

Greek ground forces in Crete and their small arms, November 1940 - May 1941

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A captain of a merchantman sharing cigarettes with Greek soldiers, wearing British and Greek helmets, and a local Cretan.

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Note: This article was initially published in, the now defunct, Orbat Web Magazine-Historical Military Organization in Volume 1 as a Bonus Article. The following is a revised version with a lot more information and corrections of errors.

Organising the units

The regular V Infantry Division had completed its mobilisation by November 6th, 1940 and from the 16th to the 25th it was transported to the mainland (18,662 men and 566 officers -out of the 22,500 total number of troops-, with 687 animals and 81 vehicles) to fight the Italians in the Albanian front. The only Greek armed units left on the island were the cadres units (about 1,000 men) and about 500 gendarmes.

The division was replaced by the Hania Military Command as the main army functioning formation on the island and the Hania, Heraklio and Rethymno cadres

were put under its command. Three infantry battalions (of two companies and one Saint Etienne machine-gun platoon each) were formed by these cadres.

During January 1941 these infantry battalions were moved to the mainland and only an unknown number of troops were left on the island (armed with about 1,000 11mm Gras Mod. 1874 rifles, 12 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns and 40 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-guns).

In the end of December 1940 an order had been issued for the formation of a Militia on the island. The Kriti Military Command issued an order on January 4th, 1941 to the effect that 3,050 men should constitute the Militia (1,200 for Hania, 550 for Rethymno, 900 for Heraklio and 400 for Lasithi). They would be administered by the local Gendarmerie but tactically and operationally they would be under the Hania Military Command. On February 1941, though, the number of militiamen was reduced to 1,500 and, in the end, no actual Militia was formed. The Hellenic Official History of the Campaign mentions that in April 1941 this Militia had one battalion in each Prefecture (Hania with 564 officers and privates, Heraklio with 484 officers and privates, Rethymno with 265 officers and men and Lasithi with 243 officers and men - these numbers denote the men assigned to form the Militia, but how much of its forming was accomplished is not known).

The Gendarmerie Privates School arrived on the island on March 1941 as reinforcements (about 15 officers and 900 men).

Many troops reached Crete from the mainland after the armistice was signed (April 20th, 1941), but they were unarmed. They were ordered to report to the closest cadre battalions (unless they were Cretans; officers were placed with any unit that was in need of them).

The recruits of the Training Camps in the Peloponnese (about 5,000 men) arrived in April 1941. In the beginning 8 training battalions were formed (I, V, VI and VII Training Battalions from the Nafplion Training Camp; III Training Camp from the Tripoli Training Camp and II, IV and VIII Training Battalions from the Kalamata Training Camp) and finally (on May 11th) they were transformed to Infantry Regiments (Cretan) with 8,500 men each (after an influx of new recruits). Each regiment would consist of 2 battalions (one with experienced troops and the other with recruits being trained) of 4 infantry companies (of 120 men each) and 1 'machines company' (machine-guns, mortars etc.).

Finally the 1st Class / Officer Cadets Military School (300 students and 40 officers) arrived on the island on April 29th.

On May 4th Crete was divided in 4 military districts : I in Hania, II in Rethymno, III in Heraklio and IV in Neapoli.

On May 9th the 1st (I and II Military Districts) and 2nd (III and IV Military Districts) Military Commands were formed.

Finally it has to be noted that by the beginning of April 1941 the Greek Army had already mobilised 21 divisions, 3 brigades and various border sectors (of divisional, brigade and regiment size) out of 7 million inhabitants. These troops had been fighting the Italians since October 1940 in Epirus-Albania and then from April 19th the Germans, so there was no more manpower to use.

On May 20th the structure of the Greek ground forces in Crete was the following :

Kriti Higher Military Command (Ανωτέρα Στρατιωτική Διοίκησης Κρήτης)

- 1st Military Command (Στρατιωτική Διοίκησης) at Hania

- I Military District (Στρατιωτικόν Διαμέρισμα)
 - Hania Cadres Battalion (Εμπεδον Τάγμα Χανίων)
 - Hania Garrison (Φρουρά Χανίων) is mentioned by some sources
 - 1st, 2nd, 6th and 8th Infantry Regiments (Cretan) (Σύνταγμα Πεζικού [Κρήτης])
 - Hania Military Hospital and Hania POW Camp is mentioned by some sources
- II Military District at Rethymno
 - Rethymno Cadres Battalion
 - 4th and 5th Infantry Regiments (Cretan)
 - Gendarmerie Privates School
 - Rethymno POW Camp
- 2nd Military Command at Heraklio
- III Military District at Heraklio
 - Heraklio Guard
 - 3rd and 7th Infantry Regiments (Cretan)
 - Heraklio Cadres Battalion
 - Heraklio POW Camp
- IV Military District at Neapoli
 - Lasithi Cadres Battalion (being formed)

On May 20th, 1941 there were about 11,500 men (excluding gendarmes) and about 3,000 – 4,000 armed civilians on the island.

