



# THE OBSERVATION POST



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## The Battle of Crete New Zealanders' Experiences

Gunner Scott of 6th Battery kindly handed in this letter describing the Battle of Crete from "Believe It or Not Ripley." It is so good that everyone will enjoy it.

By now news of our debacle on the beautiful Isle of Crete will have reached you. Before proceeding — I'm unharmed and well, though very tired. Jerry did his level best to rub me out, but due to God knows what, I managed to escape. On many occasions I was fatefully resigned for the end. Strange to relate when I made up my mind to it I experienced no fear or trembling whatever, when fellows on either side of me were hit, my surprise was only superceded by the alacrity with which I decamped to pastures new. My deliverance was miraculous, and now I'll tell you a story. Sit very still, light a cigarette and imagine Robert "Believe it or Not" Ripley fading into insignificance.

### Pessimistic Pharisees

We were living on the fat of the land at Crete after the Greek campaign. Everyone with a whole skin was happy, jolly and bright, drinking wine at the local inns, eating fresh-made peasant bread, loling in the sun among the fresh green grass at the Brook's Bank and generally thanking God for small mercies. While some gorged themselves on oranges, the pessimistic pharisees wagged a warning finger and reminded us of the adage relating to gourmandising Romans and Hannibal's armies champing at the bit. "Beware, there will be an invasion" quoth they. "Nerts," we replied and continued our frolics. Oh dear, how little we realised what a different tenor life would take only two days later. Our bivouac area was among the olive trees on a slight rise above the road. Occasionally it was our duty to supply a picket for it. The night prior to the invasion two of us were laughing and talking while we searched passing travellers in the hope we would perchance catch a Fifth Columnist on his way to send a message to Der Fuehrer. "Damn this racket," observed my companion, "I'm going to sleep all day to-morrow." "So am I," replied I, and with that we handed over to the next relief. At 0800 next day, we were relieved by the new guard. Would we go straight up the hill for a sleep, or down to the stream for a wash? After an argument we decided to have a sleep first. On our way up the hill I noticed one big German bomber circling over our valley. He wasn't near us so we kept going. Five minutes later the air was black with bomber Stukas, fighters, diving, hedge-hopping, machine-gunning. Scotty wanted to know what it was all about and put his head up over the side of the ditch to have a look. A bullet whizzed into the grass only a few inches away. "Boy, oh Boy, was that close," said Scotty as we put heads down and tails up—all the same the ostrich.

### Paratroops

It was impossible to get any real cover where we were, so out we dived and ran till our eye balls nearly burst. The row overhead was becoming louder and louder as we literally fell into our two-man camouflaged hut of bamboo, panting and sweating, flat out on the ground. We were used to bombers and didn't much worry, but when we saw waves and waves of gigantic strange looking planes, painted dark green, wing tip to wing tip and nose to tail, we were non-plussed. Over they went at about 500 feet, very slowly and neither bombing nor machine gunning. Wave after wave roared out of sight behind the olive trees. They banked to the left, then descended to 200 feet above us. When they were directly overhead again our suspicions were realised. The bottoms of the first 50 opened just like that, and spewed out a shower of parachutists. Not one by one did they drop but in hundreds. As I watched the coloured "mushrooms" floating down with black shapes bobbing and swaying beneath, I felt my

knees quake and my throat go dry. All I could croak to the man next to me was "Hell, look at 'em." They floated down in front, behind, and on both sides of us. Then the fun started. The roar of planes, no higher than the trees now, quaked the ground, the rattle of the machine guns was deafening and the noise of my heart thump-thump-thumping was painful. Details of that are unnecessary, but suffice it to say it was like shooting pigeons.

