OPERATION MERCURY: THE BATTLE OF CRETE

DATE: 20 MAY – 01 JUNE 1941

Having swept through Greece in April 1940, German forces began preparing for the invasion of Crete. This operation was championed by the Luftwaffe as the Wehrmacht sought to avoid further engagements prior to commencing the invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa) in June.

Pushing forward a plan calling for the mass use of airborne forces, the Luftwaffe gained support from a wary Adolf Hitler. Planning for the invasion was permitted to move forward under the restrictions that it not interfere with Barbarossa and that it utilize forces already in the region.

PLANNING OPERATION MERCURY

Dubbed Operation Mercury, the invasion plan called for Major General Kurt Student’s XI Fliegerkorps to land paratroopers and glider troops at key points along Crete’s northern shore to be followed by the 5th Mountain Division which would be airlifted into captured airfields.

Student’s attack force planned to land the bulk of its men near Maleme in the west with smaller formations dropping near Rethymno and Heraklion to the east. The focus on Maleme was the result of its large airfield and that the attack force could be covered by Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters flying from the mainland.
DEFENDING CRETE

As the Germans moved forward with invasion preparations, Major General Bernard Freyberg, VC worked to improve Crete’s defenses. A New Zealander, Freyberg possessed a force consisting of around 40,000 British Commonwealth and Greek soldiers.

Though a large force, approximately 10,000 lacked weapons and heavy equipment was scarce. In May, Freyberg was informed via Ultra radio intercepts that the Germans were planning an airborne invasion. Though he shifted many of his troops to guard the northern airfields, intelligence also suggested that there would be a seaborne element. As a result, Freyberg was forced to deploy troops along the coast that could have been used elsewhere.

In preparation for the invasion, the Luftwaffe began a concerted campaign to drive the Royal Air Force from Crete and establish air superiority over the battlefield. These efforts proved successful as British aircraft were withdrawn to Egypt.

Though German intelligence wrongly estimated the island’s defenders to only number around 5,000, the theater commander, Colonel General Alexander Löhr, elected to retain the 6th Mountain Division at Athens as a reserve force.

OPENING ATTACKS

On the morning of May 20, 1941, Student’s aircraft began arriving over their drop zones. Departing their aircraft, the German paratroopers met fierce resistance upon landing. Their situation was worsened by German airborne doctrine which called for their personal weapons to be dropped in a separate container.

Armed with only pistols and knives, many German paratroopers were cut down as they moved to recover their rifles. Beginning around 8:00 AM, New Zealand forces defending Maleme airfield inflicted staggering losses on the Germans.

Those Germans arriving by glider fared little better as they immediately came under attack as they left their aircraft. While attacks against Maleme airfield were repulsed, the Germans succeeded in forming defensive positions to the west and east towards Chania.

As the day progressed, German forces landed near Rethymno and Heraklion. As in the west, losses during the opening engagements were high. Rallying, German forces near Heraklion managed to penetrate the city, but were driven back by Greek troops. Near Maleme, German troops gathered and began attacks against Hill 107 which dominated the airfield.
Though the New Zealanders were able to hold the hill through the day, an error led to their being withdrawn during the night. As a result, the Germans occupied the hill and swiftly gained control of the airfield. This permitted the arrival of elements of the 5th Mountain Division though Allied forces heavily shelled the airfield causing significant losses in aircraft and men.

As fighting continued ashore on May 21, the Royal Navy successfully dispersed a reinforcement convoy that night. Quickly understanding the full importance of Maleme, Freyberg ordered attacks against Hill 107 that night.

Unable to dislodge the Germans the Allies fell back. With the situation desperate, King George II of Greece was moved across the island and evacuated to Egypt. On the waves, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham worked tirelessly to prevent enemy reinforcements from arriving by sea though he took increasingly heavy losses from German aircraft. Despite these efforts, the Germans steadily moved men to the island through the air. As a result, Freyberg’s forces began a slow fighting retreat towards the southern coast of Crete.

