

“It was an Aussie ship which had escorted them home”: the Royal Australian Navy in the evacuations of Greece and Crete, April–June, 1941

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Introduction

At 10 pm on 25 April 1941, the destroyers HMAS *Vendetta* and *Waterhen* approached Megara beach in southern Greece. There they joined the Royal Navy (RN) troopship SS *Thurland Castle*, the cruiser HMS *Coventry*, and the destroyer HMS *Wryneck*, which were waiting to embark the 5,000 assembled British and Commonwealth troops. First-class stoker Andrew (“Andy”) Nation in *Waterhen* recalled how, with only a new moon, the darkness of the night was interrupted periodically by flashes of light in the sky as the waiting troops blew up “roads, bridges in fact everything that was standing” to prevent German forces utilising equipment that could not be taken on to the evacuating ships.¹ Though hoping to embark 600 troops, *Waterhen* managed only around 70, while *Vendetta* embarked 350.² By the early hours of the next day, with the threat of German aircraft intensifying as dawn loomed, the convoy was forced to leave unembarked troops behind to depart for Crete. Despite these precautions, German planes pursued the convoy throughout the day, dropping bombs mere metres away from the ships.³ Nevertheless, the convoy arrived safely at Suda Bay at 6 pm. As troops disembarked on the island, relieved at having made it off the mainland safely, they could only “thank God the navy ha[d] taken over at last”.⁴

A month later, the navy again came to the rescue in Crete, when the dominance of the German air force necessitated the evacuation of 28,614 troops who had been left to fortify the island after evacuations from Greece.⁵ On 28 May, HMAS *Napier* and *Nizam*, the two newly arrived in theatre Royal Australian Navy (RAN) destroyers, made their way to Sphakia Bay in Crete alongside HMS *Kelvin* and *Kandahar*. Just as in Greece, the moon cast little light on the

¹ Andrew Nation, diary entry, 8 May 1941, Australian War Memorial (AWM) PR00186.

² Ibid.; G. Herman Gill, *Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942*, vol. 1, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series 2 Navy, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957, p. 323.

³ Nation, diary entry, 8 May 1941.

⁴ Private William Lancaster Carter, diary entry, 25 April 1941, AWM PR01952.

⁵ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation”, in *The campaign in Crete November 1940 to June 1941*, AWM54 535/2/23, p. 34.

scenes of chaos that awaited the ships as they entered the bay. Rumours buzzed among the ships' companies that they were to embark 1,000 troops each, prompting Petty Officer Ronald Henry Stuart Perkins to suggest that *Nizam* change its name to "Dee Why" in honour of the Manly ferry.⁶ The ships left Sphakia around 3 am. The convoy was attacked by dive bombers on their way to Alexandria and though *Napier* escaped damage, *Nizam* was less fortunate. Several near misses, so close that Perkins recorded "the ship was lifted out of the water", resulted in damage of the officer's galley and cabins.⁷ Though those on board felt *Nizam* "seemed to be singled out for the kill", they arrived at port in Alexandria safely with the rest of the convoy at 4.30 pm on 29 May, "still about to tell the tale."⁸

By early June, after successfully evacuating around 80 per cent of the forces on Greece and around half of the troops on Crete, the navy had been stretched to its limit and the ships' companies were at breaking point. For Nation, "much more of this life" would leave him "needing a couple of attendants and a straightjacket".⁹ The navy's tireless efforts to evacuate tens of thousands of mainland troops from mainland Greece and Crete - in particular, the experiences of those on board ships involved in the complex naval operation - has received limited attention in Australia. Recent accounts of the evacuations, such as Maria Hill's *Diggers and Greeks* (2010) and Craig Stockings and Eleanor Hancock's *Swastika over the Acropolis* (2013), offer little analysis of the complexities of the naval campaign and the strain placed on the ships' companies.¹⁰ Though such publications acknowledge the role of the navy, they present a more simplified account of ships evacuating troops from A to B. Throughout the complex operations, there were over 73 ships involved in either Greece or Crete, responsible for navigating difficult conditions and constantly changing circumstances to arrive at the evacuation points, embark troops, and return to safety under enemy attack.

Within these evacuating convoys were ships from around the Commonwealth, including eight Australian ships. In surviving Australian sources from the time, both soldiers and ships' companies make particular mention of the "Aussie ship[s] which had escorted them home", while the official histories and recent publications on the RAN involvement in the

⁶ R.H.S. Perkins, diary entry, 28 May 1941, AWM 3DRL7649.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 May 1941.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29 June 1941.

¹⁰ Maria Hill, *Diggers and Greeks: the Australian campaigns in Greece and Crete*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2010; Craig Stockings and Eleanor Hancock, *Swastika over the Acropolis: re-interpreting the Nazi invasion of Greece in World War II*, Brill, Lieden, Boston, 2013.

evacuations emphasise the role of the RAN in order to demonstrate the Australian naval contribution to the conflict.¹¹ Though these narratives, such as David Stevens' *The Royal Australian Navy in World War II*, contextualise the Australian participation as part of a larger RN fleet, their focus on the RAN inadvertently creates an image of Australian naval prominence.¹² So how distinctive a role did those Australian ships perform? Despite the focus on the distinctive Australian identity in archival documents, RAN contributions to the evacuations were largely indistinguishable from those of other RN vessels. Their contribution was undeniably important, but only as part of the larger naval force that successfully evacuated thousands of troops from Greece and Crete.

