

- The battle was the first massive airborne assault in world history. It involved 1.100 planes. The first waves were paratroopers and others in gliders. Later powered transport aircraft were used to bring in men and supplies.

- The first battle in WWII where the population (including elderly people, women and priests) took an active part fighting alongside the soldiers.

- German casualties were greater than in the entire conquest of the Balkan peninsula.

- The loss of 151 German Ju 52 transport planes, out of a total of 350, later caused problems for the Germans supplying their army in the later important battle of Stalingrad.

- The British navy rescued 18.000 troops. Some fought at the battle of El Alamein next year. The evacuation was like a little Dunkirk. It had a high cost in ships and lives lost.

CASUALTIES

Total numbers who participated were 18.047 from UK, 10.258 Greeks mostly recruits 7.702 New Zealanders 6.540 Australians, 22.000 German paratroopers and mountain troops took part in the battle.

Germans 4.000 dead almost half of them the first day of the battle, the heaviest casualties since the beginning of WWII until then. Loss of 350 aircraft among them 151 Ju 52 transportation planes.

Commonwealth troops 2.000 dead plus 1.828 from the British navy. Prisoners 12.200. Greek soldiers 544 dead. The British navy saved 18.000 troops and prevented a seaborne invasion by Germans with the cost of 3 cruisers and 6 destroyers sunk. Among them HMS *Gloucester* with 722 men dead from a crew of 807.

Many of the commonwealth troops that were left behind found refuge in mountain villages at the coast south of Chania and Rethymno. The local villagers and their families provided them with shelter and food risking their lives and causing reprisals by the Germans. The last evacuation of these soldiers was in 1943 from the exit of Tripitís gorge close to sougia where there is a monument now.

Relaxing at Ag Apostoli, WWII KALAMAKI



Disembarkation in Souda, April 30, 1941.

FAMOUS PARTICIPANTS

Some of the distinguished persons who participated in the battle are-



Bernard FREYBERG (1889-1963) Major General and commander of the Allied troops. Hero in WWI for his participation in the Gallipoli expedition. In the battle of Somme he won the Victoria Cross. He had 9 wounds on his body. Personal friend of Winston Churchill. After the war he was Governor General of NZ from 1946-1952. He became a member of the House of Lords in the UK with the title of Baron.

THE PEOPLE OF CRETE. Although the Cretan division was trapped in mainland Greece where it fought the Italians, during the battle of Crete very young and untrained recruits came to fight. They were poorly armed and equipped. Besides the old men the women with agricultural tools even priests rang the bells calling the Cretans to fight. The population suffered reprisals by Germans with mass executions and burning of villages.

Andrew CUNNINGHAM (1883-1963) The admiral was based in Alexandria and was head of the British fleet in the Mediterranean. He saved the pride of the navy protecting Crete from sea born invasion and evacuating the troops after the battle. In 1943 became 1st lord of the Admiralty in London. His statue stands at Trafalgar Square in London.

Lord Louis MOUNTBATTEN (1900-1979) Great grandson of Queen Victoria and uncle of Prince Philip. He participated in the battle as a commander of 4 destroyers. His flag ship, HMS *Kelly*, was sunk by stuka dive bombers. He survived and became supreme commander of the Allies in SE Asia and the last Viceroy of India in 1947.

Prince PHILLIP (1921-2021) Born in Corfu. He was the son of the Greek prince Andrew. He left Greece when he was 2 years old. As a young British naval officer, he was aboard the battleship HMS *Valiant* sailing between Crete and Kithyra. On May 22 the ship was damaged by enemy planes. After the war in 1947 he married the future Queen Elizabeth.

Kurt STUDENT (1890-1978) German Major General. In 1936 he became head of the paratroopers. He came in to Maleme airport when it was secured.

Wolfgang von RICHTHOFEN (1895-1945) was the cousin of the famous Red Baron. He was also a pilot in WWI with 8 victories. Head of the air corps that destroyed Guernica, Warsaw and Beograd. He was the head of air forces during the battle of Crete. Arrested by Americans and the end of the war. He died in a prison camp.

