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Dodecanese Campaign

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The **Dodecanese Campaign** of World War II was an attempt by **Allied** forces, mostly **British**, to capture the **Italian-held Dodecanese** islands in the **Aegean Sea** following the **surrender of Italy** in September 1943, and use them as bases against the **German-controlled Balkans**. The Allied effort failed, with the whole of the Dodecanese falling to the Germans within two months, and the Allies suffering heavy losses in men and ships.^[3] The operations in the Dodecanese, lasting from 8 September to 22 November 1943, resulted in one of the last major German victories in the war.^[4]

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Background [edit]

Further information: Military history of Greece during World War II and Mediterranean and Middle East theatre of World War II

The **Dodecanese** island group lies in the south-eastern **Aegean Sea**, and had been under **Italian occupation** since the **Italo-Turkish War**. During Italian rule, the strategically well-placed islands became a focus of **Italian colonial ambitions** in the Eastern Mediterranean. **Rhodes**, the largest of the islands, was a major military and aerial base. The island of **Leros**, with its excellent deep-water port of Lakki (Portolago), was transformed into a heavily fortified aeronautical base, "the **Corregidor** of the Mediterranean", as **Mussolini** boasted.

After the **fall of Greece** in April 1941 and the **Allied** loss of the island of **Crete** in May, Greece and its many islands **were occupied** by German and Italian forces. With the ultimate defeat of Axis forces in **North Africa** in spring 1943, **Winston Churchill**, who at least as far back as the **Gallipoli Campaign** had a deep interest in the region, turned his sights on the islands. The British envisaged an operation to capture the Dodecanese and Crete, and thus not only deprive the Axis of excellent forward bases in the Mediterranean, but also apply pressure on neutral **Turkey** to join the war. This would serve a favourite idea of Churchill's, of a "route through the **Dardanelles** to Russia as an alternative to the **Arctic Convoys**."^[5] In the **Casablanca Conference**, the initial go-ahead was given, and Churchill ordered his commanders to lay out relevant plans on 27 January 1943.^[6]

The plans, codenamed "Operation Accolade", called for a direct attack on Rhodes and **Karpathos**, with forces totaling three infantry divisions, an armoured brigade, and relevant support units. Landings at Crete, which was too well fortified and had a strong German garrison, were dropped. The main problem faced by the planners was the difficulty of countering the 10th Flying Corps (*X Fliegerkorps*) of the **German Air Force** (*Luftwaffe*) because of a lack of air cover, since the American and British aircraft were based in **Cyprus** and the **Middle East**. This challenge was further exacerbated by the demands of the upcoming **invasion of Sicily**. The Americans were skeptical about the operation, which they regarded as aiming mostly at post-war political benefits for Britain, and an unnecessary diversion from the **main front in Italy**. They refused to support it, warning the British that they would have to go on alone.^[7]

As an Italian surrender became increasingly possible, in August 1943 the British started preparations to quickly take advantage of a possible Italian-German split, in the form of a scaled-down "Accolade". A force based on **8th Indian Division** started being assembled, and American assistance in the form of **P-38 Lightning** long-range fighter squadrons was requested. As a result of the **Quebec Conference**, however, and the American refusal to assent to the British plans, the forces and ships earmarked for "Accolade" were diverted to other fronts, barely a week before the **surrender of Italy** on 8 September.^[8]

Initial Allied and German moves — The Fall of Rhodes [edit]

On the announcement of the Armistice, the Italian garrisons on most of the **Dodecanese Islands** either wanted to change sides and fight with the Allies or just return to their homes. However, in anticipation of the Italian surrender, German forces, based largely in mainland Greece, had been rushed to many of the islands to gain control. The German forces were part of **Army Group E** commanded by *Luftwaffe* **General Alexander Löhner**.

