

THE DODECANESE: KOS AND LEROS

CHURCHILL'S FOLLY

Winston Churchill's fascination, some would argue fixation, with the region encompassing the Balkans and Turkey did not end with the disastrous Dardanelles campaign in 1915. Throughout the early years of the Second World War Churchill's ever active mind was developing plans that included opening a second front in Balkans and persuading Turkey to enter the war on the Allied side.

Towards the end of 1942 the Allies fortunes had revived. By mid October the Italo-German air offensive against Malta had been finally defeated, this was quickly followed on the night of the 23rd when the 8th Eighth Army launched its successful offensive at El Alamein. Having been ejected from Egypt the Afrika Korps and its Italian allies were soon in full retreat, hastened by the Anglo-American invasion of the French Morocco (at Casablanca) and French Algeria (at Oran and Algiers) . Attacked from both the east and west the Axis forces were soon bottled up in Tunisia surrendering on the 13th May 1943.

The occupation of the North African coastline allowed the Allies to consider their next move. An element in these discussions was possible future operations in the eastern Mediterranean, the seizure of Crete or of one or more major Dodecanese Islands such as Rhodes would hamstring Axis movement in the region, threaten the Balkans and possibly entice Turkey to join the Allies. At the Casablanca Conference in Morocco during January 1943 Churchill instructed the Chiefs of Staff to prepare a plan to capture the Dodecanese but the Americans, focussed on attacking Germany through mainland Europe, were less than enthusiastic and refused to deviate from this goal. Action in the Eastern Mediterranean was to be a purely British affair.

Following the successful invasion of Sicily (Operation Husky) on the 9th July 1943 Benito Mussolini was voted out of power by his own Grand Council and arrested. General Pietro Badoglio assumed power and almost immediately opened covert negotiations with the Allies to secure an Armistice. Hitler and his staff were all too aware that Italy was a now

a very reluctant partner and would seek a separate peace with the Allies and prepared accordingly. Despite the seizure of Sicily and the planned invasion of mainland Italy Churchill was still fixated on the Dodecanese writing in August to the Chief of Staffs that seizing Rhodes and the other key islands was “a business of great consequence to be thrust forward by every means...I hope the Staffs will be able to stimulate action which may gain immense prizes at little cost though not a little risk”.

Unfortunately “Accolade”, as the operation was called, was doomed from the start. The Americans considered that the Churchill’s interest in promoting “Accolade” was merely an attempt to prevent or postpone the invasion of mainland Europe (Operation Overlord) and would only provide some air assets but little else. It was clear that the resources required for the operation, as outlined at the Casablanca Conference back in January 1943, could not be provided by the British alone. Finally the Allied deception plan, Operation Mincemeat, which had preceded the invasion of Sicily Husky had been hugely successful in convincing the Germans that the Allies were preparing for a major landing in the Aegean or Balkans. To counter such a move the Germans had transferred extra troops, ships, planes and artillery into the area throughout the summer of 1943.

Events were now gathering pace. On September 8th the Italian Armistice was announced and the Germans implemented their countermeasures, codenamed "Achse" (Axis). By the 11th September the German “Sturmdivision Rhoddos “ had secured control of Rhodes, the largest and most strategically important island in the Dodecanesse taking some 40,000 Italian prisoners in the process. For the British the capture of Rhodes would have been the key that would opened the door to Churchill’s Aegean venture, failure to secure the islands ensured that “Accolade” was now going to be a very limited operation with few benefits but much risk.

Forced to revise their plans the British now moved quickly to occupy other important islands: Kos, Leros and Samos. It was hoped that with the support of pro Allied Italian troops garrisoning the islands all three islands could be held and then used as bases from which, eventually, Rhodes could be taken.

The first target was Kos and on the 13th September the first British troops arrived on the island and by the 18th the defending force was well established. Other than 1st Battalion, Durham Light Infantry there were contingents from The RAF Regiment to man light anti aircraft batteries defending the airstrip near the village of Marmari and all the necessary support services. Spitfires from the 7th Squadron South African Air Force landed to support the Army and in turn were quickly reinforced by a flight from 74 Squadron Royal Air Force. Given that the islands was some 27 miles long and between 1 and 6 miles wide this was surprisingly small force.

The occupation of Leros commenced on the 17th September when the 2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers landed on the island followed by the 4th Battalion The Royal West Kent Regiment and 1st Battalion, The King's Own Royal Regiment. This force was later reinforced by the 2nd Battalion, The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment. There was also the usual support structures plus elements of the Long Range Desert Group (L.R.D.G.) and Special Boat Squadron (S.B.S.).

Having been beaten to the minor prizes the German quickly planned for their recapture. Operation "Eisbar", the German invasion of Kos, commenced on the 3rd October and by the 4th the island was in their hands. The two flights of Spitfires were quickly eliminated, several being captured intact. The various locations being defended by the Durham Light Infantry, strung out along the island, were isolated and quickly overcome. The Germans captured 1,388 British troops and 3,145 "Badoglio" Italians. One of those captured was **Reggie Baxter from Hoxne** who was serving with the 1st Battalion Durham Light Infantry.

On the 12th November the Germans launched Operation "Taifun" with landings from the sea on the northern coast of Leros and a parachute drop in the centre of the island which effectively split the defending forces in two.

Only the L.D.R.G. and S.B.S. had had the foresight to make a contingently plan should the island fall, most made the short sea crossing to Turkey where they were, momentarily, interned. For most of the garrison there was no hope of escape and some 3,000 British and 5,350 Italians were taken prisoner. For many of the Italian officers who sided with the Allies

the cost was high as they were executed by the Germans on Hitler's orders.