

As regards the tactical planning of the operation, both the "Malems"^f and "Iraklion" squadrons (each consisting of twenty boats) were ordered to put in at the intermediate harbor of Melos. They were to proceed from Melos at such a speed that the Malemes group would reach its destination on the afternoon of X-day plus one and the Iraklion group on X-day plus two.

At the same time, two Italian mine-sweeper units were to move forward to Melos in order to be immediately available as soon as Suda Bay and the port of Iraklion should fall into German hands. Their task then would be to clear a channel large enough to permit the entry of the regular merchant ships, which would be ready and waiting to leave the Piraeus together with an escort of torpedo boats as soon as the signal should be given. A detailed time schedule for all of these actions was set up²³⁵.

In order to assure successful accomplishment of the naval transport missions, a certain amount of offensive action was necessary. Inasmuch as the naval force itself was too weak to provide this, it was imperative that the VIII Air Corps take over the task of keeping enemy naval elements out of the waters north of the island during the daylight hours.

It was only during the day, of course, that the VIII Air Corps was able to keep the area under sufficiently continuous surveillance to forestall any attempt at intervention on the part of the British fleet²³⁶. For the reconnaissance aircraft, bombers, and dive-bombers had to be back at their primitive

235 - More detailed information can be obtained from a number of sources contained in the Karlsruhe Document Collection, specifically from the operational orders of the Admiral (Southeast) and the various combat reports dealing with Operation MERKUR. General Ringel (op.cit.) also gives accurate and detailed descriptions of the units to be transported by ship.

236 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 8c.

take-off bases on the Greek mainland by dusk. This was one good reason behind the order to move the fighter and dive-bomber units to the captured airfields at Malems and Iraklion at the earliest possible moment²³⁷.

The orders calling for the employment of VIII Air Corps single-engine and twin-engine fighter units to ward off enemy air attack during the approach, air drop or landing, and return flight of the transport aircraft²³⁸ seem to be rather an empty formality in view of the following factors:

1. the enemy air forces originally stationed on Crete had either been destroyed or withdrawn,
2. there was no reason to expect that the British would bring their aircraft carriers into action during the early stage of operations,
3. the distance separating Egypt and Crete seemed an effective guarantee against the possibility of a large-scale bombardment by British air units, and
4. the German Luftwaffe had overwhelming air superiority.

The VIII Air Corps was also given the task of guarding the ocean transports to Crete against attack by enemy air or naval forces²³⁹. This mission, like all those assigned to the VIII Air Corps, was limited to the daylight hours. As soon as darkness fell, the slow little boats were defenseless against enemy attack, and a very high percentage of them were sunk²⁴⁰.

237 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 8g.

238 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 5, paragraph 8a.

239 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 8d.

240 - See Chapter VIII, present study.

Of even greater significance to the conduct of operations were the orders directing the VIII Air Corps to support the ground forces by attacking clearly identified enemy targets, assembly areas, antiaircraft artillery batteries, etc.²⁴¹. Unfortunately there was no direct ground-to-air radio communication to guide the bombardiers in the placement of their bombs. All radio traffic had to be relayed through the complicated and time-consuming channel Combat Group - XI Air Corps - VIII Air Corps, which naturally resulted in delays and poorly aimed hits.

During the early stage of the invasion, the Air Landing Corps continued to maintain its headquarters in Athens²⁴², which served as a dissemination point for orders dealing with all the various phases of Operation MERKUR. The coordination of the Air Landing Corps and the VIII Air Corps, the employment of reserve forces, and the handling of sea and air transport - all of these functions could be carried out successfully only if there were a single, central command headquarters readily accessible throughout the entire course of the invasion. Moreover there were already three generals (Generalleutnant Suessmann, 7th Air Division; Generalleutnant Ringel, 5th Mountain Infantry Division; and Generalmajor Meindl, Storm Regiment) with their staffs assigned to direct operations on the island, so that there really was no need to transfer Corps headquarters to Crete during the first phase of action - i.e. before a point of main emphasis became apparent.

In conclusion, it must be admitted that the careful preparation and the thorough orientation of participating officers and troops which are reflected in the orders issued for Operation MERKUR²⁴³ gave every indication that a rapid and decisive success might be expected in Crete²⁴⁴.

241 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, paragraphs 8b and 8c.

242 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 7, paragraph 15.

243 - Not all of the operational orders pertaining to Operation MERKUR are available today. The most significant gaps are those left by the VIII Air Corps

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243 - (cont'd) time table of operations (see the letter from General Meister) and the documents of the 7th Air Division.

244 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 16

CHAPTER IX

The Battle of Crete²⁴⁵.Section 1 - The Transport of the Parachute Forces and the Freight Gliders
to Crete.

The weather, needless to say, is a determining factor in the conduct of an air landing operation²⁴⁶. As far as 20 May 1941 was concerned, the Chief Meteorologist (Chefmeteorologe), Fourth Air Fleet, forecast the rapid approach of stormy weather from southern Italy, presumably resulting in complete cloud cover and very poor visibility.

In contrast to this, the meteorologist of the XI Air Corps²⁴⁷ declared that the bad-weather area further west would have no effect on Crete and its vicinity and that there was every indication that the weather on 20 May would be favorable²⁴⁸.

The responsibility of reconciling these two widely-differing "expert" opinions and of deciding whether to go ahead with the operation, taking a chance on running into bad weather, or to postpone it was passed on by the Fourth Air Fleet to General Student²⁴⁹.

245 - This chapter is based largely on the XI Air Corps and Fourth Air Fleet "Reports on Crete", supplemented by reports dealing with individual combat sectors and by the personal recollections and notes of the author.

246 - For example, the carefully prepared allied air landing at Arnheim (crossing of the Rhine River in 1944), which failed in large part due to weather conditions.

247 - Regierungsrat Dr. Brandt was meteorologist of the XI Air Corps.

248 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 1.

249 - Based on information given the author by General Schlemm, Chief of Staff, XI Air Corps: "...excited telephone conversations about the weather conditions were held during the night of 19/20 May ... Student was to decide..."

German planners were fully aware that the surprise factor, normally one of the most decisive aspects of an air landing action, was out of the question in Crete. Although none of the available sources say so specifically, we can surely assume that the feverish activity going on during the night of 19/20 May - the final loading of the transport aircraft, the assembling of the troops at the take-off bases - and the highly contagious nervous tension so typical of the last hours before going into action had not escaped the attention of the enemy²⁵⁰.

It is possible that the enemy was informed through the American Embassy in Athens (America had not yet declared war on Germany), or perhaps through the highly efficient espionage network left behind by the British when they withdrew from Greece. Advanced patrol boats, camouflaged as fishing craft but equipped with radio transmitters, were on guard in the waters north of Crete.

There is no doubt but that it was these patrol boats which transmitted the first warning to the British forces on Crete, as soon as the VIII Air Corps began the all-out bombardment attack (between 0530 and 0600) scheduled to launch the operation (see the map on the following page). The Luftwaffe attacks on the enemy bivouac and barracks areas near Chania and Malemes²⁵¹, on telecommunications lines, etc. were robbed of most of their effectiveness, for the enemy forces - warned in plenty of time - were able to seek and find adequate cover in previously prepared air raid ditches.

250 - The author himself witnessed the lack of caution displayed in one of the staff headquarters in Athens (Hotel Anglais); a number of officers frankly discussed operational plans in the presence of the Greek waiters (enemy agents). They all seemed utterly unconcerned about the need for military security - an error which was to result in a good deal of bloodshed...

251 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 14, paragraph 2, I, b).

Surely such ruthless bombardment would have shattered the morale and will to resist of any other enemy and reduced him to panic-stricken helplessness - not so the New Zealanders! Their behavior reflected superior courage and discipline. It was a bit of bad luck for Germany's "bold and irreplaceable air landing troops"²⁵² that they had to go into battle against an enemy force composed of the very best soldiers of the British Empire.

The subsequent battle of Crete was unique in a number of ways²⁵³. "It was something entirely new - the first really large-scale air landing action in the annals of military history!" Just how did the fighting proceed?

The VIII Air Corps had barely concluded its preparatory bombardment missions when the first freight gliders (under the command of Major Koch) appeared over the target area, followed by 500 transport aircraft carrying a total of more than 5000 parachute troops. This force, the first attack wave, was landed i.e. by parachute) under air cover provided by the VIII Air Corps (see the sketch on the following page).

Combat Group West²⁵⁴

In spite of the inadequacies of the airfields and the terrible problem of dust, all of the transport units had been able to take off according to schedule. The approach flight, under fighter escort, was also uneventful. It was the glider landings and the paratrooper release operation which proved difficult. The gliders were released too late from the tow coupling, which meant that their gliding velocity was too high for easy maneuverability. Thus they found themselves over the target area, gliding far too fast towards a terrain which

252 - W. Churchill, op.cit., pages 285 and 302.

253 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 284

254 - The description of the ground fighting has been restricted to general developments; relevant details will be pointed out in the footnotes. The

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254 - (cont'd) emphasis is placed on the evaluation of the over-all situation
and on the decisions taken by command.

made a smooth landing next to impossible. Rocks and ditches, olive trees and grapevines - all represented unforeseen obstacles. The appointed landing areas lay quite far apart, so that there was little chance of one group's coming to the assistance of another²⁵⁵. In an attempt to make doubly certain that none of the paratroopers should be blown out to sea, the majority of the transport aircraft discharged their human cargo not over the level coastal plains, as had been planned, but over the mountains south of the main coastal highway (see the sketch on the following page).

Since the island's defenders had set up a series of strongly fortified positions ranging up into these mountains, a large number of paratroopers (mostly from the III Battalion, Storm Regiment) were killed or seriously wounded by enemy fire while still in the air, struggling to get out of their parachutes on the ground, or caught in the trees²⁵⁶. The ones who landed safely in the valleys had no time to assemble in an orderly group or to search for the weapons containers which had been dropped by freight parachute. Most of the containers fell into enemy hands, and the defending forces put the weapons to immediate use.

The II Battalion, Storm Regiment, landed without enemy interference in its assigned target area southwest of the airfield at Malemes. The percentage of injuries sustained during the jump was low (less than 1%).

255 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 4.

256 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 5

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Parachute and Air Landing Troops on Board the Ju-52

Above: Paratroopers (without their weapons, wearing life packets).

Below: Air landing units, armed with rifles of the 98-K type, ready for the landing. A release bay for weapons containers is shown in the background.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: The approach flight over the Aegean
Sea, 20 May 1941.

Below: Paratroopers descending over Crete.

121

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: Paratroopers landing in the middle
of a vineyard.

Below: A 37mm antitank gun is dropped over
Crete with quintuple freight parachute.

122

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Both photographs show the landing of a freight glider near Malemes; olive trees, vineyards, and irrigation ditches proved to be effective obstacles.

123

The IV Battalion, Storm Regiment, equipped with heavy weapons, ran into a group of armed civilians upon landing south of the airfield at Malemes and west of the bridge. As a result, the paratroopers were not able to recover all of their weapons and equipment. Many of the antitank weapons, motorcycles, etc. dropped with multiple freight parachutes were so badly damaged by the olive trees in which they landed that they could not be used (see the photograph below).

PHOTOGRAPH

During the landing on Crete, paratroopers often got caught in olive trees, on telephone lines, etc.

The Combat Group Staff, under the leadership of Major Braun, landed by freight glider south of the bridge in the dried-out river bed.

The 3d and 4th Companies, I Battalion, Storm Regiment, had landed by freight glider at the western edge of the Malemes airfield and on Hill 107 from which the airfield could be kept under fire (see the photographs). Only a few of the freight gliders were fortunate enough to land at their appointed landing places; the vast majority came to rest far away from their assigned targets.

General Meindl[†] landed by parachute at a point west of the bridge. He was seriously wounded almost immediately and had no choice but to give up command of the Combat Group.

Combat Group Center

On the whole, General Meindl's Combat Group West had encountered relatively little defensive fire during the approach flight and landing operation and had suffered almost no losses in transport aircraft. The reception accorded Combat Group Center was an entirely different story - "... at Chania antiaircraft artillery fire blossomed forth from hitherto totally unsuspected positions..."²⁵⁷

PHOTOGRAPH

Parachute forces descending over Crete.

257 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 10.

The freight gliders, carrying the 1st and 2d Companies of the I Battalion, Storm Regiment, were met by concentrated fire from both light and heavy anti-aircraft artillery and were thus diverted from their appointed missions. The 2d Company (led by Captain Altmann), with fifteen gliders at its disposal, was supposed to seize the enemy antiaircraft artillery posts east of Chania and on the Akroteri Peninsula. The 1st Company (under 1/Lt. Genz), with nine gliders, was to capture enemy artillery and radio posts south of the city (see the map on the following page).

PHOTOGRAPH

Landing Paratroopers from Combat Group Center.

Captain Altmann's gliders, having been released from tow at 6000^Fft., were unable to locate their preappointed landing points in the chaos of enemy artillery fire and landed so far apart that there was no way to render mutual assistance. The artillery positions which had been "identified" and reported as such by the German aerial reconnaissance units turned out to be deserted dummy installations. In reality the enemy had established strongly fortified positions in the hills which overlooked both the city and the northern shore of Suda Bay and had manned them with infantry troops.

1/Lt. Genz and his company were somewhat more fortunate, despite the fact that they lost four of their nine gliders (one as a result of a broken towing cable and the other three due to incredibly clumsy landings). Even so, the 1st Company was able to complete its mission with the remaining five machines.

Generalleutnant Suessmann, who had taken off by freight glider for Chania early on the morning of 20 May, was killed in a crash en route²⁵⁸. Colonel Heidrich assumed command of the 7th Air Division, retaining the command of his own regiment at the same time.

The majority of the 3d Parachute Regiment had been released according to plan over a broad basin southwest of Chania (see the photograph on the following page).

258 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 12. When the He-111 towing Generalleutnant Suessman's glider overtook the slower transport aircraft, the vortex created was so powerful that it ripped the wings off the glider. The latter crashed on a rocky promontory of the island of Aegina.

A second version, reported to the author by Major Altmann, maintains that Generalleutnant Suessmann's glider was one of those which had been used in the landing at Corinth and which had been parked outside in the burning heat ever since with nothing to protect them from the sun. The relatively flimsy and highly vulnerable construction of the gliders had simply been unable to survive the climatic conditions...

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258 - (cont) There is still a third, totally unconfirmed version of the accident, according to which the regular glider pilot, a man of long experience with both fighter aircraft and gliders, was ordered by General-leutnant Suessmann to surrender the wheel to an officer who had had no experience in piloting gliders.

PHOTOGRAPH

The landing area of the 3d Parachute Regiment near Chanis.

The I and II Battalions, 3d Parachute Regiment, and the temporarily attached Parachute Engineer Battalion all managed to land as planned. The III Battalion, 3d Parachute Regiment, however, missed its assigned landing point by several miles, its companies coming down over a widely scattered area. This, in turn, meant that their starting positions were far from favorable.

The descending paratroopers and their gear drew heavy enemy antiaircraft artillery fire, and "many of the weapons containers exploded in mid-air".²⁵⁹ Moreover, enemy artillery fire prevented a number of the transport aircraft from discharging their paratroopers on schedule, so that the latter landed either too soon or too late, as far as the original time-table was concerned. More important, the original combat units - the backbone of the over-all force - were separated and disorganized.

259 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 13.

All in all, as the transport aircraft returned to their take-off bases after having delivered the first invasion wave, the leaders of the operation could not fail to believe that "the paratrooper landing had succeeded as planned".²⁶⁰ Only 1.4% of the 500 transport aircraft were lost. The VIII Air Corps was equally optimistic regarding the success of the first landing wave. After all, its aircraft had encountered no enemy aircraft whatsoever, and enemy antiaircraft artillery had accounted for only a few instances of minor aircraft damage.

We must remember though, that the Headquarters of the Air Landing Corps in Athens had absolutely no direct information from the landed paratrooper units. Although the latter were equipped with several radio transmitters, not a single reply was received to the many urgent messages requesting additional data on the situation.

Section 2 - The Early Stages of the Ground Fighting²⁶¹.

Combat Group West

We know from the radio log of the Storm Regiment that, as of 1340 on 20 May 1941, there was still no means of communication between the parachute troops on the island and the Headquarters Staff of the XI Air Corps on the Greek mainland. The following notation appears in the log:

260 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 26. The same conclusion is expressed in the Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 18, paragraph III. Paragraph II (page 18) of the same source points out that the VIII Air Corps had held down enemy antiaircraft artillery fire very effectively throughout the operation.

261 - These are three detailed sources dealing with the exploits of Combat Group West:

- a) Storm Regiment, Combat Group West, Operations Office, Combat Report dated 7 June 1941 (report by Colonel Ramcke).
- b) Headquarters, Storm Regiment, Radio Log for the period 20 through 27 May 1941.

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261 - (cont'd)

- c) Although we have none of the 7th Air Division documents available, events can be reconstructed with relative ease and accuracy from the XI Air Corps Report on Crete.
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"Reconnaissance aircraft delivers important orders by air drop at 1530..."²⁶²

The heavy signal communications equipment belonging to the Combat Group had been loaded into the nine freight gliders assigned to the Regiment Headquarters Staff (group under Major Braun), and these gliders landed so clumsily that not only they, but also their cargo, were damaged beyond repair (see the photograph on page 122). The signal officer of the Storm Regiment, 1/Lt. Goettsche, after hours of tireless experimentation managed to assemble an improvised transmitter from the remains of the wrecked equipment, and with this contact was established at 1615 (according to the radio log) with the Headquarters Staff in Athens.

The light-weight radio equipment, released by freight parachute during the paratrooper landing, had survived undamaged and with it the Storm Regiment established contact with its II and IV Battalions, located west of the airfield at Malemes. The III Battalion, whose members had jumped right into the midst of a strong enemy defense force, was decimated completely. Of the 600 paratroopers, 400 - including the battalion commander and the majority of the commissioned and non-commissioned officers - were dead after the first few hours of desperate and courageous resistance²⁶³.

