

THE ROLE OF CRETE IN THE BATTLE FOR GREECE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

By George C. Blytas (1)

The Second World War started in September of 1930 and lasted seventy months. Greece was dragged into the conflict at the end of the thirteenth month of war, on October 28, 1940. In the first 13 months of that conflict, before the invasion of Greece by Italy, Germany had conquered seven nations, subjecting more than a hundred million people to the Axis, by doing battle for just about three months. During that three month period, a European nation fell to the Axis on the average every two weeks.

When Greece came into the war, Britain was losing a ship a day in the Battle of the Atlantic, and until recently, London was being raided day a night by the *Luftwaffe*. The British navy had ceded control of the British Channel to the German navy, and in the USA, Josef Kennedy and Charles Lindberg were declaring that Europe had been conquered by Hitler's Germany, and that the US had better get used to the idea of dealing with a Nazi Europe. The Italians had penetrated deeply into British-held Egypt and were pushing the British out of British Somaliland; and up to that time, the Italian garrisons in North and Eastern Africa continued receiving reinforcements and fresh troops from Italy.

..... But then, Mussolini, without any provocation, decided to attack Greece, expecting that he would be in Athens in less than two weeks. Mussolini was not alone thinking that way. Everybody thought that Greece would capitulate in two weeks; everybody that is, except for the Greek troops.

..... 1)This
copyrighted note is based on the book [THE FIRST VICTORY, GREECE IN THE SECOND
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Determined to hold onto Crete, Churchill sent two antiaircraft battalions to the island. But not a single British soldier was allowed in continental Greece, because the Greek Prime Minister, Metaxas, did not want to give an excuse to Hitler to invade Greece. In fact diplomatic relations between Greece and Germany remained normal until April 6 1941. This is an important fact to keep in mind.

Mussolini envisioned Greece becoming a part of a modern Roman Empire, which would comprise a large part of the Balkans, North Africa, Eastern Mediterranean and Egypt with Alexandria and the Suez Canal. Italy already occupied Libya and a significant part of eastern Africa. The Duce called the Mediterranean Sea *Mare Nostrum*, Our Sea, and boasted that his 8 million bayonets were more than the entire population of Greece, which unfortunately was true.

The First Victory: On October 28, 1940, after a rapid incursion of about 15 miles into central Epirus , two Italian divisions, the Ferrara and the armored Centauri division, were stopped and badly mauled by the artillery of division VIII of Ioannina, which at that time was only about 60% mobilized, having two regiments, one of them *evzones* or *tsoliades*. The position where the Italians were stopped is the Kalpaki crossroads on the western side of the Pindus mountain. Kalpaki and the author's parental village, Sitaria, were on the first line of defense.

At the same time two Italian regiments and several battalions invaded Epirus at the coastal area, targeting the ports of Igoumenitsa and Preveza, the Sienna was invading the Thesprotia area between Pindus and the coast, while the powerful Julia Alpini division, 14,000 troops strong, invaded on the east side of Pindus, on Smolikas mountain, where the only defensive

force was a detachment of 2,000 new recruits under Colonel Konstantinos Davakis. By November 8, the battle of Kalpaki was won, giving Greece and its allies, the British, their First Victory in WWII. Two days later, reinforcements from Division I (Larissa) annihilated the Julia division, in the battle on eastern Pindus.

Those victories were won before the Greek army was fully mobilized. It should be noted that most of the Greek troops had to arrive to the front by marching over very long distances, because the train station closest to the front was (and still is) in Kalambaka, 120 kilometers, as the crow flies, from the border, and the Greek army had less than 250 trucks for all services.

In the Battle of Kalpaki two regiments of Division VIII badly mauled two Italian divisions, the Ferrara and the Centauri. In that battle, the commander of VIII, Major General Haralambos Katsimitros, had ignored orders from the Athens headquarters that "strongly suggested" that he withdrew to the second line of defense, essentially abandoning Ioannina in order to improve the defense of Athens. The reason Katsimitros made that hard choice is that during the months preceding the invasion, he had developed good defensive trenches and minefields, and had carefully placed his artillery at well hidden posts and caves, at considerable heights up the mountainsides. The labor for those defenses was provided by volunteers, elderly men and women of all ages, from the surrounding villages.

