

# Australia's War: 80 years ago this week

## 26 May 1941





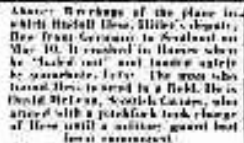
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# LATE CITY

14 PAGES—2r

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\*Kagame's family, who, according to Greig, would be receiving no other financial support from the UN, are still in the country, but are struggling to find a way of making a living.

LONDON, May 24.—Germany's armoured troops have suffered their heaviest defeat since they entered the Libyan campaign.

The actions of the Hood has brought the war closer to the

MR. ROBERT H. HUNTER: The action at the ballroom flood did not inspire Britain's demand of the same in several ships and the demand for the Navy (Mr. Hagman is right). In the morning, we will give it and we shall see the outbreak of the war he said.



## 26 May 1941 - Brisbane

- Mr Hughes was ignoring the fact that, in a war with Germany and Japan, Britain would only retain superiority in capital ships if France remained in the alliance and Italy remained neutral.
- In aircraft carriers Britain was heavily outnumbered by Japan unless Britain was allied with America.

### COMMAND OF SEA NOT IN DANGER BY LOSS

MELBOURNE, Sunday.—The sinking of the battlecruiser Hood did not imperil Britain's command of the seas in capital ships, said the Minister for the Navy (Mr. Hughes) to-night. "In that category we still are at least as strong as at the outbreak of the war, he said.

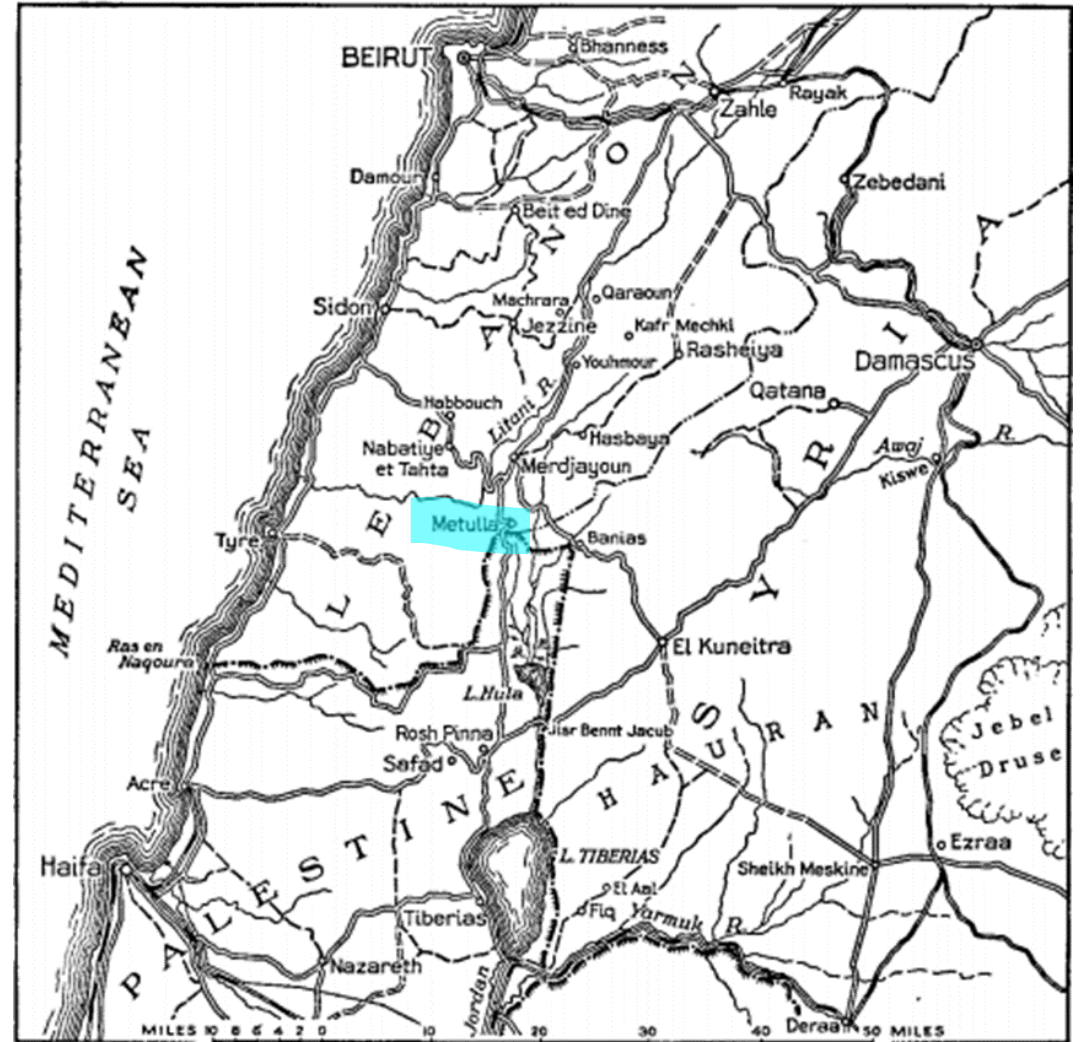
Mr. Hughes added that while he was not minimising the seriousness of the loss of such a fine ship, it must be viewed in its correct perspective in relation to the whole of the war at sea.

This loss was more than offset by losses which British naval units had inflicted on the enemy. To date major losses suffered by Britain's opponents—apart from destroyers and smaller craft, were—

Battleships: Three, possibly four—German, one; Italian, one, possibly two; France, since her capitulation, one.

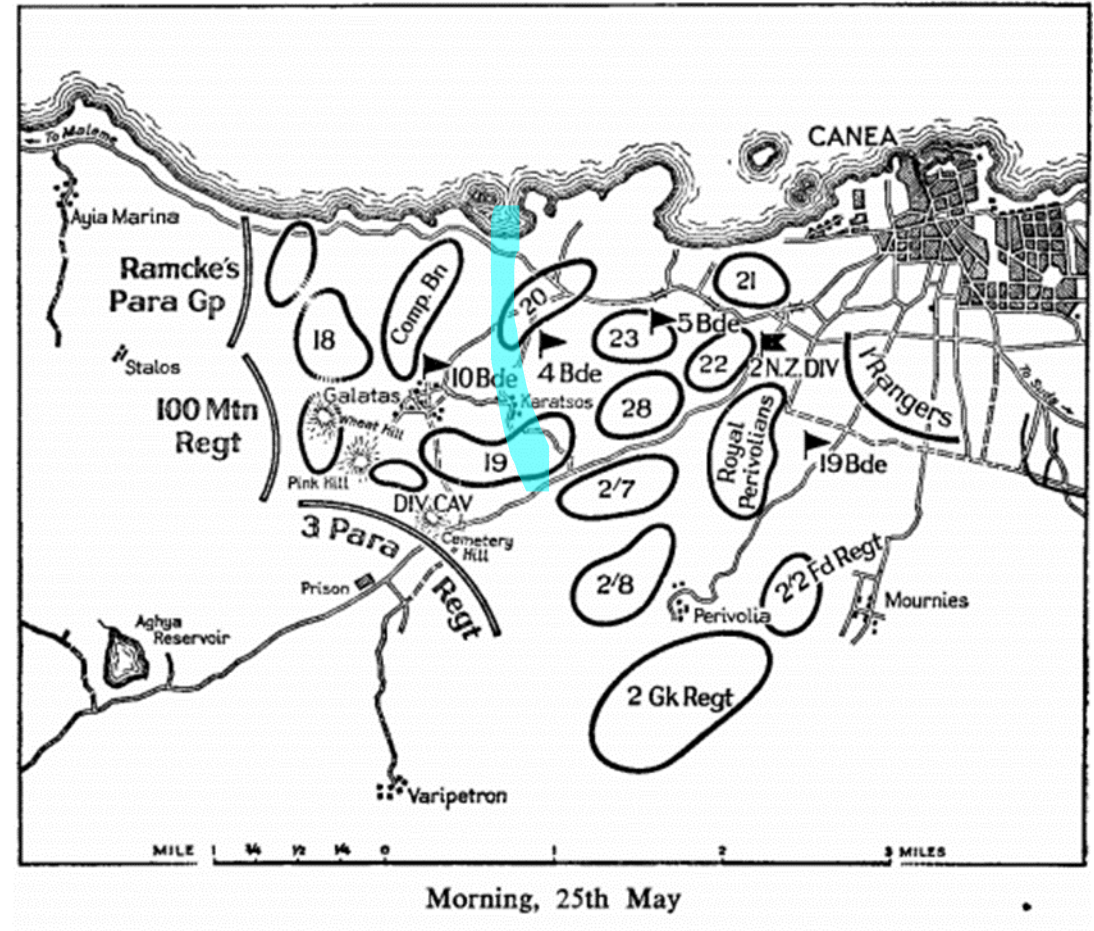
# 26 May 1941 - Palestine

- At the next conference between Lavarack and Wilson on the 26th Wilson said that the 31<sup>st</sup> May, the date previously mentioned for the invasion was now too early.
- When Lavarack again said that he thought the right column from **Metulla** would make faster progress than the column on the coast road Wilson agreed that this was a likely development.



# 26 May 1941 - Crete

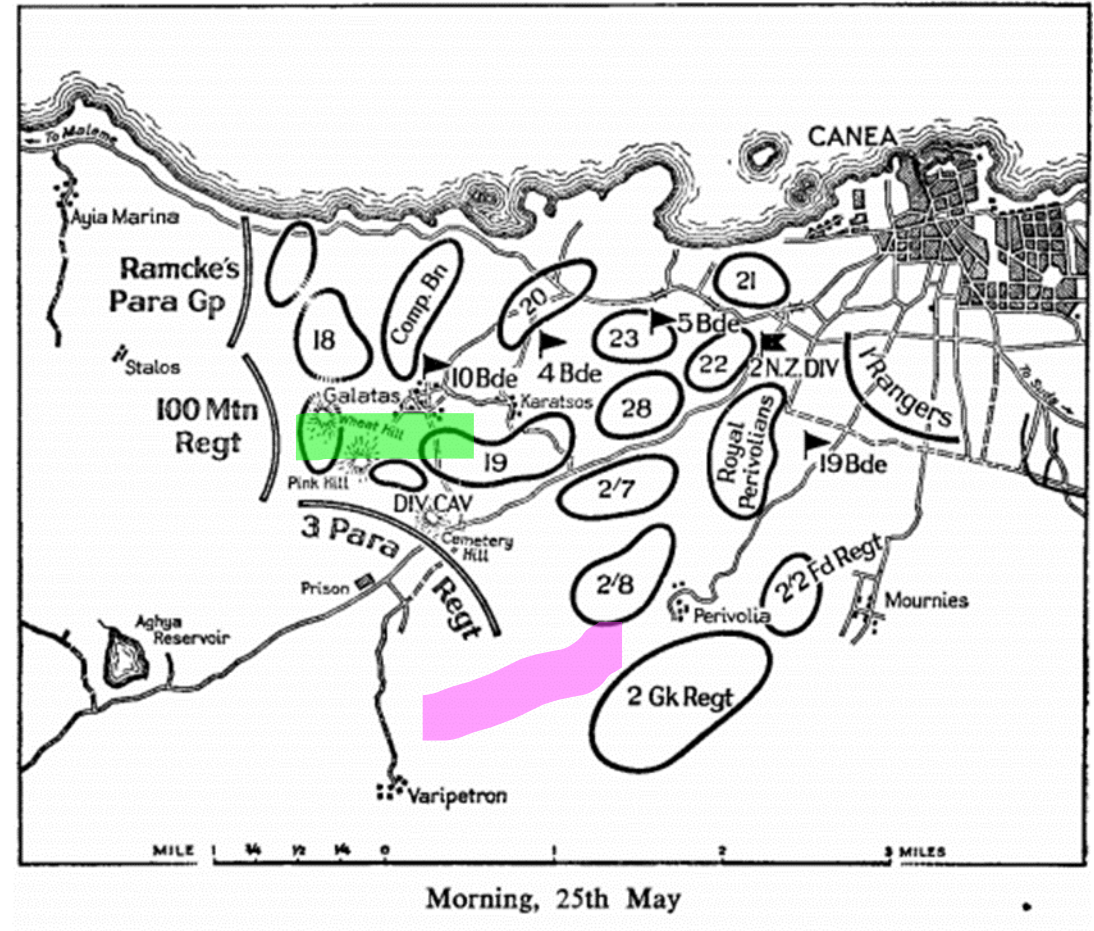
- About one o'clock on the morning of the 26th an order was issued confirming Puttick's decision to withdraw: the division would retire to the new line, which was along the creek about a mile and a half west of Canea.
- That morning at 9.30 after a conference with Captain Morse, NOIC, Suda, and Group Captain Beamish, Freyberg cabled Wavell:
- I regret to have to report that in my opinion the limit of endurance has been reached by the troops under my command here at Suda Bay. No matter what decision is taken by the Commanders-in-Chief from a military point of view our position here is hopeless. A small ill-equipped and immobile force such as ours cannot stand up against the concentrated bombing that we have been faced with during the last seven days. I feel that I should tell you that from an administrative point of view the difficulties of extricating this force in full are now insuperable. Provided a decision is reached at once a certain proportion of the force might be embarked. ...
- If you decide in view of whole Middle East position that hours help we will carry on. I would have to consider how this would be best achieved.





# 26 May 1941 - Crete

- Meanwhile both the forward brigades had been strongly attacked.
- At 11.15 the engineers in the 21st's sector on the right were thrust back by a German attack but counter - attacked and retook the lost ground. The 19th Battalion was under heavy pressure, and at 2 p.m. two platoons were forced out of their posts but a new line was formed 150 yards back; by 5 p.m. the original posts were retaken.
- From about 10.30 a.m. onwards enemy infantry, supported by air and mortar bombardment, attacked the left flank of the Australians and pushed into a gap between it and the 2nd Greeks. The threat to two Australian platoons on the left was such that they were withdrawn some distance towards Perivolia, and there held on. In the afternoon the attack was intensified and at length the 2/8th was ordered to withdraw to its original positions outside Mournies, and the 2/7th received similar orders. They withdrew about 5 p.m. and fitted in among the Marines round Mournies.



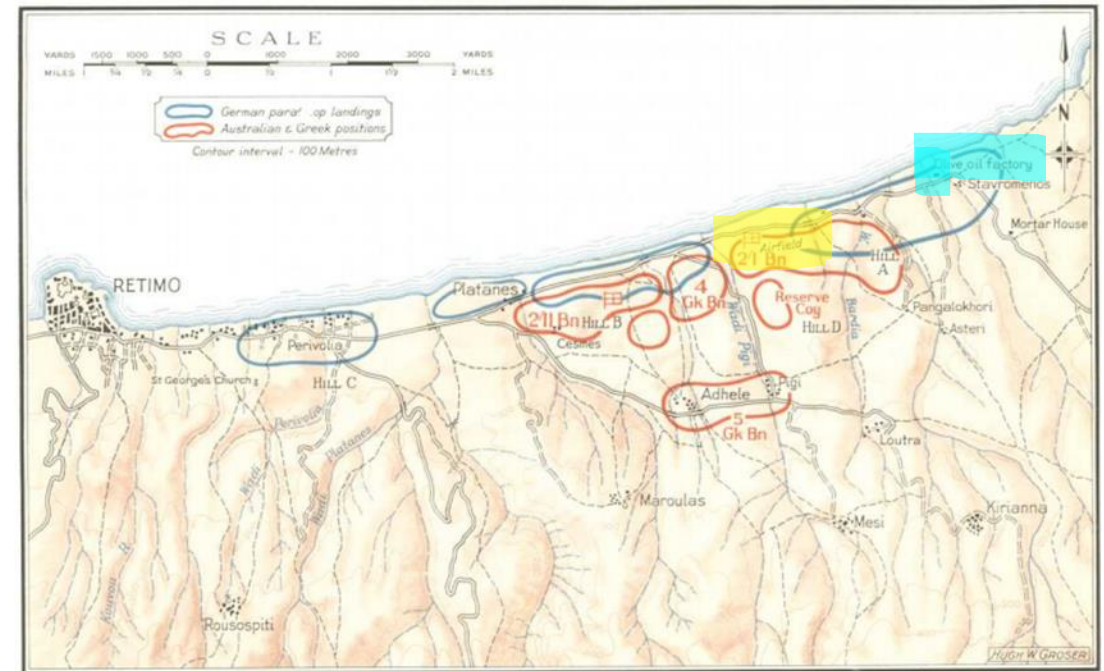
# 26 May 1941 - Crete

- Much of the day was spent in confusion between commands caused by failure of all communications and changes to command arrangements when the battle moved back into an area commanded by General Weston.
- At about 10.00 p.m. after consulting Vasey, Puttick (photo) decided on his own authority to order a withdrawal to a defensive position at the head of Suda Bay.
- This order was countermanded by Freyberg but the units were already moving back when the new order arrived and the move continued.
- Meanwhile the Composite Brigade was carrying out its orders to advance and occupy a position about a mile west of Canea. Its acting commander, Lieut-Colonel Duncan of the Welch, did not know that the Suda Brigade had retired and there was no support on his left.
- Inglis had been ordered to take command of the Composite Brigade but he was unable to locate the units of the Brigade during the day so returned to the command of the 4th Brigade.



# 26 May 1941 – Retimo, Crete

- At 9 o'clock on the 26th, hearing that the fire from the factory had diminished, Campbell sent a tank and a platoon of Embrey's company to explore.
- Embrey himself led the infantry which reached the outskirts of Stavromenos, covered by the tank and by fire from the 75-mm guns on Hill "A".
- Having gone so far without meeting opposition he decided to attack, and the artillery fire was stopped as he and his men jumped the wall and captured the factory, taking forty-two wounded and forty unwounded Germans prisoner.
- From these they learnt that at 3 a.m. the three surviving officers with thirty men had made off eastwards.
- There were now 500 German prisoners penned in a cage under the southern side of Hill "D".



Situation at Retimo, evening, 20th May



# 26 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- At noon that day (25<sup>th</sup>) the 1st Battle Squadron, Pridham-Wippell in Queen Elizabeth with Barham, Formidable, and eight destroyers including the Australians Voyager and Vendetta, had left Alexandria for a flying-off position S.S.W. of Kato Strait.
- In the early hours of the 26th Abdiel, Hero and Nizam sailed with the Special Service Troops it had not been possible to land at Selino Kastelli on the 24th. This time the attempt was to be made at Suda Bay.
- The air attack on Scarpanto, limited in scale by the carrier's shortage of aircraft, was carried out in the morning darkness of the 26th. Two enemy aircraft on the ground were certainly destroyed and a number damaged, and two were shot down in combat during air attacks on the British ships. Formidable lost one aircraft.
- At 7 a.m. on the 26th the battle squadron was joined by Ajax, Dido, and their three destroyers, and the force retired to the south and east.



# 26 May 1941 - Mediterranean

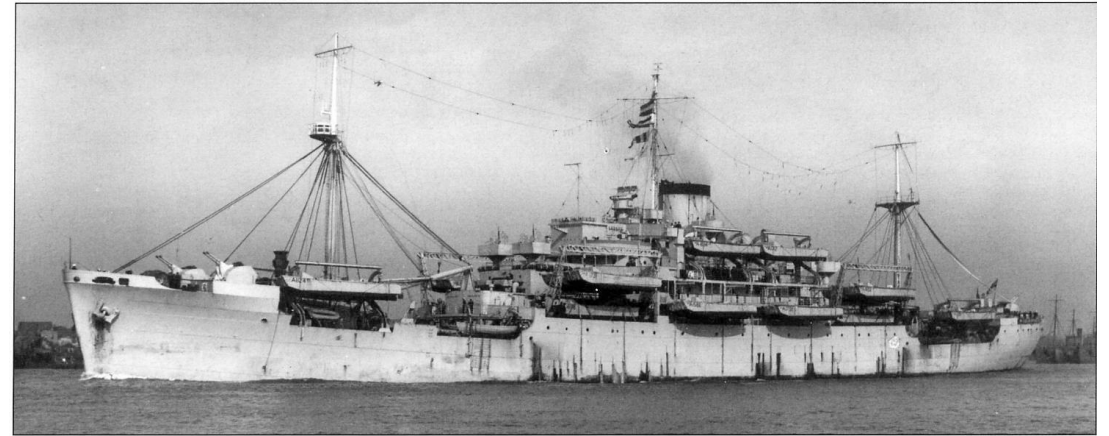
- The Glenroy convoy was some distance west of the battle squadron north bound, and Cunningham instructed Pridham-Wippell to provide cover. Course was altered to the westward soon after noon on 26th.
- At 1.20 p.m., when the battle squadron was about ninety miles north-east of Bardia it was attacked by large formations of fighter-escorted high level and dive bombers from Libya.
- Formidable received two hits, one of which blew in her starboard side forward and started a fire; and the destroyer Nubian had her stern blown off but remained seaworthy.
- Formidable operated fighter patrols until dusk, but was then detached for Alexandria escorted by Voyager, Vendetta, Hereward and Decoy.





# 26 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- Glenroy, escorted by Waller in Stuart with Coventry and Jaguar, again failed to land her troops.
- Throughout the 26th the convoy was the target for sustained air attacks. Bombs were successfully evaded until the evening, when the ships were about fifty miles from their objective.
- At 6.20 p.m., in a heavy dive bombing attack, Glenroy was set on fire and damaged by near misses. The fire was extinguished and course resumed for Timbakion, but three of Glenroy's landing craft were put out of action and all the army petrol was lost through the fire.
- It was plain that the landing could not be effected before daylight, and the operation was abandoned. At 9.15 p.m. the ships turned back.

