

Time Slips, Memories Fade – But Lessons of Leadership and War Remain

Greg Mills

It was a long time ago now.

After nearly 80 years, the veterans are few and fading. And the battle did not last long; little over a week. It was bloody by modern metrics, with 12,000 casualties over this time, but not in the context of the Second World War with its 70 million dead.

In the dry sweep of history, 43,000 Allied and Greek forces, about half of whom had been evacuated from mainland Greece the previous month, were defeated by a group of 20,000 German parachutists in an airborne invasion of Crete starting on 20 May 1941. Once the airfield at Maleme to the west of the island was captured, and German reinforcements could be landed, the Allied force retreated, about 18,000 of whom were evacuated from the tiny fishing village of Sphakia to the south.

Almost 4,000 Allied troops were killed, another 2,000 Royal Navy personnel were lost, and 11,000 were captured.

Dig deeper and there are stories of grit and tough decisions, and a campaign which went on for the war's duration, the lessons of which ring true today, and not only for military leadership.

As the survivors fade away so should these learnings remain.

On the Allied side, the Greek theatre assembled a cast of characters not out of place on a *Guns of Navarone* set.

Colonel Freddie De Guingand, then a member of the Middle East Joint Planning Staff but later to become General Bernard Law Montgomery's Chief of Staff and, later still, a founder of the SA Foundation, conducted reconnaissance on the Greek mainland in the 'guise of a journalist ... wearing a borrowed suit in a rather loud check'.

Such schoolboy enthusiasm and eccentricities were not unusual.

The Yak Mission on the mainland was the private army of Peter Fleming, brother of author Ian, who had attached himself to General Adrian Carton de Wiart, a man 'with only one eye, only one arm, and -- rather more surprisingly -- only one Victoria Cross.' Carton de Wiart started his service in the Boer War (when he was wounded in the stomach and groin), First World War (shot twice in the face, losing his eye and also a portion of his ear in Somaliland; and on the Western Front losing his left hand in 1915 and pulling off his fingers when a doctor declined to remove them, shot through the skull and ankle at the Battle of the Somme where he won his VC, through the hip at the Battle of Passchendaele, through the leg at Cambrai, and through the ear at Arras), and in the Second World War. He also survived two plane crashes, spent time as deputy to Louis Botha and then later head of the military

mission in Poland, and escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp. In describing his experiences in the First World War, he said: 'Frankly, I had enjoyed the war.'

This cast produced moments of dust-dry comedy. As the British retreat down the Greek peninsula in April, the 1st Armoured Brigade commander walked up to the Duke of Northumberland in the midst of facing down the German thrust, 'My dear fellow, how nice to see you. I've always wanted to tell you how marvellous your mother looked at the Coronation.'

The halls of Oxford and Cambridge were a fertile recruiting ground for expertise, especially among the archaeological faculty. They were to play a major part in the Cretan insurgency after the evacuation.

John Pendelbury, notable for his glass eye, mastery of Cretan dialect and swordstick had served as curator at Knossos on Crete in the 1930s. Along with the Cambridge and Oxford dons Nick Hammond, David Hunt and the Tasmanian Tom Dunbabin, he was quickly recruited into the Special Operations Executive. Pendlebury was wounded and later executed by the Germans following the invasion.

AW Lawrence, a professor of classical, and half-brother to TE Lawrence, was based, too, in Alexandria, sent by Churchill to train Jews in Palestine for sabotage, in breach of the League of Nations mandate. One of their first recruits was Moshe Dayan, who lost his eye when training with them.

Unsurprisingly, it was a time with strong overtones (and undercurrents) of class. Evelyn Waugh was posted to the commando unit 'Layforce', under Colonel Robert Laycock, which was to assist the evacuation. Waugh was scandalised by the 'officer first, soldier second' mentality, which features in Waugh's novel *Officers and Gentlemen*. Waugh vents on what he saw as a betrayal of the soldiers by the British ruling class. He later claimed that the officers, notes Antony Beevor in his magisterial volume on the campaign, 'had behaved disgracefully' in the flight over the White Mountains to Sphakia, with 'many of them taking places in the motor transport and leaving the wounded to walk.'

Into this mix was inserted local politics and personalities. Affairs on Crete at the time were complicated by presence of Greek royal family which had fled the mainland, and were being ushered by a mixed band of British soldiers and diplomats. King George (who had been trained in the Prussian Guard) eventually made his departure to board the ship for Egypt on a mule wearing full service with medal ribbons and 'highly polished riding boots'. On the way his pale-coated mule attracted the 'amorous interest of another', which risked the group being spotted by the Germans overhead.

This was not the first time he faced exile, Greece having experienced 23 changes of government, a dictatorship, and 13 coups in ten years from 1924. King George is supposed to have remarked that 'the most important tool for a King of Greece is a suitcase'.

It was not as if the royal family was particularly welcome on Crete, which had strong republican tendencies. George had upset relations further by granting legitimacy to the

dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas in 1936. And that's not to say that the Cretans were themselves united. As on the mainland, factions were divided by blood and ambition, and between communists and nationalists, a fragile unity which descended into a bitter civil war after 1945.

