

## Chapter 4: Crete — Lions and Chickens

*To my mind almost the dominating feature of the fighting on Crete (at least to the NZers) was the fact that the actual fighters were lion-hearted and nearly always gave more than they got. were ready and willing to endure more than was asked of them, but the command (severely handicapped, of course, by poor communications) was shaky and sometimes weak, chicken-hearted.*

W. E. Murphy<sup>1</sup>

*Greece was a disaster; Crete was a tragedy.*

Freyberg<sup>2</sup>

Kippenberger's part in the battle of Crete was especially significant. In a campaign that highlighted the command failings of the New Zealand Division, Kippenberger would be one of the few New Zealand commanders to emerge with his reputation enhanced. His performance on Crete, although not entirely free from criticism as will be seen, was outstanding and marked him out as a commander with potential. If Freyberg had dismissed Kippenberger as a potential brigadier before Greece, after Crete he could no longer afford to do so.

With the fall of Greece to the Axis, Crete was the foremost Allied position in the Middle East. It became in May 1941, the scene of the world's first great airborne invasion, and because of the losses experienced, it would be Germany's only major airborne offensive of the war.

The geography of Crete is peculiar and it had a more than usual influence on the outcome of the battle. Crete is 166 miles (267 kilometres) long west to east and only 36 miles (58 kilometres) across at its widest point. The terrain is extremely mountainous with peaks ranging from 5 000 to 8 000 feet (1525 to 2440 metres). There are only three flat areas on the island — the areas where the airfields were located. Possession of one or more of these vital airfields, enabled any force to contest possession of the whole island.

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Murphy to McClymont, letter, 20 April 1948, McClymont Papers, WA II 3/16b NZNA.

<sup>2</sup> Freyberg to Kippenberger, letter, 5 December 1949, Gavin Long Papers, AWM 67 [8/26] AWM.

All the vital parts of Crete were on the gently sloping north coast, the coast nearest to the enemy forces now in Greece, and therefore vulnerable and exposed to attack. These were connected by the one road which in 1941 was in a very poor state. Only one lane wide at many points with bridges that could not carry vehicles over seven tons in weight, the road was a poor military asset. Telephone communications between these vital centres were equally poor and were also to have an undue influence on the outcome of the battle.

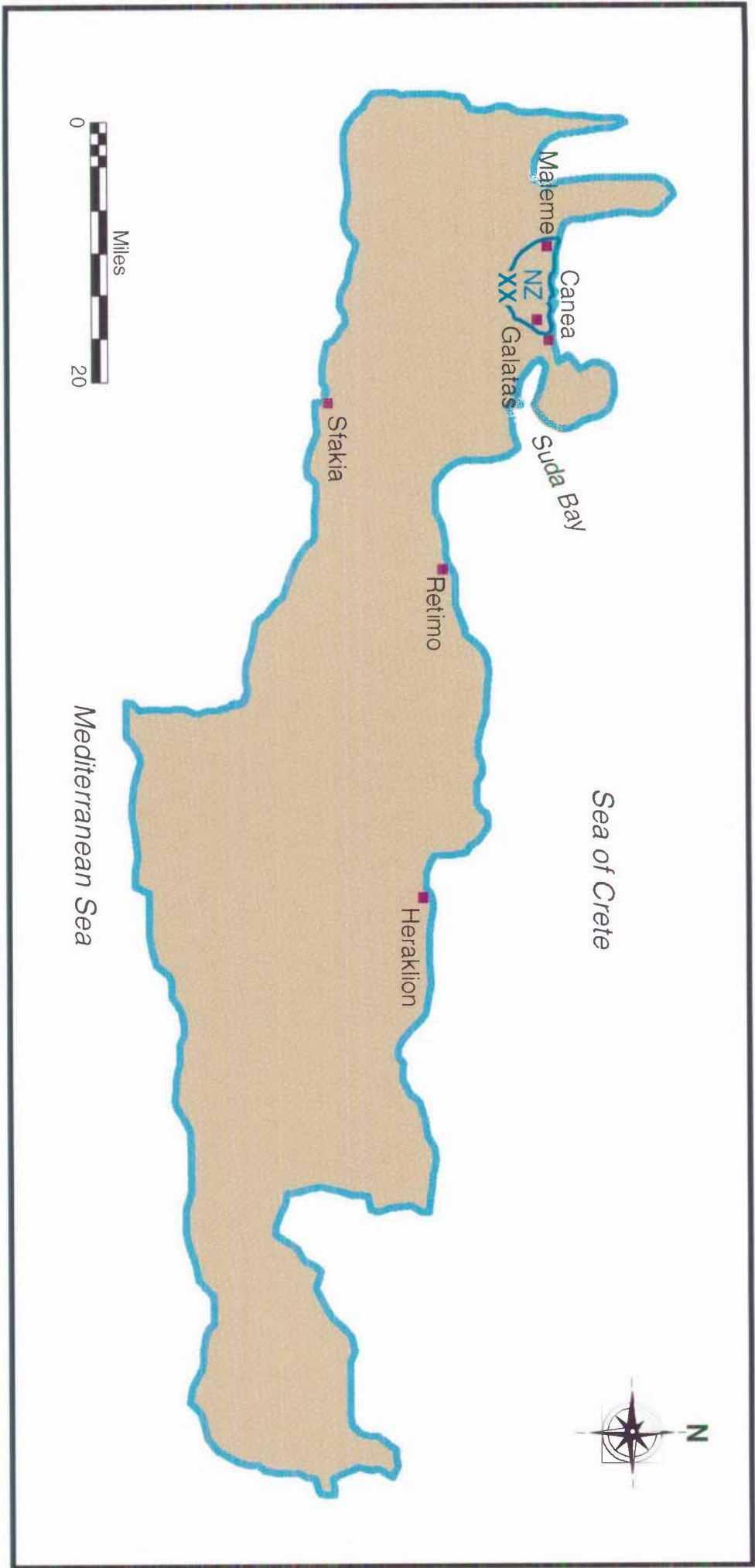
To this difficult topography in April 1941 came the men of 4 and 5 Brigades of the New Zealand Division and of 19 Brigade of the AIF, who imagined at the time that they were on a temporary stopover on their way back to Egypt after the Greek debacle. That the New Zealand Division was to do the bulk of the fighting in Crete owed more to accident than to design. It was not until 30 April 1941, only twenty days before the airborne invasion, that General Freyberg and his staff learned that the New Zealand troops were to play an active role in the defence of Crete and that he was to be Creforce's GOC!<sup>3</sup>

For an area of such obvious importance it is surprising that more had not been done to prepare Crete for the onslaught that was known to be coming. Britain, given permission by Greece to garrison Crete on 21 May 1940, established a small garrison at Suda Bay, but very little defensive work was carried out. When the New Zealand and Australian troops arrived in Crete they found no prepared plan or scheme of defence, the heavy artillery required for the defence of Crete was poor and well below requirements, transport vehicles were scarce, the roads very bad, signals communications were very sketchy, supplies had not been accumulated, accommodation for the troops did not exist, the aerodromes were in a poor state of repair and the last aircraft of the RAF on Crete left just as the troops were arriving.

The situation did not improve after the evacuation from Greece even though an attack on the island was imminent. The troops arrived in Crete, most carrying their personal weapon but very little else and for over a month they waited for vital equipment which never arrived. This equipment included the most basic type required for soldiering: picks, shovels and entrenching tools without which it is impossible to prepare defensive positions, base plates for mortars, tripods for machine-guns, sights for artillery pieces and even the most

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<sup>3</sup> D. M. Davin, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945. Crete*, Wellington, 1953, p.7.