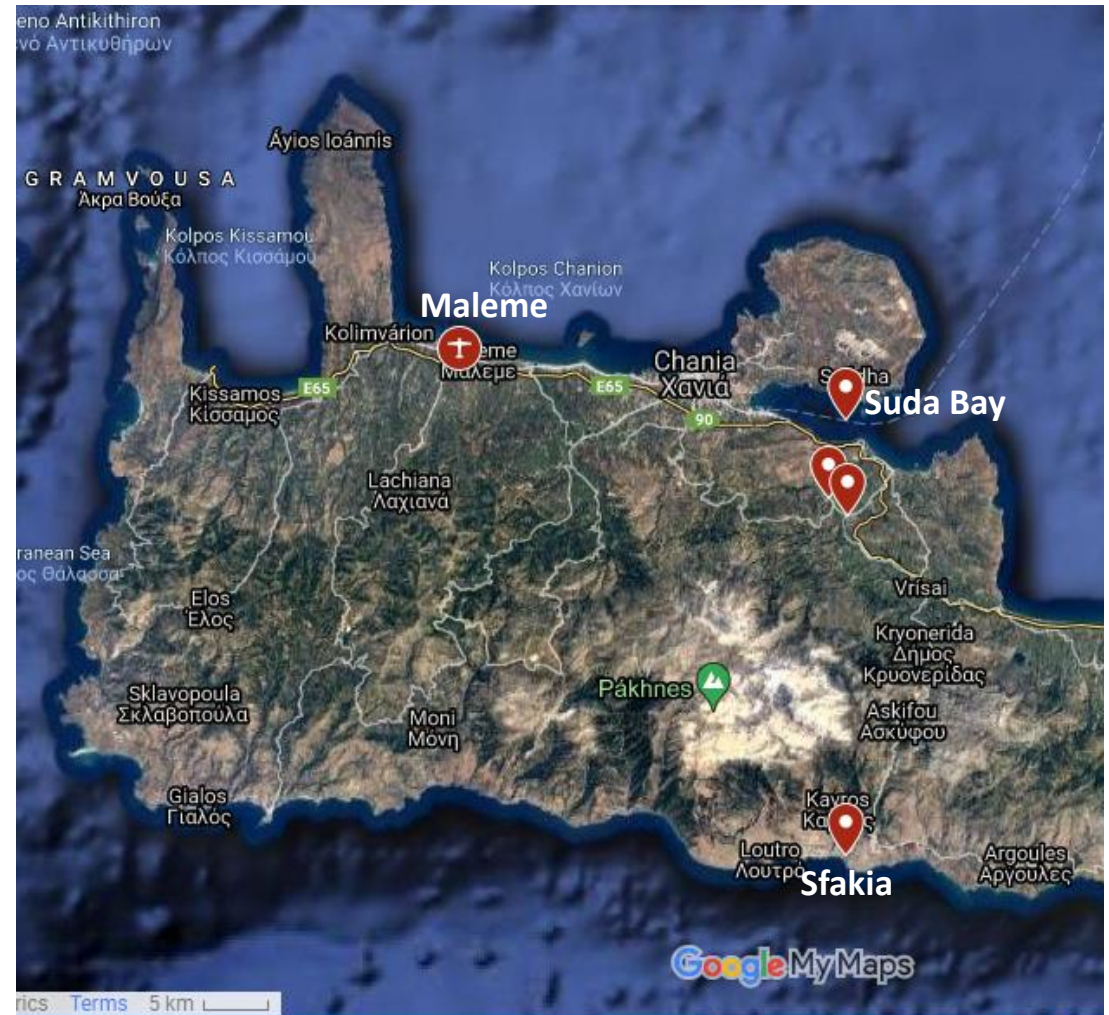


The cargo ship GLENROY was a most successful conversion and, in her final configuration, was armed with six 4-inch guns and had a carrying capacity of 27 landing craft and 1,098 troops.

This photo probably later than May 41.

# 26 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- On the 26th Morse, NOIC Suda Bay, recorded:
- "General situation in Suda-Canea area very bad and General Officer Commanding decided that he could no longer continue the battle. Preparations made for evacuation and movements of H.Q. and W/T to Sfakia.
- Confusion all day due to lack of definite orders.
- P.M. Burnt all unwanted secret papers ."





# 26 May 1941 - Atlantic

- At 10:30 on 26 May, a Catalina piloted by Ensign Leonard Smith of the US Navy located her, some 690 miles northwest of Brest. At her current speed, she would have been close enough to reach the protection of U-boats and the Luftwaffe in less than a day. Most British forces were not close enough to stop her.
- The only possibility for the Royal Navy was Force H with the aircraft Carrier Ark Royal, the Battlecruiser Renown and the light cruiser Sheffield, under the command of Admiral Somerville.
- Victorious, Prince of Wales, Suffolk and Repulse had been forced to break off the search due to fuel shortage; the only heavy ships remaining apart from Force H were King George V and Rodney, but they were too distant.
- Ark Royal's Swordfish were already searching nearby when the Catalina found her. Several torpedo bombers also located the battleship, about 60 miles away from Ark Royal. Somerville ordered an attack as soon as the Swordfish returned and were rearmed with torpedoes. He detached the cruiser Sheffield to shadow Bismarck, though Ark Royal's aviators were not informed of this.
- As a result, the Swordfish, which were armed with torpedoes equipped with new magnetic detonators, accidentally attacked Sheffield. The magnetic detonators failed to work and Sheffield emerged unscathed.
- Upon returning to Ark Royal, the Swordfish loaded torpedoes with contact detonators. The second attack comprised fifteen aircraft and was launched at 19:10. At 20:47, the torpedo bombers began their attack descent through the clouds.
- The Swordfish then attacked; Bismarck began to turn violently as her anti-aircraft batteries engaged the bombers. One torpedo hit amidships on the port side.
- A second torpedo struck Bismarck in her stern on the port side.



A Swordfish returns to Ark Royal after making the torpedo attack against Bismarck.

# 26 May 1941 - Atlantic

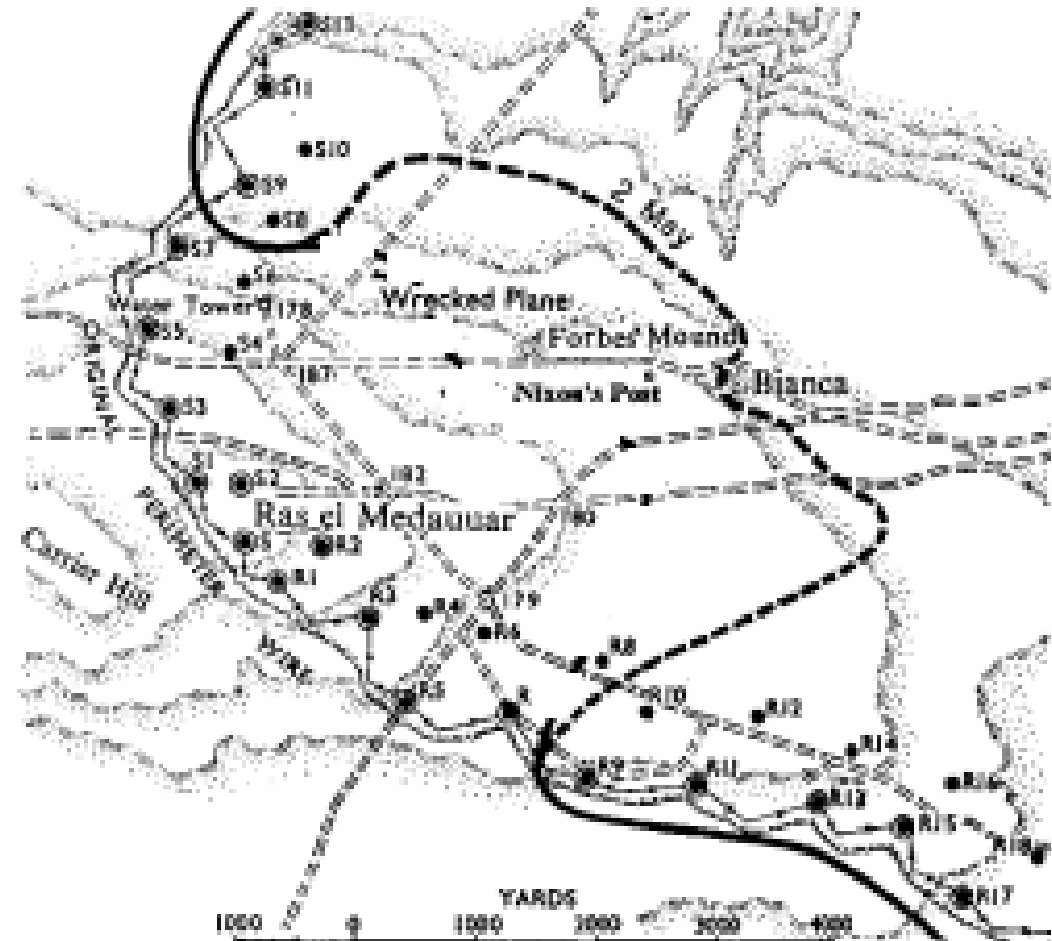
- Bismarck was now steaming in a large circle, unable to escape from Tovey's forces. Though fuel shortages had reduced the number of ships available to the British, the battleships King George V and Rodney were still available, along with the heavy cruisers Dorsetshire and Norfolk.
- Lütjens signalled headquarters at 21:40 on the 26th: "Ship unmanoeuvrable. We will fight to the last shell. Long live the Führer."
- As darkness fell, Bismarck briefly fired on Sheffield, though the cruiser quickly fled. Sheffield lost contact in the low visibility and Captain Vian's (photo) group of five destroyers was ordered to keep contact with Bismarck through the night.
- Vian ships encountered Bismarck at 22:38; the battleship quickly engaged them with her main battery. After firing three salvos, she straddled the Polish destroyer ORP Piorun. The destroyer continued to close the range until a near miss at around 12,000 m forced her to turn away.
- Throughout the night and into the morning, Vian's destroyers harried Bismarck, illuminating her with star shells and firing dozens of torpedoes, none of which hit.





# 27 May 1941 - Libya

- Having advanced his front on both flanks, Burrows began planning to push out the line of his centre company, swinging it forward 300 yards on the right and 50 yards on the left.
- On the night of the 27th Captain Gillan's company moved out to establish itself on the new alignment. It proved impossible to complete the digging of the positions that night, so the men withdrew before daylight to their former line, intending to complete the job next day.
- The enemy appeared to know that some - thing was afoot and increased his harassing fire: next day some 650 shells fell on the western sector positions.
- After dark Gillan's company went out to complete the new 2/13th centre company positions and occupy them permanently. Gillan's men were well ensconced and just settling down to a meal when about 200 Germans came forward in apparent expectation of finding the positions ready for the taking.
- A covering patrol reported their approach. In a close fight the Germans, walking straight into an ambush, were engaged with every Bren gun and mortar to hand and fled to their own lines. Then Lieutenant Bucknell, gathering six men, followed on the heels of the enemy to within 15 yards of their positions, threw in grenades to the front, engaged the flanks with Bren fire, and withdrew without harm. Agonised cries testified to deadly work .



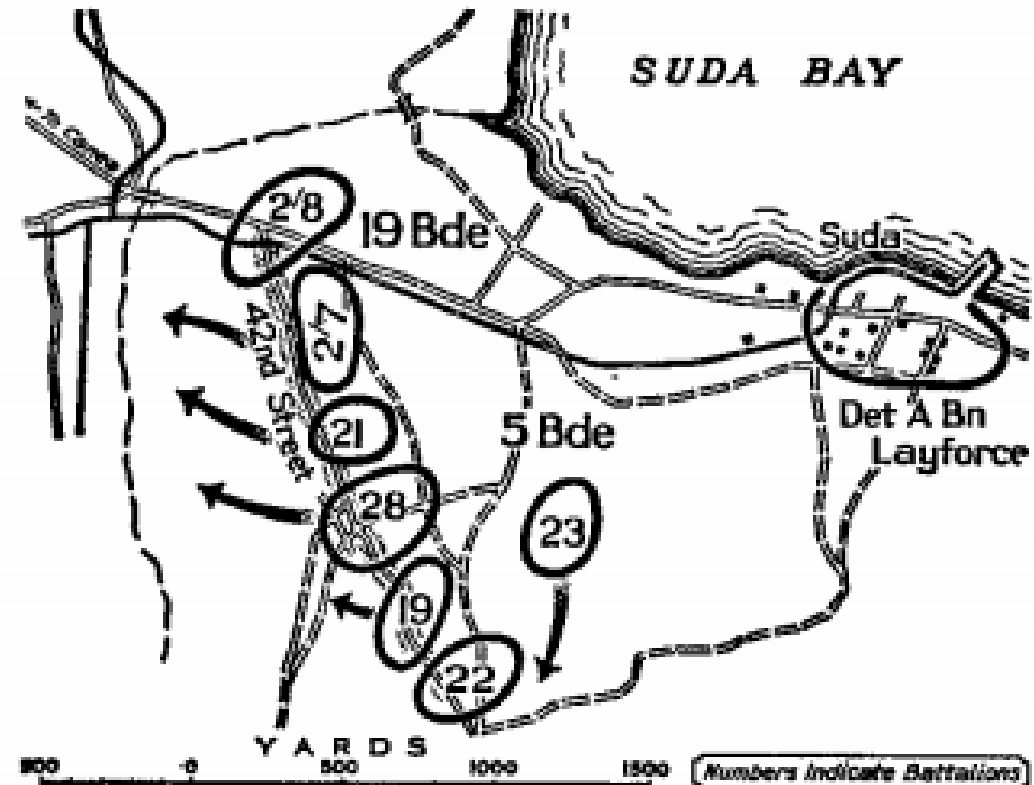
Shortening the Salient, May-July 1941

# 27 May 1941 - Crete

- About 1 a.m. Weston realising the danger of the Welch's position sent orders to Colonel Duncan to withdraw. The order appears to have reached him too late, if at all. The Welch were forward with the depleted Rangers and Northumberland Hussars supporting the left flank.
- A German attack opened at dawn. By 9 a.m. one of the two forward companies was surrounded and the other had lost heavily; Duncan decided to withdraw to the Kladhisos Creek, and as the enemy was encircling his flank, he ordered the two rear companies under Major Gibson to move west of Suda to cover the withdrawal of the remainder.

# 27 May 1941 - Crete

- Puttick and Vasey picked positions for their depleted brigades along the "street"—a straight earth road through the olive groves. The line was held (from the right) by the 2/8th (astride the main road), 2/7th, 21st New Zealand, 28th, 19th, 22nd. They were packed tightly—the 28th, for example, on a front of 250 yards, and the depleted 21st on a far narrower one.
- About 11 a.m. the Australians saw some 400 Germans advancing astride the Suda Bay road.
- The Germans were seen off by an unplanned but coordinated charge possibly initiated by the Maoris.
- The Germans had received a shock, and made no further attack that day, however, hundreds of Germans were seen moving round the hills to the south steadily encircling the Australian and New Zealand position.





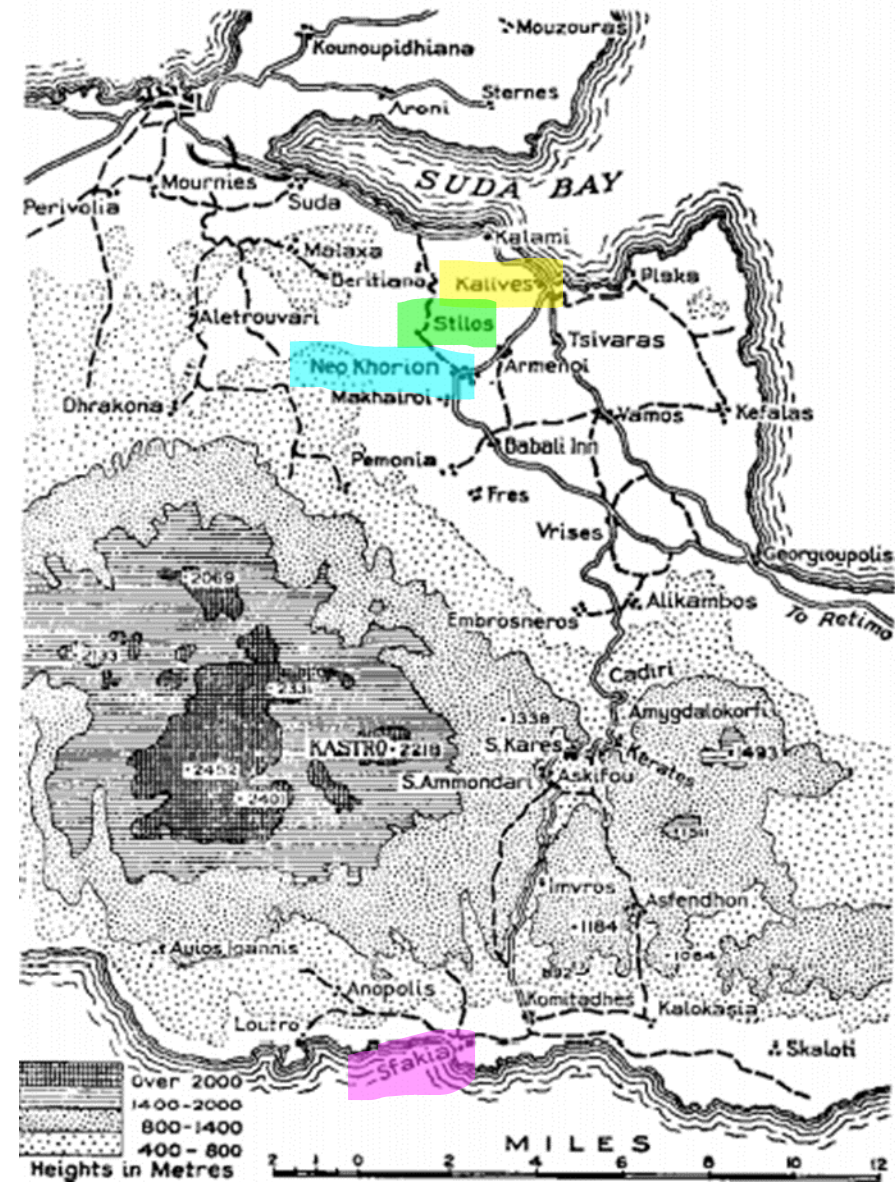
# 27 May 1941 - Crete

- A reply was now received from Cairo to Freyberg's outspoken signal of the 26th in which he had declared the situation "hopeless". It suggested that the Suda-Maleme force should retire on Retimo and hold the eastern part of the island.
- Freyberg at 1 a.m. on the 27th sent Wavell a message stating that Retimo was practically foodless and without ammunition, and all guns in the Maleme-Suda sector had been lost because of lack of tractors; the force could survive only if food was landed at Sfakia at once.
- In the afternoon Freyberg received orders to abandon Crete.
- General Weston appears to have gone southward to survey the line of withdrawal, and, when he turned back, found it almost impossible to move against the tide now streaming along the road winding up into the mountains towards Sfakia.
- Lt Stephanides described the scene: ... on all sides, men were hurrying along in disorder. Most of them had thrown away their rifles and a number had even discarded their tunics, as it was a hot day. . . . Nearly every yard of the road and of the ditches on either side was strewn with abandoned arms and accoutrements, blankets, gas masks, packs, kit-bags, sun helmets, cases and containers of all shapes and sizes ...
- Freyberg wrote later: There were units sticking together and marching with their weapons—units of one or other of the composite forces that had come out of the line—but in the main it was a disorganised rabble making its way doggedly and painfully to the south. There were thousands of unarmed troops including the Cypriots and Palestinians. ... Somehow or other the word Sfakia got out and many of these people had taken a flying start in any available transport they could steal and which they later left abandoned ...



# 27 May 1941 - Crete

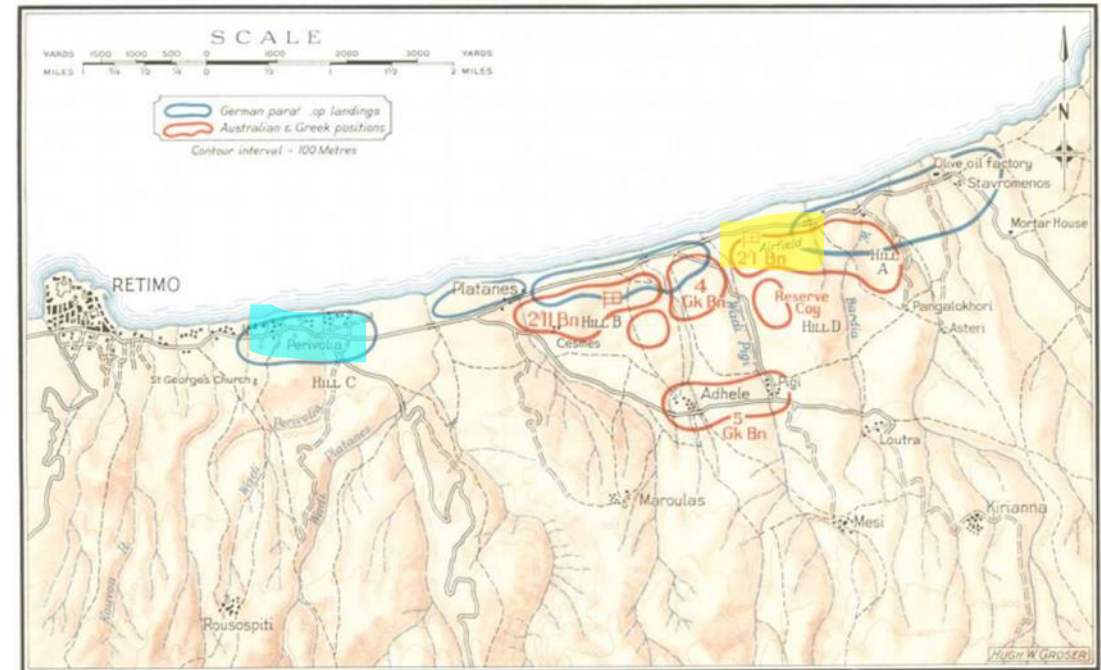
- Vasey and Hargest had decided to keep together and try to coordinate the withdrawal. In the course of the 27th they met the commander of a battalion of Laycock's force, who had orders from Weston to occupy a delaying position on the road to Sfakia.
- Thereupon Vasey and Hargest decided to withdraw that night to Neo Khorion, south of Stilos, in the hope that Layforce would be covering that area. Their plan was that the 5th Brigade would go to Stilos, the 19th Brigade to Neo Khorion with the 2/8th Battalion at the junction of the road from Kalives and the 2/7th linking with the New Zealanders at Stilos. At 9 o'clock, when the rearguard at 42nd Street was due to disengage and begin its long march to Stilos, it was still light and the withdrawal was delayed until after 10. The head of the column reached Stilos, 14 miles away, at 3.30 a.m. on the 28th.





