

# VIRGILIO SPIGAI: LERO, LA BATTAGLIA PER IL DODECANESO

ATRIO DELLA SCUOLA ELEMENTARE, LAKKI - 11.09.2017

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Nick Jellicoe

## 10 DAYS IN SEPTEMBER

### Special Force Operations at the start of the Dodecanese Campaign

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Why was there a fight over these islands? What was their importance in the closing months of 1943?

Churchill always wanted to take these islands. As early as January 1943 he was talking about an operation to take them.

He had his reasons.

Like Gallipoli, this was part of Churchill's grand plan. Controlling these waters so close to Turkey might present an alternative convoy route to the frozen passage to Archangel instead through Turkey to supply Russia.

British convoys were under tremendous air strike pressure from Crete. Having another forward base might alleviate this pressure.

Holding the islands might also help if Turkey were to be invaded by Germany. And given Turkey's desire to get the islands back could be used as a "bargaining chip".

The idea was strongly opposed by Eisenhower, George Marshall and then later by the allied Naval and Air Mediterranean C-in-Cs.

That the Dodecanese were so far from allied air cover already presented problems. Leros is 390 miles from Nicosia, the closest allied airfield.

Both Churchill's strategic isolation and the immensely difficult air cover issue made any Aegean campaign an extremely dangerous one.

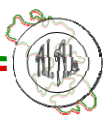
All the more surprising, then, that the allies had lamentable planning, went ahead knowing there would be little to no air cover from the American P.38 Lightning, and that the core of the assault – the 8th Indian Division – was no longer available. Nor would any tanks or artillery.

Frankly, it begs the question: was this heroic campaign doomed to failure before it even started?

To attend an HQ briefing just the same day the Badoglio Government's Armistice was officially announced, George was flown to Cairo. He was deeply pessimistic about the fragility of the plan that was presented. As was his boss, Raiding Force Middle East HQ, Colonel Robert "Bull" Turnbull.

In the interests of speed, he volunteered to drop by parachute that night to try to persuade the Governor of Rhodes, Admiral Inigo Campioni, to put his 35,000 troops at the disposal of the allies. The drop was delayed a critical 24 hours.

When he finally saw Campioni it was 02:00 the morning of the 10th. Initially, the Admiral seemed enthusiastic. When he heard, however, that allied forces would only arrive at the earliest September 15th and then only with meagre strength, he became cautious. Throughout the day, he played for time while Kleemann, the commander of Sturmdivision Rhodos was already maneuvering his 7,500 strong forces into position to secure the airfields of Marriza, Calato & Cattavia.



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By 17:00 it was over. Campioni knew that he had no choice. He had not allowed Jellicoe to see the situation for himself on the ground but George understood that and appreciated any help he could give – information on minefields, medical attention to Julian Dolbey, his accompanying Intelligence officers and interpreter, and the use of a MAS (Motoscafo armato silurante) to get off Rhodes. By 17:15 General Wilson back in Cairo knew that the first, critical part of the plan – securing Rhodes – had failed.

What George did not like was being accompanied back to Kastelorizzo by his Deputy, Col. Ruggero Fanezza. In his words, he was “odious”.

When Jellicoe got there on MS 12, he found Turnbull had already left but that one of his men, Sutherland, had brought in around 22 SBS men from L and M detachments and taken control of the base.

Jellicoe decided to head north to Simi as fast as possible but as he slept on deck, Fanezza countermanded his orders and took him back to Kastelorizzo. George was furious. But diplomatic.

The following day – September 12th - was spent planning – Turnbull, Jellicoe and Sutherland were all together. That evening they head for Kos - Jellicoe on MS 12 and Sutherland on ML 249. More reinforcements from Haifa arrive – eventually SBS forces would total around 65 men. Jock Lapraik and Andy Lassen both also head north after a short stop at Kastelorizzo.

With the hope of any air cover from Rhodes now gone, it was clear that the airfield on Kos and the deep-water port of Leros are doubly important and these two become the Special Forces' new mission – Sutherland to get Kos organized; Jellicoe to Leros to get the Governor, Rear Admiral Luigi Mascherpa's support.

Let me take a moment to talk about who and what these Forces were.

FORCE 292, the Special Forces used in the campaign came under the leader of Col. Robert Turnbull of the Middle East Raiding Forces. They included not only the SBS, SAS, LRDG, the Greek Sacred Squadron and the LSF.

What were these groups?

First the SBS, the Special Boat Squadron, Jellicoe's group.

Roughly 65 men in two Detachments, David Sutherland's S and Laypraik's M. One of whose members was the Danish VC, Andy Lassen.

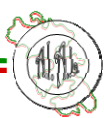
Then the LSF. The Levant Schooner Flotilla commanded by Adrian Seligman with the SNOA for the operation Frank Ramseyer. They carried the groups around the islands.

The Special Air Service, David Stirling's original group which Jellicoe left in March 1943 to command the reformed SBS. These were the “originals”. Men like Paddy Mayne who took over command when Stirling was captured and put in Colditz. Jock Lewes, who invented the famous Lewes bomb used for blowing up aircraft.

