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**AMPHIBIOUS AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN THE
AEGEAN SEA 1943-1945. OPERATIONAL
EFFECTIVENESS AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS**

by

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December 2003

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**AMPHIBIOUS AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN THE AEGEAN SEA 1943-1945.
OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

The Aegean Sea during the Second World War drew the attention of both the Allies and the Axis. However, although historians have chronicled the fall of Greece and Crete in the spring of 1941, little attention has been given to the war in the Aegean after 1941. From the early days of the Mediterranean war, Churchill especially believed that the elimination of the Italian occupation of the Dodecanese islands, would facilitate British operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and help to convince Turkey to enter the war on the Allied side. When, in the autumn of 1943, Churchill sought to realize these goals, he succeeded only in creating an operational disaster and provoking a minor crisis between the Western Allies.

For the British, the Italian surrender of September 1943 provided a window of opportunity to thrust through the Aegean into Greece and the Balkans. The Americans firmly rejected Churchill's proposals for operations in the Eastern Mediterranean as designed to serve British imperial interests rather than those of the rapid defeat of Germany. Despite failure to secure U.S. support, Churchill nevertheless proceeded with operations against Kos and Leros, with disastrous results. However, the British were more fortunate in conducting special operations in the Aegean and against Crete in 1943 and 1944 to the end of the war. This thesis follows the main events that affected the Aegean Sea in the war, stressing issues of inter-allied relations, peripheral strategy, tactical solutions to strategic problems and special operations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Aegean Sea has been an area of many confrontations. Its islands changed hands several times. In the beginning of 20th century, all of the Aegean islands, with the exception of the Dodecanese, were in Greek hands. Italy occupied the Dodecanese islands in 1912 in its attempt for colonial expansion. In the following years, Italy sought to exploit the potential of the Dodecanese as a naval and air base in the Eastern Mediterranean. Britain, and especially Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister for most of the Second World War, was interested in the Aegean Islands for two reasons: first was their strategic position in blocking sea communications to the Black Sea. Second, Churchill believed that the Dodecanese in British hands would remove an impediment to Turkey's entry into the war on the Allied side.

On the outbreak of war in 1939, Britain began to plan for the occupation of the Dodecanese. Having signed a treaty with Turkey in October 1939, London initially ~~foresaw~~ a significant Turkish involvement. With the arrival of the German Air Force in the Dodecanese in January 1941, Churchill's desire to entice Turkey into the war grew almost to an obsession. Given heavy British commitments in other theaters and other areas of the Mediterranean, however, plans for the capture of Dodecanese were never implemented until 1943.

From 1941 to 1944, the Aegean, and especially the Dodecanese islands, were folded into the Anglo-American dispute over the Mediterranean strategy: the British "peripheral" approach to victory contrasted with an American view that the shortest route to victory led through an invasion of Northwest France into the heart of Germany. The strongest supporter of the British peripheral strategy was Winston Churchill. One must not make too much of these inter-Allied strategic divisions. The British understood that Germany's defeat could not come without an invasion of northwestern Europe. They were merely concerned that Britain's diminishing strength not be exhausted on a premature Continental assault. Churchill also sought to use Allied assets in the Mediterranean to secure Britain's post-war interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Americans, suspicious of Churchill's motives, regarded the Mediterranean peripheral

strategy as both indecisive and a violation of the principle of “concentration of forces.” However, the war strategy was agreed upon between the British and Americans in the conferences held in 1943 at Casablanca, Washington and Quebec. The Allies identified as their primary objective the cross-channel invasion of France codenamed “Overlord”.

From the beginning of 1943, the British updated their plans to capture Dodecanese, now codenamed “Accolade”. Churchill saw the Italian surrender in September 1943 as a strategic opportunity to be seized – “Improvise and Dare,” he instructed his C-in-C Mediterranean, General Sir Maitland Wilson.¹ The time had come to “play high”. General Wilson sent troops and occupied the islands of Kos, Leros and Samos.

The Americans felt that operations in the East Mediterranean would have a “suction pump” effect on resources of the theater. General Eisenhower could not afford to provide long-range fighters and transport aircraft to support “Accolade”. He needed all the available resources for the Italian campaign and considered “Accolade” as a diversion.

Germans decided in May 1943 to defend Italy. The question was how? Kesselring favored a forward defense. Rommel proposed withdrawing forces to the north to save manpower. Kesselring won that argument, but not in May 1943. In Hitler’s mind, the Balkans and Italy were linked, because he believed that the Allies would skip from Foggia to Yugoslavia, taking advantage of Tito’s resistance movement and linking up with the Red Army. Therefore, the Balkans were the point where the Mediterranean and Eastern Fronts came together. If Turkey slid over to the Allied side, that would cause him even more problems.

By the end of September 1943 Hitler ordered that the Aegean islands were to be held and those lost to be recaptured. German response was quick and swift. Drawing forces mainly from the 22nd Infantry Division stationed on Crete, on 3 October 1943, the Germans mounted a combined airborne/amphibious assault on Kos that took the British garrison by surprise. The British force defending the island was actually an infantry

¹ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Closing the Ring*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin CO, 1951), 538

battalion with supporting arms. The British resistance lasted just one day. By 4 October, the Germans occupied the island.

The British failed to draw the lessons from the fall of Kos, which exposed the vulnerability of British garrisons scattered on small islands with minimal air cover far from their supporting base in Egypt. Rather than withdraw their exposed forces from Leros, the British decided to hold it. Their forces on that island amounted to about four infantry battalions with supporting arms along with the remnants of a demoralized Italian garrison. The British commander, Brigadier Robert Tilney, chose to defend the beaches and dispersed his forces along a lengthy coastal perimeter. His central reserve of one company was too small to influence the battle. German airborne landings were ruled out.

The Germans formed five groups to land on respective sites on the eastern and western side of the island. Their main objective was to divide Leros' defenders by capturing the narrow isthmus in the center of the island. On 12 November 1943, the landing force approached Leros and managed to establish two footholds on the island. Late on the first day, German paratroopers dropped on the isthmus and succeeded in seizing the northern part of the ridge. In the next three days, Tilney, with inadequate air support, failed to repel the Germans. At 1700 on 16 November, Leros surrendered. Subsequently, the British withdrew all troops from Samos leaving in the Aegean only a small detachment in Kastellorizo.

The Allies in the Aegean throughout the war conducted many special operations. In 1941, some attempts were made to capture some of the Dodecanese islands. In the next two years, many raids were undertaken that aimed to destroy Axis aircraft. Gaining valuable experience from these years, the subsequent raids from the end of 1943 to the summer of 1944 were better organized and well carried out. During this period, special operations became an integral part of Allied deception operations that aimed to deceive the Germans regarding the Balkan landing site. Germans in the islands remained under constant attack by British special operations forces until the end of the war.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Issues about the Second World War are extensively discussed in the bibliography. However, operations in the Aegean have attracted less attention among scholars of this period. This thesis provides a new perspective by examining the amphibious and special operations in the Aegean in the wider context of the Allied operations in the Mediterranean. The main themes discussed are peripheral operations, inter-allied relations, the tactical operational solutions to strategic problems and special operations.

To be effective, peripheral operations must contribute to success in the main theater. From the beginning in 1939, the Mediterranean had always been considered by Britain to be a peripheral theater, one where it could fight Axis forces at an advantage, train its army, hone its joint operations capabilities, audition its best commanders and gain offensive victories that would build morale and showcase Britain's refusal to accept Hitler's domination of Europe. At the same time, the Mediterranean was Britain's imperial lifeline that had to be defended. Churchill feared that, if he failed to make a show of British power there, then Spain and Turkey might join the Axis. Franklin Roosevelt acquiesced to Churchill's Mediterranean strategy in the summer of 1942, over the protests of his Secretary of War and his Chief of Staff, who saw it as wasteful and serving British, rather than American, interests. The American President sought to shore up Churchill's political position at home, demonstrate to Stalin that Washington was serious about a "Second Front," and to buy time to build up American forces so that, when the invasion of Northwestern Europe came, the Americans would dominate the Western Alliance. By 1943, the Allies decided that the time had come to invade Northwestern Europe the following year. With that decision, the Mediterranean was slated to become a strategic backwater. The successful Allied invasion of Sicily in July-August 1943 opened the Mediterranean to Allied shipping and led to the ouster of Mussolini. From Washington's viewpoint, most Allied goals in the Mediterranean had been achieved. However, assets were still committed there and Churchill sought to prosecute Mediterranean operations that would keep that theater active, bolster British influence in the Alliance, and shore up Britain's post-war position. He also entertained

pet strategic projects, which most historians regard as fanciful, to invade Germany from the South. This seems to be one of Winston Churchill's failings as a strategist -- he wanted to expand the peripheral operations when they had long ceased to play strategic dividends.

The next issue, inter-allied relations, plays into the peripheral operations theme. Churchill wanted to prolong operations in a theater where he thought he had leverage. Unlike Northwest Europe where his armies will be dwarfed by American and Russian forces, in the Eastern Mediterranean, he had the upper hand. But in "Accolade" he overplayed his hand and actually undermined his credibility by exhibiting poor strategic judgment.

A third issue is the strategic context. "Accolade" was carried out in the context of the Italian surrender in September 1943. Italian surrender induced an overly optimistic net assessment -- wishful thinking. It was simply impossible to hold Kos and Leros so far from the British base, without airpower. The British invasion of the Dodecanese also failed to draw Turkey to the Allied side.

Special operations carried out in the Aegean throughout the war enjoyed more success than did "Accolade." Indeed, operation "Accolade" may be viewed as a giant raid that sought to achieve disproportionate strategic results. In early 1944, the Germans committed substantial forces in Greece to confront the Allied special forces, anticipating a major invasion in the Balkans.

II. THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Mediterranean is the largest inland sea in the world. The east-west axis is approximately 2,400 miles long while the widest section is 1,000 miles wide. The Mediterranean is divided into two main basins by the Sicilian Narrows stretching from Sicily to Cape Bon, Tunisia. The larger eastern basin is approximately 1,400 miles long and two of the Mediterranean's three entrance-exits points are in this section: the Suez Canal and the Turkish Straits. Many battles have taken place here during the centuries.²

While the Mediterranean is divided into eastern and the western sections, the true distinction is between the northern and southern sections in terms of physical characteristics.³ The northern part has several natural ports on the mainland and on many islands. As a result, the seafarers favored the "trunk routes" in the northern part of the sea where it was easier to move from island to island or from port to port.⁴

The northern offshoots of the eastern basin are in the Adriatic and Aegean Seas, routes to the "soft underbelly of Europe".⁵ The Aegean Sea is an almost enclosed sea roughly 400 miles long by 200 miles wide. It stretches from the shores of Greece in the west and in the north to the coast of Asia Minor in the east and it is connected with the Sea of Marmara through the Dardanelles. Crete, Karpathos (Scarpanto) and Rhodes mark its southern limit.⁶

The Aegean Sea has been an area of military and political confrontation at least since the abduction of Helen of Troy in 1100 BC. Homer's legendary "wine dark sea"

² Charles Koburger, *Naval Warfare in the Eastern Mediterranean 1940-1945*, (New York: Praeger 1993), 1.

³ Carla Rahn Philips, "Navies in the Mediterranean in the Early Modern Period", in John Hattendorf (ed.), *Naval Policy and Strategy in the Mediterranean*, (London: Frank Cass 2000), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ Koburger, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

offers an indispensable sea and air corridor from the Mediterranean and Europe to the Black Sea, the Turkish Straits and the Middle East.⁷

The many islands of the Aegean form four groups: the northern Sporades, the east Aegean islands, the Cyclades and the Dodecanese. The name Dodecanese means “twelve islands” although this group consists of about twenty islands of various sizes: Patmos, Lipsos, Levitha, Leros, Kalymnos, Kos, Kasos, Karpathos, Nisyros, Chalci, Symi, Telos (Piskopi), Astypalaia (Stampalia), Alimnia, Kastellorizo and Rhodes.

Since the 15th century, the Aegean islands were under Ottoman rule and remained so until Greece’s independence in 1830. The newly independent country included only the Cyclades and the northern Sporades and sought to integrate the rest of the Aegean islands as well. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, Italy became a competitor in the region. Italy was trying to keep up with the Great Powers and made plans for colonial expansion in North Africa. On September 1911, Italian troops invaded the Turkish provinces of Tripoli and Cyrenaica, which, in November, together with the vilayet of Fezzan, were annexed by Italy and became the colony of Libya.⁸

The war continued throughout the winter to the spring of the next year when in April, Italy first occupied Astypalaia and later the rest of the Dodecanese. The reason for occupying the Dodecanese was threefold. The first was to secure bases for attacking the flow of supplies and men from Turkey to Libya. The second was to use the islands as a major bargaining chip in the diplomatic maneuvering in the Balkans and Asia Minor. The third was to use them for launching any future operations against the mainland of Asia Minor.⁹

Under the Treaty of Lausanne, which concluded the Italo-Turkish war, Italy agreed to withdraw its forces from the Dodecanese when the Turks had fulfilled their obligations in Tripolitania.¹⁰ However, the “temporary” occupation of the Ottoman areas

⁷ Charles Maechling, “The Aegean Sea: A Crisis Waiting to Happen”, *Proceedings*, (Vol. 123, Issue 3 March 1997), 71.