Half of the I Battalion, Storm Regiment, having landed on the island by glider, made its way to the enemy encampment on Hill 107 only to find it deserted. Pushing on, they became involved in single combat with isolated enemy elements and were soon overrun. The battalion commander, Major Koch²⁶⁴, was seriously wounded. The glider crews, however, did succeed in eliminating the enemy antiaircraft artillery battery at the western end of the Malemes airfield. Von Plessen, the company commander, and a great many of his men lost their lives in this action.

262 - Storm Regiment, Radio Log, page 1.

263 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 5.

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264 - In 1940, Major Koch had seized the bridges over the Albert Canal during
the occupation of Fort Eben Emael.

Thus the Storm Regiment had only two battalions left (the II and the IV) to seize the airfield at Malemes and to ward off the attacks of an ubiquitous enemy! What with the murderous heat, the total lack of suitable tropical clothing, and the numerically superior enemy, secure in well-camouflaged, strongly fortified positions made even more impregnable by barbed wire barriers, it is no wonder that the task at hand seemed utterly impossible for a regiment without a leader and with no more than light-weight weapons at its disposal.

Combat Group Center.

The approaches to Chania and Suda Bay were guarded by two hill positions, on the rocky Akrotiri Peninsula in the east and in the hills near the village of Galatas west of Chania. Both were manned by strong enemy forces. Captain Altmann's glider assault on Akrotiri miscarried right at the start; the gliders crashed on the rocks of the promontory, forty-eight men were killed in the fighting, an equal number wounded, and the rest taken prisoner²⁶⁵.

The enemy positions in the hills around Galatas were to be taken by the III Battalion, 3d Parachute Regiment, under the leadership of its commander, Major Heilmann²⁶⁶. The entire operation was doomed to failure due to the fact that the III Battalion landed wide of its appointed area. Coming down in the valley, the troops were soon covered by enemy infantry fire from the surrounding hills.

The Parachute Engineer Battalion, although it landed according to schedule, found itself pinned down by enemy fire²⁶⁷ issuing from hedges, trees, and field positions. This sniper harrassment was so effective that the German troops were able to recover their weapons containers and withdraw to cover only under the greatest difficulty.

265 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 10.

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266 - By 1944 Heilmann had attained the rank of Generalmajor and the assignment as commanding general of the 1st Parachute Division in Italy.

267 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, pages 16 and 17.

Among the enemy forces defending the village of Alikianu, southwest of Chania, against the Parachute Engineer Battalion were also Greek civilians - including women and children - armed with shotguns.²⁶⁸

The I and II Battalions, 3d Parachute Regiment, had suffered heavy losses and were completely exhausted²⁶⁹. Under these circumstances Colonel Heidrich could not possibly risk an attack on the capital city of Chania, much less an assault on Suda Bay.

Section 3 - Crises during the Ground Fighting.

1. 20 May 1941 (morning and afternoon).

During the forenoon only the first half of the contemplated paratrooper force was landed on Crete, as the first invasion wave. Between 0800 and 1100, the transport units made their way back to the take-off bases in Greece. At this point it proved to be impossible to get the transport aircraft ready on schedule for the next wave. The take-off fields were overcrowded to begin with, and even though all the available fire hoses were pressed into service, they were unable to make much headway against the dense clouds of dust created by the aircraft landings. In addition, some of the transport aircraft which had been damaged by enemy artillery fire had to make crash landings. There were not enough tow trucks available to keep the wreckage cleared away at all times and, as a result, some of the runways were blocked²⁷⁰. Consequently, some of the transport

268 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 17. Unfortunately, such violations of international law on the part of the civilian population of Crete were by no means rare. There are, for example, several verified instances of their having behaved most barbarically, maiming and robbing German paratroopers.

269 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 18.

270 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 18, paragraph III.

aircraft were forced to circle over their home airfields for as long as two hours before the runways could be cleared for them to land.

According to the original time-table, the second wave was to take off at 1300. But what with inexperienced personnel and inadequate equipment (manual pumps) even the refueling operation took much longer than had been anticipated. As a result, the take-off operation was subject to lengthy delays, some aircraft taking off as much as three and one-half hours behind schedule!²⁷¹

Under these conditions it was clear that the planned tactical take-off order could not be maintained. This, in turn, meant that the transport units were unable to reassemble in the air as planned; they arrived over their target areas between 1500 and 1800 in small bands of three to five aircraft or, at most, in squadron strength.

The delays in the take-off operation plunged the entire plan of attack into confusion. The VIII Air Corps took off as agreed upon to cover the approach flight of the second wave, and found not a single transport aircraft to protect! The preparatory bombing raids carried out by VIII Air Corps units on the target area went entirely unexploited. They had not succeeded in destroying the enemy, of course, but merely in holding him in check for the short period during which the paratroopers should have landed. Inasmuch as the VIII Air Corps fighters had to leave the landing area by 1615 at the latest (to make sure that their remaining fuel would be sufficient to get them back to their bases), the majority of the paratroopers in the second wave had to complete their jump without air cover. Since a number of transport aircraft had been put out of action during the first wave, the Combat Group East had to be reduced by approximately 600 troops²⁷².

Inevitably, the following question arises: we know that the air transport forces reported the delay in taking off to the Air Landing Corps - why, then, was the VIII Air Corps

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271 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 22.

272 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 22.

not notified? Was this symptomatic of a lack of cooperation between the two Corps? General von Heyking has the following to say²⁷³:

"The transport units returning from the first mission were often unable to land right away because of the dust and had to remain in the air for an inordinately long time. As a result, the entire landing operation took considerably longer than the XI Air Corps had planned.

The situation was immediately apparent to the wing commander,* and as soon as he himself had landed, he reported it to the XI Air Corps by telephone. The line to his immediate superior, the Air Commander, XI Air Corps, was out of order, so he spoke directly to the Chief of the General Staff, XI Air Corps, and requested the necessary postponement of the take-off of the second wave."

General von Heyking went on to say that the wing would carry out its mission even without the support of the VIII Air Corps if necessary. In view of the postponement of their take-off, the units could not possibly regain their home bases before dusk after completing the run to Crete. This meant that they would all have to land at the airfields in the immediate vicinity of Athens.

273 - General R. von Heyking, op.cit., page 5 ff.

* Translator's Note: i.e. General von Heyking.

The Chief of the General Staff allegedly promised that a final decision would be made and the wing informed in plenty of time of what it was to do. This decision never reached the wing²⁷⁴.

There are also two basically differing reports, concerning the course of the landing operation itself during the second wave²⁷⁵.

"Reconnoitering the landing area near Iraklion during the approach flight, Colonel Bräuer noticed that previously landed paratroopers were lying in cover there, an unmistakable indication that the enemy fire in this sector was too heavy to make a paratrooper landing there particularly wise. In spite of the heavy antiaircraft artillery fire, Colonel Bräuer had the transport aircraft repeat their landing approach two or three times, until he was able to find an area which seemed to be free of enemy troops and suitable for a parachute jump"

The other report claims that the transport pilots, lacking experience in the landing of paratrooper forces and confused by the uniformity of the terrain, were unable to orient themselves properly and were thus incapable of finding the assigned landing points and releasing the paratroopers according to plan ...

274 - The author has discussed this particular aspect in detail with General der Fallschirmjaeger Schlemm, at that time Chief of Staff, XI Air Corps, and with Generalleutnant Trettner, Retired, former Operations Officer, XI Air Corps. General Schlemm stated categorically, "I never received such a telephone call!" General Trettner was more cautious: "It's possible that there may have been a call of that kind. I can't remember - we were all enormously overworked and at the end of our strength..."

275 - The reports were furnished the author by Lt. Colonel W. Hornung (from the air transport forces) and Colonel Boehmler, who served under Colonel Bräuer as battalion commander at Iraklion.

Towards noon of the first day of the invasion, the 3d Parachute Regiment reported from Chania that it was giving up its attack on the capital city. The XI Air Corps considered the possibility of diverting the 2d Parachute Regiment, assigned to Rethymon, to the operational area of the 3d at Chania. There would hardly have been time to execute such a last-minute change in plans, however, and besides it would have resulted in even greater disorganization and confusion²⁷⁶.

When the situation at Malemes began to be critical (also towards noon), General Student dispatched Lt. Colonel Snowadzki, Headquarters Commandant, together with a small airfield staff, to set up a provisional take-off and landing system there²⁷⁷. "Circling over the airfield at low altitude, Snowadzki perceived that it was decorated with a pattern of swastikas. He landed without further ado, and taxied right into British artillery fire! His aircraft suffered minor damage." However, Snowadzki was able to take off again and return to his home base.

As the next link in this "chain of misfortunes", General Student received the alarming news that "enemy tanks, coming from the direction of Malemes, are attacking right across the airfield!"²⁷⁸ This might well have meant the end of Combat Group West on Crete.

But still worse was to come during the course of the invasion of Crete. On the afternoon of 20 May, each transport group - even each transport squadron - took off for the second wave as soon as it was ready, in an attempt to make up as much of the lost time as possible. By the time they appeared over the target

276 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 26.

277 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild".

278 - Storm Regiment, Radio Log, page 2, entry for 1620.

area, the situation was completely chaotic²⁷⁹. The landing of the paratroopers took place hours after the preparatory bombing attacks and without any sort of air cover whatsoever (see the diagram on the following page; the hours indicated are those prescribed by the original plan - in reality the second wave of transport aircraft reached the target area between 1515 and 1840²⁸⁰).

As a result, the enemy was given the opportunity to meet the oncoming units individually - and with great success - both in the air and on the ground. He had been warned by the bombing attack, and he had sufficient time to recover from it.

It is clear, then, that the second attack wave, assigned to capture Iraklion and Rethymnon, was doomed to failure from the very start by the difficulties encountered during the take-off from the Greek mainland!²⁸¹

The landing area of the 2d Parachute Regiment (under the command of Colonel Sturm), near Rethymnon, belonged to the operational sector assigned to the Combat Group Center. Colonel Sturm had divided his troops into three units for the accomplishment of their mission, the capture of the airfield and the city of Rethymnon. These units were the following:

- a. I Battalion, 2d Parachute Regiment, (except for two companies) and 2d Company, Parachute Machine-Gun Battalion (under the command of Major Kroh).

Mission: occupation of the airfield at Rethymnon.

- b. III Battalion, 2d Parachute Regiment, 2d Battery, Parachute Artillery Battalion, and one company from the Parachute Machine-Gun Battalion (under the command of Captain Wiedemann).

Mission: capture of the city of Rethymnon.

- c. Regiment staff with two companies, as a reserve force²⁸².

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- 279 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", No. 15, page 19 ff.
- 280 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 24. "Colonel Bräuner arrived with the Regiment staff at 1840..."
- 281 - This statement is taken from Generaloberst Student's own account (Memoirs, page 19, Paragraph III).
- 282 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 18.
-

Major Kroh's group jumped about two and one-half miles east of its assigned target area and landed on rocky, mountainous terrain - scattered over some five miles! The losses suffered as a result of landing injuries and sudden enemy artillery salvos were so high that the Battalion had to abandon all hope of carrying out its mission, the capture of the airfield (see the diagram on the following page; somewhat later, an air drop point was established east of the group's position in order to keep it supplied with ammunition and food in its desperate fight against the Greek partisans).

Most of Captain Wiedermann's group landed far wide of the appointed area, stumbled onto strongly fortified enemy positions, and was decimated²⁸³.

The Regiment Staff Group suffered the same fate.

And the hopelessness of the situation at Rethymon could not even be reported to the Air Landing Corps in Athens; the radio equipment had all been destroyed.

Combat Group East.

The 1st Parachute Regiment, reinforced by the II Battalion, 2d Parachute Regiment, one company from the Parachute Machine-Gun Battalion, and one company from the Parachute Medical Battalion, and under the command of Colonel Bräuer was assigned the task of seizing the city and the airfield at Iraklion (see the diagram on the following page).

The approach flight was carried out, on the average, two and one-half hours later than planned²⁸⁴. Many of the transport aircraft ran into extremely heavy antiaircraft artillery and machine-gun fire and a number of them crashed in flames.

283 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 20.

284 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 23.

Because of the mountainous terrain, the paratrooper release altitude had to be increased to 650 ft.²⁸⁵. Many of the paratroopers were wounded or killed by enemy fire while still in the air.

One of the battalions (the II Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment) was given the mission of securing the airfield at Iraklion.

British light and medium tanks plowed right through the midst of the II Battalion while it was still in the process of landing; most of its units were destroyed within twenty minutes!

Twelve officers and 300 men from this Battalion alone were killed, and eight officers and more than 100 men seriously wounded²⁸⁶.

The transport aircraft carrying still another battalion (I Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment) were refused permission to take off due to the lateness of the hour.

The advent of darkness called a halt to the assault on the city of Iraklion by the III Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment. The invaders were stopped outside the city walls, which were manned by strong enemy forces.

The II Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment, had been forced to leave all but two companies in Greece due to a shortage in air transport space, and although these two companies managed to land in an area which was free of enemy troops, they were too weak to intervene effectively in an attack on either the city or the airfield²⁸⁷.

By the evening of the first day of operations, not a single one of Crete's three airfields was in German hands.

285 - The usual altitude was between 300 and 400 ft.

286 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 24.

287 - Standing out in the general confusion of the second wave are isolated instances of top-notch performance on the part of individual paratrooper officers, non-commissioned officers, and troop units. Let one example

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287 - (cont) suffice for all - the heroism of 1/Lt. Graf Bluecher, I Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment, who managed to capture a large number of enemy artillery pieces with his very small force, and who was killed in action on Crete on the same day (21 May 1941) as two of his brothers. (Taken from the notice in the DAZ (Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung) of 6 June 1941).

The developments we have just described brought the crisis in the ground fighting on Crete to its climax, a climax whose magnitude could not be appreciated by the individual paratrooper units since they were unable to communicate with one another.

The officers responsible for the over-all conduct of the operation, those from the Fourth Air Fleet (who had been so sure in the beginning that a single parachute regiment could capture Crete without difficulty) no less than their colleagues from the XI Air Corps, were seriously alarmed at the turn developments had taken. Everyone feared the worst.

General Jeschonnek relayed to General Student orders from the Reichsmarschall to the effect that General Student was not to fly to Crete, but was to remain in Athens and direct operations from there. (In this connection we should recall that General Student had been seriously wounded in the fighting near Rotterdam in 1940, after he had insisted upon flying to Waalhaven to be closer to the scene of action.)

2. 20 May 1941 (evening).

By the evening of the first day of operations, the invaders were forced to concede that the enemy forces were far stronger than had been anticipated at all four of the locations selected as paratrooper landing points.

"After the first day of fighting had taken heavy toll of their strength, it can be estimated that there were only 7,000 paratroopers left on the island by the evening of 20 May to face an enemy force of approximately 45,000.

Approximately 200 miles away from their home bases, these paratroopers were completely on their own; they had no alternative but to keep on fighting, without any hope of outside assistance. It was impossible to bring in reinforcements by air during the hours of

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darkness; not even urgently needed ammunition could be delivered..."²⁸⁸

288 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", No. 15, page
19.

Nevertheless, it was during the night of 20/21 May 1941 that the enemy lost the battle of Crete!²⁸⁹

General Freyberg, Commandant of the island of Crete, was expecting the main attack during the night, or rather during the early morning hours of 21 May, and assumed that the main landing force would be transported across the Aegean by boat. It was completely foreign to the tactical thinking of that time that an air landing force alone could carry out a decisive operation. Thus, General Freyberg was confident that the greater part of the German invasion force would arrive by ship and land at some point along the coast.

In spite of the strong numerical superiority of his own forces, which could be deployed at will during the night without the risk of Luftwaffe interference, General Freyberg did not dare to expel the weak and exhausted German paratrooper units from the island - something which he could have accomplished easily by a concentrated offensive against them. The fact that the British Alexandria fleet, heavily armed, spent the night patrolling the waters north of Crete on the alert for German landing craft is ample proof that top-level British commanders were of the same opinion as General Freyberg.

The British view, in summary, called for the German main landing force to attack from the sea. As a result every inch of coastline area was occupied by the enemy - and continued to be occupied by the enemy (see the maps on the following pages). It was this mistaken evaluation of the situation which cost the British an otherwise certain victory on Crete. British leaders were unwilling to use any of the four fresh battalions stationed east of Malemes to meet the "main German invasion from the sea"

289 - This statement reflects the opinion of the author.

in a concentrated counterattack on the paratroopers storming the airfield at Malemes²⁹⁰.

For the German leaders, the time had come either to give up Crete or to risk everything in one bold maneuver²⁹¹. In order to carry out the planned landing of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, at least one airfield in Crete would have to be securely in German hands - and that as soon as possible.

"Despite a number of doubts and reservations"²⁹², the choice fell upon the airfield at Malemes.

For one thing, the Malemes field was closest to the take-off area in Greece, and besides, the German offensive had pushed farthest at Malemes. True enough, the landing surface at Malemes was substantially smaller than that at Iraklion. The British had utilized Malemes only as a fighter base. The plan to use this airfield as the base for a large-scale air landing operation, as a base at which thousands of airborne troops would be landing - not to mention supplies for the entire invasion force - was a classic example of the practice of putting all one's eggs in one basket.

Chania was still in enemy hands; the attack on Suda Bay had come to a standstill.

No news whatsoever had been received from Rethymon.

An attempt was to be made to assemble the paratrooper forces at Iraklion into a concentrated task force on 21 May to take the airfield by means of an all-out attack. There was no doubt that the fighting would be extremely heavy in this sector.

During the night of 20/21 May the engine-driven sailboats, which had been delayed by strong headwinds²⁹³, finally arrived at Melos. There they waited for further instructions as to when and at what

290 - Generaloberst Student, special issue of "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger", page 2, column 3.

291 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", page 19.

292 - Generaloberst Student, loc.cit., paragraph IV.

293 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 20, paragraph 5.

point on the northern coast of the island they were to land.

