

# KOS AND LEROS 1943

The German Conquest of the Dodecanese



**ANTHONY ROGERS**

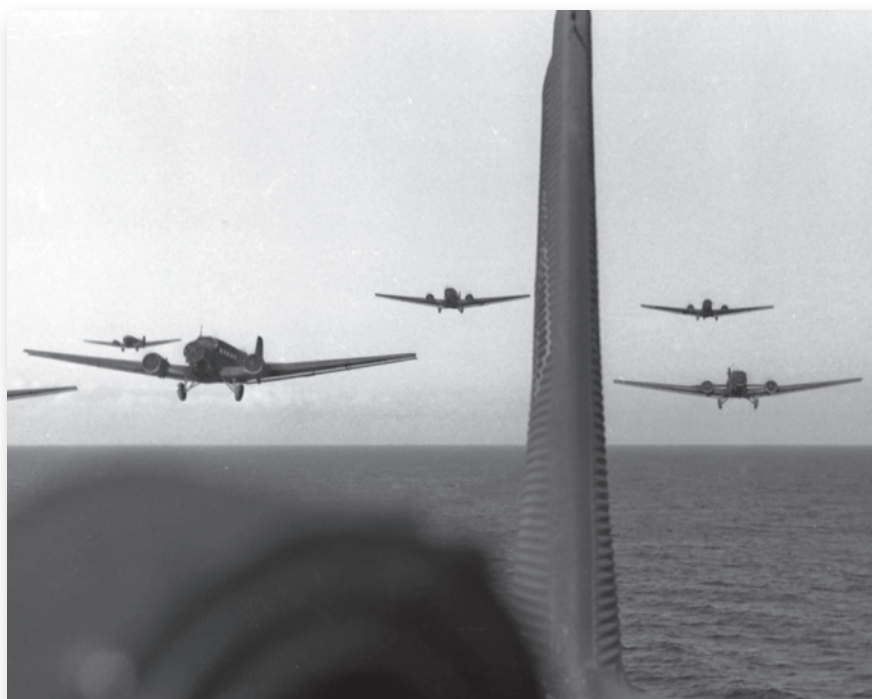
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CAMPAIGN 339

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*Series Editor Marcus Cowper*

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# INTRODUCTION

During World War I, Winston Churchill had been forced to resign as First Sea Lord of the Admiralty as a result of his role in the disastrous Allied effort in the Dardanelles. Twenty-eight years on, his apparent fixation with the region would resurface with dire consequence. The Italian armistice of September 1943 provided Churchill, now Britain's prime minister, with an opportunity to conduct a major operation in the eastern Mediterranean. It was argued that a new front in the Aegean would increase pressure against a faltering Wehrmacht and might even persuade Turkey to join the Allies. In spite of American opposition, Churchill proceeded. Spearheaded by the Special Boat Squadron and the Long Range Desert Group, British-led forces were sent to occupy the Italian-administered Dodecanese. Three months later, Kastellorizo was the only island remaining in British hands. The cost was an entire infantry brigade, some 100 aircraft and 20 naval vessels.

## THE STRATEGIC SETTING

The Aegean Sea is part of the eastern Mediterranean and provides access via the Dardanelles to the Sea of Marmara. This, in turn, is linked by

The Germans were quick to react in the wake of the Italian armistice. Generalleutnant Ulrich Kleeman's Sturmdivision Rhodes seized control of Rhodes on 11 September 1943, taking prisoner some 35,000–40,000 Italians. A vast quantity of Italian weapons was also seized. (Author's collection)





the Bosphorus to the Black Sea. The Aegean is characterized by its many islands, with two main archipelagos forming the Cyclades in the south, and the Dodecanese in the south-east. The Dodecanese, populated mainly by those of Greek extraction, comprise 14 principal islands (not 12 as the name implies). These are: Patmos, Lipsi, Leros, Kalymnos, Kos, Astipalaea, Nisyros, Tilos, Halki, Symi, Rhodes, Karpathos, Kasos and Kastellorizo.

In the early 16th century, after more than 200 years under the Knights of St John, Rhodes, soon followed by the rest of the Dodecanese, fell to the Ottomans. The situation prevailed until the Italo-Turkish war of 1911–12, from which Italy would emerge triumphant, having seized Libya and most of the Dodecanese. An agreement that Italy would relinquish control in the Dodecanese was delayed by the outbreak of the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and further complicated as a result of World War I, when, as an inducement for the Italians to come on side, the Allies accorded Italy full possession of the Dodecanese. After the Armistice, the future of the region continued to be a subject for debate, but was still under Italian occupation at the start of World War II.

When, in September 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany, Turkey refrained from taking sides, preferring instead to maintain cordial relations with the warring factions. Il Duce Benito Mussolini also opted for neutrality, until the time seemed right to join what looked like being the winning side. On 10 June 1940, Italy entered the war as Germany's ally against Britain and France.