# Crete

20 May 1941

simple communication equipment. Between the arrival of the New Zealand and Australian forces and the invasion of Crete some materiel was sent to Crete but it was never enough. From Egypt arrived six I (infantry) tanks and sixteen light tanks and one hundred and seventeen field artillery pieces. These artillery pieces were sent without instruments or fuses for the ammunition so that by the time the battle started only forty-nine field guns with 300-400 rounds a piece were available. For the six I tanks and sixteen light tanks no spare parts were available and POL supplies were extremely limited.<sup>4</sup> As Kenneth Sandford has aptly commented, "from the beginning, right through to the end, it was a pauper's campaign".<sup>5</sup>

Just how short of equipment the forces on Crete were can be seen from the equipment deficiencies of the two units Kippenberger commanded in Crete — 20 Battalion and 10 Brigade. (Kippenberger also commanded 4 Brigade while in Crete but only for a very short period of time.) Upon arrival in Crete, Kippenberger — now promoted to the temporary rank of Colonel — conducted an equipment inspection of 20 Battalion "with his usual care".<sup>6</sup> While the personal equipment and arms of the individual soldiers was nearly complete, except for one man who possessed only a hand grenade, the battalion had its two mortars fully intact but without ammunition, had virtually no signalling equipment, and only thirty-seven of the allocated fifty Bren guns.<sup>7</sup> As one of the veterans recalled: "There was again a lot of digging to do, made more than usually difficult by a shortage of picks and shovels which we had been ordered to leave behind in Greece".<sup>8</sup> On Crete the steel helmet became the main digging tool. Kippenberger's main command of the battle, 10 Brigade, was in an even worse situation on the eve of the battle. The artillery attached to the brigade consisted of three Italian 75-mm guns without sights and with very little ammunition. They could only be aimed by the gunner peering down the barrel before firing. The brigade possessed only two trucks for all purposes, six medium machine guns — four without tripods — but had no mortars and there was an

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>5</sup> K. Sandford, *Mark of the Lion. The Story of Capt. Charles Upham, VC and Bar*, London, 1962, p.62.

<sup>6</sup> Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.96.

<sup>7</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.46.

<sup>8</sup> Glue, "Wartime Reminiscences", *op. cit.*

acute shortage of digging tools.<sup>9</sup> In Kippenberger's possession was the only map available to the brigade.<sup>10</sup> The two Greek regiments of the brigade, "malaria ridden little chaps from Macedonia with four weeks service" were totally under-equipped and poorly trained for the battle ahead and 6 Greek Regiment, because of an administrative oversight by their commander, would begin the the battle with only three rounds of ammunition per man.<sup>11</sup> This unit had fired no rounds of ammunition in training while 8 Greek Regiment had fired ten rounds. All told the Greek regiments "had no military knowledge whatever".<sup>12</sup> Nor were the New Zealand units much better. While the Divisional Cavalry was a "well disciplined confident unit that easily adapted itself", the Composite Battalion was a different matter. This unit was "wholly untrained in Inf work, siting of posts, ... inability to patrol and care of arms". It also "lacked confidence".<sup>13</sup>

So alarmed was Kippenberger by the state of his new command that he vehemently expressed his concerns to the new Divisional Commander. According to an eyewitness:

Col. Kippenberger took command of the 10th Brigade on 14 May and was soon aware of the shortcomings of the Greek regiments and the lack of infantry training of the ASC and the Divisional Cavalry troops. He remonstrated in vain with General Puttick, going so far as to rub off the circles indicating the Greek positions on the General's map, insisting that they could not be considered effective military formations, but for all his pains he was met with 'Don't spoil my map, Kip.' The 20th Battalion, in reserve, could well have supported or replaced the Greeks.<sup>14</sup>

These shortages were well known to the GOC Creforce. He made it clear in

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<sup>9</sup> Report on Operations, 10 Infantry Brigade, 20 -25 May 1941, p.2, 10 Infantry Brigade War Diary (WD), WA II 1/ DA 50.1/1/1, NZNA.

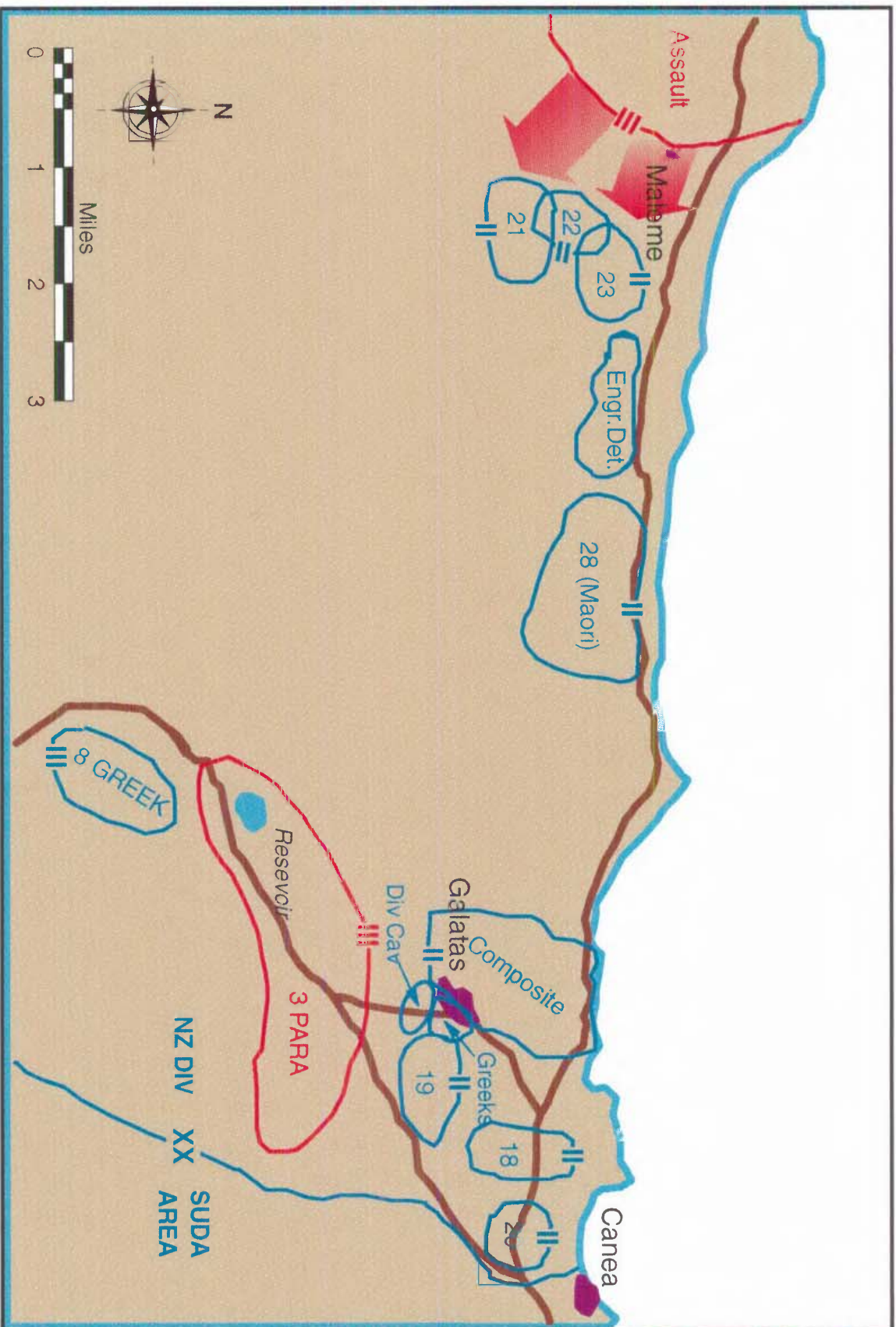
<sup>10</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.50.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, pp.49,52.

<sup>12</sup> Report on Operations, 10 Infantry Brigade, 20 -25 May 1941, p.2, 10 Infantry Brigade War Diary (WD), WA II 1/ DA 50.1/1/1, NZNA.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Captain A. L. Lomas, NZMC, Personal Communication with T. Simpson, T. Simpson, *Operation Mercury: The Battle for Crete, 1941*, Auckland, 1981, pp.164-5.



## New Zealand divisional Area and German Landings

Crete, 21 May 1941

a cable to the New Zealand Government that the shortages and the almost total lack of air protection, seriously undermined the fighting ability of Creforce and limited the chance of overall success.<sup>15</sup> Despite the appeal Crete remained a pauper's campaign.

