

Commentary on Heinz Richter, 'Operation Mercury, the Invasion of Crete'

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The battle of Crete, fought in May-June 1941, remains a significant event in New Zealand's history. New Zealand soldiers played a crucial role in the fighting and their casualty rate, with over 3,800 dead, wounded and prisoners of war, was high for such a small country. Kiwi commanders made key decisions in the battle, decisions which led directly to the Allied defeat. Which commanders and which decisions, however, has been a subject of debate ever since.

Heinz Richter's article on the battle has interest for a New Zealand audience because it presents an often unheard German view. Richter provides a useful analysis of the German problems in assembling their invasion force, in reconnaissance over Crete and in sticking to schedule with their transport planes on the day of the assault. All of these matters increased the possibility of a German defeat. Furthermore, his interpretation of the decision-making by commanders in Athens and on Crete adds to our understanding of the plans for the invasion and the progress of the battle. He points out that German 'mission-style tactics' meant that their officers on Crete were better able than their Allied counterparts to make immediate decisions in the heat of battle without waiting for orders from above.

Richter also adds to our limited awareness of the 'rather neglected role of the Greeks' in the battle. He shows that the gendarmes and other Greek forces played a more important part than most New Zealand historians have acknowledged.

However, it is clear that he has not looked at the original New Zealand documents on the battle, now held in Archives New Zealand. Because of this, he has relied on the interpretations of British authors (in particular the prominent military historian, Antony Beevor) about the decisions made by Kiwi commanders on Crete. The documents in New Zealand show that in a number of areas these views are wrong.

Richter (and Beevor and others) appear to not understand that General Freyberg's defence plan was based on immediate counter-attack to push the German forces off any foothold they were able to gain.¹ This policy was successfully put into practice at Irakleion (Heraklion), Rethymon (Retimo), Suda Bay and Chania (Hania). It did not occur at the key airfield at Maleme because the New Zealand brigade commander was almost certainly having another attack of the shell shock from which he had suffered intermittently since World War I.² A counter-attack at Maleme on the first day would probably have defeated the depleted German forces west of the airfield, as General Student acknowledged after the war.³ Such a success would have led to the Allies winning the entire battle.

Nor does Richter realise that Freyberg, while concerned about a sea invasion, was well aware that the primary threat was from the airborne forces attempting to seize an airfield. His headquarter's summary of the German plan of attack, issued to senior commanders on 12 May, stated that 'the entire plan is based on the capture of the aerodromes' and that sea landings 'will be of secondary importance to those from the air'.⁴ Richter also says that the only place where the parachutists had a chance to take an airfield was at Maleme, when in

fact they came close to seizing the airfield at Retimo and were thrown back only after a series of determined counter-attacks by the Australian and Greek defenders.

Richter repeats earlier criticisms of Freyberg for keeping Allied forces in defensive positions on the beaches rather than committing them to a counter-attack at Maleme on the second night of the battle. However, two German flotillas were approaching Crete that night and, if they were not intercepted by the Royal Navy, the Allies would have had to confront them once they had reached the coast. Fortunately for the defenders, the RN did its job but Freyberg could not be sure of this in advance.

These military history debates aside, Richter's most controversial views concern war crimes committed during and immediately after the battle. He mentions only two acts of terror against Cretan civilians by German paratroopers and soldiers, whereas at least nine villages suffered punitive operations between June and August 1941, with hundreds of Cretans shot. He also fails to acknowledge that some of these atrocities were a direct result of General Student's order of May 31 for harsh reprisals against any civilians who had fought against the invaders.⁵

Richter attempts to exonerate Student by mentioning both the support a Kiwi officer gave him at his war crimes trial after the war and the friendly relations later established between the New Zealand Crete Veterans Association and the paratroop veterans association. It is, however, unlikely that either of these events would have happened if the Kiwis had been aware of Student's reprisal order on Crete and the subsequent atrocities committed by some of the paratroopers.

Richter also states, on the basis of post-battle reports by German combatants, that 'the Maoris did not always observe the rules of war' during the battle. It is true that New Zealand soldiers were involved in more close quarter fighting and bayonet charges on Crete than in any other battle during the war. By their nature, such actions are savage and merciless. For instance, in the fight at '42nd Street' on May 27, Maori (and other New Zealand and Australian soldiers) killed many Germans who were attempting to flee or take shelter from a fierce bayonet charge. However, there is no reason to assume that this or other similar events involved deliberate war crimes and there is no New Zealand evidence suggesting that Maori soldiers on Crete failed to observe the rules of war.

¹ See the orders to various New Zealand units reproduced in Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Covell, *Freyberg: Churchill's Salamander* (Auckland: Century Hutchinson, 1989), 20 and 30.

² David Filer, *Crete: Death from the Skies – New Zealand's role in the loss of Crete* (Auckland: David Bateman, 2010), 21-22, 148-149.

³ B. H. Liddell-Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* (London: Cassell, 1951), 241.

⁴ Barber and Tonkin-Covell, *op cit*, 32.

⁵ See Antony Beevor, *Crete: the Battle and the Resistance* (London: Penguin, 1992), 236-238.