The most important German force in the Dodecanese was the 7,500-strong Assault Division "Rhodes" (*Sturm-Division Rhodos*) commanded by

Dodecanese Campaign	
Part of the Mediterranean and Middle East theatre of World War II	
Map of the Dodecanese Islands (in dark blue)	
Date	September 8 – November 22, 1943
Location	Dodecanese Islands, Aegean Sea
Result	German victory
Territorial changes	German occupation of the Dodecanese
Belligerents	
United Kingdom	Germany
Kingdom of Italy	Republican State of Italy
South Africa	
Greece	
Commanders and leaders	
Robert Tilney	Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller
Inigo Campioni	Mario Soldarelli ^[1]
Casualties and losses	
4,800 men	1,184 men
113 aircraft	15 landing craft
6 destroyers sunk	
4 cruisers moderately damaged	
4 cruisers severely damaged	
2 submarines sunk	
10 minesweepers and coastal defense ships sunk ^[2]	
Mediterranean and Middle East Theatre	
Adriatic North Africa East Africa Mediterranean Sea Gibraltar Malta Balkans Iraq Syria-Lebanon Bahrain Palestine Iran Italy	
Dodecanese Southern France	
Dodecanese Campaign	
Rhodes Leros Kos	

Generalleutnant Ulrich Kleemann. This division had been formed during the summer in the island of Rhodes, which was the administrative center of the Dodecanese Islands and possessed three military airfields. Because of this, Rhodes was the principal military objective for both the Allies and the Germans.

On 8 September, the Italian garrison on the island of **Kastelorizo** surrendered to a British detachment, which was reinforced during the following days by ships of the Allied navies. The next day, a British delegation, headed by **Lord Jellicoe**, was dropped by parachute on Rhodes, in order to persuade the Italian commander, **Admiral Inigo Campioni**, to join the Allies. The swift action of the German forces, however, preempted the Allies. Without waiting for the Italians to decide, Kleemann attacked the 40,000-strong Italian garrison on 9 September, and forced it to surrender by 11 September. The loss of Rhodes dealt a heavy and critical blow to Allied hopes.^[9]

While the government of the Kingdom of Italy surrendered and many Italian soldiers in the Aegean were tired of the war and had become opposed to Mussolini, Italian Fascist loyalists remained allied to Germany in the Greek campaign, with General Mario Soldarelli rallying Fascist **Blackshirts** and Italian soldiers loyal to Mussolini to continue the war in support of Mussolini's aims, and German forces in Greece convinced 10,000 Italians in the Aegean to continue to support their war effort.^[10]

Despite this setback, however, the British High Command pressed ahead with the occupation of the other islands, especially the three larger ones, **Kos**, **Samos** and **Leros**. The Germans were known to be overstretched in the Aegean, while the Allies enjoyed definite superiority at sea and the air cover provided by two **Spitfire** squadrons (**7 Squadron, SAAF** and **74 Squadron, RAF**) at Kos was deemed sufficient.^[11] It was hoped that from these islands, with Italian cooperation, an assault against Rhodes could be eventually launched.^[12] Thus, from 10 to 17 September, the **British 234th Infantry Brigade** under **Major General F. G. R. Brittorous** coming from **Malta**, together with 160 men from the **SBS**, 130 men from the **LRDG**, A Company, 11th Bn, **Parachute Regiment**^[13] and Greek **Sacred Band** detachments had secured the islands of **Kos**, **Kalymnos**, **Samos**, **Leros**, **Symi** and **Astypalaia**, supported by ships of the **British** and **Greek** navies. The Germans quickly mobilized in response. By 19 September, **Karpathos**, **Kasos** and the Italian-occupied islands of the **Sporades** and the **Cyclades** were in German hands. On 23 September, Lieutenant-General **Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller** was ordered to take Kos and Leros. Müller was the commander of the **22nd Infantry Division** garrisoning "**Fortress Crete**".^[14]

Battle of Kos [\[edit\]](#)

For more details on this topic, see [Battle of Kos](#).

Having identified the vital role of the Allies' only airfield at Kos, *X Fliegerkorps* started carrying out bombing raids on it and the Allied positions of the island, from 18 September. At the same time, reinforcements in aircraft started arriving, giving the Germans 362 operational aircraft in the area of the Aegean by 1 October.^[15]

The British forces on Kos numbered about 1,500 men, 680 of whom were from the 1st Bn, **Durham Light Infantry**, the rest being mainly RAF personnel, and ca. 3,500 Italians of the 10th Regiment of the **50th "Regina" Infantry Division**. On 3 October, the Germans effected amphibious and airborne landings known as Operation *Eisbär* ("Polar Bear") and reached the outskirts of the island's capital later that day. The British withdrew under cover of night. They surrendered the next day. The fall of Kos was a major blow to the Allies, since it deprived them of vital air cover.^[16] The Germans captured 1388 British and 3145 Italian prisoners.^[17] On 3 October, German troops executed the captured Italian commander of the island, **Colonel Felice Leggio**, and 101 of his officers. This was done in accordance with **Adolf Hitler**'s order of 11 September to execute captured Italian officers.^[18]

Battle of Leros [\[edit\]](#)

For more details on this topic, see [Battle of Leros](#).