Before turning to the course of the battle a brief outline of the Allied positions in Crete, and Kippenberger's place in them, is necessary.

At Maleme, the crucial airfield in the north-west, and at Ay Marina, was 5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade under command of Brigadier Hargest. 5 Brigade consisted of four infantry battalions one of which, the 21 Battalion, had been dispersed in the Greek campaign and was down in strength to 190 men. On the eve of the battle its strength was built up to 350 by the addition of composite groups. The brigade's objective was to cover two fronts — Maleme airfield and the coastline. This dual nature of the brigade's objectives — defending the beaches and the airfield — meant that when the attack came, the enemy's preponderance in airpower and the lack of effective communications between units of the brigade would make its "strung-out" defence a "serious shortcoming".<sup>16</sup>

Positioned immediately behind 5 Brigade on the Galatos Plain was 10 Brigade which had been created on 14 May out of existing composite forces. It was commanded during the battle by Colonel Kippenberger. 10 Brigade consisted of First Composite Battalion, 750 men which included artillery men and ASC units, the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, and a platoon-and-a-half of machine-guns. Also included in the brigade was 20 Battalion, which Kippenberger could not use without obtaining permission to do so from the Divisional Commander, Brigadier Puttick, and two Greek regiments. As mentioned earlier, Kippenberger was not happy with the quality of the Greek troops and wanted them withdrawn. When the battle started, 19 Battalion shot the Colonel of 8 Greek Regiment on the first day as he had been throwing grenades at them.<sup>17</sup> 10 Brigade was to hold a defensive position facing west and it was not expected that

<sup>15</sup> Freyberg to NZ Government, 1 May 1941, also Message Mideast from Ausforce 5 April 1941, Greece Messages, Blamey Papers, AWM DRL 6643 1/2a, AWM.

<sup>16</sup> Davin, *op. cit.*, p.67.

<sup>17</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.55.

this sector would have an important part to play in the coming battle. In the event it became the second most important sector.

It would appear that Kippenberger had already begun to impress those around him. This is certainly the opinion of Geoffrey Cox, a junior IO now acting as Freyberg's personal newspaper editor, who recalled that even before the battle Kippenberger "had already begun to arouse a remarkable affection as well as admiration among the troops, something which extended beyond those in his own immediate command".<sup>18</sup> Trying desperately to establish a troop newspaper on Crete, Cox shared the back of a lorry with Kippenberger and several others and recalled that Kippenberger was a "quiet, lean figure, in no way assertive in manner, but carrying even in this dusty crowded vehicle, unmistakable authority".<sup>19</sup>

Immediately behind 10 Brigade at Canea was 4 Brigade consisting of three battalions all of which were very deficient in materials. The whole brigade, for example, possessed only the one truck. 4 Brigade was under the command of Kippenberger's old mentor, Brigadier Inglis, who had been summoned from Egypt by Freyberg and arrived in Crete on 17 May. 4 Brigade, despite having only the one heavy vehicle, was to act as a mobile reserve force for Creforce and was to be ready to counter-attack at any vital point when needed.

Behind 4 Brigade at Suda Bay was MNBDO — the Marine Naval Base Defence Organisation, a force largely of marines and naval personnel under the command of the marine Major-General Weston. Its role was to provide for the defence of the Suda Harbour area.

In the centre of the island at the Retimo sector were two battalions of 19 Australian Brigade at Georgeopolis and a further two battalions were covering the airfield at the town of Retimo. The two battalions at Retimo were under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel I. R. Campbell. They would be cut off and isolated during the course of the battle but, in a brilliantly conducted defence, would deny the airfield to the enemy before running out of ammunition on the final day of the battle.

Still further east at Heraklion, the third airfield, was 14 British Brigade, a mixture of British and Greek forces but also containing the 2/4th Australian Battalion.

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<sup>18</sup> G. Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles*, London, 1987, p.57.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*



GOC Creforce was, of course, Major-General Freyberg, but commanding the New Zealand Division from 2 May was Brigadier Puttick with Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry as GSO1. The Allied positions as described had been dictated by three main considerations: Crete's terrain, the anticipated attack based on sound intelligence sources, and the forces available to meet that attack. There were many weaknesses apparent in the defensive positions prepared by the Allied troops, most notably in the single line of communications between the sectors of the defence, the overextended nature of the defensive positions which left much ground undefended, especially that west of the Maleme airfield, the lack of transport available which effectively crippled the mobile reserve and the isolation of those sectors east of Suda Bay.

The invasion of Crete began on 20 May 1941 with an airborne attack by German paratroopers and glider-borne troops. Although the battle for Crete lasted for thirteen days and officially ended on 1 June 1941 with the capitulation of those Allied troops still remaining in Crete, the faulty tactics and poor command decisions of several New Zealand commanders, meant that the outcome of the campaign had already been decided by the third day.

Two such decisions turned the tide of the battle in favour of the invading forces and once they were made: no hope of victory for the Allied troops on Crete remained. The two decisions were the withdrawal of 22 Battalion from Maleme airfield on the evening of the first day of the battle and the following decision not to counterattack at Maleme until the third day and then to do so with only two weak and already exhausted battalions. According to W. E. Murphy, Andrew's decision to abandon Maleme, the high ground above the airfield (Hill 107) and his forward companies:

Remains to my mind the central blunder of the campaign where you had a battalion commander who was a VC winner of the First World War, and obviously very respected on that account, but who was quite incompetent as a battalion commander. His intellect didn't measure up to the task and he was given the key site / position of the whole battle.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> W.E. Murphy, interview, 27 January 1993, Wellington, New Zealand.

Not only did Andrew leave this key position “which his instructions totally forbade him to do” but he left his forward companies uninformed of the withdrawal and “virtually deserted them and he lost the battle”.<sup>21</sup> Kippenberger, after the war, described 22 Battalion at Maleme as “a heartbreaking story” and that the CO “obviously lost his grip ... [He] retired before any of the companies and without telling them”.<sup>22</sup>

General von Senger und Etterlin, the defender of Cassino, has written of committing a reserve:

The decision to throw in reserves is nearly always decisive for the outcome of a defensive battle. Since the lines are only thinly held a surprise attack will always result in penetrations.<sup>23</sup>

Yet when 22 Battalion withdrew to 21 Battalion’s positions its commander, Lt.Col. Leckie, whose role at Maleme was to immediately counter attack if 22 Battalion experienced trouble, did nothing. Three miles to the rear, Hargest learned what had happened at the airfield and did nothing — he went back to bed. Murphy has written of this inaction that “no counter attack was even so much as mentioned. This surely was the nadir of leadership in 2nd NZEF”.<sup>24</sup> Not quite! The divisional reserve with its role of immediate counterattack had been allocated to 4 Brigade under the command of Brigadier Inglis. Once the German forces had established a foothold at Maleme the need for a spirited counterattack was imperative and was immediately apparent to Inglis who began to ready 4 Brigade and prepare a plan of attack. Brigadier Puttick refused to launch the counterattack, reluctant to commit his full reserve in broad daylight without air cover and with the possibility of a seaborne invasion likely at any time. Yet not to counterattack immediately meant that the battle initiative had passed to the German commanders and their forces were allowed the time considered so

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Kippenberger to Inglis, letter, 8 July 1948, Inglis Papers Inwards Correspondence 1 June —31 August 1948, MS 0421 Folder 31 ATL.

<sup>23</sup> F. von Senger und Etterlin, *Neither Fear Nor Hope*, Novato, Ca., 1989, p.233.

<sup>24</sup> W. E. Murphy, “Crete — New Zealand Command Failures”, *Comment*, Vol 9, No. 1, 1966, p.28.

precious in warfare to consolidate their hard won but still tenuous positions. Puttick should have concentrated on this crucial battle and taken steps to restore the situation. It was a crucial mistake not to commit the fighting reserve to the battle in hand rather than keep them for a situation that might not (and in this case, did not) eventuate.