The LRDG, the Long Range Desert Group, till then commanded by Guy Prendergast and on Leros led by Jake Easonsmith whose death gave the leadership to David Lloyd Owen.

Georges Bergé's Free French troops (my father used to say they were “very French and very free”) and of course the Leros Lohos, the Greek Sacred Squadron whose commander Krist Tsigantes stayed a life-long friend of my father's.

In the picture you see my father talking with a Greek 2nd Lieutenant (I think its Stefan Cassuli of the GSS) and in the middle is Captain Chevalier of the FF.



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How these groups emerged is complex. It started with Churchill's enthusiastic support for the Commandos launched in June 1940 with the idea of raising 10 groups each of 500 men designed to hit back across the Channel at Hitler's Europe.

One of these was No.8 commando. My father – along with Winston's son, Randolph – a very useful political connection for the Bob Laycock, the commanding officer, David Stirling, Evelyn Waugh, the writer, Carol Mather, Philip Dunne. And one of Stirling's originals, Jim Almonds.

Amongst the commandos was -- Roger Courtney, the "father of the SBS". It was his ideas that folding boats (FOLBOATS) could be used to raid enemy shipping in port.

The forces started to work together in 1941. LAYFORCE brought together three Commando Groups – No.s.7,8,11 – but their target, Rhodes, was never assaulted.

When the group broke apart, Stirling went off to start the SAS in Kabrit, Courtney the Special Boat Section (the early SBS) within the submarine force. During the Rommel Raid in November 42, the ground forces were dropped off by submarine, brought in by SBS while Stirling's SAS were air dropped elsewhere to create a distraction.

In 1942, the SAS goes into high gear with the massed jeep attack at Sidi Haneish and Jellicoe's successful Heraklion raid.

The Dodecanese operations in 1943 were, in many ways, the end result of these developments.

Their capabilities on land, at sea and in the air were many: reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, small scale assault, rapid reaction and search, rescue and evacuation, something that was particularly useful in these operations.

Back to the islands.

By September 13th, the LRDG are en route, Kos was taken over by Sutherland and Jellicoe meets with Mascherpa on Leros to ensure the Italian garrison's commitment to fight with the allies. He is able to select suitable landing sites with Mascherpa's help.

Having sent Alan Redfern (LRDG) the day before by seaplane, David Lloyd Owen's LRDG arrive on Leros while Kos receives the first allied aircraft on Antimachia. Sutherland's men have helped guide in paratroops and the 1st Battalion Durham Light Infantry arrives by destroyer and the 17th two further companies from the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Irish Fusiliers arrive.

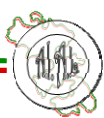
Wasting no time, Sutherland goes north to Samos while Lapraik goes to Simi to see how it can be used as a raiding base against Rhodes.

But it proves too late, Müller has been planning an operation against the two main islands, Kos and Leros, since the 23rd.

10 days later, on October 4th, Kos fell in a two-day operation. Antimacchia had already been put out of operation on Sept 21, Lambia did not last long and by the end Spitfires were flying off the salt pans on the northwest coast. As they were taking off, the pilots were taken prisoner.

Special Forces were pulled out of Simi on the 12th but not before causing considerable casualties on German attempts to take the small island.

On the 11th, Jellicoe sent Sutherland back to Turkey in case he himself did not make it through (Jake Easonsmith, the newly appointed LRDG commander had done the same five days earlier sending Lloyd Owen back to Haifa. Easonsmith had been right. He was in fact killed in a patrol that Tilney asked him to head up on the very last day.).



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Knowing the attack would come the next day, LRDG and SBS occupied positions north of Gurna Bay to defend against a parachute drop.

Tony Rogers in the UK helped me with some detailed maps of SBS activities.

The LRDG and SBS turn out to be positioned exactly where they were needed as a rapid reaction force to support counter-paratroop operations.

On the 13th the LRDG goes back and north to protect the Buffs HQ while Jellicoe's SBS send probing recce units towards Alinda Bay to find out what they can about German dispositions.

After 54 days of continuous air bombardment but only four days of fighting, Brig. Tilney "threw in the towel". At 17:30 on November 16th.

Special Forces managed to evacuate considerable numbers -around 70 LRDG and probably 30 or so SBS. My father's group escaped from Parteni Bay to Turkey via Lipsos.

The Italians who fought with the British paid a high price. Many of the officers on the batteries and on other islands were executed. On Cefalonia, an Italian Division was wiped out. A year later, both Mascherpa and Campioni were executed in Parma by Fascist Republican Italians.

Probably Churchill should have listened to his Generals. Alan Brooke, his Chief of General Staff, was exasperated by what many saw as an "obsession" with a Rhodes operation. When Jellicoe had gone out to Egypt with Bob Laycock's LAYFORCE in January 1941, its original destination was Rhodes. And Robert Courtney had actually already carried out beach reconnaissance for an assault that never took place.