The orders issued by the Fourth Air Fleet for the continuation of operations on 21 May 1941 contained the following specific assignments²⁹⁴:

1. XI Air Corps

- a. Transport of sufficient reinforcements to the Combat Group West to assure the latter's ability to seize the airfield at Malemes. This operational area was to be the point of main effort.
- b. As soon as the airfield had been seized and secured against further enemy harrassment, the landing of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division was to be started without delay.
- c. Reinforced by the Mountain Infantry troops, Combat Group West was to launch an attack on Chania and to establish contact with the Combat Group Center. Subsequently, it was to capture Suda Bay in order to establish a landing point for the ships transporting heavy weapons.
- d. The Fourth Air Fleet appointed Generalleutnant Ringel, together with the staff of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, to take charge of both Combat Group West and Combat Group Center. He was to fly to Malemes with the first of the Mountain Infantry battalions on 21 May 1941.

2. VIII Air Corps

- a. The VIII Air Corps was to furnish air cover for the landings in the Malemes and Chania areas by holding down enemy antiaircraft artillery fire and by supporting the operations of the paratroopers already on the ground. The point of main emphasis was to be the area assigned to the Combat Group West.

294 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 21.

- b. VIII Air Corps units were to provide air support for the assaults on Chania and Suda Bay.
 - c. VIII Air Corps reconnaissance aircraft were to keep the waters around Crete under surveillance and to guide alerted fighter aircraft to the attack on any identified enemy naval forces.
3. Office of the Admiral (Southeast)

This agency was to do everything in its power to make sure that the first band of motor-driven sailboats (carrying heavy weapons, ammunition, and troops) landed near Malemes before dusk on 21 May 1941.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

The airfield at Malemes, showing transport
aircraft (Ju-52's) damaged by enemy fire.

145.

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Generalleutnant Ringel called Malemes
airfield the "gates to Hell".

Above: Newly arrived Mountain Infantry
troops.

Below: Malemes airfield, with the coastal
highway in the foreground.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Parachute forces on Crete. Note the terrain - highly favorable to a defending force by virtue of the plentiful cover it offered -, the highly unsuitable clothing (at a temperature of over 86° F in the shade), weapons and equipment, as well as the swastika flag being used as an aircraft orientation marker.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

On the island of Crete donkeys were used to transport heavy weapons and equipment, as well as ~~few~~ paratroopers slightly wounded during the fighting or injured in landing.

PHOTOGRAPH

The radio station at Malemes.

The olive groves provided both
shade and cover.

Radio was the only practical method of communication on the island. The danger of sabotage by guerrilla fighters was too great to permit the laying of telephone cables or the maintenance of a courier service. As the photograph indicates, the parachutes could be utilized as tents.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: The city of Iraklion

Below: The airfield at Iraklion

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: The take-off from the Greek mainland, showing the clouds of dust stirred up by each aircraft.

Below: Bombardment of an enemy position in the vicinity of Chania.

3. 21 May 1941 (morning and afternoon)

20/21 May 1941 was a "night of decision"²⁹⁵ in the battle of Crete. The German leaders had been unable to find out anything regarding the deployment of enemy troops during the night; nor could they be certain that no enemy reinforcements had landed in Suda Bay. And it was out of the question to expect the parachute forces landed during the day to keep watch on the harbors along the southern coast. It was a piece of luck for the invaders that the southern ports were too ill-equipped to permit the landing of troops to strengthen the defenders' force.

The paratrooper forces, somewhat the worse for wear, took advantage of the hours of darkness to assemble and organize their scattered elements. They remained on the alert, expecting momentarily to be attacked by the enemy. Conferences were held to determine the offensive and defensive tactics to be put into use the next day; everything possible was done to care for the countless numbers of wounded, the toll of the first day's fighting²⁹⁶.

One of the reasons for selecting the Malemes area as the point of main effort was the fact that a smoothly functioning radio station had already been established thereby the signal communications officer of the Storm Regiment and his staff. And this assured the maintenance of contact between Malemes and the Air Landing Corps headquarters in Athens²⁹⁷.

According to the original plans, the Air Landing Corps was to keep the individual combat groups supplied with ammunition. Since there were not enough supply containers available, all supplies had to be landed rather than air-dropped at Malemes.

295 - This phrase occurs in nearly all of General Student's writings, eg. in his Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", page 19, column 2.

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- 296 - The author has had at his disposal the diary of the Corps medical officer, containing lists and reports on all the wounded (some of them merely jotted down on scraps of paper). The diary is a deeply moving document, a tribute to the tireless effort and spirit of self-sacrifice demonstrated by the medical personnel who had landed with the paratroopers.
- 297 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 1: "... despite the fact that most of the signal equipment had been lost ..."
-

Combat Group West

In conjunction with the landing of the urgently needed ammunition supplies for the Combat Group in the early morning hours of 21 May 1941, Captain Kleye (from the staff of the XI Air Corps²⁹⁸) undertook a reconnaissance mission to determine landing conditions at the Malemes airfield. "Landing at Malemes and taking off again immediately, he was subjected to heavy infantry fire..." He also drew some artillery fire. It was extremely difficult to combat the enemy artillery positions, for they nearly always cut their fire at the approach of an aircraft.

Captain Kleye's report persuaded the Air Landing Corps to postpone the landing of a Mountain Infantry battalion for a bit. However, the air landing was to be carried through at all costs on 21 May.

In order to bring reinforcements to the Storm Regiment at Malemes with the least possible delay, the XI Air Corps ordered the parachute landing of two combat groups, one to the east and the other to the west of the airfield (see the sketch on the following page).

a. In the mistaken assumption that the area lying between Platanias and Pyrgos was free of enemy troops, the Corps ordered the landing of the 5th and 6th Companies, 2d Parachute Regiment, under the command of 1/Lt. Naegele, behind the enemy lines. Their mission was to drive forward against the enemy stronghold at Malemes from the east and to destroy it.

b. During the early afternoon, two and one-half companies made up primarily of antitank troops were dropped by parachute west of the airfield at Malemes. The landing was preceded by a concentrated

298 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 1, paragraph II.

air attack by the VIII Air Corps²⁹⁹.

c. Command of the Combat Group West was assigned to Colonel Ramcke³⁰⁰, who landed west of Malemes by parachute during the afternoon.

In the meantime the Storm Regiment (or rather what was left of it) had reorganized itself into two groups. The first, under Gericke, pushed forward along the coastal highway to attack the airfield, while the second, under Stentzler, undertook to subdue the enemy forces on Hill 107. After a highly eventful struggle, fraught with crises on both sides, the Storm Regiment succeeded in accomplishing both objectives³⁰¹.

The uncertainty of the over-all situation, the often complicated channels of command and the frequently arbitrary issuance of orders, the indescribable thirst induced by the heat and dust - all of these factors placed the troops under a tremendous strain. The German victory at Malemes would not have been possible without the effective support of the VIII Air Corps and the energy and initiative of individual leaders, among both the commissioned and non-commissioned officers.

The crisis occurring during the afternoon of 21 May 1941 was made up of several clearly recognizable phases:

a. The reinforcements which landed by parachute east of Malemes found themselves in territory patrolled by strong enemy forces. They were almost completely destroyed by enemy armored units.

299 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, pages 2 and 3.

300 - Colonel Rancke was the commander of the Parachute Replacement Units (Fallschirm-Ersatzeinheiten) and Training Schools.

301 - For detailed descriptions of this eventful and extremely costly struggle for possession of the airfield at Malemes and the hills lying to the south of it, the reader is referred to the following sources: Gericke, Von Malemes Bis Chania (From Malemes to Chania), and Alkmar von Hove, Achtung Fallschirmjaeger (Watch Out, Paratroopers).

b. Although the Gericke group was able to clear the runway and its immediate vicinity of enemy troops, the British still could keep the airfield under machine-gun and artillery fire and thus jeopardize the landing of German aircraft.

c. Almost simultaneously, the Air Landing Corps headquarters in Athens was deluged by alarming reports from the Combat Group West:

"The New Zealanders are attacking the airfield with the support of strong armored units. We have no more antitank ammunition. An enemy force of regiment strength is moving up from Palaechora in the south to attack Malemes!"³⁰²

All the available forces from the VIII Air Corps were dispatched immediately to meet the approaching enemy force with tireless air attacks, but it proved extremely difficult to distinguish friend from foe in the featureless terrain. The enemy troops also made use of captured swastika flags toward off bombardment. The losses resulting from the difficulty of clear identification were probably unavoidable, but at the same time they were most painfully felt³⁰³.

Beginning at 1600 on 21 May 1941, a mountain infantry battalion made up of units from the 100th and the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiments and under the command of Colonel Utz, was landed at the Malemes airfield³⁰⁴.

302 - Storm Regiment, Radio Log, page 4, and XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 5. The report that a strong enemy force was approaching from the south was not accurate. It was based apparently on false observations. The case was never satisfactorily clarified (XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 6).

303 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, pages 8 and 9. The following is quoted: "The units were subjected to attack by their own Do-17 units, and suffered serious losses as a result." The unit under the author's command on Crete was the victim of a low-altitude raid by German twin-engine fighters (Me-110's), with their horrifying pictures of sharks and sirens on the wings. The sight and sound of them alone was enough to demoralize the troops. The attack killed eight men and wounded a number of others. The report is contained in the Storm Regiment, Radio Log, page 5.

304 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 5.

The landing was carried out with skill and determination on the part of the transport pilots from the 3d Special Duty Bomber Wing (Colonel Buchholz) in spite of heavy enemy artillery fire. A large number of Ju-52's remained behind on the field, damaged by enemy fire or gutted by flames (see the photographs on page 144). Thanks to the presence of mind and skill of the pilots, the losses were kept relatively low.

With the capture of the airfield at Malemes, the battle of Crete was already won³⁰⁵. By the evening of 21 May, the crisis seemed to be over.

Combat Group Center

"There was no appreciable change in the situation faced by Combat Group Center on 21 May 1941".³⁰⁶ Contrary to expectation, the British did not attack in the vicinity of Chania. The 3d Parachute Regiment made several attempts to seize the hills around Galatas, but was turned back by strong enemy defenses. The Combat Group Center was so weakened by the losses it had sustained and by the enervating climate that it could do no more than hold on to its original positions and - in doing so - to tie down a number of enemy troops.

The paratrooper force at Rethymnon (approximately a battalion in strength) was kept busy dodging repeated attacks by an enemy force far superior in number. There was no possibility of their being able to seize the airfield or the city.

305 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", page 19.

306 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 7.

PHOTOGRAPH

The area of operations at Rethymon was so narrowly limited that supply was a definite problem. In order to solve the problem, the XI Air Corps set up a supply drop point some five miles from the airfield (see the photograph above; the supply containers are clearly recognizable at the left). The supply point, under the command of 1/Lt von Roon, was subjected to continual harrassment by Greek guerrilla fighters.

Combat Group East

On 21 May, the forces of Combat Group East were still too widely dispersed to be able to carry out an effective assault on the airfield or the city of Iraklion. All attempts to reassemble the paratroopers had been unsuccessful.

A concerted drive to seize the city, exploiting a previous air attack by the VIII Air Corps, gained ground in the beginning but was soon forced to a standstill by the lack of heavy weapons. The harbor fortifications - an ancient Venetian fort - could not be taken with light infantry weapons.

The lack of cover around the airfield itself made further attack impossible without strong artillery support. Thus there was little that the Combat Group East could do except to tie down the enemy units in the area and to prevent the enemy from using the airfield³⁰⁷.

4. 21 May 1941 (evening)

The forces landed (by parachute and by aircraft) at Malemes seemed strong enough to hold the airfield and to guarantee the successful establishment of an airlift between Greece and Crete (planned for 22 May 1941).

If the German forces were to prevail, they would have to be able to count on the feasibility of landing additional mountain infantry troops and heavy weapons (especially antitank guns)^{at} (at least this one airfield on the island.

Colonel Ramcke, officially designated successor to General Meindl (who had been wounded) as commander at Malemes, arrived in the area of operations.

General Meindl, (see the photograph on the following page), together with the majority of the seriously wounded personnel, had been taken back to Athens in one of the returning transport aircraft.

However, Combat Group West still lacked a uniform chain of command uniting the paratroopers and the Mountain Infantry troops under a single authority not belonging directly to either group.

307 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 13.

PHOTOGRAPH

The Combat Groups Center and East were soon forced to switch to defensive operations, by means of which they struggled to hold the ground they had already won, to keep the enemy from utilizing the airfields at Rethymon and Iraklion, and to block the main highway along the coast.

The elimination of any island-based enemy air activity was sufficient to assure the Luftwaffe air supremacy over Crete³⁰⁸.

On the basis of their reconnaissance reports, the German operational planners had no choice but to assume that the majority of the Alexandria fleet, reinforced by elements from the Gibraltar fleet, was under way. Since the available German naval forces were

308 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 28, paragraph 5.

too weak, the Luftwaffe was given the task of single-handedly containing the British fleet to the extent necessary to permit the transport of troops, equipment, and supplies over the Aegean to Crete³⁰⁹.

The situation at Iraklion was so uncertain that it was deemed wiser to recall the fleet of boats which was to land near Combat Group East. The fleet headed for Malemes was ordered to proceed alone.

Section 4 - The Fate of the Ocean Transport Groups³¹⁰.

The two groups of engine-powered sailboats set out on schedule at dawn on 20 May 1941. The Malemes group, carrying the reinforced

309 - The fact that the Greater German Broadcasting Station (Grossdeutscher Rundfunk) still had made no mention of the operations on Crete by 21 May 1941 reflects the attitude of top-level German command - on 21 May they were by no means certain of ultimate victory on Crete! It was not until the fifth day of operations (24 May 1941 at 1700) that the Wehrmacht High Command released a special bulletin which revealed what was taking place for the first time. The London Times of 21 May 1941 predicts a British victory on Crete and continues, "The outcome in Crete will decide more than mere strategic advantage ... a German defeat on Crete would be serious and a frightful blow to German prestige." In this connection, the reader is also referred to Appendix 7, which deals with the impressions of members of the enemy force on Crete.

310 - There are a number of good reports on these ocean transport missions, including those by the Navy, the Luftwaffe, and the Mountain Infantry forces. The best source remains the original war diary of the Admiral (Southeast) (Admiral Schuster). As far as the role of the Luftwaffe is concerned, and particularly the "naval air battle" waged by the VIII Air Corps, the author has based his description on the Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, and on the diaries of General von Richthofen. General Ringel, op.cit., pages 100 - 121, deals in great and highly dramatic detail with the journey of the Mountain Infantry forces. No attempt has been made to reproduce his treatment of the matter fully. General A. Wittmann, writing in the magazine "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry), No. 2, 1954, pages 24 - 51, presents an excellent summary. Winston Churchill, op.cit., pages 287 and 288, deals with the fate of the "chiques", the small sailboats. The British losses he gives for the battle between the Luftwaffe and the Royal Navy do not agree with those cited by the VIII Air Corps and

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310 - (cont) other German sources. Even today one reads terribly exaggerated accounts of German losses (tenfold! !). It was not 4000 mountain infantry troops who died in the Aegean (Churchill, op.cit., page 287), but exactly 297 men, including the commander of the III Battalion, 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment.

III Battalion, 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment, was under the command of Lt. Colonel Ehal from the Piraeus, while the Iraklion group, bearing the reinforced II Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, was entrusted to Major Treck from Chalkis. The total number of troops on board these small transport vessels is given as 2,300³¹¹.

As far as Melos the progress of the two groups, each one accompanied by an Italian torpedo boat and two mine-sweeper groups, was smoothly uneventful apart from the fact that the convoy speed had to be decreased to as little as two or three nautical miles per hour because of bad weather³¹².

By the evening of the first day of operations, the transport groups, waiting at Melos for further instructions, were forced to the conclusion that the invasion of Crete was not going to be completed in the short time originally anticipated and that, consequently, their own landing could not possibly be carried out on schedule (i.e. that same day).

On 21 May the Admiral (Southeast) reported to the XI Air Corps that Malemes was safely in German hands, and that a stretch of coast suitable for landing boats was also free of enemy forces. And with this, the first prerequisites for a landing were fulfilled³¹³. The Malemes group set out from Melos.

In accordance with previously made arrangements, at 0900 the group was ordered to stop and - soon thereafter - to reverse course, since it had not been definitely determined that the waters ahead were free of enemy ships.

Approximately one and one-half hours later, aerial reconnaissance forces reported that

311 - Diary of the Admiral Southeast, page 4.

312 - Specifically, strong headwinds!

313 - Diary of the Admiral Southeast, page 5.

the waters north of Crete were free of enemy forces. Hereupon the group was ordered to continue on its way.

The reasoning behind this last order was based on the following considerations³¹⁴:

a. According to weather forecasts, winds from the north and northwest were expected - in other words, tailwinds which might well increase the convoy speed to five or six nautical miles per hour. This meant that the group could reach Malemes before nightfall. In the mistaken assumption that this wind was already coming from north or northwest, German leaders reasoned that the group could not have moved very far north during the short time which had elapsed after the "reverse course" order. (As it turned out, during this time there was a strong wind from the southwest, which had pushed the group farther north than would otherwise have been the case.)

b. Operational planners were of the opinion that a drastic change in the orders issued to the transport fleet could well jeopardize the success of the operation.

Accordingly, the Admiral(Southeast) asked the operation leaders for a direct answer to the question as to whether it was absolutely necessary to assume the additional risk inherent in the unfavorable situation of the moment, or whether the operation, i.e. the progress of the naval group, could not be postponed by 24 hours.

Because of the inadequacy of signal communications, it was clear from the beginning that some of the boats would not receive the messages to reverse course and then to resume their journey to the original destination.

The operation leaders determined that the situation demanded that the transport vessels proceed. Accordingly, the destroyer "Lupo" was ordered to head for Malemes with its contingent of ships, moving at top speed and not stopping to wait for stragglers.

