

The Sacred Squadron

The struggles of an elite military unit from the
deserts of Africa to the islands of the Aegean during
WW2

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In October 1940 Greece was drawn to the vortex of WWII, the most catastrophic struggle the world has ever known. Its participation in hostilities was to last formally until October 1944, a period during which Greek troops would fight from the rugged mountains of Albania and the numerous islands of the Aegean to the inhospitable desert of North Africa and the Italian peninsula. In fact, Greek troops continued to fight against the Axis in the Aegean until the last day of the war (8 May 1945). These troops formed parts of the famous Sacred Squadron.

The Sacred Squadron made its first official appearance on 6 September 1942, under the name “Squadron of Select Immortals”. Its creation was the result of a variety of factors, the main one being the presence of many officers of the Hellenic Armed Forces (both commissioned and NCOs) in the Middle East, for whom there were not enough units. On the other hand, there was an urgent need for the creation of a military unit that would be strictly committed to military duties, abstaining from political developments that constantly occurred among the ranks of the Hellenic Armed Forces (conservatives vs. leftists; officers discharged after the

failed republican coup of 1935 vs. royalists, etc.), reducing their military capacity and rendering them untrustworthy in the eyes of the Allies. For these reasons, in the summer of 1942 Wing Commander G. Alexandris (subsequently a member of the Sacred Squadron and Chief of the Royal Hellenic Air Force) had suggested to Panagiotis Kanellopoulos, vice president of the Greek government in exile, in Cairo, the formation of a group of volunteers, mainly from the officers' ranks, who would be willing to fight as plain soldiers. Such a unit was formed in August 1942 with Major Antonios Stefanakis (an officer discharged after the 1935 coup) as its provisional commander, consisting of 143 low ranking officers, 40 soldiers and 30 assisting troops (cooks, waiters and tent guards). However, it was gradually reinforced with volunteers from the Royal Hellenic Navy, Royal Hellenic Air Force, Police and Gendarmerie.

Activities in the North African front

In September 1942 the unit moved to Egypt, where two developments occurred that were to determine its character and further course. The first was the assumption of its command by Colonel Christodoulos Tsigantes, who had been dishonourably discharged after the March 1st, 1935 coup. Tsigantes was assigned command of the unit on 15 September. His reception by his subordinates was not good, due to intense political passions that had developed among the ranks of Greek units in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Tsigantes managed to win his men's trust. According to Vlachostathopoulos (p. 24): "Following a heated discussion with them [on 12 September, three days before the

official assumption of his duties], he convinced them that he not only could, but also wanted to lead them to war, and that he would keep them away from all that was happening in various units until then. His words, combined with his formerly distinguished career in the Army (medals of valour; repeated wounds in battle; knowledge of several foreign languages' as well as his participation in the Foreign Legion) resulted in his acceptance by all. Thus began the glorious history of this Squadron". Photopoulos adds (p. 27): "This smart move by Tsigantes, along with his honesty and persuasion, made for a successful diplomatic maneuver (though contrary to military regulations)... Subsequently, for three whole years (1942-1945)... he kept diligently his promise to the end, leading his elite special unit along the difficult path of honour and duty, and earning for it the unique and praiseworthy title of "Legend"". Soon, Tsigantes accomplished the renaming of his unit to "Sacred Squadron". Furthermore, along with the founder of the famous SAS, the legendary David Stirling, he thoroughly reorganized the Sacred Squadron, turning it into an elite commando unit. Emmanuel Perissakis mentions the event that marked this "mutation" of the Sacred Squadron (GES/DIS, p. 34): "On 25 December 1942, the commander of the 1st British Raiding Regiment, Colonel Stirling, also commanding the Sacred Squadron, returned to Cairo from Libya and visited the seat of the Sacred Squadron... Colonel Stirling asked the commander of the Sacred Squadron whether it would be possible to reorganize and train within a month his unit as a mechanized commando unit, moving on jeeps and armoured vehicles equipped accordingly, so as to undertake operations at great depth behind enemy lines, using as bases the desert or the mountains separating Tripolitania from Sahara proper. This

proposal was accepted immediately, on condition that the Sacred Squadron would be timely supplied with the equipment necessary for its reorganization and training; its deficiencies in various critical specialties would be taken care of; and that he would be given a free hand, with no interference during the course of its training and preparation". At this point it is worth mentioning that the British Army had always had a long experience in the conduct of successful raids by small units, something which was proven time and again during the battles in North Africa, by both the SAS and Long Range Desert Group (LRDG).



Colonel Tsigantes with Pilot Officer Nikolaos Zervoudakis in the North African front

Soon, two contingents of the Sacred Squadron were given the opportunity to participate in battle for the first time. The first (consisting of eight men under Wing Commander Alexandris, on three specially arranged jeeps) was to participate alongside a

commando unit in a harassment operation at the rear of Afrika Korps in the region of Agedabia (in southwest Cyrenaica), This operation took place during the period 19 November-12 December 1942 but did not involve any hostilities, due to the fast withdrawal of German and Italian forces. The second operation was meant to be a raid by sea in the region of El Agheila (at the southernmost part of the Gulf of Sidra), again at the rear of Afrika Korps. A contingent of 60 men of the Sacred Squadron, under Lieutenant Colonel Emmanuel Fradellos, was going to participate in it; however this operation (which would have lasted from 4-23 December 1942) was also eventually aborted, due to the rapid redeployment of enemy forces.