The Royal Navy in the Mediterranean

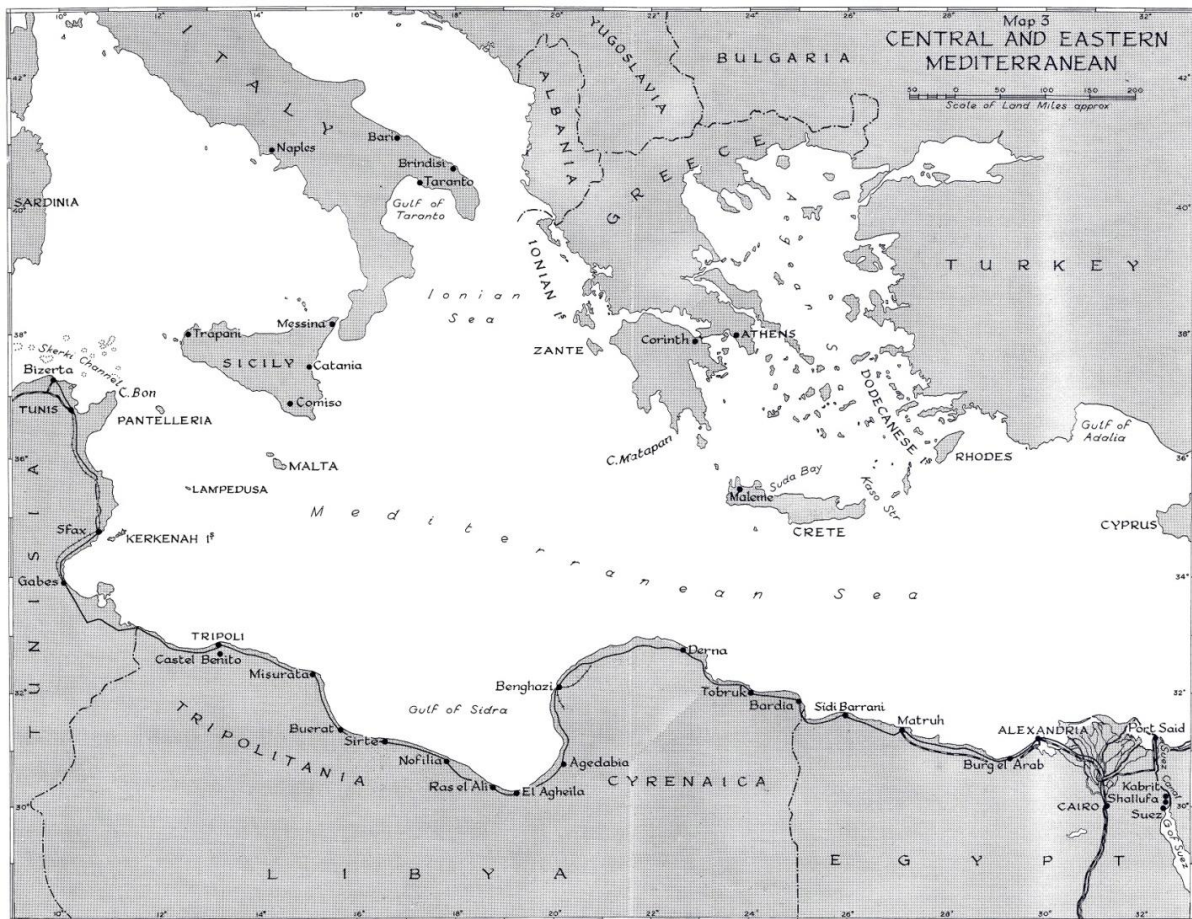


Figure 1: "Central and Eastern Mediterranean", from I.S.O Playfair et al., *The Mediterranean and Middle East: the Germans come to the help of their ally*, 1941, volume II, HMSO, London, 1954, p. 9.

¹¹ Richard W. Stanton, "A life on the ocean wave", unpublished memoir, AWM MSS1658, p. 17.

¹² David Stevens, *The Royal Australian Navy in World War II*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1996. See also, Gill, *Royal Australian Navy, 1939-1942*.

The Mediterranean Sea represented a strategic opportunity for both the British and Italians. Control of the Mediterranean offered vital support for bases and land campaigns in the arena; for the British, this included their bases at Malta and Alexandria, and their land campaigns in North Africa and the Middle East [Figure 1]. Though priority was inevitably given to the home theatre around Britain, the need for control of the Suez Canal and Red Sea, and access to the Eastern Mediterranean, ensured the British Fleet maintained a strong presence in the Mediterranean in 1940 and 1941.¹³ This also allowed them to blockade and isolate Italy, and to protect Atlantic trade routes between Gibraltar and the west.¹⁴ Consequently, British naval presence in the Mediterranean assumed importance only second to the home theatre itself.¹⁵ Under Commander-in-Chief Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, the Mediterranean fleet comprised the largest naval force outside British home waters.¹⁶

Operation Lustre and the battle of Cape Matapan

One of the most decisive victories of the RN in the Mediterranean in 1941, and one that would be key for the later evacuations, happened while troops were still being transported to Greece. On 28 October 1940, Italy invaded Greece through Albania, prompting Greece to become involved in the war.¹⁷ To the Greek Government, it was clear that a German invasion was imminent and while Greek forces were able to resist the Italians on the Albanian front, the government felt they would be unable to mount an effective defence against the Germans as well.¹⁸ The prospect of a German invasion compelled the Greek Government to request British assistance, as per Britain and France's earlier promise of military support in April 1939.¹⁹ In early 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff in London decided to send British and Commonwealth forces to Greece to aid the resistance, which would prove timely as just over five months after the Italian invasion, Germany did indeed enter Greece and Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941.²⁰

¹³ S.W. Roskill, *The war at sea: the defensive*, Volume 1, HMSO, London, 1954, p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁷ Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika over the Acropolis*, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Stockings and Hancock, p. 1.

²⁰ Gavin Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, [2nd ed.] Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1986, p. 1-2; Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika over the Acropolis*, p. 1.

Over the course of March and April 1941, the navy transported troops and equipment to mainland Greece as part of Operation Lustre to support resistance of Axis forces. As part of the operation, 58,364 troops, 8,588 motor transports, guns and tanks, as well as stores and other equipment, were transported from Egypt to Greece in a series of convoys.²¹ Each convoy had, on average, two or three destroyers to screen, as well as support from anti-aircraft cruisers during the most vulnerable sections of the journey.²² The battle fleet provided cover from the threat of the Italian surface fleet, which was at sea to the west of Crete during the operation. Australian ships participated in Lustre, with *Perth* sailing from Alexandria on 7 March as part of the 7th Squadron convoy while the RAN destroyers escorted convoys throughout.²³

On 27 and 28 March, the convoys were interrupted by the presence of the Italian fleet in the eastern Mediterranean. After reports on 27 March of three Italian cruisers and a destroyer heading towards the area of operation, Cunningham took four battleships and nine destroyers out under the cover of darkness to rendezvous with Vice-Admiral Henry Pridham-Wippell – Second-in-Command in the Mediterranean and commander of the 1st Battle Squadron – to the west of Crete at 5 pm the next day.²⁴ At 8 am on the 28th, four Italian cruisers and six destroyers were spotted 30 miles south of the Greek island of Gavdos. At 8.12 am, the Italians opened fire.²⁵ By 8.29 am, Pridham-Wippell's forces had begun returning fire, and by 8.55 am, the Italians withdrew to chart a course north-west.²⁶ Two hours later, one Italian battleship with destroyers was pursuing Pridham-Wippell's cruisers and firing 15-inch salvos at HMS *Orion* and *Gloucester*.²⁷ Later in the day, a damaged Italian battleship was sighted sailing at low speed.²⁸ RN cruisers and destroyers pursued the battleship *Vittorio Veneto* and by the time darkness fell, the squadron were encircling the Italian ships. The battle itself, later known as the Battle of Cape Matapan for where it took place [Figure 2], began around 10.30 pm on the 28th, when both the Italian and the British ships, including *Perth* and *Stuart*, engaged.²⁹

²¹ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy*, p. 304.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 305.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 305–306.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

²⁶ *Ibid.*,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 309–310.

²⁸ Frame, *The Royal Australian Navy*, p. 48.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, *The Royal Australian Navy*, p. 49.

