

# The Battle for Leros

The future of the Leros task force was written in the sand, on the edge of the seashore; it was washed away, the water suffused with blood: one in four of the task force was killed or wounded,

## GEOGRAPHY

The island of Leros is approximately ten miles long and varies in width from one to five miles. It falls naturally into three sections joined by two narrow isthmus. The whole is very mountainous and devoid of cover. A narrow valley runs from the northern extremity down the center of the island to its southern tip. Its continuity is broken to the south of St Nicola and north of Meraviqlia by the low but prominent Rachi Ridge.

The island is indented by seven bays, each of which has good landing beaches. Elsewhere there are many places where the coastline is fit for scramble landings in calm weather by lightly equipped infantry.

## PRELUDE TO THE BATTLE

At Kos and Kalymnos, the Germans had assembled a force of four F boats, thirteen I boats, five auxiliary naval craft, and a number of caiques; into these the enemy loaded the troops and equipment already assembled in these islands. Despite the earlier efforts of Allied destroyers and air forces, the Germans had succeeded in getting the bulk of their invasion flotilla in position for an assault on Leros.

At about 0130 hrs on 12 November, Allied aircraft reported two groups of seven and eight barges steering northwest from Kappari Island. It had been expected that the Germans would launch their assault in daylight from the cover of minefields at the northern end of Kalymnos. The Royal Navy destroyer flotilla leader considered that the forces were moving up to these bays and that he would be unable to interfere with them because of the minefield. Due to an erroneous appreciation in the CIC's

Operations Room in Cairo, it was not believed that these enemy formations might in fact be the assault force until it was too late to intercept.

In the early morning of 12 November, the evening assault force was reported by ML 456, patrolling off Leros. There is no doubt that, had the destroyer flotilla leader been ordered to intercept at once, the northern assault force might have been destroyed. The failure by the British to intercept these enemy forces after watching their progress across the Aegean is inexcusable.

The Germans acted with great determination and successfully called the bluff that Allied forces were a threat to them by day. By night the Germans hid their craft with great skill while their extensive air reconnaissance enabled them to know exactly where the Allied destroyers were and to attack while keeping their own forces clear. By 5 November, when the reinforcements had arrived, the British Garrison on Leros consisted of:

4th Buffs	360 all ranks.
1st King's Own	450
2nd RIF (with under comd B Coy 2RWK)	500
3 Bty (less one tp) 1 Lt. AA Regt RA	250
One Tp 18/25 Pdrs	50
Detachments 9 Fd Coy Sappers and Miners	50
47 DID RIASC	100
161 Fd Amb	70
570 AO and AD	70
LRDG and SBS	100
TOTAL	2,000

Until the time of arrival of the Fortress Commander on 5 November, the relations between the Italian and British forces were unsatisfactory both politically and militarily. Less than half the total of 5,000 Italians on the island belonged either to the Navy or Army, the others being dockyard personnel and the remnants of merchant crews who had been torpedoed; of the latter, the majority were unarmed. This garrison was disposed mainly in the gun positions, which were sited on the highest peaks and designed chiefly for coast defense. The remaining Italian personnel were sited in infantry positions covering the bays of Porto!aqo and Serocampo. Italian Headquarters were in Portolao.

The combined armament of the Italian gun positions was on paper impressive, consisting of guns varying in caliber from 150 mm to 20 mm including light and heavy AA. In practice, the fire power was highly ineffective; the majority of the guns were of very old pattern with worn out pieces and inferior sighting gear. The only heavy AA guns worthy of the name were six 90/53-mm guns for which there was scarcely any ammunition. No AA guns were served with any form of fire control instruments, and the coastal batteries had neither fire control instruments (apart from short horizontal base range -finders) nor any form, other than verbal, of range and bearing transmission. The system of communication

was very poor; for the most part it depended upon single overhead lines, which were soon destroyed by hostile air action.

Until the time of Brigadier Tilney's arrival, Italian morale was very poor. The men had no confidence in their officers, and the officers had little respect for the British administration. The loyalty of at least a minority of the Italians was open to doubt, and the confidence that could be placed in the whole was equally dubious. Under these circumstances it was obvious that little reliance could be placed upon the Italian garrison and that the plan of defense would need to be designed accordingly.

