

LA VITA AI TEMPI DELLE BATTERIE

international meeting, open court of primary school – Lakki, Leros 14th sept 2015

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Battle for the Dodecanese

-- September–November 1943 --

Leros has so far escaped the mass tourism that typifies much of the Mediterranean. One reason, perhaps, is the island terrain. The rugged landscape has a mainly rocky coastline and few sandy beaches. Hotels are limited but sufficient to cater for the few summer visitors. They include an ever dwindling number of returning war veterans who come to pay tribute to fallen comrades, most of whom were killed in five days of fighting in November 1943. In 1912 Leros and the Greek Dodecanese came under Italian rule. The decision by Italy to unite with Germany in 1940 would change everything. By summer 1943, Hitler's *Wehrmacht* was faltering as it fought a war on too many fronts. In Russia the Soviets had finally halted the German advance; Axis forces had surrendered in North Africa; the Allies had landed in Sicily and Italy and American-led forces were pushing north towards occupied Europe. In July the Italians turned against *Il Duce* Benito Mussolini, replacing him with *Maresciallo* Pietro Badoglio. The Italian armistice followed in September.

The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, seized upon the opportunity to open a new front in the eastern Mediterranean. It was felt that such a move could only add to the pressure being applied against Germany; furthermore it might provide encouragement for Turkey to join the Allies.

For the operation to have any chance of success it was imperative that Rhodes be seized together with the island's all-important airfields. Before the British could act, however, the German *Sturmdivision Rhodos* seized control of Rhodes, thus ending British hopes of an assisted take-over. Nevertheless, there was hope in the British camp that even without Rhodes some islands might be occupied. Kos, Samos and Leros were duly secured and garrisoned primarily by troops of 234 Infantry Brigade. Island outposts were also manned by detachments of the S.B.S. and the Long Range Desert Group (L.R.D.G.). There were already on Kos 3,500–4,000 Italians including the majority of two infantry battalions. As air defence there were Spitfire Vs of 7 South African Air Force Squadron and 74 Squadron with approximately 500 ground support personnel. There were also about 680 British soldiers on the island, consisting mainly of 1st Battalion The Durham Light Infantry.

On 23 September *Generalleutnant* Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller commanding 22. *Infanteriedivision* was ordered to make preparations for the seizure of Kos and Leros. Müller intended to make Kos his first objective in a combined sea and airborne assault. Accordingly, the first wave landed at Marmari on the north coast at 05:00 hours on 3 October. Further landings took place along the rugged south coast. Soon after 07:00, paratroopers of the *Division Brandenburg* were dropped. The Germans pushed towards their objectives overrunning each in turn until arriving on the outskirts of Kos town later the same day. That night, the demoralised remnants of the British defence withdrew into the hills. The battle was concluded the next day. For the Italians, Kos was the latest in a

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series of defeats. For the British, it was a disaster. Without Kos there was no longer any possibility of providing air support for the remaining islands in British hands.

The main efforts of the Germans now turned to Leros, with the *Luftwaffe* concentrating on targeting key installation and shipping.

On 5 November Brigadier Robert Tilney arrived as the Fortress Commander, allowing Major General F. G. R. Brittorous to be relieved. By this time there was on Leros a substantial British presence; in all some 3,000 officers and men.

The Italian garrison numbered approximately 5,500 and included an infantry battalion, two machine-gun companies and part of a maritime reconnaissance squadron equipped with Cant seaplanes. The Italians manned gun emplacements and occupied positions overlooking likely landing areas.

Ultimately control of the Dodecanese was dependent on those fighting on the ground. But the crews of merchantmen, warships and submarines also had a vital role. Shipping was vitally important, not least for transporting men and equipment. Both sides paid dearly for their efforts. Air power was also crucial and over the eastern Aegean in late 1943 the *Luftwaffe* dominated the air.

On the eve of Operation '*Taifun*' ('Typhoon'), the German codename for the capture of Leros, *Generalleutnant* Müller had at his disposal a force of experienced and motivated combat troops. The initial wave comprised four seaborne *Kampfgruppen* (combat groups) and a *Luftwaffe* parachute battalion. A second wave stood by with anti-aircraft and artillery units, as well as heavy weapons for the infantry. Assault troops and paratroopers of *Division Brandenburg* were held in reserve near Athens. In the early hours of 12 November, Allied air reconnaissance reported two groups of 'barges' inside a minefield east of Kalymnos. It was assumed that the enemy was assembling in preparation for a daylight assault on Leros. However, the threat posed by mines precluded a pre-emptive strike by the Royal Navy. Only later was it realised that this was the main (eastern) force en route to Leros.

Fighting continued for five days as both sides lost and re-took ground in a series of seesaw actions. German and British reinforcements were ferried to Leros until the very end, but the latter were greatly disadvantaged by not having air support. The Germans, on the other hand, had Junkers Ju 87 *Stuka* dive-bombers on call from dawn till dusk.

On the morning of 16 November it seemed that the Germans were on the verge of overrunning Brigade Headquarters on Mount Meraviglia. Tilney withdrew with his staff, hoping to relocate his command post at Lakki in the south.

However, remaining troops on Meraviglia managed to stem the German advance. Tilney returned to his headquarters and attempted to restore order out of the chaos. It was hopeless. That afternoon a renewed effort by the Germans resulted in the capture of Tilney and his staff. Elsewhere, British troops still felt they retained the upper hand. The Brigadier, however, concluded that further resistance was futile and in a controversial move agreed to end the fighting.

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Samos, the final obstacle to Germany's conquest of the Aegean, was abandoned by the British and fell without a fight on 22 November 1943.

A few days after the loss of Leros and only too aware of the backlash to be expected from his critics, Winston Churchill recommended that the Foreign Secretary adopt an evasive policy when the issue was raised in Parliament.

German forces had unknowingly undertaken their last successful operation to seize and occupy foreign soil. But soon, events were overshadowed by the situation elsewhere.

Then, as now, Leros was all but forgotten.

Those who survive remember. And the cemeteries and memorials continue to bear silent witness.