

## Greece and the Defence of Crete, 1939 – 1941

by GEORGES YIANNIKOPOULOS

**ABSTRACT.** This article aims to examine the Greek plans for the defence of Crete, both before and during the Greek-Italian war. Crete's strategic position, especially in relation to the Middle East, motivated Britain who began to work out plans, even from the start of the war, aimed at the defence of Crete in case it was threatened by Axis forces. British action and contribution is more or less recognised in the international bibliography. However, what is less recognised, even in Greece itself, are the activities and the decisions taken by the Greek government and the General Staff to reinforce the island's defence after the break out of the Greek-Italian war and especially during the last few months, before the battle of Crete began. Moreover, the article focuses on the condition of the Greek army units upon arrival on Crete and what efforts were made or not made for improvements.

**KEYWORDS:** CRETE, GREECE, BATTLE, BRITAIN, WORLD WAR 2, GREEK ARMY, DEFENCE

**T**he battle of Crete was waged in May 1941 and is an inseparable continuity of both the Greek-Italian and Greek-German wars and the activity of the British Expeditionary Force in the wider region of Greece. Crete's strategic position, especially in relation to the Middle East, motivated Britain who began to work out plans, even from the start of the war, aimed at the defence of Crete in case it was threatened by Axis forces. British action and contribution to the defence of Crete after the start of the Greek-Italian war, as well as the participation of British, Australian and New Zealand troops in the battle of Crete are facts more or less recognized, since the international bibliography has, righteously, acknowledged Britain's struggle for the defence of Crete.

However, what is less recognised, even in Greece itself, is the participation of the Greek army and Greece, in general, in the battle of Crete. The fact that Greek participation was generally limited and in terms of forces and war equipment cannot be compared to that by Britain may have resulted in occupying only a small place in the international and Greek bibliography. Apart from Greek Army General Staff's publications, the remaining bibliography on the battle of Crete

includes only a minimal number of books referring extensively on the Greek army's participation in the battle of Crete.

The aim of the present article is to explain what were the Greek plans for the defence of Crete, both before and during the war; what were the activities and the decisions taken by the Greek government and the General Staff to reinforce the island's defence before this great battle began; what was the condition of Greek army units upon arrival on Crete and what efforts were made or not made for improvements.

### *Greece's defence plans before the war*

The majority of dangers Greece had faced up until 1939, throughout its short modern history, almost always arose in the Balkan region and in general from the same countries, i.e. Turkey and Bulgaria (1897, 1912-13, 1920-22). For this reason, the Greek Army was armed and organised in order to successfully face any of the Balkan armies but was not in a sufficiently advantageous position to take on a European army equipped with modern weapons. The army's weak point was mainly attributed to its type of armaments and not its fighting ability, something which was well illustrated during the Greek-Italian and the Greek-German wars. Moreover, no serious attempts had been made to reinforce the armed forces by means of up-dating their equipment, since the majority of funds supplied to them was used in the construction of fortification lines (the Metaxas line) along the country's north-eastern borders<sup>1</sup>.

In other words, the Greek Army General Staff were preparing the armed forces to fight according to the criteria prevalent at the time of World War I, hence ignoring the developments of that era. Consequently, the country's defence plans were adapted and adjusted with the neighbouring states in mind and in particular Bulgaria, since this was the country posing the greatest danger to Greece after the signing of the agreement of friendship, neutrality and arbitration in 1930 by the then Greek Prime Minister Mr. Venizelos and his Turkish counterpart. For this reason, no particular strategy for the defence of Crete existed, given that it was

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<sup>1</sup> The construction cost of the fortification line in the Greek-Bulgarian border amounted to 1,458,000,000 drachmas. Pheobus GRIGORIADIS, *From 4th August to Albania*, Kedrinos, Athens, 1974, p. 294.



Eleftherios Venizelos reviews the 5<sup>th</sup> Cretan Division (V Μεραρχία «ΚΡΗΤΩΝ»)  
([www.militaire.gr](http://www.militaire.gr))

both theoretically and practically impossible for Bulgaria to threaten this region<sup>2</sup>.

The occupation of Albania by Italy in April of 1939 erected a new status quo in the Balkans. A new threat to Greece's borders began to emerge in an area where no planned defence strategy had been made provision for. The rapid increase of Italian provocation made the threat of war appear to be an indisputable, unavoidable fact and the creation of defence strategy a necessity. Within this framework the need for employing further strategy aimed at protecting the island of Crete emerged, since the island's strategic position was obviously important. Even more obvious, however, was the fact that the Italian Navy was capable of threatening Crete. As it actually emerged later, a plan to attack Crete<sup>3</sup> existed together with the plan to attack Greece via Albania, which, however, never took place owing to the unfortunate outcome of the Italian attack in the Albanian front.

According to Greek plans, the Government based the island's defence on the

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2 Ioannis KOLIPOULOS, *History of the Greek Nation*, vol.15, Ekdotike Athenon, Athens, 1980, p. 345.

3 During a meeting at Florence's Palazzo Vecchio, on 28/10/1940, Hitler, himself, had offered Mussolini one airborne division to use them in the invasion of Crete. Martin VAN CREVELD, *Hitler's Strategy 1940-1941: The Balkan Clue*, Govostis, Athens, 2013, p. 88.

5th Division comprised solely of Cretans and which had under its orders three infantry regiments (14th based at Canea, 43rd at Rethymno and 44th at Heraklion) and one artillery regiment (5th based at Souda)<sup>4</sup>. This force of approximately 18,000 men was considered to be sufficient for the island's defence.

The Division developed coastal defence and also a network of observation both of sea and airspace, upon orders from the General Staff. Conversely, no measures were taken as far as the protection of Crete was concerned in the event of an attack from the sea. This was due to two particular reasons: a) to the lack of the requisite means i.e. guns, mines etc. and b) to the fact that the Greek Government was convinced that the British Fleet would intervene in the case of enemy action in the Mediterranean<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, small-scale invasions could be successfully handled by the armed forces until the British Fleet intervened.

### *The situation after the outbreak of the war*

The Greek General Staff considered that the transfer of the Division based in Crete to the Albanian front was a necessity when the Greek-Italian war broke out in 1940. This was, of course, to reinforce the Greek Army in its difficult task of defending Greece against the formidable, as they were considered, Italian forces.

