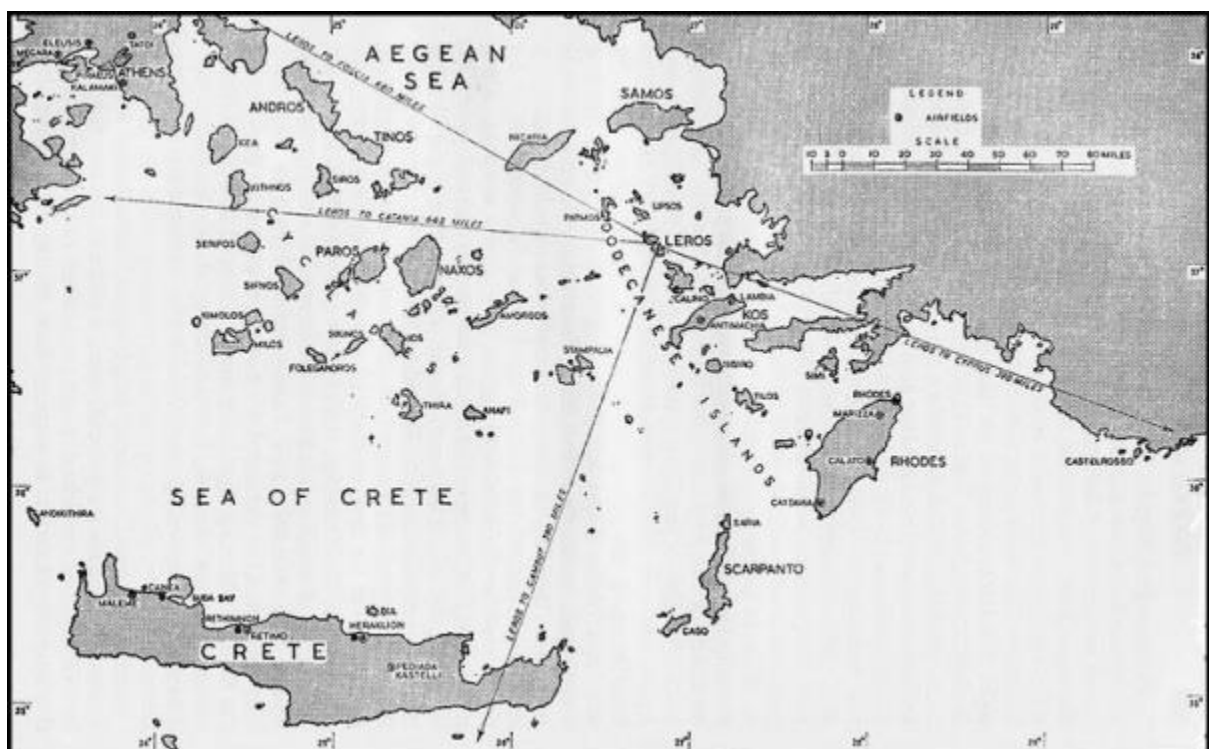


The Origins of Operation '*Cordite*'.

The Rhodes to Nowhere.

Layforce and Middle East Commando.



Within the sphere of Operation '*Mandibles*' (i) lay many unrealized plans for the occupation of the Dodecanese Island group, held by the Italians, and designed to bring the Turkish nation into the war on the side of the British and her Commonwealth.

Planning for these operations began in late 1940 and by December of that year Gen. Sir

James Marshall-Cornwall had arrived in Ankara as head of the new Military Mission and it was further proposed to court the Turkish with a visit from the then C.I.G.S. Gen. Sir John Dill and the Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden.

Although the British looked favourably on this operation Churchill himself favoured Operation Workshop, the occupation of the island of Pantelleria which lay in the Mediterranean Sea between the Italian island of Sicily and the coast of North Africa. Although not in the sphere of Mandibles this was the choice of Churchill until he was finally convinced on the 20th January 1941 by Adm. Sir Andrew Cunningham that losses to shipping would be far too expensive in both ships and men and at the proper time all efforts would pursue the agenda of '*Mandibles*'.

Within the sphere of Mandibles lay Operation Blunt, a raid to be conducted by 50 (Middle East) Commando on the island of Kasos on the 25th February 1941. The reconnaissance of the beach was carried out by H.M.S. Rorqual under the command of Lt. Cdr. Ronald Hugh Dewhurst assisted by Lt. Cdr. Nigel Clogstoun Willmott who had great knowledge of the area but not until the morning of the 28th in fact the submarine never left Alexandria until the 26th for her 12th War Patrol and followed this reconnaissance with a further one on the island of Scarpanto before returning to her base on

the 7th March. Already the operation was on the back foot and never took place.

Operation '*Pitch*' (i) was all part of Operation '*Abstention*' the attack on the island of Kastelorizo to be undertaken between the 24th and 28th February.

Although this operation took place it was not the success it was hoped to be, in reality it was a bit of a dog's dinner and came in for some quite scathing criticism.

Operation Cascade was another deception plan born from the fertile mind of Dudley Wrangle and would employ the first incarnation of the Special Air Service.

The Special Air Service or to give it its full title 1st Special Air Service Brigade was formed up at Perham Down on the edge of Salisbury Plain in June 1940, Perham Down is the name the villagers use although its real name is Tidworth and lies six miles north-west of Andover in Hampshire. The men were drawn from volunteers originally for the newly formed Commandos, but the Prime Minister Winston Churchill wanted an airborne force formed and so on daily orders boards the call went out for volunteers willing to engage in airborne duties. Those selected formed up in the army camp at Perham Down which had in existence there since being built during the Great War in 1915 here they were split into two distinct groups, one would engage in parachuting whilst

two others would train in gliders and began their initial training before moving to R.A.F. Ringway near Manchester to commence parachute training. Here at the No.1 Parachute Training School, they began to learn their new trade, firstly jumping from balloons and then from converted Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bombers. On completion the Brigade which consisted of three Battalions each of five-hundred troops, the three Battalions were numbered,

1 SAS (Parachutists) further broke down to ten platoons each with fifty all ranks each platoon suffixed by the letters A to K.

2 SAS (Glider) and 3 SAS (Glider) were deemed fit to serve overseas and duly left for the Middle East late in 1940 arriving in Egypt on the 30th December 1940. On arrival in Suez they quickly moved on to Lydda and then to Latrun in Palestine where they were billeted in a Yeomanry Camp, here they began acclimatisation and engaged in light training before moving to a camp south of Amman at Bayir Wells in the Trans-Jordan and began training again in earnest.

On the 28th April 1941 now fully trained and conditioned for active combat, the men of the Brigade were sent to Crete which would become their centre of operations, it was hoped that they would engage the enemy by attacking their Lines of Communication in Libya and to attack the enemy in the Dodecanese islands.

A fictitious operation was planned with the invasion of Karpathos which was created to cover the real plan that of the attack on Rhodes, a further deception was that of the S.A.S.'s attack on an airfield in the south of the island, plans for a raid to take out Graziani's H.Q. were also worked on.

One of the main aims of Cascade was creating a false order of battle something that in the end paid dividends as captured documents would later show that the Axis believed there were 40% more tanks in theatre and 45% more infantry.

Brigadier Dudley Wrangel Clarke R.A. who had been commissioned in 1916 and later served with the R.F.C. before returning to the R.A. at the war's end and between the two wars had served in Palestine was sent to the Middle East at request of General Sir Archibald Wavell, arriving there on the 18th December 1940, previously Clarke had been the driving force behind the creation of the Commandos along with Churchill and at a later date he would be involved with the creation of the American Rangers but for now Wavell wanted him for something else.

Deception, strategic deception, Clarke was given the job of coming up with a deception plan which would convince the Italians that there was indeed a British Airborne Brigade in theatre and would soon be engaging the enemy.

A further operation which appears never to have gotten past the '*here's an idea*' stage was Operation Armature.

Whilst all this was going on following the success of Wavell's forces in the Western Desert under Richard O'Connor during Operation '*Compass*' plans were made for the invasion of the island of Sicily, Operation '*Influx*' (to be later re-designated as Operation '*Whipcord*' proposed to commence after the successful completion of Operations '*Crusader*', '*Acrobat*', '*Gymnast*', later '*Super Gymnast*') which was hoped to begin in the spring of 1941.

All efforts were now to concentrate on the proposed invasion of the island of Rhodes,

Operation '*Cordite*', to deny the use of the island from the Germans who they expected to occupy and then using it as a Luftwaffe base against them but first though, they would need the men.

By July 1937 the British Government had come to regard Mussolini's Italy as potentially no longer a reliable friend and was indeed a potential future enemy, the French were slowly leaning in a similar direction. They asked the British in early 1939 if the island of Cyprus could be made ready for any actions that needed to be taken against Italy in time of war, a war which for all the previous paper waving was imminent. They fore-saw that the island could be used for advanced air patrols of the

Dodecanese islands and to add depth to their own forward airfields in Syria, at Beirut.

The British were not too keen on the idea of developing the island but, agreed that the airfields at Nicosia and Larnaca should be upgraded, and fuel and ammunition storage should be developed, and access made available to the French.

In March 1940 at a conference between the French and British held in Aleppo it was asked what operations were to be undertaken to neutralize the threat from the Dodecanese islands and Rhodes in particular, and what forces would be made available if and when the situation arose.

These questions were put to the CIGS in London on the 9th April, there was no conclusive answers forthcoming regarding any operations and that no additional manpower was available.

The French said that they could provide three Battalions of troops and shipping if the British could provide aircraft and anti-aircraft cover. The French also stated that the Turks would see this as a positive action and could help decide the Turks into throwing their lot in with the potential Allies.

As the Allies waited for the Italians to decide whether to enter the war, they knew that the Italians had recently reinforced their troops in Libya, Albania, and the Dodecanese along

with Italian troops sent to their East African Colonies.

With the situation in France taking a turn for the worst and the eventual French capitulation and creation of Vichy France and, the Turks now being deeply concerned about any involvement with the shrinking Allies especially if their Air-Force suffered heavy losses, aircraft they needed in their defence of Thrace against any Axis aggression that may occur.

Before the French forces in Syria joined up with Vichy France, they were still looking at the neutralization of the perceived threat from the Dodecanese and again stressing in particular the island of Rhodes.

