

THE BEGINNING OF THE BATTLE OF CRETE [edited text]

The island of Crete became a target for the German's after they secured the Greek mainland in April 1941. It became a target because they would be able to use the island to attack British shipping and also to stop the British use of the Suez. The British could use the island as well. They would use it to give them better control of the Mediterranean and strengthen their control of the northern end of the Suez Canal. After being told that it wouldn't disrupt his plans in Eastern Europe seriously, Adolf Hitler, although reluctantly, agreed to the invasion of Crete, which was known as Operation Mercury ...

The geography of Crete made it difficult to defend also, there were four main areas that needed to be secured, Suda Bay, Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion. All of these places were located on the northern coast, facing the Greece, which was completely occupied by Greece. Losing any of the four major positions would make defending the rest of the island virtually impossible ...

The battle began on the morning of the 20th of May, many of New Zealand troops were still eating their breakfast as they sky became clouded with German paratroopers. Soldiers had the same reactions. 'I was scared stiff, said by John Haines, 'I cried like a child, really frightened, then got stuck into the enemy' said by Private Howard Thomas.

The German paratrooper drop was the biggest airborne assault. German soldiers were virtually sitting ducks; those who dropped over the soldiers on the ground simply did not survive. But the German equipment came down in separate parachutes and helped the Creforce tremendously because of supply shortages ...

By day four, fresh German forces moving in from the south threatening the line at Plantanias, and the New Zealanders were immediately forced back toward Galatas. But the major concern for Creforce was the increasing supply shortages. Most troops had barely enough rations to last another ten days. Life was becoming harder. This can be seen through a quote from Private Bernard Booth, "Life was very tense, there was little or no food, water [had to be] for drinking - there were no washing e.g. shower facilities. We wore the same clothes every day, and you slept out in the open - when you did get to sleep."...

On the 24th of May, a German onslaught against Galatas, the Suda Bay, Retumo and Heraklion sectors suffered ferocious air attacks. Throughout the Crete campaign the allies suffered from lack of air cover and the German Stukas and bombers ruled the air...

When the battle of Crete ended, 2180 men formally surrendered to the Germans. The conditions were awful, this can be seen from a quote from Melville Smith, "we lost count of time and I can't remember us having food." They were also given unpleasant duties, which can be seen from a quote from Private Campbell, "We were given the unpleasant taken of burying the dead - a job not helped by the sultry weather". However, many men decided to escape from the Germans, and to this day still thank the Cretans for sheltering them and giving them their food. But many escaped the Germans and remained in the villages of Crete for a long time, until it was safe to escape. And many headed into the mountains. This can be seen from a quote from Corporal Earnshaw, "after getting weaker from lack of food... I became... helpless. About six of us decided to escape. We went out to see and headed into the mountains."...

THE COST OF THE BATTLE OF CRETE

The battle was extremely costly for all sides. More than 1,700 British commonwealth and also Greek troops were killed and 15,000 were captured during the Battle of Crete. 571 New Zealanders died and more than 2,180 became prisoners of war. This was the largest amount of New Zealand prisoners taken in a single battle during the Second World War. As well as the large loss for Creforce, more than 6,000 German soldiers were killed or wounded. But because of the heavy paratrooper losses, Hitler never authorized this same technique again. Many Cretan civilians also lost their lives during the battle; many were killed in the conflict or died fighting as supporters. It is estimated that more than 8,000 men, women and children were killed.

The Battle of Crete saw the consequences of the British not realizing the strategic importance of the use of airfields. The Germans were able to bring in reinforcements as they could, when the British Commonwealth was virtually stranded. As a direct consequence of this, the Royal Air Force formed the RAF Regiment who was given responsibility for defending its own bases from ground and air attack ...

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE OF CRETE FOR NEW ZEALANDERS TODAY

The Battle of Crete holds much significance for New Zealand citizens today, as the Battle for Crete was a torturous battle that saw 671 men dying to defend the island of Crete. And more than 2,000 formally surrendering to the Germans.

The New Zealander's who fought at Crete have differing thoughts about the battle. John Gordon said, "Crete was my destiny and I felt proud to go through the whole campaign." However, both Private Fletcher and Private Christiansen both agreed, that Crete was a waste of precious time and lives. And Lance Bombardier Bill Hoare said "I'm proud to have been associated with Cretan people defending their homeland."

Today, and in more recent times however, commemoration and celebrations happen to honor the lives of lost men. Last year, more than two hundred New Zealand veterans and families travelled to Crete for the 70 year anniversary. Some were expected to have emotional reunions with Cretan people who sheltered soldiers during the war.

Although the Battle of Crete today, seems like a battle full of hardships and unwanted deaths, for many, it showed their strengths and acts of bravery. Sergeant Alfred Hulme and Second Lieutenant Charles Upham were awarded the Victoria Cross, Hulme rushed forward alone and used hand grenades to clear the position of a German strongpoint, Upham received his award for outstanding gallantry and leadership during the battle. Today, Charles Upham is acknowledged for his acts of bravery, leadership and gallantry during the battle of Crete in many ways. A small room at the Papanui RSA is dedicated to his name as well as a gravestone, engraved with a poppy at the Papanui Cemetery. Charles Upham is also remembered by the placement of a large statue in the township of Amberley with small plaques surrounding going into in-depth thought of his time in battle, and before and after his time in the forces.

Today, in our own hearts, we can acknowledge the 7,700 soldiers who fought whilst under constant heavy fire, which became increasingly difficult because of their huge shortage of artillery, food, water and general living conditions. These men fought, died and became prisoners of war, and we must honor these men for their bravery as they played a part in the saviour of our country. "The heroism and the sacrifice displayed by the New Zealanders who fought at the island of Crete has ensured that their deeds have retained a special place in our history that will never be forgotten" - Veteran's Affairs Minister Judith Collins.