⁸ R. Bosworth, “Italy and the End of the Ottoman Empire” in Marian Kent (ed.), *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 57.

⁹ Peter Smith and Edwin Walker, *War in the Aegean*, (London: William Kimber, 1974), xiv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

by a Great Power became permanent. The subsequent Balkan War of 1912-13 between the Ottoman Empire and its neighbors, the Balkan states, left the fate of the Dodecanese undecided.

The Dodecanese card was especially useful for the Italians to play since the British Admiralty had concluded that, in Italian hands, these islands were a potential threat to the imperial naval route to the East.¹¹ Indeed, the Galipoli campaign in 1915 would not have been possible if Italy, dominating the Dodecanese, had been active on the side of the Central Powers.

During the first Balkan War, Greece liberated the northern Aegean islands of Lemnos, Imbros, Tenedos, Thasos and Samothrace as well as the eastern Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Ikaria. By 1913, all of the Aegean islands, with the exception of the Dodecanese, were in Greek hands. Of all the Aegean islands, however, only Crete had been awarded to Greece by the London Treaty of 17 May 1913. As stipulated in this Treaty, the Great Powers would decide the fate of the other Aegean islands. The final cession of the Aegean islands did not take place until ten years later as a consequence of the First World War.

The aspirations of the Great Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean during the first quarter of the 20th century were related to the partition of the Ottoman Empire. In the First World War, the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers abandoning its traditional relationship with Britain. Britain has been established in the Mediterranean since the 17th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Mediterranean was a vital link in Britain's imperial strategy, essential to the defense of India and the communications with the Eastern Empire. Although the exploitation of the oil resources of the Middle East increased the region's value, principal imperial interests went beyond this region.¹²

¹¹ Bosworth, 66.

¹² Michael Simpson, "Superhighway to the World Wide Web: The Mediterranean in British Imperial Strategy, 1900-1945", in John Hattendorf (ed.), *Naval Strategy and Policy in the Mediterranean*, (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 51.

Having succeeded in defeating the Ottoman armies in the Middle East in the First World War, Britain demanded the lion's share of the spoils at war's end. Britain sought to dominate the Middle East and play a preponderant role in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹³

The terms of the Treaty of Sevres, signed on 10 August, were severe for Turkey. The Turkish mainland was left to Turkey, together with the shores of Marmara and the Galipoli Peninsula. Mesopotamia and Palestine came under a British mandate; Syria was left to France while the Hijaz was to be independent. The Ottoman government had to renounce all claims to Egypt, Sudan and Cyprus to Great Britain. Smyrna was placed under Greek administration for five years, when a plebiscite was to be held. Greece was to have Thrace and the islands of Imbros and Tenedos, which control entry to the Dardanelles.¹⁴ To enable Italy to transfer to Greece de jure Turkish territory in a special article, Turkey renounced to Italy all its rights to the Dodecanese.

However, this Treaty was overturned in 1920 by the successful revolt of Kemal Ataturk against the weak government of the Sultan and by the defeat, in the Greek elections, of the Prime Minister Venizelos who had brought Greece into the war on the side of the Allies. His Germanophile opponent, King Constantine, reclaimed the throne. Faced with the Ataturk's resistance and gravely misjudging the reaction of the Allies, the King's General Staff decided in 1921 to launch an attack against Ataturk's stronghold at Ankara. Advancing from Smyrna, the Greek armies came within sixty miles of Ankara, where, caught with greatly overextended communications, they were exhausted and retreated back to defensive positions.

Kemal worked quickly to shore up his fragile military and diplomatic position. His first diplomatic move was to establish a working relationship with the Soviet Union. Indeed, Nationalist Turkey became the first country to receive considerable Soviet military aid. The collaboration of two countries resulted in the partition of Armenia between Turkey and Russia.¹⁵ Italy, upset by the pro-Greek policy of Britain and France and attracted by Kemal's promises of economic profits, was the first among the Allies to

¹³ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴ Harry Howard, *Turkey, the Straits and the US Policy*, (The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 99.

¹⁵ David Fromkin, "Gamblers on the Turkish Brink", *Military History Quarterly*, (Vol. 1, Issue 3, Spring 1989), 96.

change sides. France, with similar motivations, changed to a pro-Turkish policy. In Britain, the prime minister could only offer Greece moral support. In the period between August 1920, when the Allies signed the Treaty of Sevres with Turkey, and the winter of 1921, the situation was completely reversed. The Allies were now reluctant to impose the treaty that they themselves had conceived and signed one year earlier.¹⁶ In August of 1922, Kemal launched his final attack on the weakened and overstretched Greek defenses. The Greeks were forced to retreat in disorder and to evacuate Asia Minor.¹⁷ As for the Dodecanese, although Italy signed an accord with Greece simultaneously with the Treaty of Sevres to cede the islands to Greece, the Italian government denounced the accord with Greece in October 1922. The Greek government, before accepting the Treaty of Lausanne, reserved in writing its views on the determination of the Dodecanese¹⁸. The Dodecanese remained under Italian occupation until 1943 and under German occupation until 1945. After a short period in British hands they were united with Greece in 1947.

In 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne marked the end of hostilities. Its signing was a triumph for the Kemalist revolution. It replaced the Treaty of Sevres, which symbolized the defeat and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and was never fully implemented. As the victor in the war against Greece, Turkey gained great advantages: land frontiers considerably more favorable than those of the Treaty of Sevres to include western Anatolia and eastern Thrace and the recovery of the islands of Imbros and Tenedos. For its part, Turkey acknowledged Greek sovereignty over the islands of Lemnos, Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Ikaria. Having massacred or expelled its Armenian minority in 1915, Ankara now proceeded to expel its considerable Greek population. In short, in a convoluted way, the First World War and its immediate aftermath had been a victory for Turkey. It had shed a burdensome empire and achieved defensible frontiers. It had replaced a ramshackle regime with a dynamic new leadership dedicated to Turkey's transformation into a modern nation state. National solidarity was enhanced by the elimination of two significant ethnic groups who would otherwise have resisted Kemalist plans to transform the Ottoman regime into a Turkish national state. In short, post-

¹⁶ Ibid., 96.

¹⁷ Ibid., 100.

¹⁸ Smith and Walker, xvi.

Lausanne Turkey was a satisfied power, one that believed that it had been duped into joining the First World War and which was unlikely to join a second world conflagration because it had nothing to gain from a victory of either the Stalin or Hitler, and much to lose if it chose the wrong side. To this fact, Churchill seemed totally oblivious.

After the First World War, Britain once again deployed a major fleet in the Mediterranean. However, the strategy was to defend, first, the homeland and, second, the Far East from its base in Singapore.¹⁹ In the words of the British Chiefs of Staff, “the essence of our naval plan rests on the arrival of our main fleet at Singapore at the earliest possible moment”.²⁰ Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia in the summer of 1935 demonstrated the limits of this strategy. If the two-power standard could suffice for a war against Japan and Germany, it was not at all possible that Britain could build a larger navy to face the threat of an additional Italian naval power. As military plans were impossible to implement, a cabinet committee suggested, at the end of 1935, that Britain not antagonize Italy.²¹ This policy prevailed until 1939 when Admiral Andrew Cunningham, Chief of the British Mediterranean Fleet and a convinced “Mediterraneanist,” questioned its wisdom and the outbreak of war shifted British priorities.

As for the Aegean islands, Britain was interested in them for two reasons. The first was their strategic position in blocking sea communication to the Black Sea. Second was their influence in bringing Turkey to the British side in the case of war.²² Moreover, after the Italo-Abyssinian war, Britain realized that it must have a base on the eastern Mediterranean comparable to the Italian one on Leros. For some time, London examined the option of having a port on the Greek mainland or in Cyprus, but the prospects were not encouraging and the idea was abandoned.²³ Well aware of the potential of the

¹⁹ Simpson, xvi.

²⁰ N. H. Gibs, *Grand Strategy. Vol. 1 Rearmament Policy*, (London: HMSO, 1976), 375.

²¹ Gibs, 379.

²² Smith and Walker, 35.

²³ Gibs, 193, 385.

Dodecanese islands as a naval base, the British gathered detailed intelligence on their military installations and defenses, on an island-by-island basis.²⁴

Italy emerged from the First World War bitterly disappointed. While it had fought on the winning side, it did not get what it believed it deserved. Italy saw that both Britain and France were able to extend their influence in the eastern Mediterranean through the mandates sanctioned by the League of Nations. Britain especially now dominated the eastern Mediterranean. In its plans for expansion in the Balkans, Asia and Africa, the bases on the Dodecanese islands played a significant role. First, they kept both Greece and Turkey in check. Second, they enabled Italian air and naval forces to strike at Egypt's coastline. Third, in case of war against Greece, they could outflank the Greek mainland.²⁵ Contrary to the agreements, Italy began to fortify the islands in 1934. The Turks offered to renounce their claims to the islands if Italy agreed not to fortify them. Italy did not even reply to that proposal.²⁶ On the other hand, the Greek Navy could isolate the islands. In any case, the Italians did not skillfully exploit the military potential of the Dodecanese during the course of the war. On the contrary, the islands became a strategic burden for Rome, despite the fact that their potential was ever present.²⁷

Greece's goal had always been the integration of the remaining Aegean islands. That goal, and Italian aspirations in the region, made Italy the main threat to Greece's security. After 1933, when the international situation began to deteriorate, the Balkan countries directed their efforts towards a treaty. Thus, after long negotiations, the "Balkan Agreement Pact" was finally signed in 1934 between Greece, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Romania.²⁸ In the subsequent events of the war, however, that pact was not put into effect. Despite their traditional enmity, in 1933 Greece and Turkey signed the "Pact of Cordial Understanding" with the Italian threat in mind. When, in April 1939, Italy

²⁴ Jeffrey Holland, *The Aegean Mission*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 8.

²⁵ Smith and Walker, 34.

²⁶ Brock Millman, "Turkish Foreign and Strategic Policy 1934-42," *Middle Eastern Studies*, (Vol. 31, Issue 3, July 1995), 485.

²⁷ Smith and Walker, 35.

²⁸Constantinos Polizois (ed.), *An Abridged History of the Greek-Italian and Greek-German War 1940-41 (Land Operations)*, (Athens: Hellenic Army General Staff Military History Directorate, 1996), 2-3.

occupied Albania, Greece felt imminent danger from Italy.²⁹ One week later, the prime ministers of England and France announced that they would guarantee the independence of Greece and Romania.³⁰

Turkey also opposed Italian occupation of the Dodecanese islands and considered Italy to be the main threat to its security. Nor did Ankara abandon its goal of once again taking over the islands. Five days after Italy and Germany signed the Steel Pact on 7 May 1939, Turkey and Britain agreed to cooperate in the event of a war in the Mediterranean area. After a month of further discussions about the cession of Hatay (Alexandretta) to Turkey, a similar announcement was made by France and Turkey.³¹ Both Britain and France considered the active cooperation of Turkey valuable in three ways. First, from a political point of view, it would affect the behavior of the other Balkan states. Second, Turkey commanded the Dardanelles. The closing of the straits could stop Italy's supply route from the Black Sea. Third, it could isolate or capture the Dodecanese and strengthen Allied control in the Aegean.³²

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

³⁰ Gibs, 707-12.

³¹ Major General I. S. O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East. Vol. 1 The Early Successes against Italy*, (London: HMSO, 1954), 25.

³² Gibs, 713.

III. STRATEGY, PLANS AND ACTIONS 1939-1943

A. THE FIRST YEARS OF THE WAR

The German invasion of Poland in September 1939 marked the outbreak of the Second World War. British policy was to encourage the neutrality of not only Italy, but also of the Balkan countries. The threat of a German incursion into the Balkans was evident by late 1940. Thus, British strategic interests in the Middle East were potentially threatened from the Balkans.³³ Turkey was strategically important to the defense of the British position in the Middle East because of its capacity to provide a strong defense against German action from the North through the Balkans. In fact, the Turkish army was large but antiquated. It was in British interest that Turkey stay neutral. But, the Foreign Office was attempting, without success, to construct a unified Balkan resistance to Hitler.

Following the tripartite conversations begun in April 1939, on 19 October, after a period of uncertainty, Britain, France and Turkey signed a treaty of mutual assistance along with a military convention.³⁴ The agreement required the parties to collaborate effectively and to provide all assistance possible in case they became involved in a war in the Mediterranean.³⁵ The military convention, although not as detailed, dealt with the containment of Bulgaria and the defense of Salonika among other issues. The Dodecanese were to be attacked by an Anglo-French-Turkish force as soon as local air and sea superiority could be achieved. Air bases in Turkey would be required and were to be equipped by the Allies.³⁶ However, the treaty was accompanied by a suspensive clause stating that Turkey had no obligation unless it received certain loans and war materials.

In subsequent staff conferences, the capture of the Dodecanese was often raised and plans were reviewed. For Turkey, the attack on the Dodecanese was the only offensive operation in its generally defensive mode. The Turkish mountain divisions

³³ Major General I. S. O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East. Vol. 1 The Early Successes against Italy*, (London: HMSO, 1954), 49.

³⁴ Butler, 66.

³⁵ Playfair, 51-52.