On the 4th of November the Greek Government notified the British Government of her intention to transfer the 5th Division from Crete, with the proviso that the British themselves would undertake the island's defence<sup>6</sup>, since their interest in protecting it was already particularly strong<sup>7</sup>. In spite of objections on the part of the British General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in the Middle East<sup>8</sup>, the British Government agreed to undertake the defence of Crete and thus permit the departure of the 5th Division for the Albanian front<sup>9</sup>. This

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4 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, *History of the Greek-Italian and of the Greek-German Wars 1940-1941*, (Army Operations), Directory of Military History, Athens, 1985, p. 222.

5 GREEK ARMY GENERAL STAFF, Directory of Military History, *The Greek Army in the Second World War, The Battle of Crete*, Directory of Military History, Athens 1967, reissued 1993, p. 5.

6 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, *History of the Greek-Italian and of the Greek-German Wars 1940-1941*, (Army Operations), op., cit., p. 223.

7 PRO, War Office Papers, WO 106/3239.

8 PRO, War Office Papers, WO 106/3239.

9 PRO, WO 106/3239.



Artillery of the 5<sup>th</sup> Cretan Division during the battle of Trebeshina (www.patris.gr)

took place between the 18th and 25th November using Greek ships requisitioned for the purpose, protected by both Greek and British destroyers. In total, 566 officers, 18,662 armed soldiers, 687 animals and 81 vehicles were transferred without a single loss being incurred<sup>10</sup>.

From the moment when the 5th Division was transferred to the Albanian front and the defence of Crete was entrusted to the British, and up until the Battle of Crete, began a period of time during which the Greek Government undertakes a series of decisions aimed at reinforcing the island's defence. However, many of these are never to be realised whilst those that are, become the object of serious objection so much so that pertinent queries relevant to Greek Government's intentions arise. Let us examine the facts as they took place.

Immediately following the 5th Division's departure, command of the Greek forces on the island was assumed by the newly formed Canea Military Command under Lieutenant General Ioannis Alexakis<sup>11</sup>. At the end of March 1941, Alexakis

10 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, *History of the Greek-Italian and of the Greek-German Wars 1940-1941*, (Army Operations), op., cit., p. 223.

11 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, *History of the Greek-Italian and of the Greek-German*

was replaced by Major General Christos Kitsos, who then was replaced, on May 10, by Major General Achilleas Skoulas. The Command was attached to the 1st Higher Military Command of Athens and the Base-Battalions of Canea, Rethymno and Heraklion were under its orders. However, in January of 1941, these battalions were also transferred to mainland Greece, after agreement was reached with the British Military Headquarters in the Middle East. Thus, the only Greek forces remaining in Crete were the nucleus of the battalions, armed with out of date equipment consisting of approximately one thousand Gras rifles, twelve St. Etienne machine guns and forty sub-machine guns Chaucat.

Already, however, by the beginning of November 1940, Alexandros Papagos, Commander-in-Chief of the Greek Armed Forces, intending to reinforce the defence of the island issued his decision to form a new division in Crete, on November 7th<sup>12</sup>. This division, the formation of which was the wish of the Cretan people, was to be composed of old classes of soldiers who were to be armed by the British. The creation of this division was acceptable to the British themselves who took a favourable view of the Greek army undertaking the partial responsibility for the defence of Crete, since they were already in a difficult position owing to the war effort in North Africa and the Middle East. In his book *Crete, the battle and the resistance* A. Beevor writes: "...but no British troops would have been needed. Raising a second Cretan division combined with other Greek troops escaped from the mainland and arming them with captured German weaponry would have been sufficient."<sup>13</sup> In actual fact the formation of the division would have dramatically increased the island's chances of resisting invasion. Had this reserve division been raised immediately after the Greek Commander-in-Chief's decision had been announced, all the time necessary for training and arming the division by the British would have been available. The Greek army was incapable of equipping it, given that all existing means had been supplied to those on the Albanian front.

The existence of this significant force on the island combined with its reinforcement by the British and Greek units, which would have departed from

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*Wars 1940-1941*, (Army Operations), op., cit., p. 223.

12 Eleftherios PAPAGIANNAKIS, "The Battle of Crete", *Military History Magazine*, issue 12, Athens, (May 1997), p. 19.

13 Antony BEEVOR, *Crete: the Battle and the Resistance*, Penguin Books, London 1991, p. 231.

mainland Greece, as they did, would have been capable of holding back the Germans and keeping Crete. However, as we shall see later on, no plan existed for the transporting of Greek army units to Crete. Moreover, this decision to transfer the war to Crete was not the outcome of a pre-meditated plan but a necessity arising from the facts<sup>14</sup>.

In spite of this decision, no attempt was made to create a new division. The Greek General Staff did not invite troops to mobilise and no documentation or evidence exists explaining the apathy surrounding the implementation of the Greek Commander-in-Chief's decision. The Greek historian S. Linardatos apportions the blame to the British, stressing their apathy throughout their entire stay on the island and the fact that they did not make provision for raising and equipping this new Cretan division<sup>15</sup>. It is, however, a fact that in spite of having agreed to equip this new division, the British were only in a position to keep part of this agreement. Colonel Salisbury-Jones wrote about this matter in his subsequent report on the Battle of Crete: "*...the provision of complete equipment was of course impossible, but it was agreed that 10,000 rifles should be provided*"<sup>16</sup>. But even that number of rifles was not provided. Only 3,500 American carbines arrived in Crete. This was due to the fact that German air raids in Britain had destroyed small arms factories and thus, the production of that number of rifles was impossible.

At the same time the decision to raise a new division was taken, the Greek



Lieutenant-General Bernard Cyril Freyberg,  
1st Baron Freyberg

14 Spiros LINARDATOS, *The War of 1940-41 and the Battle of Crete*, Dialogos, Athens, 1977, p. 455.

15 Spiros LINARDATOS, *op. cit.*, p. 455.

16 Antony BEEVOR, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

General Staff proceeded to attempt to reinforce the defence of Crete by other means which however were never realised. Following orders issued by the Greek General Staff, December 1940 saw the initial organisation of militia units<sup>17</sup>. In accordance with these orders, the units were to be responsible for the security of technical operations and delicate points in general arising from the possibility of parachutist and amphibious activities. The militia was to be created by calling up troops of the 1915-1920 classes, who would number 3,000. These units would be under the jurisdiction as far as their administration and training was concerned, of the Gendarmerie, but regularly under that of Canea Military Command. The militia was to be equipped partially by the Greek forces but mainly by the British<sup>18</sup>.

However, while the mission of equipping the units had begun by the Greeks (blue caps, arm-bands and weapons), new orders from the Greek General Staff issued in February 1941 decreed that the strength of the militia be reduced to 1,500 men with a further decision from the War Ministry at the end of March 1941 cancelling the previous orders and instructing that not only the weapons but also the arm-bands and caps be returned to Athens<sup>19</sup>.