It should be noted that German officers had been on the island until September. They knew the topography and existing defenses intimately, and the presence of agents or at least sympathizers of Germany was probable if not certain. The following were the main points of Brigadier Tilney's appreciation:

- Of the troops available only the British could be trusted; therefore, the dependable fighting force consisted of one British infantry brigade (supported by four 18/25 pdrs) upon whom would fall the entire responsibility for the defense.
- The German command of the air and the proximity of their bases gave them local naval control; thus their powers of reinforcement were many times those of the British.
- The uncertainty of the ammunition supply coupled with the German command of the sea and air meant that the longer the battle lasted, the greater would be the enemy's advantage. Therefore, the defense must strive for an early favorable decision, which meant aggressive tactics.
- If the enemy was denied the beaches in the bays, it could not land supporting arms; therefore, the beaches must be covered.
- Lack of transport and, therefore, of mobility would prevent the maintenance of a strong central reserve. Thus, the available forces would need to be deployed on a wider front than was desirable. This would aggravate the poverty of communications but was inevitable.
- Tilney's conclusion was that the enemy should be destroyed at the earliest possible stage of the attack.

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The Commander's intention was to destroy the enemy at the earliest possible stage of his attack (1) on the sea, (2) on the beaches, and (3) on any bridgehead. The island was divided into three sectors and the infantry battalions allotted as follows:

North Sector	The Buffs Center Sector	2 RIF
(plus B Coy 2 RWK)	South Sector	1 King's Own
(less one		
	company)	

All battalions were sited to cover the beaches in the bays, with one company in reserve in each sector. All units were to be ready to move into the other sectors and come under command of any particular sector commander into whose sector they might move. Fortress reserve (one company of the King's Own) was sited with the primary task of counterattacking any air landing in the North Sector.

- Medium machine guns were allocated as follows:  
North (twelve)-to sweep the beaches  
Center (ten)-to sweep the beaches and Mount Rachi  
South (eight)-to sweep the beaches
- Artillery -The Field Troops was sited in the central sector. The Lt AA Battery was also in the central sector with four guns sited primarily in a coastal defense role. Four 2 pdr guns were allocated to the northern and central sectors respectively in a coastal defense role.
- Italians -To ensure that they did not leave their positions and to avoid confusion between German and Italian troops, the Italians could only leave their positions at the risk of being shot unless they were wearing the distinguishing signal armbands.
- Fortress HQ was located on Meraviglia.

It can be argued that this defense plan had no stability in that the principal heights (Mount Clidi, Meraviglia, and Rachi) were not fortified and in some cases not even occupied.

Two factors from the outset were a very serious drawback to the defense: the first was the enemy's dominance of the air, and the second was the rocky nature of the terrain, which largely precluded digging defensive positions. Ultimately, however, the action called for probes coupled with immediate attacks on the enemy. The battle (on both sides) was offensive in nature; a battle of attrition rather than one of holding ground.

## THE BATTLE

At 0530 hrs on 12 November, ML 456, which was out on patrol, signaled warning of an approach by enemy invasion craft. This ML engaged the enemy and eventually succeeded in returning to Alinda Bay and landing its wounded. The morning was dead calm and clear, and by 0615 hrs the enemy craft were clearly visible from the shore. Curiously enough, no enemy aircraft were yet on the scene and none appeared before 0730 hrs. The initial landings were made at 0630 hrs without air support. They took place simultaneously at Raima Bay, Grifo Bay, and Appetici, while a further attempt at Blefuti was driven off.

Enemy attempts at landing in the area of Blefuti were thwarted by shore batteries which sank one F light ter and two assault landing craft, and forced the remainder to turn back. One enemy company succeeded in getting ashore at Raima Bay; it was counterattacked by D Company 4th Buffs and, after a fierce fight, was entirely liquidated by midday with seventy prisoners being taken. The enemy made no further attempts at landing either here or at Blefuti.

By 0900 hrs, the Brigadier received a message indicating that Mount Clidi was being seriously threatened. This feature was one of considerable importance to the defense. It commanded not only the north-east promontory, but also the road and valley running through the center of the northern sector, and this particular area was being used as a dropping ground for supplies reaching the defense by air; it was also the area considered most likely for the landing of enemy paratroops and gliders. Mount Clidi also commanded the Alinda Bay area, and its capture by the enemy would most likely lead to the outflanking of the defense in the central sector.

