

28th Māori Battalion Crete

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"No infantry had a more distinguished record, or saw more fighting, or alas, had such heavy casualties."

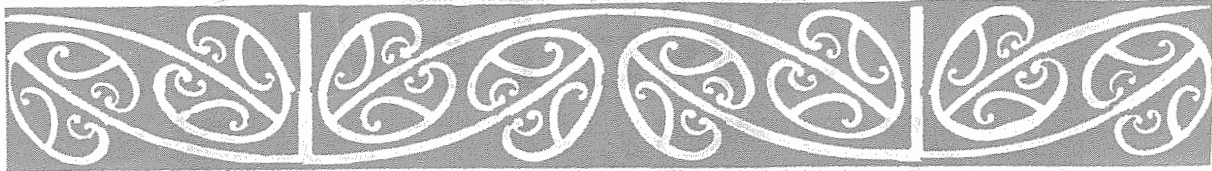
*Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, Commander of the 2 NZEF,
commending the 28th Māori Battalion.*

Look for further information:
[28th Māori Battalion \(28maoribattalion.org.nz\)](http://28maoribattalion.org.nz)

CRETE



Alexandria June 1941 — Crete Survivors. Taken the morning following their disembarkation.



Because Crete dominates the eastern Mediterranean Basin and constitutes the key position of this vital area joining the three continents Europe, Asia and Africa, it was occupied by the Allies. This created difficulties for the German Airforce in their offensive actions against the allied bases in the Middle East and Africa since their aircraft were stationed at remote airfields in the mainland of Europe. At that time it constituted a serious threat against the Romanian oil-fields about 700 miles from the island.

If it were occupied by the Germans, Crete could serve as an air and naval base, obstructing the Allied transports in the Mediterranean and become an assembly area of the Axis Forces supporting the operations of German and Italian troops in the Middle East, Suez, Egypt and generally in North Africa. This consideration led Hitler to approve the plans to capture Crete.

In the period November 1940-April 1941 very little was done towards organising an effective or even satisfactory defence of the island. On April 1941 the command of the Allied Forces on the island was assigned by General Wavell to Major General Freyberg, Commander of 2NZE which had operated in Greece. Freyberg had to face the difficult situation of preventing the enemy from using Crete as an airforce and submarine base.

Freyberg's men were incompletely equipped with minimum supply of ammunition. They were New Zealander's, British, Greeks and Cretans. The troops were actually those evacuated from the mainland and had suffered considerably. They had a minimum of means, lack of vehicles and heavy armaments, some of them unarmed as well. Despite all these handicaps the morale of these troops was very high.

The 4th NZ Brigade had as its mission to provide intervention readiness in favour of the Maleme Sector.

The British Fleet patrolled around the island under the command of Admiral Cunningham with the task of preventing the transporation of forces by sea.

But there was no allied aircraft on the island during the Battle of Crete. The last six British aircraft which had remained in Crete departed May 19 to Egypt.

Total Allied Forces 31,500 men including 1500 officers.

The Battle of Crete lasted from May 20-June 1 1941.

The deeds of outstanding bravery of all the defending forces are legendary. The story of the spontaneous charge by the Maoris on the last even-

ing in Maleme, told by Colonel Dyer and said by him that "for sheer inherent courage was unsurpassed in the Middle East," loses nothing in the retelling:

"As evening approached the Germans who had been steadily reinforced all day by troop carrying planes began to press us. I suppose they thought that we would turn and run. In front, just below the edge of a spur at about 100 yards distance they erected a banner such as you would see in a street procession — a broad strip of red cloth held up by a pole at each end. In the centre was a white circle with a large black swastika.

Then opening a concentrated fire they came at us from the front and right. As a man the Maoris rose where they lay, a scattered bank of figures under the trees. With knees bent and leaning to the right they slowly advanced firing at the hip. They did not haka for this was not rehearsal. Instead there rose from their throats a deep shout "Ah Ah Ah" as they advanced firing. Then the cartridges in their magazines being exhausted they broke into a run with bayonets levelled and their shouts rising as they went. The ground shook with the heavy tramp of men, the air whistling and cracked with bullets. Men went down but still they charged. The pride of the German army turned and fled."

On the morning May 26, Major General Freyberg cabled to Cairo "The endurance limits have been reached by the men —" and "requests permission for the evacuation of the island." At 4 p.m. May 27 permission was granted. Major General Freyberg issued the order to withdraw and depart for Sfakia.

Approximately 15,000 men managed to reach Sfakia and board British navy vessels during the nights May 28-June 1 and depart for Egypt.

The major part of the troops that did not manage to board the vessels surrendered while hundreds withdrew to the mountains receiving hospitality from the brave Cretan farmers, many escaping to the Middle East later on.

Casualties —

Army — 13,500 (killed, wounded or captured)

Navy — 15 vessels sunk 2000 officers and seamen lost.

The 7th German Airborne Division was totally wiped out and never again until the end of the war were parachutists deployed massively.

The Battle of Crete became a Greek epic. Cretan men and women and children without appropriate means gave a unique example of heroic defence and sacrifices typical of people that can only live free. This was Crete's historical contribution and was a glorious page of Greek history.