It is difficult to interpret these incomprehensible actions on the part of the Greeks. Whilst initially the right decision had been made as far as reinforcing the defence of Crete, it was finally never realised owing to orders from the Greek Government itself. The root of this inconstant political behaviour should be searched for in the "particular" relations between the 4th August Dictatorship, in power from 1936 onwards, and the Cretan people. This case is reinforced by the later testimony of Major General Ch. Kitsos, that he was responsible for the revocation of the order: "... because he was not sure that the villagers would not turn these weapons against the government"<sup>20</sup>

Looking back in history, we see that Crete has a long tradition of bloody battles aimed at securing her freedom and independence and for this reason the Cretan people have developed an unusual character in comparison to other

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17 GREEK ARMY GENERAL STAFF, Directory of Military History, *The Greek Army in the Second World War, The Battle of Crete*, op., cit., p. 9.

18 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, *History of the Greek-Italian and of the Greek-German Wars 1940-1941*, (Army Operations), op., cit., p. 224.

19 Spiros LINARDATOS, op. cit., p. 456.

20 Leonidas KALLIVRETAKIS, "The Battle of Crete", *Ta Nea, Prosopa 21th Aionas*, v. 116, Athens, (26<sup>th</sup> May 2001), p. 13.





General Tzanakakis, GOC of Greek forces, at manoeuvres, probably Palestine

Greeks. According to a German military document:

“... the Cretans are considered intelligent, hot-blooded, valorous, excitable as well as obstinate and difficult to govern. The agricultural population is accustomed to using arms, even in everyday life. Vendetta and abduction are still customary and criminality is high...”<sup>21</sup>.

Also, Eleftherios Venizelos, one of Greece’s greatest politicians who had made his mark on Greece by means of his political and social reforms as well as

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21 Antony BEEVOR, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

his amazing achievements in home policy<sup>22</sup>, originates from Crete. He himself, however, together with the royalists during the First World War had led Greece to national division over the subject of whether Greece should enter the war on the side of the Entente Cordiale or the Germans. The nation had divided into two main political groups, the Pro and Anti Venizelos parties, divided by a deep hatred of one another and reaching extremes at times i.e. beatings and even murder<sup>23</sup>. Crete was obviously considered to be the bastion of “Venizelism” and therefore hostile to the King and pro-royalist governments.

In 1941, even though Venizelos had already died<sup>24</sup>, the hatred and enmity between the two political groups and their supporters was still extremely strong and the Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas was afraid that Crete could become a suitable area from which a political movement against the dictatorship or even the moderate King George II could arise. Three years previously, in 1938, an uprising against his regime had broken out in Canea Crete. This uprising, the heads of which were politicians and dismissed officers who supported the Venizelos party, was enough to instil fear into Metaxas, even though it failed virtually at once without even requiring the intervention of the government’s forces. Metaxas considered the Cretans a continual threat to both himself and his government, especially after the attempted uprising<sup>25</sup>. His attempt to disarm the Cretans, by law, was based on this fear. According to this law, Cretans were obliged to lay down their weapons: “both the agent and the symbol of resistance to foreign oppression“, to the Greek Government<sup>26</sup>.

Indeed, the Cretans responded to the government’s call and handed over to the local police authorities a significant number of weapons, many of which were kept for years in crypts. As it turned out later, the weapons collected were never sent to the front but remained locked in local depots. Authorities were, probably, more interested in finding the 1,000 or so modern rifles that were stolen, during the 1938 uprising, from a military depot in Kastelli. By doing so, the government believed that he could reduce the danger of a new uprising succeeding.

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22 During Venizelo’s first term in power (1910-1915), Greece had more than doubled its geographical area, and according to a popular saying, it had become the country of two continents and the five seas.

23 Two attempts had been made to assassinate E. Venizelos in 1920 and 1933.

24 E. Venizelos died in Paris on March 19, 1936.

25 Spiros LINARDATOS, *op. cit.*, p. 456.

26 Antony BEEVOR, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Unfortunately, however, he succeeded in leaving the Cretan people unarmed three years later and unable to play an even more decisive role in the battle.

Only within the framework of this ideological and political dispute between the dictators regime and the Cretan people may, perhaps, the cancellation of the creation of the militia be explained. The government feared the possibility of troubles and even the formation of a movement to overthrow the regime, were the Cretans to be armed.

A decision in March 1941 to dispatch the Police Academy with a strength of 15 officers and 900 troops was a further attempt to reinforce the island<sup>27</sup>. In April of the same year, the dual fronted battle having started after the German invasion, it became increasingly obvious that it would be extremely difficult to stop the Germans advancing in spite of the land battle being fought by the Greek and the British forces. Thus, on April 15th 1941 the Greek General Staff issued an order

by means of which 8 battalions of recruits were despatched to Crete from the training centres in Peloponnese. These battalions comprised a total of 85 officers and 4,825 troops. These men were the draftees of the 1940 and 1941 classes and had undergone a very brief and basic training. These units were scantily armed, since there were tremendous shortages of weaponry i.e. one third of the men were unarmed and the others had between 5 and 20 cartridges per rifle<sup>28</sup>.



Élos (dème de Kíssamos, Crète). Bust of General (αντιστράτηγος) Emmanuel Tzanakakis, in the village's main square (wikimedia commons)

27 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, *History of the Greek-Italian and of the Greek-German Wars 1940-1941*, (Army Operations), op., cit., p. 224.

28 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, *History of the Greek-Italian and of the Greek-German Wars 1940-1941*, (Army Operations), op., cit., p. 224.

*Decisions taken in Crete before the battle*

Several days after the order had been issued, the Greek Government seeing that it was useless to continue the fight on mainland Greece disengaged the British Expeditionary Force, which departed from Greece part bound for Alexandria and the remainder for Crete. It was then that King George II, Crown Prince Paul, Prince Peter, the Prime Minister Tsouderos, certain members of the government and the British Ambassador in Athens arrived in Crete on a British hydroplane. It should be noted here, that the appointment of Mr. E. Tsouderos as Prime Minister could not be considered as coincidental. The historian P. Papastratis points out that:

“...the British as well as the King and Tsouderos were obviously well aware that public opinion in Crete would certainly not be in favour of what was considered as and indeed was, the continuation of the Metaxas regime. Consequently, there is no doubt that one of the main reasons for Tsouderos appointment as premier, was that as a Cretan himself he would make the King and the Government more acceptable on the island”<sup>29</sup>.

The appointments of Stylianos Dimitrakakis as Minister of Justice and Lieutenant General Emmanouil Tzanakakis as Minister of War served exactly the same purpose.

