THE QUEEN OLGA AND THE BATTLE OF LEROS

52 DAYS 1943

VASILIS MENTOGIANNIS - COSTIS MITSOTAKIS - GEORGE NIKOLAIDIS

UNDERWATER FILMING & RESEARCH

UFR TEAM

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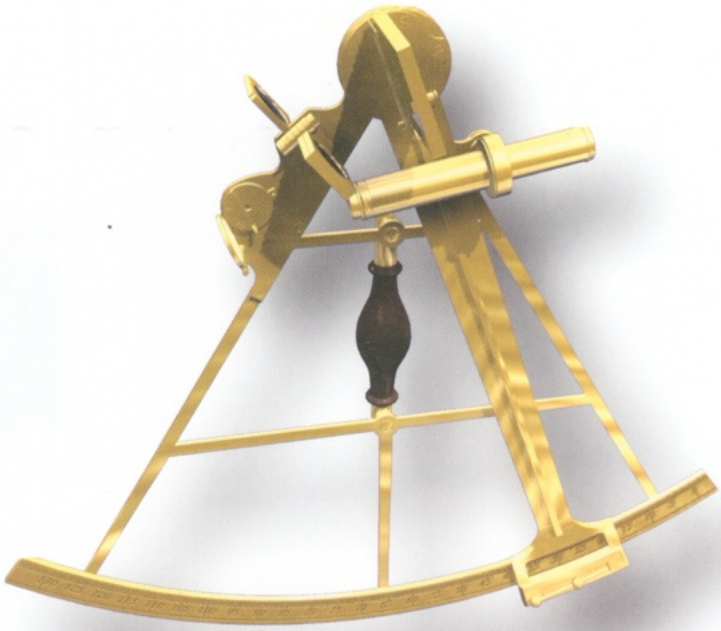

Vasilis Mentogiannis – Costis Mitsotakis – Yorgos Nikolaidis

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"The dead only die when they are forgotten"

KASTANIOTIS EDITIONS

Acknowledgements

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Finally, we would like to thank our publisher, Thanasis Kastaniotis, for believing in this adventure.


TECH 76

Introduction

A sign in Leros harbour welcomes visitors in three languages: Italian, English, and German—not French, Spanish, or some other language—because it was Italian, British, and German forces that fought an incredibly intense battle here in 1943; a battle which very few people know anything about.

Thousands of those who took part in the battle and their relatives visit the island to pay their respects to the fallen. We followed their tracks from 1943 until the present and uncovered stirring human stories.

Four years of research, still unfinished; hundreds of photographs; over thirty hours of digital video footage; underwater shots of the artefacts of war; and dozens of hours of conversation with survivors from Greece and abroad provided us with what we needed to create a unique album of photographs that is a world first.

The photographs are accompanied by a number of short texts that constitute a veritable relay of memories, as each eyewitness picks up the thread of their account at the point the previous witness left off.

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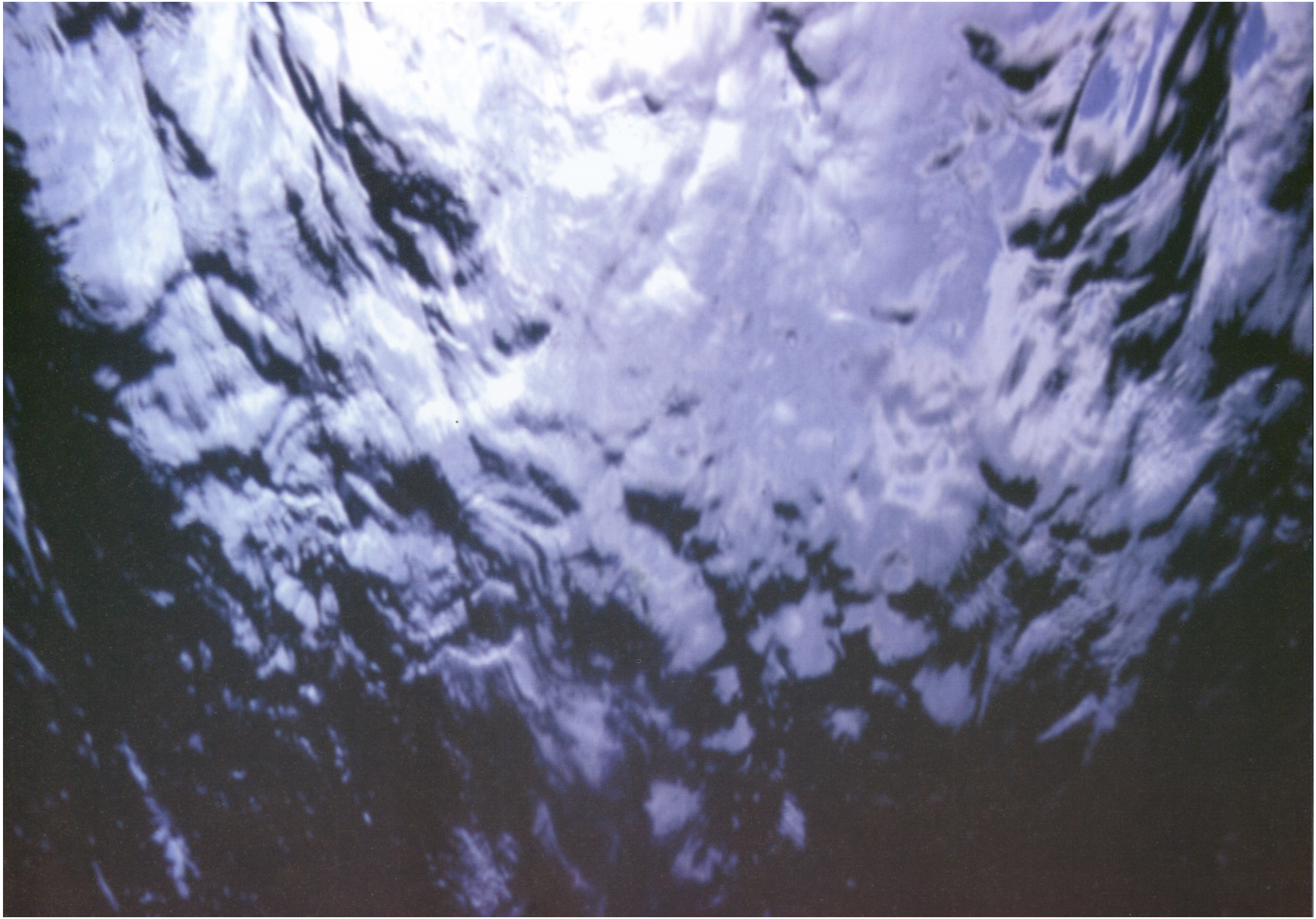
Contents

* The ranks of the narrators in Chapter 2, *The Queen Olga, a Greek destroyer*, appear as they do in the contemporary records in the Hellenic Naval Archives.

The *Queen Olga*
Naval Museum archive



The diving team: preparations in Lakki Harbour.

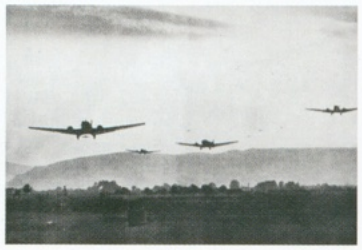
UFR TEAM

JUNKERS JU 52

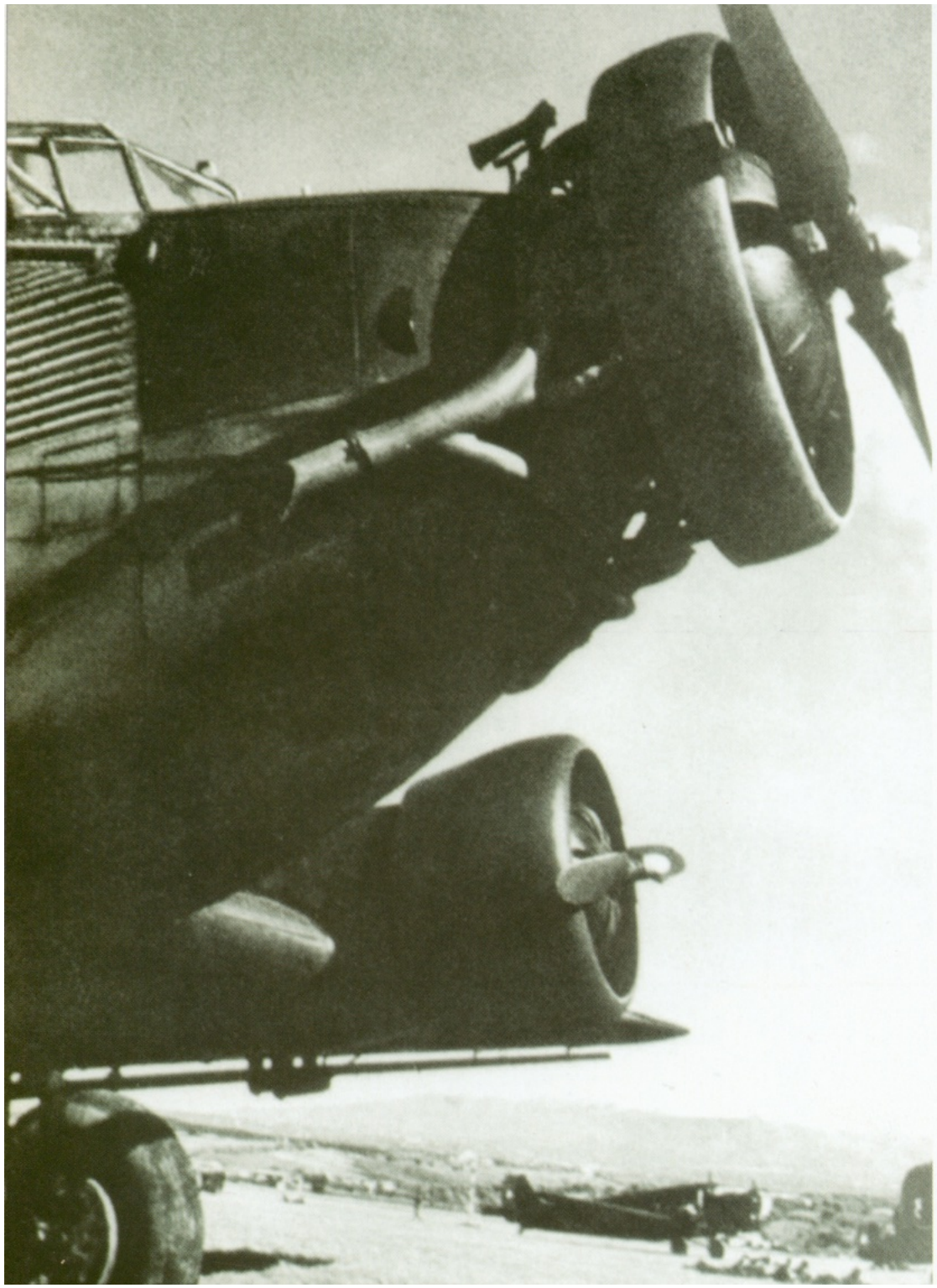
Late September, 2000. We have just completed our fourth dive on the *Queen Olga*, a Greek destroyer sunk off Leros in 1943. New to the island, we are still ignorant of this peaceful island's turbulent history.

We are inundated with information about World War II wrecks in the Leros area, including an aeroplane at the bottom of Agia Marina Bay.

Fishermen and locals point out the site of the wreck to us.





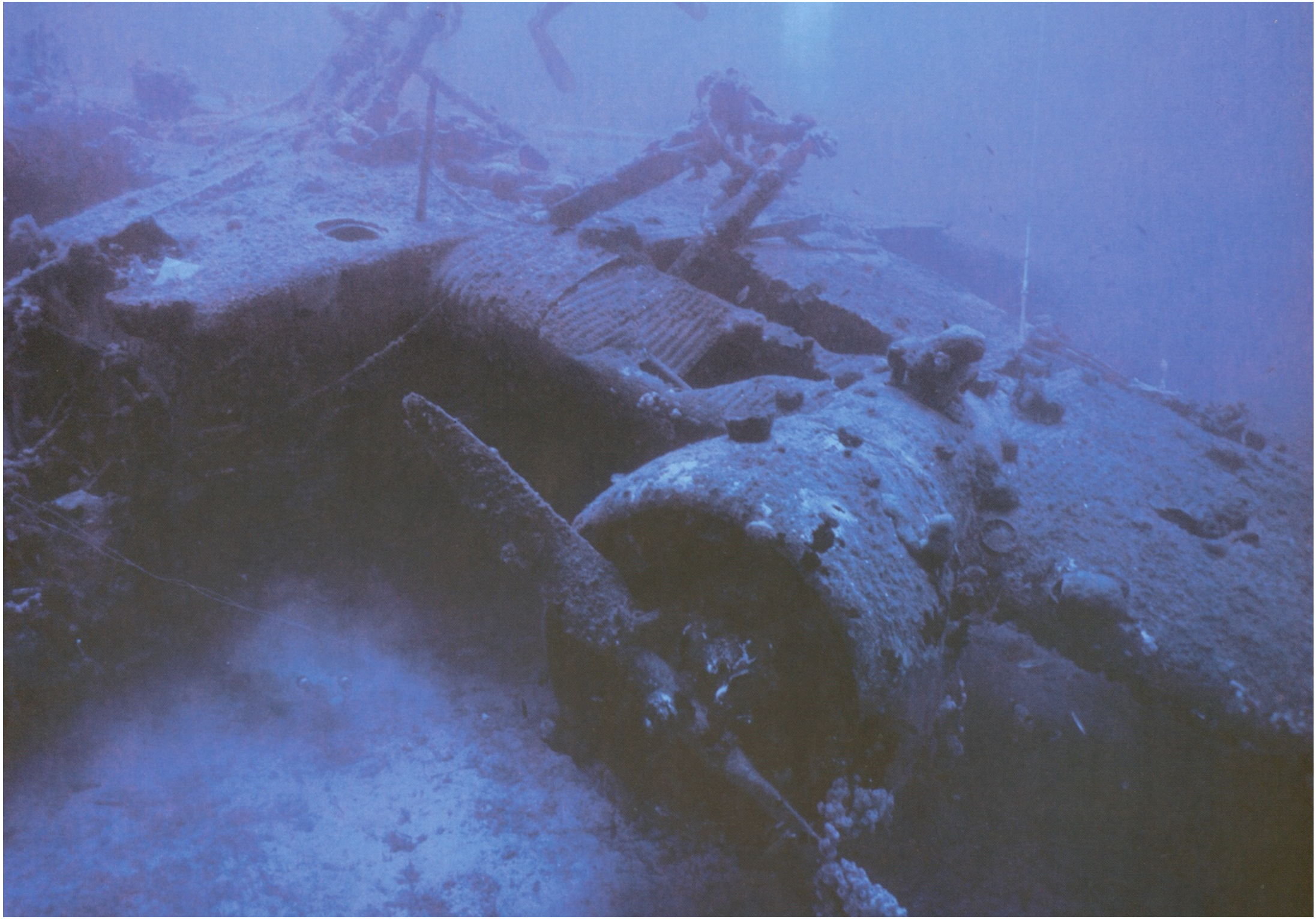


We spot the wreck at a depth of 42 metres. The plane is lying upside-down on the sea bed and is in perfect condition. The struts supporting the landing gear are pointing straight up: the three wheels must have come off when the plane crash landed into the sea. The plane is seemingly untouched, save for the front engine, which is buried in the sand; it must have been the first part of the plane to hit the bottom.

(previous pages) Above the aircraft's 'right' wing. The plane is lying upside-down on the seabed at a depth of 42 metres.

A Junkers-52: the front engine.
Tasos Kanaris archive

One of the three engines is visible. In the background: the support struts for the landing gear. The wheels came off when the plane crash landed into the sea.



We can make out the spot on the left wing where the craft was hit, immediately after the engine.

We are positioned to the side of the craft, at the spot where the paratroopers would have boarded.

Taking care not to stir up the sand, we enter the murky interior of the plane.

The side machine gun stands mounted, loaded, and at the ready.

The point where the plane was hit can be made out on the hull, just behind the engine on the right wing.

Costis Mitsotakis entering the plane's interior for the first time.

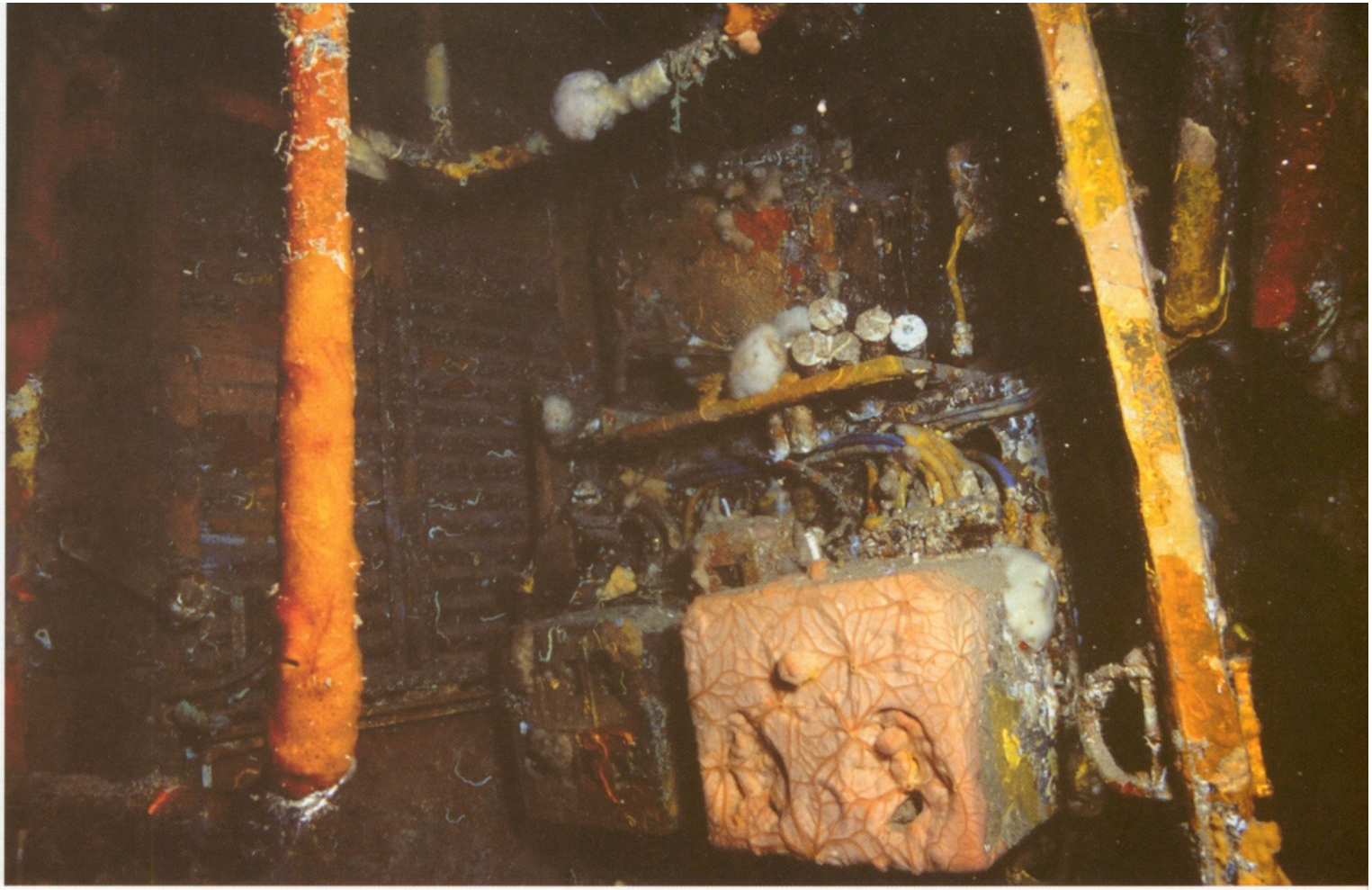
We proceed further into the interior: additional magazines are secured to the roof of the cabin; the safety belt on the radio operator's seat is still fastened.

We make out the radio, and—above it—six emergency flares. A folding seat is in the upright position; above it, the light that once gave the paratroops the signal to jump.

We are in front of the doors that lead through into the cockpit…we push and they open. Unbelievable though it may seem, they are still in perfect working order. The levers, pedals, and bank of instruments in now directly in front of us; we can make out a German word here and there. The safety belts on both pilots' chairs are undone: it would seem they managed to bail out of the plane. We grope around in the sand on our way back to the exit, revealing a tube from the radio, a heel from a military boot, and a fork.

(left) Inside the aircraft.

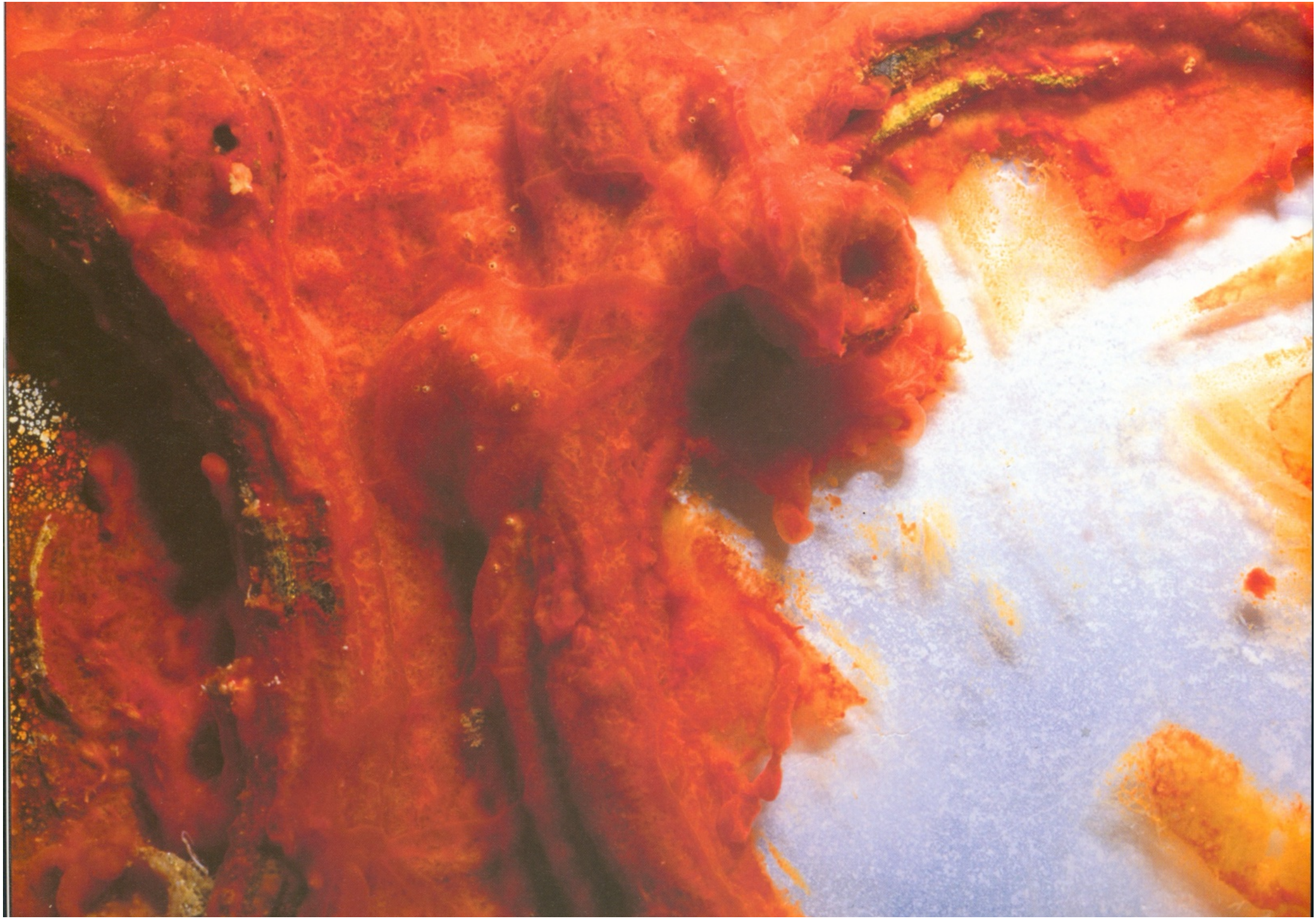
(lower left) MG-15 machine-gun magazines secured to the roof of the cabin.



In the background, the plane's radio stands just in front of the door into the cockpit.

A vacuum tube that has become detached from the radio.

(far right) Detail of the flares that have fallen onto the radio.



A little further down, underneath a piece of sheet metal, we discover the sole of another boot, whole this time and covered in human bones.

(previous left) Detail of the instrument panel in the cockpit. The red colour is due to the presence of spongoid organisms.

(previous right) Inside the cockpit: the aircraft's instrument panel.

The cabin: the collapsed door can be made out in the background, the yellow of the life boat to the left.

The remains of a paratrooper's boot: the sole.

Human bones inside what's left of the boot.

The gyroscope mechanism on the machine gun; below it, we can make out part of the magazine. The gun is covered in spongoid organisms.

Aircraft data

The aircraft is a three-engine Junkers-52 with a hull 18.9m in length and a wing-span of 29.25m. Fitted with three BMW 725 hp engines, the Junkers-52 was armed with three or five 7.92mm MG-15 machine guns and 500Kg bombs, and had a crew of four or five. It served as a transport plane and light bomber.

The aircraft carried German paratroopers, munitions, and tonnes of fuel.

Production of the Ju-52 in Germany ceased in mid 1944. Between 1932 and 1944, a total of 4,845 Ju-52s were built in France and Germany.

Operation Hermes was one of the Luftwaffe's largest operations ever, and one of the single biggest airborne attacks of all time. Planes like these and sea-borne landing craft transported a total of 22,750 men and their equipment to Crete. Of these, 10,000 were paratroopers, 750 were flown in aboard eighty DFS 230 gliders, 10,000 were transported in Ju-52s, and 7,000 disembarked from ships of the German navy.

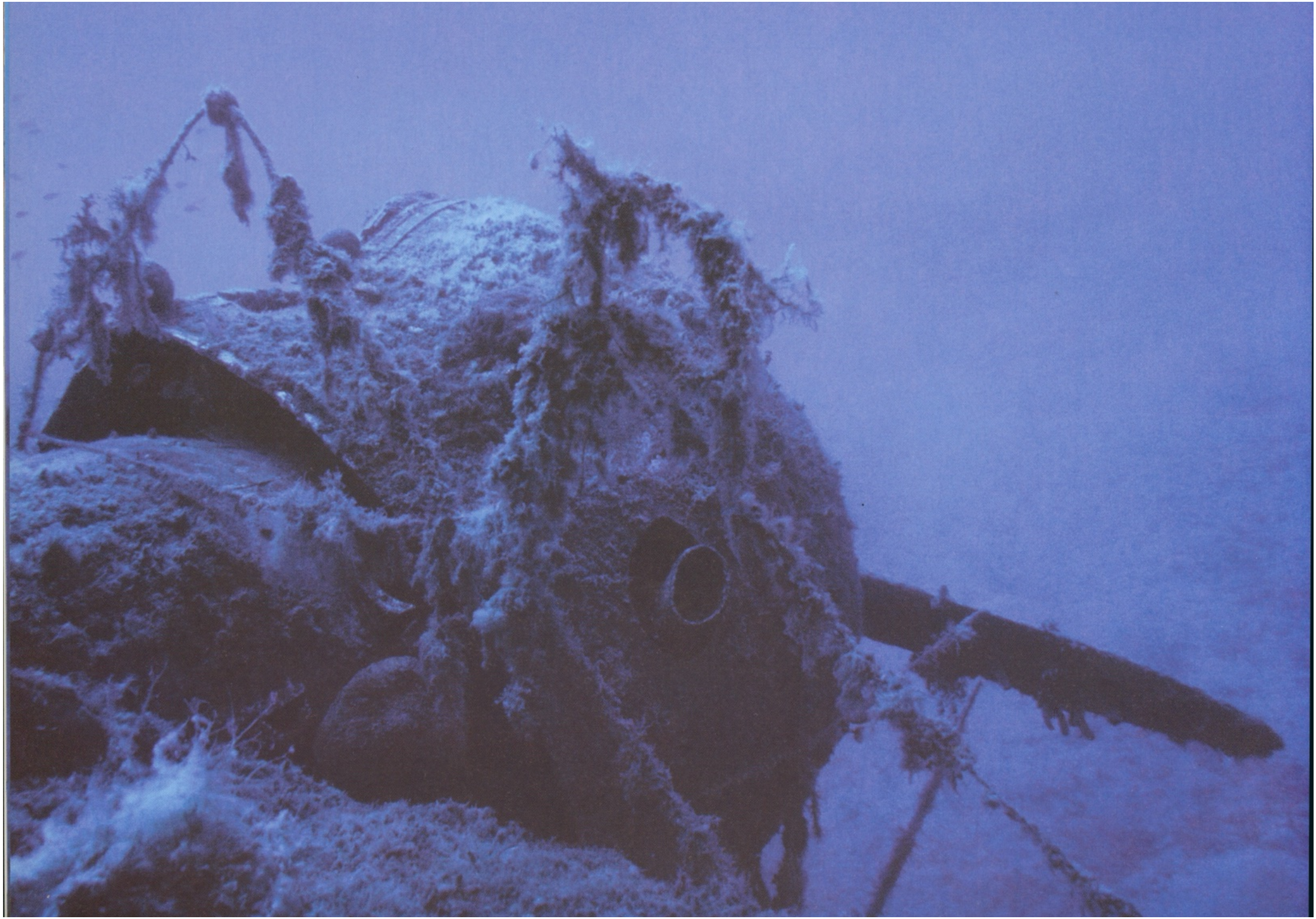
The attack took place in two waves, each consisting of 493 Ju-52s.

The Germans suffered heavy losses: 4,500 men killed and 271 Ju-52s destroyed. This was the last time the Germans were to assign a primary offensive role to paratroops.

Model of a Junkers-52/3mg6e. The markings are from the Battle of Stalingrad.

(following left) In the depths: the front of the aircraft.

(following right) A Junkers-52 flying a mission. From the *Tasos Kanaris archive*.



Identifying the aircraft

We contacted German historians and researchers in an effort to identify the wreck. However, they informed us that they would only be able to help if we located the metal plate on which the plane's serial number was inscribed. They provided us with the exact dimensions of the plate, which is made of aluminium and riveted to the plane.

It was most probably located in the cockpit, on one of the three engine blocks, or the fixed section of the tail to which the rudder is attached.

However, despite persistent searching, we did not manage to locate the plate.

Detail: the wiring in the on-board radio.

The Junkers' right engine.

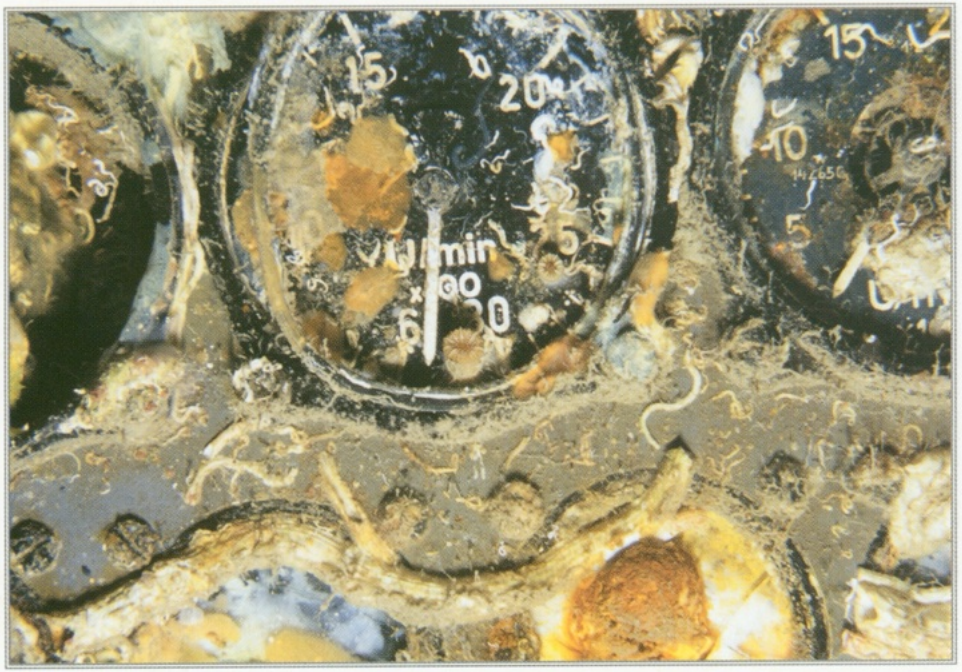
The support strut for the aircraft's rear wheel.

Access to the cockpit was limited, and visibility poor. However, holding the camera against the window with one hand, we were able to photograph the entire instrument panel blind in sections.

Unfortunately, careful examination of the resultant images blown up on the computer screen also revealed nothing.

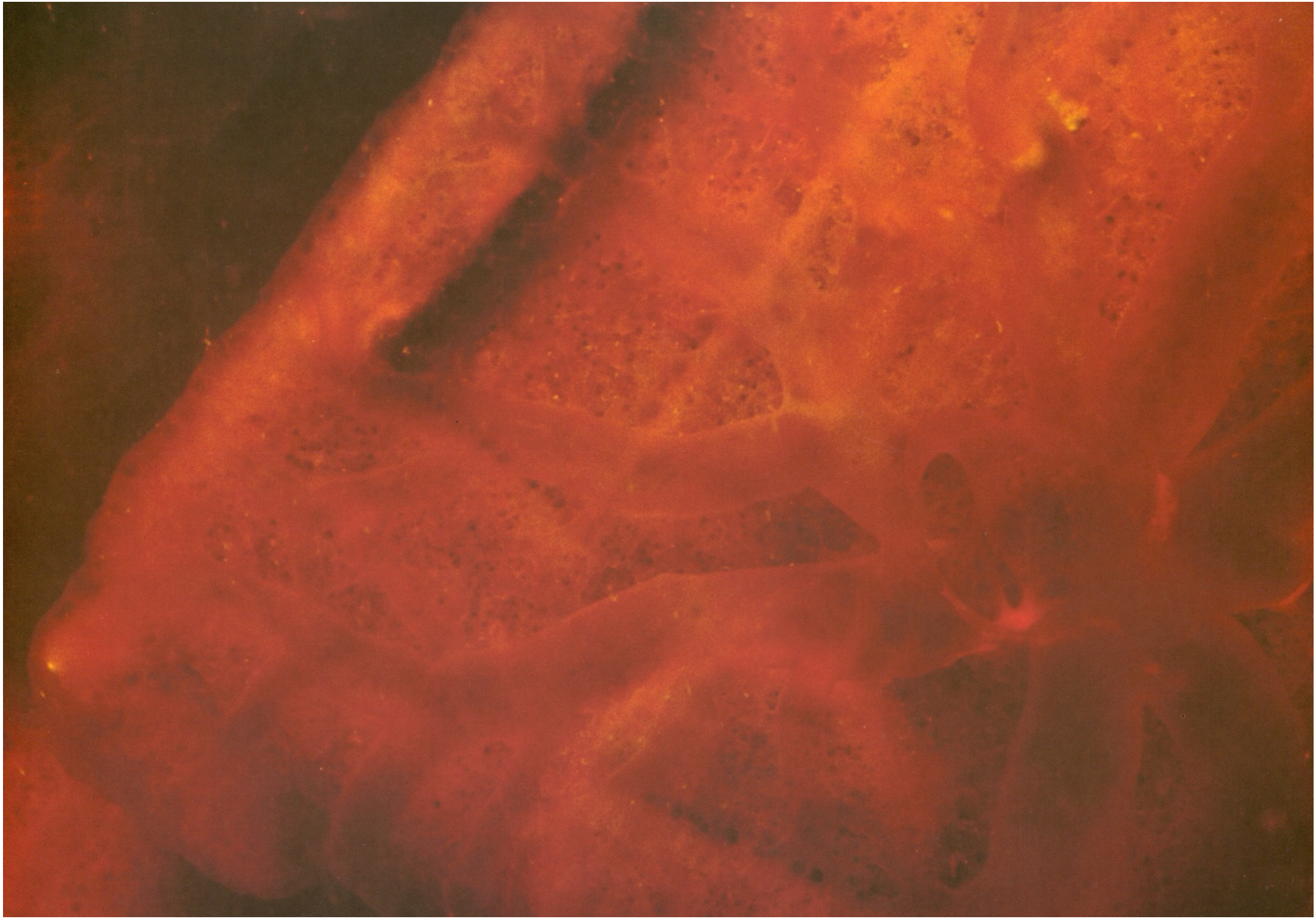
A thick layer of barnacles on the engines forced us to abandon our investigation there, while the only way to examine the relevant section of the tail was by destroying the rudder.

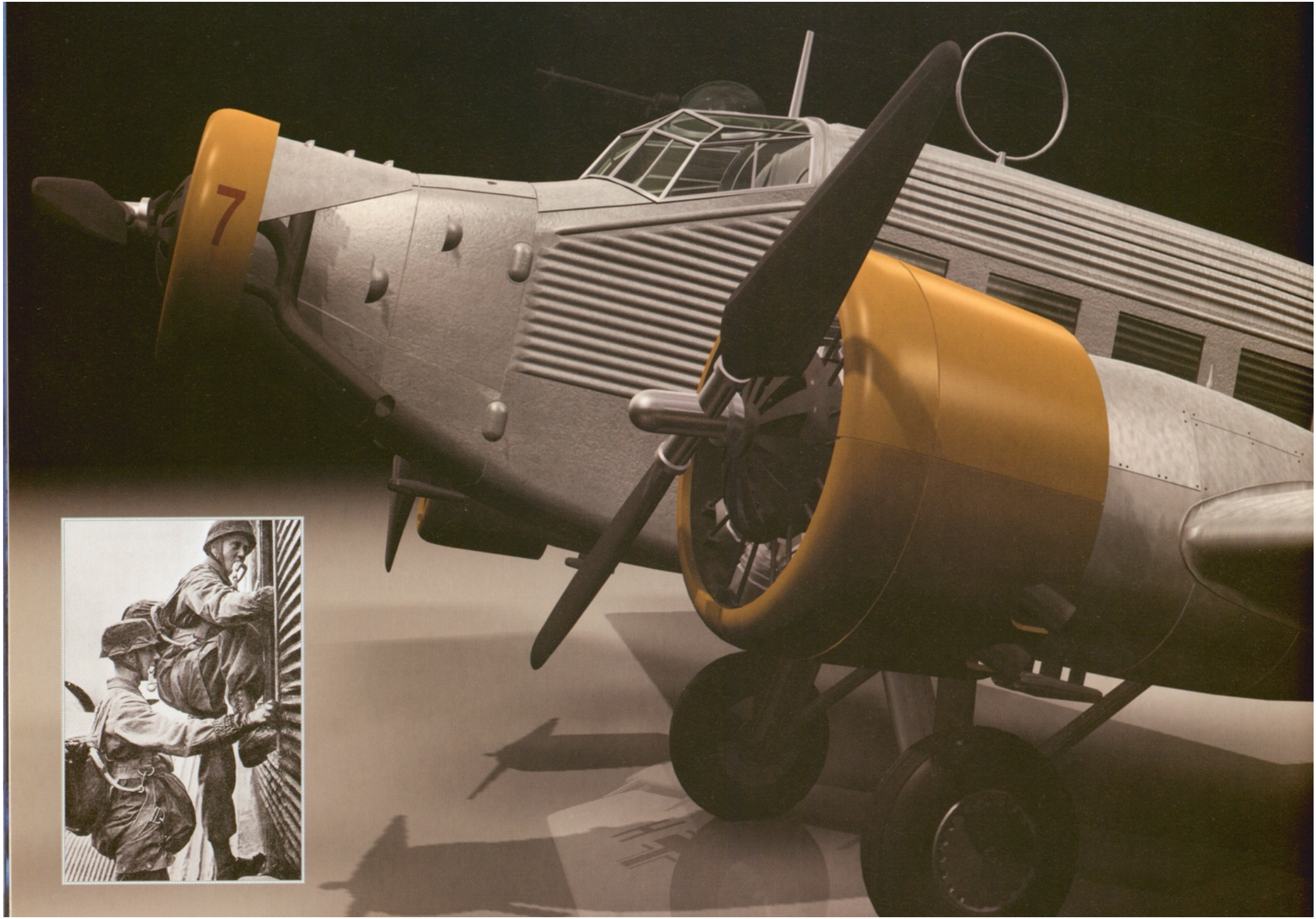
A section of the instrument panel.



Detail: we can still distinguish the calibrations on the aircraft's three rev counters.

Close up of one of the instrument's on the instrument panel partially covered in spongoid growths.

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Leros-bound paratroopers climbing on board at Tatoi. *Peter Schenk archive*.

(following) A unique sensation: Costis waiting for Eirini to come out of the Junkers.

But our investigation did not stop here: we were to return to the aeroplane, this time focusing on its interior.

Every wreck has its own unique history, and we can measure our success by the accuracy with which we can reconstruct the events of which that history is comprised.

We shed light on our shadowy picture of a wreck when we can imagine what exactly happened to it. Only thus can one respect and identify with it.

Model of a Junkers-52.

