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FROM THE BATTLE TO END OF THE WAR The German Navy on Leros, 1944 till 1945

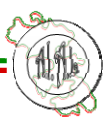
On 16 November 1943 the swastika flag was hoisted on Mt. Meraviglia and the battle for Leros was over. The German forces had decided the battle of Leros by throwing in more and more reinforcements and by their constant air superiority.

A bunch of problems waited after the surrender, though. The island had to be secured by bringing in the occupation troops, the Italian coastal fortifications and harbour facilities had to be restored, the fighting troops and the prisoners had to be brought back to Piraeus.

The occupation troops were brought over from Coo where they had arrived already before the invasion of Leros. Many had been sunk with their ships by British forces but survived in the warm water and were rescued. In Coo they were equipped at first with Italian weapons. Leros got two 999 battalions. These were made up by a third from seasoned soldiers who were to get a quiet post and two thirds by political or criminal prisoners who were to prove themselves to get rid of their punishment. The first commander of the island was colonel Wolf.

Most of the Italian batteries were taken over by a Navy Artillery Detachment. Until July 1944 10 batteries could be restored except of "Ciano" on Mt. Clidi which had suffered by air attacks and later by an ammunition explosion. Also the batteries on Mt. Mouplogourna and the Anti Aircraft battery on Mt Skoubarda had been destroyed very much by air attacks. The Army took over 4 smaller batteries. No German guns were brought to Leros except of Infantry guns.

Portolago was also for the Kriegsmarine the best base in the East Aegean and therefore a coastal defence flotilla "Dodekanes" was based there under captain Bennecke. Germany had of course no own forces in the Mediterranean and had to bring them in by different ways: Submarines submerged by the Gibraltar strait, MTB's and small motor minesweepers by the inland canals of France. Bigger motor minesweepers and landing boats were sailed down the river Elbe, taken on trolleys and brought to the Danube, down to the Black Sea and through the Bosphorus to the Aegean. Smaller Navy and Army landing boats could be transported dismantled by rail to Piraeus or Saloniki. For the Dodecanese only little forces could be made available: 4 wooden patrol vessels built in Skaramanga on Salamis, 4 motorboats and some ex Italian tugs, motor sailing vessels and harbour service craft. Also, a part of 15th landing flotilla was based there with 10 small infantry landing craft and 2 motor sailing vessels. The Army had a company of engineer landing boats 780 with some 17 units based in Portolago which were mostly used for transports between the islands. The Chief of Sea transports Portolago took care for the convoys between Rhodes and Piraeus which often called on Portolago. The bigger convoys were escorted by ex Italian destroyers. The anti submarine nets were found more or less serviceable and could be repaired and maintained by a boom defence group "D".



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The air force made use of the sea plane base "Alberto Rosetti" for her 7th sea rescue squadron with Dornier 24 flying boats and for coastal squadron group 126 with their Arado 196. But no unit was based permanently at Leros.

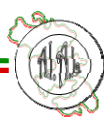
The first big task for the Kriegsmarine after the occupation of the Dodecanese was to lift the troops having fought and the many Italian prisoners to Pireus. The German troops were transported on the ex Italian destroyers very fast and without losses. The biggest problem were the Italian prisoners because of their sheer number. From all Aegean islands 98.000 men had to be taken to the mainland. Proposals to bring the 34.000 Italian prisoners from Rhodes to Turkey were turned down by Hitler. He instead ordered to utilize the transport ships with the maximum load of men regardless of the number of life rafts. Accordingly, the Navy wanted to fill the steamer "Donizetti" in September 43 Rhodes with 2100 men. The Army commander of Rhodes General lieutenant Kleemann ordered this number to be reduced to 1584 men. But "Donizetti" fell prey to the British destroyer "Eclipse" and was lost with no survivors at all. The escorting "TA 10", an ex French torpedo boat, was no match for "Eclipse" and had to beach herself in Rhodes. The biggest tragedy occurred when the steamer "Oria" with some 4000 Italian prisoners ran aground near Cape Sunion in February 1944 in a gale. Before leaving for Pireus, "Oria" had called at Portolago. From then on the Italian prisoners were flown to Athens, 15.970 Italians in all.

In the summer of 1944, Portolago was used as an intermediate stop for the convoys to Rhodes. The ships could be replenished and lay sheltered in the Bay whereas Kos and Rhodes harbors were largely unprotected.

At such an occasion Portolago was attacked in June 1944 by three British paddle boats penetrating the boom undetected during the night and damaging two destroyers and sinking a tug and a patrol vessel.

In August 1944 Bulgaria and Romania surrendered and it became clear that Greece had to be evacuated from German troops not to be cut off. In a two month effort with all means including air transport 37.138 men could be lifted from the islands to the mainland. The casualties were only 380 men. But not all islands could be evacuated: Rhodes, Kos, Leros, Kalymnos, Milos and the north west part of Crete stayed occupied. On Leros remained 1102 German and 809 Italian soldiers. The Italian soldiers were loyal to Germany and worked in the repair shops of San Giorgio Naval Yard and in building tunnels in the fortifications. Commander was now colonel Koschella, commander of the harbour of Portolago became commander Fetzer, in 1945 lieutenant-commander Brachvogel. The flotilla still existed but was rated down to a harbour defence flotilla. It was mainly used for transports between the Dodecanese Islands. The engineer landing boats had costly deployments in small battles on the islands of Symi and Piscopi.

There were no supplies coming from the mainland any more. Also the Greek inhabitants had to be fed by the Germans. When Turkey declared war on Germany, two engineer landing boats sailed to the Turkish coast and took back a flock of sheep and flour to Rhodes which had been bought by agents. As time passed and the rations became shorter, the commander East Aegean, Major General Wagener had a meeting with the orthodox bishop of Rhodes in January 1945 to establish a contact with the red cross. German and British naval officers met on boats in Turkish waters on 20 January to discuss the supply traffic. In February the first motor sailing vessels with supplies for the Greek and Italian civil population entered the ports of Rhodes,



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Kalymnos and Leros. The Germans supported also the emigration of civilians to the Allied held Patmos.

The connection with Germany was now only held by wireless and mail airplanes which came once a fortnight in average. It brought mail and at Christmas small parcels for the soldiers and took back mail and ill soldiers and officers. The planes landed in Rhodes. The mail was delivered to the other islands by boat or later, when the boat traffic was frequently attacked by British motor gun boats, by planes which had been left on the islands. Leros could be reached by a Fieseler Storch which used a landing strip at Partheni where today the airport is. The stamps of this traffic are today very valuable. The last airplane in March, a Focke Wulf 200 Condor, coming from Vienna had to stay in Rhodes, as the Russians had taken Vienna already.

The commander East Aegean was angry about the British forces which could attack the little traffic between the islands at will and ordered torpedo attack craft to be built against destroyers. Two motorboats were equipped with Italian torpedoes and two fast attack motorboats built to designs delivered from Germany. There was just one opportunity for such an attack in January and high waves and a failing engine prevented a shot.

On 8 May 1945 the Commander East Aegean, Wagener, sailed with a captured British motor launch, his most powerful boat, to Symi, to sign the German surrender. For the German soldiers began a two year imprisonment in the desert of Egypt.