³⁶ Millman, 25

assigned to this operation were trained in amphibious operations and Turkey constantly pushed the Allies to implement this operation.³⁷

The Aegean was also an issue in the Anglo-French agenda. In their staff discussions, the French had more ambitious ideas for the Aegean area than had the British. They suggested the occupation, with Greek consent, of Melos and possibly also Salamis, Navarino and Argostoli. This would prevent the Italians from obtaining these key points. It would also be the first step in the encirclement of the Dodecanese.³⁸ The French were eager to do this as soon as possible. For them, the best way to ensure that the Turks joined the Allied camp was to demonstrate their determination to occupy the Dodecanese. They also agreed to provide one division for the defense of Thrace. However, in May 1940, the Germans attacked France, which fell in June.

The fall of France and the Italy's entry into the war on 10 June 1940 transformed the strategic situation in the Mediterranean. By then, the importance of the Dodecanese and Crete became more critical for Britain, which had to face the Axis alone. Meanwhile, even before the Franco-German armistice, Turkey decided to adopt an attitude of non-belligerency.³⁹ Turkey's defection helped to collapse British Balkan strategy. To make matters worse, Italy invaded Greece on 28 October 1940. Britain could spare only scarce resources to aid Greece.

In November 1940, the British Director of Combined Operations, Sir Roger Keyes, suggested to the chief of Staff the capture of Pantelleria, the small Italian island in the Sicilian Narrows. The capture of Pantelleria would add a base in the chain of air-naval bases between Gibraltar, Malta and Alexandria. Admiral Cunningham objected to this operation, known as "Workshop", because Pantelleria would impose an additional strain on existing resources.⁴⁰ Cunningham suggested that a much better plan for this force was the capture of one or more of the Dodecanese islands. Located on the flank of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Playfair, 86.

³⁹ Butler, 301.

⁴⁰ Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, (New York: EP Dutton and Company, 1951), 291.

the convoy routes, these islands, with their airfields, represented a threat to his Fleet, should the British intervene in Greece.

The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was not in favor of this proposal because an attack on the Dodecanese should include the big islands like Rhodes, for which, many more men would be required.⁴¹ On 20 January 1941, with the presence of the German Air Force in Sicily, the operation “Workshop” was pronounced impracticable and the Commando troops designated for it were allocated to the capture of the Dodecanese. A German Air Force occupation of the Dodecanese could be a threat to Aegean traffic and also lead to an attack of the Suez Canal. Thus far, the ineffective use of these islands by the Axis was mainly due to the fact that the British provided heavy escorts for their convoys. Also, the Italians did not operate torpedo bombers from Rhodes against British ships.⁴²

The operation for the capture of the Dodecanese, code-named “Mandibles”, was always on the Commander-in-Chief’s agenda. But, as fears grew that the Luftwaffe would soon appear in the Dodecanese, it took priority. The other constant factor in undertaking operation “Mandibles” was to induce Turkey to enter the war. Turkey felt threaten from September 1940 when German troops occupied Romania. Admiral Cunningham suggested taking first Kasos, the small island that lies just east of Crete near the island of Karpathos. The capture of Kasos would enable the British to occupy both sides of the Kasos Straits, where many Italian torpedo boats and submarines operated. Moreover, by mounting a few guns on Kasos, the British could command the airfield at Karpathos.⁴³

On 16 January 1941, the Chiefs of Staff decided not to raid the Dodecanese until the plans for all the islands had been settled. Their order to cancel the operation for taking Kasos arrived a few hours before the assault on 17 January.⁴⁴ While the Commanders-in-Chief could not assume a major operation against the Dodecanese, they were reluctant to leave the islands undisturbed. In answer to their request, the Chiefs of Staff replied that

⁴¹ Playfair, 309

⁴² Butler, 372.

⁴³ Cunningham, 306.

⁴⁴ Playfair, 325.

any smaller operation must be related to the larger ones, and that, in fact, all operations were to be part of one plan.⁴⁵ The major operation would be undertaken after the arrival of the landing ships in the Middle East, sometime in March. When German aircraft began to lay mines in the Suez Canal at the end of January, using Rhodes for refueling, the Commanders-in-Chief realized that operation "Mandibles" needed to be executed. On 17 February 1941, a failed attempt was made to land on Kasos. Another attempt to seize Kastellorizo one week later succeeded at first without difficulty. The intent was to use Kastellorizo as an advanced base for motor torpedo boats. The Italians reacted with unexpected vigor and retook the island.⁴⁶ The long awaited landing ships arrived in the Suez Canal on 9 March, but at that time, operation "Mandibles" had to be delayed because of the events in Greece. It was decided to send a force to reinforce the Greek troops under attack by Italians.⁴⁷

By the end of January 1941, worried by the presence of about 4,000 German Air Force personnel in Bulgaria, the British Prime Minister and the Chiefs of Staff were turning once again to Turkey, which they always regarded as the lunch pin in their Balkan strategy. To overcome Turkish hesitations, the Chiefs of Staff on 29 January recommended that three fighter and seven bomber squadrons and some one hundred anti-aircraft guns be sent to Turkey to protect Istanbul, Smyrna and the airfields. If those measures could not deter German aggression in the Balkans, the British aircraft could at least reach the Romanian oilfields at Ploesti.⁴⁸ They recognized that if aid to Turkey were accepted, they could spare little or nothing for Greece. But in January 1941, Turkey was the priority. As for Greece, the most important thing was to hold Crete and, with the approval of Greece, to occupy the islands of Mytilene and Lemnos. The Prime Minister and the Cabinet approved their recommendations.⁴⁹

Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Middle East, objected to this strategy. He felt that these recommendations would divert

⁴⁵ Ibid., 325.

⁴⁶ Cunningham, 316. See also Chapter V.

⁴⁷ Playfair, 326, 385.

⁴⁸ Butler, 383.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 384.

squadrons badly needed in North Africa. While the three services' Commanders-in-Chief Middle East recognized the soundness of the "high policy of infiltrating air squadrons into Turkey", they considered the capture of the Dodecanese an essential precondition. In any case, the Turkish president refused to allow British units on Turkish soil because that would mean Turkey had entered the war.

The Anglo-Greek attempt to repel the German assault on the mainland ended in failure, and the ignominious seaborne evacuation of British and Greek troops from Greece recalled Dunkirk in June 1940. By the end of April 1941, the Germans occupied the country. Furthermore, the Germans capitalized on their offensive momentum in May to launch an airborne assault that captured Crete. Therefore, the Axis powers now had complete control of the Balkans and the Aegean islands. British forces were on the defensive in the Aegean and, for the moment, in North Africa. The British strategy was to defend the Middle East as a base for future offensive operations under more favorable conditions.⁵⁰

With the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Germany committed the major part of its forces to the Eastern front. The threat of a German invasion of England became more remote and Britain could afford to send reinforcements to the Middle East. The most pressing objective in the Middle East, once the British position there was stabilized, became the destruction of the Axis forces in North Africa. Until this objective was achieved, operations in the Aegean were put on hold.⁵¹

B. THE ANGLO-AMERICAN DIVERGENT VIEWS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Anglo-American differences over the role of the Mediterranean in Allied strategy was a major source of tension within the Western Alliance during World War II. In the short term, at least, the British preferred an "indirect" or "peripheral" approach to victory in Europe through the encirclement of Germany. This clashed with the "direct" approach through an invasion of northwest France to the heart of Germany advocated by American soldiers like George Marshall, impatient with London's dalliance on the fringes of the

⁵⁰ J. M. A. Gwyer, *Grand Strategy, Vol. III, June 1941-August 1942, Part I*, (London: HMSO, 1964), 5-7.

⁵¹ Ibid., 171-176.

war. In fact, the two approaches reflected the positions, interests and cultures of each power.⁵²

The British plans after the fall of France in June 1940 rested on the use of seapower to blockade the European coastline, forcing an extended war of attrition upon Germany. Mussolini's attack on Greece in 1939, and his subsequent declaration of war on the British in June 1940, had opened World War II's Mediterranean front. In April 1941, Hitler had intervened in the Mediterranean to rescue his incompetent ally and to solidify his southern flank in preparation for *Barbarossa*, the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union. London's reaction was to solidify control of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, as a base of operations against over-extended Axis forces.⁵³ Defense of these positions led to the use of the entire Mediterranean area as an offensive base. Britain's best chance hope for victory was to buy time, postponing any decisive engagement for as long as possible because their small army could not hope to defeat the "Wehrmacht". Seapower was the empire's strength and such a power was more suitable for peripheral campaigns. In the Mediterranean, the British forces could be employed to inflict serious damage on Germany's southern flank and attack Hitler's weak Italian ally.⁵⁴ For centuries, London had avoided placing large numbers of troops on the European continent, with the exception of World War I.

The architect of the British approach during the war was the Prime Minister himself. As First Sea Lord during World War I, Winston Churchill had planned the failed Gallipoli expedition, a classic example of a peripheral strategy. Some argued that Churchill's obsession with the Mediterranean sprang from a desire to vindicate the failed 1915 Gallipoli expedition, that had nearly cost him his political career. Rather, Churchill believed that the Mediterranean offered the best battlefield on which Britain could showcase its combined armed strengths and produce victories that would bolster the morale of the British people, and convince the Americans that Britain was an ally worth defending. Churchill turned to the Mediterranean passionately seeking a military victory.

⁵² Mark A. Stoler, *The Politics of the Second Front*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 2.

⁵³ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁴ Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, (New York: Frederick Praeger Publishers, 1968), 1-18.

He insisted throughout the war that the Eastern Mediterranean continued to have strategic value to the Allies as a southern approach to the Axis. Indeed, he personally coined the two popular phrases associated with this strategy: “closing the ring” and “soft underbelly”.⁵⁵

The American military planners considered the Mediterranean peripheral strategy both indecisive and a violation of the principle of “concentration of forces.” Working with potentially enormous resources in manpower and material, the Americans were convinced that the most efficient way to conduct a war was by direct confrontation with the enemy’s main forces. U.S. planners regarded the British insistence on the Mediterranean strategy merely as a ploy to preserve their Empire.⁵⁶

The war strategy was agreed upon between the British and Americans mainly at Casablanca in January 1943, at Washington in May 1943 and at Quebec in August of the same year. At Casablanca, the Allies identified as their primary objective a plan for cross-channel invasion, code-named “Overlord”. In the Mediterranean, an assault against Sicily was decided and code-named “Husky”, while subsequent operations would depend on circumstances.⁵⁷

On 18 November 1942, the Commander-in-Chief Middle East ordered his staff to prepare plans for the capture of Crete, as well as Rhodes and the other Dodecanese islands, in order to secure Turkey’s entry into the war. However, the strong Axis posture on Crete ruled out any assault with scarce resources. The British planners considered the assault on Rhodes a possibility if the German Air Force was kept fully engaged elsewhere.⁵⁸ Planners estimated the additional resources required for operations in the Aegean, as two auxiliary aircraft carriers, 88 landing craft of various types and ten aircraft squadrons. On 27 January, the Prime Minister ordered the Commander-in-Chief

⁵⁵ Stoler, 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 6-7.

⁵⁷ Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy Vol. IV: August 1942-September 1943*, (London: HMSO, 1972), 625-628.

⁵⁸ Jeffrey Holland, 24-5. *The Aegean Mission: Allied Operations in the Dodecanese, 1943*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988), 24.

Middle East, to “plan and prepare for the capture of the Dodecanese employing ‘ingenuity and resource’ to the full”.⁵⁹ However, the real problem concerning the planning for operations in the Aegean was that of priority. Axis forces in North Africa did not surrender until May 1943. The only operation explicitly approved at Casablanca in January 1943 was the invasion of Sicily. The tempo of operations in the Aegean would be decided by the demands for “Husky”.

On his appointment as Commander-in-Chief Middle East on 16 February 1943, General Maitland Wilson was ordered by the Prime Minister to conduct the following four tasks. First, he was to maintain the Eighth Army. Second, he was to support “Husky”. Third, he was to prepare to support Turkey and fourth, to plan amphibious operations in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶⁰ General Wilson found out that plans for the capture of some of the Aegean islands preexisted for some time.

To consider the plans for a major assault on the Dodecanese, code-named “Accolade”, a joint planning staff, known as Planning Staff No 2, was created in February 1943. By 2 May, a detailed plan was drawn up for an assault on Rhodes and Karpathos. According to this plan, the forces required for the entire Aegean enterprise were three infantry divisions, one armored brigade, two independent infantry battalions, two parachute battalions and supporting troops. The main concern facing planners was to provide adequate air cover for the landing troops from the air bases in Cyprus and North Africa.⁶¹ However, those forces were not available from the Middle East command and there was no intention of withdrawing them from North Africa.

The Washington conference of May 1943, also known as “Trident”, confirmed the overall strategic concept of the war. Regarding the Mediterranean theater, the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided that:

The Allied Commander-in-Chief, North Africa will be instructed to mount such operations in exploitation of “Husky” as are best calculated to eliminate Italy from the war and to contain the maximum number of German forces. Each specific operation will be subject to the approval of the Combined Chiefs of Staff. The Allied Commander-in-Chief, North

⁵⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁰ Howard, *Grand Strategy*, 382.

⁶¹ Smith and Walker, 43.