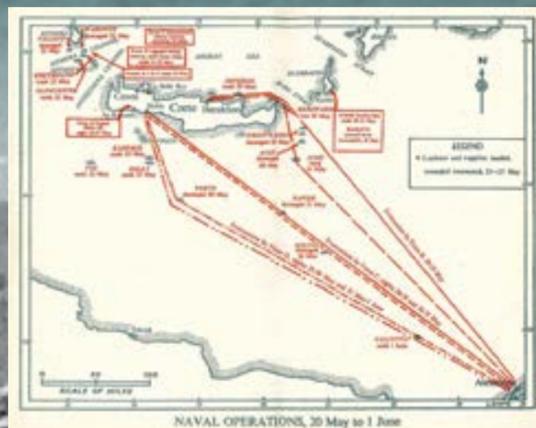
BLUCHER Bros. 3 young brothers who were offspring of the Prussian marshal Blucher who together with Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. All of them died in the battle of Crete, their graves are at Maleme.



Max SMELLING (1905-2005) Boxing world champion 1930-32. He was famous for the fights with Joe Louis. Participated as a paratrooper in the battle where he was also wounded at his knee.

James ROOSEVELT First son of president Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). He was a captain in the US marines. He was in Crete as a liaison officer with the British army. He left the island 2 days before the airborne invasion.

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Ships in Suda bay May 1941

1941

Battle of Crete

MAY 20 – JUNE 1, 1941

HISTORICAL ROAD MAP

Places that can be visited

Matilda tank in Maleme airfield with Tavronitis bridge.



1 Maleme airport

It was constructed in late 1940 by the British troops. The most important fighting took place here. The Germans captured the airport on 21 May. This was the turning point in the battle for the island. The Germans could now fly in men and equipment using their JU 52 transport planes. Maleme was used as a civilian airport after WWII until 1959 when the present airport in Akrotiri peninsula then began operations.

2 Hill 107

The fall of the hill was crucial point which drove to the conquest of the Maleme airport. The hill was defended by a New Zealand battalion without any air cover and with a lack of communications. Today on the hill there is the German military cemetery with 4416 graves.

3 Tavronitis old bridge

Built at the beginning of the 20th century as one of the first public works of the Cretan state. The German paratroopers found refuge under the bridge on Tuesday May 20 while operating against Hill 107 and the airport. Today there only exists the metal frame of the bridge with marks of the bullets from the battle on its stone base. Opposite the bridge is the RAF memorial.

4 Cadets memorial

On 20 May Greek cadets from the military academy in Athens put machine guns on the top of a hill above Kolimbari. They shot at the German planes which were flying low toward Maleme airport. Today there is a monument at this point with a nice view of Chania gulf.



5 Kissamos

On 21 May 72 German paratroopers dropped at the old port of Kissamos. They surrounded by the 1st Greek regiment and local civilians. Their captain, Murbe, was killed together with the majority of his men, the rest surrendered. On 28 May Kissamos fell after 2 days resistance by the 1st Greek regiment. The Germans disembarked their first tanks in Crete at the port. They had been transported from Peloponnese. There is a small marble plaque at the promenade with names of Greek civilians who fell during the fight.

6 Platanias

The New Zealand 28th Maori battalion repulsed the attack of the German troops at the bridge of Platanias river on May 21st. This delayed the German advance to Galatas along the coast. The Maori were in Platanias village up on the hill. They were covering the plain below with their machine guns. At the old village there is a tunnel entrance under the church. The tunnel was made by the German troops after the occupation for defence reasons. You can visit the tunnel.



7 Ag. Marina

At a beach side tavern close to Platanias on April 30 General Wavell, commander of the British forces in the Middle East, had an important meeting. He came to Crete from Cairo by a Blenheim plane and landed at Maleme airport. He took the car which was waiting for him and came to the taverna where he met with senior generals Wilson and Freyberg. The two were in Suda aboard the cruiser Ajax. Wavell told the two that, according to Churchill's orders, Wilson was now in charge of the force which would occupy Baghdad and told him to go there. He told Freyberg that he was now the commander of the allied troops defending Crete. After the lunch they had together, Wavell departed on the same plane to Cairo.