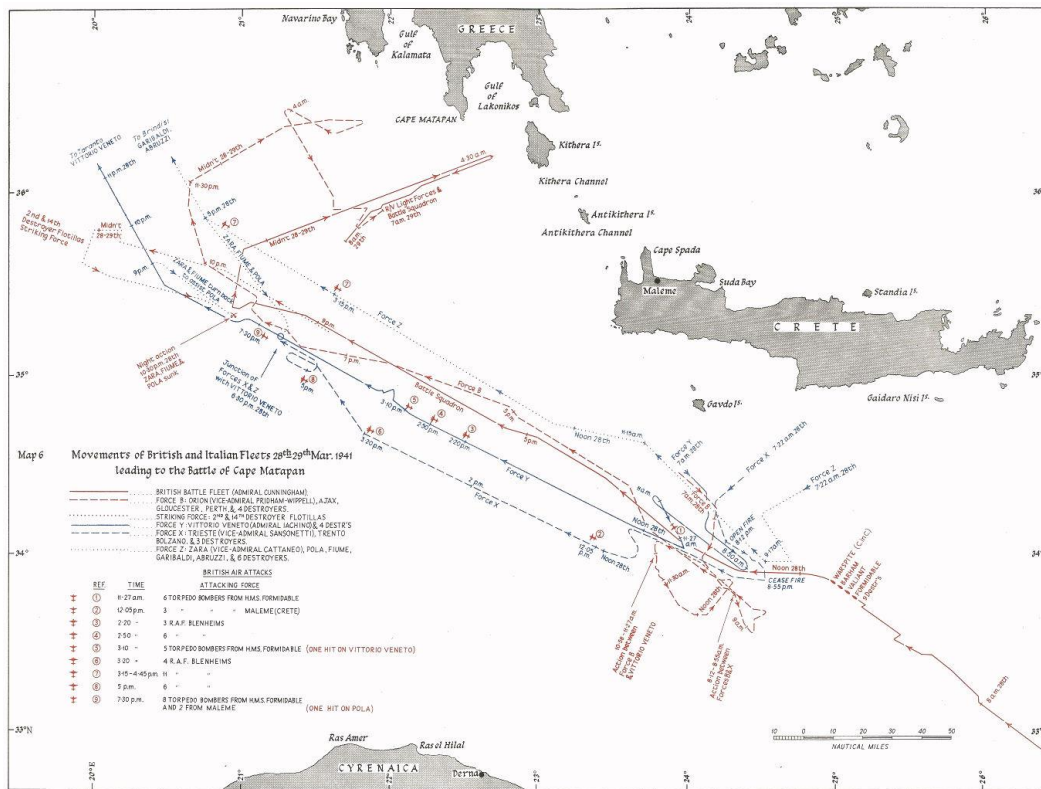


Figure 2: "Movements of British and Italian fleets leading to the battle of Cape Matapan", from I.S.O Playfair et al., *The Mediterranean and Middle East: the Germans come to the help of their ally, 1941*, volume II, HMSO, London, 1954, p. 61.

What followed was 30 minutes of “hell let loose” as the opposing navies exchanged fire. Able seaman James Duncan Cooper recorded the battle in his diary, describing it as “just like regater [sic] night only a little hotter”.³⁰ As the Italians fired 15-inch salvos as the RN ships, Cooper feared “it was all over &...we were finished”.³¹ Around 11 pm, the battle ceased and the British fleet regrouped to the north.³² The Italian fleet had lost three heavy cruisers and two destroyers, and suffered their worst defeat in the war.³³ The RN victory over the Italian Fleet was later to prove a blessing during the evacuations; though the substantial threat posed by German air attacks and Italian submarines still hovered over evacuation forces, the Italian surface fleet had effectively been taken out of the equation.

³⁰ J.D. Cooper, diary entry, 28 March 1941, AWM 3DRL6478.

³¹ Cooper, diary entry, 28 March 1941.

³² Gill, *The Royal Australian Navy*, p. 315.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 316-317.

Operation Demon and the evacuation of Greece, 24–29 April

Succumbing to overwhelming German numbers in mid-April, the British made the decision to evacuate all Commonwealth troops on the mainland on the 21st.³⁴ Operation Demon, the codename for the evacuation of Greece, was complicated and technically challenging. Withdrawal to evacuation beaches was to take place from 22 April, starting with unessential fighting and administration units followed by the final covering force embarking on the 27th.³⁵ By the 21st, there were 62,532 British, Australian and New Zealand troops who needed to be embarked under the constant threat of enemy action in land, air and sea.³⁶

Such an operation required the cooperation of and communication with the different services – army, navy, and air force – to be carried out effectively. While the army was responsible for moving troops to the evacuation points, it was the navy who was responsible for successfully embarking them from the mainland. From his headquarters in Crete, Pridham-Wippell was in charge of the evacuations, and responsible for the planning of the operation.³⁷ To ensure cohesion between the army and navy’s related operations, Rear-Admiral H.T. Baillie-Grohman from Middle East Command was sent to the mainland to liaise with General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, leader of the British forces in Greece.³⁸ Communication relied on landline and wireless transmitters, both of which posed difficulties for clear and effective organisation of the operation. While the navy and air force designed their communication equipment using wireless transmitters in order to work with their constantly moving positions, the army relied on landline communication and had a “comparatively weak wireless organisation”.³⁹ These landlines were susceptible to damage and destruction not only through bombardment and sabotage but also through wear-and-tear while moving between locations. Consequently, the army’s reliance on these landlines left them vulnerable to “almost complete breakdown of communications”.⁴⁰

One situation which might have been improved by more reliable inter-service communications was the reconnaissance of possible evacuation beaches. Though evacuations

³⁴ “Anzac Corps. Operation Order No 2 – the withdrawal from Greece of Anzac Corps”, AWM54 534/3/4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hill, *Diggers and Greeks*, p. 1.

³⁷ Andrew B. Cunningham, *A sailor’s odyssey: the autobiography of Admiral of the Fleet, Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope*, Hutchinson & Co, London, 1951, p. 353.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 353.

³⁹ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Lessons and conclusions”, in *The Campaign in Greece*, AWM54 534/2/28, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Lessons and conclusions”, p. 10.

would ideally have been conducted at established docks, many had to make use of natural bays and beaches to avoid German forces, particularly once the main port in Athens, the Pireaus, was wrecked.⁴¹ Once evacuation was decided upon, there was no naval officer in location to conduct the necessary reconnaissance, and instead an army officer was responsible for scouting for suitable beaches and evacuation points.⁴² It was not until 15 April, two days after Cunningham was informed evacuation was imminent, that Baillie-Grohman arrived on Greece to arrange and co-ordinate the evacuation.⁴³ The ten days between his arrival and the first night of the evacuations gave Baillie-Grohman little time to undertake a comprehensive naval survey of the coastline.⁴⁴ On top of this, the late arrival of Baillie-Grohman for naval reconnaissance meant that the navy had limited success in locating suitable local small vessels to assist in embarking troops onto the ships.⁴⁵ The beaches, docks and vessels designated for evacuation were not, therefore, thoroughly considered for their suitability, making the evacuations more complex than perhaps they needed to be.