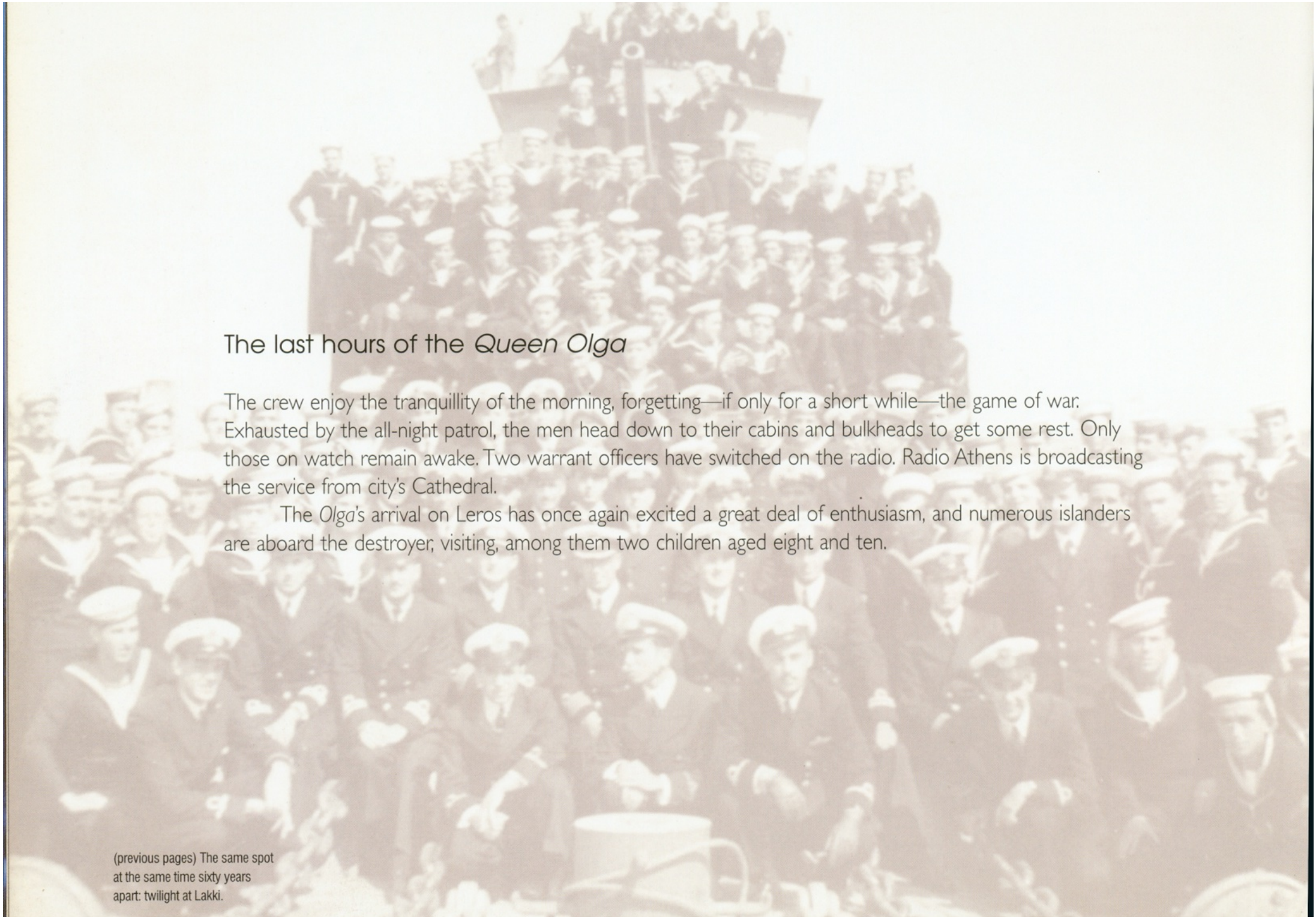
(inset) Paratroopers boarding the Junkers, holding the static line in their teeth. *Nikos Mastorakos archive.*

THE *QUEEN OLGA*, A GREEK DESTROYER

It is 7:00 am when the *Queen Olga* and H.M.S. *Intrepid* drop anchor in Lakki's large natural harbour. It is Sunday 26 September, the feast of Saint John the Theologian, and the faithful are on their way to the old church







The last hours of the *Queen Olga*

The crew enjoy the tranquillity of the morning, forgetting—if only for a short while—the game of war. Exhausted by the all-night patrol, the men head down to their cabins and bulkheads to get some rest. Only those on watch remain awake. Two warrant officers have switched on the radio. Radio Athens is broadcasting the service from city's Cathedral.

The *Olga*'s arrival on Leros has once again excited a great deal of enthusiasm, and numerous islanders are aboard the destroyer, visiting, among them two children aged eight and ten.

(previous pages) The same spot at the same time sixty years apart: twilight at Lakki.

Seamen from the *Olga*'s crew.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

Blessas withdraws to his cabin after twenty four hours on the bridge; Grigoropoulos, the First Mate, does likewise. Ensign Daniil lies down on the sofa in the map room, while Delagrammatikas and Simitzopoulos quit the bridge for the second lieutenant's quarters. Lieutenant Batsis, the duty officer, is in the wardroom; his assistant, Second Lieutenant Matalas, is on the poop deck. Also in the wardroom are Ensign Gourgouris, the ship's doctor, and Second Lieutenant Christofilos, who is completing the engine log.

War has still not been declared. The *Olga* in the Gulf of Corinth, July 1940.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

The Church of the Panagies beneath the Fortress. In the background, Alida Bay.

Model Junkers-88 G-7a. One of the Luftwaffe's key aircraft, the Junkers-88 could perform a number of roles including those of a fighter, bomber, and vertical assault plane. All in all, almost 15,000 were manufactured.

At 9:00 sharp on Crete, the German pilots of the First LGI Bomber Squadron of the 10th Air Corps are climbing into their planes—Junkers 88s—and preparing for the attack on Leros.

A Junkers-88 A-10 on route for Leros.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

Ensign Matalas instructs Able Seaman Theodosopoulos, part of his watch, on rousing the crew and subsequent tasks. Of course, Seaman Gunner Vasilis Theodosopoulos, age 29, cannot possibly imagine that in less than fifteen minutes he will be dead.

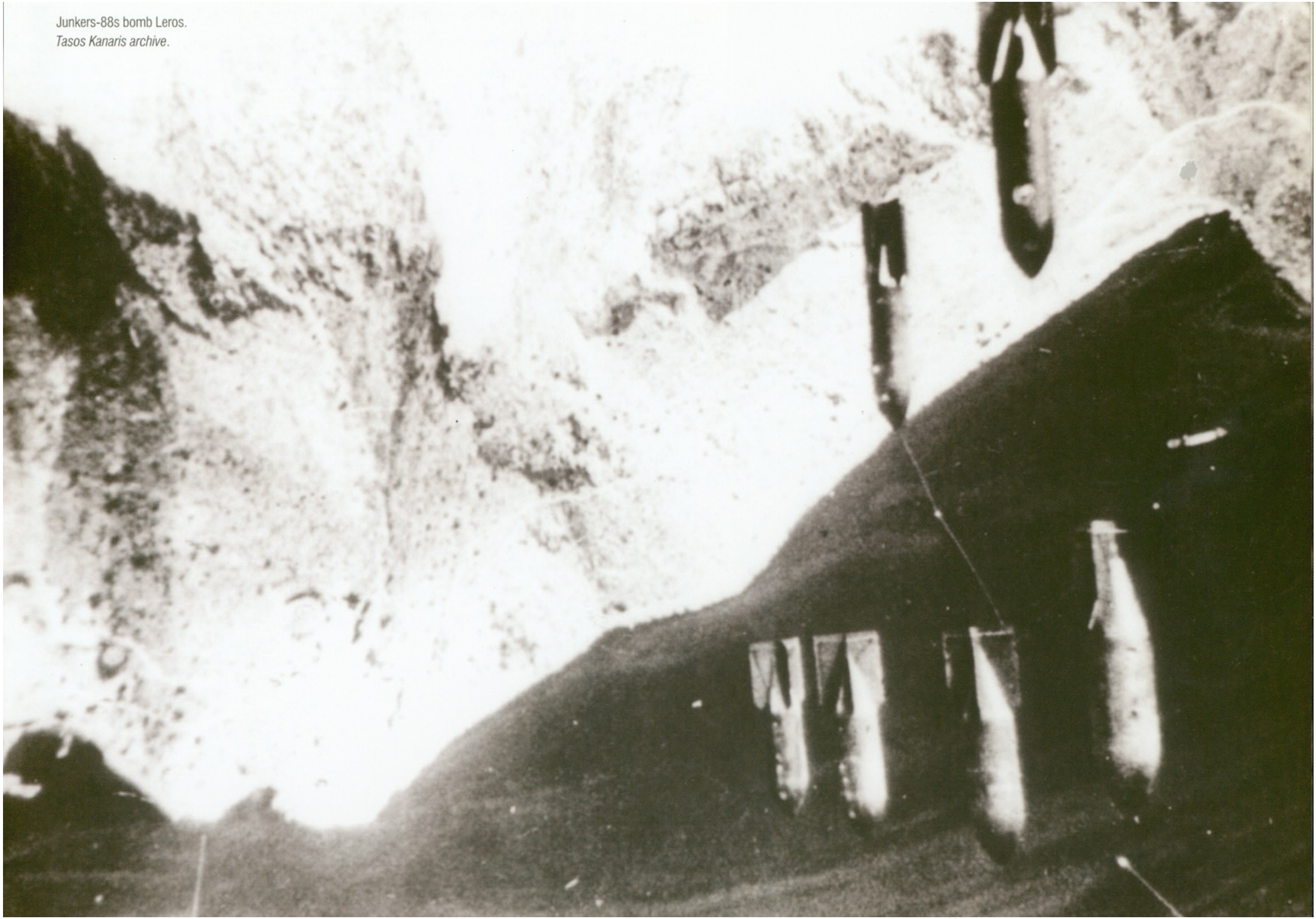
The German squadron of Ju-88s, flying in perfect formation, begin their descent from 1,500 metres.

It is three minutes to ten when the early-morning tranquillity is shattered by the whistling sound of the first bombs falling around the boat, so close the ensuing vacuum almost lifts the destroyer out of the water as enemy machine guns strafe its decks. A bomb lands in H.M.S. *Intrepid*'s Boiler No. 3; the exploding shrapnel pierces the main pipe which, whistling demoniacally, begins to release steam into the atmosphere.

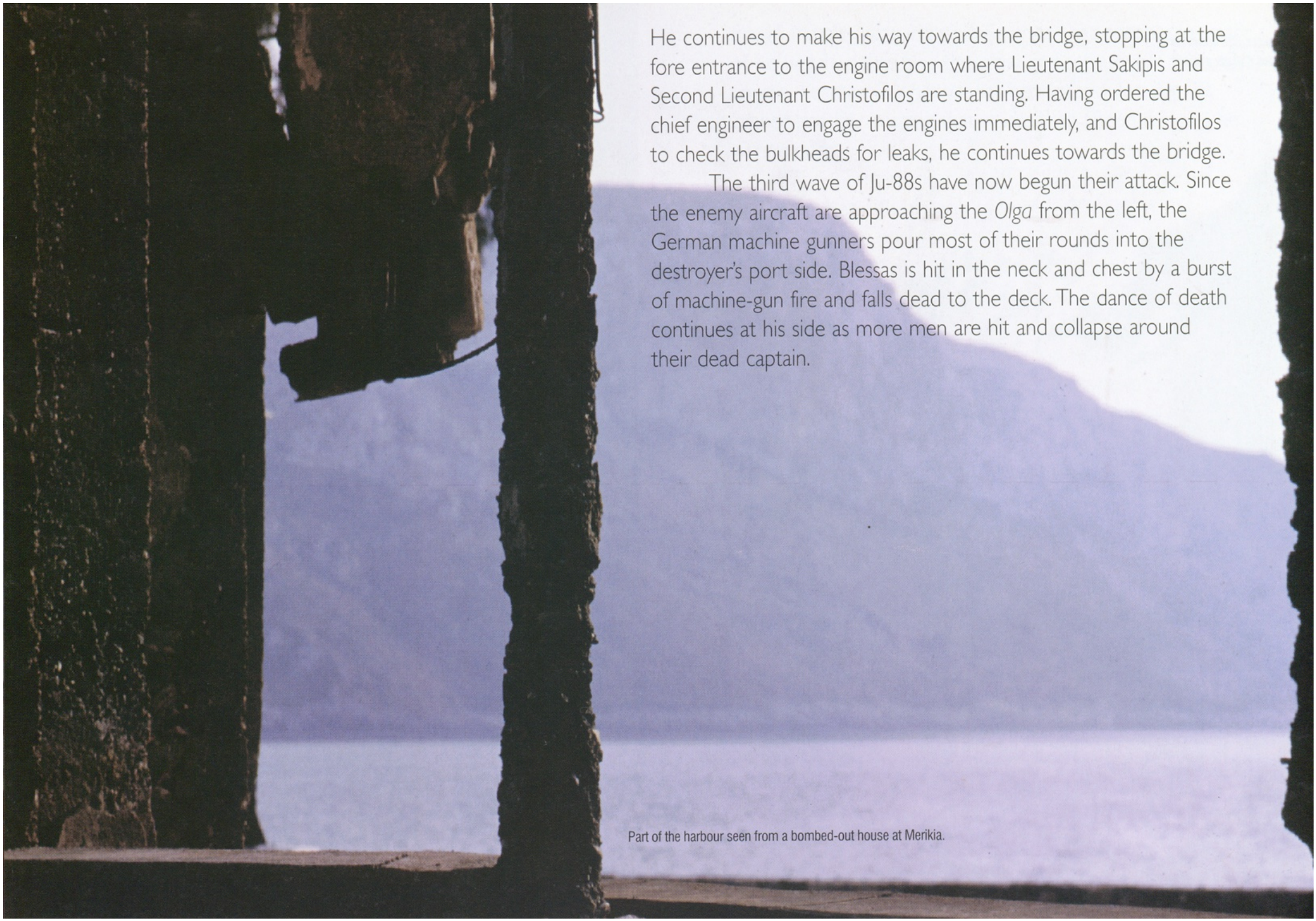
"Alarm, alarm!" There is a one-minute intermission before the second wave of the attack—the men run to take up their battle stations. The anti-aircraft gun crews are strengthened. The *Olga*'s captain is one of the first to appear on the poop deck. Wearing a pair of trousers and a sweater, though barefoot, he heads for the bridge along the ship's port side with other officers in his wake. Delagrammatikas presses the switch and the alarm bells fall silent.

Blessas puts heart into his men: "It's nothing, lads, we'll get through this, too. Man the guns!"

Ensign Gourgouris with the medical officer from the *Ierax*.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.



Junkers-88s bomb Leros.
Tasos Kanaris archive.



He continues to make his way towards the bridge, stopping at the fore entrance to the engine room where Lieutenant Sakipis and Second Lieutenant Christofilos are standing. Having ordered the chief engineer to engage the engines immediately, and Christofilos to check the bulkheads for leaks, he continues towards the bridge.

The third wave of Ju-88s have now begun their attack. Since the enemy aircraft are approaching the *Olga* from the left, the German machine gunners pour most of their rounds into the destroyer's port side. Blessas is hit in the neck and chest by a burst of machine-gun fire and falls dead to the deck. The dance of death continues at his side as more men are hit and collapse around their dead captain.

Part of the harbour seen from a bombed-out house at Merikia.

The *Olga* in flames in the harbour.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

Second Lieutenant Delagrammatikas orders the left-hand Oerlikon to open fire. It jams and Lieutenant Batsis and four able seamen immediately rush to help reload the gun; Afratis, the weapons engineer is summoned to the bridge.

The hum of aircraft can again be heard in the sky above. Time freezes once more while they wait as at least two bombs fall a few metres behind the port funnel, blowing the Vickers Gun and the third 127mm machine gun to pieces. There is a deafening roar, and a powerful tremor is felt throughout the ship—the floor begins to fall away. The Vickers and its crew have literally been wiped off the deck. Grigoropoulos, the First Mate, Simitzopoulos, the Gunnery Officer, and 14 able seamen have literally been blown to pieces in the explosion.

Seaman Gunner Koutsouradis is hit on the right side of the head and loses consciousness; when he comes round, his legs are in extreme pain; they are on fire. He can hear moaning close by and a thick blanket of thick smoke prevents him from seeing anything. Though he can make out a faint light among the flames and the smoke, it is the sizzling sound emanating from the flesh on his legs that makes him jump into the sea. He is the only member of the Vickers crew left alive.

The terrible explosion has mangled almost the entire width of the deck. The *Olga*'s stern section, now almost severed from the rest of the ship, begins to sink. The entire ship is now listing heavily to starboard.

A few carefree moments.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

The bombardment of Lakki.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

The Oerlikons positioned on the fore funnel are destroyed: able seaman Argyris is killed, while Vitoratos is catapulted into the sea from his post on the right-hand rapid-fire gun. Another four seamen are dismembered by the blast. Apprentice Arvanitakis, burning alive among the remains of the searchlight, is rescued by Second Lieutenant Matalas, who plucks him out of the flames and extinguishes his burning clothing.

The jammed left-hand Oerlikon is destroyed by shrapnel and exploding Vickers shells. Lieutenant Batsis is wounded in the leg, the arm, and the stomach; Ensign Daniil attempts to take him down to the sickbay with the help of a seaman. A gunner burning like a firework emits a few heartbreaking cries before falling silent for ever; another member of the crew is pinned beneath two upturned, incandescent sheets of metal—death brings relief. Lieutenant Sakipis, the Chief Engineer, takes a bullet in the face as he runs towards the engine room. He tries to climb down the stairs with blood pouring out of his mouth and nose; his grip falters and he falls to his death. Seaman Torpedo Operator Stamatopoulos, badly wounded and being helped to the sickbay by two able seamen, exhorts the men: "At 'em, lads!".

Within 30 seconds, the planes of the third and final wave have dropped their bombs and are heading off towards the south-east. The German attack lasted no more than four or five minutes, but has left the *Olga* close to death; H.M.S. *Intrepid*, the "Mas 554", an Italian cruiser, and two commercial vessels sinking rapidly; and the fuel tanks, workshops, and warehouses of the Italian Naval Base badly damaged.

The crew of the *Olga* in Alexandria, a month before the sinking of their ship.
Greek Historical & Folkloric Archive.

Peace returns to the island, though the scene is unrecognisable. Though there are a few small fires amidships, the most serious danger is posed by the ship's ever-steepening angle in the water.

On deck, everyone continues to do what they can for the wounded. At about 10:08, the ship lists even more markedly to starboard.

The clever little dog, the ship's beloved mascot who roamed the ship constantly in search of a hand to pet it or a game to play, added a lighter note to shipboard life. The crew called him Vazaios, because his master and trainer was the likeable apprentice engineer of the same name from Santorini. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive.*

Ensign Daniil goes down to the sickbay, repeating the order to abandon ship and urging the crew to help the wounded off the ship in any way they can: "We're sinking!" As he is about to leave the sickbay, the ship begins to capsize and water starts to pour in. Ensign Daniil manages to swim to the surface after the ship has turned turtle. Many others, however, do not make it out of the sinking ship, or are dragged down after it. Second Lieutenant Delagrammatikas hauls himself onto the deck, grabs a seven year old child, and jumps into the sea: both are saved. The boy had been visiting the destroyer with his father.

Sgouros, the likeable Corfiote telegraph operator, is attempting to repair the radio with Able Seamen Stouraitis and Maronitis as Second Lieutenant Kontaratos, Apprentice Mylonas, and Seaman Gunner Lagos fetch ammunition for the Oerlikon when water begins to pour onto the bridge. Kontaratos manages to escape the iron-clad coffin, but Lady Luck is not smiling on him: he is hit by the mast when the ship turns turtle and is dragged to the bottom. Some of the shipwrecked sailors now floating in the layer of burning diesel meet a terrible end, while most of those who jumped into the sea from the ship's starboard side are either sucked underwater in the wake of the sinking ship, or wounded on the destroyer's superstructure.

But the most emotionally-charged moments of all take place in the sickbay, where the ship's doctor is tending to Lieutenant Batsis, who begs the doctor not to leave him as he haemorrhages uncontrollably. We hear voices among the madness shouting "We're sinking. Into the sea!". Gunner Liaskos, his spine broken and haemorrhaging uncontrollably, drops out of bed and drags himself towards the exit. Seaman Orderly Dendrinos seizes Batsis under the arms as Able Seaman Kozidis takes hold of his legs, and the two of them try to get him on deck. But orderly and seaman are thrown to one side when the ship suddenly lists violently, and Gourgouris is left to drag Batsis along on his own as his sickbay begins to fill with water. But there is no longer anything he can do: the water has covered everything. The doctor makes two attempts to get out, but both prove unsuccessful: slammed against a bulkhead, he swims into an enclosed space. His lungs close to bursting, he makes a last-ditch attempt before the ship capsizes totally and, finding a way out, bobs to the surface only to see the *Olga* keel-up. Ensign Daniil, swimming at his side, characteristically remarks: "I didn't think you'd make it because you took such a long time. I thought you'd gone down with Batsis".

Batsis, badly-wounded as he is, finds himself trapped in the sickbay alone: Gunner Liaskos, too, does not manage to distance himself sufficiently from the *Olga* and follows her to the bottom as a result.

Mastrakos, the universally popular ship's electrician, is found clinging to the ship's keel. However, he dies of his wounds the following day in Leros' Italian hospital, along with another five crew members.

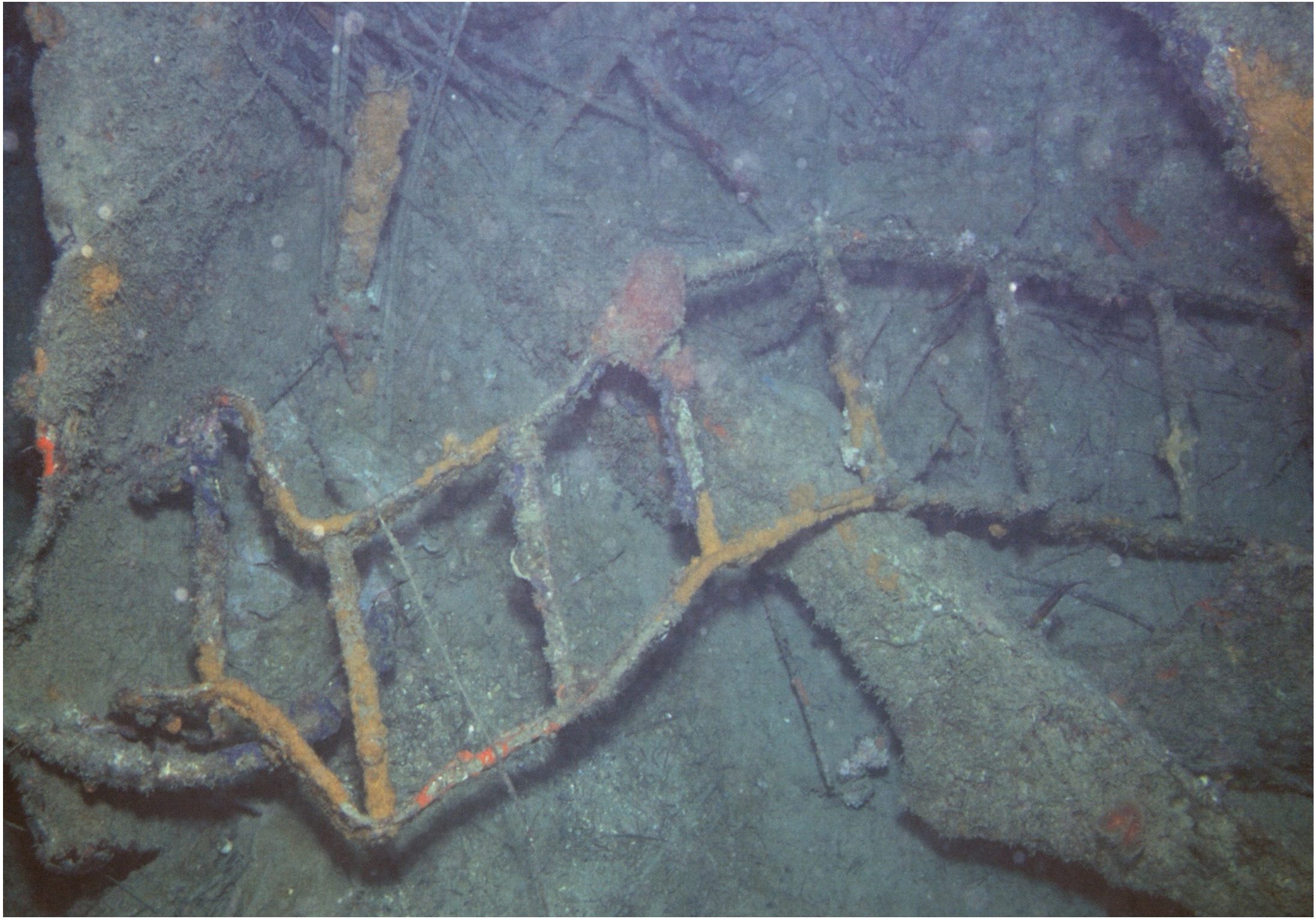
Five men trapped in the fore compartment manage to escape just moments before the vessel slips under the surface by climbing one by one through the safety porthole on the port side. They make it to the surface in the nick of time.

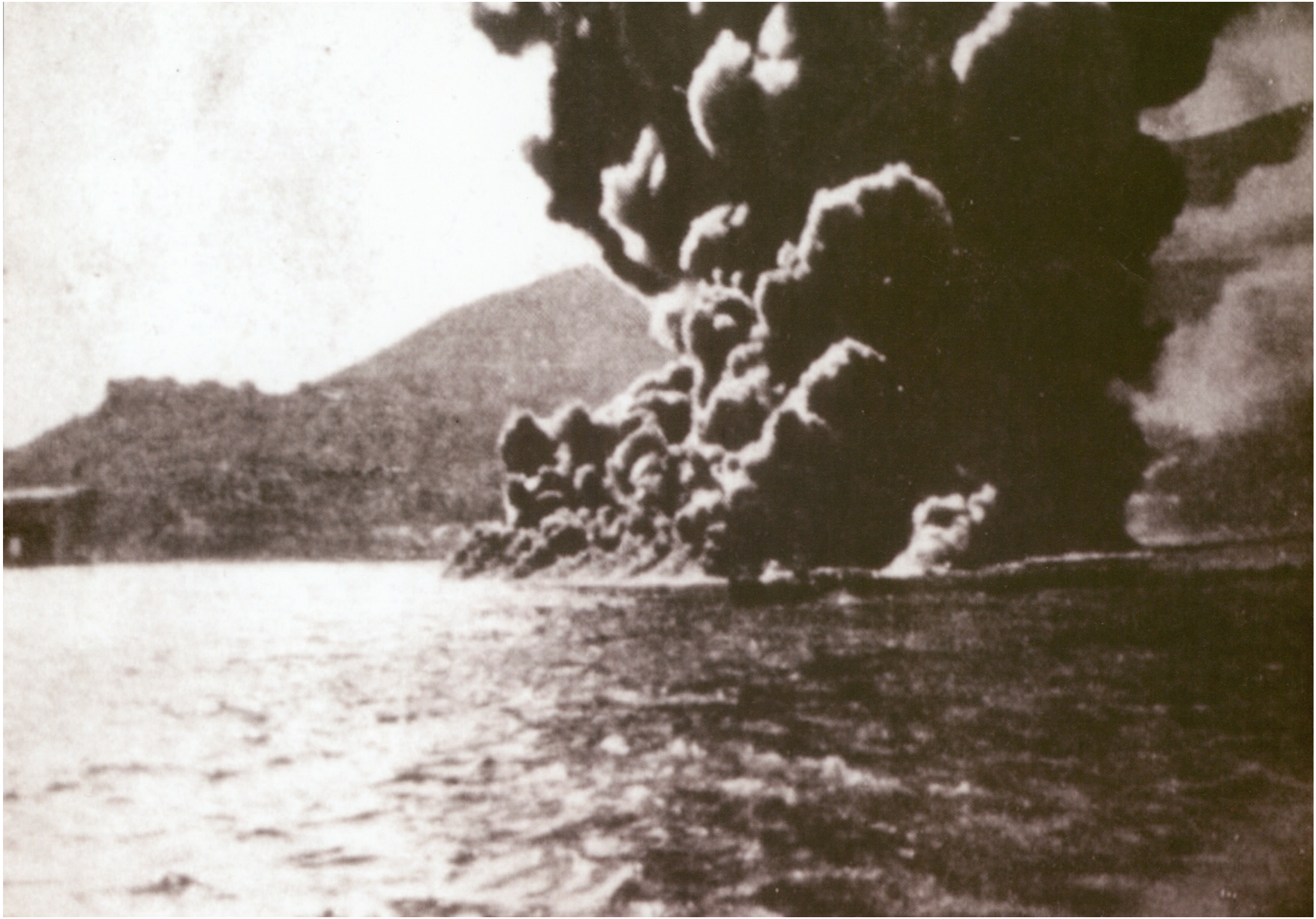
It is now 10:11 on the morning of Sunday September 26, 1943, and the sea has covered the *Queen Olga* for ever. The tragic cost of those hellish fifteen minutes: 80 dead and 23 wounded, seven seriously. All in all, 141 crew members survived.

Few things in life are as sad as a sailor losing his ship.

(following left) With only her bows above water: the *Olga* sinking. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive*.

(following right) The wreck of the *Olga*, its metal twisted and scattered by the bombardment.



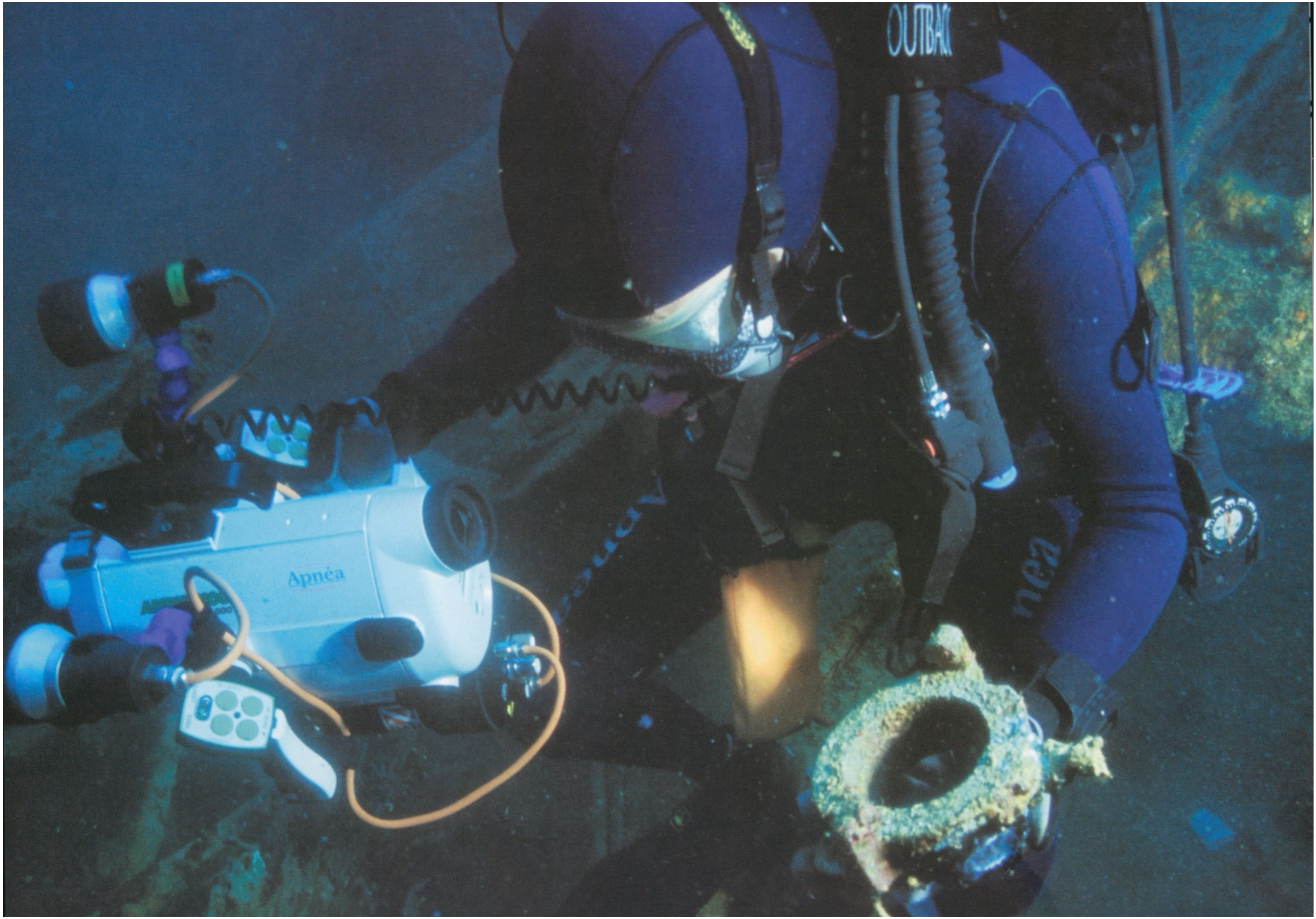


(previous left) A shell with its propellant (the 'macaroni') taken from the *Olga*'s munitions.

(previous right) Fuel spilt by the *Olga* burning after the sinking. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive*.

Parts of the ship scattered in the depths.

Costis stops filming to take a closer look.


OUTBACK
Apnéa

A gas mask filter.

A depth charge.

Torn metal bears witness to the tragedy.

A section from the underside of the *Olga*.

The rear part of the shell. The safety cap is still in position in the detonator.

Commissioning the *Queen Olga*

As the threat of war becomes more distinct, the Metaxas dictatorship begins to turn a more methodical eye towards defence.

The commissioning process for four new destroyers, which began in 1934, comes to a halt immediately after Venizelos' departure from politics in 1935, and the international tender is cancelled.

The results of a second tender in March 1935 are ignored by the Supreme Naval Council, which decides to place an order for Admiralty-designed destroyers with the British.

All due processes are complete by the summer of 1936, but Metaxas rejects the terms stipulated by the British shipyard. After lengthy negotiations, the order is finally placed in January 1937 with the Yarrow Shipyard in Glasgow, but for two—rather than four—destroyers.

During the negotiations, the Greek Admiral of the Fleet explains to the British that Greece does not have the requisite foreign exchange to purchase the ships' weaponry from British arms manufacturers, and that the order will have to go to Germany, which has proved willing to accept payment in Greek tobacco. The British, in recognition of Greece's economic difficulties, accept this amendment to the agreement. The two ships, which are to be built in Glasgow to specifications which will number them among the era's finest class of destroyers, are to be dubbed *King George* D-!4 and *Queen Olga* D-15.

The projected cost of the *Olga* is in the region of 380,000 Pounds Sterling, which at the time equated to around 320 million Greek drachmas.

The *Olga* is launched and subjected to tests on February 4, 1939, reaching a safe speed of 34 knots. The Greek flag is raised on February 11, though the ship is not officially inducted into the Hellenic navy until three days later.

After brief stops in Dresden, Gibraltar, Algiers, and Argostoli to replenish stores, the *Olga* finally sails into the Salamina Navy Yard on March 1, 1939, where intense work is begun immediately to fit the ship's artillery. The Rheinmetall machine guns, which were ordered from the German manufacturer in the autumn of 1938, take two months to fit.

Sailors on the *Olga's* prow.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

Built:	Britain, 1936-1938, in the UK Yarrow & Co. Ltd. shipyard in Scotstoun, Glasgow.
Displacement (in tonnes):	1,335 unladen / 2,000 laden
Dimensions (in feet):	Length 323 total / 312 at the waterline, Width 32 1/4, Draught 8½
Propulsion:	Two 34,000 SHP Parsons steam turbines, 3 Yarrow boilers.
Speed (in knots):	Maximum safe speed 34, max. permissable 32, economical 14.
Operational range (in miles):	3,370 at a speed of 12 knots, 2,330 at a speed of 19 knots, 1,600 at a speed of 26 knots, 1,180 at a speed of 31 knots.
Fuel capacity:	455 tonnes of diesel.
Weaponry:	4 127mm Rheinmetall machine guns, 4 37mm Rheinmetall rapid-fire guns, 2 quadruple 533m, British-made torpedo tubes, 2 depth charge launchers, 2 depth charge rails.

The shipyard provided quarters for 145 men. During 1940-41, the *Olga* will have a crew of approximately 200. During 1942-43, numbers will be in the region of 235-240 men following changes and additions to the *Olga*'s weaponry. However, between 25 and 30 of these men will be off the ship at any one time on leave.

Model Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns.

Glasgow, June 2, 1938. The launching of the *Queen Olga*. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive*.

January 14, 1942. Blessing the *Olga* shortly before she sets sail for Calcutta. The *Spetsai* is pulled up alongside. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive*.

The *Olga* in dry dock in Calcutta. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive*.

We spent a month in England waiting to accept delivery of our ship from Glasgow. Zarokostas was the captain and Lieutenant Commander Damianakis the First Mate. We tested the *Olga* just outside Glasgow harbour—full speed ahead, turning etc.—under the flag of the British merchant marine. Then we raised the Greek flag, and the priest came from London to bless the ship. I was the first person to raise the flag and the last, when, at 8:00 on the morning she sank, I went and raised our flag. By rights, I wasn't allowed to—it should really have been raised by a signalman—but I went and did it all the same: it was the last time.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician aboard the* Olga.**

The *Olga* in action

Takes part in operations between 1940 and 1943. From the start of the war until April 1941, she escorts a number of convoys, as well as taking part in the first and third incursions into the Straits of Otranto (between Italy and Albania).

In early February 1941, she transfers all of Greece's gold from Athens to Crete to prevent it falling into the hands of the Germans. Following the German invasion, she transports the Greek government to Crete.

When the Germans enter Greece, she and other vessels leave for the Middle East.

Refitted in Calcutta at the end of 1941.

February 1942, returns to the Mediterranean. Takes part in the operations at Tobruk and inducted into the British Squadron, where she quickly distinguishes herself in action under Lieutenant Commander Blessas.

The Admiral of the Fleet is a regular visitor on her bridge. She tows the *Papanikolis* off Port Said after the legendary submarine suffers a series of mechanical failures.

Late February 1943, Sophia Vembo, Greece's national singer, moves the ship's crew when she performs on the *Olga*'s forecastle in Alexandria.

Early October 1942, the *Olga* is inducted into the 14th British Destroyer Flotilla and carries out escort duties between Alexandria and Malta. The military and commercial vessels involved are decimated by air and submarine attacks. The scale of the danger is conveyed by the following figures: of the fifteen destroyers in the 14th Flotilla, only three—among them the *Olga*—survived escort duties. On December 15, the *Olga* and H.M.S. *Petard* sink the Italian submarine *Uarsciek*. The *Olga* rescues her crew.

Sinks the Italian K/B *Varsuer* on December 14, 1942 off Benghazi, together with H.M.S. *Petard* once again; the *Strombolli*, an Italian petrol tanker, near the island of Pantelaria on January 18, 1943; an Italian convoy consisting of two warships and two escort vessels, including the *Castore*, one of the Italian navy's finest destroyers, in co-operation with H.M.S. *Jeruis*, a British destroyer.

Plays a key role in the operations against Pantelaria—Mussolini's "island fortress"—and the Sicily landings.

Takes part in Operation HUSKY (an amphibian operation involving an enormous armada of 2,590 vessels of every type assembled to transport 181,000 troops), which opened up a second front on Sicily and gave the Allies their first bridge-head in Europe.

Following the Italian capitulation, the *Queen Olga* participates in the unique moments of the morning of September 16, 1943, when the Italian fleet surrendered.

On September 18, 1943, she sinks another convoy consisting of the transports *Pluto* (2,000 tonnes) and *Paolo* (4,000 tonnes) plus their escort the N-2104, with two British destroyers, H.M.S. *Faulknor* and H.M.S. *Eclipse*.

The *Queen Olga* was sunk on September 26, 1943 in Lakki Bay off Leros, following an intense air attack by German Ju-88 aircraft. The captain was killed along with six officers, 65 warrant officers and seamen, and eight civilians.

Between December 31, 1941 and the day on which she was sunk, the *Olga* covered a total distance of 74,741 miles in 4,407 hours.

Captains of the *Olga* were decorated on six occasions: twice by the British Admiralty (this being the first occasion on which Greek officers received the Distinguished Service Order) and four times by the Hellenic Navy. She covered more miles than any other ship in the central Mediterranean, an area dubbed "submarine meadow" and "bomb street" by Allied crews.

Churchill described the central Mediterranean as the "most perilous stretch of sea on the globe" in a contemporary speech to the House of Commons in which he requested MPs to rouse themselves and honour the crews of the Allied ships who were fighting there with such self-sacrifice and endurance.

Off Port Said, 1940.
Klairi Moschou archive.

Greece and Italy at war

On October 28, 1940, Benito Mussolini declares from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia that he will send "41 million spears" against the Greeks . An enormous, modern Italian fleet consisting of 330 warships, including 131 submarines, is now pitted against six Greek submarines and six destroyers, the only battle-worthy vessels of the 32 in the Greek fleet. The remaining ships were launched between 1906 and 1914!

Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, said at the time that the firepower of the entire Greek fleet was equal to that of a single Italian battleship!

By the end of January 1941, the RAF has 133 aircraft at its disposal. The crews of the Allied warships can feel satisfied that the protective umbrella provided by British fighters is gaining in strength day by day.

November 1940—January 1941: Britain's military strength is at its lowest ebb, and the British are clearly not in a position to offer further assistance to Greece. In fact, it was probably the other way round: the only country still on the British side is Greece, which is making a titanic effort to retain its freedom. Greece is the only part of mainland Europe that has yet to submit to Axis forces.

The Germans invade Greece on April 6. With only limited British assistance, the Greeks, a nation of seven million people, are now essentially at war with almost the entire continent.

The Hellenic General Navy Staff broadcast the following message to all units at 6:50:

"Germany has declared war. German forces have begun an attack on the Macedonian Front. An ultimatum was delivered at the same time. Air attacks expected".

The German attack came as a surprise to no one; the Greeks were now engaged in a struggle for survival.