This delay in the participation of the Sacred Squadron in operations in the North African front was not meant to be the last. On 25 January 1943 (or, according to others, on the 27th), the Sacred Squadron started its overland journey from Egypt to Tripolis (Libya) in order to join the SAS for a joint sabotage operation on the rear of Axis forces, in Tunisia, However, on their arrival the troops of the Sacred Squadron were informed of Stirling's capture; a fact that, once again, led to the cancellation of further action. There followed a personal appeal of Tsigantes to Field Marshal Montgomery, during which he persuaded him to place the Sacred Squadron under General Leclerc's brigade of Free French. Perissakis mentions respectively: "Influenced by the recent accident of the British commando regiment [i.e. the SAS] and believing that the width of the front did not allow for the conduct of commando raids of the type for which the Sacred Squadron had trained and reorganized, General [sic] Montgomery ordered its immediate return to Egypt. This decision by the

commander of the 8th Army naturally caused great disappointment among the men of the Squadron. Colonel Tsigantes and his escorts tried to persuade General Montgomery with a series of arguments. They claimed that the Squadron's return to Egypt for the second time without participating in operations for which it had prepared itself could have significant and unpredictable consequences to the men's morale, most of whom were officers; also, that impressions of the Allies among the Greek public opinion, both abroad and in occupied Greece, would be very negative, especially in association with the fact that approximately around the same time the Greek 1st Brigade was also moved away from the front. In the end, the incorporation of the Sacred Squadron to the French Brigade was suggested as a compromise... This suggestion was based on the view that, after its incorporation to Leclerc's Brigade, the Sacred Squadron could be used for operations aiming at outflanking the German right in Tunisia" (GES/DIS, 87).



Colonel Tsigantes and General Leclerc inspect men of the Sacred Squadron at Nalut,
in Tunisia

Under these circumstances, the first engagement of the Sacred Squadron in the North African front took place in Ksar Rillan, in southern Tunisia, during the battles for the Mareth Line. There, the Sacred Squadron (involved at that time in reconnaissance operations) and some French units were attacked on the morning of 10 March by a strong mechanized column, which, however, was repulsed by the RAF. During that battle the Squadron suffered the loss of three men (missing). Ksar Rillan was finally taken on 19 March by a French contingent including 12 jeeps by the Sacred Squadron, with the loss of one dead and one severely wounded member of the Squadron.

There followed the successful outflanking of the Mareth Line by the troops of the 8th Army, as well as the taking of the city of Gabes, in southern Tunisia, which became the next stop of the Sacred Squadron. On 3 April, the latter was detached from the French Brigade and placed under the command of the 2nd New Zealand Division which, on 6 April, participated in the battle of Wadi Akarit, the fiercest one after that of El Alamein. In the course of this battle the Sacred Squadron suffered the loss of one man (Cavalry Captain G. Bourdakos).



Colonel Tsigantes inspects German prisoners after the battle at Wadi Akarit

Subsequently, the Sacred Squadron participated in the liberation of the cities of Sfax (9 April) and Sous (12 April), where the Greek units were received with great enthusiasm. In the period 13-16 April the Squadron operated for the last time in North Africa, participating in reconnaissance patrols during the battle for Enfidaville (mod. Enfida), in the course of which six of its men were taken prisoners. On 17 April, a few weeks before the successful termination of the Battle of Tunisia (on 13 May), the Squadron was ordered to return to Egypt in a hurry, in order to participate in operations in other fronts. However, the real reason of its hasty recall was the Greek government's fear of its possible participation in rebellious activities developing among the ranks of the two divisions of the Hellenic Army of the Middle East (Vlachostathopoulos, 26, 98; Photopoulos, note in p. 30).



Colonel Tsigantes with Commander Emmanuel Mathaiou (a close associate of his during the North African campaign) in one of the jeeps of the Sacred Squadron