In view of the importance of Mount Clidi and the urgent need of preventing its capture by the enemy the Brigadier ordered the Fortress Reserve (One Company of the King's Own) to move up in support of the feature. The reserve company arrived in the Clidi area about 1000 hrs, two platoons being sited around the guns and one being directed onto Pt 192. This platoon apparently lost its way and was mopped up by the enemy before reaching its objective. The first two platoons failed to hold what appeared to be a strong enough position and, by 1770 hrs, had been pushed back to the Italian barracks on the western slopes, leaving the top of Mount Clidi, together with the coast battery, in the hands of the enemy. Thus, the German operation LEOPARD was successfully launched with the Kustenjager (assault troops) landing in the northern part of the island.

At dawn on 12 November, members of the German First Battalion of the Second Parachute Regiment and the Brandenburgers emplaned at Tatai Airfield near Athens in forty Ju 52 trimotor transport planes, en route to Leros. Less than three minutes flying time from the DZ they were recalled to Athens because the situation with the initial assault force remained unclear.

In less than an hour, the paras emplaned a second time. Three hours later the Ju 52s were approaching Gurna Bay at wave top height. Climbing to 400 feet, the transports, now in line formation, dropped the paratroopers across the narrow neck of land lying between Gurna Bay and Alinda Bay. The Ju 52s were quickly enveloped by a barrage of flak from Bofors and small arms. A ball of fire engulfed one of the planes, but the remaining aircraft flew in steady formation with the parachutists making rapid exits into a hail of fire.

Laden with belts of Spandau ammunition, the German airborne troops dropped heavily onto the rocky ground. On the initial drop 150 were killed or wounded, but the remainder scarcely paused before going into action against the defending infantry (A Company 2 RIF and B Company 2 RWK). Moving out toward Mount Germano, the British troops saw parachute canopies draped over groups of dead German paras; perhaps fifteen canopies in the immediate area; fitting shrouds for a brave and resolute enemy. Before long the Germans had regrouped and assembled a deadly screen of resourceful paratroops to hold the Rachi Ridge.

Ceaseless attacks in cooperation between the Stukas, ground attack aircraft, and tactical bombers had a telling effect on the defenders as the battle progressed. Flares were fired directing the Stukas toward the exposed British infantry, who were immediately bombed and machine-gunned. As the dive-bombers turned off, the British were subjected to intense mortar attacks, suffering heavy casualties in the process. Within minutes, a fresh formation of Stukas was seen circling overhead ready to renew the attack.

The German paras were engaged with small arms fire by two RIF platoons and B Company 2 RWK (Captain Percy Flood, MBE) from Pt 36 and Mount Germano, and by two platoons of 4th Buffs from lower Quirico. They suffered fairly heavy casualties (stated by the Germans afterwards to have been 40 percent) both from this fire and from broken limbs, though they would have suffered more heavily had the men behind the medium machine guns been trained machine gunners. (The gunners were inclined to fire at the Ju 52s rather than into the box within which the paras were descending.)

The British troops in the immediate neighborhood of the landing, however, were so few that the enemy was able to reorganize without serious opposition, mopping up the two RIF platoons and establishing themselves in the narrow neck between Gurna and Alinda Bay. There is no doubt that the decision to land troops in this area was not only a bold move, but took the defense by surprise, since it had not been considered suitable for such an operation.

At about 1900 hrs, the Brigadier held a conference with OCs of the King's Own and 2 RIF and gave orders for a night attack to throw the enemy off the Rachi Ridge. Lt-Colonel Maurice French, OC 2 RIF, was to lead this attack using two companies (less one platoon) 2 RIF and two companies of the King's Own; 2300 hrs was

fixed as H Hour. Events did not work out according to plan; the attack was first postponed due to the late arrival of the King's Own moving from the south, and finally canceled due to developments on Appetici and to the fact that one of the attacking companies had proceeded to the wrong RV and got lost in the darkness. The failure to launch this attack undoubtedly gave the enemy an unexpected opportunity to strengthen what was, initially, a somewhat shaky hold on the narrow neck in the center of the island.

At midnight on 12-13 November, a disturbing report was received from the Platoon Commander on Appetici to the effect that he was being hard pressed by enemy attacks up the eastern escarpment and that he required reinforcements. The Brigadier ordered the remaining platoons of that company to be sent to maintain the hold on Appetici, while a further platoon of 2 RIF was to be sent to strengthen the hold on Leros Castle. For some reason that was never satisfactorily explained, the move of the two platoons to Appetici was countermanded in a message from Fortress HQ without the Brigadier's knowledge. It was 0400 hrs before the Brigadier got these platoons on the move again after a further report on the now critical situation on Appetici. They arrived too late, suffering casualties in their attempt to reach the position, and the result was the loss of Appetici shortly after daylight.