The situation was tragic aboard the *Olga*. There wasn't a single free berth, never mind a cabin…so I slept in the wardroom, sitting in an armchair with my head on the table. Even that would have been just fine, if only the alarms had let you get a wink of sleep. We were on alert all day long, so when the enemy planes appeared we'd be able to start evasive manoeuvres right away. We found a little peace at night by floating along without anchoring in the shadow of cliffs, where we'd be hidden from enemy aircraft. I don't think anyone could have hated the moon as much as we did during that accursed April.

P. Dakoulas, Midshipman, the* Olga*'s engineer.

The sailors manning the anti-aircraft guns could often see the enemy pilots in the cockpit quite clearly.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

Sailors at the *Olga*'s stern, beside the depth charges.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

There are bones scattered all around the wreck of the *Olga*.

A sailor at the *Olga*'s stern.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

We have land and a homeland when we have ships on the sea.

Thucydides

The fleet that would not surrender

Nowhere in the world has a plan ever been drawn up, or even a last-minute decision reached, determining what that nation's fleet will do after the signing of a truce with a victorious invader.

Yet this has happened in Greece on not one but two occasion, both under terrible conditions with the enemy literally at the gates of Athens: once in September 480 BC, and again in April 1941 AD.

It was in an atmosphere of chaos, disaster, and disappointment that by a unanimous decision of officers and crews, ships attacking an attacked alike sailed south towards any sea where their presence could prove useful. Very few preferring to remain and share the fate of Greece; given the bleak desperation of those days, it would be wrong to condemn these men for their actions.

Greece may have capitulated, but the Greek flag flew free over the sterns of ten ships and five submarines. The ships of the Greek fleet knew no geographical limitations: they went into action wherever they found the enemy, from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic to the North Sea.

Greece fought and defeated the Italian divisions in Albania for five long months. Her forces then succeeded in withstanding the "perfect" German army for 55 days.

Poland succumbed in 55 days, France in 25, Belgium in 18, Holland in 4, Yugoslavia in 3, and Czechoslovakia, Denmark, and Luxembourg surrendered without a shot being fired.

It is in a spirit of historical justice that I feel forced to admit that of all the adversaries who have pitted themselves against us, only the Greek soldier has defended himself with reckless courage and total contempt for death. The Greek people struggled so bravely that even their enemies cannot deny them their true stature!

Adolf Hitler, the Reichstag, May 4, 1941

The Greeks in the flotilla have proved very popular comrades-in-arms. Their good humour and somewhat careless discipline concealed the fact that they are a highly capable and courageous crew. Despite everything that has befallen them with the Italian and German invasions, and their gnawing concern for the family and friends they have left behind, the Greeks have found the way to moderate their grief in laughter and song.

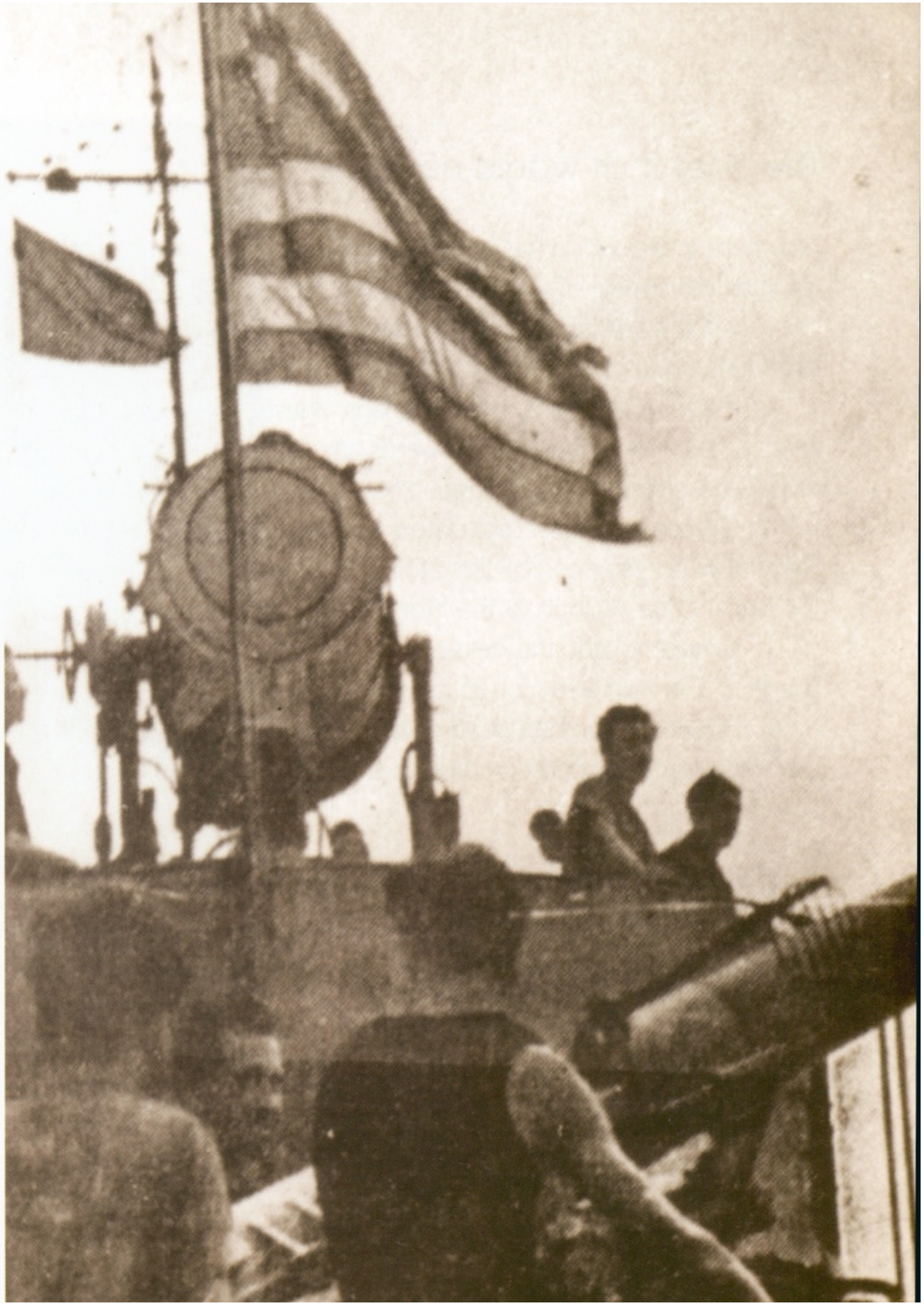
***Captain G.G. Connell of the H.M.S.* Petard**

The crews of the boats we escorted told us they felt secure under Greek escort. We constantly circled the convoy like sheepdogs, and never let a single enemy ship get near.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

Every time we left Alexandria behind, I wondered if we would ever see the lighthouse in the harbour again. One evening, I was on my way back to the ship in the motorboat. There were several warrant officers and seamen with me, who were also returning from a few hours leave. We would be embarking in the morning to escort another convoy to Tobruk, and one or two of the sailors told me with a touch of bitterness and concern that their colleagues on other ships and dry land thought them suckers for serving on the Olga and constantly putting their lives at risk.

***K. Chrysanthis, Ensign, Second Engineer on the* Olga.**



The crew of the Vickers Gun at the alert.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

The Allies—the Brits and the Americans—didn't want us because we were handsome; they wanted us because we were strong.

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

The *Olga* was commanded by Lieutenant Commander Blessas, a warm-hearted and courageous officer who, apart from being a consummate professional, was also an internationally-renowned bridge champion.

Lieutenant G. Connell

Mine was a 125mm gun; we weren't anti-aircraft, but we were still at our station when the alarm sounded. My station was in the bows. There were three guns there, and because I was a gunner, I knew how to fire both the large one and the small one. The planes were flying overhead…you'll have to excuse me for crying as I remember. But never mind, it'll pass. Just then, some big cartridges burst open on the deck near my feet, with the macaroni uncovered on the inside; the gunpowder, in other words. And I tried to figure out what had happened; what were they doing there—I mean they were from the Vickers, and the Vickers was shooting at the planes overhead. I snapped out of it, loaded the gun and started to fire. Lots of the boys say we hit one, but the truth is you got that impression because the planes would lose height as they banked and headed out to sea. That's why we thought we'd hit them.

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

Night, Alexandria harbour, and the obligatory intense night bombardment has begun. The *Olga* is yet again engulfed in a pandemonium of anti-aircraft fire and bombs exploding in the harbour and nearby neighbourhoods. The crew were quite familiar with all this by now, and view bombardments coolly and calmly. Only a third of the crew stay on deck to man the rapid-fire anti-aircraft guns and the damage team whose job it is to ensure that the ship is blacked out and watertight. The rest of the men try to get some sleep, since the day ahead will most likely bring with it an exhausting and perilous journey with no time for rest whatsoever. Of course, when the bombs fall close to the ship, the aftershock of the explosions can even knock some of the men out of their hammocks and onto the deck below. And quite a few of them felt the need to whisper a prayer to the Virgin and Saint Nicholas in the twilight of the bulkheads. But deep down, everyone believed the *Olga*'s lucky ace would keep the bombs far away.

***From* The Queen Olga: a destroyer in the throes of war**
by Vice-admiral (retired) Konstantinos Metallinos.

As you'll have gathered, water was in short supply. After patrols lasting fifteen or twenty days, we'd have run short of a lot of things, and sometimes we'd eat ship's biscuits and nothing else for days on end. It never crossed anyone's mind that this was in any way inadequate, because all we were interested in was how to sink as many enemy ships as possible and liberate Greece. That's all we cared about…

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga**

Night air-raid on Alexandria.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

We didn't sacrifice a torpedo without giving it a lot of thought beforehand; we usually sank ships with depth charges. We could travel at 40 miles an hour—they didn't have radar, we did.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga**

The Americans were dropping bombs on the Mediterranean like everyone else. Once, they hit a British ship like ours, and the order came in that all Allied shipping in the Med had to be painted red by morning. We'd paint the *Olga*'s funnel red at night, over the camouflage.

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

We'd escort these huge ocean liners packed full of Canadians and Australians who were sick of the Mediterranean and were leaving Egypt because the Germans had now got as far as the Atlantic; as far as the Azores.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

Cunningham, the governor of the Mediterranean at the time, often congratulated the captain and crew of the *Olga* on their achievements in the Mediterranean, not the Atlantic, which was another story.
But then where do we find ourselves: the Atlantic.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

The Italian soldiers didn't know there were Greek ships in the Mediterranean; they thought they'd captured them all, just like they thought they'd taken Greece.

We'd captured a few admirals, Italians. Once the master-at-arms had taken them, dressed them, fed them and given them some tea, he put them in the spotlight on the poop deck, right underneath the Greek flag, because we take prisoners out of the ship's prison when we are at sea. They saw the flag; they didn't know we were a Greek ship. They didn't believe that there was a Greek fleet.

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

When we went to Alexandria in 1942/43, we'd write to our parents on little sheets of Red Cross note paper, which we'd send to Athens and receive a reply. We'd pay for three words at most: "Alive and well".

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

We were on our way to Malta with H.M.S. *Petard*. We were still some 40 miles away and sailing at a speed of 23 knots. I was on watch from midnight until 4:00 in the morning; the First Mate was below decks in the chart room. I was on the bridge when I saw the *Petard* signalling; they'd spotted something in the dark, but weren't certain. But then the enemy submarine launched a brace of torpedoes. The *Petard*'s anti-torpedo equipment picked up the sound of the torpedoes, but they also saw its wake. That's when I saw H.M.S. *Petard* taking evasive action and turning 25 degrees to port, as the signalmen began to inform the *Olga*. In the meantime, the British ship had whistled twice to indicate that it was turning to port. Of course, there wasn't time to check the signals, and at the speed we travelled at night, how could you hear their whistles with any certainty? But my eyes were sharp—they still are—I could see their wake and without losing a second I said "Hard to port, 25 degrees!" because we were going fast and it was a dangerous manoeuvre.

They told us afterwards that the captain of the *Petard* had said "Good bye, Queen *Olga*". He was almost certain the torpedoes would hit us. It all happened so fast; it was almost impossible to react in time.

***Anonymous account of an officer serving aboard the* Olga.**

The *Olga* is approaching Skala Cove when an Italian machine-gun opens fire. Some bullets fly over the bridge and everyone instinctively ducks. Blessas straightens up first, and looking around him realises he's on his own. And he humorously commented: "Well ducked, boys, well ducked!"

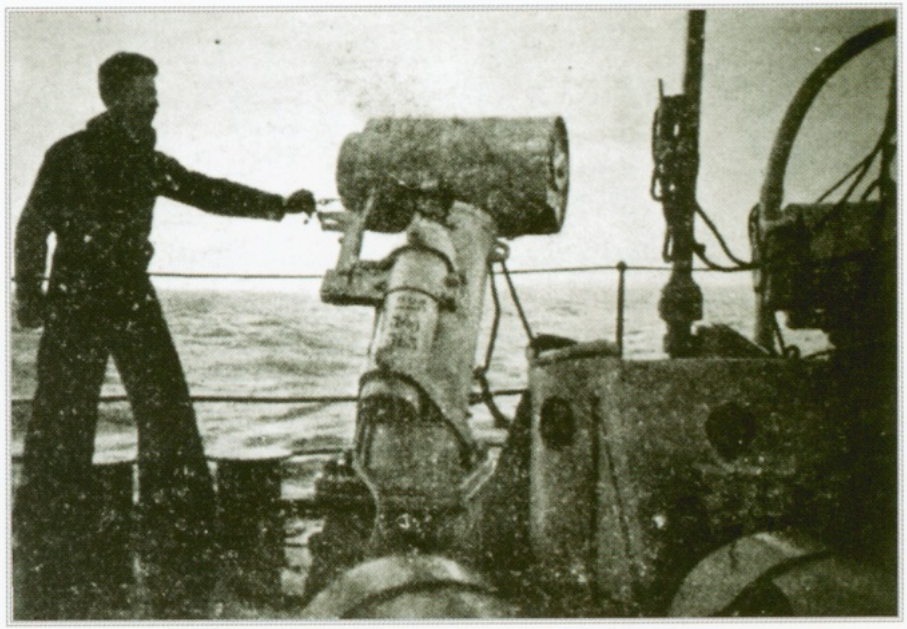
During a big storm, the Captain, the First Mate, and I took turns at the helm; the seas were so high that no one else could make it up the bridge.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

The Italian capitulation of September 15 also included an agreement to hand over the Italian fleet. So a large British force was assembled consisting of four battle ships, two aircraft carriers, eight cruisers, and eighteen destroyers, including the *Olga*. We were the only non-British ship in the flotilla.

One of the terms already accepted was that a British liaison team should board the Italian flagship: the *Italia*.

The depth-charge launcher at the *Olga*'s stern. The sailor is ready to fire once the order is given to begin the attack on the submarines.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.



We formed a line, and the Italian ships sailed past us to right and left. And every ship saluted; these enormous monsters, twenty times our size, thirty five thousand tonners, floating by paying their respects with their machine-guns pointing at the deck and flying the black standard. The surrender of the Italian navy was unique; nothing like this had ever happened before. In the old days, under Nelson, you captured the ship—but it's one thing to capture a ship, and quite another for it to be surrendered voluntarily. The Italians should have scuttled them like the French did down in Algeria; but that was one of the terms of the capitulation: the English didn't want them falling into the hands of the Germans, because the Germans were highly capable on sea, just as they were at everything.

So they sailed past and saluted us for a very long time. It came as a surprise to us; there we were at battle stations, and we were moved. At that moment, we all thought that Italy was requesting Greece's forgiveness. Magnificent moments, unrepeatable. We'd made an enormous flag, and we couldn't believe our eyes: they were saluting us.

***Anonymous account of an officer serving aboard the* Olga.**

The *Olga* beside the *Georgios*, another destroyer, in the Salamina Navy Yard, autumn 1939. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive*.

The Italian surrender is something we will never forget. On the orders of Admiral Cunningham, the Italian vessels had to pass by us first—past the *Olga*—flying the black flag of surrender. They sailed before us, dipping their flag in salute, and there wasn't a dry eye on board. I'm crying now just recalling the scene.

Every one from the captain down was weeping with national pride. Over three hundred ships had surrendered.

The order had been given for us to be the first ship in the column, which is to say we were first; then we escorted them to Alexandria.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

It was noon when, laded down with a suitcase and my few possessions, I boarded a felucca and began to search for the *Queen Olga*, a destroyer, in Alexandria harbour. I finally found her tied to a buoy in the northern section of the port. I climbed up the gangway, saluted the flag, and asked to present myself to the officer of the watch. They took me to an ensign, who turned out to be Simitzopoulos, who was a year older than me and quite well known. Then he took me to the First Mate, Lieutenant Michalakis Grigoropoulos, who received me quite politely, and told Simitzopoulos to see me settled in. There was a cabin behind the wardroom that must once have been a storeroom, and had now acquired the name "The Ensign Cubby Hole".

One of the six beds in the Cubby Hole was unoccupied, and I seized it on the spot. That miserable little room seemed like a palace to me. It's no small matter to have your own bed, and aboard the *Queen Olga* at that!

I was in awe of her from the moment I set foot on her. The *Olga* wasn't just another ship. She had earned incomparable distinctions, taken

Lieutenant Commander Georgios Blessas, the *Olga*'s captain. *Hellenic Naval Museum Archive.*

part in the most perilous missions, and come under fire from the air on literally hundreds of occasions. Not to mention the fact that she'd sent a submarine to the bottom, and was the only Greek ship to have sunk an Italian destroyer in a surface engagement.

The *Olga*'s officers smelt of gunpowder and didn't hide it. They were proud of their ship, which was only natural.

***Dimitris Matalas, Ensign aboard the* Olga.**

There were a number of officers who dreamt of commanding the legendary *Olga*. On the evening of September 19, 1943, Baltatzis, who was considerably senior to Blessas, made no effort to conceal the other officers' annoyance that he should have held the post for so long. Blessas took his time before answering: "But why should I quit the ship now? You cannot imagine how close we all feel to the *Olga* and to one another. Indeed, now that the operations in the Aegean are underway, I don't think a change of captain would be in anyone's interests. And anyway, what was the rush? I don't think I'll be aboard the *Olga* for that much longer."

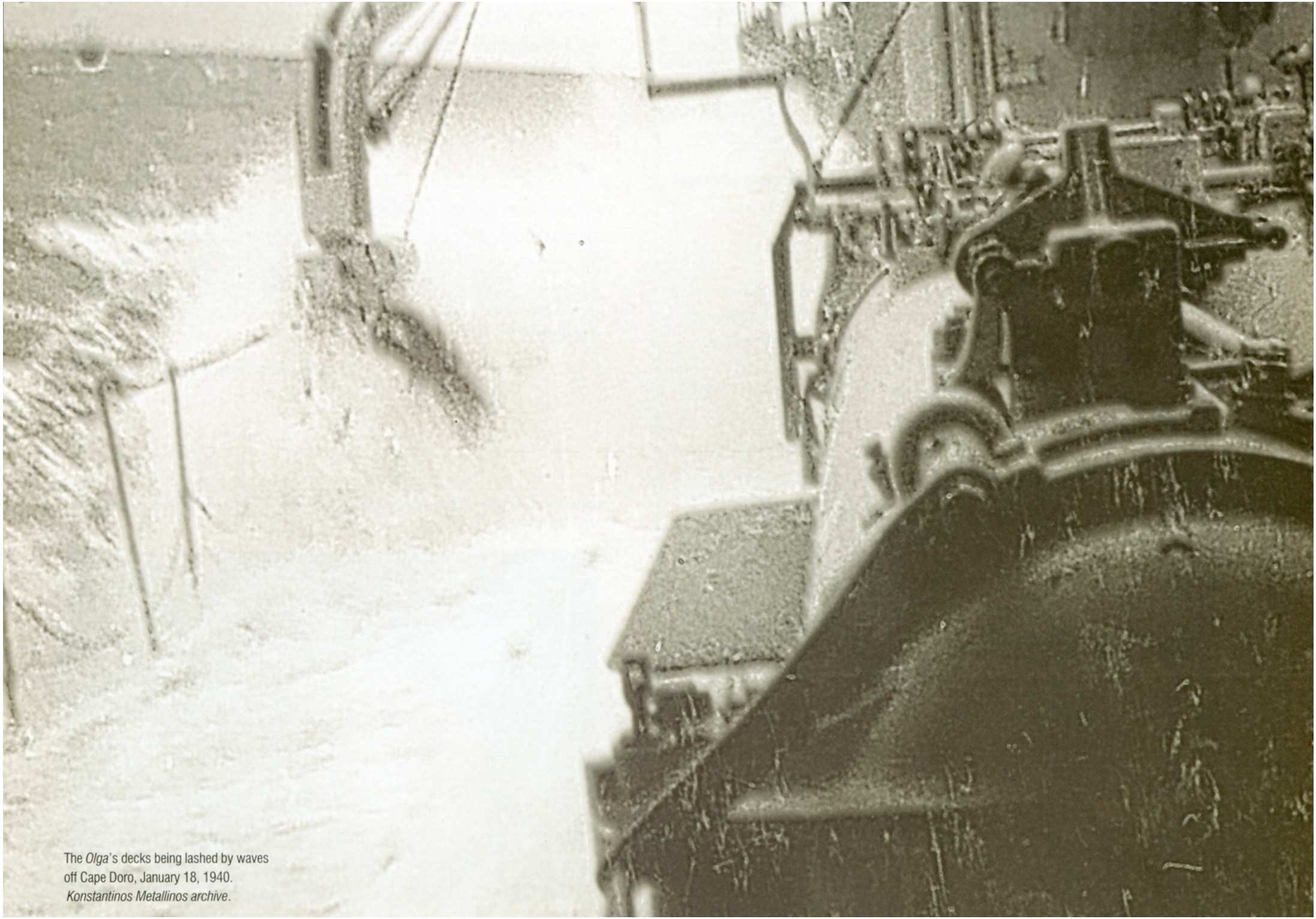
H.M.S. *Formidable* an arcraft carrier, and H.M.S. *Valiant* a battleship, part of H Squadron, shortly before the allied landings on Sicily, June 4 1943.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

We sank an entire German convoy between Melos and Astypalaia. The Germans had put Greek crews on some of the ships—I can remember their cries: "We're Greeks, we're Greeks!" The Germans had requisitioned them; they were taking food and supplies to Rommel.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

Evening, September 24, 1943. Blessas dined at a Greek home along with Admiral Petropoulos, the commander of destroyers, who writes: "It was as though I had a premonition late that evening when Blessas was leaving Alexandria on his final voyage. I didn't want to leave him, and shared a buggy to his ship, where I bade him farewell." He was killed two days later.

Blessas, the *Olga*'s captain, wearing his customary beret on the bridge. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive*.



The *Olga*'s decks being lashed by waves off Cape Doro, January 18, 1940. *Konstantinos Metallinos archive*.

My brother was in hospital in Lakki with a broken hip. An hour before the sinking of the *Queen Olga*, the Italian nuns took my father to one side and said: "Doctor, take the child away because we are expecting war. There will be a bombardment, and this place is not safe". So we took my brother home on a board. I never did find out how the nuns knew about the attack.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros inhabitant.

Blessas, the *Olga*'s captain, had said the night before that whoever wanted to could visit the ship the following day, which was a Sunday. And they all arrived in their boats, their caïques, to come on board and admire the ship and see the Greek flag up close for the first time. They were all killed, though their names are not included among the fallen—they were civilians, not soldiers.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, inhabitant of Leros.

September 26 was the feast of Saint Spyridon and John the Theologian; I can't tell you why, but it was an important day for the Greeks back then, and it was the most important holiday on Leros. Virtually the entire island was in the church or Town Hall, where they had gone to learn the English and Italian news.

A Chinese ship entered the harbour that morning carrying English merchandise—biscuits, meat, coffee, potatoes—and was unloading its cargo. I went to see the Chinamen…I'd heard they had short legs. And then the first planes passed by overhead; black planes, for the first time! They had the black cross on them. And I say to a *tenente* who was heading down towards the barracks, I say: "aeroplanes". He goes like this, takes a look, and says: "They're ours". "But ours are blue, they're not black", I tell him. He takes another look: "You're right", he says, and I couldn't see him for dust.

They were attacking the *Queen Olga* as we spoke, diving towards her like vultures, because she'd inflicting a lot of damage on them before she came to Leros.

Kostas Koumoulis, retired trader, Leros.

I was 19 years old and I worked in the workshop at the Naval Base. The slaughter took place on September 26, which was a Sunday, at 9:20 in the morning. Half the planes went for the *Olga*, and the other half attacked the Base. A lot of skilled workers lost their lives—the bombs fell on the workshops and the foundry—but I had my bat's bone and was spared.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, inhabitant of Leros.

Kostas Kouvas finds the shipyard plate on the wreck of the *Olga*. The plate has now been presented to the Leros Museum.

The Germans didn't let us catch our breath: they were dropping bombs, but also strafing the decks continually, which is why we had a lot of casualties even before she sank.

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

They'd hit the *Olga*—the sea was in flames.

When they'd dropped all their bombs, they started up with their machine-guns, and the bullets would shoot past close to you as you ran all the way to the shelters. We escaped death by 10 centimetres that day.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, inhabitant of Leros.

I was on the Oerlikon, firing at the planes, but my gun jammed and the lieutenant came up—Dimitris Batsis the Gunnery Officer...God rest his soul, we were friends—to help me get it working again. Just then, a plane flew past so low that I can see the pilot's face, and drops a bomb which misses me by about a metre, disappears under the bridge and explodes in the engine. A piece of iron shoots out right away, glowing red hot, and takes his leg off. I grabbed him and took him down to the sickbay.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

All those bombs killed a lot of fish, and the sea was so whipped up, you thought they were people. I rolled up my trouser legs and stuck a fish down each: one in the right and one in the left. And that's how I showed up at home: to laughter and tears, but anyhow alive.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, inhabitant of Leros.

I see the range-finder—Politis was his name—and he isn't wearing a helmet. I tell him: "Your helmet, lad, put it on!". "Yes, sir", he says, and puts it on. A little later on I see a plane manoeuvring to strafe the poop deck. I can see flashes as it approaches; realising right away that it's firing, I shout "Take cover!". They hit us: shrapnel gets Batsis on the left-hand Oerlikon, and dents Politis' helmet. His helmet saved him.

***Anonymous account of an officer serving aboard the* Olga.**

Flesh had stuck to the ship's metal; you didn't see men, just flesh that had merged with bones and stuck to the deck.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

A number of survivors swam through the blazing sea.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

I'd say the biggest hero was Manolis Gourgouris, our unsung ship's doctor, because he was last one to get out of the ship alive. By the time I'd got Batsis off the bridge and down to the sickbay, the boat was keel-up and turned turtle. We got tangled up in ropes when the mast collapsed, and were lucky to get out of there. Batsis shouted "Take me with you", but there was no way we could. It was just impossible: if we'd delayed another second, we'd have drowned.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

Manolis Gourgouris was the only combat doctor in the entire navy. He was on board ship all the time. He never served in a hospital or on dry land, and he spent two and a half years of the three and a half of the war aboard the *Queen Olga*. Everyone thought he was a goner, but he made it last out of the sinking ship because he was trying to save Batsis, who was wounded.

E. Gourgouris, the wife of Lieutenant Gourgouris, the* Olga*'s medical officer.

The plate from the shipyard where the *Olga* was built, restored, in the Leros Museum.

Ensign Gourgounis, the *Olga*'s medical officer.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

I looked down and saw severed legs, heads…What can I say…it was a tragic situation.

We were sinking. There's a noise and the ship starts to list to starboard. We grab hold of the railings and start jumping into the sea. Just before I jump, I see and hear a child crying. It was Perikles. Instead of jumping, I climb up, run over, grab him, and jump into the sea. When we've distanced ourselves a bit, we stop to watch the *Olga* going under with the rest of the shipwrecked sailors. And the thought comes out of nowhere: "Lads, lets say farewell to our ship"…"Long live our *Olga*!" "Long live our navy!" "Long live Greece!" we all shout at the top of our lungs, even the wounded. Thinking about it sends a shiver down my spine: what morale, even at a time like that!"

***Anonymous account of an officer serving aboard the* Olga.**

Someone rescued an eight year old child from the burning ship. He put the kid in a boat, in a launch, with the rest of the survivors. The kid's name was Perikles Konstantaras, and he lives on Crete now.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, inhabitant of Leros.

I remember the sailors shouting in the water: "Jump, Christidis! Jump!". Most of the survivors had distanced themselves from the wreck, but I was on the keel, and a hole had opened up in the ironwork beside me.

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

A boat flying an Italian flag came to pick us out of the sea, but I didn't get in it. I got into another which took us to Lakki.

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

A British torpedo boat threw down nets for us to clamber up out of the sea. I remember sailing through fires to get into the harbour…the spilt diesel was on fire on the surface of the water.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

I gradually began to realise how a person's life can change in a matter of minutes. Less than an hour before, I'd been half listening to the service on the radio without a care in the world.

But now the legendary ship on which I am proud to have served was no more, and its captain and another seventy people had gone down with it.

Until then, when I found myself in hospital, I'd seen the war as something essential; as a source of glory and distinction. Now I'd come to know a more terrible side to war. How can I ever banish the image of the mangled sailor whose pain-wracked moans still ring in my ears? Among all these horrors the once-in-a-lifetime scene of the survivors shouting "Long live the *Olga*!" as a single voice is like a glorious parenthesis.

***Dimitris Matalas, Ensign aboard the* Olga.**

Seeing the whole world aflame, I had to abandon what I was working on and come to Lakki to show my parents I was still in one piece. Everyone was at the hospital, vans were coming and going transporting the wounded and the dead, and everyone was waiting…to see. Their eyes were easily read; they were saying: "It might be my brother, my son".

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, inhabitant of Leros.

Able Seaman Arvanitakis was in Leros hospital; a nun had given me a spray for his body. He saw and recognised me, but I didn't him: he was too badly burnt.

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

We were looking for a way off the island. I say to the British: "We, sir, want to continue fighting the war, to liberate our homeland. I don't know what you are doing. Give us a boat so we can leave. Otherwise, we'll leave via Turkey and go to meet the others". In the end, some of us left on a Spanish vessel flying a Turkish flag, a situation we quickly remedied.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

We travelled in convoy with the Greek ships, and the English take over about twenty miles off shore; they wouldn't let us disembark on Cyprus. They stopped us; if we'd gone ashore there, the whole of Cyprus would have risen up against them.

We shouted and sang songs of liberation.

The English had this to say: "Don't, in the name of God, let the Greeks onto the island, because there will be a revolution". If five hundred sailors had landed on the island, we'd have occupied it.

***Nikos Simiriotis, Seaman Electrician on the* Olga.**

There were a lot of fascists up at the batteries, who didn't give the signal for the air raid siren to be sounded to warn of approaching aircraft; to wake the crew up, because they caught the *Olga* napping. They had earphones up there, and could hear the planes when they were still miles off; they even knew if they were friend of foe.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, inhabitant of Leros.

2nd Lieutenant Nikos Delagrammatikas of the *Olga*, now an ensign, on the bridge of the *Pindos*. Greece, early 1945.
Nikos Delagrammatikas archive.

Man-trap (emergency exit) from the wreck of the *Olga*.
Leros Museum.

A porthole from the wreck of the *Olga*.
Leros Museum.

A watch owned by a member of the *Olga*'s crew, which stopped when the ship sank.
Leros Museum.

Eisenhower and Cunningham observe the landings on Pantelaria island from the bridge of the cruiser *Aurora*, June 10, 1943.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

The *Olga* in the Indian Ocean.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

Although I have no evidence to back me up, I'd say the Italians' failure to sound the air raid siren can be put down half to a combination of confusion, indifference and low morale and half to the deliberate inertia of some of the troops in the observation posts, because overnight, after the capitulation, they suddenly found themselves fighting alongside their former enemies against their former allies. They didn't know who they had to hit and who they didn't.

Vice-admiral (retired) Konstantinos Metallinos.

From everything I've read and heard from survivors about the destroyers operating in the Dodecanese, I'd say the crew of the *Olga* hadn't expected to come up against such intense resistance or Luftwaffe attacks. It would appear that very few British leaders knew, either; not even Churchill, who'd decided the operations should go ahead.

Neither the ships nor their crews could have imagined they were sailing into such great danger; indeed, they thought they would find themselves in relative safety, protected by the air defence of their new allies: the Italians.

Since the majority of the operations took place at night, they thought they were safe enough. Of course, events proved them wrong, and, as we know, casualties were heavy.

Vice-admiral (retired) Konstantinos Metallinos.

At a critical stage in the war which called for enormous naval sacrifices, a British politician once remarked: "I can built a fleet in thirty years, but a Navy needs three hundred".

Commemorative photograph of the crew, Alexandria, February 26, 1942.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

THE MALTA OF THE AEGEAN

The British reach the island on September 13.
The Germans, betrayed by the Italians for a second time, decide to take Leros at any cost.





Churchill writes: "When the capitulation, that momentous event, took place, my thoughts immediately turned to the Aegean islands, at which our strategy had for so long been aimed".

Following Roosevelt's refusal of assistance, operations in the Aegean had to be limited to the means that were already at the disposal of the Middle East command.

Churchill discusses the situation in his memoirs, and the title he gives the chapter dedicated to these matters speaks volumes: "The quarry lost"

***(Chapter 12, vol. I, part V of* The Second World War)**

Leros was under Turkish rule from 1523 until 1912. Italy took the Dodecanese islands in 1912 on the pretext of the Italo-Turkish war, and the islands remained under Italian rule until 1943. Italy had persuaded the Great Powers that she was holding onto the islands on a temporary basis, in order to strengthen her position vis-à-vis Turkey.

Leros is turned into an enormous naval base. The Italian capitulated on 8 September, 1943, paving the way for British intervention in the Aegean in general, and the Dodecanese islands in particular.

Winston Churchill,
Chronicle of the 20th Century.

The Italians were very mild mannered until 1933-34. But things changed with the arrival of fascism.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

In 1940-41, before the Italians surrendered, an Englishman repeatedly flew over the island and dropped bombs on the Italians. It was Lord Hamilton, and he'd show up in the Leros sky every time there was a full moon. He flew very low and 'planted' bombs—that's what we used to say. After each of his visits, we'd rush to see what damage he'd caused the Italians. There was an anti-aircraft gun where the asylum is now, and Hamilton got at least 90 people there alone.

But one full moon he crashed while trying to evade the spotlights. The Italians say they shot him down. Whatever the truth of the matter, his death saddened us so much that if you'd pricked us on that day, we wouldn't have bled a drop of blood. He rests in peace here on our island.

We climbed up to take a look at the spot where Lord Hamilton's plane crashed, and found lots of Italians and his charred corpse. An Italian went up and gave him a kick, but his officer pulled out a pistol and said: "figlio di grande putana…you son of a bitch, that man's a hero, he fought for his country. You fight like him, if you can. Show some respect or I'll blow your brains out". All us Greeks applauded, and were happy when the Italian soldier saluted the dead Englishman.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

Model of the most famous British fighter plane of all: the Hurricane MK1.

Italian ceremony at Lepida.
Giannis Paraponiaris archive.

A British major disguised as a shepherd. It was he who provided Michalis Samarkos of counter-intelligence with his radio. *Tasos Kanaris Collection*.

Despite the Italians' tight security, our intelligence managed to get messages across to Greece. Giannis would send the occasional package or note out with a passenger.

He'd take a yellow Faber pencil, ten or twelve centimetres long, hollow it out and put a note in it on a piece of very thin, rolled-up paper. The pencils were so well-made, they didn't look at all suspicious.

It was Giorgis Valsamis that came up with the idea, and the pencils could be handed to the ship's mechanic without arousing suspicion. That's how we got our messages out and instructions and questions in.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

I had a friend, an Italian sailor by the name of—I think—Francesco, who says to me one day: 'I'll give you something to remember me by'. It was a cap badge from the submarine *Delfino*: the captain opens his orders one mission and sees that he has to sail to Tinos and sink the *Elly* on August 15. This was before war was declared between Greece and Italy. From what I found out later, the *Delfino* was sunk, too.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, Leros.

A cap badge from the *Delfino*, the Italian submarine that torpedoed the *Elli*, a Greek warship.

The commander of Leros, Admiral Luigi Mascherpa, was having an affair with Zoitsa, God rest her soul.

Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.

The Italians are amorous sorts, Mediterraneans like us: they'd bother our women—in a romantic way, of course—but they would bother them.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

If an Italian solder wanted to win over a Greek girl, Mussolini would give him a gift of five thousand lira to marry her. That's how a few very poor or very ugly girls married Italians. For them, it was enough that they were Greek girls.

A gold lira was worth sixty four francs at the time. And although the Italian girls were mad for Greek men, woe betide any Greek who dared take an Italian girlfriend: he'd go straight to prison.

But one guy managed to pull it off and married an Italian girl.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

We were just kids, 12 years old, and we'd set ourselves a goal: to take down the sign outside the school, because it said "Italian School of Leros in the Aegean" in Italian.

Samarkos knew what we were up to…he knew that a gang of five kids had gone and shown the Italians.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

Admiral Mascherpa, the commander of the Leros Naval Base, didn't think it was a very good idea for a Greek destroyer to come to Leros.

Mascherpa stressed this to the British with his usual directness, but they replied that the desperate lack of ships does not permit us to take various points of view into account, even when such points of view make perfect sense!

Captain Spigai, submarine commander.

Admiral Mascherpa, the last Italian commander of Leros. *Tasos Kanaris archive*.

We presented ourselves to General Brittorous on October 2, having first agreed to do so with our colleagues Giorgos Valsamis, Giorgis Boulafentis, Stamatis Angelou and others. We laid our educational problem before him, and requested that he allow a Greek school to be opened, assuring him that we would not request any financial assistance for the running of the school.

His answer was terse and to the point: "The matter will be resolved at the table of peace. But for now, we are fighting a war".

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

…The Germans made their appearance on September 9.

We saw an aeroplane very high up in the sky: it didn't drop any bombs, it just flew around Leros and then headed south.

It was the first German plane. German planes continued to visit the island from that day on, probably flying reconnaissance missions and to unnerve the defenders and test the waters.

The occasional bombs they dropped didn't frighten us, we didn't all run into the shelters and very few people left their houses for…safety. When the alarms sounded, we'd watch the German planes like babes in arms, quite unaware of the danger.

That went on for quite a few days; our main concern was getting hold of food…

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Italians parading on Leros.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

(following page) Giorgos Nikolaidis posing with a Bren gun.

FIFTY TWO DAYS IN 1943

In the space of six weeks, Leros suffered around 180 aerial bombardments carried out by no less than 1,396 aircraft which dropped in the vicinity of 700 bombs. The anti-aircraft batteries fired around 250,000 rounds of ammunition.





The overall picture and data concerning the war

The battle lasted for **52** days. On November 15, 1943, there were **25,479** people on the island! Around **3,800** British troops, **8,000** Italians, **10,979** local people, and some **2,500** Germans. The British lost around **250** men, **3,200** of their troops were taken prisoner, and **250** escaped. The Italians lost **400**—including **12** officers who were executed, while **5,351** of their men were captured and some **2,000** others got off the island. The Leriots lost **15** dead plus another **164** missing in action, while the Hellenic Navy suffered **71** casualties. The Germans lost **520** men.

The Germans had approximately **400** aircraft in Greece, Rhodes, and Crete, of which **100** were definitely destroyed while another **25** probably sustained damage. German naval losses amounted to **9** commercial vessels, **14** landing craft, **13** M-boats and similar vessels, a fuel tanker, **5** converted caiques, over **20,000** tonnes of arms and ammunition, and some **2,200** men drowned.

The British lost **16** aircraft and **6** destroyers. Another **6** destroyers and **4** cruisers sustained serious damage, and a submarine was lost with all hands. Four smaller vessels were also sunk and another eight sustained damage. Total British losses, included prisoners, were **5,046** men.

The local farmers are forced to work to stay alive. There was a lot of work to be done, and workers were called to Leros from other islands, too. The Naval Base filled with cement and iron, along with submarines, destroyers, PT boats, auxiliary vessels and 6,000 men. There was an aerodrome with fighter planes and bombers. Auxiliary services and the Air Force. Artillery batteries on every summit. One hundred and five pieces of artillery planted on the mountains of Leros!

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Leros was a major naval base, manned by 8,000 men, of whom 6,000 were naval personnel.