The French were willing still to undertake this venture and asked the British for assistance and if given they promised to help with the defence of Egypt by providing a division of infantry to be deployed for the defence of the Canal Zone. They also promised to send bomber and fighter squadrons to Egypt to help the R.A.F.

Nothing would come of this as the French in Syria finally allied themselves to the new Vichy Government in Metropolitan France, those few troops which were on Cyprus were shipped to Syria although a few pledged their allegiance to the Free French so for now it was left in the hands of the British to conduct any

operations in the Dodecanese hence the
'Mandibles' plans.

Although since the Italian entry into the war in June 1940 had kept the Middle East forces busy with Cyrenaica, East Africa and the Mediterranean and Red Sea they did on occasion make advances on the Dodecanese.

In September 1940 after part of the British fleet had delivered stores to the island of Malta on their return to Alexandria ships from the 3rd Cruiser Squadron, the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious and her escorting destroyers sailed north of Crete and aircraft attacked two airfields on Rhodes, they lost four Fairey Swordfish in the attack, and the cruisers shelled positions on the island of Scarpanto, returning safely to Alexandria on the 5th September. The island of Leros was also attacked at a later date.

The Italians retaliated with four air raids during September on Haifa in Palestine. Their target was the oil facilities, and some damage was done.

The Italians now attempted to invade Greece and the face of the war in the theatre now changed.

By now it was expected by the British that the Germans would at some-time soon make their presence felt and so Operation '*Workshop*' came into being. It was planned that the Special Service troops to be employed on the operation

be shipped out as part of convoy code named 'Excess'. It was planned that once the occupation of Pantelleria was completed the Commandos would be relieved by troops stationed in readiness on Malta, sadly though there were not enough troops on the island or even enough anti-aircraft guns or troops to man them either and it was judged that the operation was susceptible to failure through the expected intervention of the German Luftwaffe. It was proposed then to send the Special Service troops the long way round the Cape to Egypt where it was hoped they could be employed on other operations ideally the capture of the islands of Stampalia and Scarpanto, Churchill though objected to this arguing that Rhodes should be the first choice if this route was taken but still holding out for Workshop to go ahead. No further progress or decisions was made on these proposals.

Whilst this was happening the R.A.F. and F.A.A. carried out attacks on the Dodecanese throughout November and December, the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* launched another air attack on Rhodes on the 17th December this time with no losses all the time though it was feared that the Germans could and would use the bases here to refuel their aircraft and attack Haifa, the Canal Zone and also as far afield as Cyrenaica. Therefore, the attack on Rhodes was gaining greater importance. The C.I.G.S. were still though opposed to this even though the Prime Minister himself fully endorsed the

operations but not as some proposed, small scale '*pin prick raids*' he wanted Rhodes.

By the 20th January 1941 the Defence Committee had finally deemed Operation '*Workshop*' as impracticable due to the appearance of the Luftwaffe and Cunningham's claims of shipping losses and also, the Excess convoy had already sailed, the Dodecanese was back on the cards.

Plans for the capture of Kasos and Kastelorizo came to fruition and with the arrival of Layforce expected in March 1941 plans for the capture by them of Scarpanto and Rhodes went ahead although Scarpanto was quickly dropped and in the opinion of Churchill the Rhodes operation took on even greater importance than before.

Aircraft operating from the islands had now dropped mines in the Suez Canal increasing the threat to shipping and the continual threat from the Dodecanese forced the British to station more Squadrons to defend Alexandria, the Delta and Suez and the Canal thus depleting their strength in the Western Desert. But with the situation in Greece deteriorating overshadowing the victories over the Italians in East Africa the proposed operation was now again under threat.

Aircraft based at Benghazi launched an attack on the canal on the 30th January 1941 and

succeeded in laying many mines which caused the Royal navy a great deal of difficulty dealing them and keeping the canal open, once Operation Compass neutralized the threat from here on February the canal was for a short time a safer place.

March 1941 saw further Luftwaffe attacks on the Canal Zone which led to the Suez Canal being closed to all shipping temporarily as the British made to clear the canal of the German mines.

These troops then were on route from the U.K. the men of Layforce, made up of 7 Commando, 8 (Guards) Commando and 11 (Scottish) Commando, along with A Troop now part of the Guards Commando from 3 Commando and the Folbot Section sailing in the converted Glen Ships the Glengyle, Glenearn and Glenroy.

These 3 Commandos would become A, B and C Battalions whilst once 52 Commando returned from East Africa, they would amalgamate with 50 Commando and become D Battalion, respectively.

The recorded strength of the three Battalions on landing were A Battalion, thirty-six officers and five hundred forty-one o/r's, B Battalion, thirty-eight officers and five hundred-two o/r's, C Battalion thirty-five officers and four hundred ninety-eight o/r/s. The Folbot Section or Troop had two officers and twelve o/r's. On amalgamation when 50 and 52 Commandos became D Battalion it had a

recorded strength of thirty-six officers and five hundred thirty-two o/r's. The combined strength being one hundred-forty-six officers and two thousand ninety-one o/r's.

Once the men of Layforce were in theatre they would become part of 6th Infantry Division and operate as a Brigade under the overall command of Maj. Gen. John Fullerton Evetts.

An Operational Order, No.1 can be found in the War Diary of A Battalion dated 3rd March 1941 which details much of the operation although most of what follows dealing with the landing comes from this much of what it says must be treated with a pinch of salt as it was for training purposes only, exactly why an illiterate Don R should deliver copy No.79 to the Duke of Aosta must be seen as well quite simply British humour. Copy No.78 can be found on the Union Club Notice Board in Alexandria.

The plans call for a fourth Commando to be deployed, No.13, although there were plans to raise a further 3 Commandos in the Middle East the plans came to nothing, and we can assume that the role of No. 13 would be played by the combined 50/52 Commando as D Battalion.

Further troops were required, a battalion each for A, B and C Battalions, these were to be drawn from 44th (Lowland) Infantry Brigade. This Brigade belonged to the 15th (Scottish) Division a territorial mirror of the 52nd Division. It was though not in theatre and

never would be although the Division which was formed on the 2nd September 1939 was downgraded to Lower Establishment after the threat of invasion of the British Isles had diminished and many men from this Division were sent to both the Middle and Far East as drafts, perhaps then the bulk of the 44th arrived here although their Anti-Tank Company which is recorded in the Orbat did not as this was disbanded well before these plans appear to have been made.

The Battalions in question were the 6th and 7th Kings Own Scottish Borderers and the 8th Royal Scots.

In reality it would have most likely have been troops drawn from the 6th Division, formed on the 3rd November 1939 by the renumbering of the 7th Division it never received its full quota of troops and would eventually be dissolved during June 1940 with the Divisions H.Q. moving to Mersa Matruh as the H.Q. of the Western Desert Force.

With the prospect of action in the Dodecanese islands the Division was reformed on the 17th February 1941 and would include the 14th and 16th Brigades. It was never fated to see action as a division but rather as Brigades or part of, in the various other areas of operations in theatre.

It had been hoped that as a Division they would garrison the Island of Crete after moving from Mersah Matruh and relieving those troops on the

island who had been evacuated from Greece, shipping though was at the time not available and the eventual German invasion put an end to that although 14th Brigade under the command of Brigadier Chappel (1st Beds and Herts, 2nd Black Watch (Royal Highlanders) 2nd York and Lancs. and 2nd Leicester's) were part of the troops defending the Heraklion sector on the island.

Two companies of 1st Essex became part of '*Hab Force*' who helped to relieve the R.A.F. base at Habbaniya during the short-lived Iraq crisis.

The 16th Brigade under Brigadier C.E.N. Lomax (2nd Kings Own Royal Regiment (Lancs.)), 2nd Queens Royal Regiment (West Surrey) and 1st Essex, 2 Companies) was lent to Lavarack's Australian 7th Division for Operation '*Exporter*' the invasion of Syria.

A third Brigade would be added the 23rd (initially known as the Canal Area Brigade, it had been dispersed in the canal area as part of the H.Q. sub-Area Troops) later when the Division was renumbered again this time as the 70th Division who would see active service within the Tobruk perimeter replacing the Australian troops before being posted to the Far East with troops becoming part of the Chindit Columns, it would at times include battalions of the Essex Regiment, Durham Light Infantry, The Buffs and the Border Regiment amongst others.

Further troops were required these being men drawn from the 1st R.T.R. (although the plans found in 7 Commandos War Diary state 5 R.T.R.

Rea Leakey in his book *Leakey's Luck* states that his regiment were engaged in amphibious training during March and early April 1941 both B and C Squadrons appear on the Orbat.

5 R.T.R. were though in theatre and had previously seen action in France in the summer of 1940 and can be assumed I believe to have played some role in the proposed operation.

As it was a Combined Operations project air cover would be provided by squadrons based on the islands of Cyprus and Crete.

On Cyprus RAF Nicosia was in the process of being constructed and would provide the means to base two Squadrons, 250 Squadron flying Curtis Tomahawks were in theatre by the 1st April and the Hawker Hurricanes of 213 Squadron would arrive later but by this time the climate in the theatre had changed dramatically. The airfield though would not become operational until either June or July so it would have to be the summer and not early spring before the operation could feasibly be contemplated.

Crete was not much better, the RAF bases at Malame and Heraklion still required further construction work and only the latter would be able to support all types of aircraft, there were two Landing Strips in case of emergencies based at Retimo and Pediada on Kastelli.

Short Sunderland's of 230 Squadron operating from Suda Bay could provide reconnaissance whilst at Malame which was initially a Fleet Air Arm station but was taken over by the RAF housed 805 FAA Squadron flying Fairey Fulmars. Other Squadrons available were 203 Squadron and their Bristol Blenheim's and 80 Squadrons Hawker Hurricanes. Other aircraft from 30, 33 and 112 Squadrons were also available on the island which included Gloster Gladiators, Hawker Hurricanes and Brewster Buffalo's, many of these though were in a poor state of repair. With a round trip of close on six-hundred miles the fighters from Crete would have been of little value so it would possibly be safe to presume an aircraft carrier most likely the H.M.S. Illustrious would have been a definite requirement for the safety of the attacking force.

A large naval presence was also required this being under the command of Rear Admiral H.T. Baillie-Groham once the captain of H.M.S. Ramillies was also required, these included the three Glen ships and two further troop transports along with a Destroyer Flotilla of five ships plus a further two attached, the names in the orders for the ships are all fictitious although the destroyer flotilla the 5th was not, a close support vessel most likely one of the insect class monitors was also required. Further naval forces in support were also required these most likely being drawn from the 15th Cruiser Squadron.

