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"Victory in Crete is absolutely necessary at this  
turning point of the war!"

Winston Churchill<sup>1</sup>  
May, 1941

Director Assistance Chief Major Archie Maxwell App Alexander	REFERENCE [1956]	K 113,107-162
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"Crete can never be taken!"

General Freyberg<sup>2</sup>

"The struggle for Crete is over, The whole is-  
land has been cleared of enemy forces."

Wehrmacht High Command,<sup>3</sup>  
report dated 2 June 1941

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- 1 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War, The Grand Alliance, pp 270-304.
- 2 - General der Flieger Student, Kreta, Sieg der Kuehnsten (Crete, Victory to the Bravest), Steirische Verlagsanstalt, Graz, 1942, page 9.
- 3 - Wehrmacht High Command, Reports.

8-1115-21



## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present study is to describe the events which took place in the southeast European theater of war during May 1941. Joint operations by the German Twelfth Army and Fourth Air Fleet had succeeded in driving the Anglo-Greek forces from the mainland. Expulsion of the British from the islands in the Aegean Sea was absolutely necessary, if the vitally important sea route Constanza - Corinth - Italy was to be secured for Germany. The island of Crete was the chief base for the British air and naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean.

For Hitler, who had a horror of all operations which involved crossing a body of water<sup>4</sup>, the action in the eastern Mediterranean was merely a minor skirmish in a secondary theater of war. Germany was in the midst of preparations for the campaign in Russia, slated to begin in the summer of 1941, and the battle going on in the Balkan theater of operations seemed fairly insignificant.

The marked lack of enthusiasm of the Italian fleet for Mussolini's plan to recapture the "mare nostrum", the ignominious failure of the Italian armies during the Grecian adventure, and the collapse of the Italian troops in North Africa all combined to convince the German Wehrmacht High Command that there was little hope of firm support from her

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4 - Generaloberst Student, article in "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), special issue dated May 1953, page 2.

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Italian allies in case Germany should decide to launch an attack in the Aegean.

The future enemy for continent-minded Hitler was Soviet Russia; it was with great reluctance that he listened to the plans to break England's power in the Mediterranean by means of a daringly-conceived operation by the German Luftwaffe-occupation of the island of Crete by an air landing action. The next step from Crete was to be a landing on Cyprus, and the ultimate objective the capture of the Suez Canal<sup>5</sup>. Rommel's panzer armies were to cross the desert to Alexandria. "Air expeditions"<sup>6</sup> were planned from there to Syria and Iraq.

The most intransigent obstacle to Germany's ambitious plans was the strength of the Royal Navy. Accordingly, the battle of decision would be the one between the German Luftwaffe and the British naval forces.

Shortly before the beginning of the Russian campaign, then, the events covered in our study started to take shape at these border points between southeast Europe and the Near East, on the one hand, and Europe and Africa, on the other. The Luftwaffe, undaunted by land or water, was to play the leading role; supporting roles had been assigned to elements of the German Army and Navy.

The purpose of our study is to present a chronological summary of the events in the eastern Mediterranean during May 1941. This is an eminently worthwhile undertaking, for "...as far as sheer daring is concerned, the air attack on Crete is the most outstanding operation of the entire war. Nothing even remotely like it had been tried before

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5 - Alkmar von Hove, *Achtung Fallschirmjaeger!* (Watch Out - Paratroopers), Druffelverlag, Leoni am Starnbergersee, 1954, page 112.

6 - Taken from the diary of General von Waldau, page 45, where the following



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6 - (cont) appears: "Junck is to take two squadrons to Baghdad....".  
Major von Blomberg was killed in action in Baghdad on 12 May 1941.

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or was ever tried subsequently. It was a revolution in the field of tactics....!"<sup>7</sup>

This new and revolutionary method of waging war - new in concept and new as far as the equipment was concerned - was to succeed in drawing a good deal of attention to the minor skirmish which took place in a secondary theater of operations. The fact that the occupation of Crete was a Pyrrhic victory<sup>8</sup> makes it imperative that we delve into all the sources of error which made it such a costly operation that no further large-scale air landings were attempted during the entire course of the war.

The scope of the available reference materials is somewhat disappointing; although there is a wealth of material (documents, books, etc.) dealing with Crete, it does not furnish detailed coverage of all the questions which must be dealt with in an exhaustive treatment of the subject. In particular, there is a lack of authentic information concerning the coordination of the operations of the Luftwaffe bomber units with those of the air landing forces. As a result, it is extremely difficult to determine the reasons for the error in timing which led to a number of serious setbacks.

In addition, we have very little documentary material on the role played by the Army, a role which was of decisive significance for the ultimate victory. We are faced with a gap in the reporting<sup>9</sup>. As far as the Navy's role is concerned,

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7 - Generalmajor (Major General) J.F. Fuller, Der Zweite Weltkrieg (The Second World War), Humboldt-Verlag, Vienna and Stuttgart, 1950, page 128.

8 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War (based on excerpts prepared by the Historical Division, Karlsruhe).



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9 - According to a personal letter to the author, one of the collaborators on the present study, A. Buchner, is working on a book dealing with the operations of the German mountain infantry units in Crete (to be based on authentic sources).

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the documentary material available is commensurate with the scope of its participation in Operation MERKUR<sup>10</sup>.

The most important single source is the report issued by the air landing corps<sup>11</sup> just a few days after the fighting on Crete came to an end. There is every reason to accept it as the definitive chronicle of events. It presents a convincing and colorful summary of the impressions of the participants, of the operational measures taken, and of events themselves. Obviously, it was prepared too soon after the air landing operation to include all the pertinent details, with their complex and far-reaching ramifications, for a great many of these details did not come to light until later, after interrogation of wounded personnel, etc.

In contrast to the on-the-spot report of the XI Air Corps, the official "Report on Crete", prepared by the Fourth Air Fleet as higher headquarters, did not appear until 28 November 1941<sup>12</sup>. It is obvious from the report that Crete had been overshadowed by the events taking place in the Soviet theater of operations; in many instances the Cretan operations are inaccurately reported and improperly evaluated<sup>13</sup>.

These two detailed basic sources are supplemented by a plethora of individual reports which serve to throw additional light on the events occurring on the various combat sectors or to illuminate the specialized roles played by air transport,

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10 - Operation MERKUR (Mercury) is the code designation for the occupation of Crete.

11 - Combat report of the XI Air Corps, dated 11 June 1941, Part II, page 2, Karlsruhe Document Collection. (Hereafter referred to as "XI Air Corps, Report on Crete").

12 - Report of the Operations Branch, Fourth Air Fleet, File No. 1839/41, Classified, date 28 November 1941, Karlsruhe Document Collection. (Hereafter referred to as "Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete").

13 - These are Generaloberst Student's exact words as stated to the author.

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supply, logistics, etc. The reports which were prepared after the war, and thus based on the "memory" of their authors, not only contain a goodly number of factual errors but are usually highly subjective in tone.

The death of the commanding officer of the 7th Air Division<sup>14</sup> and the incapacitation of the commander of the storm regiment (Sturmregiment)<sup>15</sup> are no doubt responsible for the lack of any first-hand observations concerning the effectiveness of leadership in the Luftwaffe units. The war diary maintained by the 7th Air Division has been lost.

Of the many works dealing with the battle of Crete, one deserves our particular attention - a representation of the Cretan campaign as seen from the point of view of the enemy, and substantiated by captured documents in American (GMDS) and British collections. "The author is a New Zealander who took part himself in the fighting on Crete. His book is very well written, well documented, and based on exact personal knowledge of his subject; all this, combined with great vividness of style, makes it a masterpiece of military history...."<sup>16</sup>. This work has no parallel, not even in Germany, although it must be admitted that the author's knowledge of some aspects of air landing operations is not so perfect as it might be. This lack, however, is not serious enough to detract in any way from the excellence of this source.

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14 - Generalleutnant Suessmann, Commanding Officer, 7th Air Division, was killed when his aircraft crashed during the approach flight to Crete.

15 - Generalmajor Meindl, Commander, Storm Regiment, was seriously wounded during the first day of fighting on Crete.

16 - D.M. Davin, Crete, in the Official History of New Zealand, Oxford University Press, London, 1953.

17 - Based on a letter to the author from the military historian Major W. Mark, Ph.D., in Aarau, Switzerland.

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The memoirs of the commander of the air landing corps<sup>18</sup> are landmarks in the description of the struggle to occupy the island of Crete. They are of particular value because they are permeated with highly objective criticism of the decisions taken and measures ordered by their author.

All the rest of the sources are more or less indebted to these three (all of them easily accessible), and thus have relatively little to offer in the way of original observation.

We may summarize the question of source material by pointing out that the sources available are not entirely satisfactory. A good deal of research and evaluation are still necessary if we are to have a complete and detailed picture of the air landing action in Crete and if we are to understand the reasons why the air landing forces were not pressed into service again throughout the entire war.

There are certain difficulties to be overcome in the preparation of a complete account of the operations in Crete. For one thing, due to the fact that there was very little time for systematic preparation, improvised measures were the rule of the day. As a result, there are very few directives or orders of the usual type available.

Furthermore, a complete account of Crete must include mention of all the various Luftwaffe, Army, and Navy units which participated in the operation and must make some attempt to coordinate the roles played by them.

The extremely heavy losses suffered during the fighting on Crete have left relatively few survivors who could be interviewed as to their personal experiences. Moreover, after the fifteen years which have elapsed since the battle of Crete, it is only natural that their recollection of events should be somewhat uncertain.

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18 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs appearing in the magazine "Weltbild" in the June, July, and August numbers of 1951.

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Any discrepancies or questions can be cleared up with absolute accuracy only in those cases in which the informants have some sort of diary or personal notes at their disposal<sup>19</sup>.

The air landing forces had passed their initial test with flying colors during 1940. Even the most skeptical and conservative of Germany's top military leaders seemed to be fully convinced of their worth. Nevertheless, there were still influential circles in the Wehrmacht which felt called upon to advise against any increase in the strength of the new force and to warn against its employment on a large scale. In reality, of course, their attitude was motivated chiefly by their reluctance to accept the incontrovertible fact of the tremendous success enjoyed by the air landing corps<sup>20</sup>. Misleading and untrue statements from this source have not been taken into consideration in preparing the present study.

The hectic development and growth of the air landing force in the period during which Germany's military activity was subject to strictest secrecy makes it extremely difficult to prepare an accurate record of the newly activated units and their chain of command. We must not forget that in 1939 Germany's only paratrooper company displayed its ability before Hitler during the harvest festival ceremonies on the Bueckeberg; a scant five years later, Germany had an entire air landing corps at her disposal for the occupation of Crete.

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19 - In this connection the reader is referred to the diaries of Generals Conrad, von Waldau, Seibt, etc., and the commentaries pertaining thereto.

20 - Based on information given to the author by Generaloberst Student.

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## CHAPTER I

## Development and Organization of the Parachute and Air Landing

## Forces after their Commitment in the West (May 1940).

The unexpected success of the air landing corps during the capture of Fortress Holland and of Fort Eben Emael in 1940 gave rise to the plan of developing the parachute and air landing arm further, increasing it considerably in size. Goering was especially eager to see the paratrooper units strengthened; after all, they had done a good deal to enhance the reputation of the Luftwaffe.

The number of volunteers for the parachute forces (officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted personnel) during the summer of 1940 surpassed all expectations. As a result, physical and mental aptitude requirements could be made exceptionally high and adhered to strictly<sup>21</sup>. It must be conceded that the morale and the standard of training were excellent, with one possible reservation - the youthful paratroopers were so eager and so willing to risk their lives that they really ought to have had an older and more cautious corps of mid-echelon leaders to act as a brake and to keep them from indiscriminate foolhardiness.

The air landing corps grew so rapidly that the technological developments revealed as necessary by the campaign in Norway and Holland in 1940 were unable to catch up. As a result, the paratrooper units lacked light-weight rapid fire weapons, light artillery with

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21 - Based on the author's personal experience. Of every hundred non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel volunteering for duty with the parachute forces, only about fifty were able to pass the physical examination and the probationary period.

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automatic draft gear (which could be either dropped from the aircraft or landed), and - above all - powerful yet easily-handled antitank guns. There was always the alternative of dropping 37mm antitank weapons with a so-called quintuple parachute (five freight parachutes bound together), and it was even possible to secure a heavy motorcycle with side-car to the exterior of a Ju-52 and to drop it (with parachutes) over the area of operations. However, the number of guns and vehicles which could be dropped was very limited and their over-all effectiveness often jeopardized by the damage they sustained upon landing.

In addition, by 1941 the German aircraft industry had not yet succeeded in meeting the need for a faster transport aircraft with greater load capacity and a bullet-proof fuel tank and for a more robustly constructed freight glider with greater stability under adverse weather conditions, a larger loading area, and a diving brake.

The signal equipment for handling ground to air communications (between the supporting bomber forces and the ground troops and between the transport aircraft and the landed paratrooper forces) had not been developed any further, in spite of the fact that it was the inadequacy of the equipment which led to the catastrophe at Rotterdam on 14 May 1940.

In short, "Crete came too soon!"<sup>22</sup>

During the convalescence of General Student, who had been seriously wounded during the landing in Holland, command of the 7th Air Division was assumed by General Putzier. General Putzier had led the special duty air units assigned to support the air landing operation in Holland in 1940.

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22 - These are the exact words used by General Student during a lecture held at Hildesheim on 29 November 1953.

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Lt. Colonel Trettner (GSC), Operations Officer of the 7th Air Division, was in charge of the preliminary staff work needed for the planning of possible air landing actions in such areas as Gibraltar, Malta, the Cyclades, etc. Operations SEELOEWE<sup>23</sup>, in particular, was planned down to the last detail.

Eventually all of these projects were given up or postponed indefinitely.

It was not until January 1941<sup>24</sup> that General Student was able to resume command of his division. In the meantime the latter had expanded into the XI Air Corps (parachute and air landing).

The following table shows the organization of the XI Air Corps (as of 15 April 1941<sup>25</sup>):

Organization of the XI Air Corps as of 18 March 1941<sup>26</sup>

Headquarters, XI Air Corps (General Student, Tempelhof)

reconnaissance squadron

air transport squadron

air transport headquarters staff

41st Luftwaffe Communications Battalion

operations staff, paratrooper antiaircraft machine gun forces

supply headquarters staff

paratrooper medical battalion

23 - Operations SEELOEWE (Sealion) was the code designation for the landing in England.

24 - Alkmar von Hove, op.cit., page 104

25 - Based on an official table of organization prepared by the Operations Branch, office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, dated 15 April 1941. Personnel assignments can be reconstructed from the combat reports. See also the organizational table of the Air Landing Corps, Headquarters XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Section B, File No. 2025/41, Classified, dated 30 April 1941; as well as Appendix 1 to the present study.



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26 - Based on an official table of unit distribution prepared by the  
Operations Branch, office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe.

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## Headquarters, 7th Air Division

one air transport squadron

headquarters staff, 1st Parachute Regiment

Group I, 1st Parachute Regiment

Group II, 1st Parachute Regiment

Group III, 1st Parachute Regiment

1st Artillery Company

1st Antitank Company

## Headquarters, 2d Parachute Regiment

Group I, 2d Parachute Regiment

Group II, 2d Parachute Regiment

Group III, 2d Parachute Regiment

2d Artillery Company

2d Antitank Company

## Headquarters, 3d Parachute Regiment

Group I, 3d Parachute Regiment

Group II, 3d Parachute Regiment

Group III, 3d Parachute Regiment

3d Artillery Company

3d Antitank Company

## Parachute Machine Gun Battalion

Parachute Engineer Battalion

Parachute Antitank Battalion

Parachute Artillery Battalion

Parachute Signal Company

## Headquarters, 22d Infantry Division\*

16th Infantry Regiment\*

65th Infantry Regiment\*

22d Artillery Regiment\*



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22d Reconnaissance Battalion\*

22d Antitank Battalion\*

22d Antiaircraft Battalion (motorized)\*

Divisional troops\*

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\* (Translator's Note) Here the following notation appears: "DLM bzw. Ob.d.H. unterstellt" (subordinate to DLM or Army High Command). I have been unable to find the abbreviation DLM listed anywhere. It might conceivably stand for Deutsches Luftfahrtministerium, although the usual title, of course, was not Deutsches but Reichsluftfahrtministerium.

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## Air Commander (XI) (Fliegerfuehrer XI)

Headquarters Staff

I Group, 1st Air Landing Wing

II Group, 1st Air Landing Wing

III Group, 1st Air Landing Wing

## Headquarters, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

I Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

II Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

III Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing (at that time subordinate to  
the C(?) Air Corps)

IV Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing (at that time subordinate to the  
IV Air Corps).

## Headquarters, 2d Special Duty Bomber Wing

101st Bomber Group

102d Bomber Group

104th Bomber Group

105th Bomber Group

## Headquarters, 3d Special Duty Bomber Wing

9th Special Duty Bomber Group (at that time subordinate to the  
X Air Corps)

106th Special Duty Bomber Group

I Group, 172d Bomber Wing

40th Special Duty Bomber Group

50th Special Duty Bomber Group

60th Special Duty Bomber Group

## Headquarters, Storm Regiment (Sturmregiment), with Signal Platoon.

I Group, Storm Regiment (Signal Platoon, 3 Squadrons\*, 1 Heavy Company)

II Group, Storm Regiment (Signal Platoon, 3 Squadrons\*, 1 Heavy Company)

III Group, Storm Regiment (Signal Platoon, 3 Squadrons\*, 1 Heavy Company)



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IV Group, Storm Regiment (4 Companies, making a total of 13 artillery companies, 15 machine gun companies, 14 anti-tank companies, 16 engineer companies).

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\* Translator's Note: The German text has the abbreviation "St.", which could stand for Stab (staff) as well as Staffel (squadron). (?)

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## CHAPTER II

The Decision to Attack; A Brief Description of the Island.

Section 1 - The Order for the Occupation of Crete.

The Balkan campaign in April 1941 had left the Axis Powers in possession of the Greek mainland. If southeastern Europe was to be permanently secured, however, the expulsion of the British from the mainland was not enough. It was imperative that the Aegean islands be cleared of the enemy as well. For this reason, General Student, Commanding General of the XI Air Corps (the air landing corps), suggested to Goering on 20 April 1941 that Germany should occupy the island of Crete in a paratrooper and air landing operation<sup>27</sup>.

Hitler allowed himself to be persuaded of the need for such a step and ordered the attack on Crete with the proviso that it should begin on 15 May 1941.

During a conference in Wehrmacht High Command Headquarters with Generalfeldmarschall Keitel and General Jodl, the point was raised whether it might not be even more urgent to have the air landing forces take the island of Malta first<sup>28</sup>. Hitler, however, decided on Crete, which could serve as a springboard to the Suez Canal via Cyprus. "Malta can be taken care of later," he is supposed to have said, "... the occupation of Crete is a good way to conclude the Balkan campaign".<sup>29</sup>

Hitler's decision was transmitted to the XI Air Corps on 23 April 1941.

At this time, the

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27 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 3.

