

Peter Cannon – *At all Costs: The Royal and Royal Australian Navies in the Defence of Crete, 1941*

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Introduction

The British Empire's Mediterranean campaign of the Second World War was possible only through the application of sea power. Loss of sea lines of communication and naval power projection would have inevitably resulted in the collapse of the theatre with dire consequences for the course of the war. This paper will serve as a case study of the campaign's most dangerous hour. Having evacuated its British, Australian and New Zealand forces from the Greek mainland, the Army determined to hold the strategic island of Crete in May 1941. The overstretched and fatigued forces of Admiral Andrew Cunningham's British and Australian Mediterranean Fleet found themselves fighting a daunting concentration of German airpower to prevent seaborne invasion forces getting ashore, supplying the army and eventually rescuing as many soldiers as possible when the battle was lost. The attrition and strain imposed upon the fighting efficiency of the fleet through its steadfast support of the Army was the closest Britain came to strategic failure in the Mediterranean.

The Strategic value of Crete

In 1941, Crete served as an advanced base for air and sea operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Refuelling facilities at Suda Bay, the only sizable harbour on the island, greatly extended the operational radius of light naval forces; although its vulnerability to attack from enemy-held airfields in Greece was appreciated. At the end of the Greek campaign, around 50,000 Imperial troops were evacuated from the mainland with approximately 25,000 reorganised in Crete to form the bulk of the defence during the subsequent invasion. Complementing the military imperative, London was resolute in its political determination to hold the island and finally inflict a serious defeat on the German *Wehrmacht*.

The German Operation

The German invasion of Crete was entrusted to the *Luftwaffe* utilising XI *Fliegerkorps*' transports and parachute division, 7 *Fliegerdivision*, backed by an Army Mountain division, 5 *Gebirgsdivision*. Tactical air support was provided by General Wolfram von Richthofen's VIII *Fliegerkorps*. Hitler, unwilling to accept the risks of an unsupported airborne assault, had personally insisted that the aerial forces be backed by a seaborne component of additional combat troops, supplies and heavy weapons facilitated by the embryonic *Kriegsmarine* organisation in Greece under Vice Admiral Karlgeorg Schuster. In contrast to the *Luftwaffe*'s confidence, the *Kriegsmarine*, with no warships whatsoever in the Mediterranean, viewed a sealift operation in waters controlled by the Royal Navy with undisguised horror.

Schuster was responsible for transporting two battalions of mountain troops, supporting units, weapons and supplies in largely decrepit, hastily-requisitioned small steamers and Greek motor-sailing fishing boats called caïques. These vessels were organised into the First and Second Motor Sailing Flotillas; the former aiming for Maleme in the west of Crete and the latter Heraklion in the east. The island of Milos, 70 miles north of Crete, would serve as a staging point for the transports, carrying approximately 6,300 men, during their painfully slow passage across the Aegean. Each convoy would be accompanied by a single torpedo boat from the small Aegean-based Italian naval force, more navigational guides than escorts.

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British Naval Dispositions

The Mediterranean Fleet's primary aim was to prevent amphibious landings. As the Germans had concluded, the British believed that an aerial assault required a seaborne element as an essential precondition of success. Its destruction, backed by naval resupply and reinforcement, would ensure British victory. Cementing the Navy's critical role was ULTRA intelligence estimating 12,000 parachutists supported by 10,000 men landed from the sea on the second day of operations with the areas of Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion deemed the most likely targets. Due to the anticipated scale of air attack, it would be necessary to operate naval forces from Alexandria, 420 miles from Suda Bay which would require the rotation of forces on station as they ran low on fuel.

Cunningham's forces comprised four battleships, *Warspite*, *Queen Elizabeth*, *Valiant* and *Barham*, eight light cruisers including the Australian HMAS *Perth*, three old anti-aircraft cruisers and 31 destroyers including HMA ships *Napier*, *Nizam*, *Stuart*, *Voyager*, *Vendetta* and *Waterhen*.¹ The fleet's lone aircraft carrier, *Formidable*, was unable to provide air cover before 25 May due to recent operations. With the depleted RAF forced to evacuate Crete, the Fleet was forced to operate for almost a week without any air cover and reliant upon its anti-aircraft weapons. Despite Britain being a world leader in their development, combat operations had seen anti-aircraft system performance fall far below expectations and rapid remediation programs underway in the UK were yet to reach Mediterranean ships.

