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Author: W. Gaul

Abstract: The occupation of Crete in May 1941 was principally a German Air Force occupation in which the Navy and the Army played only subsidiary roles. It was the first successful invasion from the air over a disputed sea area. A report of Luftflotte 4 forms the principal source of this study, while all details of the British countermeasures are taken from "War at Sea", Vol. II.

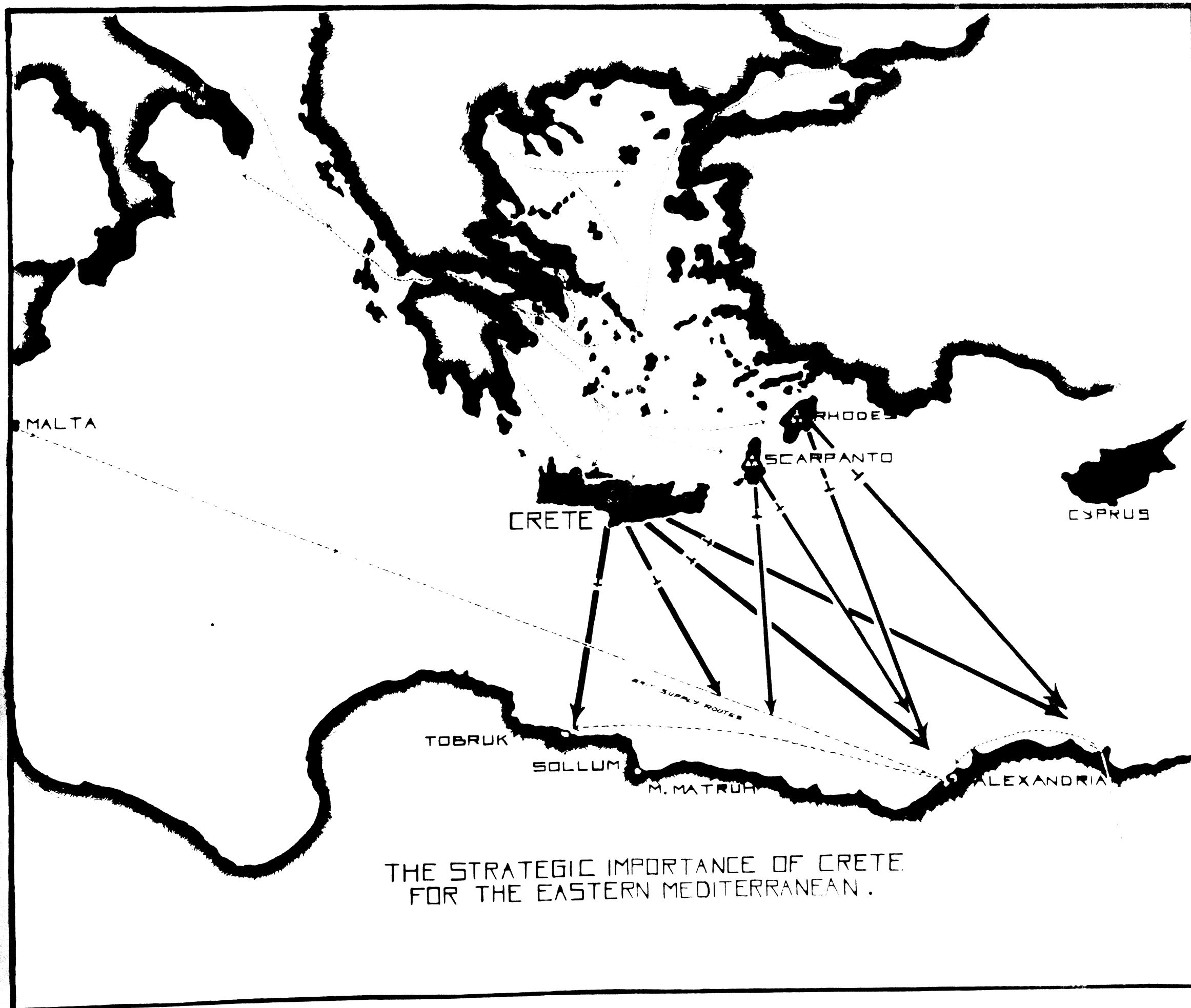
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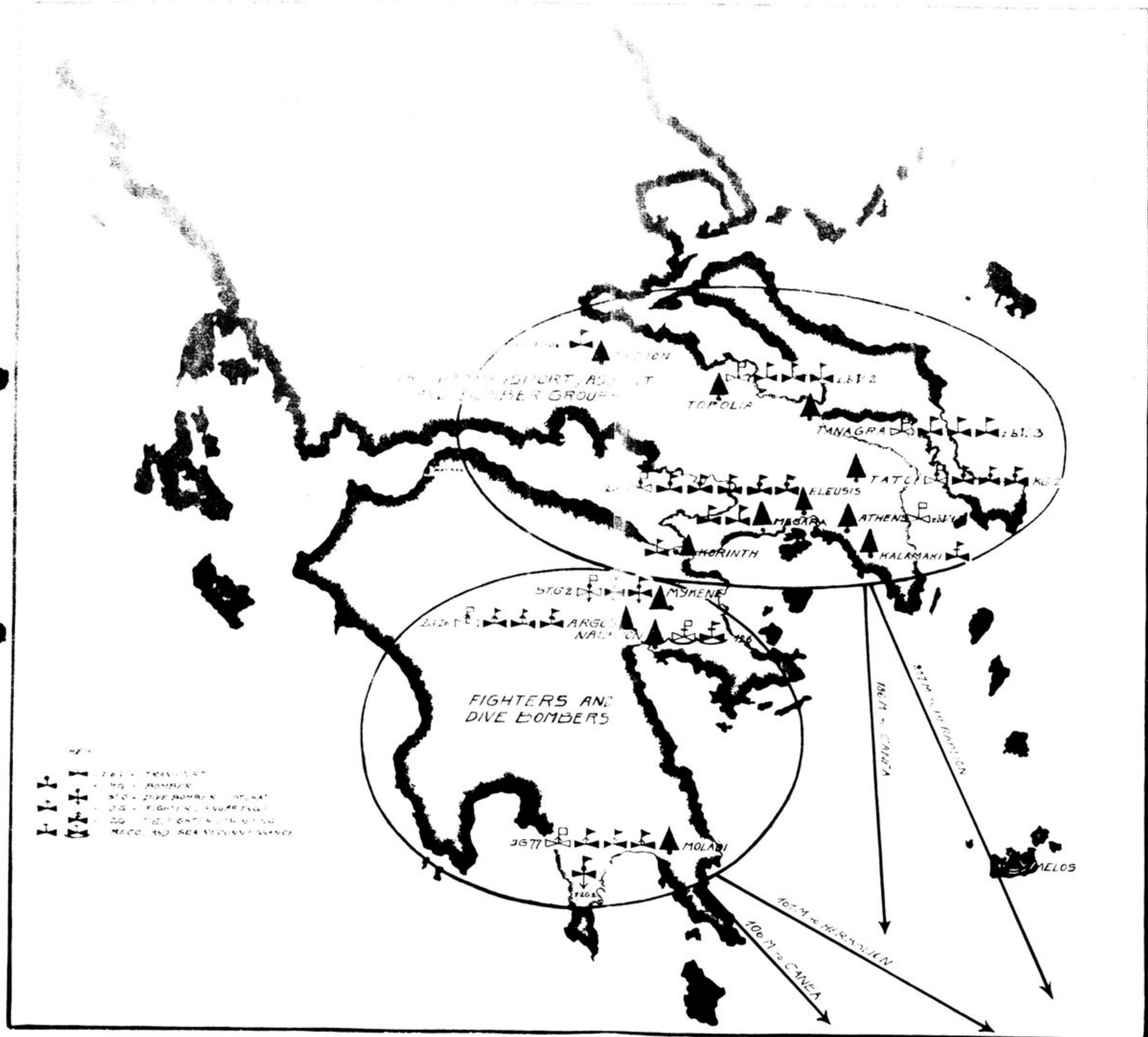
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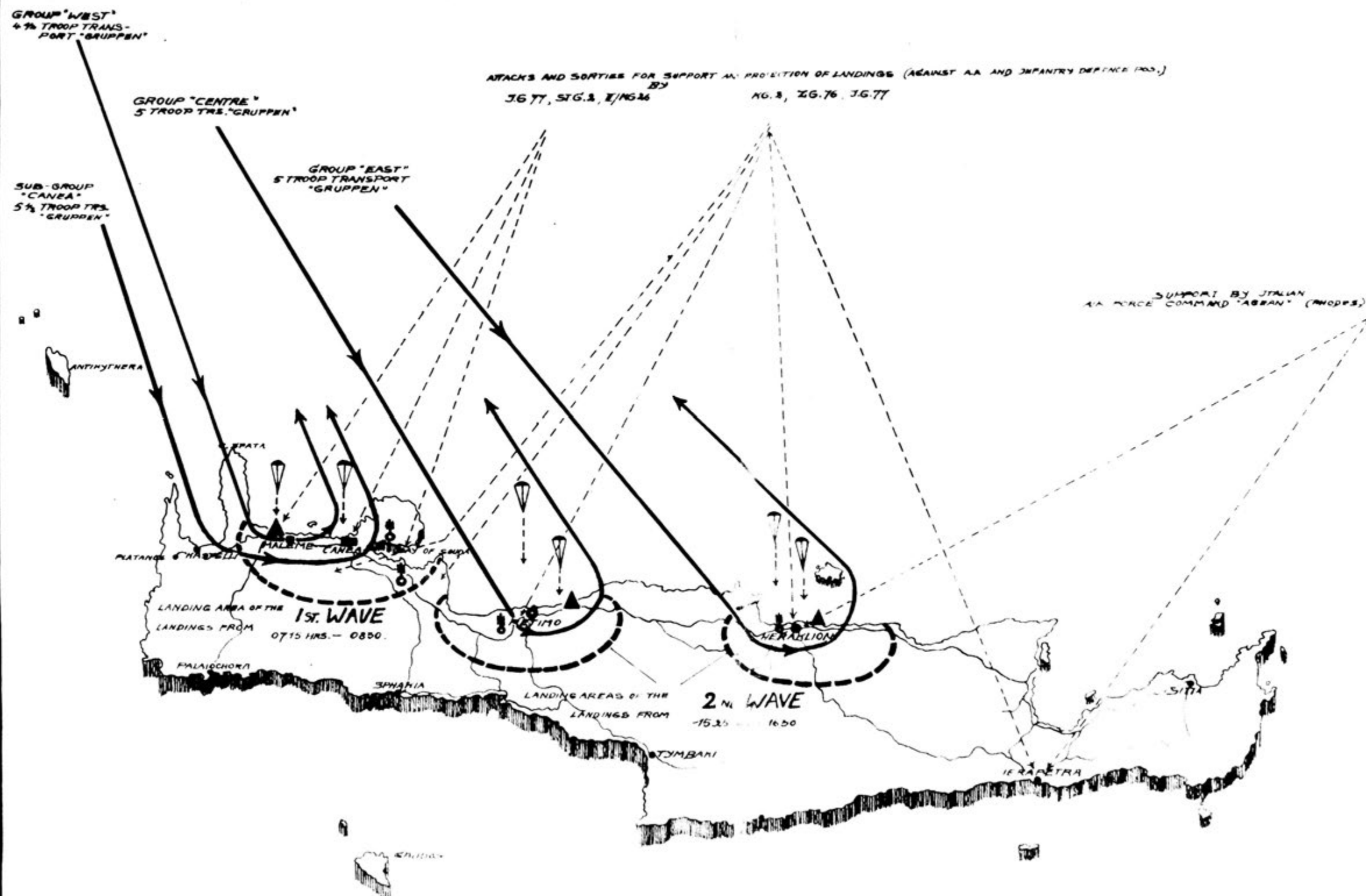
PLAN 1.