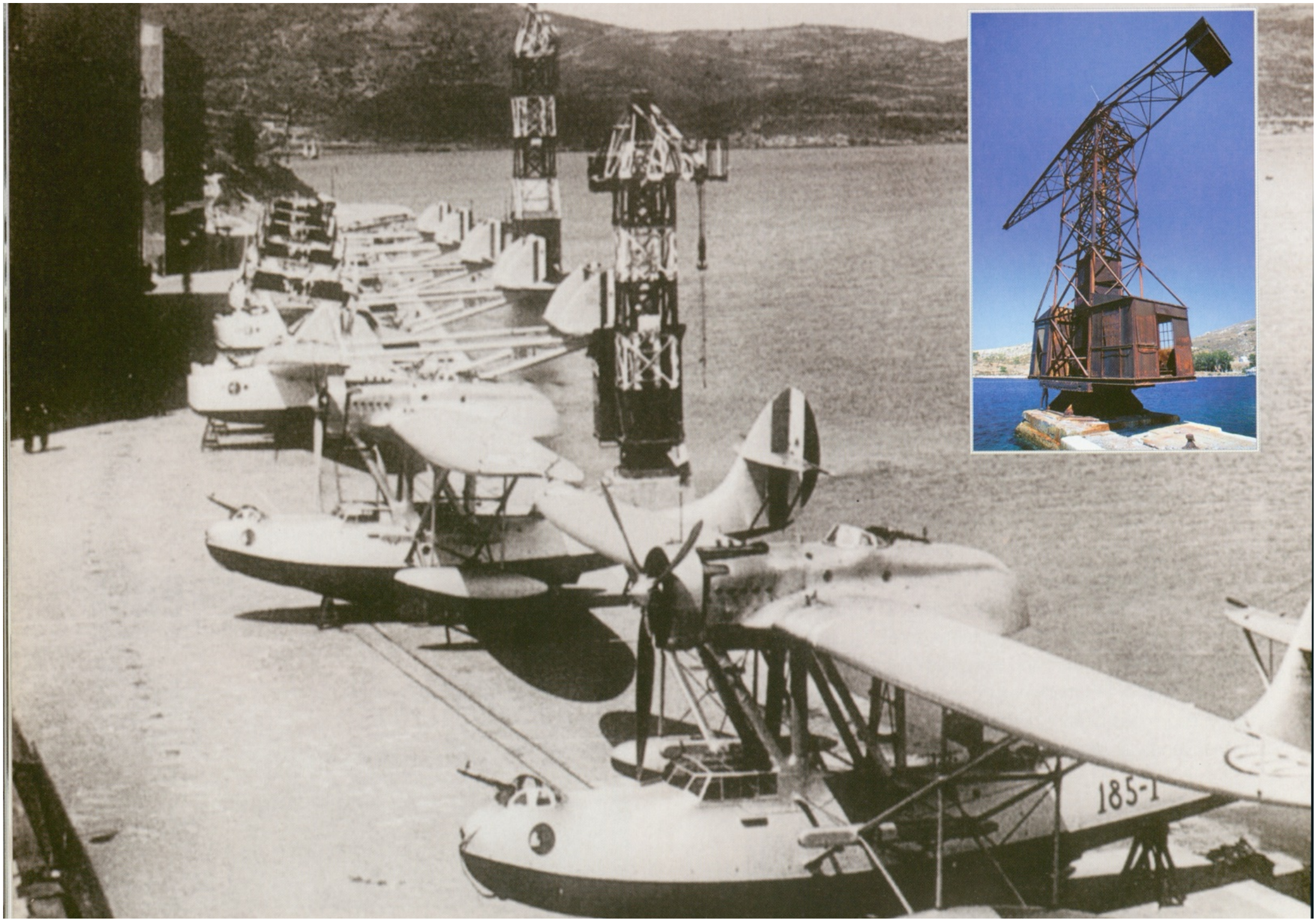
There are artillery batteries scattered around the coast and on high ground. Dug into the mountain side, they are completely autonomous, and equipped with living and storage areas, anti-aircraft guns, enormous spotlights, and a great deal of independence.

Leros is as heavily armed as a lobster! There are five naval batteries—three with 152mm artillery with a range of 18,300 metres, and two with 120mm guns with a range of 16,100 metres; nine anti-torpedo batteries, all 76mm; twelve anti-aircraft and anti-torpedo batteries, three equipped with 102mm, one with 90mm, and eight with 76mm artillery.

A total of 149 machinegun nests of varying diameters, and 17 enormous 150mm diameter carbon searchlights make up the island's air defences.

Captain—later Admiral—Mascherpa, observing target practice with the commander of the naval forces in the Dodecanese. Twin anti-aircraft gun on Patela. *Konstantinos Kogiopoulos archive*.

The base of the large machine-gun on Mount Markelos, part of the Farinata Battery.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Loading torpedoes at the Italian naval base at Lepida.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

Mines stored at the Lepida naval base.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

The Leros Naval Base in 1937, with S.55 and Cant Z.501 seaplanes from the 185th Squadron. On the left, we can make out the seaplane hangars, one of which is now exhibited at the Hellenic Air Force Museum at Tatoi, Athens.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

(inset) The crane that lifted the seaplanes into the water has survived intact to this day.

A double armour-plated door from the shelter of the Italian commander, Admiral Mascherpa.

Defence installations

Anti-submarine and anti-torpedo nets have been laid across the mouths of the bays at Lakki and Partheni. Blefouti Bay is equipped with a permanent anti-torpedo net. There was also sufficient netting in the quartermaster's store to secure Alida Bay. Equipment for laying the nets: one floating crane plus a few barges. Three mine-sweepers formations, four tugs, three water wagons, fifteen barges, and two floating cranes: one 120 and the other 40 tonnes.

Communication services with three fortified buildings, a depot at Partheni with 300 torpedoes, stores with supplies for approximately one year.

Electrical services with a central power station in the interior of the island, plus a second in a cave at Agios Georgios equipped with three electric generators. Fuel services with five semi-underground metal tanks for crude oil with a total capacity of 36,000 tonnes.

Ammunition service with munitions dumps in both covered buildings and man-made caves, equipped with everything required for the battle. Shells have already been delivered to the various batteries.

Health services, with a 300-bed hospital in Gonia, an auxiliary 50-bed hospital in Alida, and a second auxiliary hospital dug into the mountain for emergencies.

Logistics service with sufficient food supplies for eight months. The *Ivorea*, a refrigerator ship carrying 40 tonnes of frozen meat, anchored off Partheni.

(far right) Large cement construction for the air-raid siren on Mount Patela, part of the FAM-DICAT battery.

There was also a submarine yard with loading equipment, warehouses and barracks capable of serving the needs of four medium-range submarines.

A squadron of ten aircraft.

Naval forces comprising the 4th Destroyer Squadron, the 5th Leros Submarine Group, the 3rd PT-boat flotilla, groups of torpedo boats, minesweepers, and anti-submarine craft.

The Italians had boats at the base equipped with two 1,150 hp, 18 cylinder petrol engines with a maximum speed of 52 knots. They were armed with two torpedoes each, one to port and one to starboard

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, Leros.

The enormous base is all that remains of the air-raid siren designed to warn the island well in advance of the approach of enemy planes.

German reconnaissance planes drop leaflets: *"Seamen of Leros! We know the names of the men who sold you out to the British. When we land, they will learn the meaning of torture"*. Signed: Kleeman, Commander of Rhodes, Commander of the Wehrmacht Division.

The Battle of Leros

An initial landing party of British forces lands on Leros on the night of September 15. Another section containing some 400 British troops arrives on the 17th.

The main bulk of the British forces disembark on September 20 along with the General Staff, including Brigadier General Brittorous of the British army, who had been assigned the command of the Armed Forces of the Aegean. It is not long before a certain amount of friction between Brittorous and Admiral Mascherpa, the commander of Leros, become apparent.

Another 1,000 British troops arrive on September 22.

On the 25th, the British command takes control of all radiotelegraphic communications.

The first systematic air raids begin on the 26th: two destroyers are sunk off Lakki: the Greek *Queen Olga*, and the British *Intrepid*. An Italian PT boat is also sunk, while a number of commercial vessels sustain serious damage.

The aeronautical installations are bombarded on the 27th, resulting in the destruction of two sea planes.

Air attacks continue over the next two days, 60 planes taking part on September 29, and 40 on October 1. The *Euro*, an Italian destroyer, is sunk on the same day.

The Germans take the island of Kos on October 3, and with it British hopes of an air base in the Aegean.

The *Legnano*, a minesweeper, is sunk during an air raid on October 5, and the *Ivorea*, a refrigerator ship, on October 6.

The British withdraw their forces from Kalymnos on the same day, and the island is immediately occupied by German troops.

The bombardments continue on a daily basis. The *Volta*, and Italian destroyer, distances itself from Leros in an effort to evade the air raids, but is accidentally bombarded by British gunboats, sustaining major damage. German planes spot the *Volta* shortly afterwards and finish her off.

Inhabited regions of Leros are bombed on October 9. The minesweeper *Azio* sustains moderate to serious damage, while the *Ms 26* torpedo boat runs aground on Cape Pano Zymis and is abandoned.

Italian batteries on Leros begin to bombard Kalymnos on October 10, in order to harass the German forces.

British forces abandon the island of Simi on October 11 and are transferred to Cyprus. Leros continues to sustain German bombardment on a daily basis.

The Germans take Astypalaia on October 22.

The *Ms 15* torpedo boat is sunk off Lakki on October 25 during an air raid. *Ms 11* sustains damage.

On October 26, a British destroyer sinks in the straits between Kos and Turkey after hitting a mine.

There are no air raids between November 1 and November 6.

General Tilney of the British army arrives on Leros in early November and is named Commander of the Leros Guard. General Hall replaces Brittorous on November 5 as Commander of the Armed Forces in the Aegean. Intense aerial bombardments are resumed on November 7. A third British division lands on November 8—the Luftwaffe continues intense bombing.

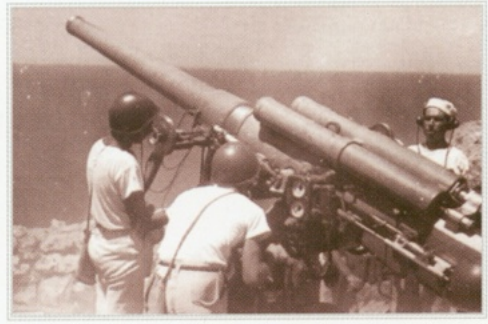
German forces under the command of General Müller begin landing before dawn on the morning of the 12th under favourable weather conditions and visibility. One group of landing craft approaching from the south-west is targeted by the Katsouni battery, changes course and distances itself from the shore.

Another group approaching from the East splits into four sections, one of which manages to land on the western side of Cape Zymi; a second to the east of Mount Kleidi; a third on the eastern coast of Mount Pityki, directly below the battery on the summit. The fourth, which is heading in a northerly direction, is intercepted by battery fire. PT boats 555 and 559 are caught by surprise on Kryfos beach and captured.

The Germans receive effective air support and achieve a number of successes despite coming up against stiff resistance. Paratroopers dropped onto the island's narrow central strip in the afternoon further complicate the situation for the defenders.

General Tilney's planned night counter attack is postponed for some reason. The reinforcements he requests from Samos cannot get to Leros due to a lack of transportation.

Despite strong winds, a second wave of paratroopers are dropped at 7am on the morning of November 13. The Germans, taking advantage of the adverse weather conditions which are preventing the arrival of reinforcements by sea, continue to press towards the Pityki battery, which they capture. Mascherpa, the Italian commander, also requests reinforcements from Samos, while Tilney is preparing a counter-attack for the following day. The British get the counter-attack under way, but split their forces between the central section, where the German paratroopers have taken position, and Mount Pityki. The Germans manage to advance from the East and North and take a number of positions. Two British destroyers bombard the new German positions in the central part of the island. In the meantime, British planes drop weapons and ammunition. The Germans take the island's Venetian fortress on the night of November 15. Having destroyed virtually all the island's air defences, the German air force can now go about its business undisturbed, which allows the Germans to hold and consolidate their positions.



A 76/40mm gun with its crew.
Konstantinos Kogiopoulos archive.

The Italian command repeats its request to the British for a counter-attack with Italian forces, but receive no reply. The British are wary: they do not trust the Italians and are afraid that they will betray them. The situation worsens on the night of November 15—reinforcements are the only hope for the British.

On the morning of November 16, the British command requests Italian assistance in the defence of Mount Merovigli, where their headquarters are based.

The situation on the front lines is now irreversible.

At 12:30, the Germans send an envoy to the Italian command requesting the surrender of the Italian forces, and promising that no Italians will be killed. The Italian command rejects their request. However, a British officer arrives at 17:30 with an order to cease all military activity since the British command, surrounded and defeated, has surrendered. General Tilney arrives in person and under guard shortly afterwards to confirm the truth of this. The order to surrender is communicated to as much of the island as possible given the current state of communications.

The Germans execute several Italian officers and begin to take English and Italian troops prisoner. They then begin transporting the prisoners by sea to Greece, and from there to concentration camps in Germany and Poland. Admiral Mascherpa is transferred to a special court in Parma, Italy, which sentences him to death. He is executed on May 24, 1944.

Plinth at the entrance to the battery on Mount Katsouni, above Lakki.

Events as related in the official German archives

Major General Müller of the 22nd Infantry Division, stationed on Crete, is to take charge of operations. The operation aimed at taking Leros is codenamed "Leopard". Two German convoys are lost at sea, and Major General Müller suggests a further postponement of the attack on Leros. That same night, General Winter asks Admiral Lange if he considers the capture of Leros to be of vital importance. In turn, the Admiral passes on these officers' doubts to Admiral Fricke, stressing that the operation is becoming more and more perilous, and suggesting that given the present circumstances, the attack is more likely to fail than it is to succeed. He goes so far as to state that they could lose every naval unit used in the operation. Admiral Fricke insists on the need to capture Leros as a means of capturing all the Dodecanese islands.

The *Kari* and the *Trapani*, transports on their way to Kos with 1,000 men destined for the attack on Leros, are attacked by a submarine. The *Kari* sinks with the loss of 510 men.

Hitler is not deterred: he orders that Operation Leopard commence as soon as conditions permit.
In the end, it is the Fuhrer himself who takes the decision, and the order to begin the attack—first on Samos and then on Leros—arrives from Berlin at 16:00 on September 26.

The date foreseen for the attack is November 9.
The operation's codename is changed from "Leopard" to "Typhoon" in an attempt to ensure absolute secrecy.

General Müller, the commander of the operation to capture the Dodecanese.
Peter Schenk archive.

The base of the air-raid siren on Mount Patela – once part of the FAM-DICAT battery – as it is today.

(below right) One of the two air-raid sirens of the FAM-DICAT battery on Mount Patela. *Tasos Kanaris archive*.

We saw aeroplanes the next day. They were flying low and we thought they were ours. People went out into the street and waved: in almost no time at all, it had turned into a bloodbath.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

At the time, excuse my French, we had three brothels: one for the Greeks, a classy one for the officers, and one for the soldiers and seamen. The girls were from Italy and Greece, from Smyrna and Samos, and there were about fifteen of them in each. When the girls heard the battery bells ringing, they ran straight into our shelter just as they were, naked as the day they were born. A bomb fell in front of us and another on top—I was near the entrance—and how I found myself blown right across the shelter by the blast I'll never know. There were people sprawling all over, all tangled up like a ball of string and some with broken noses. An Italian was shouting "I'll go nuts, I'll go nuts!" "Stop up, shut it, calm down", we shouted. It's a terrible thing war.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

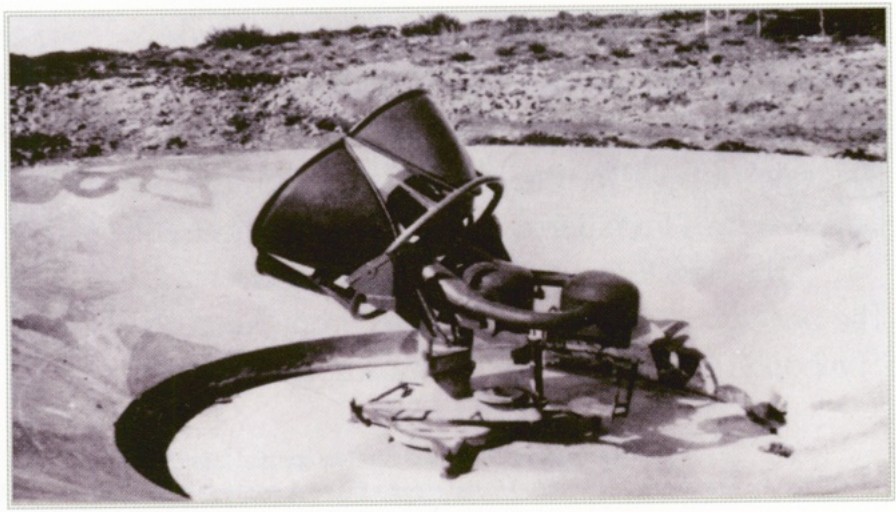
The British army took up positions on three upland zones on Leros, one battalion for each. One zone included Skoubarda, Tourtouras, and Xirokambos; the second Vigla, Merovigli, Rachi, and the whole right side of the main road to Partheni; and the third, the area to the left of the road between Lakki and Archangelos.

A number of bombs fell on inhabited areas. Luckily, everyone had left the town by now and taken to the caves, so we didn't have any deaths to mourn.

Most of the bombs fell on the Agia Paraskevi and Christos districts; they were probably meant for Merovigli, the linchpin of the island's air defence, which was equipped with the best and newest 90mm anti-aircraft guns.

The Church of the Taxiarchis and the graveyard above the town at the foot of Merovigli weren't spared. The church was blown to bits, and crosses from the tomb stones, along with the bones of the dead and even arms and other body parts, were strewn across the fields below. It was a macabre sight.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.



We decided to go to the caves because some of us were afraid. We put my brother on a board and set off. But what did we find in the caves? Bugs and millions of fleas that got under the kid's plaster casts. He was suffering terribly from the itch, so we went back home. One of my uncles had a girlfriend up at the cave, which is why he didn't want to come back.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

The heavy artillery of Battery 262 on Skoubarda was now bombarding Kalymnos almost continuously from Ai Georgis. The German forces were now concentrated on Kalymnos, mainly in Vathy, while they had set up their Command HQ in the Villa Strega, which was set amidst a beautiful mandarin and orange grove. The trees had fruit on them, too.

The Brits had withdrawn from Kalymnos to Leros. The beginning of our drama's end was at hand. Some people still didn't want to believe that the Germans could land on Leros. The tree assigned a lot of importance to the artillery batteries, and didn't think troop carriers could get near the island. And where could they drop paratroops: the ground was unsuited to infantry, and there were machine-gun nests everywhere.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

The Skoubarda batter. Kalymnos is visible in the distance.

Part of the air-raid siren.
Giannis Paraponiaris archive.

The planes flew very low over the sea, so they wouldn't be heard.

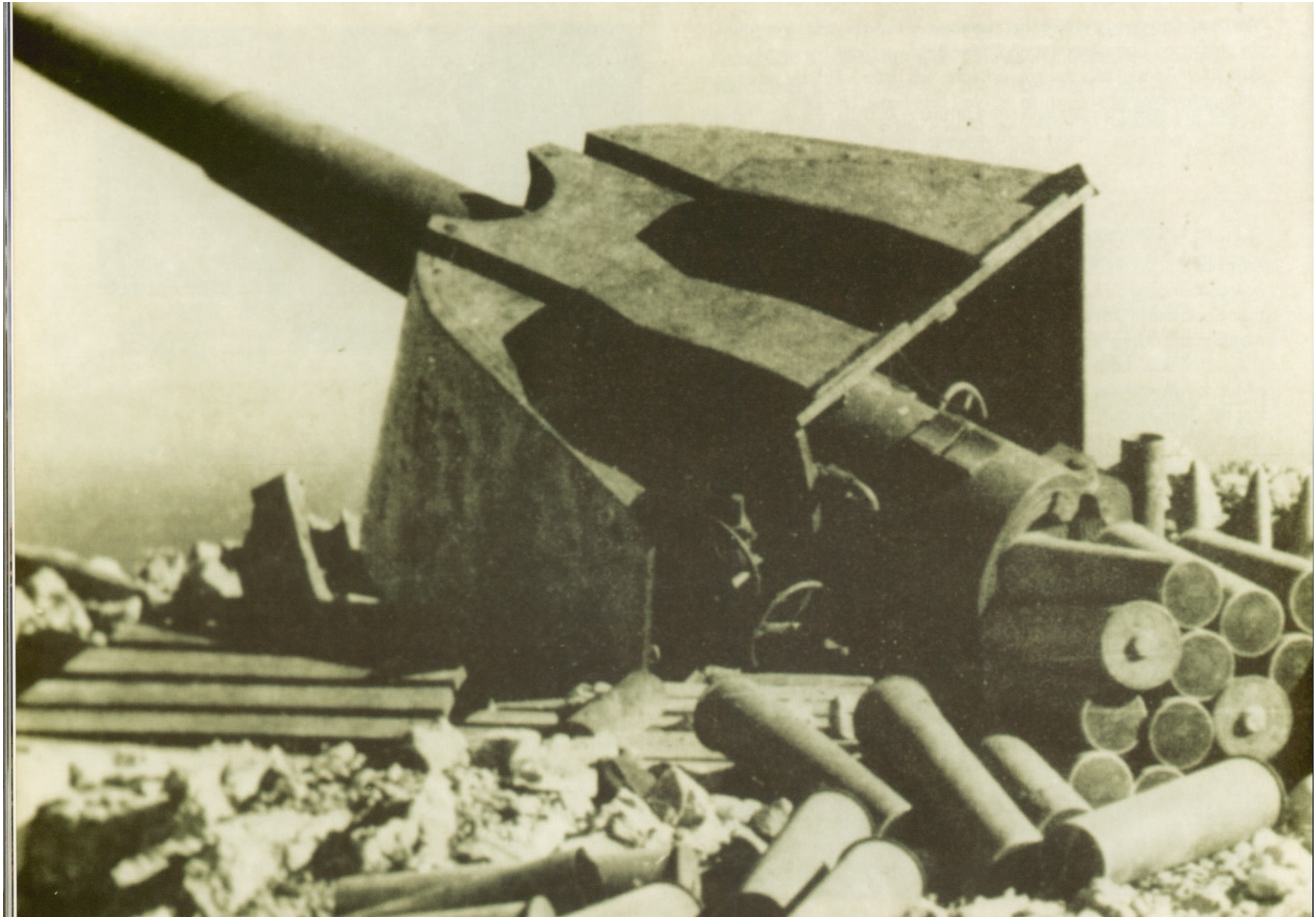
Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.

There was this guy called Giakoumis Dimitriadis who was always playing the tough guy. I was in bed with my cast on, and I say to him: "Get away from the window, so I can see the planes". The moment we hear a Junker approaching, Giakoumis runs into a corner of the room and a mortar lands and makes a huge hole in the wall right above his head. How neither the shell not his fear killed him, I'll never know.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

(following left) The 152mm battery on Mount Skoubarda after an air attack. Note the enormous shells.
Peter Schenk archive.

(following right) Today: the slit through which the machine-gun projected.



Italian Battery 888

The telephones, which would have allowed us to exchange some information and settle our doubts, were only fitfully operational.

By the end of the day, we no longer had any doubts: we saw the naval formation sailing past out of range to the north reach the Farmako Straits, turn 120 degrees, and head straight for Leros. The officer in command of the 888 Battery called his group commander, Artillery Captain Leonetto Amadei, who managed to contact the FAM-DICAT command post and receive authorisation to open fire.

Shells from the 888 damaged two troop carriers which subsequently caught fire. Others came under fire and withdrew from the operation, heading for open waters where they would enjoy the protection of the destroyers.

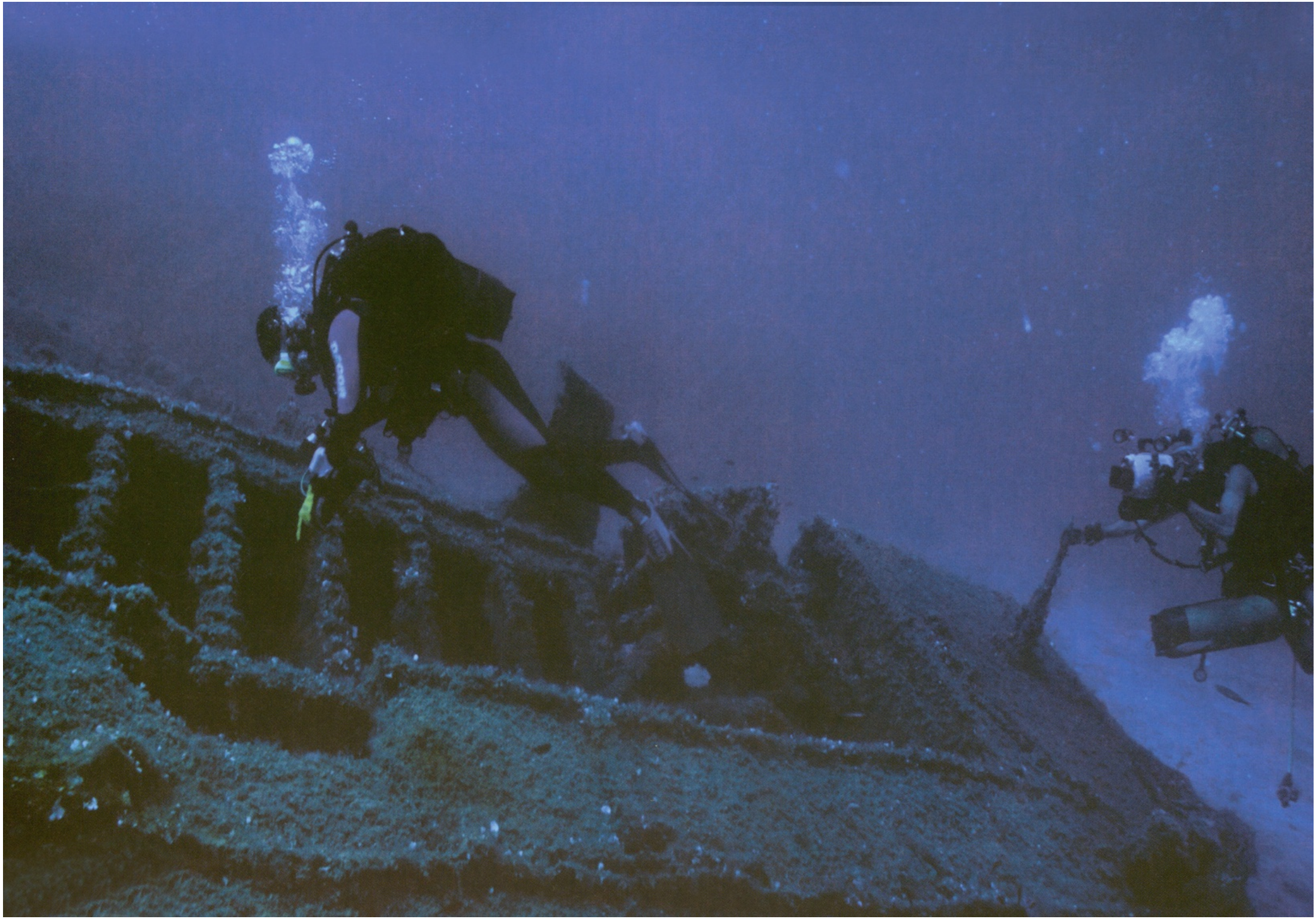
Another troop carrier hit by fire from the 888 Battery sustained damage to its rudder and began to circle the little island off the coast called Strongili, repeatedly crashing into the rocks. Ammunition exploded on board and a fire broke out on deck—it sank shortly afterwards. The survivors swam to the island where they came under fire from numerous machinegun nets. They took shelter on the far side of the island. A boat from the Partheni flotilla approached the island two days later, picking up the 32 exhausted Germans prisoner, and transfering them to Leros.

(previous pages) Up on Skoubarda Hill.

(far right) The diving team exploring the wreck of the landing craft.

The light H-type German landing craft hit on 12/11/1943 by 888 Battery firing from Mount Blefouti. It ran aground on Strongili Island.

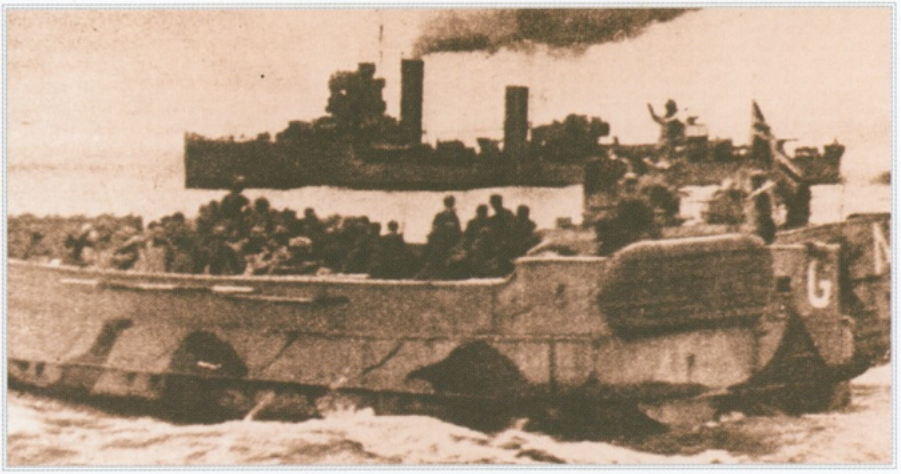
Marinos holding a dixie taken from the wreck of the landing craft. It and other objects were given to the Leros Museum.



We kids were oblivious to the danger. Although our folks were terrified, the sight of the bombs tumbling out of the planes one after the other like a chain looked funny to us—we thought they were tied together.

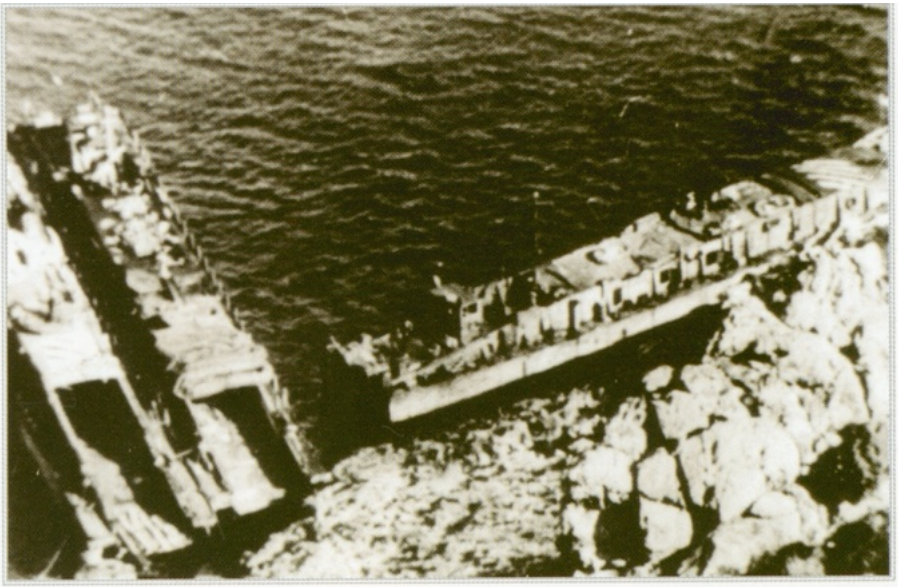
Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

A German helmet. A number of weapons, bullets, grenades, magazines, canteens and other objects are scattered around the wreck.



A landing craft of the same type, protected by the German destroyer *TA17*, making its final approach into Kryfos Bay on the morning of November 12, 1943.
Peter Schenk archive.

The port side of the landing craft. The landing craft was cut in two by a series of powerful explosions.



Light vehicle transport unloading Greek troops

Soldiers disembarking in Kryfos Bay, November 12, 1943.
Peter Schenk archive.

Even today, the shell is dangerous..

British soldiers continued to swell the guard until there were 3,000 of them. There were around 8,000 Italians, though only 1,000 were front-line combat troops. The rest were assigned to coastal defence, the anti-aircraft batteries, and various technical services. The fact that the island's coastal defence had been left to the Italians raised a few eyebrows; there were a number of doubts raised about both their ability and their desire to fight.

The Italians had spent years systematically arming Leros as a naval base, and had installed powerful batteries on every piece of high ground. That's why the military high command in Cairo had persuaded themselves that Leros was literally impregnable. Then, of course, there was the persistent rumour that Churchill had said Leros had to be defended at whatever cost.

An equerry came in at around 4:30 and informed us very calmly that the German invasion fleet was in sight, and that all officers should make their way to their battle stations as soon as possible.

It was 5:10—the Battle of Leros was beginning. The church bells continued to ring as the Stukas started to fly over the island and the Italian naval batteries whipped the sea around the enemy vessels into a frenzy. A sergeant of the Royal Irish Fusiliers who was observing the course of the shells through his binoculars muttered that if the Italians had been Maltese gunners, the ships would have been wiped out in an instant.

Leonard Marsland Gander,* Daily Telegraph *correspondent, British journalist.

There was a wooden platform in front of where the cinema is now—all the craftsmen would go to the Naval Base by sea every day to work. And we continued to come and go between Lakki and the Base throughout the entire bombardment.

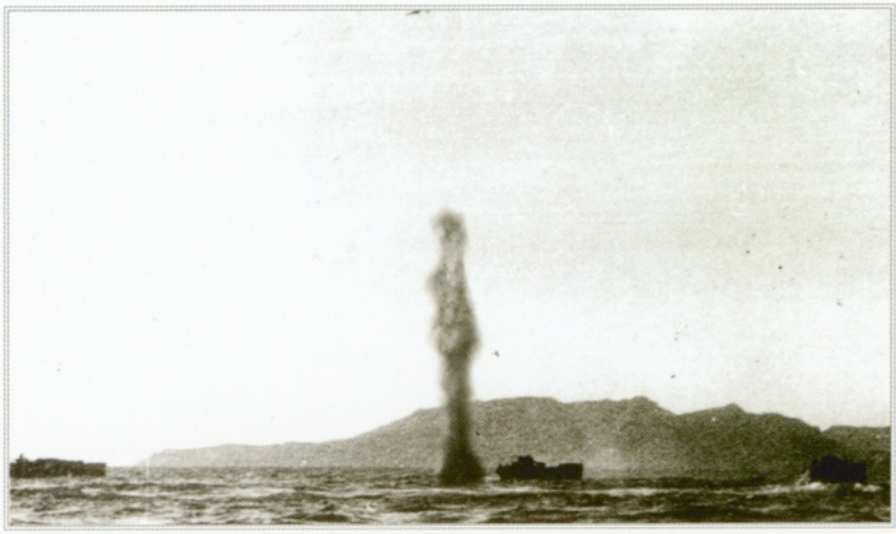
One morning we were in the water wagon that was to take us across—it had a canvas canopy strung up for shade. We heard sirens and a whirring sound and stuck our heads out only to see four planes. They spotted us and, not being able to make out if we were soldiers or civilians, banked and started to dive with the sun at their backs.

The captain abandoned ship and some guy with a lot of courage took command and started zigzagging to and fro in the harbour.

The Germans bombarded us mercilessly. There were bombs exploding to the right, bombs falling to the left. Kostaloukas stuck his leg out to slide into the sea and a shell blew it off. Another guy, Manolis, Roussou's son, took a shell in the balls. He pulled me close and said: 'Go tell my wife I'm dead'. And it just kept on until we finally put in to Merikia instead of Ai Georgis.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, Leros.

The Italian barracks on the Naval Base at Ai-Georgis today.



German landing crafts under heavy fire. *Tasos Kanaris archive.*

From up on top of Merovigli, I saw the Germans who had landed to the North making their way up towards Mount Vedetta—then I saw two red flares. That was the signal for the Stukas, which had already been circling over the island for half an hour, to get into formation.

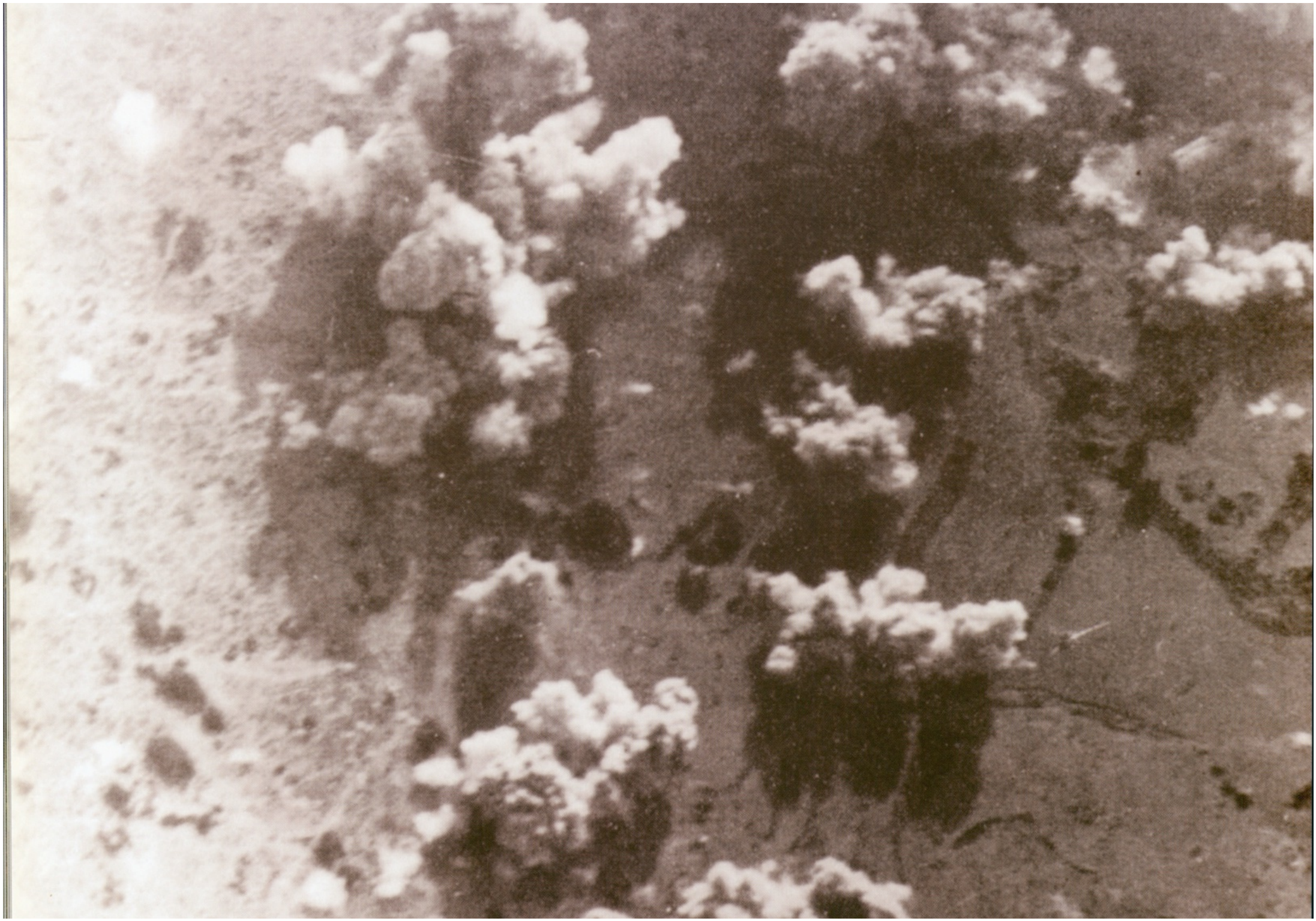
When the first Stuka started its noisy descent, I happened to be close by a position held by Italian machine-gunners. The gunner the Irish Fusiliers called Francesco had been shooting away with a lot of mettle all morning, and the barrel of his gun had started to glow with the heat. This was his big moment: he waited perfectly still with a glint in his eyes. As the first Stuka came closer he sent a barrage of bullets into its belly. The Stuka faltered, regained height and flew off towards Kos, leaving a thin stream of black smoke in its wake. Francesco was incredibly pleased with himself, and turned to face me grinning with pleasure, his thin swarthy face aglow. He looked like a Roman legionary—I could have painted him wearing an ancient helmet. I thought that this was the best possible reply to all those who thought the Italians a spent force, hysterical and not the stuff of soldiers.

The remaining Stukas regrouped after the unexpected welcome they'd received from the Italian anti-aircraft defence they so despised. It was clear that they had switched target from the Buffs, who were resisting the German troops as they landed, to Francesco. That made my situation rather perilous, and I rolled down the hill and sheltered in a small crater. Francesco was standing tranquilly at his post targeting the attacking Stukas without pause. Three shells whizzed into the ground about a hundred metres from his position, but left barely a scratch on the rocks. When the dust settled and the black smoke had thinned a little, I saw Francesco safe and sound in his dugout. The Stukas made off into the distance, disappointed, and a new formation took their place. Francesco turned to look at me and said with pride: "I am an Italian".

Leonard Marsland Gander, Daily Telegraph correspondent, British journalist.

Italian paratrooper.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

Model Junkers 87B-2 in colours from the African front. Known as the Stuka, this was one of the Luftwaffe's most well-known aircraft. Vertical attack plane, light bomber, it made a nightmare opponent. The sound emitted by the plane's siren is designed to cause panic.



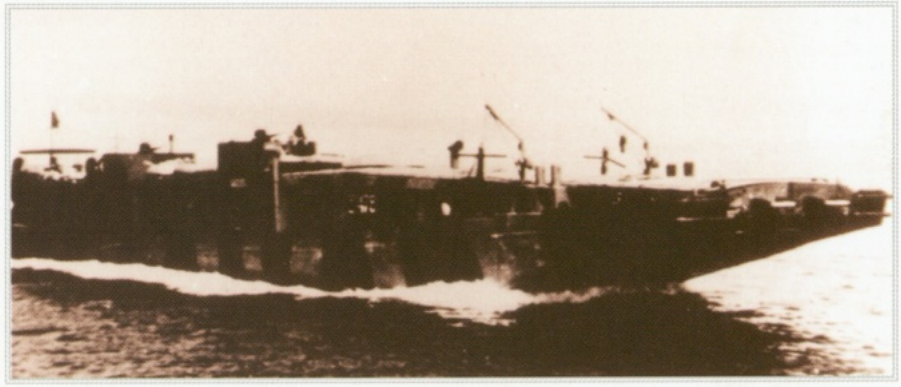
The bombardment lasted 52 days. They would start at 7:00 in the morning and finish at 7:00 at night. The Germans were so punctual there was no need to look at your watch.

There were four families living in our house, 39 people in all. A mortar demolished the wall of our house, destroying an old ice fridge with it; a child had been standing right in front of the fridge, but there wasn't a scratch on him. We dug a one-metre deep L-shaped trench out the back of our house and covered it with sheets of corrugated iron and soil. Imagine all 39 of us climbing into that hole in the ground! Aunt Katina would block the entrance with her enormous backside, and we'd piss ourselves and couldn't get out. She was the wife of Stamatis, Angelos' son.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

Leriots. *Tasos Kanaris archive*.

Leros under heavy bombardment.
Tasos Kanaris archive.



A German light vehicle carrier approaching Leros.
Peter Schenk Collection.

In the morning, we were surprised to see a small unit making its way towards Alida beach, having sailed round Kato Zymi.