Cunningham, ashore in Alexandria to orchestrate the complex operations, sought to contest the northern approaches to Crete utilising night sweeps by light forces of fast cruisers and destroyers. While two battleships remained to the west as heavy support, light forces would enter the Aegean Sea by the Kithera and Antikithera channels in the west and the Kaso Strait in the east to penetrate deep into the Aegean seeking invasion convoys. These forces were to retire south out of the Aegean during the day due to the threat of heavy air attack.

British and Australian surface forces faced the greatest concentration of aerial combat power ever operated against shipping to that time. Richthofen's VIII *Fliegerkorps*, flying from both Greek and Italian Dodecanese airfields, were tasked to support German troops ashore and control the waters around Crete. No less than eight of the *Luftwaffe*'s 11 Ju 87 *Stuka* dive bomber *Gruppen* were allocated, while a further two supporting Rommel's *Afrika Korps* in Libya would also be drawn into the fighting. Four *Gruppen* of high-level bombers and three *Gruppen* of dive-capable Ju 88s were complemented by three *Gruppen* each of single-engine and twin-engine fighters, many operating as fighter-bombers. On 17 May, 514 of the force's 716 combat aircraft were deemed serviceable; 228 bombers, 205 dive bombers and 233 fighters all based within 200 miles of Crete were backed by a small Italian force of approximately 25 serviceable bombers and 24 fighters flying from Dodecanese airfields. While Richthofen's force was to maintain control of the Aegean to cover the transports by day, both the Germans and the British understood that the night would belong to the Royal Navy.

The Attack on Crete

The assault commenced on 20 May with 7 *Fliegerdivision*'s paratroops targeting the Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion airfields and encountering far greater opposition than expected. All units were quickly in trouble and taking crippling casualties. Concentrating on the landings, VIII *Fliegerkorps* largely ignored Cunningham's ships before light forces moved into the Aegean after dark. Force C, including *Perth*, fought a brief, inconclusive action with five Scarpanto-based Italian motor torpedo boats in the Kaso Strait. Neither side suffered damage before Scarpanto airfield was bombarded, to little effect, by three destroyers including *Nizam*.

¹ HMAS *Waterhen*, along with the Australian sloop *Paramatta*, spent late May supporting the Australian garrison in Tobruk while the destroyer *Vampire*'s urgent need of a major refit precluded her participation in the fighting before leaving the theatre for Singapore.

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The following day, naval forces experienced heavy air attacks as they stood clear of the Aegean, the fleet suffering its first casualty when one of *Perth*'s consorts, the destroyer *Juno* was hit by bombs from Italian high-level bombers and quickly sank. With aerial reconnaissance indicating convoys approaching Crete from Milos, light forces were again ordered into the Aegean after dark while the Battlefleet, Force A1 under Rear Admiral Bernard Rawlings, stood off to the west. The unwieldy German First Motor Sailing Flotilla had hoped to make landfall before dark, but just before midnight was illuminated by Rear Admiral Glennie's Force D, the cruisers *Dido*, *Ajax*, *Orion* and four destroyers, off Cape Spada, about 18 miles short of their landing beaches.

The Italian torpedo boat *Lupo*, suddenly confronted by *Dido* looming out of the darkness, did well to fight her way through the three cruisers in a short, sharp melee. Despite taking numerous hits, none proved serious and *Lupo* proceeded to retire at full speed, leaving the defenceless convoy to be slaughtered. The flotilla was engaged for two and a half hours with approximately 10 caïques and small steamers destroyed, the remainder managing to escape in the dark. About 800 men were lost, efficient rescue efforts limiting the number of fatalities but the Army combat element of 3 Battalion, 100th Infantry Regiment was destroyed as a fighting unit. Glennie, concerned about his ammunition state, subsequently returned to Alexandria to rearm.

Following this success, the ensuing 36 hours would prove to be the Royal Navy's toughest action of the war. With the First Motor Sailing Flotilla routed and airborne forces ashore facing defeat, VIII *Fliegerkorps* concentrated its firepower on the Mediterranean Fleet. Having passed through the Kaso Strait, Rear Admiral King's Force C, the cruisers *Naiad* and *Perth*, anti-aircraft cruisers *Carlisle* and *Calcutta* and three destroyers came under air attack north of Crete at 0700. These attacks, some of the most savage ever experienced, continued for over five hours. *Perth*, separated from the force to close and sink a surviving caïque, invited the full weight of the attack upon herself. Soon afterwards, the destroyer *Nubian* sank another straggling steamer while *Naiad*, attempting to cover *Perth*, fell behind and reinforced the lesson that German pilots relished isolated targets clear of the anti-aircraft umbrella barrages fired by their consorts.