A small group of men would make up the last element of requirements, these would be the afore mentioned Lt. Cdr. Willmott and Lt. Roger Courtney, Kings Royal Rifle Corps who had created the Folbot Section which would later go on to become the Special Boat Section and later Squadron and L/Cpl. James Sherwood of the Royal Army Service Corps. They would provide the reconnaissance of the beaches in the area where the troops were proposed to be landed.

Willmott was fully aware of the plans for the Rhodes operation but expressed deep concern, a concern that if not investigated could and would have led to a disaster. The naval charts used to plan the operation were wrong. Willmott took his concerns higher and explained that the charts were incorrect and could lead to severe casualties like those suffered during the Gallipoli landings some twenty-five years previously in April 1915.

He managed to convince the higher ups that to avoid anything similar then a reconnaissance of the beaches was desperately required. As of then they did not know about sand bars, and underwater defences, sunken barbed wire, if these defences did in-fact exist and went unknown then the landing troops were likely to flounder on the approaches, it would fail he told them and was able to prove that the charts were all but useless which led them to approve of the required reconnaissance once Roger Courtney was on the scene.

There were other things to consider before the operation could take place, obviously the reconnaissance but also one of deception and so enter Dudley Wrangel Clarke.

Brig. Dudley Wrangel Clarke R.A. who had been commissioned in 1916 and later served with the R.F.C. before returning to the R.A. at the war's end and between the two wars had served in Palestine was sent to the Middle East at request of Gen. Sir Archibald Wavell, arriving there on the 18th December 1940, previously Clarke had been the driving force behind the creation of the Commandos along with Churchill and at a later date he would be involved with the creation of the American Rangers but for now Wavell wanted him for something else.

Clarke also served briefly in Abyssinia before joining Wavell where he had created several ghost armies to confuse the Italians, his creed would become,

'What do you want the enemy to do?'

A diary had been taken from a captured Italian officer showed that there was fear amongst the Italians that the British would engage in airborne operations against them, Intelligence thus required a plan.

Deception, strategic deception, Clarke was given the job of producing a deception plan which would convince the Italians that there

was indeed a British Airborne Brigade in theatre and would soon be engaging the enemy.

He was to create a regional organization for MI 9 with the working title of '*Advanced Headquarters A Force*', the 'A' standing for Airborne, originally based in a converted bathroom within G.H.Q. before taking over two small flats at No.6 Sharia Kasr-el-Nil and worked with a small staff two officers and ten other ranks, here began to put into operation his deception plan, Operation '*Abeam*' on April 4th 1941.

Previously deception operations for the proposed invasion of the island of Rhodes in the Dodecanese in Italian hands since the Italo / Turkish war of 1911/12 (and had seen the Italians colonize the group at one time up to seventeen-thousand civilians inhabited the islands but by the time war broke out this number had been reduced to around eight thousand) had been undertaken, Operation '*Byng Boys*' was a surveillance operation from neutral Turkey of the island by a powerful telescope on loan from the R.A.F. based in a Turkish manned post on a rocky outcrop, the telescope could quite easily see the island some sixteen miles in the distance.

Operation '*Cordite Cover Plan*' was implemented to try and convince the Italians to move troops from Rhodes to Scarpanto which lay between Rhodes and Crete and further, to try to get the

Italians to redeploy their remaining troops to the north of the island. This plan was never put into operation and was cancelled by the end of March 1941.

Operation '*Cascade*' saw the creation of a bogus order of battle which saw the inclusion of the S.A.S. Brigade, the 10th Armoured Division to be deployed in the Western Desert and the 7th Infantry Division which was to garrison the island of Cyprus.

Lastly, Operation Dolphin was another intelligence gathering operation conducted from a small ketch sailing in the vicinity of the island.

What then of the opposition?

The Italian forces which garrisoned the Dodecanese group of islands were drawn from the 50th Infantry Division '*Regina*' and would have a presence on many of the islands although some would be small consisting of communications only, the bulk of the Division was garrisoned on the island of Rhodes the largest island within the group.

The Division contained the 9th and 10th Infantry Regiments each containing four infantry battalions, two mortar companies and a battery of artillery for further support. Also, within their ranks were the 201st and 301st C.C.N.N. Battalions better known as the '*Blackshirts*'

including a machine gun company and two mortar companies.

Three artillery groups of the 50th Artillery Regiment '*Regina*', the 35th and 36th Coastal Defence Artillery Groups, 50th Mortar Battalion with their 81mm mortars, 50th Machine Gun Company, 23rd and 50th Anti-Tank Companies armed with the 47/32 anti-tank guns, 91st Pioneer Company, 250th Mixed Company on workshop repair duties, 46th Mixed Telegraph/Radio Signal Company, a Chemical Warfare Company and then the Army Corp detachments to the Division which included the Carabinieri group '*Aegean*' carrying out police duties, Defence Sector '*Dodecanese*' Head Quarters, 18 companies of 8mm machine guns dispersed throughout the islands, 56th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Group, several companies of L3 Tankettes and various elements of engineers.

The coastal defences were considerable and eight batteries covered the islands coastline. The Majorana battery at Mount Smith housed 3 x 152/40mm guns and 1 x 120/50mm. The Melchiori battery at Kalitea had 3 x 152/40mm guns and 1 x 120/35mm. At Kremasti the Bianco battery were equipped with 3 x 120/45mm guns and 1 x 76/17mm. On the west coast of the Lindos promontory was the Dandolo battery with 3 x 152/40mm guns and a 120/55mm. To the east of the same promontory was the Morosini battery with 3 x 152/40mm guns and a 70/17mm. At the southern end of the island on its east coast

stood the Mocenigo battery with 3 x 120/45mm guns and a 70/17mm gun, on the western coast on the southern end of the island was the Bragadino battery with its 4 x 120/45mm guns and a further 70/17mm and lastly at Alimia was the Allmnia battery with 1 x 76/40mm and 2 x 76/50mm guns.

Overall, a well sized force for three Battalions if at full strength and four Commandos roughly equivalent to two full strength Battalions but without any weapon heavier than the Boys Anti-Tank Rifle to take on hence the reason for deception plans.

It was troops from the 10th Regiments 4th Infantry Battalion which had sorted the Commandos out on Kastelorizo in February along with elements of their navy and air force so these defenders would not be the easy touch some people believe the Italian forces to have been.

Their air force would need to be taken care of also, from the nearby island of Leros there was 161 Squadron flying CMRO 43/44's, 162 Squadron flying CR 42's and 163 Squadron flying a

mixture of CRI 32's and CR 42's also Gruppo Succors, the air sea rescue aircraft with 2506 B's.

On Rhodes itself flying from Maritza were the 50 Gruppo BT (201/11 Squadrons) Z 1007 bis with 172 Squadron RT2 1007 bis (Reconnaissance).

At Gadurra was 92 Stormo BT (200/201 Squadrons) flying SM 79's, 41 Gruppo As (204/205 Squadrons) flying SM 84's and 281 Squadron with SM 79's.

Their naval presence included steamers, military tankers, civilian tankers, freezer ships, fishing vessels at least one river boat, Torpedo Boats including the *Libra*, *Lince* and *Lire*, 6 Fast Attack Boats and Destroyers including the *Crispi*.

The Dodecanese islands came under the charge of Governor General Ettore Bastico whilst the 50th Infantry Division '*Regina*' (Queen) came under the command of Gen. Alessandro Piazzoni, as said, it would be a hard nut to crack but before the operation could take place a reconnaissance of the beaches would have to take place.

The Folbot Section under Lt. Roger Courtney was tasked with making a reconnaissance of the chosen beaches on Rhodes for the hopefully impending landings. He had been working with Capt. S.M. Raw of the 1st Submarine Flotilla practising the loading and launching of the Folbots (German for Folding Boat), canoeing, swimming, and the use of an infra-red torch.

He along with Lt. Com. Willmott and L/Cpl. James Sherwood of the R.A.S.C. would carry out in the task; they boarded H.M.S. *Triumph* under Lt. Com. W.J.W. Woods and set sail from Alexandria on what would be her 13th War Patrol

on the 24th March 1941 arriving off Rhodes during the early hours of the 26th. During the morning they made a periscope reconnaissance and later during that night they prepared to launch a Folbot, but the sub's orders were changed, and she was ordered to proceed to the area south of Anti-Milo where it was reported the Italian fleet was heading. After the battle of Matapan which saw the Italians in retreat the Triumph she began the return voyage to Rhodes just before midnight on the 28th.

In the early hours of the 30th March a further periscope reconnaissance was made before the Triumph put out to sea to recharge her batteries. Shortly after midnight the Triumph returned and Courtney and Willmott with the help of Sherwood and several ratings launched the Folbot. The beach they were heading for was situated north of Rhodes harbour which they reached and whilst Courtney stayed with the Folbot Willmott swam to the shore and began investigating the bar, beach, rocks, and sea wall, he took soundings and recorded the positions of the barbed wire defences. He was even able to penetrate some sixty yards inland and checked out the Italian H.Q. at the Hotel des Roses before safely returning to Courtney and in turn the Triumph, all told they had been gone some four hours.

Further periscope reconnaissance's were made during the afternoon of the 31st and just before midnight they launched the Folbot again,

this time they would check out the beach's south of Rhodes, again it was Willmott who made for the beach and again he was able to record and penetrate the defences and was even able to walk along a street. They safely returned after 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours and the Triumph proceeded seaward.

Three other beaches were checked via the periscope on the 2nd April and just before midnight the Folbot was launched again to reconnoitre another of the beaches on the eastern coast of the island. Courtney checked on one beach whilst Willmott took it upon himself to check another before returning to Courtney only to find he was suffering from the effects of cramp and his torch was faulty all the same they made it safely back by 03.30 hrs on the 3rd. They now set off for another periscope reconnaissance but at the target area they grounded at thirty-four feet and whilst attempting to get free the submarine broke surface. HMS Triumph retired from the immediate area and submerged believing that it was possible that they had been sighted, once the position was considered they decided that it would be best to abandon the rest of the mission and return to Alexandria, here they reached safely on the 5th April.