First Operations in the Aegean

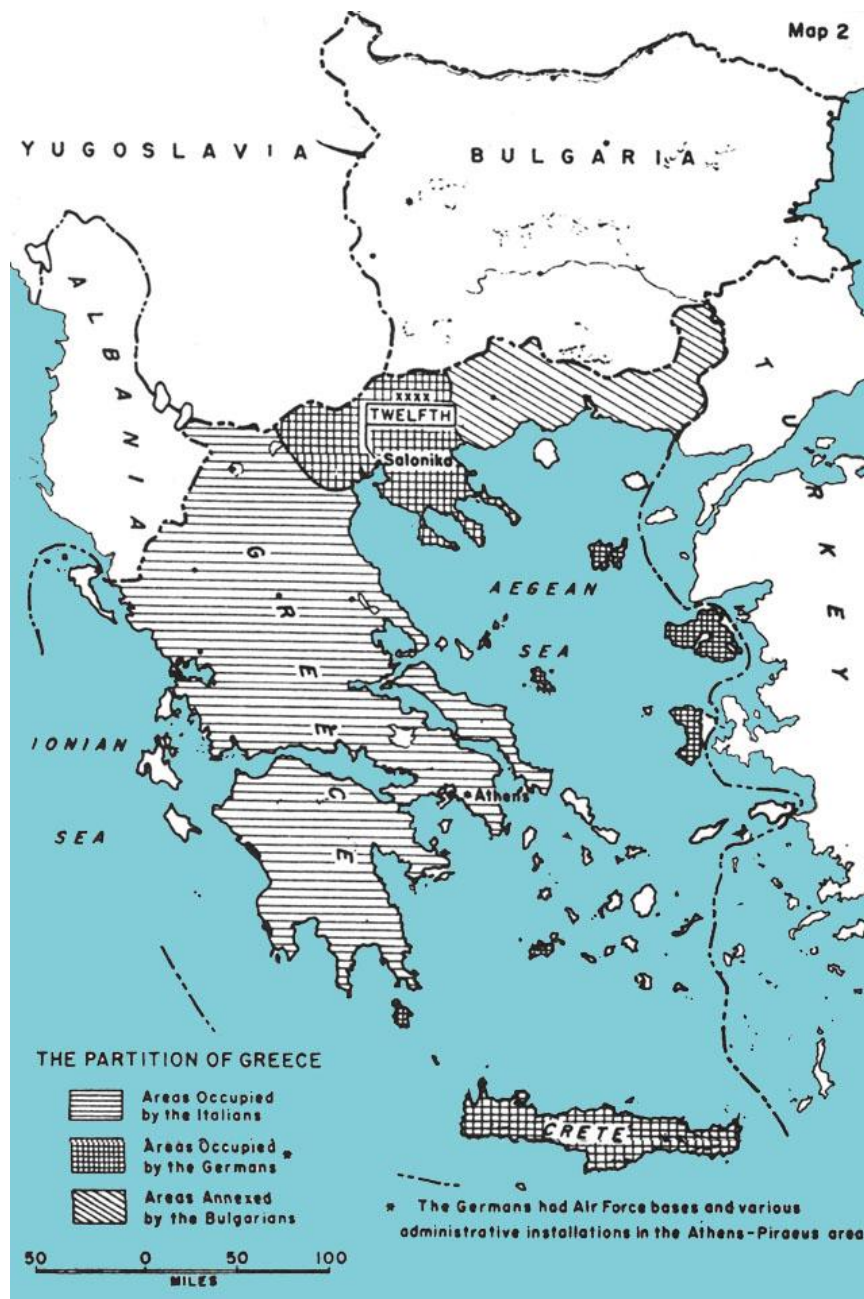
From May until October 1943 the Sacred Squadron reorganized in camps in Egypt and Palestine. According to Vlachostathopoulos (p. 26), “after the Tunisian campaign, the Squadron’s commander removed half its personnel (those who did not manage to accept the new spirit he envisaged for the unit), including others in their place who were willing to serve under him”. Thus, the Squadron increased in numbers, reaching 327 men; also, it was restructured (to include a command unit; base contingent and three raiding squads); while training intensified, so that its men would become capable of conducting amphibious and aerial assaults in the Aegean islands.



Men of the Sacred Squadron training in parachute drops



A group of men of the Sacred Squadron



Map of occupied Greece (1941-44)

Italy's surrender, on 8 September 1943, upset the military status quo in occupied Greece. Suddenly Italians, until then allies to the Third Reich, became its potential enemies. This realization developed into a chaotic situation in occupied territories, as Italian occupation forces had lost their will to continue the war, lacking, however, the means to return home. Under these circumstances, both British and German started a tug of war whose prize would be

the occupation of Italian controlled territories in the Aegean and Ionian Seas. In the case of Samos, the willingness of the “Cuneo” division that held it to cooperate with the Allies resulted in the sending of small British forces to the island, in a symbolic reinforcement of the Italian garrison. At the same time, under similar circumstances, the Italian garrisons of Icaria, Fournoi, Astypalaia (Stampalia), Leros, Kalymnos, Kos and Symi also switched sides. However, the British government was not willing to allow the presence of Greek military forces on the islands, apparently in the expectation of trading the possession of some of them with Turkey in return for the latter’s participation in the war on the Allied side. Later, however, when Turkey’s unwillingness became obvious, the British attitude changed. Therefore, the sending of troops of the Sacred Squadron to the “liberated” Aegean islands was only permitted in late October. This expedition would involve two groups. The first, consisting of 200 paratroopers, would land on the island on the 30th and 31st of October. The second would travel by sea, via Leros (with the ships carrying it arriving at Samos on the 1st and 5th of November, respectively). Despite the rather eventful arrival in Samos of the whole of the Sacred Squadron (characteristically, 21 paratroopers were wounded during their drop, five of whom seriously - with three crippled for life - as a result of bad weather conditions), the men took positions at Mytilinioi, as well as areas near Pythagoreion and Karlovasi. Around the same time, there arrived on the island Emmanuel Sophoulis, Minister of Social Care of the Greek government in exile, representing Greek administration. However, the liberation of Samos was not meant to last. The recapture of Leros by the Germans, on 16 November, left Samos exposed. The

following day, a heavy German bombing of non military targets at Vathy and Pythagoreion and a subsequent German demand for surrender resulted in the decision by the British military commander to abandon Samos. The evacuation took place between 19-22 November and involved the transfer to Kusadasi (Turkey) of British forces, the Sacred Squadron, 800 Greek guerillas, 12,000 refugees and 8,500 Italians (including General Mario Soldarelli, commander of the Italian division, and the Metropolitan of Samos) by various boats. Troops of the Sacred Squadron assisted in the evacuation until 25 November when, following an agreement with the Turkish government, they travelled to Cairo by land, in civilian clothes.