Since the English naval units only stayed on Leros during the night, the unit had to be German. We could hardly believe how daring they were. The sentries wavered with their fingers on the trigger, because if they were German they had to be mad; suicidal. Suddenly, tracer bullets were furrowing the air as the water around the unit began to seethe.

The unit headed for the shore and ran aground on the rocks; they must have suffered a number of dead and wounded. A rowing boat appeared immediately afterwards and began to cross the bay. After a similar delay, the rowing boat also came under fire from the smaller machine-guns and disappeared in a barrage of bullets.

The oars stopped moving and the boat also ran aground. But the oars started up again half an hour later. No one was shooting at the boat anymore, and the man reached the shore and climbed out of the boat—or, rather, what was left of the boat—seemingly quite unperturbed. He was clearly confused.

The German was taken prisoner and escorted to command HQ for interrogation. He was sobbing: he was such a harmless Nazi. He showed us that the enemy were not all supermen.

Leonard Marsland Gander,* Daily Telegraph *correspondent, British journalist.

There were mortars coming down, and my mother ran to save my father's clinic, because a bomb had fallen inside. We started down Panteli—my mother, loaded with equipment from the clinic, was also carrying a mattress to save us if a bomb fell nearby.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

Burnt-out Italian facilities at Merkia.

A paratrooper hung there for days upside down, entangled in branches. He kept shouting "Mother, Maria, water, water" until he died. No one went near him for fear of the Germans, but also for fear of the British. There was a battle being fought down below.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

(far right) One of dozens of building abandoned during the war.

A dead German officer.
Peter Schenk archive.

Bombarding the batteries on Skoubarda Hill.
Peter Schenk archive.

The familiar German stick grenade. Grenades and incendiary devices were the scourge of fugitives.

One of two entrances into the hospital carved into the rock.

Inside the hospital: a corridor leading to another level in the heart of the mountain.

The cave/shelter that formed a continuation of the hospital was a tunnel some 200 metres in length. It had two entrances, both of which were located a few dozen metres from the hospital building. During the final days, and following the destruction of the hospital, this shelter was transformed into the actual hospital: a row of wooden bunk beds were constructed along the walls of the tunnel in which the sick and wounded were installed.

The operating theatre with its tiles, cupboards, oxygen, and operating table from Turin.

One of the hospital's many corridors. This particular one leads to its largest room, which to this day contains the patients' beds. Cavities were utilised along the length of the corridors for storage; an air duct ensured good ventilation. There are also gutters cut into the floor for water.

Model of the Messerschmitt BF-109, a single-seater fighter plane. The Luftwaffe markings are from spring 1937.

English Beaufighter.
Konstantinos Metallinos archive.

Two of our Beaufighters, the only British planes that had showed up so far, cut across the sky in a northerly direction. Four Messerschmitt 109s were on their tail, and our blood froze as we realised they were gaining on them. Short-range fighters against long-range fighters—it we at least had the Turkish aerodromes!

A smiling but clearly upset officer came out of the shelter, and informed us that 25 aircraft had been spotted flying in low from the West. "They must be ours", he said, "the Germans aren't keen on riding the waves!"

I went into the shelter and out through the exit opposite, and found myself under fire from a low-flying aircraft firing its machine-guns and dropping small bombs. I hit the deck for safety, re-entered the shelter and out the other door. The planes that had dropped their loads on the island were flying in an easterly direction back to their bases, but twelve or fifteen Junkers-52 transport planes were flying in a single line about a hundred metres above the strip of land between Gourna and Alida.

The thought of paratroops crossed nobody's mind until something white appeared under one of the planes and opened up into a big mushroom. Beneath the mushroom, we could make out the dark shape of a paratrooper, the whole thing looking incredibly funny, and then another and another, until there were fifteen of them all together, most of them with grey parachutes. The first one, who may have been their officer, was on the ground before the machine-gun nests on Mount Merovigli recovered from the shock. But within moments the scene was transformed into a hell of incandescent red tracer bullets. The slow-moving, low-flying transports were a tempting target for the machine-gunners, who set about them as one would outsize ducks. One foundered and disappeared after the briefest of dives. From a mile away, the paratroopers looked like little dots. They must all have been killed.

Some parachutes had got tangled up with others, and yet more with the telegraph wires. We were all quite certain not one of them had survived.

An indignant officer related how he'd seen the Italians running down the road to Alida with their hands held high in surrender, and the Germans mowing them down.

A corporal in the Irish Fusiliers arrived at command HQ to tell us that his squad had fought hard and inflicted in the region of fifty casualties on the enemy, but had themselves suffered significant losses. From what he said, it seemed the paratroopers had already formed a crack squad.

The noisy, terrible spectacle resumed a little later: German transports sailing in from the direction of the Turkish coast slipped past the British naval watch and anchored in Vagia Bay, which their comrades had secured.

The Stukas had resumed their activities, and the anti-aircraft guns kept up a constant barrage though with little success. Another parachute drop took place at around 9:00, employing the same tactics as the first: the bombers took on the machinegun nests and pillboxes on the ground first. These were followed by two groups of Ju-52s, flying in low from the West and unloading their human cargo between Gourna and Alida. The machine-gun nests and Bofors did their best to counter the attack. A plane crashed into Alida Bay in flames, dragging a parachute behind it with the man dangling from it like an outsize doll: it was a horrible sight. Another aircraft had sustained damage and was losing height, the men it was transporting dropping into the sea. The parachutes looked like brides in white. Quite a few of them reached the ground in one piece and ran to reinforce their comrades.

One could say that the Germans lacked a clear picture of the situation on the island, because a sea plane approached Alida and seemed to want to land off the beach. A hail of bullets sent it crashing into the sea. A German landing craft entered Alida Bay under fire from our artillery; its stern was engulfed in flames within minutes. The air filled with a cloud of black smoke as the boat was transformed into a fiery furnace. Then it was blown sky high by a powerful explosion; it must have been loaded with ammunition.

Leonard Marsland Gander, Daily Telegraph correspondent, British journalist.

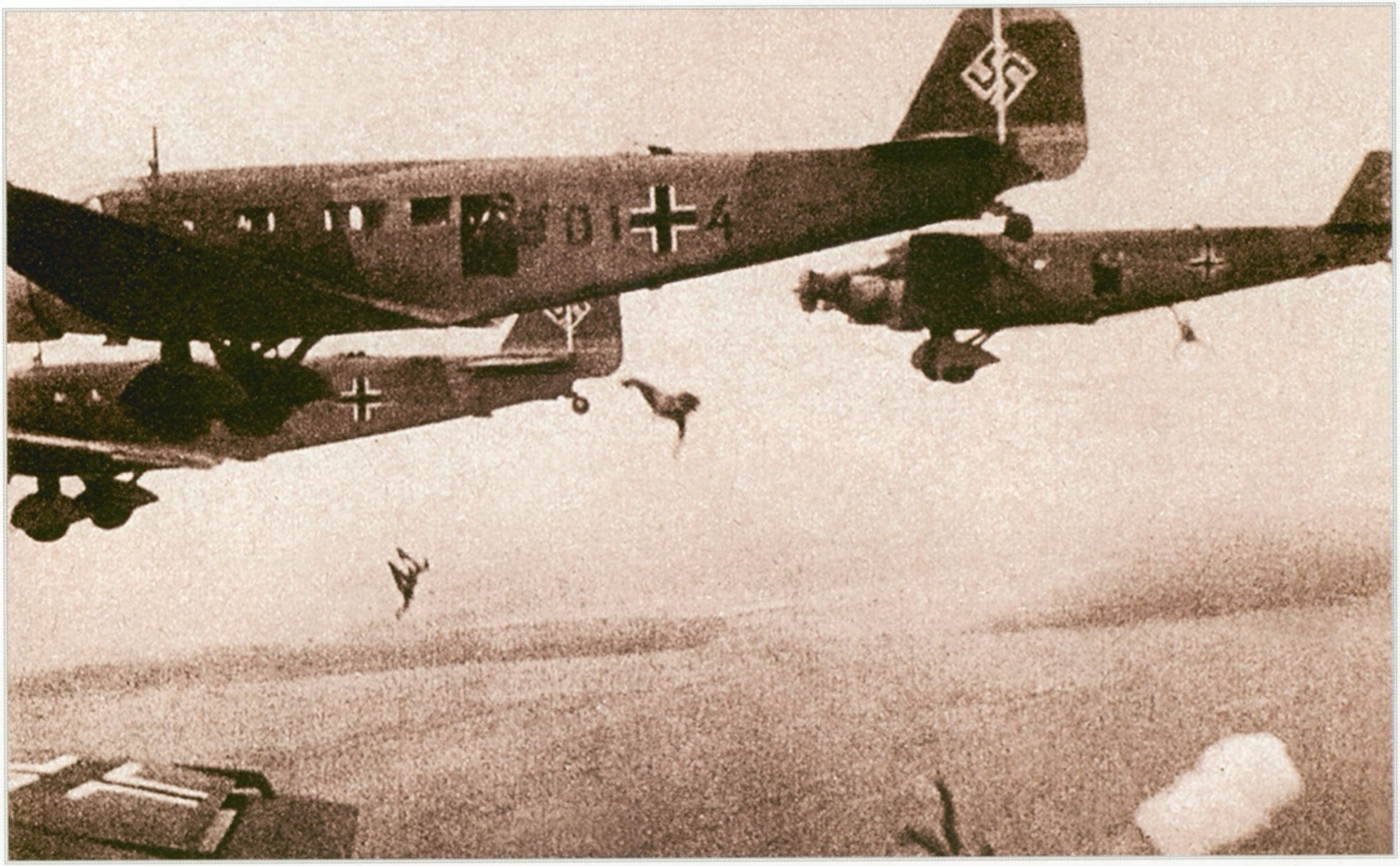
Germans about to board the Junkers-52 that will take them to Leros, Tatoi, November 1943.
Konstantinos Kogiopoulos archive.

The paratroopers would jump out of one plane only to be cut to pieces by the propellers of the plane next in line. And what with the British firing at them from below, it was far from easy for the Germans to reach the ground in one piece.

Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.

(left) German paratroopers being dropped on Rachi. Of the 470 dropped, 62 were killed and another 100 declared missing in action. Their mission: to split the island in two.
Peter Schenk archive.

German paratroopers jumping out of their transports.
Nikos Mastorakos archive.



The gunfire and artillery blasts had spread from Panagia to the whole of Alida.

The paratroopers were clearly going to land right on top of us, in front of us, and definitely behind us. It was perfectly natural for us to be in a cold sweat. We must have more anxious than the soldiers as we sat there waiting for them: all they had to lose was their lives—not to mention the fact that they could defend themselves; our whole families were in peril.

We'd heard so much about the Hitlerites' atrocities!

I counted the minutes. A loud whirring sound far to the west was getting closer and closer, the sound mingling with all the terrible moans and screams. Steel gun barrels, those most impressive achievements of human progress—everything from 152mm artillery to pistols—were belching forth across the entire island, and now from the skies, too! I'd opened the window a fraction and could see the whole of Alida Bay, Agia Marina, and the Fortress before me. The sight was spectacular and terrible at one and the same time.

A paratrooper was coming down some fifty metres in front of me, dangling by strings from a large yellow umbrella. Swinging like a pendulum with his legs slightly bent at the knee and his machine-gun held at the ready, he was swivelling right and left—multicoloured, puffed up with padding, with his head thrust into his helmet so his face looked black.

It seemed to me that he was a demon straight from hell, which he had arraigned before me in all its horror, but the sky was full of men just like him.

Nikos Mastorakos archive.
In England, everyone knows about the Battle of Crete, but no one knows a thing about the Battle of Leros. Everyone knows the last time the Germans used paratroopers was during the Battle of Crete. Wrong, the last time was on Leros. (*Reg Neep, British soldier in the King's Own Regiment*).

The giant Ju-52s were flying by low on the horizon outside, dumping a continuous and rapid stream of bundles that immediately unfurled as the planes made their way out to sea, though continuing to drop a few who splashed into the sea and sank straight to the bottom, never to return to the surface again. More than a few of them were laid to rest before tiring themselves in battle, slowly sinking to the bottom with their parachutes. One of the planes trailed smoke as it, too, approached the surface of the water. It plunged into the sea within minutes, agitating the sea all around with waves reminiscent of a southerly gale.

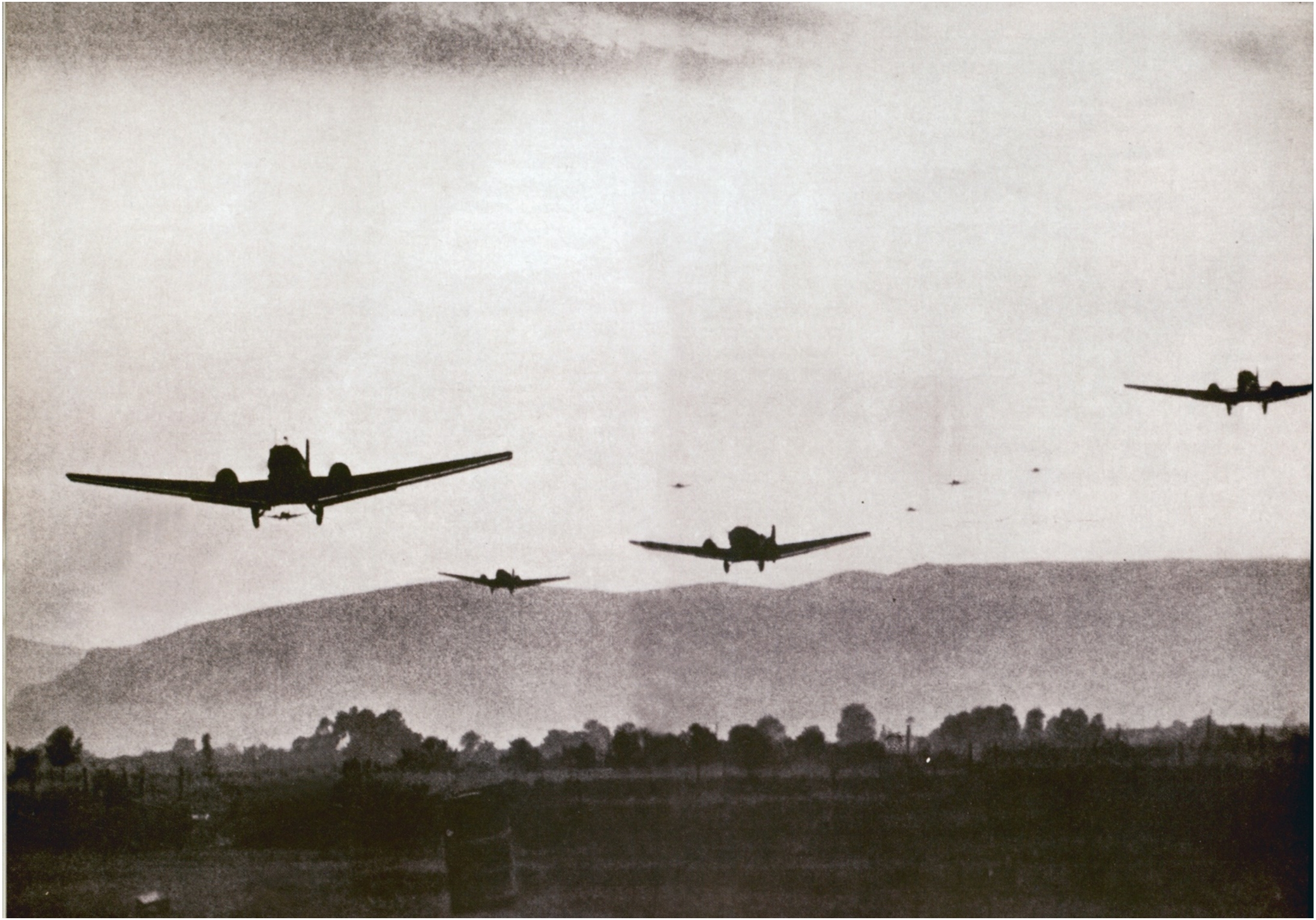
A window opened some hundred metres to my left, and my friend Nikos Malias appeared like some romantic or curious observer. But he can't have been overjoyed by what he saw as he fell wounded to the floor. I could hear screaming inside the house; fortunately, he's still alive today, though the bullet went clean through his chest.

There was fearsome hand to hand fighting all across Alida; there'd be an Englishman on one side of a wall in the field and a German on the other…and the Stukas above our heads didn't let up for a moment.

It was just as well that the German aviators slept at night.

It's estimated that around 600 paratroopers were dropped that night, and that about half of them were lost in the sea or on dry land. One of our own sailors, who was captured by the Germans, says he helped bury three hundred dead in the drop zone.

German paratrooper in Alida.
Tasos Kanaris archive.



Lega, the Jesuit priest, relates that some of the wounded, faced with certain death, threw their grenades instead of seeking help. In that way, they executing their orders to blow up the landmines in the area, and helped their comrades.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Loading crates into the lower section of the hull of a Junkers-52.
Nikos Mastorakos archive.

Junkers-52 transport formations after take-off.
Every aircraft could carry up to twelve paratroopers.
Nikos Mastorakos archive.

The claxon has sounded, and one after another they leap into the void.
Nikos Mastorakos archive.

A German M-type landing craft loaded with mules and a couple of German soldiers was hit at Panagia: a German waded ashore and hoisted some of those flags they had aboard near the Greeks, so the planes wouldn't fire at him—he signalled to them. Then he came into the shelter—the whole area was awash with big shelters—and picked up an English gun from the weapons lying on the floor, and used it to get the sixty Italians inside out into the open all by himself. Sixty men surrendered, for God's sake!

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

"Five o'clock tea". I saw fifteen Englishmen drinking tea at 5:00 in the midst of the battle. A single German took then prisoner. "Hands up!" was the first English phrase I learned. He took them prisoner and took them to Kleidi by himself. I don't know what became of them.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

When the Germans came—it was around 9:00 or 10:00 at night, if I remember rightly—they knocked on the door and came in. My father let out a "Welcome, welcome", and I told him "They're not English, they're Germans". I remembered what Germans looked like from the newsreels they'd shown in the cinema with Mussolini. "No", says my father, "they're British special forces". But I insist: "No, father, they're not English, they're German".

They said to us "English, English?"; they were looking for British soldiers, but what they desperately wanted to know was how many Gurkhas there were. There's a special battalion in India that have these curvy knives: they were night commandos who'd attack at night and slice the enemies' bellies open.

The Germans were terrified of them. They asked how many Italians there were, we said there were around 3,000, but that didn't interest them at all. English? My father said 4,000. "Gurkhas, Indians?", they asked, and my father told them some more lies: 5,000. And that really put the wind up them. To calm them down, my poor mother piped up with "Brandy, brandy anyone?", and they replied "Ja, ja", but when she brought it they asked my father to drink first because they were afraid we were going to poison them. Things like that had happened on Crete, and the Germans on Leros had come from Crete.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

There was knocking at our door at eleven o'clock that night. It was two villagers from next door. A German had left a wounded paratrooper with them who'd been hanging from a tree. He'd threatened to kill them all if he died. The paratrooper was moaning in great pain, and could neither sit nor stand up, and they were afraid he might die and that the others would kill them all when they came back. We decided to walk down to the British hospital in the Villa Belleni together, more out of ignorance of the danger than courage, to tell them to come and get him.

But a sentry stopped us before we reached the coast, outside the Villa Syridakis, just behind the Bellini, and took us into the house. They were all lying on the floor, wearing very little. Their officer, who was just wearing his trousers, spoke to us in French. We took him for an Englishman. When I assured him that the wounded man was a German, he sent three soldiers with us, who had us walk in front of them as they followed, guns at the ready. We reached the house without exchanging a word. The wounded man embraced them. They gave me a packet of cigarettes, picked him up, and left.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Paratroops fighting to take a piece of high ground on Leros.
Peter Schenk archive.

Lakki harbour.

Panteli harbour.

Alida harbour.

Partheni harbour.

The British HQ on Merovigli.

The Italian defence HQ.

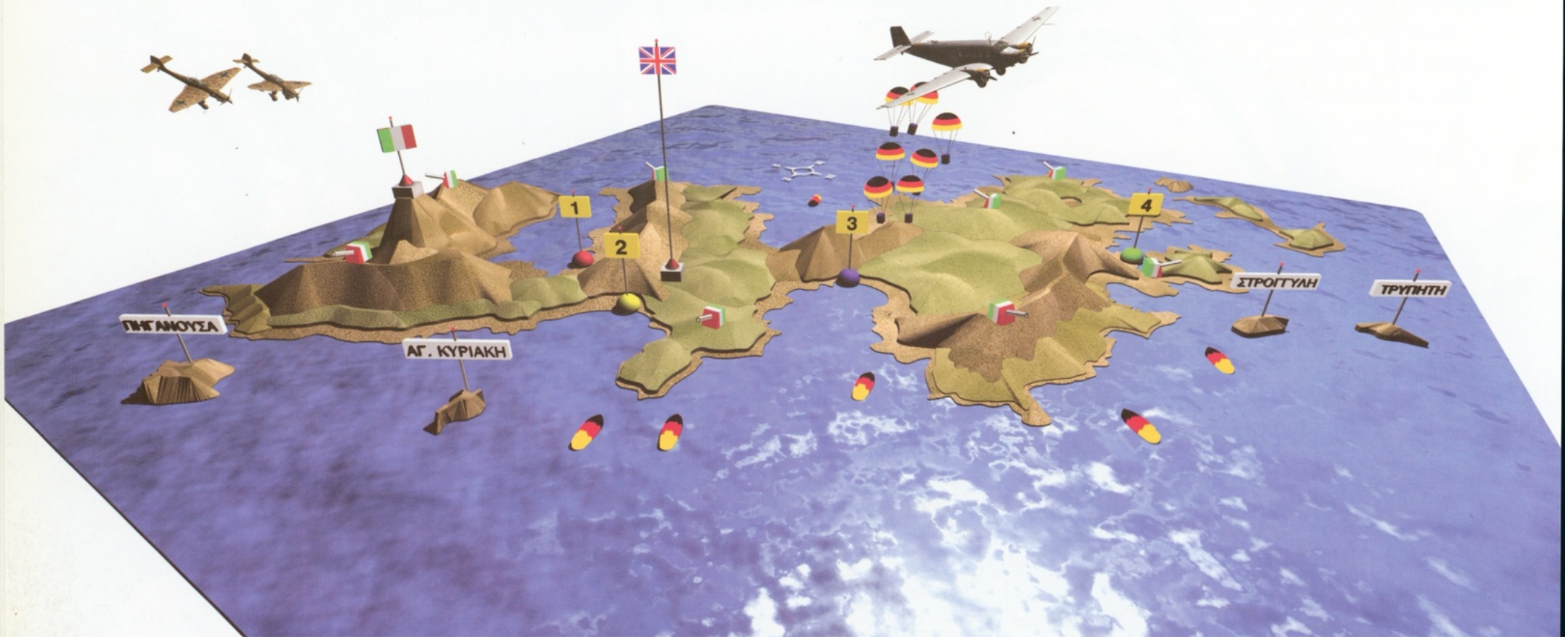
Italian batteries.

German landing craft head for the points where they will shed their cargoes.

Junkers-52 transport plane.

Stukas: light bombers, vertical assault planes.

German paratroops descending towards Rachi.



Detail: we can make out the narrow strip of land, possession of which will allow the Germans to split the island in two.

3D maps of the battle.

3D Modelling: Costis Mitsotakis.

I suppose it must have been around four in the afternoon when I had yet another shock…I stumbled across an intelligence officer at the tunnel's eastern exit with an armful of papers. He went out, lay them on the hillside, sprinkled them with paraffin and set them alight. This seemed to me a marvellous way of informing the bombers that were continually circling above us of the desperate situation in Command HQ. I asked him how he'd come up with the idea. "We're simply burning confidential documents, just to be on the safe side, you know; codes and that sort of thing", he replied.

Leonard Marsland Gander,* Daily Telegraph *correspondent, British journalist.

The British HQ on Merovigli was protected by some 20 metres of solid rock. Shaped like a spear, it had two exits, one facing Lakki, the other the coast at Alida. A third access point led to a spiral staircase that wound its way up to the little square on the top of the hill with a view over the coast at Alida, Lakki, Gourna, and Panteli.

You could watch the paratroopers coming down from your own doorstep, see how they ran, how some flapped like sails while others got caught in the trees and stayed there dangling, not wriggling or anything—they'd been hit in the air. There was a guy from Crete, Kostis was his name, but we called him 'Kotis' [chicken], who shot four Germans from below with his rifle, but they got him, too.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

One of the many corridors in the large shelter at Merkia.

The Italian Naval Command bunker was far superior to the British one. It had a concrete floor, lights, and good ventilation. It was, however, terribly congested with sailors and soldiers who would stand around idly doing nothing. They would throng in front of the entrance and then crowd into the tunnel when they saw the bombs beginning to fall, even if they were miles away, or the planes were heading for the other side of the island.

Some of them would very devoutly cross themselves. These continuous waves of panic were aggravating and infectious. Efforts to persuade the Italians that the bombs were not destined for them personally, and that it would be better to make a decision as to whether to stand inside or outside proved fruitless. Gesticulating as we talked, they continued to run in and out of the bunker tirelessly and ceaselessly. They looked at me as though I were mad when I refused to go into the bunker as a squadron that was clearly on its way to another target flew overhead.

Leonard Marsland Gander, Daily Telegraph correspondent, British journalist.

Italian soldiers in front of the shelter.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

View of the area around Rachi, the site of the German paratroop drop, seen from one of the entrances into the British shelter / HQ.

Alida Bay at night.

View of Alida Bay, where a section of the German forces landed, seen from the other entrance to the British HQ.

Konstantinos Metallinos archive.
A small boat tied up at Lakki at around 10:00, and six Irishmen climbed out onto the wharf. They'd been taken prisoner on Pityki and shut up in a cave, but they had managed to get away, steal the boat from Panteli and make it to Lakki. The Germans had treated them well, but hadn't given them any food because they didn't have any. (*Leonard Marsland Gander, Daily Telegraph correspondent, British journalist*).

We were in a shelter and the Germans approached us asking in Italian first if there were any Italians inside, we said "No, we're Greeks", and one of the Germans asks us in impeccable Greek "Are you Greeks?" to confirm what we had said. We came out and starting talking to him, asking where he'd learnt the language. "I've been in Piraeus for three years", he replied.

Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.

One of the two large entrances into the Merkia shelter. This is the shelter described by Leonard Marshland Gander: "The Italian Naval Command bunker was far superior to the British one. It had a concrete floor, lights, and good ventilation. It was, however, terribly congested with sailors and soldiers who would stand around idly doing nothing..."

The area around Alida changed hands frequently, especially the high ground to the west. One minute there'd be British troops up near our hideouts, the next minute they'd be Germans. The Germans would open a door and stick their gun barrels in first; then you'd see their dark helmets as they spoke. And they'd always ask the same question: "English?". If the answer was no, Greeks, they'd close the door behind them, and we'd breathe a sigh of relief.
The situation was confused in Alida, but Merovigli was a volcano ready to explode. The Stukas there almost always hunted in packs, and would dive so low you expected them to crash into the mountainside as they tried to pluck the fighters from their trenches like vultures. It was here that the full destructive fury of the bombardments was unleashed. They blew the mountainsides and ridges asunder and wrapped them in smoke and dust. The only thing they didn't do was drop incendiary bombs: with the dense, dry grasses on the hillside, the thick covering of trees and bushes, and the landmines, this would have been a catastrophe; a catastrophe that could have graced the pages of Dante's *Inferno* in an illustration by Dore. Fortunately, the thought may simply not have crossed their minds.
That was a hard, epic battle they fought on Merovigli. All of Leros watched on, since the mountain is visible from the whole island.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Bombardment of Merovigli.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

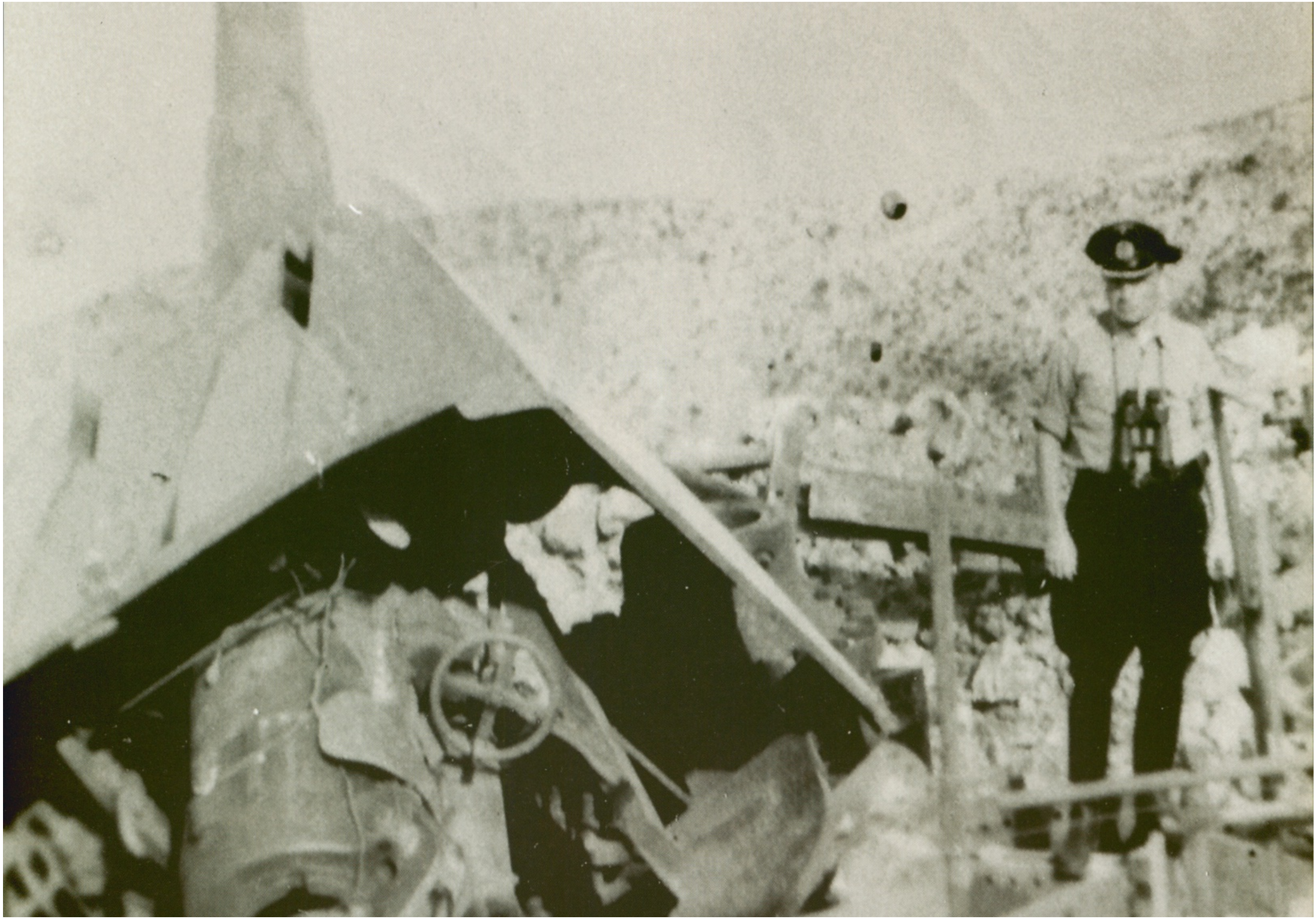
The battery on Patela was in command of eight other batteries. Merovigli was *grupo centro*, which is to say it was the central battery: the gallery that started there went all the way down to coast. This was where Tilney, the British commander, stationed himself.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

The bunker was now full of dust, smoke, and people lying on the ground carrying out their duties with a great deal of effort. People couldn't stand at the eastern entrance anymore, because a German mortar would send a shell over every now and then from Pityki. Brigadier Tilney, as unruffled as ever, organised a meeting. The photographer related that the battle had ebbed and flowed during the night, and that command HQ had at one point been almost completely surrounded. The brigadier was resting when he was informed that German paratroopers were ascending towards Merovigli. Arming himself with a Tommy gun, he ordered the entire general staff to grab a weapon and led a group sally which, partly due to the element of surprise, and partly due to their synchronised group fire, drove the Germans back and re-established communication with the forces to the north. But, unfortunately, no reinforcements had arrived that night, and no supplies, either. The Brigadier drew up a message for the Middle East Command, announcing the successes that had been achieved, the difficulties faced, the exhaustion of his men, and the lack of ammunition, especially for the Bofors. The message finished thus: "We have done our duty. Now it is your turn. I shall fight to the end."

Leonard Marsland Gander,* Daily Telegraph *correspondent, British journalist.

A German officer examining a 152mm machine-gun destroyed on Skoubarda.



Our people in the caves at Liskaria and Panagies saw Italian seamen from Kleidi loading ammunition for the Germans. Their officers were nowhere to be seen. After the battle, we found their bodies—they had been executed—in the red fields to the east of their battery.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

My father was a man who took duty very seriously—they would often take him to tend to the wounded at night. We heard shots from the pillbox one evening, after they'd brought my father back and left. When we went outside, we heard a voice repeating "mother, father" a little below our house. There was a dry river bed in Alida, and it was there that we found two British soldiers. I remember that the lieutenant was wearing round glasses, and that the Union Jack he'd wrapped around himself was all there was keeping his guts in. My father could do nothing for him. The other was very young, but already dead.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

The living quarters of the FAM-DICAT Battery on Mount Patela today.

The entrance to the shelter, right beside the living quarters.

We watched on in trepidation. The flaming arcs and grey tulips in the sky were now appreciably fewer in number, which would indicate that the machinegun nests were running out of ammunition. Which meant that the German planes could squawk like vultures in almost total safety over the defenders' heads, in search of flesh; the soul of Merovigli, which was on the point of death.

The Germans climbed up Merovigli inch by inch, rock by rock, bush by bush in a game drunk with death. Crawled along on their bellies, they paid no attention to the exploding mines and machine-gun nests that sowed death. It was a superhuman effort, heroic, the final pointless glint of Hitler's arms in the worldwide collapse he brought about along with his own.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

When a plane came down near Alida, what made the greatest impression on me—and that's why I remember it—was the smell of burnt flesh.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

German troops fighting to take the ridge.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

Merovigli didn't stop burning until nightfall. All we heard all night—and this was the most nightmarish night of all—was the barking of the machine-guns. There was no longer any room for hope, although it is hard for someone to believe something their eyes do not want to see.

The battle started with the dawn and continued without a break until evening. The Germans launched an intense attack on the Fortress, which held out until four in the afternoon. Then the swastika slowly ascended the Fortress flagpole.

The British and Italians put up a tough defence, and the Germans threw the full might of their air force into the skies above Merovigli. It was an aerial bombardment of unprecedented ferocity. The Germans encircled Merovigli to the north, too, and captured the central zone which included the Fortress and Pityki, while the British were busy opposing the landings at Kato Zymi.

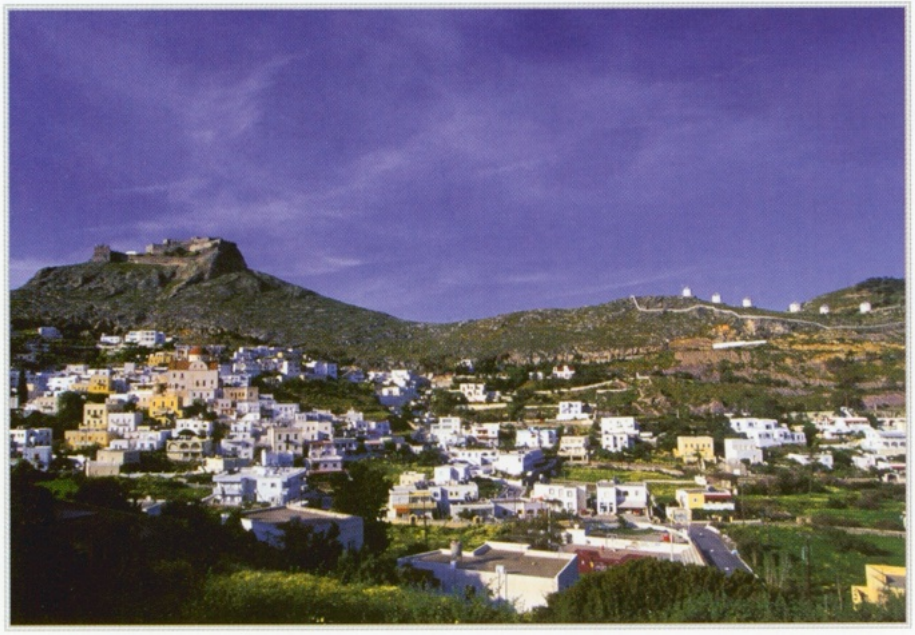
Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Of course, you know that religious feeling can create all manner of myths. There was a mirror—an enormous searchlight—at the Church of the Panagia on top of the Fortress, which they used to aim at the planes to dazzle the pilots—that's how they shot them down. It was this that downed the first English plane, by mistake. And sure, they bombed the mirror, but never hit the church—which is how those stories about the miracle of the Panagia of Kastro got started.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

The Fortress and Platanos, November 1943.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

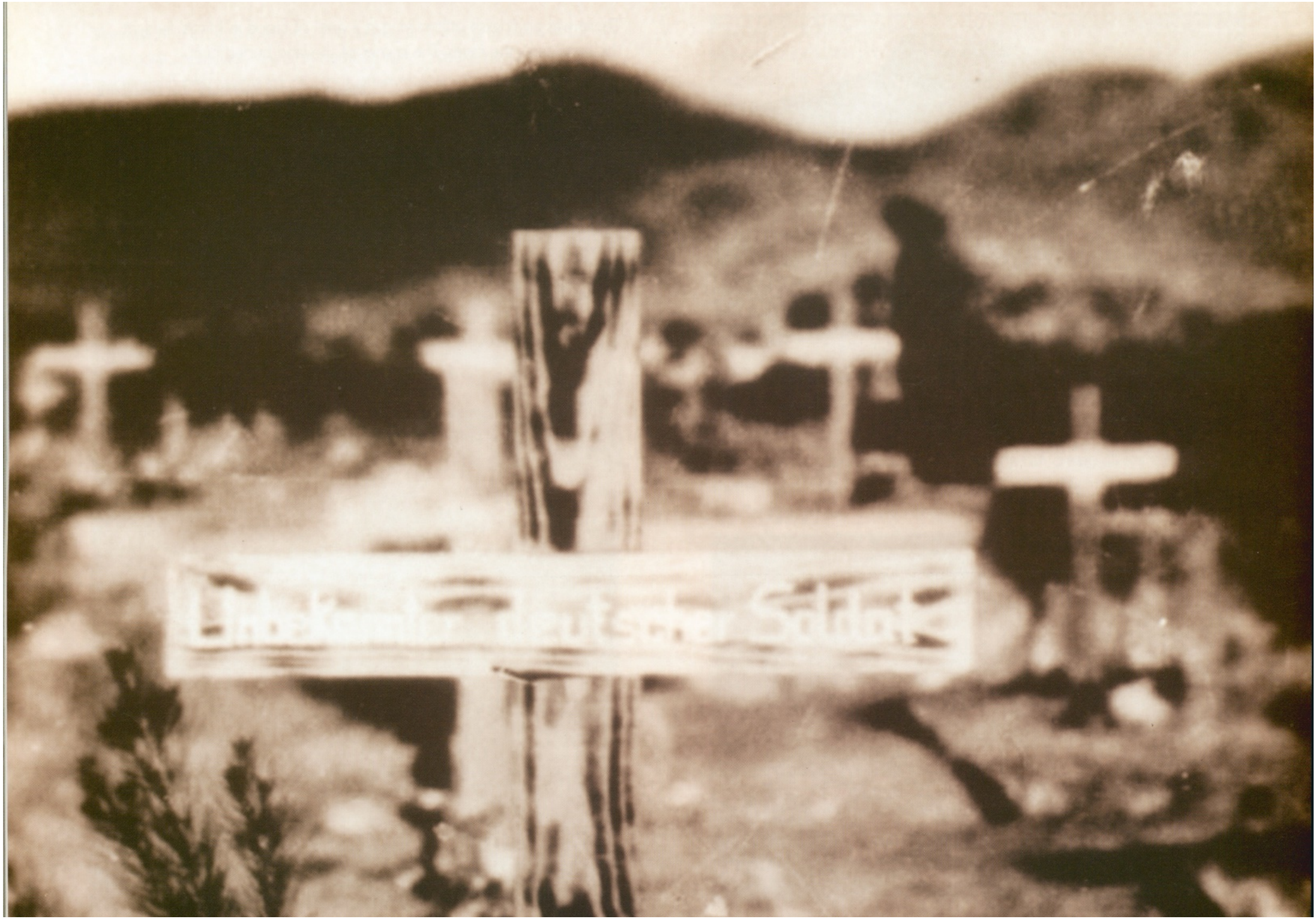
The Fortress and Platanos today.



There was an English officer lying in a pool of blood in Minas' field, at the bend near the caves. The owner of the land buried him.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

The German cemetery.
Peter Schenk archive.



The bombardments became more frequent and more intense. We were dizzy from the racket, disgusted at the sight of the rivulets of black on the ground, of the blood-stained stretchers plying back and forth between the hillside, and the emergency first aid stations.

Then we saw a grey column on the move along a path. They were Germans! We thought our time had come, but then we noticed that the Germans were unarmed, and that there was an English soldier walking behind them, bayonet fixed. They were German prisoners, still proud though somewhat bowed. They didn't even turn to look when a bomb exploded close by; they just kept on marching as though on parade.

I was physically and emotionally exhausted, angry at the pointless futility of all of this. I wanted to leave this place and go far, far away.

Leonard Marsland Gander,* Daily Telegraph *correspondent, British journalist.

