

by  
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### Introduction

The events in Crete during May 1941 have been generally well recorded, especially from the point of view of the German airborne invasion. Less well known however, is a series of events which link units of the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (2AIF), with the British Army's Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) and Royal Army Ordnance Corps – Engineering (RAOC-E, later REME). Although an "ad hoc" use of Matildas by an Australian infantry battalion, it preceded Australia's "official" use of Matilda tanks in New Guinea by some two years. These events occurred in the vicinity of Retimo, a small town of 10000 people on the northern coast of Crete. The town of Retimo had been the capital of the Russian part of the Island, and was a rich olive oil and wine district.

Retimo, also known as Rethymon, was the location of one of the three airfields in Crete, and thus a very attractive objective for German invasion troops, the other airfields being Maleme and Heraklion. The airfield of Retimo lay to the east of the town about 100 yards from the beach and running parallel to it.

A ridge, between 100 and 200 feet high overlooked the airfield. The area around Retimo is shown on the accompanying sketch map (to come). As the Australian units in Crete had been blooded in the Western Desert, and had taken part in the Greek campaign, they were experienced troops, and their outlook was distinctly based upon Western Desert warfare, even down to the names of depressions and gullies which were identified as wadis.

### The Defenders

The 2/1st Infantry Battalion, 2nd AIF, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ian Campbell, was the nucleus of the force charged with the defence of the Retimo airfield. Campbell's force, in addition to his own battalion, comprised the 2/11th Infantry Battalion 2nd AIF, four improvised battalions of Greek infantry, 800 Cretan police, a battery of 2/3rd Field Regiment, 2nd AIF with four 100 mm Italian guns and four 75 mm American guns, two platoons of an Australian Machine Gun Battalion, a section of field engineers, and a detachment

from B Squadron 7th Royal Tank Regiment with two Matilda Mk II tanks. The Greek infantry were all conscripts, who had little training and whose equipment was poor. Many of their weapons were manufactured before 1900.

Shortages in ammunition, mortars, uniforms and boots, medical equipment and anti-aircraft artillery, as well as no radio equipment meant that Campbell's Force was very much the "poor relation" compared to the forces at the other two airfields. Communication was by telephone and runner. The two Australian battalions each had a carrier platoon, each of which had only two machine gun carriers. Most of the carrier crews were being used as normal infantry.

Although Campbell's force had been located in the Retimo sector since the end of April 1941 when they were evacuated from Greece, the tanks of 7 RTR did not arrive on location until 17th and 18th May, being driven in by road, after the original plan of landing from naval lighter had been abandoned due to rough seas. These tanks had been ordered to be dug in on the airfield as strong points, however Lieutenant Colonel Campbell disagreed with this and obtained permission to keep them in their mobile role, concealing them in an olive grove along the Wadi Pigi, which lay to the south-west of the airfield. The condition of the two Matildas was described by Lieutenant Colonel Campbell as '... worn out in Libya, and had no reserves of fuel or ammunition'. The detachment of 7 RTR was commanded by Lieutenant George Simpson, and was supported by Lieutenant Frank Mason, Staff Sergeant L.H. Hockett and one other rank of No. 5 Independent Infantry Brigade Workshop, RAOC. No. 5 Independent Infantry Brigade Workshop had originally been sent to Greece in support of the ANZAC Force deployed there. Following service in the Greek campaign, the unit was evacuated to Crete.

### The Airborne Invasion

The German airborne invasion was launched on 20th May, with troop-carrying aircraft being spotted from 0900 hours onward. It was not, however, until 1600 hours that Retimo was targeted, firstly with bombers and low-level strafing. At approximately 1615 hours, the first troop-carrying aircraft arrived, dropping paratroops who landed along the coast near the airfield. Some nine aircraft were brought down by small arms fire.