Map of Samos

Reorganization of the Sacred Squadron

The British failure to open a new front in the Aegean in 1943, thus drawing Turkey to the War on the Allied side, resulted in the abandonment of large scale operations in the region in favour of hit and run tactics targeting German garrisons on Greek islands. Therefore, despite the fact that the Sacred Squadron continued its

training in climbing and the use of amphibious means (for the purpose of landing on the Greek mainland) as late as January 1944, it was finally decided to turn it into a commando unit, to serve in cooperation with the Special Service Brigade, under Brigadier D.S.T. Turnbull. According to Dimitrios Palaiologos: “Raiding forces would meet at a deserted, always different coast, in the southwest of Turkey, where they would create a “raiding base”, with a staff by British and Greek officers; as well as units of the Special Service Brigade, the Sacred Squadron and the Navy. The latter would provide landing and escort ships, armed sailing boats and other vessels of various types, to be used for billeting of troops and storing food. This peculiar way of forming a base was due to the need to avoid protests and frictions with the Turkish government, which continued to be neutral, not tolerating the presence of foreign troops on its soil” (GES/DIS, 163). Moreover, for operational purposes, the Aegean was divided into two sectors, north and south, with the former (consisting of Samos, Icaria and islands further to the north) assigned to the Sacred Squadron and the latter (consisting of the Dodecanese, Cyclades and Crete) to the Special Service Brigade. Also, in order to better respond to its new duties (including the destruction of floating vessels; dry docks; wires; maintenance facilities, fuel tanks; radio bases; coastal gun positions; searchlights, etc.), the Sacred Squadron was divided into three raiding squads, under Lieutenant Colonels Andreas Kallinskis and Tryphon Triantafyllakos, and Major Pavlos Dimopoulos, respectively (with the general command still held by Tsigantes).



Men of the Sacred Squadron in 1943

On 14 February 1944, a detachment of the first raiding squad “embarked on a diesel engine sailing boat and left for Limassol, accompanied by an antisubmarine vessel. There it arrived on 17 February, departing again on the 26th. Sailing by the Turkish coast, and stopping at various coves, it arrived six days later, at 8.00 a.m. on 4 March, at Vromolimano cove, close to Cape Korakas, in the Cesme peninsula, in Turkey, being its final destination” (GES/DIS, 164-5). The first raid was successfully directed against Samos, in the period 7-18 March. Moreover, in the evening of 8 March a patrol of two men of the Sacred Squadron on a reconnaissance mission to Chios arrested at sea an armed German sailing ship carrying ammunition and food.

In the period 29-31 March, a ten man squad raided Psara with the purpose of neutralizing its garrison and destroying a lighthouse and radio. However, this mission was unsuccessful.

On 3-4 April, a contingent of 30 troops of the Sacred Squadron raided successfully Mytilini, with the purpose of “killing or arresting the members of Gestapo, seizing its archive and liberating those held in its prisons and the building of the city’s school, also used as prison” (GES/DIS, 175). The mission was deemed successful, resulting in the killing or wounding of 13 Germans, with the respective wounding of a soldier of the Squadron.

In the period 27-29 April, following a request by the SBS, a group of six men of the Squadron assisted it in the course of the SBS raid on Ios and Amorgos. Also, a group of three men of the Squadron joined a group of 11 British commandos that raided Paros successfully, where a German airstrip was under construction. This operation ended on 18 May with serious material damage for the Germans, as well as the loss of 6-7 of their men.

During April, the Sacred Squadron was upgraded to regiment, with a respective increase of its strength to 1,000 men and modification of its organization.

Subsequently, Samos became the theater of a second raid by the Sacred Squadron. In the course of the night of 17 May, a contingent of 13 men of the Squadron, assisted by two British officers and two civilians, landed on the island. Their original plan was to destroy a fuel depot and an outpost near Karlovasi. However, they discovered that the fuel had been transferred elsewhere, and eventually attacked successfully the weak garrison

of Marathokampos. The operation ended with the withdrawal of the men of the Squadron late in May.



Monument in honour of the Sacred Squadron, in Samos

On the night of 28 May, a force of 49 men, under the commander of the 1st raiding squad, landed at the west coast of Chios with the purpose of raiding the city of Chios and nearby locations, in order to destroy wiring installations and the dry dock by the port. Following a successful surprise attack, the commando groups withdrew without losses. According to Palaiologos: "The raid at Chios resulted in the blowing up of the dry dock and the destruction (or serious damage) of 13 small ships; also, the blowing up of the small building housing the cable heads, the destruction of four of them and the death of an unknown number of

men from the crews of the blown up German ships” (GES/DIS, 188).

On 18/19 June a detachment of eight men of the Sacred Squadron neutralized a German outpost in the village of Langadia, in Chios. On the night of the 20th, the same detachment attacked a German outpost by the Bay of Gera, in Lesbos, destroying three enemy vessels, the dry dock and the adjoining storehouse. These operations were the last of the 1st raiding squad in the Aegean, as of mid June it was gradually replaced by the 2nd.

The first operation of the 2nd raiding squad (which during this period had been renamed “Aegean contingent”) was directed against the German garrison at Vathy, on the east side of Kalymnos. Accompanied by 14 British troops, the men of the Sacred Squadron attacked the Germans on 29 June, killing nine and wounding ten, including their commander. The British detachment suffered one dead and two wounded.