The loss of Appetici meant that the enemy possessed a "point d'appui" on the right flank of the defense which threatened the main bastion at Meraviglia. An effort to recapture this feature obviously had to take precedence over a counterattack on Rachi. Accordingly, the Brigadier sent for OCs the King's Own and 2 RIF and gave instructions to Lt-Colonel French (who was also OC, Central Sector) to work out a plan for its recapture by a night attack on 13-14 November. French was told that he could count on all available men from the King's Own, who would form the major part of the force, and that he was to work out his plan in conjunction with OC of that battalion.

At 1800 hrs, the enemy launched the expected attack on Quirico and actually gained possession of it. An immediate counter attack was made, and the feature was retaken with the exception of the Italian gun positions. In the meantime, OC 4th Buffs received orders from the Brigadier to recapture Mount Clidi during the night and to be prepared to move south the following day with the object of securing the northern slopes of Rachi.

As dusk fell on 13 November, the situation was as follows: In the north, the Germans had suffered heavily both in prisoners and other casualties, while the threat to Mount Clidi had been considerably relieved. In the area of Rachi there had been little activity but it was to be feared that the company of 2 RIF holding the ground between Appetici and Meraviglia was in trouble.

The Germans had captured Appetici but had undoubtedly suffered heavy casualties. Casualties to the British defenders in this area had also been heavy, constant bombing had taken its toll, a

complete platoon on Appetici had been lost, the one in Leros Castle was in a precarious position, and the two platoons which had arrived too late for the relief had lost some of their members.

The Brigadier's estimate of the enemy strength at this time was 500 in the northern sector, about 400 in the Rachi area, and some 200 in the Leros promontory—a total of not less than 1,100 (it is now known that it was quite appreciably more than this figure). The British strength at this time numbered 1,200 (excluding RA, RE, and administrative personnel) and, of this number, 700 were in the Center Sector.

On 13 November, it became clear that the whole of the enemy's effort in the Aegean was being directed against the island of Leros. The Brigadier asked GHQ Aegean to send all available British reinforcements to Leros. GHQ agreed to send 2 RWK (less B Coy which was already on the island). One company was expected on the night 13-14, but did not actually arrive until the following night; it was hoped the remainder would be shipped across on the night 15-16th. Although it might be hard on these troops to put them into the attack within a few hours of their landing, it was agreed that the favorable opportunity might pass and, without their assistance, there were insufficient troops to defend the island; the essential prerequisite was to kill the Germans, not merely to hold ground.

The Brigadier returned to his headquarters at about 1600 hrs to ascertain from Lt-Colonel French how the plan for the attack on Appetici had worked out. As the situation had developed during the preceding twelve hours, it had become impracticable to employ any of 2 RIF on this attack, one company having been lost in the Gurna-Alinda bay area, one company already severely handled on Appetici the previous night, and HQ and one company committed to the defense of Meraviqlia. It had, therefore, been agreed between OC 2 RIF and OC King's Own that three companies of the King's Own should carry out the task. Lt-Colonel French, knowing the ground better than anyone else, had, however, made arrangements to lead the attack himself with a guide from his own battalion accompanying each of the King's Own companies.

Briefly, the plan for the attack on Appetici was that A and D Companies the King's Own were to approach under cover of darkness and attack and clear the feature shortly after moonrise. HQ Company the King's Own was to follow up, organize the position and hold it against any further attack by the enemy. A and D Companies, having cleared the feature, were to withdraw as soon as possible to the area of Porta Yecchia (known as the Anchor), to be readily available for further offensive operation toward Rachi.

The attack was to be silent, and the weather deadened any sound of approach; the moon, being well into its third quarter, was rising sufficiently late to allow an approach to the objective under cover of complete darkness. "Advance to contact" should

not have been a difficult problem, since a broad and well-defined track led up the side of the feature straight onto the objective, and those taking part in the attack had the advantage of being able to make a very careful daytime observation of the route from a commanding observation post on Meraviglia.