28 - Dokumente der Zeitgeschichte (Documents of History), the memoirs of General Student in the magazine "Weltbild", Volume 6, Issue 14, dated 15 July 1951, page 18.

29 - See Footnote 28, above.

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majority of the paratrooper units were still stationed at their home airfields or were assigned to troop training areas.

Thus there was very little time available to assemble the air landing units and to prepare them for the operation against Crete. Together with other, similarly improvised air landing operations of World War II, Crete goes to prove that heavy losses and serious setbacks are the inevitable corollary to any air landing action which is launched without adequate planning.

The 22d (Air Landing) Infantry Division, under Generalleutnant Graf Sponeck, which had been tried and tested during the operations in Holland during May 1940, had been sent off to Rumania by the Army High Command to occupy the oilfields for Germany, although in reality it was subordinate to the XI Air Corps<sup>30</sup>. Despite repeated requests to the Wehrmacht High Command and even to Hitler himself, General Student was unable to get it back for the contemplated occupation of Crete. The Army High Command was not in a position to furnish the transport space needed to move the Division to Greece. The Twelfth Army in Greece was ordered to release certain units to strengthen the air landing forces and to support the latter in every way possible.

The Fourth Air Fleet, under the command of Generaloberst Loehr, was entrusted with the accomplishment of Operation MERKUR; the VIII and XI Air Corps were assigned to it for this purpose.

Admiral Schuster (Admiral, Southeast) was placed in charge of the naval operations.

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30 - See the table of organization drawn up by the office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, Intelligence Branch, under date of 15 April 1941; see also Chapter I.

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After the assembly of the XI Air Corps and its transport into the operational area, the most urgent task was the collection of material on the topography of the island of Crete.

## Section 2 - A Brief Description of the Island.<sup>31</sup>

### 1. Size, Situation, and History<sup>32</sup>

With an area of 3,235 square miles, Crete is the largest island in Greece. It ranks after Sicily, Sardinia, Cyprus, and Corsica as the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean. Running from east to west, Crete is approximately 162 miles long; its average width is 18 1/2 miles. The narrowest point on the island, the Isthmus of Ierapetra, is only 7 miles wide; the widest point, 35 miles. The island has approximately 400,000 inhabitants, most of whom earn their living through agriculture.

Crete forms the southern boundary of the Aegean Sea with its countless islands. There are no other islands between Crete and the coast of Africa<sup>33</sup>. It is precisely Crete's situation which makes it so very important as a base for the eastern Mediterranean. The distance separating Crete and Libya (North Africa) is less than that between Sicily and Tripoli. Moreover, Crete offers a vantage point from which to control ocean traffic through the Suez Canal and to Egypt.

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31 - Sources consulted: the report prepared by the office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, Operations Staff, Intelligence Branch, File No. 12 480/41, Classified, dated 25 April 1941, and the military-geographic description of Greece prepared by the Army General Staff, Cartography and Topography Branch, Berlin, 1941.

32 - The widely differing orthography apparent in the geographic and other names on Crete is no doubt due to the utilization of different maps. The Greek, English, Italian, Latin, and German versions often vary inexplicably - such as Iraklion, Megalokastro, and Candia for one and the same city! The present study will use the versions preferred in the main sources used (reports of the Fourth Air Fleet and XI Air Corps).

33 - See the following map, page 16.

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## Significant distances:

Crete (western tip) - Sicily	497 miles
Crete (western tip) - Athens	186 miles
Crete (western tip) - Derna	186 miles
Crete (eastern tip) - Rhodes	100 miles
Crete (eastern tip) - Cyprus	342 miles
Crete - Alexandria	335 miles

Even in prehistoric times, from the third to the first millenia B.C., Crete flourished as a link between the Near East and Africa and Europe.

The island has countless ruins, brought to light by the excavations carried out by Schliemann and Evans (1899), which bear witness to a glorious past.

The sailors from Crete carried the island's culture as far afield as Egypt, Troy (Near East), and Spain.

Economically, Crete is an almost independent member of the Greek state, into which it was officially incorporated in 1913.

## 2. Population and Government.

Crete is divided into four provinces, Chania, Rethymnon, Iraklion, and Lassithi (from west to east). The seat of government is located in Chania; the largest and most important city is Iraklion.

Once the Turks had been driven out in 1923, the population of Crete was made up of Greeks only, united by their common Greek-Orthodox religion. They are generally considered to be intelligent, temperamental, astute in business affairs, freedom-loving, and courageous - but at the same time easily excitable and difficult to handle. The tradition of vendetta is still alive in Crete today!

The settlements in Crete are scattered irregularly about the island. The majority of the villages are



clustered in the few valleys and plains available, while the mountainous portions of the island are completely unsettled. There are, however, a number of "summer settlements" up on the mountain ridges, where the villagers pasture their cattle during the summer months. There are a few sections along the coast which are uninhabited, for the unyielding mountains, without roads or water, make life impossible.

Apart from the coastal mountains just mentioned, Crete has an adequate water supply from its wells and springs. The water must be boiled, however.

The island has a total of 1,264 villages. Their box-like houses of hollow brick are roomy and usually have flat roofs. Although electric lights are to be found only in the cities, nearly every village has a telephone.

### 3. Topography, Soil, and Harbors.

Crete is primarily an island of mountains<sup>34</sup>. Only 185 square miles, or 3% of the total area, are plains. In the northern part of the island, the lofty mountain ranges give way to a narrow strip of foothill land. There are four distinct mountain ranges, covered with snow until mid-May, which divide the island.

In the west, the Levka Ori (white mountains) range extends in a chain 50 miles long, its highest peak 8990 feet above sea level. Made of limestone, the range is steeply precipitous, inaccessible, and totally barren of vegetation. There are two passes which cross it at an altitude of about 1,640 feet, one in the west and one in the east<sup>35</sup>.

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34 - See the pictures on the following page.

35 - See Appendix 2.

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PHOTOGRAPH

Two pictures of Crete taken from the air.  
Both show clearly the barren, inhospitable  
mountain landscape with the foothills of  
the north at its base.



The second range, Ida, is equally barren and uninviting, rising to a height of 8,200 feet. The third, Diktai or the Lassithi Mountains, rise to a height of 6,560 feet around a thickly settled high-altitude plateau. The lowest road across the island, leading over the pass to the harbor of Ierapetra on the southern coast, is located at the eastern edge of the Diktair range.

The eastern part of the island is covered by the fourth mountain range, almost entirely uninhabited and completely treeless. Its highest peaks attaining a height of 4,920 feet, it is known as the Sitia "Peninsula".

Grapes, olives, tobacco, almonds, carob fruit, and grain thrive in the few fruitful coastal plains and in the foothill areas.

#### PHOTOGRAPH

In contrast to the southern coastline of the island, the northern coast is very irregular and dotted with bays. Suda Bay (see the photograph, above), Crete's most important harbor, is the only one which offers complete protection against the frequent stormwinds from the north. The Akrotiri Peninsula,



which lies directly north of Suda Bay (it may be seen in the background of the photograph on the preceding page) falls off steeply into the sea and is a thoroughly effective barrier to any force seeking entry into the harbor. Suda Bay offers excellent cover for sea-going vessels and is ideal as a harbor for seaplanes. The plateau on Akrotiri (1,640 feet high) provides a perfect vantage point from which to defend the harbor and to keep it under constant observation. Even in prehistoric times, the Peninsula was strongly fortified to defend Suda Bay.

The Gulf of Mirabella, another protected bay, is located on the northeast coast of Crete. This bay, too, is suitable for use by seaplanes. The harbors serving the three large cities on the northern coast (Ghania, Rethymnon, and Iraklion) are artificial ports, their basins protected by breakwaters and piers and their channels only deep enough for vessels of 3000 tons or less.

There are no harbors whatsoever on the eastern and western coasts of Crete. On the southern coast, the mountains plunge directly into the sea and the violent surf makes almost the entire coast unapproachable. The southern coast has only one, very inadequate port, in the southeast near Ierapetra. In addition there are two tiny bays, Palaeochora and Skafia, neither of which is really equipped as a harbor. They are utilized occasionally by sailboats and fishing cutters with a maximum draught of five feet.

#### 4. Highways and Cities.

Crete's main artery is the highway which runs along the northern coast from Kastelli (in the west) to Sitia (in the east). Its importance becomes all the greater when we consider that Crete, large as it is, has no



railway<sup>36</sup>. Narrow and of varying surface composition, this road is the only means of communication among the main population centers of the island. For a part of its way, the road can be seen from the sea. There are a few secondary roads leading from the main highway into the interior of the island, but only four of these actually go through to the southern coast.

## PHOTOGRAPH

The east-west highway along the northern coast, here the stretch connecting the airfield at Malemes with Chania.

All the rest of the so-called roads are really no more than narrow pathways, suitable only for pedestrians and donkeys.

Only the main highway and the four north-south roads mentioned above can be utilized by motorized troops.

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<sup>36</sup> - See Appendix 2

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The largest and most important city in Crete is Iraklion (also known as Megalokastro or Candia), which has approximately 40,000 inhabitants. It has very little industry - an olive oil refinery, a few raisin processing plants, and one or two wine presses. The inhabitants earn their living through the sale of agricultural products, shipping, and fishing.

## PHOTOGRAPH

The capital city, Chania. In the background in the right-hand corner of the photograph is the airfield at Malemes (marked with an x)

Chania has a population of 26,000 and is the official capital of the island as well as its seat of government. All of the consulates are located in Chania. The city lives by trade and commerce; there is no industry (note the absence of factory chimneys in the above photograph).



Rethymnon, with a population of approximately 10,000, lies on a point and has little significance except as a center of local administration with a favorable position as far as island traffic is concerned.

The smaller cities, such as Kastelli, Neapolis, Nikolaos, and Sitia, are connected with one another by the coastal highway. The largest of these has no more than 3,000 inhabitants. Most of them are simply market towns for the surrounding villages. Ierapetra, with 3,000 inhabitants, is the only settlement on the southern coast which can be considered a "city". All of these settlements are characterized by the presence of ancient fortresses (usually in ruins) dating from Venetian or Turkish times.

#### 5. Airfields.

The German intelligence agencies were able to gather the following data on Crete's three airfields - which were little better than emergency fields as far as their equipment was concerned:

Iraklion: There was an airfield located some two and one-half miles east of the city. It boasted two runways (one of them still under construction) 4,600 feet long and 150 feet wide. The field seemed to be adequate for bombers.

Rethymnon: About five miles east of the city there was an improvised landing strip some 3,300 feet long.

Malemes: At Malemes, which is located approximately ten and one-half miles west of Chania, there was an airfield 3,600 by 1,650 feet. It did have a finished runway, but no other equipment whatsoever. It was presumed to be adequate for the employment of both fighters and bombers.

All of these airfields had been established and built up by the Greeks and the British at the beginning of the war. All three lay close to the main highway running along the northern coast of the island. There were no airfields whatsoever in the interior or on the southern coast.



We have already mentioned the feasibility of landing seaplanes in the bays along the northern coast.

6. A Military-Geographic Summary of Crete.

Crete is completely inaccessible to a landing from the sea or from the air from the south, west, and east. It offers no suitable terrain for an air landing in the interior; the pathless, arid, and barren mountain regions are far too wild.

Any operation carried on in the eastern portion of the island must accept the risks involved in being very far away from the mainland base of operations (Athens). A large-scale joint landing by sea and air forces could be carried out only in the northwest of the island, where it would have the coastal highway at its disposal. The only well-equipped harbor capable of handling such an operation was Suda Bay.

After careful consideration of the conditions obtaining, German strategists established the various possible lines of main effort developing after an invasion within this relatively small area (small, in relation to the size of the island) - around the capital city of Chania, west of Chania towards the airfield at Malemes, and east of Chania towards Suda Bay.

7. The Personal Impressions of the Author.

The author participated personally in the battle for Crete. As commander of an overstrengthened parachute company, he was released over Malemes on the first day in the first wave of paratroopers. As an eye-witness, then, he may be permitted here to



supplement the "official" version of events with a few subjective observations.

The soldier in the midst of operations is totally unconscious of the undeniable beauty of the island's landscape. All he sees are dust and dirt, a terrain which offers few landmarks by which he can orient himself, but whose rocky composition and wealth of thin-leaved olive trees make the ricocheting of enemy bullets particularly unpleasant<sup>37</sup>.

We found the clothing of the natives rather strange - a homespun shawl some twenty to thirty feet long and as wide as a towel, a sheepskin jacket and sheepskin cap in the form of a fez. The Cretan houses proved to be not entirely free of fleas and bedbugs and thus fairly uninviting as billets. But even camping outside was not much better; sand fleas and other bugs saw to it that we slept very little.

Because of the unaccustomed heat, a march of even one or two hours was a tremendous strain. We were continually thirsty and tired and there was never anything around to drink.

In addition, the German, Italian, and Greek maps proved to be so terribly inaccurate that it was almost impossible to find one's way, even along the main highway. The distances seemed eternal.

To put it succinctly, there wasn't a single soldier who really felt at home on Crete - quite a different situation from that observed in France, Italy, and even Norway ...

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37 - See the photographs on the following page.

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Our fairly lengthy disquisition on the military-geographical characteristics of Crete is, in the author's opinion, imperative if the reader is to understand the over-all organization of the mission and the decisions made by those entrusted with its accomplishment, and to appreciate properly the battle fought by the air landing force.

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## PHOTOGRAPHS

Two typical views of the landing area on the northwestern coastal plain of the island of Crete. Note the olive trees in the foreground and the steadily rising foothills and mountain ranges in the background. (The landing area shown is the one near Malemes).



## CHAPTER III

## The Enemy Situation

## Section 1 - The Permanent Occupation Force and the Units Recalled from Greece.

Immediately after the conclusion of operations on the Greek mainland, German planners began an intensive campaign to obtain data on the enemy situation on Crete. This task was entrusted to the Fourth Air Fleet, with its subordinate headquarters staffs (the VIII and XI Air Corps) and all the aerial reconnaissance and other intelligence facilities available<sup>38</sup>. Specific missions were assigned as follows:

## 1. Aerial reconnaissance

Two reconnaissance squadrons from the VIII Air Corps were to keep ship movements around Crete under constant surveillance and to determine the strength of the enemy forces stationed at the harbors and the strength and position of enemy air forces.

The reconnaissance squadron from the XI Air Corps was assigned to investigate the island's airfields and to determine the location of anti-aircraft batteries, artillery positions, field fortifications, and troop assembly areas.

## 2. Intelligence service (the counter-espionage service directed by Admiral Canaris)

Admiral Canaris' organization sent a number of confidential agents to Crete with orders to find out whatever they could about enemy strength, any military preparations being made by the British, and the morale and attitudes of the population.

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<sup>38</sup> - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, Part II, Section 1, page 8.

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Especially trained interrogators from the Twelfth Army were to interview prisoners with a view to determining the military situation of the enemy on Crete.

The isolated position of the island and its distance from Athens (186 miles), which would serve as the base of operations for the contemplated German landing, made it all the more difficult to obtain accurate information concerning the enemy and his situation.

#### Results of Intelligence Activity

##### 1. Enemy Strength

On the basis of the investigations made, the strength of the enemy force was estimated at one division made up of two infantry and one artillery regiments<sup>39</sup>. No data could be obtained regarding the geographic distribution of these elements. In addition, it was assumed that there were remnants of the Anglo-Greek forces from the mainland on the island; their exact strength was unknown.

Despite careful observations of Crete-bound ocean traffic, it was impossible to tell definitely whether reinforcements were being landed, superfluous troops being evacuated, or merely supplies being delivered. Direct surveillance of convoy movements around Crete was impracticable since the ships came and went by night. This was especially true of traffic in and out of Suda Bay.

Strange as it may seem, there was reason to suppose that troops were being evacuated from Crete. "From early May on, the island was watched continuously by aerial reconnaissance forces. They were unable to discover any information pertaining to the strength and distribution of enemy forces. We studied the aerial photographs

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39 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 9.

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in vain in search of the "tramped down" areas invariably indicative of established defensive positions. Returning reconnaissance pilots reported again and again that the island appeared to be completely dead. The only sign of life were the antiaircraft defenses, consisting of antiaircraft artillery and fighter aircraft, and even these were extremely weak..."<sup>40</sup>

Intelligence data indicated that there were from twenty-five to forty aircraft (mostly fighters, a few bombers) at each of the island's two main airfields, Malemes and Iraklion. The airfield located near Rethymnon was determined to be of extremely limited suitability.

Light and heavy antiaircraft artillery was identified in the vicinity of the airfields, at Suda Bay, and near the capital city of Chania. It seemed to be concentrated around the area of Chania.

Suda Bay, the most important harbor on Crete, was occupied by enemy naval forces (both warships and transport ships), in varying strength. There were hardly any ships stationed in the other harbors or along the coast near possible landing areas.

Fortifications and bunkers were identified only in the immediate vicinity of the airfields. Confidential agents reported that the natural caves in the limestone mountains of the island were being equipped as supply caches<sup>41</sup>.

As far as the attitude of the population was concerned, it was assumed that they would be more than willing to conclude a peace based on the same favorable conditions as had been granted to the forces on the mainland. Germany's top-level military leaders were convinced that there were certain influential circles in Crete which, at the very least, could be counted upon to remain neutral, and



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- 40 - Generaloberst Student, "Kreta, Schicksalsschlacht unserer Fallschirmtruppen" (Crete, The Turning Point for Germany's Parachute Forces), in a special issue of "Der Deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), dated May 1953.
- 41 - For a picture of one of these natural caves, see the photograph on the following page.
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which, under certain circumstances, might even show themselves sympathetic to the Axis Powers. There was even serious speculation as to whether the British might not voluntarily leave the island in view of this attitude on the part of a large portion of its population<sup>42</sup>.

## PHOTOGRAPH

This photograph shows the entrance to a cave on the island of Crete. In the foreground, left to right, are General Ringel, Commanding Officer of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, General der Flieger Student, and General Schlemm, Chief of Staff of the XI Air Corps.

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42 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 9.

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Intelligence reports regarding the situation of the enemy on Crete were not only very superficial but also highly contradictory. In one report<sup>43</sup> it is stated that "the Greeks are no longer capable of fighting..." Their fear of the German dive-bombers and twin-engine fighter aircraft was supposedly too great. "In the event of a German landing, a similar demoralization among the British forces can be expected - though perhaps to a some what more limited extent..."

In another order it is pointed out that the troops must be made aware that the majority of the enemy forces were British, a great many of them having already seen action in the Peloponnesus and having escaped from there to Crete<sup>44</sup>.

In Paragraph 2 (Enemy Situation) of the directive issued for Operation MERKUR by the XI Air Corps<sup>45</sup>, it is mentioned that the information currently available was inadequate, but that it would be supplemented regularly as additional data were received. The promised supplementary information was never forthcoming....

Instead Admiral Canaris, Director of Germany's intelligence services, paid a personal visit to Athens at the beginning of May. On this occasion, he commented as follows<sup>46</sup>: "The majority of the British forces have already been evacuated; the VIP's of the Cretan population are awaiting us with open arms so that they can go ahead and throw out the rest if they won't go peaceably!" German military leaders believed in all seriousness that the island of Crete would be willing to capitulate on the same terms as had been offered Greece, and that the British would then withdraw from the island.