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314 - Office of the Admiral (Southeast), classified report on Operation MERKUR,
No. 8689, dated 16 June 1941.

The commanders of the operation were certain that the Malemes group would reach Cape Spatha - and thus the protective proximity of the coastline - by about 2100. According to the evening reports of the aerial reconnaissance forces, the British naval forces in the area could not be expected to reach the Cape before 2200. With a bit of luck, then, the landing could succeed³¹⁵.

At 2334 the "Lupo" radioed that the sixteen small boats making up the Malemes group had been stopped by British cruisers and destroyers and that the group was in danger of being annihilated.

The forenoon of 22 May 1941 revealed the surprising intelligence³¹⁶ that the enemy, in spite of continual activity on the part of the German Luftwaffe and the consequent risk of heavy losses, was combing the waters between Crete and Melos in search of reported transport vessels. It seemed apparent that the British were determined to hold Crete, even if it meant employing all of their naval forces.

In the face of this determination, German leaders concluded that there was little to be gained by sending out any more motor-powered sailing vessels as transport ships. Another way would have to be found to bring the most urgently needed supplies to the island³¹⁷.

While the two sailboat groups, both of which had been ordered to return to the Piraeus, were still at sea, the decision was taken

315 - Handwritten marginal note on the original, in the records of the Naval Command Headquarters (Seekriegsleitung): "This timing is extremely unrealistic."

316 - Another marginal note on the original: "... hardly surprising! The effects of the Luftwaffe attacks will take some time to make themselves felt."

317 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, Diary, page 33: "General von Richthofen insists that the sailboats be ordered to proceed inasmuch as the reinforcements were badly needed on Crete and the British naval forces had withdrawn in defeat. However, the shock occasioned by the destruction of the first group was so great that the entire operation was called off - most unfortunately. . ."

to bring the most important equipment (including tanks) to Crete by individual transport ship. In preparation, work was begun on a landing stage at Castelli (on the northwestern part of the island).

In summary, the report of the Admiral (Southeast) has the following comment to make³¹⁸: "... only by means of close and constant coordination between the Fourth Air Fleet and the units subordinated to it and the command headquarters of the Twelfth Army, was it possible to overcome the enormous difficulties described.

Close coordination at command level, coupled with mutual understanding and effective cooperation at the operational level, were the prerequisites for the successes achieved and for the rapid compensation of the failures suffered.

The need for an adequate period of preparation for future missions of this type cannot be overemphasized."³¹⁹

* * *

The Air Naval Battle over the Aegean and the Fate of the Second
Ocean Transport Group.

In the Diary of General von Richthofen, the battle of the VIII Air Corps against the British naval forces is described as follows³²⁰:

318 - Report of the Admiral (Southeast), page 13, paragraph 2.

319 - Handwritten marginal note contributed by Admiral K. Fricke, Chief of Staff, Naval Command Headquarters: "Doubtful! The advantage of better preparation would be cancelled out by the disadvantage of stronger enemy defenses. Preservation of the element of surprise precludes systematic preparation of the sort envisioned by the Admiral (Southeast). The Admiral (Southeast) ought to have obeyed the instruction of the Naval Command Headquarters to permit the departure of the transport ships only after it had been determined that the waters were free of enemy naval forces.

In the opinion of the Naval Command Headquarters, the delay necessitated by "preparing for Operation MERKUR proved to be more of a hindrance than a help inasmuch as the element of surprise had to be sacrificed".

320 - General von Richthofen's description (pages 29 and 30 of his Diary) is so vivid - although not entirely free of inaccuracies - that the author has elected to quote it in its entirety.

"22 May 1941 - Since 0500 we have been receiving reports to the effect that British cruisers and destroyers are patrolling the waters near Iraklion, Crete, as well as near Melos and Cythera.

The first group of transport boats, with more than 2,000 troops on board³²¹, was surrounded and destroyed by the British force during the night³²². The Italian submarine³²³ accompanying the group succeeded in sinking one British cruiser, but that was all. The British force withdrew towards the west.

There was a second British force, composed of four cruisers and three destroyers, lying in wait off the coast of Iraklion. At dawn this force set out at full speed for Melos, approaching the island at about 1000.

On the basis of erroneous reports, our second transport group was ordered to depart from Melos in the morning. Five of our sailboats were attacked by the British force; the rest were able to escape from the enemy behind a smoke screen thrown up by the Italian escort ship³²⁴.

Since the German dive bomber forces had been sent up that morning against the enemy western squadron (which was stationed just south of the Peloponnesus and threatened to destroy our dive bombers at the Malaiois airfield right near the sea), there were no dive bombers available to head off the British naval force proceeding to Melos. Even the Ju-88's and He-111's had been committed against the western squadron. As a result, the

321 - This figure is inaccurate. Each transport group was capable of moving one battalion.

322 - "Destroyed" is hardly appropriate; see page 159 of the present study for the actual losses sustained (Footnote 310).

323 - This was not an Italian submarine (U-Boot), but a torpedo boat (T-Boat).

324 - The escort ship was the Italian torpedo Boat "Sagittario".

Do-17 wing is the only one available. As the boats burst into flame, the Do-17's drop their first bombs. We gave the boats up for lost, but the enemy suddenly reversed course and headed west to Cythera. Our second landing (near Iraklion) has also been prevented but this time at least we didn't lose all the boats. Our paratroopers on Crete are waiting in vain for reinforcements.

In the meantime the dive bombers are ready to take off again and are ordered up against the enemy naval force bound for Cythera. All available aircraft are mobilized for action - single-engine fighters, with and without bombs, twin-engine fighters, Ju-87's, He-111's, Ju-88's, and Do-17's.

The British ships are hit again and again. They burst into flames and sink. Others approach to pick up the survivors and are themselves hit by the bombs. The British call for help, and the main British fleet dispatches another cruiser group to reinforce them.

The ships had been under constant bombardment from the air since daybreak. Now they were beginning to run out of antiaircraft ammunition. The cruisers making up the newly-arrived relief group are also caught in the hail of bombs. The battle is a seething chaos of ships zigzagging and turning at full speed, on fire, sinking, or dragging themselves along, listing to one side and leaving a trail of oil on the water, with no goal but to escape from this Hell.

... In the late afternoon the British cease fire, presumably because they have no more ammunition. Slowly and wearily they withdraw towards Alexandria. The outcome is unmistakable. I have the feeling the we have won a great and decisive victory."³²⁵

It was by no means certain, however, that the British fleet

325 - See pages 193 a and 193 b (diagrams) of the present study, which indicate British losses, as given by British sources (eg. D.M. Davin, Crete, page 450ff)

considered itself beaten³²⁶. It had suffered considerable damage, to be sure, and was forced to keep out of the way of the Luftwaffe during the day. It was assumed that the British would augment the force patrolling the waters north of Crete during the following night.

It soon became apparent that the VIII Air Corps did not have sufficient personnel at its disposal to permit it to fulfill all the various combat missions assigned to it. Once the battle of the "Luftwaffe against the Royal Navy in a limited area"³²⁷ got under way, the VIII Air Corps had no alternative but to relegate its other missions - among them the furnishing of air support for the ground forces on Crete, to the background³²⁸.

Through the intervention of the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, who happened to be visiting Fourth Air Fleet Headquarters, two groups from the X Air Corps (III Group, 30th Bomber Wing, and I Group, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing) were ordered to reinforce the VIII Air Corps.

326 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 31, paragraph III.

327 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 31, paragraph III, 4.

328 - Thus General von Richthofen was very much mistaken when he complained (on 22 May 1941) that "...the ground troops, getting stronger and stronger, have so far failed to make any decisive move - they're simply sitting around and doing nothing. Crete is positively dead!" (Diary, page 31). In the recollection of the author, the only people "sitting around" were the crews of the destroyed or badly damaged aircraft. However, due to the personal influence enjoyed by General von Richthofen, remarks such as the above, however remotely they might agree with the actual facts, found their way to top-ranking Wehrmacht circles, where they did much to injure the reputation of the newly-established parachute forces (This is not, of course, subject to proof; it represents the author's opinion).

General von Richthofen's diaries exaggerate the role played by his own VIII Air Corps. On pages 32 and 33, for example, he lists enemy losses for a single day, 22 May 1941, as six cruisers and three destroyers - "definitely sunk". He continues, "At last we have proved that no enemy fleet can keep afloat in an area controlled by the Luftwaffe." Significantly, he makes no distinction between day and night control. The Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 31, reports that "three cruisers or destroyers

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328 - (cont) were sunk" on 22 May 1941. According to Churchill, op.cit.,
Volume III, the following ships were actually sunk: the cruiser
"Gloucester", the cruiser "Fiji", and the destroyer "Greyhound".

The second transport group (the one which was to land in the vicinity of Iraklion) was saved from destruction by the Italian torpedo boat assigned to escort it (the "Sagittario"). The warning did not come through until 0800 on 22 May 1941³²⁹. Reversing course immediately upon receipt of the order, the group ran into a British naval force. Thanks to the prompt action of the "Sagittario", the transport boats were able to escape from the enemy behind a rapidly created smoke screen. The majority of the vessels managed to get back to Melos unharmed. The Italian forces manning the torpedo boat had acted with dispatch and tactical ingenuity to protect the transport boats entrusted to their care.

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The attempt to land reinforcements on Crete by boat during the first days of the operation was a failure. The reservations which the Naval Command Headquarters had expressed prior to the operation³³⁰ had been fully substantiated. We have no choice but to condemn as a serious mistake the decision to begin the first ocean transport runs at a time when the presence of strong enemy naval forces in the Aegean was still being reported by the aerial reconnaissance forces. The losses incurred thereby could have been avoided.

329 - Office of the Admiral (Southeast), No. 830/41, classified, dated 23 May 1941 (addressed to the Naval Command Headquarters), page 2, paragraph III: "Radio communication to the Italian escort destroyers had to be routed through the Italian station attached to the office of the Admiral (Southeast). There had not been time to equip the individual transport boats with radio facilities."

330 - See Footnote 319, page 163 of the present study - operations should not have been begun until the military situation at sea had been brought under firm control.

Royal Navy spokesmen characterize 22 May 1941 as "... the most costly day for the fleet, which had three ships sunk and six damaged".³³¹ The losses sustained by the VIII Air Corps, on the other hand, were satisfactorily minor, the British fleet reporting two German aircraft definitely downed, six probably downed, and three damaged.

The sea rescue squadron turned in a magnificent performance in helping to save countless hundreds of troops, both friendly and enemy, from death by drowning.³³²

The only troop unit to be transported to Crete by sea³³³ during the first stage of the fighting was a small armored force with two tanks of the Panzer III type. It landed in the bay of Kastelli, on the northwestern coast of the island, on 25 April 1941 (sic).

Section 5 - The Assumption of Command at the Point of Main Effort by General

Ringel and the Operations of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division.

The third day of operations on Crete, 22 May 1941, came to an end without the hoped-for gain in territory at any one of the four landing points.

The airfield at Malemes, the

331 - Colonel W. Gaul, Retired, "Operation MERKUR", Volume 4, 1951, of the magazine "Europäische Sicherheit" (European Security), Verlag Mittler + Sohn, Darmstadt, page 11.

332 - H. Horbach, "Argonautenfahrt Reichenhaller Gebirgsjaeger" (The Journey of the Mountain Infantry Troops from Reichenhall), in volume 2, 1954, of the magazine "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry). On page 41, the following appears: "... They haven't forgotten us; life rafts are dropped by air ... and there is place for all of us in them. Then the sea rescue aircraft will pick us up and by evening we'll be in Athens.

Three of our comrades died on board the rafts (!). All the rest of us, including the wounded, managed to hold out until we were rescued."

334 - Generaloberst Student, "Sonderbericht Kreta" (Special Report on Crete), page 3, column 2.

only real potential gap in the anti-invasion defenses of the island, was still under British artillery fire. Despite intensive efforts, the VIII Air Corps was unable to eliminate the sources of this fire³³⁵. A commando unit from the XI Air Corps, equipped with captured enemy tanks, had to be on hand to clear the landing strips of the flaming wreckage congesting them.

The enemy was firmly convinced that the Germans would be unable to take the island using the "impossible" airfield at Malemes as a base of operations³³⁶. Churchill himself replied to the report of the commander in chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, stating that the expenses of maintaining the Fleet were too high to permit its being risked in an attack on Crete³³⁷.

"If it were merely a matter of a duel between the Mediterranean Fleet and the German Luftwaffe, the limitations

335 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 1; Storm Regiment Radio Log, page 7, reports the following radio message, received at 0745 on 22 May 1941: "XI Air Corps to Storm Regiment; The heavy artillery position two and one-half miles east of the airfield is being combatted (author's note: without success) by twin-engine fighter aircraft. There are neither dive-bomber nor single-engine fighter aircraft available". The absence of forces from the VIII Air Corps, a result of the unexpectedly violent sea-air battle, was a decided disadvantage as far as the scheduled course of Operation MERKUR was concerned. If the enemy artillery at Malemes airfield could have been eliminated in time, the loss of a hundred or more transport aircraft might have been prevented.

336 - W. Hornung, "Lufttransportversorgung der Insel Kreta" (Air Supply Operations to the Island of Crete), 26 October 1954, describes the "deficiencies of the Malemes airfield" as follows: "... narrow and uneven, furrowed by grenades, it was more like a plowed field than a landing strip. Every time an aircraft landed, it sent up a cloud of fine red dust ..."

337 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 292.

you suggest in the movement of the Fleet might be justified as necessary.

Under the present circumstances, however, we also have the battle of Crete to consider! If the Fleet can manage to stave off the ocean transport and landing of enemy reinforcements and supplies until the invasion force has been brought under control by our Army, then the Army may be able to take over the task of coping with attacks from the sea.

Thus, it is of vital importance that the Fleet prevent the landing of any enemy expeditions on the island within the next few days, even though such action may mean further losses for the Fleet ..."

From the above it is apparent that the enemy still believed, on the third day of operations, that the main invasion force would land from the sea. The action - or rather lack of action - of the island's military commander, General Freyberg, was also indicative of this belief, for he refused to send his numerically superior reserves into combat against the relatively weak German air landing groups, obviously holding them back for the anticipated landings from the sea.

The transport aircraft continued to land German troops; on 22 May 1941 two Mountain Infantry battalions and one Mountain Infantry Engineer battalion³³⁸ were brought to the island. But the losses inflicted on the air transport force were becoming unbearably high. The operational strength of the Ju-52 units amounted to 493 aircraft on 20 May 1941 - by

338 - More troops than had been loaded onto all the ships from the two motor-driven sailboat squadrons!

23 May 1941 it had sunk to 273 Ju-52's³³⁹. In other words, more than half of the original force had been put out of action, meaning that the surviving machines and crews were forced to assume twice as many assignments and twice as much responsibility³⁴⁰. Each transport aircraft was required to fly two missions per day from the Greek mainland to the island of Crete. This was a tremendous feat in view of the difficulties involved, and one deserving of the very highest praise³⁴¹.

On the evening of 22 May 1941, Generalleutnant Ringel, Commander of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, landed at Malemes with his divisional staff and assumed command of the operations there³⁴². In compliance with his orders, the units were reorganized.

Generalleutnant Ringel's first objective was to clear the western portion of the island of enemy troops, in order to secure the airfield for the use of the invaders.

The Mountain Infantry Engineer Battalion advanced as far as Kastelli (see the map on the following page), in spite of the stubborn resistance offered by civilian volunteer fighters and

339 - W. Hornung, study dated 29 March 1955, Appendix 6, page 40. Not all of these, of course, were total losses; some of the aircraft included in this statistic sustained only minor damages, which could be repaired within a few weeks.

340 - The troops which, according to General von Richthofen's reports, "sat around doing nothing", were made up primarily of the crews whose aircraft had been destroyed or damaged (based on the author's personal observations).

341 - Generaloberst Student, on page 22, column 2 of his Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", describes the problems posed by the Malemes airfield as follows: "The airfield at Malemes was a landing strip the shape of a towel approximately 2000 ft. long. It had to be handled like a raw egg, which meant that only one aircraft could land or take-off at a time. As a result, it took about four hours to land a single battalion! Under such conditions as these, it was only by extremely strict discipline that the airfield commandant (Lt.Col. Snowadzki, from the staff of the XI Air Corps) was able to implement the air traffic restrictions

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341 (cont) which had been imposed." In this connection, the reader is also referred to Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 34, paragraph I, 1.

342 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 33, paragraph 4.

military snipers waiting in ambush³⁴³.

The harbor of Palaiochora, on the southern coast of the island, was captured by the 55th Motorcycle Rifle Battalion (Kradshuetzenbataillon 55) in the face of similarly stubborn resistance.

These two operations put an effective end to the threat of enemy attack on the Malemes airfield from the west or the south³⁴⁴.

At Generalleutnant Ringel's behest, two groups were formed to push forward to the east, via Chania, to Suda Bay:

- a) the first group, consisting of mountain infantry troops under the command of Colonel Utz, was to cross the mountains towards the south;
- b) the second, made up of the reassembled paratroopers from the Storm Regiment and the reinforcement units landed at Malemes under Colonel Ramcke, was to proceed along the coast.

343 - The reinforced paratrooper unit, the "Detachment Lt. Muerbe" (Detachment under the command of 1st Lieutenant Muerbe), which had landed by parachute near Kastelli on 20 May 1941 was a part of the force commanded by the author in Crete. Of the seventy-three men making up the unit, only eleven survived, all of them seriously wounded. Approaching in six Ju-52's, the Detachment selected a valley about two-thirds of a mile square, close to the coast and directly southeast of Kastelli, as the only possible landing area. The enemy, however, had established fortified positions in the hills and on the ridges overlooking the valley and had manned them with an understrengthened Greek regiment reinforced by a number of British instructors, and this force was well able to keep the valley under continual artillery fire. Even before 20 May, the enemy positions had been occupied night and day; they were kept supplied and reinforced by volunteer guerrillas from among the civilian population.