In the aftermath of the fall of Kos, the Italian garrison of **Kalymnos** surrendered, providing the Germans with a valuable base for operations against their next target, Leros. The operation, codenamed Operation *Leopard*, was originally scheduled for 9 October, but on 7 October, the Royal Navy intercepted and destroyed the German convoy headed for Kos. In addition to the loss of several hundred men, the Germans also lost most of their few heavy **landing craft**. The Germans were forced to bring in new ones by rail, and it was not until 5 November that they had assembled a fleet of 24 such light infantry landing craft. To avoid interception by the Allied navies, they were dispersed among several Aegean islands and camouflaged. Despite Allied efforts to locate and sink the invasion fleet, as well as repeated shelling of the ports of German-held islands (see naval operations section below), the Germans suffered little losses and were able to assemble their invasion force, under **Generalleutnant Müller**, for Operation *Taifun* ("Typhoon") on 12 November.

The German invasion force consisted of personnel from all branches of the *Wehrmacht*, including veterans from the **22nd Infantry Division**, a **Fallschirmjäger** (paratroop) battalion, and an amphibious operations company (coastal raider, *Küstenjäger*) from the **Brandenburger** special operation units.

The Allied garrison of Leros consisted of most of the 234th Infantry Brigade, ca. 3,000 men of the 2nd Bn, **The Royal Irish Fusiliers**, under Lieutenant Colonel Maurice French, the 4th Bn, **The Buffs (The Royal East Kent Regiment)**, the 1st Bn, **The King's Own Royal Regiment (Lancaster)**, and the 2nd company of the 2nd Bn, **Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment**, under **Brigadier Robert Tilney**, who assumed command on 5 November. There were also ca. 8,500 regular Italian soldiers, mostly naval personnel, under **Admiral Luigi Mascherpa**.

Leros had been subjected by the *Luftwaffe* to a prolonged aerial bombardment, starting on 26 September, which had already caused significant casualties and damage, both among the defenders of the island and amongst the supporting naval forces. In the early hours of 12 November, the invasion force in two groups approached the island from east and west. Despite failures in some areas, the Germans established a bridgehead, while airborne forces landed on Mt. Rachi, in the middle of the island. After repulsing the Allied counterattacks and being reinforced the following night, the Germans quickly cut the island in two and the Allies surrendered on 16 November. The Germans suffered 520 casualties and captured 3,200 British and 5,350 Italian soldiers.^[19]

Naval operations [\[edit\]](#)

Since the operational theater was dominated by a multitude of islands and the Allies and Germans had to rely on naval vessels for reinforcements and supplies, the naval component of the campaign was especially pronounced. Initially, naval presence on both sides was low, most of the Allied shipping and warships had been transferred to the central Mediterranean, in support of the operations in Italy, while the Germans did not have a large naval force in the Aegean. The Germans had air superiority, which caused the Allies many losses in ships.

Vice Admiral **Werner Lange**, German Naval Commander-in-Chief of the Aegean, tried to reinforce the isolated German garrisons and carry out operations against Allied garrisons, while transporting the Italian **prisoners of war** to the mainland. Allied ships tried to intercept these, resulting in several tragic losses. On 23 September, **HMS Eclipse (H08)** sank the torpedo-boat **TA 10** and the steamer **Donizetti**, which had 1,576 Italian

captives on board.^[9] Another tragedy occurred a month later, when **USAAF B-25s** and **RAF Beaufighters** sank the cargo ship *Sinfra*, which had 2,389 Italian POWs, 71 Greek POWs and 204 German guards on board, of whom only 539 were saved.^[17]