The mobilization was almost complete by November 14, when the Greek counteroffensive started and continued the successes of Divisions V and I. In a few days the Italians were swept out of Epirus, sometimes after determined resistance; and the Greek army entered North Epirus, aka southern Albania. By November 22, the Greek army captured the first Axis-occupied town, the predominantly Greek town of Korytsa, after a hard fought battle planned and executed by Lieutenant General Tsolakoglou. That was the largest battle so far in the Greek-Italian war, involving six Greek divisions attacking well-defended positions held by six Italian divisions. The free world celebrated the Battle of Korytsa as the major event that it obviously was: the taking of a city from the Axis forces. The Axis was invincible no longer. The morale of the free nations took a considerable boost, and the leaders of Balkan and Arab states as well as of Turkey began to have second thoughts about the outcome of the war. After all, up to that time, not only Germany, but Italy also had been invincible!

The Greek advance into Albania continued unabated: Moschopolis, Pogradets, Premeti, Ayioi Saranta, Delvino, Argyrokastro were taken. In most of those towns the Greek troops were received as liberators.

On December 4, "the day of crisis in Rome" Mussolini told his son-in-law and foreign minister of Italy, Ciano: "There is nothing else to do. This is grotesque and absurd but it is a fact. We have to ask a truce with Greece through Hitler". Ciano tried to dissuade Mussolini, but eventually he saw the truth in the Duce's words.

The next day, on December 5, Hitler made available to Mussolini 50 Junkers (large troop carrier aircraft) with their crews. And the pace at which Italian troops started arriving in Albania increased rapidly. The numerical advantage that the Greeks held briefly rapidly disappeared, and the Italians outnumbered the Greeks significantly. Even before those forces arrived in Albania, however, on December 5, the Greek army was ordered to stop advancing for a critical period of two weeks, even though the Italians at that time were terribly demoralized and their leadership was in total disarray. The details of the political scene around this period are quite interesting, and are discussed in *The First Victory* .

Up to this time the Cretan Division V, headquartered at Hania, was still in Crete to defend the island. By December 14, however, the 13,000 troops of V had also arrived at the front via Thessaloniki (by sea) raising the number of Greek troops at the front to 245,000. The British sent a small force (the Creforce) to Crete, to provide some defense. The Cretan division became heavily involved in battle starting in January 1941, especially in the latter phase of the Greek offensive, perhaps the most deadly. These are the battles for the mountains Trebessina and Sendeli, which were the last hurdles to overcome before reaching Tepeleni and the important port of Avlona, the ultimate objective of the Greek objective. Before getting to Tepeleni, divisions XV (Florina) and I took Klissoura, the crossroads town that leads to Tepeleni.

By January 24, Divisions I and V, had taken Trebessina and the surrounding hills. In a week long counteroffensive the Italians tried to recapture Trebessina. Their efforts were aborted by Regiment 14 of the Cretan division. On the same day, regiments 43 and 44 of Division V captured Punta Nord, the north side of Sendeli. The battles that followed, carried out between January 24 and February 24 under arctic conditions , proved to be a futile and very costly exercise. In the meantime, back in Athens, dramatic events had taken place in January: Metaxas had died on January 29, and had been replaced by Koryzis.

The Cretan division was ordered to take south Sendeli by frontal assault, a formidable undertaking, given the fact that the southern end of that mountain was very well defended, and its vertical sides were impossible to climb even without enemy fire and in good weather. The conduct of the Sendeli battle became a controversial aspect of the Albanian campaign. Several Cretan families lost more than one son in that battle. The numerical advantage of the Italians,

the weather conditions and the topography all came together to form an impassable hurdle.

By the time the Greeks reached Sendeli in February and Tepeleni in the first week of March, the defending Italian forces were vastly superior numerically to the Greek forces all across the front, but especially in those locations that were close to Avlona, the port of entry for most Italian troops.

But the greatest battle in the Albanian campaign, in terms of the number of Italian troops involved and probably the most costly in terms of lives lost, was yet to come; it would be the Italian Spring Offensive, in which Mussolini, who came to Albania to see his forces "break the back of the Greeks", deployed 13 divisions (more than 120,000 troops) to break through a 12-15 kilometer front held by 6 Greek divisions. The Italian force had 300 field guns and 200 warplanes supporting that offensive.

The Spring of the Axis, as this counteroffensive was called, ended in complete failure after 12 days during which the Italians made more than 18 attempts to break through the Greek lines. Hill 731, which had been in Greek hands since January 23rd and was held until after the April invasion by the Nazis, became the most blood-soaked territory of the Albanian theater of war, and probably in all of Europe.