# 27 May 1941 – Retimo, Crete

- The second tank was now in working order and, during the night of the 26th-27th, Campbell guided it to Sandover to support yet another attack westward towards Perivolía, this time by two companies, Honner's and that of Captain Gook (who had succeeded McCaskill).
- The tanks were quickly put out of action by artillery and mortar fire.
- Honner had just decided that with both tanks out of action it would be useless for the infantry to attack, when Gook wormed his way into his ditch and announced that his forward platoon (Lieutenant Roberts) could not be found. After further reconnaissance Gook returned to say that the missing platoon must have attacked and broken into the Perivolía position.
- Writing after the campaign Honner described what followed:
- "That left me only one thing to do—attack to help Roberts out of trouble or to complete the success he had started. I knew I'd have to lose men but I couldn't lose time. A section from 14 Platoon—nine men—was ordered to move to a low stone wall fifty yards ahead round a well about twenty-five yards from the German line, to cover with Bren fire our attack across the open.
- They raced along the low hedge to the well. The leader, Corporal Tom Willoughby, was nearly there before he fell. The man carrying the Bren went down. Someone following him picked it up and went on until he was killed, and so the gun was relayed until it almost reached the well in the hands of the last man, and he too was killed as he went down with it. Eight brave men died there—Corporal Willoughby, Lance - Corporal Dowsett, Privates Brown, Elvy, Fraser, Green, G. McDermid, and White. The ninth man, Private Proud, was hit on the tin hat as he jumped up, and fell back stunned into the ditch. ...
- Then we tried the other side. Lieutenant Bayly headed a party (along a forward leading tributary of the ditch) but he was the only one in the leading group not hit. Private "Blue" Pauley was hit here and so was young Fitzsimons who had been wounded on the 23rd but got away from the dressing station to rejoin his company when he heard it was going into action again. ...



Situation at Retimo, evening, 20th May



# 27/8 May 1941 – Retimo, Crete

- When the invasion began Campbell had destroyed his codes. Since then he had received from Freyberg's headquarters only such news as could be sent to him by wireless in clear language, and he knew that if an embarkation was planned orders for it would have to be sent to him by other means.
- On the 26th Lergessner arrived from Canea, bringing the first news of the failure of the Rangers on the 24th; but he added that there was no talk of evacuation at Force headquarters.
- On the night of the 27/28th the lighter arrived from Suda Bay under Lieutenant Haig, carrying two days rations for the Retimo force. Haig, who was known to the force at Retimo, having ferried supplies there before the attack, had orders to march across country to Sfakia after delivering the rations.
- Freyberg had hoped to send the message to Campbell that the whole force was to withdraw with Haig, but he had left Suda before receiving it.
- Freyberg asked Cairo to have a message dropped to the garrison. The order started:
- We are to evacuate Crete. Commence withdrawal night 28-29. . . Embark Plaka [Plakias] Bay east end night 31st May-1st June.
- On the 28th aircraft dropped some cases of food and ammunition at Retimo and may have dropped this message too. If so it was not picked up.
- Later a second message was sent—the Hurricane that carried it did not return.



# 27 May 1941 - Mediterranean

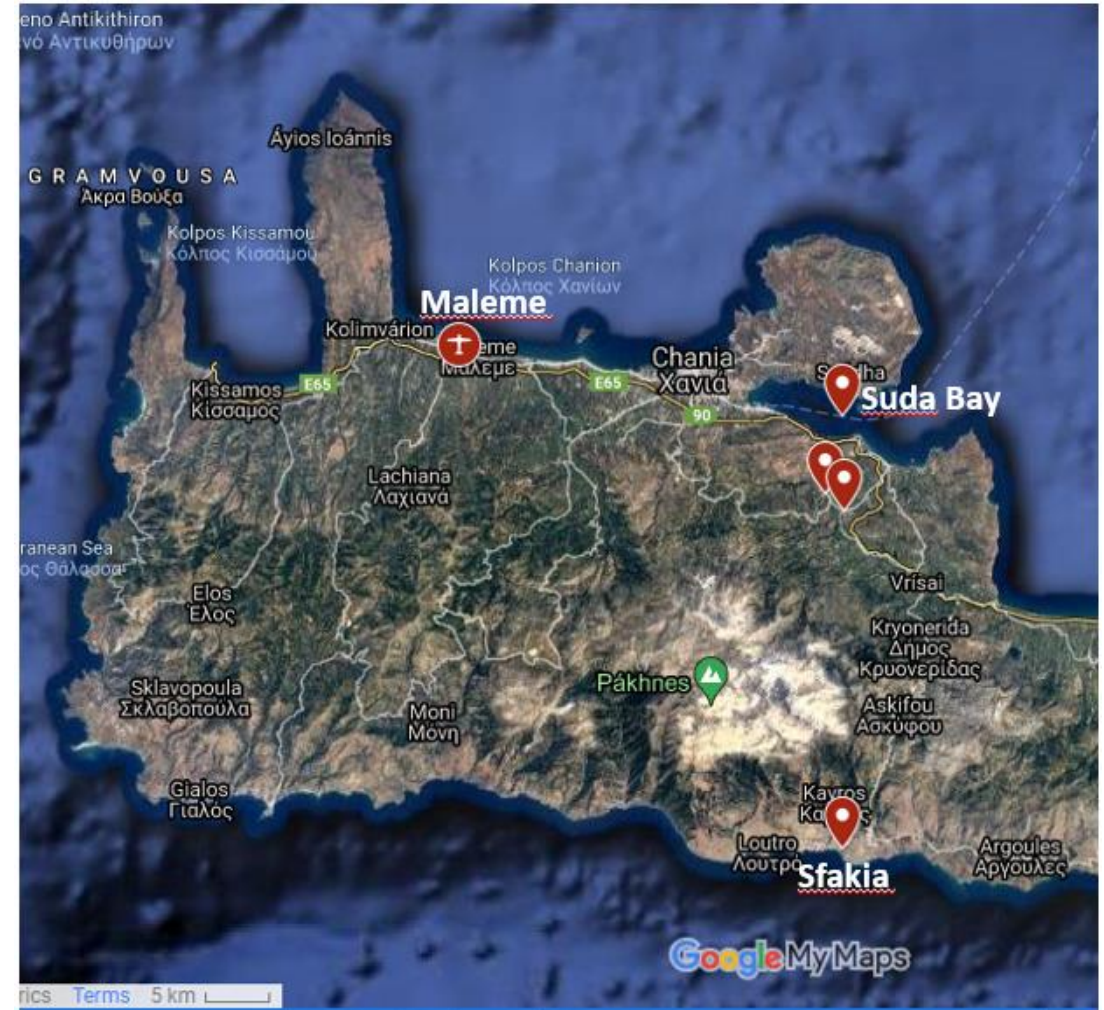
- The remainder of the Battle Fleet operated to the north - west of Alexandria, and at daylight on the 27th steered towards Kaso. Just before 9 a.m., when 190 miles from Scarpanto, the squadron was attacked by about fifteen aircraft from the Dodecanese. Barham was hit, had a turret put out of action, and suffered flooded bilges from near misses.
- Soon after noon Cunningham recalled the squadron to Alexandria, where it arrived at 7 p.m.



Barham refuelling in Souda Bay, February 1941

# 27 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- Abdiel, Nizam and Hero reached Suda Bay during the night 26th-27th, disembarked their troops and stores, and embarked 930 (merchant seamen, some naval people, and others not needed) and returned to Alexandria.
- At 10 p.m. on the 27th, having destroyed the port wireless station, the remaining members of the base staff in a "convoy of lorries and cars left G.H.Q. for Sfakia. Progress very slow on account of bad road and thousands of disorganised retreating troops."





# 27 May 1941 - Atlantic

- After daybreak on 27 May Tovey came up with his battleships. At 08:43 lookouts on King George V spotted Bismarck, some 25,000 yd away. Four minutes later, Rodney's two forward turrets, comprising six 16 in guns, opened fire, then King George V's 14 in guns began firing. Bismarck returned fire at 08:50 with her forward guns; with her second salvo, she straddled Rodney (photo).
- As the range fell, the ships' secondary batteries joined in and Norfolk and Dorsetshire began firing their 8 in guns. At 09:02, a 16-inch shell from Rodney struck Bismarck's forward superstructure severely damaging the two forward turrets.
- According to survivors, this salvo probably killed both Lindemann and Lütjens and the rest of the bridge staff, although other survivors stated that they saw Lindemann on the deck as the ship sank.
- A second shell from this salvo struck the forward main battery, which was disabled, though it would manage to fire one last salvo at 09:27.
- One of Bismarck's shells exploded 20 feet off Rodney's bow and damaged her starboard torpedo tube—the closest Bismarck came to a direct hit.
- Bismarck's rear turrets managed to fire three salvos before another shell put them out of action.



# 27 May 1941 - Atlantic

- By 09:31, all four main battery turrets had been put out of action.
- By 10:00, Tovey's two battleships had fired over 700 main battery shells, many at very close range. The four British ships fired more than 2,800 shells at Bismarck, and scored more than 400 hits, but were unable to sink Bismarck by gunfire. The heavy gunfire at virtually point-blank range devastated the superstructure and the sections of the hull that were above the waterline.
- At around 10:20, running low on fuel, Tovey ordered the cruiser Dorsetshire to sink Bismarck with torpedoes and ordered his battleships back to port.
- Dorsetshire fired a pair of torpedoes into Bismarck's starboard side, one of which hit. Dorsetshire then moved around to her port side and fired another torpedo, which also hit. By the time these torpedo attacks took place, the ship was already listing so badly that the deck was partly awash. Bismarck had been reduced to a shambles, aflame from stem to stern. She was slowly settling by the stern with a 20 degree list to port.
- Bismarck disappeared beneath the surface at 10:40.



# 27 May 1941 - Atlantic

- At 11:37 on the 27th May when Tovey was steaming for home having accomplished his task the First Sea Lord made him a signal, that had in fact been drafted by Churchill and sent at his behest. It read:
- We cannot visualise situation from your signals. Bismarck must be sunk at all costs, and if to do this it is necessary for King George V to remain on the scene then she must do so even if subsequently means towing King George V.





# 27 May 1941 - Atlantic

- Dorsetshire and the destroyer Maori moved in and lowered ropes to pull the survivors aboard.
- At 11:40, Dorsetshire's captain ordered the rescue effort abandoned after lookouts spotted what they thought was a U-boat.
- Dorsetshire had rescued 85 men and Maori had picked up 25 by the time they left the scene.
- Out of a crew of over 2,200 men, only 114 survived.



HMS Dorsetshire picking up survivors

# 27 May 1941 - Atlantic

- In the elaborate system of patrols for the enemy battleship two Sunderlands participated on 27th May.
- Squadron Leader Podger and Flight Lieutenant Costello sighted neither Bismarck nor her detached consort Prinz Eugen but both encountered enemy aircraft. Two He-115s approaching Costello and then sheering off, while a single He-115 was hotly engaged and damaged by Podger's gunners.



A Heinkel He 115B seaplane of 1./Küstenfliegergruppe 206 on a crane.

# May 1941 - Atlantic

- HMAS Nestor was commissioned on the Clyde on 3 February 1941 and joined the Home Fleet based on Scapa Flow and spent the first months of service escorting North Atlantic convoys, on patrol and screening the Fleet capital ships at sea.
- Nestor was a unit of the force which hunted the Bismark, although having been diverted to Iceland to refuel she was not with the force when the Bismark was sunk on 27 May 1941.



HMAS Nestor, 36 knots, 6 4.7 inch guns, 1 4inch AA gun, 10 torpedo tubes and depth charges.



# May 1941 - Atlantic

- In May 1941 Fairey Swordfish, from Victorious and Ark Royal, attacked the German battleship Bismark in the open Atlantic and scored three hits, one of which so damaged her that she was only able to steam in circles until the pursuing battleships came up and sank her.
- Swordfish attacks on battleships in harbour had previously crippled the Dunkerque at Mers el Kebir and sunk the Conte di Cavour, the Duilio and the Littorio at Taranto.
- The Swordfish had a maximum speed of 124 knots and a range of 454 miles.
- The Japanese carrier borne B5N, which had been in action in the Sino-Japanese war since 1938 had a max speed of 204 knots and a range of 528 miles.
- The Japanese land based G3M, which had been in extensive action in the Sino-Japanese war since 1937 had a max speed of 202 knots and a range of 2,400 miles.

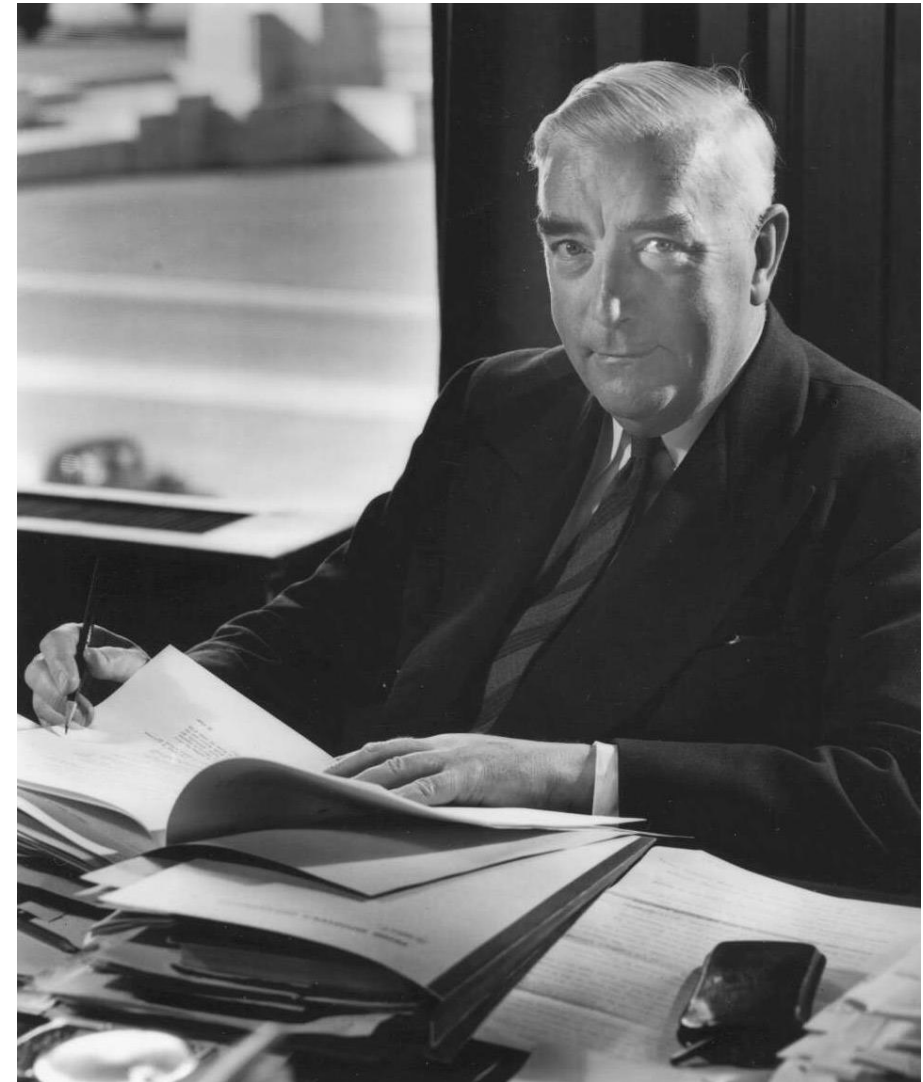


A Fairey Swordfish Mk I Naval torpedo aircraft



# 28 May 1941 – Melbourne

- In a review with the Advisory War Council on 28 May of the efforts he had made in London Menzies stated that he had been amazed to discover in March that the British Foreign Office views were "utterly negative".
- He had urged "the need for a realistic approach by (a) a frank discussion with Japan of the facts of the position, (b) pointing out to Japan the effects which war with the British Empire and probably the United States would have upon her, and (c) abandoning an attitude of resignation to the inevitability of a conflict which the Foreign Office appeared to hold".
- He added that, contrary to the impression which had been created in some quarters in Australia, he did not advocate a policy of appeasement.





# 28 May 1941 – Palestine

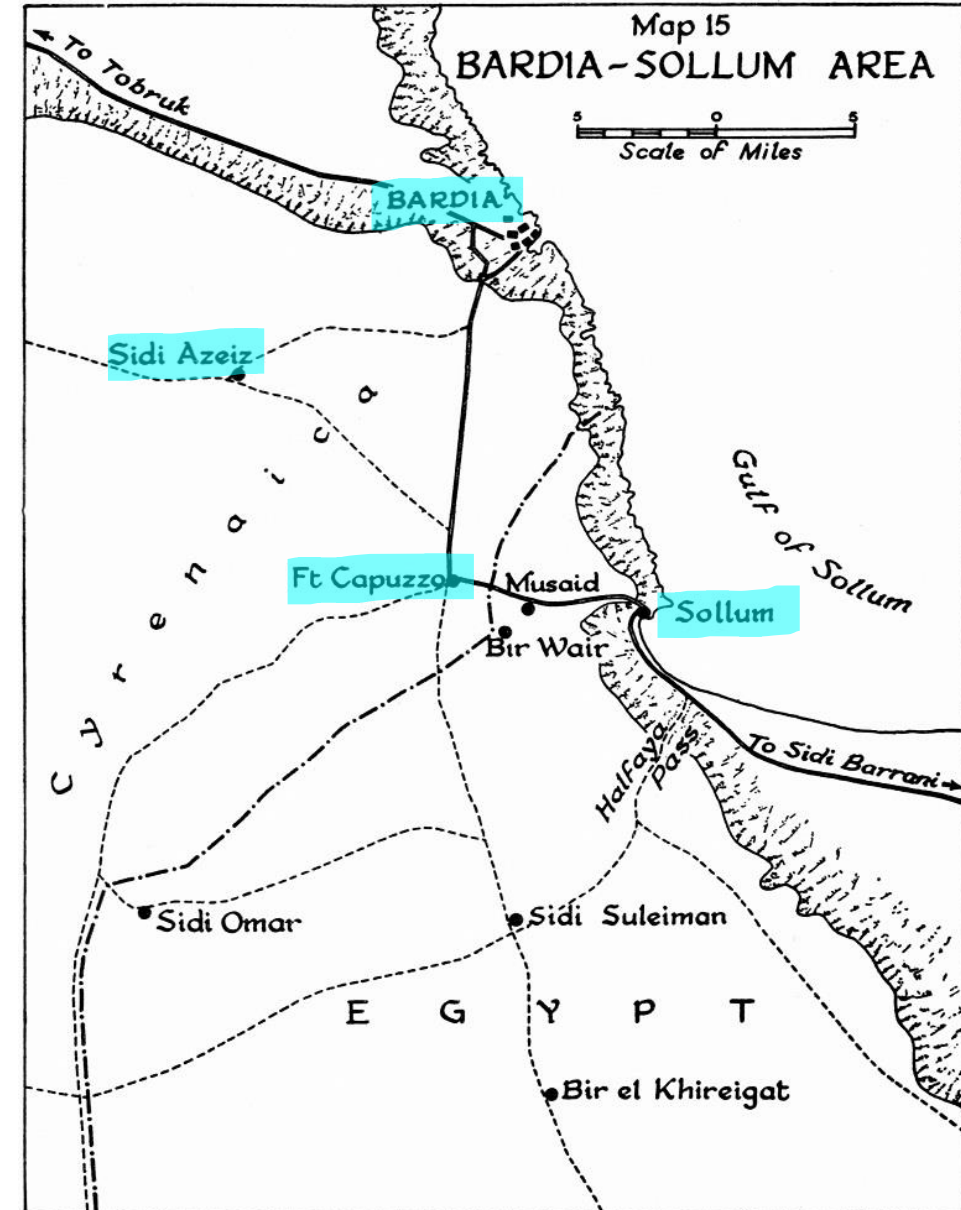
- On the 28th Wilson was still unable to tell the divisional commander exactly what units would be in his force; and only a few copies of an Intelligence handbook providing information about the Syrian roads, towns and people and the defending army were available.
- The only maps were on a scale of 1 to 200,000, whereas maps on a scale of 1 to 25,000 or 50,000 are desirable for warfare in tangled mountain country.
- Wilson informed Lavarack that no heavy tanks or heavy anti-aircraft artillery would be ready until the middle of June and asked when he would be able to attack without them. Lavarack said that he hoped at least a battery of light anti-aircraft guns would be available;
- he thought the attack should begin early, and that he would be ready by 3rd June.
- Wilson said that other units would not be ready until the 5th; and the attack could not begin before that date.



Generals Wilson and Catroux

# 28 May 1941 – Egypt

- On 28th May General Wavell gave his orders for operation 'BATTLEAXE'.
- The Western Desert Force was first to defeat the enemy on the frontier and secure the area Bardia–Sollum–Capuzzo–Sidi Azeiz. Next it was to defeat the enemy forces in the area Tobruk–El Adem, and then exploit to Derna and Mechili. General Beresford-Peirse was to fix the role, which was to be vigorous, of the Tobruk garrison during each stage.
- The date of readiness for 'BATTLEAXE' was governed mainly by the time required to re-equip the 7th Armoured Division.
- After the 'TIGER' convoy had arrived at Alexandria a number of vexing difficulties and delays occurred in the unloading of the tanks, modifying them for the desert, and even giving some of them a necessary overhaul. The business of re-equipping made 10th June the earliest possible date for the attack to begin, but before pitting a virtually new division against the experienced Germans something more was necessary.
- Many of the tank crews were strangers to the newest types of tanks, and needed instruction.
- Moreover, 7th Armoured Division had not existed as a formation since February; many of its officers and men had been dispersed to other tasks, and it required both organizing and practising. It was now to consist of the 7th Armoured Brigade with two regiments of cruiser tanks, the 4th Armoured Brigade with two regiments of 'I' tanks, and the Support Group. A scant five days was added for training, and 15th June was fixed as the day for the offensive to begin.
- All these delays angered the Prime Minister, who felt that each day lost would tell in the enemy's favour, and he bombarded General Wavell with detailed questions.



# 28 May 1941 – Libya

- Next morning five ambulances came up behind the enemy positions opposite and German stretcher bearers under cover of a Red Cross flag scoured no-man's land for wounded.
- Stretcher bearers went out from the 2/13th to help in the compassionate work but were also canny enough to take a close look by daylight at the enemy positions.
- Burrows' men were able to stand up and stretch their limbs while the work went on till a German Spandau burst, aimed at nobody, signalled that the truce was over.
- On the right of the 2/13th Battalion, Colonel Martin's 2/9th Battalion, the veteran unit of the Salient, which had already pushed its positions far in front of the line it originally took over in rear of Bianca, advanced its line 150 yards to conform with Burrows' movement. The defences of Martin's front line were now excellently developed and completely wired and trip-wired.