On 14 September the first Allied loss occurred, when RHN *Katsonis*, was rammed and sunk by U-boat hunter *UJ 2101*. The *Luftwaffe* also intervened in force: On 26 September, 25 **Junkers 88s** sank the RHN *Vasilissa Olga* and the **HMS Intrepid (D10)** at Lakki Bay, Leros, followed on 1 October by the Italian *Euro* and **HMS Panther (G41)** and *Carlisle* (heavily damaged) on 9 October. At the same time, the short range of **Hunt class destroyers** *HMS Aldenham* and RHN *Pindos* and RHN *Themistoklis* prevented them from intercepting the German invasion convoy headed for Kos.^[17]

Further losses on both sides followed; after the loss of Kos and friendly air cover, the Allied navies concentrated on supply missions to the threatened islands of Leros and Samos, mostly under the cover of night. On 22–24 October, a German **minefield** east of **Kalymnos** caused the sinking of *HMS Hurworth* and *HMS Eclipse (H08)*, while RHN *Adrias* lost its prow; the ship managed to escape to the Turkish coast and after makeshift repairs, sailed to Alexandria.^[17]

On the night of 10–11 November, a group consisting of the destroyers *HMS Petard*, *HMS Rockwood* and **ORP Krakowiak** bombarded Kalymnos and *HMS Faulknor* Kos, where German forces were assembling for the attack on Leros. Nonetheless, the German convoy reached Leros on 12 November, escorted by over 25 ships, mostly U-boat hunters, torpedo boats and mine sweepers. During the subsequent nights, Allied destroyers tried to find and destroy the German vessels without success, limiting themselves to bombarding the German positions on Leros. With the fall of Leros on 16 November, the Allied ships were withdrawn, evacuating the remaining British garrisons.^[19]

By that time, the Germans had also started employing the **Dornier Do 217s** of *KG 100*, with their novel **Henschel Hs 293** radio-controlled missile, scoring two hits: causing severe damage to *HMS Rockwood* on 11 November and sinking *HMS Dulverton* two days later.^[19] The Allies lost six destroyers sunk and two cruisers and two destroyers damaged, between 7 September and 28 November 1943.^[3]

Aftermath [edit]

After the fall of Leros, Samos and the other smaller islands were evacuated. The Germans bombed Samos with **Stukas** (I. Group Stuka Wing 3 in Megara), prompting the 2,500-strong Italian garrison to surrender on 22 November. Along with the occupation of the smaller islands of **Patmos**, **Fournoi** and **Ikaría** on 18 November, the Germans thus completed their conquest of the Dodecanese, which they were to continue to hold until the end of the war. The Dodecanese Campaign is one of the last great defeats of the British Army in World War II, and one of the last German victories. The German victory was predominantly due to their possession of complete air superiority, which caused great losses to the Allies, especially in ships, and enabled the Germans to supply and support their forces. The operation was criticized by many at the time as another useless **Gallipoli**-like disaster and laid the blame at Churchill's door; perhaps unfairly so, since he had pushed for these efforts to be made far sooner, before the Germans were prepared.

In the context of the **Holocaust**, the British failure to capture the Dodecanese sealed the fate of the **Jews** living there. Although Italy had passed the anti-Jewish law of the **Manifesto of Race** in 1938, Jews living on the Dodecanese islands (and Italian-occupied Greece) experienced much less antisemitism than in the German and Bulgarian occupied zones of Greece, where harsher and harsher policies were implemented over time against the Jews, culminating in March 1943 with deportations to the death camps in occupied Poland. The Italian surrender, the subsequent German takeover and the failure of the Allied offensive meant that the safe haven disappeared and most of the Dodecanese Jews were eventually murdered by the Germans. In particular, 1,700 members of the ancient Jewish community of **Rhodes** (of a population of about 2000) were rounded up by the Gestapo in July 1944 and only some 160 of them survived the camps.^{[20][21][22][23]}

The Italian prisoners of war were transferred to the mainland by the Germans in overcrowded unseaworthy vessels, which led to several accidents, of which the sinking of the *SS Oriá* on February 12, 1944 was the most deadly. More than 4,000 Italians died when the ship sank in a storm.

In popular culture [edit]

The failed campaign, and in particular the **Battle of Leros**, inspired the 1957 novel *The Guns of Navarone* and the successful 1961 movie of the same name.

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External links [edit]

- Special Operations in the Dodecanese 🔗
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