It should be pointed out that once the Italians became enmeshed in battle with the Greeks in Albania, the Italian garrisons in Africa, north and east, were left without reinforcements from Italy. That allowed the British Commonwealth forces to take the upper hand in eastern Africa, where the king of Abyssinia, Haile Selassie, returned to his capital triumphantly. The day was April 6, 1941.

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When Hitler saw that Mussolini was in deep trouble with the Greeks, he decided to intervene. He could not afford to see fascism expelled from Italy, a distinct possibility the way things were going in Albania. So he sent 29 divisions that were slated for the Russian front into the Balkans. Twelve of those divisions invaded Greece on and after April 6, 1941. They were accompanied by more than 600 warplanes and 1,800 tanks (in round numbers). A large number of planes would also be used for the conquest of Crete. Thus the Axis, Italy and Germany, with help from

Albania and Bulgaria, were using close to one million troops, 2,000 tanks and more than 1,000 warplanes to conquer a nation of seven million people that had already been engaged in a deadly war for five and a half months.

Even so, it took Hitler two months to conquer all of Greece. More than half of that time was dedicated to the preparation and execution of the capture of Crete! In the process Hitler lost more than 7,000 troops killed, compared to 159 men he lost in securing Yugoslavia in less than a week.

In Operation Marita, the invasion of Greece, Hitler first faced the defenders of the 21 forts of the Metaxas line, a very costly undertaking. Many of the forts in the line held up against an onslaught by the best Nazi troops for four days. The Germans finally reached Thessaloniki by bypassing the Greek forts via the Monastiri valley, today's Vardarska. Marching further south, toward the Aliakmon river, the Germans faced the combined forces of a few Greek divisions aided by a British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 52,000 which Churchill had convinced the Greeks to accept, primarily to ensure that Greece would not join the Axis. The background behind the decision to involve the BEF in Greece makes an interesting chapter in the history of this period.

The plans the BEF arrived to Greece with, were mostly retreat plans. The ports of embarkation had been carefully selected several weeks earlier to be small, dispersed and inconspicuous, since they knew that Piraeus would be rendered useless from the first day of the German invasion. And they had 2,300 lorries with which they could retreat at an average speed of 35 kilometers a day. The Greek troops that were given the task to defend central Greece on the side of their allies, were unable to catch up with them, having to march on foot and at night, in order to avoid the *Luftwaffe*. Even so, pages of heroic resistance were written by the Greek cavalry, Divisions XX and XII and the 21st Independent Brigade of young recruits. Those units and others slowed the rate of advance of the Germans significantly.

By the time the Germans reached Athens, Koryzis had committed suicide over a disagreement with the King and had been replaced by a Cretan economist-banker, Emanuel Tsouderos. The King chose a Cretan prime minister because he knew he would have to go through Crete to reach Egypt, and he knew that he did not have many friends in Crete.

The Battle of Crete has been discussed in many English language books because the British Commonwealth forces (ANZACS) were heavily involved in it, and because it was the first time

that an attack was carried out almost entirely by air born troops. Hitler used his 7th Airborne Parachutist Division and other elite troops for what was going to be the first and the last time in WWII. The battle is also unique because the civilian population, Cretans of all ages and both sexes, fought valiantly on the side of the British Commonwealth and Greek troops that defended the island.

It is worth mentioning that since King George (who did not trust the Cretans) had not permitted the creation of a Cretan militia wearing distinguishing marks of their fighting status, those civilian fighters were not protected by the Geneva Convention; so upon capture, the Germans could execute them without any qualms, and they did.

The form of warfare used by Hitler to capture Crete was dubbed "Vertical Deployment", and involved using simultaneously both, paratroopers and gliders carrying troops that were fully armed and ready for action. Operation Merkur was commanded by General Kurt Student, the developer of that form of deployment. The German forces added up to 22,750 troops, 1,370 aircraft, 70 vessels and a large number of Italian warships. Those troops comprised several of the best trained units of the German army. More than a regiment of German troops and much heavy equipment and weapons that were scheduled to reach Crete by sea were sunk by Admiral Cunningham's destroyers on the 21st of May.

The defending forces consisted of 31,489 Commonwealth troops and 11,451 Greek troops. Of the Commonwealth troops, 5,200 belonged to the Creforce which had been sent to Crete when Division V left for the Albanian front, and they were adequately armed. The rest were remnants of the BEF that were still in Crete because there was no adequate means of transportation to Alexandria. The remnants of the BEF came with very few weapons, and even fewer means of communication. The Greek troops also were inadequately armed. The more than eleven thousand Greek troops shared 7,281 outdated firearms of various types; and ammunition was in short supply. The civilian population used hunting rifles, axes and agricultural implements. Commander of the allied forces was Lieut. General Freyberg, a New Zealander of considerable fame. He was chosen for that post by Churchill, and reported to the Commander in Chief Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell.