There was a concerted effort by the German paratroops to capture Hill "A", which overlooked the eastern end of the airfield. At about 1715 hours, Campbell ordered the two tanks of 7 RTR to go round to the east of Hill 'A' to support an attack. Due to terraces in the vicinity, it was impossible for the tanks to go far off the road. One of the Matildas bellied on the edge of a ditch on the north side of the airfield, and the second Matilda fell into Wadi 'K', a drop of between 8 to 10 feet. Lieutenant Simpson, the 7 RTR Detachment commander, dismounted from this tank but was killed by a burst of machine gun fire. With nowhere to go, the remaining crews of the tanks apparently remained with their immobile machines, unable to provide any support to the battle.

The German paratroops had occupied most of Hill 'A' by 2200 hours and captured the two tanks' crews. During a night action, C Company of 2/1st Battalion recaptured the airfield which had been briefly held by the Germans. A dawn attack by both Australian Battalions, the 2/1st against Hill 'A' and the 2/11th against Hill 'B', had mixed results. 2/1st Battalion was forced to withdraw due to the lack of support by the Greek Battalion, but 2/11th cleared the Germans off Hill 'B'. Later on the morning of 21st May, Hill 'A' was captured, and this and subsequent actions during that day netted the Australians about 140 Prisoners of war.

### Tanks back in action

Attacks by the Australians on the olive oil factory on 22 May were defeated, and the reduced companies of 2/1st Battalion withdrew to a location around the airfield. The bellied Matilda was now back in allied hands, and so Lieutenant Mason, the RAOC-E officer, directed efforts to recover the vehicle, and the tank was moved to the base area of the battalion. A scratch crew from the Carrier Platoon of 2/1st Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Lawry, was trained in the operation of the Matildas by Lieutenant Mason. B Company of 2/1st Battalion began the task of digging the second Matilda out of Wadi 'K'.

On 24th May, the first Matilda recovered from the vicinity of the airfield made a reconnaissance at 0600 hours towards the olive oil factory. It was not fired upon. A second reconnaissance was made around 1800 hours, this time the tank moving past the factory and towards Mortar House. On this patrol, the tank was driven by Staff Sergeant Hockett (RAOC-E) and commanded by Lieutenant Mason. On its return, the tank stopped near

the Australian lines after being hailed by an Australian, and as Staff Sergeant Hockett opened the hatch to speak to the soldier, he was wounded in the arm by fire. He subsequently lost his arm.

An attack was planned for dawn on 25th May, and Lieutenant Colonel Campbell joined the single Matilda at Wadi Pigi to guide it to the road junction where it was to be provided in support of 2/11th Battalion. On the way to the start line however, it ran off the road. The attack was postponed and the Matilda was subsequently extracted and returned to 2/1st Battalion location. During that night it was used in an attempt to extract the other Matilda from Wadi K, and although some movement was achieved, the tank remained in the ditch. More digging was called for.

At 0530 hours on 26th May, the single Matilda supported the postponed attack by 2/11th Battalion on the village of Perivolia. As the attack went in, the Besa machine gun jammed, and as no other means of direct fire support was available, the attack was halted, then postponed. By 1100 hours the Besa was repaired, and B Company 2/1st Battalion, supported by the Matilda, patrolled towards the olive oil factory to the east of the airfield. Little fire was observed coming from the building, and so, supported by Besa fire, the patrol rushed the factory and over-ran the building with only one Australian casualty. The capture of the factory, with 80 Germans, half of whom were wounded, released the Allied prisoners held there. This included the RTR survivors. Being constantly shelled over five days and only having eaten a few biscuits meant the released prisoners were in poor condition.

Meanwhile, the second Matilda had been recovered from Wadi 'K'. As the RTR men were physically unable to man the tanks, further training of the Australians was made, and the tanks now had crews as follows:

One tank was commanded by Lieutenant Pat Lawry of 2/1st Battalion and had three gunners from 2/3rd Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery as the crew.