According to reports by wounded personnel, Lt. Muerbe's detachment had not even had a chance to recover the weapons containers dropped by air. Ten minutes after the detachment had landed, it had already been destroyed.

The civilian population was unbelievably brutal in its treatment of the more than sixty dead; only the courageous intervention of the British saved the wounded from a similar fate (based on the personal experience

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343 - (cont) of the author).

344 - The surviving paratroopers would never have been strong enough to have effected rapid clearance of the area on their own, particularly in view of the terrain difficulties involved.

In view of the relatively weak fire power of his forces, General Ringel was eager to avoid head-on attack whenever he could, preferring to take enemy positions by encirclement or by flank attack. The progress of the Mountain Infantry forces through this "merciless desert of rocks"³⁴⁵ was characterized by the motto "sweat saves bloodshed"²⁴⁶. The island did not even have paths, let alone roads, leading from west to east. The Mountain Infantry units had no alternative but to attack from mountain strongholds - and the British began to get scared, withdrawing from one coastal position after the other.

The Mountain Infantry forces, plagued by infernal heat during the day and by intense cold during the night ("... a cold which penetrates to the very marrow ...", in General Ringel's words³⁴⁷), had to carry not only their weapons and gear, including machine guns and mountain artillery pieces, but also their ammunition, their food, and - above all - their drinking water. The utter barrenness of the rocky desert precluded the establishment of any sort of reliable supply line - regardless of whether supplies were to be delivered by beast of burden or by motor vehicle. There is a great deal of truth in General Ringel's statement that "very rarely have troops been forced to march and fight under any worse conditions"³⁴⁸. In the foothills the troops were able to cover about one mile an hour provided they did not have to contend with enemy snipers. The marches had to be accomplished during the early morning or evening hours; the unbearable heat during the day (104° - 113° F., with no shade available!) precluded any movement whatsoever.

345 - General Ringel, op.cit., page 131.

346 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 22, column II.

347 - General Ringel, op.cit., page 132.

348 - General Ringel, op.cit., page 133.

The conditions faced by the rest of the parachute forces, the groups at Chania, Rethymnon, and Iraklion, had remained substantially unchanged, i.e. weapons, ammunition, and foodstuffs were being delivered by air drop.

By the evening of 22 May 1941, the groups landed on Crete had still not managed to establish contact with one another.

Nevertheless, the headquarters staff in Athens seemed to consider the situation obtaining on the evening of 22 May more favorable than that of the previous day, despite the continuing lack of any definite data concerning the enemy situation. The most important goals were still to prevent the enemy from landing reinforcements during the night at Suda Bay, which was still not in German hands, and to keep him from utilizing the airfields on the eastern end of the island³⁴⁹. The over-all plan was to strengthen the Malemes bridgehead sufficiently so that it could be used as a base from which to encircle the British forces and drive them out of their naval stronghold on Suda Bay³⁵⁰.

349 - The official British report (given by General A. Wittmann, "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry), volume 3, 1954, page 6) reads as follows: "In the battle of Crete, the Germans have been unsuccessful in every sector but that of Malemes, which is the only city they have occupied so far. The defenders have an advantage over the German forces in that they have armored tanks at their disposal. The situation at Malemes is still undecided. There is reason to believe that the Germans may still be driven from the airfield." General von Waldau, at that time Chief of the Luftwaffe Operations Staff, made the following comment in his diary (page 47) on the occasion of his visit to Athens to confer with the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff at Fourth Air Fleet headquarters: "... a fine situation at command level, from top to bottom! ... There wasn't a trace of systematic planning or effective leadership in this operation until the 5th Mountain Infantry Division was brought into the picture!"

350 - Quoted from the diary of General Ringel (page 7, column I) by General A. Wittmann, op.cit. It is interesting to note that the "Reports on Crete" of the Fourth Air Fleet and the XI Air Corps do not contain any evaluation of the military situation as of 22 May 1941.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: Crete, showing the coastal highway.

Below: One of the many small coves dotting the northern
coast of Crete.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: Storm Regiment headquarters near Malemes.

Below: Colonel Heidrich's headquarters at Chania.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: Suda Bay

Below: Paratroopers advancing along the coastal
highway. Donkeys were used to tow the fully-
laden weapons containers.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: City of Chania after German bombardment.

Below: The harbor of Chania after German bombardment.

Germany's Italian allies were so favorably impressed by the development of the situation on Crete that they offered, on the evening of 22 May, to participate in the occupation of the island. The Italian commander at Do-decanes offered (among other things) to contribute an anti-tank company - which, however, never arrived³⁵¹. After referring the matter to the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, for decision, German leaders accepted the Italian offer. The Italian forces were to land on the eastern end of the island; a German liaison staff was dispatched to Rhodes to handle the details.

On 23 May 1941, seven British fighter aircraft and one British bomber landed on the airfield at Iraklion in defiance of heavy harrassing fire from the Combat Group East³⁵². One of the British aircraft burst into flames. In order to prevent further landings by British aircraft on Crete, it was decided to reinforce Combat Group East with parachute reserve forces which had been established in the meantime by the XI Air Corps. Made up in part of remnants of the 7th Air Division, the new parachute battalion was launched west of Iraklion on 24 May. The new battalion, however, like the original force, had no heavy weapons at its disposal and had no immediate effect on the situation in its area of operations³⁵³.

351 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 30, paragraph 5. An "offer", after all, was not really binding. In order to be really effective, the Italian forces ought to have attacked at once (in the opinion of the author). By the time the Italian Expeditionary Corps landed on eastern Crete on 28 May 1941 (!), the outcome of the operation had already been decided.

352 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 11; Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 35, paragraph II, 1.

353 - It took until 27 May to assemble and organize the newly-landed forces; from this day on, however, the airfield at Iraklion could be considered securely in German hands.

It proved infeasible to relieve the overburdened facilities of the Malemes airfield by routing traffic to the newly-secured and far better-equipped airfield at Iraklion. As a result, the original plan could not be put into operation.

On the evening of 23 May, contact was established between Combat Group West and Combat Group Center - at Stalos, a unit from the 3d Parachute Regiment ran into the 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment, which was advancing from Malemes in the southwest³⁵⁴.

During the same evening, the first single-engine fighter aircraft were transferred to Malemes³⁵⁵. Additional units from the 5th Mountain Infantry Division had already been flown to Malemes³⁵⁶.

In order to provide closer coordination between the VIII Air Corps and General Ringel's group by eliminating all the various intermediate stations previously needed to relay requests for air support, the Chief Signal Officer (Hoeherer Nachrichtenfuhrer) of the Fourth Air Fleet set up a direct radio channel between the two organizations³⁵⁷. As a result, the VIII Air Corps was able to keep up a

354 - For detailed descriptions of the meeting, see XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 4, and Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 35, paragraph I, b.

355 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 36.

356 - The available sources do not provide specific information as to which units these were.

The study by W. Hornung ("Lufttransportversorgung der Insel Kreta", 26 October 1955) fails to conform to the facts in a number of points. On page 4, for example, Hornung states that "... the airfield at Rethymon (!) could also be used until the evening of 22 May ... in this way, reinforcements were flown in for the hard-pressed 2d Parachute Regiment. Units from the 6th Mountain Infantry Division were flown in uninterrupted missions from the mainland to Rethymon." Hornung is mistaken here. Colonel Sturm was kept prisoner by the British until 27 May, and the employment of units from the 6th Mountain Infantry Division was ordered by Generalfeldmarschall List on 25 May (regimental commander,

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356 - (cont) Colonel Jais). See the report by General A. Wittmann, "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry), volume 3, 1954, page 10 ff. According to Generaloberst Student, the airfield at Rethymon was not available for use until 1 June 1941.

357 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 36.

running attack on pockets of enemy resistance and on enemy artillery positions, thus smoothing the way for the paratrooper and mountain infantry forces. The VIII Air Corps attacked Suda Bay unrelentingly, and on 23 May, for example, sank five of a fleet of six British speedboats.

During the battle against the British naval forces in the waters north of Crete, VIII Air Corps units sank three destroyers³⁵⁸; only light vessels were sighted in the vicinity of Crete. There was no way of telling whether or not the majority of the British Alexandria Fleet had given up the fight³⁵⁹.

On 23 May, in any case, the enemy found it "... imperative that the strongest possible reinforcements be brought to the island in order to assure the destruction of the enemy forces already landed before the latter could, themselves, be reinforced."³⁶⁰

"The difficulties faced by the enemy and the losses in highly-trained troops sustained by him must be very great indeed; he cannot possibly continue at this pace." General Freyberg received the following message from Churchill:

"The eyes of the world are turned to your magnificent struggle, upon which so many significant developments depend."³⁶¹

General Ringel's tactic of advancing through the mountains,

358 - According to the diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, more ships than just these three were sunk. A final summary of all the ships sunk or damaged during the battle of Crete is being prepared on the basis of all available sources (German, English, and Italian) and will be submitted as a separate appendix to the present study.

359 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 31, paragraph III.

360 - Churchill, op.cit., page 293.

361 - Churchill, op.cit., page 293. The "significant developments" included not only the threat to the Suez Canal, Cyprus, and the oil ports of Syria, but also potential effects on the fighting in North Africa and Egypt.

which was time-consuming but far safer in terms of personnel losses, might have given the enemy a chance to land quite strong reinforcements in Suda Bay, had it not been for the fact that the Luftwaffe kept enemy ship movements under constant surveillance during the day and subjected enemy vessels to effective bombardment. Only the fastest British ships were capable of covering the distance from Alexandria to Suda Bay and back (375 miles one way) in a single night in view of the fact that approximately one-half the route was within range of Luftwaffe aircraft. In any case, the British did not have sufficient fast ships at their disposal. And once German dive-bombers could be based on Crete, German air supremacy would be so complete that there would be no reason to fear further enemy landings.

Prompted by the situation reports of 23 May 1941, the Fourth Air Fleet initiated the following measures designed to facilitate the occupation of Crete:

XI Air Corps:

- a. Transport of additional reinforcements, particularly to General Ringel's group, in order to subdue enemy resistance once and for all. (The number of reinforcements, of course, was dependent upon the number of transport aircraft available).
- b. Air supply of the Combat Group on Crete.

VIII Air Corps:

- a. Armed aerial reconnaissance over every inch of the waters surrounding Crete.
- b. Provision of air support for the ground fighting on Crete.
- c. Prevention of enemy landings.
- d. Provision of protection for urgently necessary ocean supply transports.

Office of the Admiral (Southeast):

In keeping with the desperate need for renewed efforts to supply Crete from the sea, the Office of the Admiral (Southeast) was assigned the following missions:

- a. Provision of some measure of relief for the transport aircraft (and thus for the only island airfield in German hands - the one at Malemes.)
- b. Transport of heavy weapons, tanks, and vehicles which could not be carried by transport aircraft and which were urgently needed on Crete.

Ocean supply transports could be carried out only during the daylight hours; they must have reached their destinations by nightfall.

For this reason the bases at Melos and Cythera, which were to be used as home ports by the transport ships, were protected by light and heavy artillery.

By 24 May the ground fighting in the sector assigned to General Ringel's group had come to a halt before the enemy's well-fortified positions on both sides of Galatas (see the sketch on the following page).

"No change in the situation at Rethymon and Iraklion."³⁶²

On 23 May two Mountain Artillery battalions, one Mountain Antitank Battalion, and the majority of the Motorcycle Rifle Battalion³⁶³ were landed at the airfield at Malemes; on 24 May,

362 - Office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, Intelligence Branch, Situation Report No. 623, page 7. The situation reports issued by the Office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, sometimes contained rather strange information on Crete. On page 20, for example, we read that "... targets in the center of the city (i.e. Iraklion) were hit repeatedly by bombs. Enemy field fortifications and one enemy artillery position were destroyed."

The Luftwaffe did play a decisive part in the occupation of Crete, but it seems to be difficult - if not impossible - to describe its role in terms which do not appear ridiculous to anyone having first-hand knowledge of the situation.

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363 - The Motorcycle Rifle Battalion was transported, including motorcycles
and sidecars, by Ju-52's!

these forces were augmented by one reconnaissance battalion, one antiaircraft machine-gun battery, one and one-half Mountain Infantry Company³⁶⁴.

The majority of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division had now been landed on Crete³⁶⁵.

Section 6 - The Collapse of the Defending Forces after the Conquest of Chania.

On 25 May the enemy attacked the airfield at Malemes with a force of bombers and fighters based in Egypt³⁶⁶. This attack, however, was too weak and came too late to have any real effect on the development of events. The only tangible result was to limit the airfield's usefulness to the invaders by blockading the landing strips with wrecked aircraft³⁶⁷. German losses were relatively slight.

During the night of 24/25 May, specially selected British vessels, most of them destroyers, succeeded in landing reinforcements and supplies at Suda Bay³⁶⁸. All of the enemy forces in the Chania and Suda Bay areas had been moved to Galatas,

364 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 34, paragraph I, 1.

365 - General A. Wittmann, op.cit., page 9. General Wittmann, as commanding general of the 95th Mountain Artillery Regiment, was an eye-witness to the events on Crete, thus a genuine source of information!

366 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 22.

367 - This situation can be compared with that of the airfield at Waalhaven in Holland on 12 May 1940, during the campaign in the West (see the author's study concerning the employment of the air landing forces in the West during 1940). Waalhaven, too, was the "only available airfield" within enemy territory (Fortress Holland).

368 - As early as the evening of 24 May, the British Fleet no longer had any real chance to wrest possession of the island from the German invaders. British political leaders, however, were not ready to concede the loss of the island to the enemy.

The air superiority enjoyed by the Luftwaffe made it impossible for British naval forces to operate during the day, hence the night landings (also during the night of 26/27 and 27/28 May).

in the mountainous region west of Chania. Operating from this position, they were to provide a last-resort defense of the capital city and Suda Bay. It was here that the decisive battle for the possession of Crete took place.

Generalfeldmarschall List, "deeply concerned over the outcome of the battle for Crete"³⁶⁹, ordered an additional Mountain Infantry Division placed at the disposal of the XI Air Corps - as reinforcement for General Ringel's group. This Regiment (the 141st, under the command of Colonel Jais) did not arrive on Crete until 26 May.

In the meantime, General Student, Commanding General of the XI Air Corps, had landed at Malemes on the morning of 25 May and had proceeded immediately to General Ringel's headquarters³⁷⁰.

PHOTOGRAPH

General der Flieger Student visiting
the headquarters of Colonel Ramcke on Crete
on 25 May 1941 (Student right, Ramcke with
white scarf and fieldglasses).

369 - General A. Wittmann, op.cit., page 10.

370 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 5.

The attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps on Galatas, Chania, and Suda Bay did much to weaken enemy resistance. Galatas was occupied during the afternoon of 26 May, only to be lost again in the evening³⁷¹ to a British counter-attack carried out with the support of armored forces. In "murderous infighting"³⁷², Colonel Ramcke's paratrooper group (moving along the coast to form the left flank) and the looth Mountain Infantry Regiment (under the command of Colonel Utz) managed to gain some ground as night fell. The battle lasted throughout the night, the British hanging on "like bulldogs"³⁷³. By daybreak the village of Galatas was again in German hands, after a struggle which had taken heavy toll on both sides.

Yielding to the pressure brought to bear by the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment (under the command of Colonel Krakau), which had advanced through the mountains south of Galatas, the British forces had retreated from their key positions just before Chania³⁷⁴.

Admiral Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief of the Alexandria Fleet, had ordered an attack for 26 May on the German air base on the island of Scarpanto, east of Crete. The attack was to be carried out by aircraft from the 23,000 ton aircraft carrier "Formidable", escorted

371 - During the evening hours for the simple reason that there was no Luftwaffe interference to contend with!

372 - These are General Wittmann's exact words!

373 - The King of Greece, who had fled to Crete and was in hiding somewhere between Galatas and Chania, was barely able to escape to safety in Egypt. On the evening of 26 May, General Freyberg reported to Field Marshal Wavell that "... our position here is hopelessly untenable!" (Churchill, op.cit., page 295). Churchill replied as follows: "It is absolutely imperative that we achieve victory on Crete at this time. Throw in everything you have that could make our struggle a success!"

by two cruisers and eight destroyers. The purpose of the attack was to destroy any German and Italian aircraft located at the base and to prevent the anticipated landing of Italian forces on the island of Crete. Only eight (!) British aircraft took off from the "Formidable"³⁷⁵, and the total extent of their success was to damage slightly several German aircraft on the ground. German dive-bombers attacking the "Formidable", on the other hand, managed to land two direct hits which resulted in serious damage for the aircraft carrier. One of the escort destroyers (the "Nubian") was also severely hit. It was only with great difficulty that the attack fleet was able to make it back to Alexandria.

On the same day, a second British naval unit, made up of the battleship "Barham" (31,000 tons), two cruisers, and five destroyers, was attacked by Ju-88's and He-111's southeast of Casco. The "Barham" received a number of direct hits. All British fleet elements, including the convoys on their way to Crete with reinforcements, were ordered on 27 May to head back to Alexandria; for the moment, all hope of reaching Crete with reinforcements and supplies was abandoned.

General Freyberg³⁷⁶ reluctantly reported that the troops under his command at Suda Bay " ...have reached the outside limits of human endurance - a small, ill-equipped, and relatively immobile force cannot hope to withstand concentrated air attacks of the kind we have experienced during the last week ..."
The British no longer had

375 - General Ludovico, op.cit., page 14; see also footnote , page).

376 - Churchill, op.cit., page 295.

sufficient troops at their disposal to mount a large-scale offensive action. The relentless activity³⁷⁷ of the German Luftwaffe had done much to break the enemy's fighting morale.

On 27 May 1941, Chanis³⁷⁸ finally fell into German hands, after preliminary bombardment had caused fires and property damage throughout the city. Paratroopers from the Ramcke and Heidrich Groups and infantry troops from the 100th and 141st Mountain Infantry Regiments converged on the city from all sides nearly simultaneously. This unexpectedly rapid success - the sudden collapse of the enemy defenses on the island's main front - was due exclusively to the untiring efforts of the mountain infantry forces. The torturous route covered by the "Krakau" group, from the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, was an "introduction to Dante's Inferno"³⁷⁹.