Africa may use for his operations all these forces available in the Mediterranean area except for four American and three British divisions which will be held in readiness from 1st November onwards for withdrawal to take part in operations from the United Kingdom.⁶²

The Prime Minister presented his grandiose Mediterranean plans at the “Trident” conference. But the Americans felt that operations in the East Mediterranean area would have a “suction pump” effect on resources of the theater.

The invasion of Sicily was launched on 10 July 1943 and the island was captured after a campaign lasting 38 days. The Combined Chiefs of Staff then approved General Dwight Eisenhower’s recommendation for the invasion of Italy on 3 September 1943. On 25 July, the Italians overthrew Mussolini and the possibility of an Italian collapse was imminent. The British looked to exploit the Italian collapse by seizing areas held by Italian garrisons. The Americans were reluctant to assign forces to protect what they saw as British imperial interests.

It was against this backdrop that the Quebec or “Quadrant” conference took place in August 1943. Concerning the Mediterranean, the approved plans called for the elimination of Italy as a belligerent, the seizure of Sardinia and Corsica, and maintaining unrelenting pressure on German forces in northern Italy.⁶³ As for operations in the Balkan area, they “will be limited to supplying Balkan guerillas by air and sea transport, to minor Commando forces and to the bombing of strategic objectives”.⁶⁴ By then, “Overlord” had become the primary Allied objective. Moreover, the Americans had the upper hand in Allied War Councils because they controlled the majority of military assets in the Alliance. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister did not give up his views and made several attempts to maintain the momentum of operations in a Mediterranean theater where he believed that Britain could exert an influence disproportionate to its actual strength in the Alliance.

By the end of July, three versions of “Accolade” had been drawn up, each dependent on circumstances. The first was a “walk-in” to Rhodes and the other

⁶² Howard, *Grand Strategy*, 663.

⁶³ Ibid., 684.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 685.

Dodecanese islands if the Italians surrendered and the Germans withdrew. The second was a quick “Accolade” in case the Italians surrendered but the Germans defended the islands. The third was a full “Accolade” in the event, considered unlikely, of both Italian and German opposition.⁶⁵

One major concern for the success of operations in the Dodecanese was air support. It seemed that the options available for satisfactory air support resided either the use of airfields in Turkish Anatolia, or in the construction of airfields on Kos capable of supporting at least four squadrons of single-engine fighters. By August, however, another option was considered. The British hoped that the Allied operations in the central Mediterranean would attract the German Air Force, allowing Eisenhower to release heavy bombers to attack German airfields in Greece and Crete. He also could provide four squadrons of P-38 (Lightnings) fighters for air cover in the Aegean.⁶⁶

On 1 August, General Wilson figured out his immediate needs for assault shipping to load one infantry brigade and one armored regiment. For a small scale “Accolade”, in addition to the 8th Indian Division, he also needed the 10th Indian Division, the 1st Greek Brigade and the 9th Armored Brigade. The Commander-in-Chief Middle East depended on the Allied Forces Headquarters in Algiers for the majority of his naval and air assets. After the landings in Sicily, sufficient landing ships were available for an assault on Rhodes. However, out of the eight Landing Ships Infantry (LSI), five were destined for the Indian Ocean.⁶⁷ On 2 August, the British Chiefs of Staff authorized those ships to be detained in the Middle East.

On 5 August, General Wilson asked Eisenhower for eight ships, four squadrons of P-38 fighters, transport aircraft to lift a parachute battalion, one parachute battalion and two special forces units. All of them were to arrive in the Middle East by 15 August. Eisenhower agreed to provide the troops and the ships, but refused the aircraft. However, he changed his mind one week later because he feared that demands for “Accolade” would drain resources he needed for the campaign in Italy. Meanwhile, the American

⁶⁵ G. J. C. Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol. V: The Campaign in Sicily 1943 and the Campaign in Italy, 3rd September 1943 to 31st March 1944*, (London: HMSO, 1973), 533-4.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 535.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 536.

Joint Chiefs of Staff made clear that they opposed any British action taken unilaterally and any deviation from plans without the approval of the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Furthermore, on 21 August, the ships detained in the Middle East were dispersed. On 26 August, Eisenhower informed General Wilson that he needed the 8th Indian Division for Italy. In this event, “Accolade” was compromised for want of adequate forces.⁶⁸

On 3 September 1943, the 8th Army invaded the Italian mainland from Sicily. On 8 September, Italy surrendered as the U.S. 5th Army prepared to storm ashore at Salerno. Anticipating this event, a liaison team under Major The Earl George Jellicoe was sent to Rhodes to verify if the Italians would take any action. If the team reported favorably, the 234 Brigade, the only force left to General Wilson, would sail for Rhodes. The German force on Rhodes, consisting of about 7,000 men under General Ulrich Kleeman, captured the Italian Regina Division commander and attacked the division. Admiral Luigi Campioni, the Italian Governor, learned from Jellicoe that British help could not arrive before 15 September. Therefore, on 11 September, he ordered the garrison, comprised of 30,000 troops, to surrender to 7,000 Germans. Without Italian troops to assist them, the British forces were too few -- only one brigade -- to seize Rhodes. On the other side, the Germans were determined to hold the islands.

Churchill had agreed with the Quebec decisions mainly because he believed that the Allies had enough power to cross the Channel and at the same time to undertake operations in the eastern Mediterranean.⁶⁹ This was because Allied planners optimistically assumed in the summer of 1943 that the Germans were on the ropes and the Italians would assist the Allies. In his meeting with President Roosevelt in Washington DC on 9 September, the Prime Minister insisted that, after meeting the German main forces in Italy, “it may be possible to spare some troops to emphasize a movement north and northeastward from the Dalmatian ports”.⁷⁰ Without waiting for the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 537.

⁶⁹ Stoler, 124.

⁷⁰ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Closing the Ring*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin CO, 1951), 134-137.

approval of his plan, on 9 September he sent his “blessing” to General Wilson to launch “Accolade”: “This is a time to play high. Improvise and dare”.⁷¹

American planners considered such ideas as “dangerous” diversions. In fact, since Churchill was not to disturb “Overlord”, the Joint Chiefs of Staff the next day approved the capture of Rhodes and the other Dodecanese islands. However, the Americans insisted, “the diversion of any major forces eastward should be resisted unless it can be conclusively shown that such action contributes to the success of Overlord”.⁷² General Wilson, with the Prime Minister pressing him but with inadequate resources, made the decision, with the full support of the British Chiefs of Staff, to go ahead with a less ambitious plan. The plan called for the occupation of Kos, 60 miles northwest of Rhodes, to use its airfield in Antimachia. Leros, 35 miles further to the northwest, was the second island to be occupied. It had a defensible harbor and some port equipment but no airfield. The third island to be occupied was Samos, 40 miles north of Leros and situated on the sea-route to Smyrna. These islands were to become bases for a “piratical war” on enemy communications in the Aegean.⁷³ General Wilson then proceeded by sending the elements of the 234 Infantry Brigade to the islands: the Second Battalion of the Royal Irish Fusiliers (2 RIF) to Leros, the First Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry (1 DLI) to Kos, and the Greek Sacred Squadron and the Second Battalion of the Royal West Kent (2 RWK) to Samos. The special forces, Special Boat Squadron (SBS) and the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) were already there.

Even this reduced plan, required air support, so General Eisenhower was asked again to provide long-range fighters and transport aircraft for a limited period of time. Eisenhower, however, emphasized that the Italian campaign must not be prejudiced by any other operation in the Mediterranean.⁷⁴ General Wilson did not abandon “Accolade” and he was still making plans for the occupation of Rhodes. On 22 September, he submitted a revised plan for an attack on 20 October assuming that he could use the 10th Indian Division and part of an armored brigade. General Eisenhower had his reservations

⁷¹ Ibid., 538.

⁷² Maurice Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1943-44*, (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1959), 252.

⁷³ Molony, 539.

⁷⁴ Smith and Walker, 80.

and he reported to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 3 October that, if an aggressive strategy was pursued in the Aegean, his theater would be asked to undertake considerable air and sea commitments that he might not be able to afford.⁷⁵

On 3 October, a German battle group attacked Kos and captured the island within twenty-four hours. Many senior British commanders wanted to cut their losses after the fall of Kos. However, this event produced exactly the opposite reaction from Churchill. Leros and Samos were to be held at all costs while the capture of Rhodes was still under consideration.⁷⁶ Churchill, having doubts if the five British battalions of about 3,000 men could match the 7,000 Germans on Rhodes, asked the Chiefs of Staff to consider the possibility of retaking Kos with this force.

He also pressed Eisenhower and Roosevelt on 7 October for the provision of supplies needed for “Accolade”. He informed the President that Italy and the Balkans were part of the same theater and that providing one division and landing ships for a limited period of time would not affect “Overlord”. It had never been his aim “to send an army in the Balkans, but only agents, supplies and Commandos to stimulate the intense guerilla prevailing there.” Rhodes was the key to this operation and its importance was worth the dispersion of resources.⁷⁷ The Americans considered such an attack as politically motivated to bring Turkey into the war.⁷⁸ The President replied to Churchill that he was opposed to any diversion of forces that were necessary for the Italian campaign.⁷⁹ Failing to persuade the Americans to summon another high-level conference between the Allies, Churchill succeeded in inducing an Allied commanders’ meeting to settle the issue.

On 9 October, the entire problem of the eastern Mediterranean and the Italian campaign was discussed at La Marsa in Tunis between General Eisenhower and his Commanders-in-Chief and General Wilson. The prospect of undertaking “Accolade” was diminishing after receiving reports that the Germans had reinforced their army in

⁷⁵ Matloff, 255.

⁷⁶ Holland, 36.

⁷⁷ Churchill, *Closing the Ring*, 210-1.

⁷⁸ Stoler, 126.

⁷⁹ Matloff, 257.

Italy and were fighting a major battle south of Rome.⁸⁰ The commanders unanimously concluded that, “we are agreed that our resources in the Mediterranean are not large enough to undertake the capture of Rhodes and at the same time secure our immediate objectives in Italy.”⁸¹ Confronted with the choice between Rhodes and Rome, they chose Rome.

The Middle Eastern Commanders-in-Chief agreed on 12 October that an attempt to recapture Kos would not be possible unless Turkey agreed to the use of its airfields. However, even with the use of Turkish airfields, there was not sufficient aircraft in the Middle East to support the retaking of Kos. Nevertheless, they decided to hold Leros and Samos, believing that a successful defense depended mainly on establishing a supply line with submarines, aircraft and caiques.⁸²

C. TURKEY AND THE ALLIED PLANS

Throughout the war, Britain considered Turkey to be a vital player in the Mediterranean. During the period between November 1942 and November 1943, the British conducted 128 staff-meetings with the Turks.⁸³ As early as June 1941, Turkey had been concerned about Bulgarian mobilization and thought that this was the prelude to a German attack against Turkey. In a staff meeting held in June 1941,⁸⁴ the British suggested that, by November 1941, they could offer Turkey four divisions and one armored brigade. Although the two sides did not sign an agreement, the British felt that they had an assurance that Turkey would resist a German attack.⁸⁵

The course of events during the winter 1941-42 in Libya and the Far East made the summer offers unrealistic. On 9 January 1942, the British informed Ankara that all they could send was twenty-six air squadrons and four brigades for their protection. When, on 4 April, the Foreign Office asked the Chiefs of Staff about the forces offered to Turkey, they replied that the situation in the Western Desert did not allow them to send

⁸⁰ Ibid., 258.

⁸¹ Molony, 545.

⁸² Ibid., 548.

⁸³ Holland, 51.

⁸⁴ Gwyer, 183.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 184.

the twenty-six squadrons to Turkey.⁸⁶ When the Turks accepted the German offer to sell them war materials, the British felt that they could not blame the Turks. Furthermore, in June, the Foreign Office suggested that jointly with the United States, they should offer the Turks 1,000 tanks and 1,000 antiaircraft guns. The Chiefs of Staff, taking into consideration the situation in the Middle East, objected that this offer, if fulfilled, would strip Allied soldiers of vital equipment.⁸⁷

In November 1942, Churchill informed the Chiefs of Staff that “a supreme and prolonged effort must be made to bring Turkey into the war.”⁸⁸ As the Casablanca conference ended in January 1943, Churchill decided to pay a personal visit to the Turkish president Ismet Inonu. The Turks received their distinguished visitor at Adana, where a conference took place on 30 and 31 January 1943. The Turkish leaders “listened to Churchill’s eloquent persuasions and assured him of their sympathy for the Allied cause.”⁸⁹ The military delegates discussed the nature and the quantity of war material that should be provided to Turkey. Churchill was very optimistic that Turkey would abandon her neutrality. The Turkish General Staff, however, considered that Turkey’s neutrality should be maintained until the end of the war.⁹⁰

In the event that Turkey entered the war, operation “Hardihood,” stipulated the British force would arrive in four phases. The first phase would witness the arrival of twenty-five Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons with the respective antiaircraft artillery to protect their airfields, together with three antitank regiments. The second phase would see the provision of twenty-five more RAF squadrons with the necessary antiaircraft artillery. The third phase included further heavy and light antiaircraft units and two more antitank regiments. The fourth phase would see the arrival of two armored divisions.⁹¹ Moreover, from January to March 1943, Turkey received some sixteen million pounds sterling

⁸⁶ J. R. M. Butler, *Grand Strategy Vol. III, Part II: June 1941-August 1942*, (London: HMSO, 1964), 456.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 457.