At 1000, the Second Motor Sailing Flotilla was sighted. In contrast to *Lupo* the night before, the Italian torpedo boat *Sagittario* laid an effective smoke screen and charged into the attack against overwhelming odds. Controversially, Admiral King, still well astern in *Naiad*, did not appreciate the size of the convoy. With ammunition being used at an unprecedented rate, King decided that chasing further to the north, closer to the German airfields, invited destruction. The gallant *Sagittario* was able to disengage as Force C, steadily taking damage from countless near misses, now attempted to extricate themselves from the hornet's nest of the Aegean, running to the southwest towards the Kithera Channel.

As damage forced King's ships to reduce speed and the constant attacks threatened to exhaust their ammunition, Rear Admiral Rawlings' Battlefleet steamed towards the channel to support them. Just as they were sighted, under clouds of anti-aircraft shell bursts, another caïque was reported and the destroyer *Greyhound* detached from the Fleet to dispatch it. At that moment, *Warspite* was heavily damaged in a low-level blitz attack by a Bf 109 fighter bomber, while the isolated *Greyhound* was singled out by a formation of *Stukas* and quickly destroyed. King, senior to Rawlings, now found himself the senior officer on the scene and after sending two of his nearly exhausted destroyers, *Kandahar* and *Kingston*, to rescue *Greyhound*'s survivors, also ordered Rawlings' two cruisers, *Gloucester* and *Fiji* away to join them as anti-aircraft support without enquiring about their ammunition state. Meanwhile, German units were so close to their airfields that having attacked, were able to refuel and rearm before returning in smaller formations, or even alone, to continue the battle.

By the time the mistake was realised, it was too late. Fighting to re-join the battlefleet, *Gloucester*, having run out of heavy anti-aircraft ammunition, was overwhelmed and necessarily left behind with extra life rafts to sink alone. Despite the numerous inadequacies of British anti-aircraft systems in

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achieving 'kills', German pilots maintained a healthy respect for the heavy batteries firing rapid barrages directly over the ships which adversely affected their accuracy. *Fiji*, accompanied by King's two destroyers, steamed a diverging course from that of the retiring battlefleet to open the distance from the airfields. After four hours of murderous attacks, in which most of VIII *Fliegerkorps* remained fixated on the isolated ships, *Fiji* was disabled by a fighter bomber and finished off by a Ju 88, her heavy anti-aircraft magazines also empty. Having rescued the majority of *Fiji's* crew, the destroyers' perilous fuel state forced them from the scene and tragically, their reliefs, Captain Hector Waller's Australian destroyers *Stuart*, *Voyager* and *Vendetta*, were sent to the wrong search area by a communications error.

The events of 22 May drove home the lesson that the Navy was unable to operate in or near the Aegean during daylight without significant air support. This was further reinforced early the next morning when Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten's destroyers *Kelly* and *Kashmir*, fresh from sinking a final surviving caïque of the First Motor Sailing Flotilla during the night, were in turn rapidly destroyed by a *Gruppe* of *Stukas*. Cunningham was at this point forced to recall his battered fleet, low on anti-aircraft ammunition and fuel, to Alexandria to regroup. However, this did not end the Navy's support for the battle. Various attempts were made to land reinforcements and supplies in Crete with disembarkations only possible by fast warships at night due to German command of the air. Light forces also swept the northern coast during the ensuing nights, ensuring they were clear of the entrances to the Aegean by dawn.

By 26 May, *Formidable* had scraped together a handful of serviceable aircraft to form a small air group. Cunningham, boldly if perhaps inadvisably, threw her into the fight to strike back at the *Luftwaffe* with a dawn raid on Scarpanto's airfield. Whilst successful, the damage achieved by the small strike force of five Fulmar fighters and four Albacore bombers was negligible. However, the Libyan-based *Gruppe* of *Stukas* that stumbled across the battlefleet while searching for transports, was quite sufficient to knock the Mediterranean's only aircraft carrier out of the war for six months despite the best efforts of the defending fighters. *Voyager* and *Vendetta* assisted her back to Alexandria.

After eight days of fighting, the Army's resistance to the German assault, now constantly flying 5 *Gebirgsdivision* reinforcements into the captured Maleme airfield, finally collapsed forcing London to order an evacuation the Mediterranean Fleet was ill equipped to execute. Aside from the losses and ships incapacitated from battle damage, the strain on personnel and machinery in the light forces, ships that had been operating to the limits of their endurance for months, caused considerable anxiety. But the soldiers trusted the Royal Navy implicitly, and the sailors could not, and would not let them down with Cunningham asserting that it would take three years to build a new fleet but three hundred years to build a new tradition. And so, the weakened but undefeated fleet steeled itself to again run the gauntlet of triumphant German airpower.

