

# TAC NEWS

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March—April 2023 Modeling Excellence Since 1967

## **OPERATION MERKUR** **Crete, May 20th, 1941**

### **The Opposing Forces**

With the fall of Greece, many Allied troops withdrew to the island of Crete to reinforce the garrison there. By the time of the invasion, the forces on the island had swelled considerably. Greek forces included the Cretan Gendarmerie, the Heraklion Garrison Battalion, and the remnants of the 12th and 20th Army divisions. The Commonwealth forces included the New Zealand 2nd Division, the Australian 19th Brigade Group, and the British 14th Infantry Brigade, among others. The Allies had less than 100 pieces of artillery of various calibers, and a handful of tanks: Matilda IIs from B Squadron, 7th Royal Tank Regiment and Mk VIB light tanks from C Squadron, 4th Queen's Own Hussars. The Greek forces were extremely short on firepower, with very few machineguns and an acute lack of ammunition.

For the Germans, General Student was given the mission to capture the island. In order to do this, he had the full 7th Flieger Division and the 5th Gebirgs (Mountain) Division at his disposal. Student divided his forces into three groups: Battle Groups West, Center, and East. In phase one Battle Group West, which contained most of the Fallschirmjäger-Sturmregiment, would assault and seize the airfield at Maleme, as well as roads and bridges near Canaea. Battle Group Center, consisting of Fallschirmjäger Regiment 3 with elements of 1st Battalion Fallschirmjäger-Sturmregiment would land in "Prison Valley" and attack towards Hania and Souda.

Phase Two would begin when the planes returned to Greece and the rest of Battle Group Center and Battle Group East would embark. The second wave of Battle Group Center consisted of 1st and 3rd

Battalions of Fallschirmjäger Regiment 2. This wave would seize the town of Rethymnon. Battle Group East, consisting of Fallschirmjäger Regiment 1 and 2nd Battalion Fallschirmjäger Regiment 2, would land and secure Heraklion.

### **May 20<sup>th</sup>: the First Day**

There were problems with the operation even before it began. First and foremost, the Allies knew the Germans were coming. "Ultra" intercepts gave away not only the date but also landing locations. To make matters worse, German intelligence underestimated the Allied strength on the island, assuming the forces evacuated from Greece had gone to Egypt instead.

The first wave met furious resistance from the Allied troops on the island, with some battalions cut off and decimated. The second wave was delayed due to the turnaround time necessary for the JU-52s, and so these troops did not land together, but piecemeal instead. By the end of the first day, none of the airfield objectives had been secured. All along the northern coast of Crete, the bodies of the Fallschirmjäger lay like a gray carpet. If there was any positive outcome for the Fallschirmjäger on that first day, it was that the Allies did not counterattack that night—and it was to prove a costly mistake for the defenders.

### **May 21<sup>st</sup>: the Second Day**

On the morning of the 21st, Point 107 and Maleme Airfield were taken by the Germans, and elements of the 100th Gerbirgsjäger Regiment were flown in, providing badly needed reinforcements. The Allies knew that they needed to retake the airfield to

prevent the Germans from reinforcing their positions. Unfortunately, the troops scheduled to participate in the night attack were delayed getting into position. The attack did not get underway until after dawn, and it failed under the watchful eyes of the Luftwaffe. From this point on, the campaign for the island would now be a series of fighting withdrawals by the Commonwealth forces.

### **The Initial Seaborne Landing Attempts**

The German plan also included a seaborne element. Elements of both invading divisions were to be brought in by sea in a convoy of old caiques, escorted by a single Italian torpedo boat. The British enjoyed overwhelming naval superiority, and the only hope for the German landings were to be able to make a nighttime run to reach the northern coast of Crete without being detected. Unfortunately for the Germans, this proved impossible. The first convoy to leave Greece was intercepted by a group of British cruisers and destroyers and was turned back by the Royal Navy after losing about 800 men. It is a testament to the Italian torpedo boat captain's skill that more of the convoy was not sunk. A second convoy left Greece for Crete also turned back without ever reaching its shores.

### **May 23<sup>rd</sup>—27<sup>th</sup>: Withdrawal to the Coast**

As the days progressed, with Maleme Airfield secure, it became just a matter of time before the Allies were driven off the island. By the 24th of May the Germans were able to capture the town of Kastelli, freeing some of the paratroopers who had been captured during the fighting. These forces were opposed by the remnants of the 1st Greek Regiment, who continued to fight in the Kastelli area until May 26th. The Germans meanwhile continued to attempt to land troops by sea, and were finally successful in landing some forces on May 28th, including a couple of light tanks. These failed to play a major role in the campaign however, and were mostly used to mop up pockets of resistance.