⁸⁸ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: The Hinges of Fate*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 698.

⁸⁹ Howard, *Grand Strategy*, 378.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 378-80.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 380.

worth of equipment other than petrol. These supplies stimulated Turkish demands for more equipment. The British hoped to use this equipment as bait to draw Turkey into the war. The real enticement for “Accolade,” however, would be the British occupation of the Dodecanese. Turkey on the Allied side could offer air bases from which to bomb Greece, Romania and Bulgaria. It would bring an estimated forty-six divisions into the Allied side, although they had to depend on the Allies for the equipment. It would also enable the Allies to control the Dardanelles and Bosphorus and enable the supply of Russia through the Black Sea.⁹²

The fourth phase of “Hardihood” could not be set in motion, unless the port of Smyrna had been opened. Consequently, it was important first to control the Aegean. For that purpose, the British and the Turks discussed plans for capturing Rhodes, Kos and some other islands. As the Turkish Chief of General Staff revealed to General Wilson, the force they had earmarked in 1940 for the occupation of the islands was still in existence.⁹³

Churchill did not abandon his plans to bring Turkey into the war and to capture Rhodes, even after the fall of Leros on 16 November 1943. New provisions of forces and equipment were made during the November-December 1943 period and the Turks still asked for more help.⁹⁴ At the beginning of 1944, equipment could not be spared for operations in the eastern Mediterranean. Additionally, difficulties with the Turks were ever present. On 31 January 1944, the British halted all supplies to Turkey and on 7 February, the Combined Chiefs of Staff released the forces earmarked for all plans regarding Turkey.⁹⁵

D. THE AXIS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN IN 1943

The German High Command had decided by the end of May to defend Italy and the Balkans, even should Italy defect from the Axis. The Germans had two main strategic aims, based on the assumption that the Allies would undertake a major offensive in the

⁹² John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy Vol. V: August 1943-September 1944*, (London: HMSO, 1956), 89.

⁹³ Howard, *Grand Strategy*, 381.

⁹⁴ Ehrman, 193-5.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

Mediterranean. The first was to defend the German boundaries by preventing any penetration of the European southern perimeter. The second was to secure the Balkans, which were more valuable to Germans than was Italy.⁹⁶

If the worst comes to the worst, Hitler had told his advisors on 14 May, the Italian Peninsula could be sealed off somehow. It is of decisive importance for us to hold the Balkans: oil, copper, bauxite, chrome, above all security, so that there is not a complete smash there if things get worse in Italy.⁹⁷

Plans for sending German troops into Italy (operation “Alarich”) and to take over Italian-held sectors in the Balkans (operation “Konstantin”) had existed since May. Operation “Achse” in July carried those plans further and included the disarmament of Italian troops, and the occupation of the main ports in Italy. In the Balkans, German troops were to occupy key points on the mainland and the islands while the Aegean was to be placed under German control.⁹⁸ The British underestimated the ability of Germany to occupy both Italy and the Balkans after the Italian surrender. By the end of 1943, the German order of battle included 25 divisions in Italy and a further 20 in Yugoslavia, Greece and the Aegean. Hitler’s military advisers urged a shorter line in the Mediterranean. General Jodl recommended defending the Pisa-Rimini line in Italy and in Greece the line running east and west of Salonica, the line successfully held by the Central Powers during the First World War.

Hitler delayed a decision on the matter until late September when he decided to fight south of Rome. At the same time, Hitler ordered that the Aegean islands were to be held and those lost to be recaptured. The Aegean had to be defended along a chain of islands running from Peloponnesus through Cythera, Crete Karpathos and Rhodes. Hitler had three reasons to defend the Aegean. The first was to deny the Allies island bases toward the southeast mainland. The second was to counter the Allied influence upon Turkey, and the third was to block an Allied supply route to Russia.⁹⁹ However, by

⁹⁶ Molony, 188.

⁹⁷ Howard, *Mediterranean Strategy*, 42.

⁹⁸ Molony, 189.

⁹⁹ Molony, 543.

committing all his available resources to the defense of the Mediterranean, Hitler played into the Allied hands because he weakened his forces in northwest Europe.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Howard, *Mediterranean Strategy*, 43.

IV. THE BATTLE FOR KOS AND LEROS

A. THE DISPOSITION OF FORCES

German Army Group E under General Alexander Loehr held mainland Greece and the Aegean Islands. Its military formations included the 11th Luftwaffe Field Division, 104th Infantry Division, the 1st Panzer Division, 117th Infantry Division and the 1st Mountain Division. The 22nd Infantry Division was stationed in Crete and it was the only army division specially equipped for air transport. In Rhodes a new Assault Division Rhodes was established with four motorized battalions. Moreover, German forces before the Italian armistice garrisoned the islands of Lemnos, Lesbos, Chios, and Melos.

The German Navy forces under the command of Vice Admiral Werner Lange in the Aegean were weak. His force consisted of a variety of vessels including five ex-Italian destroyers, four torpedo boats, six minesweepers; six escort vessels plus a number of auxiliary boats. Extra shipping was to be made available from the Adriatic.

The German Air Force in Greece consisted of the X Flieger Korps that counted 215 aircraft, including 29 single engine Me-109s, but no bombers. Steady reinforcement of Greece from the West, Austria and Russia increased the number of the bombers to 94 and the Me-109s to 69 by 10 November 1943.¹⁰¹

The British land forces committed to the Aegean amounted to five infantry battalions, two special forces units and some supporting arms. The naval forces consisted of six cruisers, 33 destroyers including seven Greek and some lesser ships and craft. Due to the air attacks by the German Air Force, the British ships should have proceeded to the Turkish coast to lie in wait during daylight hours. Some 282 Allied aircraft, excluding transports, of the Middle East Air Command, were at first allocated to the operations in the Aegean.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Molony, 543.

¹⁰² Ibid., 531.

B. THE BATTLE FOR KOS

Kos lies only four miles from the Turkish coast, 60 miles northwest of Rhodes and 30 miles south of Leros. The island is 28 miles long and six miles wide, possesses 112 kilometers of coastal line and is an area 290 square kilometers in size. The only port is the town of Kos on the northeast coast while the only airfield in Antimachia is 18 miles away. A rugged ridge runs the full length of the southern part of the island. On the northern side the sandy beaches provided ideal landing sites.¹⁰³

The Italian garrison on the island was comprised of about 3,000 men, the 10th Regiment of the Regina Division and artillery units. Those men were ill equipped and their morale had suffered after the armistice. The British garrison arrived on Kos from September 16 to 23 and included the First Battalion Durham Light Infantry (1 DLI), the 2901 and 2909 Squadrons of the RAF Regiment with 33 Hispanos antiaircraft guns and the 1st Light Antiaircraft Regiment with 18 Bofors guns. Also, two Spitfire Squadrons, 7 Squadron, the South African Air Force and 74 Squadron, RAF flew into Kos.¹⁰⁴ The Force Commander Colonel L. R. F. Kenyon believed that for to successfully defend Kos he needed an infantry brigade, an artillery regiment, a field engineers company, a squadron of tanks and antiaircraft units. The 1 DLI was disposed in three groups: A and B companies at Kos town, C Company on the outskirts south of the town and D Company with the RAF Regiment gunners at the Antimachia airfield.

The German Air Force began to attack Kos with Ju-88s from 18 September. The airfield in Antimachia and the strips at Lambi and Pili were bombed with catastrophic results. On 1 October, the airfield and the strips were attacked again and eight pilots from the squadrons were killed and 12 aircraft destroyed. On 26 September, eight Ju-88s sank the destroyers “Intrepid” and “Queen Olga” (Greek) at Portolago in Leros.¹⁰⁵

The Germans, after securing Rhodes on 11 September, regarded Kos as their next objective. The green light for the assault on Kos, code-named “Polar Bear”, was given on 24 September, after Hitler met with General Maximillian Weichs, Commander in Chief Southeast. The Naval Commander of Attica undertook the detailed naval planning for the

¹⁰³ Smith and Walker, 90-1.

¹⁰⁴ Holland, 119.

¹⁰⁵ Molony, 544.

embarking of troops and the assembling of adequate ships. The plan provided for a main landing on the flat north coastline near Marmari, west of Kos and close to the Salty Flats airstrip. A second landing was to be made at the southwestern corner of the island, at Kamara Bay while a subsidiary landing was to be in the Cape Foca area to the east of Kos.¹⁰⁶ For the operation, the 22nd Infantry Division under Major General Friedrich Wilhelm Mueller had been reinforced by two companies from the special Brandenburg Division. One company from the Coastal Raider Battalion, a unit like the British SBS and the other was a parachute company from the Brandenburg 4th Regiment. The army units selected for the operation formed the Battle group Mueller, after the name of their commander, Major General Mueller. The 2nd Battalion of the 65th Grenadier Regiment (II/65) and afterwards the 3rd Battalion of the 440th Grenadier Regiment (III/440) were to land at Marmari. The 2nd Battalion of the 16th Grenadier Regiment (II/16) was allocated to the southeast coast near Cape Foca. The company from the Coastal Raider Battalion was to land at Kamara Bay.

On 1 October, the German invasion force embarked from Piraeus, Suda and Heraklion in five transports, nine ferries and three engineer assault boats escorted by two minelayers, five motorboats and four caiques. The Germans sailed in the dark because they were unaware of the garrison's strength. The convoy was first sighted by British aerial reconnaissance on 1 October near Naxos, where the battle group made the rendezvous. Due to the air superiority of the German Air Force, it was not possible for ships to engage that force during daylight hours. A destroyer squadron of three ships was dispatched from Alexandria to intercept the force. The destroyers were unable to locate the convoy during the two subsequent nights because the convoy's destination was thought to be Rhodes. Since they could not locate the convoy, they withdrew to Alexandria to refuel. General Wilson later said that they did not consider that the Germans had sufficient time to gather an amphibious force.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the two battleships at Alexandria were ordered on 1 October to sail home and no other ships were available. To make matters worse, the two submarines sent to patrol the coasts of Kos arrived after the Germans had landed.

¹⁰⁶ Smith and Walker, 117.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 112.

At dawn on 3 October, the German forces landed on the three landing sites and took the British garrison, which had received no previous warning of an impending landing, by surprise.¹⁰⁸ At 0630, the Brandenburg parachutists dropped near Antimachia airfield. Some 1,200 men were put ashore during the first wave and were supported by light artillery and armored cars. The German Air Force provided close air support by continuously bombing the British force. The II/65 was pushing towards the nearby Salty Flats airstrip and damaged the ten Spitfires hidden there. Soon the Germans had cut through the Kos-Antimachia road and disrupted communication between Force Headquarters and the airfield. The A and B companies of the DLI were concentrated five miles west of Kos. The deputy commander ordered the companies to take positions astride the road in an effort to prohibit the Germans from entering the town.

The D Company defending the airfield alongside the RAF Regiment gunners were also subjected to heavy attack. They held up well despite the heavy bombing but by the afternoon, the German troops marching from Kamara Bay joined those attacking the airfield. By 1700, all antiaircraft guns were disabled and the troops, being out of touch with the rest of the island, were ordered to withdraw to the south coast.¹⁰⁹

The Germans succeeded in wedging between A and B Companies, A Company lost contact with the rest of the battalion. By 1900, there was a general withdrawal of the troops to Kos, except for A Company. A Company was decimated and its remnants joined the battalion later on. At Kos, the survivors of the three companies established a defensive perimeter. At 2000, Colonel Kenyon, decided that resistance was futile since no reinforcements were to arrive that night. He intended to take the survivors into the neighboring hills, under the cover of a rearguard and to continue the fight as guerillas. The survivors split into teams of about twelve men and moved during the night towards the rendezvous village of Cardamena. The rearguard, a platoon with some mortars, lasted until 0200 the next day. The situation was chaotic and finally it was every man for himself. The plan to fight from the hills came to naught because Cardamena was already in German hands, even for those who managed to get there. For many days after the battle, German patrols searched for the British in the hills.

¹⁰⁸ Holland, 121.

¹⁰⁹ Smith and Walker, 119-127.