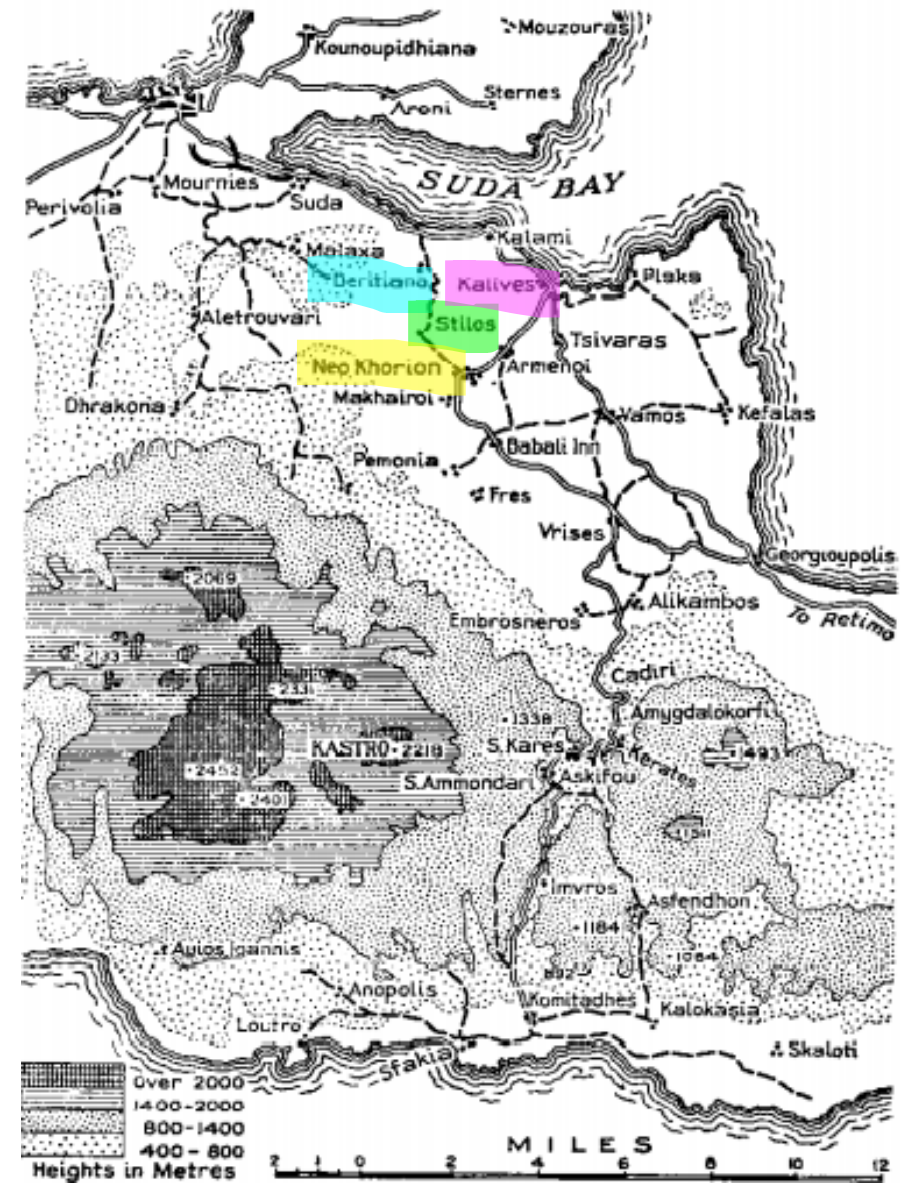


Shortening the Salient, May-July 1941



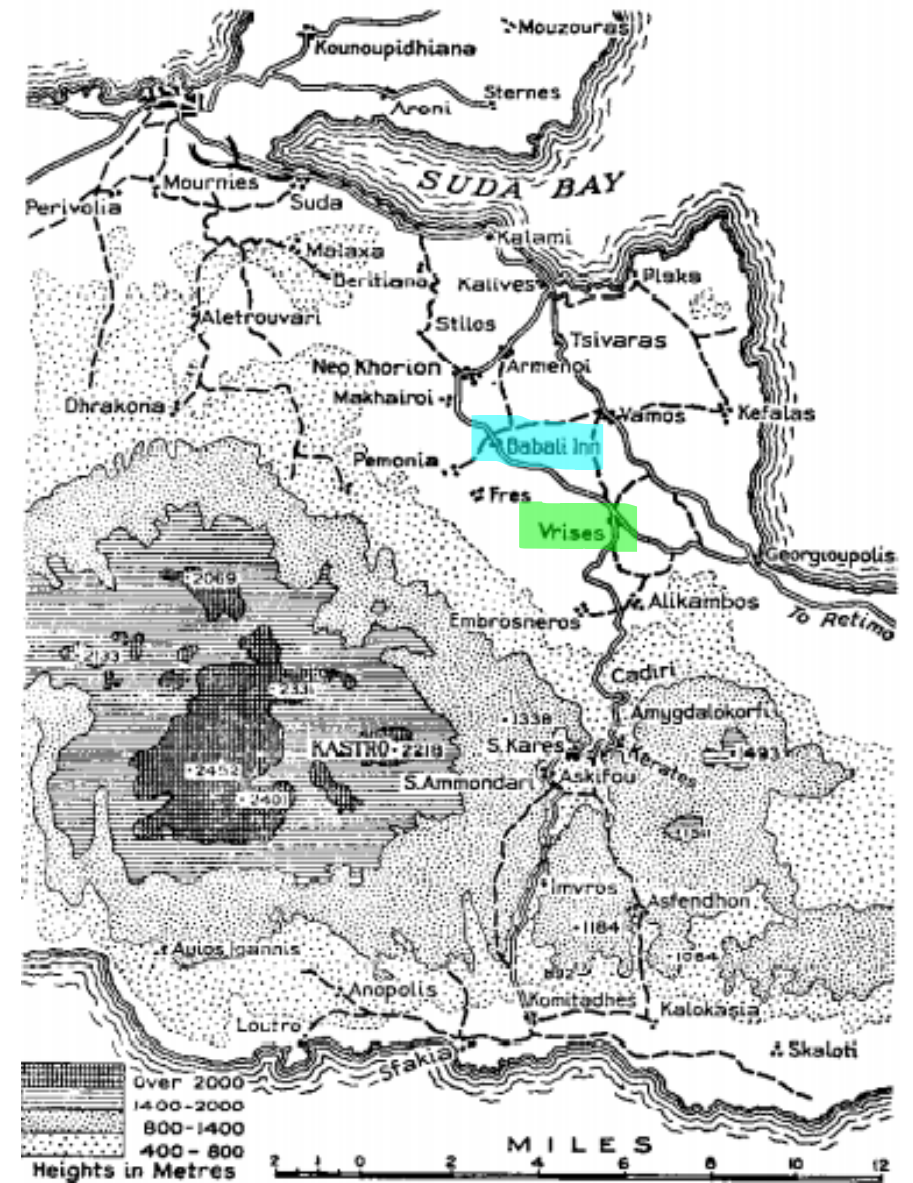
# 28 May 1941 – Crete

- At dawn on the 28th the 5th New Zealand and 19th Australian Brigades, each little stronger than a battalion, were deployed along the Sfakia road from Beritiana, which was only half a mile from Suda Bay, to Babali Inn, about six miles inland.
- A company of Layforce and two companies of the Maori battalion were astride the road at Beritiana.
- The 5th Brigade was grouped round Stilos.
- The 19th Brigade was about Neo Khorion, with the 2/8th Battalion astride the road leading up from Kalives and the 2/7th in rear of the New Zealanders on the Stilos road. At Babali Inn was the remainder of Layforce.
- The two brigades were to withdraw that night.
- By 6 a.m. on the 28th the Germans reached the commandos and Maoris at Beritiana and had them under fire; in two hours they surrounded these rearguard companies and were streaming past them towards Stilos. The surviving commandos withdrew through the Maoris' positions at 11 a.m. and at 12.30 Captain Royal began to withdraw his Maoris. They succeeded in fighting their way back to their unit. At 6.30 the German attack reached the 5th Brigade; there it was stopped with severe loss, probably fifty being killed or wounded.



# 28 May 1941 – Crete

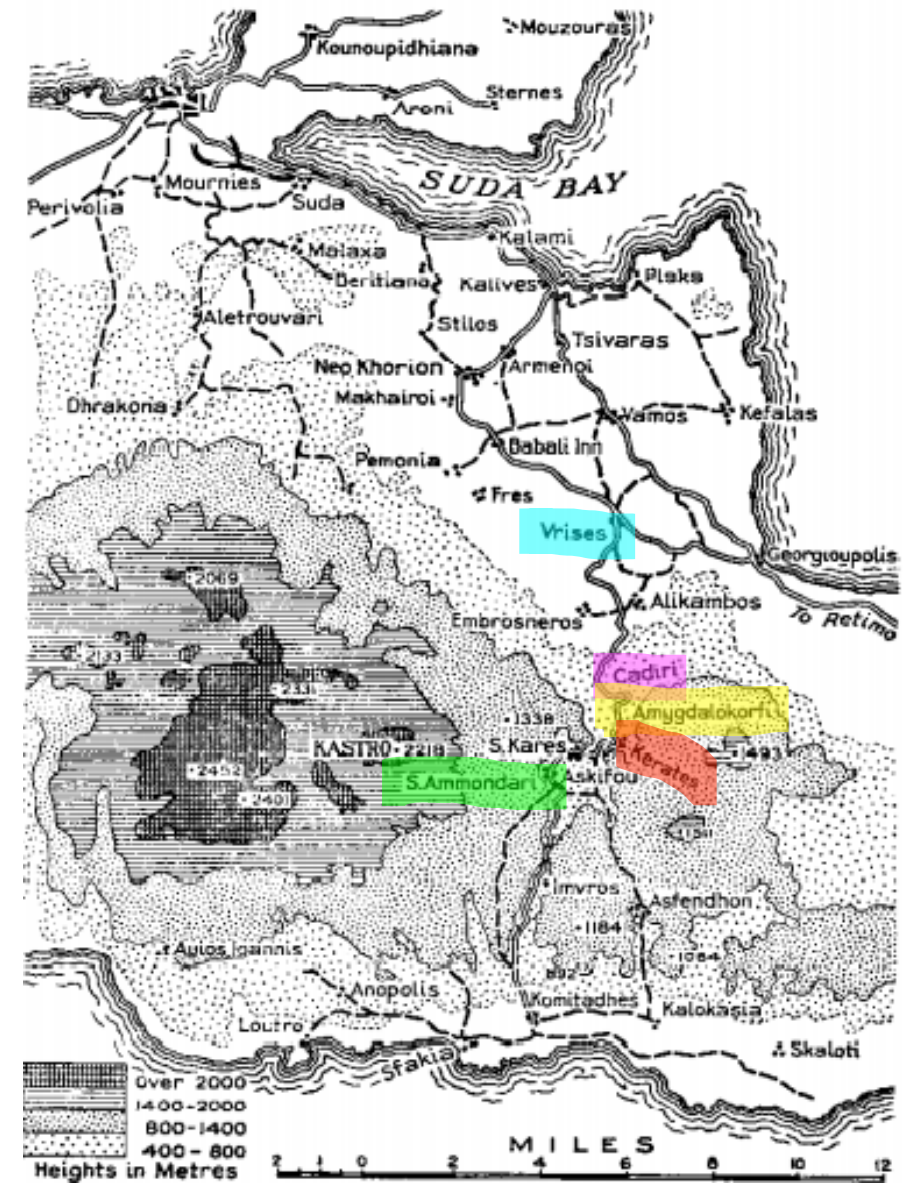
- About 9 a.m. Hargest in conference with Vasey decided that their men should begin to move back that day.
- It was arranged that while the 2/7th acted as rearguard, the 5th Brigade would march south to Babali Inn and reinforce the line Layforce was holding there. The battalions would then pass through this line to Vrises. The forward units thinned out and withdrew in good order.
- When the 2/8th arrived at Babali about 2 p.m. it took position with Layforce, and Hargest's 5th Brigade and the former rearguard, the 2/7th Battalion.
- The enemy followed fast and at 1.35 p.m. attacked the Babali rearguard. Until dusk Layforce was under intermittent machine-gun fire, though, throughout the day, for the first time since the 20th, air attack was inconsiderable





# 28 May 1941 – Crete

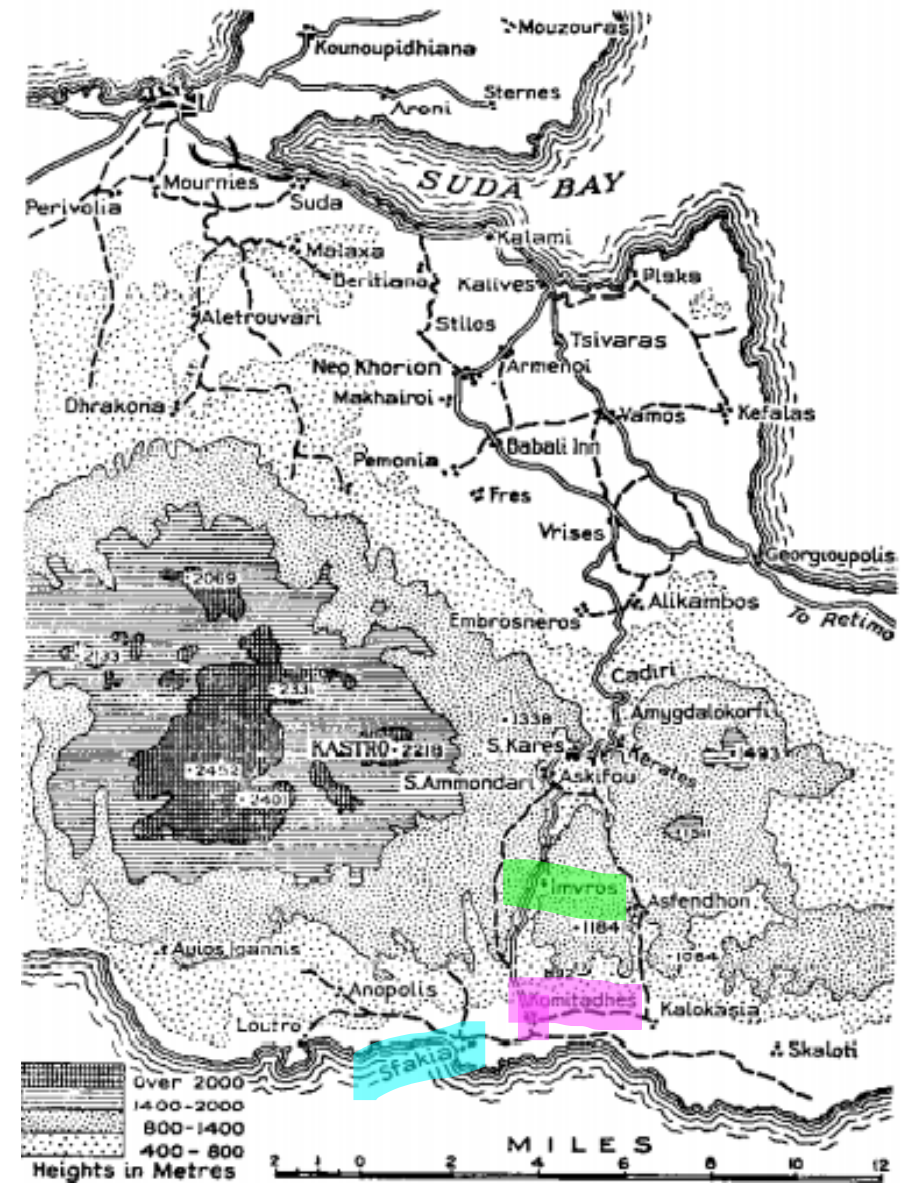
- At 9.15 p.m. this rearguard began to withdraw to **Vrises**.
- There the 5th Brigade and the remainder of the 19th had assembled early in the afternoon and thence, after a few hours' rest, the New Zealand battalions at 6 p.m. had moved on with the intention of reaching **Syn Ammondari**, 12 miles away, that night. This was an exacting march up hill to the top of the pass. The men were footsore and very weary. Near **Cadiri** engineers blew up the road before the rearguard had passed and caused a galling delay to the infantrymen who had to make a difficult detour round the demolition.
- The 4th Brigade was already deployed at the entrance to the **Askifou** plain, the 23rd Battalion having established a covering position at **Amygdalokorfi**.
- The 2/7th had marched back to the Askifou plain where it took position just north of Askifou village itself. The 2/8th was now wearily marching towards the **Kerates** area, where it arrived about 5 a.m. Layforce followed, withdrawing to Imvros south of the plain.





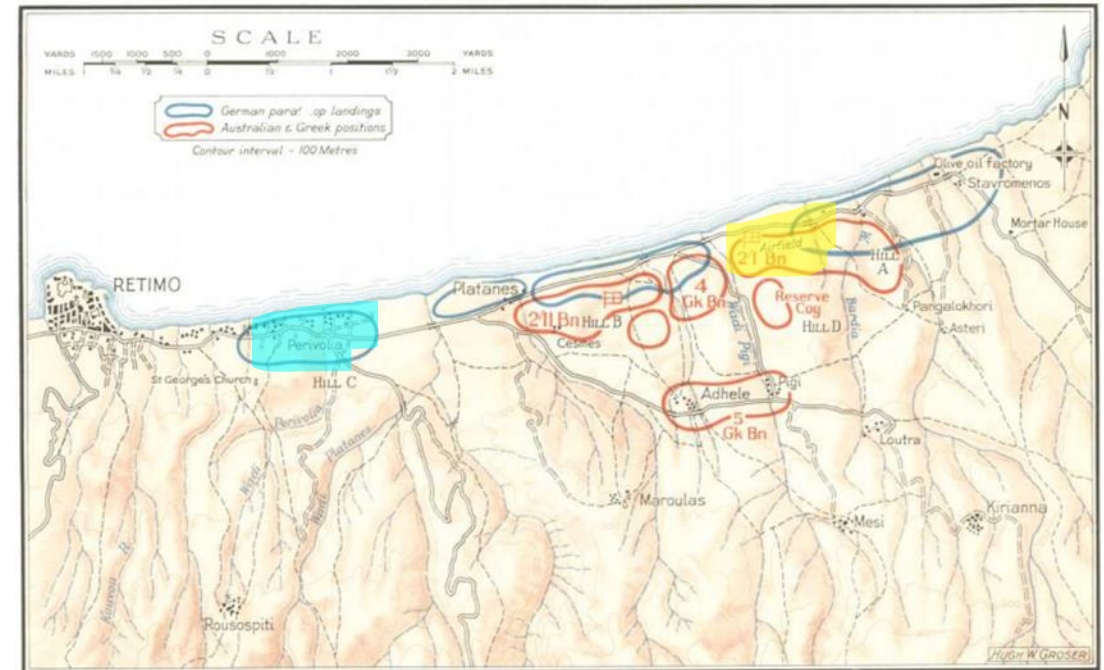
# 28 May 1941 – Crete

- At Sfakia, General Weston had been preparing for a series of embarkations. Early on the afternoon of the 28th he went to Imvros, where Major Burston commanded a group which included the 2/3rd Field Regiment and other detachments.
- Weston arranged that Burston should organise about 60 men of the 2/3rd Field Regiment to guide units from the top of the escarpment to the beach. Burston reconnoitred the escarpment and disposed his men along a track winding across the Komitadhes ravine and through Komitadhes village, and that night these guides kept the flow of traffic moving steadily to the beach.
- At Sfakia that night (the 28th) four destroyers embarked 230 wounded and 800 British troops.



# 28 May 1941 – Retimo, Crete

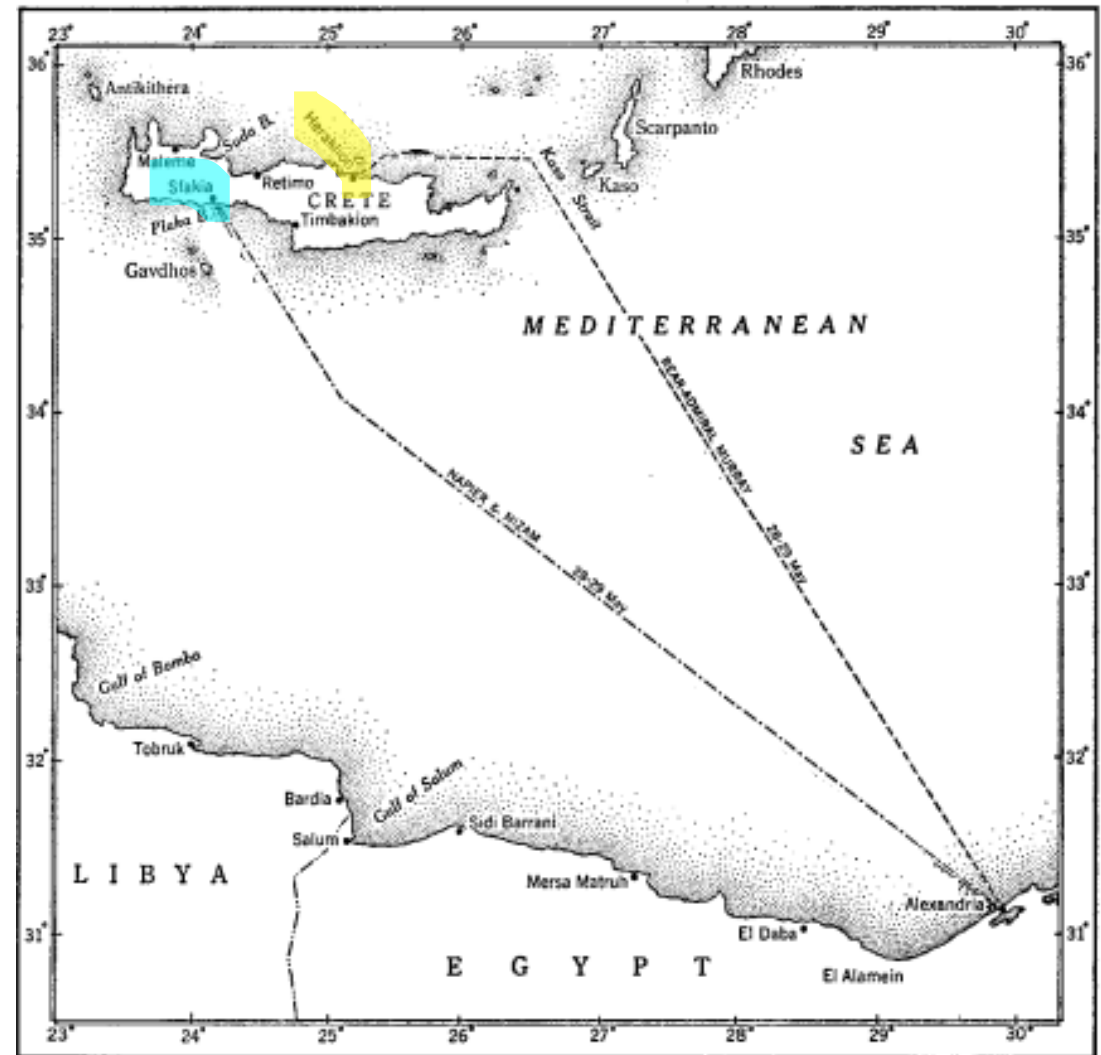
- As the loss of the two tanks and the shortage of artillery ammunition made a successful daylight attack against **Perivolia** impossible, Campbell ordered Sandover to assault the village that night. By this time the 2/11th had exhausted its mortar ammunition and many men were using captured small arms. Sandover planned an attack by two companies astride the road leading into Perivolia from the south-east.
- The head of the Australian column came under heavy fire at short range. However, the company pressed on, gained the crossroads and penetrated along the wadi towards the sea. Wood's company advanced and bombed the houses on the main road, but ran into heavy grenade and mortar fire which wounded Wood, and two platoon commanders, Lieutenants Bayliss and Lee.
- The responsibility had been placed upon Wood of deciding whether the attack could continue or not. At 4.33 Lieutenant Scott, the only unwounded officer, on the orders of Wood, who lay mortally wounded, fired two green Very lights—the signal that the company was withdrawing.
- They withdrew before dawn, but of Wood's company only forty-three came back.
- After the failure of this attack, Campbell decided that he had not enough men to risk another thrust against enemy troops who were so far from **the airfield**, the protection of which was his main task .