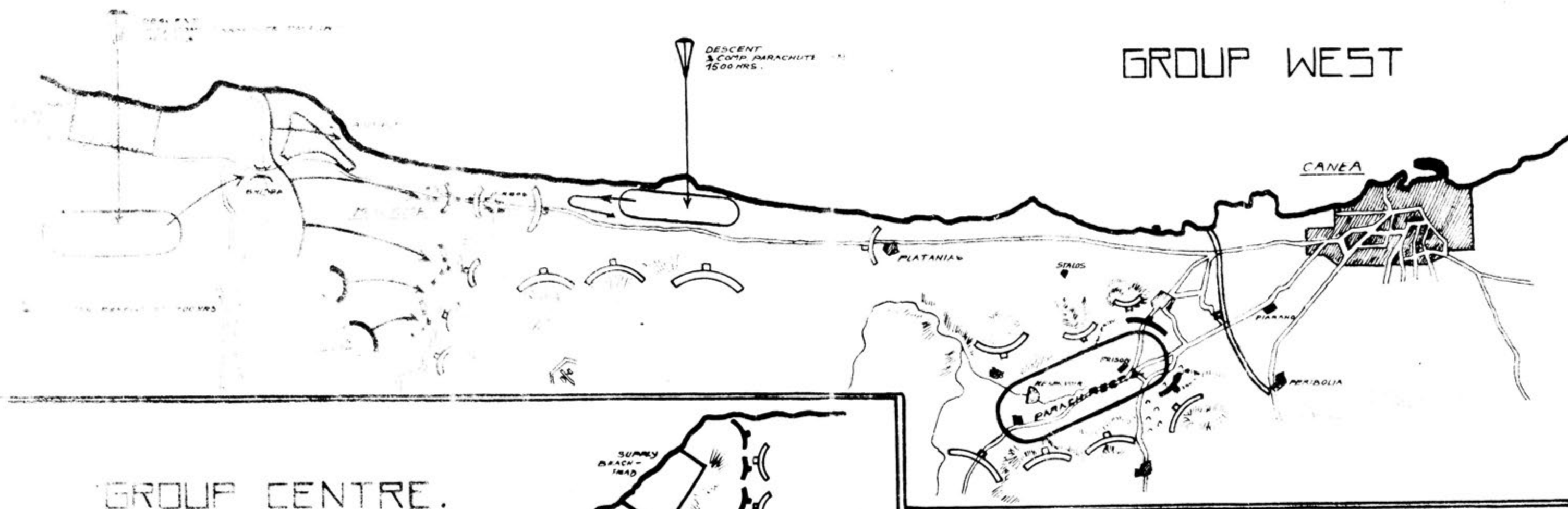
PLAN 3.

BEGINNING OF THE LANDING ON CRETE
ON MAY 20, 1941.

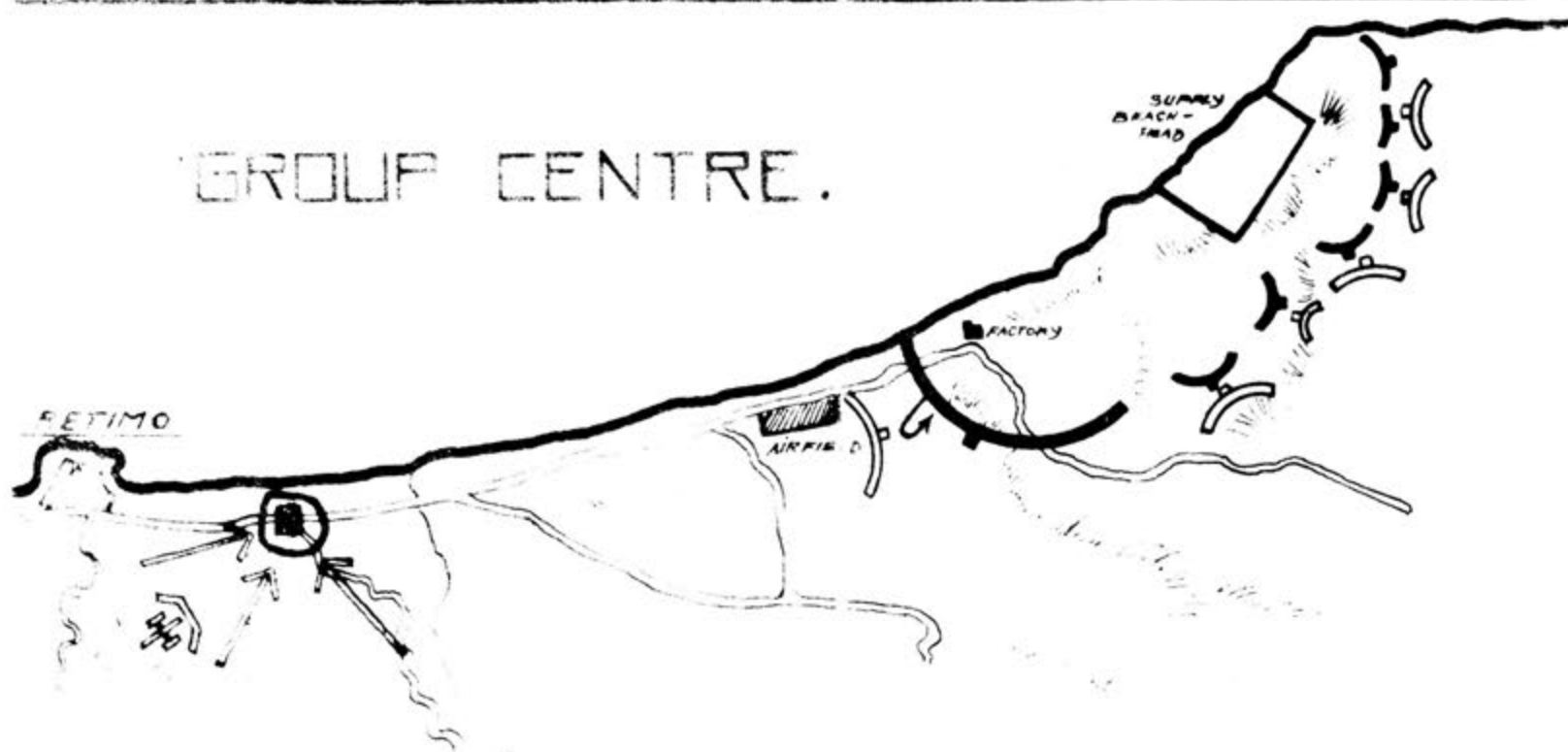


PLAN 4.

GROUP WEST



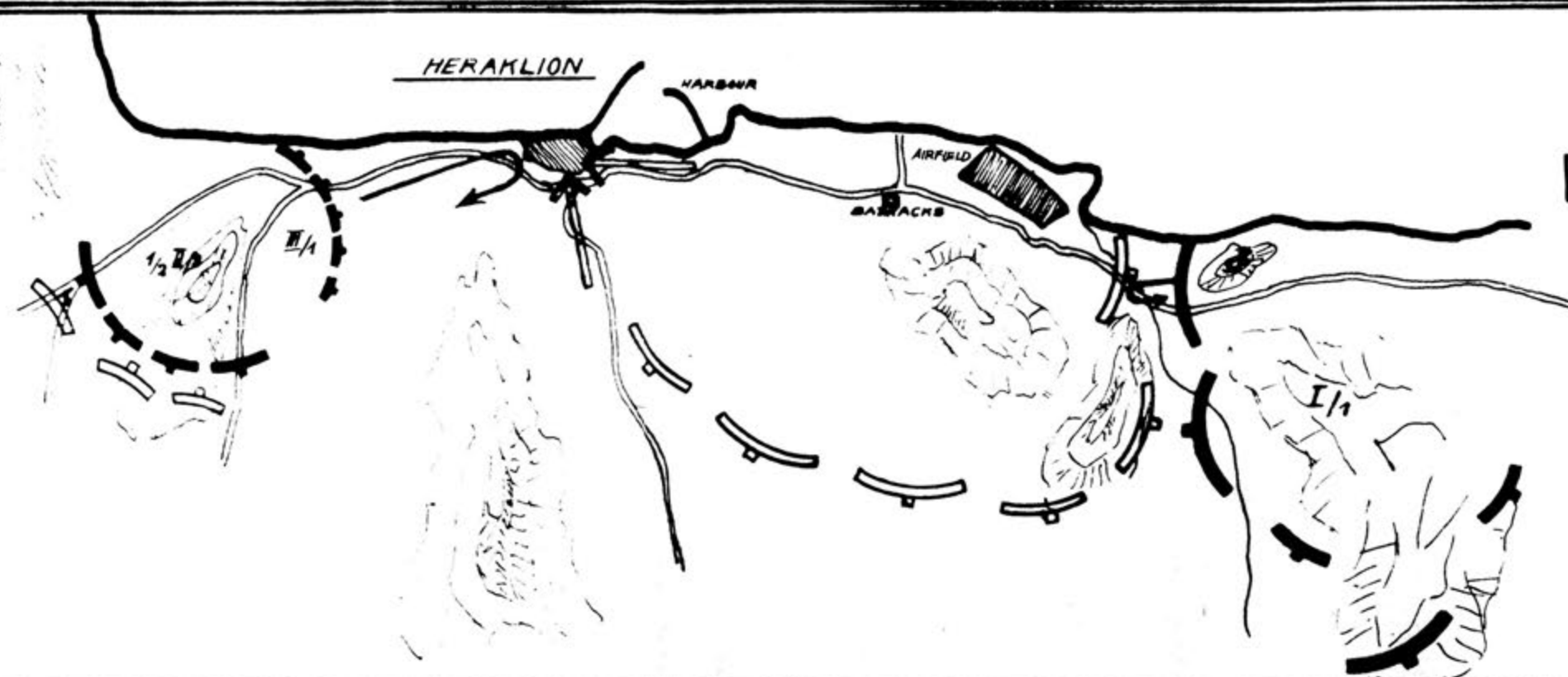
GROUP CENTRE.



