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BATTLE OF CRETE  
MAY 20 - JUNE 1, 1941

SOURCE

This bulletin is based upon a study recently prepared in the Military Intelligence Division.

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MAP

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BATTLE OF CRETE\*  
MAY 20 - JUNE 1, 1941

1. GENERAL

The German conquest of Crete, effected between May 20 and June 1, 1941, constitutes the first occasion in history when an expeditionary force transported by air and an air fleet conquered a distant island protected by an overwhelmingly superior navy and a land garrison which was considerably stronger, numerically, than the invading force. Such an outcome would have been unthinkable two years ago. Today, however, the result of that campaign awakens among soldiers merely a mild feeling of surprise; the importance of air power has been brought home to the world since 1939. Its importance was so well illustrated in Poland, Norway, and France, that the conquest of Crete from the air comes, not as a Jules Verne phantasy, but rather as a logical step forward in three dimensional warfare.

The German invasion of Crete cannot be regarded as a rehearsal for an attack on Great Britain. The conditions under which the British sought to defend Crete were exceptionally unfavorable for the defender and will probably never recur. British air power was almost non-existent over Crete, as the airfields on the island were few in number and poor in quality; and the Royal Air Force in Egypt was too weak and too far away to permit large scale British air intervention in the struggle for the island.

Such a condition could not occur in a battle of Britain. In England, a strong Royal Air Force stands ready to dispute air superiority with the Luftwaffe on even or close to even terms; whereas over Crete the superiority of the Luftwaffe was unchallenged. Hence, from the outcome of that local and small scale action no conclusions should be drawn which would also apply to a large scale attack on England.

Crete, the fourth largest island in the Mediterranean, is approximately 160 miles long and varies in width from  $7\frac{1}{2}$  to 35 miles. It is extremely mountainous; high mountain-masses exist in the central and eastern parts, and the Madara Mountains in the western half of the island rise to an elevation of 8100 feet.

On the whole, the island contains only a moderate amount of fertile soil, but nevertheless it is densely populated, the population in 1928 being approximately 385,000.

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\*The attached map will prove useful in identifying the places and areas mentioned in this bulletin.

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Its south coast is generally precipitous and lacks good harbors. Sfakia is the only port worthy of the name on this coast, but even that is just an anchorage, without wharves.

Along the northern coastal plain of Crete are the three principal cities of Canea, Retimo, and Heraklion, as well as the splendid anchorage of Suda Bay. The fact that all important strategic objectives of Crete were located on this north coast, facing the German-held mainland of Greece, and the lack of a suitable harbor on the south coast to facilitate British communications with Egypt, were major strategic handicaps for the British defense forces.

The road net of the island is inferior; by American standards, first-rate roads do not exist. The best of these generally poor roads parallel the north coast and connect the key strategic points of Canea, Suda Bay, Retimo, and Heraklion. Roads across Crete from the north to the south coast are few in number, and those that exist are mere mountain tracks. This lack of north-south communication was a serious disadvantage to the British when they were forced to evacuate their troops to Egypt from the beaches of the south coast.

## 2. FORCES

### a. British

The British forces had occupied Crete in November 1940, soon after the outbreak of the Greco-Italian war. Throughout the succeeding winter of 1940-1941, approximately one British brigade, reinforced by some Greek replacement troops, had garrisoned the island. During this six months' period of occupation, measures had been taken by the British to strengthen the island defenses. The three poor airfields at Maleme, west of Canea, and those near Retimo and Heraklion had been gradually improved, but even by May 1941, these fields could not be classified as first-class airdromes. An auxiliary field had also been laid out at Kastelli, and some medium coast artillery had been sent to Suda Bay to increase its value as a naval base.

The influx into Crete of unorganized elements of the defeated British expeditionary force from Greece proved a mixed blessing for Great Britain. While these troops brought a welcome numerical increase of strength to the hitherto small British garrison, at the same time they were necessarily but fragments of the splendid British divisions which had gone to Greece.

The British Empire garrison of the island of Crete, which was commanded by Major General Freyberg of the New Zealand Division, is believed, on May 20, 1941, to have consisted of the following units:

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<u>Unit</u>	<u>Approximate Strength</u>
New Zealand Division	7,000
6th Australian Division	6,500
Mixed English Troops -	
including 3,000 Marines	10,000
Palestine and Cypriot Labor	
Troops	4,000
Greek Forces	<u>10,000</u>
Total	37,500

It was estimated that of this number about 12,000 were fighting troops; the remainder were odds and ends of service units that had escaped from Greece.

It should be noted that such a composite force, most units of which were far below their normal strength because of their recent involvement in a disastrous defeat and withdrawal, could not be so efficient as a smaller force which was well-organized, up to strength, and fully equipped. Particularly distressing was the British garrison's lack of heavy equipment, especially tanks and artillery. A small number of these vital weapons had been brought up from Egypt to replace those lost in Greece, but the British force still lacked much essential materiel. Entrenching tools and barbed wire were also sadly wanting.

Under these circumstances the defense of Crete by the British had to be carried out under unusually difficult conditions.

British forces were disposed mainly at Maleme, Suda Bay, Retimo, and Heraklion. In the Maleme sector there were 5000 New Zealanders supported by a force of three Greek battalions, two batteries of heavy anti-aircraft, one battalion of light anti-aircraft, one battery of six 37-mm. howitzers, and one battery of field artillery, composed of six Italian guns. British and Greek forces in the Maleme sector, therefore, totalled about 7800.

In the Suda Bay area there was a Royal Marine mobile base defense detachment of 3000 men. In addition there were 1557 troops from English regiments, as well as a special force of about 881 men. The latter consisted of artillerymen, evacuated from Greece without their guns and equipped as infantry to assist in the defense of Crete. Two Greek battalions, a coast artillery unit, two batteries of heavy anti-aircraft, two batteries of light anti-aircraft - one of which was Australian - and one battery of searchlights comprised the rest of the forces in this area.

The 19th Australian Brigade, consisting of four infantry battalions and one machine gun company and totalling 2498 men, was in the

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Retimo sector. Two batteries of Australian artillery, totalling 375 men armed with 18 Italian guns, and four Greek battalions were also there, as were three infantry tanks.

Between Suda Bay and Retimo there were two battalions of infantry with a strength of 763. These were apparently spread out between the two places to act against parachute troops landing eastward of Suda Bay.

In the Heraklion sector there were four infantry battalions - three from home regiments and one Australian - totalling 2622 men. In addition, there were two batteries of light antiaircraft, one regiment of Royal Artillery armed as infantry, one battery of Royal Artillery armed with nine Italian guns, and two Greek battalions. Two infantry tanks were also in this sector.

Besides those already mentioned, the British forces in Crete had 16 additional light tanks and five infantry tanks. Their exact location is not known.

The British air forces in Crete were small. In the middle of May a total of only about 16 serviceable planes of all types were stationed on Cretan airfields. These were mainly pursuit planes of the Spitfire and Hurricane type, together with a handful of Bristol Blenheim bombers which had been flown back from Greece. It was not possible for the British to give effective air support to their land forces in Crete with squadrons stationed on Egyptian fields, although a few bombers based on fields at Mersa Matruh (west of Alexandria) actually participated each day from May 21 until the British had completed their strategic withdrawal. This small British Air Force, however, proved entirely incapable of meeting the hundreds of planes of the Luftwaffe by which Crete was attacked.