Situation at Retimo, evening, 20th May

# 28 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- In the early morning of 28th May, Rawlings in Orion with Ajax, Dido, Decoy, Jackal, Imperial, Hotspur, Kimberley and Hereward for Heraklion; and Arliss, (D)7, in Napier, with Nizam, Kelvin and Kandahar for Sfakia left Alexandria to embark the troops.
- Rawlings was due at Heraklion at midnight, and therefore had to pass through Kaso Strait by 9 p.m., at about the end of evening twilight.
- Attacks by high level bombers began at 5 p.m., followed a few minutes later by dive bombing. During the remaining daylight the ships were continuously attacked, some ten separate raids by formations of up to nine aircraft being recorded.
- At about 7.20 p.m. Imperial received a near miss. At 8.10 p.m. Ajax suffered a near miss which started a small fire, seriously wounded twenty men and badly shocked others, and caused above-water damage. Rawlings detached the ship and sent her back to Alexandria after dark.
- The rest of the force cleared Kaso Strait at 9 p.m. and turned to the west through a dark clear night with a fresh north-westerly wind.





# 28/29 May 1941 - Mediterranean

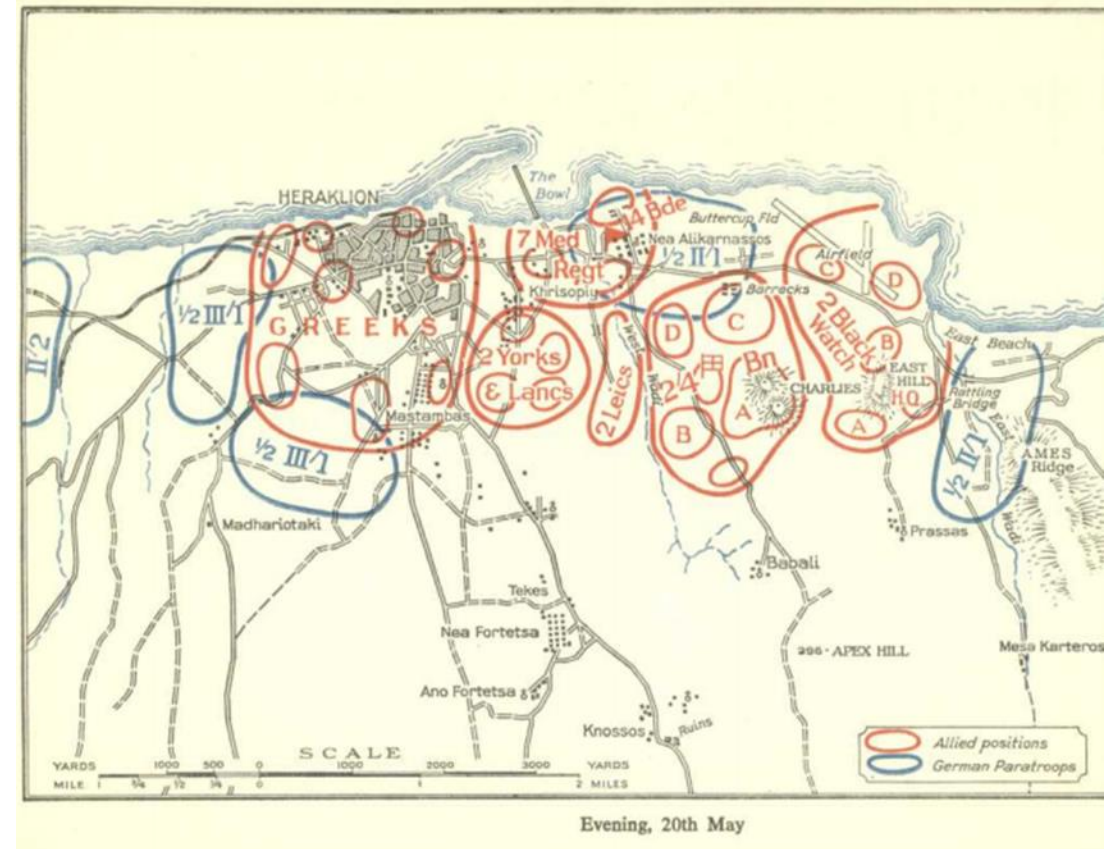
- On the evening of the 27th Morse had signalled to Cunningham that numbers available for embarkation at Sfakia would be:
- night of 29th-30th, 6,000;
- 30th-31st, 5,000;
- 31st-1st June, 3,000; plus 1,200 from Retimo at Plakias Bay.
- To meet the 29th-30th commitment, Cunningham sailed a force from Alexandria at 9 p.m. on the 28th under King in Phoebe, with Perth, Calcutta, Coventry, Glengyle, Jervis, Janus and Hasty.
- The relatively slow speed of Glengyle dictated the sailing time from Alexandria and lengthened the period of passage.



British Infantry Landing Ship HMS GLENGYLE, max speed 18 knots.

# 28/29 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- At Heraklion the British defence line encircling the port was about seven miles in length, but by about 11 p.m. some 2,000 troops, including a large number of wounded, were on the mole ready to embark, and out-lying troops were being withdrawn to an inner rearguard line.
- Rawlings arrived soon after 11.30 p.m. he had decided to ferry with the destroyers. Silently in the darkness, broken only by occasional Very lights soaring up from the German lines, Hotspur, Decoy, Jackal and Hereward stole into the harbour and berthed two-deep at the mole.
- The withdrawal was carried out with hardly a hitch, though there was much anxiety when, after midnight, the troops still in the forward posts learned that the time-table had been put forward one hour, and they had to hurry along the routes to the town. The Australians knew from experience in Greece that the naval ships could not wait.
- The town itself, a crowded place of narrow streets and close-set buildings, was in ruins. "Heraklion (wrote Captain Tomlinson) was one large stench of decomposing dead, debris from destroyed dwelling places, roads were wet and running from burst water pipes, hungry dogs were scavenging among the dead. There was a stench of sulphur, smouldering fires and pollution of broken sewers. Conditions were set for a major epidemic."
- After half an hour the two outside ships had filled and left to transfer their troops to the cruisers, shortly followed by the other two. Imperial and Kimberley then entered the harbour and loaded up, and Kimberley, last to leave, embarked the final stragglers at 2.55 and left the mole at exactly 3 a.m. on the 29th.
- "It is believed," wrote Macdonald, "that except for those in hospital none were left behind."



# 29 May 1941 - Melbourne

- Menzies had returned to Australia on the 24th, and had been immediately engaged in other matters, but on the 29th—the day after Wavell had been instructed, apparently without the knowledge of the Australian Government, that Syria must be occupied—the War Cabinet considered Bruce's messages.
- On their decision Menzies cabled direct to Churchill on the 29th saying that Australia was "much exercised by the present position in the Middle East". Menzies asked, among other things, whether large and urgent reinforcements of fighter aircraft could be sent to the Middle East and whether an attempt at the occupation of Syria could be made by British forces.
- The War Cabinet also decided to ask Blamey for an appreciation of the position in the Middle East with particular references to Syria and the defence of Crete and Cyprus.
- On the same night Bruce informed Menzies that a decision had been reached to go into Syria with British and Free French forces as soon as possible.

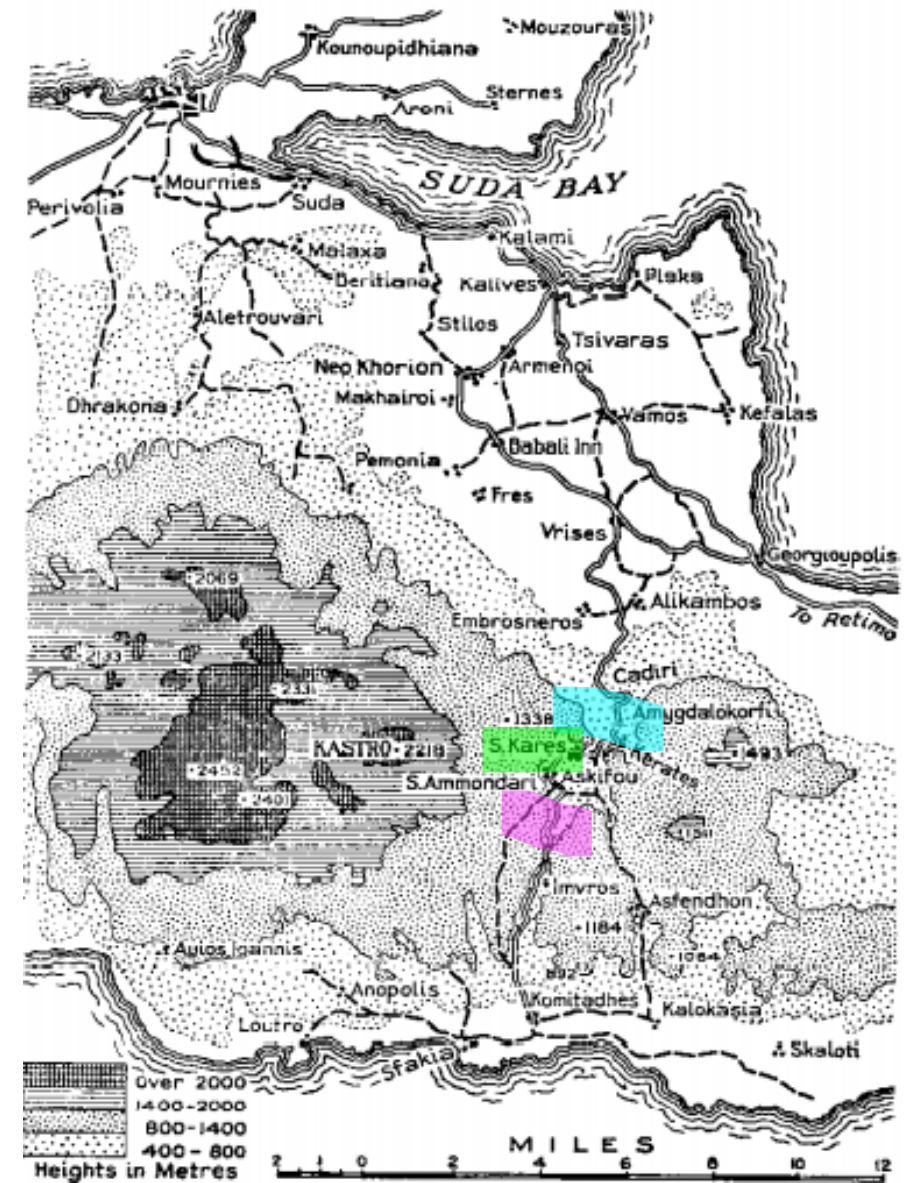


MELBOURNE, 1939-09-27. INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE WAR CABINET. L TO R. THE MINISTER FOR COMMERCE, SENATOR MCLEAY; THE MINISTER FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND FOR INFORMATION, SIR HENRY GULLETT; THE MINISTER FOR SUPPLY AND DEVELOPMENT, R.G. CASEY, THE PRIME MINISTER AND TREASURER, R.G. MENZIES; THE MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, G.A. STREET, AND THE SECRETARY TO THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE AND TO THE WAR CABINET, F.G. SHEDDEN. (THE ATTORNEY-GENERAL, W.M. HUGHES WAS ABSENT).



# 29 May 1941 – Crete

- On the morning of the 29th the 23rd Battalion was holding the entrance to the Askifou plain. At 7.15 a.m. large numbers of Germans were seen advancing towards it. The battalion had been reduced to the strength of only about a company. It had only five officers and, at the end of the day, was commanded by a lieutenant, R. L. Bond.
- The men were weary, hungry and short of water. Hargest's brigade major, Dawson, solved the water problem by collecting all the glass bottles and other containers he could find in Sin Kares, filling them and sending them forward in a truck.
- At 2 p.m. Weston ordered that the 4th Brigade, after having held the Askifou rearguard position until nightfall on the 29th, should withdraw to the beaches. By dawn on the 30th, the 19th Brigade, comprising the 2/7th and 2/8th Battalions, with the marine battalion, and supported by two guns, three light tanks and three carriers, were to occupy a final rearguard position. The rearguard position was near Vitsilokoumos in the hills covering Sfakia. Vasey would probably be responsible for holding this position until the night of the 31st-1st,
- During the afternoon the enemy edged forward but the battalion withdrew without incident, and from Sin Kares the men were carried back in trucks, of which a few remained. By 9 p.m. they had passed through the 4th Brigade's main rearguard position on the southern edge of the Askifou plain and the 4th had begun to move back.



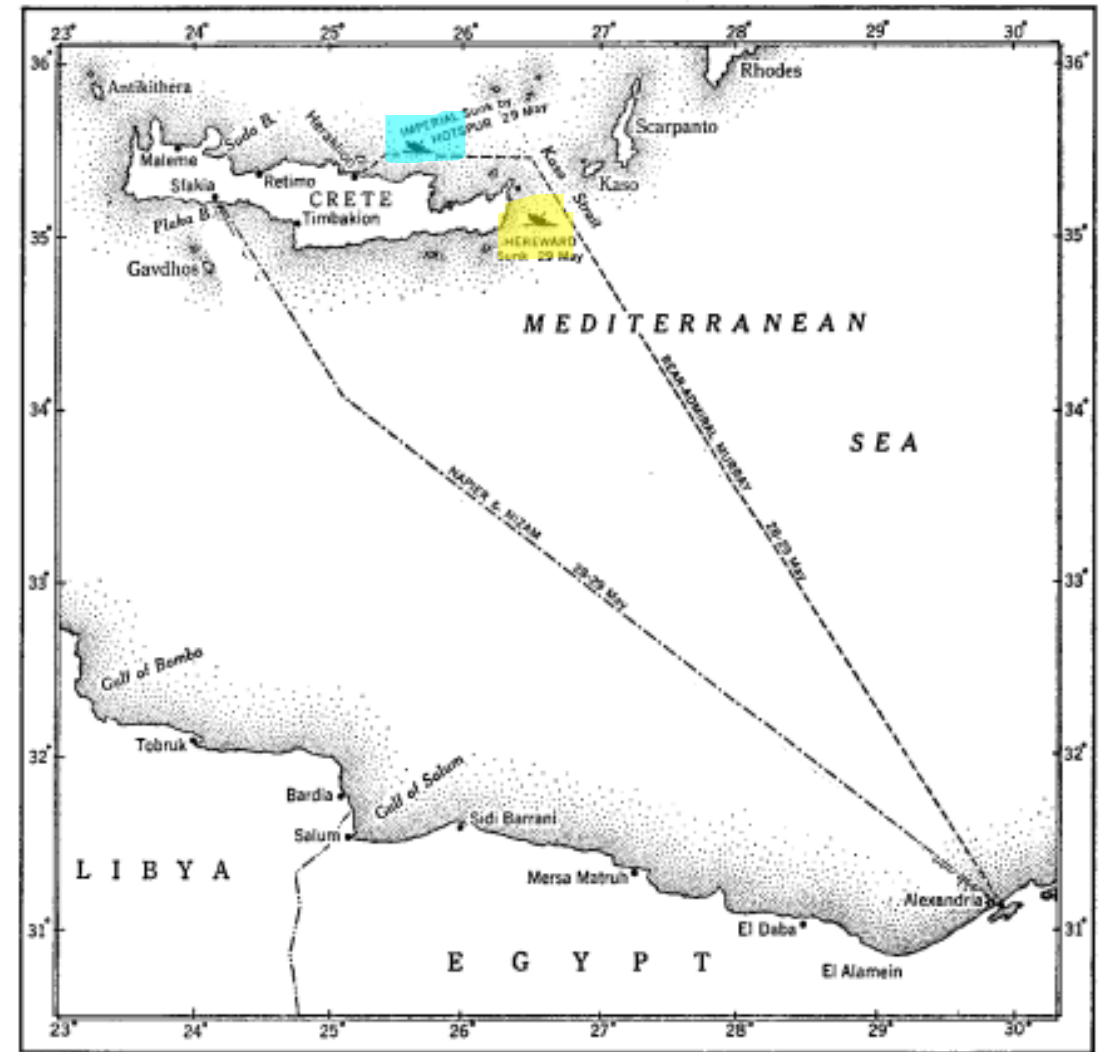
# 29 May 1941 – Crete

- Between 10 and 11 p.m. on the 29th, the 5th, and at daylight on the 30th, the 4th reached the end of the tarred road above Sfakia.
- In this dispersal area were crowds of men, chiefly base troops, who had lost their units. "The place was literally swarming with men of all sorts," wrote Hargest later, "and nearly all (of ) units who had straggled and were now at a loose end, eating up rations and using water that fighting troops needed . Down below on the sea coast it was supposed to be worse ." The lack of food and water was now crucial.
- During the 29th Burston had improved his traffic control organisation along the Komitadhes track and had converted it into a "sheeprace", so that "once a man got into the flow of traffic he just could not (and was not allowed to) stop".
- By 3.20 a.m. on the 30th about 6,000 men had been embarked, including 550 wounded, and the squadron sailed .



# 29 May 1941 - Mediterranean

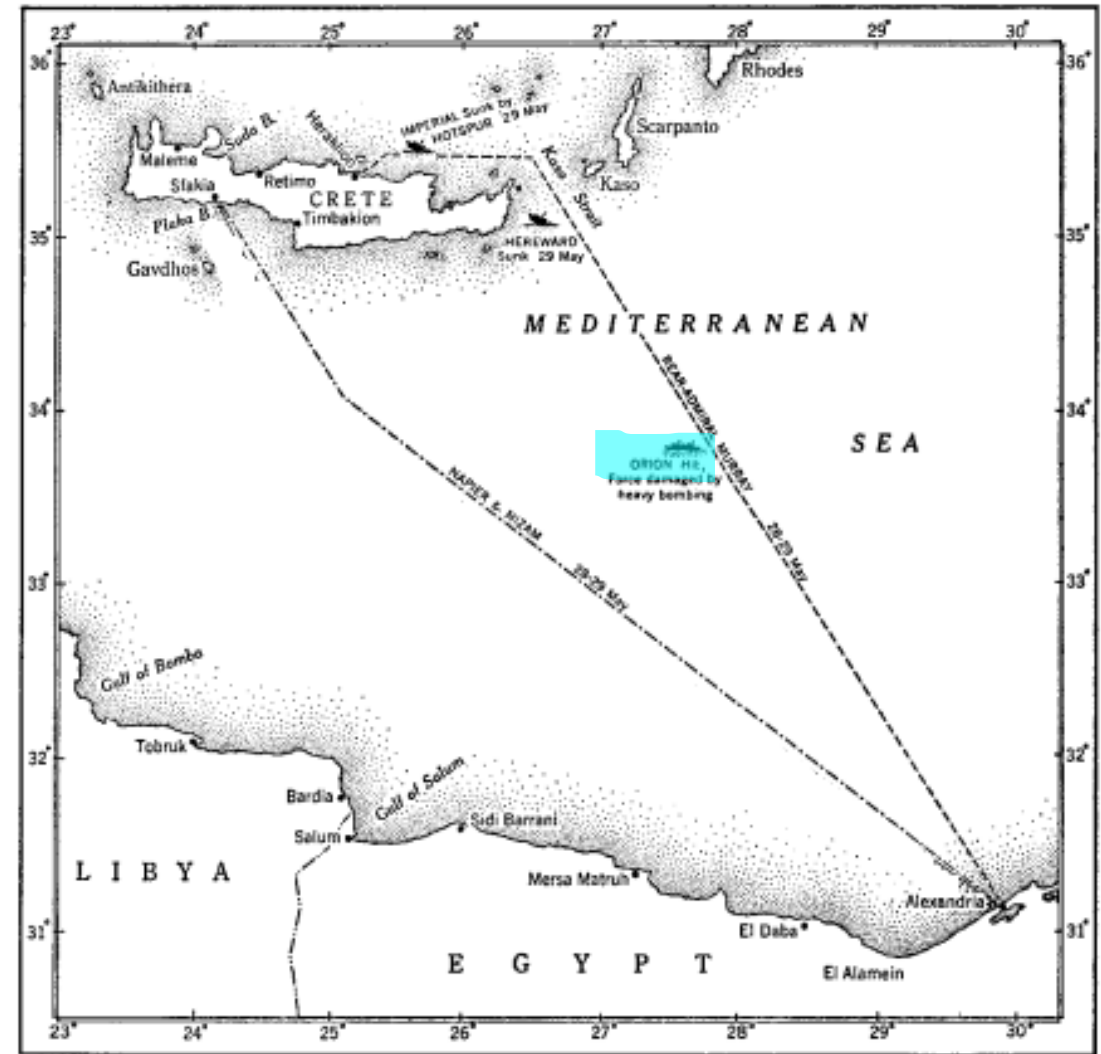
- By 3.20 a.m. the force had formed up and was steaming at 29 knots for Kaso Strait.
- At 3.45 a.m. **Imperial**'s steering gear, apparently damaged by the near miss the previous day, suddenly failed. Rawlings sent Hotspur back to take everyone off and sink her, while the remainder of the force proceeded eastwards at 15 knots.
- Hotspur, her task completed and now with a total of about 900 on board, rejoined the squadron at the northern entrance to Kaso Strait just after sunrise, and speed was increased to 29 knots. As the sun rose the turn to the southward to the strait was made. It was then that fire was opened on the first two dive bombers.
- The squadron was in the middle of the strait when, at 6.25 a.m., **Hereward**, with approximately 450 troops on board, was hit. Rawlings decided it would be inviting further casualties to send a destroyer to her, and continued on. When last seen she was making slowly across the five miles of sea towards Crete, her guns engaging an enemy aircraft.
- Decoy was damaged by a near miss at 6.45, and speed had to be reduced to 25 knots, and further reduced for a while to 21 knots when a very close miss damaged Orion a few minutes later. About 8.15 Dido was hit, and at 9.5 a.m. Orion, both ships having forward turrets put out of action. The Captain of Orion, wounded in one of the earlier attacks died at this point.