POSITIONS
OF THE
THREE LANDING GROUPS
EVENING OF MAY 21, 1941.

GERMAN , BRITISH .

GROUP EAST.



THE GERMAN OCCUPATION OF CRETE

(OPERATION "MERKUR")

By W. Gaul.

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FORWORD

The occupation of Crete in May 1941 was principally a German Air Force operation in which the Navy and the Army played only subsidiary roles. It was the first successful invasion from the air over a disputed sea area.

A report of Luftflotte 4 forms the principal source of this study, while all details of British countermeasures are taken from "War at Sea", Vol. II.

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CHAPTER I

General survey of the Balkan situation and preparations for the invasion of Crete (Operation "Merkur")

1. As 1940 drew to a close and the threat of a German invasion of England gradually subsided, the main interest of the war switched to the Balkan and Mediterranean theaters.

Grave Italian reverses in North Africa had compelled the Germans to provide additional military support; in January 1941, they had transferred Filegerkorps X to Sicily and the German Africa Korps had been moved to Tripoli, primarily as a defensive force to intercept the British in the Gulf of Sidra. The progress of the Italian campaign in Albania, the internal political situation and the attitude to foreign affairs in Yugoslavia gave justifiable ground for grave misgivings. Britain was obviously anxious not only to retain her naval supremacy in the Mediterranean but also to strengthen her position and, by supporting Greece with arms and troops, to acquire bases at an early stage for military operations in the Balkans. Not only did this imply deterioration in the position of Germany's Italian ally, but it constituted a direct threat to Germany from the south which, in view of preparations already in progress for the Russian campaign, was particularly serious.

Thus, on 6 April 1941, the 12th German Army, supported by units of Luftflotte 4, attacked Yugoslavia and Greece. Their main object was to turn to the account of the Axis the latent potential in the Balkans, but the attack might also improve conditions for the coming struggle against British sea power in the Mediterranean. It was vital for the Axis powers to gain naval supremacy at least in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean, as the development of the situation in North Africa would depend largely on sea supplies.

2. The strategic importance of the Peloponnesus and the Greek islands in a campaign for the Eastern Mediterranean is plain from a glance at the map (see Plan 1). To Crete, with its airfields at Maleme and Heraklion and its naval base in Suda Bay, was attached particular significance. It was Britain's main base during the Greek campaign and, in fact, allowed her to block the approach to the Aegean against Italy's sea communications from the Ionian Sea and so prevent passage to the Dardanelles. Moreover, British occupation of Crete reduced the value of the Italian Dodecanese islands which had to be entirely supplied by sea and constituted an effective and persistent threat to the flank of the German Army in Cyrenaica and Libya.

Axis possession of Crete, however, would reverse the strategic position. With careful distribution of the forces of the Italian Fleet, it should not be difficult to

keep open the sea route through the Ionian Sea to the Aegean or to maintain supremacy in this sea area, once unimpeded passage through the Dardanelles into the Black Sea was achieved and supplies for the Dodecanese assured. The acquisition of Crete's air bases would be particularly valuable for the conduct of air warfare over the sea along the north coast of Africa and against the main British naval bases in the Eastern Mediterranean, Alexandria and Suez. Not only would possession of Crete simplify the operational air offensive but also assure air escort for sea transports from Greece to the north coast of Africa (Derna, Mersa Matruh).

Although the campaign against Yugoslavia and Greece proceeded according to plan - Greece's Thracian army capitulated on 10 April, her Epirus army on 20 April and the British Supreme Command had evacuated by the 25th* - these successes were not sufficient to mask the developments on the African front. Bold operations of the German Africa Korps had achieved important successes; Tobruk had been surrounded and the Egyptian/Italian border crossed at Sollum, but further successes obviously depended on maintaining supplies by sea and bringing up troop reinforcements. Once again the importance of sea power was evident. On 25 April Naval War Staff wrote in their war diary: "... no exact information is at present available on enemy supply and transport traffic to Tobruk or on the enemy situation in Crete. It must be assumed that the enemy will endeavor to hold Tobruk and, in view of Crete's particular importance as a base for domination of the Eastern Mediterranean, will make every attempt to land strong forces there to ensure prolonged resistance to attack...."

Thus, from the German standpoint, domination of the Greek sea area with the use of its harbors and immediate occupation of Crete were of very great importance for the continuance of the African campaign.

3. At that time there were no German naval forces available for such operations in the Mediterranean. Initiative and striking power of the Italian Fleet could not be relied on. A special operation by the German Air Force offered the only chance of occupying the island.

Some ten days after the opening of the Greek campaign, on 15 April, Commander Luftflotte 4 (Major General Loehr) proposed to Goering that the concluding move the campaign should be the capture of Crete by Fliegerkorps XI (airborne and parachute troops).**

* For effects of the air war on the Yugoslav, Greek and British Fleet in the Balkans and its bases, see Appendix 1. The Greek Fleet became subordinate to British Command on 24 April 1941 and put into Alexandria with 14 units on the 25th; units of the Yugoslav Navy arrived there on the 26th.

**Operation "Crete", report of Luftflotte 4, Hist. Sect. R.A.F. 8A-2026.

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Two proposals were submitted. Luftflotte Command 4 suggested occupation of the western sector of the island by airborne infantry forces. Fliegerkorps XI, on the other hand, thought it more practicable for airborne units and paratroops to occupy some seven points simultaneously, among these Maleme, Canea, Retimo and Heraklion. The advantage of the first plan was that a powerful assault force could be assembled in the west, adequately covered and supported by Fliegerkorps VIII, but, on the other hand, long and arduous fighting might develop in difficult mountain terrain. According to the second plan, it seemed possible to seize salient points and break up enemy defenses in one assault; this, however, would also mean the extensive dispersal of the weak attacking forces.

The somewhat vague data regarding the actual enemy strength on the island caused Goering to seek a middle course. His solution was the capture of Crete by seizing the four most important points in turn, so that each assault force could have the full protection of Fliegerkorps VIII. The western section of the island, including Maleme and Canea, the pivots of the entire enterprise, was to be taken in the morning and the central and eastern sectors, including Retimo and Heraklion, during the afternoon.

4. On 21 April, the German Air Force received the Fuehrer's orders to proceed with the operation as planned by D-in-C German Air Force, and forces of the Army and Navy were accordingly subordinated.
5. There were unusual obstacles to surmount in preparing for the operation, since it had to be performed in the interval between the close of the Greek and the opening of the Russian campaign. The necessary air units had only a poor and numerically weak ground organization at their service; labor for repairing and developing the airfields and for extending the communications network had already been drafted to the eastern front. Transport facilities were very limited indeed, confined primarily to slow sea transportation by very few ships. Provision of the necessary aircraft fuel was a further problem since there were not many fuel supply columns available.

Thanks, however, to the rapid progress of the Greek campaign, the commands of all the services taking part were soon assembled in Athens which German troops had reached on 27 April. This simplified the task of making personal contact and enabled many difficulties to be cleared up.

Fliegerdivision 7 (parachute division) of Fliegerkorps XI was transported by rail and truck from Germany to Attica to join up with those sections of the division already in Corinth. For airborne operations, the 5th Mountain Division then in the Athens area was reinforced and subordinated to the Korps. From 2 to 12 May, air transport forces were overhauled in Germany

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and transferred to the air bases of Dadian, Topolia, Megara and Athens Faleron. Anti-aircraft forces of Luftflotte 4 were strengthened by forces of Army H. Q. 12 and used, during preparations, to defend the German Air Force ground organization, the Piraeus, Patras harbor and the Corinth Canal.

For defense of transports to Crete and occupation of the newly acquired bases on the island, 1 anti-aircraft regiment, 1 light anti-aircraft division, 1 light and 2 heavy anti-aircraft batteries and 1 anti-aircraft machine-gun battalion were made ready. In addition, the Dodecanese island of Scarpanto was prepared to receive fighters and dive-bombers (Stukas). On 9 May, the island of Melos was occupied and equipped for supply shipping and as an emergency naval base. Kythera was taken over on the eve of the operation, 19 May, while on the following morning, the island of Antikythera was occupied and an anti-aircraft defense base set up there.

6. In all these preparations, naval transport played a decisive role.

On 22 April 1941, Naval War Staff had received from their German Air Force liaison officer the first definite intimation of the enterprise, together with the request for the necessary naval transports and, if possible, escort forces.* Fuehrer directive No. 28 was placed before the Naval War Staff on 27 April.** Commenting on the directive, they pointed out the difficulties of the transport problem,***regarding not only the provision of shipping but also in view of British naval supremacy, the actual passage of the transports. They realized that the German Air Force could only achieve and retain supremacy over the coastal waters of Crete for a brief period and that only during that period could the necessary reinforcements of supplies and personnel be conveyed to the island under cover of German aircraft and escorted by Italian naval forces.