The entire operation was a disaster. Out of 1,600 men comprising the garrison, only about one hundred were rescued by an SBS detachment. The rest were either killed or captured. The Germans suffered 85 casualties and lost two landing craft.¹¹⁰

C. THE BATTLE FOR LEROS

The island of Leros lies 35 miles to the northwest of Kos. It is ten miles long and its width varies from one to five miles. Its area is 53 square kilometers with a coastline of 71 kilometers. It is divided into three sections joined by two narrow isthmuses. The island has nine bays, each of which possesses good landing beaches. In the central section, between Alinda and Pandeli Bays, lies the town of Leros. Whoever occupies the Alinda-Gurna isthmus and the Rachi ridge, divides the island and can dominate it. Only a north-south road exists while becoming entrenched is impossible because of its rocky soil.¹¹¹

The Italians had expended much time and energy in the prewar years in an effort to fortify Leros and made it into a naval base. By this time, its importance was diminishing and the Italians had few resources left in the Aegean. At the time of the armistice, it was a submarine base but by 8 September none of the Italian submarines were left in the Aegean. From the 4th Destroyer Squadron, also based in Leros, only one destroyer was there while eight boats from the 3rd Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla remained in Leros. Seven Cant Z 501 seaplanes were serviceable from the Air Force squadron.¹¹²

To defend the island base, the Italians had installed a significant number of naval and antiaircraft guns. There were 24 batteries. Three were 152 mm, two 120 mm, four 102 mm, one 90 mm, and 14 76 mm and 17 searchlight positions. With all these impressive batteries, for some people in Cairo, Leros could be held against any attack mounted by the Germans. The guns, however, were in exposed positions and sited in open mountings and possessed inferior sighting devices. Out of a total Italian strength of 8,000 men, 6,000 were navy personnel but many of those were administrative staff. The army force of 1,200 men consisted mainly of one battalion of the 10th Regina Infantry Regiment, one Blackshirt Company and two companies of Marines, guards of naval installations. The first British force to arrive on the island on 17 September was the

¹¹⁰ Molony, 544.

¹¹¹ Holland, 125 and Molony, 552.

¹¹² Smith and Walker, 191.

Second Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers (2 RIF) under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Maurice French. French, lacking sufficient forces to occupy the entire island, decided that the best way to defend Leros was to occupy and hold the highest point in the central sector. Lacking also the proper means of communications, he regarded his force as a flexible reserve behind the static Italian defenses.¹¹³

In September and October, Force 292, actually III Corps Headquarters, controlled the operations in the Aegean and 234 Brigade was in charge of Leros. On 1 November, a new Headquarters Command Aegean under Major General H.R.Hall was established with his Headquarters and Staff in Samos. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Tilney was appointed to be in command of 234 Brigade and became Fortress Commander Leros. Admiral Luigi Mascherpa had the overall command of the Italian forces in Leros and the Badoglio government had placed him and his garrison under Tilney's command without conditions.¹¹⁴

Meanwhile, more British reinforcements arrived in Leros, after it was decided that the island would be held. Finally, the main units under 234 Brigade were the Second RIF, the Fourth Royal East Kent Regiment (4 REKR) of the Buffs (less one company), the First Battalion King's Own Royal Regiment (1 KORR), B Company of the Second Royal West Kent Regiment (2 RWKR), detachments from Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) and Special Boat Squadron (SBS), a detachment from 28th Heavy Antiaircraft Battery, part of the 3rd Light Antiaircraft Battery and supporting elements.

Tilney reorganized the defense force and devised a completely new plan characterized by the slogan, "No enemy shall set foot on this island unless to be a prisoner of war". Tilney faced the classic dilemma in coast defense of either to attack the enemy when he comes ashore or occupy the beaches lightly and hold back the main force to attack the enemy's main thrusts. He decided on the former based on the assumptions that the Germans had command of the air and occupied the neighboring islands of Kos, Kalymnos and Levitha. Therefore, unlike the British, they could quickly bring reinforcements. The uncertainty of the supply of ammunition and the German air and

¹¹³ Smith and Walker, 192

¹¹⁴ Molony, 549, 552

local naval superiority meant the longer the battle lasted, the greater his disadvantage would become. The enemy had to be defeated on the beaches before landing supporting arms. Lacking mobility, he could not afford to maintain a strong central reserve.¹¹⁵

Therefore, Tilney divided the island into three sectors. The north was held by the Buffs, the center by the RIF and B Company of RWK and the south by the KORR and a company of KORR as a central reserve. The LRDG men were sent to the principal batteries to stiffen the morale of the Italians and the SBS was to act as a small mobile reserve against paratroops. Furthermore, the battalions were also organized in company sectors. The four 18/25 pounders field guns were placed in the central sector while 30 machine guns sent to Leros without crews were distributed to the battalions. Tilney's Headquarters were in the central sector in a tunnel in Meraviglia hill.

Tilney's plan suffered from many weaknesses, which the Germans quickly exploited. By choosing to defend the beaches, he dispersed his forces in a lengthy coastal perimeter, and as always, in this case, he was weak everywhere and strong nowhere. His central reserve of one company was very small and could not influence the battle. The vital central sector with the key terrain of Rachi ridge was not organized for defense. Apparently, airborne landings were ruled out. Thus, the plan had not established a firm base and lacked the flexibility of a strong reserve.¹¹⁶

On 5 October, General Mueller was preparing another assault on Leros, after receiving orders for doing so on 9 October, using mainly the same forces that assaulted Kos. The troops on Kos were to be replaced by the IX Battalion of the 999th Fortress Infantry Division. On 7 October, two cruisers and two destroyers surprised the first troop replacement convoy and sank two transports and five out of six ferry lighters. The British submarine "Unruly" surprised another convoy and succeeded in sinking the minelayer "Bulgaria" carrying 350 troops. With losses from both convoys totaling 659, the troops for the garrison at Kos were lost and the landing crafts for Leros sunk. Therefore, the operation to capture Leros, codenamed "Leopard", was postponed. The German Air Force struck back, severely damaging the destroyer "Penelope" and the antiaircraft

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 553.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 554.

cruiser “Carlisle” and sinking the destroyer “Panther”. A request to attack the British ships in the Turkish territorial waters was ruled out by Hitler. Between 9 September and 31 October, the British lost five destroyers and two submarines while four cruisers and two destroyers had been damaged. This rate of loss exceeded the value of goals pursued.¹¹⁷

The German Navy transferred ferry lighters from the Danube via the Black Sea and the Dardanelles camouflaged as civilian vessels. The army transported by rail from Denmark the 780th Assault Engineer Company with 13 landing boats to Piraeus. All those craft were to transport II Battalion of 22nd Air Force Field Regiment from Piraeus to the Dodecanese. Agents reported landing exercises taking place from landing craft in the Lavrio Gulf to the south of Athens. They were also reported to be moving eastward on 5 November. It took the Germans until 11 November to get their force across to the jump off points at Kos and Kalymnos. The German convoy crept unnoticed to Paros. From there, it moved to Naxos, Amorgos, Astypalaia and Levitha and reached Kalymnos on the evening of 11 November. The British could not intercept the convoy and inflicted only minor losses.¹¹⁸

On 10 November, Admiral Lange reported that the required landing craft were now in position and the Army Group E issued the order for operation “Typhoon”, changing its name from “Leopard”, on 12 November. The Germans formed five groups, each named after its commander. “Group Schaedlich”, with the company from Coastal Raider Battalion sailing from Kalymnos was to land in Pandeli Bay, capture Battery Lagoon on Mount Apetiki and proceed to capture Leros town. “Group Von Saldern” with II/65 from Kos and II/22 from Kalymnos was to land in Grifo Bay and on two beaches north of it. Then, it was to capture Battery Ciano on Mount Clidi and control the Alinda Bay and prepare the way for the landing of the second wave. “Group Doerr” with III/440 from Kalymnos was to land in Palma Bay in the north and capture the batteries on Mounts Markelos and Muplogurna. Those three groups comprised the Eastern Battle Group. “Group Aschoff” with the II/16 from Kalymnos was to land in the southern part of Gournas Bay and in the small bays of Drymonas and Cefalo. “Group Kuehne” with the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 547.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 552.

First Battalion of the 2nd Parachute Regiment (I/Para 2), embarking from Athens Tatoi, was to drop near Rachi ridge, capture the battery and afterwards attack another battery in Meraviglia. Those two groups comprised the Western Battle Group. The reserve was held in Athens and consisted of the Third Battalion of the 1st Brandenburg Regiment and the 15th Parachute Company of the 4th Brandenburg Regiment. General Mueller, placed in Kalymnos, was to land with the second wave.¹¹⁹

Mueller wanted to achieve maximum surprise against the island prepared for the attack. Therefore, he decided to land his first wave on the eastern side. The main effort of the landings would be north of Alinda Bay in order to take Clidi, the key terrain in the northern sector. The British, thinking that Clidi was unscaleable, left it with a thin defense. However, the main objective of his plan had been the capture of the narrow isthmus between Alinda and Gournas Bays for securing the center of the island and splitting it into two parts.¹²⁰

At 0445 on 12 November the landing force approached Leros from the north over a calm sea. In the Eastern Battle Group, the “Von Saldern” and “Doerr” Groups tried to land and were repulsed by the East Kent’s on all the landing beaches except Grifo Bay. Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Iggulden, the commanding officer of the East Kent’s, did not know about the enemy landing there until 1000 when the central reserve arrived to counterattack, with no success. In Pandeli Bay in the south, the Brandenburgers seized Apetiki hill. A company of the RIF counterattacked and contained the enemy and Tilney ordered the RIF’s reserve company also to attack. French never received that order and the chance of repelling the landings was lost forever. In reality, the Germans now had two footholds on the island. The Western Battle Group came under accurate heavy fire from the Italian batteries and they were actually driven off and ordered to reinforce the Eastern Battle Group the next day.¹²¹

No place on the island was suitable for landing paratroops according to the British. Therefore, it was a dramatic shock when at 1500, German parachute troops dropped near Gournas Bay and they succeeded in seizing the northern part of the Rachi

¹¹⁹ Peter Schenk, “The Battle for Leros,” *After the Battle*, (Issue No 90, London, 1995), 18.

¹²⁰ Smith and Walker, 217-8.

¹²¹ Molony, 555.

ridge. Thus, at night on 12 November, the 234 Brigade faced a grave situation with the Germans establishing a foothold in the vital Rachi ridge. Communications were cut off and each British battalion fought independently. Tilney asked Hall for reinforcements and Hall sent the Royal West Kents from Samos. However, a gale forced the ships to turn back. It was on the night of 14/15 when the battalion disembarked at Portolago Bay in three company groups and those companies fought separately.

During the first night, Tilney was thinking of concentrating his entire force or moving only the KORR, from the southern to the central sector. However, it seemed unwise to bring the REKR southwards and to abandon the northern beaches and some dumps of store. He decided to move the KORR but in the flow of events, he was unable to implement his decision, especially as British forces continued to be pounded by the German Air Force.

During 13 November, the Western Battle Group landed below Clidi and in Padeli Bay and more parachutists were dropped. In the evening, B Company of the Buffs recaptured most of Mount Clidi. C and D Companies of the REKR attacking southwards gained San Quirico and Germano hills. A major effort was made at 0200 on 14 November by two companies of the KORR to recapture Apetiki. That attack was partially successful although Lieutenant Colonel French was killed. During these efforts, British destroyers provided naval fire support to the ground troops.¹²² Later on 14 November, Tilney attempted to recapture Rach ridge attacking from the south with two companies of the KORR and one company of the RIF, aiming to link up with the REKR. However, the attack failed and the Germans held the ridge. During the night of 14/15 November, the RAF dropped ammunition and at dawn on 15 November, a destroyer sank three landing craft filled with Germans in Alinda Bay.

The plan for 15 November was that a company of the RWKR followed by the KORR would attack northwards to link up with the REKR striking southwards. The attack was not successful, except for local gains. Failures in communications never allowed for effective command and control. The next day, Tilney made great efforts to seize the Rachi-Meraviglia ridge but to no avail. The troops did their best without

¹²² Molony, 556.

success. In the growing confusion, Von Saldern's Group, reinforced by the III Battalion of the 1st Regiment of the Brandenburg Division, made a sudden attack from Apetiki and overran and captured Tilney at Meraviglia.¹²³ That was the end because Tilney realized that every effort was useless. There were no reinforcements other than the Greek Sacred Squadron on Samos. However, the British did not want to offend the Turks and so did not commit them. At 1700, Leros surrendered.

Tilney was a victim of his original plan, having dispersed his forces without sufficient reserves. In the course of the four-day battle, he ordered 11 attacks. One consisted of a three-company strength, two of two-company strength, six of single company strength and of two platoons or less. Of those attacks, two won local successes, five partial successes and four failed.¹²⁴

On 18 November, the Commander-in-Chief Middle East ordered all troops to withdraw from the Aegean except for a small garrison on Kastellorizo. The Germans suffered 1,109 casualties and lost 21 vessels, mostly small, and 92 aircraft. The British suffered 4,800 casualties, many of these prisoners, and lost 26 vessels and 113 aircraft in the Aegean operations.

¹²³ Ibid., 557.

¹²⁴ Smith and Walker, 265, Molony, 557.

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V. SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN THE AEGEAN SEA

On 18 June 1940, after the armistice of France, Winston Churchill in a letter to Lieutenant-General Sir Hastings Ismay, his personal Chief of Staff, asked:

What are the ideas of C. in C. H.F., about Storm Troops? We have always set our faces against this idea, but the Germans certainly gained in the last war by adopting it, and this time it has been a leading cause of their victory. There ought to be at least twenty thousand Storm Troops or “Leopards” [eventually called “Commandos”] drawn from existing units, ready to spring at the throat of any small landings or descents. These officers and men should be armed with the latest equipment, tommy guns, grenades, etc., and should be given great facilities in motorcycles and armored cars.¹²⁵

The War Office had already started the formation of ten “Independent Companies” and half of them saw action in Norway. Now, with Churchill’s offensive spirit, these forces were to expand with remarkable results.¹²⁶ This was the origin of the Combined Operations, as the special forces were named.