# 29 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- At 10.45, when the force was about 100 miles from Kaso, a squadron of eleven bombers attacked **Orion**, which had 1,100 troops on board. One bomb passed through the bridge and burst below in the crowded mess decks, killing 260 and wounding 280. Communication between bridge and engine room was destroyed, the steering gear was put out of action, and three boiler rooms were damaged.
- The ship, out of control, steadied on a course back to Scarpanto until matters could be rectified. Hotspur's 1st Lieutenant watched her as pouring yellow and black smoke, she was swinging round towards the Kaso Strait, out of control. . . . The whole squadron waited breathlessly, and then she began altering slowly round, and limped back towards us. We dropped back and round the wounded ship, and steamed on with her. Sometimes great clouds of yellow smoke would come from her funnel, and she would drop right down in speed owing to the sea-water seeping into her oil tanks.
- After 11 a.m. there was a two hour respite during which two Fulmar aircraft—the first friendly fighters seen by the force—"caused a distinct feeling of relief". There were three high level attacks between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m., but no further damage was suffered; and the force reached Alexandria at 8 p.m. and landed 3,486 troops, some 600 having been killed or captured on passage.
- Rawlings wrote: "the conduct of the military units embarked in my flagship was admirable, and they remained remarkably steady and helpful throughout. I very much regret the heavy casualties they sustained."



# 29 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- Hereward (photo) did not reach the shore, but sank. However most of her troops and ship's company were saved by Italian torpedo boats.
- Most of the Australian anti-aircraft gunners were on Hereward. One of them wrote afterwards: "Lieutenant Jim Mann of 'B' Troop\* was an inspiration to all on board because of the soldierly way in which he helped organise the 'Abandon Ship', and saw that men had something to keep them afloat.
- He was one of the last to leave and was drowned. When his turn came all floating material had been used.
- In the water we were strafed and bombed by a Stuka for a short while. Later an Italian Red Cross plane arrived and kept the Stuka away, by circling round the men in the water. Italian motor torpedo boats took the survivors to Scarpanto and later an Italian destroyer took us to Rhodes.
- \*Lt J. G. Mann was a Melbourne barrister and Rhodes Scholar.



# 29 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- Arliss' destroyers had embarked additional whalers for beach work, five tons of badly needed rations for 15,000 troops, and 150,000 rounds of small arms ammunition at Alexandria, and made an uneventful passage to Sfakia, where they arrived about midnight.
- Sfakia, a small fishing village, had a shingle beach of which only a short stretch could be used for embarking in boats. The beach was walled in by a 500-foot high escarpment and access to it was by a precipitous goat track. Only those actually embarking could be on the beach and, in the absence of signal communications, touch between the beach area the escarpment, had to be maintained on foot. It took at least two hours to climb the goat track.
- Both navy and army headquarters on shore were in a cave near the village, and for this first night Morse had signalled Cunningham that "up to 1,000 will be ready to embark".
- Embarking in their boats, the destroyers lifted a total of 744 and sailed at 3 a.m. on the 29th. The force was bombed by four aircraft between 9.5 a.m. and 9.40 a.m. and Nizam sustained minor damage from near misses. Alexandria was reached without further incident at 5 p.m. that day.





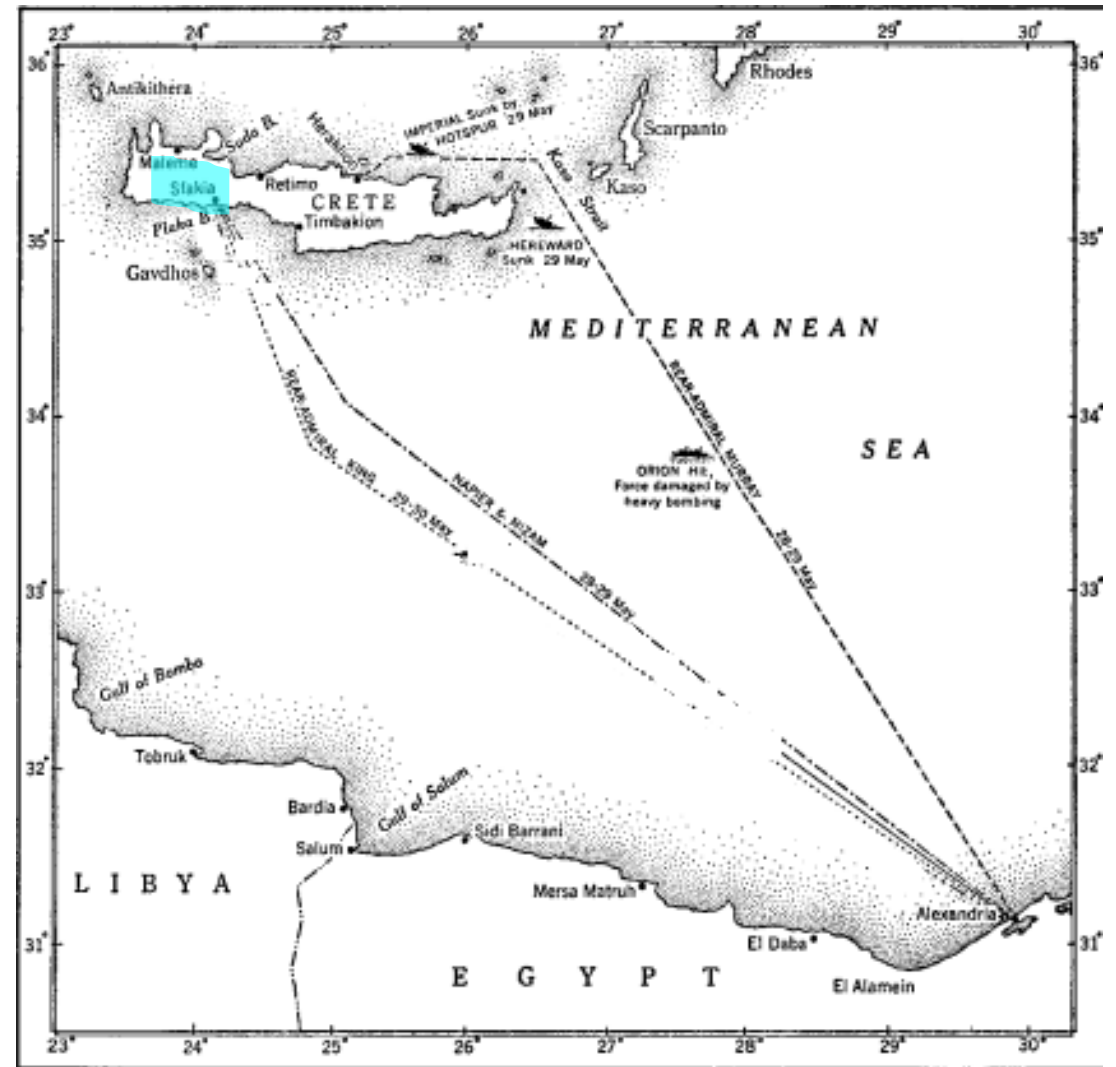
# 29 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- Only one air attack was experienced by King's force on the passage north, at 10 a.m. on the 29th, when bombs fell close to Perth.
- In Alexandria, Cunningham (portrait) learned of the losses and damage suffered by the Heraklion force. In a signal to the Admiralty on the 29th he outlined the situation, and added that a Glen ship and cruisers were on their way to Sfakia.
- He continued: "It is evident that tomorrow we must expect further casualties to ships accompanied with extremely [heavy] casualties to men particularly in the case of Glengyle if she is hit with 3,000 men on board. The fighter protection available is very meagre."
- He then asked if it were justified risking heavy casualties in crowded ships, and accepting a scale of loss and damage to the fleet which "may make us so weak that we cannot operate".
- He remarked that on the other hand to leave men deliberately in enemy hands was against all our tradition "though in the end many men will be alive who may well be lost if they embark".
- He concluded: "I am ready to continue with the evacuation as long as we have a ship with which to do so but I feel it my duty to put these considerations before their Lordships."
- In 1937 and 38 while Cunningham was second in command of the Mediterranean fleet HMS Hood had been his Flagship.



# 29 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- The Admiralty reversed the stand they had taken six days earlier on sending a "Glen" ship to Crete, and replied that same evening that Glengyle should be turned back but the remaining ships should continue.
- By the time this signal was received by Cunningham Glengyle was nearing Sfakia, so she was not recalled.
- Instead, to strengthen King's screen and to be available as rescue ships should any in his force be sunk, Cunningham sent Waller in Stuart with Jaguar and Defender from Alexandria late on the 29th to join King south of Crete the following morning.
- In the afternoon of the 29th Cunningham was told in a message from General Wavell that Wavell, Air Marshal Tedder and General Blamey unanimously considered that "Glen" ships and cruisers should not be used, but that destroyers should embark at Sfakia on the night of the 30th.





# 29/30 May 1941 – Retimo, Crete

- After dusk on the 29th Major Hooper, who had been with the Greeks on the eastern flank, reported to Campbell that the Greeks declared that a large German force was advancing from the east—the direction of Heraklion.
- Soon afterwards the Greeks learned that Maleme and Heraklion were in German hands and the four Greek battalions began to withdraw into the mountains.
- Having received no permission to leave his post, Campbell at once ordered the whole of the 2/11th to occupy the position the 4th Greek was abandoning.
- At midnight Greeks brought news that Germans were arriving from the west and that 300 motor-cyclists had entered Retimo.
- Campbell's only source of news from outside his own area was now the B.B.C., which announced that the situation on Crete was "extremely precarious". There was only enough food to last one more day.
- Later Campbell was informed that German tanks were behind the 2/11th and in the valley behind Hill "D". Campbell decided that he could now carry out his task—to deny the airfield to the enemy—for only an hour at the most and only at heavy cost. The fact that Lieutenant Haig had been ordered to Sfakia suggested that Sfakia was the embarkation point; it was three days' journey away and his force could not possibly reach it. His men had been on half rations for three days and now had food only for that day. Campbell told his subordinates, that he proposed to surrender,
- Campbell ordered Lergessner to make a white flag and display it, and at the same time he sent messages by telephone or by runner to all units and sub-units informing them of the surrender and telling them to display white flags and assemble at the north-west corner of the airfield. A quarter of an hour later, as the German fire continued, he himself tied a towel to a stick and walked down the track towards the airfield.





# 29/30 May 1941 – Retimo, Crete

- Sandover, CO of the 2/11<sup>th</sup>, spoke to Campbell on the phone and told him that he was in favour of making for the hills.
- He then instructed his officers that all men should be told there was no known chance of rescue nor source of food, and then be given the choice of surrendering or going. If they wanted to go they'd better go quickly as the back road might be cut.
- "I am going myself," said Sandover, "we'll think what to do when we get out of this."
- Major Heagney, the second-in-command of the battalion, who, though still in poor health, had managed to rejoin the battalion from hospital, and a number of other officers decided to remain.
- Sandover then left with a party of officers and other ranks. This group halted in a gully behind the Greeks. Here others, including Honner, caught up.
- When we caught up the main body (Honner wrote) I found I was the only man with a map—a Greek map and it was our standby for the next 3 months.



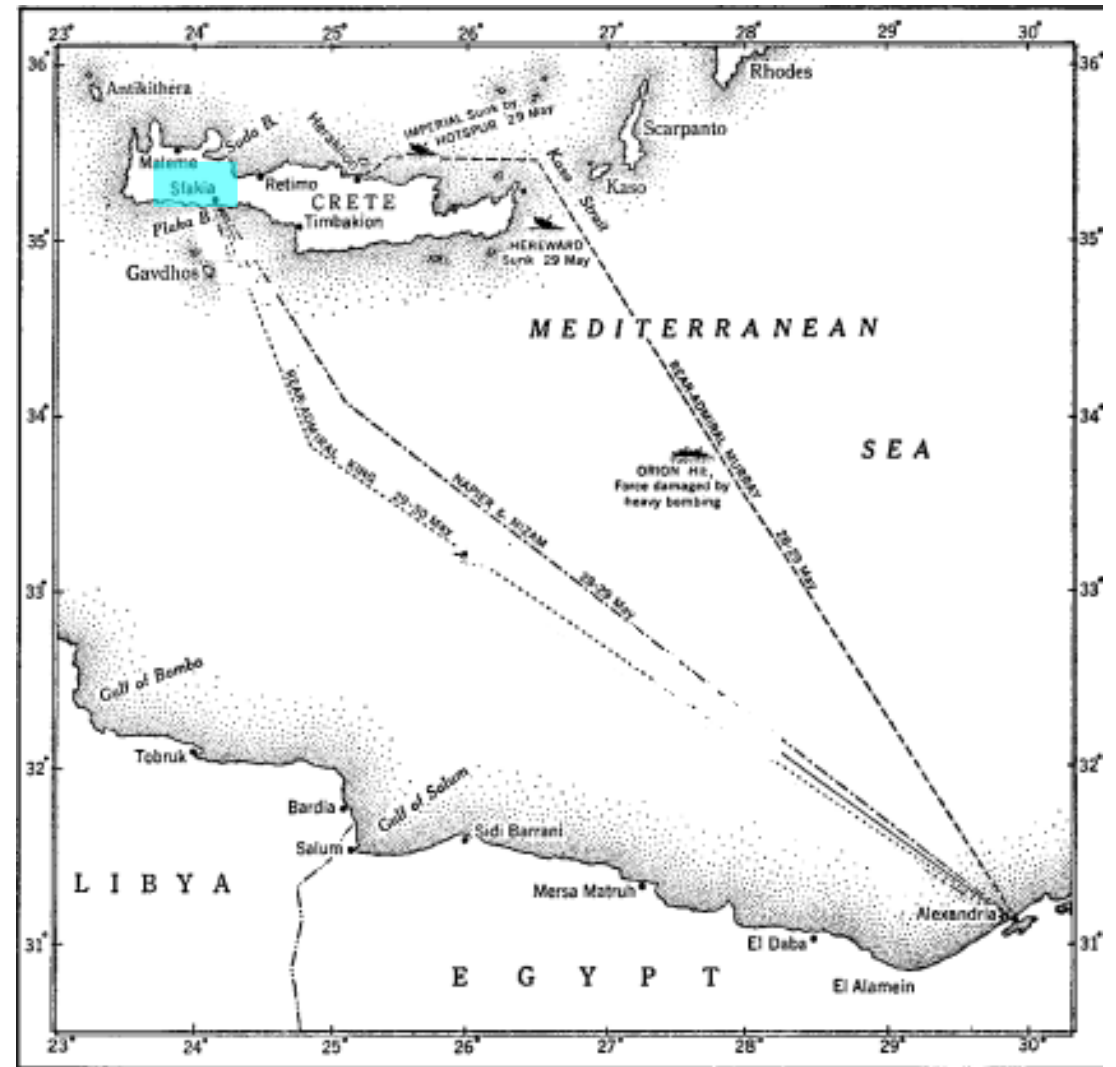
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

076363

1944-10-03. WX5 BRIGADIER, R.L. SANDOVER,  
COMMANDING OFFICER, 6TH INFANTRY BRIGADE.

# 29/30 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- King's force reached **Sfakia** at 11.30 p.m. on the 29th and embarkation began in Glengyle's boats and two landing craft which had been specially shipped in Perth.
- Embarkation proceeded swiftly after some temporary slowness with walking wounded.
- Some delay was experienced on shore due to the inadequacy of the goat track and, once embarkation was in its swing, Morse found "the difficulty was to get troops down to the beach quickly enough".
- At 3.20 a.m. on the 30th, having embarked "about 3,400 troops", the force sailed at 19 knots.
- Stuart, Jaguar and Defender joined at 6.48 a.m. south of Gavdhos.



# 30 May 1941 - Egypt

- On 30th May Blamey informed the Government that the 7th Australian Division (less one brigade group) together with two cavalry brigades, one Indian infantry brigade and the Free French Division were to move against Syria.
- The extent to which resistance would be offered to an invasion was a matter of conjecture and the total Allied force available was "inadequate for the task should there be any serious degree of resistance on the part of the French".
- Should it prove unequal to the task the operation could be classed as a raid and troops withdrawn along the coast under cover of the navy. Adequate air protection could be provided.



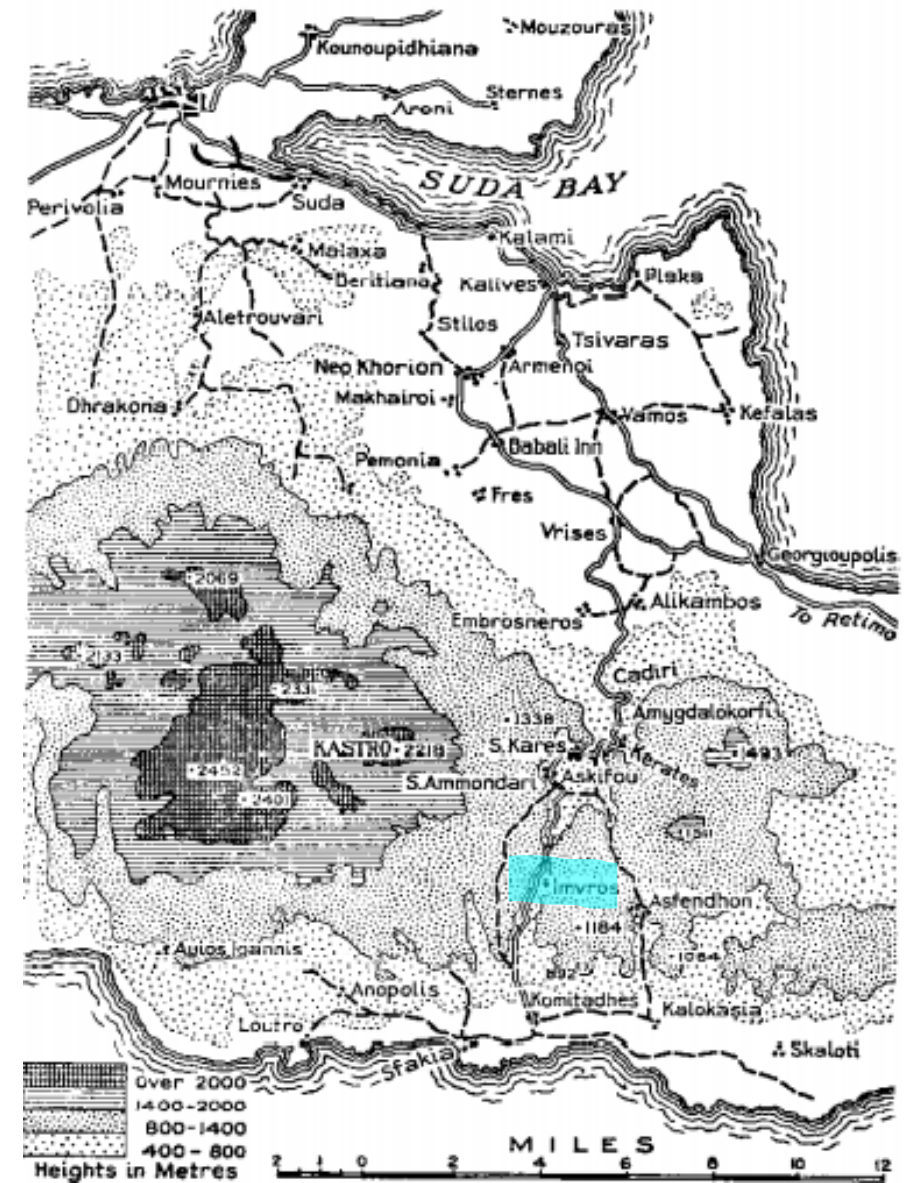
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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# 30 May 1941 – Crete

- In the rearguard position Vasey had the 2/7th forward astride the road, the weak 2/8th holding a large wadi on the left flank, and the marines in reserve. In support were the two 75-mm guns of the 2/3rd Field Regiment—these were the only guns to cross the mountains—and two machine-guns of the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion.
- The brigade was to hold this position during the 30th and 31st and to embark that night.
- Forward of the infantry and about a mile north of Imvros the three light tanks of the 3rd Hussars covered a detachment of the 42nd Field Company which was to crater the road in four places when the tanks drew back.
- The tanks supported by the carriers fended off the enemy, inflicting heavy casualties until ordered back at 4.00 p.m. after the Germans started to move over the hills to the west.
- About 3 p.m., while this action was in progress, men of the 2/8th saw troops advancing. They were fired on and dispersed, a patrol identifying 25 German dead.



# 30 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- At 9.15 a.m. on 30th day Cunningham dispatched Arliss in Napier with Nizam, Kelvin and Kandahar from Alexandria.
- Soon after midday Kandahar developed engine trouble and Arliss sent her back to harbour.
- Three hours later three aircraft delivered an attack in which near misses damaged Kelvin; she was sent back, and the two Australian ships continued alone.
- On 30 May Cunningham (portrait) unburdened himself to the First Sea Lord in a personal letter:
- “There is no hiding the fact that in our battle with the German Air Force we have been badly battered. I always thought we might get a surprise if they really turned their attention to the fleet. No A/A fire will deal with the simultaneous attack of 10 to 20 aircraft.”
- It wasn't only the loss and damage to ships that disturbed Cunningham.
- “I have been rather anxious about the state of mind of the sailors after seven days constant bombing.” he wrote  
“...Ajax out of the last 60 days has spent less than 10 nights in Harbour I believe. Dido has had one in the last 21 days, and so on. The destroyers are the same - just very tired.”