Admiral Southeast (Admiral Schuster) was placed in charge of the transports, supported in his task by the German Naval Liaison Staff in Rome. Despite the problem of reinforcing the Africa transports (to bring up the 15th Armored Division), transferring anti-aircraft guns and the ground staff of Fliegerdivision X from Sicily to Greece and recalling German armored units from the Greek zone into the Adriatic for future operations in the Russian campaign, the required organization was set up, the transports sailed and the preparations were concluded on time.

The following craft were assembled for the operation:

2 motor sailing vessel squadrons to transport the first consignment of heavy arms, personnel and equipment to the island.

- * File Operation "Merkur" PG/32454?NID p. 4.
** File Operation "Merkus" PG/32454?NID p. 7.
*** Personal File "Marita-Merkus" PG/32549/NID.
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3 steamer squadrons to carry heavy trucks, tanks and heavy arms and to ensure the island's regular supplies.

Minesweepers to sweep the sea area round Crete, the approaches to be used by German ships and, particularly, Suda Bay.

7. In addition to torpedoboats already escorting the transports, the Italian Navy made available their Dodecanese forces consisting of 2 destroyers, 3-4 torpedoboats, some E-boats and 4 U-boats.

The Italian Admiralty refused to dispatch further Italian naval forces from their home waters since, apart from those torpedo-carriers indispensable to the regular Libya transports, there were no other units available for service and the situation in North Africa did not permit any interruption of traffic. A German Naval War Staff suggestion that the Italian Fleet should put to sea at the start of the Crete operation to draw off the British Fleet, was also turned down by the Italian Admiralty on the grounds "that the enemy would soon discover that the Italian Fleet had sailed and the result would be an immediate sortie of the entire British Mediterranean Fleet. This, in the opinion of the Italian Staff, would detract from the surprise element and the success of the operation".*

Thus, apart from the uncertainty regarding the British situation in Crete itself, Britain's naval supremacy was the most serious challenge to the success of the enterprise.

8. While air reconnaissance, agents' and prisoners' reports were pieced together to supplement the picture of British strength in material and personnel on the island, Fliegerkorps VIII made preliminary attacks on military targets, ships in Suda Bay and British units and transports in the waters round Crete and in the Aegean. Theirs also was the task of providing regular air cover and escort for transports preparing for action. According to Luftflotte Command 4, the Korps carried out its commitments in exemplary fashion and damaged or sank 27 ships,**destroyed 34 aircraft, some on the ground, some in air battles and heavily damaged another 20 on the ground.***

* Personal File "Marita-Merkur", PG/32549/NID p. 16.

** See Appendix 1.

*** From "War at Sea": "The invasion was preceded by a preparatory period of air bombing from 14 May, in consequence of which the R.A.F. with its serviceable machines reduced to seven, was obliged to abandon the Cretan airfields before the main attack started. No fighter protection was therefore available in the island during the battle...."

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On 17 May, it was decided that X-day for Operation "Merkur" should be 20 May.

9. Preparations were concluded and the following forces were ready for operations by 19 May (see Plan 2):

1. Fliegerkorps XI

1 Reconnaissance Staffel;
Fliegerfuhrer of Fliegerkorps XI with 10 Transport Gruppen;
Fliegerdivision 7 with 3 Parachute Regiments;
Korps troops: (1 Assault Regiment, 1 Parachute Engineer Battalion, 1 Parachute Machine-gun Battalion, Parachute Medical Detachment);
Parachute Machine-gun Anti-aircraft Battalion;
Reinforced 5th Mountain Division with 3 Mountain Rifle Regiments (1 from the 6th Mountain Division);
Motor-cycle Battalion 55;
2nd Battalion/Armored Regiment 31;
2nd Battalion/Anti-aircraft Training Regiment and Light Anti-aircraft Detachment 84;
Part of the 6th Mountain Division (still attached to 12th Army) in reserve.

2. Fliegerkorps VIII

Bomber Geschwader 2 with 3 Bomber Gruppen (Do 17);
Training Geschwader 1 with 2 Bomber Gruppen (Ju 88) (additional Bomber Gruppen and 1 Bomber Gruppe of He 111 from Fliegerkorps X expected);
Dive-bomber Geschwader 2 with 3 Stuka Gruppen;
Fighter Geschwader 77 with 3 Fighter Gruppen;
Heavy Fighter Geschwader 26 with 3 Heavy Fighter Gruppen;
2 Reconnaissance Staffeln.

3. 2nd Gruppe/Bomber Geschwader 4 for minelaying operations in the Suez Canal.

4. Sea Reconnaissance Gruppe 126 with 2 Staffeln.

5. 7th Air Sea Rescue Staffel reinforced by aircraft of Luftflotte 4.

6. Admiral Southeast assembled the following:

2 Motor Sailing Vessel Squadrons, Nos. 1 and 2, with 63 ships in all;
2 Steamer Squadrons, with 7 merchant ships in all.

On the Motor Sailing Vessel Squadrons were embarked:

1 Battalion of the 6th Mountain Division on each;
Personnel and gear of the 7th Flieger Division which could not be dropped or brought by air;
Pack animals and gear of the 5th Mountain Division which could not be brought by air;
Ammunition and food supplies.

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On the Steamer Squadrons were embarked:

Anti-aircraft guns;
Guns;
Tanks;
Heavy equipment of Fliegerkorps XI and the 5th Mountain Division;
Ammunition;
Food supplies.

10. The operation was to proceed according to the directive of C-in C German Air Force:

Fliegerkorps VIII: At dawn on X-day, preliminary attacks to eliminate R.A.F. units still on Crete and silence the ground defenses. Protection of the approach and landing of the first and second wave of Fliegerkorps XI and support for their fighting on the island. Escorting of German naval transports and annihilation of British naval forces in the area round Crete.

Fliegerkorps XI: The first wave, on the morning of X-day, was to capture Maleme airfield and British positions round Canea and Suda Bay. On the same afternoon, the second wave was to occupy Retimo and Heraklion airfields. On X+1 day, landing of mountain troops on Maleme and Heraklion to begin.

11. Admiral Southeast was requested to organize the sailing of motor sailing squadrons and minesweepers so that the first squadron might land at Canea on the evening of X+1 day and the second in Heraklion on the evening of X+2 day. Steamer squadrons were to be ready to sail as soon as Suda Bay was reported to be clear of mines and enemy forces.*

To this end he ordered:

Motor Sailing Vessel Squadron 1, Group Maleme, comprising 1 Italian torpedoboat (Lupo) and some 20 motor sailing vessels, to leave the Piraeus on X-2 day at 2100. Arrival at Melos to take up waiting position on X-1 day by 2000 and off the beach at Maleme on X-day, 20 May, by 1600.**

Motor Sailing Vessel Squadron 2, Group Heraklion, comprising 1 Italian torpedoboat (Sagittario) and some 30 motor sailing vessels, to leave Lavrion on X-day at

- *) The failure of Admiral Southeast's operational order
**) No. 600/1941, Most Secret of 17 May to comply with instructions of Luftflotte 4 cannot be explained. No supplement or amendment followed.

Naval War Staff had expressed some hesitation regarding the early date fixed for sailing of the first squadron. As a matter of fact, reports received regarding British naval forces caused the Admiral on the morning of the 18th to cancel the sailing of the first squadron, ordered to proceed on that day, and to postpone it for 24 hours.

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2100. Arrival at Melos to take up waiting position on X/1 day by 1800 and at Heraklion on X/2 day by 1800.

Two Italian minesweeper groups, one for Suda, one for Heraklion, each comprising 1 Italian torpedoboat and 4 minesweepers, to leave Piraeus on the morning of X/1 day and after waiting at Melos to arrive at destination towards noon on X/2 day.

Of the subsequent steamer transports, the first squadron carrying troops and equipment was to sail on X/1 day, if the situation was well in hand but the airfields not yet ready for use.

Close air escort was promised for all the transports and, in addition, air reconnaissance of the ports of destination for the minesweeper forces. It was planned to provide regular transmission of intelligence regarding the naval situation to the commanders of each group.

Further defense measures outside the Aegean were:

- a) Disposition of 4 Italian U-boats, two east and two west of Crete.
- b) Italian E-boats to patrol between Kasos and Crete on the nights from X-day onwards.
- c) Air reconnaissance against British naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean from dawn to dusk.

12. On the eve of the operation a summary of the situation would run roughly as follows:

The enemy's most valuable base on Crete was Suda Bay, occupied alternately by warships and merchant vessels. Attacks by Fliegerkorps VIII on 17 and 18 May were successful (the cruiser York was badly damaged, 1 destroyer damaged, heavy damage to several large and small merchant vessels, 1 tanker of 13,000 G.R.T. set on fire). It was not known how many troopships from Egypt and British forces from Greece had landed, since transports proceeded by night. The occupying forces on the island were thought to be more than one division strong. Anti-aircraft defenses were strong, particularly in Suda Bay and at Maleme, Heraklion and Retimo airfields. There was no evidence of any special installations for ground defense. The strength of British armored units was unknown. Attitude of the native population was doubtful, possibly neutral, in order to obtain terms as favorable as those meted out to the Greeks.

Strength of the British Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean was known. Observation of its movements and prompt report of these to Admiral Southeast was an important factor for deciding when to begin supply transports to Crete. According to reports of the radio intercept service, the C-in-C of the British Mediterranean Fleet was at sea on the afternoon of 18 May, probably in

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the area west of Crete, with a squadron comprising 2 battleships, 3 cruisers and 4 destroyers. Air reconnaissance did not confirm this, however, and merely identified 3 cruisers and 7 freighters in Suda Bay, the latter unloading. On 19 May, air reconnaissance reported several British formations in the Eastern Mediterranean obviously connected with operations in the Crete area. All the commands agreed that the British anticipated a landing in Crete. Their naval forces had taken up a waiting position, assuming that the main transports would arrive from Italy and Greece. They had apparently failed to realize fully the strength of the intended air transports. Possibly the removal of the 2nd Armored Division from Patras had deceived the British who might have assumed that this transport movement was in connection with Crete.