General Wittman, commander of the advance group from the Mountain Infantry Regiment, describes it as follows³⁸⁰:

"For almost three whole days and nights the members of our 85th, sweating profusely under the load of their heavy equipment, struggled on through this desert of stone - no shade, no water, nothing but the pitiless sun reflected from the burning and barren rocks (naked cliffs as high as 6,500 ft.), their heat certainly near to the boiling point. The troops are still forced to be their own beasts of burden..."

Apparently the British could not believe that physical feats such as these were humanly possible. A tough and courageous fighter, the British soldier was not suited either psychologically or physically for 'punishment' of this kind."

377 - Churchill, op.cit., page 294.

378 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 8;

379 - General Wittman, op.cit., page 12; see also the diagram on the following page.

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380 - General Wittmann, op.cit., page 12 ff.

As soon as the threat of a German encirclement action became apparent, it was clear that any attempt by the British to hold Chania or Suda Bay was quite pointless. Thus, in order to avoid being caught in a hopeless situation on 28 May, the British forces began to withdraw as rapidly as possible. An 800-man strong commando troop³⁸¹ was landed at Suda Bay during the night of 26/27 May to cover the British retreat towards the south.

On 28 May Suda Bay fell into German hands, and the battle of Crete was over³⁸².

381 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 296. The commando troops, under the leadership of Colonel Leydock, were landed near Suda by the mine-layer "Abdiel" during the night of 26/27 May. Relatively fresh, these troops fought effectively in a rear guard action which enabled the surviving British forces from the Malemes and Chania sectors to make their way to the southern coast of the island (a repetition of the success at Dunkirk!)

382 - On 25 May, the Wehrmacht High Command had finally lifted the ban on information concerning Operation MERKUR and issued the following official bulletin: "Since the early morning hours of 20 May, German parachute and air landing forces have been engaged in combat against elements of the British Army on the island of Crete. With the valuable support of fighter, bomber, and dive-bomber units, they have carried out a bold attack leading to the capture of tactically important points on the island. Reinforced by newly arrived units of the German Army, the ground forces have switched to the offensive. Nearly all of the western part of the island is already in German hands. Joint operations by paratrooper air landing, and Army forces are continuing according to plan. The German Luftwaffe has succeeded in frustrating an attempt by the Royal Navy to intervene in the battle for Crete by driving it out of the waters north of the island and by sinking or damaging a large number of enemy vessels". (It is interesting to note here that no exact numbers, names of ships, or further details are given; apparently the Wehrmacht High Command was skeptical of the accuracy of the operational reports received. Author's note). "The Luftwaffe has achieved air supremacy over the entire area. Italian naval and air units have been participating in the battle of Crete since 20 May and have contributed a great deal to the victories so far achieved." (This would seem to be flagrant exaggeration. If the Italians had really played an effective role, contributing

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382 - (cont) a substantial naval force, attacking Malta, etc., then British power in the Mediterranean could have been broken once and for all! Instead the Italians failed to recognize and take advantage of this "moment of weakness" of the English. Author's note). "Yesterday the German Luftwaffe again participated in the battle of Crete with overwhelming success. Under cover provided by fighter aircraft, the transport units released paratroopers over the island to strengthen the ground force. German bombers carried out effective attacks on enemy artillery employment, machine-gun nests, barracks, camps, and troop assembly areas; they destroyed a number of British artillery posts and radio stations, demolished two aircraft on the ground, and sank a merchant ship of 1000 gross registered tons south of Crete."

The bulletin issued by the Wehrmacht High Command for 27 May 1941 reads as follows: "In spite of extremely difficult terrain conditions, German mountain infantry troops succeeded yesterday in breaking the inordinately tough resistance offered by British forces and Greek insurgent troops. In a bold attack, our forces drove the enemy from his strongholds, seized the city of Chania, and pursued the defeated forces south of Suda Bay."

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: A machine-gun emplacement utilized during the
battle of Galatas.

Below: The monument to the fallen at Galatas. Built
by the survivors of the Storm Regiment on one
of the unconquerable hills, the monument is
topped by a diving eagle.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: General Student (right, nearest the wall)
in conversation with General Ringel (stand-
ing in the sidecar of his motorcycle).

Below: General Student examining one of the enemy
tanks captured on Crete.

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PHOTOGRAPH

Our photograph shows Crete's only
through highway, the coastal road -
narrow, full of curves, and in poor
repair!

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PHOTOGRAPH

The port of Chania. To the right of the photograph, the harbor itself, its maximum depth of six and one-half to ten feet making it navigable only for small coastal shipping. In the upper left-hand corner we see the swastika displayed outside the headquarters of the Harbor Commander, Ltjg (Leutnant zur See) Oesterlin.

General Ringel assigned the task of clearing the Akrotiri Peninsula (north of Suda Bay) to the parachute forces, and went on to lead the units under Colonel Jais and Colonel Krakau in the pursuit of the retreating enemy forces. The advance battalion, under the command of Lt. Colonel Wittmann, succeeded in relieving the combat group from the 2d Parachute Regiment after heavy fighting near Rethymnon (see the map on the following page) during the day of 29 May.

At Iraklion, too, the enemy had attempted to bring up reinforcements. On 24 May elements of the "Argyp and Sutherland Highland" Regiment had landed at Timbaki³⁸³ on the southern coast and had fought their way through to Iraklion. The majority of this enemy force was decimated by the German parachute battalion led by Major Vogel, which had landed on the island on 24 May as reinforcement for Combat Group East. On 28 May, additional reinforcements in the form of a parachute battalion made up of the survivors of a number of various units and placed under the command of Captain Boehmler³⁸⁴, landed east of the Iraklion airfield (see the map on the following page).

With the help of the reinforcements mentioned above, on 29 May Colonel Braeuer's group was ordered to seize the airfield at Iraklion.

383 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 297.

384 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 12.

A sharp increase in enemy naval activity off Iraklion was noted during the night of 28/29 May. The British had sent in boats to facilitate the evacuation of the 4,000 troops³⁸⁵ stationed at Iraklion.

On the morning of 29 May, when the German attack on the Iraklion airfield got under way, the paratroopers found the area already clear of enemy forces. Both the airfield and the city of Iraklion were captured.

The evacuation operation, however, resulted in heavy losses for the British. The evacuation fleet (the cruisers "Orion", "Ajax", and "Dido" plus six destroyers as escort) was harrassed by German dive-bombers from early in the morning of 29 May until afternoon, when it finally came within sight of Alexandria. Two of the destroyers, the "Imperial and the "Herewarth", were sunk with all the troops on board, while the cruisers were subjected to serious damage in the Straits of Cuso.

"The conditions on board the "Orion" were dreadful", writes Churchill³⁸⁶, "... in addition to its crew personnel, there were 1,100 troops on board. A single German bomb, which landed on the bridge, killed 260 men and wounded 280 others ..." The ship caught fire. More than one-fifth of the British forces evacuated from Iraklion were killed during the journey to Alexandria.

* * *

On 27 May, General Freyberg was given permission to evacuate his troops from the island³⁸⁷. There was no chance of their retreating via the harbors

385 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 298; C.M. Davin, op.cit., page 481, states that the defending force at Iraklion comprised 8,024 troops, some 3,000 of whom were Greek volunteers. No action was taken to evacuate the wounded.

386 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 298.

387 - C.M. Davin, op.cit., page 388. Final permission to evacuate the island was granted only after lengthy communiques had been exchanged among the British Middle East Command Headquarters (Englisches Oberkommando Mittel-ost), i.e. General Wavell and Admiral Cunningham, and the British

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387 - (cont) Admiralty in London. The fiasco suffered by the Royal Navy was
the final motivating factor.

on the northern coast of Crete. The roads to Rethymon and Iraklion were already blocked by German mountain infantry troops. Only the southern coast, to all intents and purposes completely free of harbors, offered a base of operations for an organized retreat from the island.

Sphakia³⁸⁸, the assembly point for the British forces, is a small fishing village at the foot of rocky cliffs plunging steeply into the sea from a height of 5,250 ft., on the southern coast of the island. These cliffs can be crossed only by means of an almost perpendicular goat trail. It was here that some 22,000 men³⁸⁹, British and Greek troops³⁹⁰, were ordered to assemble to board the evacuation ships. Here they were forced to remain hidden while a desperate rear guard action was being fought against the pursuing 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment in the trackless and waterless wastes of the barren mountains (see the map on the following page).

During the course of four nights, beginning on 28 May, the British succeeded in evacuating the majority of their forces from Crete with the help of the cruisers, destroyers, and troop transport ships of the Royal Navy.

The British evacuation action was a masterpiece - one whose scope and effectiveness were not fully appreciated by the Fourth Air Fleet³⁹¹.

During the day the British naval forces, including the fast transport ship "Glengyle" (capacity: 3,000 troops), were given constant air cover by Air Marshal Tedder's small force of Egypt-based fighter aircraft.

388 - Also spelled "Skafia" and "Sphakion".

389 - W. Churchill, *op.cit.*, page 297; C.M. Davin, *op.cit.*, indicates on page 521 that some 17,000 troops were evacuated ("allowing foormen killed on passage", *sic.*)

390 - Very few Greek troops were actually evacuated with the British forces.

391 - Colonel W. Gaul, *op.cit.*, page 13: "... four cruisers, twelve destroyers, one mine sweeper, and one transport ship made up the force which transported the 17,000 British troops back to Alexandria..."

The difficulties involved in getting the troops on board³⁹² during the few hours of darkness available, with only small landing boats to fall back on, were truly enormous. The departure from the "pier" of Sphakia also had to be accomplished in the dark. The British evacuation fleet was already well on its way to salvation in Alexandria by the time the VIII Air Corps units, already exhausted both physically and mentally, had taken off from the Greek mainland and made their way to the waters south of Crete³⁹³.

Nevertheless, evacuation of the island cost the enemy dearly in both personnel and materiel³⁹⁴. On 1 June the antiaircraft cruiser "Calcutta" sank after several direct hits by German bombers. A number of cruisers and destroyers were severely damaged.

392 - C.M. Davin, op.cit., page 521: "miscounting on embarkation".

393 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 42, records the following mission: "... armed reconnaissance over the Aegean as far south of Crete as aircraft range allows..." In the all-out effort to relieve the forces cut off at Rethymon and at Iraklion as soon as possible, insufficient forces were assigned to the task of pursuing the enemy, whose strength had been badly underestimated, and preventing his evacuating the island during the night.

394 - During May 1941, the following British vessels were damaged in the waters around the island of Crete:

- a. Battleships: "Warspite" and "Valiant" (33,000 tons, with a speed of 25 nautical miles per hour and a crew of 1,800 men. Built in 1913 and 1922 respectively, they had been renovated and fitted with catapults.)
- b. Light Cruisers: "Perth", "Orion", "Ajax", and "Dido" (7,000 tons on the average, with an average speed of 32 nautical miles per hour and an average crew of 574 men; built during the years 1932 through 1935).
- c. "Napier" and "Kelvin" (no data).

(Based on Weyer's "Taschenbuch der Kriegsflotten" (Pocket Manual of Military Naval Forces), Volume XXVIII, 1934, J.F. Lehmann Verlag, Munich).

The following British vessels were sunk in the waters around Crete during May 1941:

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394 - (cont)

- a. Cruisers: "Calcutta", "Gloucester", "Fiji", "Kelly", "Kashmir".
- b. Destroyers: "Greyhound", "Juno", "Imperial", "Hereward", as well as one submarine.

The following were damaged:

- a. Cruisers: "Dido", "Perth", "Ajax", "Orion".
 - b. Aircraft Carriers: "Formidable".
 - c. Destroyers: "Napier", "Kelvin".
 - d. Miscellaneous assault boats, landing boats, etc.
-

By 1 June 1941, the battle for the island of Crete had come to an end³⁹⁵.

"A victory without parallel had been achieved - the result of true inter-service cooperation. Luftwaffe, Navy, and Army have all done their best."³⁹⁶

"For the very first time, a higher-level Luftwaffe headquarters had been in charge of an operation in which all three Wehrmacht branches took part."³⁹⁷

395 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 40, paragraph I, 2.

The bulletin issued by the Wehrmacht High Command read as follows:

"The struggle for Crete is over. The whole island has been cleared of enemy forces." The British Ministry of War, on the other hand, released the following bulletin: "After twelve days of the hardest fighting yet encountered in this war, it was decided to withdraw our forces from the island."

Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 53, reports laconically:

"Mission accomplished. Crete cleared of enemy forces as of today."

396 - General A. Wittmann, op.cit., page 19, column II.

397 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52, paragraph I b: "The achievement of this unique victory was made possible only by the indomitable courage demonstrated by parachute forces and the mountain infantry troops on Crete in the face of tremendously difficult climatic and topographical conditions and by the untiring and exemplary employment of the air transport forces and the units of the VIII Air Corps."

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: The dead, their bodies often bearing the marks of brutality on the part of the native guerrillas or partly decomposed as a result of climatic factors, were buried in mass graves.

Below: Parachute and mountain infantry troops standing in front of the graves (distinguishable by the paratrooper uniform, left above, and the "Edelweiss" shoulder patch, right above).

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: General Student expresses his thanks to General-
feldmarschall List, Commander in Chief, Twelfth
Army, for the assistance rendered by the mountain
infantry forces in the occupation of Crete.

Below: The "Crete" arm-band, shown here, was awarded to
all those who participated in the battle of Crete.

The German victory on Crete has given rise to a number of commentaries and critiques. The British General Fuller, for example, writes as follows³⁹⁸:

"As regards sheer daring, the air attack on Crete is the most outstanding of the entire war. An operation of this sort had never been attempted before and was never tried again afterwards. It was not really an air attack, but rather an invasion from the air, with the invading army approaching by air rather than by land or by water. Its most significant characteristic was the fact that the forces involved were moved by air transport - the lifting of an entire army into the air, thus assuring its complete independence of highway and railway networks and of the need for cross-country marches. The battle of Cambrai in the year 1917 was the first example of an invasion from the air, and even the relatively primitive technological developments which made it possible represented a revolution in tactics."

Winston Churchill³⁹⁹, however, belittles the scope of the battle of Crete, stating that:

"Goering's victory in Crete, however, was no more than a Pyrrhic victory, for the troops he was forced to sacrifice in order to take Crete could have been utilized to capture Cyprus, Iraq, Syria, and possibly even Persia..."

The losses in elite troops sustained during the battle of Crete - and they were undeniably very high - effectively deterred German strategists from employing their air landing forces in the subsequent operations in the Middle East. We are justified in asking whether it was really wise to squander an indispensable force such as this in a life and death battle to capture a single base.

398 - Generalmajor J.F.C. Fuller, Der Zweite Weltkrieg, 1939 - 1945 (The Second World War, 1939 - 1945), Humboldt-Verlag, Vienna and Stuttgart, 1952, page 128.

399 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 302.

The Italians failed to take advantage of the momentary weakness of the British naval position in the Mediterranean which had been brought about by the action in Crete. As a result, the operations in the eastern Mediterranean area never had very much significance as far as the subsequent course of the war was concerned.

The enemy has on occasion⁴⁰⁰ been reproached with the fact that he had been present on Crete since October 1940 and had failed to utilize the seven months at his disposal to prepare an adequate defense for the island.

During the course of these seven months, however, Crete had had a total of no less than seven different commanders. Moreover, there were neither experts (i.e. engineer personnel) nor manpower available to take on the task of constructing a network of fortifications. By the time the last commander, General Freyberg, took over, he no longer had sufficient time to adapt his - suddenly urgent - defensive measures to the exigencies created by the island's topography. All Crete's harbors and airfields were located on the northern coast of the island. The main point of defense, on the other hand, was concentrated in the area of Suda Bay - in the vicinity of the fleet! Because of this, the defense of the rest of the island was sadly neglected. No definite plans had been made to prepare the island of Crete for defensive operations; the Middle East was far too large an area that General Wavell could be expected to pay particular attention to Crete, located at the periphery of the overall theater of operations.

The island was vulnerable only from the north! Why, then, did the British take no action to develop the harbors on the southern coast?⁴⁰¹ Why was no attempt made to build new airfields in the south and to transfer the main supply depots to the southern part of the island?

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400 - General Fuller, *op.cit.*, page 129: " The battle of Crete was lost not in May 1941, but rather during November 1940 and the months preceding it."

401 - See the military-geographical evaluation of the island at the beginning of the present study.

It may be pertinent to point out here that the British never considered seriously the possibility that they might lose Greece. The airfields on Crete had only one purpose - that of support for the operations on the Greek mainland. It was for this reason that they were located on the northern coast of the island. The British made a grave mistake in not destroying the airfields once they had fallen into German hands. That they did not was due to the spirit of optimism prevailing in General Freyberg's headquarters, on the one hand, and to the extremely good morale of the English troops, on the other. Both sides - and this is an unusual situation in wartime - were forced to fight because they had no other alternative. The British soldiers "never fought better than on Crete"⁴⁰². By the same token, "Crete was the grave of the German paratroopers"⁴⁰³.

The Germans overestimated the degree of pro-Axis sympathy on the part of the native population and underestimated the will to resist on the part of the British forces.

The German victory on Crete was the result of a single factor - the air superiority achieved by the Luftwaffe!

In the last analysis, it seems doubtful that the tactic of landing paratroopers directly over their target can be considered an error on the part of the German planners. Undeniably, a landing could have been made at some distance from the target, west of Malemes for example, where far less enemy resistance would have been encountered. On the other hand, it is questionable whether the occupation of the island could have been accomplished in such a short time and with significantly fewer losses than was actually the case. And time was short - for Operation MERKUR was to be followed immediately by the campaign against Soviet Russia, Operation BARBAROSSA.

