

CHAPTER 9

CRETE

WITH the German occupation of Greece the fate of Crete became of major importance to both sides. In the Eastern Mediterranean the island occupied a position analagous to that of Malta in the central sea.¹ It was a shield to and provided a valuable fuelling base on the British east-west communications, and facilitated the passing of Malta convoys. On the flank of the Italian supply lines to Libya it constituted, in British hands, a further threat to them. Situated athwart the entrance to the Aegean, its possession exerted considerable influence on the control of that sea and of the Black Sea oil route Constanta-Corinth-Italy, vital to the Axis. This influence could have been extended southwards to British detriment with the island's occupation by a strong and vigorous hostile naval power. It was not, however, this thought which primarily influenced the German leaders' deliberations, but the fear that the island would be used as an air base from which to raid the Rumanian oilfields which made them regard its denial to the British as essential. Its use by Germany as a stepping stone to Egypt was a secondary consideration, and was proposed to Goering by General Lohr, commander of the *Fourth Air Fleet*, on the 15th April 1941. On 21st April the proposal was submitted to Hitler. It provided for the seizure of Crete by parachute and airborne troops as the first phase of an airborne offensive against the Suez Canal via Cyprus. Hitler approved, and on the 25th April, the day on which the first of the troops withdrawn from Greece were landed at Suda Bay, issued Directive 28, "Operation Merkur", which ordered the German occupation of Crete for use "as an air base against Britain in the eastern Mediterranean". The operation was entrusted to the *Fourth Air Fleet* with the *VIII* and General Student's *XI Air Corps* under command (the *VIII Air Corps* a purely air formation, and the *XI* an airborne troop formation) and was to be supported by the *Twelfth Army*, and by the Admiral Commanding the South-Eastern Area.² The German development of airborne and parachute forces was well known to the British, who anticipated their use in an attack on Crete. Towards the end of April, intelligence of "the movement and excitement of the German *XI Air Corps* [in Greece] and the frantic collection of small craft in Greek Harbours"³ confirmed anticipation, and indicated that the probable date for attack would be

¹ In a telegram from London to the Australian Government on 8 May 1941, the Australian High Commissioner, Mr Bruce, gave the views of the Chiefs of Staff Committee as: "General feeling is that Crete can be held but for the present only to the extent of denying it to the enemy although later as defences strengthen it may be made operational base similar to Malta."

² In Feb 1941, Hitler approved the appointments of naval shore commanders at Salonika, Volos, and Piraeus, and of an admiral (Commanding Admiral, Balkans) "to achieve proper coordination between the naval units operating in the entire south-eastern area and to guard all naval interests there". The "Admiral, South-East" took up his appointment in the second half of March. *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs, 1941*.

³ Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. III (1950), p. 240.

about the 17th May.⁴ During the intervening period, efforts were made to reinforce the island with combat troops, to land supplies of stores and munitions, and to strengthen the defences.

About this time the Mediterranean Fleet received reinforcements. The 5th Destroyer Flotilla, *Kelly*, *Kipling*, *Kelvin*, *Kashmir*, *Jackal* and *Jersey*,⁵ arrived under the command of Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten⁶ as Captain (D) in *Kelly*, and was based on Malta where, shortly after its arrival, *Jersey* was mined and sunk in the entrance to Grand Harbour. The cruiser *Dido*⁷ also arrived; and Australian representation with the fleet was strengthened by two new destroyers, *Napier* and *Nizam*. It will be remembered (Chapter 3) that in May 1940 the Commonwealth Government approved an Admiralty proposal that ships' companies of the Australian destroyers in the Mediterranean should man new ships building in Britain. Arrangements had been made, and new drafts from Australia replaced the trained men who left the old destroyers for the new ships. In August 1940 the Admiralty asked the Naval Board if a Captain, R.A.N., could be made available as Captain (D) of the new ships (five of the "N" class),⁸ and were informed that no suitable R.A.N. Captain with destroyer experience was available other than Waller. "If Captain Waller is appointed to *Napier* and a captain is required for *Stuart* it will be necessary to provide an officer of that rank from the Royal Navy." In the circumstances Waller could not be spared from the Mediterranean, and the following month the Admiralty nominated Captain Arliss⁹ as Captain (D) of the 7th Flotilla. He commissioned *Napier* at Fairfield's yard on the Clyde on 28th November 1940. Her first task, during her working up period, was to transport Mr and Mrs Churchill from Thurso to the new battleship *King George V*¹ in Scapa Flow (when they farewelled Lord Halifax² on his departure in that ship for the United States as British Ambassador in January 1941) and later to return them to the mainland. The second ship of the flotilla, *Nizam*, was commissioned at John Brown's yard, Clydebank, on 19th December 1940 by Lieut-Commander Clark.³

⁴ When Hitler gave his consent to the operation on 21 Apr he instructed that the attack was to begin on 15 May. Transport and supply difficulties, and the shortage of suitable airfields in Greece, caused postponement to 20 May.

⁵ Destroyers (1939), 1,690 tons, six 4.7-in guns, five 21-in torp tubes, 36 kts. (*Jersey* sunk at Malta 2 May 1941, *Kelly* and *Kashmir* off Crete 23 May 1941, *Kipling* and *Jackal* in E Mediterranean 11 and 12 May 1942).

⁶ Admiral Rt Hon Earl Mountbatten, KG, GCSI, GCIE, GCVO, KCB, DSO; RN. (1914-18: HMS's *Lion*, *Queen Elizabeth* and submarines.) Comd HMS *Illustrious* 1941; Chief of Combined Ops 1942-43; Supreme Allied Cdr, SE Asia, 1943-46. Viceroy of India 1947, Governor-General 1947-48; C-in-C, Mediterranean, 1952-53, Allied Forces in Medit 1953-55; First Sea Lord and CNS since 1955. B. 25 Jun 1900.

⁷ HMS *Dido*, cruiser (1940), 5,450 tons, ten 5.25-in guns, six 21-in torp tubes, 33 kts.

⁸ *Napier*, *Nizam*, *Norman*, *Nepal*, *Nestor* (1941), 1,690 tons, six 4.7-in guns, five 21-in torp tubes, 36 kts. The ships were manned by the RAN, designated "HMA" Ships, and appeared as such in the RN and RAN Navy Lists; but they remained the property of HM Government. (*Nestor* was sunk in Mediterranean 15 Jun 1942.)

⁹ Vice-Adm S. H. T. Arliss, CB, DSO; RN. Comd HMS *Salisbury* 1918-19, HMAS *Napier* and Capt (D) 7 Flotilla 1940-42; Cmdre (D) Eastern Fleet Flotillas 1942-44; comd HMS *Berwick* 1944-46. B. 11 Jul 1895. Died 6 Nov 1954.

¹ HMS *King George V*, battleship (1940), 35,000 tons, ten 14-in and sixteen 5.25-in guns, 28.5 kts.

² Rt Hon Earl Halifax, KG, OM, GCSI, GCIE. (1915-17: served as major in France.) Viceroy of India 1926-31; Sec of State for Foreign Affairs 1938-40; Ambassador to USA 1941-46. B. 16 Apr 1881.

³ Capt M. J. Clark, DSC; RAN. Comd HMAS's *Yarra* 1939, *Doomba* 1939-40, *Nizam* 1941-43, *Warramunga* 1945-46. Of Richmond, Tas; b. Franklin, Tas, 30 Mar 1906.

After working up exercises, fleet duties, and some weeks of North Atlantic convoy work, *Napier* and *Nizam* sailed for the Mediterranean via the Cape. They parted company at Aden on the 30th April, and *Nizam* swept ahead of US Convoy 10A (*Queen Elizabeth* and *Queen Mary* carrying 10,000 A.I.F. troops and 1,000 R.A.A.F.) through the Red Sea to Suez, where they arrived on 3rd May. *Nizam* went on through the Canal, and reached Port Said the following day.

Further reinforcements, the battleship *Queen Elizabeth*⁴ and the cruisers *Naiad*⁵ and *Fiji*, joined the fleet from the west in a joint convoy operation similar to those which had been the vehicle of previous accessions of strength. In this operation, which lasted from 6th to 12th May, and in which *Perth* and the newly-arrived *Nizam* took part, the Mediterranean Fleet covered the passage of two supply convoys from Alexandria to Malta, and south of that island took over from Force "H" the reinforcements which had accompanied it from Gibraltar, and a convoy ("Tiger") of four merchant ships loaded with motor transport and tanks for Egypt.⁶ The fleet was accompanied by *Formidable*, but nature provided effective air cover in the shape of low overcast which safeguarded the ships from air attack in the danger area south of Malta; and a moonlight attack during the return journey to Alexandria on the 10th May was beaten off without loss to fleet or convoy. During the westward passage *Ajax*, *Imperial*, *Havock* and *Hotspur* were detached and effectively bombarded the harbour and shipping at Benghazi. This operation was repeated by Mountbatten's destroyers, which accompanied the fleet thus far on the eastward passage, and then returned to Malta. Fleet and convoy reached Alexandria safely on the 12th May, and there *Nizam* found *Napier* awaiting her.

Consequent upon the arrival at this time of two new flag officers, Rear-Admirals King⁷ and Glennie,⁸ flag appointments in the fleet were rearranged. Pridham-Wippell assumed command of the battle fleet, with his flag in *Queen Elizabeth*; Rawlings became Rear-Admiral 7th Cruiser Squadron flying his flag in *Orion*; King, in *Naiad*, became Rear-Admiral 15th Cruiser Squadron; and Glennie Rear-Admiral (D) in *Dido*. These were the men who, under the direction of Cunningham ashore at Alexandria, were to carry out the operations afloat in the battle for Crete.

II

Crete is an island 160 miles long east and west, with a north and south width varying between 35 and seven-and-a-half miles. A mountain spine,

⁴ HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, battleship (1915, refitted 1937), 31,000 tons, eight 15-in and eight 6-in guns, 24 kts.

⁵ HMS *Naiad*, cruiser (1940), 5,450 tons, ten 5.25-in guns, six 21-in torp tubes, 33 kts; sunk by German submarine in E Mediterranean, 11 Mar 1942.

⁶ "Tiger" originally consisted of five merchant ships but one, *Empire Song* (12,656 tons), struck a mine when entering the Sicilian Narrows from the west, and subsequently sank.

⁷ Admiral E. L. S. King, CB, MVO; RN. Comd 15 Cruiser Sqn 1941; an Asst Ch of Naval Staff 1941-42; PNLO to Allied Navies 1943. Of Ruan Minor, Cornwall, Eng; b. Windom, USA, 22 Feb 1889.