The second tank was commanded by Lieutenant Beddells of 2/11th Battalion and had two gunners from 2/3rd Field Regiment as the crew.

At 0525 hours on 27th May, 2/11th Battalion commenced their attack on Pervolia, with the two tanks in support.

### Tanks knocked out

Although the 2 pounder guns of the Matildas were now able to be used, both tanks were knocked out. The tank commanded by Lieutenant Lawry was supporting the Battalion's left flank, and it was hit by an anti-tank round that penetrated the right side. The gunner was killed and the remaining crew severely burned when bailing out of the blazing vehicle. The second tank, commanded by Lieutenant Beddells, was on the right flank and had moved along the edge of the beach. It was on the enemy's forward position when it detonated a mine which broke the track. The cupola was hit by a mortar bomb, and when Lieutenant Beddells put his hands onto the hatch to hoist himself out of the tank, he was hit by a burst of machine gun fire and lost several fingers. All the survivors of the action were wounded.

With the loss of the tanks, the support to the Australian infantry was minimal, and so the attack was again called off. This attack left the force considerably depleted, both in personnel and ammunition. Attempts were made to take Pervolia on 28th May, and although the village was held for a short time by the Australian battalions, they were so depleted in numbers that they were forced to withdraw.

### The End at Retimo

German forces were being resupplied regularly by air, and on 30th May a German motorised column and tanks were seen approaching. The Australians had no food, little ammunition and could not communicate with their headquarters, and so at 0840 hours Lieutenant Colonel Campbell surrendered. At the time of the surrender, the Australians had captured approximately 400 prisoners of war and had buried almost one thousand German paratroopers.

No German aircraft had landed at Retimo during the German invasion, and the actions of Lieutenant Colonel Campbell's force contributed significantly to the German casualties in the Retimo area.

Lieutenant Mason remained with Lieutenant Colonel Campbell's force, and became a Prisoner of War on 30th May, 1941. Being an Ordnance Mechanical Engineer he was transferred to the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers upon its formation in 1942, and in the London Gazette of 25th September 1947, he was awarded the Military Cross for his actions during the Battle for Crete.

In a letter to Major General W. S. Tope, CB, CBE, MI Mech E, REME, published in the REME Magazine of January 1948, Frank Mason responded to the congratulations offered by Major General Tope on behalf of REME on the award of his Military Cross. Frank Mason only gave some small details of his involvement with the tanks on Crete in this letter. Unfortunately, it is not recorded in any sources available to the author who actually made the recommendation for the award of the Military Cross, but it can only be assumed it was Lieutenant Colonel, later Brigadier, Ian Campbell DSO.

### Sources

There are small differences in the original sources used to compile this story, and so the author has used the immediate post action reports as the prime source of information when describing the actions.

The author has been unable to obtain anything from the 7 RTR War Diary for that period, as the copy held in the Tank Museum at Bovington, UK, has no entry for Crete. Photos of the Matildas in action on Crete have not been found. There exists two photos of Matildas at Retimo in the collection of the Australian War Memorial. Both were taken in 1945 when the Island was back in allied hands, and show the tanks in a forlorn condition. One shows a Matilda on the beach with its track broken, no gun, and perhaps missing the cupola. The second tank is shown off the side of a road, without a turret and with its idlers missing, presumably stripped for useful parts.

Many thanks to Mr Brian Baxter of the REME Museum, for supplying an extract of the REME Magazine for January 1948, and to Mr David Fletcher of the Tank Museum for providing an extract from the TANK Journal of May 1994, and for his assistance in looking into the 7 RTR War Diary.

Other works consulted in the preparation of this article included:

The Australian Official History of World War 2 'Greece, Crete and Syria' by Gavin Long

The First at War – the story of the 2/1st Australian Infantry Battalion 1939–45 – The City of Sydney Regiment

Australian War Memorial files in AWM 54 - 534/2/21, 34/2/38, 535/21/29

Australian War Memorial photos – 131042, 131092

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