When the counterattack was finally launched on Maleme on the morning of 22 May, the plan was poor and it was a case of far too little far too late. Despite the spirit and courage shown by the two attacking battalions, the attempt to retake Maleme petered out into a costly failure. The counterattack had been Creforce's last hope to recover the lost positions and hold on to Crete and now that it had failed it made defeat inevitable.

Following the failure of the counterattack 5 Brigade was withdrawn from the Maleme position and a new line consolidated about Galatos. The campaign for Creforce after the fall of Maleme quickly turned into a succession of spirited rearguard actions and long route marches to the evacuation beaches at Sphakia. There are two high points in the battle worth mentioning — on 25 May when a scratch New Zealand force commanded by Kippenberger recaptured Galatos and on 27 May when 2/7 Battalion together with 28 Battalion, 19 Battalion and part of 22 Battalion made one of the longest bayonet charges in history, charging over 600 yards and killing more than 300 Germans in the process which wiped out the German I Battalion of 141 Regiment in its first action.<sup>25</sup> Such high points could not, however, turn the tide of battle and just over half of Creforce was evacuated from Crete beginning with the evacuations on 28 May. On 1 June those members of the force remaining in Crete formally surrendered to the German forces now in command of the island.

When the attack on Crete began on 20 May Kippenberger was in command of his "extemporised" brigade in the Galatos sector.<sup>26</sup> That morning Kippenberger was as surprised as any on Crete at the hypnotic sight that greeted him when the attack began but he quickly rallied his forces. He grabbed his rifle and binoculars

<sup>25</sup> Davin, *op. cit.*, p.378.

<sup>26</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.49.

and set off from Galatos to his battle HQ. En route he was shot at by a paratrooper at close range but managed to deceive and stalk his enemy and shoot "him cleanly through the head at ten yards".<sup>27</sup> In doing so, however, Kippenberger badly twisted his ankle in his jump sideways in order to avoid the paratrooper's fire and was to carry this painful injury for the rest of the campaign.

Both Greek regiments had lost contact at the beginning of the battle and Kippenberger's main concern was the position of Pink Hill held by the Petrol Company, the company of the ASC whose main role in the division was the delivery of fuel. The company soon lost all three of its OCs before a supply officer arrived to take command and survive long enough to restore control of the hill after a fierce struggle.

Kippenberger was very keen to launch a counterattack to recover the lost ground and asked Puttick repeatedly for permission to launch "a vigorous counter-attack to clear the Prison Valley".<sup>28</sup> Denied this permission Kippenberger had to be content with a series of fighting patrols sent out to harass the enemy.

Even after the war General Puttick maintained that a counterattack in the Prison Valley area was not necessary. He commented on the *Official History* narrative:

the narrative in several places states or infers that a counter-attack in the Prison area was essential and the course to follow. Personally I completely disagree. The Galatos front was merely a foundation for the real front at Maleme. All that was required to do was to hold fast which it did most successfully.

According to Puttick, a counterattack in the Prison Valley had "little to recommend it"<sup>29</sup> yet he did eventually launch such an attack. Two companies of 19 Battalion and some light tanks were ordered to attack during the night but Kippenberger was not informed until after it had started. Puttick stated the decision to launch the counterattack was:

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.54.

<sup>28</sup> 10 Brigade to NZ Div, 1415 hrs 20 May, in Inglis Papers Inwards Correspondence 1 June—31 August 1948, MS 0421 Folder 31 ATL.

<sup>29</sup> E. Puttick, comments by LtGen Sir Edward Puttick on Dan Davin's Draft History of the Crete Campaign pp.135-629 31/5/51, p.3, PERS Puttick 4/7, NZNA.

influenced mainly by a report that a landing ground was being constructed. A secondary consideration was the repeated requests by commander 10 Bde. ... The counter-attack by 19 Battalion might assist morale and impose caution on the enemy, its only virtues so far as I could see.<sup>30</sup>

In his report on the operations of 10 Brigade, Kippenberger is scathing about the missed opportunity of the failed counterattack. His report stated that he learned of the attack at 2030 hrs Z Hour, and that "there was some confusion as to the objective".<sup>31</sup> As he had been unaware of the attack, "in consequence the forward commander, in touch with the situation, was unable to assist or direct the attack in any way and it was consequently abortive".<sup>32</sup>

On 21 May Kippenberger found that the enemy had taken Cemetery Hill during the night and could enfilade part of his own defensive positions. He organised a counterattack on the hill using a squadron of cavalry and 1 Company of 19 Battalion. The hill was successfully taken but could not be held because of a lack of cover and it became no-man's land.

The pattern of attack/counterattack continued, although Kippenberger noticed a gradual decline in morale of his brigade. On 23 May 5 Brigade moved into reserve behind Kippenberger's position and it became obvious that the enemy was building up strength in front of the 10 Brigade positions which had now become the front line. The 24th May started as "ominously quiet" for 10 Brigade and Kippenberger used the opportunity to tour the brigade positions. On reaching the Composite Battalion's position Kippenberger:

tried to put a little heart in to some of the officers, but too many had the idea that they had done their bit and should be relieved. It was only too clear that the unit had little fighting value left.<sup>33</sup>

Kippenberger reported this state of affairs to Puttick who then replaced the

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> Report on Operations, 10 Infantry Brigade 20-25 May 1941, p.2, 10 Inf Bde WD, 20-25 May 1941, Crete, WA II 1 DA 50.1/1/1.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.62.

Composite Battalion with 18 Battalion and that night by Operational Order No. 6, 10 Brigade came under the operational command of 4 Brigade, although the unusual step was taken of leaving Kippenberger in command of all the forward troops defending the Galatos line. Inglis left Kippenberger at Galatos as a sub-area commander rather than having him rejoin 20 Battalion because of his "desire to have a strong commander on the spot to look after the Composite Battalion and co-ordinate its actions with those of the other units". As Inglis stated after the war:

In the result this compromise worked as well as any other that would have been practicable under the circumstances — mainly because Kippenberger and I had complete confidence in each other.<sup>34</sup>

On 25 May the decision to leave Kippenberger in command at Galatos was to prove its worth. The day was one of hard and critical fighting and the pressure on the line was so intense that the flanks of the line were overrun. The local commander had flouted the order to stand fast and let the side units deal with penetrations informing his officers that "they could fall back if outflanked and hard pressed".<sup>35</sup> Men began to abandon their positions so that "the withdrawal was now general and in danger of becoming a rout".<sup>36</sup> Kippenberger acted unhesitatingly to stem the tide:

Suddenly the trickle of stragglers turned to a stream, many of them on the verge of panic. I walked in among them shouting 'Stand for New Zealand' and everything else I could think of.<sup>37</sup>

With the help of two senior NCOs Kippenberger was able to organise the retreating men under the nearest officers and NCOs "in most cases the men responding with alacrity" and sent them to the next forward ridge to cover the right flank of 19 Battalion now dangerously exposed and to give the men "time

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<sup>34</sup> Inglis, Comments by Major General Inglis on Dan Davin's Draft History of the Crete Campaign pp.135—256, Inglis Papers, Inwards Correspondence, 2 November 1950 — 16 March 1951, MS 0421, Folder 40 ATL.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Davin, *op. cit.*, p.203.

<sup>37</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.65.

and space to get their second wind".<sup>38</sup> Kippenberger, after the war, recalled:

the dreadful sight of New Zealand troops running in panic at Galatos. It can happen and is infectious, and will only be stopped by stern action.<sup>39</sup>

Kippenberger's pre-war preparation must have been vital in enabling him to assess a dangerous situation and take immediate and effective remedial action. A soldier who witnessed this incident burst into tears when he recalled Kippenberger's action forty years later:

Kippenberger was walking around amongst the stuff that was flying as though it was Cuba Street in Wellington — completely unconcerned and that made one think, could this be as bad as we think it is. There were guys falling all around you — beside you — you wondered who was going to get it next. And in the middle of it all this mighty, mighty man.<sup>40</sup>

While Kippenberger had been rallying the panicking troops, Inglis had sent as many reinforcements as could be spared to the Galatos line including the brigade band and the Kiwi Concert Party. Using them and the battalions of 5 Brigade, a continuous line from Galatos to the sea was soon established.