⁸ Admiral Sir Irvine Glennie, KCB; RN. Comd HMS *Achilles* 1936-39, HMS *Hood* 1939-41, Destroyers, Mediterranean, 1941-42, Destroyers, Home Fleet, 1943-44; C-in-C America and West Indies 1945-46. B. 1892.

steep-to on the southern side, runs most of its length. South to the Mediterranean Sea the island presents an inhospitable back, a rugged, harbourless coast. Its welcome lies to the north, with its front door a good, though undeveloped harbour at Suda Bay, and some lesser havens along its length. In the north, too, is the only country suitable for airfields; and it was at Suda Bay and the airfields—Maleme to the west and Retimo and Heraklion to the east—that the British garrison was deployed. Only two or three roads, and those generally degenerating to tracks unsuitable for motor transport over some miles of their southern extremities, connect the inhospitable south with the welcoming north. The nearest neighbouring land is that of islands, Antikithera some twenty miles to the west and Kaso some thirty to the east. In May 1941 both of these were in enemy hands. They were unsuitable for the mounting of an attack on Crete, but formed the horns of a hostile crescent which embraced the island and covered with strong air power both the northern front door through which seaborne supplies had to pass, and the side entrances from the Mediterranean leading to that door. The enemy base for airborne attack lay opposite the front door, some 150 miles distant in the Athens area. The British base, for supply and for seaborne defence, lay nearly three times that distance away at Alexandria, opposite the unwelcoming back. As Cunningham wrote: "From the point of view of defence it would have suited us much better if the island could have been turned upside down."⁹

Yet with all the disadvantages it was generally felt by the British commanders that the island could be defended successfully with the existing resources. In his subsequent dispatch on the Battle of Crete, Cunningham wrote:

It was known that airborne invasion of the island was impending; but it appeared almost inconceivable that airborne invasion alone could succeed against forewarned troops, that seaborne support was inevitable and that the destruction of troop convoys would win the day.

Destruction of convoys was not to be on the one side. The enemy air power in the area was great; the British was pitifully weak and soon to become non-existent. The reinforcement and supply of the island was seriously hampered by air attack during the brief period between the withdrawal from Greece and the German assault on Crete, to an extent contributing to the final outcome.

The problem in the few days prior to the attack was threefold—reinforcement with combat troops, the removal of some thousands of "useless mouths", and the bringing in of supplies and munitions. At the end of April there were rations in the island for 30,000 for sixty days; but the arrival of 25,000 withdrawn from Greece brought the number of troops up to 45,000, in addition to which there were some 15,000 prisoners of war. Reinforcement with combat troops and their equipment was only partially successful. It had been intended to build Suda Bay up as a naval base, and to set up a complete Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation.

⁹ Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 358.

This organisation, of 5,300 Royal Marines with anti-aircraft guns, search-lights, booms, nets, mines and other equipment, had arrived in the Mediterranean via the Cape; but at the end of April was in Haifa restowing its ships which had been stowed in England "in a manner which bore no relation to the priority in which all the various items would be used".¹ On the 9th May 2,000 M.N.B.D.O. Marines with their anti-aircraft guns arrived at Suda, "but the danger of losing ships through enemy air action was considered too great to allow any further M.N.B.D.O. storeships to be sent to Crete".² A week later *Gloucester* and *Fiji* disembarked at Heraklion the 2nd Battalion of the Leicester Regiment with their full equipment; and during the night 18th-19th May *Glengyle*, escorted by *Coventry*, *Auckland*, *Waterhen* and *Voyager*, took 700 men of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders from Alexandria to Timbakion on the south coast, whence they travelled overland to Heraklion.

The withdrawal from Greece imposed an increase in the numbers to be fed and maintained in Crete without providing any great increase in fighting strength, and the question of supplies was a mounting anxiety for the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Suda Bay, Captain Morse.³ Every opportunity was taken to send away unwanted troops, prisoners and civilians, but new arrivals kept numbers in the island near the same level. When the German assault began on 20th May Crete's defenders numbered approximately 40,000, comprising 15,000 United Kingdom troops, 7,700 New Zealand, 6,500 Australian and 10,800 uniformed Greeks. Meanwhile enemy air attack, against convoys at sea and ships in Suda Bay, increased in scale and intensity; ships were sunk on passage and also in harbour, where the constant air attacks made discharging of cargo slow and difficult. Labour was a problem. As the scale of air attack increased the supply of civilian Greek, and later Cypriot, labour dwindled and became less reliable. Finally the Australian and New Zealand brigades supplied a dock company and additional labour, and the men "gave excellent service under the most trying conditions", as Morse reported.⁴

Between the 9th and 14th May two convoys, "AN.30" and "ANF.30", the first of three and the second of four ships, reached Suda Bay; and two, "AS.30" of thirteen ships and "ASF.31" of two ships, sailed thence for Egypt. Australian destroyers were among the escorts of all four convoys.⁵ "AN.30" was originally of four ships which sailed on the 6th May, one from Haifa, two from Port Said, and one from Alexandria, escorted by *Auckland*, *Grimsby*, *Flamingo* and *Vampire*, to rendezvous with *Stuart* and *Waterhen* at 11.30 a.m. on the 7th. Due to a variety of circumstances, Waller in *Stuart* did not get his convoy and escorts formed up until 6.30

¹ Cunningham, p. 358.

² Cunningham, Despatch, *The Battle of Crete*.

³ Vice-Adm Sir Anthony Morse, KBE, CB, DSO; RN. FO Northern Area, Mediterranean 1944-45; FO Malaya 1945-46. B. 16 Oct 1892.

⁴ During the period from 29 April to 20 May some 15,000 tons of army stores were off-loaded at Suda Bay from fifteen ships, and eight ships were sunk or damaged in the harbour by air attack. (Cunningham, Despatch.)

⁵ Australian destroyers with the convoys were: "AN.30" *Stuart*, *Waterhen*, *Vampire*; "ANF.30" *Stuart*, *Vendetta*; "AS.30" *Voyager*, *Vampire*; "ASF.31" *Stuart*, *Vendetta*.

p.m., matters being made difficult by the fact that one of his charges, *Rawnsley* (5,000 tons), could not steam at more than eight knots while another, *Lossiebank* (5,627 tons) could not steam at *less* than eleven. At this juncture *Stuart's* engines broke down, and Waller had to return to Alexandria, and carried out a six-hour attack on a submarine on the way.⁶ The convoy proceeded north in charge of *Auckland*. At 6.45 p.m. on the 8th, just south of Kaso Strait, *Rawnsley* was torpedoed in an air attack. *Rawnsley* was taken in tow by *Grimsby* escorted by *Waterhen*, and was anchored in Ierapetra Bay on the south coast of Crete. Here she was bombed on the night of the 11th, and sank the following morning. Three other ships of these two convoys, *Widnes*⁷ of "AN.30" and *Dalesman* (6,200 tons) and *Logician* (5,993 tons) of "ANF.30" were lost by air attack in Suda Bay.

The two southbound convoys reached Egypt without loss, though the eccentric *Lossiebank*, one of the two ships in "ASF.31" (the other was the Dutch *Nieuw Zeeland*, of 11,069 tons) had a narrow escape. The cruiser *Dido* was senior officer of escort, and had on board Greek gold to the value of £7,000,000 which she had embarked at Suda Bay. *Lossiebank* was carrying 2,000 troops. Just before daylight on the 15th May in the northern end of Kaso Strait, *Lossiebank* broke down, first on one engine, then on both. *Dido* sent *Nieuw Zeeland* on ahead with *Stuart*. At 6.24 a.m. *Lossiebank* told *Dido* she would be ready in fifteen minutes. "I replied," reported *Dido's* captain, who was acutely conscious of the bullion he was himself carrying and of the 2,000 troops in *Lossiebank*, and who did not relish being stopped so close to Italian airfields, "if you are not ready then I will come alongside, disembark troops and sink ship. Fortunately she was proceeding with both engines within ten minutes." At 11.45 a.m. the convoy was attacked by five Italian bombers from Rhodes. They concentrated on *Lossiebank*. "Bombs appeared to straddle her on all sides and she was obscured from view but emerged from clouds of spray apparently undamaged." Shortly afterwards the 1st Battle Squadron was met and provided cover, and the convoy reached Alexandria without further incident.

The Germans also were concerned with the question of seaborne supplies for Crete, which would arise for them once their attack began. By arrangement with the Italians, the Aegean was placed under the command of the German "Admiral Southeast", whose area of responsibility was defined as the east coast of Greece including the Gulf of Athens, and such islands off the coast and in the Aegean as were occupied by German troops. The Peloponnese and the west coast of Greece came under the command of Italy. The Italian naval staff agreed to provide some destroyers and smaller vessels and, in addition, to place their naval forces in the Dodecanese, temporarily at the disposal of the Admiral Southeast. All these

⁶ The attack was apparently unsuccessful. No Italian submarine was sunk between 31 March and 27 June 1941.

⁷ HMS *Widnes*, minesweeper (1918), 710 tons, one 4-in gun, 16 kts; bombed and beached in Suda Bay, Crete, 20 May 1941.

Italian naval forces were under the command of an Italian Chief of Staff, Captain Count Peccori-Giraldi, who was attached to the Admiral South-east.⁸ German attempts to persuade the Italians to commit their main fleet in support of the operation were, however, unsuccessful.

The German airborne attack was scheduled to begin on the 20th May, and it was planned that the first wave should occupy the airfield at Maleme and the British positions at adjacent Canea and Suda Bay in the morning, and that the second wave should occupy the eastern airfields in the afternoon. Follow-up by sea was to be by a flotilla of motor sailing vessels at Canea on the evening of the 21st, and by a second flotilla at Heraklion twenty-four hours later. A flotilla of steamers was to proceed to Suda Bay as soon as the harbour was in German hands. In preparation for these seaborne movements the island of Milos, eighty miles north of Suda Bay, was occupied as a naval base, and the Admiral Southeast formed two motor sailing flotillas totalling sixty-three ships, and two steamer flotillas totalling seven merchant ships. The smaller vessels were loaded with an army battalion, air force troops, pack animals, ammunition and supplies; the steamers with tanks, heavy guns, heavy equipment and ammunition and supplies. To protect the flotillas Peccori-Giraldi had two destroyers, twelve torpedo boats, and a number of speed boats and minesweepers—and strong air support. It was the task of the British navy to prevent any such seaborne landings.

III

Indications to the British were that the German assault on Crete (where General Freyberg had been placed in command on shore) would begin about the 15th May, and as soon as the fleet got back to Alexandria from the TIGER operation, moves to meet the attack were put in hand. Cunningham was faced with a number of problems. Continuous air attacks from the 14th May made Suda Bay untenable as a naval base and reduced serviceable Royal Air Force aircraft on the Cretan airfields to seven, which were withdrawn to Egypt on the 19th. Losses and wear and tear in earlier operations had reduced *Formidable's* serviceable aircraft to four, with no reserves of machines or flying crews—a condition which could not be remedied before the 25th May, and then only on a limited scale. Anti-aircraft ammunition was in short supply, and on the 13th May “the remaining stocks of 5.25-inch and 4.5-inch were now down to only three-quarters of the outfit required for the fleet”.¹ Cunningham knew, therefore, that he would have to operate, without air cover and with the need to conserve anti-aircraft ammunition, in an area which, dominated by enemy air power, was 420 miles from his own base. Nor could he disregard the possibility of intervention by the Italian fleet.