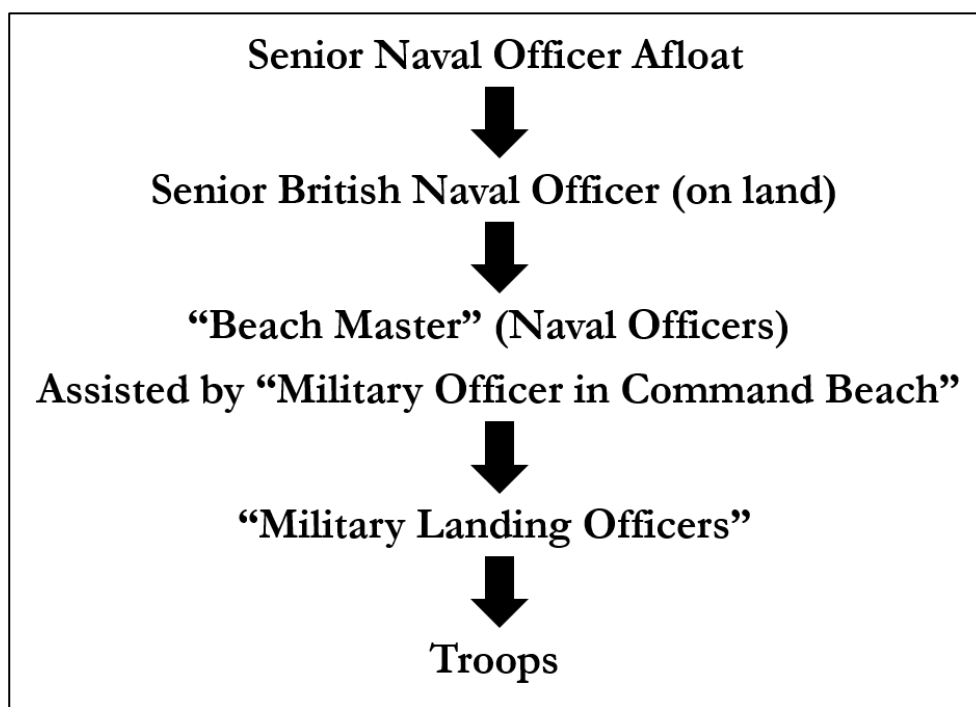


Figure 3: Command structure on evacuation

⁴¹ Cunningham, *A sailor's odyssey*, p. 352.

⁴² Historical Section of the War Cabinet, "Lessons and conclusions", p. 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The beaches themselves marked the line of demarcation between the navy and army's zones of responsibility; though the army was responsible for directing the evacuations on the mainland, once troops reached the beaches, piers, and docks they were under the command of the navy. The senior naval officer afloat (in this case Pridham-Wippell) held the highest command of the naval officers involved.⁴⁶ Second-in-charge was Baillie-Grohman, the senior naval officer on shore.⁴⁷ In theory, being able to monitor the situation as a whole, the officer afloat was placed to direct ships to the beaches where they were needed. In practice, however, constantly changing conditions made it difficult for the officer afloat to maintain awareness of the needs of every evacuation point.⁴⁸ As such, one of the key lessons from Operation Demon was the recommendation that a naval officer on shore should have greater command of ships within a 40 or 50 mile radius of the beaches, as he was more ideally placed to see the situation as it unfolded and allocate ships more effectively.⁴⁹ Under these two senior British naval officers, each evacuation beach was commanded by a naval officer, designated "beach master".⁵⁰ Beach masters were assisted at each site by military officers and would determine how the evacuation at each location would proceed, based on knowledge of the conditions of each beach and evacuating party.⁵¹ The beach masters and assisting military officers would then pass the evacuation orders on to the military landing officers who would direct the troops to the beaches and the assembled boats or ships.⁵²

In the initial evacuating plans for Greece, 16 different evacuating parties were to withdraw to six collecting areas before embarking from ten beaches [Figure 4].⁵³ As each evacuating party moved into position, a covering force would remain behind to protect against enemy attacks.⁵⁴ Key personnel, such as army officers, were given first priority for evacuation.⁵⁵ Other available troops would embark next, followed by the covering force only once all other personnel had been embarked.⁵⁶ This prioritisation, however, resulted in greater difficulties

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "Force HQ Operation No. 14", 23 April 1941, reproduced in Historical Section of the War Cabinet, "Evacuation. 21st to 29th April. 1941", in *The Campaign in Greece*, AWM54 534/2/28, p. 12a.

⁵¹ "Force HQ Operation No. 14", p. 12a.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Force Headquarters, Operation Orders and Instructions Positions of Collecting Area's and Beaches the Evacuation of Greece", AWM54 534/3/5.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

and was another lesson from the campaign; the early removal of senior personnel made controlling the troops and enforcing evacuation orders challenging, adding to the chaos of evacuations.⁵⁷

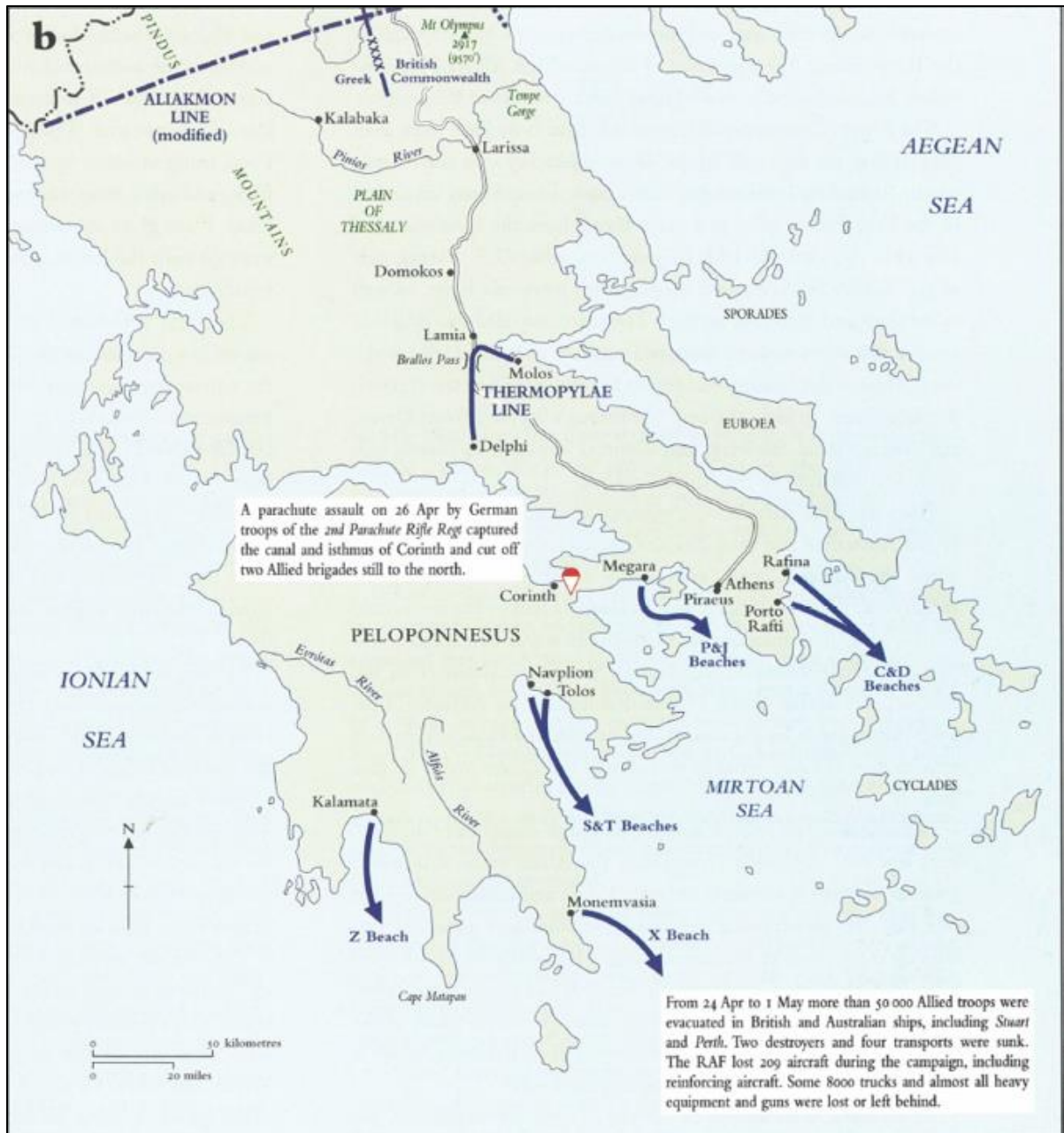


Figure 4: "The evacuation from Greece, 24 April–1 May 1941", from John Coates, *An atlas of Australia's wars*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 145.

