

# 75<sup>TH</sup> BATTLE OF LEROS

international meeting, municipal theater of Lakki - Leros, sept 26th 2018

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*Memories of the Battle of Leros, 1943*

43 years ago today I came face to face with the results of the Battle of Leros as I walked into Leros' British war cemetery on my eighteenth birthday. I saw all these graves of young men, the same age as I was, with no life in front of them as I then hoped for. I knew nothing of the Battle of Leros then, nor what part it had played in the war, only that all these men had died fighting for an ideal of democracy which they held dear. The fact that I shared their ideal bridged the time and space now between us. These young men and others of their generation had died fighting for their country during the war (when my parents had still been teenagers themselves), and had made it possible for me to live my life as I was doing then. The memory of that birthday has always stayed with me. The feelings which induced me to write a book about the men who fought for Leros must always have been there at the back of my mind for all those years. During my research, I was privileged to meet and interview many of the men who had fought in the battle and today I want to pay tribute to both them and their fellow comrades who did not survive. The survivors were all brave enough to tell me about the true tales of the horror of war – the hand-to-hand-fighting, the confusion, the fear. None of them came of this war unscathed. Indeed, no-one came through the war unscathed.

It is important to remember the heroism of the Greeks in this war. Winston Churchill paid tribute to them saying, 'If it were not for the bravery of the Greeks and their courage, the outcome of WWII would be undetermined.'

But on the eve of the public announcement of the Italian capitulation, there was already a bleak outlook for Greece, despite the optimism of its people. The Times on 7 September 1943 reported from Smyrna on 'Destitute Athens'. It stated:

*'According to reports reaching here, the morale of the Greek people, stiffened by the Allied victories and by the hope of an early deliverance, is higher than ever, but the physical strain resulting from the scarcity of food and other hardships is again becoming alarming, especially on the Greek mainland and on the islands nearest to Greece.'*

On Leros and neighbouring islands, civilians were starving as no food was getting through the blockades.

After the Italian surrender The Special Boat Squadron and the Long Range Desert Group played a vital role in defending Leros. All of these men already had excellent track records in the Middle East and would prove expert in the tasks of sabotage, fighting and rescuing in the Dodecanese islands. Both the SBS and LRDG had undergone rigorous training in the Middle Eastern in preparation for the Dodecanese Campaign. One of these man Jack Mann I have recently met after piping up in an audience that he was in this picture.

One of the first officers in Leros after the Italian surrender was Captain George Jellicoe, leader of the Special Boat Squadron. Moving in to Leros, Jellicoe had no inkling of what he might find there, so was adjusting his plans as he went. His initial aim was to make contact with the Italian governor, Admiral Luigi Mascherpa.

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Under cover Greek agents were helping the SBS – men like Nikos Pyrovolikos who since 1941 had been transporting signallers and agents between the Dodecanese islands, Turkey and Cyprus. He worked with a group of other Greek civilians using fishing boats. [He came under the direction of one of the British officers of the SBS. The English officer paid him a wage in gold sovereigns and brought him supplies; every 15 days the English officer came and filled the boat up with everything they needed for the trips: food, biscuits, chocolate and other provisions.] Pyrovolikos was only one of many Greek locals employed by the Royal Navy in the service of the British government throughout the war undertaking covert operations.

The next lot of men to arrive on Leros was a squadron of the LRDG taken by the Greek destroyer Queen Olga from Haifa to Leros arriving the following day in the middle of an air raid. Major Guy Prendergast had been promoted to lieutenant colonel and appointed commander of the LRDG, and Major Jake Easonsmith was appointed his deputy

Of the 234th Battalion which came to Leros, the Royal Irish Fusiliers were the first set of British military troops to land, coming in early 19th September. With them was 21 year old Officer Ted Johnson who recalled;

*We'd had no briefing about Leros. The first intimation we had that we were going to Leros was after we'd already left Haifa on the destroyer, officers were sent for and we were told by our second-in-command at the time who imparted the information to us that we were going to Leros and most people said, 'Where the hell's Leros? And what's Leros all about?' We had no briefing whatsoever on why we were going there or what we'd find when we got there. We had no battle plans.*

The four main British regiments on Leros were the Royal Irish Fusiliers (also known as the Faughs), the 4th Battalion of the Queens Own Royal East Kent regiment (known as the Buffs), the 1st Battalion of King's Own and the 1st Battalion of Queen's Own Royal West Kents.

The Queen Olga and the Intrepid had been used to help move British troops and equipment to Leros. Ted Johnson remembered it sinking and for him, it was his first fatality on Leros: he told me;

*'My first casualty on Leros was a Greek sailor who was killed on Olga. I helped pull him out of the water and he'd been down a bit of a time and that was a bit of a gruesome sight.'*

The British destroyer Intrepid went down that same night. The Greeks and the British were now joined in their determination as common fighters in a battle against the Germans.

Once the bombing started, it was to become relentless until the end of the Battle of Leros.