8 Ag. Apostoli hospital

This was an allied military hospital before and during the battle of Crete. After the battle the Germans used the place as a prisoner of war camp, before transporting them by ship to Europe. Some ruined buildings still exist there.



9 German memorial (German eagle)

The memorial that the Germans erected after the battle. It is 2 Km before to the west of the entrance to Chania at the top of a small hill. Only its base remains. The stone eagle which was on this site has been partly destroyed and removed.

10 Welsh memorial

Erected close to the old town hall of New Kydonia to honour the Welsh regiment, one of the better trained units that the British deployed on the island. New Zealand troops had a camp under the shade of olive trees in the region around the settlements Daratsos – Galatas.

11 Galatas village square



The scene of fierce fighting between 20-26 May. Capture by the Germans and reconquest by the allies with the help of Greeks occurred several times. On the bell tower of the church was a machine gun nest while around the narrow village streets were hand to hand fights. Today in the square there is a New Zealand monument and a little museum.

12 Cemetery hill

It rises south of Galatas village with amphitheatric view to Chania and prison valley. Construction of a large memorial complex was started here with room for every participating country for their exhibits and an visual theatre, which left unfinished.

13 Prison valley Agia

Landing place for a German paratrooper regiment on the first day of the battle. Their aim was the conquest of Galatas heights and to overpass the allies in assaulting Chania and Suda bay. The prison there with its high wall offered cover to the Germans who used it as their base to assault Galatas for 5 days. After the battle the Germans used the prison to gather Greek patriots who participated in the battle and the resistance during the AXIS occupation. Many of them were executed. Today the building with its white walls is used as a prison again.

14 Golgothas

Execution place used by the Germans 2 km from the prison building. Today there is a memorial and in the centre of it there is the wooden stake where the Germans tied the Greek patriots before shooting them.

15 Keritis river bridge Alykianos

Location occupied by the 8th Greek regiment from where it was attacking together with Cretan farmers the Germans at prison valley preventing them outflanking the British. After the battle the Germans executed beside the narrow stone bridge tens of civilians from the nearby villages of Alykianos, Fournes and Skines because they participated in the battle. Today there is a memorial and cenotaph with the skulls and bones of those executed next to the bridge

16 Floria Kandanos

On May 23th a German unit on motorcycles with machine guns were on their way to capture Paleochora and prevent the British using the little harbor for sending reinforcements. They were trapped for two days by armed Cretan people with 24 dead. In revenge, just after the battle of Crete, the Germans burnt down Kandanos and executed its male villagers. At village Floria on the road as well in Kandanos square there are memorial plaques.

17 Chania old town

During the afternoon on 24th May swarms of German planes strike the old town of Chania. They were part of the 8th air force corps under commander General Richthofen the same person who destroyed Guernica during the Spanish civil war. 13 Venetian mansions from the 16th & 17th century were destroyed. Some of their ruins still exist around Canevaro street. The town was taken on May 27th, the first Nazi flag put on the top of a Turkish minaret next to the market hall square.

18 Hotel Doma ex British legation

A three floor building erected at the beginning of the 20th century as the Austrian consulate. In May 1941 it hosted the British embassy after its departure from Athens. After the battle the Germans used the building for military administration. Today it is used as a hotel.

19 Freyberg's headquarters

A two floor building with red tiles on the roof at the Ag Mathaios region of Chania. Freyberg's HQ was here. It is on the road from the town to the Venizelos tomb. From its balcony the General had seen the airborne invasion arriving on the morning of Tuesday May 20. the building sheltered an elementary school and today it is empty but in good condition.

20 Venizelos home

Home of the great Greek politician that today houses his museum. It was used as residence for the German military commander of the island. Paintings on the walls which remind one of German beer gardens are in one of the rooms.

21 Venizelos graves

Landing place for gliders on 20 May morning aiming to attack Freyberg's HQ. During the fight which followed and the extermination of the Germans, English Major Barnet lost his life.

22 Gouverneto

Monastery from the Venetian period with a defensive wall. A German attempt to disembark from the sea at the gorge entrance failed and the captive German soldiers were kept in the monastery.