⁵⁷ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, "Lessons and conclusions", p. 9.

The evacuation itself proceeded over five nights between 24 and 29 April, with troops gathering at collecting areas from the 22nd.⁵⁸ At Navplion, around 9,800 troops, staff and civilians gathered to evacuate from S and T Beaches; at Theodor, approximately 13,000 gathered to embark from J Beach; around 5,200 gathered at Megara to evacuate from P Beach; and roughly 9,000 troops assembled at Porto Raphiti and Raphina to evacuate from C and D Beaches.⁵⁹ Complications arose on the 23rd when German aircraft destroyed the remaining Royal Air Force (RAF) aircraft at the Argos airfield, leaving the evacuation without air protection.⁶⁰ Prior to this, the navy was apprehensive about German air dominance and concerned that the RAF – with their main base too far away on Malta – would be unable to provide adequate cover against enemy air attacks.⁶¹ With this loss of the scant British air support the Argos airfield supplied, the prospect of increased interference from German air raids initiated a change in the evacuation plans.⁶² In the revised plans, the more vulnerable beaches at Attica would be used sparingly, and beaches further south in the Peloponnese would be added to the evacuation zones. Beach Z at Kalamata was added, where at least 8,000 troops from the 16th and 17th Australian Brigades were to embark.⁶³ At Monemvasia, Plytra and Githion, Beaches X, N, and Y were included to take the New Zealand division and any other stragglers.⁶⁴ Beach J was abandoned and Navplion was set up as the evacuation headquarters.⁶⁵

The situation in the water and on the beaches was chaotic. Leading signalman Mick De Little remembered the scene that greeted *Vampire* as it approached Navplion on the 23rd, where “several ships on fire, fires ashore and [the] smell of burning oil” compounded the difficulties caused by the troop ship *MV Ulster Prince* going aground twice that night.⁶⁶ To get the troops onto the ships, any available vessel was utilised. Landing craft from ships, flat-bottomed barges, whalers and skiffs were used alongside local vessels such as caiques to ferry evacuating forces from the beach.⁶⁷ Petty officer William Bracht in *Perth* later remembered picking up troops on the night of the 24th, recalling that “as soon as we flashed the signal to shore scores of small boats came towards us. Soon we had hundreds of soldiers ... clambering

⁵⁸ “Positions of Collecting Area's and Beaches”.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Evacuation. 21st to 29th April. 1941”, p. 20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 20–21, 33.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21, 33.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶⁶ G.V. De Little, diary entry, 23 April 1941 [misdated, 24 April 1941], AWM PR01820.

⁶⁷ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942*, pp. 320, 322.

up the nets” and on to the ship.⁶⁸ Once on the ships, the chaos continued. With the loss of air support to contend with German air attack, which increased the overall dangers of the evacuations, the navy decided to make maximum use of destroyers in embarking troops in order to complete the evacuations as quickly as possible.⁶⁹ Not designed for troop transport, the destroyers soon became overrun with exhausted troops in search of a place to sleep, food or a cup of tea. Bracht recalled walking on the mess deck to see “soldiers everywhere, some sleeping and others talking”, all of them looking “just about done” in the words of De Little.⁷⁰

Though the use of destroyers as troop transports rather than screens against enemy attack made the operation more precarious, there were advantages to having more ships available to embark troops. *Stuart*, under Captain Hector “Hec” Waller (RAN), which would normally have been on screening duty, was instrumental in evacuating a greater number of troops from Tolos and Navplion than expected on the night of the 26th. Arriving at Tolos just after 11 pm, the destroyer found 600 troops waiting for embarkation on a lighter barge, and a large number of soldiers waiting on shore.⁷¹ Embarking the troops from the barge, Waller requested assistance of a cruiser from Navplion where both *Perth* and HMS *Orion* were involved in evacuations.⁷² While awaiting the arrival of *Perth*, *Stuart* transported the 600 on-board to Navplion and offloaded them to *Orion* before returning to embark more troops.⁷³ Thus the use of the destroyer to embark troops, alongside Waller’s decision to transport the 600 on the barge to *Orion* before returning for further embarkations, ensured that a total of 1,620 troops were evacuated from Tolos that night, a higher number than originally expected.⁷⁴

The operation was perilous and in constant threat from German bombers and Italian submarines. The evacuations had to proceed without the support of the battle-fleet and the convoys were vulnerable without this protection. Able Seaman Cooper, writing in his diary in *Perth*, recorded the hazards to the journey from Greece to Crete:

We are looking forward to a very hot time of it for if the Germans get a wake up to us we are in for trouble. We had about six air raids red til about dinner time & then with out any one seeing them two [dive bombers] come out of the sun & let go four

⁶⁸ William Henry Bracht, unpublished memoir, AWM MSS1576, p. 115.

⁶⁹ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Evacuation. 21st to 29th April. 1941”, pp. 20, 26.

⁷⁰ Bracht, unpublished memoir, p. 115; De Little, diary entry, 26 April 1941.

⁷¹ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942*, p. 325.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

bombs at the troop ships but missed thank God. We have fighters up all around us but they never seen them.⁷⁵

The constant possibility of bomber attacks added emotional strain to the evacuations for the ships' companies, as they always had to be "ready for trouble".⁷⁶ Cooper wrote of the nervous tension and exhaustion he was under throughout the evacuation when "every one is on there [sic] toes. I was very nerves [sic] & often thought we would get a dish into us any minute, God what a night."⁷⁷ Similarly, Nation wrote of his terror during an air raid. Nation was sitting on deck when

one bloke pointed up in the sky + said here they come when I looked I all I could see was this thin line coming down vertically. I scrambled under cover and heard a bomb whistling down thats the time you really give yourself up, when you hear them whistling ... he only dropped two bombs and by the size of the explosion I think that was all he could carry, we can't get missed much longer its on the wall that we will collect a packet, the first one hit the water 25 yrds forrand and the second one about the distance from our stern, the ship shook and shuddered all over and shrapnel clattered against the side like hailstones, several chaps got hit with small pieces but none serious.⁷⁸

Through such attacks, six RN ships were sunk with many others damaged, and though no RAN ships were seriously harmed, the strain was felt nonetheless. For ratings and officers, the need for constant readiness and the terror during attacks "would drive a man to drink", felt Nation.⁷⁹ After months at sea in the evacuations, coupled with *Waterhen's* later sinking during the Tobruk supply runs in May and June, Nation was "jack of the bloody lot" and, as mentioned earlier, feeling a straightjacket was in his future if things continued as they were.⁸⁰

Matters were further complicated by the poor communication, both between ships and between land and sea, caused by the unreliable wireless technology. This resulted in errors and delays that confused the operation. On the night of the 28th, *Perth* sailed towards Kalamata to help evacuate the 8,000 troops assembled. The destroyer HMS *Hero*, which was sent in ahead of the other ships to gauge the situation, reported to RN officer Sir Phillip Bowyer-Smyth, captain of *Perth*, that the enemy had control of Kalamata.⁸¹ Though German forces had attacked at 6 pm, they were driven back by Australian and New Zealand troops, who were able

