

Death From Above: An Examination of the German Airborne Invasion of Crete

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Abstract

Operation Merkur, German for "Operation Mercury", was the first large-scale airborne invasion in history. This operation was conducted by Nazi Germany on the Greek island of Crete in May 1941. In a bold and costly attack, thousands of German paratroopers launched a new form of warfare: airborne assault. Though the operation resulted in a German victory, a multitude of factors led them to abandon large-scale airborne operations for the remainder of the war. Conversely, the battle's tactics and outcome influenced Allied forces and continue to shape military doctrine today. "Death from Above" analyzes Operation Mercury to uncover why it dissuaded further German airborne operations; while simultaneously demonstrating enough tactical promise to inspire future operations by other nations. Drawing on primary sources and firsthand accounts from both German and Allied perspectives, this paper breaks down the operation's events and evaluates its lasting impact on modern military strategy.

Throughout the history of warfare, the brunt of fighting and invasions has been endured by the foot soldiers of the infantry who had to traverse long distances to reach their objectives and battles. This would change drastically during the Second World War with newly created airborne infantry dropping from the skies behind enemy lines, introducing a new kind of fighting with increased speed and movement. The German airborne invasion of the Greek island of Crete was the first instance in military history of an invasion where the vast majority of troops were parachuting into combat. The battle for Crete raged from the 20th of May 1941 to the 1st of June 1941, as a part of the joint German and Italian offensive to gain control of all Greek territories. The invasion of Crete was a smaller-scale battle compared to the multitude of other major engagements in the Second World War, however, it created many lasting impacts. The study of first-hand accounts, tactics, preparations, and battle details yield a good insight into how the airborne units operated. This battle and the actions of the airborne troops heavily influenced both German and Allied usage of airborne troops later in the War.

Additionally, it set the early framework for air assault operations that are still in practice. However, although victorious in Crete, German airborne units were decimated by a lack of preparation, deficient supplies and coordination, and the misjudgement of resistance strength. This resulted in the suspension of any major German airborne operations for the rest of the war.

Airborne operations were still in their infancy during this time, so the use of airborne troops *en masse* was daring and revolutionary. There were no standard tactics established on how to effectively utilize airborne units in order to fulfil their missions. Unlike standard infantry and armoured units of the day, these units did not have the luxury of a constant supply chain and therefore had to strike hard and fast to secure their objectives. This meant that only a certain type of audacious soldier would be selected to hold the title of paratrooper.

Revered as elite soldiers, the German *Fallschirmjäger* (paratrooper[s]) underwent rigorous training in all aspects of airborne warfare. The *Fallschirmjäger* were led by the most competent and experienced officers, making them some of Germany's finest troops.¹³⁶ The soldiers felt distinguished from the ordinary infantry units of the Army as they were highly motivated, extremely physically fit, and very disciplined.¹³⁷ Moreover, the men's training in infantry, survival and support skills was superior to most other German military units. The troops received a wide variety of training to be a self-sufficient unit. Their often-isolated nature of operations behind enemy lines, away from the main force and support, required the men to be proficient in a vast array of skills in order to be a self-sufficient unit. Every *Fallschirmjäger* would undergo specialized training in a variety of roles, many of which were often reserved as

¹³⁶ Mark Edmond Clark, "The German Invasion of Crete and the Importance of Intelligence and Logistical Planning in the Rapid Deployment of Light Units," *Army History*, no. 21 (1991): 32.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

singular positions in the rest of the Army. An example of the diverse experience and knowledge possessed by the *Fallschirmjäger* was *Gefreiter* (Lance Corporal) Erich Lepkowski. Besides the standard airborne infantry training, he was a qualified combat engineer, skier, driver, radio operator, and locomotive engineer.¹³⁸ This level of skill would only be enhanced after combat in Crete. The main task of the *Fallschirmjäger* was to land behind enemy lines, secure key positions, and hold out until a larger force would meet and relieve them. With limited use thus far in the invasions of Western Europe and Scandinavia, the Island of Crete would come to be the defining moment for the German airborne infantry.