Outside of the small amount of vital weapons and equipment brought from Egypt and some improvements on existing airfields, very little had been done by the British, during their six months of occupancy, to improve the defense system of the island.

b. German

To carry out the conquest of Crete the Germans created a task force under the command of General Loehr of the German Air Force. This task force comprised strong units of the German Army and Air Force and weak elements of the Navy, the latter consisting mainly of motor torpedo boats and mine sweepers. Some Italian ground, air, and naval forces also participated in the Cretan campaign, but it appears that these units were not subordinated to the German High Command.



The German air forces which participated in the Cretan operation are estimated to have had the following strength:

<u>Planes</u>	<u>Number</u>
Heavy bombers and dive-bombers	360
Two-engine fighters	150
Single-engine fighters	315
Transports	<u>650</u>
Total	1,475

These units were organized as the VIII Air Corps.

With the exception of 60 two-engine fighters based on the Italian island of Rhodes, the entire German Air Force was based in Attica and on airfields in the Peloponnesus.

Three skeleton divisions of the land forces and parachute troops were allotted to General Loehr for the capture of Crete. These forces were placed under the command of Lieutenant General of Aviation Student, who had particularly distinguished himself as commander of the parachute and air infantry troops which had operated against Rotterdam in May 1940.

The troops placed under command of General Student comprised the following units:

<u>Units</u>	<u>Approximate Strength</u>
Parachute Division - three regiments	4,950
22d Air Infantry Division - part only	5,600 <i>no</i>
5th Mountain Division* - commanded by Major General Julius Ringel	<u>5,000</u>
Total	15,550

British reports state that a further 4600 men, the remaining elements of the 22d Division, were assigned to the operation but that the campaign was concluded before these units could be transported to Crete.

This list is undoubtedly incomplete. It is known that at least one German motorcycle company was active in Crete and that considerable antiaircraft units were landed to defend the Maleme airport. Probably the total strength of land troops ran between 17,000 and 18,000.

These units possessed a considerable number of supporting

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\*Only two regiments of this division took part in the Cretan battle.

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weapons, notably, 37-mm. antitank guns, 81-mm. mortars, 75-mm. infantry howitzers, and 75-mm. mountain howitzers. It has been reported that these were the largest artillery weapons used by the Germans on Crete. This has not been verified, however.

While there are unconfirmed reports of the presence of German light tanks on the island in the latter stages of the battle, these rumors have not yet been confirmed. If these reports are correct, these tanks were transported by ship and not by air.

The detailed organization of the German parachute rifle regiments employed on Crete is not known at this time. During the winter of 1940-1941, however, some information could be obtained as to the then organization of existing German parachute regiments, and it is quite probable that regiments of the type described below were actually used in Crete. The organization of the parachute regiment in the winter of 1940-1941 was as follows:

Headquarters;  
1 signal platoon;  
1 mountain howitzer company;  
1 antitank company;  
3 parachute rifle battalions.

The parachute rifle battalion was organized into:

Headquarters;  
1 signal platoon;  
1 heavy weapons company;  
3 parachute rifle companies.

The parachute rifle company consisted of:


Headquarters;  
1 signal section;  
3 rifle platoons.

Each rifle platoon consisted of two standard infantry squads, each squad being armed with two light machine guns. There were also an antitank rifle section and a light mortar section in each rifle platoon. The light mortar section contained a light infantry mortar of 50-mm. caliber.

The heavy weapons company of the battalion was organized as follows:

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Headquarters;  
1 signal section;  
1 light mortar section;  
1 antitank rifle section;  
2 heavy machine gun sections;  
1 heavy mortar section. — 4 (81mm)

Each of the heavy machine gun sections was equipped with two standard machine guns with tripod mounts.

The heavy mortar section contained four mortars of 81-mm. caliber.

The exact armament of the mountain howitzer company and the antitank company is not known. In the Cretan campaign these units were transported in Ju-52 airplanes and neither the weapons nor the personnel were dropped by parachute.

The strength of a parachute rifle company was estimated in the winter of 1940-1941 at 130 officers and men, that of the battalion at 550 officers and men, and that of the regiment, at 2000 officers and men.

### 3. STRATEGIC FACTORS

Whether it was wise for the British to seek to defend Crete, when it was known that the enemy could quickly achieve air mastery, is a question which history alone will be able to answer.

On the other hand, the acquisition of Crete was a tempting objective for the German High Command, for the island offered Germany both defensive and offensive advantages. From a defensive viewpoint, the capture of Crete would result in the loss to Great Britain of the only air bases from which her bombers could attack the Roumanian oil fields. In addition, German airplanes on Crete and light axis naval forces based on Suda Bay would assure relative security to Axis shipping which used the island water route from the Black Sea to the Adriatic via the Aegean Sea and the Corinth Canal.

From an offensive viewpoint the acquisition of Crete as a German military base would mean that the movements of the British fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean would be further restricted, and that German air forces based on the island airfields could increase their attacks on the Cairo - Alexandria - Suez Canal area and could intervene, if necessary, in the fighting in the western desert of Egypt. The expulsion of the British from Crete would also facilitate Axis political pressure on Turkey and would be an essential prerequisite for any military moves in Cyprus, Syria, and Iraq.

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The German Campaign in Yugoslavia and Greece had been completed by May 2, with only minor losses in the German Army and with their troops still possessing combat efficiency. The Axis possessed ample ground forces in the southern Balkans for a Cretan campaign of any degree of severity. A major difficulty, however, stood in the path of any German conquest of Crete. British naval superiority in the Aegean was undisputed. Any German landing operation from the sea therefore, could be accomplished only by stealth, and even then at enormous risk. From the start, therefore, the German High Command could not count on a successful water-borne expedition to Crete until the British fleet had been either destroyed or driven from the Aegean. In consequence, the German High Command had to rely for the conquest of Crete almost entirely on its Air Force. Single-handed, the Luftwaffe would have to destroy the Royal Air Force, defeat the British Navy, carry out the usual artillery preparations prior to the attack, transport the land forces to their initial landing places, and then support them in all further operations, since these land forces would necessarily lack their usual complement of heavy weapons.

The Germans were aided in their task by unusually well placed airfields, some captured and some belonging to Italy. Whereas the British airfields in Egypt were out of effective supporting range of the few exposed bases in Crete, the fields available to the Axis were adequate in number and were at an ideal distance from their objectives for bomber operations, although inconveniently remote for continuous action over Crete by single-engine fighters. As soon as the R.A.F. on Crete was effectively neutralized, the Axis fields were practically immune from attack.

#### 4. PLAN OF ATTACK

The German plan of attack appears to have been approximately as follows:

A three or four day air bombardment was to precede the actual landing operations. To carry out this air bombardment, the VIII German Air Corps concentrated 300 bombers and 200 fighters on the German airfields at Meneidi, Eleusis, and Argos. This air bombardment concentrated on the following four primary objectives:

- a. Naval base at Suda Bay;
- b. Maleme airfield;
- c. Retimo airfield;
- d. Heraklion airfield.