The attacking force arrived at the FUP unobserved, and the attack went in at 0200 hrs. It was, however, anything but a success. Although French himself led the way straight toward the objective, both A and D Companies of the King's Own experienced difficulty in maintaining direction and made little progress. Two platoons of A Company lost direction completely and were not seen again. First light found the attacking force in exposed positions still some way short of the objective, and the enemy, realizing the unhappy position of the attackers halfway up a bare slope, counterattacked down the hill inflicting severe casualties and causing the remainder to withdraw in some confusion.

Of the British officers involved in this attack 90 percent became casualties, including Lt-Colonel French, who was killed. His loss was a great one not only to his own battalion but to the brigade as a whole. He knew the island far better than any other senior officer, and his qualities of leadership, untiring energy, and painstaking thoroughness made him a very valuable officer. From A and D Companies of the King's Own, one officer and seventy men were all that remustered.

While the attack on Appetici was taking place, the Germans launched an attack on Meraviglia from the direction of Rachi. Although this attack was held, the situation at one time was threatening, since the brigade defense platoon was driven from its positions on the northern slopes of the feature and there was little behind them. The Brigadier was forced to recall HQ Company the King's Own from the Appetici attacking force, and the situation on Meraviglia was satisfactorily restored. It was unfortunate, if not unwise, to withdraw a company from the force attacking Appetici, but the attack never sufficiently developed for this company's role to be executed. The Brigadier was of the opinion that this withdrawal did not materially affect the issue on Appetici.

The Commander, therefore, decided merely to contain the enemy on Appetici and turned his attention to an attempt to destroy the German paras on the Rachi Ridge. With this achieved, he would be in a position to concentrate his force for a renewed attack on Appetici. This decision to attack the enemy on Rachi was further prompted by the fact that the German troops had undoubtedly become somewhat disorganized by the failure of their attack on Meraviglia during the night; an early counterattack therefore held out every hope of success. Orders for the attack on Rachi were given by the Brigadier to OC the King's Own and the new OC 2 RIF at 0730 hrs.

The attack went in at 0930 hrs with a great dash and determination on the part of C Company 2 RIF who got the enemy well on the run and captured a number of prisoners. Seeing the enemy to be in some confusion, the Brigadier ordered the advance of B Company 2 RWK and B Company 2 RIF along the low ground on either side of the ridge and then moved forward himself with an artillery OP party on to the southern end of the ridge. Unfortunately, the follow-up of the King's Own companies were neither as close nor as successful as it should have been, and they were held up by light automatic fire from groups of enemy who had remained underground and allowed C Company 2 RIF to over them.

The main point of such resistance was a feature known as Searchlight Hill, some 250 yards southeast of Pt 109. The Company Commanders of both King's Own companies were killed in the early stages of this attack, and this was undoubtedly a major contributory cause of the failure of these units. Not until 1100 hrs did they clear Searchlight Hill, and then all their efforts to clear Pt 109 failed. The end of the day found them still on Searchlight Hill, although they had been driven off this feature again at about 1300 hrs and had had to retake it late in the afternoon.

C Company 2 RIF who had pushed on found themselves in considerable difficulty, not having been followed up as they had expected. Toward the end of the day they managed to withdraw in rather a mauled condition to the area of Searchlight Hill. B Company 2 RWK met stiff opposition in their advance along the low ground west of Rachi but by noon had reach Germano where they contacted D Company four Buffs. They now came under command 4th Buffs and remained thus until the end of the battle.

The dawn counterattack on Mount Clidi put in by D Company 4th Buffs was successful, and forty prisoners were taken. B Company was then to have cleared Pt 192, and move on down to the north shore of Alinda Bay, joining C Company, which was being directed down the road to Alinda from Quirico. However, after clearing Mount Clidi, B Company was held up all day in the area of Pt 192 and withdrew back to Clidi in the evening.

In the meantime, the Germans had again attacked Quirico at first light and met with success, but they were immediately counterattacked and driven off by C Company 4th Buffs, which collected seventy prisoners. C Company then started to move down toward Alinda Hospital but met with determined resistance from every house in the valley and by nightfall had not made any appreciable headway; they were therefore withdrawn for the night into defensive positions about Pt 184.

During the day when it seemed apparent that the enemy was concentrated in some strength in the Rachi -St Nicola-Quaranta area, the Brigadier had asked the SBNO if bombardment of this area by destroyers might be arranged. Two destroyers duly arrived at dusk, steamed into the entrance of Alinda Bay, and gave a short but intense bombardment to the target area. The

material effect of the bombardment may not have been great, but it is difficult to exaggerate what a heartening effect this inspiring display of outside help had on the defending troops.

