

BOOK REVIEW BY WING COMMANDER DAVID CADDICK

THE FALL OF CRETE

ALAN CLARK

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The Fall of Crete by the late Alan Clark was first published in 1962 and was republished last year. It tells the story of the battle for the strategically important Mediterranean Island of Crete. It is written in an engaging style that covers the strategic context of the battle, the tactical conduct of the battle and many individual recollections and interpretations of events in the fierce and bloody fighting that took place.

The island was considered to be strategically important by both the Allies and the Axis powers as it could be used as a base from which the Mediterranean and Aegean seas could be dominated by air and naval forces based on the island. Its size means that numerous airfields, in addition to the 3 already in existence, could be constructed to host any number of aircraft. Its main port, Suda Bay, was considered to be one of the finest anchorages in the Mediterranean that could be readily defended by land base artillery from both air and naval attack. Thus whichever side controlled Crete would have a great strategic advantage in the Mediterranean theatre of operations with all that this implied for the campaigns in North Africa and the Balkans. The Axis forces enjoyed air superiority whilst the Allied powers were dominant at sea and were able to garrison the island with almost 30,000 troops. The German forces eventually took the island in May 1941 using parachute and glider troops to seize the 3 airfields with follow on forces being airlanded on the captured aerodromes.

The battle for Crete is worthy of study by students of air power for several reasons. First there is the lack of joint campaign planning on the part of the Allies that led to a less than coherent defence being prepared. Second, although the vital ground and centres of gravity, in particular the island's airfields, were correctly identified they were not afforded the priority for defence that they merited. Indeed, once their importance was confirmed by the actions of the attacking forces they were not effectively reinforced. It is interesting to note that the German forces, ultimately the victors, reinforced their limited success whilst the Allies did not reinforce their quite considerable successes in the early stages. Third, the campaign illustrates the point that in modern war there are no rear areas. The RAF personnel on the island were considered non-combatant, and indeed they were not trained or equipped to carry defensive operations. Had they been the outcome of the battle might have been very different. Fourth, the importance of air superiority is driven home, as well as the ability to counter air superiority which the allies were able to do by operating at night and by using their ground based air defence to good effect. Finally the pivotal role that a robust C4I system plays in the success or failure of battle is exposed.

The book is somewhat disappointing in relating events after the fall of Crete as it concentrates on the exploits of individuals. It would have benefited from a more strategic analysis of the conduct of the war now that the Germans held Crete. It is also somewhat anti-German in sentiment in some parts of the book, which could call into question its objectivity, but this can be excused by the fact that it was originally written only 17 years after the war had ended.

Overall the Fall of Crete provides a serious study in joint operations for all students of the military art. In particular, almost 60 years exactly since the battle was fought, the terrible cost for all sides and the gallantry displayed by so many is a vivid reminder of the human price of military operations.

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