For their achievements on this operation Willmott was awarded the D.S.O. and Courtney received the M.C. and was promoted to Capt.

James Sherwood who had helped with the launching and recovery of the Folbot and its maintenance amongst other things received the knowledge that it was a job well done.

The plans for the proposed invasion of Rhodes appear simple; possibly too simple but then they are only proposed plans.

The Commandos and support battalions would board their transport at Alexandria, 7 Commando and her support battalion on board the Glengyle, 8 (Guards) Commando and the support battalion aboard the Glenroy, 11 (Scottish) Commando with her supporting battalion on board the Glenearn, a further transport would transport the other Commando most likely 50/52 escorted by a flotilla of destroyers, two other attached destroyers and a further transport ship.

The Infantry Landing Ships Glenroy (Capt. (Ret'd) Sir J.F. Paget RN), Glenearn (Capt. (Ret'd) L.B. Hill OBE RN) and the Glengyle (A/Capt. (Ret'd) C.H. Petrie RN) were converted from their original intention of being fast passenger and cargo liners for the far east line of the Glen Line which had been built between the years of 1938 and 1939.

They never saw their original intention as soon after launch they were acquired by the Admiralty as a supply ship before further conversion in mid-1940 to that of Infantry Landing Ships.

They were well protected and had for their fire power eight two pounder pom-poms, four two pounder guns and eight twenty-millimetre Oerlikons. They carried three LCM's and twenty-four LCAs/ILCS (M)'s and were capable of carrying between seven hundred and eleven hundred troops.

They would later in the theatre be employed in an attack at Bardia, transporting and evacuating troops to and from Greece and the evacuation from Crete, and the operation in Syria, '*Exporter*'.

Support on land for the attacking Commandos would be supplied by the tanks of the 7th Armoured Division which by the end of March had been withdrawn from the Western Desert and units from 4th Armoured Brigade, and two Squadrons, B and C respectively, of 1 RTR comprising of Cruiser Mk.1's commonly known as A9's and Vickers Mk. VI's and the Infantry Brigade Anti-Tank Company would be aboard 8 Tank Landing Craft along with 2 Royal Naval Corvettes as escort.

The 4th Armoured Brigade was based around Ishmalia where they were engaged in the new art of amphibious training embarking and disembarking from Landing Craft until the first week of April, with the turn of events caused by the introduction of Rommel into the Western Desert Campaign most of these men were rushed up by both land and sea to Tobruk and took part

in the valiant defence of this soon to be
invested port.

The force would arrive at Phineka Bay, Cyprus
via the Gulf of Adalia under air cover provided
by RAF Cyprus during the hours of daylight.

There were two beaches on Rhodes where the
landing was due to take place and would
commence on the third day of the operation
beginning.

No.'s 11 (Scottish) with her supporting
battalion and 50/52 Commandos would land on
Beach 1 at Trianda Bay. The Scots would land in
eleven A.L.C.'s and one M.L.C., A Company of
her supporting battalion would land in one
M.L.C. whilst 50/52 Commando would land in a
further four M.L.C.'s at 01.00 hrs. on D Day.

At 01.45 hrs. the balance of the supporting
battalion was to land. A further landing would
be made at 02.30 hrs. this would-be transport,
reserve ammunition and stores.

The objectives of the two Commandos once ashore
would be the W/T Station, Shore Battery
Positions, the Submarine Cable Station, and the
harbour in Rhodes town.

The supporting battalion of infantry was to
capture the Italian barracks and the Italian
Military Head Quarters and to take up positions
to block the Trianda-Rhodes Road.

On the second beach at Villa Nova 7 Commando in eleven A.L.C.'s and 1 M.L.C., A Company of her supporting infantry battalion in one M.L.C., and a similar disposition for 8 (Guards) and her supporting infantry would land at 01.00 hrs. The balance of the two supporting infantry battalions would land at 01.45 hrs. and a third landing if needed by 02.30 hrs.

Stores, ammunition, and transport would begin landing at 01.45 hrs. in the first of two landings, the second commencing at 03.00 hrs. would bring in further transport and ammunition and stores and would also bring in the tanks of 5 R.T.R. and the Anti-Tank Company. Once the tanks and guns had been successfully unloaded the H.Q. Staff for the Infantry Brigade and attached R.A.F. personnel would transfer from their destroyer to the M.L.C.'s of one of the transports and land.

The objectives of both 7 and 8 (Guards) Commando would be the aerodrome and troop concentrations based in and around Calitea.

The support troops of 8 (Guards) Commando will be to consolidate and hold the landing beach and to cut communications, 7 Commandos supporting infantry were to attack the aerodrome at Marizza and once relieved by men from the other battalion of infantry were to proceed to Calitea and support the Commandos.

Once all the initial objectives had been taken the Infantry Brigade H.Q. Staff would then

proceed to plan for the capture of the rest of the island.

Support from the air during daylight would come from squadrons based on the island of Crete, prior to the landings Blenheim's would bomb targets at Rhodes and Calitea, troop concentrations and aerodromes at Lardo, Caletto and Cattavia. It was hoped that by 07.00 hrs on the day of the landing that sufficient progress had been made to land two squadrons of light bombers at Marizza to give close support to the troops as and when required.

All so simple...on paper.

Although Wavell had approved of the plan to help the Greeks, he certainly did not agree with taking so many battle experienced troops and sending them to Greece once convoys of men and aid commenced on the 4th March 1941 under the codename of Operation '*Lustre*', if they could keep the Greeks in the war they were certain it would ensure success once Operation '*Cordite*' got under way.

'*Cordite*' though could be avoided if the following had happened. Although Layforce were sent to the Middle East to undertake operations within the Dodecanese Islands before they even reached the theatre a further window of opportunity was opened for them to engage the enemy.

Once O'Connor's advance into enemy held territory the so called 3 Day Raid, Operation '*Compass*' had ended in early February 1941 with the communique to Wavell, '*Fox killed in the open*' after achieving far more than could have been hoped he still hoped to continue with his advance later and knock the Italians once and for all out of the war.

Whilst his units were re-fitting and recuperating plans were being considered for the capture of the Cyrenaican port of Tripoli some 800 miles from their current positions.

The plan for Wavell's '*Spring Offensive*' would involve an advance from their positions around Beda Fomm by land and a landing by sea, by land they planned for elements of 7th Armoured Division mainly 5th RTR to advance in support of the 6th Australian Division and all available artillery and support units to the port whilst a landing by sea would be made by then of Layforce and the Middle East Commando also bringing in the tanks of the 3rd RTR this plan if successful would then lead to a further advance to link up with the French in Tunis thus hopefully bringing about a swift conclusion to the campaign.

Once troops and equipment though had been filtered off for the disastrous short-lived foray into Greece which included the 6th Australian Division and subsequent loss of so many troops and equipment along with the entry

of the Afrika Korps into the Desert War the plans as did those for the Dodecanese Campaign came to nought.

The situation was though changing and changing fast, the D.A.K. had been formed on the 11th January 1941 and Erwin Rommel became its commander on the 6th February just before the Afrika Korps began to leave for Libya and he soon found his way to Libya and would soon make his presence felt, first contact between the British and Germans was made on the 20th February when troops of the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion briefly clashed with the armoured cars of the K.D.G.'s (King's Dragoon Guards) known to many as the '*King's Dancing Girls*', the tide of the desert war was about to change, a change for the worst.

Elsewhere, the situation took in a critical position also; Operation '*Lustre*' quickly lost its sheen, even as convoys began to take Allied forces to Greece plans were being made for their eventual evacuation, Operation '*Demon*'. When the Germans invaded Greece and the Balkans on the 6th April 1941, Operation '*Marita*' was a resounding success for the Germans, with the bulk of the Greek forces fighting the Italians on the Albanian with success there would be no success elsewhere and the Allied forces in the line near mount Olympus took part in yet another evacuation, many making it to the safety of Egypt thanks to the efforts of the Royal Navy, others making it to the temporary

safety of the island of Crete, many remained in Greece though and remain there to this day.

Crete would fall at the end of May and ironically men from Rhodes helped to secure the island.

On the 24th May 1941 to rub salt into the wounds of the British planners of '*Cordite*' twenty-five vessels sailing under the Italian flag left Rhodes carrying men from the 1st Battalion, 9th Regiment and the 2nd Battalion, 10th Regiment of the 50th Infantry Division '*Regina*' along with a platoon of San Marco Marines, a L3 Tankette Company consisting of thirteen tanks, a platoon of Blackshirts, a company each consisting of anti-tank guns and mortars and two hundred-fifty mules. A total of around two thousand eight hundred thirty-five all ranks under the command of Col. Ettore Caffaro.

A final twist of irony to end the tale.

We will never know whether '*Cordite*' would have succeeded or failed as it never happened, Churchill wanted the Turks to enter the war on the side of the British, Commonwealth and Dominions and how far would he have been prepared to go?

Would he have been prepared to sacrifice Layforce and 6th Division to achieve his aims?

He had already sacrificed the 51st Highland Division in France in the summer of 1940 in a vain attempt to keep the French in the war when the cause was already lost and condemned so many brave Scots to years of incarceration would he then have continued in the Dodecanese in the same vein?

Whatever the outcome the men of Layforce were not to have a prolonged life.

In September 1943 Operation 'Accolade' was due to go ahead, this was the proposed British attack and occupation of Rhodes and Karpathos to be carried out by three Infantry Divisions and one Armoured Brigade along with further support units, further plans for the occupation of Crete were cancelled due to the extensive defensive positions they would encounter.

The C.I.G..S Alan Brooke was totally against this part of the operation and all aspects of the operation in what he called '*Churchill's Rhodes madness*' and for the time being he got his way as this part of operation was cancelled on the 25th December a most likely welcome Christmas Present for the battling Brooke, although by now it was all academic as operations did go ahead against other islands in the Dodecanese, Churchill had urged the Middle East Command to '*improvise and dare*' and that it was an '*immense and fleeting opportunity*' and '*that this is the time to play high*'.

Eisenhower considered the whole enterprise a waste of time and resources, Churchill though got his way and was duly proved wrong once again.

The islands of Astypalaia, Kastelorizo, Kalymnos, Kos, Leros, Samos and Symi had been secured by men of the 234th Infantry Brigade and men from the L.R.D.G. and S.B.S. both of which included men from the original Layforce, A Company of the 11th Parachute Battalion and men from the Greek Sacred Squadron.