But the line was penetrated at dusk when Galatos was taken by German troops, leaving the Divisional Cavalry trapped in front of the town. The adjutant of 18 Battalion, part of the defensive line from Galatos to the sea, recalled seeing to his left, "Germans just swarming into Galatos and on the right more swarms coming along the sea coast".<sup>41</sup> As Glue recalled more than fifty years on, "The Germans were making a supreme effort to take Galatos by nightfall".<sup>42</sup> Once again Kippenberger acted decisively and organised a quick counterattack on the town using two dilapidated tanks, two companies of 23 Battalion and whatever forces were available. Kippenberger decided to hit the enemy hard using speed and

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Kippenberger, covering letter with the Marshall critique, 11 June 1949, IA 77/35 NZNA.

<sup>40</sup> Colin Power, quoted in T. Simpson, *op. cit.*, p.252.

<sup>41</sup> Captain E. Batty, Diary 25 May 1941, McClymont Papers, WA II 3/16a NZNA.

<sup>42</sup> Glue, "Wartime Reminiscences", *op. cit.*

surprise “to facilitate the retirement of Major Russell’s group (West Galatos) and to deliver a check to the enemy advance”.<sup>43</sup> For Kippenberger the counterattack on Galatos was the supreme test of twenty years of preparation. It would establish his reputation as a field commander.

When organising the attack Kippenberger stressed the need for speed, surprise and aggression. He also exuded confidence. A lieutenant of 23 Battalion spoke to Kippenberger before the attack:

I asked him about the coming show about two minutes away, and he said “They’ll run like Hell”. I know I immediately had the feeling they would and so did all that heard him.<sup>44</sup>

Another participant later recalled of Kippenberger:

He seemed to be directing the counterattack personally and to have command of any troops that were about. ... I remember Col. K. saying to L/Col. Gray ‘We must retake Galatos!’<sup>45</sup>

The men of the attack party fixed bayonets and attacked straight up the road into the town at 2010 hrs. Kippenberger’s last words were: “For Christ’s sake: get cracking!”<sup>46</sup>

The attack on Galatos has virtually become part of New Zealand folklore, “our only major success”<sup>47</sup> of the campaign. One officer recalled:

Heaven knows how many colleges and schools were represented by their ‘hakas’, but the effect was terrific — one felt one’s blood rising swiftly above fear and uncertainty until only an unexplained exhilaration quite beyond description surpassed all else and we moved as one man into the

<sup>43</sup> Report on Operations of 10 Brigade, p.6, 10 Bde WD, WA II 1 DA 50.1/1/1, NZNA.

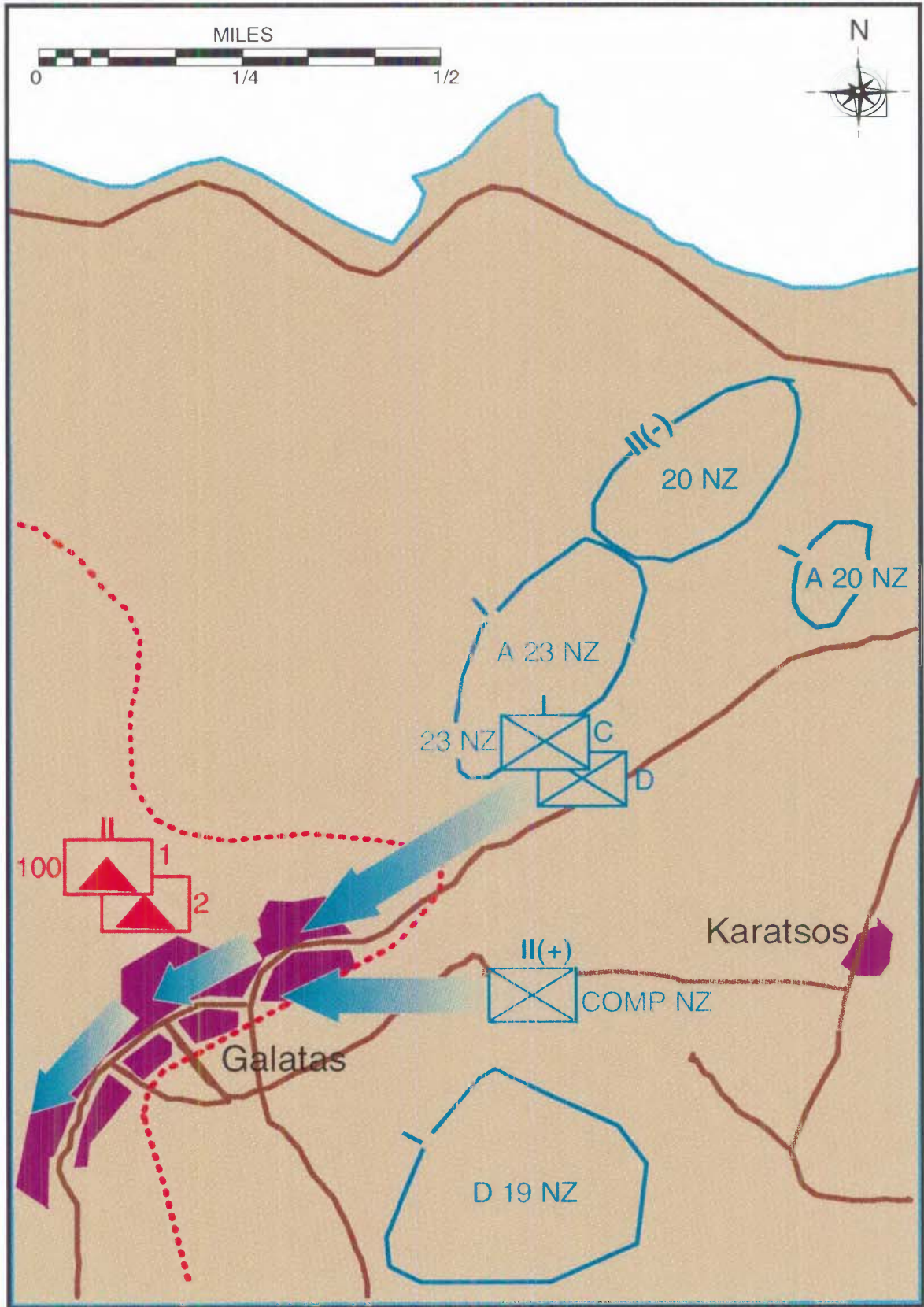
<sup>44</sup> Lt Connolly, quoted in Ross, *op. cit.*, p.77.

<sup>45</sup> Capt. J. Sullivan, 1 SGT 20 Bn, McClymont Papers, WA II 3/16a

<sup>46</sup> quoted in Simpson, *op. cit.*, p.253.

<sup>47</sup> Glue, “Wartime Reminiscences”, *op. cit.*





## Counter-Attack at Galatas

25 May 1941

outskirts.<sup>48</sup>

An NCO present at the charge recalled how the various battle cries were “the most ungodly row I have ever heard”,<sup>49</sup> while Sandford has commented that “there are many who say that this hour was the fiercest fought by New Zealanders in the whole war”.<sup>50</sup> At 2030 hrs Kippenberger reported to Brigade Headquarters that the counterattack on Galatos was underway and that “hard fighting [was] in progress”. He also stated “have two companies 23 (weak) in hand and cannot do more than complete line indicated. Recapture position requires serious counterattack say at dawn”.<sup>51</sup>

It was not to be. While the infantry charge was successful and retook the town at great cost to the German forces consolidating there, and a precious breathing space won for Creforce, it was no more than a short respite. That night the dictates of military tactics demanded that Galatos had to be abandoned while a new shorter line was formed by linking up with 19 Australian Brigade in front of Canea. Freyberg later wrote of the Galatos counterattack, “In my opinion this was one of the great efforts in the defence of Crete”.<sup>52</sup> Kippenberger wrote a vivid description of the Galatos attack:

There was a tremendous amount of bayonet work in Galatas on the Sunday evening the 25th of May. New Zealanders have never put in a more furious attack. For 15 minutes there was perfect pandemonium in the village, an indescribable uproar, shouts screams, grenade burst and a deafening rattle of rifles and Brens and tommy guns with quite clearly for a while Rex King’s football yell piercing the din. Wounded men and some 20 crazed women and children poured down the road and then just as darkness fell, there was quiet. I went in to find out the position. The narrow cobbled street was in places almost carpeted with dead, nearly all

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<sup>48</sup> Report by Lieutenant Thomas, quoted in Davin, *op. cit.*, p.313.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Sandford, *op. cit.*, p.94.