The Germans hoped to achieve the following results by these attacks:

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- a. To paralyze the Royal Air Force or drive it back to Egypt;
- b. To neutralize the ground defenses of the British airfields;
- c. To render Suda Bay unusable as a British naval base.

The actual landings of German troops from the air were to begin only after sufficient progress had been made by the Air Force towards attaining these objectives.

The initial objective of the actual air landing operations was to seize one, or if possible, all British airfields. The seizure of these fields was to be effected by parachute troops. The air infantry and mountain troops were to be landed only in case one or more airfields fell into German possession.

The parachute division was directed to land three combat groups, each composed of a parachute regiment in the vicinity of the three British airfields at Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion. This equal distribution of the parachute division indicates that there was initially no true main effort to the German attack and that the German Command felt that the chances of capturing the individual British airfields were about equal. It should be noted that these three parachute attacks were made in areas widely separated from one another.

When and if the parachute troops succeeded in capturing one or more of the British airfields, it was planned to reinforce them with strong air-borne contingents of infantry and supporting weapons, and then to develop a main attack, with full air support, in order to accomplish a specific strategic objective. This specific strategic objective, however, could not be determined until it was known which airfield had been captured.

A naval expedition of unknown size was also to play a part in the operation. This expedition was to sail from the Piraeus, but the Germans dared not place too great hopes in this expedition, for they realized that the British had enormous naval strength in this end of the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, they took the risk. The expedition was, in fact, destroyed, but this catastrophe did not prejudice German success on Crete as a whole.

## 5. OPERATIONS

The actual invasion of Crete was preceded by several days' reconnaissance, the massing of aircraft on Greek airdromes, and a few days' intensive attacks by fighters and bombers on the island antiaircraft defenses.

The German preparatory bombardment of British installations on Crete was extremely heavy and effective. Many transport ships were sunk

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or damaged at Suda Bay, with the result that the naval base had to be at least partially evacuated by the British Navy.

Still more serious for the British hopes of a successful defense were the German attacks on British airfields. The loss of British airplanes was so heavy that Air Marshal Longmore decided to withdraw all his remaining air units from Crete. This decision really did not greatly change the air situation over that island, for Longmore's three small squadrons stationed there could not have hoped to resist the masses of the Luftwaffe. Nevertheless, the evacuation brought about an unmistakable decline in the morale of the British land forces. From that moment on, every British soldier found himself in a position in which he had to continue the struggle without the moral backing which would have come from the presence of even a few British planes. He was forced to accept battle not only with the German Army, but with the German Air Force as well, and with the feeling that his own Air Force had deserted him. In such a frame of mind he was suddenly faced with an overwhelming air-borne attack.

The actual German landing attack was begun at about 8 A.M., May 20. Several hours of intensive preparation by dive-bombers using both bombs and machine gun fire preceded the parachute landing. British officers taking part in the defense state that this air attack was of "unparalleled intensity" and that the defenders were forced to take shelter in slit trenches.

Beginning at 8 A.M., about 2000 parachutists were dropped on the western part of the island, in the vicinity of Canea and the Maleme air-drome, covering a space eight miles long and three miles wide. The parachutes were dropped in waves of about 600 each, and approximately two-thirds of the parachutes in each wave carried only equipment. Troops were also disembarked from gliders which landed on beaches and other fairly level stretches of ground. These gliders, each of which carried twelve men, were towed by Ju-52 transport planes, generally in pairs, but occasionally in tows of three.

Two types of German gliders\* were used on Crete, each type weighing 1790 pounds. The frame of the fuselage was steel and that of the wings was wood. The span of the gliders was 80 feet, the length 50 feet. One machine gun was mounted on the starboard side of each glider to provide a measure of defensive strength.

The towing speed of the gliders is thought to have been about 105 miles per hour, the maximum gliding speed 70, and the landing speed 35-40. No auxiliary engines were fitted into any glider.

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\*The Appendix attached hereto gives further information on German gliders.

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It is not believed that the Germans used any large number of gliders in the Cretan operation; and although one British informant thinks they used about 100 in all, 50 appears to be the average estimate of British observers. All evidence indicates that the German use of gliders was experimental only. The Germans consciously avoided landing gliders near British defense positions, preferring to set them down at some distance from both their own and British troops.

The parachutes used were of four colors: white, green, gray-green, and brown. The proportion of white parachutes was approximately one in 24. Personnel was carried in white and green parachutes, supplies in gray-green and brown. The average height of drop was about 300 feet, and all parachutes were equipped with a quick opening device.

After landing, the parachutists immediately proceeded to collect their arms from the containers. In order to give the containers a limited mobility, some were equipped with two wheels and a towing rope.

Each parachutist is said to have carried an automatic pistol, four hand grenades, and a large knife. The automatic pistols are believed to have been dropped in containers, as were the heavier weapons: light and heavy machine guns, antitank rifles, and 50-mm. and 81-mm. mortars. No weapon heavier than the 81-mm. mortar appears to have been dropped by parachute.

The casualties of the parachutists were extremely heavy. This is evidenced by both British eyewitness accounts and the official statement of the German High Command. British machine gunners and individual marksmen took a heavy toll among the helpless Germans as they drifted to earth and in the first moments after landing, before they could reach their kit bags and secure their weapons. The parachutists who landed within the British defense lines at Maleme and Canea were largely accounted for, but the bulk appear to have landed farther back. Within a few hours after landing, these men were becoming organized and were gradually developing themselves into an efficient fighting force. At noon some of these groups gained undisputed control of a hospital and a penitentiary on the high road between Maleme and Canea, splitting off the Maleme airfield and its defenders from the main British base at Canea. As evening approached, the attacking parachutists followed up this initial success with one of almost decisive importance - the seizure of the Maleme airfield itself. This success permitted the Ju-52 transport airplanes to begin the movement of the air infantry detachments, and during the evening of the 20th, only a few hours after the airfield had come into German possession, these planes began using the Maleme field. At this time the Maleme airport was still under British artillery fire, and many of the German troop-carrying Ju-52 planes appear to have been destroyed while on the field.

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The second phase of the German attack began at 4:15 P.M., when parachute landings began in the vicinity of Retimo and Heraklion. Approximately a regiment of parachutists was dropped in each area. Here also the German objectives were undoubtedly the capture of the local airfields. The British estimates of parachutists dropped at Retimo ranged from 1200 to 1500 and at Heraklion, from 2000 to 2500.

It is noteworthy that the original groups of parachutists attacking Maleme, Retimo, and Heraklion were about equal in strength, although the Retimo group was probably slightly weaker than the other two.

The successful British defense at Retimo and Heraklion, in the opinion of certain British officers, was the result of the adoption by the local commanders of a "defensive in depth," and not, as in the case of Maleme, to the mere holding of the perimeter of the airfield.

The losses of the parachutists at Retimo and Heraklion were exceptionally heavy - heavier indeed than at Maleme. Early British reports described these parachute groups as having been destroyed. These reports proved to be inaccurate. Seriously weakened as these parachute groups were by their initial losses, a considerable proportion of the two groups escaped destruction and remained a serious threat to the British position in the central portion of the island. As a result, however, of their failure to capture an airfield, these Germans were entirely dependent on supplies of food and ammunition dropped by air. On the 22d, small German parachute groups forced their way into Heraklion, but were shortly thereafter driven out of the city by the British garrison.

