



IT TAKES COURAGE - BATTLE FOR CRETE

Journal 6 April 2022

With 20 some days before ANZAC Day is commemorated, it is appropriate that the article below is republished. The article describes in candid detail what occurred during the Battle of Crete and the reasons the Maleme airport was lost to the Nazi invaders.

As a former Australian soldier and a member of Telamon Force that went to Greece in 1991 and onto Crete to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the battles. Numerous battles fought by the Australians, New Zealanders and their Greek allies during WW2. I have always been fascinated about the events surrounding the loss of the Maleme airport and subsequently the campaign on Crete.

I have always admired and still do the courage, tenacity, resilience and bravery of the Australians, New Zealanders and their Greek allies during this period and I just could not understand why the battle that was raging around the Maleme airport was lost. Especially when the Kiwis in this instance had the upper hand at the time. There is no doubt in my mind that the Kiwis were exemplary and extremely courageous in defying ground to the enemy.

Historians used euphemisms such as poor communications, poorly equipped, insufficient resources, unknown terrain and a host of other like-minded reasons for the loss of Crete. Yet, nowhere did I ever read or see failure in leadership being the cause of the loss of Crete. I am reminded of comments made by Major General M.P. Blake, AO, MC who was the Land Commander Australia in 1991 to Telamon Force prior to departing to Greece. At that parade he said, "when you visit Greece and Crete, I want you to find out the truth about the battle of Crete."

I did not understand what he meant at the time, but I did conduct my own enquiries during our time spent in Greece and Crete. I found the Greeks to be very hospitable and kind towards the Australians and the New Zealand contingents that attended the Anniversary. I also came about information regarding collaborators, Nazi massacres and atrocities against the Greeks, tales of bravery involving the allied troops and the Greeks, stories of valour by all the stakeholders in involved and of those involved in the resistance against the Nazi aggressor. However, I did not and could not find reasons why Crete was lost to the Nazi invaders. This fact would remain hidden from me until recently when the article below was published.

What I learnt from reading into the article are that no matter what the cost, the truth must never be made a scapegoat, nor diminish the valour of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. If the truth is to be buried, then future generations will go onto repeat the same errors of judgement given the same conditions. Our men and women who are sent off to war, deserve to be trained to the highest degree possible, with the best equipment, knowledge and skills to survive unimaginable horrors that we that remain behind cannot imagine.

There are many lessons to be learnt here and I for one thank God that I am alive to see men with the courage of Major General Sandy Thomas standing up and telling it as it is. Loyalty is one thing, the truth another. Those who died during the battle for Crete during WW2 did not do so in vain. May their spirits and memories live on long after we have gone.



Peter Adamis is a Freelance Journalist/Social Media Commentator and writer. He is a retired Australian military serviceman and an Environmental & Occupational Health & Safety Training Consultant (Retired). A Bachelor of Adult Learning & Development (Monash), Grad Dip Occupational Health & Safety, (Monash), and Dip. Training & Assessment, Dip Public Administration, and Dip Frontline Management.



OFFICER BREAKS RANK OVER THE BATTLE OF CRETE

Tim Donoghue 08:48, May 14 2011 THE PRESS

SANDY THOMAS: "If we had gone in on that first night we would have won the battle." Major General Sandy Thomas says poor leadership shown by Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force commanders on Crete directly led to the loss of the battle for the Mediterranean island in May 1941.

Mr Thomas, 91, has waited 70 years to tell his version of the battle, which involved German General Kurt Student's paratroopers and soldiers from many countries – including Kiwis – out of respect to the descendants of the two New Zealanders he believes contributed significantly to the loss of the battle.

The two men in Mr Thomas's sights are Colonel Les Andrew, VC, the commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion, entrusted with the defence of Maleme Airfield, and Brigadier James Hargest. Brigadier Hargest was a Southland politician turned soldier who commanded the 5th New Zealand Brigade on Crete. Mr Thomas told The Dominion Post that for 70 years since the battle, which he took part in as a second-lieutenant with the 23rd Battalion stationed near Maleme, he had steadfastly adhered to the code of loyalty to his fellow officers.

