

ALFRED KNIGHTS - GUNNER, ROYAL ARTILLERY

Alfred joined up in March 1940 and became a Gunner in the Royal Artillery. In September he was sent overseas, either to the Middle East or more likely North Africa. We do not know at this stage what part of the Royal Artillery he served but, as he later served in Crete, it is quite possible that he was in the Expeditionary Force that went to Greece and was evacuated in April 1941 to Crete. A component of the 1st Armoured Brigade was the 104th (Essex Yeomanry) Regiment, an anti tank unit, which fought in both Greece and Crete. With the Balkans under his control Hitler, with reluctance, was forced to view Crete as a possible platform for the British resurgence in the Balkans. Its occupation would prevent this happening as well as giving the Germans a good base in the Eastern Mediterranean from which to harry the British. Operation Mercury More positively it would involve a small seaborne invasion but their main thrust would come from use of his highly trained and motivated airborne troops. Although the British High Command was aware of the attack through Enigma intercepts their problems in defending the Island were serious. "Creforce", as the command was known, was deficient in tanks, artillery, general equipment and transport most of it having been abandoned in Greece. Ammunition and even tools for preparing defences were in short supply and men had to resort to using their tin helmets as digging tools. The Royal Air Force was stretched and could offer little support. Geography was also against the defenders in that the primary military objectives in any invasion, the airfields at points on the Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion, and the port at Suda Bay were all located on the northern coast and faced a now very occupied Greece. In all, or indeed any, of these locations then the defence would become very problematic. The invasion began on the morning of the 20th May and, initially at least the airborne assaults on all three key airfield were beaten off with heavy losses but bridgeheads had been established west of Maleme and in an area called Prison Valley, just to the south-west of the town of Canea. The German High Command in Athens staring possible defeat in the eyes decided to concentrate on reinforcing these two bridgeheads and threw all available resources at them. This decision paid off as the New Zealanders defending Maleme had withdrawn and although under some artillery fire the Luftwaffe flew in reinforcements and the fate of Crete was

sealed. For the German airborne force and the Luftwaffe Transport arm it was a very costly victory. "Creforce" began to retreat across the mountains of central Crete to the southern coast and here the Royal Navy, at considerable costs, evacuated as many as 17,000 men whilst a further 3,500 had been killed or wounded. 6,500 men were taken prisoner Alfred being one of them.