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43 - Attack Orders of the II Battalion, Storm Regiment, dated 16 May 1941 (from the author's personal collection).



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- 44 - Generalmajor Meindl, "Gruppe West" (Group West), Operational Directive for Operation MERKUR, No. 120=41, Classified, dated 17 May 1941 (see Appendix 3).
- 45 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, No. 47/41, dated 12 May 1941, Operational Orders for Operation MERKUR, Classified, for commanders only (see Appendix 4).
- 46 - Generaloberst Student, "Der Deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), May 1953.
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This evaluation of the enemy situation on Crete turned out to have nothing whatsoever to do with the conditions actually encountered.

The main reason for the failure of German intelligence activity lay in the masterful way in which the British managed to camouflage their preparations for the defense of the island. Having become thoroughly familiar with the way in which the German parachute forces were employed (during the operations in Norway, Holland, and Corinth), the British had reconnoitered the island to locate all those points at which a parachute landing might conceivably be expected. The majority of these potential landing areas (usually lower-lying valleys) were surrounded by hills from which they could be kept under observation, and the enemy had established and permanently manned strong positions on these vantage points. In addition snipers had been strategically distributed throughout the surrounding wooded areas, so that the landing spots could be kept under fire from all sides.

And all of these preparations went undetected by German intelligence. They were not apparent in the enlargements made of aerial photographs; nor were they noticed by low-flying reconnaissance aircraft.

The antiaircraft and artillery positions which showed up on the aerial photographs turned out, in part anyway, to be dummy positions - manned with wooden guns! The real positions, carefully camouflaged, lay elsewhere<sup>47</sup> and most of them remained undetected.

There was no way of telling how long before the start of operations in the southeast theater the British had begun the task of fortifying the island of Crete<sup>48</sup>.

In any event, it was clear that the British had every intention of defending the island and of defending it successfully<sup>49</sup>.

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47 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 11.

48 - See page , paragraph , of the present study.

49 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 11, paragraph g.

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2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Defending Force (factors determined by the position of the island and the state of its harbors and airfields and by the availability and effectiveness of fortifications).

The British were aware of the fact that an air landing action on Crete was in the wind. And so far as they knew, the possibility of supporting operations by the Italian Navy could not be discounted. In any case, they assumed that a coup carried out by German paratrooper forces would naturally be supported by other troops brought to the island by sea.

Accordingly, their defenses were built up to meet a combined attack. The island's topography limited an attack by parachute and air landing forces to those three areas along the northern coast where the three airfields were located. Around these three airfields, according to the reports of German agents, the British had set up a system of defensive positions, admirably organized and equipped and cleverly camouflaged among the olive trees.

In addition, strong defensive positions had also been established at all those points along the coast which might conceivably be vulnerable to a landing from the sea<sup>50</sup>.

For the most part, however, these reports were brushed aside as fantastic. The theory that the British had placed their confidence primarily in the effectiveness of antiaircraft and other heavy artillery concentrated at the airfields and at the points at which an air landing might be expected was tacitly accepted as the correct one.

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50 - The British were firmly convinced that the Italian Navy would participate in any German action against Crete.

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One of the main strengths of the defending force, then, lay in the concentration of its power at the few specific points made most likely by the island's military-geographic situation. The defenders reckoned with the possibility that the contemplated invasion would be strongly localized, in which case it could be easily repulsed by massed counter-attacks with armored support.

The British did their best to stir up Cretan feeling against the Germans and even armed large sectors of the population. In this way they gained considerable reinforcements (particularly valuable because of their exact knowledge of the countryside) for their defensive forces. The British appeal to the vendetta instincts of the native population was to take serious toll of the German invaders.

Although the British had relatively little heavy artillery to set against the lightly-armed parachute and air landing forces, they did possess the advantage of strong antiaircraft artillery and - above all - the easy mobility of most of their artillery. The fact that the majority of the British units were motorized placed the defenders in a favorable position to begin with. German intelligence agents were firmly convinced that any invading force would encounter light and medium armored vehicles on Crete.

Sons of a sea-faring nation, the British defenders naturally placed a great deal of hope in effective support by the Royal Navy, whose aircraft carriers, heavy cruisers, and submarines could be summoned without delay from Alexandria, Malta, and Cyprus. Since the British were so clearly in command of the seas, it seemed most unlikely that an enemy attack might come from the Aegean. Most of Crete was easily visible from the sea, so that British vessels could hold great stretches under fire at a time and



thus destroy an invading force entirely with naval artillery.

The signal communications system was extremely well organized, so that the British would have no difficulty in shifting their defensive forces about to meet the brunt of an enemy attack (which, in any case, would necessarily be limited to a narrow strip extending some 125 miles along the northern coast of the island).

And this, as a matter of fact, brings us to one of the weaknesses in the British defense system - namely the fairly large distances from one position to the next and the difficulty of establishing contact between them except by the main coastal road. It is true that the British had a highly adequate aircraft reporting service, which - as reported by aircraft from the VIII Air Corps - was directed from a series of patrol boats in the Aegean<sup>51</sup>. Even so, the lack of adequate reconnaissance, fighter, and bomber aircraft was bound to act as a weakening factor in the defense of Crete, in view of the island's distance from the large Allied bases in Africa and the Near East. In the last analysis, if an enemy invader should succeed in blocking the one and only highway along the northern coast, there would be no way to move the defending forces about to meet the various points of emphasis occurring during the attack.

As a result, the geographic location of the island's three airfields along the main thoroughfare was actually more of a weakness than a strength, as far as the defenders were concerned. If there had been a central airfield located somewhere in the middle of the island, it would have provided a far more effective base from which to combat landings both from the sea and from the air. Unfortunately, however, Crete possessed no other airfields.

Apart from Suda Bay, the harbors of Crete were entirely without significance. They were far too ill-equipped to permit the rapid unloading of transport vessels, either those bringing reinforcements



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51 - Hqs XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Enemy Data Sheet (Feindnachrichtenblatt) No. 2, page 15, III, 1, b.

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for the defenders or those landing troops and supplies to support an invasion. The British would find it necessary to tie up strong defense forces at the harbors only if the Italian Navy should take part in the invasion.

British intelligence was soon able to assure the defenders of Crete that there was very little likelihood of intervention of any kind on the part of Italian naval forces. Due to the high degree of effectiveness of the British intelligence service, the defenders of Crete were furnished with exact information concerning the contemplated air landing operation (including the latest operational directives<sup>52</sup>), so that there could no longer be any hope of taking them by surprise. Even the possibility of a tactical surprise in terms of the kind, strength, or time of the operation was ruled out entirely<sup>53</sup>.

The defenders did not have sufficient armaments and ammunition. This was particularly true of the units which had fled to Crete from the Greek mainland; they were haphazardly equipped, poorly armed, and only rarely motorized. This disadvantage was compensated to some degree at least by the fact that the topography of the island was bound to create a great deal of difficulty for any force landing by parachute. The rocky, mountainous terrain alone would assure that a certain percentage of the parachutists were injured by the landing itself. The olive groves, the irrigation ditches, and the low thorny shrubs such as century plants also served as obstacles to an air landing force and thus as reinforcements for the island's defense force. On the eve of the invasion, then, a defense force determined to hold out to the last (under the command of General Freyberg, appointed by General Wavell on 28 April 1941 to the post of Commander, Crete<sup>54</sup>) faced an equally determined attacking force under the leadership of combat-seasoned officers.



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- 52 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 9 ff.  
53 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 12.  
54 - D. M. Davin, Crete, page 39.
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All in all, the strengths and weaknesses of the British defending force just about balanced each other. For the attackers, it was imperative that the Luftwaffe - i.e. the VIII Air Corps - should prove enough of a match for the Royal Navy to keep it from intervening in the battle of Crete. This in turn, depended in great part on the weather.

### 3. Weather Conditions<sup>55</sup>.

Even today, with the help of radar and other navigation aids, it is absolutely impossible to guide a large parachute and air landing force through a large-scale operation under unfavorable weather conditions. Not only the location of predetermined landing areas, but also the preparation for the landing by pinpoint bombing of specific targets and its continual support by bomber and supply transport aircraft are dependent upon a fairly long period of good weather. The task assigned to the meteorologists of the air landing force, a definitive evaluation of weather conditions, was thus an extremely important and responsible one.

In general, as far as flight weather over Crete is concerned, conditions are typical of the Mediterranean climate<sup>56</sup>. During the winter, which extends from November through February, there are frequent storms, with heavy clouds and a great deal of rain. During the summer, from June through August, the weather is cloudless, dry, hot, and almost without atmospheric disturbance of any kind. The lowest temperature in winter is 39° F; the highest in summer, 96.8° F.

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55 - See the report prepared by the office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, Operations Staff, Intelligence Branch, File No. 12480/41, Classified, Section IV, C, 2, dated 25 April 1941.

56 - This is substantiated by the experience of the author in Crete.

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In an air landing operation carried out during the month of May, the aircraft would be exposed to the danger of icing only at altitudes of 3,300 feet and above.

The winds from the north often result in the formation of air pockets, especially along the rocky northern coast of the island. This, in turn, leads to the formation of haze and resultant poor visibility. The cloud cover and cloud altitude in the various parts of Crete are almost entirely dependent upon wind direction, due to the mountainous character of the island. During the summer most of the winds blow from out of the north and northeast.

Weather conditions on the ground are exceedingly uncertain because of the frequent cyclones. As a result, a parachute force must be prepared to sustain a certain number of injuries during the landing itself. Wind velocity on the northern coast of the island is between ten and fifteen feet per second and even higher during the day, when ocean winds are blowing.

Because of the mountain ridges (over 6,500 feet high) dividing the island, the landing areas on the northern coast are plagued with treacherous down winds even during the good weather period in summer. There is very little fog during the summer months; however, it is often a feature of the winter storms.

The intense sunshine and withering heat of Crete's subtropical climate was bound to make inroads in the striking power of the air landing forces.

Even so, provided there were no unforeseen changes in the long-range weather forecast for May 1941<sup>57</sup>, the weather conditions could be judged not unfavorable for an air landing action Crete.

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<sup>57</sup> - See Chapter VIII, Section 1, of the present study.



## CHAPTER IV

## The German Forces

## Section 1 - XI Air Corps (Parachute and Air Landing Forces).

As has already been mentioned, it proved impossible to secure the assignment of the 22d Infantry Division for the operation in Crete. A subsequent request for the detachment of at least certain elements from it to form the nucleus of a well-trained landing force was also disapproved. This was the "first serious disappointment"<sup>58</sup> suffered by the air landing corps. The second, even more significant one followed immediately - General Student continues, " ... My request to have the VIII Air Corps made directly subordinate to me was unfortunately disapproved".<sup>59</sup>

General Student's purpose in making the above request was to achieve uniform and centralized operational command of the flying units and the air landing forces they were to transport<sup>60</sup>. The VIII Air Corps was unwilling to accept such a chain of command and won its point by declaring that the staff of the XI Air Corps simply did not have sufficient personnel to enable it to handle both corps<sup>61</sup>.

As a compromise, the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, appointed the Fourth Air Fleet (under the command of Generaloberst Loehr) as superior headquarters and gave it the command of both the VIII and the XI Air Corps. Inasmuch as the naval forces under the command of the Admiral, Southeast, were also attached to the Fourth Air Fleet, it could be stated that Operation MERKUR represented "the first occasion on which a higher-level Luftwaffe agency

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58 - Generaloberst Student, in a special issue of "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper) dated May 1953, page 2, column 1; also in a letter dated 15 March 1955 to Prof. R. Suchenwirth.

59 - See Footnote 58, above.

60 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, Section B, File No. 1839/41, Classified, dated 2 October 1941, Commanders' Conference, page 4, Figure 5.



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61 - Based on verbal information given to the author by General Meister, former Chief of Staff, VIII Air Corps, during a conversation in Hannover on 18 November 1955.

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was in charge of a major operation involving all three Wehrmacht branches"<sup>62</sup>.

There was, to be sure, one disadvantage - the Fourth Air Fleet was "rather out of things"<sup>63</sup>, and thus was too far away for effective intervention.

The 5th Mountain Infantry Division, already stationed in Attica and the Peloponnesus, was assigned to the XI Air Corps. Originally these forces were a part of the Twelfth Army, under the command of Generalfeldmarschall List, and had played an important role in the breakthrough of the Metaxas Line<sup>64</sup> and thus in the capture of Greece.

Counting the ground forces of the XI Air Corps, the 7th Air Division, and the Storm Regiment, but excluding the assigned heavy weapons companies and specialized units, the total strength of the striking force amounted to no more than six regiments. "Hitler never had the right forces available at the right time"<sup>65</sup>. The ground force was far too weak to accomplish the task demanded of it, namely the capture of a heavily defended island whose territory was as large as half the present province of Hesse! In addition, the 5th Mountain Infantry Division had absolutely

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62 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 54.

63 - Based on information given the author during a conversation with General Meister and substantiated by General Trettner.

64 - A line of fortifications along the northern border of Greece.

65 - Generalfeldmarschall von Manstein, report on the fighting in the Mediterranean theater of operations, page 102.

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no practical experience in air landing operations, while the 22d Infantry Division (a part of the 7th Air Division and thus of the XI Air Corps since 1938) not only had the advantage of joint training with the air transport units but had also gained a great deal of valuable experience during the operations in Holland.

The ground forces of the XI Air Corps could be divided into three categories, depending upon their method of transport and the way in which they were to be employed. They were the following:

1. Those elements which were to be brought to the island by freight glider as the first attack wave - the 1st Battalion of the Storm Regiment under the command of Major Koch. In May 1940, elements of this battalion had helped to capture the Belgian fort Eben Emael and the bridges over the Albert Canal as a part of Germany's "miracle weapon", the glider-transported air landing forces. In short, they were the elite of the air landing corps. Cool-headed and immune to panic, these experienced soldiers were to be landed by the silent freight gliders directly at the enemy positions, their mission being to eliminate enemy antiaircraft and other artillery prior to the arrival of the parachute troops.

On 17 May 1941, Major Koch had at his disposal fifty-three "combat" freight gliders and ten "transport" freight gliders<sup>66</sup>. The combat gliders had a capacity of ten men (including the pilot) and all their equipment. The transport gliders were to bring the heavier signal communications equipment, items such as 200-volt transmitters, which could not be dropped by parachute, and the staff of the 7th Air Division to Crete.

The extremely light construction characteristic of the freight gliders (a framework of plywood and light-weight metal covered with tautly-stretched canvas) proved to be no match for the weather conditions and the inadequate maintenance facilities which were



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66 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, File No. 5642/41,  
Classified, dated 15 May 1941, "Air Transport Orders for Crete"; see  
Appendix 6.

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inherent in all operations in Greece. The fifty-three transport gliders mentioned above were the remainder of an original force of seventy-nine assigned to Attica.

## PHOTOGRAPH

A freight glider ready to take off for Crete. the 130 foot-long towing cable has been fastened to the glider's nose; its landing skid has been wrapped with barbed wire to cut the landing run as short as possible.

## PHOTOGRAPH

A freight glider after the landing on Crete. The loading aperture is clearly visible under the wing in the foreground of the photograph.



2. Those elements which were to descend upon the island by parachute - the 7th Air Division with its three paratrooper regiments, the Storm Regiment with three battalions, and the various independent battalions and companies attached to the XI Air Corps or to the 7th Air Division.

We have considerable information available, in the form of official memoranda<sup>67</sup>, regarding the equipment, armament, and method of employment of the paratrooper forces. There are two points which deserve our special attention.

#### PHOTOGRAPH

a. The officers, as leaders of their respective units, were given white parachutes for the leap over Crete. In this way, the troops would have a fairly good idea - even while still in the air - of the general direction in which to hunt for their unit commanders. (The photograph above shows a white parachute, second from the left, during the landing on Crete.). The parachutes used by the troops were of a darker color designed to blend into the landscape.

b. Nearly every memorandum contained warnings against the fire of

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67 - Group West, Generalmajor Meindl, Operations Branch, No. 102/41; see Appendix 3.

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enemy ship-based artillery<sup>68</sup>.

The leadership of the 7th Air Division and of the paratrooper regiments was entrusted to combat-seasoned, reliable officers. The non-commissioned officers and the majority of the paratroopers, however, were to see action for the first time in Crete - clearly somewhat of a disadvantage in view of the over-all situation.

With a very few exceptions<sup>69</sup>, morale, standard of training, armament, and equipment could be regarded as entirely satisfactory. On the other hand, however, the youthful paratroopers lacked the kind of practical experience which even the best of training courses cannot impart, but which the rest of the infantry troops had obtained by the long marches through Poland, France, and the Balkans - without having participated in a single large-scale engagement.

And this gives us an inkling of the rather odd position of the paratrooper. He was not a member of the army, yet he was expected to fight on the ground; he wore a Luftwaffe uniform, yet was unable to fly an aircraft; his training was often of the sketchiest kind. The highly exaggerated esteem for the paratrooper among the civilian population served to bolster his self-confidence, otherwise based on nothing more tangible than the paratrooper patch on his shoulder. His colleagues in the infantry forces looked with envy at the many privileges accorded him, from extra jump pay and special rations to the comforts of motorized transport. His aura of heroism was enhanced by the fact that most paratrooper missions were "top secret"; decorations were awarded with a lavish hand in the beginning.

Every effort was made to obviate the potential dangers inherent in this situation by assuring calm, cautious, and experienced leadership. The contemplated occupation of Crete, an operation ordered at the last minute

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<sup>68</sup> - General Meindl, for example, had landed at Narvik by parachute and was



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68 - (cont) well acquainted with the dangers of enemy artillery fire, both  
from the sea and from the land.

69 - The most important exception was clothing!

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with no opportunity for the detailed preparations which had led to sure success in Holland, was hardly conducive to improvement of the attitude held by the "younger" paratrooper. Systematically trained for individual combat, the majority of the younger paratroopers were inclined to place too much faith in the newness and in the surprise value of the air landing method. As a result, they felt that they could carry the day without having to resort to the tried and tested principles of a planned attack.

The stubborn self-confidence of the younger paratrooper forces often represented a barrier between them and their leaders; command of a paratrooper unit was anything but an easy assignment.

The foregoing should not be interpreted as an attempt to belittle the paratrooper forces in any way. On the contrary, our appraisal would do them little service if we did not point out the bad as well as the good by mentioning objectively recognized deficiencies.

c. By May 1941 the paratroopers had achieved a relatively high standard of perfection in landing techniques and state of technical equipment, insofar as tactical and other deficiencies permitted. The air landing forces, on the other hand, consisting of infantry troops which were to be transported by air to their area of operation, had enjoyed superb training as far as tactical ground fighting was concerned, but were completely innocent of experience as regarded the actual air transport action!



## PHOTOGRAPH

The photograph shows mountain infantry forces landed by air in Crete; the airfield in the picture is the one at Malemes.