On the 28th of October 1940, led by Benito Mussolini, Italy invaded Greece and was met with stiff resistance that pushed the Italians back into Albania.¹³⁹ This growing Italian and German interest in the Mediterranean brought the island of Crete to the forefront of Allied military commanders and planners. The Allies could use the island and its airbases to launch attacks on German-held Romanian airfields and serve as a possible launch point for an Allied invasion of mainland Europe from the south.¹⁴⁰ On the contrary, if held by the Germans, it would enable them to strike Cyprus, the Suez Canal and the British Naval fleet harboured at Alexandria in Egypt.¹⁴¹ As a result, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered immediate defences built on Crete as the Italians, now aided by the Germans, resumed an all-out invasion of Greece in April 1941.¹⁴² The British, along with Commonwealth troops and Greeks once again mustered a brave defence on the mainland, prompting Churchill to remark about the Greeks' heroism; "Hence, we will not say that Greeks fight like heroes, but that heroes fight like Greeks."¹⁴³ However, this fortitude was no match for the combined German-Italian onslaught which swept across the Greek mainland. The stage was now set for the next clash, this time on the small island of Crete.

The Germans felt confident and ready after a string of victories across Western Europe throughout the previous spring of 1940 in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway. The idea of an airborne invasion of Crete is credited to *Generaloberst* (Colonel General) Kurt Student, who presented it to Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering, Air Force Commander-in-Chief, in April 1941.¹⁴⁴ The idea was approved and would see the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe*, taking over the main role in the invasion from the Army. Codenamed *Unternehmen Merkur* (Operation Mercury) and

¹³⁸ Franz Kurowski, *Infantry Aces - The German Soldier in Combat in World War II*, (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2005), 192.

¹³⁹ Heinz A Richter, "Operation Mercury, The Invasion of Crete," *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, no. 16 (2013), 147.

¹⁴⁰ H. W. Koch, "The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany: The Early Phase, May-September 1940." in *The Second World War*, ed Nick Smart (London: Routledge, 2017), 125.

¹⁴¹ Clark, "The German Invasion of Crete," 32.

¹⁴² Richter, "Operation Mercury, The Invasion of Crete," 147.

¹⁴³ Chris Moorey, "The Battle of Crete and Occupation: 1941 to 1945," in *A History of Crete* (London: Haus Publishing, 2019), 251.

¹⁴⁴ Clark, "The German Invasion of Crete," 31.

set for May 1941, the Germans developed this invasion to launch initial coordinated shock assaults and secure strategic positions to bring in supplies via air and sea.¹⁴⁵ Confidence was high amongst the German ranks who had just routed the perceived weak enemy from mainland Greece and were primed to finish the remaining Allied soldiers off. Fueling the Germans' expectations of a quick victory. This perceived weakness of the Allies was not unfounded. Of the 58,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers sent to Greece to aid in its defence, roughly 2,000 were killed or wounded with another 14,000 captured, a nearly 28 percent casualty rate.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the Allied Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Mediterranean General Freyberg reported: "I cannot hope to hold out with land forces alone, which as a result of campaign in Greece are now devoid of any artillery, have insufficient tools for digging, very little transport, and inadequate war reserves of equipment and ammunition."¹⁴⁷ Such human and material losses could not be easily replaced. Nevertheless, Churchill telegraphed a clear message to the Allied commander, stating: "The island must be stubbornly defended."¹⁴⁸ Although severely hampered, the Allies were determined to put up staunch resistance that the Germans were unprepared to meet.