The Germans reacted swiftly, and Kos fell on the night of the 3rd / 4th October and Leros fell a month later. Samos and the other smaller islands were later safely evacuated; casualties inflicted on the British forces were heavy, around one thousand three hundred eighty-eight prisoners being taken on Kos including the whole of the 1st Durham Light Infantry who were deployed there. The 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers, 4th Buffs (The Royal East Kent Regt.) and the 2nd Queens Own (Royal West Kent Regt.) were amongst three thousand two-hundred prisoners taken on Leros.

Rhodes remained in enemy hands now under the control of the Wehrmacht until the end of the war.

It would then in summing up fair to say that despite how good Layforce was deemed to be in view of what happened to those employed on Operation Accolade, with more and better

aircraft and shipping, experienced troops although many like the L.R.D.G. would be undergoing a task that was far away from their primary employment it would have failed leaving the consequences of a possible debacle similar to Operation '*Jubilee*' at Dieppe and Operation '*Agreement*' (an extension of a plan from 1940 called '*Waylay*') at Tobruk firmly in the hands of a Prime Minister obsessed.

The real irony of the whole sad affair is that men from Layforce most likely fought against those troops proposed by the French to fight in the Dodecanese during the operations in Syria in June 1941, Operation '*Exporter*'. Some would also finally make their way to the islands, sadly not Rhodes but Leros and a few other islands. Those that had volunteered for the L.R.D.G. and S.B.S. along with some of the support troops originally proposed for use in '*Cordite*', especially The Buffs.



Irony indeed.



Within the sphere of Operation 'Mandibles' (i) lay many unrealized plans for the occupation of the Dodecanese Island group, held by the Italians, and designed to bring the Turkish nation into the war on the side of the British and her Commonwealth.

Planning for these operations began in late 1940 and by December of that year Gen. Sir James Marshall-Cornwall had arrived in Ankara as head of the new Military Mission and it was further proposed to court the Turkish with a visit from the then C.I.G.S. Gen. Sir John Dill and the Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden.

Although the British looked favourably on this operation Churchill himself favoured Operation Workshop, the occupation of the island of Pantelleria which lay in the Mediterranean Sea between the Italian island of Sicily and the

coast of North Africa. Although not in the sphere of Mandibles this was the choice of Churchill until he was finally convinced on the 20th January 1941 by Adm. Sir Andrew Cunningham that losses to shipping would be far too expensive in both ships and men and at the proper time all efforts would pursue the agenda of '*Mandibles*'.

Within the sphere of Mandibles lay Operation Blunt, a raid to be conducted by 50 (Middle East) Commando on the island of Kasos on the 25th February 1941. The reconnaissance of the beach was carried out by H.M.S. Rorqual under the command of Lt. Cdr. Ronald Hugh Dewhurst assisted by Lt. Cdr. Nigel Clogstoun Willmott who had great knowledge of the area but not until the morning of the 28th in fact the submarine never left Alexandria until the 26th for her 12th War Patrol and followed this reconnaissance with a further one on the island of Scarpanto before returning to her base on the 7th March. Already the operation was on the back foot and never took place.

Operation '*Pitch*' (i) was all part of Operation '*Abstention*' the attack on the island of Kastelorizo to be undertaken between the 24th and 28th February.

Although this operation took place it was not the success it was hoped to be, in reality it was a bit of a dog's dinner and came in for some quite scathing criticism.

Operation Cascade was another deception plan born from the fertile mind of Dudley Wrangle and would employ the first incarnation of the Special Air Service.

The Special Air Service or to give it its full title 1st Special Air Service Brigade was formed up at Perham Down on the edge of Salisbury Plain in June 1940, Perham Down is the name the villagers use although its real name is Tidworth and lies six miles north-west of Andover in Hampshire. The men were drawn from volunteers originally for the newly formed Commandos, but the Prime Minister Winston Churchill wanted an airborne force formed and so on daily orders boards the call went out for volunteers willing to engage in airborne duties. Those selected formed up in the army camp at Perham Down which had in existence there since being built during the Great War in 1915 here they were split into two distinct groups, one would engage in parachuting whilst two others would train in gliders and began their initial training before moving to R.A.F. Ringway near Manchester to commence parachute training. Here at the No.1 Parachute Training School, they began to learn their new trade, firstly jumping from balloons and then from converted Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bombers. On completion the Brigade which consisted of three Battalions each of five-hundred troops, the three Battalions were numbered,

1 SAS (Parachutists) further broke down to ten platoons each with fifty all ranks each platoon suffixed by the letters A to K.

2 SAS (Glider) and 3 SAS (Glider) were deemed fit to serve overseas and duly left for the Middle East late in 1940 arriving in Egypt on the 30th December 1940. On arrival in Suez they quickly moved on to Lydda and then to Latrun in Palestine where they were billeted in a Yeomanry Camp, here they began acclimatisation and engaged in light training before moving to a camp south of Amman at Bayir Wells in the Trans-Jordan and began training again in earnest.

On the 28th April 1941 now fully trained and conditioned for active combat, the men of the Brigade were sent to Crete which would become their centre of operations, it was hoped that they would engage the enemy by attacking their Lines of Communication in Libya and to attack the enemy in the Dodecanese islands.

A fictitious operation was planned with the invasion of Karpathos which was created to cover the real plan that of the attack on Rhodes, a further deception was that of the S.A.S.'s attack on an airfield in the south of the island, plans for a raid to take out Graziani's H.Q. were also worked on.

One of the main aims of Cascade was creating a false order of battle something that in the end paid dividends as captured documents would

later show that the Axis believed there were
40% more tanks in theatre and 45% more
infantry.

Brigadier Dudley Wrangel Clarke R.A. who had
been commissioned in 1916 and later served with
the R.F.C. before returning to the R.A. at the
war's end and between the two wars had served
in Palestine was sent to the Middle East at
request of General Sir Archibald Wavell,
arriving there on the 18th December 1940,
previously Clarke had been the driving force
behind the creation of the Commandos along with
Churchill and at a later date he would be
involved with the creation of the American
Rangers but for now Wavell wanted him for
something else.

Deception, strategic deception, Clarke was
given the job of coming up with a deception
plan which would convince the Italians that
there was indeed a British Airborne Brigade in
theatre and would soon be engaging the enemy.

A further operation which appears never to have
gotten past the *'here's an idea'* stage was
Operation Armature.

Whilst all this was going on following the
success of Wavell's forces in the Western
Desert under Richard O'Connor during Operation
'Compass' plans were made for the invasion of
the island of Sicily, Operation *'Influx'* (to be
later re-designated as Operation *'Whipcord'*
proposed to commence after the successful

completion of Operations '*Crusader*', '*Acrobat*', '*Gymnast*', later '*Super Gymnast*') which was hoped to begin in the spring of 1941.

All efforts were now to concentrate on the proposed invasion of the island of Rhodes,

Operation '*Cordite*', to deny the use of the island from the Germans who they expected to occupy and then using it as a Luftwaffe base against them but first though, they would need the men.

By July 1937 the British Government had come to regard Mussolini's Italy as potentially no longer a reliable friend and was indeed a potential future enemy, the French were slowly leaning in a similar direction. They asked the British in early 1939 if the island of Cyprus could be made ready for any actions that needed to be taken against Italy in time of war, a war which for all the previous paper waving was imminent. They fore-saw that the island could be used for advanced air patrols of the Dodecanese islands and to add depth to their own forward airfields in Syria, at Beirut.

The British were not too keen on the idea of developing the island but, agreed that the airfields at Nicosia and Larnaca should be upgraded, and fuel and ammunition storage should be developed, and access made available to the French.

In March 1940 at a conference between the French and British held in Aleppo it was asked what operations were to be undertaken to neutralize the threat from the Dodecanese islands and Rhodes in particular, and what forces would be made available if and when the situation arose.

These questions were put to the CIGS in London on the 9th April, there was no conclusive answers forthcoming regarding any operations and that no additional manpower was available.

The French said that they could provide three Battalions of troops and shipping if the British could provide aircraft and anti-aircraft cover. The French also stated that the Turks would see this as a positive action and could help decide the Turks into throwing their lot in with the potential Allies.

As the Allies waited for the Italians to decide whether to enter the war, they knew that the Italians had recently reinforced their troops in Libya, Albania, and the Dodecanese along with Italian troops sent to their East African Colonies.

With the situation in France taking a turn for the worst and the eventual French capitulation and creation of Vichy France and, the Turks now being deeply concerned about any involvement with the shrinking Allies especially if their Air-Force suffered heavy losses, aircraft they

needed in their defence of Thrace against any Axis aggression that may occur.

Before the French forces in Syria joined up with Vichy France, they were still looking at the neutralization of the perceived threat from the Dodecanese and again stressing in particular the island of Rhodes.

The French were willing still to undertake this venture and asked the British for assistance and if given they promised to help with the defence of Egypt by providing a division of infantry to be deployed for the defence of the Canal Zone. They also promised to send bomber and fighter squadrons to Egypt to help the R.A.F.

Nothing would come of this as the French in Syria finally allied themselves to the new Vichy Government in Metropolitan France, those few troops which were on Cyprus were shipped to Syria although a few pledged their allegiance to the Free French so for now it was left in the hands of the British to conduct any operations in the Dodecanese hence the '*Mandibles*' plans.

Although since the Italian entry into the war in June 1940 had kept the Middle East forces busy with Cyrenaica, East Africa and the Mediterranean and Red Sea they did on occasion make advances on the Dodecanese.

In September 1940 after part of the British fleet had delivered stores to the island of Malta on their return to Alexandria ships from the 3rd Cruiser Squadron, the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious* and her escorting destroyers sailed north of Crete and aircraft attacked two airfields on Rhodes, they lost four Fairey Swordfish in the attack, and the cruisers shelled positions on the island of Scarpanto, returning safely to Alexandria on the 5th September. The island of Leros was also attacked at a later date.

The Italians retaliated with four air raids during September on Haifa in Palestine. Their target was the oil facilities, and some damage was done.

The Italians now attempted to invade Greece and the face of the war in the theatre now changed.

