

Maleme Airfield, May 20, 1941

Historical Overview

This scenario deals with the fighting in New Zealand's 22nd Battalion sector, specifically around Maleme airfield and the Tavronitis bridge on May 20, 1941. It is only part of a larger action in this area.

This was the opening gambit of Operation Mercury, the German airborne invasion of Crete. Thirteen days later the last of the defenders withdrew from the island, but the blow they had dealt the attackers signaled the end of major German airborne operations for the duration of the war.

The Germans knew that control of an airfield on Crete was vital to the success of the mission, and Maleme, among others, was targeted on the first day. Equally important in the Maleme sector was the high ground around Point 107, which dominated the airfield and made the airfield largely unusable if still in enemy hands. The defenders were undersupplied and bombing had disrupted Allied communications to such an extent that the day mainly consisted of confused and isolated fighting. But with the German III Battalion landing in the middle of 5th Brigade positions east of the airfield and being mostly eliminated the remaining three battalions of Assault Regiment Group West had to complete the task.

By the end of the day elements of the 22nd still hung on to parts of the airfield and Point 107 was firmly in the hands of the defenders, but bad communications again lead to faulty reading of the situation, and the New Zealanders withdrew, leaving the airfield firmly in German control. From that point on the Battle for Crete had arguably been lost.

This replay of the Maleme battle yields a slightly different result.



Scenario map showing replay of the battle for Maleme Airfield and Pt. 107.

Maleme After Action Report



Point 107 and bridge, as seen from west side of valley, where the German attack originated. The airfield is the level ground to the left and beyond the valley.

The New Zealand forces were dug in around the airfield and in depth up the slope of Pt. 107. Rows of barbed wire (still hidden) blocked off the far exit of the bridge, at the base of the hill, and other wire cordoned off access to Pt. 107 from the south.



View looking south.



Above: Glider troops land in the Tavronitis valley. Below: Rapid advance towards airfield.



The first wave of Fallschirmjäger land by glider and form up in the valley. 3 Kp., 1st Battalion lands near the mouth of the Travronitis River while Specialstrosstrupp Brücke lands just north of the bridge. The pre-attack aerial bombardment raises a massive dust cloud, obscuring their landing from the New Zealand 22 Battalion dug in east of the valley. While the defenders still have their heads down, the Germans rapidly cross open ground and scale the embankment to advance into the fields on the north side of the airfield. Specialstrosstrupp Brücke moves north along the lower edge of the embankment in support of this attack.



Electing to dig in back from the edge of the valley, the New Zealanders' carrier platoon, defending this side of the airfield, opens up on the advancing paratroops. The first of the Bofors also engages from the far side of the airfield in enfilade as the paratroops leap frog from field to field. As NZ mortars dug in near Pt. 107 add their fire to the defense, casualties among the attackers begin to mount.



The German mortar now supports the 3 Kp. attack by dropping smoke to cover the open areas between the fields, shielding the paratroops from the Bofors. Under cover of smoke the Fallschirmjager close assault the New Zealand forward positions, are thrown back and assault again. 3 Kp. commander is killed when breaking cover to storm the farm house.



As the glider borne troops slog forward the first German reinforcements parachuted in west of the valley begin to arrive. Although the airfield is not yet secured, IV Battalion's Pak 36's are rushed to the north side to defend against possible counter attack.

8 Kp. arrive and are sent in across the valley, forming up quickly at the bottom of the embankment on either side of the bridge, in preparation for an assault on Point 107, the second German objective. They are supported by the heavy machine guns of 15 Kp., IV Battalion.





Smoke is laid by the German mortars on Pt. 107 in an attempt to obscure 88 Kp. as it moves across the valley.

Remnants of 4 Kp., part of the initial wave of glider borne troops that had landed to a devastating reception on the south face of Pt. 107, filter in from the south end of the valley after their failed attempt to attack Point 107. A Vickers and N.Z. troops dug in behind barbed wire along the embankment open fire. 4 Kp. returns fire, knocking out the Vickers, before moving in under cover of the embankment to work their way up in support of the developing attack on the bridge and Pt. 107.



Remnants of 4 Kp. enter valley from south.

At this point the attack has essentially developed into two assaults, one on the north side of the airfield and the other against the base of Pt. 107, focussing on the RAF camp and the dry canal that runs along the foot of the hill. With the 3rd Battalion decimated east of Maleme and the remnants of 4 Kp. now filtering in attesting to the failure of the south attack, the German commander is aware that if he is to take both objectives, he can't wait until the airfield is secure before engaging Pt. 107. He is also painfully aware that the numbers do not favour his beloved paratroops, as they are now roughly equal to the defending New Zealanders. His only hope is that his regimental mortars and artillery arrive soon, and that with the support of this along with concentration of force, he can drive the enemy from Pt. 107 and the airfield.