In the last analysis, the XI Air Corps could consider itself fortunate that it was assigned mountain infantry units in place of the experienced 22d (Air Landing) Infantry Division, which could not be spared at the moment. The 5th Mountain Infantry Division, under the command of General Ringel, had had a great deal of combat experience in a number of theaters of war<sup>70</sup>. In view of the mountainous terrain of Crete, the Division could be viewed as a welcome deus ex machina for the coming operation. It was clear that the mountain infantry units could do much to support the regular air landing corps.

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70 - General Hubert Lanz, Gebirgsjaeger (Mountain Infantry), H. H. Podzun-Verlag, Bad Nauheim, 1954, page 302.

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Altogether, then, the XI Air Corps had at its disposal for the air landing operation on the island of Crete the following forces:

- freight gliders (storm forces)
- paratroopers
- mountain infantry (as airborne infantry)

The Air Commander (Fliegerfuehrer), XI Air Corps, Generalmajor Gerhard Conrad, had ten Ju-52 special duty bomber units<sup>71</sup> under his command with which to transport the landing force to Crete.

These transport units were organized into special duty bomber wings as is shown below for their participation in Operation MERKUR<sup>72</sup>:

1. Special Duty Bomber Wing (von Heyking)

- 60th Special Duty Bomber Group
- 101st Special Duty Bomber Group
- 102d Special Duty Bomber Group
- 106th Special Duty Bomber Group

The wing staff was stationed in Topolia, together with all the groups except the 106th, which was assigned to the airfield at Dadion<sup>73</sup>.

2. Special Duty Bomber Wing (Buchholz)

- 40th Special Duty Bomber Group
- 105th Special Duty Bomber Group
- 1 Group, 1st Air Landing Wing

The Buchholz Wing was stationed at the airfield at Tanagra except for one half of the I Group, 1st Air Landing Wing, which was located at Eleusis. It was the 1st Air Landing Wing

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71 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 11, Section 1, b.

72 - The organizational roster given here is taken from a study by Lt. Colonel Horning, Retired, which, in turn, is based upon the war diary kept by Generalmajor Conrad. Hornung's data do not agree entirely with the report of the XI Air Corps. Both sources are available in the Karlsruhe Document Collection.

73 - See the following maps for the distribution of the air units participating in the Crete operation.

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which was to tow the freight gliders (DFS-230's) carrying Major Koch's I Battalion, Storm Regiment, to its landing point<sup>74</sup>. For reasons of space, it was necessary to divide the I Group, 1st Air Landing Wing, assigning each half to a different airfield. After completion of its initial mission, the towing of the freight gliders to Crete, the half group from Eleusis was to return to Tanagra and remain there.

3. Special Duty Bomber Wing (Wilke)

I Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

II Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

172d Special Duty Bomber Group

The staff of the Wilke wing was stationed at the airfield in Megara, while the bomber groups were distributed between Megara and the airfield at Corinth.

During the course of the operations against Yugoslavia and Greece, these air transport units had carried out a large number of actions in behalf of the Fourth Air Fleet and the VIII Air Corps. As a result of unfavorable weather conditions, quite a few aircraft and crews had been put out of action, so that the units had to be returned to home territory for replacement of materiel and personnel losses. Beginning on 1 May 1941 the transport units were distributed among the home area repair depots (Grossenhain, Oshatz, Sorau, Fuerstenwalde, Cottbus, Braunschweig-Waggum, Rangsdorf, Koeslin, etc.); by 14 May, they were back at their assembly points in and around Athens - their aircraft having been restored to full operability in two weeks of day and night labor. In view of the tremendous distances involved (this was 1941!), this feat deserves special praise, not only for the way in which it was performed but also for the way in which it was organized.

74 - The DFS-230 was named after the Deutsche Forschungsstelle fuer Segelflug (German Glider Research Institute) in Darmstadt; this freight glider was model number 230.



As of 14 May 1941, 502 Ju-52's were ready for action<sup>75</sup>, out of an authorized aircraft strength of 539<sup>76</sup>.

Assuming that each Ju-52 was capable of transporting a total of twelve paratroopers and their gear, the maximum number of troops which could be set down over Crete simultaneously was approximately 6,000. At least three waves would be necessary to transport the entire paratrooper force of 16,000 to 18,000 men to Crete<sup>77</sup>, and even a fourth would be required if unforeseen circumstances should put more than a few transport aircraft out of action. With the limited air transport space available, the island could be "sprinkled, but hardly deluged" with paratroopers.....<sup>78</sup>.

In other words, the numerically impressive half a thousand transport aircraft - an armada of the air - were somewhat misleading.

#### Section 2 - The VIII Air Corps.

As of May 1941, the strength of General der Flieger Freiherr von Richt-hofen's VIII Air Corps, which was assigned the task of providing air support for the landing on Crete, was as follows<sup>79</sup>:

280 bomber aircraft (Ju-88's and Do-17's)

150 dive bomber aircraft (Ju-87's)

180 single-engine and twin-engine fighter aircraft (Me-109's and Me-110's)

40 reconnaissance aircraft<sup>80</sup>.

The VIII Air Corps, its aircraft strength brought up to the total indicated (approximately 650), had already seen action as a ground support corps during the Balkan campaign and was stationed at the "best" airfields in Greece, viz:

75 - The study by Lt. Col. Hornung (based on General Conrad's diary) states that there were only 439 transport aircraft ready for action as of 14 May.

76 - Based on the records of the XI Air Corps.

77 - Generaloberst Student, during the course of a lecture held at Hildesheim.



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- 78 - General Guderian often spoke of these two extremes as being characteristic of the methods employed by bad and good leadership respectively.
- 79 - Based on the diaries of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, as edited by Colonel Deichmann, Retired. The reader is also referred to Winston Churchill, The Second World War, Volume III.
- 80 - There <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ no data available regarding the models of the reconnaissance aircraft; presumably they were Ju-88's or Do-17's.
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the fighters and dive bombers on the Peloponnesus, and the bombers in central Greece (see map).

On 1 May 1941 Major von Heinemann (GSC), Operations Officer of the VIII Air Corps, was ordered to Gatow to help plan the Corps' role in the coming campaign against Soviet Russia<sup>81</sup>. And this rounded out the multiple mission of the VIII Air Corps, which was expected to accomplish the following tasks simultaneously:

rebuild its strength after the conclusion of the Balkan campaign;  
prepare for the air landing in Crete,  
continue sporadic combat missions over the Aegean (a relatively new method of employment - air combat over water), and  
prepare itself for an entirely new mission (the Russian campaign) in an entirely new theater of operations.

#### Section 3 - The Mine-Laying Group.

The II Group, 4th Bomber Wing, was an independent unit under the direct command of the Fourth Air Fleet. Its mission<sup>82</sup> was to lay a carpet of mines around the Suez Canal and off the shore of Alexandria prior to the beginning of the landing in Crete<sup>83</sup>.

#### Section 4 - The Sea Rescue Service.

The carrying out of an air landing on the island of Crete presupposed the air transport of two divisions across the sea! In addition, there was the entire VIII Air Corps, whose effective employment over Crete depended upon its reaching the island from the Greek mainland - a long distance over water. All in all, some 1,200 aircraft<sup>84</sup> would be participating in Operation MERKUR,

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81 - The diaries of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, as edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 4.



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- 82 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Grete, page 12.
- 83 - The II Group was equipped with He-111's. During the period from 1 May through 7 June, it carried out six missions to Alexandria, four to Suez Canal, and two to Iraklion. (Geschichte des K. G. 4 (History of the 4th Bomber Wing), Karlsruhe Document Collection).
- 84 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War, page 279; the same figure is also found in the diaries of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen.
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certainly a large enough number to warrant the establishment of a well-organized sea rescue service.

The Fourth Air Fleet had the following forces at its disposal for the accomplishment of sea rescue missions<sup>85</sup>:

1. Two squadrons from the 126th Naval Reconnaissance Group, based at Nauplia on the eastern coast of the Peloponnesus and equipped with He-60's. Among the missions assigned to the 126th Group was the task of keeping the waters of the Aegean under constant surveillance to spot any instances of distress at sea. The He-60, however, was not large enough to permit it to pick up rescued crews<sup>86</sup>.

2. The 7th Sea Rescue Squadron, whose headquarters at Phaleron had been expanded to Sea Rescue Headquarters (Aegean)<sup>87</sup>. The 7th Squadron was equipped with aircraft better suited to sea rescue operations than the He-60:

5 He-59's and

3 Do-24's.

Obviously, this was a very small force in view of the extensive area to be covered. Accordingly, the Fourth Air Fleet requested additional sea rescue aircraft from the Sea Rescue Headquarters in Sicily<sup>88</sup> and was assigned three more machines.

In addition, the Sea Rescue Headquarters (Aegean) assembled all the Fw-58's on duty with the fighter units and all the aircraft from the stand-by squadron of Fourth Air Fleet Headquarters and scheduled them for employment to drop inflatable boats during sea rescue operations. Plenty of inflatable rafts had been brought from the home area and were

85 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 43 (J, I, 1).

86 - Taken from a letter written by Lt.Col. Fegler, Retired, Karlsruhe Document Collection.

87 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 43

88 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 43.



stored ready for immediate use at Sea Rescue Headquarters in Phaleron.

Since the German naval force in the Aegean was so small anyway, it was impossible to reserve sufficient ships for sea rescue operations exclusively. Only three small vessels could be made available, and even these were not really adequately equipped.

Section 5 - The Naval Forces under the Command of the Admiral (South east)<sup>89</sup>.

The preparations for Operation MERKUR envisioned two main missions for the participating naval forces:

1. the delivery of sufficient supplies of weapons, explosives, gasoline, foodstuffs, etc. to meet the immediate needs of the landing force, and
2. the preparation of the transport actions involved in the accomplishment of Operation MERKUR.

Most of these supplies had to be transported from the Black Sea through the Dardanelles to Salonica and on to the Piraeus. Coordinating the appearance of German, Rumanian, Bulgarian, and Italian ships in the right place at the right time

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89 - There are authentic documents available concerning the employment of the German Navy in Operation MERKUR, most of them collected by the author during wartime (1944), such as the following:

- a. War Diary of the Admiral (Southeast) for the period 16 May through 31 May 1941 (kept by Admiral Schuster and Kapitän zur See Heye).
  - b. Navy Group Command (South), Operations Report No. 4358/41, dated 19 July 1941, classified, dealing with naval activity in the Aegean.
  - c. Admiral (Southeast), Report on the Preparation and Accomplishment of Operation MERKUR, File No. 8689, classified.
  - d. Admiral (Southeast), Brief Report to Naval Command Headquarters (Seekriegsleitung), File No. 830/41, classified, dated 23 May 1941.
- Most of the material to follow is based on the last-named source.



was a problem of no mean difficulty<sup>90</sup>. And the entire success of the initial phase of the air landing depended upon timely delivery of the necessary supplies to their destinations in Crete.

The first supply wave was to consist of sixty-three small motor-driven sailboats, which were to bring materiel reinforcements<sup>91</sup> to the island as soon as suitable landing areas were in friendly hands.

These boats had been rounded up and gotten ready in a hurry, and there had been no time to check on their seaworthiness. The majority of the Greek crews "vanished" and had to be replaced by German naval personnel, who first had to be brought from Germany by air<sup>92</sup>.

Compasses and charts were most inadequate on all these sailboats; moreover, not a single one could be fitted with radio and signal equipment in the short time available.

The sailboat groups destined for Malemes and Iraklion were each given one Italian destroyer as escort. Each destroyer carried one of the German convoy leaders (Commander Devantier and Commander von Lipinski).

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90 - See Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 12 ff; the Operations Reports of the XI Air Corps; and Report No. 1, 54 of the Mountain Infantry forces. The figures reported in all of these sources agree; however, only in the War Diary of the Admiral (Southeast) is there a detailed summary of the last-minute drop-outs.

91 - War Diary of the Admiral (Southeast), page 2.

92 - Admiral (Southeast), Brief Report to Naval Command Headquarters, page 1.

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While some attempt had been made to equip a number of the sailboats as mine sweepers, patrol boats, speedboats, etc., the result "bore all the characteristics of improvisation."<sup>93</sup>

Italian naval units, comprising torpedo boats, submarines, speedboats, and mine sweepers, were available in the area under the leadership of the Italian Commander Conte Pecori-Giraldi. Their participation in Operation MERKUR, however, was highly questionable; the ships had a way of developing "engine trouble" whenever they were needed....

In summary, objective appraisal of Germany's forces and those of her allies seems to indicate that they were quite adequate for the mission they faced, a mission which had been planned with care but whose actual execution was bound to be attended by a good deal of improvisation. Opinions regarding the degree of strength required varied considerably. "A single paratrooper regiment is enough for Crete", said the Fourth Air Fleet<sup>94</sup>; "The available forces are wholly inadequate", countered the XI Air Corps<sup>95</sup>.

In any case, there were certain changes in the over-all strength during the period between the assembly of forces and the actual launching of Operation MERKUR. For example, "... 17 May 1941: during the night the British bombed our airfields in Athens once more... five aircraft were destroyed completely and thirty-eight damaged!"<sup>96</sup>

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93 - Admiral Schuster's war diary contains the following comment, "...an Italian submarine chaser had no more effective armament than a light machine-gun".

94 - Reported to the author by General Trettner as the opinion of General Korten, Chief of Staff, Fourth Air Fleet.

95 - Generaloberst Student, During the course of a lecture at Hildesheim.

96 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, War Diary, page 13 ff.

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By dint of personal visits to Rhodes and Scarpanto<sup>97</sup>, General von Richthofen succeeded in obtaining the promise of Italian assistance. Six Italian speedboats were to be detached to block the Straits of Caso (to the east of Crete) and the Italian torpedo bombers were to provide support from the air. The Italians had a total of twenty-one bombers and reconnaissance aircraft and twenty-four fighter aircraft based on Rhodes and Leros, as well as a number of small naval units; in addition to the six speedboats, the sources mention two destroyers and a number of MAS<sup>98</sup>.

The airfields in Greece which served as bases of operations for the flying units were so unfortunately located as far as the transport network was concerned that the difficulty of keeping them supplied was a very real threat to the maintenance of striking power.

On the whole it can be concluded that the German flying and air landing units were quite capable of carrying out Operation MERKUR with success; it was the poorly organized aerotechnical ground service system which was the source of difficulty<sup>99</sup>.

The air landing forces could only take light-weight special hand weapons with them in the transport aircraft. Inasmuch as the enemy had been forced to leave all his heavy equipment behind during the evacuation of the Greek mainland, the result

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97 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, War Diaries as edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 14 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

98 - MAS are "the secret weapons of the Italian Navy", according to Italian Air Force General D. Ludovico, "Die Eroberung Kretas aus der Luft" (The Occupation of Crete from the Air), page 10.

99 - See "Europäische Sicherheit" (European Security), Volume 4, 1951, the article "Operation MERKUR" by Colonel W. Gaul, page 3.

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was that the battle of Crete was the only battle during the entire war which was fought by both sides with light-weight hand weapons<sup>100</sup>.

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100 - Generaloberst Student, "Kreta, Schicksalsschlacht unserer Fallschirmtruppen" (Crete, the Turning Point for Germany's Parachute Forces), in a special issue of "Der Deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper) dated May 1953, page 3, column 1.

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## CHAPTER V

## Assembly and Preparation of the Air Landing

## Units in Central Greece (up to 14 May 1941).

The assembly area allotted to the air landing units assigned to Operation MERKUR was the region around Athens in the middle of the Greek mainland. Not until late April 1941 was this area brought under complete subjugation by the German Twelfth Army, and the attitude of the population was not particularly friendly at the time the assembly action got under way<sup>101</sup>.

According to the plan, the German attack force was to be fully assembled and prepared by 14 May 1941; Hitler had ordered that the landing was to be launched on 16 May 1941.

The first phase was the assembly of the "Suessmann Detachment" (i.e. those elements of the 7th Air Division which had taken part in the landing near Corinth on 26 April 1941) in the area around Corinth, such assembly having been accomplished by 2 May 1941<sup>102</sup>. During the period from 27 April through 3 May, the rest of the 7th Air Division and the troops of the XI Air Corps set out by rail from their assigned stations in the Reich.

These troops, together with their supplies and the freight gliders, required some ninety railway cars<sup>103</sup>. As a result of

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101 - Based on the personal impressions gained by the author during the assembly action. The one usable highway was crowded with recently discharged Greek soldiers. They were assumed to be harmless - but were they all??

102 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 3.

103 - Based on a study by Generalmajor K. Seibt dated July 1945, Karlsruhe Document Collection. Generalmajor Seibt served as Quartermaster General, XI Air Corps.

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the fighting in Jugoslavia and the consequent destruction of railroad lines, there was only one route which could be utilized for troop and supply transports, and this route led over a single-rail bridge over the Danube. It had a total capacity of only one transport train per day, so that there was no alternative but to separate the cargo as follows:

1. the freight gliders and the supplies were transported by rail to Sofia and Salonica and were unloaded south of the Danube. From these unloading areas, gliders and goods were brought by air to the take-off airfields, whence they were delivered by truck to Athens or by ship to the Piraeus.

Every attempt was made to camouflage these transports (by moving the freight gliders in furniture vans, for example) in order not to jeopardize the secrecy of the planned undertaking.

2. the troop trains were unloaded north of the Danube in the regions of Arad and Crajova in Rumania. The transport from the unloading points to central Greece was accomplished by motor vehicles via Sofia, Salonica, Kozani, and Larissa.

The distances involved, using Braunschweig (as the most centrally located of the paratrooper bases in the Reich) as a basis, were as follows:

Braunschweig - Athens	1,783 miles
Arad - Athens	995 miles
Sofia - Athens	498 miles.

Because of the extremely poor condition of the roads and the need for maximum haste in carrying out the transport action, these distances represented a strain and a burden to the troops being transported as well as



to the drivers of the transport vehicles. Even so, natural obstacles such as the Rhodope Mountains and the hairpin curves of the Rupel Pass and at Thermopylae resulted in very few instances of serious damage to any of the 4,000 vehicles of the XI Air Corps.

The topography of the Greek mainland is not conducive to the establishment of a well-developed transport network. Greece has the smallest railway network of all the Balkan countries, for example - only 1,865 miles in length, as compared with West Germany's 77,050 miles! Highway construction, too, presents almost insurmountable difficulties and is prohibitively expensive. As a result, ocean transport has developed into the most important method of moving passengers and goods.

The German Twelfth Army was responsible for determining the order of transport during the assembly operation<sup>104</sup>, for one of its armored divisions was marching back from Attica to Serbia along the same narrow, difficult route at the same time<sup>105</sup>.

PHOTOGRAPH

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104 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, pages 3 and 4.

105 - In preparation for the coming campaign against Russia.

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The route had been badly damaged by the retreating enemy (see the photograph on the preceding page), quite apart from the fact that it was in total disrepair. And an earthquake in Thessalig shortly before the transport action got under way had made the war damage even worse. The city of Larissa had been partly destroyed.

It was due to the inadequacy of the transport facilities that the movement of the 22d (Air Landing) Infantry Division from Rumania to Attica was determined to be unfeasible<sup>106</sup>. Instead, the 5th Mountain Infantry Division (already stationed in the Athens area) was assigned to the XI Air Corps and trained for employment as an air landing force.