The Greeks did not wish to precipitate a German invasion by allowing Britain to establish a military presence in their country. But, after meeting

On Monday morning, 13 September, an advance party of the Special Boat Squadron arrived by sea at Kos. These are members of 'S' Detachment SBS and crew of ML 349 at Kos port. (Kostas Kogiopoulos)

with the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden in February 1941, Greek government ministers were persuaded that Germany intended in any event to subjugate their homeland. The Royal Navy had already been granted the use of port facilities on the island of Crete and soon British forces began to arrive in mainland Greece. The Germans invaded a few weeks later and by the end of April they had overrun the country. Surviving British and Greek forces withdrew to Crete, which fell to a German airborne assault in May 1941.

Farther south, German forces had recently arrived in Libya in support of their Italian allies. In the central Mediterranean, Malta continued to provide the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy with a base from which to disrupt Axis supply routes, but was proving expensive to maintain. The situation in North Africa might have developed very differently had Malta not held out. As it was, the outcome of the desert war remained in the balance until mid-1942, by which time British forces had been pushed back towards Alexandria before the line was eventually stabilized at El Alamein.

On 18 October, the final Italo-German air offensive against Malta ended in an Allied victory. On the night of the 23rd, the British Eighth Army launched a major offensive against Axis forces in the Western Desert. It was the beginning of the end for the Deutsches Afrikakorps. October 1942 heralded a welcome reversal of British fortunes in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. By November, the Afrikakorps was retreating westward and on the 8th the Allies landed in Algeria and Morocco.

Now that they were in a position to do so, the commanders-in-chief in the Middle East began to consider action in the eastern Mediterranean. If they could re-occupy Crete and take possession of the Dodecanese, the

Officers of the Kos Allied landing party, probably on their way to meet the Italian commander, Colonello Felice Leggio: Second from left is SBS Major David Sutherland; to his left is Lieutenant Commander Frank Ramseyer, RNVR. (Kostas Kogiopoulos)



British would be ideally placed to restrict Axis movements in the region. Such a development was bound to inspire Turkish confidence and might even persuade Turkey to declare openly for the Allies. This would allow the use of Turkish airbases from which to strike at Greece, Romania and Bulgaria; it would open the way through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus and, controversially, could even lead to action in the Balkans. After reconsidering, it was concluded that the defences in Crete were such that it was unlikely that the island could be taken. The possibility of capturing Rhodes and the Dodecanese with the object of opening the Aegean as far as Izmir in Turkey was seen as feasible, but only if the Luftwaffe was pre-occupied elsewhere. There would also be a requirement for additional resources: two auxiliary aircraft carriers, 88 assorted landing craft and ten aircraft squadrons. A proposal was referred to Winston Churchill, then in Morocco attending the Casablanca Conference with America's President Roosevelt. The idea appealed to the Prime Minister, who decided to seek the opinions of the Chiefs of Staff. They needed time to respond. The whole question of Allied strategy for 1943 was still under consideration and depended largely on available resources. But just six days later, on 27 January 1943, Churchill instructed the commanders-in-chief to plan and prepare for the capture of the Dodecanese employing the utmost 'ingenuity and resource'.

The Americans were less than enthusiastic about opening another front. The United States Military Command considered that there was really only one way to defeat Hitler: by striking at Germany itself. Operations in the Aegean, codename '*Accolade*', would therefore be almost exclusively a British affair.

On 25 July 1943, following the Allied invasion of Sicily (Operation *Husky*) Benito Mussolini was ousted and replaced by Maresciallo Pietro Badoglio. Suddenly, it seemed, Italy had no interest in continuing the war as an Axis partner. While Badoglio's government negotiated surrender terms with the Allies, Adolf Hitler and his Staff prepared for the inevitable. Having anticipated Italy's volte-face the Germans responded with countermeasures under the codename *Achse* (*Axis*). Sturmdivision Rhodos quickly seized control of Rhodes, the largest and strategically most important island in the Dodecanese, disarming and taking prisoner tens of thousands of Italians. British plans to secure Rhodes with the cooperation of resident Italian forces were thus pre-empted. Rhodes was the key, without which, any attempt to seize and hold the rest of the Dodecanese was likely to fail. Winston Churchill was undeterred. Operation *Accolade* would proceed regardless and British forces were hurriedly deployed to occupy remaining islands.

For some time, Adolf Hitler had expected such an occurrence, his fears reinforced prior to *Husky* with a strategy of deception by the British and Americans. German forces in Greece and the Balkans were formidable. The German war effort was partly reliant on natural resources imported from the region. Greece, in particular, was a valuable source of ore, including chrome (used in armoured steel production) and bauxite (from which aluminium was extracted). But more importantly, if Allied air bases were established in the Aegean, the all-important Ploesti oilfields in Romania would be well within reach of bombers and long-range fighters. A British presence in the Aegean could hardly be ignored, therefore, and German forces were tasked with taking immediate action.