Any interception of a seaborne attack would have to be north of Crete, it being assumed that the most likely places for attempted landings would

⁸ *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs*, 20 Apr 1941.

¹ Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 363.

be Canea, Retimo, and Heraklion. It was undesirable unnecessarily to expose ships to air attack in the Aegean by day, but necessary to have them there at the time a seaborne assault was attempted. There was also the fuelling problem. Cunningham met the situation by disposing his forces in five groups: a battle squadron west of Crete to provide heavy cover; three groups of cruisers and destroyers to carry out night sweeps north of Crete and retire from the Aegean in the daytime unless circumstances demanded their presence north of the island; and a reserve battle squadron at Alexandria. Air reconnaissance ("but it was very thin") was arranged to give intelligence of any German moves by sea.

The first British move was on the 14th May, when Pridham-Wippell in *Queen Elizabeth* with *Barham*, accompanied by cruiser and destroyer forces, sailed from Alexandria. During the 15th they covered convoy "ASF.31" south of Kaso Strait. The following day patrolling dispositions were made, the battle squadron west of Crete, the three light forces, two in the west and one in the east, sweeping the respective straits in readiness for eventualities. They remained in position without any enemy surface move until the 18th, when they returned to Alexandria to fuel.² Pridham-Wippell was relieved by Rawlings in *Warspite* with *Valiant*, *Ajax* and destroyers; the other forces made quick dashes to Alexandria and out again, and were back in position by the 19th, and further sweeps were carried out both in the west and east that night.

At daylight on the 20th May Rawlings, with *Warspite*, *Valiant*, *Napier*, *Kimberley*, *Isis*, *Janus*, *Griffin* and *Imperial*, was to the west of Crete. At 9 a.m. he was joined by Glennie in *Dido*, with *Orion*, *Ajax* and destroyers, which force had been sweeping Antikithera Strait. *Gloucester* and *Fiji*, having fuelled at Alexandria, were on their way to join Rawlings. In the east, King in *Naiad*, with *Perth*, *Kandahar*, *Nubian*, *Kingston* and *Juno*, was south of Kaso Strait.

From his headquarters at Suda, Morse, the N.O.I.C., could see Canea wireless station and the hills which hid Maleme beyond. From 8 a.m. on the 20th he watched heavy German bombing south of Canea and over Maleme, followed by intense machine-gun attacks on adjacent areas. At 9 a.m. he saw parachute troops dropping south and west of Canea, and concentrations of troop carriers and gliders in the direction of Maleme. From 11.45 a.m. and throughout the afternoon and evening there was heavy dive bombing and machine-gunning of Suda Bay and its defences. The assault at Heraklion, some sixty miles to the east, began four hours after that at Maleme, with a heavy dive bombing attack followed at 4 p.m. by two hours' intensive bombing and "a terrific machine-gun attack from the air which lasted about an hour. It is estimated that 400 planes were over the town between 1600 and 1900".³ A few minutes after 7 p.m. Captain Macdonald,⁴ the Naval Officer-in-Charge, watched "large numbers

² Some destroyers with the battle squadrons did not return to Alexandria but were fuelled at sea from the battleships.

³ Capt M. H. S. Macdonald, RN, NOIC Heraklion, Letters of Proceedings, May 1941.

⁴ Capt M. H. S. Macdonald, DSO, OBE; RN. (HMS's *Acteon* 1915-16, *Dublin* 1916-17.) NOIC, Suda Bay 1940-41, Heraklion 1941, Cypriot Ports 1941-46. B. 18 Aug 1879. Died 19 Apr 1951.

of low flying planes approaching from the sea". They dropped parachute troops to the west of the town and on the airfield. About the same time parachute troops descended also at Retimo. By the evening of the 20th the German airborne assault on Crete was well under way, and meanwhile the attempted seaborne assault was in preparation. Throughout the day the Maleme motor sailing flotilla of twenty-five ships, which had left Piraeus, battled against strong head winds as it made for Milos. It reached the advanced naval base there during the night, in readiness for its operation on the 21st.

As soon as he learned that the attack on Crete had started, Cunningham issued instructions for night sweeps in the Aegean by the light forces. As a result of air sightings of the Maleme flotilla, these instructions were amplified to meet an expected seaborne attempt during the night 20th-21st. King was instructed to cover the vicinity of Heraklion, and Glennie to guard the Maleme-Canea-Kisamos Bay area. King's force passed Kaso Strait on the evening of the 20th, where it was unsuccessfully attacked first by torpedo bombers and later by six motor torpedo boats which were driven off, and some damaged, by *Juno*, *Kandahar*, and *Naiad*. During the night the force investigated false reports of a seaborne landing at Heraklion, and retired through Kaso Strait (where it was joined by *Calcutta*) in the early forenoon without further incident. In the west, Glennie's force sighted nothing, and retired on Rawlings during the forenoon of the 21st. Another force, Mack (Captain (D) of the 14th Flotilla), in *Jervis* with *Nizam* and *Ilex*, passed through Kaso Strait late on the 20th and between 2.42 and 2.45 a.m. on the 21st bombarded the airfield on Scarpanto, afterwards fruitlessly searching Pegadia Bay on that island for enemy shipping. It then retired to Alexandria to fuel. Throughout the 21st all forces south and west of Crete were subjected to heavy air attacks. In Glennie's force *Ajax* was damaged by a near-miss. King's force was bombed continuously from 9.50 a.m. to 1.40 p.m., and shortly before 1 p.m. lost *Juno*, which received direct hits and sank in two minutes.⁵ The battle squadron suffered no damage, but the high expenditure of anti-aircraft ammunition caused Rawlings to warn the fleet of the need for economy.

The activity of the British early on the 21st caused the Admiral South-east to alter his plans. He had reported to General Headquarters of *XI Air Corps* that the Maleme flotilla (whose heavy arms and ammunition and additional mountain battalions were urgently needed) had been ordered to reach the coast of Crete on the 21st "regardless of enemy fleet movements". Early that day it sailed from Milos under the escort of the Italian destroyer *Lupo*;⁶ but at 10 a.m. was ordered back to harbour when the admiral learned of the presence of the British ships. Later reconnaissance reported no British ships north of Crete, and the commanding

⁵ The Germans thought their score was higher, and a report of *Fourth Air Fleet* (28 Nov 1941) stated that "Units of Flying Corps 8 sank one destroyer and severely damaged another as well as two cruisers", and that during the 21st bomber units from around Attica, Stukas from Scarpanto, and Italian air force units from Rhodes scored "3 direct hits on cruisers, one direct hit on a destroyer, one hit on a steamer, and two other cruisers believed damaged".

⁶ *Lupo*, Italian destroyer (1938), 679 tons, three 3.9-in guns, four 18-in torp tubes, 34 kts.

officer of *Lupo* said that he could reach Maleme before dark. The flotilla set off again at noon. Meanwhile the second (Heraklion) flotilla was on passage from Piraeus. At this stage a further attempt was made to persuade the Italian fleet to put to sea "to pin down British warships away from Crete"; but the authorities in Rome again refused.⁷

During the 21st British air reconnaissance reported the southward move of the Maleme flotilla from Milos, and in the evening *Glennie* in *Dido*, with *Orion*, *Ajax*, *Janus*, *Kimberley*, *Hasty* and *Hereward* moved in through the Antikithera Channel, shooting down two enemy aircraft without damage to themselves in a sharp attack at 7.30 p.m. In the east King, whose force was now joined by *Carlisle*, passed north through Kaso Strait at midnight and swept along the north coast of Crete.

Meanwhile the Maleme flotilla, delayed by strong head winds, was belying the statement of *Lupo's* captain that he would reach Crete before dark. At 11.30 p.m. it was still some eighteen miles north of Canea, steering south; and here, at this time, it met *Glennie's* force steering east at 28 knots, the cruisers in line ahead, the destroyers spread to screen and broaden the search. *Janus*, on *Dido's* port bow, was first to sight the enemy. *Glennie* led his cruisers round to the north and encountered *Lupo*. The Italian passed ahead and close down the starboard side of *Dido* and *Orion*, making smoke, firing torpedoes, and receiving bursts of fire from the cruisers. She then cut in between *Orion* and *Ajax*, and "was finished off by the latter with a complete broadside up the stern".⁸ For two hours *Glennie's* force manoeuvred in the neighbourhood engaging the ships of the flotilla.

When illuminated they were seen to be crowded with German troops and to be flying Greek colours. The crews, obviously pressed men, standing on deck waving white flags, and it was distasteful having to destroy them in company with their callous masters. . . . In all one or two steamers, at least a dozen caiques, a small pleasure steamer and a steam yacht were engaged and either sunk or left burning, beside the destroyer blown up.⁹

By 2 a.m. on the 22nd there were no more enemy vessels in sight, and after a further sweep to the east and north *Glennie*, short of anti-aircraft ammunition and anticipating heavy attacks at daylight, withdrew, and rejoined Rawlings at 8 a.m. It was estimated that about 4,000 German troops were in the ships sunk by the force.¹

⁷ Earlier in the year (March) the Italians had told the Germans that unless they received fuel oil from Germany "the big ships will have to be inactivated in June of this year and the submarines in Feb 1942". The Chief of Staff, Armed Forces High Command (Keitel), said that examination showed the Italians had 600,000 tons of fuel oil, "more than we have ourselves"; which made Raeder wonder "whether the 600,000 tons actually exist or whether the Italians gave this figure merely because it was the one that had been quoted to the Duce". *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs*, 18 Mar 1941.

⁸ *Lupo* was severely damaged but did not sink, and took part in the subsequent rescue of German troops from the sea.

⁹ *Glennie*, Letter of Proceedings, "Operations off Crete 19th-23rd May 1941". Dated 4 Jun 1941.