The air transport units of the XI Air Corps, returning from repair and overhauling sojourns in the Reich, were all back in Greece by 14 May 1941.

Thus, by the evening of 14 May 1941, the XI Air Corps, with the 7th Air Division and with those Army and Luftwaffe elements temporarily assigned to it for Operation MERKUR, was assembled and ready for action in the Athens area<sup>107</sup>.

The next step, however, was fraught with considerable - and unforeseen - difficulty. In central Greece there was no Luftwaffe ground organization, no Air District Command (Luftgaukommando), no Airfield Area Command (Flughafenbereich), and no Airfield Group Command (Fliegerhorstkommandatur)<sup>108</sup>. There were neither supply facilities nor a signal communications system.

The VIII Air Corps, which had taken part in the campaign in Greece, had secured the "best" airfields for its own use. Ten officers qualified to fill the post of Airfield Group Commander were flown to Greece from Vienna.

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106 - See Chapter III, Section 1, of the present study.

107 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 6.

108 - See the study by Generalmajor K. Seibt (July 1945, Karlsruhe Document Collection), page 15.

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to take charge of the emergency airfields designated for the use of the air transport units<sup>109</sup>; members of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division were assigned to act as maintenance personnel. The transport aircraft were bogged down to their axles in the deep sand covering these airfields<sup>110</sup>.

The parachute and air landing troops were billeted in tents in the immediate vicinity of their take-off airfields<sup>111</sup>. Everything seemed to be ready - except that the gasoline for the transport aircraft had not arrived! Only with the greatest of difficulty could the gasoline needed for the first transport wave be procured and the aircraft fueled in time to take off on schedule<sup>112</sup>. It took five days before a satisfactory gasoline supply system could be established.

The troops occupied the waiting time in studying their operational plans, packing supply containers for later air drop runs (see photographs on the following page), and in being instructed by military medical officers in the maintenance of health and fighting ability<sup>113</sup>.

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109 - See page 15 and 16 of the present study.

110 - Generalleutnant von Heyking, Study No. 638, dated 16 April 1947, page 3 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

111 - Generalmajor K. Seibt, Study dated July 1945; on page 14 we find the following: "... during the period from 10 through 12 May the final decision was made regarding the location of the airfields to be used. With this information in hand, logistical planners could begin to distribute the parachute and air landing unit to tenting areas near the airfields. Luckily, the British had left some 2,000 tents behind in the Piraeus when they evacuated the Greek mainland..."

112 - See Chapter V, Section 4, of the present study.

113 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, No. 1091/41, dated 14 May 1941, classified, "Special Instructions for the Medical Services - Operation MERKUR" (Karlsruhe Document Collection). Among other things, this Directive dealt with the prevention of malaria by means of carefully-controlled daily doses of Atebrine, the first-aid treatment of snake bites and scorpion stings, the utilization of portable filter apparatus to obtain germ-free drinking water, and the prevention of amoebic dysentery.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

The two photographs above show troops packing supply containers at airfields in central Greece. Each container was clearly labeled by its color and markings to show what it contained and for whom it was destined.



## CHAPTER VI

## The Plan of Attack.

## Section 1 - The Two Alternatives.

The air landing units were on their way to central Greece; the Quartermaster Staff of the XI Air Corps was doing its best to improve the inadequacy of airfield facilities and to establish a gasoline supply line for the air transport units. Representatives of the top-level agencies involved in the planning of Operation MERKUR had come together in Athens for a last-minute joint session. On 16 May 1941 there were conferences between the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, General Jeschonnek, representatives of the Fourth Air Fleet, General Student, and General von Richthofen<sup>114</sup>. The plan ultimately accepted at these conferences was, in a way, a compromise solution.

There were two distinct possibilities for carrying out an air landing operation on Crete<sup>115</sup>:

1. The western portion of the island - approximately the area between Malemes and Chania - could be seized first by parachute and air landing forces and the rest of the island gradually occupied by ground attack moving from west to east.

This plan had the very important advantage that the invaders could achieve a tremendous concentration of force in a single area and thus a relatively rapid and decisive victory. This prospect was all the more tempting in view of the fact that the VIII Air Corps

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114 - Lt. Col. Deichmann, "Einfuehrung zum Balkanfeldzug" (Introduction to the Balkan Campaign), page 12.

115 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 7.

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would be able to provide concentrated air support for the approach flight and the landing action and to furnish consistent air cover for the subsequent ground fighting.

The main disadvantage inherent in this plan was the inevitability of a long and difficult struggle over mountainous terrain, for it was certain that Suda Bay and the airfields located in the eastern half of the island would enable the enemy to bring in the reinforcements he needed to maintain a strong defense indefinitely. To be sure, it seemed highly unlikely that the British would attempt to land reinforcements by day in the face of such overwhelming German air superiority. Even strong elements of the VIII Air Corps, however, which were to move forward to the airfield at Malemes as soon as it fell into German hands, could probably do little to prevent the enemy's landing reinforcements under cover of night.

The plan (which had been worked out by Fourth Air Fleet planners<sup>116</sup>) had an excellent chance to succeed if the majority of the parachute troops could be landed deep in enemy territory, with only the minimum number needed to contain the enemy being dropped directly into the enemy positions.

Simultaneous dummy attacks at other points on the island, carried out with paratrooper dolls and automatic noise-makers<sup>117</sup>, were planned to dissipate the enemy's defenses and to create confusion during the first, decisive minutes of the landing operation.

2. The plan put forward by the XI Air Corps<sup>118</sup> envisioned simultaneous attacks

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116 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, Part C, I, a, page 7.

117 - Dummy attacks and their accomplishment are described in detail by the author in the study "Westfeldzug 1940" (The Western Campaign of 1940). They were planned for Crete as well, but had to be dropped because no aircraft could be spared to carry them out.



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118 - See Generaloberst Student's report to Professor Suchenwirth under date of 12 March 1955, Karlsruhe Document Collection. The following is quoted from section 4 thereof: "The attack was my plan ..."

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at approximately seven different points on the island. The advantage, of course, lay in the rapidity with which key areas could be brought under control<sup>119</sup>, thus expediting the final occupation of the island.

This virtue was outweighed by an insurmountable difficulty - the German forces, especially the transport aircraft with their load limitations of twelve paratroopers at a time, were simply too weak. Moreover, the VIII Air Corps was patently unable to provide adequate air cover for simultaneous operations at a number of different landing points. Any landing force which happened to encounter particularly strong enemy defenses would be far too vulnerable to total destruction.

Without doubt the plan had great merit, in that the enemy would be given less opportunity to recover from the initial surprise. On the other hand, just what did German intelligence know about the enemy? All things considered, very little! And it was chiefly this uncertainty about the enemy situation which led the planners to reject the proposal of the XI Air Corps, coupled with the realization that the VIII Air Corps could hardly be expected to provide adequate support for several simultaneous attacks on various parts of the island<sup>120</sup>.

Section 2 - The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Various Operational Possibilities. The Final Decision.

The plan submitted by the Fourth Air Fleet envisioned the immediate establishment of a clearly recognizable main focus of operations. Representatives of the XI Air Corps, however, raised the objection that there would be no way to exploit

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119 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 8.

120 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 13.

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this bridgehead effectively inasmuch as the enemy, supported by strong naval forces, would have time to land ship-borne reinforcements at almost any point on the coast of Crete. Moreover, the enemy's defensive forces in the island would be able to cut off the landed paratroopers and air landing troops in the mountains; in addition, the enemy could do much to delay a rapid advance to the east by simply blocking the island's single usable highway along the coast.

In summary, the following factors made it extremely difficult to evaluate the military situation and to reach a definite decision regarding which attack plan was the more promising.

1. Because of the isolated position of the island, reconnaissance of enemy positions and evolution of a detailed picture of the enemy situation could be accomplished only by means of aerial reconnaissance. And despite the fact that the aerial reconnaissance forces did their best, the data they gathered were not nearly specific, or accurate enough. As far as the aerial photographs were concerned, "there was nothing to be seen in them..."<sup>121</sup>

2. The assembly of the parachute and air landing units and the concentration of such a large number of transport aircraft in one place were bound to be noticed, thus making it impossible to keep the preparations for Operation MERKUR, a secret. As a result, the invading force could hardly hope to surprise the enemy, and this in turn nullified one of the most important advantages normally accruing to an attacking paratrooper force.

3. Royal Navy strength in the eastern Mediterranean, under the command of Admiral Cunningham, was made up of both heavy and light units<sup>122</sup>, most of them stationed at Alexandria. It was clear that an enemy naval force of these proportions

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121 - Diary of the Storm Regiment, Volume II (document), page 16.



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122 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War; on page 287 Mr. Churchill lists the following forces by name: three battleships, one aircraft carrier, twelve cruisers (nine light, three heavy), twelve destroyers, landing barges, and other minor naval craft.

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was capable of warding off a landing from the sea anywhere on Crete (if a sea landing should be planned in conjunction with the air landing, for example), particularly in view of the relative weakness of the German naval forces and those of her allies. And this deterrent ability would be a danger until a final decision had been reached regarding the outcome of the struggle between the German Luftwaffe and the Royal Navy. The majority of the Italian fleet was tied to its own home harbors; it was highly unlikely that it would come forth to provide support in Operation MERKUR.

In short, it was evident that Crete could be invaded only by means of a landing from the air.

4. The comparatively great distances separating Crete from the take-off bases occupied by the air landing forces in central Greece<sup>123</sup>, the fact that the majority of the approach flight route lay over water, and the relatively large size of the island<sup>124</sup> made it imperative that the German invaders (i.e. the XI and VIII Air Corps) capture Crete's three airfields immediately and eliminate any chance of effective counter-action on the part of the enemy air units stationed there. Needless to say, it was of the utmost importance that the airfields be captured intact so that they could be utilized to accommodate the transport aircraft right away. These two tactical requirements naturally presupposed an operational method with two very distinct objectives, a difficult problem under any circumstances and all the more so in view of the speed with which the operation had to be carried out.

After careful deliberation, the final plan decided upon by the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe,<sup>125</sup> reflected acceptance of the necessity for seizing the island's three usable airfields (Malemes, Rethymnon, and Iraklion) in a sudden coup de main at the very beginning - as a necessary premise to successful accomplishment of the air landing. An additional, fourth group was to carry out attacks on the capital city of Chania and Suda Bay in order



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to paralyze military leadership on the island

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123 - The average distance was approximately 185 miles.

124 - 155 miles in extent from east to west.

125 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 8, paragraph c.

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and to tie down the enemy troops, which were presumed to be strongest in these two areas.

The attacks on the airfields and on Chania had to be scheduled in two separate phases, so that the VIII Air Corps would be able to provide air support for the entire operation. The schedule was as follows:

Phase 1 - attack on Malemes and Chania, to begin at 0705 on X-day

Phase 2 - attack on Rethymnon and Iraklion, to begin at 1515 on X-day.

This decision actually represented a compromise between the two invasion plans discussed above. It had the advantage of making it impossible, from the very beginning, for the enemy to employ his own air forces effectively against the invading paratroopers or to undertake any large-scale redistribution of the defending force.

Even today, though we are aware of the tremendously demoralizing effects of the attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps and possess exact information on the location and strength of the enemy positions as well as on the topography of Crete, it is not easy to decide which of the two suggested plans would have resulted in the quicker victory with the fewer losses. If all of the invading paratrooper units had landed at one single point, it is hardly likely that the British would have marshalled their entire defensive strength for a counter-attack at this point. After all, they had no way of knowing how large Germany's paratrooper reserve might be! "The XI Air Corps could just as well have been only one of half a dozen air landing units; it was not until months after the occupation of Crete that we were sure it was the only one..."<sup>126</sup>.

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126 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War, page 285.



### Section 3 - The Evaluation of Aerial Photographs.

The data gathered by the aerial reconnaissance forces proved to be of very little use to the parachute and air landing forces<sup>127</sup>. This may have been due, in part, to the lack of practical experience on the part of the XI Air Corps' reconnaissance squadrons. The air landing operations in Norway, Holland, and Belgium had been subject to such rigorous security measures (in order to assure a surprise attack in each case) that aerial reconnaissance over enemy territory was not permitted prior to the launching of the operation.

In the case of Operation MERKUR, however, the gathering of information on the enemy situation and the furnishing of data on which to base the selection of the best possible landing areas were tasks which could be accomplished only by aerial reconnaissance forces - particularly in view of the fact that the available maps of Crete were often difficult to interpret and highly inaccurate.

The aerial photographs taken by the Italian Air Force, although out of date and taken from very high altitude, were hurriedly enlarged and large quantities of very poor prints made. A number of them showed unmistakable evidence of alterations designed to give support to wishful thinking<sup>128</sup>.

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127 - So far the author has had no success in locating any of the original aerial photographs made by the three reconnaissance squadrons belonging to the VIII and XI Air Corps. Thus the present section could be based only upon the author's own recollections and a few isolated comments found in the various sources consulted. Continued efforts are being made to locate some of the original photographs, many of which are in the possession of private parties.

128 - The author recalls, for example, an aerial photograph of northwestern Crete, about the size of a towel, on which a large airfield was sketched in the vicinity of Kastelli. Presumably it had been "recognized and identified" as an airfield. An olive oil refinery was outlined as an "aircraft hangar" and the beach labelled as "runway" - in blissful disregard of the intervening ditches and the sand.

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The evaluation of aerial photographs was admittedly inadequate and incapable of providing the operational planners with more than an incomplete and, in fact, often inaccurate picture of the enemy situation. As <sup>an</sup> inevitable result, the plans would not possibly take the true state of affairs into full account.

There is no evidence of any lack of effort or efficiency on the part of the reconnaissance squadrons. On the contrary, their daring low-altitude runs often provoked enemy defensive fire, and there were a number of casualties among squadron personnel<sup>129</sup>. Crete's subtropical climate, with its ubiquitous haze and its blinding contrasts between light and dark, made the task all the more difficult. The enemy's remarkably effective camouflaging, his deceptive measures<sup>130</sup>, and his strict discipline made it quite impossible to obtain more revealing aerial photographs.

#### Section 4 - Difficulties in the Field of Supply and Logistics - Ground

Organization - Signal Communications Network - Transport Facilities -  
Take-off Bases (Airfields).

Inasmuch as the damaged railway line could not be repaired within the short time available, all supplies had to be transported by sea<sup>131</sup>. Obviously, the German Navy had an all-important role to play in the preparations for the landing on Crete. It had been requested by the Fourth Air Fleet to place the necessary sea transport space and - insofar as it was able - an adequate escort for the transports at the disposal of Operation MERKUR. Taking into consideration the imminent threat represented by the British fleet, its task was by no means an easy one<sup>132</sup>.

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129 - Captain Lampertsdoerfer, for example, Commander of the Aerial Reconnaissance Squadron, XI Air Corps, was killed during a reconnaissance flight over Crete on 9 May 1941.

130 - Dummy installations!



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131 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 2.

132 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 7.

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The ports of destination for all supply transports were the Piraeus and Corinth<sup>133</sup>. The majority of ships, plagued by submarines and delayed by the continuing need for extreme caution in negotiating mine-infested waters, did not begin arriving until 17 May 1941.

Arriving in the partially destroyed harbors, the ships were unloaded by members of the German Mountain Infantry Division, and by Greek laborers. Supply goods were moved on to their final destination by provisionally organized supply columns, made up of troop transport vehicles. These were able to get through on the few and terribly overcrowded highways of Greece only after surmounting considerable difficulty and causing not a little friction. The XI Air Corps had no supply organization at its disposal for such operations; everything had to be improvised<sup>134</sup>.

Although the provisional "supply columns" were augmented by forces from the Fourth Air Fleet and the Twelfth Army<sup>135</sup>, they still had space only for the most urgently needed supplies. The worst bottleneck was in the supply of aviation gasoline. The tanker fleet was too slow and too small. Moreover, the storage tanks at the Piraeus were equipped with highly inefficient pumping facilities - with a capacity of only 600 barrels per day<sup>136</sup>. There were no gasoline trucks available for transport from the harbor to the airfields. As a result, the gasoline had to be pumped from the ship into barrels (see the photograph on the following page), loaded into vehicles, and driven to the airfields. There the aircraft had to be refueled by hand - a very time-consuming affair.

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133 - W. Gaul, "Operation MERKUR", in "Europäische Sicherheit" (European Security), Issue 4, 1951, page 3.

134 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 7.

135 - The Headquarters, XI Air Corps, had been assigned only a "staff, senior column commander" (Stab eines höheren Kolonnenführers) under Generalmajor von Mackensen. The Air Corps had to provide the vehicles.



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136 - Generalmajor Seibt, report dated July 1945, page 12 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

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## PHOTOGRAPH

Gasoline requirements for the XI Air Corps had been computed on the basis of the following factors<sup>137</sup>:

1. The average distance between Greece and Crete is 220 miles.
2. Each Ju-52 needed 530 gallons for each trip, both ways.
3. Thus, approximately 500 transport aircraft would need nearly a

quarter of a million gallons for one single mission (208,030 gallons, to be exact).

4. Ideally, at the time the operation started, there should be enough gasoline available at the airfield to guarantee that each aircraft could fly a minimum of three missions. In other words, nearly three quarters of a million gallons would have to be delivered and stored in the primitive fashion just described. The shortest distance between harbor and airfield was nineteen miles; the longest, 155 miles.

5. All in all, the transport aircraft would fly an approximate total of ten missions each<sup>138</sup>.

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137 - Summary prepared by the author on the basis of the sources consulted, in particular the study by Lt. Col Hornung, "Fallschirm- und Luftlandeeinsatz Kreta" (The Employment of Parachute and Air Landing Forces on Crete), 20 March 1955, page 37 ff. Hornung's figures on gasoline consumption are based on 0.594 gallon of B-4 fuel (87 octane) per 0.621 mile for a Ju-52 with three MBW-132 engines.

138 - According to the War Diary of General Conrad, the aircraft participating in Operation MERKUR used 21,100 cubic feet of gasoline, or 26,885 barrels of 53-gallon capacity, during the period 20 through 31 May 1941. Author's Note: It was not only the distance between central Greece and Crete which had to be covered. The haze and dust clouds hanging over the airfields in Greece frequently forced the transport aircraft to circle about for hours (personally experienced by the author!) waiting



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138 - (cont) until the rest of the unit had assembled so that the actual flight could begin. The same thing (i.e. circling above the airfield) was true of the landing after the return flight. As far as Crete was concerned, conditions were not much different. During the transport of the Mountain Infantry Division to Malemes, landing frequency was no more than one aircraft every five minutes.



There was no possibility of bringing in the gasoline by air before the operation, because all the Ju-52's were urgently needed to participate in the air landing itself.

Gasoline was transported by ship to the Piraeus and Corinth over two different routes:

1. from Rumania ( Constanza) through the Aegean,
2. from Italy through the Corinth Canal.

The unfortunate explosion of 26 April 1941 had demolished the bridge over the Canal, and some of the debris was still blocking the Channel. Divers with underwater tools had to be brought in to remove it and to clear a passageway for ships. The Greek divers were unable to accomplish the job, so German personnel from Kiel with better equipment were brought in by air; they began work on 15 May 1941<sup>139</sup>.