The estimated state of strength on the evening of 14 November shows 4th Buffs to be down to 300, while 2 RIF had lost half their number, including B Company 2 RWK. The exact state of the King's Own was not known but they had suffered heavily and were undoubtedly more critically affected by the incessant bombing than the others due to their location in the Meraviglia area, which had become the center of attention for enemy aircraft. The defense had practically no rest from fighting for three days (although, neither had the enemy) and it may be considered somewhat reckless to have adopted and continued with an aggressive policy of offensive action.

For even the best troops, the effect of lying out in the open and being bombarded like sitting ducks, were very bad. It is scarcely an exaggeration to state that there was never a moment from dawn to dusk when the enemy was not bombing and machine gunning from the air. The speedy destruction of the enemy was imperative if the defense was to have reasonable hopes of dealing effectively with German reinforcements which were en route. As the battle progressed, it was evident that the enemy had deployed on Leros first-class combat troops, who demonstrated consummate skill, courage, and self-reliance in fighting for possession of the rocky slopes of the island.

Meanwhile, A Company 2 RWK (Major Robert Butler, MBE) arrived from Samos by minesweeper and was landed at Porto!ago at 2400 hrs 14 November. It was immediately ordered to rendezvous in the area south of Porta Vecchia. Battalion HQs and C Company of 2 RWK (Major MR Read, MC) were landed some hours later and were accompanied by OC 2 RWK (Lt-Colonel Ben Tarleton), who reported to Fortress HQ at 0600 hrs. It may be said that these troops were at a greater disadvantage, being landed on a strange island by night and moved almost at once into battle. To offset this, however, platoon and company commanders had had the opportunity of studying Mount Rachi, the ground over which they were to attack, from the OPs and Meraviglia, which afforded a commanding view of the Rachi feature.

The object to be achieved on 15 November was the destruction of all enemy in the Rachi-Quaranta area; thereafter the concentration was to be on the defense around Meraviglia. The plan of attack was communicated to all commanders during the night (by coded message to 4th Buffs and by runner through OC SBS, Major The Earl Jellicoe, DSO, MC, who succeeded in working his way to and from the northern sector). A Company 2 RWK, were to attack northwards up Rachi Ridge from Searchlight Hill and were to hold the ridge from its northern end to the center. First King's Own were to follow from Searchlight Hill and to hold the ridge from the center back to that feature. Artillery and medium machine guns were to stand by to support this attack by observation; no preparatory fire plan was possible due to the

somewhat confused situation prevailing on the ridge at this time.

On a success signal being given by A Company 2 RWK, the Buffs were to attack southwards toward Quaranta and St Nicola and drive the enemy into C Company 2 RWK, supported by the available remnants of 2 RIF (the equivalent of a weak company). This group under OC 2 RWK was to advance northwards on a one-company front with its right on the road Leros-Quaranta and its left on the eastern slopes of Rachi.

A Company 2 RWK commenced their attack at 0830 hrs, but the supporting wave became seriously held up short of Pt 109, and not until 1400 hrs under cover of the last available smoke from the 18/15 pdr tp did they succeed, in a second attack led by Major Butler, in reaching this point. They suffered heavy casualties, including all their officers, and were soon forced to withdraw back to Searchlight Hill, as the King's Own would not release their LMGs to go forward to assist them.

By 1200 hrs, the Brigadier had realized that the first phase would probably not meet with complete success and warned OC 2 RWK that he had decided to put in phase two in any event. It was decided that this phase should be preceded by a preparatory fire plan and the CRA was instructed to carry this out in conjunction with the medium machine guns. Owing to difficulties of communication, this fire plan could not be laid on to permit phase two to begin earlier than 1500 hrs. The fire plan involved the expenditure of all the remaining ammunition available to the Italian coast guns that could be brought to bear on the Rachi ridge.

The artillery and MMG fire plan went well, but its effect was largely discounted by the fact that at 1500 hrs (H Hour for the attack), the infantry did not advance. As communication with OC 2 RWK had broken down, the Brigadier had to leave his command post to investigate the situation. It took him considerable time to find a serviceable jeep and driver. On arrival, the Brigadier discovered that OC 2 RWK had postponed the attack by thirty minutes due to the late arrival of the 2 RIF who were to follow up C Company 2 RWK. (A message to this effect had been dispatched to Fortress HQ but did not arrive until 1700 hrs, which further illustrates a state of disorganization.)