For that reason he had never criticised brother officers publicly. "I respect them greatly for their personal bravery." But he had decided now to "tell the truth about the battle". "It's something I've kept to myself for 70 years. It's time to tell the truth about how we New Zealanders performed on Crete." He was aware he was probably the first former 2NZEF Battalion commander to speak out and criticise fellow commanders for their role in the loss of Crete.

He said the troops on the ground slaughtered paratroopers in their hundreds in the first few hours of fighting and knew they had the battle won by 10am on May 20. "The problem was the commanding officers responsible for the defence of Maleme – Andrew and Hargest – did not recognise what was happening on the ground," Mr Thomas said. "In our first major battle [of World War II] our commanders were fighting a war which they did not understand."

The 22nd Battalion managed to hold Maleme throughout the first day of the battle, he said. On the night of May 20, he and his men, along with those of the 28th Maori Battalion, located near Platania, waited for a Maleme Airfield counter-attack order from Brigadier Hargest. That order did not come till the following day, in broad daylight, by which time, according to Mr Thomas, it was suicidally too late.

"There was only one bit of vital ground on Crete which had to be held, a hill overlooking Maleme Airfield, Hill 107, and the airfield itself. We never got the order to launch the counter-attack on the night of May 20. "That was the

reason we lost Crete. There was a feeling of bewilderment among the men when we never got the counter-attack order."

He recalled how Colonel Andrew had contacted Brigadier Hargest about 5pm on the first night with a request to have the 23rd Battalion carry out the pre-planned counter-attack. The reply came back from brigade headquarters that the 23rd Battalion were themselves tied up dealing with parachutists.

Mr Thomas said this was nonsense as the 23rd Battalion was under no real pressure from parachutists at the time. Colonel Andrew told Brigadier Hargest in this conversation that he might have to withdraw from the top of Hill 107 overlooking the airfield. To this Brigadier Hargest responded, "Well, if you must, you must."

Mr Thomas said the Battle of Crete was lost as a result of this exchange. He had had 70 years to think about the decision to withdraw from Hill 107 and the airfield. "You have got to realise VCs are awarded to people like Les Andrew for actual bravery. They don't necessarily make you a born leader. Colonel Andrew should never have left that ground.

"Even if he had withdrawn, the battle still was not lost because we still had a completely intact 23rd Battalion ... and Maori Battalion ... nearby." He said Brigadier Hargest, if he was doing his job properly, should have immediately ordered a counter-attack on the airfield and Hill 107 by the 23rd and the 28th Maori battalions. "All the brigadiers I've ever known in a situation like that would have said ... you take one step backwards and I'll have your balls. I feel awful saying this about Hargest because his son was killed in my battalion later on in the war.

"But Hargest lost the Battle of Crete right there [by not ordering the counter-attack]. If we could have held on to that vital ground [the Luftwaffe's] 1200 planes could have done nothing." Mr Thomas said Brigadier Hargest, who died as a result of mortar fire in Europe in 1944, was a gallant soldier. "But he was out of his depth as a brigadier on Crete." According to NZHistory.net.nz, run by the Culture and Heritage Ministry, Mr Hargest is the military leader who has come under the most scrutiny since the battle.

"His lethargy and lack of judgment during the first two days of the battle placed a spotlight on how he came to be serving with the 2NZEF. "In 1939 he had been found unfit for overseas service but had secured a commission through his political connections as an MP. The fact that he remained at his headquarters, well removed from the scene of action, has also been criticised." The delayed counter-attack on the airfield did eventually come, but in daylight on May 21, when the troops were at the mercy of the Luftwaffe's Stuka dive bombers, Mr Thomas said.

"That was Hargest again. It was madness. It makes you weep because our boys, the Maoris for instance, they are terrific fighters at night and the Germans hated fighting at night." We had to attack that airfield at night when their planes could not fly ... It was so silly to attack in daylight. They had no chance of taking that airfield in daytime." He described the Fifth Brigade's plan round the Maleme Airfield under Mr Hargest as dysfunctional "to say the least".