On April 28th, 1941, on the initiative of the Greek Government, a meeting took place in Canea aimed at the adoption of defence measures for the island. This meeting was attended by Lieutenant General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, Major General Eric C. Weston, Major General Achilleas Skoulas, R.A.F. Air Vice Marshal John D’Albiac, Rear Admiral C. E. Turle, Wing Commander G. R. Beamish as well as other Greeks and British officers. The Greek Prime Minister as chairman of the meeting, requested that the island’s Greek forces be placed under the command of a British General, and that they be equipped with both weapons and supplies by the British<sup>30</sup>.

The following day the Army Academy arrived in Kolymbari at Canea by two diesel boats following certain cadets and officer’s initiative. The cadets carried with them their Mauser rifles with 30 rounds each, as well as 3,000 rounds as a spare, five Chaucat machine guns, but not in good condition, with 150 rounds

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29 PROCOPIIS PAPASTRATIS, *British policy towards Greece during the Second World War 1941-1944*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, p. 2.

30 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, *History of the Greek-Italian and of the Greek-German Wars 1940-1941*, (Army Operations), op., cit., p. 226.

each and some 200 grenades. The cadets camped at the Moni Odigitrias Kyrias Gonias (Gonia Monastery). The Army Academy was directly under the orders of the War Ministry at Canea, which a few days later named Lieutenant Colonel Loukas Kitsos as the new commander of the Academy.

The most critical moment for the Hellenism was approaching. From the day that the Germans had taken over mainland Greece, Crete was the Greek Government's last bastion and the sole base wherein the troops which had withdrawn from Greece gathered. Moreover, it was the only un-occupied piece of Greek territory where a "free" Greek army existed owing to the presence of the King,

the Government and the Greek Armed Forces. Consequently, the significance of maintaining Crete as a free island was of a tremendous moral and political nature. However, the King and the Government once again acting in contradictory fashion gave rise to much criticism post war on the part of Greek historians criticised the Greek Government for not transferring Greek units and in particular the 5th Division to Crete<sup>31</sup>.

As far as this accusation is concerned, difficulty exists in apportioning blame to the Greek Government or the Greek General Staff since the Greek army had already been fighting a hard battle against Italy from the end of October. After six months of continuous fighting under difficult weather conditions, the army had reached the limit of its endurance. It is also a fact supported by the lack of official documentation that no plans existed either before or after the outbreak of the war, to transfer the fighting to Crete in the event of matters taking an adverse turn for the Greek forces.



General Ioannis Alexakis

31 Ioannis MOURELLOS, *The Battle of Crete*, Printing House "Mourmel", Heraklion, 1946, p. 12; LINARDATOS, op. cit., p. 455.

The transfer of the fighting to Crete appears to have been coincidental with the developing political and military situation. Commander-in-Chief Papagos' denial to withdraw the Greek divisions from Albania<sup>32</sup> in order to use them in the Macedonian front resulted, on the one hand the divisions to be trapped in Albania, on the other hand the Macedonian front to collapse<sup>33</sup>. Papagos himself after the war, stated that:

“...when Germany came into the war, the Greek Superior Command intended to defend itself step by step on the mainland of its fatherland and therefore no reduction would have been made in the forces available to send to send the 5th Division to Crete “<sup>34</sup>.

In this way he justified not dispatching the troops to Crete, and continued:

“...I repeat that the British had undertaken the defence of Crete. In spite of the Greek Superior Command's orders, the voluntary surrender on the part of the Epirus Army thwarted the Greek Commands intentions of continuing the fight in Greece. Those who undertook the defence of Crete, the British, at no time requested from the Greek Superior Command troops to defend the island, when the Germans came into the war. The Greek Superior Command was occupied with the fighting in mainland Greece and had the impression that the British, as those responsible for the islands defence, had taken all the necessary measures for that purpose “<sup>35</sup>.

One thing which is definitely beyond doubt is that the presence of the 5th Division would have been of decisive help during the Allied battle in defence of the island. Its impressive appearance in the Albanian mountains constituted the best guarantee as to the assistance it would have provided. The Italian General Sebastiano Visconti Prasca refers to the contribution of the division at the front in his book *Greco-Italian War 1940-41* saying:

“...the division of Cretans which was sent to the front line surrounded us implacably. I consider it my duty as a soldier to pay tribute to the heroism and the fighting abilities of the Cretan troops “<sup>36</sup>.

The argument put forward by S. Kallonas that it was impossible to move, not only the 5th Division but also other Greek units from Albania to Crete owing to the dominant German Air Force, the intervention of which could have been

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32 Ioannis KOLIOPOULOS, op. cit., p. 438.

33 Ioannis KOLIOPOULOS, op. cit., p. 449.

34 Ioannis MOURELLOS, op. cit., p. 13.

35 Ioannis MOURELLOS, op. cit., p. 13.

36 Stylianos KALLONAS, *The Battle of Crete*, Privately published, Athens, 1965, p. 13.



*A captain of a merchantman sharing cigarettes with Greek soldiers, wearing British and Greek helmets, and a local Cretan. (from Alexis Mehtidis,*

catastrophic<sup>37</sup>, holds very little weight when one considers that during the same period thousands of British and Greek troops were successfully and safely transferred both to Crete and Egypt; despite the fact that the German Air Force finally managed to sink a total of 26 ships causing the loss of more than 2,000 men. It is worth noting that the few Cretan officers and soldiers of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division who managed, on their own initiative and by various means, to reach Crete, when they presented themselves to the Military Authorities, they sent them on leave to their homes. Unfortunately, Major General G. Papastergiou, the commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division during the Greek-Italian war, although he managed to return to Crete, he was killed by a sergeant of the Gendarmerie because, as it was rumoured, he held him responsible for desertion.<sup>38</sup>

Also, at the beginning of May, the Greek Government will attempt to form the militia again - even though the Government itself had a few months previously

<sup>37</sup> Stylianos KALLONAS, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Antony BEEVOR, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

prevented this very formation - in order to try and reinforce the islands defence even at this late stage. Thus, by means of a decree issued on 5/5/41 by the War Ministry it was decided that the militia should be formed<sup>39</sup>. Theoretically speaking, this decision made provision for the formation of four militia battalions comprising 1,556 officers and men throughout the island of Crete. However, these battalions were not to be formed yet again. The official excuse was that the necessary equipment which the British had promised the Greek Military Authorities had not been supplied and therefore the troops were unarmed<sup>40</sup>. Where the truth really lies no one knows but the events described below paint a completely different picture.