The details of the offensive and defensive plans and operations are beyond the confines of this note, but they are fully covered in *The First Victory*. Some interesting points follow.

Hitler's intention to surprise the defenders was aborted by the ULTRA decrypts. On the other

hand, when Freyberg asked permission from Wavell to destroy the landing strips of the Maleme airport, he was denied. Freyberg's request was rational, since Crete had absolutely no air support, while both Wavell and Freyberg knew that the Germans would be using overpowering air forces. Some commentators have interpreted Wavell's refusal to allow destruction of the landing strips as reflecting his decision not to hold Crete. That would be very much against Churchill's wish, and may explain why shortly after the battle for Crete Churchill dispatched Wavell to India.

Wavell was notorious for being a taciturn general. He refused particularly to share his thoughts with Churchill whom he considered meddling and mercurial. More examples of this antithesis are discussed in *The First Victory*, especially in connection with the sending of the BEF to Greece. One explanation of Wavell's stance could be that he did not have adequate forces in the Middle East to hold both Crete and Malta, and Malta was a more critical strategic asset than Crete, because it prevented the flow of Axis forces and reinforcements from Italy to Libya and north Africa. Strategically speaking, Wavell was correct.

The loss of the battle for Crete is primarily the result of a bad judgment on the part of two New Zealand Lieut. Colonels who were in charge of the defense of Maleme, and of their commander, Brigadier Hargest, and secondarily the result of lack of communication equipment.

At the evening of May 20, the first day of battle, Lieut. Colonels Andrew and Leckie inexcusably decided to abandon Hill 701 and the Maleme airport, which Andrew's battalion had successfully defended from the parachutists throughout the day. In fact during that first day the German losses were appalling. The defenders also had significant losses but the airport and the hill were still firmly in their hands. Inexplicably Hargest agreed to their request to withdraw. From there on it was easy for the Germans to land troops virtually unimpeded. Despite those bad decisions on the part of the defenders of Maleme, it took Hitler 10 days to capture Crete instead of the two days he had planned. In large part that was the result of the determined armed resistance of the Cretan civilians.

Strategic implications of the Battle for Crete. The battle for Crete was important to the outcome of the battles for the control of the Mediterranean and North Africa. Hitler's Mediterranean Strategy called for the capture of Gibraltar, Alexandria and the Suez Canal as a means to strangle the United Kingdom. When Hitler was forced to capture Crete, losing his paratroopers in the process, he lost the means of capturing Malta, which was what his generals wanted to do. By capturing Malta, the Axis would have been able to transfer troops and armor from Italy to North Africa, making it easier for Rommel and Kesselring to prevent the Allied forces from

landing on Italy.

Because of Crete, Hitler also missed the opportunity to take control of the oil sources of Iraq. On April 2 1940, General Ali Rashid (after whom the Baghdad airport is named today) had taken control of the oil installations in Basrah and Habaniya and had captured the small British garrison there. But when von Ribbentrop suggested to Hitler to send the paratroopers to Iraq to help Ali Rashid, Hitler replied that he could not do so, because they would probably be needed for Crete. The British managed to regain the Iraqi oil installations. To get Crete Hitler lost Malta and Iraq. He also missed the opportunity to take Cyprus, which was virtually undefended at that time.

After the capitulation of Greece, the Allied efforts in Africa were helped by the guerilla resistance in Occupied Greece. Many battles took place in which Axis units were attacked by the *andartes*. Bridges and viaducts were blown, railroads, mines and installations were destroyed. In addition of preventing the flow of reinforcements and war materiel to north Africa, the resistance forced the Axis to keep substantial forces in Greece.

The price Greece paid for that resistance is counted in the thousands of civilians killed in retaliation and the complete destruction of infrastructure, the mining, the roadways and the ports. At the same time large swaths of Greek territory and many small and medium size cities were liberated. Unfortunately, during the occupation and especially after the war ended, extremist groups on the right and the left led the country to a civil war (1947-1949) that caused much pain in the country and slowed the recovery of Greece significantly.