By now it was expected by the British that the Germans would at some-time soon make their presence felt and so Operation '*Workshop*' came into being. It was planned that the Special Service troops to be employed on the operation be shipped out as part of convoy code named '*Excess*'. It was planned that once the occupation of Pantelleria was completed the Commandos would be relieved by troops stationed in readiness on Malta, sadly though there were not enough troops on the island or even enough anti-aircraft guns or troops to man them either and it was judged that the operation was

susceptible to failure through the expected intervention of the German Luftwaffe. It was proposed then to send the Special Service troops the long way round the Cape to Egypt where it was hoped they could be employed on other operations ideally the capture of the islands of Stampalia and Scarpanto, Churchill though objected to this arguing that Rhodes should be the first choice if this route was taken but still holding out for Workshop to go ahead. No further progress or decisions was made on these proposals.

Whilst this was happening the R.A.F. and F.A.A. carried out attacks on the Dodecanese throughout November and December, the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* launched another air attack on Rhodes on the 17th December this time with no losses all the time though it was feared that the Germans could and would use the bases here to refuel their aircraft and attack Haifa, the Canal Zone and also as far afield as Cyrenaica. Therefore, the attack on Rhodes was gaining greater importance. The C.I.G.S. were still though opposed to this even though the Prime Minister himself fully endorsed the operations but not as some proposed, small scale '*pin prick raids*' he wanted Rhodes.

By the 20th January 1941 the Defence Committee had finally deemed Operation '*Workshop*' as impracticable due to the appearance of the Luftwaffe and Cunningham's claims of shipping

losses and also, the Excess convoy had already sailed, the Dodecanese was back on the cards.

Plans for the capture of Kasos and Kastelorizo came to fruition and with the arrival of Layforce expected in March 1941 plans for the capture by them of Scarpanto and Rhodes went ahead although Scarpanto was quickly dropped and in the opinion of Churchill the Rhodes operation took on even greater importance than before.

Aircraft operating from the islands had now dropped mines in the Suez Canal increasing the threat to shipping and the continual threat from the Dodecanese forced the British to station more Squadrons to defend Alexandria, the Delta and Suez and the Canal thus depleting their strength in the Western Desert. But with the situation in Greece deteriorating overshadowing the victories over the Italians in East Africa the proposed operation was now again under threat.

Aircraft based at Benghazi launched an attack on the canal on the 30th January 1941 and succeeded in laying many mines which caused the Royal navy a great deal of difficulty dealing them and keeping the canal open, once Operation Compass neutralized the threat from here on February the canal was for a short time a safer place.

March 1941 saw further Luftwaffe attacks on the Canal Zone which led to the Suez Canal being closed to all shipping temporarily as the British made to clear the canal of the German mines.

These troops then were on route from the U.K. the men of Layforce, made up of 7 Commando, 8 (Guards) Commando and 11 (Scottish) Commando, along with A Troop now part of the Guards Commando from 3 Commando and the Folbot Section sailing in the converted Glen Ships the Glengyle, Glenearn and Glenroy.

These 3 Commandos would become A, B and C Battalions whilst once 52 Commando returned from East Africa, they would amalgamate with 50 Commando and become D Battalion, respectively.

The recorded strength of the three Battalions on landing were A Battalion, thirty-six officers and five hundred forty-one o/r's, B Battalion, thirty-eight officers and five hundred-two o/r's, C Battalion thirty-five officers and four hundred ninety-eight o/r/s. The Folbot Section or Troop had two officers and twelve o/r's. On amalgamation when 50 and 52 Commandos became D Battalion it had a recorded strength of thirty-six officers and five hundred thirty-two o/r's. The combined strength being one hundred-forty-six officers and two thousand ninety-one o/r's.

Once the men of Layforce were in theatre they would become part of 6th Infantry Division and

operate as a Brigade under the overall command of Maj. Gen. John Fullerton Evetts.

An Operational Order, No.1 can be found in the War Diary of A Battalion dated 3rd March 1941 which details much of the operation although most of what follows dealing with the landing comes from this much of what it says must be treated with a pinch of salt as it was for training purposes only, exactly why an illiterate Don R should deliver copy No.79 to the Duke of Aosta must be seen as well quite simply British humour. Copy No.78 can be found on the Union Club Notice Board in Alexandria.

The plans call for a fourth Commando to be deployed, No.13, although there were plans to raise a further 3 Commandos in the Middle East the plans came to nothing, and we can assume that the role of No. 13 would be played by the combined 50/52 Commando as D Battalion.

Further troops were required, a battalion each for A, B and C Battalions, these were to be drawn from 44th (Lowland) Infantry Brigade. This Brigade belonged to the 15th (Scottish) Division a territorial mirror of the 52nd Division. It was though not in theatre and never would be although the Division which was formed on the 2nd September 1939 was downgraded to Lower Establishment after the threat of invasion of the British Isles had diminished and many men from this Division were sent to both the Middle and Far East as drafts, perhaps

then the bulk of the 44th arrived here although their Anti-Tank Company which is recorded in the Orbat did not as this was disbanded well before these plans appear to have been made.

The Battalions in question were the 6th and 7th Kings Own Scottish Borderers and the 8th Royal Scots.

In reality it would have most likely have been troops drawn from the 6th Division, formed on the 3rd November 1939 by the renumbering of the 7th Division it never received its full quota of troops and would eventually be dissolved during June 1940 with the Divisions H.Q. moving to Mersa Matruh as the H.Q. of the Western Desert Force.

With the prospect of action in the Dodecanese islands the Division was reformed on the 17th February 1941 and would include the 14th and 16th Brigades. It was never fated to see action as a division but rather as Brigades or part of, in the various other areas of operations in theatre.

It had been hoped that as a Division they would garrison the Island of Crete after moving from Mersah Matruh and relieving those troops on the island who had been evacuated from Greece, shipping though was at the time not available and the eventual German invasion put an end to that although 14th Brigade under the command of Brigadier Chappel (1st Beds and Herts, 2nd Black Watch (Royal Highlanders) 2nd York and Lancs.

and 2nd Leicester's) were part of the troops defending the Heraklion sector on the island.

Two companies of 1st Essex became part of '*Hab Force*' who helped to relieve the R.A.F. base at Habbaniya during the short-lived Iraq crisis.

The 16th Brigade under Brigadier C.E.N. Lomax (2nd Kings Own Royal Regiment (Lancs.)), 2nd Queens Royal Regiment (West Surrey) and 1st Essex, 2 Companies) was lent to Lavarack's Australian 7th Division for Operation '*Exporter*' the invasion of Syria.

A third Brigade would be added the 23rd (initially known as the Canal Area Brigade, it had been dispersed in the canal area as part of the H.Q. sub-Area Troops) later when the Division was renumbered again this time as the 70th Division who would see active service within the Tobruk perimeter replacing the Australian troops before being posted to the Far East with troops becoming part of the Chindit Columns, it would at times include battalions of the Essex Regiment, Durham Light Infantry, The Buffs and the Border Regiment amongst others.

Further troops were required these being men drawn from the 1st R.T.R. (although the plans found in 7 Commandos War Diary state 5 R.T.R. Rea Leakey in his book *Leakey's Luck* states that his regiment were engaged in amphibious training during March and early April 1941 both B and C Squadrons appear on the Orbat.

5 R.T.R. were though in theatre and had previously seen action in France in the summer of 1940 and can be assumed I believe to have played some role in the proposed operation.

As it was a Combined Operations project air cover would be provided by squadrons based on the islands of Cyprus and Crete.

On Cyprus RAF Nicosia was in the process of being constructed and would provide the means to base two Squadrons, 250 Squadron flying Curtis Tomahawks were in theatre by the 1st April and the Hawker Hurricanes of 213 Squadron would arrive later but by this time the climate in the theatre had changed dramatically. The airfield though would not become operational until either June or July so it would have to be the summer and not early spring before the operation could feasibly be contemplated.

Crete was not much better, the RAF bases at Malame and Heraklion still required further construction work and only the latter would be able to support all types of aircraft, there were two Landing Strips in case of emergencies based at Retimo and Pediada on Kastelli.

Short Sunderland's of 230 Squadron operating from Suda Bay could provide reconnaissance whilst at Malame which was initially a Fleet Air Arm station but was taken over by the RAF housed 805 FAA Squadron flying Fairey Fulmars. Other Squadrons available were 203 Squadron and their Bristol Blenheim's and 80 Squadrons

Hawker Hurricanes. Other aircraft from 30, 33 and 112 Squadrons were also available on the island which included Gloster Gladiators, Hawker Hurricanes and Brewster Buffalo's, many of these though were in a poor state of repair. With a round trip of close on six-hundred miles the fighters from Crete would have been of little value so it would possibly be safe to presume an aircraft carrier most likely the H.M.S. Illustrious would have been a definite requirement for the safety of the attacking force.

A large naval presence was also required this being under the command of Rear Admiral H.T. Baillie-Groham once the captain of H.M.S. Ramillies was also required, these included the three Glen ships and two further troop transports along with a Destroyer Flotilla of five ships plus a further two attached, the names in the orders for the ships are all fictitious although the destroyer flotilla the 5th was not, a close support vessel most likely one of the insect class monitors was also required. Further naval forces in support were also required these most likely being drawn from the 15th Cruiser Squadron.

A small group of men would make up the last element of requirements, these would be the afore mentioned Lt. Cdr. Willmott and Lt. Roger Courtney, Kings Royal Rifle Corps who had created the Folbot Section which would later go on to become the Special Boat Section and later

Squadron and L/Cpl. James Sherwood of the Royal Army Service Corps. They would provide the reconnaissance of the beaches in the area where the troops were proposed to be landed.

Willmott was fully aware of the plans for the Rhodes operation but expressed deep concern, a concern that if not investigated could and would have led to a disaster. The naval charts used to plan the operation were wrong. Willmott took his concerns higher and explained that the charts were incorrect and could lead to severe casualties like those suffered during the Gallipoli landings some twenty-five years previously in April 1915.

He managed to convince the higher ups that to avoid anything similar then a reconnaissance of the beaches was desperately required. As of then they did not know about sand bars, and underwater defences, sunken barbed wire, if these defences did in-fact exist and went unknown then the landing troops were likely to flounder on the approaches, it would fail he told them and was able to prove that the charts were all but useless which led them to approve of the required reconnaissance once Roger Courtney was on the scene.

There were other things to consider before the operation could take place, obviously the reconnaissance but also one of deception and so enter Dudley Wrangel Clarke.