On 19 May, the following picture was formed from the air reconnaissance report on enemy movements:

- 1 heavy cruiser between Malta and Crete on easterly course;
- 1 cruiser formation with 1 aircraft carrier at noon northwest of Alexandria on northwesterly course;
- 1 heavy formation of 2 battleships, 3 heavy cruisers and several destroyers south to southeast of Cape Littinos;
- Another formation of capital ships, comprising 2 battleships, 1 cruiser and 2 destroyers, at noon in the area west of Crete on northwesterly course (report of Italian air reconnaissance).

If these reports were correct, all 4 British battleships were assembled in the Crete area on that day. Furthermore, interception of urgent radio messages between Alexandria and Crete also suggested the presence of convoys.*

The first group of motor sailing vessels escorted by the Italian torpedoboat Lupo, whose departure had been postponed for 24 hours on 18 May owing to the situation at sea, was now proceeding towards Melos.

13. The British Command had expected the attack on Crete. They based their countermeasures on the assumption that invasion from the air without the support of naval transports would not succeed and hoped that, by impeding these, the issue might be decided in their favor.

The Fleet in Alexandria was therefore instructed to undertake the difficult task of sealing off the area round Crete. Suda Bay could not be used because of heavy air raids, so that two groups had to be formed, one to intercept the German transports, the other to proceed to Alexandria for extra supplies of fuel. Unfortunately, the aircraft carrier Formidable was unable to provide

* Naval War Staff, War Diary, Part A, 19 May 1941.

fighter cover for the forces then at sea owing to heavy fighter losses incurred in previous operations. British prospects of accomplishing their task were, therefore, not very favorable.*

All important military strong points and possible landing sectors on Crete were given the best possible defenses and carefully camouflaged from the air. Armament for the troops was not very efficient; in particular, there was a lack of artillery and machine-guns. Some 45,000 men were ready for the operation. Rations and ammunition appeared to be adequate.

* "War at Sea", Vol. II, P. 304 ff.

CHAPTER II

Course of the operation

14. The attack commenced according to plan with operations by two reinforced heavy fighter Staffeln which, between 0550 and 0600 on May 20, attacked airfields and anti-aircraft defenses in the Maleme, Canea and Heraklion areas. The attack was a complete success; when the first wave touched down later, there was not a single British fighter in the air.

During the approach of the first wave of transport aircraft and during the descent of the paratroops, Dive-bomber Geschwader 2, parts of Bomber Geschwader 2 and Italian aircraft of the Aegean Command attacked anti-aircraft sites, tented camps and garrisons in the principal areas. In order to harass the British Command, bombs were dropped at the approaches to Canea, Retimo, Heraklion and Ierapetra to put telephone lines out of action.

Of the first wave of paratroops, one group was charged with the task of occupying the airfield at Maleme to safeguard subsequent landings, while the second group was to capture the village of Suda and the town of Canea, break down British resistance and eliminate their defenses.

15. Both groups touched down between 0715 and 0830 according to plan (see Plan 3). Each group was to be preceded by gliders carrying half an assault regiment which was to land among the anti-aircraft positions and quickly destroy them. The transports were escorted by twin-engined and single-engined fighters. Of 500 Ju 52 aircraft, only 7 were lost. With the first wave were landed:

Group Maleme: By 4 Transport Gruppen (Ju 52) and half a Transport Gruppe with gliders in tow:-

The Assault Regiment, minus half a battalion;
1 Company of Parachute Anti-aircraft Machine-gun Battalion;
1 Parachute Medical Platoon.

Group Canea: By 5 Transport Gruppen (Ju 52) and half a Transport Gruppe with gliders in tow:-

Half a battalion of the Assault Regiment;
1 Parachute Regiment;
The bulk of the Parachute Engineer Battalion;
1 Company of the Parachute Machine-gun Battalion;
1 Company of the Parachute Anti-aircraft Machine-gun Battalion;
1 Medical Company;
The Staff of Fliegerdivision 7.

Although the return of the transport units and the escorting aircraft of Fliegerkorps VIII seemed to indicate that the action had proceeded according to plan, radio and reconnaissance reports received during the afternoon revealed a much less favorable picture. Descents and landings were attacked by strong British infantry forces which had not been expected; particularly round Maleme, the British were quite ready for the landings and paratroops sustained heavy losses as they dropped, while others were prevented by the enemy defenses from reaching their equipment containers. One battalion of the Assault Regiment was landed too far to the east. The fact that both groups were without a leader was an added difficulty: the leader of Group Canea (Lieut. General Sussmann) had been killed when his glider crashed on landing the leader of Group Maleme (Major General Meindel) was badly wounded soon after landing.

While the second wave was preparing for action, Fliegerkorps VIII carried out attacks with bomber and dive-bomber formations on landing grounds and ships in Suda Bay (3 merchant ships ablaze) and supported troops already landed.

16. Preparation of the transport planes for the landing of the second wave did not augur well. It was not possible to fit all the Ju 52s, after their return between 0900 and 1000, for a take-off at 1300. Dust clouds on the airfields, crash-landings and improvised fuelling delayed the start and proved particularly disadvantageous to Group East. The tactical sequence in which the units were to go into action could not always be maintained.

Of this second wave, one group (Group Central) had to seize the airfield at Retimo and advance thence towards Suda Bay, while the second group (Group Heraklion) had to occupy Heraklion town and airfield and keep the latter open for subsequent landings.

Between 1525 and 1630 the following were landed:

At Retimo by 5 Transport Gruppen:

Staff Parachute Regiment 2;
2 Battalions/Parachute Regiment 2;
2 Heavy Companies/Parachute Regiment 2;
Sections of Parachute Machine-gun Battalion;
Sections of Parachute Anti-aircraft Machine-gun Battalion
1 Parachute Artillery Battery.

At Heraklion by 5 Transport Gruppen:

Staff Parachute Regiment 1;
3 Battalions/Parachute Regiment 1;
1 Battalion/Parachute Regiment 2;
2 Heavy Companies/Parachute Regiment 1.

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Once again both groups descended in the thick of opposing infantry defenses. Heavy losses occurred even during the descent. Delayed take-off and difficulty in locating objectives led to scattered landings, especially in the case of Group East, and proposed objectives were not reached.

17. Reconnaissance of Fliegerkorps VIII reported that the sea area around Crete was clear during the morning. By 1445 however, southeast of the island's eastern tip, a British battleship squadron with 1 aircraft carrier and, a little later, to the west of the island, a light formation of 2 cruisers and 12 destroyers, were sighted. While German bomber aircraft did not make contact with the enemy, the Italians reported at 1940 that their torpedo-carrying Staffel stationed at Rhodes had encountered a formation of light units in Kasos Strait. A cruiser (10,000 tons) was said to have been hit by a torpedo and to be listing. Messages from "Italuft", the German liaison staff at Italian Air Force H.Q., reported 2 further cruisers hit by torpedoes on the same night.*

18. Thus the general situation on the evening of the first day of operations gave some cause for anxiety. None of the island's airfields was as yet in German hands. The situation was best at Maleme where the airfield was at least temporarily held, although under enemy gunfire. The enemy still occupied Canea. The attack from Retimo on Suda Bay had to be abandoned due to strong British defenses. No communications had been established between the individual groups at Maleme, Canea, Retimo and Heraklion and there was no news at all from Heraklion. Casualties were high. The naval situation was unsatisfactory in that no successes had been achieved against the strong British forces which had been sighted. It therefore seemed probable that the enemy would seek to throw in reinforcements on land, finish off the shattered parachute units and intercept the expected German sea transports.

The necessary conditions for the landing of the 5th Mountain Division on 21 May had not been fulfilled.

It was vital to the course of the operation that the following action should be taken on the next day:

- a) Speedy capture of at least one airfield in Crete for the purpose of future landings. Maleme was selected.
- b) With the help of new reinforcements, capture of Suda Bay for the unloading of heavy arms transported by sea.
- c) The appointment of a new commander to the two leaderless groups at Canea and Maleme.
- d) Reconnaissance of the waters around Crete to obviate all possible threat to German sea transports from British naval forces.

* No losses according to British documents.

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Fliegerkorps XI was instructed accordingly and Lieut. General Ringel with the staff of the 5th Mountain Division was appointed commander of the western groups.

Fliegerkorps VIII was directed to make ready strong forces to attack naval targets.

Admiral Southeast was asked to use every possible means of ensuring the landing of the first motor sailing vessel squadron at Maleme on the evening of X/1 day (21 May) before dusk, so that heavy arms, ammunition and a further Mountain Battalion might be brought up.

Renewed efforts to persuade the Italian Fleet to put to sea to draw British naval forces from Crete failed.

- 21 May Early reconnaissance on 21 May again intercepted British forces which had obviously penetrated to the area north of Crete by night and were now making off. The forces observed were principally three groups in areas to the west, south and east of Crete. Owing to several mistakes made by air reconnaissance in identifying the types of vessels sighted, a really clear survey was not possible. A force of heavy ships, comprising 2 battleships, 2 cruisers and 8 destroyers, was sighted at 0935 40 miles southwest of Capt Matapan and attacked by 12 Ju 88. A cruiser was hit by a 1,400 kg. bomb and one hit was scored on one of the battleships. Pressure of German air attacks was evidently driving this force southward at first but later in the evening it returned to Crete and, at 1915, was sighted 60 miles west of Capt Crio steering a course of 080°. At 1545, some 90 miles west of Crete, it was again attacked by 12 Ju 88; a battleship and 2 cruisers were hit. At 1600 in the same sea area light forces were attacked by 17 Ju 87, and a cruiser was reported hit.

Light forces seemed to be operating east of the island. At 0915 Italian bomber aircraft reported a formation of light units south of Kasos Strait, from which they believed they had bombed and sunk one cruiser. Southeast of Crete another formation of light forces was attacked at 1600 by seven Ju 87 and Italian torpedo aircraft from Scarpanto: the aircraft reported 1 cruiser and 1 destroyer damaged.

Regardless of the great risk, the enemy were obviously doing their utmost to defend Crete and to obstruct German seaborne landings.*

In the meantime, the first motor sailing vessel squadron was south of Melos and advancing on Maleme. Admiral Southeast had again postponed the departure of this squadron by one and a half hours as a result of

* From "War at Sea": British shipping losses on 21 May:

Cruiser Ajax damaged by near-miss, speed considerably reduced,
Cruiser Orion damaged by bombs,
Destroyer Juno sunk by bombs at 1249 south of the isle of Kasos.

