

THE BATTLE FOR LEROS - TED JOHNSON AND BILL MINNEAR

Rob Forsyth

Following the capitulation of Italy as an Axis power, the Dodecanese island of Leros was occupied by British forces on 15 September 1943. The Battle for Leros began with some 50 days of continuous daylight German air attacks from September until German air and sea landings took place on 12 November. The battle ended four days later with the capitulation of the Allied forces to a numerically superior enemy on land and, more critically, in the air where no fighter cover to counter the Stuka bombers was provided. The occupation, then loss, of Leros was heavily criticised at the time as a poor strategic decision by Churchill. A list of those RN ships and Army units lost in the battle appears below.

The majority of the surviving British Forces were taken prisoner. They faced the grim prospect of spending the rest of the war in a German PoW camp. Senior officers were taken off the island by flying boats; more junior officers and their men were crammed into ships and taken to the Port of Piraeus on the mainland of Greece and then marched through the streets of Athens - the Greek crowd were largely sympathetic to the British - before being transported in cattle trucks some 1,400 miles to Germany by way of the Balkans with very little food and no sanitation facilities - and in winter.

Naval ships lost or damaged

6 destroyers sunk: *HM Ships Dulverton, Eclipse, Hurworth, Intrepid, Panther, His Hellenic Majesty's Ship (HHMS) Olga*

3 submarines sunk: *HM SMs Simoon and Trooper, HHMS Katsonis*

10 lesser warships sunk, including six motor launches and two landing craft

1 cruiser crippled beyond repair: *HMS Carlisle*

3 cruisers heavily damaged: *HM Ships Aurora, Penelope and Sirius*

4 destroyers heavily damaged: *HM Ships Hursley, Penn and Rockwood, HHMS Adrias*

4 submarines heavily damaged: *HM SMs Torbay, Unseen, Unrivalled and Unsparring*

Army units involved and subsequently captured

234 Infantry Brigade HQ

4th Battalion, Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment)

1st Battalion, King's Own Royal Regiment (Lancaster)

2nd Battalion, Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment

2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers (Princess Victoria's)

3 Battery less one Troop 1 Light Anti Aircraft Regt RA

Troop of 25 pounders. These guns had been captured once before at Dunkirk and had been given to the Italians. They were later found again on Samos

Detachment 9 Field Company Madras Sappers and Miners

47 Defence Issue Depot (DID) Royal Army Service Corps (RASC)

161 Field Ambulance Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC)

570 Advanced Ordnance Depot Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC)

Detachment Long Range Desert Group (possibly squadron strength)

Detachment Special Boat Squadron

TED JOHNSON



Ted as a PoW

Ted enlisted in the Royal Ulster Rifles (RUR) in September 1940. He was commissioned in June 1941 and posted to the 2nd Battalion, The London Irish Rifles, who were then in the 47th London Division defending the beaches in the Littlehampton area. In June 1942 he was posted to the Middle East where he arrived just prior to the Battle of El Alamein. Being of Irish nationality, he was further posted on to Malta GC where the 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers (The Faughs) needed officer reinforcements. As an RUR commissioned officer, he was attached for all purposes to the Faughs, a nickname in use since the Napoleonic Wars deriving from their unpronounceable Gaelic motto “Faugh-a-Ballagh” meaning “Clear the way”. They were part of the Allied forces that occupied Leros.

Ted’s platoon had faced a counter-attack and beach landing by German troops. In the subsequent action the platoon had to retreat in the face of an overwhelming force; for his part in this Ted was awarded the Military Cross. In the end the Germans overran all the Allied troops who were forced to surrender. This was largely due to the lack of air cover which allowed the Germans to bomb the island every day for several weeks largely unopposed. The whole British force were made PoWs. Ted published a book, *Island Prize, Leros 1943* (Kemble Press) in January 1992 and has also recounted his PoW experiences in an article in the December 2007 edition of the *Deddington News*:

‘Christmas 1943: We, a group of prisoners, had recently completed a 14-day cattle truck journey from Athens to Moosberg, near Munich, where the touring accommodation was not ideal (40 hommes - 8 chevaux was the sign on the outside of the wagon). Now, on 23 December, I was one of a random selection leaving Moosberg for another camp. We were told journey time would be two days but at the end each prisoner would have his own room! Travel accommodation improved to a train of hard seat coaches. During the usual body search before we left I lost my issue field dressing to the “ferret”. I hope the small compass hidden in it was of use to the eventual finder. Our guards for this journey were more amiable than those we had known before and I was able to buy a loaf of bread from one of them for 10 cigarettes (Red Cross, no doubt). We arrived at our end station Lukenwalde, near Berlin, having come via Leipzig and Halle in the late evening of Christmas Day.

