

Historical Note

The Battle of Crete

The Battle of Crete was a significant episode in World War II for New Zealanders. Crete was strategically very important to the Allies, to help them secure the eastern Mediterranean and defend Egypt. In April 1941 Hitler declared that Crete must be occupied to provide a base for aerial warfare against Britain in the eastern Mediterranean.

The commanders directly in charge of Crete at the time, however, did not fully grasp its importance or the imminence of the German invasion. The island was, therefore, hopelessly and needlessly unprepared for attack.

At the end of April 1941 the Allies were driven out of Greece by the advancing Germans and on April 29th the New Zealand troops and others being evacuated started arriving in Crete. Most of the New Zealand Division was amongst the evacuees. A composite battalion of New Zealanders was made up from all sorts of different units and backgrounds as they arrived in Crete – there were a total of 7,500 New Zealanders in the Crete garrison. In the three weeks which followed their arrival, the soldiers rested and developed a good relationship with the hospitable locals.

The New Zealander, General Freyberg, was finally put in charge of the forces in Crete but realised how hopelessly prepared they were if an attack were to take place. He had very few fighting troops and those he had were poorly equipped, exhausted and disorganised following the evacuation. There was little in the way of military equipment, tools or supplies. Freyberg communicated his concern to the New Zealand Government who, in turn, expressed concern to Churchill about the deployment of the New Zealand Division in Crete, requesting that they either be given the means to defend themselves or that the decision to defend at all costs be reversed.

The German airborne offensive began on May 20. The first attacks were born entirely by the New Zealanders. This was the first great airborne invasion in history, with over a thousand planes dropping thousands of paratroopers from the sky. Much of the Battle of Crete from this point on consisted of fierce, hand-to-hand fighting. In spite of their superiority, the Germans achieved only a narrow victory in taking the airfield at Maleme and in subsequent attacks. Many individuals distinguished themselves by acts of bravery and heroism in this Battle, including Charles Upham and the Maori Battalion.

Once the airport was taken, however, there was little hope for the defenders of Crete. On May 27, the order was given to withdraw from the island. The only hope for the ANZACs at Suda, Canea and Galatas was a 65 kilometre trek across the island to the south coast over some of the roughest country in the world. They staggered, exhausted and wounded, through the mountains without food or water, discarding gear as they went. When they reached the coast, there was not always transport available and they had to disperse into the mountains again and wait. (Peter McIntyre, recently appointed New Zealand's official war artist and on his first assignment, was part of that retreat.) Three days later the last evacuation ship left. Roughly 15,000 men were taken to Egypt but 14,000 remained behind killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

The people of Crete sheltered, fed and clothed many New Zealanders left behind, further strengthening the bond between the two countries.

One of the participants described the Battle of Crete as "beyond doubt the most extraordinary battle of all time."

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