¹ This estimate was excessive as was the implied figure of casualties inflicted. From German records available since the war, it is now known that the total strength of the enemy convoy was 2,331, and consisted of *III Bn 100 Mtn Regt*, *Heavy Weapons Groups* and part of *II AA Regt*. The report of *Air Fleet 4* stated: "Due to the courageous action of the *Lupo* in firing torpedoes at the enemy from a range of 200 metres, although she herself received 18 direct hits which put her out of action, and to the scattered formation of our ships, only a small portion of the

While Glennie's force was engaged with the Maleme flotilla, King's cruisers and destroyers were sweeping the north coast of Crete from Kaso Strait. At 4 a.m. on the 22nd they were off Heraklion, whence they swept north-westward in search of enemy convoys. At 8.30 the force was steering towards Milos under heavy air attack when a single troop-laden caïque was sighted and was sunk by *Perth*. Later in the morning more small vessels were sighted ahead. The British destroyers gave chase while *Perth* and *Naiad* engaged an escorting enemy destroyer which retired under smoke. *Kingston*, ahead of the cruisers, engaged an enemy destroyer and reported sighting a large number of caïques behind a smoke-screen she was laying. This was apparently the Heraklion convoy, which was of considerable size. All this time the British force was under heavy air attack, which was practically continuous from 9.45 a.m. *Carlisle's* maximum speed was 21 knots and, in the chase, the ships were becoming strung out. King considered that in the face of heavy air attacks (Cunningham later described them as "certainly on a majestic scale") this was most undesirable, and he ordered the destroyers to abandon the chase, and withdrew to the westward. The Heraklion flotilla thus escaped. But the main object of the British—the prevention of seaborne landings on Crete—was achieved, as the Admiral Southeast ordered the return of the flotilla to Piraeus. "The problem of supplying heavy arms and reinforcement by sea," commented the Report of the *Fourth Air Fleet*, "therefore remained unsolved."² During retirement the air attacks continued unabated. *Perth* was shaken by near-misses, but *Naiad* and *Carlisle* were both hit, the first-named sustaining bad damage with her speed reduced to 16 knots.

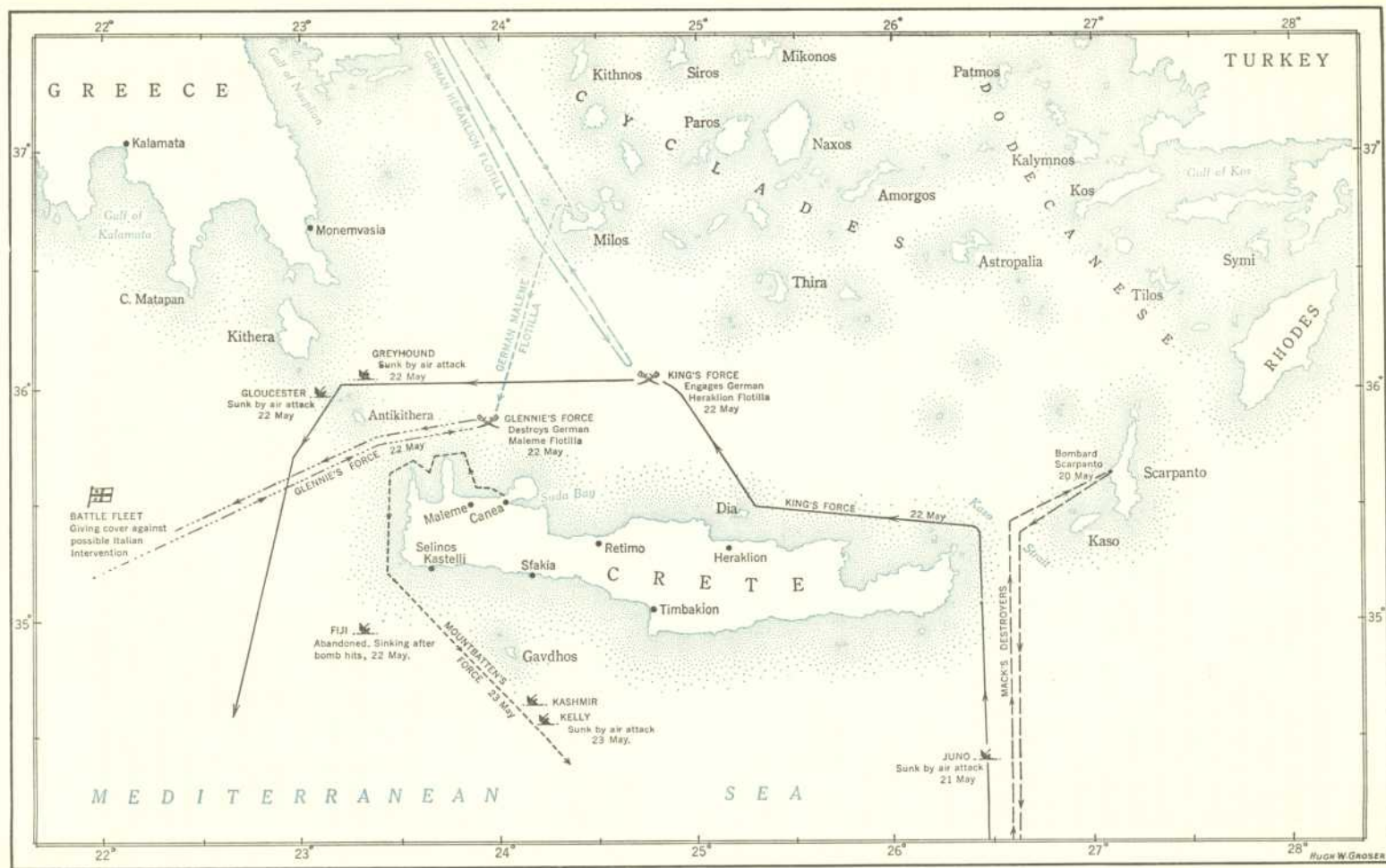
Rawlings with the battle squadron was patrolling close west of Kithera Channel. At 8.30 a.m. he was joined by *Gloucester*, *Fiji*, *Greyhound* and *Griffin*, which had spent the night patrolling off Matapan. Ordered by Cunningham, more destroyers were on their way to join him—Mountbatten's five ships from Malta, and Waller in *Stuart* with *Voyager* and *Vendetta* from Alexandria. Glennie's force, which Cunningham had ordered back to Alexandria when he heard of its shortage of ammunition, was detached for that port at 10.45 a.m. Shortly after noon Rawlings received a request for support from King, and the battle squadron headed for the Aegean at 23 knots. At 1.12 p.m., in the Kithera Channel, anti-aircraft shell bursts ahead indicated King approaching under heavy air attack. As the two forces met *Warspite* was attacked by dive bombers and received a direct hit which wrecked her starboard anti-aircraft batteries

Flotilla was caught and destroyed." The morning report of the *Twelfth Army* dated 28 May 1941 stated: "The number saved from *1 Light Convoy* has increased to 1,665 including 21 Italians. It is expected that this number will be still increased slightly, as not all the islands have been searched yet."

The Air Sea Rescue Service, which the Germans had instituted, saved many lives, helped by Italian speed boats and by the Italian destroyers *Lupo* and *Lira*, "whose conduct was exemplary". (*Air Fleet 4 Report*.)

The most reliable casualty statement seems to be the *Twelfth Army* statement of "Missing: 13 officers 311 OR lost at sea". This is supported by the QMG Report of 4 Jun which gives casualties of *1 Light Convoy* as "309 killed".

² Cunningham, in his Despatch on the battle, says that King's situation was a difficult one, "but it appears that no diminution of risk could have been achieved by retirement and that, in fact, the safest place for the squadron would have been among the enemy ships".



The Battle of Crete

and reduced her speed. The battle squadron turned in astern of King (who now, as senior officer, assumed command of the combined force). All ships were getting short of anti-aircraft ammunition, *Gloucester* and *Fiji* particularly so, and air attacks continued with little intermission, to take heavy toll.

Greyhound was the first to go. She was rejoining the screen around 2 p.m. after sinking a large caique when she was struck by two bombs from dive bombers. King, unaware of their shortage of ammunition, sent *Gloucester* and *Fiji*, with *Kingston* and *Kandahar*, to pick up survivors and stand by the stricken ship; but being told of their lack by Rawlings he at 2.57 p.m. ordered both cruisers and the destroyers to withdraw at *Gloucester's* discretion. At 3.30 p.m. the two cruisers were sighted from the battle squadron overtaking at high speed and engaging enemy aircraft. Twenty minutes later *Gloucester* was hit by several bombs, immobilised, and set on fire with her upper deck a shambles. *Fiji* was ordered to leave boats and rafts, sink *Gloucester*, and withdraw. The battle squadron, steering S.W. by S., was gradually getting clear of the Straits, but intermittent air attacks continued, and at 4.45 *Valiant* was hit aft in a high-level attack, though without serious damage. Soon after this *Fiji* reported her position, in company with *Kandahar* and *Kingston*, thirty miles due east from the main force, steering south and under air attack. At 5.45 p.m. Mountbatten's destroyers joined the battle squadron and at 6.30 p.m. course was altered to the southward to close *Fiji*. Before touch could be made *Kandahar* reported that *Fiji* had been hit and was sinking. *Kelly*, *Kipling* and *Kashmir* were detached to give assistance (*Kelvin* and *Jackal* were sent to Kithera Channel to seek *Gloucester* survivors), and Waller in *Stuart*, on his way to join Rawlings the following morning, was diverted with *Voyager* and *Vendetta* to help with the *Fiji* rescue work. The Australian destroyers could not find the position, however, and searched fruitlessly for some hours south of Gavdhos Island before being recalled to the battle squadron. In the event *Fiji's* survivors were rescued by *Kingston* and *Kandahar*, who left the scene of sinking with a total of 523 at 10.45 p.m. to join King. Two hours earlier, in accordance with instructions received from Cunningham, *Decoy* and *Hero* were detached from the battle squadron to Ayia Roumeli on the south coast of Crete to embark the King of Greece, the British Ambassador, and other important personages. Shortly before 10 p.m. Rawlings, whom King had requested to detail destroyers for night duties as instructed by Cunningham, ordered Mountbatten's destroyers to abandon their searches and to carry out night sweeps north of Crete in the Canea-Kisamos-Suda Bay area.

The main force had altered course to E.S.E. at 9 p.m. on the 22nd and so continued until 1 a.m. on the 23rd, when King with his four cruisers (two of them damaged and all practically denuded of anti-aircraft ammunition) parted company for Alexandria on Cunningham's orders. Rawlings remained south of Crete, and at 4 a.m. turned to the north-westward to make a daylight rallying point for Mountbatten off Kithera

Strait. But half an hour later a signal was received from Cunningham recalling all forces to Alexandria forthwith.³

On receipt of this signal Rawlings turned to the eastward ("although my inclination was to continue towards Cape Elephonisi") and took stock of the situation. There were in his vicinity scattered groups of ships south or south-west of Crete—King's four cruisers; Waller and his three destroyers; *Kandahar* and *Kingston* (almost out of fuel) on their way to join King; *Jaguar* and *Defender* bound from Alexandria to Suda Bay with ammunition for the army; *Kelvin* and *Jackal* of Mountbatten's flotilla who were returning independently after a sweep of Kisamos and Canea Bays; and *Decoy* and *Hero* with the King of Greece and other important personages on board. All these ships were within dive bomber range from the north, and Rawlings decided ("swayed, I believe, no little by the two fuel-less destroyers and *Decoy's* principal passenger") that he should form a rallying point for them. He therefore set course for Alexandria at 15 knots, and informed them all of his position, course and speed. Throughout the forenoon of the 23rd the scattered groups joined up (*Jaguar* and *Defender* were detached later to enter the Aegean at nightfall) and by 10.45 a.m. were in a compact force steering for Alexandria. The force was kept under enemy air observation during the day, but there were no attacks. Alexandria was reached without further incident in the early hours of the 24th May.