Though aided by the arrival of a commando force under Colonel Robert Laycock, the Allies were unable to turn the tide of the battle. Recognizing the battle as lost, the leadership in London instructed Freyberg to evacuate the island on May 27. Ordering troops towards the southern ports, he directed other units to hold open key roads south and prevent the Germans from interfering.

In one notable stand, the 8th Greek Regiment held back the Germans at Alikianos for a week allowing Allied forces to move to the port of Sphakia. The 28th (Maori) Battalion also performed heroically in covering the withdrawal.

Determined that the Royal Navy would rescue the men on Crete, Cunningham pushed forward despite concerns that he might sustain heavy losses. In response to this criticism he famously responded, “It takes three years to build a ship, it takes three centuries to build a tradition.”

During the course of the evacuation, around 16,000 men were rescued from Crete with the bulk embarking at Sphakia. Under increasing pressure, the 5,000 men protecting the port were forced to surrender on June 1. Of those left behind, many took to the hills to fight as guerillas.

In the fighting for Crete, the Allies suffered around 4,000 killed, 1,900 wounded, and 17,000 captured. The campaign also cost the Royal Navy 9 ships sunk and 18 damaged.

German losses totaled 4,041 dead/missing, 2,640 wounded, 17 captured, and 370 aircraft destroyed.

Stunned by the high losses sustained by Student’s troops, Hitler resolved never to conduct a major airborne operation again. Conversely, many Allied leaders were impressed by the Airborne’s performance and moved to create similar formations within their own armies. In studying the German experience in Crete, American airborne planners, such as Colonel James Gavin, recognized the need for troops to jump with their own heavy weapons. This doctrinal change ultimately aided American airborne units once they reached Europe.
**M’44 SCENARIOS FOR OPERATION MERCURY: THE BATTLE OF CRETE**

The Battle of Crete consists of 21 standard scenarios and 1 Overlord map. These scenarios chronicle the entirety of the Battle for Crete, and include only the best available in the Scenarios from the Front (SFTF) files on the DoW website, as well as 2 official scenarios by Richard Borg.

No campaign rules are included; not all M’44 players have access to the Campaign books. Instead, simply tally up the number of medals won in each scenario after playing both sides. A medal tally sheet for all scenarios is included below.

1. May 20: Group West – Target Maleme Airfield
2. May 20: Unternehmen Merkur – Maleme Sector
3. May 20: Group Centre – Target is Rethymno Airfield
4. May 20 – 29: Rethymno
5. May 20: Group East – Target is Heraklion
6. May 20: Heraklion
7. May 20: The Streets of Heraklion
8. May 20: Group Centre – Target is Chania
9. May 20: Prison Valley
10. May 21: Assault on East Hill
11. May 21: Counter Attack at Maleme
12. May 21 – 25: The Olive Oil Factory
14. May 23: Platanias
15. May 23: Battle of Galatas – Action 1
16. May 25: Capture of Kastelli
17. May 26: Battle of Galatas – Action 2
18. May 27: 42nd Street
19. May 28: Kalami Heights
20. May 28: Babali Hani
21. May 30: The Road of Sphakia
22. Crete Landings OL
**OPERATION MERCURY: THE BATTLE FOR CRETE — MEDAL TALLY SHEET**

Play each scenario from both sides then enter your total medal count in the table. There are a total of 276 medals if the Overlord scenario is included and a total of 254 medals without.

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<th>SCENARIO (+ total medal count)</th>
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<td>2. Unternehmen Merkur (14)</td>
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<td>21. The Road of Sphakia (12)</td>
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<td>22. Crete Landings – Overlord (22)</td>
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**TOTAL MEDAL TALLY**

Acknowledgments to the authors of the scenarios that make up this Battle of Crete compilation:

- Richard Borg
- serg_codmod
- jdrommel
- Brycie35
- Leo-T
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This Operation Mercury: the Battle of Crete booklet was compiled by **Semba**