On the 20th of May 1941, the battle began in what Churchill described as "a head-on collision with the very spear-point of the Nazi lance".¹⁴⁹ The Germans were set to secure harbours, airfields, and key crossroads on the initial landing so that supplies could be hurriedly brought up. Under standard military logic of the time, the paramount goal on either side was to hold key logistic positions for supply and transportation, which aided in movement and fighting capabilities. For these reasons, attackers and defenders paid close attention to possessing these locations. Perceiving this threat, the Allies built stronger defences around the island's three main airfields and harbour in Souda Bay which would have devastating effects on the invading force.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Allied military planners believed the invading force would come from the sea, with the threat from above not being properly considered. This was due to the lack of knowledge and experience surrounding the implementation and effectiveness of airborne operations. On the contrary, the Germans' preparation was unusually rushed with only one month transpiring from when the plan was brought to Hitler's desk to when the battle began. The long-planned invasion of Russia was set to launch in June and would not be delayed for the Crete operation, forcing it to be rushed as units would be needed to take part in both. Minimal reconnaissance was conducted, a nod to the ignorance of the Germans already viewing the British, Commonwealth, and

¹⁴⁵ Richter, "Operation Mercury, The Invasion of Crete," 147.

¹⁴⁶ Moorey, "The Battle of Crete and Occupation," 252.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁴⁸ Michael McGrady, "The Defence and Loss of Crete, 1940-1941, Part I" *The National Archives*, (6th August, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ Moorey, "The Battle of Crete and Occupation," 254.

¹⁵⁰ Richter, "Operation Mercury, The Invasion of Crete," 148.

Greek troops as a vanquished foe.¹⁵¹ Therefore, all German battle plans were clouded by the idea of a swift victory. Roughly 500 transport planes would bring 15,000 *Fallschirmjäger* into battle from the air in two waves, as there was a lack of aircraft due to the rushed preparations.¹⁵² There was little consideration given to the fact that many aircraft would be destroyed or severely damaged during the first wave, dramatically reducing the number available for the second wave. Regular doctrine in airborne drops dictated one or two waves with their own designated aircraft, however, aircraft returning to deliver more troops was not, unless logistically unavoidable. This lack of preparation by the German command put their *Fallschirmjäger* straight into the firing line as they jumped onto strongly defended positions and were forced to fight and wait until reinforcements and equipment arrived.

The preliminary jumps by the German parachutists and glider troops on the enemy strongholds resulted in major casualties. German *Fallschirmjäger* Helmut Wenzel recalled: “As the ’chute opens, I hear whistling in the air, all around me. It’s bullets! The British are ready for us and greet us.”¹⁵³ Due to the lack of thorough battle preparations and planning, many *Fallschirmjäger* found themselves highly vulnerable to enemy fire while landing in dangerous and contested drop zones. Dozens were killed in their parachute harnesses before they even reached the ground. For the German troops who survived the initial drop, the ordeal was far from over as they had to wait for more airborne support, which ranged from hours to days.¹⁵⁴ Due to the shock of the initial setbacks, the Germans delayed the second wave as rumours of the failures and casualties of the first attacks started to circulate. The battle hung on a knife's edge and anxiety spread amongst the waiting soldiers, including *Grefreiter* Erich Lepkowski.¹⁵⁵ Finally, the second wave was sent into the raging battle and once again landed near the strong points to reinforce the depleted first wave. The German command committed all their troops, a daring risk that could have resulted in the complete destruction of their force. Such a serious defeat would deal a major blow to German society and military operations, while uplifting the depleting Allied morale. *Grefreiter* Lepkowski landed near one of the airfields, was wounded and temporarily taken prisoner by the Australian soldiers defending it, a more fortunate series of events compared to many of his comrades.¹⁵⁶ The *Fallschirmjäger* who survived the initial jump, and were still able to fight, then faced their next major obstacle: supplies.

The Germans had planned to drop containers of equipment separately from the *Fallschirmjäger*, who were only equipped lightly.¹⁵⁷ The idea was that the troops would be able to make the jump, with landing and initial ground movements only lightly

¹⁵¹ Richter, “Operation Mercury, The Invasion of Crete,” 149.

¹⁵² Clark, “The German Invasion of Crete,” 34.

¹⁵³ Moorey, “The Battle of Crete and Occupation,” 254.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Kurowski, *Infantry Aces*, 193.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 193-194.