<sup>51</sup> Kippenberger, Original Duplicate of Message, sent 25 May 1941 relating to counterattack on Galatos Crete, WA II 1 DA 50.1/22/1, NZNA.

<sup>52</sup> Freyberg, Campaigns in Greece and Crete, Short Unofficial Account for Minister of Defence on Operations of the New Zealand Division in Greece and Crete, p.5, PERS Puttick 4/6, NZNA.

Germans. Every door and window had been smashed in and dead Germans sprawled in every room by the street, with wounded on both sides walking, crawling or propped against the walls everywhere. Apparently they had been massing in the village to carry forward the attack, took shelter in the houses when the attack began and were slaughtered there by grenade, bullet and bayonet. And what a slaughter. I was responsible, and it was an ugly sight. Nevertheless, it re-established the line and made possible an orderly retirement during the night to the next position. A great Sunday.<sup>53</sup>

For a short time Kippenberger was placed in command of 4 Brigade before rejoining 20 Battalion for the long forty mile march to Sphakia. For all the men involved the march over the White Mountains to the southern coast was a “desperately hard march, uphill nearly all the way, and made more difficult by the masses of masterless troops, British and Greek, who cluttered the way”.<sup>54</sup> For Kippenberger, marching across this type of terrain on a badly swollen ankle, the journey was one of sheer agony. He wrote soon after the campaign:

Had a sprained foot. Got it laced up and did it good to walk on it. There was little time for sleeping and when there was a chance the pain kept me awake. Did one night march during the retreat, 9 hours with only the hourly 10-minute halts and never suffered so much in my life, but perforce led at a steady pace and got the battalion through in good order though all dead on our feet.<sup>55</sup>

The Battalion’s War Diary confirms that “Good even pace set by Col. Kippenberger who was in the lead with Bde HQ”.<sup>56</sup>

An incident occurred during the withdrawal which revealed much about Kippenberger as a commander. Unsure of which fork in the road to follow, Kippenberger had to shine a torch on the map he was carrying. Instantly there

<sup>53</sup> *Kippenberger — Letters from a Soldier*, T 214, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, recorded 1959.

<sup>54</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.71.

<sup>55</sup> Kippenberger to Henderson, letter, 5 June 1941, Glue Papers.

<sup>56</sup> 20 Bn WD, 27 May 1941, WA II 1 DA 50/1/17, NZNA.

was a chorus of cries and abuse from some stragglers in front of him ordering him to "Put out that fucking light!" One man rushed forward and kicked the torch from his hands. Kippenberger recalled:

Sheer panic, as there were no Huns for miles. I stood up and seized him by the throat and squeezed till he gurgled and then cried in the darkness that if there was another sound I'd order my men to shoot and keep on shooting. I heard grunts and bolts clicking from the 20th but no other sound and went on map reading.<sup>57</sup>

Kippenberger had regained control of a dangerous situation instantly.

The battalion trudged on to reach the embarkation point where it was to fight a minor skirmish with a German patrol which it totally destroyed. A report by Sergeant H. W. Kimber gives a detailed account of 20 Battalion's progress:

Along came the 20 Battalion with Kip marching under extreme difficulties at the head of them. It was really good to see a unit still under perfect control, retiring in an orderly and well organised manner thanks to Kip's good discipline. (*no rabble or ratierty rules about this outfit*). For days past one had become used to seeing a rabble of panic stricken men making their way to the beach. They had deserted their units and for the most part had thrown away all their gear, arms, coats, water bottles etc. I smartly paid my respects to the C.O 18 Bn and rejoined 20 Bn. It was good to be home again.<sup>58</sup>

The Battalion's Official Historians reflected that "*Esprit de corps* is a cliché but it counted at this stage".<sup>59</sup>

The Inter-Service Committee Report commented on the breakdown of discipline in many of the units on Crete:

Scenes were witnessed during the withdrawal which could only be attributed to a low standard of discipline. The instinct of self preservation

<sup>57</sup> Kippenberger to Henderson, letter, 5 June 1941, Glue Papers.

<sup>58</sup> Report by Sergeant H. W. Kimber, copy in the Glue Papers.

<sup>59</sup> Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*; p.142.

overrode all else. Officers failed to exert the control that might have been expected of them. ... At night, any attempt to put on the lights of a car would be greeted by abuse and, in some cases, by bullets.

The report felt that discipline needed tightening and recommended a solid course of drill which "still has its place, and should not, as it is seen by some, be associated solely with bows and arrows".<sup>60</sup> The report's comments did not apply to Kippenberger's 20 Battalion and his grip on it remained tight. The decline of many other units though made his performance on Crete outstanding by comparison.

Yet his performance had not been faultless. On 28 May 18 and 20 Battalions had an eighteen mile march over winding mountainous roads with Kippenberger doing the navigating. The Brigade War Diary recorded:

Owing to a misunderstanding Lt Col. Kippenberger who was in charge of the column, considered that he had passed the plain of ASKIPHO and so ordered a halt and dispersed under trees at a place which was actually two miles short of the plain.<sup>61</sup>

The mistake was detected and both battalions moved off to be in the correct position by midday. In Kippenberger's next campaign an error in navigation would not escape so lightly.

For Kippenberger the evacuation was to prove a very unhappy experience as not all of the battalion could be taken off — only 230 of the 306 men of the battalion could leave on the first night. Kippenberger protested at Major Burrows, his 2IC, being left behind with those who could not leave on the first night instead of himself but was "sharply overruled".<sup>62</sup> Inglis had overruled Kippenberger and remained unrepentant at his way of doing so; Freyberg had stated that all COs and Battalion HQs must go on the first night and "It was no time to argue matters of detail with a harassed General who had enough troubles

<sup>60</sup> Extracts from Inter-Service report on Crete, p.4, Crete Historical Papers, Orders, etc, WA II 8/17 Part I, NZNA.

<sup>61</sup> 4 Bde WD, 28 May 1941, WA II 1 DA 46/1/17, NZNA.

<sup>62</sup> Davin, *op. cit.*, p.434.

on his mind".<sup>63</sup> It was clear to those around Kippenberger though that the "explicit orders" to go "nearly broke his heart".<sup>64</sup>

On the night of 30 May Kippenberger, with 230 men of the battalion, walked to the beach at Sphakia past the men who were certain to become POWs within days "Some begged and implored, most simply watched stonily, so that we felt bitterly ashamed".<sup>65</sup> Kippenberger's unit passed through the armed cordon on the beach which had orders to shoot anyone trying to break through and Kippenberger counted his men. In the belief that "there is always room for one more" Kippenberger "bullied the cordon officer" into taking a few more men from the beach, mostly from Divisional HQ.<sup>66</sup>

The battalion embarked on the Australian destroyer *Napier* and sailed for Alexandria. The destroyer was bombed en route and suffered severe damage; the bombing interrupted Kippenberger's shaving and he joined in a line passing ammunition to the ship's gunners. On board Bill Glue experienced his "biggest fright of the war when a bomb went between the rail and the deck of our boat when she heeled over to dodge a stick of bombs".<sup>67</sup> Another near miss caused one of the ship's boilers to explode. At one point forty-three bombs were dropped around the ship but all were near misses.<sup>68</sup> It was a very narrow escape but the *Napier* managed to limp into Alexandria Harbour.