The Allied force, known as *Creforce*, was commanded by the New Zealander, Major General Bernard Freyberg. A man of unquestionable courage and principle who had won the VC and three DSOs in the First World War, and been wounded countless times ('You nearly always get two wounds for every bullet or splinter, because mostly they have to go out as well as in,' he said once explaining his 27 wounds), he faced a difficult task defending the island with a handful of tanks, inadequate supplies, just 200 trucks and, crucially, just 13 aircraft across mountainous terrain under intense and constant German air bombardment.

But along with naval support, he had one enormous asset: intelligence from Ultra which gave him pinpoint warning. But Freyberg was wracked with indecision. A favourite of Churchill's, he believed the thrust of the invasion would come from the sea, despite the intelligence. And when the moment of invasion came, he essentially took himself out of the battle.

In pressing for Freyberg's appointment, and indeed in reviewing the conscience that had motivated him to send an expeditionary force to Greece in the first instance, Churchill, a famed nostalgist, would have done well to heed the advice of the Greek dictator General Metaxas: 'Few realise how easy and dangerous it is to mix sentiment with strategy.'

Freyberg's failings, as Beevor reminds, of 'obstinacy, muddled thinking and an extreme reluctance to criticise subordinates' influenced the outcome. Freyberg was apparently unable to sack a useless officer 'perhaps part of that soft-heartedness very often found,' Beevor suggests, 'in large men of prodigious physical courage.'

Confusing ability with loyalty, and driving decisions by nostalgia rather than hard-edged reality, remains a perennial challenge for leadership, even in today's supposedly more empirical, cross-checked and performance-based world.

His exceptional courage and steadfast integrity aside, Freyberg's lack of imagination and tactical sense led to one of his briefers to 'ruefully' put him in his *Pooh-esque* 'bear with little brain' category.

The consequences of Freyberg's failings surfaced in his steadfast belief that he faced a seaborne landing in spite of the intelligence confirming the time and place of the airborne offensive.

His was unfortunately not the only case of poor leadership and ultimately fatal decision making.

The fate of the Allied forces in Crete was decided to be along a 20-kilometre strip between the airfields at Maleme to the west and the port of Souda Bay.

It is this same strip to which most of today's tourists flock, Crete welcoming more than five

million visitors in 2019. The battle raged up and down today's cluttered beachfront with its hotels, apartments for hire, tavernas offering moussaka and souvlaki with apparently 'genuine pork and chicken', motorbike hire, and 'play and taste' mini golf.

The Allied failure to hold Hill 107 overlooking the airfield at Maleme was the turning point in the battle, the responsibility of some terrible dithering by two officers, one a retreaded Australian politician, Brigadier James Hargest, and another, Lieutenant-Colonel Leslie Andrew, like Freyberg a VC winner from the first world war. Had they ordered a counter-attack, as the Germans expected, they would have rolled them up. Of the 3,000 German paratroopers who landed on the northern coast of Crete at Maleme, Rethymo, Chania and Heraklion on the first day, 2,000 were killed.

The German cemetery, where 4,465 of their fallen were consolidated in 1965, lies on the forward face of Hill 107 amidst a plantation of olive trees, behind them the overgrown British command bunker.

*Stone crosses
Deep blue sea
Granite slabs
Neither black or white, uniform*

*The flower of youth
Descending under canopies
Now, their view from the hilltop
Permanent, memories erased*

*A war to be forgotten
Men to be remembered
Victims and innocent
A grey definition*

The Allied dithering can be excused, perhaps, by another constant in battle: the fog of uncertainty and confusion. Certainly, their job was made much tougher, and their nerves stretched beyond breaking by a complete lack of air support. The island had been subjected to constant German bombardment from the air for three weeks before the invasion. Logistics were equally important, as they are today: the Allies required some 27,000 tons of supplies, but managed to land just ten percent of this amount.

Herewith another pertinent lesson. Dithering is fatal in a martial contest. It's a little like refereeing: make an appraisal, a timely decision and stick with it. At least you would have won the breathing space to reassess if things turn out wrong. Inaction, too, is fine, if that is the decision. Dithering is different.

The Allies, and Freyberg, were not the only ones culpable of an intelligence failure. The Germans believed that there were just 12,000 Allied troops on the island, and had neither reckoned on the Greek forces and Cretan irregulars. As a consequence of their high casualties, German airborne forces were taken out of the war as a unit, despite the fact it

accelerated the formation of similar British force. Hitler declared following Operation Mercury on Crete that 'the day of the parachutist is over', though they would be used in special operations such as that to rescue Mussolini from partisans at the top of the Gran Sasso in September 1943. Moreover, the loss of 300 German aircraft of their dedicated total of 1,300, half of which were scarce transports, had longer-term implications, including for Operation Barbarossa, in the invasion of the Soviet Union which kicked off just one month later, on 22 June.