IV Battalion mortars along with the off board fire support's FO finally arrive and take up positions along the west edge of the board. In the rush to bring this support into action, the German mortars emplace in the open, astride the road, a decision that will come back to haunt them. But the Germans can now bring their artillery advantage into play, quickly engaging and neutralizing the Bofors which had been holding up the assault on the airfield.

With the carrier platoon positions overrun, 3 Kp. and Specialstrosstrupp Brucke, with losses mounting, close in on the three Bofors pits at the east end of the airfield.





The Pak 36's arrive in the fields north of the airfield and emplace under fire, hoping to help the Germans secure hard won ground. With the last of the Bofors knocked out or neutralized and the airfield mostly in Fallshirmjäger hands, the New Zealand commander commits his armoured reserve, a Matilda, supported by elements of C Company.



The Pak 36's manage to emplace just as the Matilda crosses the airfield. Their small calibre shells bounce off the Matilda's armour as it moves in unchallenged and supported by N.Z. infantry. The remnants of 3 Kp. and Specialstrosstrupp Brucke are driven back from their high water mark at the east end of the airfield as the tide appears to have turned.



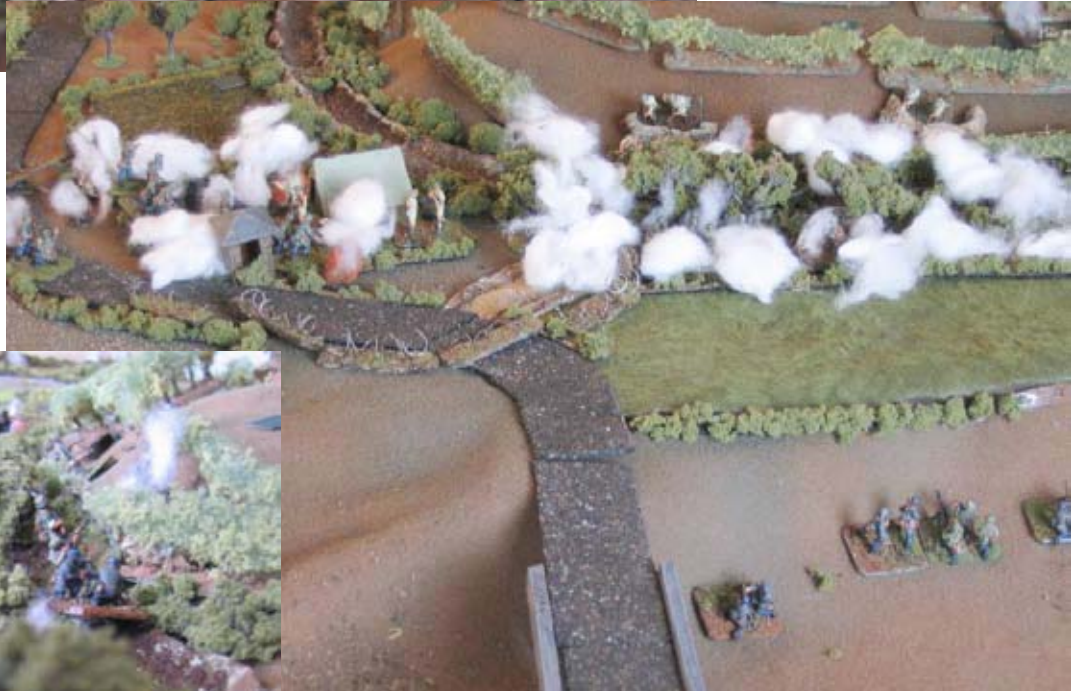
Blinded by smoke the Matilda moves in to support the infantry in their close assault of the German AT guns. Bad luck trades off the AT gun for the Matilda, and the Fallschirmjager surge back to the offensive.



The surviving N.Z. infantry flee the field, pursued by the attacking paratroops as the Germans now move their heavy machine guns to the south side of the airfield in support of the final push on Pt. 107.



From the olive groves on Pt. 107 the New Zealand commander watches the battle unfold. The German 8 Kp. disappears behind the river embankment as they prepare for the assault. Soon after this point German mortars zeroed in on the lone N.Z. mortar, knocking it out with a direct hit and, with communication to the supporting batteries of 75's also now disrupted, eliminating the defenders artillery options.



Under cover of smoke, the German assault on the bridgehead goes in. Although reinforced by elements of C Company, the RAF personnel are quickly pushed out of the RAF compound and eliminated.

German paratroops cross the dry canal and advance up the west slope of Pt. 107.



Battling into the olive groves.