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adverse reconnaissance reports. This made it impossible for the ships to arrive at Maleme before dark. Despite the risk involved (renewed sortie of British forces at night to the area north of Crete), the formation was not recalled because of the urgent need for reinforcements on the island. Furthermore the torpedoboat Lupo was ordered to try to proceed ahead with the fastest of the motor sailing vessels to reach Maleme as soon as possible. British air reconnaissance detected and reported the sailing vessels proceeding south of Melos at 1700.

20. After Fliegerkorps XI had succeeded on the morning of 21 May in landing single Ju 52s on the beach at Maleme, it was evident that this procedure did not suffice for rapid provision of the necessary reinforcements. However, as the airfield was still being shelled by the British, the only course was to supplement troops by means of parachute descents. The Korps decided therefore to drop another two and a half companies for the attack on the airfield from the west and, after the descent of two further companies in the rear of the enemy fighting east of the airfield, to launch the attack from both sides.

The latter two companies, dropped at 1500 in the enemy's rear, failed to achieve success. They either landed right inside or on the verge of well-camouflaged machine-gun and infantry positions, or else on minefields. Most of the armament containers were lost, casualties were heavy; in the case of one company, all the officers and N.C.O.s were killed. Only very few of the paratroops succeeded in making their way to a farmstead and forming a defense position.

On the other hand, at 1600 the assault troops from the west forced the enemy to withdraw. At 1700 Maleme was taken and the airfield more or less secure in German hands. A reinforced battalion of the 5th Mountain Division began to land there while the fighting was in progress and their losses were slight.

The subsidiary Group Canea (Parachute Regiment 3) held the ground around the prison south of Galatos and on both sides of the reservoir. Despite considerable numerical superiority, the British surprisingly enough did not attack here. A German attack against British positions on the hills southeast of Galatos was foiled by strong defensive fire.

21. Group Central in the Retimo area, split into two smaller groups, was also engaged in a strong defensive action near Perigolia and east of the airfield.

Group East at Heraklion was likewise split up into two subsidiary groups, one of which was vainly attempting to seize the two of Heraklion and the other the airport. Despite partial support by Fliegerkorps VIII, both operations had to be abandoned.

22. The successful sea operations of Fliegerkorps VIII during the course of 21 May were equaled by

corresponding achievements on land; the decisive operation, capture of Maleme airfield, had succeeded* (see plan 4).

However, a report of the advance of fresh forces from Palaiochara towards Maleme promised heavy battles for 22 May. The situation remained tense. Absence of heavy anti-tank weapons and inadequate artillery was very marked as the British were using tanks in all sectors. Fliegerkorps VIII's air support of the ground forces was ineffective in mountain terrain, where friend and foe were indistinguishable and the enemy forces were able to make full use of their knowledge of German recognition signals. Moreover, the appointed commander of the ground forces had not arrived in Crete by 21 May.

In spite of the British Fleet's extensive losses off Crete during 21 May, it was to be expected that British forces would again penetrate to the area north of the island during the night. Supply of heavy arms and equipment by sea thus remained a problem, but it was still hoped that the first motor sailing vessel squadron would arrive.

For 22 May attention had to be centered on consolidation and development of the former positions. A supply base had to be rapidly created at Maleme, at least for air transport, and from there Canea and Suda Bay had to be captured as bases for disembarkation of sea transports were urgently required. Reinforcements of men, weapons and ammunition had to be brought in to enable the other groups to hold their positions. It was vital that the Commander of the 5th Mountain Division should assume command in Crete.

23. When, about 2234 on the night of 21 May, an incomplete radio signal was received from the Italian torpedoboat Lupo, it was interpreted to mean a landing and start of the return passage. The hope of having heavy anti-tank weapons in Crete by the 22nd seemed to be fulfilled. An hour later, however, Lupo reported that she and 16 motor sailing vessels had encountered 3 cruisers and 4 destroyers near Cape Spatha and had scored 2 torpedo hits on a cruiser. They were then pursued for one and a half hours, during which the enemy scored 18 hits, before the German ships succeeded in disengaging. They had run into Force "D", comprising the cruisers Dido, Orion and Ajax and the destroyers Janus, Kimberley, Hasty and Hereward on night patrol of the Canea, Maleme and Heraklion area. British sources give the position as 25 miles north of Suda Bay, 35° 56' N, 24° 15' E. The engagement lasted two and a half hours.

It is interesting to observe the discrepancies in the British and German reports. While Lupo claimed two hits on one of the British cruisers, the British

*"War at Sea": "... and by 2300 Maleme airfield and the area to the west was reported captured. This seizure of the principal landing ground was to prove decisive".

account reads as follows: ".... and at least a dozen caniques, two or three steamers and a steam yacht were sunk or left burning; about 4,000 German troops were estimated to have been lost. A torpedoboat of the escort, after firing torpedoes at the cruisers, was blown up by the Ajax".

Fortunately, German losses were not so severe; no steamers were involved and Lupo, the only escort vessel, was not sunk by Ajax.* At the time of receipt of the message, the German Command hoped that the tropedoboat would prevent the British from sinking all the motor sailing ships. This was, in fact, the case.

It had been decided to divert the motor sailing vessels of Group Heraklion to Maleme because of the position on land and indeed, it was already advancing south of Melos, when this latest information made it imperative to recall the ships by radio. It transpired later that the message was not received and furthermore, unaware of the enemy situation, the slower ships of Group Maleme were still advancing. Obviously, the arrival of the sea transports can be attributed solely to good fortune.

22 Early on 22 May, air reconnaissance reports showed
May that the British had not yet left the sea area north of
Crete. Burning vessels, wrecks and rubber dinghies were
24. reported at various points. At first Admiral Southeast
assumed that these were the remains of Group Maleme, but
he later realized that Group Heraklion might also have been
annihilated by British naval forces.

This group, led by the Italian torpedoboat Sagittario, had not received the renewed warnings of Admiral Southeast until 0800 on 22 May, when it had immediately turned back. Shortly after, however, it encountered British naval forces. By putting up a smoke cover, the torpedoboat succeeded in withdrawing the motor sailing ships out of the direct sight of the British, who were themselves seriously engaged in warding off heavy air attacks. The boat was further successful in drawing the enemy off on an easterly course from the motor sailing ships and in sinking a cruiser of the Leander class with 2 torpedoes.** The bulk of the sailing ships returned to Melos.

Luftflotte 4 did their utmost to clear the waters surrounding Crete. According to messages from Fliegerkorps VIII, 3-4 British formations, totaling 4 battleships, 11 cruisers, 18 destroyers and 1 tanker, participated in the fighting. Attacking in waves and setting aside all other commitments, the German Air Force claimed to have sunk 3 cruisers or destroyers, badly damaged 3 heavy units and hit 6 other vessels. In addition, a formation of Bomber Geschwader 30, during transfer from Sicily to the Peloponnesus, reported damaging a battleship and setting fire to a cruiser from a squadron which was west of Crete between 1200 and 1400.

In spite of this success, the German Air Force had been unable to prevent the destruction of several

* See p. 18.

** Not confirmed by British sources.

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motor sailing vessels of the first squadron. Only 10 out of 24 of the ships were brought to safety and only 1,500 of the 2,300 men embarked were rescued. Moreover, in the confusion of battle the Italian torpedoboats Lupo and Sella were mistakenly attacked and damaged by German bombers. Shrapnel and machine-gunfire from the aircraft killed 4 men and injured 23 on Sella.

25. This day's events showed that the forces of Fliegerkorps VIII were inadequate to fulfill all the operational assignments. In addition to operations over land in support of the army a struggle with the British Fleet for naval supremacy was being waged which called for a supreme effort. C-inC General Staff German Air Force (Gen. d. Flieger Jeschonnek), present at operational H.Q. of Luftflotte 4, therefore ordered immediate reinforcement 30 and one Gruppe of Dive-bomber Geschwader 1 (both formerly of Fliegerkorps X).

26. Events of 22 May led Naval War Staff to conclude that the British had strong naval forces stationed west to southwest of Crete ready to thrust into the area north of the island and impede German transports. Realizing the significance of Crete, they had risked an all-out operation by Fleet units, accepting possible severe losses. Admiral Southeast confirmed this view and believed that enemy operations would not decrease in intensity until Crete had fallen to the Germans and the need was, in consequence, diminished. So far, it had proved almost impossible to establish supplies by sea, even with torpedoboats, since the latter could not bring up heavy weapons and were unsuited to landings on an open coast.

This development fully confirmed Naval War Staff's first interpretation, voiced prior to the Crete operation. They had regarded the attempt to proceed with the first naval transports on the evening of X-day (20 May) at a time when strong forces of light and heavy British ships were still being reported by air reconnaissance, as a serious mistake. Losses incurred might, in their opinion, have been avoided. Sea transports should not have been run until the salient points on the island had been occupied and the German Air Force had driven the British naval forces from the waters surrounding Crete, that is, until the Air Force could claim the exercise of naval supremacy.

27. Even "War at Sea" depicts 22 May as "the most costly day for the Fleet, which had three ships sunk and six damaged".

The cruiser Gloucester was sunk at 1500, the cruiser Fiji, hit at 1845, capsized at 2015, while the destroyer Greyhound sank at 1351. The battleships Warspite and Valiant were damaged, the former heavily. The cruisers Perth, Naiad and Kingston were damaged by near-hits, while the anti-aircraft cruiser Carlisle was badly damaged by direct hits. The Fleet, on the

other hand, reported that in spite of numerous attacks only 2 German aircraft were shot down, 6 probably shot down and 3 damaged.

The special ship Glenroy, which had left Alexandria on the afternoon of 22 May escorted by Coventry, Auckland and Flamingo to land reinforcements at Tymbaki (southern Crete), was recalled in view of the very heavy losses already sustained. The weight of the German air attacks made a change of plan necessary.

28. On 22 May, Fliegerkorps XI had begun transportation of reinforcements by air. Intermittent shelling on the airfield impeded the operation, crash landings temporarily prevented smooth progress but, generally speaking, losses remained negligible and, during the day, it was possible to fly to Maleme:

2 Mountain Battalions, 1 Mountain Engineer Battalion, part of a Parachute Artillery Unit and 1 Field Hospital.

The anticipated British attack from the south did not take place; instead they attacked with tanks from the direction of Pyrgos. The attack was repulsed and Pyrgos taken in a counter-thrust.