The artillery fire plan could not, of course, be repeated, and C Company 2 RWK moved into the attack at 1530 hrs, too late to gain much advantage from it. The company did, however, reach its objective and took fifty prisoners, though it suffered heavy casualties, including a near mortal wound to Major Read. It did not, however, make contact with 4th Buffs. The 2 RIF company that followed up became heavily involved with the enemy strong points, which had allowed C Company 2 RWK to pass over them and made very little headway. In fact, none of C Company 2 RWK was able to get back the way it had gone, and one platoon actually fought its way round the northern end of Rachi ridge and eventually withdrew down the road that skirts the western end of the ridge.

The Brigadier received no report from 4th Buffs during the day. Wireless communication had broken down and, being desperately short of officers and always hoping that a message would arrive, he did not feel he could spare an officer to make the somewhat hazardous journey. OC 2 RWK was now ordered to establish a defensive position covering the Quaranta-Leros road and to be prepared to renew the attack the following day with the assistance of his D Company, which was due to arrive from Samos during the night.

There was little more than a platoon and Brigade HQ left for the defense of Meraviglia unless the troops containing the enemy in the Rachi-Quaranta area were withdrawn; and to withdraw part of these troops would have served neither to secure the defense of Meraviglia nor to dislodge the enemy from Rachi. Thus, the weakness on Meraviglia had to be accepted. The east face of this feature was now the responsibility of Brigade HQ personnel under the G1 while the north face was under OC 2 RIF.

OC LRDG (Colonel GL Prendergast, DSO) was ordered to send out two patrols, one down the northern end and the other the southern end of the east face, both in the direction of Leros. They were to operate a limited distance from Meraviglia and, if they bumped the enemy, they were to simulate as much noise as possible without getting closely engaged, the intention being to cover the weakness of this front. The southern patrol did in fact encounter the enemy and 2 I/C LRDG (Lt - Colonel J. Easonsmith, DSO) was killed. It was most unfortunate that such a valuable officer should have been lost in such a manner, but the shortage of officers was now so acute that there was no practical alternative to his employment in this way.

At 0400 hrs on 16 November, the enemy launched an attack against the east side of Meraviglia and, by 0600 hrs, was threatening to overrun Fortress HQ. Every available man in HQ went to assist in the defense, and during the course of the fighting, the G2 and the SBNO's Flag Lieutenant (Lt Alan Phipps, RN) were killed and the G1 wounded. Brigade HQ was at the point of being captured. Consequently at 0645 hrs, the Brigadier decided to move his HQ with his senior staff officers and the SBNO to Porto!ago where he hoped to find the newly arrived D Company 2 RWK, (Major Bobby Flint, MBE) and use it to restore the situation.

At about 1600 hrs, a message was received from GHQ with the proposal to evacuate the Leros force on the night of 17-18 November, and that details would follow in the second part of the message. Brigade HQ was overrun before the second part of this message was received. Both the Brigadier and the SBNO were of the opinion that an evacuation was scarcely practicable and could only be effected at great cost in ships and personnel. Any idea of evacuation for the Italians was ruled out. It can now be stated that the Naval CIC Eastern Mediterranean confirmed this opinion and stated that it would have been impossible to evacuate any but a small portion of the British force on Leros, and then

only at great cost.

At 1630 hrs, enemy machine gun, mortar, and small arms fire in the area of HQ became intense and the final assault on Meraviglia began earlier than expected. By 1700 hrs, it was discovered that it was impossible to get out of the HQ tunnel, since the enemy was standing over all the exits with light automatics and grenades. The discovery was made by the Brigadier himself when he endeavored to get out accompanied by the CRA only to be greeted with a grenade and a burst of automatic fire which, for some obscure reason, failed to inflict any wounds.

Brigade HQ was, therefore, completely trapped with all means of communication to forces outside entirely severed. It was unfortunate that this should have occurred without any warning. It seems that this must have been due to the fact that the handful of men left holding the eastern face of Meraviglia had become so demoralized by the enemy bombing and machine gun fire as to allow the enemy to occupy this vital feature without sending any word back as to what was happening.