On 13-14 July a particularly important operation took place whose target was the mixed (German and Italian) garrison of Symi. Starting from the neighbouring Turkish coast, the “Aegean contingent” was divided into three groups. The first (“Northern”) consisted of 91 men of the Squadron and 23 of the SBS, and was meant to attack the city. The second (“Southern”), consisting of 36 men of the Squadron and 22 British, would attack the village of Panormitis; while the third (“Western”), consisting of 31 men of the Squadron and 21 British, would operate in the area of Hagios Phanourios. The operation commenced at 6.45 on the morning of 14 July with an attack of the Northern group at the fortress and the port of the city resulting in the surrender of the German garrison by 12.30. At the same time, the Southern group was attacking the

monastery of Panormitis, held by another German contingent, which, however, was also forced to surrender. Finally, the Western group surprised the Italian garrison at Hagios Phanourios, arresting it. Subsequently, all three groups withdrew by sea.



Map of Symi

Despite the loss of nine troops of the Squadron and three British in the course of the fight, the operation was crowned by success. According to Palaiologos, “in the Northern sector a mixed Greek and British unit destroyed vessels under repair at the dry dock of Symi, as well as defense installations at the fortress and ammunition depots. It also destroyed quite a few automatic and

other heavy weapons, as well as a significant number of rifles and ammunition. In the Southern sector a demolition squad of three men of the Squadron destroyed defense installations in the Panormitis peninsula; the underwater wire connecting Symi with Rhodes; the telephone line between Panormitis and Symi; a number of submachine guns, machine guns and mortars; and ammunition. In the Western sector, a unit consisting of two men of the Squadron destroyed all the fortifications; a number of heavy guns, as well as ammunition depots” (GES/DIS, 195).

Vlachostathopoulso adds: “Regarding the Symi operation, King George II sent a telegram to the commander of the Sacred Squadron on 24 July, expressing his gratification for this unit’s achievement. Moreover, the prestige of the Sacred Squadron had been elevated vis-à-vis assisting British forces, and the former had become their equal, if not better”.

On the night of 7th August a landing boat with men of the Sacred Squadron launched a successful attack on the German garrison in the area of Perama, at the entrance of the Bay of Gera, in Lesbos. The target was three sailing boats carrying sugar, olive oil and wheat for the Germans. Eventually, a 35-ton sailing boat loaded with 20 tons of sugar was captured and taken to the base of the unit, in the area of Deremen, on the Turkish coast.

Until the 20th of August, when the 3rd raiding squad started replacing the 2nd, the men of the latter raided various islands of the central and southern Aegean. One of them was Tilos, the raid on which resulted in the destruction of telephone installations and the underwater telecommunications wire, connecting Tilos with the other islands of the Dodecanese.

The Wehrmacht withdraws

At the end of August, the time when the 3rd raiding squad completed its transfer to the Deremen base, the German withdrawal from the Aegean islands to the Greek mainland was fully under way, being the first stage of the evacuation of Greece by Axis forces. In this context, a group of five men of the Sacred Squadron was ordered to go on a reconnaissance mission on the islands of Karpathos and Kasos. Unfortunately, the operation on Karpathos ended tragically on 25 August, when one trooper was killed and all the other were wounded crossing a minefield. Subsequently, while the wounded were waiting for a doctor, they were taken by surprise and arrested by the Germans. During their transport to Germany one of the men died; however, two others managed to escape near the Greek-Yugoslav border.

On 29 August. a unit of 12 men of the Sacred Squadron raided successfully Santorini, destroying without resistance telephone and other installations in the area of Thermes Piges ("Thermal Springs"). Also, on the night of 7 September another unit, headed by Lieutenant Erselman, landed on the southeastern coast of Kos and attacked an outpost at Thermiano, neutralizing the small German-Italian garrison and blowing up the installations.

Approximately at the same time, the commander of the Sacred Squadron had been receiving information on the simultaneous withdrawal of occupation forces from several Aegean islands. It was therefore decided to send detachments to Chios, Lesbos and Samos and to transfer the base of the "Aegean contingent" from Deremen to liberated Chios. However, in order to avoid complications resulting from the simultaneous presence of ELAS

guerilla forces in the same areas, it was decided that detachments of the Sacred Squadron would not number more than ten men on every island, and that they would be accompanied by British liaison officers. Moreover, large scale engagements with withdrawing Germans should be avoided.



Men of the Sacred Squadron in their desert warfare outfit

Of particular importance was the presence of the Sacred Squadron in Mykonos, in whose liberation it contributed significantly. The garrison of Mykonos, consisting of 37 Germans, had been fortified in the Choremis mansion, on the northeastern edges of the town of Mykonos. The mission of their neutralization prior to their withdrawal was assigned to 23 men of the Sacred Squadron, headed by the commander of the 2nd raiding squad, who landed on the island's southeastern shores. Following a careful and extensive reconnaissance, they attacked the garrison during the night of 28th September. Despite their strong resistance, the Germans were forced to retreat to the fortified outposts of their

defense perimeter, thus allowing the destruction of ammunition depots, their food supplies and radio by the Sacred Squadron. German losses amounted to six prisoners, six dead and seven wounded. Their surviving compatriots withdrew by boat that came from Syros on this purpose on 20th September, the day of the liberation of Mykonos.