The British special forces in North Africa, joined by the Greek Sacred Squadron, were closely associated with the Aegean islands throughout the war. The actions in the Aegean can be divided in four periods. In the first, from the outbreak of the war to 1941, attempts were made to capture some of the Dodecanese islands. In the second, from 1942 to 1943, many raids were undertaken aimed at destroying as many aircraft as possible. The third, from the end of 1943 to the summer of 1944, saw multiple raids as an integral part of the campaign to deceive the Germans and defeat the Axis in Europe. In the last period, the remaining Germans were under constant attack until the end of the war. Of these protracted special operations, only the major operations will be discussed.

¹²⁵ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. II: Their Finest Hour*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 165-66.

¹²⁶ Butler, *Grand Strategy*, 282.

A. EARLY PLANS AND ATTEMPTS TO CAPTURE THE DODECANESE ISLANDS

In November 1940, the plan “Mandibles” was formulated to capture the Dodecanese.¹²⁷ On the eve of the fluctuating military situation and the various considerations in the Mediterranean, the only actual operation undertaken by the Commandos was the capture of Kastellorizo. The island lies to the southeastern limits of the Dodecanese, some 80 miles east of Rhodes and 150 miles west of Cyprus. Its total area is four square miles but it hosts a useful harbor. The intention was to use its harbor as an advanced base for motor torpedo boats. The Italian garrison of the island consisted of two detachments each with 14 troops. One was based at the wireless station and the other manned the lookout post on Monte Viglia.

In the early morning of February 25 1941, the first combined operation in the Mediterranean was launched with the landing of Commando No 50 in Kastellorizo. The operational plan called for the Commandos to undertake the initial assault on the island and afterwards be relieved by a company of the First Sherwood Foresters, who would assume the garrison duties.¹²⁸ The operation started on February 23 when 200 Commandos embarked in two destroyers at Suda Bay in Crete and sailed for Kastellorizo. The landing was made at 0200, was unopposed and the troops quickly occupied the wireless station. Unfortunately, the Italians managed to warn Rhodes of the impending attack. The Italian survivors of the initial attack withdrew to the Monte Viglia post.¹²⁹ Then it was decided to assault the post after the arrival of a gunboat carrying 24 heavily armed Royal Marines on board. The Commandos soon captured the post with the fire support from the gunboat.

The enemy reacted quickly to the landing. Between 0800 and 0930 of the same day, Italian aircraft struck the harbor, trying to sink the gunboat. Re-embarking the Marines, who would no longer be required, the gunboat slipped away. To the relieve Commandos, the company of the First Sherwood Foresters, embarked on an armed vessel

¹²⁷ Ibid., 309.

¹²⁸ Smith and Walker, 17.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 18.

in Famagusta, Cyprus and on 24 February sailed for Kastellorizo escorted by two cruisers and two destroyers. The company had been prepared for secret operations and even the company commander was uninformed of the location of the endeavor. The ships arrived in Kastellorizo on the night of 25 February. But due to poor communications and coordination, the commanding naval officer ordered the return of his force to Alexandria.¹³⁰ The British realized the confusion in Alexandria and sailed again for Kastellorizo.

Meanwhile, an Italian naval force sailed from Rhodes carrying about 100 reinforcements. They landed on the island on the morning of 27 February beneath air cover. The Commandos retreated to the southeastern corner of the island to await the garrison force.

Reaching again the island on the night of the 27 February the British naval force started landing the company. They met the demoralized Commandos who confirmed that the Italians had gained firm control of the island. As the naval forces had firm instructions to leave by 0430 the next day, the company commander had no chance to retake the island and ordered the withdrawal of his force. Thus ended the operation and the British suffered a total of 55 casualties.¹³¹

B. RAIDS ON AIRFIELDS

1. Raid on Crete, June 1942

In May 1942, the Middle East HQ realized that the Axis forces could mount such a blockade on Malta that the island would be in danger of starvation unless supplies could reach them. Thus, it was decided to mount a series of raids against enemy airfields in Cyrenaica and in Crete. These raids would distract Luftwaffe attention from a scheduled convoy from Alexandria to Malta on 11 June.¹³²

The plan was to attack all four Crete airfields of Male me, Heraklion, Kastelli and Tymbaki simultaneously and the airfields on Cyrenaica on the night of June 12. Attacking the airfields in Libya fell to the Special Air Service (SAS) while the Special

¹³⁰ Ibid., 19-20.

¹³¹ Ibid., 21.

¹³² Barrie Pitt, *Special Boat Squadron: The Story of the SBS in the Mediterranean*, (London: Century Publishing, 1983), 25.

Boat Squadron (SBS) was to attack the airfields in Crete.¹³³ After some hurried training, the four contingents left Alexandria on the evening of 6 June aboard two Greek submarines and a motorboat. Four days later the parties were on the way to their assigned targets.

The Maleme group was disappointed as it concluded that the Maleme airfield was too well guarded and they did not have any chance of success. The Germans had lost thousands of elite paratroopers in the fight for Maleme one year earlier and they had no intention of allowing infiltration.

The Tymbaki group was also unlucky. Intelligence failed to mention that the airfield had been abandoned. Kastelli airfield was briefly reconnoitered and then the group went in to destroy eight planes, six trucks, four bomb dumps, seven petrol and two oil dumps.¹³⁴ At least 70 Germans were killed in the explosion of the bomb dumps.

The Heraklion airfield was assigned to an SAS group, led by Major Jellicoe, and consisted of four Frenchmen and a Greek guide. The group landed from a Greek submarine on 10 June and destroyed 21 German aircraft. However, this difficult and successful raid had run into trouble from the beginning. The long distance over rugged terrain while carrying heavy loads delayed the group. The Germans reacted rapidly and in a fight, one Frenchman was killed while the other three were taken prisoner. The Germans, as a reprisal, executed sixty Cretans. The survivors, Jellicoe and the Greek guide, crossed the island and joined the other SBS parties in the south.¹³⁵

The raids, in total, accounted for 29 aircraft, 15 to 20 trucks, unknown but sizeable quantities of petrol oil and bombs, and caused the deaths of over 100 Germans at a cost of one Frenchman killed and three others taken prisoner.¹³⁶ Although 20 more aircraft were destroyed in Libya on the same night, nevertheless, 15 out of the 17 ships in the Malta convoy were sunk. The two ships that got through, however, saved Malta.¹³⁷

¹³³ David Sutherland, *He Who Dares*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 63.

¹³⁴ John Lodwick, *Raiders from the Sea: The Story of SBS in WW II*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1990), 34.

¹³⁵ Sutherland, 68.

¹³⁶ Pitt, 32.

¹³⁷ Sutherland, 69.

2. Operation “ANGLO”, Rhodes, September 1942

The other island in the Aegean containing large airfields was Rhodes. The Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica were using two airfields on Rhodes from which to annoy Allied shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean and also to exercise almost complete control over the sea lines of communications up and into the Aegean. The airfields were Maritsa in the north and Calatos, halfway to the southeast.¹³⁸

The objective to wreak as much damage to these two airfields was given to a small party of 12 SBS men led by Lieutenant David Sutherland (including two Greek officers and two volunteer Greek guides). It was decided to divide the force in two groups to attack both airfields simultaneously at midnight on 12 September. The party went aboard a Greek submarine that departed from Beirut on 31 August and after four days, landed at the chosen place.

Intelligence on Rhodes did not exist and the force had no radios with which to communicate. Thus, they were locked into a fixed timetable. They were to be landed the night of 4/5 September and were collected on the night of 17/18 September. On the night of 7/8 September, Sutherland decided to split his force into two parties. Each party had five nights in which to reach its objective, operate and make its way back to the beach. The two parties attacked both airfields on the night of 12/13 September as planned and caused severe damage to aircraft and the infrastructure. The 30,000 strong Italian garrisons on the island were alarmed and chased the raiders. Thus, the Maritsa party was unfortunate as they were arrested when returning on the long fifty kilometers path. Only two men escaped capture from the other party and finally swam aboard the waiting submarine.¹³⁹ Overall, the operation was successful because the airfields were no longer operable for two weeks and approximately 25 aircraft were destroyed. However, the price was steep. Ten out of the twelve raiders were captured.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Ibid., 70.

¹³⁹ For the Rhodes Raid, the film *They Who Dare* with Dirk Bogart and Akim Tamiroff was made in 1953.

¹⁴⁰ Sutherland, 77.

3. Operation “ALBUMEN”, Crete, June 1943

In January 1943 after the capture of David Stirling, the commander of the SAS, the Special Forces in the Middle East underwent a major reorganization. The SBS was enlarged and reorganized with three detachments to undertake raids into the Aegean from a base in Palestine. There, under the leadership of Major Jellicoe, the SBS conducted vigorous training and incorporated the lessons learned in Crete and Rhodes.

The first SBS operation under Jellicoe’s command was again in Crete. The task, assigned to Sutherland’s Detachment S, was to destroy enemy aircraft on the three airfields which had been raided the year before: Heraklion, Kastelli and Tymbaki. Aircraft from these airfields could be used to attack ships supporting the Allied invasion of Sicily.¹⁴¹ This was the first SBS operation with a code name and executed with written orders and radio communications. Orders for the operation stated clearly that the primary task was the destruction of enemy aircraft. The orders also stated that Sutherland’s job would be to remain near the landing place and organize a base from which patrols would be dispatched to the three targets.¹⁴²

On 22 June, Sutherland landed near Cape Kokinoxos on the southern part of the island, where the Tymbaki patrol landed four days later. Having made the decision for D-Day to be 4 July, the patrols for Heraklion and Kastelli started their march the next night over the rugged terrain. The Heraklion airfield had become less important to the Germans during the last year, and was run down as a result of Jellicoe’s attack. Very few used the place and none ever stayed the night.¹⁴³ The patrol, disappointed, decided to use the bombs to destroy a large petrol dump in the vicinity. They put a number of bombs among the petrol trucks, which destroyed them and set the whole dump on fire that consisted of approximately 150 to 200 tons of aviation fuel.

The Kastelli patrol was more fortunate. The patrol leader split his force, as Sutherland did in Rhodes. One half would create a spectacular diversion.¹⁴⁴ The plan worked well and about ten aircraft were destroyed. The third patrol attacking Tymbaki

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴² Pitt, 70.

¹⁴³ Sutherland, 104.

¹⁴⁴ Lodwick, 62.

found out, as had the party in the previous year, that there were no planes and nothing to attack. The patrols returned to the base and on 11 July, the force embarked a motorboat and sailed to Matruh. Operation “Albumen” was another success by inflicting serious damage on the Germans at the cost of one officer killed.¹⁴⁵

C. MULTIPLE RAIDS

Following the Italian armistice on 8 September 1943, a subsequent campaign for the capture of the Italian occupied Dodecanese islands took place. This campaign proved disastrous for the British and ended in abject defeat.¹⁴⁶ Special forces were involved in this campaign assuming reconnaissance as well as combat roles. Unlike the LRDG, which participated in the defense of Leros and suffered heavy casualties because it was heavily involved, the SBS suffered few casualties.

The Raiding Force Middle East raids of 1944 were part of a much larger campaign. Operation “Overlord” was to take place in June and a great deal of Britain’s Mediterranean strategy was aimed at reducing the strength of the German forces on France and at the same time to deceive the enemy about the landing area. The SBS decided to rotate its squadrons in raiding operations on the Aegean islands throughout the first six months of 1944.¹⁴⁷ At this point, the SBS began to use large 100-ton caiques hidden deep in the thousand inlets on neutral Turkish waters. From these secure bases, it could plan and mount raids on all the Aegean islands.¹⁴⁸

Squadron L, after completing a vigorous training program, launched its raids on the Dodecanese against Karpathos, Archi, Lisso and Patmos. The force landed on Stampalia on 29 January and in two successive nights, destroyed the island’s shipping. Five caiques and one seaplane were anchored. Having achieved these results, the force withdrew with no casualties.¹⁴⁹ The raiders on Simi managed to kill ten Germans while the raids on the small islands Archi, Lisso and Patmos resulted in five caiques sunk, two wireless stations destroyed and 12 prisoners taken. The detachment in March attacked

¹⁴⁵ Sutherland, 112.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 132.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 132.

¹⁴⁹ Lodwick, 112.

Kalymnos and burned a caique, set fire to the main fuel stores and killed several Germans. In the last raid of L Squadron on Nisiros, two German lighters were captured, three lighters and one caique were sunk, over 20 Germans were killed and 17 prisoners were taken with no casualties on their side.¹⁵⁰

At the end of March 1944, Squadron S took over from L Squadron. The first raid to Karpathos to investigate the enemy's reaction to the recent attack was unsuccessful due to bad weather and bad luck. Other attacks on the Dodecanese were more successful. Now, however, the pace of island attacks increased. Patrols were dispatched as often as transport became available with shipping and communications the main targets. Always, however, the goal was to make their presence felt, to demonstrate that every harbor and every manned post was subjected to sudden attack.¹⁵¹ At this time, Captain Sutherland, Squadron's L commander, decided to change the pattern of operations in order to retain the initiative and thus exploit the essential element of surprise.