### Don't Shoot

I shall never forget the creepy horrible sensation as I felt a foot, very heavy, graze my shoulder. I looked up at the owner, a big strapping blonde Hun, covered with Iron Crosses and Swastikas, and clutching a revolver in one hand as he tried to unhook his parachute with the other. He raised the revolver . . . censored . . . "Don't shoot, we like New Zealanders." This was in perfect English. I didn't fire, but someone else did. One of our boys, "Butch" Watkins from Devonport, said "lay off chaps, don't shoot, don't shoot." We didn't shoot, and a second later "Butch" was mortally wounded. From that minute later we never stopped. Why should we? By 1200 they dropped no more men in our area but released supplies. The huns had concentrated around an old building a few hundred yards away and were organising. As the supply planes circled about they shot flares into the air to indicate their position to the pilots. Up went a flare and down went the supplies in huge containers in which were good ammo and guns, machine guns, hand and stick grenades, and even field artillery! What an organisation. They landed no more parachutists, but concentrated on bringing in troops by landing their gliders and troop-carriers on the aerodrome at Malemi. We fixed them there too, and they attempted a sea landing. The Navy collected 14 troop ships and the remaining four turned back battered and beaten. With typical German ingenuity they landed the storm troopers and thousands of regiments by sea planes the next day and for days afterwards. Once that started we were finished.

### Little Food

We had very little equipment and likewise food. While we fought incessantly for days on end, the Hun poured in fresh well-equipped troops. They had everything, yet despite this we gave them a shocking hiding. The mighty Luftwaffe blasted us out. We could not fight aeroplanes, though we did attempt to with rifles until we found it useless. With impunity 300 planes dived, zoomed, and gave an acrobatic display from morning to night. One day a dive bomber pilot, minus bombs and ammo, put his hand out and waved to us. We waved back, but next time he came round to see us he didn't wave. On the fourth day of the battle, we three of us, were in a machine gun nest taking a spell—one kept watch and two slept. During my shift I thought I saw two figures making their way down the hill towards the little stream below us. I looked again hoping I'd been seeing things, when lo and behold, two German soldiers, obviously oblivious of our presence, walked right out into the clearing on the edge of the stream and commenced to undress preparatory to a swim. First I thought of pressing the trigger, but then a better idea occurred to me. I let them shed every stitch of clothes, woke up my other companions and we sallied forth. Stealthily we made through the trees until we reached the stream, only a few yards from the two Jerries. They were talking away in German and one was washing the other's back. Just as they were about to get up the bank we walked right out behind them and pushed the barrels of our rifles into the small of their backs. "Hands up,

Fritzie old boy" said one of the fellows. They ceased talking and up shot their hands. We later discovered they were parachutists. One, who spoke English, told me he was a bank clerk from Hamburg, in civil life, while his companion was a carpenter from Berlin. They told us they were told the Anzaes never took prisoners and they expected to be shot. Honestly, during both the Greek and Crete campaigns, I met some good Germans. Likewise, I met a few surly, dyed in the wool Nazis.

As I said before, we were short of food. Seeing Jerry receiving food regularly each day made our mouths water. Each parachutist carries a crimson flag, in the centre of which is a swastika superimposed on a white circle. As you know, red show up for miles, specially in contrast to dark green. So when they wish to communicate their particular position to their aircraft, they lay the flag out on a clear space among the trees and fire that flare. "Well," we thought, "Here's where we have a feed." We had found several flags among the booty and also many Verey light pistols, together with a selection of cartridges for them. Having had nothing but a handful of broken biscuits for several days, we were ready to try anything. So one laid the swastika flag out on a clearing, another firing the flare, and then we slunk back into the trees lest the aircraft should see us and recognise our khaki uniforms. Sure enough, over he came, very low. We watched him circle over the flag—then we espied much to our delight, a big cylindrical, aluminium container, about 12 feet long by 4 feet wide, come swinging down on the end of a white silk parachute. As soon as the plane was an appreciable distance away, we pounced on the spoils like hungry dogs.

### Ersatz Food ?

The thing was full of food. Laid out in separate compartments were fresh brown bread in cellophane wrappers, Frankfurter sausage, dried fruits of different varieties, concentrated chocolate in red silver paper, nuts, and in the other side the liquid refreshments. These were in nickel plated bottles with coloured stoppers. There was hot coffee, hot cocoa, hot tea, cold milk with plenty of cream in it, and believe it or not, four large bottles of rum (like treacle). Whacko! We cleaned the food up just like that—woof! then had some hot coffee. Remember the yarn about ersatz food and coffee in der Faderland? Maybe the civilians get it, but the army has no ersatz. If their coffee was ersatz, it was a wonderful imitation and suited us right down to the ground. Yes sirree, I'll tell the world. By the way, I forgot to mention the fact that most of us had no cigarettes or tobacco of any description during the main part of the battle. So imagine how pleased we were, after smoking tea leaves in newspaper for three days, to have packets of German cigarettes dropped from the sky. "Pennies from Heaven wasn't it! Then there remained only the rum! So what do you think we did—we got drunk!! " "Anyone sheen any (lie) Germansh?" "Yesh, thresh hundredsh of 'em over there!" "O.K. let 'em have it." We hit a dog, a donkey, a benzine box and a blade of grass, but no Germans. We were all seeing treble anyway.