A short history of the small arms in the Battle of Crete and their origin

On July 29th, 1938 there was a popular uprising in Hania against the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas, the Prime Minister of Greece of that time. During this uprising the people occupied the army barracks and the central storehouse from where they took 800 short Mannlicher-Schoenauer rifles, revolvers and light machine-guns. Their armament was Mannlicher-Schoenauer rifles, Gras rifles, Mauser rifles, Lebel-tromblon rifles etc. After the failure of the uprising the Cretans were asked to return their weapons to the authorities but most remained at their hands. Some of these arms were used by the people of Crete against the Germans when invasion came. They were not part of any of the units mentioned below.

V Cretan Infantry Division left for the Albanian front in November 1940 and the only small arms left on the island in army hands were 1,000 Gras rifles, a dozen 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns and about 40 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-guns of the division's cadres left in the island.

In January 1941 4,000 rifles were sent to the island to arm a planned Militia, but in February they were sent back to Athens. One of the reasons given by the government for this decision was that the British had promised to send Italian war booty from Libya to arm both the army and the planned Militia but the government, very probably, was fearing another popular uprising of the Cretans.

Many requests were made to the British to send small arms to Crete and, finally, 3,500 ' American carbines ' (sic) were sent and in April about 1,000 Italian weapons

from Libya..

The British commander in Crete tried to organise various armed units from Cretans for the coming German invasion. One of these units (of about 100 men) was armed with rifles and ammunition by the British, was under their command from April 18th and was stationed at a mountain plateau (Psiloreitis Nida) with orders to fight any paratroopers landing there. The British actually managed to buy only 200 weapons in the Cretan market to arm units like the above.

The Gendarmerie Privates School (500 short Mannlicher-Scoenauer rifles, 400 'American type ' rifles (probably British 0.303 No 3 Pattern 14 built in the U.S.A. - hence ' American type ' -), , 44 9mm Steyr-Solothurn S1-100 sub-machine guns - Machinenpistole 34 - and 12 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns) reinforced Crete in March.

Recruits from the Training Camps in the Peloponnese were sent to Crete in April. Their weapons were various, 1/3 of these 5,000 recruits were unarmed and the rest had 5 - 20 cartridges per rifle.

The 1st Class of the Officer Cadets Military School arrived in Crete at the end of April (300 students and 40 officers), armed with 340 Mauser rifles - war booty from the Turks in the Balkan Wars, rebarreled to 7.92mm -, five 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-guns, one 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-gun, 200 hand grenades and 5 VB grenade thrower rifles (without grenades, though).

The Gendarmerie received 10 boxes with weapons and enough ammunition from the British, but they were of a different calibre to the rifles. So they were not used until the second day, when German ammunition of a similar calibre with the ones received were captured by the Gendarmes.

There also were Italian rifles available, albeit without magazines and a few Italian Breda light machine-guns (with which G. Kalogeridis' company in Galata was armed).

When invasion came 1/3 of the Hellenic forces was unarmed. Armed civilians' units were formed, armed with their private weapons (e.g. Gras), but with little ammunition. Other forces (in Hania, Heraklio and Rethymno) were armed with British weapons taken from British storehouses. So a force of 150 reservists were armed by the 3rd Infantry Regiment (Cretan) C.O. with ' American type ' weapons, found in a storehouse. Another group of civilians broke into British storehouses in Heraklio and took the weapons, but could not use them due to lack of ammunition. Greeks and British broke into the Venetian storehouses in Hania and found a number (400 ?) of British rifles and Italian light machine-guns, which had not been distributed. In Rethymno the Staff Officer of the Military Command ordered the breaking-in of a storehouse to distribute Market Control Police's weapons to civilians. In the end, civilians in Kastelli found 30 Gras rifles in the Market Control Police Station and distributed them among themselves.

During the course of the battle some weapons reached Crete from Egypt, some of which were destroyed at storehouses from the German bombing, while others were not delivered to units.

Weapons captured from the Germans armed quite a number of units.

The 5th Infantry Regiment (Cretan) captured a quantity of boxes with rifles, light machine-guns and ammunition from the Germans on May 21st in the Rethymno sector (the German rifle ammunition could be used by the Greek 7.92mm Mauser rifles).