British reports state that on the 24th the Retimo parachute group succeeded in interposing itself on the highway between Suda Bay and Retimo.

It would appear from various British accounts that these isolated parachute groups, no matter how unsuccessful they were in attaining their primary objectives, nevertheless succeeded in fulfilling an important role in the German campaign. As a whole, the continued existence of these groups in the central portion of the island prevented the British from massing their full strength in the western sector to repel the German main effort at Maleme. The isolated parachute groups at Retimo and Heraklion were eventually, on May 27, relieved from their predicament by German mountain and motorcycle troops advancing east from Suda Bay.

The fate of Crete was finally settled in the Maleme area.

During the 21st and 22d, the ever-strengthening German forces drove the British back out of artillery range of the Maleme airfield

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and into their previously fortified positions at Galatas, a village southwest of Canea, which protected both Canea and the naval base at Suda Bay.

Each day the pattern of German attack was relentlessly repeated and enlarged. By means of flares, parachutists indicated areas and points of resistance to aircraft. Such points were promptly dealt with by Stukas and Me-110's, and the advance of the air-borne troops continued. British artillery which had been thrown back beyond range of the airdromes was kept under constant attack. When the artillery positions were hidden from air view, the parachutists would indicate them with flares.

In rapid succession, two German mountain infantry regiments of the 5th Mountain Division, air infantry regiments of the 22d Division from the Bremen area, and a variety of auxiliary units, arrived by air from Greece. The ground troops were under the command of Lieutenant General of Aviation Student, Major General Julius Ringel, a former Austrian officer, commanded the detachments of the 5th Mountain Division.

The first objective of this composite force was to clear the western portion of the island of Greek and British detachments and thus permit all forces to be concentrated for a main drive from Maleme on Canea and Suda Bay. These preliminary movements consumed the better part of May 21 and 22. Motorcycle detachments which had been brought to the island in Ju-52 transport planes played an important part in these mopping up expeditions. One motorcycle detachment pushed southwestward from Maleme to the town of Palaiohora, at the southwest extremity of the island. Another motorcycle detachment advanced to the west, captured Kastelli and possessed itself of the British auxiliary airdrome south of the village.

Maleme airfield, the key of the whole German position, was gradually strengthened not only by new infantry units but also by light antiaircraft batteries of 20-mm. guns, brought to Crete by air transport. While German preparations for a decisive attack on land were still in progress, important decisions occurred at sea.

On May 23 and 24, major battles took place in the water around Crete between the British Eastern Mediterranean Fleet, under Admiral Cunningham and the VIII German Air Corps under General of Aviation von Richthofen.

The British fleet had entered Cretan waters in order to repel an expected German water-borne expedition. Actually such an expedition, convoyed by Italian naval units, was on its way to Crete when the British fleet appeared. On the 20th, and during the night of May 22 - 23, the

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German transports encountered British warships, with disastrous results for themselves.

The size and composition of this German water-borne expedition is not known at this time. The British Intelligence reports that one large transport and many small schooners were destroyed by their naval forces and also states that some thousands of Germans were drowned in these encounters. The Italians report the loss of a destroyer in their encounter with the British fleet. The Germans, on their part, admit the failure of their expedition and state that some 200 soldiers were lost at sea and that only a few schooners reached Crete. Summing up all evidence available, it can be said that there can be no dispute that the German expedition was largely destroyed in this encounter and that the reinforcements reaching Crete by water were numerically so insignificant that they could in no way influence the outcome of the land battle.

The German water-borne threat to Crete, however, caused the British fleet to expose itself to the German and Italian air forces based on the airfields of Attica, the Peloponnesus, Italian Rhodes, and the Greek Aegean islands. This British fleet was almost totally without the support of the Royal Air Force in the resulting series of engagements. A few planes from the aircraft carrier Formidable participated in the early stages of the fighting, but these planes were hopelessly out-numbered, and soon were forced to withdraw altogether when the Formidable was damaged.

The result of this air force-naval engagement was disastrous for the British Navy. While only two cruisers and four destroyers were sunk, fully three-quarters of all British ships engaged in the battle suffered more or less severe damage. On May 23 Admiral Cunningham came to the conclusion that for the fleet to remain in Cretan waters was to invite total destruction, and consequently he gave orders for the navy to withdraw to its Alexandria base. This decision left the British land forces on Crete isolated, and exposed them from that time forward to unopposed German landing attacks from the sea as well as from the air.

The details of the final decisive land operations around Canea and Suda Bay cannot be given at this time. It is known, however, that the key British positions around the village of Galatas west of Canea were penetrated on May 25. On the 26th this initial penetration was broadened and deepened, and on the 27th Canea itself was captured.

German accounts stress the importance of the part played in these operations by mountain regiments of the 5th German Mountain Division under the command of General Ringel. These regiments are said to have brought about the fall of Canea by a flanking movement through



trackless mountains from Galatas to the area just south of Suda Bay. German accounts stress the influence of this flank movement on the British decision to evacuate not only Canea and Suda Bay, but all Crete.

The British have so far been silent on details of this battle around Canea. They state, however, that the decision to evacuate Crete was reached on May 26.

On the day Canea fell, the 27th, a small Italian force transported by boats landed at Sitia in the eastern portion of the island. The size of the expedition is not known, but it is thought that its strength did not exceed that of an infantry regiment. This landing does not seem to have been opposed, and a slow advance in the direction of Heraklion was begun by the Italians on May 28.

The British withdrawal from Canea to villages on the south coast probably began on May 27. The principle route of retreat appears to have been the road Canea-Suda-Armenoi-Sfakia. This direction of withdrawal left free, for the Germans, the north coast highway Suda-Retimo-Heraklion. German motorcycle detachments and infantry groups in captured trucks, were dispatched eastward from Suda in the direction of Retimo to make contact with the long isolated parachutists in that region. This contact was gained on May 29. Meanwhile the parachute group at Heraklion, by its own efforts, had taken that city. The following day this Heraklion group was reinforced by German motorized troops from Retimo. Upon the latter's arrival, the weak British force in the Heraklion area surrendered, although some elements succeeded in escaping into the mountains and making their way to waiting ships which were standing by off the south coast.

The main body of the pursuing German mountain division followed the British through Armenoi towards Sfakia, the principal British embarkation point. In the hills to the south of the village, heavy fighting occurred on May 29 and May 30, which ended, according to German claims, with the capture of the British rear guards. The main body of the British force, however, succeeded in embarking on the waiting destroyers and transports, and eventually reached Egypt. One cruiser, two destroyers, and an unknown number of transports were sunk in the course of this evacuation.

## 6. LOSSES

The losses incurred by the two belligerents on Crete have been given out by the respective governments.

The Germans report the following losses in Crete:



### Army

Killed	321
Wounded	287
Missing	<u>524</u>
Total	1132

### Air Forces

Killed	1032
Wounded	1632
Missing	<u>2097</u>
Total	4761

Total loss of Armed Forces 5893

The following British official statement gives the strength of British forces in Crete and the number evacuated therefrom:

	<u>Strength in Crete</u>	<u>Evacuated</u>
British Troops	14,000	7,130
Australian Troops	6,500	2,890
New Zealand Troops	<u>7,000</u>	<u>4,560</u>
Total	27,500	14,580*
Total loss		12,920

It is not known whether the troops designated as British troops include the small contingents of Cypriot and Arab labor troops which were on Crete.