During the night of the 22nd-23rd, while the main force was south of Crete, British ships were active north of the island. In the east Mack (D) 14 in *Jervis*, with *Ilex*, *Nizam* and *Havock*, passed the Kaso Strait at 9 p.m. on the 22nd and patrolled off Heraklion without incident, and then withdrew to Alexandria. In the west *Kelvin* and *Jackal* reconnoitred Kisamos and Canea Bays and then withdrew. The rest of Mountbatten's force, *Kelly*, *Kashmir* and *Kipling*, did not leave Canea Bay (where *Kelly* and *Kashmir* carried out a short bombardment of Maleme, now in enemy hands, and damaged two troop-carrying caiques by gun fire) until nearly daylight, when they retired at full speed. They survived two air attacks but at 7.55 a.m. on the 23rd, just south of Gavdhos Island, they were attacked by twenty-four dive bombers. *Kashmir* and *Kelly* were sunk. *Kipling* rescued 279 officers and men (including Mountbatten). In the three hours of rescue operations she survived six bombing attacks in which it was estimated forty aircraft engaged and dropped eighty-three bombs. She reached Alexandria safely on the morning of the 24th after running out of fuel fifty miles from the port.

By this time things were going badly ashore in Crete, where the enemy was getting steady airborne reinforcements in the Maleme-Canea sector, and the British had to form a new line. At Heraklion a demand to surren-

³ Cunningham was influenced in his decision to recall all ships by his belief, caused by a calligraphic error in a signal he received from Rawlings, that the battleships had no pom-pom ammunition left. In fact they had plenty. But for this the battleships would not have been ordered back to Alexandria and would have been available as support for Mountbatten's destroyers on the morning of the 23rd as Rawlings intended, and the subsequent loss of *Kelly* and *Kashmir* might have been avoided.

der was rejected by the British and Greek commanders. An effort to reinforce the army was made on the 22nd, when *Glenroy* embarked 900 troops and sailed from Alexandria for Timbakion, escorted by *Coventry*, *Auckland* and *Flamingo*. The operation was postponed by Cunningham (after consultation with Wavell) in view of the heavy scale of enemy air attack off Crete, and the ships returned to Alexandria⁴ where they arrived during the night of the 23rd-24th. Another attempt to land troops was made on the 24th when *Isis*, *Hero* and *Nizam* left Alexandria carrying the headquarters and two battalions of "Special Service Troops" (commandos) for Selino Kastelli on the west of Crete. The weather was too bad to complete the operation, and these ships also returned to Alexandria with their troops. *Nizam*, who had embarked five officers and 103 troops, lost two 27-foot whalers in the heavy seas.

That night, however, the fast minelayer *Abdiel*⁵ reached Suda Bay and disembarked 200 Special Service troops, medical stores and ammunition. Captain Morse recorded of Suda Bay at this time that anti-aircraft defences were considerably reduced owing to damage and casualties from bombing; that General Freyberg and staff had joined him at naval headquarters owing to the bombing of military headquarters; and that he had destroyed unnecessary books and papers. Also during the night 24th-25th, in view of indications of a possible attempted landing at Sitia in the east by Italian forces from the Dodecanese, *Ajax*, *Dido*, *Kimberley* and *Hotspru* swept Kaso Strait, but sighted nothing.

During the 25th, 26th and 27th, considerable British forces were at sea, to harass the enemy and endeavour to reinforce Crete. By the 25th *Formidable's* fighter strength had been built up to twelve aircraft, and it was decided to use her in an air attack on Scarpanto, which was being used extensively by enemy air forces. At noon that day the 1st Battle Squadron, Pridham-Wippell in *Queen Elizabeth* with *Barham*, *Formidable*, and eight destroyers including the Australians *Voyager* and *Vendetta*, left Alexandria for a flying-off position S.S.W. of Kaso Strait. In the evening *Glenroy*, now under the escort of Waller in *Stuart* with *Coventry* and *Jaguar*, again sailed from Alexandria to try to land her troops at Timbakion. Another Australian destroyer, *Napier*, with *Kelvin* and *Jackal*, also left the Egyptian base to relieve the destroyers with *Ajax* and *Dido* and join the cruisers in a repetition of the sweep of the 24th-25th. In the early hours of the 26th *Abdiel*, *Hero* and *Nizam* sailed with the Special Service Troops it had not been possible to land at Selino Kastelli on the 24th. This time the attempt was to be made at Suda Bay.

The air attack on Scarpanto, limited in scale by the carrier's shortage of aircraft, was carried out in the morning darkness of the 26th. Two enemy aircraft on the ground were certainly destroyed and a number

⁴ The Admiralty took a direct hand in this. Cunningham ordered the convoy's return at 11.27 a.m. on the 23rd. At 3.59 p.m. the Admiralty ordered *Glenroy* to turn northwards "pending instructions", and an hour later urged Cunningham to land the reinforcements in Crete that night if possible. It was, however, too late for the ships to reach Timbakion that night, and disembarkation of troops by day was out of the question.

⁵ HMS *Abdiel*, minelayer (1941), 2,650 tons, six 4-in guns, 39.75 kts; sunk in Taranto Bay, 9 Sep 1943.

damaged, and two were shot down in combat during air attacks on the British ships. *Formidable* lost one aircraft. At 7 a.m. on the 26th the battle squadron was joined by *Ajax*, *Dido*, and their three destroyers, and the force retired to the south and east. Meanwhile the *Glenroy* convoy was some distance west of the battle squadron north bound, and Cunningham instructed Pridham-Wippell to provide cover. Course was altered to the westward soon after noon. At 1.20 p.m., when the battle squadron was about ninety miles north-east of Bardia it was attacked by large formations of fighter-escorted high level and dive bombers from Libya. *Formidable* received two hits, one of which blew in her starboard side forward and started a fire; and the destroyer *Nubian* had her stern blown off but remained seaworthy. *Formidable* operated fighter patrols until dusk, but was then detached for Alexandria escorted by *Voyager*, *Vendetta*, *Hereward* and *Decoy*. The remainder of the force operated to the north-west of Alexandria, and at daylight on the 27th steered towards Kaso. Just before 9 a.m., when 190 miles from Scarpanto, the squadron was attacked by about fifteen aircraft from the Dodecanese. *Barham* was hit, had a turret put out of action, and suffered flooded bilges from near misses.⁶ Soon after noon Cunningham recalled the squadron to Alexandria, where it arrived at 7 p.m.

Glenroy again failed to land her troops. Throughout the 26th the convoy was the target for sustained air attacks. Bombs were successfully evaded until the evening, when the ships were about fifty miles from their objective. At 6.20 p.m., in a heavy dive bombing attack, *Glenroy* was set on fire and damaged by near misses. The fire was extinguished and course resumed for Timbaktion, but three of *Glenroy's* landing craft were put out of action and all the army petrol was lost through the fire. It was plain that the landing could not be effected before daylight, and the operation was abandoned. At 9.15 p.m. the ships turned back, and reached Alexandria the following evening.

Abdiel, *Nizam* and *Hero* were more successful. They reached Suda Bay during the night 26th-27th, disembarked their troops and stores, and embarked 930 (merchant seamen, some naval people, and others not needed) and returned to Alexandria. It was the final reinforcement of Crete. On the 26th Morse recorded: "General situation in Suda-Canea area very bad and General Officer Commanding decided that he could no longer continue the battle. Preparations made for evacuation and movements of H.Q. and W/T to Sfakia. Confusion all day due to lack of definite orders. P.M. Burnt all unwanted secret papers." At 10 p.m. the following day, having destroyed the port wireless station, the remaining members of the base staff in a "convoy of lorries and cars left G.H.Q. for Sfakia. Progress very slow on account of bad road and thousands of disorganised retreating troops."

⁶ The Mediterranean Fleet was thus again deprived of an aircraft carrier. *Formidable* spent eight weeks being temporarily repaired in Alexandria, followed by about three months' repairs in the United States. *Barham* underwent temporary repairs in Alexandria, and was then for six weeks repairing in Durban.

IV

So far the navy had succeeded in its task of preventing seaborne invasion of Crete, but at heavy cost. In the six days of the battle two cruisers and four destroyers were sunk; the only aircraft carrier, two battleships, and one destroyer were virtually out of action and had to be withdrawn from the Mediterranean for repairs; and four cruisers and three destroyers incurred damage necessitating repair periods varying from a few days to a few weeks. Nor was the increasing strain confined to the material of the fleet, as Cunningham pointed out to the Admiralty. In reply to a Chiefs of Staff signal of the 23rd May (before all the losses listed above were incurred) in which he was told that "if enemy convoys were reported north of Crete the fleet would have to operate in that area by day although considerable losses might be expected", he said in a message to the Admiralty of the 26th that

the determining factor in operating in the Aegean is not fear of sustaining losses, but need to avoid loss which, without commensurate advantage to ourselves, will cripple fleet out here. . . .

Detailing the losses suffered up to then, he continued:

In point of fact, supply by sea has not yet come much into the picture, as despite loss and turning back of his convoys, enemy is so prolific in air that for the moment he is able to reinforce and keep his forces supplied by air at will. This process is quite unchecked by air action on our part, and sight of constant unhindered procession of JU-52's flying into Crete is among factors likely to affect morale of our forces. I feel that their Lordships should know that effect of recent operations on personnel is cumulative. Our light craft, officers, men, and machinery alike are nearing exhaustion. Since "Lustre" started at end of February they have been kept running almost to limit of endurance, and now, when work is redoubled, they are faced with an air concentration besides which, I am assured, that in Norway was child's play. It is inadvisable to drive men beyond a certain point.