The Italian soldiers had been caught between the Allies and the Axis. Thousands of them had been abandoned after the surrender on various islands, told by the Italian Governor to swap sides in the middle of the war. Having fought for the Germans, they now were told to fight for the British.

Prisoners were assembled there after surrender, and finally all taken to the main port of Portolago (Lakki). Churchill contemplated that the British had probably downed 2,000 Germans on the way, but the enemy now held 3,000 POWs. He estimated the

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British losses to be about 5,000 men. The number of injured and dead became evident as the battle drew to a close.

On 21 November, 1943 Churchill, wrote to Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary, expressing his sadness at the loss of life and the loss of Leros. *'No attempts should be made to minimise the poignancy of the loss of the Dodecanese, which we had a chance of getting so easily and at so little cost, and which we have now lost after heavy expenditure.'*

The roll call of dead soldiers was high. After fighting on Leros, Danish soldier Anders Lassen lost his life sometime later in April 1945 on the shore of Lake Comacchio, NE Italy. He had won 3 military crosses and for his final battle was the only non-Commonwealth soldier to win a Victoria Cross. During the battle his despatches stated he had 'complete disregard for his personal safety'.

Jake Easonsmith LRDG had gone towards Leros town of Platanos to prevent the enemy moving South. It was the last day of the battle on 16th November. He was shot by a German sniper and was killed instantly. According to one of his men he was 'brave, wise, with an upright endless that shames lesser men' and was considered one of the finest men in the LRDG. He now lies in Leros war cemetery with his colleagues.

Of Alan Redfern, his Captain Lloyd Owen of LRDG wrote: 'his loss was a great blow as he was a much liked and respected officer. He had done invaluable work with us.'

One man I interviewed, PADDY MCRYSTAL, a young private in the RIFs was near to tears when he recalled the loss of his comrades: 'The commanding officer, We called him Micky French. His brother, George was there. He was killed too [ . . . ] McCallister was one of those injured. Jesus wept. Matherson, O'Connell - the two brothers were sergeants...All killed.' Paddy himself was hit in the head with a large piece of shrapnel, leaving a scar he would bear for the rest of his life. He ended up in the hospital in the POW camp for three or four months. After the surrender, the SBS and LRDG were desperately trying to get soldiers off the island.

The Great Escape Those who had not been captured were struggling to get off the island, they searched for small boats to take them to Lipsi, the island nearby, and on to the Turkish coast. Two of those to escape were Cpt Clifford Clarke and his Sgt George Hatcher. Once in Portolago, they had to move carefully in case any Germans were patrolling the vicinity, although all seemed clear. They managed to find a small boat. Hatcher recalled that it was pitch black as they went out to sea, 'We went out on the wide open sea, and were wide open for any attack. As we were rowing we suddenly saw a small German convoy going into the harbour. We all had to sit and hold our breath and stop rowing, and hope that they didn't see us.

Luckily for the handful of men in the boat, the Germans overlooked them. The men eventually made it to Lipsi where locals gave them shelter, food and water and hid them in their houses. A British agent eventually got them off on a caique to Turkey. All the British soldiers remembered the kindness of the Lerians and the locals on Lipsi who helped them escape.

Those who could not get off the island were taken prisoner on cattle trains to various detention camps where they stayed until the end of the war. This photograph was taken in Stalag 7A at Moosburg, and shows British POWs talking to new inmates captured on Leros. The battle had hung in the balance. General Muller in a history of

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22nd Infantry, admitted on 14 November, 'it appeared to be almost impossible that we should ever win the battle. The destiny of the troops on Leros hung on a thin thread'.

After the surrender, The British Magazine, The Spectator for 19 November 1943 gave an scathing verdict on the Aegean events in an editorial entitled, 'The Sacrifice of Leros': *Public opinion will not be satisfied until the whole question of Cos, Leros and Samos has been cleared up. After days of heroic resistance in which 3,000 British troops and 5,000 Italians received and deserved public admiration for holding on against perpetually reinforced German troops and mass bombing-attacks against which there was virtually no protection, we now learn that the inevitable has happened - that the garrison has been overwhelmed and the island lost [...].*

One hundred and eighty-three British and Commonwealth soldiers lie in Leros cemetery. The Germans suffered around 1,109 casualties out of their 4,500 troops. One source reckons out of 525 Italian officers on Leros about 50 died in combat, and about 440 were shot by Germans. The British prisoners numbered approximately 200 officers and 3,000 men of other rankings. The Italians POWs numbered 350 officers and 5,000 other rankings. For all of the men who fought for Leros - be they British, Italian, Greek or German - it was to become one of the most significant, and certainly the most tragic, story of their lives. For those of us who remain, let us remember those who fought so bravely for a democracy we still cherish on the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Leros.

My friend Bob King, a 96 year old Leros veteran wrote to me asking us to remember those who died on Leros quoting this poem:

*'They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old.  
Age shall not weary them. Nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.'*