There was no change in the situation for the remaining groups; arms, ammunition, rations and first aid equipment were dropped.

On the evening of 22 May lieut. General Ringel, Commander of the 5th Mountain Division, landed with his staff in Maleme and assumed command for future operations.

No sea transports were planned for the night of 22/23 May, as the uncertain conditions at sea involved too great a risk. This decision proved to be correct since the destroyers Kelly and Cashmere shelled Maleme during that night. There were also British forces off the south coast of Crete: the Greek King and other notabilities had gone aboard the destroyers Decoy and Hero at Agria Rumeli and were being shipped to Alexandria.

- 23 May During 23 May, the following airborne divisions landed at Maleme:

29. 2 Mountain Artillery Units;
1 Armored Mountain Assault Division;
The major part of an Armed Motor Cycle Battalion.

By 24 May, as a result of an advance on Kasteli and Palaiachara, the western section of the island was captured and consequently threats to the airfield from south and west were eliminated.

Defense of the airfield to the east was now also seriously undertaken and two forces detailed to attack the British in the Canea area. The first force, commanded by Colonel Utz, 5th Mountain Division, was to advance through the mountains in a southerly direction,

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while a second under Colonel Ramke, 7th Parachute Division, was to advance along the coast in an easterly direction.

On 23 May, as a result of this thrust by Force Utz, the British were thrown back to a position in the hills south of Platania from which they were at once driven out by Force Ramke's rapid advance. Platania fell, and, on the same day, contact was established with the subsidiary group landed at Canea on X-day which had fought its way through to this point.

However, while German operations went according to plan in the west, developments in the east again became critical when Group Heraklion reported that British aircraft had landed on the air base. One aircraft was shot up and in flames.

30. Until this day, Fliegerkorps VIII had possessed absolute air supremacy over Crete. No British aircraft had been sighted. Not until 23 May did 5 Bristol Blenheims raid the air base at Maleme: 2 were shot down. British aircraft had, at all costs, to be prevented from gaining a foothold on Crete. This called for rapid occupation of Heraklion airfield and the transfer of German fighters to the island. Fighter aircraft arrived at Maleme on the evening of 23 May.

31. In addition to tireless efforts by formations of Fliegerkorps VIII in support of army operations, particularly of Group Ringel, air reconnaissance had to be maintained at sea. Ships in Suda Bay were subjected to continuous attacks - the cruiser York was repeatedly hit, 1 tanker set on fire, 4 merchant ships sunk and others damaged. Five of the six M.T.B.s which put into Suda Bay were destroyed.

At 0408 on the 23rd, the British Commander in Chief had ordered a return to Alexandria.

German armed reconnaissance spotted these forces as they made off. At 0755, 13 miles south of the island of Gandos, the destroyers Kelly and Cashmere were sunk by 24 aircraft. Survivors were rescued by the destroyer Kipling. Later, the destroyers Havoc and Ilex were damaged.

On the evening of the 23rd, the Commander in Chief received the Admiralty's directive to continue support of operations on Crete.

24 May 32. No British naval forces were to be seen in the Crete area on the morning of the 24th. It was still doubtful, however, whether the enemy had finally relinquished their intention of recapturing Crete.

33. This they had not done. At 0200 on the night of the 24th, the destroyers Jaguar and Defender succeeded in landing supplies and ammunition in Suda Bay.

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Destroyers Isis, Hero and Nizam attempted to unload at Selinos Kastelli but were forced to abandon the attempt owing to weather conditions.

On the following night 24/25), the minelayer Abdiel again succeeded in landing 200 men and 80 tons of supplies in Suda Bay and conveying the wounded back to Alexandria. On her arrival there Brigadier General Laycock, 400 men and 100 tons of supplies were embarked, while Hero and Nizam took aboard 350 men and supplies and landed them in Suda Bay from 26 to 27 May. These reinforcements were the last to reach the island. A repeated attempt on 26 May to transport a battalion to Tymbaki on the special ship Glenroy again failed since at 1820, 50 miles south of Crete, on her outward passage, she was attacked by bombers. A third of the landing craft on board and the entire stock of motor fuel for the army were lost.

German air supremacy had compelled the British Fleet to attempt supply operations only by night. It had also forced them to use only fast ships which could get beyond the range of German bombers before daybreak. Thus the island's supplies declined: there were 45,000 men and 15,000 prisoners to care for and the Greek population to supply with flour. At 2150 on the 24th, General Wavell reported that rations would only last ten days although they had already been cut down by one quarter. Retimo, for example, had only 4 days' supply. Absence of first aid and ammunition grew more acute daily. General Wavell still hoped that the German air attacks would abate but in this he was disappointed.

To an enquiry from the Chiefs of Staff on the evening of the 24th, Admiral Cunningham, C-in-C Mediterranean, stated that German air bombardments made fleet operations impossible by day in the waters of the Aegean or around Crete, since further serious losses would have grave consequences in the Eastern Mediterranean.

British Command was not inclined, however, to admit defeat at this stage and demanded continued daylight operations in the waters of Crete. They added that the extent of fresh losses would show how much longer operations could be continued.

However, the Commander in Chief restated his views on 26 May, adding that German air superiority was so overwhelming that, even without naval transports, operations would be successfully concluded in favor of the Axis Powers. He added in a codicil that he had just received intelligence that the escorting destroyer Nublio and the aircraft carrier Formidable, whose aircraft had raided Scarpanto airfield on 26 May, had been attacked and damaged by German planes 150 miles south of the Kasos Strait. On 27 May, however, a personal message was received from the Prime Minister: "Victory in Crete is essential at this turning-point in the war. Keep hurling in all the aid you can."

34.

However, it was already too late: in the Maleme/Suda Bay area the British were badly beaten.

Group Ringel was advancing successfully and the eastern forces received continual reinforcements. Furthermore, the Italians sent information that they intended supporting German troops by landing mechanized units at Sitia on 28 May, an operation which C-in-C German Air Force had approved, after previous negotiation, on 22 May. The Germans therefore no longer doubted the success of the operation.

On 24 May further forces were landed in Maleme:

- 1 Reconnaissance Unit
- 1 Anti-aircraft Machine-gun Battalion
- 1½ Mountain Assault Battalions
- 1 Cyclist Company
- The Staff of Mountain Assault Regiment 85.

By the evening, after hard fighting, the British were thrown back to a strongly fortified position on either side of Galatos, while they still occupied the hills to the east of Alikiant.

Group Heraklion was reinforced by 4 parachute companies which were dropped in the vicinity of the western assault group. During the following days they assembled and advanced.

25
May
to 1
June

Reinforcement of Group Ringel, although dependent on the number of available transport aircraft and supplies to the other assault forces on the island, was given priority. The following were landed at Maleme:

25 May: 2 Mountain Assault Battalions
1 Armed Motor Cycle Company.

26 May: 1½ Mountain Assault Battalions
Staff of Mountain Assault Regiment 141
1 2 cm. Battery
1 Infantry Platoon (heavy guns)
A third of a Transport Company.

27 and 28
May: The remainder of the reinforced 5th
Mountain Division and of the Armed
Motor Cycle Battalion
1 Battalion of the 6th Mountain Assault
Division.

Operations to break down British resistance proceeded according to plan. On 26 May, after a mass attack on Canea by Fliegerkorps VIII, penetration of British positions took place to the west of the town. On 27 May, resistance was broken and Canea taken. On the 28th, during pursuit of the defeated enemy, the Germans captured Suda Bay, and on the 29th Group Retimo was relieved and contact with Group East established.

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The latter had succeeded by 27 May in occupying the high ground south of Heraklion and surrounding the forces defending the airfield. On the 28th, after fresh reinforcements had touched down, it was possible to make a combined attack with Fliegerkorps VIII on Heraklion, break British resistance and seize the airfield. In a further advance westward, Group East linked up with Group Ringel on 29 May.

On 30 May, Ierapetra was taken and contact established with the Italians who had landed a reinforced regiment in Sitia on the 28th. On 1 June, after a difficult German advance over the White Mountains, fighting in Crete was concluded by the capture of the last British forces near Sfakia.

36. After General Wavell had informed the Prime Minister on the evening of the 27th that the situation was untenable, the Chiefs of Staff telegraphed the order to evacuate Crete.

On that day the British Fleet had sustained yet another loss: the battleship Barham had been severely damaged by bombers 120 miles northwest of Alexandria (32° 45' N, 28° 20' E) and had to withdraw from the Mediterranean to Durban for repairs.

The evacuation of Crete was performed in four nights from 28 May to 1 June. Luftflotte 4 did not fully apprehend the extent of the operation, involving the safe return of a great number of British naval forces and some 17,000 men to Alexandria. They maintained that the British had been unable to remove any quantity of troops from the island, "in any case, no transports of any size were sighted". In fact, 4 cruisers, 12 destroyers, the minelayer Abdiel and the special ship Glengyle took part in the evacuation. Embarkation areas were Heraklion on the north coast and Sfakia on the south.

Further losses of men and material were, however, incurred. A bomb dropped near the destroyer Imperial on which troops had embarked in Heraklion at 0349 on the night of the 29th put her out of control, and after taking her troops on board, the destroyer Hotspur had to sink her. Due to the delay, the whole formation became involved in another bomber raid in which the destroyer Hereward was heavily damaged in Kasos Strait and had to be abandoned. The destroyer Decoy was damaged at the same time and the formation had to reduce its speed. At 0730 the cruiser Orion, with 1,000 men on board, was hit, at 0815 a bomb landed on the cruiser Dido; further direct hits on Orion at 0900 and 1045 resulted in considerable casualties. During these raids, approximately 800 men were wounded out of a total of 4,000.

Nevertheless, the evacuation continued. On the 30th the destroyer Kelvin and the cruiser Perth were damaged, on the 31st the destroyers Napier and Nizam. At 0929 on 1 June, the anti-aircraft cruiser Calcutta which had put out from Alexandria to meet the returning ships was sunk by

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aircraft 100 miles north of Alexandria. In Suda Bay the British had themselves to destroy many of their small craft and the cruiser York which, after frequent hits, was no longer seaworthy.