The strain on men and material weighed heavily.⁷ But Cunningham put his finger on the determining factor in the battle for Crete—that the enemy was "able to reinforce and keep his forces supplied by air at will". His ability in this regard had not been appreciated. It had been believed that the ground forces in Crete could deal with such enemies as landed by air, and that "seaborne support was inevitable and that the destruction of troop convoys would win the day". As it was, because he was so prolific, and unopposed, in the air, the enemy was able to dispense with

⁷ Waller, on his return to Australia from the Mediterranean later in 1941, spoke of the lack of sleep as the greatest trial. An Australian officer in HMS *Naiad* similarly spoke of "the certain knowledge when one turned in that he would not wake naturally but to the sound of action station alarms or of bomb explosions". The 1st Lieutenant of *Hotspur*, writing of a day in Suda Bay during the Greek campaign, says: "It was about two in the afternoon when we finally got anchored and managed to eat a bit and get clean. The crew were so tired by now that I only closed up the short-range weapons, and let everyone else sleep. Of course at 3.30 the raid came. I was in such a deep sleep by now that it must have taken quite a few bombs to wake me, and I remember fighting to get my shoes on with the whistle and roar of bombs going on above me; and, still with a mind half conscious, I got up on deck to see a whopper go up about a hundred yards astern. . . . The most amazing thing of all was the fact that some of our sailors slept clean through the whole fiendish din of ack-ack barrage and shaking of near bombs without turning an eyelid, which all shows how tired they were." Hugh Hodgkinson, *Before the Tide Turned*, p. 99.

The strain was heavy on older ships, and summarising his material assets in a signal to the Admiralty on 31 May, Cunningham did not count "four [Australian] destroyers of 19th Division now only fit for local duty in Western Desert".

the seaborne support which was denied to him by the British navy, though undoubtedly that denial narrowed the margin by which he achieved victory, and raised that victory's cost so high that it inflicted a lasting defeat on the German propagandists of airborne assault. In the words of General Student, "father" of the airborne idea and its champion throughout the war, and who was responsible for the organisation of parachute and landing operations in Crete: "Crete was the grave of the German parachutists."⁸ No further operations were planned for parachute troops, and in October 1941 they were incorporated in the infantry forces on all fronts.⁹

The Battle of Crete proved to the British that in an aircraft versus ship battle in confined waters where the ships had no air cover and were exposed to powerful attacks pressed home with determination, overwhelming advantage lay with the air. On the other hand it proved to the Germans that a successful attack on a strongly defended island required not only air superiority but naval superiority also. This the Germans never achieved in the Mediterranean, even with the Italian Fleet. Their complete dominance in the air enabled them to win the battle ashore on Crete, but could not wholly debar British ships from operating in the surrounding waters. Nor could it prevent the withdrawal from the island by those ships of most of the defenders whose defeat it had made possible.

V

At 11 a.m. on the 26th May General Freyberg told General Wavell by signal that in his opinion "limit of endurance has been reached by troops under my command here at Suda Bay"; and that once that sector had been reduced the reduction of Retimo and Heraklion would be only a matter of time. Embarkation of a proportion of the force might be possible if an immediate decision were taken. The following morning Wavell informed the Chiefs of Staff in London that he feared "we must recognise that Crete is no longer tenable and that troops must be withdrawn as far as possible". That same day the Chiefs of Staff replied in agreement, and instructed that withdrawal should be effected forthwith. As Cunningham wrote:

At 3 p.m. on May 27th the fateful decision was taken, and we wearily turned to planning another evacuation with fewer ships, far less resources, and in circumstances much more difficult. Our seamen and our ships were worn to the point of exhaustion, and now they were asked for more.

As with the Greek withdrawal, that from Crete was one of hurried improvisation in which most of the troops embarked from beaches after they had undergone arduous cross-country marches, being bombed and fighting rearguard actions. In only one embarkation, that from Heraklion,

⁸ Post-war interrogation of General Student, Sep 1945.

⁹ Written in Jul 1945 by Generalmajor Seibt, who was QMG *XI Flying Corps* during the attack on Crete. Both references from "The Strategic Importance of Crete, 1940-41", study prepared by Enemy Documents Section, British Historical Branch. (Actually there were some subsequent parachute operations, among others one of battalion strength to rescue Mussolini, and one of smaller strength in the Ardennes fighting in Dec 1944.)

were any port facilities available. Owing to disorganisation ashore in Crete, and the paucity of communications, it was most difficult for Cunningham in Alexandria to keep a clear picture of what was happening and what ships were required from night to night at the embarkation points. Furthermore, having gained airfields in Crete, the enemy was able greatly to increase the scale of his air attacks and to extend them over the sea farther south. This general southward extension (for the bulk of the troops were lifted from Sfakia beach in the south of Crete) did, however, enable the Royal Air Force to provide limited fighter cover to ships during daylight with aircraft operating from Egypt. This protection was organised by Group Captain Pelly,¹ of R.A.F. Headquarters, Middle East, who was temporarily attached to Cunningham's staff. On the military side Cunningham received great assistance in arranging embarkations from Major-General Evetts,² of General Headquarters, Middle East, who was appointed on his staff as Military Liaison Officer.

The plan for embarkations was that troops from the Maleme-Suda Bay area and Retimo should proceed overland to the south coast and embark from the beach at Sfakia and Plakias respectively, and that those in the Heraklion area (excepting a small number isolated to the south, who were expected to make their way to Timbaktion) would be taken from that port. Embarkation would be at night, allowing the ships to sail by 3 a.m. to get as far as possible from enemy air bases by daylight. Embarkation points and numbers to be taken off would be signalled by Freyberg, and, after consulting Evetts, Cunningham would decide what ships to send. In general this plan was followed, but in the event Heraklion and Sfakia were the only embarkation points used.

It will be recalled that the overland withdrawal from the Suda Bay area started on the night of the 27th. The same day Heraklion was cut off by the enemy to the south and west. It was decided to carry out the first embarkations on the night 28th-29th from both Sfakia and Heraklion, with the main operation at Heraklion, where were some 4,500 troops, including the 2/4th Australian Battalion. The embarkation forces left Alexandria in the early morning of 28th May, Rawlings in *Orion* with *Ajax*, *Dido*, *Decoy*, *Jackal*, *Imperial*, *Hotspur*, *Kimberley* and *Hereward* for Heraklion; and Arliss, (D)7, in *Napier*, with *Nizam*, *Kelvin* and *Kandahar* for Sfakia.

Rawlings was due at Heraklion at midnight, and therefore had to pass through Kaso Strait by 9 p.m., at about the end of evening twilight. As the force sped northwards across the Mediterranean aircraft were detected, and attacks with high level bombing began at 5 p.m., followed a few minutes later by dive bombing. During the remaining four hours of daylight the ships were continuously attacked, some ten separate raids by

¹ Air Marshal Sir Claude Pelly, KCB, CBE, MC; RAF. C-in-C ME Air Force 1953. Of Orford, Suffolk, Eng; b. 19 Aug 1902.

² Lt-Gen Sir John Evetts, CB, CBE, MC. GOC 6 British Div 1941; Asst CIGS(W) 1942-44; Head of British Min of Supply Mission to Australia, and Ch Exec Officer, Joint UK-Aust Long Range Weapons Bd of Admin 1946-51. Regular soldier; b. Naini Tal, India, 30 Jun 1891.

formations of up to nine aircraft being recorded.³ At about 7.20 p.m. *Imperial* received a near miss, the results of which, not apparent at the time, were to be far-reaching. At 8.10 p.m. *Ajax* suffered a near miss which started a small fire, seriously wounded twenty men and badly shocked others, and caused above-water damage. Rawlings detached the ship and sent her back to Alexandria after dark. The remainder of the force cleared Kaso Strait at 9 p.m. and turned to the westward through a dark clear night with a fresh north-westerly wind.

At Heraklion the Naval Officer-in-Charge (Captain Macdonald) had been informed by Cunningham that the ships would arrive, and embarkation plans had been implemented. During the day the enemy received large airborne reinforcements, and for two hours during the afternoon the defenders underwent an intensive bombing and machine-gun attack by about 200 aircraft. The British defence line encircling the port was about seven miles in length, but by about 11 p.m. some 2,000 troops, including a large number of wounded, were on the mole ready to embark, and outlying troops were being withdrawn to an inner rearguard line.

Rawlings arrived soon after 11.30 p.m. It had been intended that the cruisers should enter harbour, but in view of the earlier fresh breeze he had decided to ferry with the destroyers, and stuck to this though it was now calm. Silently in the darkness, which was patterned only by occasional Very lights soaring up from the German lines beyond the town, *Hotspur*, *Decoy*, *Jackal* and *Hereward* stole into the harbour and berthed two-deep at the mole. Embarkation went smoothly, and after half an hour the two outside ships had filled and left to transfer their troops to the cruisers, shortly followed by the other two. *Imperial* and *Kimberley* then entered the harbour and loaded up, and *Kimberley*, last to leave, embarked the final stragglers at 2.55 and left the mole at exactly 3 a.m. on the 29th. "It is believed," wrote Macdonald, "that except for those in hospital none were left behind." The enemy made no attempt to interfere with the embarkation, and though on every night previous aircraft had flown over the harbour dropping parachute flares at 11 p.m. and sometimes at 2 a.m., none appeared on this night.

By 3.20 a.m. the force had formed up and was steaming at 29 knots for Kaso Strait. Shortly after, trouble started. At 3.45 a.m. *Imperial's* steering gear, apparently damaged by the near miss the previous day, suddenly failed. Rawlings sent *Hotspur* back to take everyone off and sink her, while the remainder of the force proceeded eastwards at 15 knots. *Hotspur*, her task completed and now with a total of about 900 on board, rejoined the squadron at the northern entrance to Kaso Strait just after sunrise, and speed was increased to 29 knots. As the sun rose the turn to the southward to the strait was made. It was then that fire was opened on the first two dive bombers. "Thereafter," wrote Rawlings, "attacks began in earnest."

³ Rawlings recorded that "since bombs were on occasion (up to 7 p.m.) seen to fall 5 to 10 miles away it was judged that friendly fighters were about". "Letter of Proceedings", 28-29 May 1941.