¹⁵⁷ Richter, “Operation Mercury, The Invasion of Crete,” 149.

weighted down, and later going to fetch the heavier equipment on the ground. In reality, this was an extremely deadly task to undertake while under fire. German transport planes, taking ground fire and in poor weather conditions dropped troops and equipment sporadically and rarely on their established and coordinated drop zones. This debacle resulted in many *Fallschirmjäger* being scattered with no knowledge of where they or their equipment containers were.¹⁵⁸ Medical supplies, food and water, ammunition, and weapons were being reduced in numbers by the hour and much had to be scavenged from Allied positions. After being rescued from Allied captivity by his comrades, *Gefreiter* Lepkowski continued in the fight. After taking control of an enemy machine gun dugout, he was ordered by an officer to: “Turn the machine gun around immediately” to face the other enemy positions.¹⁵⁹

Even if both the *Fallschirmjäger* and the equipment containers were successfully dropped in the same area, it was not certain that they could be recovered. For example, near the bridge at Platanias in the northwest of Crete, most of the containers could not be reached due to the difficult rocky terrain and many had been destroyed before they even reached the ground due to Allied ground fire.¹⁶⁰ For many of the *Fallschirmjäger* with nothing left to fight with, this lack of supplies determined their fate. *Oberst* (Colonel) Alfred Sturm and the men under his command were dropped far from their intended drop zone without any equipment containers, and after a day and night of fighting, had run out of ammunition and were forced to surrender.¹⁶¹ Their need for ammunition and supplies was insurmountable as the Germans faced a battle-hardened and determined enemy.

Due to the hasty preparation, German intelligence did not correctly estimate the resolve of the British and Commonwealth troops, as well as the Greek troops and local Cretan civilians. The Germans had determined that the 10,200 Greek troops would not fight after losing the mainland and that the 15,000 British, 7,750 New Zealander and 6,500 Australian troops were demoralized to some degree from the previous defeats.¹⁶² These assumptions proved to be completely inaccurate and would have deadly consequences. Although lacking reinforcements, ammunition, and heavy guns, the Allied forces remained steadfast and were determined to hold their ground. Most of the troops defending Crete were first-class fighting units from across the British Empire and Commonwealth.¹⁶³ The vast majority of them had taken part in the fighting on the Greek mainland which had not disheartened but rather battle-hardened them. Moreover, the Greek troops also fought furiously, defending the last part of the country not under the yoke of Axis control. The fierce resistance put up by the Allied soldiers

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 151.

¹⁵⁹ Kurowski, *Infantry Aces*, 197.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 199.

¹⁶² Clark, “The German Invasion of Crete,” 33.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

surprised the Germans, who underestimated their enemy and expected just minimal opposition, resulting in major casualties.

The Allied troops were not the only combatants that the *Fallschirmjäger* had to contend with. The Cretan civilian resistance began as soon as the first German boots landed on the ground and fought the invaders by any means.¹⁶⁴ Many German veterans of the battle recounted the bitterness of the fighting and atrocities committed against their wounded by the Cretan civilians.¹⁶⁵ By all accounts, Cretan men, women and even children were exceptionally courageous and challenged the Germans at every corner.¹⁶⁶ The Germans had assumed that the local population would welcome and greet them as liberators from British influence. This was a faded reality, and the locals would be another adversary that the Germans had to fight against to gain control of the island.