The German High Command claims the capture of 12,230 British personnel on Crete. This figure, however, was said to include a few hundred Cypriots and Arabs.

### 7. LESSONS

It is still too early to draw conclusive lessons for future use from the meager information now available on the Cretan operations. Many British officers have expressed their views on various phases of the fighting but these necessarily are personal opinions formed soon after the evacuation. Since they could not have been carefully considered they should be received with caution. As Berlin also has said little, individual accounts, however interesting, should under no circumstances

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\*This figure includes wounded.

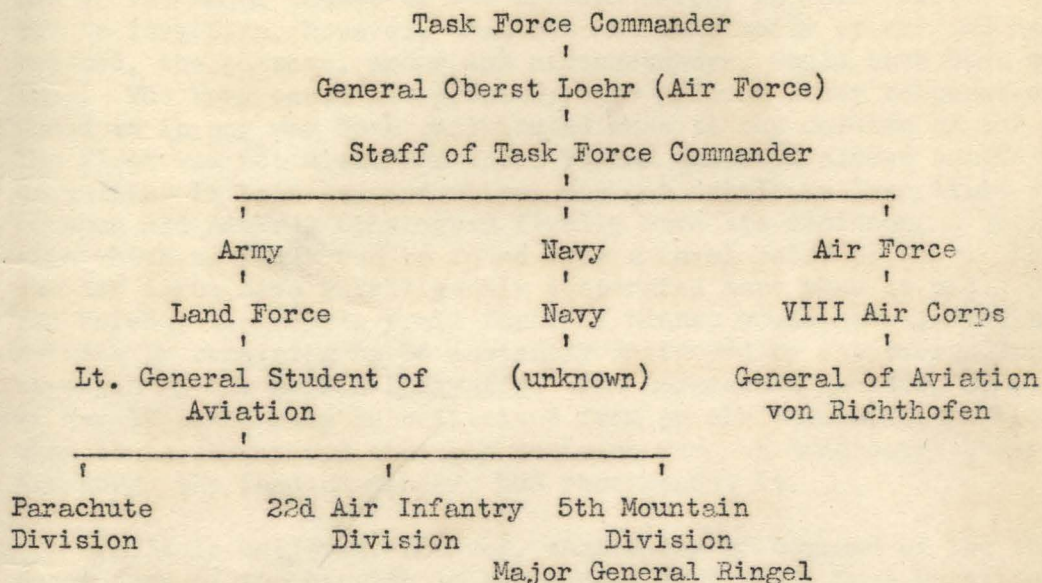
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be accepted without qualification until authoritative statements have been made by both sides.

From the data available with regard to the organization of the German attack on Crete, one factor of great importance stands out clearly - the simplicity of the German Command organization.

The Crete task force was organized as follows:



It is of particular interest in this case that an Air Force commander was assigned to the command of land and naval forces. This unusual appointment may, perhaps, have been due to the importance of the air power factor in the operation as a whole, but it is more likely that Loehr was selected because of his personal ability and knowledge of conditions in southeastern Europe. "Paramount interest" has, hitherto played little part in the selection of commanders for German task forces. These commanders seem to have been selected by the Fuehrer himself, and personal ability alone has dictated the choice.

The simplicity and effectiveness of the German command organization in this operation is obvious. It focuses attention on the British command organization and raises the question how the two systems compared with each other.

Those elements of Great Britain's Army, Navy, and Air Force which participated in the defense of Crete were all under independent commanders. These commanders, in turn, were subordinate to their respective commanders in Egypt, namely: General Wavell, Admiral Cunningham, and Air Marshal Longmore. Since Admiral Cunningham, however, sailed



with the fleet, the Naval units were actually self-contained. The Army and Air units, on the other hand, were dependent upon instructions from Egypt. As Air Marshal Longmore, Admiral Cunningham, and General Wavell were all of equal rank and were subordinate only to the War Cabinet in London, through their respective ministries, it is obvious that as far as operations in the Middle East as a whole are concerned, unity in the British command did not exist.

The absence of this unity of command will be pointed out as one of the major causes of the British defeat in this battle. It should not be forgotten, however, that even if that unity of command had existed, the outcome, under the circumstances, would have been much the same. The Navy could not possibly have offered finer cooperation. Nor could it in any way have contributed more to the defense of the island. The fleet was not withdrawn until it had suffered almost tragic casualties in both men and ships; and not until its loss limit was reached did Admiral Cunningham finally make his decision, a decision with which no fault can be found from a naval point of view. Nor could the air force have intelligently cooperated more than it did. Obviously Air Marshal Longmore's small force of planes would have served no useful purpose by remaining to be instantly destroyed by the overwhelming strength of the German Luftwaffe. And Longmore's decision to withdraw on May 19 can hardly be criticized from an air viewpoint, particularly when it is remembered that his decision was not made until General Freyberg, the land commander, had recommended it.

It is believed, however, that unity of command of the three major arms of the service in the Middle East would have benefited by central planning. Such planning should without doubt have given consideration to the strategic importance of the island of Crete and should have considered the nature of the eventual use of this island as a delaying position, pending the unavoidable outcome of the operation.

Although the British made efforts to improve existing airfields and defenses, it is thought that during their six months' occupancy of the island they could have performed much more useful work had they utilized more of the time in bettering supply facilities and communications. More motor transport could have been sent in and would have proved invaluable in the movement of troops and in supply. It has been said by some observers that more anti-aircraft guns and a hundred or more pursuit planes might have turned the tide of the air battle. It should be remembered, however, that it is questionable whether these additional guns and planes could have been spared. Crete was only part of a very important and complicated campaign which was being fought by the British Empire. When considering whether it was wise to defend Crete one must keep in mind three facts which justify the decision actually made: First, the Germans suffered heavy casualties in this battle. Although their official reports show total losses of only

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5893, reliable British sources estimate that about five thousand Germans were drowned trying to land on Crete and that at least twelve thousand were killed or wounded on the island itself. In addition, the German Air Force sustained extraordinary losses. More than 180 fighting and bombing planes and at least 250 troop-carrying planes were destroyed. Second, the campaign furnished a pattern for a major attack in the third dimension (air) and revealed to a certain extent the relative value of various types of defense against mass parachute landings. Third, and possibly most important, the defense of Crete constituted another step in the effort to delay the advance of the German might and to gain time, which is vital to Great Britain in the present conflict.

A second point of interest in studying the part played by the Germans in this campaign is the organization of all parachute troops as a parachute division under a general officer. In previous campaigns, notably in Holland, the parachute battalion appears to have been the largest unit of these troops. Parachute battalions in Holland were attached to air infantry formations to act as a sort of advanced guard. In Crete, on the other hand, one can note the evolutionary changes which have occurred in the German organization of parachute troops since 1940. The individual companies and battalions which operated in Holland gave way in Crete to a division composed of three parachute regiments. This division differed from a normal division in three respects only: it had fewer troops, it lacked supporting weapons, and it lacked artillery.

