy Jessamy Welfare

### References

The [www.battleofcrete.org.au](http://www.battleofcrete.org.au) website contains several personal stories of men who fought in the Battle of Crete. Where references have been made to these accounts in this document they have been simply identified as *Soldiers Name- Personal Stories*.

The text from the plaques currently installed on the podium of the Memorial form the central text of this document. Wes Olson, a WA historian authored the contents of the plaques.