37. During that time, Admiral Southeast proceeded with plans for organized naval supplies. Melos and Kythere were set in order and ships capable of overcoming the difficulties of the sea passage by day were made ready. Until Suda Bay with its harbor installations was ready, Maleme beach was prepared for landings. It was first used by a tug with 2 lighters carrying 4 tanks and 1 small steamer with equipment for constructing a landing stage.

38. With the conclusion of the operation on 1 June, not only had the Axis gained possession of a vital base but British power in the Eastern Mediterranean, both on land and at sea, had also been considerably weakened.

During the fighting, 12, 245 British and 2,266 Greeks were taken prisoner and there were 5,000 enemy dead. In addition, 136 guns, 30 tanks and several large supplies of stores were captured, while, on the other hand, some 14,000 Italian P.O.W.s were released.

The British Fleet had suffered a severe defeat.

Fliegerkorps VIII believed they had sunk:

- 8 cruisers
- 10 destroyers
- 1 submarine
- 5 M.T.B.s
- 10 large merchant ships totaling 15,000 G.R.T. and several light coastal craft and patrol boats.

The following successes were also reported:

- 24 hits scored on cruisers
- 13 hits scored on destroyers
- 1 hit scored on a battleship and hits scored on 21 merchant vessels.

Actual losses of British warships as reported in "War at Sea" are:

- 4 cruisers
- 6 destroyers
- 1 minesweeper
- 3 A/S whalers
- 2 motor launches
- 5 M.T.B.s
- 19 landing craft

The following were damaged:

- 1 aircraft carrier
- 3 battleships
- 3 cruisers
- 8 destroyers
- 1 special ship.

R.A.F. losses from 20 May to 1 June amounted to:

21 Aircraft shot down and 12 destroyed on the ground.

German losses were considerable. Of the troops operating on Crete, 1,915 officers, N.C.O.s and men were killed 1,759 officers, N.C.O.s and men were missing. Of the flying units (Fliegerkorps VIII and XI) 76 officers, N.C.O.s and men were killed, 236 officers, N.C.O.s and men missing.

German Air Force losses from 13 - 31 May were as follows:

<u>Type of aircraft</u>	<u>Total Loss</u>	<u>Damaged</u>
Long-range reconnaissance	4	1
Fighters	27	6
Heavy fighters	25	13
Bombers	26	18
Dive-bombers	18	4
Transport aircraft	119	106
Naval air reconnaissance	1	-
Total	200	148

These figures are inclusive both of aircraft lost as a direct result of enemy action and of those lost in operations due to other causes. Glider losses are not listed here.

CHAPTER III

Conclusions

39. There are some valuable lessons to be derived from this 12-day struggle of the German Air Force for the occupation of Crete, lessons of a tactical and technical nature which were not only turned to good account later in the war but which still have their value for the present day.

1. Operational and tactical surprise

Any daring operation, if it is to be successful, relies on the element of operational and tactical surprise. Crete, however, was a special case in that this element was lacking. Since Germans and British alike were aware of the military significance of the objective, no attempt could be made at deception. The only possible diversionary action would have been a threat to the island of Malta, but, in actual fact, the transfer of Fliegerkorps X from Sicily to the Peloponnesus clearly indicated diminished German pressure in that area. Furthermore, the unwillingness of the Italian Fleet to participate denied the German Command the opportunity of concealing the intended operation from the British.

The only alternative was to try to ensure that the time of the operation remained secret. This could have been achieved by last-moment descent of transport and glider units on the airfields, by preventing enemy air reconnaissance over this area and keeping the special units camouflaged (confined to their air bases, quarters, etc.) until the last moment, so that there could be no possible leakage of information. However, here again the German Command lacked the means, namely a sufficient and supremely well-equipped ground organization. Furthermore, all preparations had to be made in recently-occupied enemy territory within a very brief space of time (before the start of the Russian campaign).

Even the attempt to achieve a tactical surprise, normally obtained by diversionary pre-reconnaissance and combat operations over a wide area, failed because of the relatively small size of the objective.

2. Achievement of concentration. Detailing of reserves

Realization of the coincidence of the enemy's general tactical conclusions with ours, e.g. regarding the value of bases and defenses and choice of operational area, must naturally lead to a concentration of forces in a certain locality. Once this focal point has been selected, it must be divulged to all the commanders and units taking part and disposition of forces and development of the operation directed accordingly. Allocation of any airborne forces to subsidiary areas can only be made once the requirements of the focal point have been met. At the same time, it is vital to the execution of the

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operational plans to hold sufficient paratroop forces in reserve to deal with any sudden crises.

The Crete operation called for frequent use of reserves. It was only by chance that the emergency could be met, since, owing to the loss of numerous transport planes in the assignments on 20 May, paratroop forces originally intended to be dropped with the first assault group had been left behind and were thus available as reserves.

3. Heavy Weapons

Mechanization of modern warfare requires prompt commitment of heavy weapons by the attacker. If parachute and airborne landings are not supported by tanks of artillery, severe fighting will ensue and the infantry will suffer heavy losses, as was the case in Crete. (Thereafter, a request was made for heavy gliders and heavy transport aircraft.)

4. Descent of Paratroops

The need to crush enemy defenses makes it imperative to drop paratroops beyond the range of their strongpoints to allow the descending troops to assemble and thence to overrun the enemy defenses. Paratroops must therefore be good infantrymen. For this reason it seems more practicable to exercise trained infantrymen in parachute-jumping than to give infantry training to paratroops.

5. Clothing Problem

Troops landed must be clad as befits the climate of the operational area. The normal uniform of the German paratrooper, too heavy and closely knit, proved a grave disadvantage in the tropical climate of Crete.

6. Glider Operations

Glider operations in Crete led to heavy losses. In the event of opposition from enemy machine-gun nests, the employment of gliders in daylight operations and their release directly over the landing site causes great sacrifice of life. Aircraft and gliders employed must be equipped for night flying and pilots trained for night operations. It is vital to release the gliders at some distance from the objective.

7. Air Supremacy

Elimination of the opposing air force, hence achievement of air supremacy, is the most important requirement for all airborne landings and parachute operations. In the case of Crete ".... the first successful invasion from the air across a disputed sea passage...." this condition was supremely fulfilled. As a result, not only was the way prepared for army

successes, as had previously been the case in the Polish, Norwegian, French, Yugoslav and Greek campaigns, but also throughout the operation the battle with the British Fleet was decided in favor of the Axis Powers.*

In Crete it was proved that, after elimination of an opposing air force, naval supremacy can be achieved and maintained from the air for a limited period in a restricted area.

Maintenance of the striking potential and strength of the German Air Force in Crete appeared to Naval War Staff to be the most satisfactory method for changing to the offensive against the British Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean and they hoped that, once the German Command had organized the Italian forces - weak though they might be - towards this end, conditions would be ripe for achievement of the final objective of the Axis Powers, namely the capture of Alexandria and the Suez Canal.

40. The course of the Africa campaign in which the position of the Axis Powers deteriorated was a bitter confirmation of these views. Reduction in the numbers of aircraft supporting naval warfare in the Eastern Mediterranean (caused by withdrawal of Luftflotte 4 and Fliegerkorps VIII to the Russian front), lack of bombers and torpedo-bombers for offensive use against the British Fleet and scarcity of aircraft for patrol, escort and reconnaissance for German convoys ultimately led to the collapse of the supply organization for the Africa Korps and to the latter's defeat.

Crete never assumed the function originally allotted it, of aircraft carrier in the Eastern Mediterranean. Occupation of the island achieved at such great sacrifice yielded no dividends on behalf of offensive strategy, it merely improved the defensive position of the Axis in the Aegean.

* "War at Sea", Vol. II: "The Germans were able to exploit their superiority in aircraft and airborne troops to an extent which overwhelmed the defense."

APPENDIX I

Effects on the air offensive on naval bases and on the British, Greek and Yugoslav fleets during the Balkan Campaign

(Summarized from "War at Sea", Vol. II)

Attacks by the German Air Force on naval bases in Greece, after the opening of the Greek campaign, had serious consequences for the organization of supplies and for the evacuation of troops by naval transports. Moreover, they caused considerable losses in merchant shipping and fleet units.

An attack on the Piraeus on the night of 6/7 April resulted in the sinking of the British ships Cyprian Prince, Clan Fraser (the latter with 200 tons of T.N.T. on board explosion of which gave rise to fires and further damage) and the City of Roubaix; 60 Greek lighters, 20 motor sailing ships, 2 tugs, 8 medium and small vessels were destroyed and the harbor of Piraeus put completely out of action.

There were no units of the British Fleet lost, but the minesweeper Hyacinth was disabled, seriously affecting the organization of minesweeping. Convoys had to be diverted.

On the night of 11/12 April, there was another raid with bombs and mines on the Gulf of Athens. The cable-layer Retriever was sunk and the tanker Marie Maersk was set alight. Minesweeping became impossible owing to the weight of continued raids.

In an attack on Volos on 13 April, the steamer City of Karachi and the Norwegian steamer Brattdal were sunk. The attack was repeated on the 15th and the British ships Quiloa and Gualparo damaged.

On 18 April, the British tanker British Science from Convoy No. 27 was sunk by an aircraft torpedo.

On the 21st, the Greek hospital ship Esperos was sunk off Missolonghi and the following day another hospital ship was damaged off Megara.

That day also the tanker British Lloyd, Convoy No. 27, was badly damaged.

The Greek destroyer Psara was sunk on the 20th and the destroyer Hydra on the 22nd in attacks on Piraeus.

Ships' losses after British evacuation of Greece had begun were:

24 April British special ship Gleneran damaged.

25 April British transport Ulster Prince sunk off Nauplia.

[REDACTED]

25 April British transport Pennland sunk off Nauplia.

26 " Special ship Gleneran again badly damaged.

27 " The transport Slamal sunk in the Gulf of Nauplia. The British destroyers Diamond and Wryneck, with survivors off the Slamal on board, were sunk by dive-bombers in 36° 30' N, 23° 34' E. There were very few survivors.

27 " The Yugoslav transport Costa Rica was badly disabled.

[REDACTED]

LIST OF SOURCES WITH GLOSSARY

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GLOSSARY

Akte (Hand-, Krieg-) ¶	File (Personal, Military).
KTB - Kriegstagebuecher -	War Diaries.
Skl - Seekriegsleitung -	(German Naval War Staff.