It is hardly necessary to deny the completely groundless rumor to the effect that the German paratroopers had been given special drugs, a kind of "courage pill", which were

responsible for their victories⁴⁰⁴. This much-vaunted "courage pill" was nothing more than Pervitin⁴⁰⁵, which certain paratrooper units were testing for its effectiveness against air sickness.

The extremely high losses sustained by the parachute forces on Crete came as a shock to Hitler. Ironically, it was precisely the successful air landing operation on Crete which robbed Hitler of his faith in an air landing arm⁴⁰⁶.

No official evaluation of the air landing victory on Crete was made by Germany's top-level command. Nevertheless, "this battle was a milestone along the road of military history, an event with revolutionary significance for the science of waging war. We must bear in mind that

404 - Generaloberst Student, op.cit., page 23, refers to a comment made by Allan Moorhead (an Australian war correspondent) to the effect that "... the British found the bodies of German paratroopers, which had turned a vivid green within a few hours after death. Obviously they had been given narcotics of some kind. An Australian tried the 'stuff' and experienced a feeling of "emphoric enthusiasm" so strong that his companions had to restrain him forcibly from attacking an enemy emplacement all by himself."

In an attempt to defame the German paratroopers, some journalists reported that they landed in the uniform of the New Zealand Army. Similar accusations had been made in connection with the air landing operation in Holland in 1940.

None of these malicious allegations is based on fact.

405 - Pervitin is a preparation taken to combat a feeling of tiredness and to prevent air sickness.

406 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 23. During a reception at Rastenburg on 19 July 1941 for the recipients of the Iron Cross, Hitler casually made the following statement to Generaloberst Student: "Crete has proven that the days of the parachute forces are over! A paratrooper arm is exclusively a surprise weapon, and the surprise factor is pretty much worn out."

In this context, the reader is also referred to Liddel Hart, Jetzt dürfen sie reden (Now They Can Speak), Stuttgarter Verlag, Stuttgart and Hamburg, 1950, page 294 ff.

the occupation of Crete represented the first time in military history that a large and well-defended island had been taken from the air."

* * *

Section 7 - Sea and Air Supply of the Forces Fighting on Crete⁴⁰⁷.

The supply difficulties already apparent to the planners of Operation MERKUR⁴⁰⁸ proved subsequently to be the very factors which threatened the overall accomplishment of the operation⁴⁰⁹.

The majority of the supplies needed by the forces fighting on Crete were transported by ship. The following brief account of the supply operations carried out by the German Navy during the action on Crete is based on the report of the Naval Group South (Marine Gruppenkommando Sued)⁴¹⁰.

407 - See also Chapter V, Section 4, page 55 ff of the present study. The available sources which deal with the problem of supply during Operation MERKUR have only limited validity inasmuch as:

- a. Generalmajor Seibt's report (op.cit.) was prepared from memory, and
- b. the available studies by Lt.Col. Hornung (op.cit.), based on the diaries of Generalmajor Conrad, Air Commander (Fliegerfuehrer), are not entirely accurate in every detail. Lt.Col. Hornung obviously has not had access to complete information regarding the course of operations, the employment of the troops, and their individual assignments. As a result, his report is often completely useless for certain vitally important phases of the action.

408 - For example the fact that aviation gasoline was not available when needed, definitely jeopardized the success of the over-all operation.

409 - The threat to Operation MERKUR can be broken down into the following factors:

- a. the fact that Operation BARBAROSSA was about to begin,
- b. the fact that Operation SEELOEWE had been postponed, but not given up entirely; accordingly most of the necessary supplies were still in storage in northwestern France, in the vicinity of Leon.
- c. the bases on the Greek mainland were just about the worst possible take-off area for a short-term air landing operation.

410 - Naval Group South, "Brief Report", classified, dated 9 September 1941 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

1. 114 small ships (most of them sailboats equipped with engines) were available to transport some 11,320 tons in personnel (including elements of the occupation force) and materiel, including artillery, motor vehicles (among them five 10-ton tanks), ammunition, weapons, food, and assorted equipment to the island of Crete.

2. There were nineteen fairly large steamers available, transporting a total of 230,000 tons of supplies during the course of the operation⁴¹¹.

During supply transport operations from 1 May through 10 June 1941, ten of these steamers (representing a loading capacity of over 20,000 tons) were destroyed by enemy mines or torpedos. The ships were a mixed lot, belonging to German, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Italian, and French companies!

During the same period, ten of the smaller boats (representing approximately 2,000 tons' capacity) were also lost.

The main factors which made it difficult to supply the troops fighting on Crete by ship were the following:

1. the inadequacy of loading and unloading facilities in the Cretan harbors,
2. a certain lack of reliability on the part of the foreign agencies involved in supply transactions,
3. the tendency of Army and Luftwaffe headquarters to label all supply actions top priority, and
4. the passive resistance offered by the crews of the foreign-owned ships!

411 - There is no information available as to what percentage of these supplies was destined for the force which had landed on Crete originally and what percentage was destined for the occupying force which arrived later.

Inevitably, these difficulties had a detrimental effect on all attempts to solve the supply problem successfully.

Despite the fact that coordination between the Navy agencies charged with responsibility for supply operations and the Fourth Air Fleet was relatively good⁴¹², there is some truth in the contention that "the majority of the air units had not enjoyed such intensive training in sea/air operations" as might have been desirable in view of the fact that they were expected to take part in them rather frequently. The situation was aggravated further by difficulties in the communications field; German leaders were at a definite disadvantage in this respect anyway, due to the "purely arbitrary" composition of most of their units⁴¹³.

During the initial stage of operations (20 May through 27 May 1941), only the smaller boats could be sent through with supplies for the troops fighting on the island⁴¹⁴, inasmuch as unloading facilities at Malemes and Kastelli were incapable of handling larger ships. It was not until Suda Bay had been taken and cleared of enemy forces that larger vessels could be employed⁴¹⁵.

Inasmuch as the ocean supply transports were inadequate (a large percentage of them never reaching the island), it was up to the transport aircraft to ensure continuous supply by air. There were three possible methods of carrying out air supply operations to the island of Crete:

412 - Admiral Schuster, Diary, page 7.

413 - On 21 May, the Italian destroyer "Sagittario" was attacked by German dive-bombers by mistake (Admiral Schuster, Diary, page 5).

414 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 39.

415 - In the opinion of the author, the German Navy was physically incapable of fulfilling the missions assigned to it, especially during the initial phase of Operation MERKUR. This opinion is not reflected, however, in any of the other sources consulted. The question of whether the mission was even capable of fulfillment under the circumstances, i.e. whether

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415 - (cont) it was asking the impossible of the relatively primitive naval facilities available, must remain open.

In this connection, the reader is referred to the comments of the Naval Command Headquarters. (Marginal remarks on the reports received. See page of the present study for a discussion of the mistakes made by command and front units).

1. Dropping supply containers by air. This method had the undeniable advantage that the supplies reached their destination, i.e. the fighting troops, directly and quickly, without having to be reloaded for surface transport over often dangerous highway networks. On the other hand, there were a number of disadvantages to be considered.

a. In view of the difficult terrain and the rapidly changing front lines, it was inevitable that the ground forces were unable to locate a large percentage of the weapons, ammunition, and supply containers once they had been landed, and that some were dropped over enemy territory⁴¹⁶.

b. There was only a limited number of supply containers available⁴¹⁷.

c. The military situation might change entirely during the time elapsing between the original request for supplies and their actual delivery.

2. Landing supplies. As long as none of the airfields on Crete was in German hands, the transport aircraft landed their supplies on the beach⁴¹⁸.

Beach landings were extremely hard on the transport aircraft - so much so that nearly 50% of them were so badly damaged that they were unable to participate in subsequent actions⁴¹⁹.

416 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part B, page 4: "... the paratroopers were unable to get to the containers dropped to them..."(Malemes). Ibid., page 8: "Since there was no reliable supply delivery system in the tightly-limited combat theater (Rethymon), 1/Lt. von Roon set up a central supply depot and secured it against enemy harrassment."

417 - Generalmajor Seibt's report (op.cit.) does not give the exact number of containers on hand. According to notes made at the time by the author, each company in the Storm Regiment had been issued weapons and supply containers for its own use - perhaps 80-100 each. In addition, the Regiment had a reserve supply of containers, already packed and labeled, at its take-off bases. All in all, the four battalions of the Storm Regiment have had about 2,000 containers. The rest of the paratrooper units had presumably been issued containers on a similar basis.

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418 - The Air Commander, XI Air Corps, had ordered his transport pilots to "... land at all costs..."

419 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part B, page 1. According to this source, single Ju-52's succeeded in landing on the Malemes beach during the early morning hours of 21 May to deliver ammunition. According to Generalmajor Seibt, "...they landed on the beach but only half of them came back..."

3. Landing supplies at the Malemes airfield. This method was the one chiefly in use in air supply operations during the first few days. Since the XI Air Corps on Crete needed 150 to 200 tons of supplies per day⁴²⁰, approximately 100 Ju-52's had to be employed daily.

Despite the extremely crowded conditions on the Malemes airfield, air supply operations went off smoothly - apart from one or two bottlenecks - and the ground troops were kept adequately supplied, primarily with antitank ammunition and drinking water.

During the over-all period of combat, the following supplies were brought to Crete by air⁴²¹:

711 motorcycles

353 light artillery pieces

5,358 supply drop containers⁴²²

1,090,180 kg of other supplies.

During the period from 20 May through 31 May 1941, the transport aircraft covered a total of 1,485,532 miles.

A total of 3,173 wounded personnel were brought out of Crete by air during this period.

420 - Generalmajor Seibt, op.cit., page 7. The supplies sent in by air consisted almost exclusively of ammunition and weapons, since food supplies could be requisitioned on the island.

421 - Alkmar von Hove, op.cit., page 196. These data can be assumed to be accurate, since Generaloberst Student, in a special introduction to the book, speaks of the "accurate picture" it presents of the paratroopers' operations on Crete. The figures quoted were probably checked and corrected, when necessary, by General Student.

422 - The total given here agrees with the rough estimate made by the author in footnote 417, page 208.

CHAPTER X

The Losses Sustained⁴²³

The losses sustained during the occupation of Crete were unusually high. Any attempt to establish a definitive total figure is fraught with difficulty because of the following factors:

1. An unspecified number of wounded personnel were transferred to the mainland and succumbed there to their injuries (slightly wounded personnel were usually not included in the figures we have available⁴²⁴).
2. Only a very few of those reported as missing were ever found; the vast majority must be presumed to have died in action.
3. In the not infrequent instances in which all the officer and non-commissioned officer personnel of a company had been killed or taken prisoner, the personnel loss reports were often inaccurate.

The inordinately high number of personnel listed as missing during the battle of Crete can be explained in part by the fact that the paratroopers landed at points remotely distant from one another. In addition, the course of the front line was extremely unstable, the terrain enormously difficult (bristling with rocky hills, ravines, and brushwood), and the native guerrillas extremely active.

423 - The loss figures which follow have been divided as follows:

1. German losses - personnel and materiel (separated according to Luftwaffe or Army).
2. Enemy losses - personnel losses divided into those killed in action and those taken prisoner (ship losses and other materiel losses given separately).

424 - D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 488: "...the German figures are falsified... with the proviso that the lightly wounded may not be included." Unfortunately there are no statistics available from the VIII Air Corps.

There are a number of sources which contain figures on the losses sustained⁴²⁵; in the interests of completeness, the author has listed them all here so that the reader can compare them, but in the last analysis they are in fairly close agreement.

1. German losses

a. Personnel losses

The following forces were employed:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1) 7th Air Division and XI Air Corps: | 13,000 |
| 2) 5th Mountain Infantry Division: | <u>9,000</u> |
| | total 22,000 ⁴²⁶ |

Losses were as follows⁴²⁷:

1) 7th Air Division and XI Air Corps

dead: 143 officers, 1510 non-commissioned officers and troops
 missing: 28 officers, 1413 non-commissioned officers and troops
 wounded: 103 officers, 1943 non-commissioned officers and troops

2) 5th Mountain Infantry Division

dead: 17 officers, 245 non-commissioned officers and troops
 missing: 12 officers, 306 non-commissioned officers and troops
 wounded: 20 officers, 438 non-commissioned officers and troops.

425 - 1. Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52;

2. XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 14;

3. General Wittmann, op.cit., Appendix "Other Data";

4. Alkmar von Hove, op.cit., page 295;

5. D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 487 ff; and other sources.

426 - Other sources (including Davin, op.cit.) give the total as 23,120.

427 - Based on the data contained in the XI Air Corps, Report on Crete.

3) Air Commander, XI Air Corps

dead: 9 officers, 47 non-commissioned officers, and troops
 missing: 16 officers, 113 non-commissioned officers and troops
 wounded: 20 officers, 70 non-commissioned officers and troops.

The total number of dead and missing personnel from the XI Air Corps was 3,279 (including officers, non-commissioned officers, and troops).

The total number of wounded was 2,136 (including officers, non commissioned officers, and troops).

Another source⁴²⁸ classifies losses into those suffered by the troops fighting on the ground and those suffered by the flying units, and comes to the following conclusions:

1) ground troops

dead: 1,915 (including all categories of personnel)
 missing: 1,759 (including all categories of personnel)

2) flying units

dead: 76 (including all categories of personnel)
 missing: 236 (including all categories of personnel).

The difference (127) between the dead and missing of the flying units and the losses of the XI Air Corps should theoretically - represent the losses suffered by the VIII Air Corps.

In reality, however, the losses of the VIII Air Corps are listed as follows⁴²⁹:

428 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52.

429 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, Diary, (o.cit.), page 55. It is not clear whether Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen's figures refer to the campaign in the Balkans, including Crete, or to the operation on Crete alone.

dead: 172

missing: 141

total losses: 313

The only prisoners taken were seventeen German officers, who were brought to Egypt⁴³⁰.

The British figures on German losses are far too high. Churchill, for example, speaks of "more than 5,000 paratroopers killed"⁴³¹, and estimates the total German losses at 15,000 dead and wounded.

Generaloberst Student has the following to say in this connection⁴³²:
 "Our losses (both dead and wounded, amounted to 3,400 men; any figures higher than this are wrong!"

b. Materiel losses

During the air landing operation in Holland in 1940, 183 of Germany's valuable transport aircraft were lost⁴³³. According to reliable records

430 - D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 394. This is the only source which mentions these prisoners. (The author is personally acquainted with some of them - Major Altmann, for example).

431 - Winston Churchill, op.cit., page 302.

432 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 32, column II. These figures refer only to the XI Air Corps (parachute elements and flying units) and do not include the losses sustained by the 5th Mountain Infantry Division. The figures given on pages 211 and 212 of the present study are thus in agreement. Generaloberst Student has included the approximately 900 lightly wounded personnel in his figure for "wounded".

433 - See the author's study on the employment of air landing forces in the West, page 142.

of the Air Commander, XI Air Corps⁴³⁴, the losses on Crete were clearly sufficient to explain the enormous reduction in available transport space.

In the first place, all of the freight gliders which landed on the island were destroyed⁴³⁵.

An interim report (as of 25 April 1941⁴³⁶) indicates that by that time 201 Ju-52's had already been put out of action - 76 of them having been completely destroyed.

Of the 493 Ju-52's reported as fully operable on the first day of operations (20 May 1941), only 185 were still available for immediate employment by 31 May!

The losses in transport aircraft during the entire battle of Crete were as follows:

Completely destroyed:	143 Ju-52's
Missing in action:	8 Ju-52's
Seriously damaged:	120 Ju-52's.

It was clear that these extremely high losses were bound to jeopardize the pilot training program in the home area. After all, most of the replacement transport aircraft came from the pilot training schools. Factory production of the Ju-52

434 - General Conrad, Diary as edited by W. Hornung, entry dated 20 March 1955.

435 - General Conrad, Diary as edited by W. Hornung, page 22.

436 - General Conrad, Diary as edited by W. Hornung, pages 32 and 39. According to General Conrad, the operational readiness of the transport aircraft was as follows:

20 May 1941	-	493 Ju-52's
21 May 1941	-	443 Ju-52's
22 May 1941	-	322 Ju-52's (↓)
23 May 1941	-	273 Ju-52's
24 May 1941	-	263 Ju-52's
25 May 1941	-	240 Ju-52's
31 May 1941	-	185 Ju-52's

would have required too much time and too much raw material; in addition, work on other models would have had to be relegated to the background.

Supply operations in Africa and in Norway also suffered from the shortage of air transport space.

There are no data available concerning the aircraft losses sustained by the VIII Air Corps. It is said⁴³⁷ that the losses suffered by the dive-bomber units during the battle of Crete were "extremely low".

2. Enemy losses.

a. Personnel losses.

Based on the interrogation of prisoners of war, an evaluation of the strength and deployment of the enemy forces on Crete as of 20 May 1941 was set up. Prepared shortly after the conclusion of hostilities (on 11 June 1941), the evaluation agrees in the main with the data given in the "Official History of New Zealand - War History Branch"⁴³⁸, which in turn are based on authentic sources.

According to this evaluation, the following forces were present on Crete as of 20 May 1941⁴³⁹:

British Army	15,063
Royal Navy	2,366
Royal Air Force	618
Australian troops	6,540
New Zealand troops	7,702
Greek troops	<u>10,258</u>
total:	42,547

437 - General Hitschold, study prepared in 1954, page 12.

438 - D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 480 ff.

439 - D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 485, has the following to say regarding these figures: "Strength almost exactly accurate ..."

The available sources vary a great deal in their breakdown of enemy strength on Crete⁴⁴⁰, most of them listing a total of fewer than 30,000 troops. Any figures differing from the ones given above, however, must be viewed as inaccurate.

Of the total force employed, the British losses amounted to 1,751 dead and missing in action⁴⁴¹.

Admiral Cunningham indicates⁴⁴² that the Royal Navy lost more than 2,000 men during its operations "around Crete".

There is no information available concerning the losses sustained by the population of Crete or the Cretan guerrilla forces.