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139 - Generalmajor Seibt, report dated July 1945, page 19 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

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In their preparations for the air landing on Crete, the XI Air Corps and the flying units concerned were dependent upon a poorly organized and numerically weak ground organization in a country which had just come into German hands. And inasmuch as the Fourth Air Fleet, given over-all responsibility for Operation MERKUR, was simultaneously engaged in preparations for the coming campaign in Russia, there was little hope of ameliorating the situation in Greece. Most of the work was done by prisoners without adequate supervision - by hand, without tools of any kind.

The airfields and roads suffered particularly from the lack of an adequate ground supporting organization. Only three advanced airfield commands from the VIII Air Corps had any kind of ground service system at all.

"The two Air Corps had to take over ground organization services themselves"<sup>140</sup>.

This meant additional improvisation! For example, an older Army officer assigned to one of the perfectly inadequate fields as airfield commander had the runway leveled off with ploughs and harrows - the result was such a dense pall of dust that it was impossible for aircraft to take off in quick succession for close formation flight...<sup>141</sup>.

"The airfields were deserts in which the heavily laden aircraft sank in up to their axles in fine, powdery sand."<sup>142</sup> Whenever an aircraft took off or landed, it was enveloped in clouds of dust rising as high as 3,300 feet,

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140 - Quoted from the Fourth Air Fleet's Report on Crete, page 3. This passing the buck for responsibility of one of the most important functions of an air fleet naturally led to friction rather than to cooperation - as the comment clearly indicates.

141 - Based on a report to the author by Colonel H. Goetzel. Col. Goetzel was a member of the group responsible for reconnoitering airfields for the XI Air Corps (stationed at Topolia).

142 - Generalleutnant Ruediger von Heyking, Study No. 638, "Einsatz Kreta des K.G.z.b.V. 2" (Employment of the 2d Special Duty Bomber Wing in Crete), page 3 ff.

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and hanging over the airfield in the dry heat of the windless valleys.

The dust could be laid somewhat by fire-fighter platoons and sprinkler trucks to wet down the roads, but relief was very shortlived. The overcrowded conditions at the majority of the airfields were bound to have a detrimental effect on the accomplishment of the operation. Most of the fields were so small that only one squadron could take off in quick succession at a time<sup>143</sup>. As practice take-offs revealed, it took seventeen minutes for the dust to settle sufficiently and visibility to improve enough for the next take-off. It took over an hour before a transport wing whose aircraft took off from two different fields was fully assembled in the air and ready to begin its flight. These practice take-offs proved to be necessary to permit computation of the time needed to get a unit into the air, in formation, and on the way to its appointed target.

It was nothing less than miraculous that the aircraft engines, though covered with a thick coat of red sand, managed to stand up under the strain.

On 16 May 1941 three ships docked at the Piraeus with supplies for the troops fighting in Crete. Since these supplies were not in pre-packed air drop containers<sup>144</sup>, they had to be packed for transport by untrained personnel unfamiliar with the proper techniques for packing such items as ammunition, food, drinking water, etc. The packing of air drop containers requires practice and skill (see the photograph on the following page) in order to assure that the supplies packed will arrive at their final destination in fully serviceable condition.

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143 - Generalleutnant von Heyking, study No. 638, page 5.

144 - Even since August 1940, nearly all the pre-packed containers had been stored at Laon in preparation for Operation SEELOEWE (Sealion).

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## PHOTOGRAPH

Two possible methods were taken under consideration for the delivery of supplies to the troops, viz:

1. the immediate initiation of air supply operations from the airfield at Megara (the airfield lying closest to the warehouses of the Piraeus),
2. the use of light and, later on, heavy vessels.

The second method, of course, presupposed the capture of suitable harbors on the northern coast of Crete, particularly Iraklion and Chania, and later on of the harbor at Suda Bay. As a result, a small naval group was detached to accompany the first air landing unit to Crete in order to reconnoiter the harbors and to set up



suitable unloading areas<sup>145</sup>.

The fleet of "light" transport ships (i.e. the motor boats) was loaded with the gear which the parachute regiments had not been able to take with them<sup>146</sup> - weapons, ammunition, signal equipment, medical supplies, motor-cycles, etc. - rather than with the usual type of supplies. The heavy transport ships were to bring over such items as tanks, artillery pieces, anti-aircraft guns, ammunition, motor vehicles, etc.

Time was too short to fit the troops with light-weight tropical clothing. Thus the paratroopers landed in Crete in their heavy jump suits - woollen trousers, heavy shirts, overalls, arm and leg pads. This uniform was hardly adapted to the climatic conditions of the south, and it proved a considerable hindrance to its wearers in the accomplishment of their mission<sup>147</sup>.

During the pre-employment medical orientation of the troops, the greatest emphasis was placed on the prevention of malaria. Portable water filters were brought from the Army supply depot at the Piraeus in a concentrated effort to obviate the spread of dysentery and other tropical diseases. The spirit of cooperation existing between the Luftwaffe and Army medical authorities in their joint work to preserve the health and fighting ability of the landing force was exemplary. Whenever additional medicine, medical personnel, or equipment were needed, a Ju-52 was dispatched to the home area and the required items were made immediately available<sup>148</sup>.

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145 - Generalmajor Seibt, study dated July 1945, page 7; the naval group was under the command of Lt Senior Grade (Kapitaenleutnant) Bartels.

146 - Meindl Group, Operations Branch Report No. 104-41, classified, 13 May 1941, paragraph 1 ff.

147 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, Report No. 1839/41, classified, 2 October 1941, page 7.

148 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, Diaries as edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 11 ff.

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The difficulties involved in establishing an adequate signal communications system could not be overcome so easily. The available manpower and equipment was simply not sufficient to restore such a large area, so recently devastated by war that everything had to be built up from scratch. The signal regiments of the Fourth Air Fleet were already working on preparations for the Russian theater of war and could not be spared for Greece; the signal units belonging to the two Air Corps were already overburdened<sup>149</sup>. Sabotage by enemy agents was frequent and effective and communications lines were often disrupted just when they were most vitally needed. Here, too, the lack of personnel and equipment made it impossible to ameliorate the situation.

In the remote and mountainous section of Greece, signal communications lines had to bridge enormously long distances in order to connect the many units operating there with their headquarters and with each other. The need for a effective wire communications system was all the more urgent, inasmuch as the danger of enemy monitoring made radio communication inadvisable during the assembly and deployment of the invasion force.

The headquarters staffs of both the VIII and the XI Air Corps were located in Athens (though not in the same part of the city), while the Fourth Air Fleet had detached only a small advance staff to the Greek capital. On 9 May 1941<sup>150</sup> the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff arrived at Fourth Air Fleet headquarters, reducing to a minimum the delay involved in obtaining top-level decisions. The communications system hurriedly set up to serve the flying units and the troops assigned to the various airfields proved highly unsatisfactory and even during the first few days of operations led to unpleasant and far-reaching friction<sup>151</sup>. The lack of a

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149 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, pages 2 and 3.

150 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 3, paragraph 6.

151 - Chapter 8, Section 3, 1, of the present study.



signal communications company with the express and exclusive mission of serving the Greek airfield area (actually a responsibility of the Fourth Air Fleet) made itself painfully felt. Instead, the 41st Signal Battalion, XI Air Corps, was forced to furnish the personnel needed to establish and maintain the communications network<sup>152</sup>.

The antiaircraft artillery forces suffered from a similar shortage in personnel and equipment. And in view of the large number of targets in the troop assembly area which required protection from enemy air raids, their mission was almost impossible of accomplishment. Within the assembly and take-off areas assigned to the two Air Corps (in central and southern Greece), there were only sixteen heavy and seventeen light antiaircraft artillery batteries available to defend a total of fifteen airfields as well as the harbors of the Piraeus and Corinth<sup>153</sup>. Searchlights were not to be had. In order to provide some sort of protection against low-altitude raids on the airfields and tenting areas, the troops had to furnish and man their own machine guns.

During the day the enemy aircraft steered clear of the Greek mainland as a rule. It was chiefly the British night raids that caused the damage; the losses suffered by the VIII Air Corps, especially, were very high<sup>154</sup>.

#### Summary

A well equipped take-off area is of vital importance to the success of an air landing operation. The take-off area for Operation MERKUR, located in a part of Greece which was still in enemy hands at the time the first operational orders were issued and

152 - Generalmajor Seibi, study dated July 1945, page 15.

153 - See Appendix 3 of the Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete (The Employment of Antiaircraft Artillery in the Troop Assembly Area").

154 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 13. In accordance with this source, the British carried



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154 - (cont) out a twin-engine fighter raid on the airfields in the vicinity of Athens on 17 May 1941. Five German aircraft were destroyed and thirty-eight damaged! The attack took place during the night...



the troops were beginning preparations for the move to their assigned assembly points, was by far the worst yet encountered since the beginning of the war. Its many inadequacies were bound to have an adverse influence on the course of the events. Its poorly equipped airfields and its appalling lack of aerotechnical service facilities made the take-off one of the most exasperating factors of the entire operation against Crete<sup>155</sup>.

There was no clear division of responsibility among the supply units of the XI Air Corps. Instead of their being separated into two over-all groups, one to handle supply services in the take-off area and the other to arrange for supply reinforcements into the target area, a single agency was responsible for both functions<sup>156</sup>. The inevitable result was a high degree of improvisation.

The uncertainty of the gasoline supply was a source of danger for the entire operation. If the enemy should employ unexpectedly large air and naval forces to repel the invasion, any bottleneck in the gasoline supply line could spell automatic failure for the attackers.

Due to the fact that they were so overburdened with secondary and even trivial problems during the preparatory period, the air transport units, the parachute forces, and the air landing troops had little opportunity to prepare themselves psychologically for the coming operation.

#### Section 5 - Postponement of the Original Invasion Deadline.

Hitler had set 15 May 1941 as the date for launching the operation against Crete<sup>157</sup>. The belated arrival of the supply ships and the difficulties

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155 - General Student, at a command conference held on 25 September 1941.

See Appendix Volume II, page 3, paragraph 2.

156 - This agency was the Office of the Quartermaster, XI Air Corps (Lt. Colonel Seibt).

157 - See page of the Introduction to the present study.

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encountered in moving adequate stores of aviation gasoline to the take-off airfields necessitated postponement of the original deadline - first until 18 May and then until 20 May. The two factors just named were of such vital importance that it was unthinkable that the offensive could be launched so long as they were still unsettled.

Did this postponement represent an advantage or a disadvantage as far as the strength of the invader's position was concerned? There are two diametrically opposed views in this connection.

1. Generaloberst Student is of the opinion that the invasion of Crete would have been far easier if it had been undertaken at a later date<sup>158</sup>.

"The heavy increase in shipping traffic in Suda Bay, noted by our reconnaissance aircraft at the end of April 1941, was due to purely technical reasons.

It represented nothing more than an intermediate stop-over for the British troops which had been expelled from Greece and were on their way to Palestine or Egypt for reformation. They were prevented from leaving the island by the growing intensity of the air attacks carried out by von Richthofen's forces ... Thus the German attacks had the effect of holding a strong enemy force on Crete against its will. Finally, as it became apparent that a German invasion of the island was in the offing, no further attempts to move these troops were made. Obviously, the German invasion of Crete was just a few weeks too early!"

2. The VIII Air Corps<sup>159</sup> continues to defend the view that every single day's

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158 - See "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), special issue dated May 1953, "Crete, the Turning Point for Germany's Parachute Forces", page 3.

159 - As one of a number of examples, the reader is referred to a letter to the author from General der Flieger Rudolf Meister, Retired, (dated 7 July 1956). A more detailed account of the difficulties and conflicts among high-level command agencies will be found in Chapter 6 of the present study.

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delay in the parachute landing would give the enemy additional time in which to organize the defenses of the island, to provide the troops fleeing from the Greek mainland with new supplies of weapons and ammunition, and even to bring in additional forces from Egypt.

When it became known that the island's defenses had been placed under the command of General Freyberg, a highly competent officer from New Zealand<sup>160</sup>, German planners could hardly assume that an officer of such renowned capabilities would be appointed merely to clear the island and to expedite the transfer of the British troops to Egypt and Syria. Then, too, Churchill - as Great Britain's Premier - was a devotee of the World War I concept of planning, namely that an invasion of the European mainland could best be accomplished from the southeastern Mediterranean<sup>161</sup>. Only uncontested possession of the island of Crete could offer the British a chance to try out this theory during World War II.

It was undeniable that any delay in the launching of the attack served to strengthen the enemy's defenses. Even so, there were a number of advantages inherent in postponement, viz:

The constant bombardments and low-altitude harrassing raids carried out by the VIII Air Corps helped to weaken the morale of the defenders. In addition, the intensity of the German attacks forced the majority of the enemy air forces stationed on Crete to withdraw

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160 - D. M. Daving, Crete, London 1953, page 41 ff.

161 - Examples of this concept were the British landing at Gallipolli (on the Dardanelles) in April 1915 and the Anglo-French landing at Salonica in October 1917 (?).

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to Egypt<sup>162</sup>, so that there was hardly any enemy fighter defense by the time the paratrooper invasion began.

The delay gave the ground forces extra time to accustom themselves to the subtropical climate, and to perfect their preparations for the operation. Nevertheless, compared with the six months of preparation for the occupation of Fort Eben Emael, the period available in the case of the Crete landing was far too short.

A further advantage in postponement lay in the off-chance that additional information regarding the enemy situation might be received during the days between deadlines, that the aerial reconnaissance forces and agents might bring in new and important data. As a matter of fact, a number of corrections were made in the aerial photographs already on hand. In one instance, the reports of agents familiar with the island were instrumental in identifying a horseshoe-form line of structures, assumed to be antiaircraft artillery or machine gun positions, as lime kilns<sup>163</sup>. The agents also uniformly reported that the British showed no signs of reducing troop strength on the island (17 May 1941).

The ground situation was also subjected to reappraisal and correction. According to agent reports, large-scale tenting areas (near Skines and Furnes, southwest of Chania) which had been presumed to harbor British forces were in reality occupied by Italian prisoners of war.

The enemy air force on the island had been reduced from thirty-nine to thirty-three aircraft<sup>164</sup>. The German air situation reports mention the occasional appearance of Bristol-Beaufighters and Hurricanes. German air attacks on Suda Bay were met

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162 - Based on a letter from General der Flieger Meister to the author, page 2, paragraph I.



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163 - Hqs, XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Enemy Data Sheet No. 3, I, c,

dated 17 May 1941. Compilations of data on the enemy situation by the Fourth Air Fleet and the VIII Air Corps are not available for reference.

164 - Based on comparison of the Enemy Data Sheets (Hqs, XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch) for 14 <sup>May</sup> 1941 (No. 2) and 17 May 1941 (No. 3).



by strongly concentrated antiaircraft artillery of all calibers.

Reports on the development of the naval situation during the period between the original deadline and the newly established one indicate that mines were laid along the northern coast of the island toward off even small boats<sup>165</sup>. German aerial reconnaissance units noticed a sharp increase in shipping traffic in the harbors on the southern coast of the island, especially at Ierapetra. It could not be determined whether loading or unloading operations were in progress or whether the cargo consisted of troops, foodstuffs, or other supplies<sup>166</sup>.

On the whole, it would seem that the postponement of the original invasion date by a few days had relatively little influence on the course of events. The important thing, of course, was to make certain that all the fighting in the Balkan theater of operations (including the invasion of Crete) should be concluded prior to the beginning of the campaign against Soviet Russia (scheduled for 22 June 1941).

This was clearly a prerequisite, for each unit tied down elsewhere by operational necessity meant a reduction in the striking power marshalled to destroy the Russian enemy as rapidly as possible. It is difficult to judge the extent to which this might have applied to the parachute and air landing forces, for there is no way of telling where and under what circumstances their employment during the initial phase of the Russian campaign could have led to an ultimately successful outcome<sup>167</sup>.

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165 - Hqs, XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Enemy Data Sheet, No. 3, II, e.

166 - Hqs XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Enemy Data Sheet No. 3, 2, d (pertaining to the landing of reinforcements) and D.M. Davis, Crete, page 76 ff (British and German Preparations).

167 - General Meindl, Memorandum "Einsatz der Fallschirm- und Luftlandetruppen im Osten" (The Employment of Parachute and Air Landing Forces on the Eastern Front), 11 March 1942, Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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## CHAPTER VII

## The Pre-Invasion Softening-Up by the VIII Air Corps.

The period during which the VIII Air Corps carried out attacks on Crete designed to prepare the way for the parachute and air landing operation extended from 3 May<sup>168</sup> through the early morning hours of 20 May 1941.

It was clear that this battle between the air force of a continental power and the island base of a sea power would have to be carried on even after the island had changed hands<sup>169</sup>, and it was equally clear that its ramifications would reach out far beyond the Aegean<sup>170</sup>.

Even a much stronger air landing force would have been shot to pieces by battle ship and cruiser-based enemy artillery if the German Luftwaffe had not succeeded in clearing the waters around the island of all enemy naval forces. In the beginning this was the case only during the daylight hours; later on, when German and even Italian air units began to participate in operations

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168 - The most important source in the preparation of Chapter 6 of this study is the War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen as edited by Colonel Deichmann. The following is quoted from page 5 thereof:

"...on 3 May 1941 we bombarded Suda Bay, where five warships and sixteen merchant ships were lying at anchor."

169 - General A. Wittmann, in the operational reports of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, compiled in issues 1 through 3 of the monthly publication "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry). See issue 1, 1954, page 27 ff.

170 - The book Wir Kämpften auf dem Balkan - VIII Fliegerkorps (We fought in the Balkans - VIII Air Corps), compiled by Captain Freiherr von Heintze, Dr. Guentz, Dresden, 1941, presents a copiously illustrated report of the exploits of the VIII Air Corps in the Aegean and on Crete.

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from bases located on the island itself or at Scarpanto, and when Italian pocket battleships began to force their way into Suda Bay, the enemy naval forces were expelled from the Aegean and the Straits of Caso, at the eastern edge of Crete, were blocked to sea traffic<sup>171</sup>.

The attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps on the island of Crete and the coastal waters surrounding it can be divided into several separate phases.

Section 1 - Disruption of the Enemy's Preparations for the Defense of the  
Island.

1. Attacks on the antiaircraft positions set up at the potential landing areas<sup>172</sup>.

Transport aircraft flying at an altitude from 330 to 490 feet and at the relatively slow speed required for releasing parachute forces are inevitably a highly vulnerable target of almost barndoor size for enemy antiaircraft artillery of all calibers. Accordingly, the chief mission of the VIII Air Corps' dive bombers was to eliminate enemy antiaircraft artillery emplacements located near the airfields and at the paratrooper release points. The high degree of effectiveness achieved by the VIII Air Corps is apparent when we note that only seven Ju-52's (out of a total of approximately 500) were lost as a result of antiaircraft artillery fire during the entire operation on Crete<sup>173</sup>, and this in spite of the fact that enemy preparations in this regard were extremely thorough.

