

20,000 Air Troops Already Landed, and More Pouring In IN OPEN FIELDS

(By EDWARD W. BEATTIE JR.)

London, May 24 (Saturday) (BUP). —German transport planes carrying reinforcements and munitions were reported early today to be landing at the rate of one every five minutes on the Island of Crete, off which raged what was called "the greatest aerial-naval battle of all time."

Britain's Mediterranean Fleet was believed to be parrying successfully all the Axis attempts to send reinforcements to the beleaguered island by sea.

However, London newspapers warned the people to be prepared to hear of losses in British warships, though they said German claims undoubtedly were grossly exaggerated.

British sources estimated that the German Air Force had landed more than 20,000 troops on Crete by parachute, air transport and glider. Latest reports from Cairo indicated that, at least up to late Friday, the air-borne invasion was continuing on an undiminished scale.

The German planes were believed to be descending at Malei madrome to be descending at Malemi airdrome, ten miles southeast of Canea. Cairo advices indicated it was the only airfield still in Nazi hands.

Many Bombers Downed.

Many others, however, probably were dropping down in open fields since the Germans revealed their ability to land troop carriers in restricted areas during the Greek campaign.

The estimate of 20,000 German troops landed suggested that the second air-borne division was complete and perhaps the vanguard of a third had arrived.

Commentators pointed out that the British Fleet was operating in confined waters while constantly

exposed to the full fury of the German air force, with only their own relatively inadequate anti-aircraft guns to defend themselves.

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The mainland fighting seemed to centre at Malemi, where strong bands of air-borne infantry swept the area around the air field with continuous patrols so that troop carriers could maintain steady service.

Every Attempt Shattered.

The British and Greek forces were said to be fighting savagely to rout the Nazis from the Malemi region just south of Canea and Suda Bay because it dominates the lowlands before Crete's northern coasts where the Germans may attempt to land tanks. Artillery and other "panzer" forces from flat-bottom "invasion barges" reported concentrated along the southern shores of the Greek mainland.

Authoritative spokesmen called the showdown struggle between the British Fleet and the Nazi Luftwaffe a battle fiercer than any previous test of naval versus air strength and said the British warships thus far have completely shattered every Nazi attempt to land sea-borne reinforcements on Crete.

Great numbers of Nazi lives have been lost in the sinking of German troopships, and, after the dispersing of one large convoy, Italian ships were seen rescuing survivors from the sea, it was stated.

On land "heavy slaughter" has been inflicted upon the air-borne invaders, dropping down from the sky in constant swarms by parachute, gliders and big Junkers-52 transports, spokesmen said.

The German forces which had occupied Candia and Retimo were said in an official Middle East Command communique issued at Cairo to have been "accounted for" in the fierce hand-to-hand fighting, and "the situation at both places is now satisfactory."

London, May 23 (CP). — British and Allied troops have recaptured the two main German toe-holds on the mid-northern Crete coast, it was officially announced today, and the Royal Navy has smashed every costly Nazi attempt to land men by sea to support air-borne forces.

The British High Command announced that in hand-to-hand fighting such as this war has not seen before, German forces at both Candia, the island's largest town, and at Retimo, some thirty miles to the west, were "accounted for" and "the situation is satisfactory in both places."

Only at Malemi airdrome, in the extreme west, not far from the Crete capital of Canea where King George II and his Government are stationed, was the British counter-attack held up.

There British and Allied troops struggling over rough and bloody ground met fresh Nazi detachments descending from the sky. Cairo sources said the Germans still sought to use the airport, most of which had been retaken by the Allies, and were landing troops under fire on the part they still controlled.

Inflict Heavy Damage.

Allied forces were somewhat hampered by withdrawal of their fighter aircraft, but were reported inflicting heavy damage on the Germans, often before they landed.

British and Imperial forces were joined by Greek troops and by Crete irregulars, some of whom were accompanied into the field by wives armed with knives and clubs.

A British communique said: "As the German losses will show, both the British and Empire forces have never rendered a better account of themselves. In the Candia sector Greek troops also fought with the greatest gallantry."

(A message issued in Crete by the Greek Minister of the Interior was quoted in Cairo as saying: "The fight which we started against the Germans two days ago on our heroic island is proceeding satisfactorily.")

(This seemed to indicate the Greek forces were not able to get into action at the same time as

the British troops who now have been fighting four days.)

The new action by the Allied land forces was paralleled by the mighty effort of the Mediterranean fleet to hold back thousands of seaborne Axis troops and heavier equipment which they have not been able to carry by air and which they need to reinforce their aerial army.

All day, British informants said, the navy held the Axis transports and escorts off, and, they added, if it can hold them a little longer the invasion will fail.

Naval authorities warned, however, that losses were to be expected, as the fleet was working under constant menace of Nazi dive bombers and its larger units were handicapped by the confined waters in which they must manoeuvre.

The sea-air battle aroused both the public and naval and air technicians to a keen pitch of interest as some saw in it possibly the supreme test of the war between ships and aircraft.

The fleet, it was explained, was fighting not to hold off reinforcements and new weapons alone, but also supplies which otherwise must be borne by air if the German forces are to be fed.

Time Britain's Ally.

Time, in the view of British authorities, was their ally.

Available information indicated that many large units of the Mediterranean Fleet were standing the long and dangerous watch at Crete, but it also was made known that smaller craft were still keeping the African patrol against an Axis attempt to reinforce its forces in Libya, while the crisis of Crete approaches.

The Admiralty announced that British submarines "operating against the enemy's sea communications to Libya" had sunk a 9,000-ton troopship, a tanker of 7,000 tons and probably an Italian destroyer, which was known to have been hit. A big schooner, presumably carrying ammunition, also was sent to the bottom, and a smaller vessel of the same type shelled and hit several times while at anchor.

No official effort to recapitulate the German losses in transports and supply ships off Crete was made in London. In connection with a single German convoy of some thirty vessels—which Prime Minister Churchill mentioned Thursday as having been brought under the fleet's guns—it was said merely that the ships had suffered damage and that Italian vessels had run out to pick up German survivors.

Knock Out 16 Planes.

As the fleet continued to hold off German reinforcements the war on land developed into a strange no-quarter series of engagements between small groups of men scattered over the ground, the defenders watching the skies for signs of German reinforcements and the invaders desperately seeking to organize and dig themselves in before they were pounced upon by their adversaries.

Cairo despatches said the defenders had used anti-aircraft guns to such good effect that they knocked down at least sixteen Junkers troop-carrying planes in the first three days of the conflict.

(The despatches did not mention the size of the Junkers craft, but those most recently used elsewhere can carry between 60 and 75 soldiers with some equipment.)