The situation was now desperate. The Brigadier and what remained of his staff were caught like rats in a trap and all resemblance of control had vanished. Of the British troops outside, the force under OC 4th Buffs, which was moving toward Meraviglia, unaware of the situation there, numbered no more than 150 extremely weary men. The force under OC 2 RWK numbered not more than 200 and, not having received the Brigadier's last instruction, was marching in the opposite direction toward the north of the island entirely ignorant of the situation, while both the King's Own and 2 RIF had ceased as operative units.

Only two guns of the RA troops now remained in action with very few unwounded but exhausted gunners left to man them, and only ten rounds of ammunition left to fire. The Italians could be utterly discounted; the great majority had no spirit in them at all when they came into close combat with the Germans, and what morale they had possessed had completely collapsed.

On the morning of 16 November, a force of 250 promised by the Italian infantry commander had materialized as twenty-five men, all of whom had deserted before they arrived at the position ordered. The Germans, with their fresh reinforcements, now outnumbered the defense by four or five to one without taking into consideration their unopposed and overwhelming command of the air, coupled with their ability to land further reinforcements as and when desired.

In four days, eleven attacks were carried out on Brigadier Tilney's orders: one was of three-company strength, two of two-company strength, six of single company strength, and two of two platoons or less. Two of these attacks won local successes, five attacks gained partial successes, and four failed.

The possibility of either immediate or ultimate relief by Fortress HQ was negligible; only rifles were available, and only one man could cover each entrance at a time. Any active defense was, therefore, suicidal; the Brigadier stated he was prepared

to accept this course of action if other considerations could be found to balance the defense. Far from balancing it, these considerations gave much weight to the conclusion that a suicidal defense would have been useless.

One possibility was to offer the capitulation of Fortres s HQ and leave the rest of the defense to its fate. The Brigadier felt it was his duty to accept the greater responsibility, particularly in view of the order that had been received stating that there would be no evacuation, not only of Leros but of the Aegean generally. He did so at 1730 hrs 16 November 1943.(1) Thus ended the battle for Leros.

#### THE GERMAN BATTLE GROUPS

Elements of the Twenty -Second Infantry Division fought in the Polish Campaign in 1939 and in the Netherlands in 1940. In the period 1941 -1942, the division was in Romania and was then committed to the Russian Front, suffering heavy losses in the battle for Sebastopol where Generalmajor Mueller was awarded the Knights Cross with Oak Leaves. One regiment served in Tunisia in 1943, while the balance of the division was posted to Crete.

In October and November 1943, the Twenty -Second Infantry formed a major part of the German Battle Group fighting on Kos and Leros. The division included IR No 16, IR No 47, and IR No 65 Grenadiers. At various times it was commanded by Generalmajors von Spaneck, Wolff, Keripe, Mueller, and Friebe. Generalmajor Keripe was captured on Crete by British commandos. (In the Aegean, Generalmajor Friedrich Mueller carried the rank of General!eutnant.)

The Brandenburg Regiment was formed early in 1939 and contained glider and parachute units. The regiment was later expanded, and the Brandenburg Division was employed as a specialist anti -insurgency force used in the Balkans, and in particular, in Yugoslavia. II Fallschirmjager, II and III First Rgt BR, XV (Light), and IV Regiment BR were all involved in parachute drops on Leros.(2)

According to British records, the following formations of German troops were involved in operations in the Aegean in 1943:

Kos        2 Bn 16 Grenadier Regiment 2 Bn 65  
              Grenadier Regiment Para Coy  
              Brandenburg Regiment Assault  
              Engineers 2 Troops Artillery 1 AA  
              Troop 1 Company Engineer

Leros      The Kos Assault Force plus: 440th  
              Grenadier Regiment  
              I Bn GAF Field Division  
              II Fallschirmjager 2nd BR Regiment

III Fallschirmjager 1st BR Regiment XV  
Light Kustenjager 4th BR Regiment

Shipping: Twenty-five landing craft, thirteen escorts, and a covering force of two destroyers and four torpedo boats.

Aircraft: 300 attack aircraft and ninety transport aircraft.

**Estimated landed strength: 2,000-3,000 men.**

**Estimated battle casualties: 1,000, plus 2,000 drowned at sea.(3)**

NOTES

1. Brigadier RA Tilney DSO, After Action Report to the War Office, 16 April 1947.

2. Bundesarchiv, Militararchiv (Freiburg, W. Germany, H. Ill, 10 June 1985.)

3. CJC Molony et al., The Mediterranean and Middle East, vol, 5, History of the Second World War (London:Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1973), 551-552.