The Evacuation of British and Imperial Forces

The evacuation took place over four nights between 28 May and 1 June. With Suda Bay untenable, the Navy had to recover 22,000 men, most from the small beach at Sphakia on the southern coast from Alexandria, 360 miles distant. Lifts were planned between midnight and 0300 to allow ships to spend as little time as possible exposed to enemy air attack during the daylight hours approaching and retiring from Crete. The evacuation was only curtailed when the Army declared it too late to save the remainder of their forces. The RAF made a maximum effort to provide protection for the fleet, operating small numbers of fighters from North Africa far out to sea at the limits of their endurance. Frequently unable to locate the ships, the resulting cover was sparse and often non-existent. However, they did succeed in intercepting and driving off the enemy on a number of occasions which was a most welcome development for the sailors below.

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In an exception to the Sphakia-based operation, the northern coast garrison of Heraklion was rescued on the first night, 28-29 May. Rear Admiral Rawlings led the cruisers *Dido* and *Orion* with six destroyers in the bloodiest mission of the evacuation. Rawlings was considerably delayed getting away from Heraklion when the destroyer *Imperial*, damaged the previous evening by a near miss, suffered a catastrophic steering failure. After transferring personnel, she was scuttled by another destroyer; the delay resulting in the force making their run through Kaso Strait after dawn. Ferocious air attacks, commencing at 0600, continued for nine hours until the ships, with over 4,000 soldiers embarked, were only 100 miles from Alexandria. The destroyer *Hereward* was hit and sunk while damage to other ships continually slowed progress. *Dido*'s 'B' turret was destroyed by a dive bomber. *Orion*, carrying 1,100 men in addition to her crew, lost 'A' turret while a second bomb detonated in a messdeck packed with soldiers resulting in approximately 260 deaths. It was impossible to know for sure. Army machine gunners crowded the upper decks to return fire at the diving *Stukas* and by the time they reached Alexandria, *Orion* only had 10 tons of oil fuel remaining and the force had lost 800 men killed, wounded or captured with the loss of *Hereward*.

Thankfully the Sphakia evacuations, despite also coming under air attack during daylight hours, did not suffer anywhere near the same scale of casualties. *Napier* and *Nizam* were heavily involved; they were the only two ships to reach Crete on the night of 30-31 May due to damage to other units. In a major operation, *Perth*, two other cruisers and three destroyers escorted the slow assault ship *Glengyle*. Joined by *Stuart* for the run home, *Perth* was hit in the galley by a bomb from a Ju 88, the blast severing steam pipes in the forward boiler room forcing its evacuation. 4 sailors, seven British soldiers and two Royal Marines were killed. *Phoebe*, the minelayer *Abdiel* and four destroyers made the final lift out of Sphakia on the night of 31 May-1 June and the Mediterranean Fleet suffered its last casualty when the anti-aircraft cruisers *Carlisle* and *Calcutta* sailed from Alexandria to provide additional cover. *Calcutta* was hit and sunk by a Ju 88 no one had seen diving out of the sun. When it was all over, 16,500 men had been evacuated while about 5,000, for various reasons beyond the Navy's control, were forced to capitulate. The Navy had once again succeeded in what had seemed impossible but, over 13 days, 1,828 British and Australian sailors had perished.

Conclusion

The Battle of Crete, the first major air-sea battle in history, proved that naval surface forces could not prevail against a powerful land-based air force in confined waters without air cover. The British and Australian Mediterranean Fleet was eventually forced to concede the Aegean to the Germans and were driven close to defeat. Facing an unprecedented attempt to subdue an island by airpower alone, the destruction of enemy seaborne forces was believed essential to the survival of Imperial forces ashore. In achieving this, the fleet ran extraordinary risks against a powerful and highly skilled enemy air force. Despite significant losses, seaborne assaults were either destroyed or driven off. These harsh lessons were not lost on the Germans, who suspended all attempts to reach Crete by sea until after the decision on land, to the surprise of both sides, was decided by the airborne forces of the *Luftwaffe*. Despite having reached exhaustion in both men and material, the Fleet continued to put everything on the line to rescue as many of the defeated forces as possible until it was impractical to achieve anymore; their efforts upholding the finest of Naval traditions.