The remnants of four companies from the 22nd Battalion were left on the airfield on the night of May 20 without realising an order had gone out to withdraw from Hill 107 and the airfield itself. In the early morning the remaining 22nd Battalion soldiers, when they realised they were leaderless and the pre-planned counter-attack had not materialised, withdrew through the ranks of the sleeping Germans and the retreat from Crete had begun. "Les Andrew left of his own accord and took the 22nd Battalion off the only bit of vital ground in the whole of Crete. It was terrible," Mr Thomas said.

Meanwhile, back in Athens at his headquarters, German General Kurt Student sent a reconnaissance aircraft out over Maleme early on May 21. "General Student himself was on the verge of ordering a withdrawal but not a single shot was fired at this early morning reconnaissance aircraft. "On the basis of this, the pilot ... a squadron leader type I understand ... went back and told the Germans to continue the attack on the airfield. It was that close," Mr Thomas said.

"My Battalion alone killed 300 Germans. Our soldiers were in great heart. We were ready for the counter-attack. Hargest should have told Andrew to stay where he was. "If we had gone in on that first night we would have won the battle. We had rehearsed the manoeuvre twice. We did not need to hold the ground we were on. We were there to help the 22nd. But of course Hargest said no, you stay where you are." During the remainder of the war he often talked to General Bernard Freyberg, the commanding officer of the New Zealand division, about Crete.

Lord Freyberg, who became New Zealand's governor-general after the war, "taught me never to criticise senior officers and to stand by them", he said. "But when I went back to Crete a few years ago I thought, God, one ought to come clean on all of this because in future we could make the same mistakes again. You can't try to fight a war with commanders who were at war 25 years earlier."

Mr Thomas accepted that Lord Freyberg had not ordered the destruction of the airfield before the battle as he did not want his opposing parachute commander, General Student, to know the allies had cracked German communications systems. Mr Thomas said when his soldiers were ordered to retreat from Maleme they could not believe it. "Our commanders were too old on Crete. We won far more serious battles later in the war.

"Loyalty is something which is terribly important in the army. But now I realise it is a mistake not to speak out because if we don't watch it we could so easily do it again." He said Mr Hargest and Mr Andrew were clearly outstanding World War I soldiers before taking on their leadership roles in World War II. Mr Hargest was taken prisoner when his headquarters was overrun by German tanks in Libya in November 1941. He was taken before the "Desert Fox", Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, who told him his men had fought well during the battle (in Libya). He was sent to a prisoner of war camp in Italy.

He escaped and returned to Britain via France. Before D-Day, he was appointed as an official observer, attached to the British 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division and wrote perspective reports on the campaign. He was killed by mortar fire in Europe in 1944 and was survived by his wife and three children. Mr Andrew was a popular commander among his troops on Crete. His men have always steadfastly backed him against all the criticism he received over the years - before and after his death in January 1969.

One of his biggest supporters has been the 22nd Battalion platoon commander on Crete, Haddon Donald. In his memoirs, Mr Donald said Mr Andrew had the difficult job of locating his companies to defend a "four-mile perimeter area" round Maleme Airport. Mr Donald described the battle as an epic encounter, unique as an airborne invasion, and never to be repeated by the Germans because of their horrendous loss of elite troops. "It became controversial in later years as our armchair historians tried to lay the blame for its loss on individuals ... These included our 22nd Battalion commanding officer Lt Colonel L W Andrew VC," Mr Donald wrote.

"Published records indicate a considerably greater number of Allied than German forces on Crete. However, the majority of the German troops were front-line fighting men. The majority of our forces were support personnel in charge of supply, aerodromes, parts, etc. "The crucial matter, to my mind, was the complete domination of the air by the Germans and the fact that, until that time, Hitler had won every battle and was unlikely to accept a defeat," Mr Donald wrote. His memoirs said Mr Thomas, who fought in the battle alongside Mr Donald, was certainly not an armchair historian.

War historian and author Chris Pugsley has been a long-time critic of Mr Andrew's decision to retreat from Hill 107 and Maleme Airfield. Mr Pugsley said in 1991 that Mr Andrew won a VC for bravery in World War I but was "unable to cope with being a battalion commander in the second".