The British also landed some men of the No.7 and No.8 Commandos near Souda Bay. These troops were given the assignment of helping to provide a rearguard action until the garrison could withdraw.

### **May 28<sup>th</sup>—31<sup>st</sup>: Evacuation**

During this time, the Allies were able to evacuate approximately 16,000 men to Egypt via the Royal Navy. Over 9,000 men were left behind to fight on as best they could. The tough decision was made based on the terrible pounding the Royal Navy was taking from the Luftwaffe. By June 1st the last of the Allied holdouts had surrendered and the Fallschirmjäger were able to take stock of their victory. In nine days they had sustained 3,250 men killed or missing, with another 3,400 wounded out of a total force of 22,000 (this includes the men of the 5th Gebirgs Division).

The staggering casualties on Crete contributed to this being the last large-scale parachute operation that the Fallschirmjäger participated in. There were other factors: gliders were too slow and vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire and crashing. Troops deployed by parachute were exposed, themselves, in the air and then had to spend precious time getting out of the parachute and retrieving the cannisters with their weapons. In truth the most compelling reason was that the German war machine would be unable to provide the planes and fuel for such a large operation again.

### **The Planned Invasion of Malta: Origins**

The island of Malta was the only Allied base in the Mediterranean between Gibraltar and Egypt. Situated very close to the island of Sicily, the pre-war consensus was that the island was indefensible, due to the advantage the Italians would have in both submarines and aircraft in the area. Once the war broke out, it was assumed that the island would fall, and so only limited assets were deployed there. Inexplicably, however, the Italians failed to invade. Perhaps it was due to the damage sustained to their fleet during the Battle of Taranto, but regardless, the threat to Malta shifted from invasion to bombardment by air.

### **Siege and Respite—Malta in 1941**

The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force were able to use Malta as a staging ground for their raids, sinking in some cases as much as 60% of Axis shipping. With the Battle of Taranto damaging the Italian fleet and the reversals of the North African campaign, the Luftwaffe was forced to intervene. The Germans began a severe bombing campaign January to April 1941, and Malta was hit with several sorties a day,

every day. Allied morale began to ebb as people fled the cities of Malta for safety. At the end of April, however, the Germans were forced to remove their air support in order to get ready for Operation Barbarossa. With the respite the Allied forces were able to rebuild over the rest of the year. With the Italian Navy so ineffective, the British were able to ferry 75 new fighters and 230 anti-aircraft guns to the island. They also brought in 3,000 more troops and recruited more Maltese civilians to build underground shelters and alternate airstrips.

**Prelude to Invasion, January to July 1942**

In 1942 the brief period of rest was about to end. The German offensive in North Africa was suffering due to the Allied resurgence in late 1941. Fliegerkorps II was sent to Sicily, and their constant raids began to wear down the RAF. In January alone they lost 50 Hurricanes on the ground and 8 more in the air. The Allied ability to defend the island by air continued to degrade to the point where invasion plans were brought up again in late April. The operation was shelved temporarily and then brought up again near July.

**The Axis Forces**

The plan called for the Italian Folgore Division as well as the German 7th Flieger Division to land behind the invasion beaches. Their goal would be to seize the high ground near the beachheads and secure at least one airfield so reinforcements could be flown in. Once the airborne forces had landed, the seaborne troops would land. The invasion plans called for two separate landing points on the southern side of

the island. There would be several waves of seaborne forces, but the first wave would consist of the Livorno and Friuli Infantry Divisions from the Italian XXX Corps. The Italian forces would also include several battalions of the San Marco Marines and Blackshirts. There would be only limited armor support from the X Raggruppamento Corazzato.

The second wave would bring in troops from the Italian XVI Corp, including the Assieta Infantry Division and the Napoli Infantry Division , along with 2 Kompanie, Panzer Abteilung 66, an eclectic unit that contained, among other thigs, several captured KV tanks, and Panzer IVs.