After the usual “Raus, raus, schnell, schnell” we marched through the snow towards the lights of a camp on the horizon. The welcome we got was no different from any other prison we had so far encountered: wire, grim-looking Wehrmacht soldiers and the predictable rough-looking German Shepherd dog with handler. The inevitable body search took place again. This time all personal possessions were taken and with Teutonic efficiency were listed in detail. Toilet articles were given back and we were permitted to keep the clothes we wore. We were all issued with a palliasse cover, two wood pulp blankets, one bowl, one knife and one spoon. By now the outlook was worrying! Next, we were moved into a long low building which contained individual cells. I now saw the truth behind the news about each officer having his own room! No explanation was given as to why or for how long one was being given such personal attention, but by now, since capture, we were becoming used to the devious methods of the “detaining power”. It dawned on me that I was in solitary confinement and that this was a novel way to celebrate Christmas.

There was no meal that evening but a redeeming feature was that my cell was warm. This personal hovel in which I spent the next 10 days measured 15ft x 7ft 6 inches (5 paces by 2½ paces) and contained a bed with straw palliasse, a table and a stool. The metal door had the traditional peep hole, the small window was barred and high out of reach. Twice daily, what passed for food and drink was brought into my cell by a Russian slave labourer under armed escort. It was from one of these unfortunate walking skeletons that I learned why I was incarcerated - interrogation. As the days went slowly by, I thought a lot about my predicament and the events which led to this situation, and how only three years ago I was a schoolboy enjoying the freedom of my native Ireland. I sang a lot to keep my spirits up and tried to keep fit by pacing up and down my cell and running on the spot. I devised a game by rolling up my socks into a lump and playing catch against the cell wall. My release came during the tenth night at about 2am when I was taken under escort to confront a smooth-talking German officer in a brightly lit office. He spoke good English with a Canadian accent. The gist of the questioning, which was conducted in a calm conversational atmosphere, was to get confirmation of facts he already knew. I hope the answers to his questions added little to his already detailed knowledge of the events leading up to the recent operation in the Aegean, in which we had come off second best. During the interview he noted that as a citizen of a neutral country I was in the British Army - why? Finally he suggested that I help myself to be released by agreeing to join a German Free Irish Battalion which, he said, already included some of my comrades. He did not look surprised when I declined. Later I found very little evidence that such a unit ever existed. At the end of this very mild session I was released from solitary confinement into a barrack room where I met some of my colleagues whom I last saw on Christmas night and who had gone through a similar experience. A day or two later, when our whole group had been through the ordeal, we were escorted to a more permanent abode: Offlag VIIIIF in Czechoslovakia.’

After the war, Ted elected to stay in the army and obtained a regular commission in the Faughs. He was adjutant of the 2nd Battalion in Palestine 1945-46 and later Adjutant of the Army Apprentices School at Arborfield 1948-50.

He spent three years on secondment to the Gold Coast Regiment in West Africa and later became Adjutant to the Queen’s University, Belfast, Officer Training Corps from 1954-56. He retired from the army in 1958.

BILL MINNEAR



Bill was a Company Quarter Master Sergeant in The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. He served in Crete and India before being part of the force that occupied Leros. Following the surrender of Allied Forces, Bill and his unit were, like Ted Johnson, transported to Germany to be incarcerated in three different prison camps (Stalags VIIA, XVIIA and VIIIA) over a period of 15 months. Finally, in the early months of 1945, they were force-marched across Germany from east to west at the hands of German guards as an evacuation manoeuvre from Stalag VIIIA which lay directly in the path of the rapidly advancing Russian armies. Despite being told by their German captors that there would be rail transport at the end of a two-day march to the rail junction of Bautzen, it did not happen. The march then became a long struggle for survival for over 400 miles. This was in the worst months of winter, with cold winds, privation and hardship taking their toll. Some died. Some tried to escape and at least one prisoner was shot dead doing so.

Two months later they arrived in the western zone of Germany with everyone in extremely poor condition. The war, however, was drawing to a close with Russians approaching from the east and Allied forces from the west. The column then arrived in the vicinity of units of the American 9th Army as they drove towards the River Elbe - the last natural obstacle before the final drive to Berlin. Overnight the German guards disappeared - although some were captured quite quickly by the Americans. Most of the prisoners were in a dreadfully emaciated state which was not improved by too much rich food eaten too quickly. Repatriation to England followed in two stages via Brussels. Bill finally reached home in late April 1945 in a physical condition from which he took a very long time to recover.