The Allied forces were slowly pushed back throughout the thirteen-day battle due to a series of tactical blunders, counter-attack delays, and a lack of supplies. A young Greek medical officer wrote: “I knew that I was taking part in a retreat; in fact, I wondered if it should not be called more correctly a rout as, on all sides, men were hurrying along in disorder. Most of them had thrown away their rifles, and a number had even discarded their tunics as it was a hot day...”¹⁶⁷ After the Germans had successfully captured the Maleme airfield, it facilitated the landing of transport aircraft carrying more reinforcements and equipment.¹⁶⁸ The Allied Commander on Crete sent a telegram to Churchill on May 27th, stating: “Fear we must recognize that Crete is no longer tenable and that troops must be withdrawn as far as possible. It has been impossible to withstand weight of enemy air attack which has been on unprecedented scale...”¹⁶⁹ This would mark the beginning of the end of the Allied defence who were pushed back to the sea and faced surrender or escape to Egypt. The Allied High Command realized a stubborn fight to the death would garner no real achievement, and set off to salvage their remaining forces to fight another day. Around 17,000 Allied soldiers were evacuated by the Royal Navy; however, around 10,000 would not be so fortunate and faced German captivity.¹⁷⁰ The successfully evacuated troops would later play an integral part in halting the formidable German *Afrika Korps* (Africa Corps) in the North African campaign.

By June 2nd, 1941, the island had been deemed secure by the Germans and their paratroopers had claimed victory, but at a deadly cost. Nevertheless, the victory achieved by the *Fallschirmjäger* despite these handicaps demonstrated their quality as

¹⁶⁴ Moorey, “The Battle of Crete and Occupation,” 255.

¹⁶⁵ John Cirafici, “Fallschirmjäger!: A Collection of Firsthand Accounts and Diaries by German Paratrooper Veterans From The Second World War,” *Air Power History* 68, no. 1 (2021): 62.

¹⁶⁶ Moorey, “The Battle of Crete and Occupation,” 225.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁶⁸ Clark, “The German Invasion of Crete,” 34-35.

¹⁶⁹ Mcgrady, “The Defence and Loss of Crete, 1940-1941, Part II”, *The National Archives*, 6th August, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Clark, “The German Invasion of Crete,” 34-35.

elite soldiers.¹⁷¹ The use of paratroopers on a broad scale impressed Allied commanders so much that they immediately began developing their own airborne troops that would later be integral in operations in Sicily, Normandy, and the Netherlands.¹⁷² However, this was not the impression left on the Germans, with the majority of remaining *Fallschirmjäger* units being stood down as airborne troops and sent to the newly started Russian campaign as elite infantry.¹⁷³ The severe losses prevented the Germans from pursuing the fleeing Allies further and attacking Egypt and the Suez Canal, a vital life line for the British Empire. Moreover, roughly 50,000 German soldiers had to be garrisoned on the island for the remainder of the war to provide defence and suppress the Cretan resistance.¹⁷⁴ *Generaloberst* Kurt Student, the main catalyst of the airborne approach declared that Crete was: “the graveyard of the German paratroopers”.¹⁷⁵

The Germans had suffered nearly 50% casualties of the original 22,000-man-strong invasion.¹⁷⁶ This magnitude of losses can be attributed to a lack of proper battle preparations, improper coordination, and dissemination of equipment, along with a miscalculation about the enemy's resolve. The bloodstained victory reverberated throughout the German military and political spheres, leaving a lasting impact of both praise and chagrin. Adolf Hitler himself remarked about the operation, saying: “Crete has proved the days of the parachute troops are over! The parachute arm is a weapon of surprise; the surprise factor has by now been exhausted.”¹⁷⁷ The bloodshed on Crete was closely remembered by the Germans, being the last large-scale paratrooper operation conducted by them during the Second World War. If the operation had been less costly, airborne operations could have been implemented on both the Eastern and later Western fronts, possibly changing numerous battle outcomes. Nevertheless, it set a new precedent on future airborne operations and their potential in modern warfare.

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¹⁷¹ Richter, “Operation Mercury, The Invasion of Crete,” 153.

¹⁷² Clark, “The German Invasion of Crete,” 32.

¹⁷³ Richter, “Operation Mercury, The Invasion of Crete,” 153.

¹⁷⁴ James C. Bliss, “The Fall of Crete 1941: Was Freyberg Culpable?” (MA Thesis, U.S. army command and General Staff College, 2006), 4.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Clark, “The German Invasion of Crete,” 32.

¹⁷⁷ Kurowski, *Infantry Aces*, 207.

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