Liberation of Athens

While the Sacred Squadron was active in the Aegean islands, the Greek government in exile decided to upgrade it to a commando regiment (under the name “Greek Sacred Regiment”), by adding more men to it. This procedure lasted three months (June-September 1944) and, on its completion, the Sacred Squadron numbered 1,084 men. Subsequently, it was divided into two expeditionary forces (Force B and Force C) and a Rear Guard Detachment. Force C would form part of the British force about to land on the Greek mainland after the German withdrawal (“Fox Forces”), while Force B would assume new clearing operations in the Aegean. In the meantime, on 4 October 1944, the 16 men of the Sacred Squadron sent to Samos to follow the attempt of the Italian rearguard of the occupation forces to withdraw, managed to secure the peaceful surrender of approximately 1,000 Italians with their war supplies. On the other hand, on 9 October a detachment of 48 men of the Squadron under Major Kazakopoulos (“Tinos Detachment”), established a base on the Bay of Panormos, in Tinos, with the purpose of conducting further reconnaissance patrols on neighbouring Cycladic islands.

In the midst of it all, Force C was heading for southern Greece, being part of “Fox Forces”. Escorted by the destroyer “Themistocles”, it landed at Kythera, on 26 September 1944, which in the meantime had been evacuated by its German garrison. On its arrival at the port of Kapsali, it was received enthusiastically by the local population, under the Metropolitan. On 30 September, this detachment left for Poros, where it landed on 2 October. On 11 October it was supposed to attack the coastal pill boxes in Aegina. However, in the meantime it became known that the Germans had withdrawn from the wider region of Athens. Therefore, in the morning of 14 October it landed in Piraeus. From there it headed to the center of Athens via Pireos Street. According to Palaiologos: “Soon after [their landing] the men of the Sacred Squadron headed to the city center in order to march in front of Major General Panagiotis Spiliotopoulos, military commander of Attica. The cities of Piraeus and Athens received the first men of the Squadron decorated with flags. The enthusiasm of the inhabitants of both cities, celebrating their liberation, is hard to describe. The presence of this first detachment of the Sacred Squadron in the Greek capital caused a stream of emotions by the inhabitants, raising their moral which had dropped significantly as a result of deprivations suffered during the Occupation. After the end of the parade, Lieutenant Colonel Messinopoulos, commander of Force C, lay a wreath on the Monument of the Unknown Soldier and the troops of the Squadron were given barracks in the mansion of the Hellenic Army Pension Fund (presently Attica departmental store). After two days, Force C moved to the Athens College building (in Psychiko) and, subsequently, to Iosifogleio orphanage, in Syngrou boulevard”.

Renewed operations in the Aegean

The Sacred Squadron's march in the streets of Athens was an actual recognition of the sacrifices it had suffered to that day, as well as an acknowledgment of its contribution to the war effort. However, the war was yet to finish, and while this was taking place in Athens, Force B in Naxos had become involved in a difficult struggle for the neutralization of the German garrison. More specifically, starting from Chios, late at night on 13 October, 51 men of Force B landed at the northwestern coast of Naxos, in order to stop the withdrawal of the Germans (who had fortified themselves in the city's castle, waiting for some means to escape to the Greek mainland) and force them to surrender. However, due to lack of cooperation between the men of the Squadron; landing boats accompanying them and local guerilla groups supporting them, the operation (which had originally been perceived as "easy") lasted until the afternoon of 15 October, despite the arrest of the commander of the German contingent in the meantime. Furthermore, the successful termination of the operation required the arrival of Colonel Kallinskis from Chios, bringing with him a mortar. In the end, in spite of its strong resistance, the German garrison was forced to surrender. The Sacred Squadron took 69 prisoners; a mortar; 13 machine guns and a large number of rifles and ammunition, suffering the loss of just one man.



Map of Lemnos

Meanwhile, a similar operation was taking place in Lemnos, where the German garrison was likewise preparing to leave. In order to stop it, Force B organized a contingent of 133 men, under the Sacred Squadron's second in command. Attached to it were a demolition squad; a signals unit; Colonel Tsigantes and staff from the Special Service Brigade. On 15 October, this contingent embarked on a convoy that reached the port of Myrina (in Lemnos) the following day. In the meantime, the 350 Germans and 60 Italians on the island had gathered at Moudros Bay, where their ships were anchored. Using Myrina as their starting point, the men of the Squadron rushed to Moudros from three directions, engaging with the enemy on the same day. However, the latter managed to put up a stand until the following morning, when the