In April 1941 the steamship *Thamoni* docked at the port of Souda carrying a full cargo of varying supplies, weapons and food. However, the ship remained in dock for 37 days without unloading its cargo and until the German "Stukas" succeeded in bombing and sinking it. Mr. I.N. Paizis refers to the incident concerning the vessel *Thamoni*:

"...in evaluating the particularly valuable and extreme significance of the *Thamoni's* cargo and its unloading, I wished to visit the Prime Minister Mr. E. Tsouderos personally accompanied by a number of dockers in order to request that unloading of the ship's valuable cargo be permitted. The Prime Minister received us, listened to our request and then told us to wait obviously deeming that he should consult the other members of the 4th August group and when he, at last, returned we listened with surprise to his incomprehensible and inexplicable answer that unloading the vessel *Thamoni* was not permitted"<sup>41</sup>.

This refusal to unload the ship was attributed to the Minister of Public Order Mr. K. Maniatakis, who was I. Metaxas' "right arm" and one of the regimes most hated personalities.

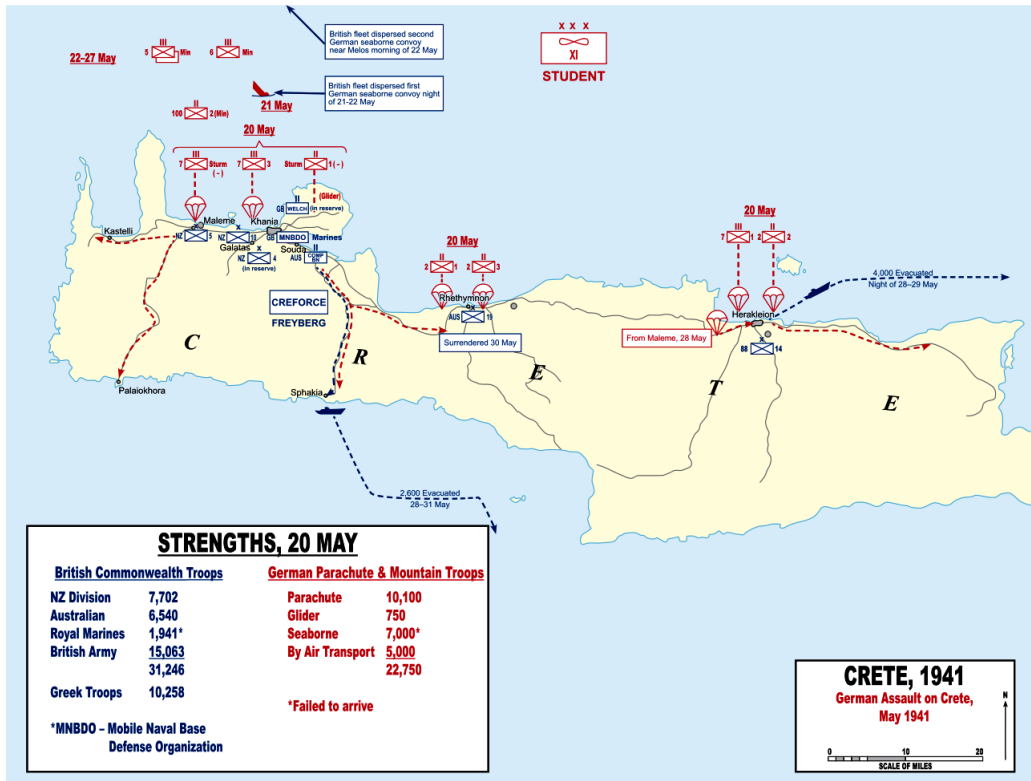
Also according, again, to I.N. Paizis, other weapons originating from Italian plunder, stored in a depot in Kasteli existed. However, the Cretan people who were asking for weapons to fight were not allowed to use even these and the depot suffered the same fate as the *Thamoni* - bombed during an air raid.

39 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/A, p. 36.

40 GREEK ARMY GENERAL STAFF, Directory of Military History, *The Greek Army in the Second World War, The Battle of Crete*, op., cit., p. 28.

41 Ioannis PAIZIS, *The Battle of Crete, the after the battle, the Resistance*, Privately published, Athens, 1971, p. 13.





German Attack on Crete 20-21 May, 1941

Furthermore, according to a hand written note belonging to Major General A. Skoulas, Commander of the Greek Forces in Crete, which is to be found in the History Archives of Crete in Canea, during an animated dialogue between the British Group Captain S.A. Gaskell and the second lieutenant A. Peitzakis - General Weston’s interpreter during the battle of Crete - at the Cairo Headquarters, the fact that the Cretans were not permitted arms was due to indications made on the part of the Minister of Public Order Mr. K. Maniadakis, during his stay in Crete, to the British, who accepted these instructions<sup>42</sup>.

Moreover, following the request by Lieutenant General I. Alexakis, Commander of the Canea Military Command, to the British for the supply of weapons to the militia, his request was accepted and granted but the weapons

42 Eleftherios PAPAIGIANNAKIS, *Military History Magazine*, op., cit., p. 20.

were never distributed. The Germans discovered them in boxes and destroyed them. The Lieutenant General himself, against the disarming of the Cretans, was replaced in May 1941, having been classed as a person not inspiring trust to the regime<sup>43</sup>. Even during the battle itself, when the British and Greeks sacked the Venetian stores in Canea searching desperately for arms, they found large quantities of British rifles and Italian sub machine guns which obviously had never been distributed<sup>44</sup>.

Reference must be made to the incident in which the doctor I.N. Paizis accompanied by several more Greeks tried to obtain the War Minister, Lieutenant General Tzanakakis approval to form an armed force of civilians. He himself writes:

“...when we were at last able to see him and talk, we asked if he would grant us the relevant authority even at the last possible moment for an attempt to form voluntary teams of armed locals who knew the territory well, so that resistance to the invaders could be set up. Lieutenant General Tzanakakis, however, answered that he was not authorised for such matters and that it depended on Freyberg’s himself approval. He introduced us to Freyberg who answered that he could not permit the involvement of civilians but only troops in the face of the enemy attacks “<sup>45</sup>.

Finally, the British Headquarters entrusted weapons for the organisation of resistance groups solely to Lieutenant Colonel P. Gyparis, an old Balkan war guerrilla fighter in Macedonia<sup>46</sup>.

John Pendlebury, a British officer who had been sent to Greece and Crete by MI(R)<sup>47</sup> in June 1940 to gather intelligence information and prepare groups to resist a possible invasion of the island by the Italians or the Germans, had also visited the British Headquarters in search of spear weapons for the guerrilla captains he was working with in the region of Heraklion. These captains were Manolis Bandouvas, a rich peasant of great influence, Georgios Petrakogeorgis, the owner of an olive-oil pressing business and Andonis Grigorakis, also known as *Satan*<sup>48</sup>.