CRETE- THE BATTLE

When German forces took control of the Greek mainland in April 1941 the island of Crete became a German target. The Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force, under the overall command of General Bernard Freyberg, was forced off the Greek mainland in April 1941 by invading German forces. Adolf Hitler agreed to Operation Mercury - the invasion of Crete - as it would give his forces a base in the eastern Mediterranean. Before the invasion he sought assurances that plans for the invasion of the Soviet Union would not be disrupted.

The New Zealanders found themselves on Crete for the 10-day battle as part of their evacuation back to Egypt from the Greek mainland. The battle was notable in three ways. It was the first mainly airborne invasion of World War II; it was the first major battle in which the allies were able to use intelligence from the deciphered German Enigma code; and it was the first time a brave civilian population (including Greek women armed with pitchforks) rose up against the invading Germans in defence of their homeland.

THE PLAYERS

Major General Sandy Thomas

Sandy Thomas was a lieutenant in the New Zealand Division's 23rd Battalion when German paratroopers invaded Crete on May 20, 1941. Seventy years after the battle he has broken ranks by criticising fellow officers and saying it was poor leadership that resulted in the loss of Crete. In particular he has pointed the finger at the commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion, entrusted with the defence of Maleme Airfield, Colonel Les Andrew, VC, and Brigadier James Hargest who, he says, both let the troops on the ground down. Mr Thomas was captured by the Germans at Galatas on Crete after being badly wounded during the battle. He went on to command the 23rd Battalion in Europe after pulling off one of the great escapes of World War II from a German concentration camp on the Greek mainland. After the war, General Thomas joined the British Army and commanded British Forces in the Far East.

Colonel Les Andrew, VC

Les Andrew was 20 years old when he won a Victoria Cross for his actions on July 31, 1917, at La Bassee Ville, in France. As the leader of a small assault party he spearheaded two attacks on machinegun posts, putting both out of action and killing several Germans in the process. In World War II he was the first commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion, which was entrusted with the defence of Maleme Airfield on Crete. Mr Andrew's decision to withdraw his battalion from Hill 107 and Maleme Airfield has been criticised by numerous military historians, including New Zealand author Chris Pugsley. Mr Andrew had 600 soldiers under his command on May 20, 1941. There were 302 casualties among his men. Sixty-two died in the battle, 146 were wounded, 175 were taken prisoner (81 were wounded and taken prisoner).

Brigadier James Hargest

James Hargest, who was born in Gore, volunteered to join the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in August 1914 and was seriously wounded at Gallipoli. He went on to serve in France, where he won a military cross in World War I. Between the wars, he was an MP in the Invercargill and Awarua electorates. Despite an adverse medical report from army doctors, Mr Hargest managed to pull strings with then acting prime minister Peter Fraser and was appointed commanding officer of the 5th NZ Brigade in May 1940. Mr Thomas describes Mr Hargest as a brave man who was in the wrong place at the wrong time as the brigade commander entrusted with the defence of Maleme Airfield and Hill 107 on Crete. Mr Hargest was killed by mortar fire in Europe in 1944. Mr Thomas says he found it "unbelievable" that Mr Hargest stayed mostly at his brigade headquarters, four miles away from Maleme Airfield, throughout the early days of the battle.

Colonel Haddon Donald

Haddon Donald, along with Mr Thomas, is a surviving New Zealand battalion commander from World War II. He now lives in retirement in Taupo. As a platoon commander with the 22nd Battalion on Crete he was seriously wounded on the airfield on May 20, 1941. He has always firmly defended Colonel Andrew's actions. On April 11, 2001 Mr Donald wrote to this newspaper describing Mr Andrew as a hero and saying his personal courage was without question. He described Mr Andrew's judgment as sound in the face of tremendous pressure and a realisation of the inevitable result of this unequal battle. He said New Zealand troops on Crete were tragically ill-equipped largely because of political failures in London and Wellington. Mr Donald commanded the 22nd Battalion in 1944 and 1945.

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/5003191/Officer-breaks-rank-over-the-Battle-of-Crete#:~:text=Sandy%20Thomas%20was%20a%20lieutenant,in%20the%20loss%20of%20Crete>