Brig. Dudley Wrangel Clarke R.A. who had been commissioned in 1916 and later served with the R.F.C. before returning to the R.A. at the war's end and between the two wars had served in Palestine was sent to the Middle East at request of Gen. Sir Archibald Wavell, arriving there on the 18th December 1940, previously Clarke had been the driving force behind the creation of the Commandos along with Churchill and at a later date he would be involved with the creation of the American Rangers but for now Wavell wanted him for something else.

Clarke also served briefly in Abyssinia before joining Wavell where he had created several ghost armies to confuse the Italians, his creed would become,

'What do you want the enemy to do?'

A diary had been taken from a captured Italian officer showed that there was fear amongst the Italians that the British would engage in airborne operations against them, Intelligence thus required a plan.

Deception, strategic deception, Clarke was given the job of producing a deception plan which would convince the Italians that there was indeed a British Airborne Brigade in theatre and would soon be engaging the enemy.

He was to create a regional organization for MI 9 with the working title of '*Advanced Headquarters A Force*', the '*A*' standing for

Airborne, originally based in a converted bathroom within G.H.Q. before taking over two small flats at No.6 Sharia Kasr-el-Nil and worked with a small staff two officers and ten other ranks, here began to put into operation his deception plan, Operation 'Abeam' on April 4th 1941.

Previously deception operations for the proposed invasion of the island of Rhodes in the Dodecanese in Italian hands since the Italo / Turkish war of 1911/12 (and had seen the Italians colonize the group at one time up to seventeen-thousand civilians inhabited the islands but by the time war broke out this number had been reduced to around eight thousand) had been undertaken, Operation 'Byng Boys' was a surveillance operation from neutral Turkey of the island by a powerful telescope on loan from the R.A.F. based in a Turkish manned post on a rocky outcrop, the telescope could quite easily see the island some sixteen miles in the distance.

Operation '*Cordite Cover Plan*' was implemented to try and convince the Italians to move troops from Rhodes to Scarpanto which lay between Rhodes and Crete and further, to try to get the Italians to redeploy their remaining troops to the north of the island. This plan was never put into operation and was cancelled by the end of March 1941.

Operation '*Cascade*' saw the creation of a bogus order of battle which saw the inclusion of the S.A.S. Brigade, the 10th Armoured Division to be deployed in the Western Desert and the 7th Infantry Division which was to garrison the island of Cyprus.

Lastly, Operation Dolphin was another intelligence gathering operation conducted from a small ketch sailing in the vicinity of the island.

What then of the opposition?

The Italian forces which garrisoned the Dodecanese group of islands were drawn from the 50th Infantry Division '*Regina*' and would have a presence on many of the islands although some would be small consisting of communications only, the bulk of the Division was garrisoned on the island of Rhodes the largest island within the group.

The Division contained the 9th and 10th Infantry Regiments each containing four infantry battalions, two mortar companies and a battery of artillery for further support. Also, within their ranks were the 201st and 301st C.C.N.N. Battalions better known as the '*Blackshirts*' including a machine gun company and two mortar companies.

Three artillery groups of the 50th Artillery Regiment '*Regina*', the 35th and 36th Coastal Defence Artillery Groups, 50th Mortar Battalion

with their 81mm mortars, 50th Machine Gun Company, 23rd and 50th Anti-Tank Companies armed with the 47/32 anti-tank guns, 91st Pioneer Company, 250th Mixed Company on workshop repair duties, 46th Mixed Telegraph/Radio Signal Company, a Chemical Warfare Company and then the Army Corp detachments to the Division which included the Carabinieri group 'Aegean' carrying out police duties, Defence Sector 'Dodecanese' Head Quarters, 18 companies of 8mm machine guns dispersed throughout the islands, 56th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Group, several companies of L3 Tankettes and various elements of engineers.

The coastal defences were considerable and eight batteries covered the islands coastline. The Majorana battery at Mount Smith housed 3 x 152/40mm guns and 1 x 120/50mm. The Melchiori battery at Kalitea had 3 x 152/40mm guns and 1 x 120/35mm. At Kremasti the Bianco battery were equipped with 3 x 120/45mm guns and 1 x 76/17mm. On the west coast of the Lindos promontory was the Dandolo battery with 3 x 152/40mm guns and a 120/55mm. To the east of the same promontory was the Morosini battery with 3 x 152/40mm guns and a 70/17mm. At the southern end of the island on its east coast stood the Mocenigo battery with 3 x 120/45mm guns and a 70/17mm gun, on the western coast on the southern end of the island was the Bragadino battery with its 4 x 120/45mm guns and a further 70/17mm and lastly at Alimia was

the Allmnia battery with 1 x 76/40mm and 2 x 76/50mm guns.

Overall, a well sized force for three Battalions if at full strength and four Commandos roughly equivalent to two full strength Battalions but without any weapon heavier than the Boys Anti-Tank Rifle to take on hence the reason for deception plans.

It was troops from the 10th Regiments 4th Infantry Battalion which had sorted the Commandos out on Kastelorizo in February along with elements of their navy and air force so these defenders would not be the easy touch some people believe the Italian forces to have been.

Their air force would need to be taken care of also, from the nearby island of Leros there was 161 Squadron flying CMRO 43/44's, 162 Squadron flying CR 42's and 163 Squadron flying a

mixture of CRI 32's and CR 42's also Gruppo Succors, the air sea rescue aircraft with 2506 B's.

On Rhodes itself flying from Maritza were the 50 Gruppo BT (201/11 Squadrons) Z 1007 bis with 172 Squadron RT2 1007 bis (Reconnaissance).

At Gadurra was 92 Stormo BT (200/201 Squadrons) flying SM 79's, 41 Gruppo As (204/205 Squadrons) flying SM 84's and 281 Squadron with SM 79's.

Their naval presence included steamers, military tankers, civilian tankers, freezer ships, fishing vessels at least one river boat, Torpedo Boats including the *Libra*, *Lince* and *Lire*, 6 Fast Attack Boats and Destroyers including the *Crispi*.

The Dodecanese islands came under the charge of Governor General Ettore Bastico whilst the 50th Infantry Division '*Regina*' (Queen) came under the command of Gen. Alessandro Piazzoni, as said, it would be a hard nut to crack but before the operation could take place a reconnaissance of the beaches would have to take place.

The Folbot Section under Lt. Roger Courtney was tasked with making a reconnaissance of the chosen beaches on Rhodes for the hopefully impending landings. He had been working with Capt. S.M. Raw of the 1st Submarine Flotilla practising the loading and launching of the Folbots (German for Folding Boat), canoeing, swimming, and the use of an infra-red torch.

He along with Lt. Com. Willmott and L/Cpl. James Sherwood of the R.A.S.C. would carry out in the task; they boarded H.M.S. *Triumph* under Lt. Com. W.J.W. Woods and set sail from Alexandria on what would be her 13th War Patrol on the 24th March 1941 arriving off Rhodes during the early hours of the 26th. During the morning they made a periscope reconnaissance and later during that night they prepared to

launch a Folbot, but the sub's orders were changed, and she was ordered to proceed to the area south of Anti-Milo where it was reported the Italian fleet was heading. After the battle of Matapan which saw the Italians in retreat the Triumph she began the return voyage to Rhodes just before midnight on the 28th.

In the early hours of the 30th March a further periscope reconnaissance was made before the Triumph put out to sea to recharge her batteries. Shortly after midnight the Triumph returned and Courtney and Willmott with the help of Sherwood and several ratings launched the Folbot. The beach they were heading for was situated north of Rhodes harbour which they reached and whilst Courtney stayed with the Folbot Willmott swam to the shore and began investigating the bar, beach, rocks, and sea wall, he took soundings and recorded the positions of the barbed wire defences. He was even able to penetrate some sixty yards inland and checked out the Italian H.Q. at the Hotel des Roses before safely returning to Courtney and in turn the Triumph, all told they had been gone some four hours.

Further periscope reconnaissance's were made during the afternoon of the 31st and just before midnight they launched the Folbot again, this time they would check out the beach's south of Rhodes, again it was Willmott who made for the beach and again he was able to record and penetrate the defences and was even able to

walk along a street. They safely returned after 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours and the Triumph proceeded seaward.

Three other beaches were checked via the periscope on the 2nd April and just before midnight the Folbot was launched again to reconnoitre another of the beaches on the eastern coast of the island. Courtney checked on one beach whilst Willmott took it upon himself to check another before returning to Courtney only to find he was suffering from the effects of cramp and his torch was faulty all the same they made it safely back by 03.30 hrs on the 3rd. They now set off for another periscope reconnaissance but at the target area they grounded at thirty-four feet and whilst attempting to get free the submarine broke surface. HMS Triumph retired from the immediate area and submerged believing that it was possible that they had been sighted, once the position was considered they decided that it would be best to abandon the rest of the mission and return to Alexandria, here they reached safely on the 5th April.

For their achievements on this operation Willmott was awarded the D.S.O. and Courtney received the M.C. and was promoted to Capt.

James Sherwood who had helped with the launching and recovery of the Folbot and its maintenance amongst other things received the knowledge that it was a job well done.

The plans for the proposed invasion of Rhodes appear simple; possibly too simple but then they are only proposed plans.

The Commandos and support battalions would board their transport at Alexandria, 7 Commando and her support battalion on board the Glengyle, 8 (Guards) Commando and the support battalion aboard the Glenroy, 11 (Scottish) Commando with her supporting battalion on board the Glenearn, a further transport would transport the other Commando most likely 50/52 escorted by a flotilla of destroyers, two other attached destroyers and a further transport ship.

The Infantry Landing Ships Glenroy (Capt. (Ret'd) Sir J.F. Paget RN), Glenearn (Capt. (Ret'd) L.B. Hill OBE RN) and the Glengyle (A/Capt. (Ret'd) C.H. Petrie RN) were converted from their original intention of being fast passenger and cargo liners for the far east line of the Glen Line which had been built between the years of 1938 and 1939.

They never saw their original intention as soon after launch they were acquired by the Admiralty as a supply ship before further conversion in mid-1940 to that of Infantry Landing Ships.

They were well protected and had for their fire power eight two pounder pom-poms, four two pounder guns and eight twenty-millimetre Oerlikons. They carried three LCM's and twenty-

four LCAs/ILCS (M)'s and were capable of carrying between seven hundred and eleven hundred troops.