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171 - General Domenico Ludovico, report in "Revista Aeronautica" (Aeronautics Magazine), Volume XXVI, No. 7, 1950, page 15 (of the photocopy).

172 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 14, paragraph 2, mentions the elimination of enemy antiaircraft defenses at the paratrooper landing areas as the most vital goal for the supporting air units. The XI Air Corps' Report (Part I, pages 14 and 15) states that the invasion of Crete on 14 May 1941 was immediately preceded by an air raid to eliminate enemy antiaircraft artillery batteries.



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173 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 15, paragraph II. There is no breakdown available for the figure of 143 Ju-52's lost during Operation MERKUR (given by General Conrad in his War Diary). In this context, the reader is referred to Appendix V of the study by W. Hornung dated 20 March 1955, Karlsruhe Document Collection

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The VIII Air Corps faced an even more frustrating situation than the XI Air Corps as regarded the procurement of aviation gasoline, ammunition, etc. The first item to become unavailable was bombs<sup>174</sup>. For the most part, the supply line was maintained by air transport (carried out by the VIII Air Corps itself) as far as the take-off bases<sup>175</sup>.

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174 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, as edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 8.

175 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, as edited by Colonel Deichmann. The following is quoted from page 59: "In evaluating the success of the VIII Air Corps in Crete, we must give due credit to the transport units - the Beckmann group. They were faced with tremendous distances between the supply bases and the advanced operational airfields being used by the VIII Air Corps, and these distances had to be covered under incredibly bad weather conditions and with appallingly little support in the way of adequate aerotechnical services.

Our flying units were absolutely dependent upon the supply runs flown by the transport aircraft. All of our aircraft - dive bombers, single-engine fighters, ground support aircraft, twin-engine fighters, bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft - would have been grounded without them. The average distance covered by each transport aircraft each day was 1250 miles.

The air transport group chalked up a total mileage of 1,250,000. (In the opinion of the author, this figure must include the miles flown during the Balkan campaign as well; there seems to be no distinction made between the Balkan campaign and the operation on Crete). During this period they transported more than 1,102,300 lbs. of bombs, 3,968,316 lbs. of miscellaneous supplies, and 3,762,385 lbs. of aviation gasoline and aircraft lubricants."

In addition, the majority of the ground organization personnel were also moved by air.

During the preliminary operations in Crete, the air transport group was charged with responsibility <sup>for</sup> of the initial equipment as well as the continuing supply of the airfields located on the islands of Rhodes and Scarpanto.

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2. Attacks by Bomber aircraft on the bivouac area south of Malemes (near Chania).

There are very few military barracks in Crete and the ones which exist (at Iraklion, Rethymon, Chania, and Suda Bay) are extremely small. As a result, the majority of the British and Greek troops on Crete were lodged in bivouac areas and provisional barracks in the vicinity of the potential parachute and air landing points along the northern coast. The scattered and primitive native settlements were obviously incapable of offering billets fulfilling even minimum hygienic requirements<sup>176</sup>. The units of the VIII Air Corps, relying partly on intelligence data and partly on pure intuition, subjected these billeting areas to constant bombardment in an attempt to weaken enemy strength<sup>177</sup>.

The bombardments, in turn, were inextricably connected with:

3. Attempts to disrupt enemy communications.

In an effort to cut off the defending troops from their command headquarters, the roads leading to and from the larger towns and cities were blocked by bombardment<sup>178</sup>. This goal was commensurate with the thinking that the attack plan of the XI Air Corps would lead automatically to success provided that the enemy could be prevented from shifting his defense forces from one point to another during the first day of the air landing operation<sup>179</sup>. Nonetheless, the success of the attacks carried out by the

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176 - In the recollection of the author, who spent several weeks on Crete (most of them in a tent), the houses inhabited by the rural population of the island were usually of clean and inviting appearance, despite the fact that they abounded in bugs of all varieties. The private villas of wealthy merchants were occasionally commandeered as billets for staff personnel or as hospital buildings.

177 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 14.

178 - These attacks were, for the most part, complete and utter fiascos! The



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178 - (cont) British, warned in plenty of time by their smoothly-functioning aircraft warning network (which included ship-based observation stations - equipped with radio - in the Aegean Sea north of Crete), were able to reach their previously prepared dug-outs before the bombs began to fall. The reader is also referred to C.M. Davin, Crete, Chapter 12, page 456 ff.

179 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, Section C, page 14.

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VIII Air Corps was won at the price of a fairly serious risk if we consider the amount of guesswork involved in the official evaluation of the enemy situation<sup>180</sup>.

As a result of other, inviolable deadlines, both time and ammunition were in relatively short supply<sup>181</sup>, which made it extremely difficult to complete the preliminary preparations for Operation MERKUR. As General von Richthofen expresses it, "... every single bomb had to be subjected to the most grudging scrutiny before it was free to be utilized."

Section 2 - The Expulsion of the Alexandrian Fleet from the Waters north of Crete (the reader is also referred to page ff).

"... Finally, on 22 May, we received a report to the effect that the contingent based in Alexandria (consisting of two battleships, one aircraft carrier, four cruisers, and fifteen destroyers) was on its way to Crete..."<sup>182</sup>. These brief statement gives full expression to the uneasiness felt by the majority of clear-thinking military experts. The parachute and air landing forces could probably be brought to Crete with little or no difficulty. But how would they be able to hold their own if ocean supply lines should be disrupted?

The paratrooper units, who had already experienced British ship-based artillery (Narvik, 1940), issued special combat orders<sup>183</sup>. Any intervention on the part of the very strong British naval units,

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180 - The following statement appears in Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen's diary under date of 17 May 1941: "Even today we have absolutely no definite information regarding the strength and will to resist of the defending force on Crete..."

181 - See the diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, page 13; General Jeschonnek, Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, insisted that preparations be cut short.

182 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, War Diary, page 16 ff.



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183 - Meindl Group, Operations Branch, Order No. 102/41, dated 14 May 1941, classified, paragraph 8. This order contains the following instructions:  
"The air landing force is to seek cover against the cliffs rising from sea in case of ship-based enemy fire. Naval artillery is relatively powerless against narrow-mouthed foxholes..."

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reinforced by additional units summoned from Malta or Cyprus, must be prevented at all costs by means of attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps<sup>184</sup>. The Italian naval forces stationed in the Aegean were not equipped to provide really effective protection. They had six torpedo boats based at Scarpanto and Rhodes, which were to operate together with a force of German dive-bombers to block the Cavo Straits, on the eastern coast of Crete. As was inevitable in view of the vastly superior British strength, they failed miserably in the beginning.

German military leaders were, as a matter of fact, fully aware of these developments; however, they were firmly convinced of the fact that the British aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean (Formidable<sup>185</sup>, Ark Royal, Argus, Furious, and Victorious<sup>186</sup>), which would have represented a very serious danger, would not be committed in the battle for Crete because of their extreme vulnerability. Even a minor hit, serious enough to damage the take-off deck, was capable of putting an aircraft carrier out of action for a fairly long time. During the period in question, the British carriers were engaged in transporting troops and aircraft to the Near East<sup>187</sup>.

The area of operations assigned to the VIII Air Corps in the eastern Mediterranean, i.e. over the waters surrounding the island of Crete, encompassed a number of focal points for action against the Royal Navy.

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184 - Especially since the X Air Corps was still stationed in Sicily at that time.

185 - The Formidable was badly hit by German dive-bombers from the 2d Dive-Bomber Wing (based in Africa) northwest of Alexandria on 26 May and was put out of action as far as operations in the Mediterranean were concerned.

186 - The War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, page 10 ff.

187 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen's War Diary makes special mention (pages 16 and 17) of the transport of 140 Hurricanes and 18 Fulmars to the Near East in early May 1941. In this connection, see also Churchill, op.cit., page 292: "How fortunate that the HMS Formidable was not sent into action - she would surely have been sunk ..."

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1. Heavily-armed and fast-moving British naval units, including submarines, were stationed directly north of Crete, presumably with orders to head off any force attempting to invade the island from the sea and to hold any enemy force landed by air under constant fire.

2. The British supply line, the only route by which troops, ammunition, weapons, and other supplies could be brought in to reinforce the island's garrison, ran along the southern coast of Crete.

3. Crete's harbors, particularly Suda Bay, were of great importance to the British forces.

British naval operations, under the direction of Admiral Cunningham, encircled the island of Crete from the east and west, the naval units approaching by way of the Straits of Case, on the one side, and Cythera, on the other. In addition, the battleships Warspite and Valiant, protected by an escort of eight destroyers, were anchored northwest of Crete under the command of Admiral Hawlings, ready to meet the anticipated intervention of the Italian navy<sup>188</sup>.

The British fleet, despite its superior strength, was at a distinct disadvantage in that the British air bases in the Near East were too far away to permit direct air support. In addition, the "closely limited" area of operation and the weather conditions obtaining therein<sup>189</sup> also proved to be unfavorable factors for the British. The prevailing haze and light cloud cover served to assist the VIII Air Corps in its attacks. Moreover, the British naval forces were close to exhaustion<sup>190</sup> inasmuch as they had been on uninterrupted duty in the Mediterranean theater since the end of February, i.e. since the start of operations in Greece.

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188 - Churchill, op.cit., page 287.

189 - Churchill, op.cit., page 292 ff.

190 - Based on a report from the British Commander in Chief in the Mediterranean to the Admiralty (Churchill, op.cit.).

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On the other hand, we must take into consideration the fact that the VIII Air Corps, as a "ground support force", was entirely unfamiliar with its new mission of combatting enemy forces at sea. Furthermore, the relatively limited range of the aircraft model in use at that time made the long approach flight over the Aegean somewhat of a trial for the crews.

The "softening" air attacks carried out against Crete by the VIII Air Corps during the last half of May 1941, had the approximate effect of a blockade of the island. Less than 3,000 of the 27,000 tons of supplies which the British attempted to ship to the island were successfully landed<sup>191</sup>. In addition, the problem of landing troop reinforcements became more and more difficult as the VIII Air Corps attacks became more intense.

General Freyberg, in command of the defending force, was convinced that his troops were adequate to their mission provided that they could be reinforced with weapons and vehicles landed on the island<sup>192</sup>. It was due to the dive-bombers and bombers of the VIII Air Corps that these reinforcements did not reach Crete.

On 18 May 1941, Suda Bay was subjected to bombardment by three bomber groups from the VIII Air Corps<sup>193</sup>. All the enemy ships lying at anchor in the harbor were hit by German bombs; the cruiser York exploded. The port area was so covered with smoke and haze that pinpoint bombardment was out of the question.

The air landing on Crete would have been quite impossible without the successful operations of the VIII Air Corps against the British naval forces.

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191 - Churchill, op.cit., page 278.

192 - Churchill, op.cit., page 281.

193 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, page 15.

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Section 3 - Achievement of Air Supremacy over the Aegean.

Enemy air attack represented the most serious danger during the relatively slow approach flight of the German transport aircraft to the island of Crete and during the landing of parachute forces over the island. Accordingly, the elimination of the enemy aircraft based on Crete (insofar as possible) was incorporated into preliminary planning.

Air supremacy over the island, at least during the daylight hours, was reckoned to be of primary importance to the successful outcome of the air landing operation.

As of 1 May 1941, there were six British Hurricanes and seventeen "old-fashioned" aircraft based at the airfields of Crete<sup>194</sup>. These air forces were strengthened during early May, so that by the time the German air attacks began, the island harbored twelve Blenheims, six Hurricanes, twelve Gladiators, and six Fulmars and Brewsters combined<sup>195</sup>. According to reports, however, only 50% of these aircraft were actually operable. The majority of the enemy aircraft were based at Iraklion; only the fighters utilized Malemes and Rethymon as take-off fields.

The enemy aircraft strength must have been subject to constant fluctuation, for it is extremely unlikely that the forces detailed above could have carried out the frequently mentioned bombardment of the Greek take-off bases utilized by the VIII and XI Air Corps<sup>196</sup>.

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194 - Churchill, op.cit., page 274.

195 - Churchill, op.cit., page 279 ff.

196 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, pages 14 and 15. The entry for 18 May 1941: "Our airfield is attacked during the night by a force of fifteen British bombers ..."

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We can only assume that Crete was utilized as an intermediate landing field for British air units stationed in Egypt and charged with the accomplishment of air attacks on the European Continent.

Beginning with 18 May 1941, the VIII Air Corps concentrated its operations on the three airfields of Crete. All day long, small bands carried out harassing attacks on the British air bases on the island. A total of fifteen British machines was destroyed - with no German losses whatsoever<sup>197</sup>.

Before long the British had no alternative but to reorganize their hopeless inferiority in the air; in consequence, they transferred "the remaining aircraft" to bases in Egypt<sup>198</sup>.

#### Summary

There are various views regarding the effectiveness of the attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps, insofar as they concerned the island itself.

"... we know less than nothing about the enemy situation. We never hear anything but rumors, and we know well enough how much faith can be attached to those".<sup>199</sup>

"... since the bomber pilots had no exact information as to the British defense positions, any hits achieved were the result of pure luck. The over-all effectiveness, as a result, was comparatively slight ..."<sup>200</sup>

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197 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, War Diary, page 15.

198 - Churchill, op.cit., page 279.

199 - General der Gebirgstruppen Julius Ringel, Retired, "Hurra, die Gams!" (Three Cheers for the Goat!), in praise of the exploits of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, Leopold Stocker, Graz and Goettingen, November 1956, page 64.

200 - Ringel, op.cit., page 81.

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The two opinions just quoted are typical of the view held by the German Army. Representatives of the VIII Air Corps, however, were just as firmly convinced of the efficacy of the operations they had carried out. "... this (i.e. air attack) was the only way in which the organization of Crete's defenses could be rendered more difficult and the fighting morale of the defending force subjected to systematic weakening".<sup>201</sup> It was due to the attacks of the VIII Air Corps that the majority of the enemy air forces withdrew to Egypt, as a result of which the German air landing operation encountered no fighter aircraft whatsoever.

Evaluation of aerial photographs of the island was of no value whatsoever. The mountainous character of the landscape, the haziness so characteristic of the island's weather conditions, and the relatively strong enemy antiaircraft artillery all combined to make it impossible for the German reconnaissance forces to obtain usable data, especially in view of the excellent camouflaging techniques employed by the enemy.

Suda Bay was full of sunken ships<sup>202</sup>, which created a great deal of difficulty for British naval maneuvers; these could be carried out only under cover of darkness in view of the ever-present threat of enemy air attack.

The preliminary battle between the German Luftwaffe and the British naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean found its culmination in the overwhelming success achieved by the VIII Air Corps. If this success had been properly exploited, the British position in the Mediterranean could have been considerably weakened<sup>203</sup>.

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201 - Based on a letter to the author from General der Flieger Rudolf Meister, Retired, under date of 7 July 1956, page 2, paragraph IV.

202 - The reader is also referred to D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 86: "List of ships sunk or damaged in Suda Bay - warships and merchant ships". During May 1941, nine warships were sunk, including one heavy cruiser. During the same period, approximately 50,000 tons of transport shipping, including one 10,000 ton oil tanker, were also destroyed.



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203 - Churchill, op.cit., page 304; also Chapter VIII, Section 4, page  
of the present study.

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## CHAPTER VIII

## The Order to Attack.

At the instigation of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe<sup>204</sup>, the special orders issued for Operation MERKUR<sup>205</sup> encompassed the following points:

1. The XI Air Corps, as a part of the first attack wave, was to take possession of the airfield at Malemes and the enemy strongholds at Chania and Suda Bay during the forenoon of the first day of operations (see the chart on the following page).

2. The second wave, to be flown during the afternoon of the first day of operations, was to capture the airfields at Iraklion and Rethymnon.

In order to carry out these missions effectively, the XI Air Corps divided its total available strength (i.e. its own parachute forces and the airborne infantry troops from the 5th Mountain Infantry Division) into three separate combat units, as follows:

1. Combat Group West, under the command of Generalmajor Meindl (Commanding General of the Storm Regiment), consisted of the Storm Regiment plus reinforcements.

2. Combat Group Center, led by Generalleutnant Suessmann (Commanding General, 7th Air Division), was composed of the 2d and 3d Parachute Regiments, corps and division specialized units, and one mountain infantry regiment. (Combat Group Center represented the focal point of operations as far as coordination of the whole was concerned - it was responsible for integrating movements in various part of the island.)

3. Combat Group East, under the leadership of Generalleutnant Ringel (Commanding General, 5th Mountain Infantry Division) was made up of the 1st Parachute Regiment and the majority of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division. (This was to be the point of main activity as far as the air landing itself was concerned.)



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204 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 13, paragraph II.

205 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operational Orders dated 12 May 1941,  
Attack Orders for Combat Group West, Operations Branch, File No. 120/  
1941, classified, dated 17 April 1941, etc.

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The German plan of attack for Crete had been worked out with painstaking care and with great attention to detail. Objectively speaking, there was no reason why the island could not be occupied in a sudden coup - provided there were no unforeseen difficulties to contend with.

Successful invasion of the island was based on the fact that there were three airfields available. If one of these should fail to be captured during the initial phase of the attack, there always remained the possibility of diverting German air traffic to one of the others which was already in German hands. In short, the invading force had three irons in the fire - one of them was bound to lead to success.

The invasion orders issued to the XI Air Corps made it unmistakably clear<sup>206</sup> that the island of Crete was to be brought under German control to serve as a base from which air warfare could be carried on over the eastern Mediterranean.

On the other hand, these orders make no mention whatsoever of a contemplated subsequent action against the Suez Canal or to relieve the troops fighting in North Africa. This is probably due to explicit orders from Hitler himself; as we have already pointed out, he considered the occupation of Crete a fitting conclusion to the Balkan campaign rather than the beginning of a new series of operations.

The orders dealt with the usual evaluation of the enemy situation with conspicuous brevity - for the simple reason that next to nothing could be discovered about it<sup>207</sup>.

The suggested plan of operation provided for the landing of the XI Air Corps in two waves for the following reasons:

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206 - Appendix 4, Operations Orders, XI Air Corps, dated 12 May 1941, page 1.

207 - Appendix 4, page 1, paragraph 2 (which refers to three enemy data sheets containing obsolete information).

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1. The available transport aircraft were not numerous enough to be able to land combat units at all the attack points at the same time, and
2. It was extremely important that the VIII Air Corps be on hand to provide effective air support during the thick of the struggle.

Germany's experience so far (especially that gained during the operations in Holland in 1940) had demonstrated clearly that one airfield was not enough for the accomplishment of a large-scale air landing operation<sup>208</sup>. Accordingly, the orders called for the simultaneous capture of a number of enemy airfields. All three - Malemes, Iraklion, and Rethymnon - were to be taken without delay<sup>209</sup>.

The missions to be accomplished by the three combat groups were as follows:

1. Combat Group West

In examining the contemplated plan of attack against the Cretan airfields, the observer is struck by the fact that it makes consistent use of the lessons taught by Germany's previous experience in the field of parachute and air landing operations. For example, strong advance "commando units"<sup>210</sup>, reinforced by paratroopers, were supposed to capture the most significant enemy positions by means of "surprise attacks"

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208 - These are Generaloberst Student's exact words, as appearing in his article in the special "Crete" number of "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), May 1955, page 2, column II.