And under these conditions, death's skeleton danced maniacally above tranquil, green Merovigli to the music of the instruments man has made for his own destruction; instruments which are now in the hands of a chimera. Bayonets, hands, and teeth were set to work, too, to shed blood on the green bushes of Merovigli, its aromatic thyme.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

The graves in the German cemetery on Leros were moved to the German cemetery at Rabedoza, Attiki, after the war.
Peter Schenk archive.

The Germans reached the tunnel that housed the British HQ. Brigadier Tilney was unable to continue his defence of the island, since this would have meant sacrificing not only himself, but also everyone inside, if the Germans began to throw grenades and incendiary devices into the tunnel. He decided to surrender. The white handkerchief they tied to the end of a stick was shot away in an instant. The same fate befell the general's hat, which they stuck out with the same aim, in the hope that they would recognise it. Then, seized by the fear of imminent attack, the Brigadier decided to gamble everything he had in the hope of saving all their lives: he leapt out of the entrance and lay on the ground frantically waving a white handkerchief and trying to draw their attention to the marks of rank on his sleeve.
The Germans got the message and ceased firing.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

We saw Brigadier Tilney in a jeep with two Germans and said: "Look we've won, the Germans have surrendered". But in fact the opposite was the case: Tilney had surrendered.

Reg Neep, British soldier in the King's Own Regiment.

Immediately after the surrender: Brigadier Tilney on the right and General Müller on the right.
Peter Schenk archive.

A lot of men fell at the Italian battery on Merovigli, among them the electrician who, seeing his commander wounded, launched himself with a bayonet at a German officer armed with a machine-gun. They fell to the ground, one hit and the other holed. Someone told me that when the Italian sailors went up to the Battery a few days later to bury the dead, they found the German lying under the electrician's corpse, the bayonet still stuck in his chest.

The commander was initially wounded in the knees and forehead, but then received a more serious wound to his right arm, which was blown to pieces by a grenade. They put him on a stretcher and took him to a British first aid station. General Tilney saw him and ordered he be taken to the English hospital at the foot of Mount Merovigli. A German officer stopped them on the way, but after thinking it over, allowed them to continue on their way…

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

There was a pillbox on the edge of Alida where the Italians fought courageously. Tenente Aliboni was dead, his arm protruding from the rubble with one swollen finger raised. Even now, aged 67, that image flashes before my eyes every time I pass by that spot.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

Wounded German.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

(previous left) The observation post / battery of the Farinata Battery on Mount Markelos. Note the rocks set in the concrete to provide natural camouflage.

(previous right) Inside the observation post / battery of the Farinata Battery on Mount Markelos.

Base of a large machine gun at the Moublogourna battery.

The battery on Mount Markelos.

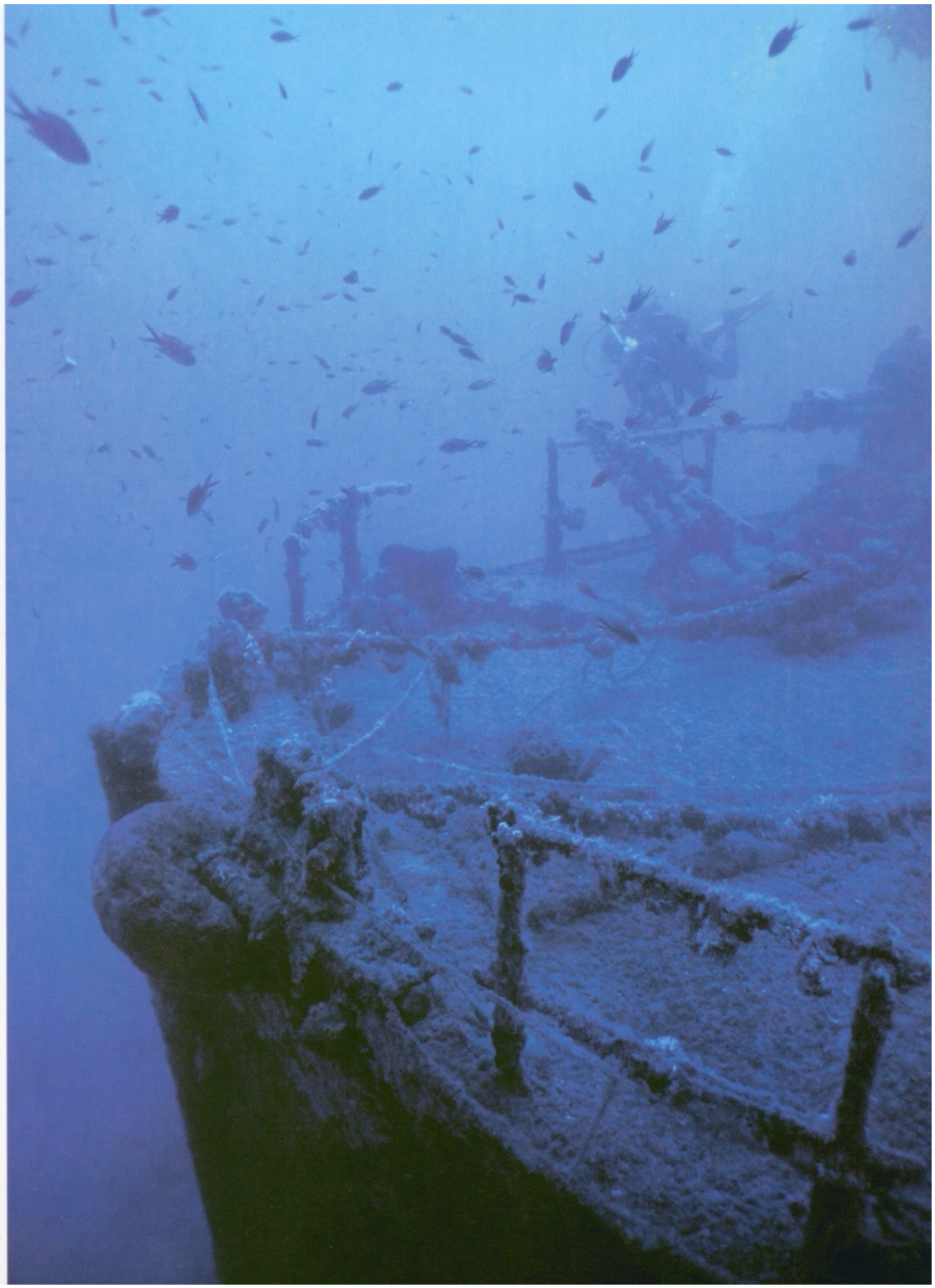
The Italians who weren't fascists fought. Up at Partheni, out at Asfoungaros, the Italians were brave lads. They had two Sicilian officers who fought with great courage, but the Germans got them. The British were tough fighters, too—they'd strip themselves to the waist and start firing.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

Bullets are scattered all over the deck.

Costis videos me underneath the ship's prow at a depth of 52 metres.

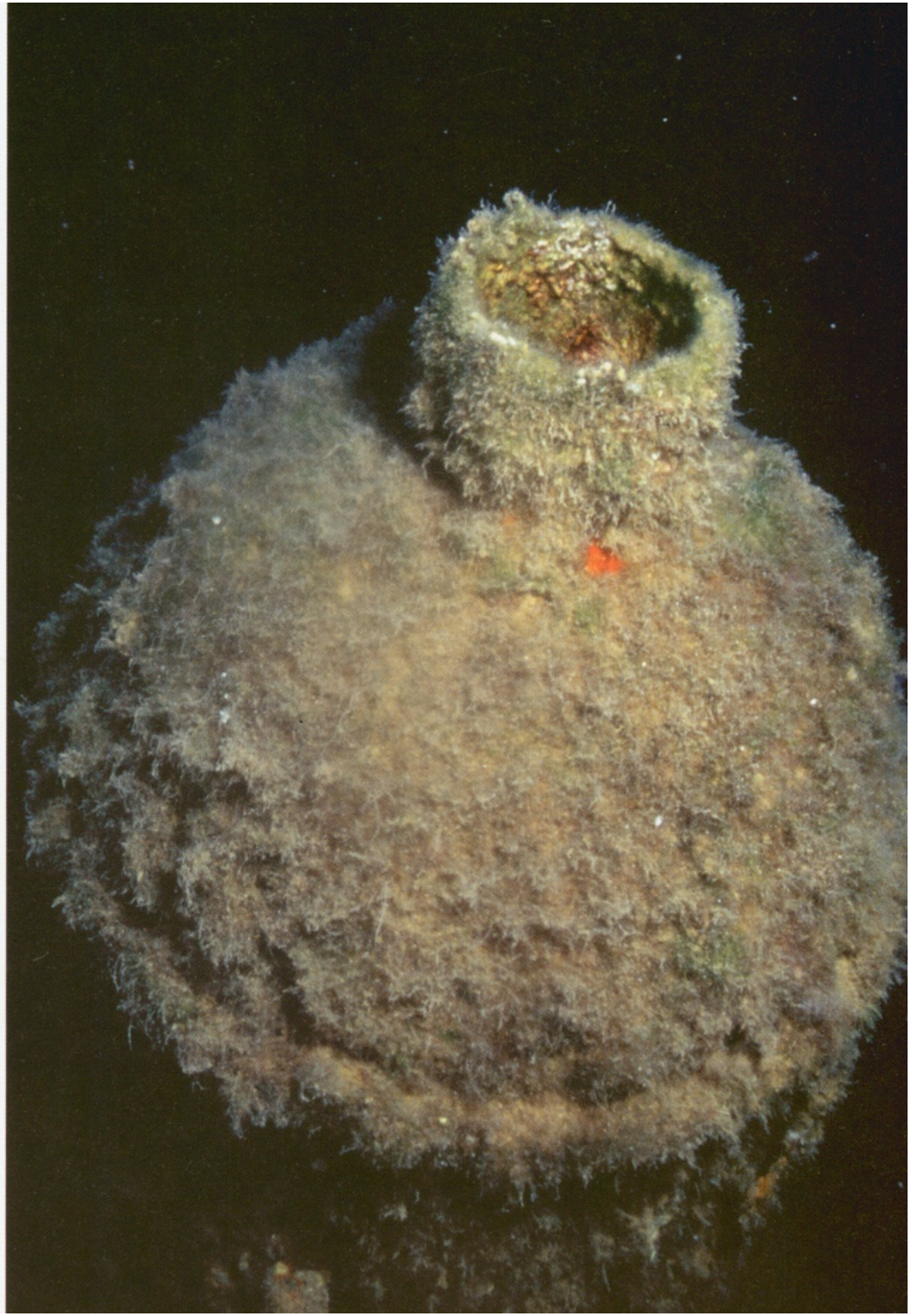
A small barge refitted to pull the metal anti-submarine net from one side of Partheni Bay to the other. They'd removed the engines and the barge was propelled by two motors, one at the stern and one on the prow. The wire moved the boat along as the net sank. It was sunk by a torpedo fired from a German aircraft.



In front of the windows on the ship's bridge.

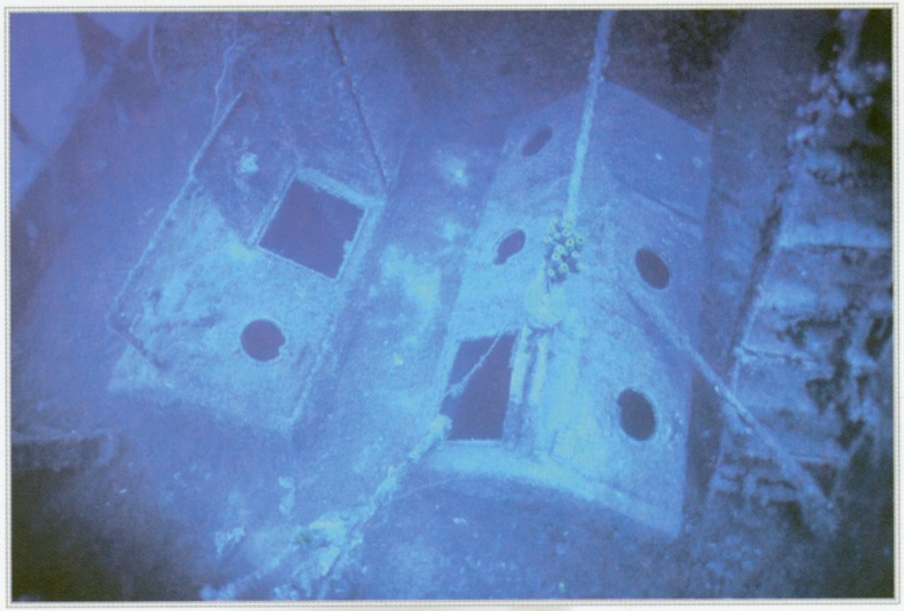
One of the two motors that moved the anti-submarine net.

(far right) The propellers have been removed from the stern so they will not become entangled in the anti-submarine nets. The thick wire ropes used to move the net are also visible.



The ship's port lantern

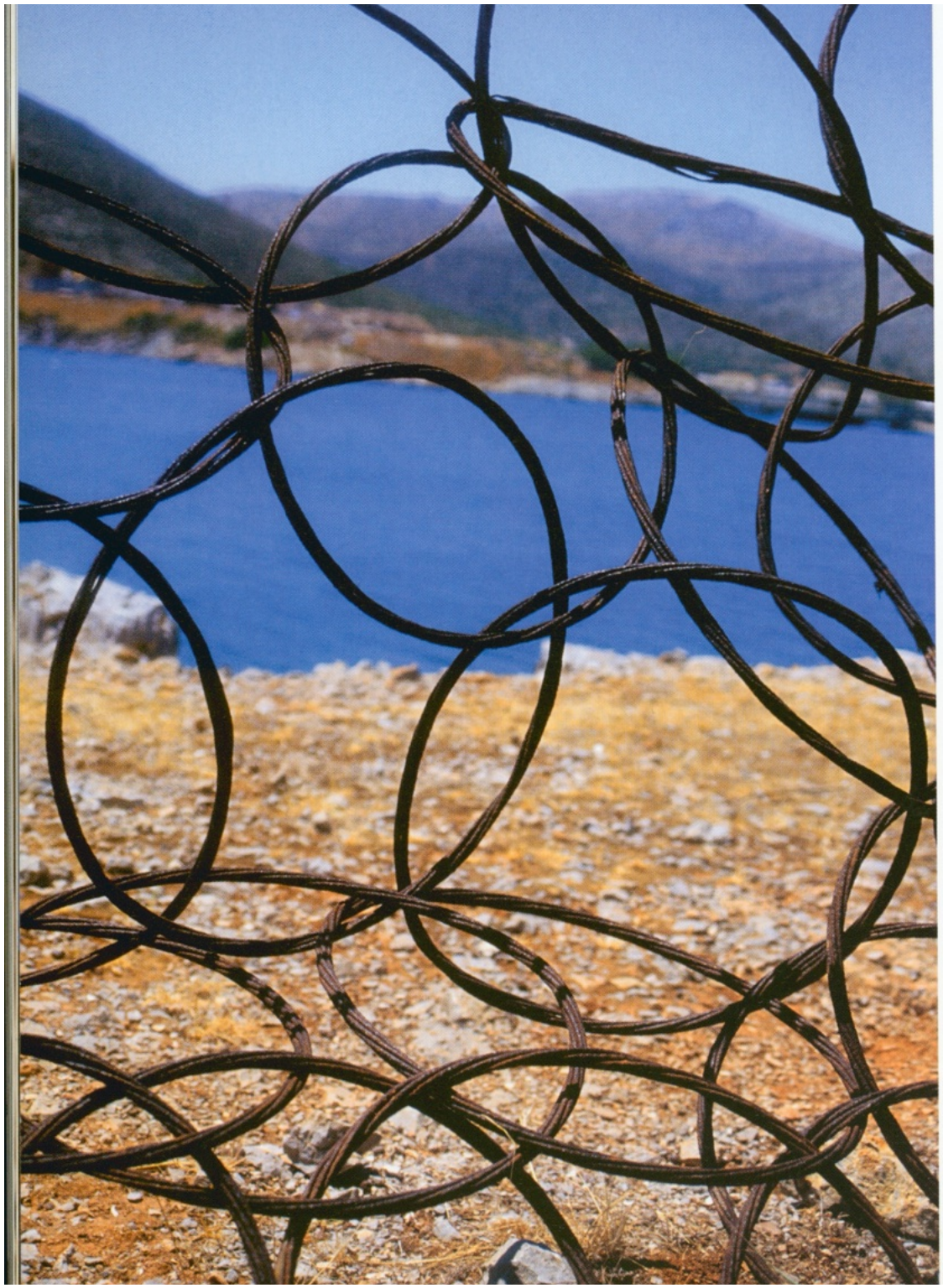
The ship's stern. The remains of planks show us that the deck was made of wood.



Above the windows looking into the boat's engine room. The two engines have been removed.

A few metres in front of the bridge, we make out the spot where the vessel was hit: there is a large vertical hole on the port side. The boat must have sunk instantaneously.

Returning to the surface after diving on the wreck in Partheni Bay, Costis hands Vasilis three Italian bullets. They were later donated to the Leros Museum.



Events as recorded in the official archives

Logbook, 22nd Division

...with every day that went by, our combative capabilities declined and success seemed almost out of the question. The fate of the forces that had already landed was hanging by a thread.

On November 14, while the German troops on Leros continued to come up against stiff resistance on the ground, renewed efforts to unload artillery in Alida Bay met with failure. At 5:50 pm, Major General Müller, the officer in command of the operation, expressed his intention to establish a bridgehead the following day in Panteli Bay with the help of air support. During the course of the day, 96 Stukas took turns providing support for the forces landing on Leros.

At 8:00 that evening, General Müller, reporting on the day's events, accurately states that the enemy had fought with conviction and major artillery support.

The offensives against Mount Merovigli and the Fortress had been repulsed.

Part of the anti-submarine net survives to this day on Partheni Beach.

The upper section of the observation post / battery on Mount Patela in ruins.

Italian Air Force commemorative cap pin. *Giannis Paraponiaris Collection*.

Insignia of the Italian 10th Regiment, which was based on Rhodes. *Giannis Paraponiaris Collection*.

Descent from the observation post / battery to the FAM-DICAT Battery's munitions dump on Mount Patela.

Marinos on the roof of the battery on Mount Markelos.

One entrance to the observation post / battery on Mount Patela. There was a second, underground, entrance which probably connected it to another battery. A third level has now been destroyed.

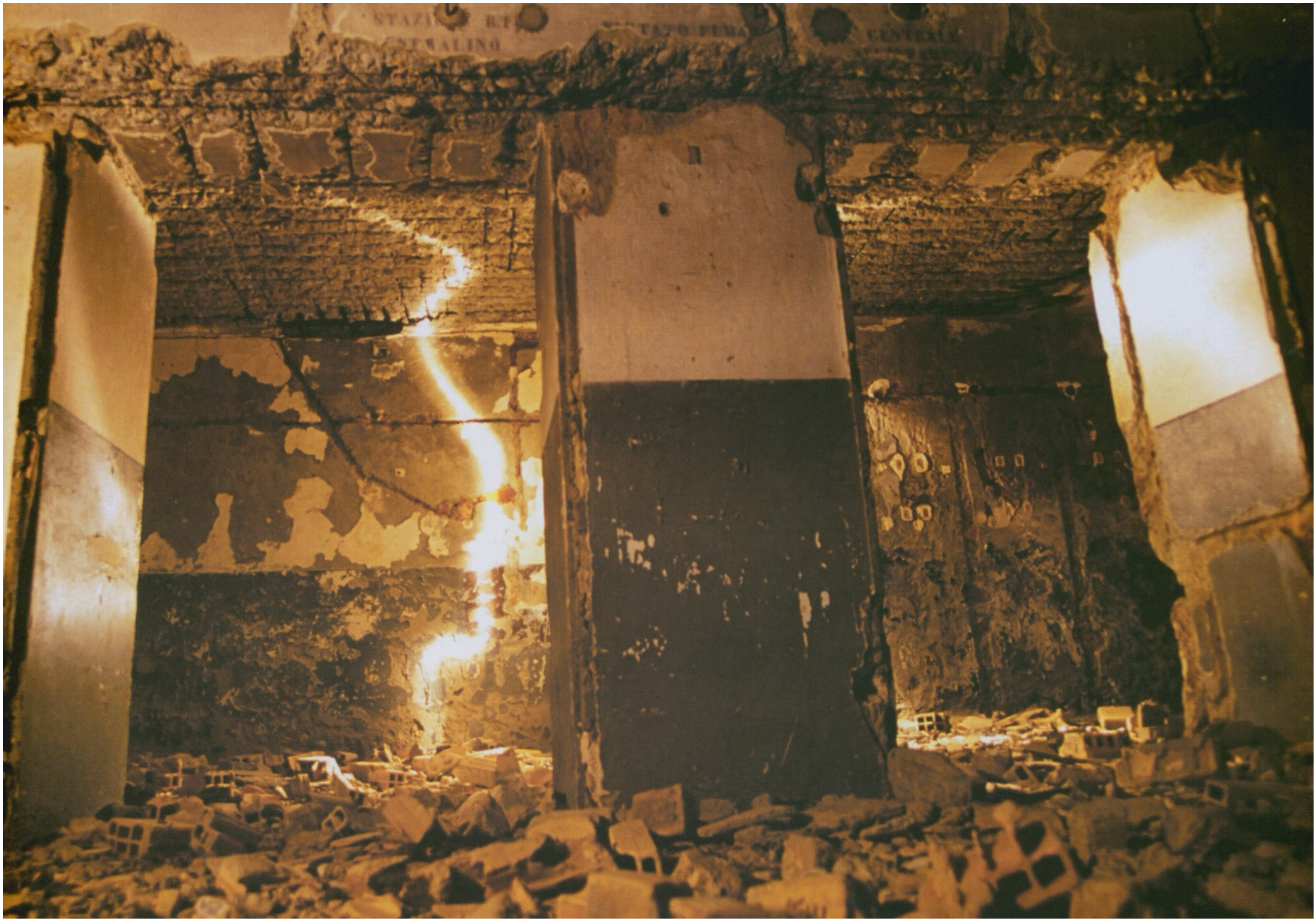
The view from the *Duce* Battery on Mount Katsouni.

Peter Schenk archive

The Germans had different sorts of parachutes — I didn't know what the red ones were, but I later found out they were for supplies. My mother — God rest her soul — used to make underskirts out of them. The parachutes came in three colours: red, white, and camouflaged. My father had told me not to pick up anything military I found, but I collected the parachutes — and they were our salvation, because we had no clothes. My mother would make us coats out of the blankets I stole, and underwear out of the parachutes. I never took anything off a dead soldier — everything I picked up I found among the stuff the parachutists dumped. (*Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros*).

Insignia of one of the four British units that fought on Leros: the Royal West Kent. *Giannis Paraponiaris Collection*.

(right & over page) The ruined interior of the FAM-DICAT installations.



The Coastal Front Command and Terrestrial Anti-aircraft Command (FAM-DICAT Command) had their headquarters on Mount Patela. They shared a communications centre buried deep with the mountain, which was connected to the observation post further up the mountain via a tunnel. One side of the centre housed the telephones used to receive information from the sentries on duty in the observation post, the other the equipment used for conveying orders to units around the island. However, this arrangement had one serious disadvantage: the relatively confined space was so packed full of equipment and work stations that the radio operators could not but annoy one another.

The noise from the equipment plus the amassing of so many different types of communication from so many sources—let alone the tumult from the air battle outside—led to an atmosphere in which only those equipped with an iron will could maintain a tolerable level of service. The situation was aggravated even further when observation post personnel were obliged to shelter in that part of the tunnel that housed the radio centre when under attack from the air.

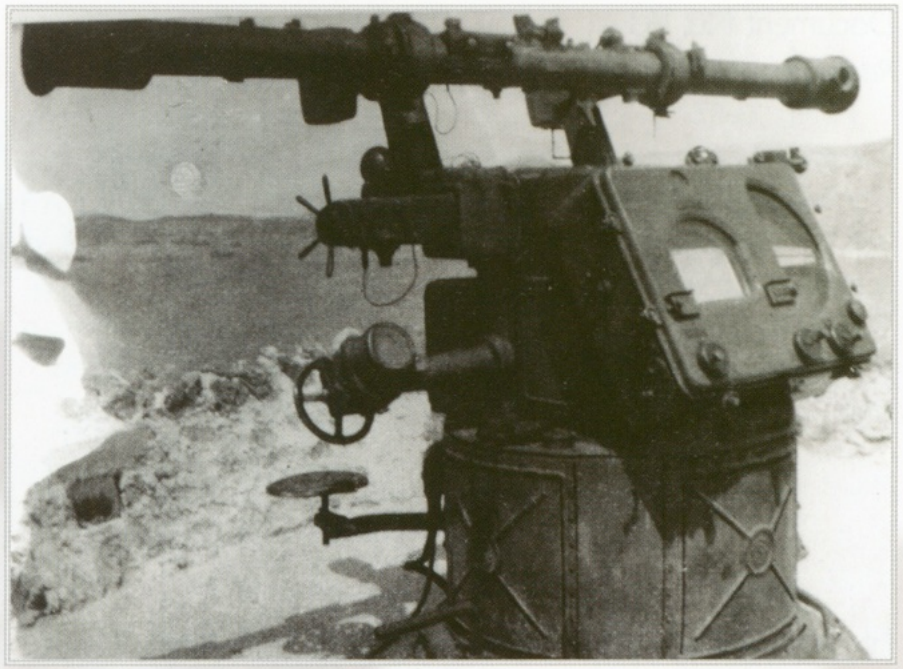
Only the protected centre of the FAM-DICAT headquarters survives—all the sections on the exterior of the mountain were totally destroyed.

The battery on Skoubarda.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

The observation post / battery
on Mount Markelos.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

The morning of November 16 brought with it good news for General Müller, the commander of the German forces. The General had taken up residence in a beautiful villa in Vathy on Kalymnos, whose garden was awash with orange and mandarin trees. It was from here that he co-ordinated the movements of the German troops on the field of battle on neighbouring Leros. What had happened? The General received a signal his intelligence officers had just that moment decoded. The signal had been sent that morning from the Regular English Command on Leros to Cairo, and read as follows: "Situation 7:15 very serious. Enemy reinforced and supported by Stukas and machine-gun fire. Our positions on the summit of Merovigli out of action. Morale low. The situation is hopeless".

It was clear that the situation was now desperate for the British, something General Müller would soon exploit to the full. First of all, he had the message sent to every unit currently in combat with his own post script added: "the enemy are breathing their last". Then he ordered the final assault on Merovigli.



Direction-finder for the guns of the FAM-DICAT battery on Mount Patela.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

A column of Italian prisoners walking from Alida towards Lakki.
Peter Schenk archive.

Document No. 163

Radiotelegraphic message from Leros: received 06:10 hours.

The end is near stop Take care with phone calls stop Morale is high stop Our seamen are brave stop Many have been killed stop Our defensive line is now one kilometre away and our hearts are adamant but fate is against us stop We have done our duty and done so with honour stop The Germans won the battle from the air stop Our total lack of air support was our downfall stop Command can no longer issue orders stop

For fifty two days they fought an unequal battle that knew no limits. German planes were in the sky over the island 24 hours a day.

(previous left) Pillbox, part of the *Duce* battery on Mount Katsouni.

After the battle. A German examines what is left of a large 152mm machine gun. *Peter Schenk archive*.

German stamp depicting Adolf Hitler.
Tasos Kanaris Collection.

THE FALL OF LEROS

"Leros surrendered at one minute to midnight on November 16, 1943."





Brigadier Tilney expressed his sadness at what he had been forced to do, and praised the Italians for their courage, fraternal participation, and conduct during the struggle.

He asked Admiral Mascherpa to accompany him to the German Command to determine the terms of the surrender. He shook the hand of everyone present, repeating his praise and thanks, and left with the German officer who had been assigned as his escort.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Following his interrogation, Admiral Mascherpa was immediately taken to a Greek house where he and Margaruzzi, another Italian officer, were kept apart from the other prisoners with two German guards.

They gave him no food for a few days, until some local civilians brought him something to eat. From there, he was led away to imprisonment and death.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

There is a battery sited on every single hill on Leros—if this war machine had been operating at full capacity, not a single German would have been able to get near the island. But lots of the batteries were traitorous; they sided with the Germans. And then the Germans executed them, because they considered them traitors. Only rarely did the British allow the Italians to fight, because they were afraid they would turn their guns on them.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

(previous left) German soldiers exuberant after the battle. *Peter Schenk archive*.

(following pages) Dawn breaks over beautiful Alida Bay.

A discussion between Brigadier Tilney and General Müller after the surrender. *Peter Schenk archive*.

Events from the official German and Italian archives

The Fuhrer's High Command: the high command of the German armed forces transmitted the following announcement:

'Following four days of hard and fluid fighting against an enemy superior both in numbers and firepower, German land and air forces led by Major General Müller, took the British Maritime Naval Base of Leros on November 16.

German radio made much of the great German victory for a number of days; this, after all, was the reason why operation "Typhoon" had been staged: to boost the morale of the German people, who saw the earth opening up before them and swallowing thousands of young Germans every day.

Italian battery at Asfoungaros

A German paratrooper captain arrived who said (via his interpreter, a sailor who knew German): "We found our paratroopers with arms and legs missing! Lieutenant Adreotti replied immediately, stressing the care that had been provided for the wounded Germans they had ferried off Strongili island. The officer continued to ask questions, wanting to find out where Vagies Beach was. Commander Meneghini replied that he knew where it was, and that he could show him if he wanted. The German told him to proceed. The Commander set off towards the coast, and Eligio Radici, an infantry captain who had been one of the commanding officers in our sector, asked if he could accompany him. The two of them walked ahead side by side, followed by the officer and a German soldier with his machine-gun at the ready.

Not long after the two of them had left their positions, they were hit by a single burst of machine-gun fire. The Germans left their bodies where they fell, unburied. Commander Meneghini's equerry was able to approach the spot a few days later and bury them.

A master craftsman mentions in his report that the Germans did not want a cross or any other form of recognition to be placed on their grave. At night, one of our workers, a prisoner, secretly made a cross on their grave out of stones.

A German soldier lies dead in Alida.
Peter Schenk archive.

Detail of a bullet.
Giannis Paraponiaris Collection.

The Kleidi battery betrayed the Allies…it was fascist and it sided with the Germans. And do you know what the Germans did? They said "since you've betrayed your homeland, you'll betray us, too". They made them dig their own grave and then they shot them.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

Captain Calise of the Italian infantry suffered the same fate. When he showed up at the Partheni detachment at around eight to surrender with his men, they marched him a short distance from his men and executed him with three rounds from a revolver.

Document No. 184
Naval radio signal from Leros: received 10:30

For General Soldarelli — to be decoded by him personally stop I inform you that Italian officers taken prisoner are being shot by the Germans stop Request you take action to ensure the international regulations of war are respected stop
085115

Mascherpa

The Germans hated the Italians for what they had done to them a second time. For abandoning them in both the first and second world wars. They really couldn't stand them.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, Leros.

Our counter-espionage organisation saved a lot of officers and doctors. We had been ordered to do so from Egypt, from Cairo.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

Relaxing: German soldiers on Alida Beach.
Peter Schenk archive.

My father saved between 50 and 60 Englishmen: he sent them across in caiques, and not a single one of the bastards ever said thank you, not one of them.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

The boatmen who ferried the fugitives across to Turkey ought to have got one gold sovereign from Samarkos—God rest his soul—for every person they helped escape. Not one of them ever did get that sovereign, though; not Yangos, not Koulouris, not Antonis, no one…but they kept on doing their job until the end.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

Samarkos lived right opposite the Gestapo building, and through the window we could see when the Germans started transmitting, so we could begin, too. Because they could trace radio signals, but they'd say "they must be ours".

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

An Italian bottle of ammonia. The Italians manufactured a number of medicinal and other products on Leros. *Tasos Kanaris Collection*.

The Villa Belleni how houses the Leros Museum.

We'd heard so much about the brutality—or rather bestiality—of the conquerors of Europe, that our knees shook at the thought that our turn had come.

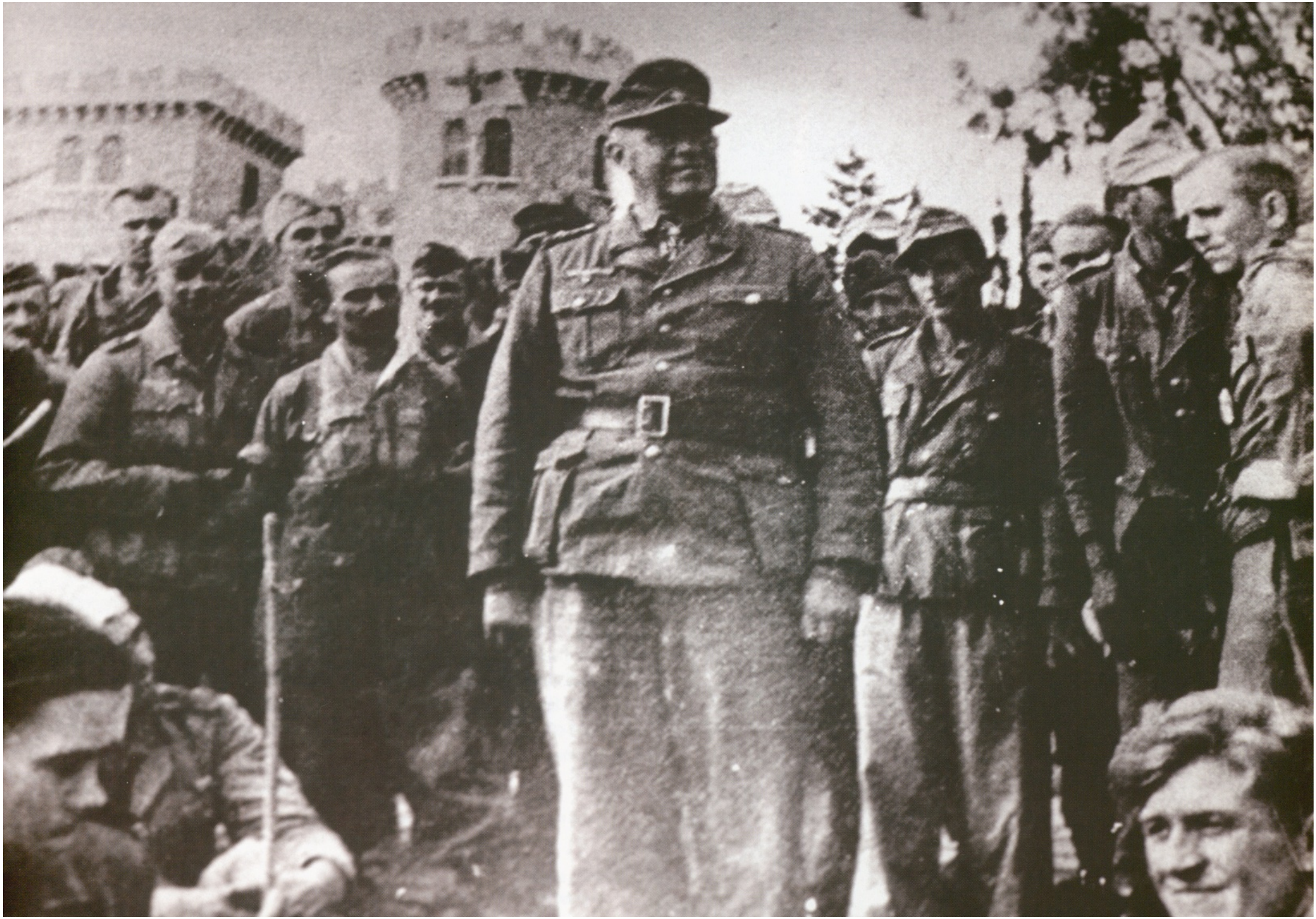
Alida Beach was packed, especially around the Villa Belleni, where, overjoyed at their victory, they embraced the wounded. Overjoyed at their victory, but perhaps more because they had come out of five days of living hell alive.

That's where Müller found them at 11:00 in the morning. His arrival stirred up wild enthusiasm. Soldiers loaded the wounded onto their backs and brought them to the general, who shook their hands and was photographed with each of them.

The roads to Partheni, Alida, Lakki, and Agia Marina, and from Rachi to Angyra, were the busiest they had ever been in the island's history. They were literally choked with people: civilians returning to their homes, because they didn't need the caves any more; captured British and Italian troops trudging to captivity, exhausted from their exertions and lack of sleep; especially the Italians who were embarking on a journey into the unknown…they could only guess what was to become of them.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

General Müller's visit to the hospital, which was housed in the Villa Belleni at the time. *Peter Schenk archive*.



They started burying people 24 hours later.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

The British didn't transport their dead…they buried them all here. The Germans and Italians took theirs home.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

Another one of my comrades-in-arms, who also fought here, wanted to forget. There were lots of us who wanted to forget. A couple of years ago, his family couldn't decide where to go on holiday, and his daughter turned around and said: "You decide where we're going. We'll go anywhere you want". And he said "I want to go back to Leros". And they came here. My friend was very melancholy…when they got to the island and it was raining, he said "They've crying for me".

Reg Neep, British soldier in the King's Own Regiment.

The real heroes are here, you see; the men that died (we are in the British cemetery). I'm a little disappointed, though that's not the right word, because a lot more men were killed than we can see in here. A lot of Englishmen, but a lot of Greeks, too, who fought with us and lost a lot of ships, including a destroyer that was carrying an entire infantry regiment to Leros. They all died, drowned. It's very sad, very sad indeed.

Reg Neep, British soldier in the King's Own Regiment.

The British cemetery on Alida Beach today.

If you walked past the workshop, some German would yell and beckon you over in sign language, since you didn't know a word of his language and he didn't know a word of yours. I can tell you, we weren't overjoyed at the invitation. As you approached, the German would ask: 'Italian?' If you replied in the negative, if you said 'Greek, Grecos', and he'd send you on your way with an abrupt gesture. You'd leave, and wouldn't even sneak a backwards glance for fear he might change his mind about letting you go. If you were Italian, you were straight into the workshop. The cart for the corpses, which was already starting to smell less than pleasant, was about the best task you could get in there. A kick in the behind was fairly common. All of this was saddening, but I have to admit that the realisation the Germans treated us differently from the Italians was some consolation.

As we walked along, us and the prisoners, we'd count the dead by the side of the road and in the fields. I'll never forget it: a silent, wordless scene that said so much. The English had an ammunition dump under the fig trees in Zoi Mavrou's vineyard— Kollias' vineyard as it is today—near the main road. It was guarded by Indian troops. A few metres further on, a short distance between them, were two dead German paratroopers, still tangled up in their parachutes, and an Indian lying face down on the ground beside the ammo dump, the gun in his hands pointing towards the dead Germans.

The wound in the Indian's back was so deep you could see that his innards smashed to a pulp. At the bend outside the Patriarch's residence, an Italian seaman lay curled up in the gutter holding his stomach with both hands. Opposite the Villa Maratos, there was a German officer lying face down ten metres from the road. He was still wearing his helmet, and his head was resting on the slope; the machine-gun on the Agios Konstantinou bend had got him as he crawled up the hill. It was Müller Jurgens, as I later found out from his father, a university professor. He only had one son: him.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Makeshift graves.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

Do you know what's stuck in my mind? Them laying the dead out in the big field, here beside the hotel. A German would hole the corpses with a pitch fork because they were as tight as a drum. When he made a hole in them, the air would escape along with a terrible smell. It took twenty days for that smell to go away. That's the sort of thing we saw when we were kids.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

Four o'clock in the afternoon on November 17, and squads of Italian prisoners were loading coal as the German units guarding them let loose with kicks and punches. The bulk of the prisoners had been split between Gonia, Agios Georgios, and the aerodrome; British and Italians troops separately. There was no food for anyone. They organized the Italians prisoners into labour gangs right away to perform all the low and degrading tasks under unspeakable conditions.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

The British cemetery on Alida Beach today.

Italian prisoners.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

At the same time, the departure of prisoners for Athens had already started. On November 30, fifteen hundred prisoners were loaded—literally—onto a single ship.

In Athens, the prisoners were forced to march long distances under terrible conditions along the streets of the city. These marches gave the prisoners the chance to see the sympathy with which they were viewed by the Greek people, who gathered around them kindly and were not cowed by the violence with which the Germans tried to push them away. A number of prisoners were killed when the bombs they were forced to collect exploded.

A state of emergency was declared on Leros in October 1944. From that date on, food rations were drastically reduced, and Italian workers and their families were permitted to leave the island.

Thousand upon thousands of prisoners were taken during the capture of the Dodecanese islands. Hitler ordered that every available means of transport be employed to transport them from the islands as quickly as possible, and that the rules regulating maximum passenger loads no longer applied.

On September 22, 1943, the *Donizetti*, which had been commandeered by the Germans, set sail from Rhodes for Piraeus. It was sunk by H.M.S. *Eclipse*, a British destroyer. One thousand, eight hundred Italian prisoners were drowned. There were no survivors.

The British cemetery at night.

Coin dating from the Italian occupation depicting Leros' communication centre.
Giannis Paraponiaris Collection.

Night shots of the Leros communication centre, a building that survives to this day along with three large directional aerials and armoured doors and windows. The interior of the building housed a great deal of equipment, including large power supply units, substations, and an interior specially modelled for the running of the Centre.

One of the entrances into the Centre, with a simple wooden door. Two armour-plated doors behind it create an antechamber for absolute security.

The *Oria*, the unknown *Titanic*

Studying a book on Leros, we discovered that a ship had sunk off Patroklos, a small island off the coast of Attica, with the loss of 4,184 lives! Consider the scale of the disaster: only 1,452 people went down with the *Titanic*!

The transport ship *Oria*.
Aristotelis Zervoudis archive.

We immediately began a more systematic investigation in an attempt to locate the site of the wreck. Having determined the general area of the shipwreck, for quite some time we found nothing. Despite all the information we had on the exact site of the wreck, we had found nothing that even indicated we were close.