They would later in the theatre be employed in an attack at Bardia, transporting and evacuating troops to and from Greece and the evacuation from Crete, and the operation in Syria, '*Exporter*'.

Support on land for the attacking Commandos would be supplied by the tanks of the 7th Armoured Division which by the end of March had been withdrawn from the Western Desert and units from 4th Armoured Brigade, and two Squadrons, B and C respectively, of 1 RTR comprising of Cruiser Mk.1's commonly known as A9's and Vickers Mk. VI's and the Infantry Brigade Anti-Tank Company would be aboard 8 Tank Landing Craft along with 2 Royal Naval Corvettes as escort.

The 4th Armoured Brigade was based around Ishmalia where they were engaged in the new art of amphibious training embarking and disembarking from Landing Craft until the first week of April, with the turn of events caused by the introduction of Rommel into the Western Desert Campaign most of these men were rushed up by both land and sea to Tobruk and took part in the valiant defence of this soon to be invested port.

The force would arrive at Phineka Bay, Cyprus via the Gulf of Adalia under air cover provided by RAF Cyprus during the hours of daylight.

There were two beaches on Rhodes where the landing was due to take place and would commence on the third day of the operation beginning.

No.'s 11 (Scottish) with her supporting battalion and 50/52 Commandos would land on Beach 1 at Trianda Bay. The Scots would land in eleven A.L.C.'s and one M.L.C., A Company of her supporting battalion would land in one M.L.C. whilst 50/52 Commando would land in a further four M.L.C.'s at 01.00 hrs. on D Day.

At 01.45 hrs. the balance of the supporting battalion was to land. A further landing would be made at 02.30 hrs. this would-be transport, reserve ammunition and stores.

The objectives of the two Commandos once ashore would be the W/T Station, Shore Battery Positions, the Submarine Cable Station, and the harbour in Rhodes town.

The supporting battalion of infantry was to capture the Italian barracks and the Italian Military Head Quarters and to take up positions to block the Trianda-Rhodes Road.

On the second beach at Villa Nova 7 Commando in eleven A.L.C.'s and 1 M.L.C., A Company of her supporting infantry battalion in one M.L.C., and a similar disposition for 8 (Guards) and

her supporting infantry would land at 01.00 hrs. The balance of the two supporting infantry battalions would land at 01.45 hrs. and a third landing if needed by 02.30 hrs.

Stores, ammunition, and transport would begin landing at 01.45 hrs. in the first of two landings, the second commencing at 03.00 hrs. would bring in further transport and ammunition and stores and would also bring in the tanks of 5 R.T.R. and the Anti-Tank Company. Once the tanks and guns had been successfully unloaded the H.Q. Staff for the Infantry Brigade and attached R.A.F. personnel would transfer from their destroyer to the M.L.C.'s of one of the transports and land.

The objectives of both 7 and 8 (Guards) Commando would be the aerodrome and troop concentrations based in and around Calitea.

The support troops of 8 (Guards) Commando will be to consolidate and hold the landing beach and to cut communications, 7 Commandos supporting infantry were to attack the aerodrome at Marizza and once relieved by men from the other battalion of infantry were to proceed to Calitea and support the Commandos.

Once all the initial objectives had been taken the Infantry Brigade H.Q. Staff would then proceed to plan for the capture of the rest of the island.

Support from the air during daylight would come from squadrons based on the island of Crete, prior to the landings Blenheim's would bomb targets at Rhodes and Calitea, troop concentrations and aerodromes at Lardo, Caletto and Cattavia. It was hoped that by 07.00 hrs on the day of the landing that sufficient progress had been made to land two squadrons of light bombers at Marizza to give close support to the troops as and when required.

All so simple...on paper.

Although Wavell had approved of the plan to help the Greeks, he certainly did not agree with taking so many battle experienced troops and sending them to Greece once convoys of men and aid commenced on the 4th March 1941 under the codename of Operation '*Lustre*', if they could keep the Greeks in the war they were certain it would ensure success once Operation '*Cordite*' got under way.

'*Cordite*' though could be avoided if the following had happened. Although Layforce were sent to the Middle East to undertake operations within the Dodecanese Islands before they even reached the theatre a further window of opportunity was opened for them to engage the enemy.

Once O'Connor's advance into enemy held territory the so called 3 Day Raid, Operation '*Compass*' had ended in early February 1941 with the communique to Wavell, '*Fox killed in the*

open' after achieving far more than could have been hoped he still hoped to continue with his advance later and knock the Italians once and for all out of the war.

Whilst his units were re-fitting and recuperating plans were being considered for the capture of the Cyrenaican port of Tripoli some 800 miles from their current positions.

The plan for Wavell's '*Spring Offensive*' would involve an advance from their positions around Beda Fomm by land and a landing by sea, by land they planned for elements of 7th Armoured Division mainly 5th RTR to advance in support of the 6th Australian Division and all available artillery and support units to the port whilst a landing by sea would be made by then of Layforce and the Middle East Commando also bringing in the tanks of the 3rd RTR this plan if successful would then lead to a further advance to link up with the French in Tunis thus hopefully bringing about a swift conclusion to the campaign.

Once troops and equipment though had been filtered off for the disastrous short-lived foray into Greece which included the 6th Australian Division and subsequent loss of so many troops and equipment along with the entry of the Afrika Korps into the Desert War the plans as did those for the Dodecanese Campaign came to nought.

The situation was though changing and changing fast, the D.A.K. had been formed on the 11th January 1941 and Erwin Rommel became its commander on the 6th February just before the Afrika Korps began to leave for Libya and he soon found his way to Libya and would soon make his presence felt, first contact between the British and Germans was made on the 20th February when troops of the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion briefly clashed with the armoured cars of the K.D.G.'s (King's Dragoon Guards) known to many as the '*King's Dancing Girls*', the tide of the desert war was about to change, a change for the worst.

Elsewhere, the situation took in a critical position also; Operation '*Lustre*' quickly lost its sheen, even as convoys began to take Allied forces to Greece plans were being made for their eventual evacuation, Operation '*Demon*'. When the Germans invaded Greece and the Balkans on the 6th April 1941, Operation '*Marita*' was a resounding success for the Germans, with the bulk of the Greek forces fighting the Italians on the Albanian with success there would be no success elsewhere and the Allied forces in the line near mount Olympus took part in yet another evacuation, many making it to the safety of Egypt thanks to the efforts of the Royal Navy, others making it to the temporary safety of the island of Crete, many remained in Greece though and remain there to this day.

Crete would fall at the end of May and ironically men from Rhodes helped to secure the island.

On the 24th May 1941 to rub salt into the wounds of the British planners of '*Cordite*' twenty-five vessels sailing under the Italian flag left Rhodes carrying men from the 1st Battalion, 9th Regiment and the 2nd Battalion, 10th Regiment of the 50th Infantry Division '*Regina*' along with a platoon of San Marco Marines, a L3 Tankette Company consisting of thirteen tanks, a platoon of Blackshirts, a company each consisting of anti-tank guns and mortars and two hundred-fifty mules. A total of around two thousand eight hundred thirty-five all ranks under the command of Col. Ettore Caffaro.

A final twist of irony to end the tale.

We will never know whether '*Cordite*' would have succeeded or failed as it never happened, Churchill wanted the Turks to enter the war on the side of the British, Commonwealth and Dominions and how far would he have been prepared to go?

Would he have been prepared to sacrifice Layforce and 6th Division to achieve his aims?

He had already sacrificed the 51st Highland Division in France in the summer of 1940 in a vain attempt to keep the French in the war when the cause was already lost and condemned so

many brave Scots to years of incarceration would he then have continued in the Dodecanese in the same vein?

Whatever the outcome the men of Layforce were not to have a prolonged life.

In September 1943 Operation 'Accolade' was due to go ahead, this was the proposed British attack and occupation of Rhodes and Karpathos to be carried out by three Infantry Divisions and one Armoured Brigade along with further support units, further plans for the occupation of Crete were cancelled due to the extensive defensive positions they would encounter.

The C.I.G..S Alan Brooke was totally against this part of the operation and all aspects of the operation in what he called '*Churchill's Rhodes madness*' and for the time being he got his way as this part of operation was cancelled on the 25th December a most likely welcome Christmas Present for the battling Brooke, although by now it was all academic as operations did go ahead against other islands in the Dodecanese, Churchill had urged the Middle East Command to '*improvise and dare*' and that it was an '*immense and fleeting opportunity*' and '*that this is the time to play high*'.

Eisenhower considered the whole enterprise a waste of time and resources, Churchill though got his way and was duly proved wrong once again.

The islands of Astypalaia, Kastelorizo, Kalymnos, Kos, Leros, Samos and Symi had been secured by men of the 234th Infantry Brigade and men from the L.R.D.G. and S.B.S. both of which included men from the original Layforce, A Company of the 11th Parachute Battalion and men from the Greek Sacred Squadron.

The Germans reacted swiftly, and Kos fell on the night of the 3rd / 4th October and Leros fell a month later. Samos and the other smaller islands were later safely evacuated; casualties inflicted on the British forces were heavy, around one thousand three hundred eighty-eight prisoners being taken on Kos including the whole of the 1st Durham Light Infantry who were deployed there. The 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers, 4th Buffs (The Royal East Kent Regt.) and the 2nd Queens Own (Royal West Kent Regt.) were amongst three thousand two-hundred prisoners taken on Leros.

Rhodes remained in enemy hands now under the control of the Wehrmacht until the end of the war.

It would then in summing up fair to say that despite how good Layforce was deemed to be in view of what happened to those employed on Operation Accolade, with more and better aircraft and shipping, experienced troops although many like the L.R.D.G. would be undergoing a task that was far away from their primary employment it would have failed leaving

the consequences of a possible debacle similar to Operation '*Jubilee*' at Dieppe and Operation '*Agreement*' (an extension of a plan from 1940 called '*Waylay*') at Tobruk firmly in the hands of a Prime Minister obsessed.

The real irony of the whole sad affair is that men from Layforce most likely fought against those troops proposed by the French to fight in the Dodecanese during the operations in Syria in June 1941, Operation '*Exporter*'. Some would also finally make their way to the islands, sadly not Rhodes but Leros and a few other islands. Those that had volunteered for the L.R.D.G. and S.B.S. along with some of the support troops originally proposed for use in '*Cordite*', especially The Buffs.



Irony indeed.