# 30 May 1941 – Crete

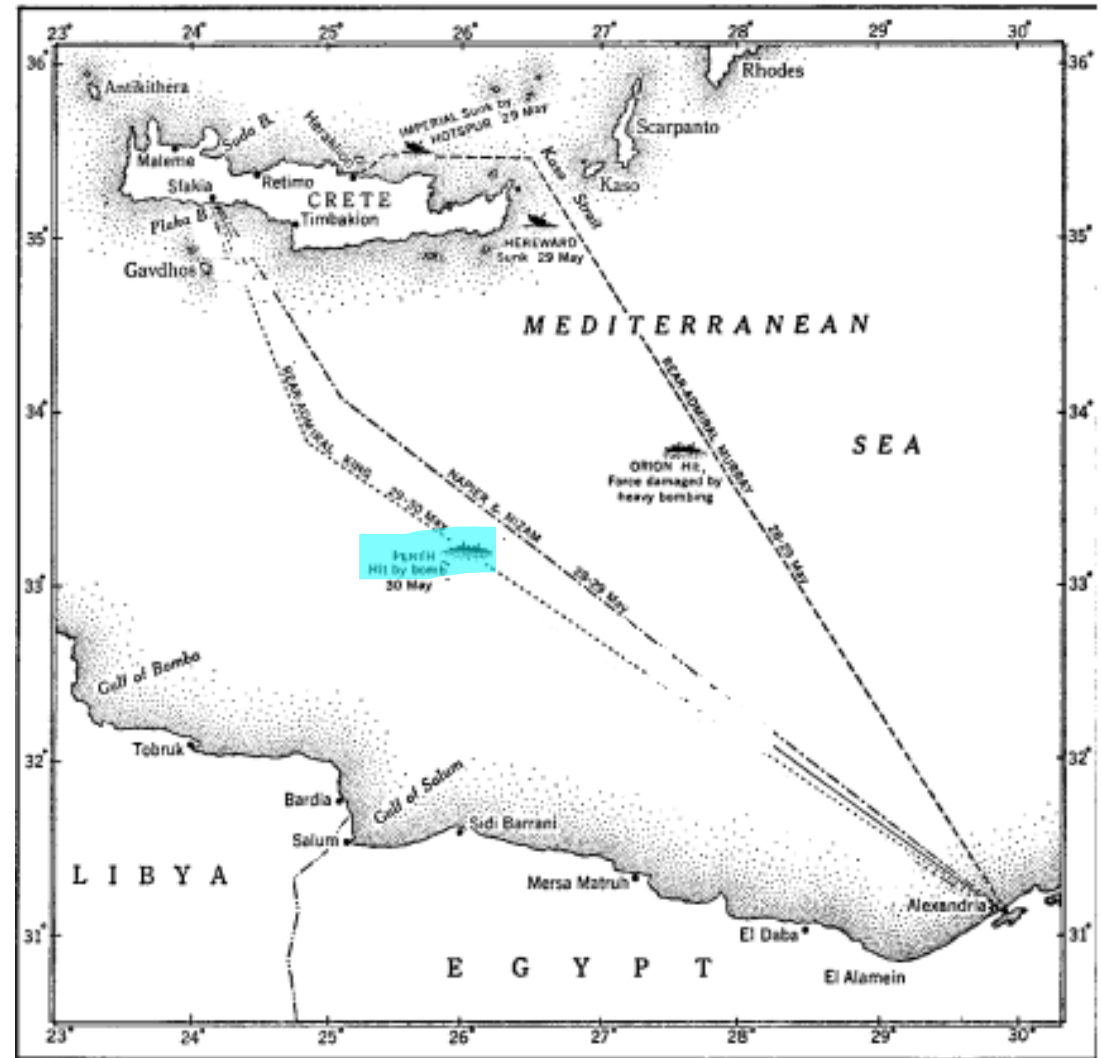
- It was learnt from signals from Cairo that only four destroyers would arrive that night, and only 2,000 men could be picked up.
- Weston selected the 4th and 5th Brigades to go. These comprised more than 2,000 men, and it was therefore decided that one battalion must stay. Hargest chose the 21st—the strongest—and it was placed under Vasey's command.
- Later Captain Morse, the naval officer in charge, announced that only 1,000 could be embarked, and at length it was decided to send off 230 men from each battalion of the 4th Brigade and the Maori battalion; the 5th Brigade would remain, and the 21st Battalion was placed under its command.
- but by 3 a.m. on the 31st the remaining destroyers—the Australian-manned Napier and Nizam—had embarked some 1,510 troops, including the reduced 18th, 19th, 20th and 28th Battalions.





# 30 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- Three air attacks were made on the force during the passage to Alexandria, and in the first of these, soon after 9.30 a.m., **Perth** sustained a direct hit abaft the bridge.
- The bomb exploded in "A" boiler room; put the forward unit out of action; and killed two cooks and two stokers of the ship's company and two Marines and seven soldiers among the passengers.
- Warrant Officer Hill and Stoker Petty Officer Reece remained in the boiler room among scalding steam in a gallant effort to save one of the stokers. He was dead when they brought him out, and themselves badly scalded.
- In the subsequent attacks between noon and 1 p.m. Perth, as a "wounded bird", was singled out for attention and suffered some near misses which "shook the ship's structure considerably".
- From then on the passage was uneventful. Late in the afternoon the force passed Napier and Nizam north-bound, and "the welcome light of Ras-el-Tin [the lighthouse at Alexandria] was sighted a few minutes before midnight".
- The number actually landed at Alexandria, including Allied troops, refugees and distressed British Seamen, was 6,029.



# 30 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- In the evening, under instructions from their respective Commanders-in-Chief, General Freyberg and staff, the Air Officer Commanding and staff, and Captain Morse and the naval staff left Sfakia in two Sunderland aircraft for Egypt.
- Major-General Weston, Royal Marines, remained in command on shore in Crete.
- Before leaving Sfakia, Freyberg signalled Wavell asking for "one last lift tomorrow night, we could embark anything up to 7,000".



31 May 1941 - Brisbane

# New Turns In Pacific Alignment

*Courier-Mail Special Service and  
Australian Associated Press*

Two new, important steps yesterday brought Japan's position in the Western Pacific to the forefront.

These were:

- 1.—Exports from the Philippines were stopped, and several vessels, including a Japanese ship, ceased loading cargoes.
- 2.—The Japanese are renewing their demands for the speeding of trade talks with the Dutch East Indies.

Nevertheless it is believed that the United States is trying to give Japan an avenue of escape from her commitment to the Axis. The Secretary for State (Mr. Cordell Hull) told a Press conference that the United States' policy towards Japan had not changed.

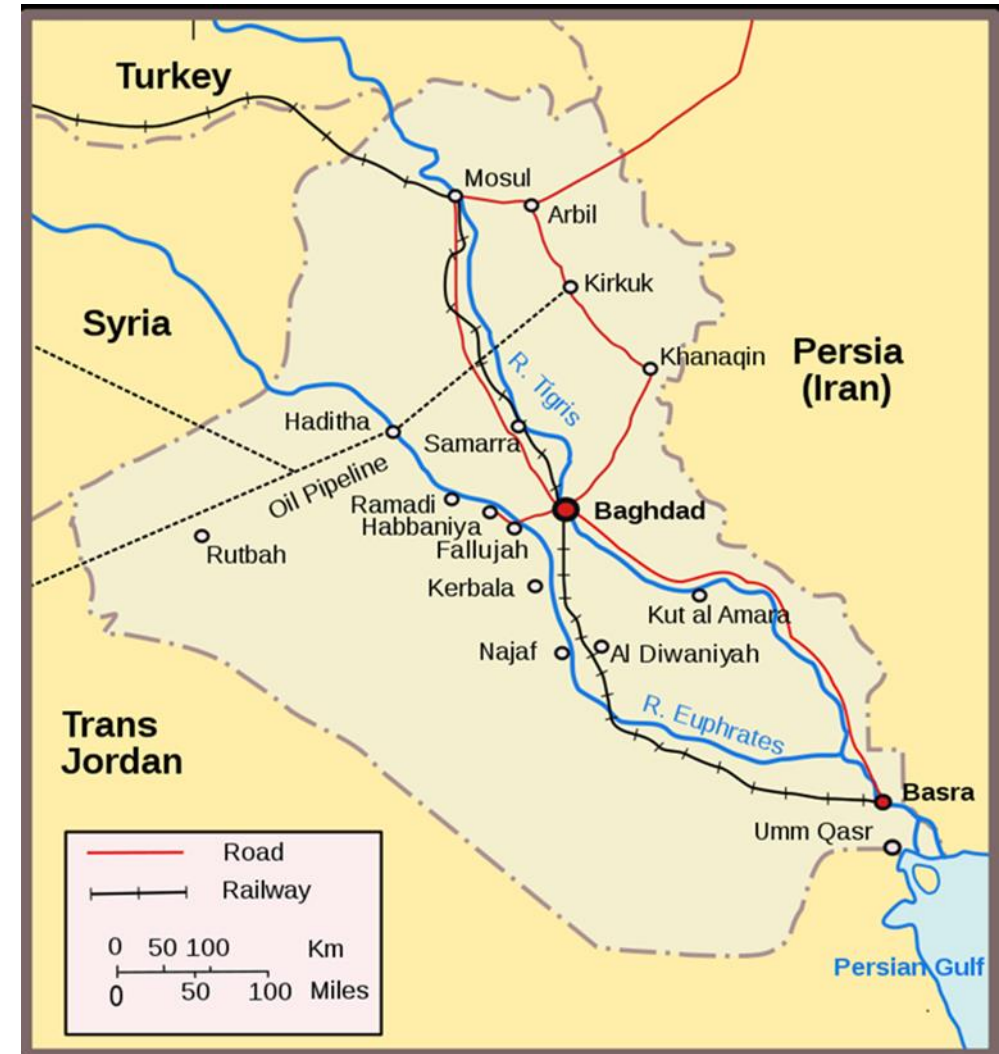
The first ship affected by the order to cease exports from the Philippines was the Japanese steamer *Kunikawa Maru*, on which the loading of hemp and scrap iron ceased at noon yesterday, says the Manila correspondent of the New York Times.

The New York Times says that Japan officially requested the Indies to reconsider their attitude in the Batavia negotiations, which the Japanese describe as insincere.



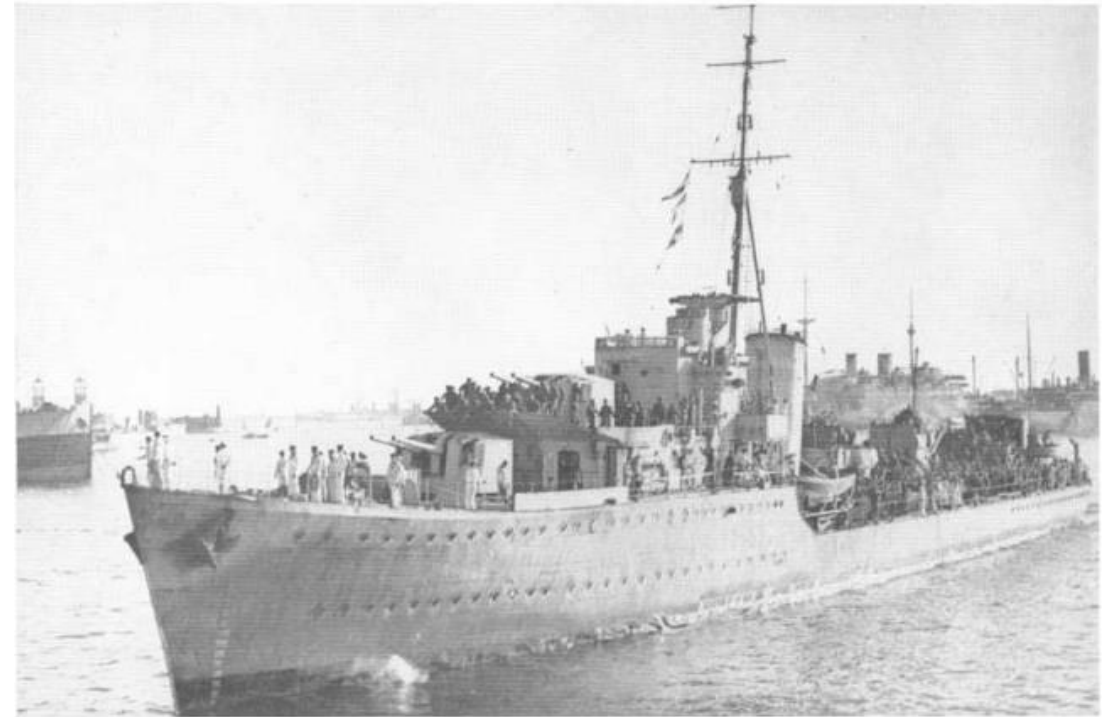
# 31 May 1941 – Iraq

- From Fallujah the column from Palestine assisted in defeating a determined counter-attack and drove the Iraqis back to Baghdad where an armistice was signed by the Mayor on 31st May and a friendly government was established.
- Rashid Ali, the Italian Consular staffs and the Mufti of Jerusalem had fled to Persia. By this time the two other brigades (the 21st and 25th) of the 10th Indian Division had arrived at Basra.



# 31 May 1941 - Mediterranean

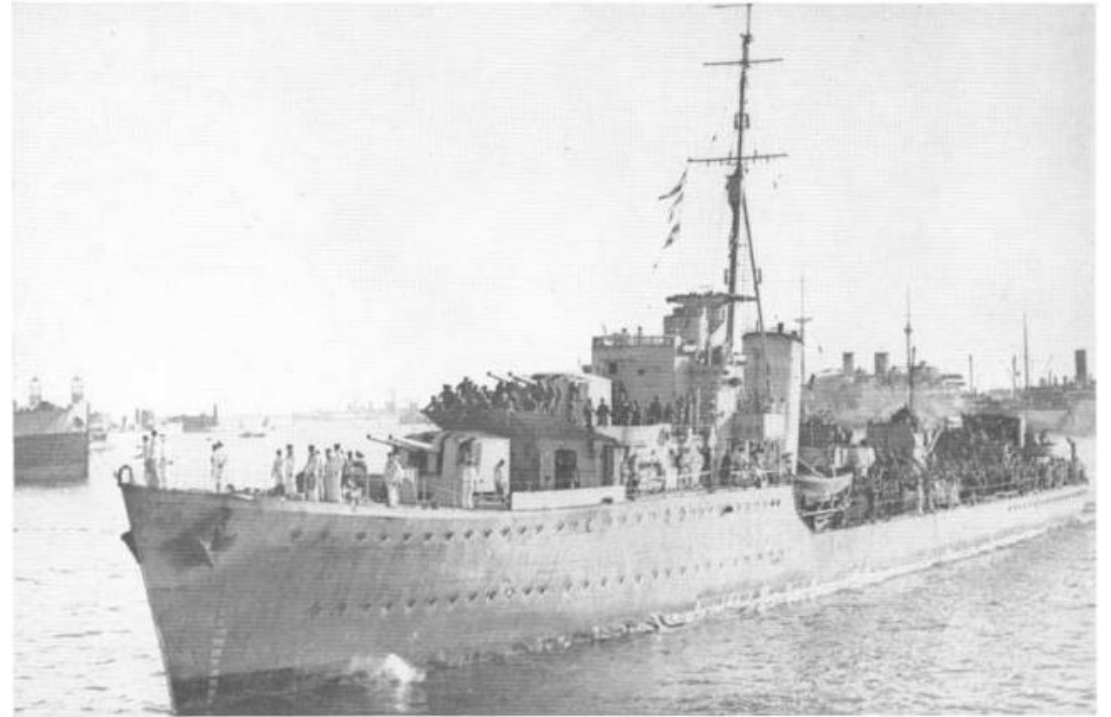
- Napier and Nizam reached Sfakia without further incident in time to begin embarkation half an hour after midnight. Embarkation arrangements ashore were excellent, "the only pity being that the army had been informed that destroyers could only carry 250 men each" .
- At 2:30am the following morning Nizam left Crete carrying 698 troops. Half an hour later Napier sailed with 705 soldiers, mostly Australians.
- Cunningham decided to send all available ships for the night of 31/1 but that maximum number to be lifted would not exceed 2,000.
- King in Phoebe, with Abdiel, Kimberley, Hotspur and Jackal, left Alexandria for Sfakia at 6 a.m. on the 31st.



(War Office)  
H.M.A.S. *Nizam* entering Alexandria Harbour on 31st May 1941 with Troops evacuated from Crete.

# 31 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- Napier and Nizam were on their way south, and at 6.25 a.m. had the heartening sight of friendly fighters.
- From 8.50 to 9.15 a.m., however, they were attacked by twelve dive bombers, and Napier sustained engine and boiler room damage from near misses which reduced her speed to 23 knots, and, at 2.10 p.m., caused her to stop for a few minutes to effect repairs.
- She subsequently went ahead on one engine and managed to reach 20 knots, and the two ships reached Alexandria without further incident at 7 p.m.

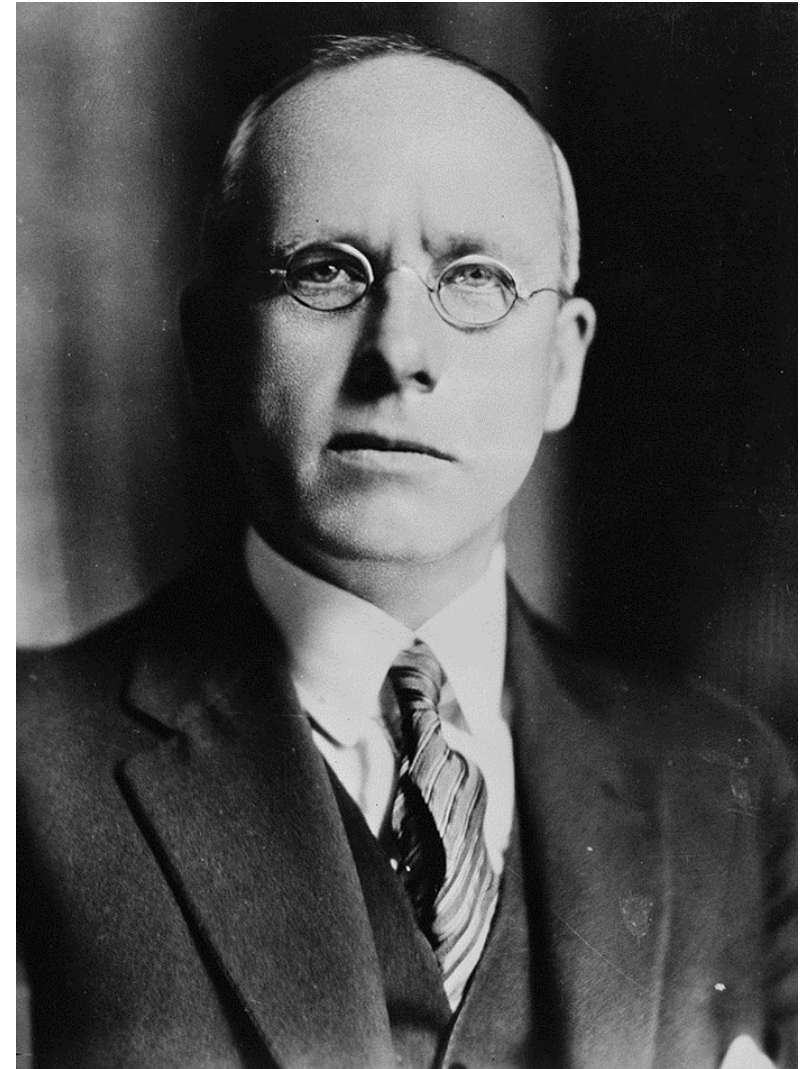


(War Office)  
H.M.A.S. *Nizam* entering Alexandria Harbour on 31st May 1941 with Troops evacuated from Crete.



# 31 May 1941 - Mediterranean

- During the day Arliss intercepted signals which told him of the small number to be embarked by King's force that night.
- He then sent an emergency signal to Cunningham, repeated to King and Wavell, giving an accurate picture of the situation at Sfakia where "there are roughly 6,500 men to come", and saying that he considered it essential to tell the army there that all these could be embarked [by King's force].
- "destroyers can carry up to 1,000 each. Napier and Nizam have 1,700 now."
- As a result of this signal, and of subsequent discussions between Mr Fraser, the Prime Minister of New Zealand (photo) (then in Egypt), Wavell, Freyberg, Evetts and Cunningham, King was instructed at 8.51 p.m. to "fill to maximum capacity".
- King's force underwent three bombing attacks on the passage north, but no bombs fell close and covering fighters kept many attackers distant.