A third development worthy of attention is the excellent use the Germans made of their motorcycle companies during the latter stages of the Cretan battle. Motorcycles or light cars lend themselves to transport by plane since they do not consume too much cargo space. These motorcycle companies constituted the mobile troops of the expedition and did valuable service as reconnoitering agencies and as advanced guards in all phases of the battle. They also did splendid work pursuing British detachments during the final advances to Heraklion and Sfakia.

*Jeeps?*

As pointed out before, most of the unofficial British statements with regard to military lessons learned at Crete must be accepted with reserve. The statements of the various British Headquarters however, were made only after a careful study of all ascertainable facts, and they, therefore, deserve close attention.

A New Zealand Brigadier drew the following conclusions from his experiences in Crete:

"Perimeter defense of airfields with artillery in depth is apparently most necessary. The British placed their guns too close to the airfields. The guns should be scattered and well camouflaged. They should not fire at aircraft and

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betray their position except as a last resort to protect their own planes on the ground, or they will be bombed out of existence as these were. All possible airfields or other landing sites should be wired or otherwise protected with ground obstructions. Many German planes landed on the roads. Infantry guarding airfields should be in short shallow trenches,  $4\frac{1}{2}$ ' deep,  $2\frac{1}{2}$ ' wide, and 6' long; individual trenches should be scattered haphazardly around the field. No mounds of dirt should be left visible to the planes. A few tanks are useful in protecting airfields - the British had several, but they were bombed out of commission before the German planes started landing troops. Some tanks had been damaged by being flooded with salt water before landing. The whole defense of an airdrome must be well organized; its first objective should be to prevent the landing of troop-carrying planes.

"German organization was excellent, of course, down to the most minute detail. Instructions taken from some of the first parachutists gave the method of signalling planes for food, bicycles, reinforcements, and direction of enemy forces. After landing, parachutists used rockets to indicate the location of British forces. Red and white rockets were fired from different points toward British forces, the red being used when the bombing and strafing was on. New Zealand troops actually succeeded in signalling German planes to drop them food, coffee, bicycles, and 'reinforcements' whom they were ready for and promptly shot down. Food parcels were small in bulk, nutritive, and well done up in weather proof containers. Fragmentation of bombs was excellent - very uniform - and in 1 to  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " fragments. No delayed action fuzes or land mines were used in the campaign."

A tentative report from the British Middle East Command draws the following lessons from the experiences of British troops on Crete:

"Airdromes, being the enemy main objective, must be organized for all-round defense, even to pillboxes, especially as parachutists may drop behind the defenses. Defenses, including artillery, must be in depth. Artillery in sites with cover proved more useful than that in the open with all-round field fire."

"All ranks of all arms must be armed with rifles, bayonets, and a high proportion of tommy guns in order to protect themselves and in the case of artillery, their guns."

  
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"By day it should be easy to deal with parachutists, but it must be remembered that they may land at night and secure an airdrome. The main problem is to deal with enemy air-borne troops, and as it is impossible to be strong everywhere, there must be strong mobile reserves centrally placed, preferably with tanks.

"Defense must be offensive. Immediate action by mobile reserves is essential to prevent the enemy from settling down. In order to secure quick action a good system of inter-communication is vital. Delay may give the enemy air force an opportunity to prevent movement. ✓

"During the bombing phase, antiaircraft and light machine guns should remain silent unless required to protect their own aircraft on the ground.

"The antiaircraft layout should include dummy antiaircraft guns and alternative positions. Positions of antiaircraft guns should be continually changed.

"Arrangements must be made so that those airdromes which are liable to attack may quickly be rendered temporarily unfit for landing.

"As important as the quick action of a mobile reserve, is the position of the fighter aircraft support, the existence of which might prevent any air-borne landing from succeeding, or at least might reduce the enemy effort.

"The foregoing are interim lessons which may be modified as a result of the findings of a special interservices committee which is now examining the operations."

Another British higher officer described the military lessons he had learned in Crete in the following words:

"Because of the type of training they had received and because of their normal duties, the usual airfield crews were valueless for defending fields.

"Positions of the defenders should be organized in depth on all sides of the landing fields, rather than merely on the edges of the fields. ✓

"Immediately after landing, parachute troops are relatively helpless. ✓

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"Trained marksmen using rifles are the best means of defense.

"Artillery, if properly placed and camouflaged, is very valuable against troop-carrying planes. (*On the ground?*)

"Defense troops should be located near areas suitable for landings and should have available a motorized reserve which can be transported in trucks to unguarded points where enemy landings are being made.

"The two most important points to be kept in mind are the time factor and the necessity for trained marksmen."

A brief and tentative study of the Crete fighting by British official sources, recently published, stresses four major lessons learned in that campaign:

- a. Slit trenches, rather than elaborate field fortifications, are the best protection against dive-bombers.
- b. The defense system of airfields must be organized in depth. A perimeter defense is not sufficient in itself.
- c. Artillerymen must be armed with rifles. On one occasion in Crete, a British battery was captured by parachutists, because the lack of infantry weapons left the personnel of the battery helpless.
- d. Mobile reserves are absolutely necessary to repulse parachute attacks.

Parachutists are relatively helpless and easily destroyed if the defender launches strong counterattacks without delay. Mobile reserves should be held in readiness for this purpose. In Crete, a lack of motorized equipment prevented the launching of such counterattacks.

One of the most important lessons to be drawn from a study of the German operations on Crete as a whole is the importance of the air transport plane. Air power must necessarily be based primarily on pursuit and bombardment planes, but for a full exploitation of air power, the transport plane appears to be as important as the other two. To be sure, the German pursuit and bombardment planes made possible the conquest of Crete. However, in the last analysis it was German troops transported to Crete in German transport planes - Ju-52's - who actually conquered the island.

Such a transport fleet as the German Air Force now possesses -

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650 Ju-52's were used in Crete - cannot be improvised in time of war. Such a fleet must be created, organized, and equipped in time of peace, long before the outbreak of war, if it is to function to its full capacity. Reliance on the transport planes used in civil aviation for more than the nucleus of such a fleet is ill-advised and is likely to prove illusory.

  
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## APPENDIX A

### NOTES ON GERMAN GLIDERS

#### SOURCE

These notes are based upon the report submitted on June 7, 1941, by an American official observer in Cairo. The information contained in that report was obtained by British officials from a 25 year old German glider pilot who was captured near Canea on May 20, 1941.

#### CONTENTS

1. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
2. MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION



NOTES ON GERMAN GLIDERS

1. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: How many men are carried in each glider?

Answer: Ten men are carried.

Question: What accommodation is provided for armament, equipment, etc., of troops carried?

Answer: Their rifles are stowed inside the glider on clamps at the side of individual passengers.

Question: Are troops sitting or standing?

Answer: All the passengers are seated, one behind the other.

Question: Is a reserve pilot carried?

Answer: No reserve pilot is carried.

Question: Is an observer carried?

Answer: No observer is carried, since the glider is released near its objective.

Question: What guns, if any, are carried, and who manipulates them?

Answer: One machine gun, Type 34, is fitted horizontally on a clamp on the outside of the glider; it is fired by the man sitting behind the pilot. This machine gun is fixed and no definite aim is made. It is fired, shortly before landing, on anything that is in the line of flight of the machine. P/W<sup>1</sup> believed that this is valuable chiefly for its effect on morale. He carried an 0.8 pistol<sup>2</sup> as his only weapon.