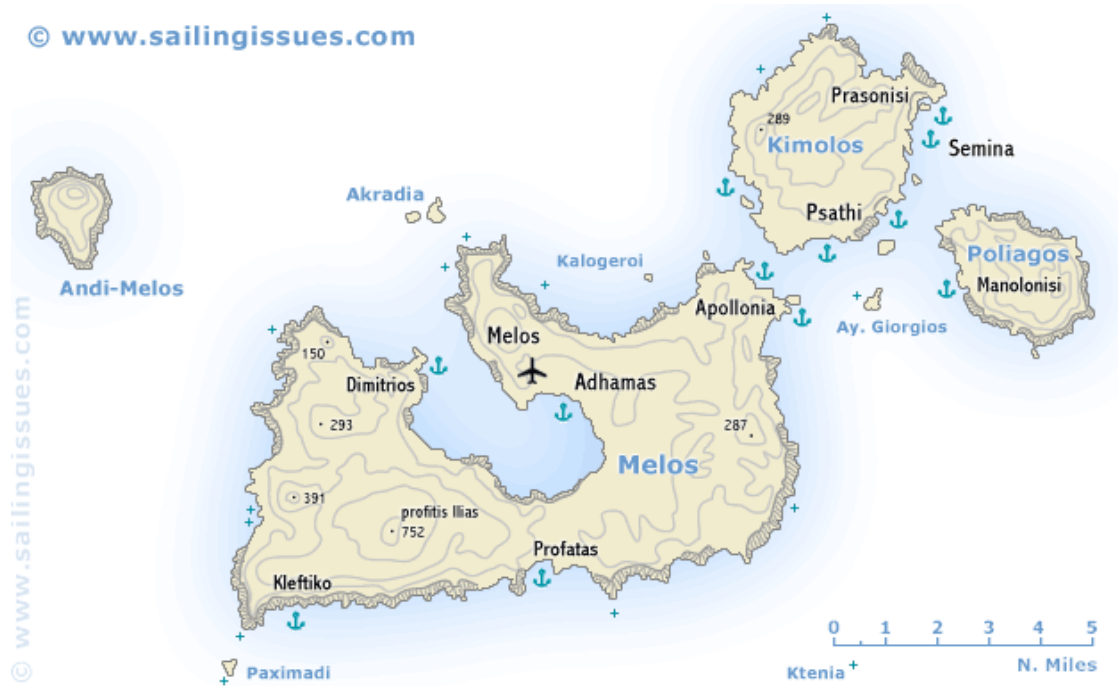
German and Italian garrison surrendered, thanks also to the contribution of five British planes and the destroyer “Themistocles”. During this operation the Sacred Squadron suffered one dead and one wounded, but took rich booty and a large quantity of food supplies.



A scene from the liberation of Lemnos by the Sacred Squadron

Following the termination of the raid on Lemnos, the British command decided that the next island to be taken would be Melos which, however, had been converted to a strong German outpost in the Aegean, due to its strategic location and geophysical particularity (as regards the protected Bay of Adamas). The island's garrison consisted of 650 men. Their morale was low and their commander had expressed the wish to surrender. On the other hand, the leaders of the Sacred Squadron could not afford more than 150 men at the time for the taking of the island which, due to its strong fortification, would require a proper landing operation and not a simple raid. However, their reservations were not taken into consideration and the operation was set for 28

October. The 177 men of the Squadron that eventually took part in it (under Colonel Kallinskis) landed on the 25th in the nearby Kimolos, which was to serve as their base. Subsequently, at 1.30 a.m. on 26 October, a commando platoon landed at Tria Pigadia and before daybreak attacked the German outposts at Pollonia and Voudia, facing the shores of Kimolos. Having neutralized their garrisons, it advanced to the interior creating a bridgehead and repelling the attack of a 35 German detachment. On the same evening, the main body of the Sacred Squadron also landed at Melos. The following day the commandos neutralized an outpost in Theiorychia ("Sulfur Mines") but realized that strong fortifications at the sites of Trahila and Korfos, including trenches, pillboxes and mines, commanded access to the center of the island and the Bay of Adamas. Therefore, they asked that either the operation be cancelled or that the detachment be reinforced with infantry and artillery units. There followed the landing of 200 Royal Marines at the south side of the island and an attack by the Sacred Squadron on 2 November which, however, failed due to the lack of British support. Following an in situ inspection of the situation by Colonel Tsigantes and the commander of the Special Service Brigade who had arrived in Melos in a haste, it was decided that it was impossible to break through the German defense site and that the operation should be terminated. On the night of 4 November, the men of the Sacred Squadron withdrew from Melos, leaving behind a detachment of 82 troops at Kimolos for the purpose of launching surprise attacks on the garrison of Melos. Despite its failure and the wounding of one soldier, the operation against Melos had caused 100 losses to the Germans and the destruction or damage of three machine guns.



Map of Melos and Kimolos

While the battle for Melos was under way, another detachment of Force B, consisting of 47 men of the Sacred Squadron, was operating at Tilos (or Episkopi), with the aim of neutralizing its garrison of 73 Germans and 89 unarmed Italians and using the island as a base for further operations. This detachment, which was accompanied by a small force of seven Britons, landed at the south side of the island on the midnight of 26-27 October, and the following morning it advanced further to the north. Under cover of the fire of the British cruiser “HMS Sirius”, it secured the surrender of the garrison in the region of Livadia (in the central-eastern side of the island), that is, 50 Germans and 70 Italians, who were subsequently picked up by the British cruiser. However, the men of the Sacred Squadron were unaware that, in the meantime, the German defence had been reinforced with approximately 100 German troops from Rhodes who had landed at the southeastern side of Tilos, launching a surprise attack on the Sacred Squadron

on the morning of 28 October. The commandos split in two groups, taking defensive positions north of Livadia. They repelled with ease the first German attack but were then struck harder, as the Germans enjoyed the support of two small boats. Thus, in the evening, while waiting for reinforcements, they were forced to withdraw further to the north in small groups. Following a night march in the rain, they reached the northeastern side of the island. There they were met by the destroyer “Navarino”, carrying reinforcements, that is, a further platoon of the Sacred Squadron. However, its commander, Major Flengas, after receiving reports on the situation, estimated that the mission had no chance of success against a stronger enemy, deciding to abort it. Thus, on the morning of 30 October the men of the Sacred Squadron withdrew, leaving behind them ten colleagues and four Britons (among them two officers) who had got lost during the withdrawal from Livadia and had been arrested. Further losses of the Sacred Squadron included two dead and ten wounded. On the other hand, the Germans suffered 26 dead and 36 wounded.