# CHRONOLOGY

8 September	Italian armistice announced.	5 November	Brigadier Robert Tilney takes over command on Leros.
9 September	Three-man liaison team parachutes into Rhodes.	12 November	Germans begin Operation <i>Taifun</i> with sea landings on the northern coast of Leros and a parachute drop in the centre of the island. Leros is effectively divided in two by German forces.
10 September	Two-man liaison team parachutes into Kos. Kastellorizo occupied by Special Boat Squadron (SBS). Unofficial mission arrives at Samos.	13 November	More German forces are landed at Leros. German assault takes Appetici. Fighting at Quirico.
11 September	German Sturmdivision Rhodos takes control of Rhodes.	13–14 November	Unsuccessful night counter-attack by British at Appetici.
13 September	SBS arrives at Kos.	14 November	Clidi is retaken by the Buffs. Fighting resumes at Rachi and at Quirico. Both sides land reinforcements.
15 September	Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) spearheads occupation of Leros. First of Durham Light Infantry reaches Kos.	15 November	Fighting continues on Rachi Ridge. More British and German reinforcements arrive at Leros.
16 September	SBS arrives at Samos.	16 November	Brigadier Tilney is taken prisoner at Meraviglia and surrenders British forces on Leros.
17 September	Royal Irish Fusiliers (first of four infantry battalions) begin to arrive at Leros. SBS sent to Symi.	19 November	Allies begin evacuation of Samos.
22 September	Germans prepare to take Kos and Leros. At about this time, the first contingent of the Royal West Kents lands at Samos.	22 November	Samos is occupied by German forces. With the exception of Kastellorizo, the Dodecanese are in German hands.
25 September	LRDG sets up base at Kalymnos.		
3 October	Operation <i>Eisbär</i> (German invasion of Kos) begins. German forces push swiftly inland.		
4 October	Kos in German hands. British evacuate Kalymnos.		
7 October	Kalymnos occupied by German forces.		
11 October	Symi evacuated by British forces.		
22 October	Astipalaea invaded by German forces.		
24 October	LRDG detachment overwhelmed in battle at Levitha.		

# OPPOSING COMMANDERS

## GERMAN COMMANDERS

**Generaloberst Alexander Löhr** was Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) Heeresgruppe E (Army Group E), which controlled the Wehrmacht (German armed forces) in the Aegean area. The Kriegsmarine (German Navy) in the eastern Mediterranean was nowhere near as powerful as the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet, but nonetheless crucial to German operations in the region. Senior naval officer Aegean was **Vizeadmiral Werner Lange**. Air operations fell to **General der Flieger Martin Fiebig** of Luftwaffenkommando Südost (Air Force Command South-East). Land forces were the responsibility of **Generalleutnant Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller**, a Prussian officer who, like many of his generation, had fought in World War I. Since 1939, he had served on the Western and Eastern Fronts. In autumn 1943 he was Commanding Officer (CO) of 22. Infanteriedivision, from which the majority of troops were drawn for forthcoming operations in the Dodecanese.

Land forces were organized into several *Kampfgruppen* (battle groups). For the taking of Kos, there would be two such groups. Each was named



### LEFT

Generalleutnant Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller commanded 22. Infanteriedivision, whose troops comprised the majority of land forces tasked with seizing the Dodecanese. During operations to take Kos and Leros, Müller's assault force was organized into several *Kampfgruppen* (battle groups). For Operation *Eisbär* there were two such groups, each named after its respective commander. (Author's collection)

### FAR LEFT

Major Sylvester von Saldern officer commanding II./Gren.-Rgt. 65 was responsible for *Kampfgruppe von Saldern* during Operations *Eisbär* and *Taifun*. (Author's collection)

**RIGHT**

Hauptmann Armin Kuhlmann  
OC 1./Küstenjäger-Abt.  
'Brandenburg' commanded  
Kampfgruppe Kuhlmann.  
(Author's collection)

**FAR RIGHT**

During Operation *Taifun*  
there were five battle groups.  
After Hauptmann Kuhlmann  
was severely wounded in an  
air raid at Kalymnos, he was  
replaced as OC *Küstenjäger* by  
Leutnant Hans Schädlich, also  
responsible for Kampfgruppe  
Schädlich. (Author's collection)



after its respective commander. Major Sylvester von Saldern was the experienced CO of II. Bataillon/Grenadierregiment 65 (II./Gren.Rgt. 65) and Kampfgruppe von Saldern. (In the Wehrmacht, Roman numerals were used to indicate battalions, and Arabic numerals other unit formations.) Hauptmann Armin Kuhlmann was born in Namibia, a dual German and British national. He is thought to have served in an infantry unit in Poland in 1939 and, later, in North Africa. He was officer commanding (OC) 1. Kompanie/Küstenjägerabteilung 'Brandenburg' (1./Küstenjäger-Abt. 'Brandenburg') and Kampfgruppe Kuhlmann.

Five battle groups were created for the seizure of Leros. Tasked once again was Kampfgruppe von Saldern, as well as Brandenburg Küstenjäger. This time, however, the latter would land as Kampfgruppe Schädlich under

**RIGHT**

Hauptmann Helmut Dörr  
OC III./Gren.Rgt. 440 headed  
Kampfgruppe Dörr. (Author's  
collection)

**FAR RIGHT**

Hauptmann Martin Kühne  
OC I./Fallschirmjäger-Rgt. 2  
led the airborne element,  
Kampfgruppe Kühne. Kühne  
is shown here shortly after  
the award of the Ritterkreuz  
(Knight's Cross) on 29 February  
1944. (Author's collection)