The squadron was in the middle of the strait when, at 6.25 a.m., *Hereward*, with approximately 450 troops on board, was hit. Rawlings decided it would be inviting further casualties to send a destroyer to her, and continued on. When last seen she was making slowly across the five miles of sea towards Crete, her guns engaging an enemy aircraft.⁴ *Decoy* was damaged by a near miss at 6.45, and speed had to be reduced to 25 knots, and further reduced for a while to 21 knots when a very close miss damaged *Orion* a few minutes later. About 8.15 *Dido* was hit, and at 9.5 a.m. *Orion*, both ships having forward turrets put out of action. It was shortly after this, when *Orion* was near-missed in an attack, that her captain, G. R. B. Back,⁵ died. He had been severely wounded by an explosive bullet in an earlier attack, and the bomb explosions "must have brought him back to a more conscious condition as he tried to sit up, calling on every one to 'keep steady'. When the attack ceased he called out 'It's all right men—that one's over'. Then he died."⁶

At 10.45, when the force was about 100 miles from Kaso, a squadron of eleven bombers attacked *Orion*, which had 1,100 troops on board. One bomb passed through the bridge and burst below in the crowded mess decks, and some 260 were killed and 280 wounded. Normal communication between bridge and engine room was destroyed, the steering gear was put out of action, and three boiler rooms were damaged. "The ship, out of control, steadied somewhat inconsiderately on a course for Scarpanto until matters could be rectified."⁷ *Hotspur's* 1st Lieutenant watched her as pouring yellow and black smoke, she was swinging round towards the Kaso Strait, out of control. . . . The whole squadron waited breathlessly, and then she began altering slowly round, and limped back towards us. We dropped back and round the wounded ship, and steamed on with her. Sometimes great clouds of yellow smoke would come from her funnel, and she would drop right down in speed owing to the sea-water seeping into her oil tanks.⁸

It was the last dive bomber attack, and after 11 a.m. there was a two-hour respite during which two Fulmar aircraft—the first friendly fighters seen by the force—"caused a distinct feeling of relief". There were three high level attacks between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m., but no further damage was suffered; and the force reached Alexandria at 8 p.m. and landed 3,486 troops, some 600 having been killed or captured on passage. "From my own observation," wrote Rawlings, "the conduct of the military units embarked in my flagship was admirable, and they remained remarkably steady and helpful throughout. I very much regret the heavy casualties they sustained."

Arliss' destroyer force had better fortune. The ships embarked additional whalers for beach work, five tons of badly needed rations for 15,000

⁴ She did not reach the shore, but sank. However most of her troops and ship's company were saved by Italian torpedo boats.

⁵ Capt G. R. B. Back, RN. (HMS's *Glory* 1914-16, *Ramillies* 1917-18.) Comd HMS's *Duncan* and Capt (D) 21 Flotilla 1939-40, *Orion* 1940-41; Flag Capt and CSO to Vice-Adm (D) Mediterranean 1940-41, to 7 Cruiser Sqn 1941. B. 22 Feb 1894. Killed in action 29 May 1941.

⁶ Rawlings, Letter of Proceedings.

⁷ Rawlings, Letter of Proceedings.

⁸ Hodgkinson, *Before the Tide Turned*, pp. 146-7.

troops, and 150,000 rounds of small arms ammunition at Alexandria, and made an uneventful passage to Sfakia, where they arrived about midnight on the 28th. Sfakia, a small fishing village, had a shingle beach of which only a short stretch could be used for embarking in boats. The beach was walled in by a 500-foot high escarpment and access to it was by a precipitous goat track. Only those actually embarking could be on the beach and, in the lack of signal communications, touch between the beach area and troops on the escarpment, in hiding from air observation, had to be maintained on foot. It took at least two hours to climb the goat track. Both navy and army headquarters on shore were now in a cave near the village, and for this first night Morse had signalled Cunningham that "up to 1,000 will be ready to embark". Embarking in their boats, the destroyers lifted a total of 744⁹ and sailed at 3 a.m. on the 29th. On the return passage the force was bombed by four aircraft between 9.5 a.m. and 9.40 a.m. and *Nizam* sustained minor damage from near misses. Alexandria was reached without further incident at 5 p.m. that day.

On the evening of the 27th Morse signalled to Cunningham that numbers available for embarkation at Sfakia would be: night of 29th-30th, 6,000; 30th-31st, 5,000; 31st-1st June, 3,000; plus 1,200 from Retimo at Plakias Bay. To meet the 29th-30th commitment, Cunningham sailed a force from Alexandria at 9 p.m. on the 28th under King in *Phoebe*,¹ with *Perth*, *Calcutta*, *Coventry*, *Glengyle*, *Jervis*, *Janus* and *Hasty*. The relatively slow speed of *Glengyle* dictated the sailing time from Alexandria and lengthened the period of passage. Only one air attack was experienced on the passage north, at 10 a.m. on the 29th, when bombs fell close to *Perth*.

Meanwhile, in Alexandria, Cunningham learned of the losses and damage suffered by the Heraklion force. In a signal to the Admiralty on the 29th he outlined the situation, and added that a Glen ship and cruisers were on their way to Sfakia. He continued:

It is evident that tomorrow we must expect further casualties to ships accompanied with extremely [heavy] casualties to men particularly in the case of *Glengyle* if she is hit with 3,000 men on board. The fighter protection available is very meagre.

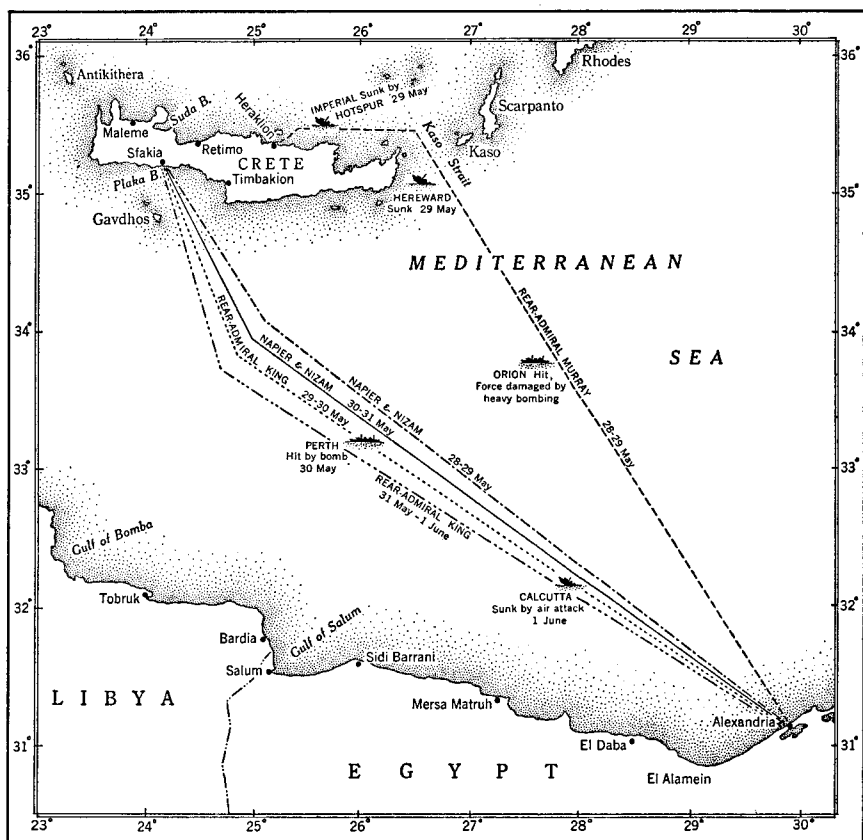
He then asked if it were justified risking heavy casualties in crowded ships, and accepting a scale of loss and damage to the fleet which "may make us so weak that we cannot operate". He remarked that on the other hand to leave men deliberately in enemy hands was against all our tradition "though in the end many men will be alive who may well be lost if they embark". He showed his own feelings by concluding:

I am ready to continue with the evacuation as long as we have a ship with which to do so but I feel it my duty to put these considerations before their Lordships.

⁹ Arliss' figures of actual embarkations: *Napier*, 296 troops; *Kandahar*, 213 troops; *Kelvin*, 101 troops; *Nizam*, 114 troops—a total of 724. The other 20 were miscellaneous. For example *Napier's* list was: 36 officers, 260 other ranks, 3 women, 1 Greek, 1 Chinaman, 10 merchant seamen, 2 children, 1 dog. (The dog is not included in the total.)

¹ HMS *Phoebe*, cruiser (1940), 5,450 tons, ten 5.25-in guns, six 21-in torp tubes, 33 kts.

The Admiralty, possibly influenced by Cunningham's remark about the many men who would remain alive as prisoners but might well be dead if they embarked, reversed the stand they had taken six days earlier on sending a "Glen" ship to Crete, and replied that same evening that *Glengyle* should be turned back but the remaining ships should continue. By the time this signal was received by Cunningham *Glengyle* was



Withdrawal from Crete

nearing Sfakia, so she was not recalled. (Admiralty, in a later signal, concurred in this.) Instead, to strengthen King's screen and to be available as rescue ships should any in his force be sunk, Cunningham sent Waller in *Stuart* with *Jaguar* and *Defender* from Alexandria late on the 29th to join King south of Crete the following morning.

King's force reached Sfakia at 11.30 p.m. on the 29th and embarkation began in *Glengyle's* boats and two landing craft which had been specially shipped in *Perth*. Embarkation proceeded swiftly after some temporary

slowness with walking wounded. Some delay was experienced on shore due to the inadequacy of the goat track and, once embarkation was in its swing, Morse found "the difficulty was to get troops down to the beach quickly enough". At 3.20 a.m. on the 30th, having embarked "about 3,400 troops",² the force sailed at 19½ knots. *Stuart*, *Jaguar* and *Defender* joined at 6.48 a.m. south of Gavdhos. Three air attacks were made on the force during the passage to Alexandria, and in the first of these, soon after 9.30 a.m., *Perth* sustained a direct hit abaft the bridge. The bomb exploded in "A" boiler room; put the forward unit out of action; and killed two cooks and two stokers³ of the ship's company and two Marines and seven soldiers among the passengers. Warrant Officer Hill and Stoker Petty Officer Reece remained in the boiler room among scalding steam in a gallant effort to save one of the stokers. He was dead when they brought him out, and themselves badly scalded.⁴ In the subsequent attacks between noon and 1 p.m. *Perth*, as a "wounded bird", was singled out for attention and suffered some near misses which "shook the ship's structure considerably". From then on the passage was uneventful. Late in the afternoon the force passed *Napier* and *Nizam* north-bound, and "the welcome light of Ras-el-Tin [the lighthouse at Alexandria] was sighted a few minutes before midnight".

In Alexandria, Cunningham had received conflicting pictures of the situation in Crete and of the numbers remaining to be embarked. In the afternoon of the 29th he was told in a message from General Wavell that Wavell, Air Marshal Tedder⁵ and General Blamey unanimously considered that "Glen" ships and cruisers should not be used, but that destroyers should embark at Sfakia on the night of the 30th. At 9.15 a.m. on that day Cunningham dispatched *Arliss* in *Napier* with *Nizam*, *Kelvin* and *Kandahar* from Alexandria. Soon after midday *Kandahar* developed engine trouble and *Arliss* sent her back to harbour. Three hours later three aircraft delivered an attack in which near misses damaged *Kelvin*; she was sent back, and the two Australian ships continued alone. They passed King's force thirty minutes later, and reached Sfakia without further incident in time to begin embarkation half an hour after midnight. Embarkation arrangements ashore were excellent, "the only pity being

² King's figure. According to figures supplied by the British Army authorities "from a count of those actually landed at Alexandria, these figures are only approximately correct", the lift on this occasion was 6,029. *Perth* embarked "1,188 passengers including military officers and other ranks, refugees, Allied troops, and Distressed British Seamen".