By this time, it was 9 p.m. and just about dark. A strange but true fact about the huns' war methods is that they never worried us much at night. The Luftwaffe goes homes to roost and mein General Fritz von Finklestein mit der storm troopers curls up and goes to sleep. They were frightened we were going to attack them, so they shot Verey lights into the air at five minute intervals, throughout the night. Minus their air-power the Germans are a far less formidable fighting power than we are. I say it myself, with the utmost sincerity, that one New Zealand soldier is worth three average Germans on the ground. It was proved time and time again, anyway. Without any undue self-effacement I was terrified at times. So frightened in fact, that my knees knocked, my teeth chattered, and I'll swear my hair stood on end. But it was the aeroplanes which scared us, not the soldiers. At close quarters, we did what we liked, but against hundreds of hedge-hopping Messerschmitts, we felt, and were utterly helpless. Throughout the whole offensive, the New Zealand troops were using German weapons as well as their own . . . censored . . .

### Cretean Heroes

The Cretean populace has rightfully earned for itself a warm place in every New Zealander's heart. Throughout their ordeal they assisted us with all means at their disposal. With what little striking power they possessed compared with Germany's iron clad hordes, they hit tooth and nail. The capital, Canea, a small city, was the object of the most vicious air attack in history. The Junkers, Heinkels, Dorniers and Stukas in hundreds rained bombs, and more bombs, on the hitherto sequestered town. They machine-gunned the streets from less than a hundred feet; they killed women and children, they dropped incendiary bombs and high explosives from morning till night for days on end; the populace fled into the hills. Mothers and children, tired, hungry, destitute, plodded over the mountains away from Canea, now a shambles, a heap of flaming carnage from end to end. At night the flames roared through the streets, up the walls of the shattered buildings, presenting a hideous red glow against the black horizon. The fire flickered and crackled, consuming the homes of thousands in only a few minutes, until all that remained of this erstwhile happy peaceful community were the black smoking ruins—gaunt and silent against the Mediterranean's sunny skyline. And so, as we looked, many of us with tears in our eyes, on this testimony of Nazi military might I thought, "c'est la guerre." Over the mangled battered bodies of their wives and children the men of Crete, young and old, with "heads bloody but unbowed" fought back with sticks, stones and even their bare fists. A wonderful race. The womenfolk with haggard sorely tried mein, sometimes came to our trenches to bring us a scrap of stale bread—the best they had, and to

take our socks for washing in the nearby creek.

### Brave Women

Those women had as much courage as I've seen in any man, and believe me, I've seen some brave men. God help any Germans caught by the Creteans. Now it is God help the Creteans. As reprisals for their just reticence in not accepting the German yolk the Nazis are now taking their pound of flesh a hundredfold. The swashbuckling storm troopers are taking their revenge. Like Greece, there will be a food shortage. When the Hun hordes have fed their fat bellies there'll be nothing left for the peasants. The hardest blow of all will be the resurrection of the Italian prisoners of war, from the Albanian campaign who were sent to Crete before the German invasion. However, the Creteans will give no quarter on a dark night I'll wager. Regarding the means of the Roman bull-frog, the Nazis allies have as little respect for them as the British did in the last war. A German officer prisoner nodded his square head in agreement when a Tommy soldier made a disparaging remark about the fighting qualities of the Italians. They are the scavengers of the Axis alliance. The main army of occupation in Greece to-day is Italian, and the influx has commenced in Crete we are told.

So far the war has brought nothing but defeat for us. We know why—lack of air support. Until we have air supremacy the war cannot end. When we do, the Anzac armies will walk all over the Germans, and when we do walk all over them, we'll rub it in. I shudder to think of the fate awaiting Hitler's army when the Maoris fight them on a more equitable basis. The much vaunted storm troopers cried for mercy on more than one occasion but they got none—they never will.

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