During the same day the 11th Gendarmerie Company captured an amount of German ammunition in the Rethymno sector, that could be used by the 4 companies of the

Gendarmerie battalion, that were armed with American rifles (or, most probably, these companies were armed by the British with war-booty rifles).

The Australians sent captured German weapons to the Greeks (they had plenty from German air-drops on their lines).

On April 23rd the Rethymno sector was reinforced by 210 Italian rifles, hand-grenades, 35 rifle grenades with 3 tromblon rifles and 20,000 0.303 cartridges (not suitable, though, for the Italian rifles) from Hania. These cartridges were, later, exchanged with Italian ones. The 1st Attached Company was armed with these weapons.

In the Heraklion sector, a company that had arrived from the mainland, was equipped with ' American rifles ' and one 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-gun that was in the Herakilo storehouse. During the battle it captured German paratroops and used their weapons.

Ground units strengths and their small arms

Strengths, small arms and ammunition as per May 20th, 1941

Hania Cadres Battalion

Ten officers and 300 men. Formed on October 29th, 1940. Armed with ninety 11mm Gras Mod. 1874 rifles (with 10 cartridges per rifle).

Rethymno Cadres Battalion

Thirty officers and 800 men. Formed on November 12th, 1940 by the 44th Infantry Regiment according to the mobilisation plan. Organised in a Staff and a Headquarters Group, 4 infantry companies, one attached company and one machine-gun company. Armed with one hundred sixty-one 6.5mm Mannlicher-Schoenauer Mod. 1903 rifles (45 cartridges per rifle), one hundred seventy-eight 11mm Gras Mod. 1874 rifles (100 cartridges per rifle), eleven 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-guns (with but a few magazines) and four 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns (with enough ammunition but a few ammunition belts - some sources mention enough ammunition belts -). Other sources mention a total of two hundred thirty five Mannlicher-Schoenauer and Gras rifles, of which 178 each had 45 cartridges per rifle.

Heraklion Cadres Battalion

Thirty officers and 800 men. Formed on October 28th, 1940 organised in a Staff and a Headquarters Group, 3 infantry companies and one machine-gun company.. Armed with three hundred eighty 11mm Gras Mod. 1874 rifles, forty-eight 7.92mm Mauser rifles (with 100 cartridges per rifle), twenty Model 1915 light machine-guns and four 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns. Other sources mention 380 Mauser rifles (with 100 cartridges per rifle).

1st Infantry Regiment (Cretan) (at Kastelli)

Thirty officers and 1,000 men. Formed from the I Training Battalion of the Nafplion Training Camp. Organised in 2 battalions (I and II, each with 4 companies and 1 machine-gun company). Armed with 1000 rifles of various types and five 8mm

M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns. Another source claims that the regiment had six hundred 6.5mm Mannlicher-Schoenauer Mod. 1903 rifles (without magazines and with 5 - 8 cartridges per rifle) as well as 24 W. W. 1 machine-guns in a very bad condition.

2nd Infantry Regiment (Cretan) (Hania)

Thirty officers and 900 men. Formed from the II Training Battalion of the Kalamata Training Camp . Armed with 500 rifles of various types (with 200 cartridges per rifle). Other sources mention that only half the regiment was armed with rifles (with 20 cartridges per rifle). The regiment ceased to exist by May 27th.

3rd Infantry Regiment (Cretan) (at Heraklio)

Fifty six officers and 600 men. Formed from the III Training Battalion of the Tripoli Training Camp . Organised in 1 battalion (3 companies and 2 machine-gun companies). Armed with six hundred 6.5mm Mannlicher-Schoenauer Mod. 1903 rifles (with 15 cartridges per rifle), two 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-guns and ten 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns - 5 in some sources - .

4th Infantry Regiment(Cretan) (at Rethymno)

1,300 (1,000 ?) men. Formed from the IV Training Battalion of the Kalamata Training Camp. Organised in 8 infantry companies and 1 machine-gun company. Armed with eight hundred fifty 6.5mm Mannlicher-Schoenauer Mod. 1903 rifles (with 15 cartridges per rifle) and four 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns (with enough ammunition and ammunition belts - only some ammunition belts for another source -). According to other sources, the regiment's 2nd Company had replaced its rifles the day before the German paratroops landed with others of the American type with 5 - 6 cartridges per rifle and it captured 12 German machine-guns when the battle started.