⁷⁵ Cooper, diary entry, 26 April 1941.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Nation, diary entry, 24 April 1941.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 29 June 1941.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Cunningham, *A sailor's odyssey*, p. 356.

to regain the quay.⁸² Evacuation was possible and troops had gathered on the southern beach.⁸³ Though this information was sent to Bowyer-Smyth, it was not received until later, and he had already made the decision to withdraw to prevent the possibility of losing the ships under his command.⁸⁴ Assembled forces, including the 2/7th Australian Infantry Battalion, signalled to the destroyers but their signals were not recognised and the ships withdrew.⁸⁵ Around 7,500 troops and civilians were left behind despite attempts by HMS *Hero*, *Kandahar*, *Kingston* and *Kimberly* to evacuate without *Perth*.⁸⁶ As *Perth* left the bay, Cooper prayed “God help them all”.⁸⁷ The destroyers were only able to evacuate 332 before sailing at 2.30 am; the 2/7th Battalion was not among them, and the battalion surrendered to the Germans at 3.45 am.⁸⁸ Though HMS *Isis*, *Hero* and *Kimberly* returned on the night of the 29th and the 30th, they were only able to embark small parties of stragglers as the main forces had already capitulated and been taken as prisoners of war.⁸⁹

This was the final night of the evacuations. Reports vary on how many troops were evacuated but Admiral Sir Cunningham estimated around 50,627 had embarked from Greece.⁹⁰ Five hundred were lost when SS *Slamat*, HMS *Wryneck* and *Diamond* were sunk on the 27th.⁹¹ Around 15,740 were left on Greece.⁹² Of those evacuated, only around 27 per cent were embarked from established ports, the rest from beaches.⁹³ The navy had managed to embark nearly 80 per cent of the Commonwealth forces on the mainland in confusing, complicated and chaotic circumstances.

Evacuation of Crete, 29 May to 1 June

There was no time for the navy to rest after the conclusion of Operation Demon, however, as securing Crete in order to protect the passage between the east and west of the Mediterranean

⁸² 2nd Australian Imperial Force and Commonwealth Military Forces unit war diaries, 1939–45, 2/7 Infantry Battalion April–July 1941, AWM52 8/3/7.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Cunningham, *A sailor's odyssey*, p. 356.

⁸⁵ War Diary 2/7 Infantry Battalion.

⁸⁶ Cunningham, *A sailor's odyssey*, p. 356.

⁸⁷ Cooper, diary entry, 28 April 1941.

⁸⁸ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942*, p. 326.; War Diary 2/7 Infantry Battalion.

⁸⁹ Gill, p. 332.

⁹⁰ Cunningham, *A sailor's odyssey*, p. 357.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Evacuation. 21st to 29th April. 1941”, p. 51.

⁹³ Stockings and Hancock, *Swastika over the Acropolis*, p. 505.

now became the focus for British and Commonwealth forces.⁹⁴ Of the 26,950 troops transported to Crete from Greece in the evacuation, 19,950 stayed on the island, taking the total number of Commonwealth troops on Crete to 28,614.⁹⁵ The navy was responsible for bringing troops reinforcements, munitions and supplies, and taking non-essential personnel to Alexandria to the limited supplies available on the island might last longer.⁹⁶ From 14 May, with increasing German air attacks, it was clear that Crete could not sustain a naval base, and RAF aircraft were withdrawn to Egypt, leaving the island without air support.⁹⁷ Aware that a seaborne landing of German forces was likely, the navy became responsible for defence of the island.⁹⁸

By 26 May, it was clear that the situation on Crete was untenable, and Major-General C.E. Weston, commander of the Mobile Base Defense Organization in Crete, was placed in charge of the evacuations of all troops from the Suda Bay and Maleme areas.⁹⁹ Markedly different from the earlier evacuation was the lack of planning for the evacuation from Crete. Food and rations were in short supply and in some places the food situation was so serious that it required emergency supplies to be air dropped to the troops.¹⁰⁰ Unlike the prior evacuation from Greece, there was no plan for multiple embarkation points, and all troops were to withdraw to Sphakia on the south coast to await evacuation.¹⁰¹ The journey to Sphakia was also chaotic: the “rapidly moving HQ”, “haphazard” transport that was largely unable to deal with the mountainous terrain, and the saturation of “refugees and stragglers” on the route made it “impossible to maintain a coherent convoy”.¹⁰² In the end, despite attempts to organise the evacuation,

the road to Sphakia therefore presented, from the first, a spectacle of masses of men moving without regular orders and without military formations; many continued their march by day as well as by night, and the movement of headquarters and of organised bodies of troops was seriously hampered, whilst the German

⁹⁴ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942*, p. 336.

⁹⁵ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Evacuation. 21st to 29th April. 1941”, p. 51; Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation 27th-31st May”, in *The campaign in Crete November 1940 to June 1941*, AWM54 535/2/23, p. 34.

⁹⁶ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy, 1939–1942*, pp. 339–40.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁹⁹ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “The Battle, 20th May to 26th May 1941”, in *The campaign in Crete November 1940 to June 1941*, AWM54 535/2/23, p. 64a.

¹⁰⁰ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “The Battle, 20th May to 26th May 1941”, p. 69.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64b.

¹⁰² Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation”, p. 1.

reconnaissance places were left in no doubt as to the axis of the withdrawal of our troops.¹⁰³

Finally, getting to the embarkation beaches was difficult. To reach the beach at Sphakia, troops had to make their way down a 20-yard wide, 150-yard long “goat track” from a 500-foot escarpment, which took two hours to get up or down.¹⁰⁴ While evacuation plans had been in place from the very beginning of the Greek campaign, the chaos from the initial evacuation to Crete and the lack of preparation for German invasion ensured that “the decision to evacuate [from Crete] was taken too rapidly to allow of elaborate administrative arrangements”.¹⁰⁵

By 28 May, embarkation headquarters of the three services had been established in a cave about a mile from Sphakia, though communication issues plagued the Crete evacuations.¹⁰⁶ In Crete, the Naval Office in Charge (NOIC) Suda attempted to send ahead a naval wireless set to Sphakia “in case he had to control embarkation from that place”.¹⁰⁷ Four German bombers and five fighters picked up the launch, however, and the wireless set was sunk.¹⁰⁸ After the set at Canea was destroyed during the evacuation and the portable set was damaged en route, no other means of naval communication remained.¹⁰⁹

Conflicting reports of evacuation numbers further complicated matters, with reports varying as widely between 10,000 and 2,000 expected troops.¹¹⁰ Due to the difficult conditions of the march, only those wounded who had “a fair chance to finish [the] route” would be allowed to participate in the evacuation.¹¹¹ In order to expedite the process, Creforce – the designation for British and Commonwealth troops on the island – determined that walking wounded would be the first evacuated, requiring the use of special landing craft to transport them to the evacuation ships.¹¹² Alongside the wounded, embarking fighting troops was top priority, particularly those who had been fighting for the longest.¹¹³ Only after all combat

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “The Battle, 20th May to 26th May 1941”, p. 69.

¹⁰⁶ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation”, p. 12.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹⁰ Cunningham, *A sailor's odyssey*, p. 385.

¹¹¹ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “The Battle, 20th May to 26th May 1941”, p. 65.