23 Sternes

There were British artillery units protecting the entrance of Suda bay. Today there exists a small memorial close to the village cemetery.

24 42nd street

Connecting the villages of Nerokourou and Tsikalaria. It is a strategically important road joining Suda harbour with Galatas. British mechanical units encamped here in November 1940 and gave the name to the road from the title of an American musical movie. The place became the battlefield of a fierce fight on 27th May at noon when German mountain

troops tried to take this position and stop the retreat of the allies to the south (Sfakia). Australian and New Zealand (Maori battalion) units repulsed them with a counter attack. The German casualties were 121 dead. Today there stands a memorial at the place

25 Suda - commonwealth cemetery

The strategic harbour of Suda was the landing place for the commonwealth troops who arrived in late April 41 after the evacuation from mainland Greece. On the harbour bottom lie 11 sunken ships from stukas air



raids before and during the battle of Crete. It was also here that Italian torpedo boats attacked the cruiser York on March 2th 1941. Next to the road which goes from Suda to Akrotiri airport stands the commonwealth cemetery.

26 Stylos

Village with cool waters. Meeting point of the allies during the retreat toward Sfakia. It was also the place base of their rearguard.

27 Ag. Pantes - Babali Chami

On 28th May was the site of the last fight. It involved Layforce detachment of 500 British commandos (who arrived during the night of the 26th in Suda coming from Alexandria in Egypt). The commandos and NZ Maori battalion fought all day to stop the German mountain troops advancing to Sfakia. The commander, colonel Laycock after the war became governor of Malta, was separated from his men but he rejoined them with the help of 2 Matilda tanks.

28 Askyfou

Plateau on the way to Sfakia coast. The part of Vrises Askyfou was the hardest part of the retreat for the troops. There were fears that the Germans would attempt a landing on the plateau to stop the retreat. At the village there is a small private museum with relics from the battle of Crete.

29 Imbros

Mountain village above Imbros gorge. The road toward the sea and Sfakia stops just after the village and continued as a path. The British pushed their vehicles and heavy armament and equipment into the gorge to prevent their use by the Germans. After WWII there were rusted ruins of them in the gorge. The gorge provided cover from German planes to thousands of retreating soldiers to reach the coast. Today it is open to trekking for tourists.

30 Chora Sfakion

Capital of Sfakia region. A smaller scale Dunkirk took place here. This was the evacuation of Commonwealth troops 28 – 31 May. The warships were coming by night from Alexandria and using their small boats to take the soldiers off the island. They also departed during the night to avoid the German air attacks when daylight was coming. A monument stands at the departing place.

31 Preveli monastery



Commonwealth soldiers who failed to depart from Sfakia took refuge at the monastery. The monks hide them until British naval vessels to come and to pick them up. For revenge the Germans burned the monastery as the Turks had done 120 years ago.

32 Rethymno



Rethymno was garrisoned by 2 Australian and 2 Greek battalions commanded by Lt Colonel Ian Campbell. The German paratroopers failed to capture the airstrip 8 Km east of the town. The Germans withdrew to a solidly

built olive factory near the village Stavromenos and kept resistance there until May 26. There was also another attempt by the Germans to enter the town but they were repulsed by Cretan police and civilians. A joint field hospital was set near Adele village with German and Australians doctors working alongside each other. Campbell was not informed about the allied evacuation of Crete. His force was trapped and surrendered on May 29. Today there is a park in Rethymno close to the bus station devoted to the battle of Rethymno.

33 Heraklion

Heraklion was defended by the British 14th infantry Brigade & 2 Greek battalions of recruits commanded by British Brigadier Chappel. German paratroopers attempted to capture Heraklion during the afternoon of the first day of the battle. They failed. They tried again the next day from the west with house to house fighting in Chanioporta. The evacuation of the allied troops took place the night of 28/29 May by 3 cruisers and 6 destroyers. On the way to Alexandria the ships were attacked by German dive bomber stukas. There were heavy losses of ships. Today there is a municipal museum devoted to the battle of Crete in the town centre not far away from the archaeological museum.