20 Battalion, all armed and clean shaven, formed up on the docks as if on parade; the RSM handed the battalion over to the Adjutant who handed it on to Kippenberger "and we marched off, I stumping hatless and very proudly at the head and everyone on the wharf saluting".<sup>69</sup> As he said later, "It was one of the proudest moments of my life".<sup>70</sup> That evening the last embarkation from Crete arrived and Kippenberger rushed down to meet the rest of his battalion "and met

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<sup>63</sup> Inglis, Comments by Major General Inglis on Dan Davin's Draft History of the Crete Campaign, pp.571-629, Inglis Papers Inwards Correspondence 17 April-12 June 1951, MS 0421 Folder 41 ATL.

<sup>64</sup> Major B.I. Bassett, unpublished volumes of letters to his wife, Vol II, p.441, Glue Papers.

<sup>65</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.76.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Glue, "Wartime Reminiscences", *op. cit.*

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.77.

<sup>70</sup> Townley interview, *op. cit.*

them openly crying”.<sup>71</sup> Kippenberger’s battered battalion was home.

Why Crete was lost has been the subject of intense debate amongst historians who have singled out a number of various commanders for the ultimate responsibility for losing Crete. Many historians have commented that the German forces would have lost the battle for Crete if the military commanders at Maleme had been more competent, forceful and daring. Both Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew of 22 Battalion and Brigadier Hargest have been singled out and blame for the loss of Crete placed firmly on their shoulders. Certainly this is the viewpoint expressed by Michael King, who blames Andrew, and by Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Covell, who in their recent biography of Freyberg put the blame primarily on Hargest.<sup>72</sup> Hargest’s reputation never recovered from his inaction on 20 May although his subsequent performance on Crete was “superb under the circumstances and did more to retrieve the position, to stave off a complete fiasco, than he will ever get credit for”.<sup>73</sup> This has largely been ignored by the military historians. Other writers have indirectly criticised Brigadier Puttick for his failure to allow the counterattack planned by Brigadier Inglis to proceed as soon as Maleme looked threatened.<sup>74</sup> As GOC Crete, Freyberg too has come in for a deal of criticism and many other commanders at the time felt that Freyberg had “bungled his task in Crete”.<sup>75</sup>

Freyberg was never fully happy about his performance in Crete and experienced considerable concern about it.<sup>76</sup> So concerned was Freyberg about his performance on Crete that it came to dominate his conversation with his colleagues after the war and he exerted considerable pressure on the official historians and series editors of the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia

<sup>71</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p.78.

<sup>72</sup> M. King, *New Zealanders at War*, Auckland, 1981, p.196. L. Barber and J. Tonkin-Covell, *Freyberg: Churchill's Salamander*, Auckland, 1991.

<sup>73</sup> W. E. Murphy to McClymont, letter, 11 May 1948, McClymont Papers, WA II 3/16b, NZNA.

<sup>74</sup> Sandford, *op. cit.*, p.68.

<sup>75</sup> Notes of interview with Brigadier W. E. Cremer, 30 July 1944. Gavin Long Notes 55; notes of interview with Major-General G. A. Vasey, 21 April 1944, Gavin Long Notes 44, quoted in Horner, *High Command op. cit.*, p.108.

<sup>76</sup> W. G. Stevens, *Freyberg VC: The Man 1939-1945*, *op. cit.*, pp.108-9.

to get their story of Crete right, according to his own perception.

Kippenberger, in 1950, in his role as Editor-in-Chief of New Zealand's Official History, summed up the performances of the New Zealand commanders:

Question now arising of limits and manner of criticism in an Official History. Story of Maleme and commanders 5 Bde (Hargest) and 22 Bn Andrew, working out very badly indeed. Hargest's inertia, flabbiness and lack of grip dreadfully evident. Puttick not much better. Inglis all talk — as now — and nothing done. In fact we are back to the opinion that I was blazing with when we got back to Egypt. Johnnie Allen, Dittmer and Jim Burrows coming out very well thank goodness. We will have to walk delicately but firmly. ... Incidentally I am rather pleased to reflect that George Clifton would have improved our command in Crete. At least he wouldn't have sat thinking all day.<sup>77</sup>

He described the New Zealand performance as "spiritless" and firmly believed that Crete "was lost because of the inept conduct of the defence".<sup>78</sup> Kippenberger was left "with a strong impression" that Crete would have been different if some senior commanders had gone forward to observe the action.<sup>79</sup> In this number Kippenberger included Freyberg who he noted "didn't go forward at all!"<sup>80</sup> Kippenberger, who had fought in the crucial Maleme-Canea sector, like most other writers reflecting on Crete, tended to forget that Freyberg as GOC Creforce had to deal with battles raging at Maleme, Retimo, Heraklion, Georgeopolis — in fact over half of the island. Where was Freyberg to go forward? Surely not to all the battle locations? It was better in this case to stay at his Force HQ, and, as will be demonstrated later, it was not easy for Freyberg to remain in his headquarters during a battle.

However, many positive elements emerged from the campaign. The cooperation between Australian and New Zealand forces was very high and the performances of most of the troops involved was first-class. It is generally

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<sup>77</sup> Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 1 December 1950, WA II 11/6, NZNA.

<sup>78</sup> Kippenberger to Stewart, letter, 25 February 1954 IA 181/32/6, Glue Papers.

<sup>79</sup> Kippenberger, notes on Results of Marshall Critique, 29 March 1949, War History: Men Against Fire, IA 77/35, NZNA.

<sup>80</sup> Kippenberger, comment on Appendix B, Report on Whether Divisional Control Worked Satisfactory, WA II 8/10 Part 2, NZNA.



accepted that the soldiers of both dominions never fought better or harder than they did at Crete and that “no blame for the loss of the island can fall on the rank and file”.<sup>81</sup> It was, however, mostly a case of lions led by chickens.

Another positive to emerge from the campaign was the performance of Kippenberger while commander of 10 Brigade, a performance which was to earn him a DSO after the battle, but more importantly, marked Kippenberger as a cool and decisive battlefield commander and a commander of potential. His long march to Sphakia while suffering from a sprained foot, surely a mental as well as physical challenge, demonstrated the quality of robustness identified as necessary for command. Other New Zealand junior commanders had excelled, although none as much as Kippenberger, who had been the only senior New Zealand commander to go forward and observe the action.

Surprisingly, Kippenberger did not escape severe criticism for his performance on Crete either, despite winning his first DSO for the Galatos action; an action in which he demonstrated, according to the citation, “a complete disregard of danger, an energetic aggressive spirit, and considerable tactical skill in organising counter-attacks and repelling determined enemy attacks”.<sup>82</sup> W. E. Murphy has made some staggering claims regarding Kippenberger’s performance:

Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger thought he did his best soldiering in Crete and the official history written under his editorship could not fail to be affected by this belief. Nor was he likely to let it deal harshly with, for example, his former superior and mentor, “Whisky Bill” Inglis. But the record can scarcely support any other view than that Kippenberger was also afflicted by the fatal passivity which infected almost all senior New Zealand commanders in Crete for the first four days and led to the loss of the battle. The brief counter-attack “Kip” mounted at Galatas on the sixth day was too little and much too late. On the day of the landing when the paratroops were most vulnerable he forbade his front-line troops to move. The enemy, able to assemble his scattered and

<sup>81</sup> Davin, *op. cit.*, p.463.