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43 Eleftherios PAPAGIANNAKIS, *Military History Magazine*, op., cit., p. 20.

44 Ian STEWART, *The Struggle for Crete*, Oxford University Press, London, 1955, p. 272.

45 Ioannis PAIZIS, op. cit., p. 24.

46 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/E, p. 1.

47 Military Intelligence (Research) was a War Office organisation started in 1938 by Colonel J.C.F. Holland and Major Colin Gubbins who later became the head of SOE. The main purpose of MI(R) was to raise, train and supply guerrilla groups behind enemy lines.

48 Antony BEEVOR, op. cit., p. 97.



People's Resistance in Crete against German Parachute Troops

In spite of the British refusal and indifference of the official Greek State, in almost all of Crete teams of armed civilians were organised with leaders who were either old “captains” or Greek reserve officers, or British officers or even members of the clergy. In many cases, these groups took rifles from British stores, but in general they were armed with out-of-date equipment and even axes. Those who had been selected for the militia which was never finally formed joined these groups.

Another fact worth mentioning, which illustrates the fear and perhaps maliciousness of the Greek Government is the that which concerns the efforts made to repeal the law to disarm the Cretans. After the arrival of the King and the Government in Crete the time was considered suitable even at the twelfth hour to try to have the law repealed. This would have permitted the Cretans to take up arms, or in the case of those who had concealed weapons during the period of disarmament, to use them without fear of the legal consequences. The most significant fact was that the government's action to repeal the disarmament law would have been an act of reconciliation at national level. It would have been an act which at a difficult time for the Greek nation would have united its people making them forget their hatred and political differences. However, when

Colonel A. Papadakis together with other officers requested that the law be repealed, the Minister of Public Order Mr. K. Maniadakis refused to do so<sup>49</sup>. The government, however, chose a different way in which to portray an atmosphere of unity and reconciliation. On May 9th, 1941 the King and government issued a law making provision for the reinstating of officers and warrant officers who had been dismissed from the armed forces for their controversial political views<sup>50</sup>.

In March of 1935, a move to overthrow the government, by mainly Venizelos and Pro-Venizelos supporters who were officers and politicians took place, instigated by Venizelos himself<sup>51</sup>. The movement failed however, and this resulted in extensive purging throughout the armed forces, many Pro-Venizelos officers being dismissed<sup>52</sup>. When the Greek-Italian war broke out, the officers who had been dismissed requested from the dictators that they be permitted to fight at the front as their duty towards their country stipulated. The regime in a display of maliciousness refused their request. This refusal was the equivalent of the greatest insult an officer could suffer - not to be allowed to fight to defend his country. Several days prior to the onset of the battle to defend Crete, the government permitted their return to the armed forces without however having restored their rank. As a result, the officers in question reacted by refusing to fight until their rank had been restored. Obviously, the officers' insistence on this matter is subject to criticism, since however correct they may have been in time of war duty to one's country comes first. The outcome of this dispute was that valuable time was wasted owing to the entire procedure necessary to solve the question. The government, yet again demonstrated that it did not possess the requisite courage and authority to impose the correct moral and political solution.

### *The Greek troops from mainland Greece*

As has already been mentioned, Greek fighting units from the country's borders were not dispatched to Crete. This, however, did not prevent hundreds of troops, after the capitulation of the Greek army on the mainland, from travelling down to Crete on their own initiative.

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49 Ioannis PAIZIS, op. cit., p. 13.

50 Spiros LINARDATOS, op. cit., p. 461.

51 Ioannis KOLIOPOULOS, op. cit., p. 365.

52 An estimated 1,800 officers were dismissed from the army.



Preveli war memorial, Crete, commemorating the work of the Preveli Monastery monks in helping allied forces in WW2. Image ID: 1659864 Media Type: Stock Photo (Editorial) Restrictions: For Editorial Use Only Copyright: paulcowan

After the army's surrender, signed on 20th April 1941<sup>53</sup>, the Greek army began to break up. The various units and military formations were dissolved, and the troops returned home. Many of them, however, when the King and the government took the decision to continue the fighting in Crete, decided to travel to the island to bolster its defence. There were also many who remained indifferent as far as the continuance of fighting was concerned and appeared to accept that the battle against the Germans was over anyway. In particular Captain E. Chryssoulis in his report to the Greek Army Headquarters in the Middle East states:

“...in Athens I expressed my wish to several superior officers and the Minister of Security that they should assist my departure for Crete, so that I could continue the fight. However, the superior officers expressed a negative opinion saying it was useless to continue the fighting and the Minister informed me that there were no seats on the ship”<sup>54</sup>.

In a similar report, reserve Captain N. Garbis states:

“...I was in telephone contact with officers from various units in Athens and Piraeus all the afternoon of April 23rd, requesting that they depart for Crete with me. Unfortunately, however, only Lieutenant-Colonel of the infantry K. Verriotis and seven other officers who were serving at the Army Supplies General Warehouse agreed to accompany me”<sup>55</sup>.

53 Ioannis KOLIPOULOS, *op. cit.*, p. 450.

54 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/E, p. 36.

55 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/E, p. 43.

In yet another report relevant to the events in Crete, V. Kontodaimon also Lieutenant-Colonel of the infantry writes:

“...commander of the 5th company at the training centre in Nauplio, I departed from the Peloponnese on April 27th after having granted two month leave to the troops the day before upon the urgent orders of Colonel I. Sini the commander of the training centre, together with only 34 men from my company I got to Crete via Spetses “<sup>56</sup>.

Even more revealing, as far as the situation in general and morale of the majority of the troops are concerned, is artillery Captain R. Spanoyiannakis’ report:

“...these were approximately 300 officers and 3,000 troops from all the armed units in Mytilene. Discipline was seriously disturbed; the troop’s morale was low and they were requesting to return to their homes. They were in dispute with the officers and one night they mutinied “<sup>57</sup>.

As we have already mentioned there were also independent groups of officers and soldiers arriving in Crete from all over Greece. In the War Ministry report it is noted that:

“...from civilians arrived, on foot, from Athens to Kalamata and then on to Crete by boat, we learned of many Greeks and British soldiers in Tainaro and the Oitilos region wishing to go to Crete. Also a large number of Messinians are willing to come down to Crete “<sup>58</sup>.