It was our good friend Kostis Georgas who informed us four months later as we were discussing the matter, that he'd spotted some metal plates in the water to the north of the island, very close to where we were searching. Till then, it had never crossed our mind that the wreck might have been salvaged for scrap, though this would explain why the sonar had failed to register a strong signal. Following Georgas' instructions, we located the wreck on our very first attempt. Following the wreckage from a depth of 9 metres down to 38 metres, we found large numbers of metal plates, barrels, and—most emotively of all—piles of fractured bones. Soles off military boots, canteens, and dixie cans were all that remained of this silent tragedy.

Very little remains today of the wreck of the *Oria*. Costis shows us a dixie.

A canteen and other personal belongings: parts of this enormous naval tragedy.

We kept sheep back then, and I'd gone up to the fold. The weather was appalling that night: lightning, thunder, wind. Suddenly there was this glow in the sky…I had no way of knowing what was happening. The next day we learned that a ship had sunk, and that the glow had been a flare. The whole of Legraina beach was littered with corpses that morning. It was a terrible sight; they were lying there like dead fish. A southerly wind—very rare in our parts—had carried their bodies ashore. There were about 1,500 bodies, some clothed other naked…it was awful. Then the Germans came and herded us away; they wouldn't let us anywhere near. They dug a trench 100 metres long on Koraka beach and buried them.

They said the Germans had torpedoed them on purpose; that a Greek and five Germans had escaped unscathed. Bodies kept washing up until June.

I remember that they cut the hulk up later on. These big tug boats came along with blow torches and dynamite, and they were working there for some time.

Giannis Konstantopoulos, Legraina.

A sole is all that remains of a soldier's boot. There are hundreds of soles scattered all over the area. We are awe-struck by the thought that these correspond to men who lost their lives here.

The *Oria*, a Norwegian-owned steamer, was built in 1920. Commandeered by the Germans, it took part in the invasion of Norway as a troop transport.
It was used once again in 1943 in operations to mop up Italian resistance in the Dodecanese.

All in all, 4,233 Italians from Rhodes and Leros were loaded into its holds on February 11, 1944. More specifically, there were 43 officers, 118 warrant officers, and 4,062 troops from all three branches of the Italian armed forces aboard.
The ship departs in the afternoon for Piraeus with an escort of three light destroyers, the *TA16*, *TA17*, and *TA19*, all of which had been commandeered from the Italians. The ship accelerates to a speed of 9 knots during the voyage.

Thirty German troops also embark as guards, plus another 60 who are travelling to mainland Greece. The crew of five includes the Greek ship's engineer and the Norwegian captain. The *Oria* is attacked by British vessels off the coast of Kos, but the convoy manages to escape and proceeds as far as Cape Sounion, where it runs into some extreme weather.

The violent storm-force winds—in excess of eleven on the Beaufort scale—drive the *Oria* off-course and the vessel strikes the island of Patroklos.

A red flare and a voice on the radio "we've run aground" signal the beginning of an incredible tragedy. The stricken vessel, its starboard side on the rocks, floods and capsizes in just a few minutes.

Fragments of metal sheets and barrels are almost all that remains of the ship.

The depth of the sea bed varies between 5 and 42 metres in the area, and its bows are left protruding from the water. The following day, February 12, five tugs are despatched from Piraeus, although only one, the *Vulcan*, makes it due to the storm that is still raging. The *Vulcan*, itself in danger, approaches the prow and ascertains that there are still five survivors inside.

Another survivor is found clinging to the rigging. The tug boat crew begin an attempt to cut a slot in the hull with a portable blow torch through which the trapped survivors—their hearts in their mouths at the prospect of survival— can escape. Unfortunately, a wave carries away the blow torch, which is lost. Attempts to recover it from the seabed are hampered by the extremely rough seas, and the attempt has to be postponed.

On February 14, almost two days later, a second tug—the *Titan*, also out of Piraeus—returns with a new blow torch and the five victim are finally released in a state of shock.

The survivors' statements reveal that one Greek and six Germans were saved. Other sources relate that fifteen German soldiers were drowned, and that the entire crew—including the Greek engineer, the captain, and the remaining German soldiers—scrambled to safety on the rocks.

Only 49 of the 4,233 Italians on board were saved. Every prisoner locked into the ship's hold went down with the ship.

The ship was carrying a lot of oil in barrels. The place was suddenly full of oil…and anyone with a trucks came to load up. Then the Germans came and chased us away.

In 1958, the baker rode off to change his ploughshare. It was then that he noticed something like a ball caught on the blade. When he took it off, he realised it was a human skull.

The trench remained there for many years. No one planted anything there. Then, in 1960 or 1965, the Italians came and took them away. They were there for some time digging up the bones. They even had sieves, and sieved the soil to find all the bones.

Kostas Konstantopoulos, Legraina.

The greatest naval tragedy of World War II, and perhaps the greatest naval tragedy of all time.

The sinking of the *Oria* was the last in a series of Italian losses due to shipwrecks. All in all, 13,000 Italians went down in the Mediterranean out of a total of 33,000 Italian prisoners lost during the whole of World War II.

German soldiers escorting Italian and British prisoners to Alida.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

But one thing's certain: the Germans didn't bother anyone, men nor women; and something else, too: they didn't take food away from anyone, and allowed civilians to help themselves to Italian supplies and the British food dumps scattered across the island, if they looked poor. They sold food to those that looked well-dressed, but at better prices than the British and the Italians.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

When the Germans took the island, they allowed the Italian stores to be looted for 24 hours. After that, the store guards sold food on the black market. I used to exchange things with them: I'd bring them two bottles of liqueur and get parmesan and potatoes…it was "I'll give you this, if you'll give me that". The Germans would give a lot for drink back then.

I was the best when it came to nicking things: my brother felt too ashamed. I'd load Varvara, our donkey, with blankets and drink and swap them for things.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

The Germans didn't feed the prisoners for the first five days, and that holds for both the British and the Italians. It was us that helped them: disregarding the danger, we gave them what we could. We helped the Italians, too. I have to admit that the Germans didn't punish a single civilian for doing that.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

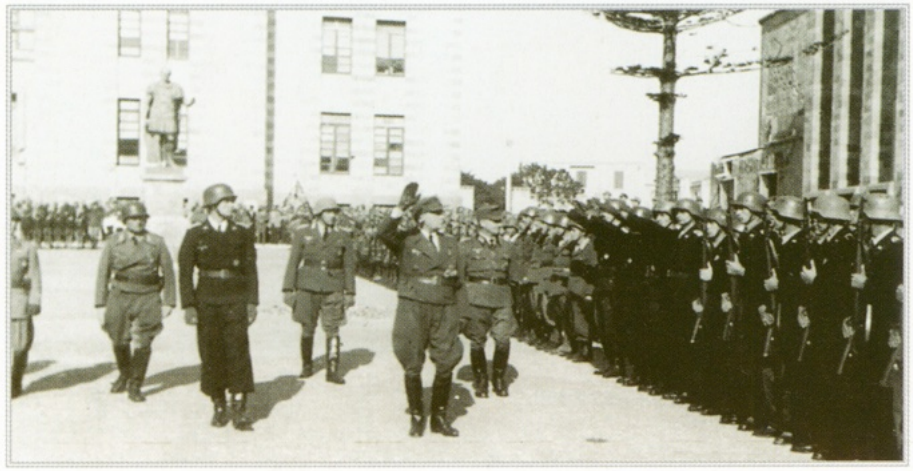
On the third day after the battle, November 19, the administration of the occupying German forces was functioning normally. They announced that they would execute 20 civilians for every German killed. That didn't come as a surprise; in fact, we'd expected the ratio to be higher.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

The German occupation. A local inhabitant and a German soldier share their hunger.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

The Germans posted up notices for locals and foreigners at Agia Marina, Platanos, and Lakki in English, Italian, and Greek. "We're here to fight a war. Don't bother us and we won't bother you. If you kill a German, we will kill thirty of your people".

Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.



The last German Governor of the Dodecanese, Brigadier Wagener.
Peter Schenk archive.

The Germans were good with us. They didn't lay their hands on a single islander, not like they were with you on the mainland, where they'd kill ten people for every one of theirs. In my line of work, I saw that they were real craftsmen, specialists.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, Leros.

A guy from Kalymnos sailed into Agia Marina in his caïque, flying a German flag. A German says to him: "Why have you got a German flag? What are you, German?" "It's because we're occupied", says the guy. "You fly the Greek flag!", the German replies.

The curfew started at six, and we sat at home in the dark. Only the doctors and German functionaries had electricity.

Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.

Seeing the German stance, which wasn't too disheartening, we plucked up the courage to go to the commander and ask him if we could get our school up and running again. The commander replied: "You are Greeks, and I have confidence in you. You shall open your school. I shall write that your school must be recognised *de facto*, because the populace would be very unhappy if it were closed". The deal was done and the "Greek School of Leros" opened.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

The Germans behaved well. They summoned my father and told him: "We know you are a Marxist and a Communist, but we also know you are an honourable man. We want you to tell the people that if they kill a German, we will kill a hundred of them. We will do everything we can to help the people in terms of food and the rest". And they opened up all the food depots and the Leriots came running: you saw everyone walking along with whole sacks of foodstuffs: beans, flour, and the rest. There was no serious friction between us and the Germans. The schools opened with Greek flags, everything was done by the book.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

Kless opened the schools and let us fly our flag. He put those donkeys in their place. The Italians were prisoners, so filthy you had to feel sorry for them, because if you're human you pity your enemy, too. You saw fine-smelling Italian officers who'd say: "Do you have two lupinia to give us to eat? We're hungry". Lupinia were something like beans.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

Vasilis at the entrance to the Katsouni shelter.

Aris Liakopoulos enters the shelter on Mount Markelos.

Inside the Lepida shelter.

Signs of war everywhere. Walking through the mountains of Leros, bullets, shrapnel, and other objects are easily found.

Inside the shelter that served as the British HQ on Mount Merovigli. Almost the whole of Leros is honeycombed with shelters large and small. Often hewn into the rock or reinforced with concrete, they always have two entrances.

The SS Commander would come round to our home. One day when the bishop was there, too, he said to my father: "George, I found out you have two women here". We had two Jewish girls in our house: Rina and Rachel. My father blushed—he went red as a beetroot—and said: "How do you want them, fried, boiled, or roast?" The German didn't answer, turned to my mother and said: "You cook very well". That officer had executed one of his own men, because he thought he'd laid hands on a local girl.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

Leros, 1945. Colonel Kosela, the island's commander, is on the right.
Peter Schenk archive.

A German went into a house, sat down, and started bothering the women…he was drunk. They threw onion skins at him where he was sitting, because they thought it would make him go away—some sort of magic, in other words: they say you can get rid of folk you don't want with onion skins. They said to him: "Go away, it's the children's bedtime", but he wasn't having any of it. Fortunately, they kept telling him to go, and he eventually got up and left.

Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.

A tragic photograph taken on March 8, 1945, of four coffins. Shortly before the Germans surrendered, they executed four Italians who tried to escape to Turkey.

Listen to something that'll show you how disciplined the Germans were. Despina, Kastis' daughter, was the most beautiful girl on the island, and lived with her father in Agia Marina. One day, she was outside and a German walked by. It was obvious that he'd been drinking—they drank a lot back then. He saw her and said: "Fraulein, miss". She was so frightened she fell over and sat on the pavement. The German went to help her up. Kless—the SS Commander—happened to be passing by at the time with two escorts…they had those red badges and could stop anyone they wanted, cars, whatever. So Kless sees this, walks over to the other man, and starts shouting at him. If the Germans spoke, they yelled. The other man gets up, "Ja woll, ja woll"—he'd lost three fingers on the Eastern Front. Kless approaches him, grabs his buttons, pulls them off, and throws them to the ground. The next day we learned that he'd had him shot; he killed him, because he thought he'd attacked the woman. No German dared lay hands on a woman after that.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

There was a well in our house, and some Italian prisoners walked past one day in bad shape and dressed in rags with three German guards. They stopped to drink some water, and the Germans heard someone playing the piano in our house.
The next day, the sound of the piano led them back to our home.

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

The following morning, three Germans knocked on our door. One of them—the tallest—says to my mother: "Madame, piano?" It so happened that my brother and me were playing at the time, him on the piano and me on my violin. My mother says to them "Come in, come in". I said to her, "What are you doing? They're Germans", but she said "Never mind". The Germans were very polite—"May we?"—and slowly made their way inside while we came to a frightened halt. One of them addressed us: "May I play a little?", and my brother says "There you are". And the German sits at the piano and starts to play "plink plink plink" with one of his fingers sticking up. "Do you think he's come to learn to play his scales", I said to my brother, and that very moment his fingers zoomed up the keyboard and he started to play magnificently. And it turned out he was none other than the first pianist with the Berlin Philharmonic. The other one picks up my violin and starts to play, while the third one in the glasses starts to sing operas. It was a marvellous concert. From then on, the Germans came round all the time to play, and my violin teacher would often join them. One day, one of them—he was Austrian—says to my father: "We're leaving, we know you have connections with the British. We are leaving tonight in three boats. All three of us have made our wills…could you please send them to Germany three months from now, when the war is over".

And my father went to Samarkos, who was our link with British Intelligence, and tells him: "Michalis, there's a convoy of three ships leaving tonight". "Where did you find that out, Giorgos?" "The Germans who come round to our house to play music told me. God forgive me, I wouldn't do it if they weren't our country's enemies. Otherwise, I wouldn't have told a soul". You see, he knew that the British would come and sink them. We never did find out what happened, but when we heard on the BBC that German boats had been sunk, we imagined the musicians were on board.

A letter arrived from the Austrian after the war. It read: "Doctor, I am alive and in East Berlin. Please send me anything edible you can along with the will". And my father put some dried figs and I don't remember what else into a parcel and sent it. I wonder if he ever got it. We never found out and he never came to tell us. We never got a reply.

A German solder blew his hand off with a grenade so they wouldn't send him to the Eastern Front. He was from Poland. His wife wrote him that "only the wounded come back from the war now". They took him to be operated on and he admitted what he'd done right there on the operating table. The Germans executed him; it wasn't easy to pull the wool over their eyes. It was lucky they did, because they'd arrested five or six Leriots and were going to execute them because of him.

Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.

There was an Austrian, Giannis we called him, who'd come round and we'd give him an egg or a tin of food to eat. I wanted a Parabel, a pistol. My poor mother persuaded Giannis to give it to me in exchange for a couple of tins of beans. A German officer arrived at the bakery the following day with the two cans. Very polite, he was. He wanted to know if they'd been stolen, and we said "No, we gave those to Giannis". "And what did he give you?" "Nothing".

He thanked us politely and left. When we next saw Giannis, he thanked us and told us they'd given him the beans back.

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

A few Italians wanted to escape and arranged for a little boat to take them to the Middle East. The guy who gave them the boat—Nikolas Paraponiaris, a relative of my wife...he died on Rhodes—turned them in. And what became of the poor Italians? The Germans made them dig their graves and then executed them.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, Leros.

One of us betrayed some Italians to the Germans. They were getting ready to leave the island in a boat from Panteli. The Germans caught them and took them to be executed. We wanted to know when they were going to execute them, so we could inform Cairo.

Who was there to find out who knew the area like the back of their hand? Well, who else but Merabeliotis, the little kid. So Samarkos says to me: "Antonis, go and find out when they're going to execute them". There was a stream to cross on the way, and by the stream there was a well with some fig trees. Now, I saw five or six Germans at the well. There was real poverty then, and they were eating donkeys, nettles; they were hungry—what can I say?—but they didn't lay their hands on anything that wasn't theirs. What's right's right: if you turned a German in of stealing, they'd execute him.

So I crouched down behind the bush and saw the Germans rubbing something behind the well. They had five or six dogs, and they were rubbing them. They'd thrown the heads away and were skinning them. Because a lot of Germans had developed a rash, they'd asked Germany what they should do, and the reply came back: "you can eat dogs, but throw away the heads. Rub them with water to get rid of the slime, the scum". The Germans put the dogs in sacks and took them away to eat them.

I make my way up the foothills through the olive groves and catch sight of seven or eight Germans and an officer. And the truck Giakouvides had fixed—he was a mechanic from France…a Chevrolet, it was. The truck burnt wood: you stuck wood in the furnace and off it went. And I can see the truck coming towards me with three women running behind it. I could hear everything from where I am, and these Germans could speak Italian and Greek, because they'd come here from Greece. The Italians' wives threw themselves at the German officer's feet, weeping and begging him. The German took the hand of the woman at his feet and lifted her up—the Germans were very courteous with women—and said: "Listen, madame, I give you my word of honour that I will not hang them". Because if they'd hanged them, it would have been a dishonourable death. And I watch on as he—he had a Parabel pistol, they all had Parabels—

German soldiers bathing in the sea, summer 1944.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

walks up and down and looks into her eyes, walks backwards and forwards again and then a third time, pulls the Parabel out of its holster and lets off three rounds in rapid succession…"bang bang bang". Then he salutes "Heil Hitler!". One of them is still not dead, so he walks over to him and shoots. Then he goes back to the women. "I gave you my word of honour and I kept it; I did not hang them, but there could be no question of my not killing them. And I can assure you they will punish me for this breach of regulations: I will be sent to Russia".

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

On February 14, 1945, when the end of the war was just around the corner and everyone knew it, the German commander posted the Second Decree drawn up by General Wagener, the officer in command of the Eastern Mediterranean. It said that Leros had to elect both a representative and a substitute representative for the People's Council on Rhodes.

Unfortunately, we were split on the issue, which was further proof that we were real Greeks. Faced by the enemy, we find the inner strength to unite, but come the first faint glimmers of peace and a tranquil life, and "insidious discord" is in there among us, smiling, as our national poet Kostis Palamas puts it.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

I was a rebel when I was young, and a devil when it came to throwing stones: I struck fear into the hearts of the other kids. All the mothers would tell their kids: "Come inside, little Boulafentis is coming!" The Argyrouka place was the house of ill-repute. She had a couple of girls in there, of whom Maria was the prettiest. That house was a secret brothel, and I'd pay a visit there from time to time. The head master took my father to one side at the club and said: "Giorgis, I have something serious to tell you". So you see, he told him everything.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

Sarafis, the late Sotiris Malachias, Thodoris and me climbed up to the Fortress, pulled down the German flag and hauled up the Greek flag in its place. But we were so worried about getting it done quickly, and because the Germans were firing at us from Merovigli, that we put it on upside down with the cross at the bottom and the stripes at the top. Tripodis showed up, gasping for breath, and says: "The Germans said you have to take down the flag". We didn't agree, and then a little kid ran up who'd been sent by Samarkos, and said: "The head master wants you to take the flag down, because they'll start shooting at you again". And that was the end of that.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

It can't have been more than three months later that the food supplies started to run out. The daily ration was reduced for soldiers and civilians alike.

Towards the end of February, 1944, foodstuffs arrived for the civilian populations of Leros, Leipsoi, and Patmos from the Red Cross or some such organisation. The commandant appointed a committee to share out the food; the German authorities were not involved in any way. Any German who took food from the inhabitants was to be executed.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

The bombarded Fortress.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

I remember once when a German stole a ration of bread from another German and they took him to Merikia and executed him. No court-martial, no nothing. They were very strict with their own.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, Leros.

The fishermen had neither nets nor thread with which to mend them and fish. They only had dynamite, which they found in mines, of which there was no shortage on either land or sea at the time. The result: numerous deaths, arms and legs blown off, and an increase in the number of blind men, orphans, widows, and cripples.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Some of our boys dived down to the wreck of a German landing craft off Panagies and found gold sovereigns the Germans had stuffed into their belts. I thought this a dirty business—there were corpses down there.

Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

The Germans' situation was critical. Their bread ration had been reduced to 200g a day by order of Kosela, the military commander, on November 6, 1944. And the results of this reduction in their already minimal diet were not long in manifesting themselves, especially among the soldiers assigned laborious duties: exhausted by their exertions and the lack of food, they filled the hospital to bursting point.

An order issued on December 10 made ten hours sleep a night compulsory for all soldiers.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

Do good and you'll find good…listen to this and you'll believe me. Some Italians were trudging past our door loaded with sacks of salt. Now, carrying salt's a nasty business, as you know, and one of them couldn't make it and fell down. My poor old mother saw what had happened and took pity on him, because if the Germans saw him, they'd kill him. So my mother helps him to his feet and takes him and the sack into the house. She gave him a little bread and a can of something to eat. When he finished, he left the house very carefully and no one was any the wiser. Now listen to this: when the war was over, my brother and some others were working the boats, smuggling they were, and they went over to Italy with some English cigarettes. And Giannis goes to do the deal and comes back with the money, but the others grass him up, and he's arrested and taken to the Customs Authorities. Now Giannis knew Italian, and the chief customs official asks him "How come you speak Italian?", and he says, "I'm from Leros". The Italian gets to his feet: "You're from Leros?" "Yes". "What's your name, where's your house…" and the rest of it. "And the baker? What's she to you?" And Giannis replies, "She's my mother". "Your mother? Madonna mia!", and Giannis shows him a photograph. The Italian takes the photograph and kisses it. "She saved my life", he says, "how can I put you on trial?" So he calls the others into the room and tells them: "His mother saved my life, only a wretch tries the son of the woman who saved him. Give the Greek his money and let him go". And that's how Giannis was saved. So you see, acts of goodness are repaid in the end!

Antonis Merabeliotis, retired electrician, Leros.

The view from mount Skoubarda.

General Tilney and Admiral Baker were interrogated at German HQ. They are let out after half an hour, and can exchange nothing more than a handshake with the two Italian officers who come in next and are presented to General Müller, who is surrounded by his staff. General Müller interrogated General Mascherpa himself in French:
"Why did the Italian command put up such strong resistance during the fifty two days of the battle? How many troops did you have, and how many did the British have? How many batteries are there on Leros? How many are still functional? Are there any munitions dumps, food supplies? Where are they?"

The victor and the vanquished: General Müller on the left, Brigadier Tilney on the right. *Peter Schenk archive.*

LEROS IS ANNEXED TO GREECE

"Everything has gone well for Hitler so far…but war, too, has its ups and downs."





When we heard that Turkey's political neutrality had remained unchanged, despite all the bombs that fell on our island and demolished our homes, it meant we were tortured by one less fear. We'd been more afraid of what Turkey would request in exchange for her assistance at the negotiating table when the war was over than of Italian demands. Italy was damned by its alliance with the Axis, but Turkey could present itself as having saved our islands from the Nazi jackboot.

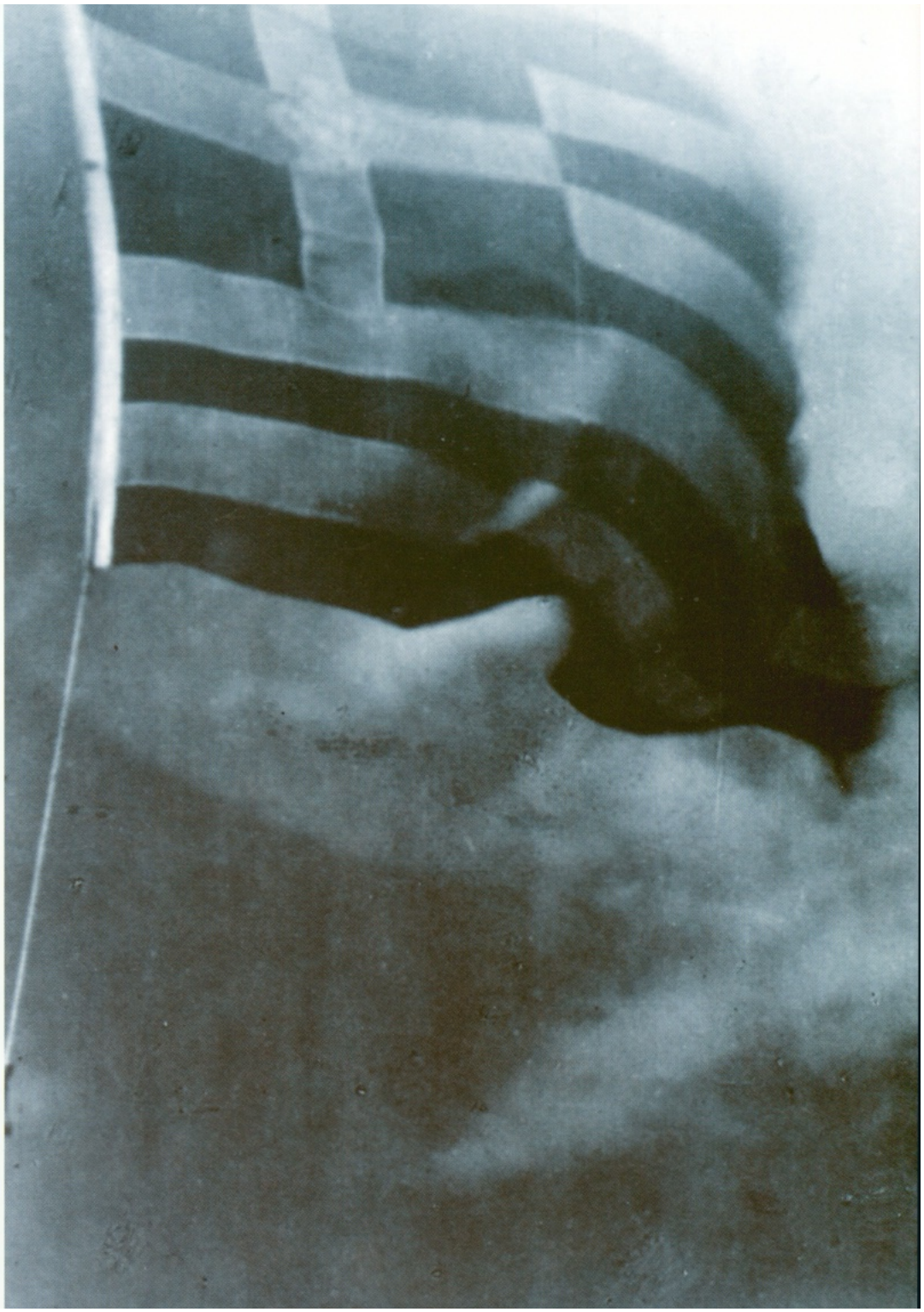
We were tortured by thoughts like these at critical moments, because our "Great" allies and the whole world admire and sing our praises in times of war, but quickly forget all that come peacetime. The only thing they cared about then were their own interests; which is how we won the wars, but always lost the games of diplomatic duplicity. Perhaps it's always our fault; us and the divisions that plague us like a curse. The disunity that always encouraged our implacable friends to place their own interests over what was morally and ethically right.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.

On May 9, 1945, General Turnbull of the British army and Lieutenant Colonel Mersinopoulos of the Ieros Lochos [Sacred Company] disembarked on Lakki quay at Gonia with twelve commandoes, among them Theologos Angelou, a Leriot reservist.

Colonel Kosela of the German army had received orders from General Wagener to surrender Leros. The islanders who rushed to catch a glimpse of their liberators had expected to see a victorious host; they'd wanted to see Greeks, their brothers, their children; to embrace them, to take pride in them. But all they got was a single Leriot, Theologos, and a few—very few—Greeks.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master of the Leros school.



This marked the beginning of two years of British administration on the island. Greece had once again to begin the struggle to lay claim to what was self-evident.

Let us wring our hearts in sacred fury at the friends who have abandoned us.

Michalis Samarkos, Head Master, Leros.

The British stripped the island bare before they left. When they'd taken all the supplies they could, they loaded everything else—cars, machinery, munitions—onto ships and scuttled them off Katsouni, where the water's deep. The poverty was unbearable by this time. We were out of every raw material—we blew up the buildings on the island to sell the iron for reinforcing concrete, for goodness' sake! Only 6,000 of the island's 10,000 inhabitants remained. On March 31, 1947, after six and a half centuries of slavery, we were united with Greece.

In the *Hellenic Government Gazette*

ARTICLE I

The Dodecanese islands of Astypalaia, Rhodes, Chalkis, Karpathos, Kasos, Telos, Nisyros Kalymnos, Leros, Patmos, Simi, Kos, and Kastelorizo and the smaller islands in their vicinity are annexed to the Hellenic State as of October 28, 1947.

ΒΡΕΤΤΑΝΙΚΗ ΚΑΤΟΧΗ

ΠΡΟΚΗΡΥΞΙΣ ΥΠ' ΑΡΙΘΜ. 1

'Ημεῖς, Στρατηγὸς BERNARD CHARLES TOLVER PAGET, K.C B., D.S.O., M.C.

ΕΠΕΙΔΗ τὰ ἐδάφη τῆς Δωδεκανήσου κατελήφθησαν ἢ μέλλουσι μετ' ὀλίγον νὰ καταληφθῶσιν ὑπὸ Συμμαχικῶν Δυνάμεων διατελουσῶν ὑπὸ τὰς διαταγὰς ἡμῶν,

καὶ ΕΠΕΙΔΗ ἀπόκειται εἰς ἡμᾶς ὡς 'Αρχιστράτηγον ἐν τῇ Μέσῃ 'Ανατολῇ ὅπως ἐξασφαλίσωμεν τὴν τήρησιν τῆς δημοσίας τάξεως καὶ ἀσφαλείας εἰς τὰ ἐν λόγῳ ἐδάφη,

Διὰ ταῦτα διατάσσομεν τὰ ἀκόλουθα:

Ἄρθρον 1ον. Ἔναρξις τῆς κατοχῆς. - 'Η παροῦσα προκήρυξις ὡς καὶ αἱ μεταγενέστεραι τοιαῦται θὰ ἰσχύουν εἰς ἕκαστον τμῆμα τῆς περιοχῆς ἀπὸ τῆς καταλήψεως αὐτοῦ ἢ καὶ μεταγενεστέρως ἀπὸ τῆς ἡμερομηνίας τῆς ὑπογραφῆς αὐτῶν. Τὰ τμήματα ταῦτα τῆς περιοχῆς θὰ τελοῦν ὑπὸ τὴν ἀποκλειστικὴν ἡμῶν στρατιωτικὴν δικαιοδοσίαν.

Ἄρθρον 2ον Δυνάμεις κατοχῆς, δημοσία τάξις καὶ ἀσφάλεια. - Πάντες οἱ κάτοικοι τῆς ἐν λόγῳ περιο-

We were true Greeks, some people may have lost their national identity, what with all the changes over the years, but there weren't more than five of them: there were five on Leros, no more no less, and we knew who they were. They'd gone Italian because they thought the Italians would be on Leros for ever. And it was these same five that turned pro-German later on. Some of them were armed. We'd lost nothing of our Greekness. They call the Dodecanese islanders "sons of Italians": while serving in Corinth I punched someone for calling me that, and at the hearing I told the captain I was more Greek than the rest of them. "The national anthem sends a shiver up my spine. It doesn't do that to you".

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

At university, Professor Crispie, who taught me international law, told us that a state always sends its best officers to a territory it has annexed in order to induct the local inhabitants into its ways as quickly as possible. Do you know what they sent us? Gendarmes who signed their name with a cross. When there was a special service at the church, the mainlanders went in first, and if there was room, the Leriots, the actual islanders, might get in, too. But we're Greeks…

Michalis Boulafentis, retired tour operator, Leros.

When World War II was at an end, the shortage of iron and the dire economic situation prompted the decision to salvage a large number of shallow-water wrecks. That's how the Queen Olga came to be sold to the Evthymiades Brothers for scrap.

An Italian diver by the name of Frazzo Italo, part of the guided-torpedo at the submarine base. He stayed in Greece after the war and married a girl from Samos, but moved to Milan after her death. He still makes his Turkish coffee in the coffee pot his wife used during their years together.
Tasos Kanaris archive.

The Olga was British-built, which meant it was metal-rich. The Shipping Ministry decided that the ship should be salvaged, and put it out for tender. The divers went down attached to compressed air pumps, laid the dynamite, returned to the surface until the water had cleared. Then they cut it into five or ten tonne pieces which they lifted out of the water with a crane and ferried across to dry land, where I was responsible for cutting it into pieces of a specified size in readiness for the foundry. I worked all night, every night, for a year. You'd find legs, arms, bones, chains, wedding rings, coins, all sorts among the metal…which we handed over to the navy. They employed a lot of workers to clean the mud off the iron so I could work on it.

Giannis Kourmadias, retired welder, Leros.

More islanders were killed after the battle than during it, and many others lost their hands to the bombs we found lying all over the island.

Savvas Konstantinidis, retired civil servant, Leros.

A recently-discovered German bomb on high ground in the Panteli area. It is still active.

A war crimes court was set up in Greece after the war. Of the 1,127 Germans Greece requested from the Allies, only nine were turned over, among them one of the two executioners of Crete and commander of the assault on Leros: General Müller.

Müller was tried in Athens on December 9, 1946 for the crimes and executions that took place on Crete.

Shortly before Müller arrived on Crete, General Brauer had told the Cretans: "You say I'm a criminal, now that Müller's coming, you'll see what a real criminal is like". And that they did.

Because the Dodecanese belonged to Italy at the time, no reference was made at the trial to the executions of Italian officers on Kos and Leros. However, the verdict saw justice done for the Italians: the general was sentenced to death. Müller was executed at Goudi on May 20, 1947. He is now buried in the German cemetery in Rabendoza, alongside another 10,000 German troops who lost their lives in Greece.

A model of the same bomb. Packed into special carrying pouches with their wings closed, when thrown the wings opened and the bombs would spiral through the air. The air pressure would pull the wire that armed the bomb, causing the metal barrel to explode. These small scatter bombs could also be dropped through a window, which is why the Italians called them "farfalle".


250 CART
303 BALL
Mk 7 BLT
CARICATORI
Kraftstoff 20l
Feuergefährlich
1940
W↑D

Costis and Giorgos with Tasos Kanaris. Yet another magnificent war museum on Leros, with a superb photographic archive and collection of secondary literature.

Detail: pharmaceuticals produced during the Italian occupation. *Tasos Kanaris archive*.

(previous left) Müller before the Greek court. *Konstantinos Kogiopoulos archive*.

A car from the period. *Christos Deligiorgis archive*.

(previous right) Giannis Paraponiaris' private collection. A veritable miniature museum created from artefacts relating to the Battle of Leros.

THE RAISING OF A LEGEND

Tuesday September 30, 2003. I am on the way home when my mobile phone rings. I answer and listen carefully: all things being well, the plane is to be raised on Thursday October 2. It was someone from the Hellenic General Air Staff on the phone; they had been on Leros for some time, preparing to raise the wreck of a German Junkers-52 transport plane that had crashed there during World War II. I quickened my pace, my mind racing: we would have to be on board a boat to Leros tomorrow afternoon. Our equipment would have to be ready in record time, and I was worried we might forget something.

We feel a little strange on the boat, but everything—apart from our discussions on the technical details of the shoot—is calm. It seems to me we have embarked upon the demystification of a legend; a wreck on which we have dived for at least twenty hours would be on the surface in a matter of hours. It's been three years since we worked on the Battle of Leros and the wrecks scattered around the island, but the Junkers had always been our favourite: it was unique! I remember how diving on the plane had seemed like a dream, and how we had complained that our dives there never seemed long enough. We found something new on every descent, but the wreck's every secret would soon lie revealed. For our part, we would be free to observe it for hours on end without danger or limitations.

Given the historical significance of the aircraft, and their up-and-running salvage programme for rare aeroplanes, the Hellenic Air Force had begun collecting the data required to assess the possibility both of salvaging the plane, and—that achieved—of displaying it in the Air Force Museum. The plane's excellent condition made it unique the world round. Like a time machine capable of taking us back to the war in

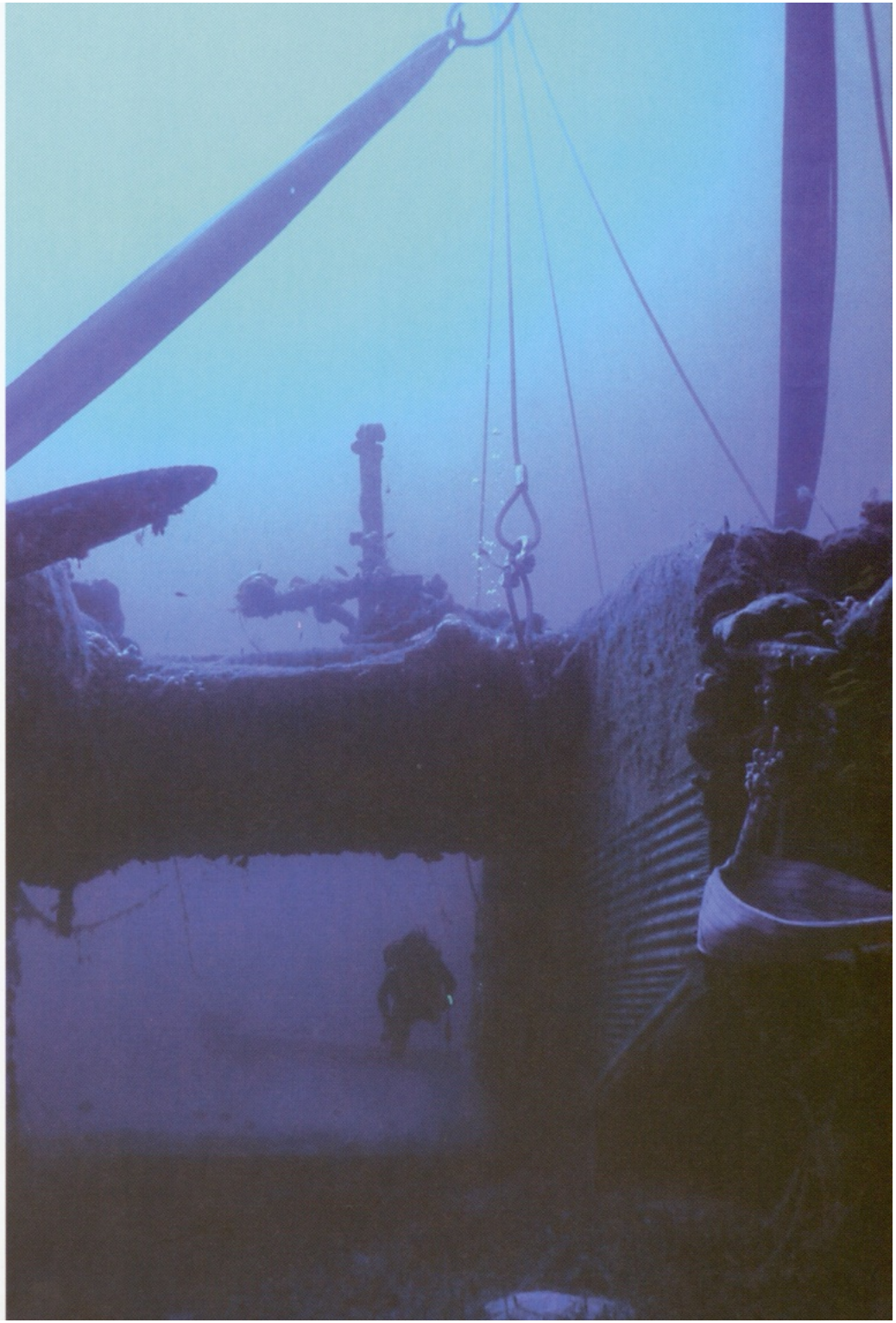
which it fought, the plane would make an impressive museum exhibit, while its raising would be symbolic of the culture of our age.

Thursday morning, and the Air Force team are on tenterhooks. After thirty days of preparations, they are ready to carry out the final stage of the salvage operation. The Air Force diving teams have been working on the seabed for days attaching belts and thick wire ropes to the aircraft. Balloons made it easier to attach each of the belts to a single, central wire rope. After sixty years at a depth of forty one metres, the risk of the aeroplane shattering during its ascent to the surface is great. All the bindings had to be balanced with enormous precision; it would then simply be a matter of connecting all the wires attached to the bindings to the arm of the floating crane which was to haul the plane to the surface. Any deviation whatsoever from the planned, safe geometry of the ascent would lead to an uneven distribution of forces and the destruction of the plane.

The platform was already manoeuvring into position. It had to be anchored directly in front of the wreck and stay in that position for as long as necessary. However, the wind had freshened and it proved impossible to anchor the platform securely. The plane lies at the bottom of Alida Bay, two nautical miles north-east of Leros. It is nearly noon, and only two of the platform's four anchors have been secured. The ascent is postponed until the following day, weather permitting. This reprieve allows us all to relax and rest a little.

The Air Force's remote-controlled underwater vehicle (R.O.V.) on the support platform, ready to be launched.

The raising of the aircraft: everything is ready for the final stage. The divers of the Hellenic Air Force Underwater and Marine Installations Preservation Team spent several days attaching the support belts to the wreck.