Question: What type of troops are carried, special Glider Corps or ordinary infantry troops?

Answer: Ordinary infantry troops were carried on the operational flights made by P/W. This was also true of training flights in Germany.

Question: What type of training is given glider pilots?

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<sup>1</sup>P/W is the abbreviation used for prisoner of war.

<sup>2</sup>This is thought to be an 8-mm. pistol. G-2.

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Answer: P/W's training was not normal, for he had started gliding as a boy in 1931. He subsequently entered the German Air Force as a pilot and was removed from power-driven aircraft and sent to Hildesheim. Because he had had considerable experience, he was started immediately on operational gliders, making many spot landings, some of them with local troops as passengers.

No special tactics were taught; the main problem was to put the machine down on the required spot as quickly as possible after release from the towing airplane.

Question: What type of training is given glider troops?

Answer: Glider troops do not appear to have had any special training beyond instruction and practice in getting out of the machine speedily.

Question: What provision is made for getting into, and out of, the glider? How soon can the troops get out of the glider?

Answer: There is an exit in the front and one at the rear. The troops, being at the ready, can get out fairly quickly.

Question: Do glider-borne troops carry parachutes, and is it possible for them to escape by parachute in case of impending crash?

Answer: No parachutes are carried by troops or pilot.

Question: How many gliders can be towed by one aircraft? One report speaks of six gliders having been towed by one Ju-52. Is this true?

Answer: P/W insisted that not more than three gliders can be towed by a Ju-52 and that he had never heard of other towing aircraft except the He-46 and the Henschel-126.\* He stated that in point of fact the largest number of gliders he had ever seen being towed together was two; he had, however, heard of three.

Question: What is the organization of glider units? Are glider units separate entities?

Answer: Glider Units are under the Luftwaffe.

Question: Do they depend upon particular groups of troop transport aircraft?

Answer: Yes. Ju-52's were at Hildesheim and were known as

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\*The Klemm has been previously mentioned by a German Air Force pilot for towing single seaters.

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Staffel\* One.

Question: How many gliders are in each unit?

Answer: About 15 to 20 gliders are in each unit.

Question: What repair and maintenance facilities are provided?

Answer: In Greece, there were about as many riggers as there were aircraft.

Question: What are the ranks of glider personnel?

Answer: The ranks are the same as in the German Air Force.

Question: What is the relation of glider personnel to other units of the German Air Force? Are they interchangeable or a separate organization?

Answer: Glider personnel is not interchangeable with that of the German Air Force.

Question: What is the total number of gliders available?

Answer: P/W insisted that he had no idea of the number of gliders available. The whole scheme was supposed to be very secret and pilots were given no information concerning it.

Question: Is a radio carried?

Answer: No radio is carried.

Question: Do gliders carry flame throwers, gas equipment, smoke-producing apparatus, etc.?

Answer: P/W stated that no flame throwers, gas equipment - except masks - nor smoke-producing apparatus were carried.

Question: Are gliders used to carry stores, equipment, guns, light cars, light tanks, etc., instead of troops?

Answer: The rear four seats are removable and P/W saw no reason why the equivalent weight in stores, etc. could not be carried. He knew nothing of a larger type capable of carrying light tanks, etc.

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\*The Staffel corresponds to the U.S. squadron.

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Question: What is an L.S. Fuhrer?

Answer: An L.S. Fuhrer is a Lastensegelflugzeugfuhrer, that is, a freight-carrying glider pilot.

## 2. MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION

Other points of interest, some of which refer to information contained in the question and answer section of this bulletin, are as follows:

a. P/W stayed in Salonika for about three days. The machines of his Staffel were assembled - wings and flying wires rigged - in about one day. In this Staffel, there were approximately as many riggers as there were machines.

b. Another unit, proceeding by air, was seen by P/W while he was at a railway station in the Balkans.

c. The flaps, which are fitted on the upper trailing edge of the wings, open upwards. When flaps are shut in the flight the machine does not drop suddenly like a power driven aircraft. Spot landings are therefore comparatively easy.

d. The fuselage of the machine is constructed with steel tubing; P/W believed that the wings were of wooden construction.

e. P/W received his Iron Cross I and II for landing near a bridge on the Albert Canal with about five other gliders and about 60 men and holding this bridge for 24 hours, preventing its destruction. A vastly superior force of Belgians took to flight, and the main force of Germans was able to cross the canal without resistance.

f. The following phosphorescent flying instruments were fitted in the glider:

- Air speed indicator;
- Altimeter;
- Rise and fall indicator;
- Compass;
- Turn and bank indicator.

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## APPENDIX B

### ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE BATTLE OF CRETE

#### SOURCE

These notes are based upon extracts from a translation which was published June 1941 in the Revue Militaire Suisse, a Swiss military journal. It is hoped that this additional information on Crete may prove of use in completing the picture described in the bulletin to which these notes are appended. With that in mind, they are offered to the reader for whatever of value they may contain.

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## ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE BATTLE OF CRETE

"Without a doubt, the Battle of Crete is one of the most interesting military operations of this war. Certainly it has shown neither the character nor the magnitude of the actions which took place a year ago on the Western Front; but it reveals methods of attack which will have further development.

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"The campaigns in Norway and Holland have shown that the Germans possess troops extremely well-trained as parachutists and air-borne infantry. Those campaigns have proved that fact, but the engagements themselves have been far less encompassing than those in Crete. In Norway and in Holland, the actions of these specially trained troops were limited to the taking of airdromes and of other objectives which would facilitate the advance of German land forces.

"Even in Greece, the parachutists which were dropped on the Isthmus of Corinth, had as their mission only the creation of a bridgehead on the Peloponnesus which would permit the advance of the German Armored Forces and would prevent the British retreat through this sector.

"On the other hand, the Crete parachutists and air-borne infantry carried on practically the entire battle. That is the new fact.

\*\*\*

"The systematic aerial reconnaissance prior to the actual invasion of Crete permitted the photographing of all details of the principal objectives.

\*\*\*

"Before departing for the attack, the parachutists studied the air photographs of positions they were to occupy. The first parachutists afterwards occupied those positions and then covered the arrival of those who followed, loaded with materiel and light cannon. Pioneers next descended with orders to clear immediately landing places for large transport planes.

\*\*\*

"The idea of transporting troops by gliders seems to have reached the stage of practical application.

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"Instead of utilizing materiel which is costly and often difficult to replace, the Germans preferred to employ towed gliders. Since gliders can land almost anywhere the difficulties of finding good terrain for landing fields hardly exists. Moreover, if the glider is damaged in landing, the loss is small.

\*\*\*

"The use of air-borne troops seems to present advantages over the use of parachutists. In the first place, the training of transported troops is not nearly as complicated as that of the parachutist. In the second place, the men are already grouped as soon as they reach the ground, and there is thus avoided the dangerous period preceding re-assembly.

\*\*\*

"German aviation supported fully the troops on the ground. Aviation officers joined the air infantry officers on the ground in order to determine the objectives which were common to their respective commands.

"In order to induce the defender to disperse his reserves, the parachutists always attacked in several places at one time.

\*\*\*

"Since the necessity of good terrain diminishes in proportion with the employment of gliders, the greater part of the country becomes vulnerable to this sort of attack."