Away from the tourist tack of the coastal plains, one is quickly onto winding mountain roads bisecting carpets of olive groves in the foothills and barren high peaks. It is less beautiful bougainvillea and dozens of gelato flavours than bearded men in battered bakkies whose grins are bulls-eyed by an inevitable stompie.

Through this difficult territory the evacuation proceeded and acts of selfless bravery. It is in this setting, at Stylos, outside Souda, that the NZ division fought a rearguard action, slowly their German pursuers. One of their number, Serjeant Clive Hulme, won the VC for dispatching not fewer than 33 of the enemy with his sniper's rifle. Then the farming village, on the eastern finger of Souda Bay, was notable for its byzantine church and a ridge line behind which Hulme positioned himself. Today its centrepiece is a series of fountains close to the local watering hole, *The Whisker Tavern*. (Hulme's son, Denny, was the World F1 Champion in 1967, proving if little else that the bravery *appel val nie ver van die boom af nie*.)

The Cretans are known for their warm hospitality regardless of their personal circumstances. This enduring trait accommodated stranded British, Australian and Kiwi soldiers, which together melded a fierce resistance to German occupation.

And so the Germans learnt that they might have won the battle, but the war was another matter. The Cretan *andartes* and the remnants of Allied units together waged a bitter and bloody insurgency against the occupiers, defined by reprisals and counter-reprisals, executions and blood feuds, terror, betrayal and deportments. An estimated 8,000 Cretans died in the struggle.

The SOE was most active fighting alongside the Cretans. Notable among them were Patrick 'Paddy' Leigh Fermor, who gained later fame as a travel writer, who together with Billy Moss (later the author of the best-selling *Ill Met at Midnight* about the General's abduction, turned subsequently into a film starring Dirk Bogarde), led the audacious kidnapping of the German commanding officer General Kreipe in April 1944. SOE operations were supported by the likes of Mike Cumberlege, the polymath and semi-piratical commander of the armed caique *HMS Escampador*, replete with gold-earring, who was captured on an SOE mission to block the Corinth Canal in March 1943 and executed at Sachsenhausen concentration camp only days before the German surrender.

The Commonwealth cemetery at Souda Bay contains, at row 15C-12, the grave of Staff Serjeant Dudley 'Kiwi' Perkins, known to the Cretans as 'Vasili', a man of extraordinary bravery and 'flair for tactics', and fluent in Greek, who was killed in an ambush in 1944. Among the fifteen hundred gravestones are nine South African airmen shot down later in the war.

The sweet smell of cut grass
Thick, underfoot
Orderly lines in death
The confusion of life

Sons of the Atlantic
Captain Watermeyer, Lieutenants Nelson DFM and Scott-Winlow, SAAF, 3 February 1944
Lieutenants Friedland, Brooksbank, Guest, Hamilton, Rice and Wells, SAAF, 7 May 1944
Toes in the Aegean

Words for those left behind
1527 lie here, half known only unto God
The ghastly drama of war
At rest far from home, together

‘War is an option of difficulties’ as General Archibald Wavell, the British regional commander in chief, was frequently heard to remark. War is a pressure cooker of the difficult choices all leaders face in a world of imperfect resources and uncertain outcomes. It is the mark of genius and bravery, and principle, whether they get them right.

Perhaps that’s the lesson of the Crete campaign most relevant today.

Souda Bay, once described by Churchill as a second Scapa Flow after the great British base in the Orkney Islands, remains strategically vital, a deep-water natural port on an island virtually equidistant from the Greek mainland and Africa.

As I cycled across the breadth of Crete, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was paying a visit to Souda Bay in the company of the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. The Secretary stayed at the Prime Minister’s family home in the enchanting Venetian port town of Chania.

Mitsotakis’ father, Costa, himself prime minister in the early 1990s, but during the war a lieutenant in the Greek Navy and a member of the Cretan underground, had been released in March 1942 by General Bruno Brauer, who led the first parachute regiment in the invasion and later was installed as the commander of the ‘Fortress of Crete’. ‘Young man,’ Brauer is reported to have told the future prime minister, ‘I released you because from what I have heard, you will one day play an important part in your country’s affairs. Keep out of trouble.’ Brauer was later tried and executed for his role on the island, despite in Beevor’s words, being ‘the least culpable of all.’

The great wheel turns. Brauer was later reburied on Hill 107 with his comrades by George Psychoundakis, one of the bravest Cretan guerrilla commanders who had taken the job of groundsman at the German cemetery.

While some things remain the same, others fortunately change for the better.

Germans are Crete's biggest travel market, some 1.3 million visiting the island in 2019 of 5.5 million overall. 'The war was the war,' exclaims Ioannis Kouraki, a barrel-chested organic farmer in Kastelli Kissamou. Some 200 Cretan males were executed in the far north-western town by the Nazis on the pretext of the mutilation of the corpses of the paratrooper unit which had been wiped out there in the initial invasion. 'Then when it was finished, it finished,' says Ioannis, wiping his bushy beard. 'Today is a different world' he adds.

When things seem to be falling apart, it's a reassuring reminder of the progress made.

Dr Mills is in Greece completing his next book.