Mid-Battle Overview

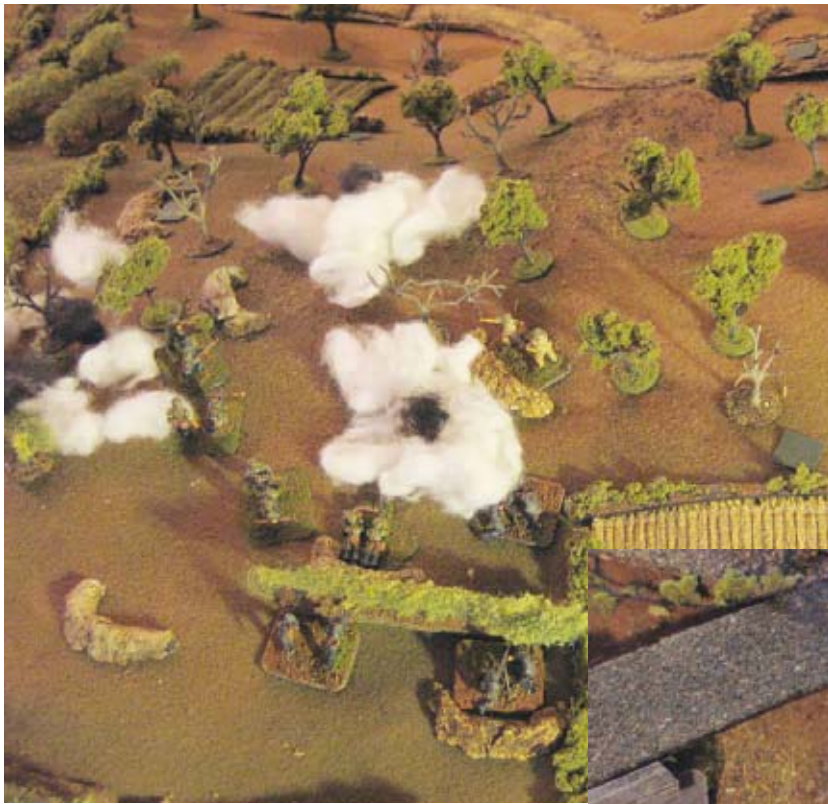
8 Kp. has moved into the olive groves and RAF compound as the initial assault force mops up resistance around the airfield. The N.Z. troops defending Pt. 107 have dug in in depth over the entire hill side hoping to wear down the attackers through attrition and making them pay for every yard of the advance. But using smoke to isolate enemy units lower down on the hill and employing its mortars, rockets and HMG's to neutralize identified enemy positions before moving in to close assault allows the Germans to work their way up the hill, moving through the N.Z. defenders with relatively light casualties.





Attempting to seize the initiative, elements of C Company from the east side of Pt. 107 abandon their positions around Maleme and counter attack the German flank. With the enemy forces fully committed to the attack, the two N.Z. carriers stage a break out in the south end of the valley with the intention of harassing the enemy mortars on the western embankment.





D Company holds the west slope of the hill against repeated attacks, but slowly the superior weight of German fire power grinds them down. Isolating the forward New Zealand positions through the use of smoke, suppressing fire allows other paratroops to close in close combat and drive D Company from its positions.

With Pt. 107 now in sight the Fallschirmjager continue to push relentlessly up the steep slope as time runs out.

Meanwhile, on the far side of the valley, IV Battalion mortars are forced to abandon their exposed position by the road, scrambling for new positions in the cover of the valley as the enemy carriers approach.



With the airfield secured and the remaining troops of 3 Kp. blocking attempts by the enemy to infiltrate back in behind their lines, elements of 14 Kp. head up past the now abandoned positions around the hamlet of Maleme in order to bring pressure to bear on the east flank of Pt. 107.



On Pt. 107 Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, the 22 Battalion commander, beats off a close assault as he watches the remaining elements of his battalion crumble.

Meanwhile, back in the valley, the New Zealanders' final gambit fails. Under accurate mortar fire the carriers and accompanying infantry loose the will to proceed and scramble back for protection behind their wire, only to find that the enemy is already there.





With the last elements of 22 Battalion isolated on the top of the hill, intense mortar fire proceeds a final push from both sides that clears the objective of enemy troops. The battle ends on the final game turn with the Germans in control of both objectives, allowing them to claim a major victory. In the final analysis, meeting more resistance than expected, the Germans were forced to conserve manpower in order to achieve their objectives. Utilizing their superior fire power and the sight advantages afforded by the slope for clear lines of overwatch fire by their support weapons, they were able to bring maximum force to focus on a narrow front, as the New Zealanders struggled to defend a very wide perimeter. In his rush to bring 15 Kp. mortars into action, the poor

sighting of these positions caused a moment's consternation for the German commander when the New Zealanders sent out their carriers, but in the end this threat evaporated on its own. The N.Z. defence was tenacious, and the Bofors, sighted well back from the edge of the valley, were able to hand out maximum damage early on in the battle. Overall, however, the defence suffered somewhat from being too spread out, allowing their units to be isolated one by one in the attack, and thus not being able to mount a serious resistance around Pt. 107. The unfortunate loss of their tank early on removed a serious obstacle for the enemy, who lacked the firepower to compete with the armour of the Matilda.