Thus far, the raids had taken place on the Dodecanese islands. Sutherland decided to operate further west in the Cyclades island group. He devised a plan to attack several of them on the same night: Ios, Amorgos, Mykonos and Santorini. The squadron operating from its base on Kastellorizo on the night of 22 April was successful in all the raids. After some other minor attacks on Paros and Naxos, 41 of the enemy were killed, 27 wounded and 19 taken prisoner. The SBS suffered two killed and three slightly wounded out of a total of 39 men. The detachment also sunk 500-ton caiques and destroyed 19 wireless stations.¹⁵²

One of the strategic goals of these operations would soon be achieved, as many more Germans would be sent to reinforce the garrisons on the islands. By early May, 4,000 extra German troops arrived on the Aegean islands, in addition to the six divisions which had been there since the beginning. As a result, hit-and-run tactics and easy successes were over for the attackers.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Pitt, 131.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 132.

¹⁵² Sutherland, 120.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 127.

Thus, the next Squadron M decided to try to go even further to the north of the Sporades islands. However, the attempted raids were not so spectacular. It seemed that a dangerous point of balance had been reached and the SBS had to act differently if it were to restore its dominance in the Aegean. Squadron M began to draw up plans for a full-scale commando-type attack on a target area with 200 men, destroy the enemy installations and withdraw when the enemy counterattack to retake the objective was imminent.

The target area chosen was the island of Simi. Before attacking Simi, a patrol of three canoes went to the harbor of Leros and sunk three escorts and damaged two destroyers. As the German Navy had no replacements available in the area, it was now possible to implement the big raid on Simi. On the night of 13 July, landings were made in three areas and the SBS and the Greek Sacred Squadron, taking the garrison by surprise, seized the island. Two drowned and six were slightly wounded while the enemy suffered 21 killed and 151 taken prisoner.¹⁵⁴ The great raid on Simi marked the end of using the SBS in the Aegean.

D. RAIDING ISOLATED ISLANDS

The Greek Sacred Squadron was formed in September 1942 in Palestine. Its initial strength was 200 men, most of them Greek officers in Egypt. The training of the squadron was similar to that of the British special forces and in January 1943 it was declared operational. It was sent into the western desert where it conducted long-range patrols and reconnaissance and security missions.¹⁵⁵

In May 1943, the squadron returned to Egypt where it was reorganized and prepared for operations in the Aegean. The squadron did not participate in the battles of Kos and Leros due to British political reservations. However, it took part in the capture of Samos in September 1943. In February 1944, its strength increased to 446 men and underwent rigorous training. At that time, the newly formed Brigade of Raiding Forces divided the Aegean into two sectors: the northern included Samos, Ikaria and the islands northwards and the southern sector included the Dodecanese, Cyclades and Crete. The

¹⁵⁴ Lodwick, 156-7.

¹⁵⁵ E. Perisakis and D. Palaiologos, *O Ellinikos Stratos sti Mesi Anatoli, (The Greek Army in the Middle East)*, (Athina: Geniko Epiteleio Stratou, Dieuthynsi Istorias Stratou, 1995), 82-98 (in Greek).

former was assigned to the Sacred Squadron and the latter to the British forces.¹⁵⁶ From March 1944 onward, the squadron rotated its detachments in various operations in the Aegean. The squadron provided the majority of forces for the raid on Simi. When the British forces left the Aegean in the summer for the Adriatic, the Sacred Squadron undertook operations in the entire Aegean.

In October 1944, the Germans evacuated Greece. They left garrisons in eight of the Dodecanese islands, Crete, Melos, Lemnos, Thasos and Samothrace. The crowning achievement of the Sacred Squadron was the systematic liberation of the Aegean islands in the period between September 1944 and May 1945.

E. GERMAN SPECIAL FORCES IN THE AEGEAN

The German special forces consisted largely of the Brandenburg Division, the special division of the Abwehr, the Armed Force Intelligence Service. The Coastal Raiders and the Parachutists of the Brandenburg division saw action in the Aegean. They were part of Mueller's Battle Group for the capture of Kos and Leros where they had great success alongside the conventional forces. The 15 Company of the 4th Brandenburg Regiment had been dropped to capture Astypalaia on 22 October.¹⁵⁷

The Brandenburg Coastal Raider Battalion was created at the end of 1942. The battalion's role was anti-partisan operations from the sea, operations behind enemy lines and against enemy vessels at ports.¹⁵⁸ After the capture of Kos and Leros, the bulk of the Coastal Raiders were employed in anti-partisan operations and against British supply vessels in the Adriatic area. Elements of the 1st Company remained in Rhodes where it became the Coastal Raider Company Rhodes. From there, it conducted operations against the "pirates", namely the SBS and the Greek Sacred Squadron in 1944 and 1945. The Coastal Raiders were on the defensive and although inferior in ships and equipment to their opponents, they achieved some significant successes.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 163-65.

¹⁵⁷ Franz Kurowski, *The Brandenburgers: Global Mission*, (Winnipeg: Fedorowicz Publishing Inc, 1997), 227.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 225.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 262-4.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Aegean Sea was not a major theater during World War II. It was a source of friction between the Allies for a brief period in the fall of 1943. To a certain extent also, the Aegean touched upon the great second-front issue. The second-front issue was a political controversy based on different national conceptions of the manner in which to defeat the Axis. The conceptions were largely the result of the histories and interests pursued by each member in a given position. As happens in inter-allied relations, each member views the situation from a certain angle and generalizes its position into the concepts of the “only” way to win. Therefore, what seems incorrect for one nation is correct for the other. That conflict affected the politico-military relations and was the dominating issue throughout 1943.¹⁶⁰

The American planners perceived the second front as a way of winning the war on American terms rather than British. In 1941 and 1942, the Mediterranean figured as a major theater for the British because Britain had a vital position to defend and could afford to so by bleeding the enemy. When the Americans proposed in this initial period to concentrate the thrust against the heart of the enemy in northwest Europe in 1943, this was premature. Likewise, the British insistence on continuing operations in the Mediterranean after 1943 was unjustified from an Alliance perspective. The operations in the Mediterranean were justified to the degree they contributed to the attack on northwest Europe the next summer.¹⁶¹ Peripheral operations have to know when they no longer support the main front.

However, in the fall of 1943, the British leaders appeared to have abandoned their own arguments and to have regarded the Mediterranean not as a secondary theater but as an end in itself.¹⁶² Britain traditionally had used peripheral strategy to achieve limited goals. Its success had depended upon an alliance with a powerful ally in the continent.¹⁶³ After the fall of France, there was no such ally left in Europe. As for the argument that

¹⁶⁰ Stoler, 160.

¹⁶¹ Howard, *Mediterranean Strategy*, 70.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Stoler, 5.

the Balkan front would contain the Russians in the Balkans, by doing so, they would march through the North European Plains reaching the Channel ports. Consequently, the second-front policy was as military as it was a political decision. From the operational point of view, the command structure in the Mediterranean is well criticized. A command system with one American commander, Eisenhower, based in Algiers and responsible for Italy and a British commander, Wilson, based in Cairo and responsible for the Balkans was at best uncoordinated. A commander responsible for the whole Mediterranean should have viewed southern Europe as a strategic unit, which happened in 1944 when General Harold Alexander became Supreme Commander, Mediterranean.

In military terms, it seems that seizing and holding the Dodecanese was very unlikely while Crete and mainland Greece were under German control and Turkey remaining neutral. The airfields of Rhodes, Kos and Karpathos were very remote. Only limited, if any, air cover could be provided to the Royal Navy in gaining the control of the sea in the southern Aegean. It would be extremely risky, after creating a foothold in the Dodecanese, to attempt to move convoys through the Aegean and the Dardanelles to the Black Sea. To sail safely across the Aegean, the prerequisite is to secure the airfields and the ports in mainland Greece, Crete, the Bosphorus Straits and western Turkey. Holding only the southern perimeter does not guarantee safe passage to the Black Sea.

At the tactical level, it seems that with unsound strategy it is not possible to achieve tactical successes. The Americans considered the Aegean a secondary theater not worth the diversion of resources from the major effort. The British, even with inadequate resources, proceeded to the Aegean guided by the principle “improvise and dare”. The latter is a military virtue but not an excuse in the absence of strategy.

The special operations conducted by the Allies in the Aegean during WWII were largely successful. Initially, the operations in Crete and Rhodes were to destroy enemy aircraft. Taking into consideration the small investment of men and equipment, the returns on aircraft destroyed were very high. The newly formed British special forces became more experienced and learned from their mistakes and successes after 1943.

The 1944 operations were integrated into the general plan of deception in the context of the Normandy landing. The SBS was not a force multiplier but a force divider.

Again, a relatively small force of about 300 men achieved much. During the first stage, the goal was to destroy as much German-controlled shipping as possible. Except for destroying caiques and harbor installations, the SBS every night transmitted information regarding German maritime activity to Cairo for the further attention of the RAF and the Royal Navy. These measures produced two results. The SBS raids caused the Germans to strengthen troop numbers on each island while the destruction of shipping forced the Germans to maintain too many garrisons on small islands.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Sutherland, 133.

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APPENDIX. CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS, 1939-1945

1939

- | | | |
|-------|---|--|
| Apr. | 7 | Italy occupies Albania, secures Adriatic, positions itself for coming attack on Greece |
| | - | British Mediterranean Fleet moves to Alexandria from Malta |
| May | - | Cunningham appointed C-in-C Mediterranean Fleet |
| Sept. | 1 | Germany invades Poland |
| | 3 | Britain and France declare war on Germany |

1940

- | | | |
|------|----|---|
| May | 10 | Churchill becomes Prime Minister |
| June | 10 | Italy joins war |
| Aug. | - | Greek light cruiser "Helle" sunk by Italian submarine while at anchor in harbor of Tinos |
| Oct. | 28 | Italy attacks Greece from Albania |
| Nov. | 5 | Britain establishes naval and air base at Suda Bay/Maleme on Crete; Greeks hold, throw enemy back |

1941

- | | | |
|------|-------|--|
| Mar. | 7 | British troops land in Greece |
| | 28-29 | Battle of Matapan secures British convoys to Greece |
| Apr. | 6 | Germany invades Greece from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria |
| | 24-28 | British evacuate mainland Greece; much of Greek fleet escapes to Alexandria, joins Allied effort |
| May | 20 | Germans attack Crete by air |
| | 28 | British began evacuation of Crete, taking large naval losses |
| June | 1 | Evacuation ends; British fleet spent |

1942 - Axis dominates the Aegean, using bases on Rhodes, Scarpanto, and Crete to attack Allied shipping to the south and to protect its own to the north

1943

Jan. - Casablanca Conference. Allied strategy that limited war in Japan in favor of Mediterranean operations.

Feb. 12 Wilson directed to prepare for amphibious operations in the eastern Mediterranean.

April 20 Operation “Hardihood” discussed. (Plans to bring Turkey into the war)

May 2-25 “Trident” Conference, Washington D.C. Priority for “Overlord” (cross-Channel invasion, May 1944) and “Anvil” (invasion of southern France)

July 10 Allies land on Sicily

20 General Wilson identifies three versions of “Accolade”.

Aug. 1 General Wilson identifies his resources and needs for a “quick” “Accolade”.

2 Standstill Order. British COS authorized eight LSI earmarked for India to be retained in the Middle East.

5 General Wilson asks General Eisenhower for support to arrive in Middle East by 14-15 August.

7 Eisenhower agrees to release troops and some shipping but not the P-38s or transport aircraft.

17 ‘Quadrant’ Conference, Quebec. Sets limits on operations in the Aegean.

18 Revocation of Standstill Order.

21 Ships previously authorized to be retained in Middle East now ordered to disperse to Indian Ocean.

	23	Wilson signals to Eisenhower that he is loading the task force for “Accolade”.
	26	Eisenhower warns Wilson that he will soon require Eighth Indian Division in central Mediterranean.
Sept.	3	Allies invade Italy.
	7	Wilson formulates another plan. Following Armistice with Italy, Wilson embarks on small operations to Kastellorizo, Kos, Leros, and Samos.
	8	Italy surrenders; Allies and Germans race to pick up the pieces.
	9-10	Major Jellicoe, SBS, to meet General Scaroina and Admiral Campioni on Rhodes.
	11	Admiral Campioni orders the Italian garrison on Rhodes to capitulate to the Germans.
	14	Wilson sends troops to occupy Kastellorizo, Kos, Leros, and Samos.
	15	British occupy Kos, Leros, and Samos and isolated Kastellorizo.
Oct	1	In consultation with Eisenhower, British COS authorizes CIC Middle East to capture Rhodes before the end of October.
	3	Kos assaulted by German Battle Group. Falls within twenty-four hours.
	2	Germans recapture Kos
	7	Churchill asks Roosevelt to reconsider his objections.
	10	La Marsa Conference.
Nov.	12	German Battle Group assault Leros.
	16	Germans recapture Leros; Kastellorizo evacuated, immediately recaptured and retained for continued use as an advanced base for raiding forces.
Dec.	-	Turkey permits Allied use of its SW coast as refuge and location for clandestine bases.

1944

- Sept. - Germans begin evacuation of Greek islands and the Peloponnesus; Operation "Manna" set in motion; Royal Navy forms Aegean Striking Group (Force 120) based on escort carriers, cruisers, and destroyers.

1945

- Feb. - Turkey declares war on Germany.
- April - Germans seize LS43 off Rhodes.

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