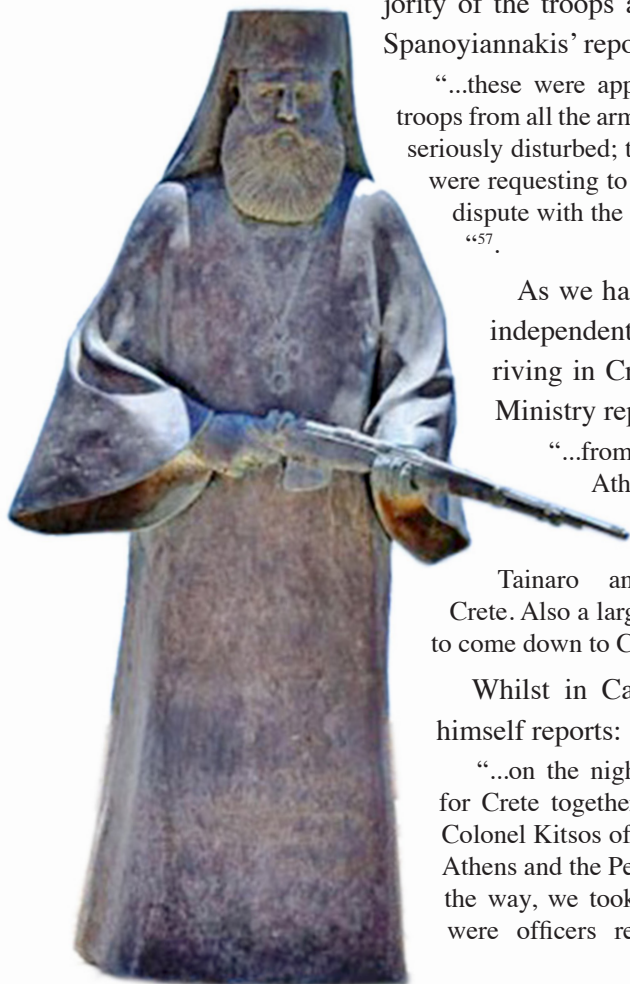
Whilst in Captain R. Spanoyiannakis’ report, he himself reports:

“...on the night of 27th to 28th April I departed for Crete together with the officers and Lieutenant-Colonel Kitsos of the infantry, after the occupation of Athens and the Peloponnese. Stopping at Mykonos on the way, we took on board 50 British, 11 of which were officers remaining from Lieutenant-Colonel

56 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/IA, p. 236.

57 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/IH, p. 328.

58 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/A, p. 53.



Mackey's battalion which had fought in Olympus. We arrived in Heraklion on May 2nd via the islands of Antiparos and Santorini<sup>59</sup>.

Since those arriving from the mainland were generally unarmed, the War Ministry decreed that they, with the exception of the Cretans, join the nearest battalions or those units most in need of troops<sup>60</sup>. Subsequently, mobilisation of all reserve forces was ordered<sup>61</sup> with prosecution on charges of desertion applying to those not complying<sup>62</sup>. Furthermore as of May 4<sup>th</sup>, access to occupied territory was forbidden by the Ministry of Security. This ensured that no information leakage would occur nor would troops return to mainland Greece<sup>63</sup>.

### *The condition of the Greek forces in Crete*

The War Ministry continued its efforts to organise the Greek forces serving in Crete. On May 11th, 1944, after an agreement with the British, the Ministry ordered that the battalions be renamed regiments. Each regiment was to be composed of two battalions, one of which was to contain the experienced soldiers, the other the trainees. It was decided the battalions would receive training from British officers who were deemed capable of training them suitably for modern war. More particularly, in his official report, the Head of the Armed Forces in Crete, General Freyberg, in reference to the newly recruited Greek soldiers training writes:

“...the method and details of the Greek army's exercises would continue to apply wherever possible, but wherever British equipment was to be used the Greek army would comply with our methods. [...] The language difficulties, both written and spoken, made it impossible to translate the instructions. We followed a training system which I called 'the natural method'. According to this method the weapons were distributed to the Greeks wherever possible and later we brought in a British company to demonstrate. Using an interpreter, we told the Greeks to imitate us as well as possible. There is no doubt that the Greeks are good students. They learn the necessary details far faster than our troops”<sup>64</sup>.

59 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/IH, p. 328.

60 GREEK ARMY GENERAL STAFF, Directory of Military History, *The Greek Army in the Second World War, The Battle of Crete*, op., cit., p. 23.

61 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/A, p. 45.

62 GREEK ARMY GENERAL STAFF, Directory of Military History, *The Greek Army in the Second World War, The Battle of Crete*, op., cit., p. 23.

63 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/A, p. 57.

64 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/ΙΣΤ, p. 37.

It should be mentioned here that the British did not consider the Greek forces on the island capable of fighting successfully. More specifically, in a coded telegram despatched on 2/5.41 by the C. in C. Middle East to the War Office, it is reported that: "...Greek troops at present of little or no value; they are mostly untrained and unarmed and morale of many doubtful"<sup>65</sup>. In another of his reports the C. in C. Middle East notes that: "...certain units of Greek recruits possibly about 4,000 suitable only for defence of prisoners of war and aerodromes"<sup>66</sup>. The British Military Mission Crete's report to the C. in C. Middle East and the War Office is even more revealing as to the general picture of the Greek army. It states that:

"...Greek troops in Crete consist of 3 Cretan Garrison battalions made up of soldiers returned from the front with indifferent morale and light (? Battalions of) recruits from all parts of Greece with only one month's training. Armament 61 old St. Etienne M. GS and 220 1915 light automatics. Rifles of 5 different types; great shortage of ammunition. No guns and no A.A. or anti tank weapons. Also, complete lack of transport, clothing and equipment"<sup>67</sup>.

In actual fact, the Greek troops portrayed an almost disappointing picture. First of all, the Greeks' equipment was extremely limited. The Greek Prime Minister's words are particularly characteristic of the situation: "...our armed forces consisting in the main of non-Cretan conscripts and therefore inexperienced in war are virtually unarmed"<sup>68</sup>. The battalions of new recruits had five different types of rifle, each soldier having no more than 20 cartridges. In the 5th battalion, between 5 and 25 cartridges were available for each soldier, whilst each company of the battalion had a platoon of unarmed soldiers. The battalions of reserve forces were armed with Gras rifles, while the Cadets had Mauser dating from 1870 and 5-30 cartridges each. The soldiers from the Police Academy carried old rifles and 5-15 cartridges per weapon. Automatic rifles were at a minimum and the sub-machine guns were models based on the 1915 design and in extremely bad condition: a great number of them not being in working order. Only a few St. Etienne machine guns were available with few tapes and limited ammunition. No transport whatsoever was available<sup>69</sup>.