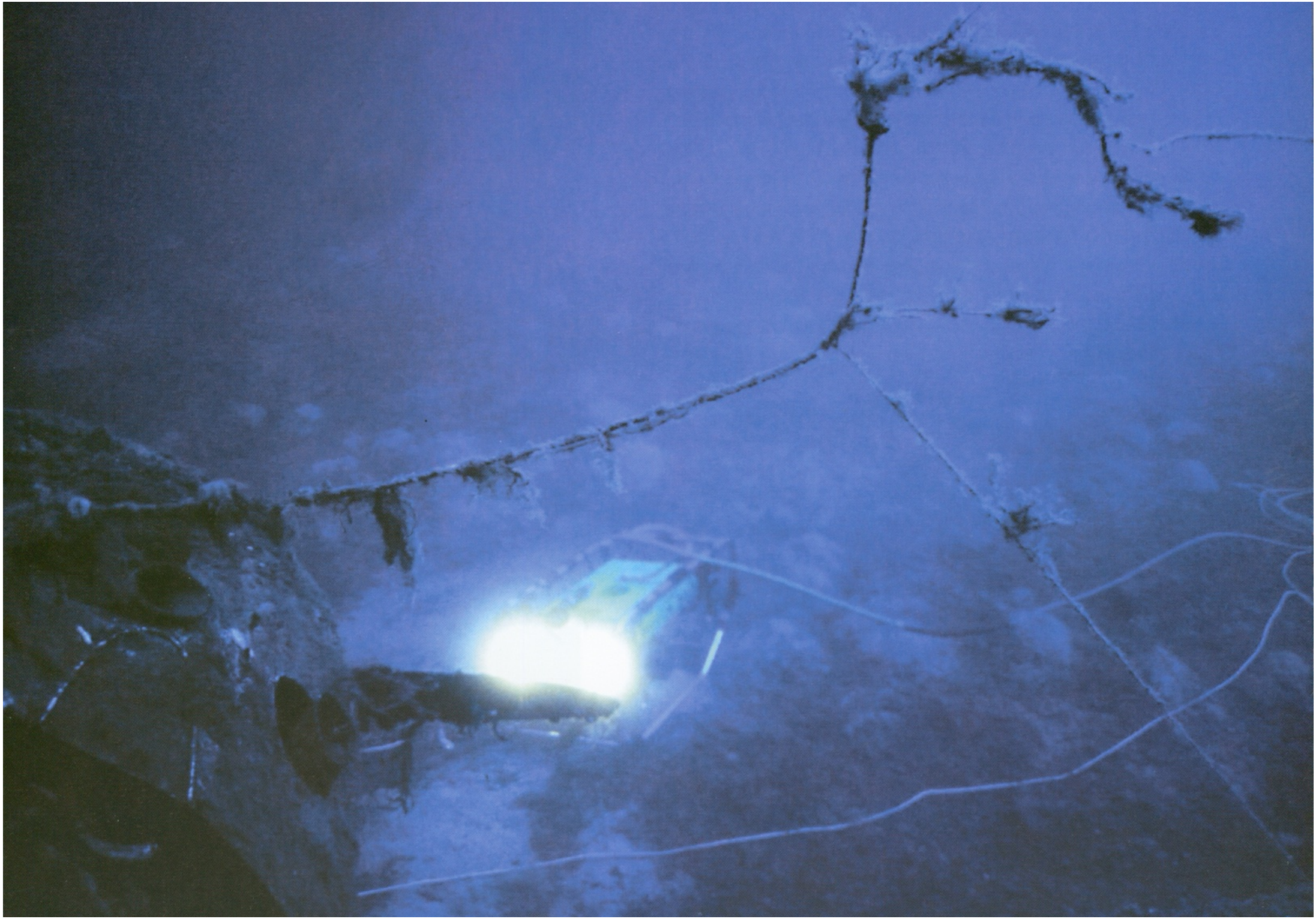


Morning, October 3, and the platform is ready, motionless beside the wreck. The moment we have all been waiting for may well be upon us. The sea is a little choppy, but the operation is to go ahead. We dive alongside the Air Force team. Equipped with full face masks and an underwater communication system, the divers are in continuous contact both with each other and the surface as they manoeuvre the enormous hook with great precision to the point where the wires from the bindings converge. They give instructions to the crane operator working in the fresh air over forty metres above the sea bed: "A little to the right, a little to the left, stop!" The divers attach all the belts. Everything is now ready. The crane begins to rise slowly and gradually until all the wires are taut.

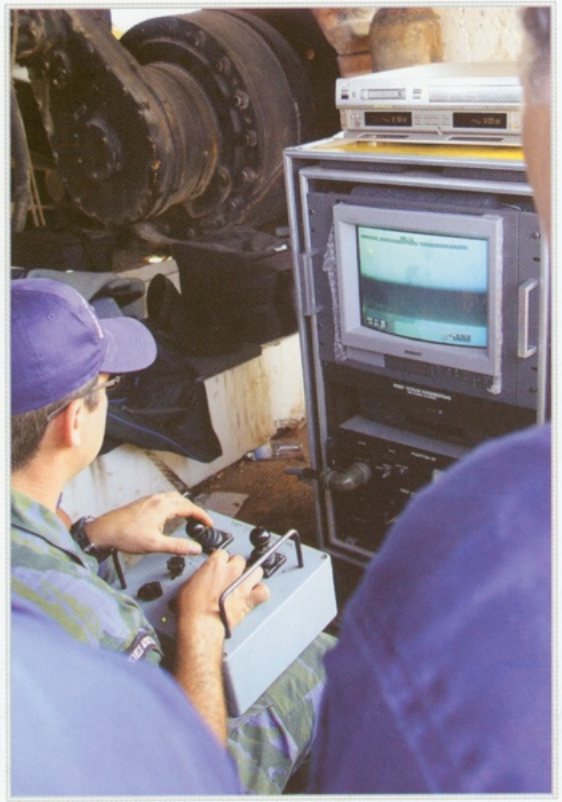
By our side, the Air Force's remote-controlled underwater robot (ROV) never takes its eyes off us for a moment. With his headlights full on, moving silently and looking like another creature of the depths, it provides the support staff on the platform above with a direct, continuous image of the entire procedure. The divers swim away from the wreck: we all have to maintain a safe distance at all times in case part of the plane breaks off and falls on or injures one of us. I watch on as one wing gradually frees itself from the sand. The plane is on the way to the surface. The only part that is missing is the central engine at the front of the plane, which came unstuck when the plane crashed into the sea. It was the first part of the plane to hit the bottom, and has lain upside down for sixty long years!

A balloon keeps the belts taut as the crane's hook is attached.

The underwater remote-controlled vehicle (R.O.V.) monitors the entire procedure and transmits images to the surface.

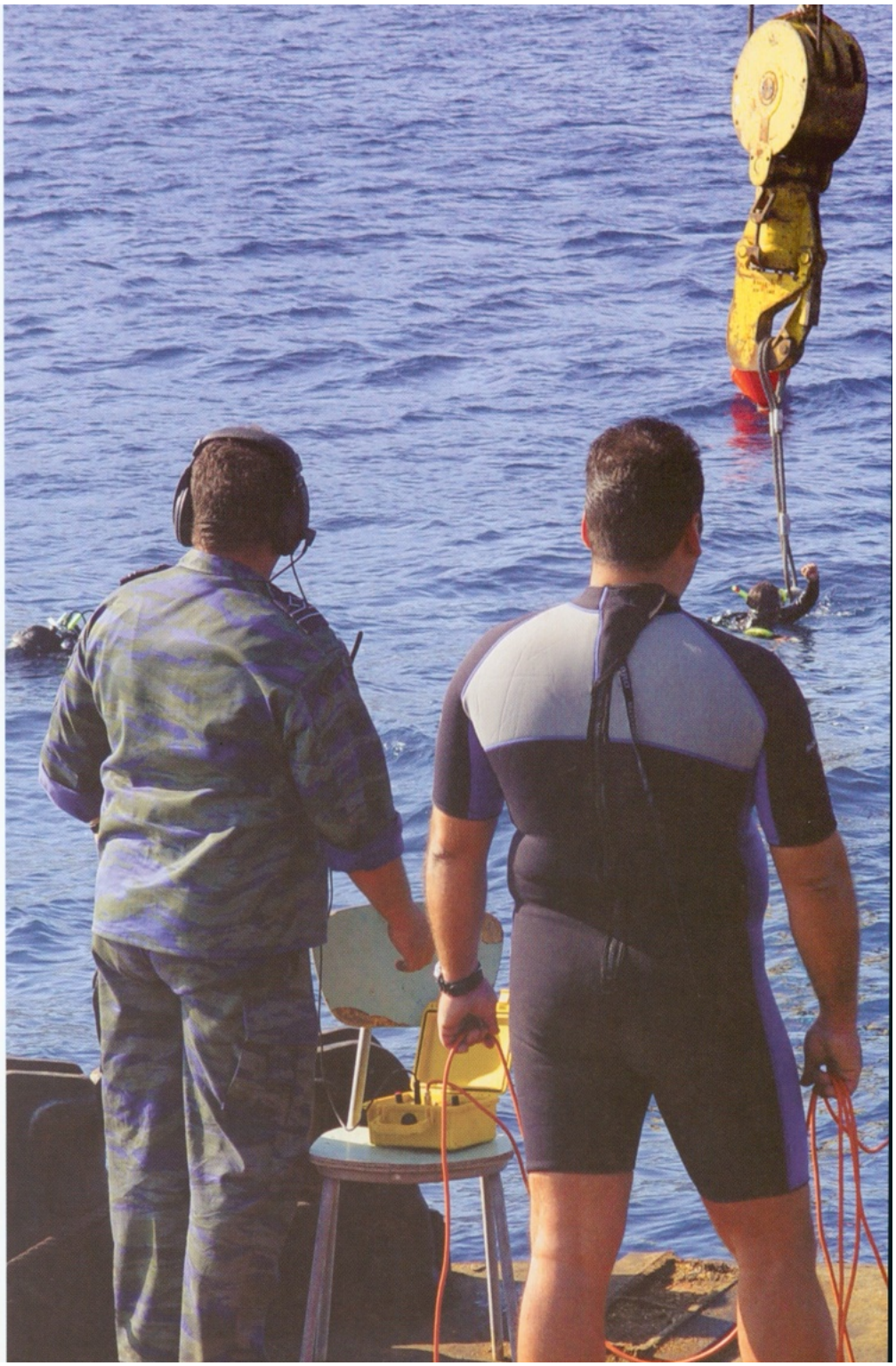


Everything is going to plan: the only difficult part now will be when the plane is lifted entirely out of the water. Only then will its battered shell have to support the plane's real weight; it could snap in two. The moment when the wreck breaks free of the water is truly magnificent. I realise it's the first time I've seen the plane without a mask on, or in the light of the sun. There isn't a sound now from the people gathered on the platform: no one moves. The water cascades out as the crane lifts it gradually higher and higher. We can see the black cross, the insignia of the German Air Force, on the tip of the right wing; on the section that was till now buried in the sand. The sight sends a shudder through us all, awakening memories and sending us back in time. The door through which the paratroopers had jumped to take Leros…



The R.O.V. operator.

Members of the team stay in touch with the divers using an underwater communication system.



The last place anyone could have imagined for a parachute drop was Leros. The island is all cliffs and rocks! Nevertheless, the intelligence service had announced the arrival of a regiment of German paratroopers from Southern Greece. There was only one possible jump zone on Leros: the area to the east of Alida beach, where the mountains sloped down to the sea a little less steeply than everywhere else. From there, they could march towards the narrow strip of land between Gourna and Alida, cutting the island in two. However, on paper it seemed a perilous and desperate venture.

Leonard Marsland Gander,* Daily Telegraph *correspondent, British journalist.

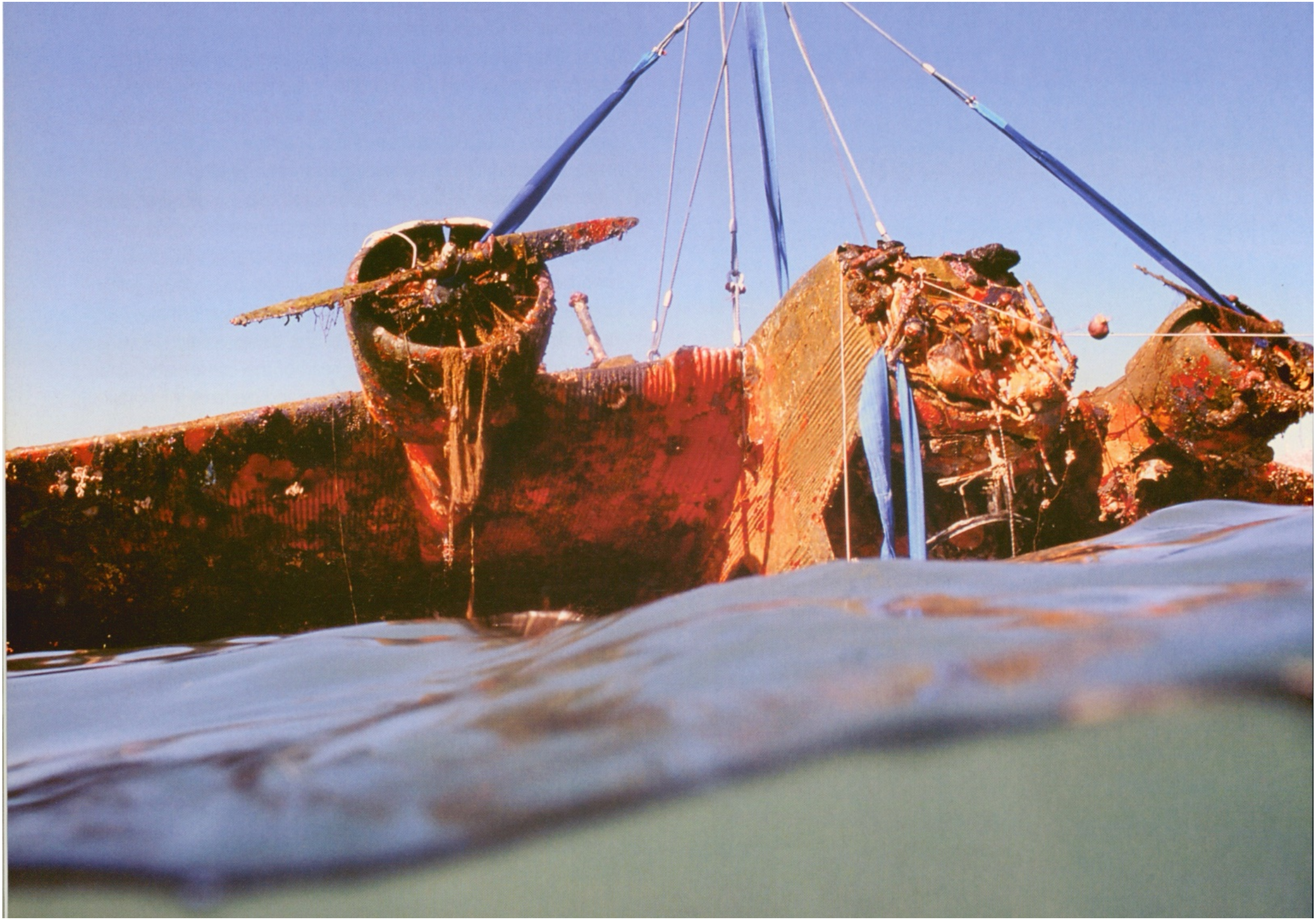
Model depicting the parachute drop onto the Gourna strip.

The aircraft's tail section.

The plane is now high in the air. Almost all the water has drained out when a loud crack and gentle tremor has our hearts in our mouths. For a moment, I am convinced the plane is going to break apart; that we are going to lose her! But the craft is now only metres from the platform: a cool head is what is needed. The team halts the ascent, and after a lightening council session decide not to raise it any higher; they will simply rest it gently on the platform. Everyone's eyes are fixed on the plane; after another two loud cracks you could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. Finally, the plane is safely on the platform; only the tail frame is damaged, and that is easily secured with ropes and belts. The danger of the plane snapping in two now passed, the head of the conservation and restoration team assesses the damage and declares it minimal and repairable.

We approach the aeroplane now dripping over our heads, and take a look into the interior through the side door. We begin a preliminary assessment there and then among the mud and water. Suddenly, I hear the team's doctor being called for: someone has found a human bone. The doctor immediately begins gathering up all the bones of the dead man, which are then placed in ossuaries and handed over to the hospital on the island. Later, the Hellenic Air Force will inform the staff of the German embassy, who will take charge of the remains.

Thousands of people were lost during World War II, all of whom remain listed as missing in action until their bodies are found. Thousands of respectful, hopeful letters were sent to their families, informing them of the loss of their loved ones.



Oberleutenant Auer, Date: 1-12-1943
Squadron Leader 6th Squadron

Dear Hutter Family

On the 13-11-1943 your son Andrea Hutter did not return from an attack upon the enemy on the Aegean island of Leros, and has since been posted as missing in action.
[...]

I am very sorry, dear Hutter family, to have to bring you this terrible news.
With you, we hope and pray that your son has been rescued and is now being held prisoner. I will contact you personally if I learn anything further. In your son, the squadron has lost an upright, well thought of soldier and comrade, who in 64 assaults on the enemy proved himself a brave and courageous soldier. I have awarded your son the Silver Frontline Clasp and the Iron Cross (Second Class), decorations I shall despatch to you upon their arrival.

Your son's belongings are being forwarded today for dispatch.

The Wehrmacht Welfare Office will gladly acquaint you with any welfare information.

If we suppose that your son fell in battle against the enemy, a soldier's fate, then may you, his family, in the blow that has been dealt you, take comfort in the knowledge that he gave his life for the good of mankind, the Fuhrer and the Fatherland.

With sincerity and sympathy.
Yours, Auer

A letter to Andrea Hutter's family from the commander of the squadron in which he served.

Andrea Hutter, the German gunner.
Peter Schenk archive.

The aeroplane minutes after it left the water.

A second section of the diving team is preparing to raise what is left of the plane on the sea bed. The front engine is buried deep in the sand and will be raised using balloons. Along with the rest of the crew, I observe the entire procedure on the ROV monitor. The balloon appears on the surface about an hour later. The crane has already started to weigh anchor. The operation is at an end.

It is three in the afternoon, and the platform is to spend the night in the port of Agia Marina. It will head back to the naval base tomorrow, where it will deliver the plane to the maintenance and restoration team. A crowd of people have gathered on the quay to gaze at the plane. For fishermen and locals, the plane was a ghost, something they'd heard about but never seen. The young men look at it with curiosity in their eyes. For the older islanders, the plane brings back terrifying images of war, which, however many years go by, they will remember with crystal clarity until their dying day.

A crowd have gathered in Alida harbour to stare at the plane.

At this stage in the process, the plane was raised very slowly; there was a real chance the aircraft would disintegrate.

Dusk at Agia Marina. The Junkers-52 is now safe on the platform.

The platform unloads the aircraft the following morning at the Leros Naval base, where the maintenance and stabilization treatment is to commence. The mechanics are to receive instruction in this particular type of aircraft prior to taking it apart so it can be transported to the Hellenic Air Force Museum at Tatoi, where the maintenance process will be completed.

The plane is gently laid on large rubber sheets. Machinery and tools begin to gather around it, and initial work is underway. As I walk along beside it, I realise I still can't believe the plane is actually here. I stand under its right wing and take a closer look. The metal is in poor shape; there are holes in it and pieces are missing: it was at exactly this spot that it was hit.

Manolis Papafotis, a local captain, gives his advice on mooring the platform.

The team's doctor, Zois Evangelopoulos, gathers the dead man's bones. We can make out the lower jaw.

I saw a plane catch fire and crash into the sea at Agia Marina. It must have been an Indian that shot it down. The Junkers were flying over him from the direction of Gourna. The plane caught fire and smoke started to stream from its right propeller. I saw men falling—a parachute had got tangled in its tail.

The Indian—he was a Christian—often came over to the house. He'd go down into the basement and sit with my grandmother, God rest her soul, telling her in broken Greek: "Seven days, seven days, the Germans kaput". He had a double-barrelled machine-gun—one of those with the magazine on top—opposite our house under a fig tree, and had shot down a couple of Junkers. But the Germans cottoned on to him and put up a flare; a Stuka dived down and made a right mess. We went to see what had happened, and there was nothing: no machine-gun, no nothing, just bits of meat hanging off the fig tree…they'd blown him to pieces. Grandmother asked what happened to the Indian. We said he'd been transferred, so she wouldn't get upset.

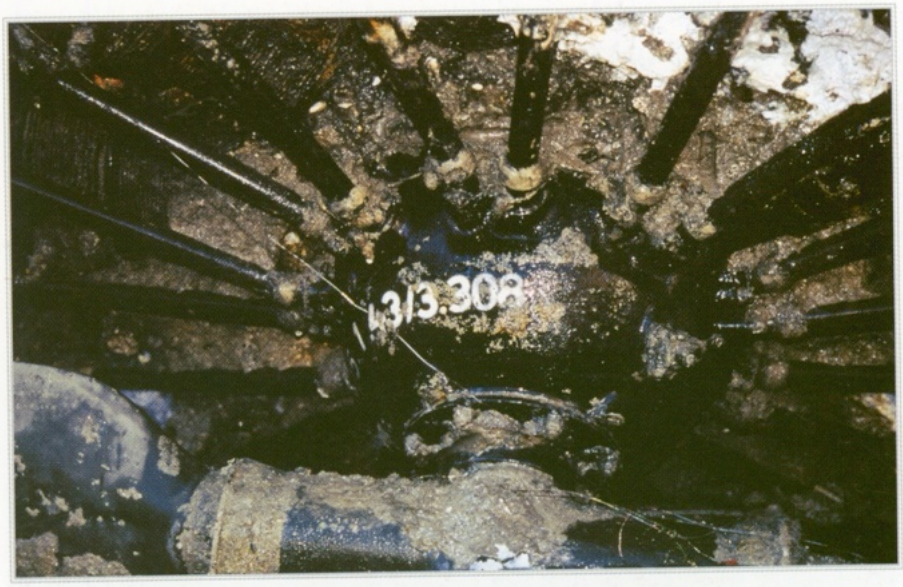
Dimitris Boulafentis, heart surgeon.

Indian prisoners at Ai Giorgis.
Peter Schenk archive.

The Luftwaffe insignia are still visible.

Just after the raising of the front engine.

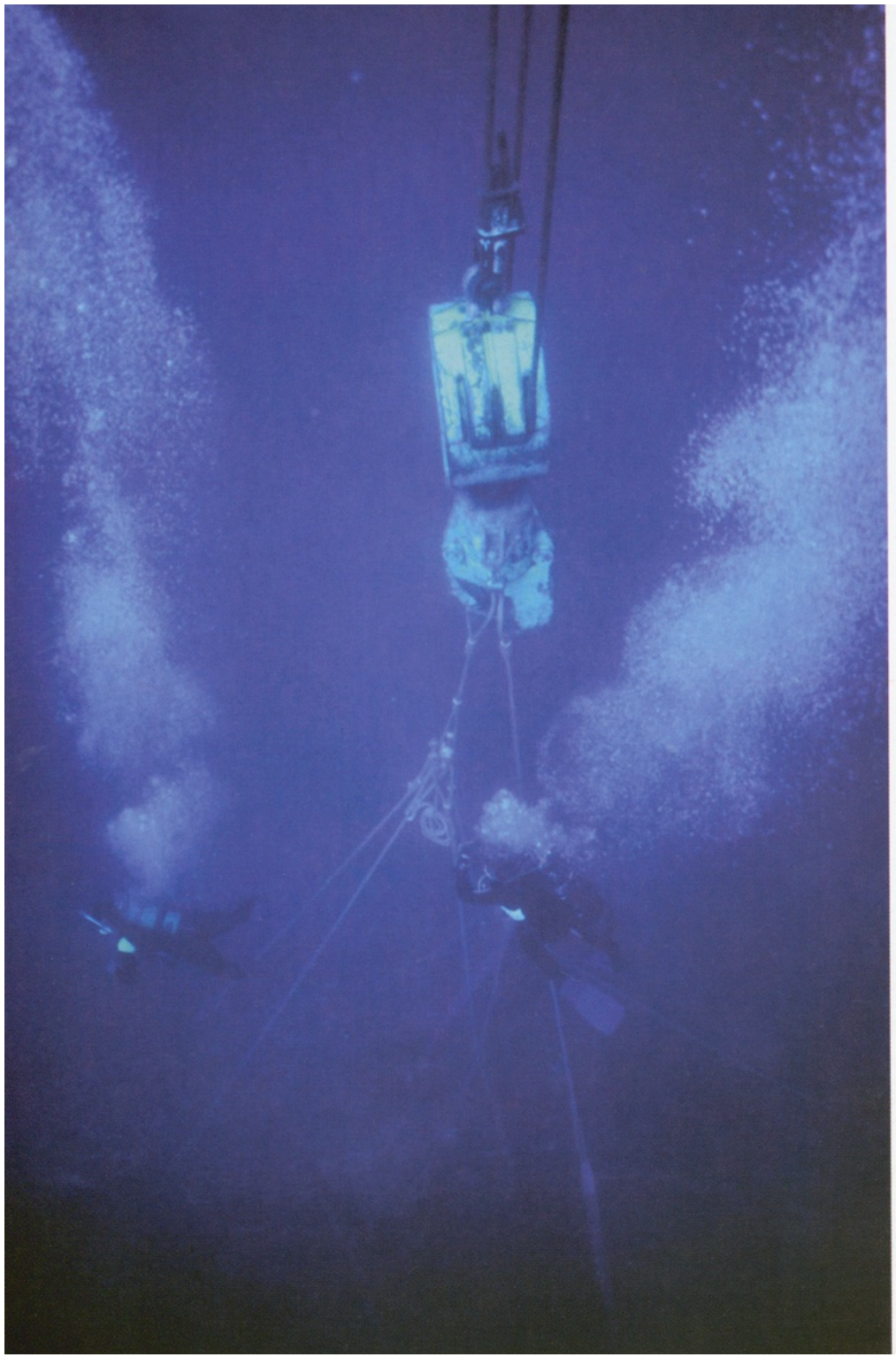
I stay rooted to the spot, staring at the spot where the plane was hit. An old man appears at my side on crutches, takes a look at the plane, and says with tears in his eyes: "the bastards, the bastards really did for us". Then he points at the German cross on the wing with his crutch: "I was ten years old when I saw that from the cave we were hiding in…the plane was flying so low, at first we thought it was a submarine".



The sand in which it was buried preserved the colours and date of manufacture on the front engine.

Team members prepare a balloon for the front engine, which is still lying on the sea bed.

Shortly before the aircraft is secured on the platform.



Before any work can begin, the cabin has to be emptied of mud and fully explored. We go in through the door and begin to poke around in the mud with our feet. It isn't long before the first finds come to light: three helmets, a folding shovel, a Schmeisser machine-gun, and other, unidentifiable objects. The mud is removed bit by bit and sieved so nothing escapes our notice. The remnants of the life boat show that it was never used. The radio and machine-guns are all in place, and there are thousands of bullets and magazines scattered around the plane. I am curious to know why all four Schmeisser clips are empty; they should have been loaded and ready in the bay for personal military kit. Since the aircraft had not had time to engage the enemy on the ground, they—and all the remaining weapons—should have been fully loaded. A pistol and two belt buckles lead me to suspect that there might be another victim. Only the barrel has survived of a Mauser rifle. Approaching the entrance to the cockpit, we find the glasses of one of the crew members in their half-wrecked leather case. Intact, seemingly belonging to another story, they induce a more emotive response than the other finds. Typical German glasses, with a design any optician would be envious of today. We respectfully put the glances in a box so they, too, can be delivered to the museum. The search continues. At the spot where the dead man's remains were found, we can make out the buttons of his uniform buried deeper in the mud. What happened to the remaining crew members? The thought sends my mind wandering. I count nine clips on the static line rig: nine paratroopers jumped in time. Some must have been captured, others drowned without trace. But some must have made it back home…

The aircraft ascending towards the surface.

The aircraft at the first stage in the preservation process at the Leros Naval Base. (inset) The plane's right-hand engine.

A letter from Andrea Hutter, a crew member in the Ju-52 squadron that fought on Leros:

In September 1943, the Italian forces in the Aegean capitulated to the British, who immediately rushed to reinforce the islands of the Archipelago. The Fuhrer's High Command decides that the island is to be retaken by paratroops and sea-borne landing parties.

I was stationed in Athens at the time. We set off for Leros with another nine Ju-52s on November 12. My flight log records that our plane's distinguishing marks were G6+FP. The plane was carrying five crew members and twelve paratroopers. I was the machine gunner.

We flew low over Alida Bay and were not hit despite coming in for heavy fire. The paratroopers jumped and we got back to Athens safely.

The following day, November 13, we flew to Leros again at around 4:00 in the afternoon. We didn't have a container of supplies aboard, nor did I have a pistol. We had three MG-15 machine guns on board. However, the paratroopers were unable to jump because of the intense anti-aircraft fire. Our plane came in for heavy fire and sustained extensive damage to the rudder. We made a crash landing into the sea about two kilometres off the coast in Palma Bay (off Cape Asfoungaros).

The crew were wearing life jackets and bailed out immediately. The flight mechanic had been fatally wounded in the cockpit and could not get out of the aircraft. The paratroopers started to jump out immediately, some of them still carrying their full kit. Without life jackets, the weight of their kit pulled them under water and they drowned. Some others, seeing their comrades drowning, stayed in the aircraft and

Getting the plane off the platform at the Leros Naval Base was just as tricky as getting it on.

tried to shed the heavy equipment about their person. The pane sank in very little time at all.

The weather was bad and I lost visual contact with my three comrades due to the waves. Now alone, I swam for two hours towards the coast, where I was eventually taken prisoner by the Italians. A paratrooper wearing a lifejacket was also taken prisoner shortly after me. I can only assume that he had taken the life jacket off the wounded man who couldn't bail out of the plane.

The remaining three crew members who swam towards the shore ran into German forces and were saved.

They took us to a camp where we were kept under guard. After a few hours, they handed us over to the British. Two days later, I was transferred to Samos with another eight German prisoners, from where we crossed over to Turkey, and from there to Cyprus. Our final destination was Haifa. The journey took five days in all.

After seven days in a camp in Haifa, they took us to Egypt, to Camp 306 on the Suez Canal. They also sent me to a barracks in Cairo for interrogation, which was not a pleasant experience. Fourteen days later, I returned to Camp 306 and was sent from there to Camp 305. When the war ended, they moved me to Camp 381 at El Alamein.

After three years as a prisoner, I finally got home safely just before Christmas, 1946.

I hope my letter will help you with your research, and if my aeroplane is ever raised, I believe it would make an admirable museum exhibit. There are a radio and an Italian rifle in the cabin that belong to me personally.

Best wishes,
Andrea Hutter

Giorgos Semidalas, wearing a protective suit, during the first stage in the preservation of the front engine.

Identifying the plane

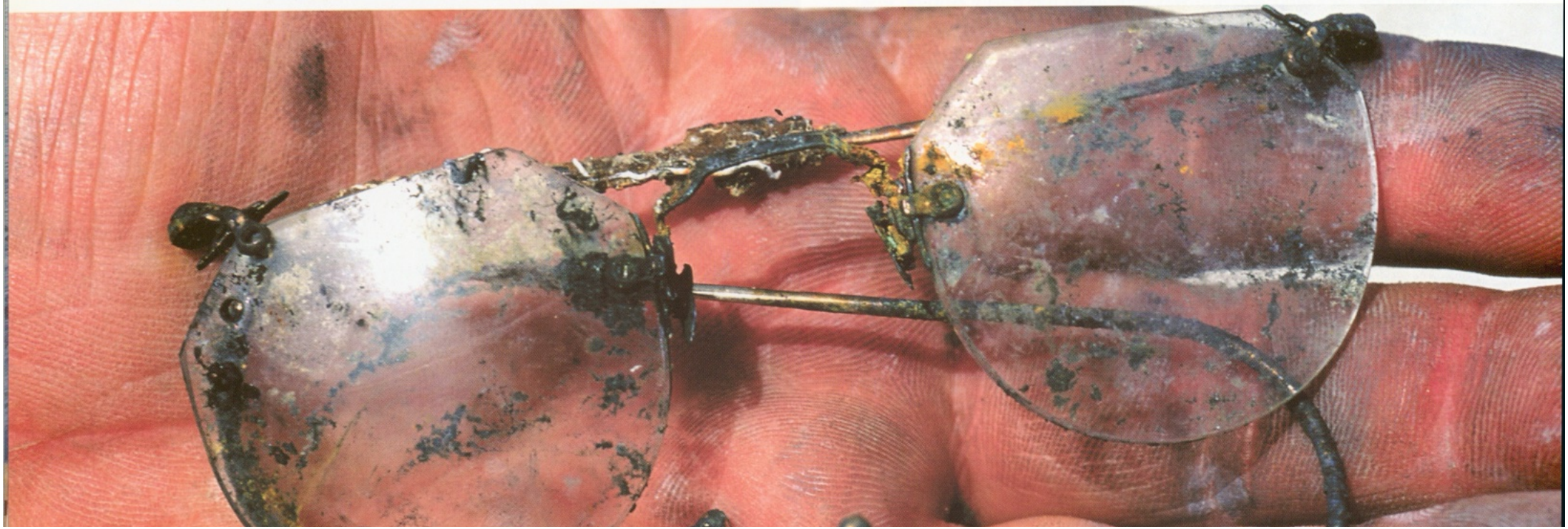
The raising of the plane provided us with the unexpected opportunity to locate the identification plates on the port side of the plane's hull.

According to the plate recording its serial number, the plane was completed on December 25, 1942, was part of Squadron II/GT2 with insignia DI+KG, and bore the production number 7607. Archive research reveals that two members of its crew were lost: Horwarth Mandeikow, the radio officer (*Unteroffizier*), and Kurt Hanuschek, the technical officer (*Uffz*). Only the remains of Kurt Hanuschek—26 years old and born in Ohlau, in what is now Poland, on September 23, 1917—were found inside the plane.

Horwarth Mandeikow, the twenty one year old radio officer born on September 29, 1922 in Hohenselchow (which is also now part of Poland) survived the crash, and was taken prisoner and hospitalised on Leros on the same day. However, he succumbed to his wounds on November 15, and was buried on the island. His grave was later transferred to the German cemetery in Athens.

We have already taken steps to locate the victim's relatives, who moved to West Germany after the war. We are currently waiting for Berlin to provide us with possible addresses for relatives or other crew members.

The glasses found inside the aircraft.



We located the details of a Junkers-52 belonging to Squadron 6./TG4 with insignia G6+FP in the loss list in the Freiburg military archive. The pilots, radio operator and gunner—Andrea Hutter—survived the crash, but the engineer did not. Andrea Hutter's plane lies at a depth of 84 metres off Cape Asfoungaros. Another Junkers-52, which crashed in the vicinity of Pano Zymi, also lost one crew member: Master Sergeant (*Oberfeldwebel*) Georg Mehren. The craft has been located at a depth of 56 metres, though only the main hull containing the cockpit, the left wing, and the left engine survive. We undertook a cursory investigation of waters close to Leipsoi on the basis of fishermen's reports of further Junkers-52, but found nothing. We quickly abandoned these attempts due to the depth of the seabed in this area.

The aeroplane during the final stage of preservation at the Tatoi Air Base. Its wings and engines have been dismantled for transportation.

(top) One of the hundreds of bullets found inside the plane after its preservation.

Clearing off the layers of silt and protecting the aircraft against corrosion.

After sixty years on the sea bed, the aeroplane was covered in a thick layer of barnacles, consisting of thousands of micro-organisms, corals, crustaceans, sponges, and other sea creatures. This layer has to be detached from the metal before the restoration process can begin. A complex cleaning process has therefore to be applied to every square inch of the plane's superstructure, which includes washing the metal with chemical solutions to dissolve the salt, calcium, sodium, and magnesium deposits without destroying the metal alloy out of which the plane was constructed. Equipment used at this stage will include magnetic attraction pumps, plastics used in the chemical industry, precision measuring equipment, valves, tanks, water extraction machinery, mixing machines, adjustable pressure water and chemical sprays, and filters. Moreover, the staff carrying out these procedures will have to wear protective clothing. Next, the alloys, aluminium, magnesium, steel, and other metals used in the craft's construction will be treated with anti-corrosion materials, again using chemicals in solution. Identical procedures are approved by the FAA and CAA—international aviation organisations—for use with working aircraft. These procedures can last anything from two to five years.

The left-hand engine has now been dismantled.

Description of our attempts to develop the films found in the cockpit

Our efforts centred on preserving the photographic emulsion during the developing process. In theory, the emulsion has been irreparably damaged by its many years submerged in sea-water. The sodium chloride, magnesium, and iodine contained in sea water would have come into contact with the silver crystals contained in every black and white photographic emulsion, neutralising the image recorded on the film. Sea water is a perfect solvent, which can leave no room for doubt that the structure of the emulsion has been destroyed. Unfortunately, the material the film is made out of runs the same risk (we can be 99% sure that the film was made by Agfa), given that film was at the time made out of animal bones, carobs, and other unstable materials. The probability of successfully developing the films from the wreck was therefore minimal. We did, however, proceed with the developing process in a spirit of scientific enquiry and curiosity. In absolute darkness and at a regulated ambient temperature of 18 degrees Centigrade, we immersed the film in a delicate solution for two hours to soften up the salts. We then dipped the film into a solution of electric aldehyde to enable the emulsion (or what was left of it) to withstand the twenty-minute developing process. We then neutralised the film and developed it in sections, following the standard development procedure: stop bath, fix, wash, stabilizer, and drying.

The end results were far better than we could have expected. We had stabilised the structure of the film medium and preserved fragments of the emulsion base.

Vasilis Mentogiannis and Giorgos Semidalas with the developed negatives found inside the aircraft. We were unlucky in that the film had never been used. If it had been, there was a good chance we would have been able to distinguish something.

The Leica found in the aircraft.

The roll of film and the negatives after development.

Machine-gun magazine carried on the plane after restoration. We can still read the red numbers on its circumference.

A Schmeisser pistol during the restoration process.

The magazine passes through numerous stages during the preservation and restoration process.

The sought-after metal plate bearing all the information about the aircraft. It was found on the aircraft's port side, low under the cockpit window.

But comes out looking like new. Sixty years on the ocean floor have not damaged it at all.

Only the buttons remain from the dead man's uniform.

The bullets found inside the machine-gun's machine restored to immaculate condition.

The cabin has been completely cleared by October 5. Now, the focus of our work shifts to the cockpit. Though many of the instruments are broken, they are still identifiable. We are very surprised to find a LEICA camera on the right-hand pilot's seat. It's unbelievable that under the barnacles, it is still immediately recognisable as a camera. With the metal lens cap pointing up, we are stirred by an incredible idea: we will develop the film! But there are more surprises to come: the three rolls of film next to the LEICA sent a shiver down my spine. My imagination runs wild: what I wouldn't give to see the photographs on that film. Logic intervenes to remind me that this is almost impossible, but nothing will stop us trying.

After finds as exciting as these, what else could one hope to find? But the final object we unearth in the mud close by the dead man's remains proves us wrong: a gold ring, the dead man's wedding band, brings our search to an emotive end.

The dead man's gold wedding ring.

EPILOGUE





"The crew of the Queen Olga were hand-picked, every man jack of them; they were the crème de la crème of the Greek navy", Christidis went on with tears in his eyes. "Our boys are that today, too, don't doubt it. They're the same sailors, the same brave lads."

***Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the* Olga.**

All of us that made it to Beirut received some compensation for the possessions that had gone down with the *Olga*. I got 100 pounds, and let me tell you about that money in case you think I'm loaded…well, I'm not, so listen up to how things worked out. The hundred pounds were to buy my clothes, my suitcase, my bag, and—I'm sorry—for the things I'd brought back from Calcutta; which is to say gifts for my family that were lost off Leros. We'd all bought stuff, because we were going back to Greece after Leros. Well, I went and deposited the hundred pounds in the Alexandria branch of Barclay's Bank. When I got back to Greece in 1949 and wanted to get married, I went to take out my money, but they wouldn't give it to me. And they didn't give me a single penny until my daughter was born. After everything—the correspondence, the certificates, and my discharge papers—the Bank of Piraeus, which represented Barclay's back then, finally paid up.

Nikos Christidis, Seaman Gunner aboard the Olga.

I want to stress that when I got back to England from Germany, where I'd been a prisoner for two years, I wanted to forget everything. I didn't want to remember that war, or Leros, or anything, and I did a fine job: I erased the whole thing from my memory.

Reg Neep, British soldier in the King's Own Regiment.

Unfortunately, no one hears much about the rank and file who died or survived. You only hear about the select few, either because of their rank or some particular act they performed; the great majority remain unsung heroes. And it might well be that their little stories are more stirring that those of the leaders, but then that's the fate of simple soldiers and seamen.

Vice-admiral (retired) Konstantinos Metallinos.

"...I hope that very soon now, I shall be able to take a rest once and for all in Greece. All the signs would indicate that only a few months now separate us from Greece. Of course, where you are, you will know all about the political infighting in Greece and the Middle East. The first hints of victory are just beginning to dawn on the horizon, and all sorts of warriors and saviours are showing up from Greece to rule us and to save us. It sickens one to see all those people wandering around with the most paradoxical demands. I have no idea where all of this will lead, though I must say I am far from optimistic about what the future has in store...which is to say that I do not foresee the period of calm we all so desperately need. As for myself, I have decided that I shall not remain in the Navy for a single day after the war...I consider it shameful, after three years of war, to be forced to take part in a war fought by Greeks against Greeks..."

Letter from Lieutenant Commander G. Blessas, the captain of the* Queen Olga, *to his brother.

"There are no permanent alliances, only permanent interests."

Lord Palmerston

So many lives have been lost, so very many…what a waste…

When I went back to Leros for the first time after so many years, I immediately recognised the mountains: they are unique. And when I visited our cemetery, I started to cry right away. So many young men lost their lives—I was only twenty years old when I arrived on Leros in 1943. The battles were hard, often hand to hand, and there were snipers and dive bombers, too: the whole bloody lot! I don't want to talk about that. But what has stayed with me are the dead, so many dead; it doesn't matter if they were Germans, Greeks, Italians, Brits…what matters is that lives were thrown away. And they're still doing it—war I mean; they can't seem to find peace, and peace is such a precious thing.

You, the young, must watch over peace like you would a precious thing: don't go to war. Live long and happily. I'm sorry for crying here, now. I'm sorry…I'm sorry, but I can't go on. Maybe later…

Reg Neep, British soldier in the King's Own Regiment.

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The photographs on pages 171 (right), 212 (top right) 230, 234 (right), 240 (right) were taken by Giorgos Nikolaidis.
Those on pages 50 & 128 (left) are by Nikoleta Kontouli.

THE BOOK BY

VASILIS MENTOGIANNIS – COSTIS MITSOTAKIS – GIORGOS NIKOLAIDIS

52 DAYS IN 1943

THE QUEEN OLGA AND THE BATTLE OF LEROS

TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK BY MICHAEL ELEFTHERIOU

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