209 - General der Gebirgstruppen Julius Ringel, op.cit., as a self-styled (page 58) "ground tactician of the old school", has the following to say: "There was only one possibility, and even that was an extremely hazardous one. All the same, it was far more pleasant to me and my fellow 'ground fighters' than leaping into the midst of the enemy without the advantage of surprise. That possibility was that the majority of the paratroopers should land on the relatively easily negotiable terrain southwest of Malemes and then proceed as a single, unified force against the smallest of the Cretan airfields. To be sure, the defenders would be in a position to bring up reinforcements along the northern coast



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209 - (cont) but in order to do so, they would be forced to depend upon the island's one east-west highway, and the latter was extremely vulnerable. If our German dive-bombers should succeed in destroying any section of it, the whole road would be rendered impassable to all wheeled traffic. Moreover, the constant danger of air attack prevented the defenders from using the road except under cover of darkness, while German air superiority enabled us to carry out any movements we pleased during the daylight hours. Subsequent events substantiated the accuracy of this evaluation of the situation..." (page 58).

210 - The "commando units" were special units from the Storm Regiment which were landed by freight glider.

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from the air. Freight gliders were to be sent directly into enemy positions in the vicinity of the airfield and into identified antiaircraft artillery and radio stations (eg. Eben Emael). Paratroopers were to be dropped in a ring, with defensive as well as offensive duties, around the target (see the diagram on the following page).

We have already mentioned the fact that the possibility of a surprise attack had been ruled out completely.

The Storm Regiment was to seize the airfield at Malemes at Y-hour, X-day <sup>211</sup>.

The orders go on to say that the VIII Air Corps was to provide air support for the Regiment in the form of bombardment attacks from Y-hour minus 30 to Y-hour <sup>212</sup>. At Y-hour, twenty-nine freight gliders from the I Battalion, Storm Regiment, were to land around and to the south of the airfield at the same time as the three other battalions from the Regiment were dropped by parachute in a semi-circle around the field.

The capture of the airfield at Malemes, as the opening wedge in the occupation of Crete, was to be effected during the first hour of the invasion by means of the encirclement action described above. The Storm Regiment appeared to be strong enough to spare almost an entire battalion for security and reconnaissance duties west of the airfield <sup>213</sup>, in order to head off anticipated counter-attacks from the west and the south. German intelligence had no data whatsoever available regarding the strength of the enemy forces stationed in the northwest corner of the island,

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211 - Y-hour was the moment at which the first wave was to appear over the target area.

212 - See Appendix 3.

213 - II Battalion, Storm Regiment, the unit to which the author belonged.

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in the Kastelli-Kisamos area. In addition, there was always the possibility that freshly landed enemy reinforcements could advance to the defense of Malemes from the southern part of Paleochora.

There were five distinct missions assigned to the Storm Regiment:

1. capture of the airfield at Malemes in a coup de main,
2. elimination of any obstacles to the coming landing of the Mountain Infantry troops,
3. securing the airfield and protecting it against enemy artillery fire,
4. armed reconnaissance to the west and the south, and
5. establishing and maintaining contact with Combat Group Center (Chania).

Once the first of the above goals had been achieved (capture of the airfield), the next mission was to keep it free of enemy harrassment on all sides.

The following missions were explicitly assigned<sup>214</sup>:

1. protection of the invasion force against enemy ship-based artillery fire,
2. surveillance of air cover, and
3. marking the line of advance for the operational planning of the German Luftwaffe.

The mobilization of the air landing force posed a serious problem. All the vehicles and beasts of burden captured on Crete were channeled through a central distribution depot, which assigned them to the various units in accordance with the priority of their missions.

Signal communications activity, antiaircraft defenses, and antitank defenses had to be coordinated orally among the responsible units of the invasion force, due to the

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214 - Appendix 3, page 3, paragraphs 5 through 7.

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uncertainty inherent in the necessary expedient of dropping the equipment involved by freight parachute (no guarantee that it would land at the proper point, that it would actually be recovered, or that it would not be damaged by the impact of landing).

Each paratrooper carried with him enough food to last for two days. After this, the air landing force was to find its subsistence on the island itself until such time as a smoothly functioning supply line could be established<sup>215</sup>.

We have at our disposal a detailed directive on the "Coordination between the Ground Forces and the VIII Air Corps"<sup>216</sup>. Among other things, this directive established uniform code designations to camouflage certain specific target areas during radio communication and a uniform sign language to guide in the planning of Luftwaffe supporting operations. For example, the following signs were used:

- + - staff
- × - supply drop point (for the air drop of supplies, ammunition, food, etc.)
- ^ - enemy resistance (with the apex pointing in the enemy's direction)
- ⋈ - enemy resistance in 4000 feet.

Each unit had been issued a series of "target maps"<sup>217</sup>. These helped a great deal in preventing mix-ups in target location; they had the added advantage of being overprinted in German, thus eliminating any confusion which might have arisen as a result of the Greek designations of geographical terms. All tactical

215 - Appendix 1 of the operational orders issued to the "Stentzler Group" (II Battalion, Storm Regiment), dated 18 May 1941, Karlsruhe Document Collection.

216 - This directive is included as Appendix 4 of the operational orders issued to the "Stentzler Group". The code designations and symbols



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216 - (cont) described were to be utilized by all air landing units, paratrooper forces, and mountain infantry troops.

217 - The author still has in his possession an authentic target map prepared for the invasion of Crete. The geographical names are printed in Greek, and the German translations, printed above the originals, often leave a great deal to be desired.

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instructions were issued exclusively in code in the interests of preserving the highest possible degree of secrecy.

The directive also prescribed preparations in the medical field, consisting of the assignment of responsible medical officers to each group, the establishment of field hospitals, and the development of a system for transporting the wounded from the island<sup>218</sup> by the following:

1. the emergency squadron assigned to the medical staff,
2. the transport aircraft
3. by ship.

The dangers of infectious tropical diseases were emphasized.

The special troop units belonging to the Corps, the Paratrooper Anti-aircraft Machine Gun Battalion, the 41st (motorized) Luftwaffe Signal Communications Battalion, etc., were distributed among the various groups (as the Paratrooper Medical Battalion had been) and were instructed to receive their orders from the group staff, most of these orders to be oral rather than written<sup>219</sup>.

During the initial phase of the battle there was little chance that the paratroopers would be able to organize a reserve force after landing. Even so, orders were issued to the effect that each group was to set aside a strongly armed force of battalion strength as a reserve for the Corps, once the initial mission had been accomplished<sup>220</sup>. It can be assumed (although this is not specifically mentioned in the directive) that these reserves were to be employed to clear things up in the interior of the island.

## 2. Combat Group Center

The attack orders for Generalleutnant Suessmann's Combat Group Center differed from those issued to the Combat Group West in that the strong force



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- 218 - Hq, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, IVb, File No. 1091/41, classified,  
dated 14 May 1941, "Special Instructions for the Medical Service".
- 219 - Hq, XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 9.
- 220 - Hq, XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 5a.
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scheduled for commitment in the Chania and Rethymnon areas could not be transported to Crete in a single wave; two flights were necessary. Thus, there was no possibility of taking the enemy by surprise in the middle sector of operations.

Making up the first wave, the 3d Parachute Regiment (under the command of Colonel Heidrich) was to be dropped in a broad valley lying some two miles southwest of Chania in the direction of Alikianu. Its mission was the destruction of any enemy troops encountered in the area and the elimination of the island's top military headquarters<sup>221</sup>.

Two companies from the Storm Regiment, equipped with twenty-four freight gliders, were detached to the 7th Air Division to seize the enemy antiaircraft artillery positions just east of Chania and a radio station located to the south of the city<sup>222</sup>. The Parachute Engineer Battalion, 7th Air Division, was given the task of capturing a reservoir and power station southwest of the operations area of the 3d Parachute Regiment (see the map on the following page). Here, too, the VIII Air Corps was expected to furnish strong air support.

The second wave, consisting of the 2d Parachute Regiment (under the command of Colonel Sturm), was to take possession of the airfield at Rethymnon as well as of the city itself. Inasmuch as the Regiment had only three relatively small combat units (their combined strength less than that of three battalions) to accomplish this mission, the closing paragraph of the order - to the effect that the Combat Group Center,

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221 - Hq, XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 3, paragraph 5b.

222 - These missions have been reconstructed from the XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 11, and from other combat reports. The documents of the 7th Air Division are inaccessible, many of them being located in the Soviet zone of occupation. Major Altmann assisted the author in the work of reconstruction.

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after completing its assigned mission, was to hold itself ready for further employment - seems rather pointless. This is a clear indication of the degree to which German planners underestimated the strength of the enemy and the importance of terrain and climate. The distance between Malemes and Chania was approximately sixteen miles, and from Chania to Rethymon an additional thirty-five. Yet the officers responsible for planning Operation MERKUR failed to give any consideration whatsoever to the poor road conditions, the relative lack of mobility of a paratrooper force, the danger of guerrilla fighters, and the debilitating effects of the climate.

One cannot escape the impression that Rethymon was included in the mission of the Combat Group Center solely to keep the airfield from being utilized by the enemy<sup>223</sup>.

Aerial reconnaissance had revealed the presence of a fairly large, bowl-shaped valley at Alikianu, southwest of Chania, which could be used as a landing field in the event that enemy bombardment should succeed in rendering the three regular airfields useless for any length of time. This raises the question of whether it might not have been wiser to drop both the 2d and the 3d Parachute Regiment over the Alikianu area. It is true, of course, that the valley was surrounded on all sides by steeply rising hills<sup>224</sup>. Thus, if it should turn out that the enemy had stationed a strong defense force in the hills, the valley would be a veritable trap.

Despite a number of serious reservations (chiefly because of the relative weakness of the available force, it was finally decided to go ahead with the Rethymon mission. The decision was no doubt influenced by the consideration that the capture of Rethymon would expedite the establishment of contact between Chania and Iraklion (a distance of more than sixty miles!)

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223 - This is the view held by the author.

224 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 12, Part II.

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### 3. Combat Group East

Iraklion, the target assigned to the Combat Group East, boasted the island's best equipped airfield. The plan envisioned the landing of the majority of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division to take the city and the port of Iraklion. Once these objectives were secured, sufficient forces would be detached to occupy St. Nicholas and Ierapetra on the southern coast<sup>225</sup>. In connection with the above plan, it was considered necessary to issue a special order emphasizing the importance of bringing in all captured vehicles (military and civilian), including trucks and busses, to increase the mobility of the landed force.

The parachute force, which was to take the airfield itself in the second attack wave (Y-hour plus eight), was made up of the 1st Parachute Regiment (under the command of Colonel Bräuer) and the II Battalion, 2d Parachute Regiment. Thus its total strength was somewhat less than four battalions.

Even assuming that everything went according to plan (that the first wave reached its goal without losses, that the transport aircraft completed their return flight smoothly and on schedule, that the second wave of transport aircraft managed to drop the paratroopers in a concentrated group over the appointed area, etc.), there would still be only a few hours of daylight in which the landing force could attain its goal with the support of the VIII Air Corps. It was clear that the enemy would make good use of the nighttime hours!

There was no chance at all that the parachute force would be able to carry off a coup de main<sup>226</sup> or even to surprise the enemy with its attack, for the defenders would already have been warned by the preceding landings at Malemes and Chania. The German planners were fully aware of this disadvantage, as well as of that represented by Iraklion's greater distance from the take-off base in the Athens area<sup>227</sup>.

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225 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 4, paragraph 5c.

226 - The term appears in the third line of Section 1 of the Order mentioned above.

227 - Iraklion lay 34 miles farther away from Athens than Malemes and Chania.

This meant almost 70 miles, or 30 minutes extra flying time, for the Ju-52's.

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The reports received regarding the strength and location of the island's defense forces were so vague that there seemed to be no reason for qualms concerning the weakness of the individual units making up Combat Group West, Center, and East<sup>228</sup>.

On the basis of the situation as it was known to German planners, there was no reason why the invasion of Crete, carried out according to the plans described above, should not lead to rapid and complete success.

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After outlining the objectives to be gained and the tactics to be followed on the ground, the Directive goes on to discuss the instructions applicable to the air transport fleet and to the VIII Air Corps.

The Air Commander, XI Air Corps, (Generalmajor Conrad) was responsible for the move by air from the Greek mainland to Crete.

Special instructions were issued concerning the smooth loading of ground units and the coordinating of take-off times, flight routes, and flight altitude (see the sketches on the following page). It was imperative for the success of the over-all invasion that the first wave of transport aircraft should appear over Crete exactly at Y-hour in a single, unified group.

It was just as important that the second wave (arriving at Y-hour plus eight) should take off as a unit and drop its paratroopers as a unit in the prescribed area. For only if the transport aircraft approached as a unit could they be

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228 - Generaloberst Loehr, Commander of the Fourth Air Fleet, is supposed to have said, "We can take Crete with one single parachute regiment!" (verbal information given to the author by Generalleutnant Trettner). Generaloberst Student, writing his memoirs for the magazine "Weltbild" from the vantage point of the present, utilizes the phrase, "I had miscalculated!" (Ich hatte mich verrechnet) as the title of his article on Crete.

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effectively protected in the air by the VIII Air Corps. The escort periods<sup>229</sup> had been worked out exactly on the basis of the performance capacity of the transport force. Any delay in the transport action was therefore bound to reduce the effectiveness of the air cover provided during the approach flight and during the landing operation. On the other hand, if the transport aircraft should be ahead of schedule, there was the danger of their dropping the paratroopers into the midst of an VIII Air Corps "softening" attack. The only solution was to set up an absolutely fool-proof flight schedule for the trip to Crete, with exact instructions for fast aircraft, slower aircraft, and very slow aircraft (those towing the freight gliders). More than 1000 aircraft would be in the air at the same time, all of them following the same relatively narrow flight course.

The western tip of the island of Cythera (south of the Peloponnesus) was selected as "jumping-off point" for the first wave; up to that point, the transport aircraft would benefit from extra protection provided by German anti-aircraft artillery.

The difficulties encountered by the air transport units during the night of 19/20 May 1941 (the night before the operation) are described as follows:<sup>229</sup>

"If the take-off was to be accomplished on schedule (i.e. at 0500 on 20 May 1941), some way had to be found to get the wing into the air in close formation in the shortest possible time. A trial assembly with subsequent take-off by squadron was ordered, and the wing was lined up by squadrons, one on the tail of the other.

The take-off was carried out squadron by squadron in close formation..."

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229 - General von Heyking, Study No. 168, dated 16 April 1947, page 4 ff.

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A second source continues:<sup>230</sup>

"Conditions were highly unfavorable to the operation.....

The transport units possessed practically no information regarding the enemy's strength. Moreover, during the night before the operation - 19/20 May 1941 - the wind changed direction by 180°, making it necessary to rearrange the line-up for take-off - all in the dark. Naturally, this last-minute change resulted in a delay in the take-off..."

In addition to the difficulties detailed above, the leaders of the transport units were quite aware of the fact that further delays in taking off were bound to occur due to the clouds of dust which smothered the airfield after each departure. On the other hand, the orders were very firm in specifying that the transport units must reach the target as a single group. The result was that the paratroopers and transport crews, instead of relaxing and getting some sleep before going into action, were gotten out of bed and marched (the troop transport trucks were all carrying gasoline!) to the airfields. The take-offs, instead of beginning at 0500, got under way at 0235. Once in the air, the transport aircraft were ordered to keep circling over the airfield until they were all assembled at the proper altitude and ready to take off in a group<sup>231</sup>.

In the last analysis, the actual circumstances under which the air transport was carried out had very little in common with those described in the order to attack. The commanders of

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230 - W. Hornung, op.cit., pages 10/11 and page 12.

231 - Based on the orders issued to the author's unit, the II Battalion, Storm Regiment, and on marginal notes entered on the orders at that time.

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both air transport and paratrooper units had to rely on their own initiative and on the effectiveness of verbal agreements to provide for the margin of safety which no order can dictate in advance.

The Directive devotes only two lines to the transport of troops by ship<sup>232</sup>, merely observing that any troops and supplies which cannot be transported by air will be moved to Crete by ship.

The German Navy had two missions to accomplish in connection with Operation MERKUR:

1. The transport to Crete of the supplies needed (weapons, bombs, gasoline, aviation fuels, Luftwaffe equipment, and foodstuffs) to assure that the landing force did not bog down during the initial phase of the fighting.

2. The accomplishment of other transport actions made necessary by Operation MERKUR<sup>233</sup>.

In preparation for the above, the Admiral (Southeast) took immediate steps to have all arriving supply vessels earmarked for further employment in Operation MERKUR as soon as they were unloaded - a necessary measure in view of the shortage of otherwise available merchant shipping. To begin with, the vessels on hand were to be supplemented by twelve ships withdrawn from transport duty in the African theater. Unfortunately, the blockade of the Corinth Canal intervened, making it impossible for the warships and merchant vessels coming from Italy to get through to join the forces of the Admiral (Southeast).

Since it was so uncertain whether the additional ships would be able to arrive in time or not, an early attempt was made to secure for Operation MERKUR the facilities represented by the small native coastal vessels. The plan was to utilize them as a first transport wave to the island as soon as appropriate

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232 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 5, paragraph 7.

233 - Office of the Admiral (Southeast), (Schuster), Report on Operation MERKUR, File No. 8689, classified, dated 16 June 1941, page 2 ff.

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landing areas had been brought under German control. The use of these smaller boats was definitely advantageous in that the risk inherent in the admitted naval supremacy of the enemy during the hours of darkness was divided among a large number of vessels. Furthermore, if the paratroopers should be unable to secure a satisfactory landing area in time to accommodate the airborne infantry, scheduled to arrive on the second day of operations, all available merchant ships and coastal vessels were to stand by to transport the mountain infantry troops to the island.

Both the Admiral (Southeast) and the Commander, Fourth Air Fleet, (whom Admiral Schuster kept informed of developments) were well aware of the alarmingly high degree of improvisation which characterized these naval operations. The vessels had been commandeered without advance notice, and there had been no time to test their seaworthiness. They were very poorly equipped as far as navigational aids were concerned; radio and signal equipment were conspicuously absent.

Two squadrons of motor-powered sailboats were formed<sup>234</sup>, one to land at Malemes and the other at Iraklion. Each squadron was assigned an Italian torpedo boat as escort, the Italian captain being placed in charge of the naval aspects of the operation. Each torpedo boat also carried a German naval officer in the capacity of convoy commander. The Italian warships were to be responsible for keeping their squadrons together and on the proper course, for defending them against enemy submarines, and for acting as radio relay station for the entire group. In view of the heterogeneous composition of the two squadrons and the resultant differences in attainable speed, there was no alternative but to issue orders not to wait for stragglers but to leave them behind if necessary.

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234 - Office of the Admiral (Southeast), Operations Order No. 1, dated 17 May 1941, classified; the reader is also referred to the report dated 23 May 1941



234 -(cont'd) by Commander Devantier on the activities of the "Western"  
Malemes) squadron during Operation MERKUR (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

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