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APPENDIX C

FURTHER NOTES ON THE BATTLE OF CRETE

SOURCE

These notes on the Battle of Crete are based upon extracts from a report just received from an American official observer in Cairo and give the latest version of the initial attack.

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## FURTHER NOTES ON THE BATTLE OF CRETE

"For a month prior to the main attack on Crete the Germans had been making a general movement toward the south of Greece. Transport planes and gliders gathered in the vicinity of Athens and Corinth, and special troops came by air, sea, road, and rail. Supplies and enormous stocks of munitions were piled well forward. Landing fields were hastily constructed in southern Greece; Aegean Islands which offered landing facilities were seized. At Milos British officers and men were captured and put to work building airfields.

"The preparation prior to the attack by air-borne troops was divided into three distinct phases.

"The Germans spent the first ten days of May - the first phase - in thorough reconnaissance accompanied by light dive-bombing and machine gun attacks. The Nazi plan for the main attack was based on the extensive series of air photographs taken at this time.

"The second phase was made up of daylight bombings and machine gun attacks on an ever increasing scale, both in frequency and intensity. The Germans launched vicious thrusts at communications and probing attacks to locate antiaircraft, troop concentrations, and defensive positions. Fighters struck the few remaining RAF planes and forced the British on the 15th to withdraw all aircraft to Egypt.

"In the third phase a series of fierce attacks was directed against sea communications in an effort to interrupt supplies. One night, operating singly, planes bombed Suda Bay continuously for seven hours. On the 17th seventeen Ju-88's, escorted by ten Me-109's, dive bombed Suda Bay. The next day, after four reconnaissances, Suda Bay was subjected to seven heavy bombing attacks supported by fighters. Even though the ships there were on fire and sinking, the unloading continued; Suda anchorage became a graveyard for vessels. On Malemi and Heraklion airdromes bombing and machine gun attacks were heavy and frequent, and there was a general intensification of all attacks in an effort to break down morale.

"Throughout the month preceding May 20 there had been a constantly rising tempo in the preparation for the air-borne invasion. The method of attacks varied; their intensity progressively increased. Daily reconnaissance and air photography enabled the Nazis to study defense disposition of troops and the location of guns and slit

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trenches. Having completed a thorough reconnaissance and having battered resistance and interrupted supply, the Nazi air army was ready to attack.

"Soon after dawn on May 20 the Luftwaffe struck the Malemi-Canea area. Its mission was to silence antiaircraft batteries and to prevent the use of the roads between Suda and Malemi. At Malemi the attack was especially heavy.

"The New Zealand 22d Battalion defending Malemi airdrome was heavily bombarded and machine-gunned for ninety minutes by Ju-87's, Ju-88's, Me-109's, and Me-110's. The bombardment was so intense that everyone was driven to slit trenches - some participants claim the severity of the attack exceeded the heaviest artillery preparations of the World War. Before the dense cloud resulting from this attack had lifted, fifty gliders had landed in the dry river bed directly in front and to the west of the 22d Battalion.

"The big scale Blitz was an awe inspiring spectacle. A distinguished British officer relates how he stood on a hill watching the attack over Malemi, enthralled by the magnitude of the operation. While he was watching the bombers, he suddenly became aware of a greater throbbing, or overtone, during the moments of comparative quiet. Looking seaward he saw hundreds of planes, tier upon tier, coming toward him. They were huge, slow-moving troop carriers with the airborne troops he had been expecting. They circled counter clock-wise over Malemi airdrome and then as if by magic, when the planes were only 200 feet above the ground, white specks suddenly appeared beneath them, and clouds of colored parachutes floated slowly to earth.

"The dry stream banks afforded shelter to the glider-borne troops which landed there. Fully armed and organized as combat teams, the troops poured out of the gliders and took up positions facing the 22d Battalion where they could cover their parachutists landing west of the stream bed. Flying at low altitude in circles whose center was about a half mile west of the 22d Battalion position, Nazi fighters covered the descent of the parachutists by continuous, murderous strafing of ground troops.

"Most of the parachutists who landed near defending troops were killed. Some who landed on the Malemi-Canea road interrupted communications. On the airdrome, defending troops were overwhelmed by parachutists who actually landed on top of them with stores and equipment. To the east and west of the airdrome Ju-52's crash-landed on the beaches and disgorged troops."

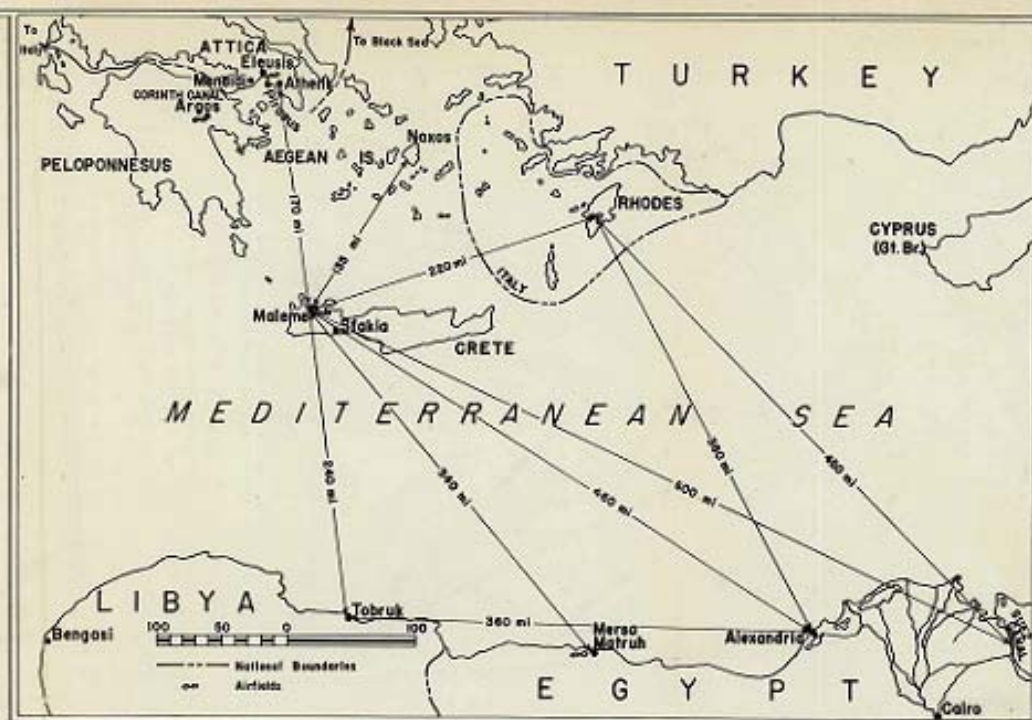
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COMMENT

In addition to their use in transporting covering forces for mass parachute landings, gliders permit the introduction of the element of surprise. Released by their towing planes as much as 10 or 15 miles from their objectives, they approach with no roar of motors and may remain undetected until the moment of landing. They carry completely equipped and organized units, which are ready for action the instant they touch the ground. The future will doubtless show a more extensive use of gliders in seacoast landings.





## CRETE

0 5 10 15 20 25 miles

- Main Roads
- - - Other Roads
- Airbase
- Airfield