A total of 12,254 enemy personnel were taken prisoner on Crete⁴⁴³.

b. Materiel losses.

During the battle of Crete, the Royal Air Force sustained the following losses:

21 aircraft downed

12 aircraft destroyed on the ground⁴⁴⁴

136 artillery pieces captured

30 tanks captured.

The Royal Navy lost the following⁴⁴⁵:

440 - Most of the sources list only "British Army, Australian troops, and New Zealand troops" and then indicate an estimated total of 28,000 troops (15,000 plus 6,000 plus 7,000).

441 - Not 5,000, as is often indicated in the sources.

442 - Admiral Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey, page 389.

443 - The figures given by the Fourth Air Fleet are in full accord with those given by D.M. Davin.

444 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52.

445 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 51. Official British sources, as cited by W. Gaul, op.cit., page 31, list the following losses: 4 cruisers, 6 destroyers, 1 mine sweeper, 3 submarine chasers, 5 torpedo boats, and 19 landing barges. It is possible that these figures are based on a different system of classification.

217

sunk: 8 cruisers

10 destroyers

5 torpedo boats

1 submarine

damaged: 1 aircraft carrier

3 battle ships

3 cruisers

8 destroyers

1 special duty ship⁴⁴⁶.

+

+

+

The high losses in personnel and materiel sustained by the British gave the Axis Powers a slight edge in the Mediterranean, an advantage which they failed entirely to exploit.

446 - Based on the British figures cited by W. Gaul, op.cit., page 14.

CHAPTER XI

The Lessons of Experience⁴⁴⁷

Our concluding remarks on the air landing operation in Crete should be preceded by a brief comparison of intention and achievement.

The intention was to capture the island of Crete in order to utilize it as a kind of "aircraft carrier" from which to disrupt the British supply lines in the eastern Mediterranean (Suez!). Moreover, reinforcements and supplies for the African campaign were to be routed over Crete as an intermediate station⁴⁴⁸. Provided that Crete could be taken quickly and without high losses, it might well be used as a stepping-stone to further conquests in the Middle East - Cyprus, Suez, Syria, etc.⁴⁴⁹.

This generously-conceived plan for the destruction of the British position in the eastern Mediterranean⁴⁵⁰ resulted in a Pyrrhic Victory won at the price of high and bloody losses, a victory which brought the parachute and air landing forces into disfavor with the top-level Wehrmacht command agencies. "The time for successful employment of this type of force is past, it no longer has the advantage of surprise. We won't need air

447 - There are two sources which report in detail on the lessons to be learned from the experience gathered on Crete: 1) Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, Appendix, pages 45-51, and 2) Report of the Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, B, File No. 1839/41, Classified (for command only), dated 2 October 1941. (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

448 - See the introduction to the present study.

449 - Liddel Hart, op.cit., page 295: "...Student told me, 'As soon as I had gained Hitler's approval for the Crete operation, I suggested taking Cyprus from the air and - using it as a base - occupying the Suez Canal. Hitler seemed to be rather in favor of the plan but didn't want to commit himself - his mind was already too occupied with the coming offensive against Soviet Russia. Later, shocked by the high losses suffered during the operations on Crete, he refused to consider any further air landing actions. It tried repeatedly to change his mind, but to no avail!'"

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450 - Winston Churchill, op.cit., page 302: "Goering could easily have captured Cyprus, Iraq, Syria, - even Persia with his air landing forces." This possibility was frustrated by the Pyrrhic victory on Crete.

landing troops any longer" - this was Hitler's decision⁴⁵¹. Possession of Crete could do little to support Rommel's advance in Africa⁴⁵². As the war progressed, this hard-won bastion in the eastern Mediterranean gradually sank into insignificance.

The success involved in the German occupation of Crete was reaped - indirectly - by the allies. "Later on the British and the Americans built up much stronger 'air landing divisions'", writes Churchill⁴⁵³.

With the help of the Allied air landing divisions, the invasion in Africa was a resounding success. The "armies transported by air" were listed on paper⁴⁵⁴ in Germany; in the Allied camp, they were where they were needed when they were needed.

451 - Liddel Hart, op.cit., page 294: "'The days of the paratrooper are over!', said Hitler".

452 - General Warlimont: "It soon became clear that the German Luftwaffe did not have sufficient forces at its disposal to exploit the advantages offered by the island of Crete as the most important air outpost in the eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, it proved to be impossible to keep Rommel's armies supplied using Crete as a base, inasmuch as the rail facilities as far as Athens were barely adequate to guarantee the supply of the forces in Greece itself and there were hardly any ships available" (in Liddel Hart, op.cit., page 290).

453 - Winston Churchill, op.cit., page 301.

454 - As of May 1944 there was still one German parachute army - but with no transport aircraft to move it!

The chance of ultimate success which was created by the victory on Crete - with particular emphasis on the resultant weakening of the British naval position in the eastern Mediterranean - was simply not exploited. Also it proved to be impossible to defeat two strong enemies, England and Russia, at the same time. Hitler's "continent-bound" thinking and his horror of over-water operations⁴⁵⁵ won out in the plans developed at top level.

+ + +

Even so, the occupation of a naturally inaccessible island by troops transported by air did not fail to produce a certain tactical effect⁴⁵⁶. In England, for example, the fear of an airborne invasion tied down a considerably large force in home defense activities. It can also be assumed that the Soviet enemy had established a relatively strong reserve force to meet any surprise attacks from the "third dimension"⁴⁵⁷.

Borderline, still precariously neutral nations such as Turkey, for example, were sufficiently impressed by the German victory on Crete that they could not be persuaded to join the Allied camp⁴⁵⁸. And as far as Germany's naval forces were concerned, the high losses sustained by the British in the battle of Crete offered proof that not even the mightiest fleet can operate with impunity in an area dominated by a superior enemy air force⁴⁵⁹.

455 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 19.

456 - The effect here was a fairly indirect one.

457 - The vast geographical extent of Russia revealed clearly at that time (as today) the limitations to which any air landing operation launched far from the friendly front was subject. The German parachute and air landing forces set down in the sparsely-settled interior of Russia were soon surrounded by enemy armored units and completely destroyed. The only air landing actions which have any chance of success in Russia are those which are improvised on short notice - against enemy key positions, command headquarters, narrow water passageways, river fords, mountain passes, etc. - and which are carried out with concurrent attacks by friendly tanks and aircraft. (Meindl study).

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458 - Generaloberst Student, during the course of a public lecture at Hildesheim on 29 November 1953.

459 - On 27 May 1941, thus during the course of the battle for Crete, the modern German battleship "Bismarck", engaged in operations against Allied supply convoys without air escort, was severely damaged by British torpedo aircraft in the northern Atlantic and finally sunk by Allied warships summoned to the scene. Unfortunately there were no German aircraft carriers in the vicinity to come to her defense.

Once the Russian campaign had gotten under way, the war in the Mediterranean was relegated to the background as a "secondary action". The imaginatively conceived targets to be attained using Crete as a base of operations were completely forgotten⁴⁶⁰.

The Lessons of Experience

Section 1

Within the realm of experience, the most conspicuous factor was the failure of the intelligence agencies to evaluate the situation of the enemy. Operations on Crete were adversely influenced by the erroneous data furnished concerning the strength and location of enemy forces⁴⁶¹. German intelligence did not have adequate or accurate information on the strength and fighting power of the British and Greek forces, their deployment throughout the island, or on the will to resistance on the part of the island population⁴⁶².

The XI Air Corps was responsible for aerial reconnaissance of enemy movements at the island's airfields, troop assembly points, and harbors; it was to locate possible enemy antiaircraft artillery emplacements, defensive fortifications, and encampments; and it was to be on the alert for any movement of enemy troops.

460 - Even the successful German attempt at intervention in Iraq (14 May through 1 July 1941) was doomed to ultimate failure. Following suit on 12 July 1941, Syria went over to the Allied camp, followed by Iran in August 1941.

461 - Report of the Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch B, File No. 1839/41, Classified (for command only), dated 2 October 1941 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

462 - Ibid., page 2: "During wartime uncertainty is usually the rule". The Fourth Air Fleet was responsible for gathering intelligence on the enemy situation, yet its reports make no reference whatsoever to the erroneous nature of the evaluations issued. The XI Air Corps was charged with the accomplishment of the actual reconnaissance flights.

In all of these missions, its efforts were unsuccessful due to the extremely difficult terrain and the extraordinary talent of the enemy for effective camouflage⁴⁶³.

Section 2.

The behavior of the enemy was decisively influenced by a single important factor in the defense of the island - the Royal Air Force was not available during the first, highly significant operations at the beginning of the battle!

"If General Freyberg had been in a position to call upon the Royal Air Force ... to bombard the German forces at Malemes, he probably could have won back the territory already lost; but the communications system connecting Crete with RAF headquarters in Cairo was positively antediluvian..."⁴⁶⁴

The stubborn resistance offered by the British and their ruthless employment of all available naval forces made it clear that they intended to defend the island at all costs. British preparations for defense had been as thorough as possible under the circumstances⁴⁶⁵. Crete's defenders (soldiers from the British Isles, New Zealand, and Australia), in obedience to the marine tradition they had inherited, looked to the sea for the invasion they expected.

463 - Reconnaissance aircraft may well alert the enemy to what is going on and thus jeopardize military security. It is up to command to decide whether it would rather have security and the resultant possibility of surprising the enemy or an adequate picture of the enemy situation. As far as Operation MERKUR was concerned, the decision was entirely irrelevant (XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 3).

464 - General Fuller, op.cit., page 130.

465 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 45, paragraph 3. Ever since November 1940, the British had been busy preparing the defenses of the island (Expeditionary Corps sent to Greece under the command of General Wilson). Specifically, the British "... identified all the possible landing points along the northern coast and secured them against invasion by strongly-manned defensive positions." (XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 4).

Section 3.

As far as the invaders were concerned, the technological inadequacies of their assembly and take-off areas on the mainland had a decidedly detrimental effect on their accomplishment of Operation MERKUR. Improvisation had become a way of life for them. The invasion plan was frustrated by the necessity (determined by the lack of airfield space) of assembling the freight glider squadrons and the paratrooper squadrons at the same fields. As a result, the slower freight glider squadrons, which were supposed to land on the island as an advance force, did not arrive until after the paratroopers⁴⁶⁶.

In terms of the over-all success of the operation, the late and piecemeal arrival of Combat Group East with the second invasion wave was nearly fatal. The inadequacy of the take-off base and its ground organization did, to be sure, play a role, but it was not the only reason for the over-all ineffectiveness of this particular action.

In view of the difficult conditions (dupst, fueling difficulties, etc.), the take-off of the second wave ought to have been postponed until the following day!

"No one was willing to take the responsibility for such a far-reaching decision."⁴⁶⁷

The XI Air Corps was not informed of these difficulties until much later, and then only inaccurately⁴⁶⁸. The VIII Air Corps was not informed at all.

466- XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 3.

467 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 4.

468 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 4.

This grave tactical error, together with the fact that the freight gliders and paratrooper units were sometimes landed as much as five miles away from their planned targets⁴⁶⁹, had serious and far-reaching consequences for the entire action on Crete. It was stated that "investigations were being conducted"⁴⁷⁰, but apart from the version already discussed, nothing further was ever heard about it⁴⁷¹.

The blame in any event must be placed on the operation's leaders, who obviously did not always cooperate in the "exemplary" fashion claimed⁴⁷².

A routine inquiry on the part of the VIII Air Corps as to whether everything was in order for the take-off of the second wave would have disclosed the difficulties immediately. Or the Fourth Air Fleet, as higher headquarters, ought to have taken a more active part, i.e. ought to have "led"! With the help of a single courier aircraft, the Fourth Air Fleet could have kept itself informed with no difficulty whatsoever...

Instead, a serious crisis for the entire operation was allowed to develop through the failure to occupy the airfield at Iraklion, the one best suited to serve as a base for the occupation of the island. As a result the original operational plans all had to be changed at the last minute. This situation

469 - "It was worst at Rethymnon..." XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, pages 4 and 5, paragraph 5. "The success or failure of a paratrooper landing lies exclusively in the hands of the jumpmaster." And some of those participating in Operation MERKUR showed serious gaps in their training.

470 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 4, paragraph 3.

471 - See page 134 of the present study.

472 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52.

could have been avoided by timely and firm leadership. Technical defects such as a failure in the communications system at the decisive moment⁴⁷³, and human factors such as overwork and exhaustion on the part of responsible leaders are things which a thoughtful commander must foresee and prevent. In this particular case, the situation could have been saved. It seems pointless to try to single out any one individual to blame.

Section 4.

As one of the last lessons of experience, let us examine the principles of employment which were defined as follows after the conclusion of Operation MERKUR⁴⁷⁴:

"The landing of the first invasion wave of the XI Air Corps was carried out over the island's three airfields right into the midst of the enemy's strong antiaircraft defenses! The enemy artillery was supposed to have been neutralized by troops landed nearby by freight glider; at none of the three airfields was this the case.

The repetition of an air landing operation in this form can never be permitted. Any subsequent landings must be carried out in territory which is clear of enemy forces. In other words, if further air landings are to be undertaken, the landing area must be seized in offensive action."

General Student has the following comments to make on the principles outlined above⁴⁷⁵:

473 - Similar difficulties had to be overcome on the occasion of the bombardment of Rotterdam on 13 May 1940!

474 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 46, paragraph II,1.

475 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 9.

"The paratrooper force is that force among our ground troops best capable of exploiting the factor of surprise. For this reason I deliberately emphasized from the very beginning the appropriateness of their employment in a coup de main (as the embodiment of total surprise), and ordered a corresponding method of commitment - a landing as close as possible to the target, permitting its capture in a sudden attack. In the face of stubborn resistance from above and opposition in my own ranks, I succeeded in obtaining approval for this new and daring method of operation. The overwhelming victories won by the paratroopers so far in Norway, Holland, Eben Emael, and Corinth have all been surprise victories based on these tactics. Crete would probably have followed the same pattern, if the difficulties discussed above had not intervened to jeopardize the entire operation."

In the case of Crete, of course, any coup de main would inevitably have cost heavy losses, since the most important factor - that of total surprise - was missing and the airfields were more strongly defended than had been anticipated. The other method of commitment (a landing out of the reach of enemy forces, assembly, and systematic advance towards the target) had been under serious consideration by the paratroop forces prior to their initial employment in the west. "This method was given particular consideration in connection with Crete"⁴⁷⁶.

It is very nearly impossible to set up a uniform principle of commitment for a paratrooper force. Before undertaking any mission, careful thought must be given to which method is likely to lead to the desired result more economically under the specific conditions obtaining. The coup de main-type of attack probably corresponds more closely to the nature of a paratrooper force, particularly if the invasion force is to be made up of smaller elements.

476 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 10.

If, on the other hand, the invasion force is of regiment or division strength, then a landing outside the sphere of enemy action, followed by assembly and systematic advance, ~~may~~ be the better plan.

The employment of Ju-52 aircraft in paratrooper and air landing operations proved entirely satisfactory⁴⁷⁷. The problem of transporting troops through the air offers a wide field of development for the aeronautical engineers⁴⁷⁸.

The utilization of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division as an air landing force proved to be great success⁴⁷⁹. Their weapons, including the heavier mountain artillery pieces, lent themselves well to air transport in every respect⁴⁸⁰. In future there would seem to be no need of maintaining a special force (such as Germany's 22d Infantry Division) to be used in air landing operations. On the contrary, it is far more desirable to be able to pick any force whose weapons can be transported by air (light infantry, for example) for such missions.

Section 5.

With the indispensable aid of the Luftwaffe, the battle with the British fleet was decided in Germany's favor⁴⁸¹. This serves as ample proof of the fact that an enemy naval force can be neutralized by air forces within a relatively limited area. It does, of course, require strong air units with

477 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 48, paragraph VII, 1.

478 - All sorts of possibilities already exist in theory and, in part, in practice - helicopters (for example the American one-man helicopter with rocket engines), aircraft capable of landing tanks, and even large-capacity jet transports.

479 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 47, paragraph VI.

480 - The difficulty, of course, was in moving the larger artillery pieces once they had been landed and in replenishing the supply of ammunition.

481 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 50, paragraph XIII.

special training in combatting ships.

Air attacks on the enemy ships were carried out with such uninterrupted ruthlessness that ship-based antiaircraft artillery, strong and highly effective to begin with, gradually subsided. Soon afterwards, the ship-based artillery was forced to a complete stop since it had run out of ammunition. At this point the VIII Air Corps intensified its attacks and since these were entirely unopposed, they were doubly effective⁴⁸². The British aircraft carriers did not dare to come too close to the Luftwaffe's sphere of action.

Only the most important of the many lessons of experience taught by Operation MERKUR have been dealt with here. Other aspects, among them the formation of an effective point of main effort, the establishment of an adequate source of supplies, the maintenance of military security, the setting up of smoothly functioning supply lines, the improvement of signal communications⁴⁸³ the question of training⁴⁸⁴, the commitment of freight gliders, the selection of weapons and equipment, the employment of tanks and heavy weapons, the question of providing appropriate clothing, food, etc., have been mentioned briefly either in the text itself or in the footnotes.

The prerequisites for a successful air landing operation have been discussed in detail elsewhere⁴⁸⁵. They were based primarily on the experience gained during Germany's two large-scale air landing actions in World War II - Holland and Crete.

482 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 278 ff. "The hated air attacks lasted from six in the morning until three in the afternoon, and continued until the ships were within 100 miles of Alexandria..."

483 - Particularly as regards communication between the ground forces and the flying units.

484 - We might point out that it ought to be easier to train an expert infantry man to be a paratrooper than to train a paratrooper to be an all-around infantryman.

485 - See the author's study on the airlanding operation in Holland, pages 146-49.

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The excellent coordination of Luftwaffe, Army and Navy operations - of paratroopers, flying units, mountain infantry troops, and sea-going personnel - created the premises for an overwhelming victory by the newly-conceived air landing force, and this in the face of the worst possible climatic and topographical conditions.