¹¹² Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation”, p. 16; Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “The Battle, 20th May to 26th May 1941”, p. 64a.

¹¹³ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “The Battle, 20th May to 26th May 1941”, p. 64a.

troops had been evacuated would civilians be embarked.¹¹⁴ Having learnt from the success in Greece, command in the Middle East devoted a separate staff to oversee the evacuation.¹¹⁵ Major-General John Evetts, commander of the British 6th Infantry Division, headed this separate staff and acted as a military liaison officer to the navy.¹¹⁶ Cooperation between the army and the navy was again emphasised, and one of the key lessons drawn from Crete was the need “for good communication between the beaches and assembly areas”.¹¹⁷ In order to ensure this, “an officer should be appointed with full knowledge of the local situation on shore to act as Beachmaster” who would liaise with the naval beach master throughout the evacuation.¹¹⁸

The situation on the beach, which had been confused enough on the mainland, was almost anarchic in Crete. With general disorganisation and a high number of refugees, the need to prevent “‘gate-crashing’ from stragglers”, meant that those allowed onto embarkation beaches were carefully controlled.¹¹⁹ This confusion was compounded by panicked soldiers fighting to climb into the boats, with Petty Officer Perkins reporting that soldiers threw around their rifles just to try and secure a spot on the embarking ships.¹²⁰ To combat such chaos, troops were to be allowed onto the beach only when called, which “eliminated the dangers of uncontrolled embarkation” but “probably did not produce the maximum number of troops which the ships could have dealt with”.¹²¹ On the night of the 30th, for example, 1,000 troops assembled to embark on the destroyers *Napier*, *Nizam*, *Kandahar*, and *Kelvin*.¹²² When only *Napier* and *Nizam* arrived, it seemed as though many of those awaiting evacuation would be left behind. Both destroyers, however, were able to carry 1,000 troops each, rather than the 250 they had initially planned to embark.¹²³ The difficulty instead came with finding the second 1,000 troops, as excess numbers had been kept off the beach.¹²⁴ Through searching the hills, a further

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation”, p. 9.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹⁷ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Lessons and conclusions”, in *The campaign in Crete November 1940 to June 1941*, AWM54 535/2/23, p. 12.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 18

¹²⁰ Perkins, diary entry, 31 May 1941.

¹²¹ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Lessons and conclusions”, p. 18–19.

¹²² Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation”, p. 24.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

400 men were found and evacuated but the destroyers were forced to leave for Alexandria at 3 am with 600 less than they could carry.¹²⁵

On the ships, disorder reigned. The barrage of German fire was relentless, and ships were constantly dealing with warnings, attacks, near-misses and pursuing planes. Leading Signalman De Little's diary entry for 29 May illustrated the constant nature of the attacks:

Yellow warning at 0745. DR [destroyers] look well racing through flat calm sea. Another yellow at 0800. Pick up *Phoebe* at 0830. *Calcutta*, *Coventry*, *Perth*, *Defender*, *Decoy* and *Glengyle* 0855. Yellow warning followed by red. 3 Junkers [dive bombers] in air; terrific barrage but they still came through it. *Perth* caught a packet through flag deck into a boiler room. Casualties on board and top speed of 25 knots. 0900 red warning, single raider. 1000 red warning. Several Junkers & 7Bs close miss on *Coventry*. 1030 Yellow warning shadowed. 1100 red - more Junkers and *Glengyle* straddles. 1315 Yellow, shadowed. 1530 Red warning, 7 Junkers, good barrage and they dive through and thank God all bombs miss their mark. She's been a bastard of a day and still more to come I reckon. 1600 yellow warning. 3 Faulmers and Hurricanes [fighters]. At last we sight friendly aircraft. Bloody near time too. 1715 yellow, British fighter patrols. 1800 Red, 1 shadower, been identified as Heinkel [German fighter], makes off. 1840 *Phoebe* makes off for Alex[andria] at 30 K[nots] with troops from Crete. Looks like another evacuation. We slow down to 6K, *Glengyle* also has troops - is slinging paravanes. 1930 speed 16k for Alex. 2030 Red warning - can hear aircraft but can't see them. 2100 dark at last, thank the Lord, what a day. 2300, 2400 quiet.¹²⁶

Adding to the difficulties of constant attack, the ships' companies had resorted to "stacking the soldiers on board like sardines" in order to accommodate the numbers.¹²⁷ The mess decks were so crowded those on board could hardly move, not only amplifying the confusion but also making it harder and more dangerous for the ships companies to do their jobs.¹²⁸ For Perkins, though *Nizam* was lucky not to be wrecked by the barrage, death came too close for comfort when a bomb fell near him on the 31st. Nearly drowning in the water that overflowed onto the ship, Perkins wrote in his diary how he "kept thinking during those few yet very long moments 'I wonder'".¹²⁹ What he wondered he could not figure out, but it is not hard to imagine the fear and panic he would have experienced.

Perhaps to the relief of the ships' companies, Cunningham's concern with the heavy naval losses resulting from constant attacks prompted him to determine that the night of 30

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ De Little, diary entry, 29 May 1941.

¹²⁷ Perkins, diary entry, 31 May 1941.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

May would be the final night of embarkations from Crete.¹³⁰ The disappointing evacuation numbers, however, prompted Creforce to request the evacuation continue to the night of the 31st as they expected that by this point another 7,000 troops would have reached Sphakia and be ready to depart.¹³¹ After being informed of the need for more evacuations, and with the reassurance that RAF cover would be available, Cunningham agreed to extend the evacuations to the night of the 31st but warned that only 2,000 troops would be embarked.¹³² Hoping that the navy might be able to send more ships than anticipated, Creforce placed another 2,000 troops on stand-by on the night of the 31st.¹³³ Later, definitive instructions came from Middle East command that this was to be the final night of embarkations, and 3,600 troops were to be evacuated.¹³⁴ Of those who had managed to make it to the evacuation beach, some 5,500 troops would be left behind.¹³⁵ With priority given to fighting troops throughout the evacuation, those left behind were weakened by hunger and fatigue and would be unable to mount a continued resistance.¹³⁶ Consequently, Creforce ordered their capitulation to the Germans.¹³⁷

At 11 pm on 31 May, the light cruisers HMS *Phoebe*, the mine-layer *Abdiel*, and the destroyers *Jackal*, *Kimberly*, and *Hotspur* arrived in Sphakia, picked up three landing craft that had been left behind previously, and made the final embarkations of the evacuation.¹³⁸ While some were able to embark successfully, the “rabble of refugees etc which thronged the entrances to the beach” again made it impossible for many troops to reach the ships.¹³⁹ Others were held up by the narrow track and Movement Control staff who insisted evacuating troops march to the beach in single file.¹⁴⁰ While the evacuation from the beaches proceeded smoothly, delays were again caused by a lack of troops available to embark.¹⁴¹ On the final night of official embarkations, the navy managed to evacuate just over 4,000 men, taking the numbers of those evacuated from Crete to around 16,000.¹⁴² Nearly half of the 28,614 on the

¹³⁰ Cunningham, *A sailor's odyssey*, p. 385.

¹³¹ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation”, p. 21.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 27.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 27–28.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

island at the start of German attacks were killed or left behind, “too exhausted by hunger and fatigue” to even move.¹⁴³ Some later escaped or hid out in the hills and offered resistance, but most were captured as prisoners of war.