65 PRO, WO 106/3239.

66 PRO, WO 106/3239.

67 PRO, WO 106/3239.

68 Stylianos KALLONAS, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

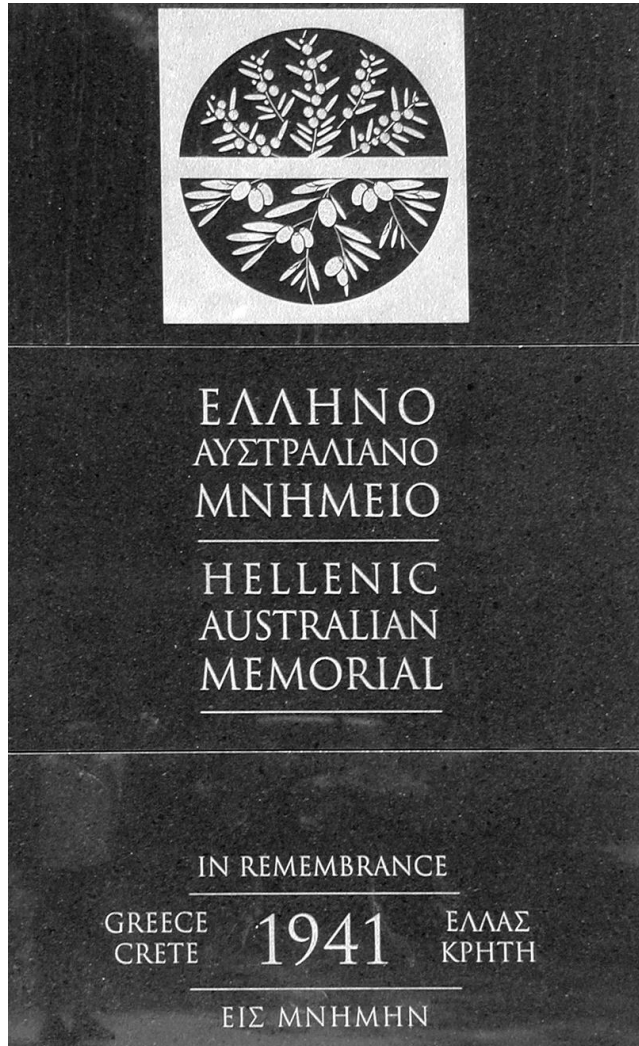
69 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/KΓ, p. 10.



As far as the battalions training was concerned, the battalions of newly recruited troops were severely lacking since they had only been enlisted for one month. They had no idea of how to use the terrain and had never fired machine guns. The troops from the Cadet School and Police Academy as well as the Air Force Cadet School had been trained truly little for battle.

Morale and as a result, discipline were at a low ebb amongst the soldiers. There were numerous reasons for this. Firstly, both morale and discipline had suffered as a result of the collapse of the Albanian and Macedonian fronts and the War Ministry's Minister Papadimas who had then granted

unlimited leave to the troops. Secondly, the fact that the troops had, basically, no training and sufficient ammunition was not available for those who were armed, notwithstanding the non-existence of weapons for a great number of them. These were all factors which were instrumental in lowering morale. As this was not enough, their living conditions were appalling - they slept out without tents or blankets and not having even the basic comforts. The only thing which kept them



Memorial for Greek and Australian soldiers in the centre of Rethymno

going was the belief - and it had become good propaganda - that the British would not desert Crete. This belief was also reinforced by the fact that both the king and the government were in Crete<sup>70</sup>.

As far as the leadership and ranking members are concerned, it is true that the battalions of new recruits, in particular, did not have sufficient officers due to the fact that very few of them came to Crete from the mainland. There were, however, many reserve or commissioned officers in Crete who were not enlisted and upon the government's decision to mobilise the forces, rushed to offer their services. Unfortunately, however, the War Ministry did not make use of them in key positions. Instead of flanking the Greek units with these officers, where there was a great need for them, they were wasted as staff officers in the military commands which had no regular mission except that of organisation and administration<sup>71</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

As a conclusion, we could say that after the breakout of the Greek-Italian war, Greece's actions were generally of a limited character as far as decisions taken for the island's defence are concerned. The blame for this lies with the King and Metaxa's military dictatorship for they entrusted the island's defence exclusively with Great Britain. It follows that they remained mere observers of events leading up to the battle of Crete.

An extenuating factor for this decision by the Greek government, however, could be considered the fact that the Greek army was using all its forces in the war in the Albanian border against Italy. As a matter of fact, the disproportionate fight given by the Greek army, a small and weak army in modern means and equipment, against the powerful Italian army, had exhausted not only the attention of the Greek nation but also all available means, both material and non-material. Under these circumstances, it was natural that since Greece was involved in a such an exhaustive war at that given time to defend the nation, the defence of Crete seemed as an event of secondary, if not minor, importance. Within the context of this kind of thinking, the Greek government's decision to leave the defence of Crete to Britain could perhaps be regarded as justified, but it is impor-

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70 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/H, p. 28.

71 DIRECTORY OF MILITARY HISTORY, File 674/H, p. 109.

tant to bear in mind that leaving the defence of part of the country to another allied country entails great responsibilities for any government, making it accountable in case of a negative outcome.

However, what cannot be regarded as justifiable, is the fact that even though the Greek government had taken some right decisions for the defence of Crete (forming a new militia division etc.), which it was in a position to bring into effect in cooperation with Great Britain, not only it did not do so, but is also liable for a series of other decisions (supplying no ammunition to Cretans, failure to lift their disarmament etc.), which eventually had a negative effect on the effort to reinforce the island's defence. The Greek government is to be held accountable for acts that are difficult to justify.



Emblem of the Greek Military Academy (Στρατιωτική Σχολή Ευελπίδων)

On the other hand, after the fall of the front in continental Greece, the Greek army that was moved to Crete was in a bad shape. Efforts made by the War Ministry together with assistance by the British to reorganise the army had only little effect, mainly due to poor means and short time. The Greek army looked unfit to fight. Probably, no one seemed to believe that in spite of its bad shape the Greek army could still fight as excellently as it did against the Italians in Albania and during its short resistance against the Germans in Macedonia. As far as the British were concerned, the Greek army in Crete was made up of: "... malaria-ridden little chaps from Macedonia with four week's service"<sup>72</sup>, and its fighting capacity was regarded negligible.

<sup>72</sup> BEEVOR, op. cit., p. 95.

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674/Δ	674/IΓ	674/KB
674/E	674/IΔ	674/KΓ
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