5th Infantry Regiment (Cretan) (at Rethymno)

One thousand two hundred men. Formed from the V Training Battalion of the Nafplion Training Camp . Organised in 3 infantry companies and 1 machine-gun company). Armed with eight hundred 6.5mm Mannlicher-Schoenauer Mod. 1903 rifles (with 15 - 20 cartridges per rifle) – one thousand Mannlicher-Schoenauer rifles with 5 - 25 cartridges per rifle for another source - , twenty 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-guns and four to five 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns (with but a little ammunition and only some ammunition belts, probably given to the 4th Infantry Regiment (Cretan) after orders of the British commander of the Rethymno sector).

6th Infantry Regiment (Cretan) (at Galatas)

Thirty officers and 1,350 men. Formed from the VI Training Battalion of the Nafplion Training Camp. Organised in 5 infantry companies and one machine-gun company. Half of the regiment armed with rifles (with 10 cartridges per rifle) and a small number of machine-guns.

7th Infantry Regiment (Cretan) (at Heraklio)

Twenty seven officers and 850 men. Formed from the VII Training Battalion of the Nafplion Training Camp. Organised in 3 infantry companies and one machine-gun company. During May 18th, the regiment was reinforced by a double company of about 250 men. Armed with eight hundred fifty 6.5mm Mannlicher-Scoenauer Mod. 1903 rifles (with 15 cartridges per rifle) and five 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns.

8th Infantry Regiment(Cretan) (at Alikianos)

Forty officers and 800 men. Formed from the VIII Training Battalion of the Kalamata Training Camp. Organised in 5 infantry companies and one machine-gun company. Armed with five hundred 6.5mm Mannlicher-Scoenauer Mod. 1903 rifles (with about 50 cartridges per rifle), three hundred rifles of various types (Mauser-Martini-Gras with 50 cartridges per rifle) and four 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns (with 1500 cartridges). The regiment ceased to exist by May 29th.

Officer Cadets Military School

Seventeen officers, 300 student officers and 20 men. Organised in the 1st and 2nd Officer Cadet Companies and one privates command platoon. Armed with three hundred twenty 7.92mm Mauser rifles (with 80 cartridges per rifle and 3000 cartridges in reserve), 200 hand-grenades, five 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-guns (with 150 cartridges per light machine-gun, actually only one functioned in the battle) and one 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-gun.

Lasithi Cadres Battalion

The necessary cadres for its forming were available, but it wasn't actually formed, since no weapons or equipment had been supplied by the day of the German attack.

' Reserves Battalion ' (at Metohi Alimani)

This ' battalion ' was composed of, mainly, wounded troops convalescing and troops that were on leave when the armistice was signed in April 1941. It seems that it was in the process of being formed when the Germans attacked (its CO actually went to a village to get some news of what was happening during the first day of the German attack; the village had already been occupied, he was captured and the ' battalion ' disbanded without taking part in any action).

Gendarmerie Privates School (at Rethymno)

Sixteen officers and 900 men in 8 companies. Armed with five hundred short 6.5mm Mannlicher-Scoenauer rifles Mod. 1903 (with 150 cartridges per rifle), four hundred American type rifles (probably British 0.303 No 3 Pattern 14 built in the U.S.A. - hence ' American type ' -), forty-four 9mm S1-100 Steyr-Solothurn sub-machine guns and twelve 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns. Another source mentions that the cartridges per rifle were 30 - 150 for all rifles.

Rethymno Gendarmerie Command

One hundred men. Armed with one hundred 11mm Gras Mod. 1874rifles (with 15 - 20 cartridges per rifle). The total number of gendarmes in the whole of Crete is mentioned as 500 - 600 or 1,200.

TOTALS

12,164 men (including gendarmes), four thousand two hundred sixty-one (4261) 6.5mm Mannlicher-Schoenauer Mod. 1903 rifles, Seven hundred forty-eight (748) 11mm Gras Mod. 1874 rifles, Three hundred sixty-eight (368) 7.92mm Mauser rifles, four hundred (400) American type rifles (British 0.303 No 3 Pattern 14 ?), One thousand eight hundred (1,800) rifles of various types (Martini, Gras, Mauser etc.), an unspecified number of Lebel rifles, forty-four 9mm S1-100 Steyr-Solothurn (Machinenpistole 34) sub-machine guns, fifty-eight 8mm Model 1915 Chauchat light machine-guns and forty-two 8mm M1907T St. Etienne machine-guns.

Notes :

1. Kriti is Greek for Crete.
2. Place-names used are modern (so, for example, Rethymno can be found in some sources as Retimo, Kalamata as Kalamai etc.).
3. When a unit is not mentioned as Gendarmerie it is Greek Army.

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