RAN in the evacuations

As the navy evacuated Greece, embarking soldiers and ships’ companies were aware of the fact that the second day of evacuations took place on the 26th anniversary of when the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACs) landed on Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. Many Australians were conscious of the significance of when the evacuations were taking place, and marked “Anzac Day” next to the date in their diaries.¹⁴⁴ For some, this prompted a reflection on the impact of the First World War, with Andy Nation writing “a lot of bloody good the last war did for the world”.¹⁴⁵ For most, however, it was simply an observation.

The media in the years following repeatedly noted the parallel between the dates of the evacuation of Greece and the Gallipoli landings, and drew connections to the Anzac spirit of the soldiers fighting in both Gallipoli and Greece. For the *Daily Examiner*, the evacuation was “another story of heroism and efficiency” where the “conduct of our troops added new lustre to the ... term Anzac”.¹⁴⁶ Both the *Canberra Times* and the *Courier-Mail* emphasised that the “Anzac line was never broken”, with the *Courier-Mail* reporting Acting Prime Minister Arthur McFadden praised the Australian troops for “having contested stubbornly the enemy’s advance, even to the last few inches of Greek soil”.¹⁴⁷ The *Age* in 1947 even presented the campaign as “that other Anzac Day”.¹⁴⁸ Comparing the Australian forces in Greece to “the Greek heroes [of] thousands of years ago”, the *Age* evoked the qualities that have come to define Anzacs in popular memory: courage, endurance, and resourcefulness.¹⁴⁹

The RAN, however, figured little in these public celebrations of Anzac heroism. Apart from Stanton’s anecdote and the awareness of the date on 25 April in ratings and officers diaries, the particular Australian naval contribution was not awarded the same level of

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Perkins, diary entry, 25 April 1941; Cooper, diary entry, 25 April 1941; Nation, diary entry, 25 April 1941.

¹⁴⁵ Nation, diary entry, 25 April 1941.

¹⁴⁶ “The evacuation of Greece”, *Daily Examiner*, 5 May 1941, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ “In the evacuation of Greece”, *Canberra Times*, 28 June 1941, p. 2; “Low casualties hoped in Greece: evacuation is stubborn fight”, *Courier-Mail*, 30 April 1941, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ D.B., ‘That other Anzac Day - the Greece evacuation’, *Age*, 26 April 1947, p. 8.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

commemoration. Instead, it was the RN as a whole which was commended for its valour in both the Greece and Crete evacuations. General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, signalled to Weston at the end of the evacuation, highlighting “the heroic efforts and sacrifices the Navy has made to rescue you all”.¹⁵⁰ In his history of the war, William Churchill praised the success of the Greece evacuations, stating that the high number of troops evacuated was “only made possible by the determination and skill of the seamen of the Royal and Allied Merchant Navies, who never faltered under the enemy's most ruthless efforts to halt their work.”¹⁵¹ Such commentary reveals the nature of the naval operation; though there were ships from the RAN alongside other Commonwealth ships involved in both evacuations, they were one part of a greater whole. To emphasise a distinctive nature of the Australian ships would fall into the trap of the mythologising of Anzac that is rife in Australian popular memory.¹⁵² Such expressions of the Anzac spirit drive a vision of Australian actions in war that often exaggerates Australian influence or involvement, and ignores aspects that do not fit into the legend.¹⁵³

In reminiscences of those involved, however, the perceived national character of the Anzac materialised in their accounts of the evacuations. Chief Petty Officer Richard W. Stanton, writing in his memoirs, recounted how Australian troops cheered “wildly” when the company of *Vampire* “hoisted the Australian flag to the masthead and raced back along the line of the convoy to let the troops know that it was an Aussie ship which had escorted them home”.¹⁵⁴ Signalman and poet Leslie Edward Clifford, who wrote a commemorative poem after the war in honour of *Stuart*'s exploits, described the “gallant lads” fighting in Greece, who needed to be evacuated only so they could “fight another day”.¹⁵⁵ Reading accounts such as Clifford's poem or Stanton's memoir, or even diary entries from officers such as Perkins who make a point of mentioning when the troops the ships embarked were Australians, it would be easy to view the RAN involvement as part of the supposed legacy of Anzac heroism. These accounts evoke an image of Anzac bravery and gallantry, of Aussies helping Aussies in the spirit of mateship.

¹⁵⁰ Historical Section of the War Cabinet, “Withdrawal and evacuation”, p. 27.

¹⁵¹ Sir Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Abridged Edition*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013, p. 419.

¹⁵² See for example, Marilyn Lake et al., *What's wrong with Anzac? The militarisation of Australian history*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2010.

¹⁵³ Mark McKenna, “Anzac Day: how did it become Australia's national day?”, in *What's wrong with Anzac? The militarisation of Australian history*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2010, p. 111.

¹⁵⁴ Stanton, “A life on the ocean wave”, p. 17.

¹⁵⁵ Leslie Edward Clifford, “The grey old lady”, unpublished manuscript, AWM MSS1226.

Nevertheless, there were very few distinctive RAN actions in the evacuations of Greece or Crete. The most significant actions came from *Perth*'s ill-fated withdrawal on the 29th, which was ultimately the decision of a RN officer, and Waller's decisions on *Stuart* on the night of the 16th. In Crete, the only significant RAN contribution came when *Napier* and *Nizam* were able to embark above the expected number of troops, ensuring less men were left behind to become prisoners of war. Yet any destroyer with the same dimensions could have acted exactly the same. Though *Perth*, *Stuart*, *Napier*, *Nizam* and the other RAN ships may have been Australian, they had non-RAN personnel in their companies, as Bowyer-Smyth's presence illustrates. The different naval origins would have been indistinguishable in the eyes of the evacuated troops; RAN personnel did not wear Australian flashes on their uniform and would have been wearing anti-flash gear including steel helmets without their identifying tallies. For both the ships companies and the evacuating troops, there was no way of immediately knowing who was Australian in the chaos of the evacuations. In the confusion, a ship was a ship.

Conclusion

The naval operation to evacuate tens of thousands of British and Commonwealth troops from mainland Greece and Crete in 1941 was complex, and began long before troops were on the ships. Responsible for organising the evacuation points, as well as the troops on them, the navy was vital in not only successfully transporting troops to Crete or Alexandria, but also in simply organising their embarkation from the beaches. Naval officers controlled who would evacuate when, and ensured that the operation ran smoothly - in theory at least. In reality the situation was chaotic and proceedings did not always go as efficiently as planned. Nevertheless, a remarkable number of troops were successfully embarked. Once on the ships, the navy's responsibilities continued, and the convoys had to protect themselves and the evacuated troops from enemy air attack. For the men serving in the ships, such an operation was tiring and seemingly endless, and the constant stress left many desiring a break at the end of the evacuations.

Though the RAN personnel fought tirelessly through their weariness, the Australian naval presence in these evacuations was indistinguishable from the wider RN exploits. The RAN presence was no doubt important - in the same way that the contributions of all the ships and their companies were important - but it was largely unremarkable. The RAN was one small part of a vast operation. It may have been an "Aussie ship which escorted them home"

but it could easily have been a RN or merchant ship, and the exhausted troops would have paid no attention. No matter which nation the ship that embarked him hailed from, Private William Lancaster Carter would still have written in his diary when he was evacuated from Greece on Anzac Day in 1941, “thank God the Navy has taken over at last.”