³ Ldg Cook/S W. B. Fraser, 21320, RAN, HMAS *Perth* 1939-41. Metal worker; of Lithgow, NSW; b. Lithgow, 27 Oct 1918. Killed in action 30 May 1941.

Cook/S N. T. Smith, 23735, RAN, HMAS *Perth* 1941. Station hand; of Orange, NSW; b. Orange, 9 Nov 1921. Killed in action 30 May 1941.

Stoker H. Straker, 22535, RAN, HMAS's *Canberra* 1939-40, *Perth* 1940-41; of Lake Macquarie, NSW; b. Lake Macquarie, 17 Nov 1916. Killed in action 30 May 1941.

Stoker 2nd Class H. C. Smith, W1621, RANR, HMAS *Perth* 1940-41. Of Spotswood, Vic; b. Fitzroy, Vic, 9 Jan 1921. Killed in action 30 May 1941.

⁴ Warrant Mechanician H. C. Hill, DSC, 18387, RAN, HMAS's *Hobart* 1938-41, *Perth* 1941-42. Of Gladsville, NSW; b. Devonport, Eng, 15 Apr 1907. Lost in sinking of *Perth*, 1 Mar 1942.

Stoker PO W. J. H. Reece, DSM, 17867, RAN, HMAS *Perth* 1939-42. Of Goulburn, NSW; b. Goulburn, 8 Jul 1903. Lost in sinking of *Perth*, 1 Mar 1942.

⁵ At the beginning of May Air Marshal Longmore was recalled to England and Tedder became acting Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East. (Marshal of RAF Lord Tedder, GCB. Dep AOC-in-C RAF ME 1940-41, AOC-in-C 1941-43; Dep Supreme Cdr SHAEF 1944-45; Ch of Air Staff 1946-50. Regular airman; b. Glenguin, Stirling, Scotland, 11 Jul 1890.)

that the army had been informed that destroyers could only carry 250 men each".⁶ Actually the two ships embarked a total of 1,403.⁷ By 2.30 a.m. on the 31st *Nizam* had filled and sailed. *Napier* followed half an hour later.

Earlier in the evening, under instructions from their respective Commanders-in-Chief, General Freyberg and staff, the Air Officer Commanding and staff, and Captain Morse and the naval staff left Sfakia in two Sunderland aircraft for Egypt. Major-General Weston,⁸ Royal Marines, remained in command on shore in Crete. On the 30th, before leaving Sfakia, Freyberg signalled Wavell asking for "one last lift tomorrow night, we could embark anything up to 7,000". After consultation, Cunningham decided to send all available ships, but that maximum number to be lifted would not exceed 2,000. To carry out this embarkation King in *Phoebe*, with *Abdiel*, *Kimberley*, *Hotspur* and *Jackal*, left Alexandria at 6 a.m. on the 31st.

At this time *Napier* and *Nizam* were on their way south, and at 6.25 a.m. had the heartening sight of friendly fighters. From 8.50 to 9.15 a.m., however, they were attacked by twelve dive bombers, and *Napier* sustained engine and boiler room damage from near misses which reduced her speed to 23 knots, and, at 2.10 p.m., caused her to stop for a few minutes to effect repairs. She subsequently went ahead on one engine and managed to reach 20 knots, and the two ships reached Alexandria without further incident at 7 p.m.

During the day Arliss intercepted signals which told him of the small number to be embarked by King's force that night. He thereupon sent an emergency signal to Cunningham, repeated to King and Wavell, giving an accurate picture of the situation at Sfakia where "there are roughly 6,500 men to come", and saying that he considered it essential to tell the army there that all these could be embarked [by King's force], "destroyers can carry up to 1,000 each. *Napier* and *Nizam* have 1,700 now." As a result of this signal, and of subsequent discussions between Mr Fraser, the Prime Minister of New Zealand (then in Egypt), Wavell, Freyberg, Evetts and Cunningham, King was instructed at 8.51 p.m. to "fill to maximum capacity".

Shortly before this Cunningham received a message from Blamey, who was perturbed at the small number of Australians so far withdrawn, asking if one of the ships could go to Plakias "where he believed a number of our troops had assembled". For example, of the five Australian infantry battalions on Crete (leaving improvised units out of account) two were withdrawing to Sfakia and one had been embarked from Heraklion, but two were cut off at Retimo. An aircraft had been sent to drop a message to the Retimo garrison ordering them to withdraw to Plakias, but the aircraft failed to return and it was not known if the message was delivered. In the circumstances it was not possible to accede to Blamey's request.

⁶ Arliss, Operation Report.

⁷ Arliss' figures: *Napier*, 68 officers, 637 other ranks; *Nizam*, 53 officers, 645 other ranks. The army figures (those actually landed at Alexandria) were given as 1,510.

⁸ Lt-Gen E. C. Weston, CB. Comd MNBDO 1940-43; Member of Ordnance Bd. Min of Supply 1943-45. RM Officer; b. 5 Jun 1888. Died 19 Feb 1950.

King's force underwent three bombing attacks on the passage north, but no bombs fell close and covering fighters kept many attackers distant. Sfakia was reached at 11.20 p.m. on the 31st, and the army was in readiness with three motor landing craft (left by *Glengyle*) already loaded. Embarkation proceeded so rapidly that for a time the beach was empty of troops. "The result was that they came so slowly that we could have taken off quite a few more before we had to leave."⁹ At 3 a.m. on the 1st June the force sailed, having landed some medical stores and embarked 3,900 troops.¹ No attacks were made on the force on the passage south, mainly due to effective fighter protection, and Alexandria was reached without incident at 5 p.m. on the 1st June. There was, however, one last blow by the enemy. To provide additional escort for King's ships, Cunningham sailed the anti-aircraft cruisers *Calcutta* and *Coventry* from Alexandria early on the 1st June. Just after 9 a.m. they were attacked by dive bombers, and two bombs hit and sank *Calcutta*. *Coventry* was able to rescue 23 officers and 232 men with whom she returned to Alexandria.

This was the final embarkation by naval surface craft. About 5,000 were left on shore round Sfakia and perhaps an equal number at Retimo and elsewhere. The men at Sfakia were "incapable of further resistance owing to strain and lack of food".² During the night of 31st May-1st June General Weston, instructed by Wavell, left Sfakia in a flying-boat for Egypt. Before he departed he left behind written orders to the senior officer remaining ashore (whoever he might then be) to come to terms with the enemy. This turned out to be Lieut-Colonel Walker,³ whose 2/7th Australian Battalion had been in the final rearguard position. It had begun a difficult march down to the beach at 9 p.m. but had arrived too late and, when the last landing craft departed, had just been drawn up on the beach awaiting embarkation.

About midnight on the 31st the First Sea Lord signalled to Cunningham that the British Government considered a further embarkation should be attempted on the night 1st-2nd June "if reasonable prospect that any substantial formed body of men is capable of embarking". Cunningham replied that Weston had instructed those remaining to capitulate, and that no further ships would be sent. As he pointed out to the Admiralty, the moon now allowed bombing of ships and beaches thus considerably increasing the hazards to ships and men; and in view of the developing situation in the Middle East "to allow the possibility of still further reduction of the estimated force available was out of the question. Even as it is we are in no condition to meet any serious enemy movement."

⁹ Hodginkson, p. 152.

¹ The Army figures (actually landed at Alexandria) were given as 3,710. According to the army figures a grand total of 16,511 were landed at Alexandria, including 112 previous to the first lift by *Abdiel*, *Hero* and *Nizam* at Suda Bay on the night 26th-27th May, and 54 sent out by air. The army list states: "These figures are only approximately correct. Those killed on passage are not included. Allowing for men killed on passage and for probable miscounting on disembarkation, it is believed that about 17,000 troops were evacuated from Crete."

² Report by Weston on arrival in Egypt.

³ Lt-Col T. G. Walker, DSO. CO 2/7 Bn 1939-41. Bank officer; of Hampton, Vic; b. Richmond, Vic, 14 Oct 1900.

Some small groups managed to reach North Africa from Crete by their own efforts. Five officers and 135 other ranks including Royal Marines, Australians, New Zealanders and Special Service troops, under Major Garrett⁴ of the Royal Marines, crossed in one of *Glengyle's* landing craft which they patched up, making most of the passage under improvised sail. They landed near Sidi Barrani (less two of their number who died from exhaustion) during the night of the 8th-9th June. During the 10th and 11th *Glengyle's* other two landing craft reached the Egyptian coast carrying in all over 100. Other parties reached safety, including 78 brought out by the submarine *Thrasher*⁵ in July. Many men remained fighting in Crete as guerillas, and later an organisation was set up whereby these were supplied and reinforced. As a result the "Germans had to maintain in Crete a force which was ridiculously out of keeping for simple garrison duty".⁶

The Crete campaign cost the navy heavily, and left the Mediterranean Fleet with only two battleships, three cruisers, and seventeen destroyers immediately serviceable. Three cruisers and six destroyers were sunk; two battleships, the only aircraft carrier, two cruisers and two destroyers were damaged beyond the repair capabilities of the Mediterranean; and three cruisers and six destroyers were under on-the-spot repairs taking from a fortnight to some weeks to effect. Over 2,000 officers and men were killed. Of this Cunningham wrote in his dispatch in the August following the campaign:

More than once I felt that the stage had been reached when no more could be asked of officers and men, physically and mentally exhausted by their efforts and by the events of these fateful weeks. It is perhaps even now not realised how nearly the breaking point was reached, but that these men struggled through is the measure of their achievement and I trust that it will not lightly be forgotten. . . . The Mediterranean Fleet paid a heavy price for the achievement. Losses and damage were sustained which would normally only occur during a major fleet action, in which the enemy fleet might be expected to suffer greater losses than our own. In this case the enemy fleet did not appear (though it had many favourable opportunities for doing so) and the battle was fought between ships and aircraft.

The losses did not prove that ships were impotent in the face of air attack. They were vulnerable without air cover, but their comparative immunity when, during the last few days, some air cover was provided, suggests that a few squadrons of long-range fighters would have altered the picture. The ships did what aircraft alone could not have done—prevented a seaborne invasion. Not until the battle had been decided and withdrawal had begun did enemy seaborne troops land, and it was the 2nd June before the Germans established communication "with a battle group of Italians, which, arriving from Rhodes, had landed at Sitia and, without fighting, had occupied the eastern part of the island".⁷

⁴ Lt-Col R. Garrett, DSO, OBE. CO 1 Hy AA Regt, RM 1942-45. RM Officer; b. Ceylon, 11 Nov 1903. Drowned in Scotland 1952.

⁵ HMS *Thrasher*, submarine (1940), 1,090 tons, one 4-in gun, ten 21-in torp tubes, 15.25 kts.

⁶ Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 392.

⁷ Battle Report of XI Air Corps.