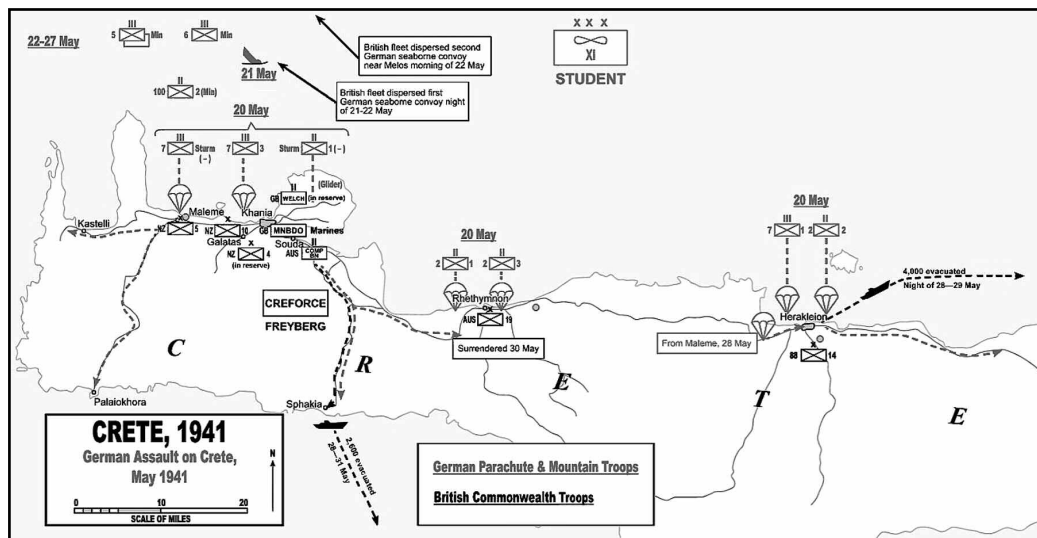
**The Allied Forces**

The Allied forces on the island had only 15 infantry battalions (including 4 Maltese battalions) formed into four brigades. There were numerous anti-aircraft units spread throughout the island, and limited armor support, including a mixture of A9, A13, Mk VIB, and Matilda II tanks. Artillery support would be provided by the 12th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, with only a few dozen 25-pounder field pieces.

**The Invasion is Called Off**

Although a tentative date of July 1942 was set for the invasion, it was ultimately called off. There were concerns that the paratroopers would suffer the same fate as they did a year before in Crete. There were also concerns that the Italian Navy would not be able to protect the seaborne landings. Although the invasion never happened it would provide several interesting gaming scenarios.

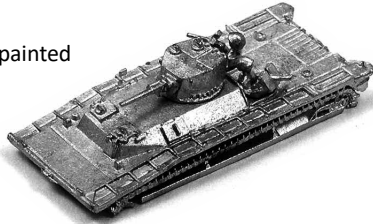
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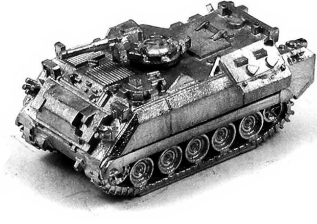
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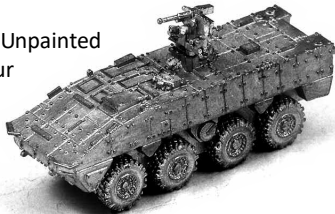
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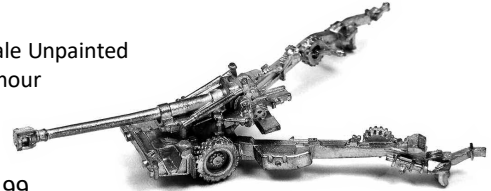
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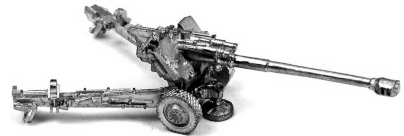
Ukrainian derivative of the Soviet era BTR-70. The vehicle has a crew of three and can carry up to seven passengers. Armament has been increased with the addition of a 30mm grenade launcher and Barrier ATGMs.

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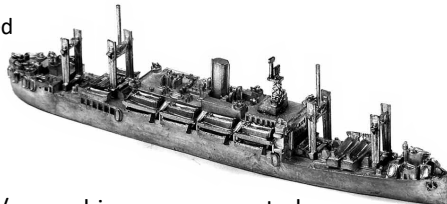
Soviet-era 152mm  
howitzer of 47 calibers;

entered service in 1987. In many ways it is a scaled-up version of D-30 152mm howitzer, which it replaced in front line service. Still in use with seven nations including Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.



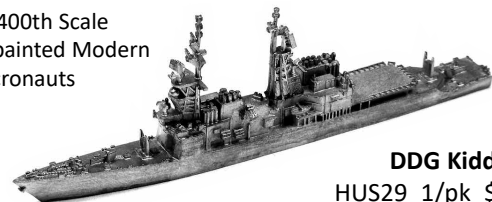
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