Crete was the first area in which the armed resistance movement emerged after the occupation. The fierce resistance of the Cretan civilians and the harsh countermeasures by General Student, forced the Cretans to respond by forming the first guerilla groups in the mountains. Interestingly, the resistance movement in Crete did not devolve to the fratricide that was witnessed in continental Greece. That may be due to the fact that there were few supporters of the king on the island. But there were also many highly respected Cretans who exerted their influence in preventing civil strife. It is also a fact that collaboration with the enemy was so effectively punished, and with such thoroughness, that one would have to be very unwise to try the role of a quisling.

Crete provided an appropriate background for the daredevil British Patrick Lee Fermor to design and execute the abduction of both, an Italian and a German general. The result was of

minimal strategic importance but had a serious impact on the morale of the occupation troops. It also resulted in the eventual execution of several hundred Cretans, which raises the question whether it was worthwhile.

The reprisals in Crete were severe. Kazantzakis, who led the committee for the evaluation of atrocities in Crete, states that more than 106 villages were destroyed and the number of Cretans lives lost runs in the thousands.

A fact that showcases the indomitable character of the Cretans is the fact that most of the six thousand commonwealth troops that were stranded on Crete after the bulk of them left on May 30 and 31, were given shelter by the Cretans despite the fact that apprehension meant death. When Middle East Headquarters suggested to the Cretans that they turn over their "guests" to the Germans, the Cretans refused. Instead they kept them under their protection until they could arrange for their gradual departure for the Middle East. The few hundred who could not be "sent over" joined the resistance.

Conclusions. The events that take place in a war are closely interrelated to one another, and there is close coupling between what happens in one theater of the war and what happens in another. The fact that the allies were able to get the upper hand in North Africa, allowed them to invade Italy from the south, and that in turn forced Hitler to come to Mussolini's rescue a second time, this time in Italy itself. The Battles in the Italian peninsula started in July of 1943 and forced Hitler to send more than 30 divisions to that front. Hitler also had to keep close to 20 divisions in Yugoslavia and Greece. So a total of 54 divisions had to be taken from the Russian front and from the western defenses of France, in order to counter the northward advance of the Allies (among them the Greek Third Mountain Brigade, or *Rimini Brigade*) in the Italian peninsula.

On 5 June 1944 Rome fell to the Allied attacks, and on the very next day, June 6, the invasion of Normandy took place. The German divisions fighting in Rome and facing the *andartes* and the partisans in the Balkans were not available to defend Normandy's shores. Just like the Italian troops fighting in Albania were not available to fight in Libya and Eastern Africa.

In a testamentary document signed on 17 February 1945, a few weeks before his suicide in the underground bunker of the Chancellery in Berlin, Hitler discusses the causes of the Nazi defeat at some length: a pertinent section in that document is the following:

Italy's entry into the war gave our enemies their *first victories*, a fact which enabled Churchill to revive the courage of his countrymen and gave hope to anglophiles the world over. The shameful defeats of the Italians in their pointless campaign in Greece caused certain Balkan states to regard us with scorn and contempt. Here and nowhere else are to be found the causes of Yugoslavia's stiffening attitude and her

volta-face

in the spring of 1941. This compelled us, contrary to our plans, to intervene in the Balkans, and that in turn led to a catastrophic delay in the launching of our attack on Russia. If the war had remained a war conducted by Germany and not by the Axis, we should have been in a position to attack Russia by May 15, 1941. Doubly strengthened by the fact that our forces had known nothing but irrefutable victories, we should have been able to conclude the campaign before the winter came.

Signed: Adolph Hitler.

Hitler's recognition of the role of Greece in WWII amply justifies the title of the book that is the source of this article, [*The First Victory, Greece in the Second World War*](#) .

SOME FACTS TO REMEMBER ABOUT GREECE IN WWII

1. The Greeks, representing one percent of the Allied population, kept the Axis in battle for 10 percent of the duration of the war: seven out of seventy months. During that period the forces deployed by Greece in Albania, were of the same magnitude as the forces deployed by the British Commonwealth in all fronts of war.
2. The unexpectedly long resistance of Greece to the Axis forces, forced Hitler to modify his war plans , both in the Mediterranean and in the Russian front, with disastrous consequences for the Axis.
3. In order to conquer Greece, the Axis mobilized close to a million troops, more than a thousand warplanes and almost two thousand tanks.
4. In WWII, Greece lost almost as many lives as the United States and the United Kingdom combined. In round numbers, six hundred thousand Greek men women and children perished during WWII, while USA and the UK combined lost about seven hundred thousand, mostly enlisted men.