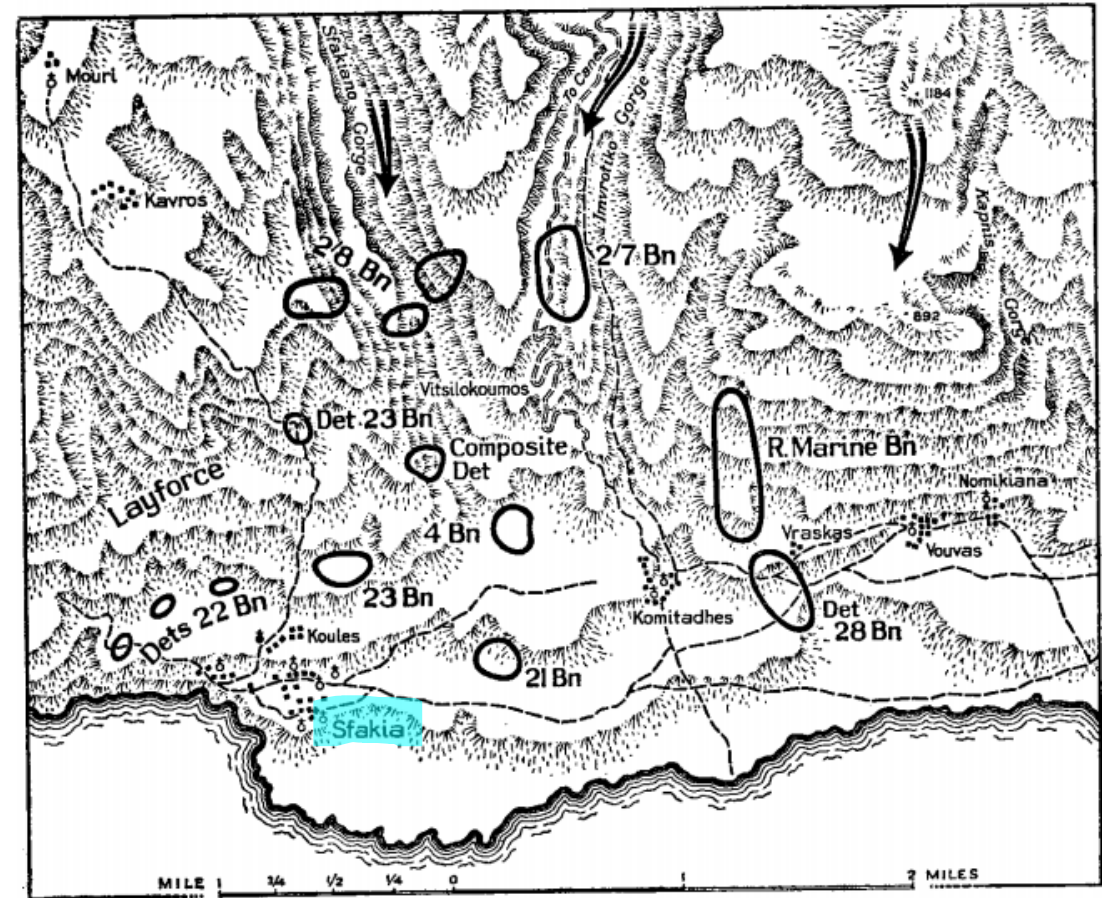
# 31 May 1941 – Crete

- The total force round **Sfakia** now included some 1,200 New Zealand, 1,250 Australian and 1,550 British infantry and some 5,000 depot troops and scattered detachments.
- All the rations had now been issued, the men were hungry and thirsty so it would be impossible for the force to offer a prolonged resistance.
- Twelve men working for eight hours were able to carry to the 2/7th and the Marines only 250 gallons of water.
- Weston had informed Hargest at 7.30 a.m. that probably 2,000 would be embarked that night (31st May-1st June) and they would be allocated: 5th Brigade, 950; 2/8th Battalion, 200; British troops, 850. Commanders should be prepared to increase numbers at short notice. Weston informed Middle East Command that its plan would leave 5,400 troops behind.
- Later he learnt from Wavell that Admiral King had been authorised to increase the number embarking to 3,500. Weston thereupon increased the allocation of New Zealanders to 1,400, and, climbing the hill, informed Vasey that an additional 500 Australians should be embarked that night.
- His intention was to allot the places proportionately among British, Australian and New Zealand troops. This made it possible for Vasey to arrange for the embarkation not only of the 2/8th but the 2/7th and his own headquarters. He ordered that his headquarters and the Marines should move to the beach at 9 p.m., the 2/7th at 9.15.



# 31 May 1941 – Crete

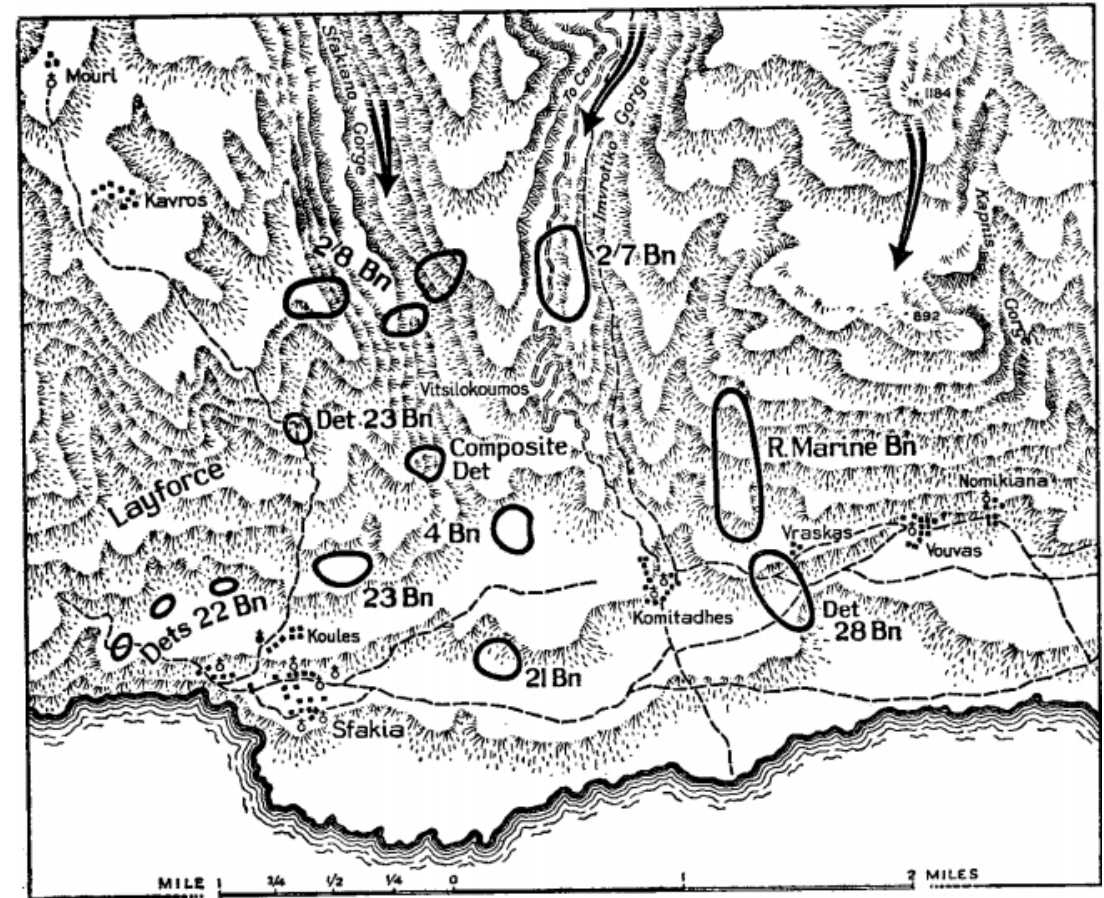
- The Germans made no attack on the 19th Brigade on the 31st, apparently contenting themselves with firing on the positions held by the 2/7th and the Marines.
- Vasey was confident that his men on the heights could hold their rearguard position until the night of the 1st - 2nd June if necessary, provided the vulnerable beach area with its thousands of leaderless men was also held. Yet it could be seen that Sfakia was being systematically encircled.
- The 5th Brigade now formed an inner perimeter round Sfakia:
- Within this double line of weary, hungry, but still dogged and disciplined soldiers was assembled a mere crowd of ill-organised men; the vigorous Hargest, who had placed a cordon round the beach to control this throng, wrote:
- There were hundreds of loose members, members of non-fighting units and all sorts of people about—no formation, no order, no cohesion. It was a ghastly mess. ...I had 1,100 troops—950 of the brigade and 150 of the 20th Battalion. We had borne the burden and were going aboard as a brigade and none would stop us. All day I answered pleas to be allowed to come . . . .





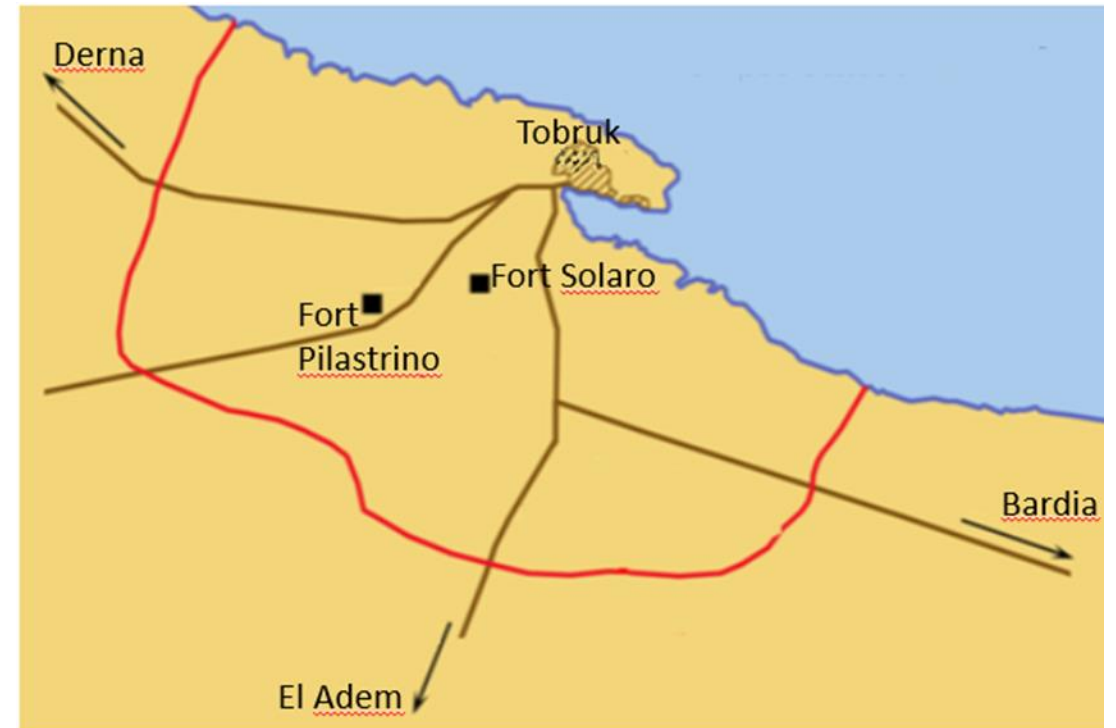
# 31 May 1941 – Crete

- At 7 p.m. Vasey's brigade major, Bell, informed Walker of the 2/7th that he was to withdraw to the beach that night. Walker fixed the time to begin withdrawal at 9 p.m. The route lay along a wadi and a very narrow track which ended up winding through the village of Sfakia.
- The ships arrived off Sfakia at 11.20 p.m.
- The 5th Brigade was in a dense column whose head was on the beach. Through a cordon it had formed passed the 21st, 22nd and 23rd Battalions, the remainder of the 20th and 28th, and the 2/8th (203 men) —but only 100 of the Marines, 27 of Layforce, and 16 of the 2/7th.
- 19th Aust Inf Bde [headquarters] arrived on the beach at about 0215 hrs and they reported that they had been continually hampered in their movement forward . . . through lack of control in the area behind the beach.
- Vasey was informed that the commanding officer of the 2/7th had arrived on the beach, and, concluding that all was well, he embarked with his staff.
- When its turn came the column moved on slowly down the cliffs above the beach itself. The path was jammed with unarmed men. The head of the 2/7th reached the beach and Colonel Walker immediately sent a few of his men on to a landing craft waiting there. The craft departed and the battalion, drawn up in order on the beach and the road, waited for it to return.
- Then came the greatest disappointment of all. The sound of anchor chains through the hawse . .
- The ships sailed at 3 a.m. About 4,050 had embarked.



# 31 May 1941 – Libya

- During May 734 Axis aircraft were over Tobruk.



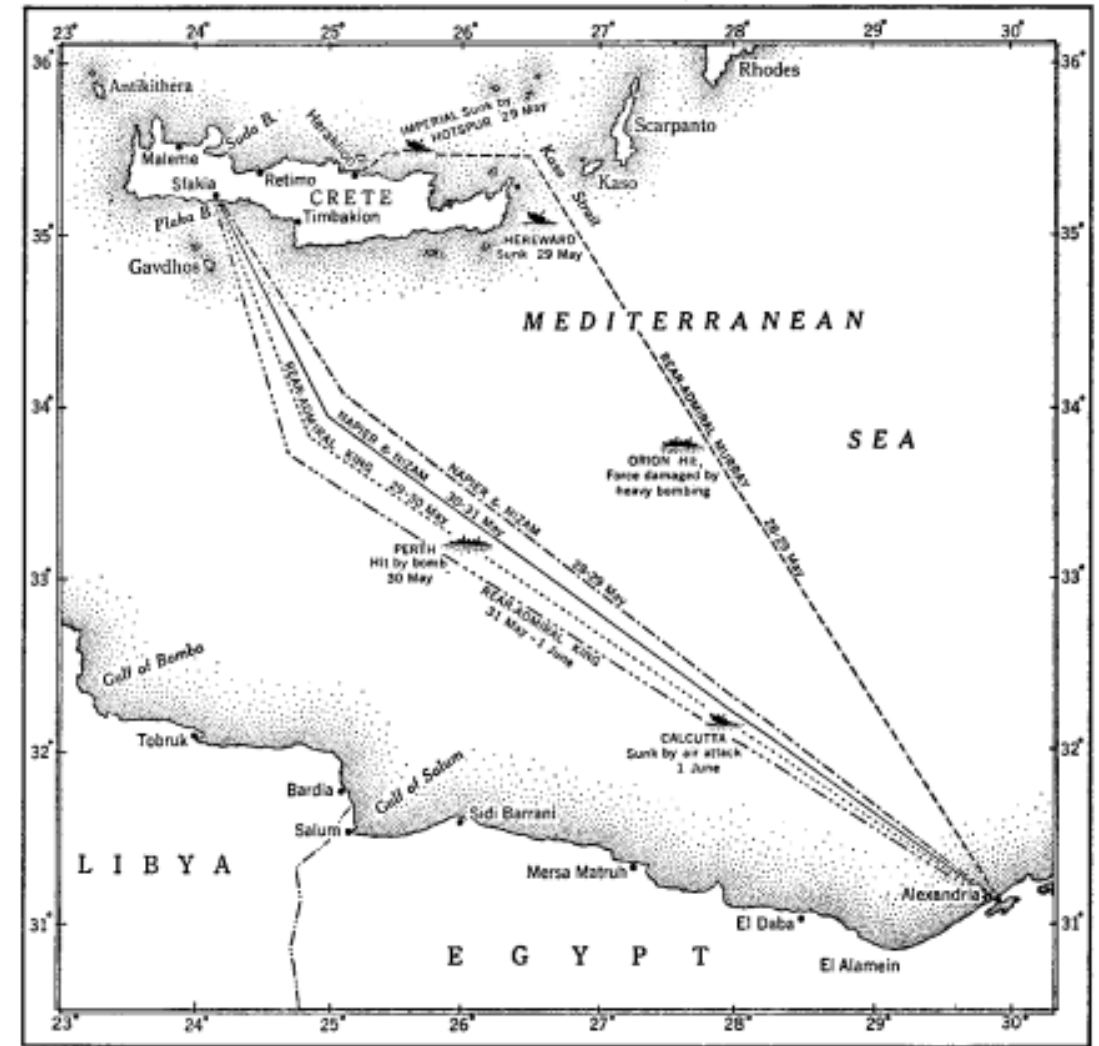
# 31 May 1941 - Atlantic

- Off Freetown U-boats sank no fewer than 32 ships during May.
- The British cargo ship Colonial (5,108 GRT, 1926) was torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic Ocean 200 nautical miles west north west of Freetown, Sierra Leone (9°13'N 15°09'W) by U-107 on 27 May. All 100 people on board were rescued by HMS Centurion.
- The Greek cargo ship Papelemos (3,748 GRT, 1910) was torpedoed, shelled and sunk in the Atlantic Ocean (8°06'N 16°18'W) by U-107 with the loss of two of her 29 crew on 28 May.
- The British cargo ship Tabaristan (6,251 GRT, 1914) was torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic Ocean (6°32'N 15°23'W) by U-38 on 29 May. Twenty-one crew members were lost, while the master, 35 crew members and three gunners were picked up by HMT Bengali and the armed trawler HMT Turcoman, and landed at Freetown.
- The British cargo ship Empire protector (6,181 GRT, 1921) was torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic Ocean (6°00'N 14°25'W) by U-38 on 30 May with the loss of five of her 38 crew. Survivors were rescued by Arundo (Netherlands).
- The Norwegian cargo ship Rinde (6,029 GRT, 1917) was also torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic Ocean off Liberia (6°52'N 15°14'W) by U-38 on 30 May with the loss of 13 of her 31 crew. Survivors, including the ship's cat, were rescued by HMT Pict. The cat remained on board Pict.
- The British cargo ship Sangara (5,445 GRT, 1939) was torpedoed and sunk at Accra, Gold Coast (5°33'N 0°13'W) by U-69 on 31 May with the loss of one crew member.
- The British cargo ship Sire (5,664 GRT, 1938) was torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic Ocean west south west of Freetown, Sierra Leone (8°50'N 15°30'W) by U-107 with the loss of three of her 49 crew. Survivors were rescued by HMS Marguerite.



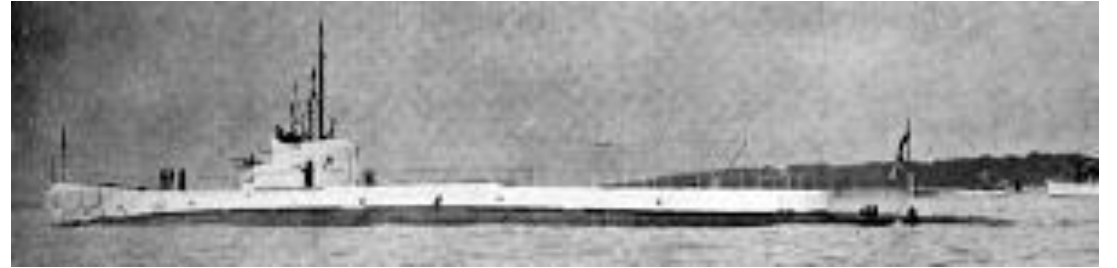
# 1 June 1941 - Mediterranean

- King's force reached Sfakia at 11.20 p.m. on the 31st, and the army was in readiness with three motor landing craft (left by Glengyle) already loaded. Embarkation proceeded so rapidly that for a time the beach was empty of troops.
- "The result was that they came so slowly that we could have taken off quite a few more before we had to leave."
- At 3 a.m. on the 1st June the force sailed, having landed some medical stores and embarked 3,900 troops.
- No attacks were made on the force on the passage south, mainly due to effective fighter protection, and Alexandria was reached without incident at 5 p.m. on the 1st June.
- To provide additional escort for King's ships, Cunningham had sailed the anti-aircraft cruisers Calcutta and Coventry from Alexandria early on the 1st June.
- Just after 9 a.m. they were attacked by dive bombers, and two bombs hit and sank Calcutta about 100 miles northwest of Alexandria. Coventry was able to rescue 23 officers and 232 men. 107 men were lost.



# 1 June 1941 - Mediterranean

- The Italian cargo ship San Marco (3,076 GRT, 1919) was torpedoed and sunk in the Mediterranean Sea 5 nautical miles due east of Cabo Carbonara, Sardinia by the River class submarine HMS Clyde with the loss of eight lives.



# 1 June 1941 - Crete

- About 5,000 were left on shore round Sfakia and perhaps an equal number at Retimo and elsewhere.
- The men at Sfakia were "incapable of further resistance owing to strain and lack of food".
- During the night of 31st May-1st June General Weston, instructed by Wavell, left Sfakia in a flying-boat for Egypt. Before he departed he left behind written orders to the senior officer remaining ashore (whoever he might then be) to come to terms with the enemy.
- This turned out to be Lieut-Colonel Walker, whose 2/7th Australian Battalion had been in the final rearguard position. It had begun a difficult march down to the beach at 9 p.m. but had arrived too late and, when the last landing craft departed, had just been drawn up on the beach awaiting embarkation.

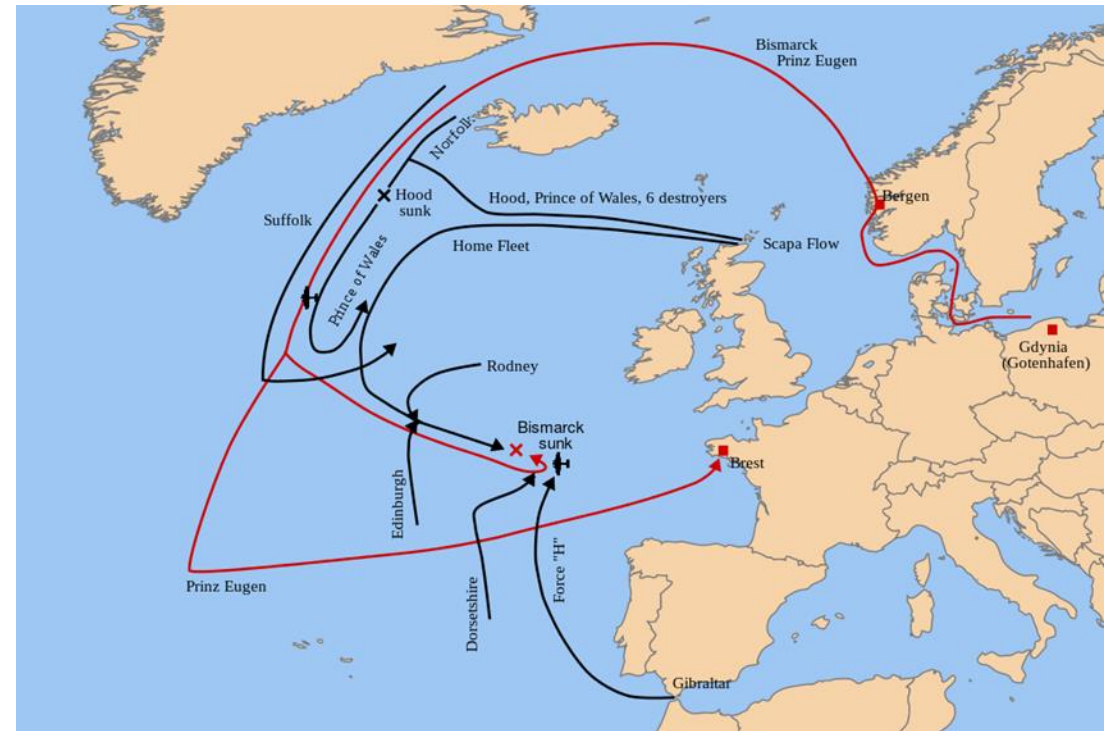


Sunderland Flying Boat



# 1 June 1941 - Atlantic

- On 1st June two Sunderllands of No. 10 Squadron RAAF stood at immediate readiness for action against the cruiser Prinz Eugen, which had parted company with Bismarck after the Denmark Strait battle, but it had safely reached Brest before they were ordered into the air.



Tracks of Prince Eugen, Bismarck and pursuing forces.

- Thanks for your attention