<sup>82</sup> DSO citation for Lt-Col (A/Col) Howard Karl Kippenberger, recommended by E. Puttick, Brigadier, Comd NZ Troops in Crete, *London Gazette*, 31 October 1941, in Biography of Major General Howard Karl Kippenberger, compiled by Staff Sergeant Grayland 17 May 1944, DA 406/97 NZNA.

shaken forces, was duly grateful.<sup>83</sup>

Murphy has ignored several key factors in this criticism. 10 Brigade was a composite brigade incapable of infantry tactics. Despite this, on several occasions, Kippenberger requested permission to launch a counterattack but Puttick refused to do so. When Puttick changed his mind that evening Kippenberger was not informed of the attack until it was underway. What Murphy has ignored in the Galatos counterattack, "too little, too late", is that the attack was successful and cleared the town of enemy, stabilising the front line. Kippenberger was disappointed at the time that the Galatos success was not reinforced and made the foundation for a larger counterattack the next morning and he firmly believed that a general counterattack was possible up to 25 May and had "pleaded hard enough for it".<sup>84</sup>

The soldier-poet Les Cleveland has also been critical of Kippenberger. His poem *Galatas* opens with:

The young hate the old  
Yet stumble after them.  
*Stand for New Zealand!*  
Yelled Kippenberger,  
Country lawyer turned Brigade Commander  
And conveyed ten thousand miles  
To practise heroics  
On a deadly Cretan hillside.

The attack on Galatos is vividly described in the poem, but the poem ends with:

Kippenberger in a tarpaulin-covered trench,  
By candlelight tallies his dead  
And bends again, calculatingly  
Over the labyrinth of Crete.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Murphy, "Crete — New Zealand Command Failures", p.28.

<sup>84</sup> Kippenberger to Lieutenant Colonel M. Forrester, 6 October, year unreadable, IA 181/32/6, Glue Papers.

<sup>85</sup> Les Cleveland, *Galatas*, in Les Cleveland (ed.), *The Iron Hand: New Zealand Soldier's Poems from World War II*, Wellington, 1979, p.28.

The tone of the poem is somewhat ambiguous but its anti-war message is clear. Also clear is the condemnation of Kippenberger's heroics which had led to the death of so many.

These criticisms are isolated ones and most writers have acknowledged Kippenberger's performance on Crete as the finest of all the New Zealand officers there. While having "a poor view of the NZ in Crete", a senior Australian officer did concede that "Kippenburger [*sic*] was *the* bloke there".<sup>86</sup> A Sergeant in his battalion recorded after Crete:

Men of the 20 Bn have a lot to thank their Commanding Officer for. Our casualties were high and would have been greater still but for him. The total disregard he had for his own personal safety when times were grim and things looked black. The sterling example he set to all ranks of what it really takes and is expected under all circumstances of those who consider themselves front line soldiers. The thorough training he had been responsible for us receiving. And last but not least the high standard of discipline he had set and rigidly maintained all the time he commanded 20 Bn.<sup>87</sup>

This is high praise indeed from one of the rank usually the most critical of officers in general and COs in particular. It is also significant to note that for many years after the war the village priest of Galatos kept a photograph of Kippenberger hanging on the wall of his house.<sup>88</sup> In the battle to hold Crete, with so many chickens amongst the senior commanders, Puttick, Hargest on 20 May, and Andrew included, Kippenberger was definitely numbered amongst the lions!

The cost of the battle for Crete was very high for all parties involved. Total losses for the Allies numbered 15 743 of which 1 751 had been killed or died of wounds.

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<sup>86</sup> Lt Col T. G. Walker, interview with Gavin Long, Melbourne, 26 January 1950, his emphasis, Gavin Long notebook, 2/114 AWM 67.

<sup>87</sup> Sgt H.W. Kimber, Account of Crete during retreat, Glue Papers.

<sup>88</sup> Allison to Borthwick, letter, 10 September 1954, quoted in Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.149.

New Zealand losses numbered 671 killed, 967 wounded and 2180 POWs. The Royal Navy also lost over 2 000 men in the evacuations.<sup>89</sup>

German losses too were very heavy but were grossly inflated by early post-battle reports. Freyberg's report to the New Zealand Minister of Defence is typical and estimated German losses at 4 000 killed, 2 000 drowned at sea and 11 000 wounded making a total of 17 000 casualties.<sup>90</sup> German sources reflected some confusion over the casualty figures for Crete which Davin states were about 4 000 killed and 2 600 wounded.<sup>91</sup>

From a total of 23 120 men committed to the battle, if all the German units had been at full strength in May 1941,<sup>92</sup> these casualty figures must have seriously alarmed the German High Command considering they had lost only 8 400 men in Poland in a campaign that had lasted over a month and where the enemy had numbered some 40 Polish divisions!<sup>93</sup> The Germans had paid heavily for Crete and would never again use their paratroops en masse in airborne attacks on defended positions.<sup>94</sup> Crete had convinced Hitler that "The day of parachute troops is over".<sup>95</sup> Conversely, for the British Army the day of the parachute troops was just beginning.

Crete added another name to the Anzac battle honours in both dominions and once again reflected both nations' obsessions with "glorious failures". The campaign mirrored Gallipoli in many respects: it was military disaster but the troops of both nations had performed remarkably well against all the odds. For the Allied troops who fought there, the battle of Crete was a tragedy and a waste. Freyberg bemoaned this fact to the NZ CGS:

It is a great pity that a Division such as ours should have had to take part in two such really bad shows. No one likes talking about failures, but the High Command will have a difficult job explaining away the losses we

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<sup>89</sup> Davin, *op. cit.*, p.486.

<sup>90</sup> Freyberg, Report on Battle for Crete, p.85, WA II 8/11, NZNA.

<sup>91</sup> Davin, *op. cit.*, p.486.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, p.488.

<sup>93</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Second World War. An Illustrated History*, Harmondsworth, 1976, p.39.

<sup>94</sup> Davin, *op. cit.*, p.464.

<sup>95</sup> Hitler to Student, quoted in B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*, London, 1983, p.242.

have suffered when so little was gained.<sup>96</sup>

Some historians have disputed that nothing was gained from Crete and have argued that the result was “almost the best thing that could have happened”.<sup>97</sup> While not going to this extreme, Nick Hammond, an SOE operative on Crete and later an eminent professor of Classics, believes that “It really was a blessing we lost it because to hold Malta and Crete would have placed a terrific strain on our resources”.<sup>98</sup> What really counted in the long run was the security of Malta — the ever present stiletto in Rommel’s back and the cause of his ultimate defeat at Alam Halfa. Hammond believes it was extremely doubtful that Britain had the resources to hold *both* Malta and Crete in 1941. It is an assessment Kippenberger reached as well: “Malta was unquestionably the key to the Mediterranean, Crete in German hands was only an embarrassment”.<sup>99</sup> As Wavell was forced to open yet another campaign in Syria immediately after Crete it is a very plausible argument.

Kippenberger’s 20 Battalion had suffered heavily during the Greece and Crete campaigns as had all the New Zealand infantry battalions. Only 12 officers of the 40 who had set out for Greece in April 1941 and only 300 out of the original 851 men of the battalion returned to Egypt.<sup>100</sup> The battalion would have to be rebuilt and retrained under Kippenberger, now a seasoned campaigner and the rising star of the New Zealand Division. Kippenberger had faced his most severe test as a commander to date. He wrote of Crete: “It was a very tough affair, very tough indeed and our losses heavy. We were pounded as on an anvil by the German Air Force, bombed and blitzed and bombed and bombed”.<sup>101</sup> On Crete Kippenberger had performed with distinction and demonstrated that he had potential for higher command. He had been well forward with the action and his

<sup>96</sup> Freyberg to Major General Duigan, letter, 4 July 1941, C798, WA 8/0, NZNA.

<sup>97</sup> I.S.O. Playfair *et al*, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East* Vol II, London, 1956, p.148.

<sup>98</sup> Nicholas Hammond, interview, Armidale NSW, 11 September 1992.

<sup>99</sup> Galley proofs, “Student — 4th Article by Kippenberger”, n.d., Inglis Papers, Central Commission Courts: Student Trial, 1946, MS 0421, Folder 62, ATL.

<sup>100</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.78-9.

<sup>101</sup> *Kippenberger -- Letters from a Soldier*, T 214, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, recorded 1959.

quick thinking and command abilities had prevented a route of panicking New Zealand troops while the counterattack on Galatos had been a stunning success; one of the few high points of the battle. Throughout the difficult withdrawal to Sphakia Kippenberger had kept an iron grip on 20 Battalion when many other units had disintegrated. It had been a hard test of command, but greater tests and even greater disasters lay ahead.