Men of the Sacred Squadron are heading towards a beach in Tilos, after the early, successful stage of their raid on the island. In the background, the HMS Sirius



Map of Tilos

Subsequently, a significant part of the activities of the Sacred Squadron focused on the continuous harassment of the strong German garrison of Melos. For this purpose this island had been placed under constant surveillance and became the target of repeated raids. On 4 November an English detachment of 27 Royal Marines under captain Arnold Bell attacked unsuccessfully the outpost at Kleftiko. This failure resulted in the death of four men (captain Bell and marines R.G. Bachelor, H.I. Bowkett and W.A. Brown) and the arrest of marine Harry Barber (Belivanakis (2), 297, 299). On 5 December, during an ambush set by men of the Sacred Squadron, the German officer in charge of Melos, Commander Bernhard Kuhn, and four other persons (including the

philhellene doctor Hans Loeber and a Greek nurse) were killed (Belivanakis (2), 81-82). On 10 December two men of the Squadron blew up a damaged German car, terrorizing its passengers who had been awaiting a service crew. On 23 December there was an assault on a German patrol in the area of Theiorycheia. The ensuing struggle resulted in the death of its commander and the arrest of its men. These actions forced the German garrison to evacuate the largest part of the island and to concentrate in the defense perimeter at Kaminia. Eventually, continual harassments by the Sacred Squadron and the RAF resulted in the German garrison negotiating surrender on 6 May 1945 (Easter Sunday). The surrender of the garrison (552 men) started on 8 May when, according to D. Palaiologos, “on the same day the commander of the detachment of Kimolos and all his men boarded small vessels and sailed to the Bay of Apollonia (Pollonia), where they were joined by the men of the Squadron who were on constant patrol in Melos, subsequently landing at Adamas. The islanders received them with great joy and enthusiasm, and the men of the Squadron marched to Plakes (sic), the capital of Melos. Throughout the route, German guards presented arms... Until 12 May the Germans had surrendered and left the island.... The surrender of the German garrison of Melos was of particular importance, since small scale raids by small forces of the Sacred Squadron had caused the cutting off of a significant German force for six whole months”.

Despite the worsening situation of the Third Reich, early in 1945 there still remained significant German forces in several Aegean islands, typically to guard them but in reality having been cut off, due to the disruption of their communications with the main war

fronts. In this context, German forces were still holding the region of Canea (in Crete); Melos; Rhodes; Leros; Tilos; Kos and Kalymnos. In order to keep them under close control, the Allied Headquarters Middle East decided to organize a base in Symi for all available Sacred Squadron Forces operating in the South Aegean. Their mission would be to blockade the occupied islands, harass German forces on them and wear them out with small scale raids. However, they were not to assume large scale operations, so as to avoid unnecessary losses, since the forthcoming surrender of the German garrisons was more than certain.



Men of the Sacred Squadron relaxing on a caique

Such a raid took place on 12 February 1945 against Nisyros, with the participation of a detachment of 110 men of the Squadron and four Britons. The island was guarded by approximately 70 Germans. The men of the Squadron assaulted the village of

Emporio, where, after a short resistance, they easily arrested twenty Germans (three of which attempted to escape by boat but were captured later). Their own losses amounted to one dead (Lieutenant Evangelos Hadjievangelou) and one wounded, while those of the Germans to seven dead and eight wounded.

Subsequently, the plan for the conquest of Tilos was activated for the second time ("Operation Cave"). For this purpose, a "Symi contingent" was put together, consisting of 513 men (including, especially for the occasion, two Indian companies). The island's garrison comprised 180-190 Germans and a few Italians with just one officer, Lieutenant Hainemann, the acting commander. Most of them had fortified themselves at the center of the island, around Livadia and its port ("Skala"). In order to defeat them it was decided that the attackers would divide in three groups, under the respective names "Northern Force", "Main Force" (consisting mostly of Indians) and "Southern Force". All three were originally scheduled to land on 27 February, but landings were postponed for the 1st of March due to bad weather. "Northern Force" landed at the Bay of Zoumboudi, on the northeastern side of the island, while "Main Force" at the Bay of Hagios Antonios, on its northwestern side. "Southern Force" landed at the Bay of Hagios Stergios, on the south. The three groups converged to the center, pressing the garrison. The main assault took place in a coordinated manner at 4.00 p.m. and an hour later it was backed by naval fire. All resistance had ceased by 6.00 p.m. The attackers' losses were two dead Indians and two wounded men of the Sacred Squadron. Germans suffered twenty dead and 142 prisoners.



Lieutenant Hainemann, acting commander of Tilos, with a British prisoner, after the failed first attempt of the Sacred Squadron at the liberation of the island

Patrol and skirmishes in the islands of the Dodecanese involving men of the Sacred Squadron continued throughout March and April 1945. Their next targets were going to be Rhodes (assault and destruction of various outposts) and the neighbouring small island of Alimnia, for the conquest of which plans had been laid for simultaneous assaults. Enemy forces were estimated at 54 Germans and 43 Italians, who would have to confront 217 men (including 28 British troops) divided into five detachments (four assigned to raiding and one serving as combined Greek-British staff). The operation would be backed by four destroyers (two British, a Greek and a French) and nine landing crafts. The first detachment (under Major Mandouvalos) landed in the area of the Bay of Pyrgos on the evening of the 1st of May and on the night of

the 2nd it attacked the outpost at the village of Heimarasi, surprising its garrison, killing 12 men, capturing another 13 and eventually withdrawing to Symi. The second detachment (under captain Tsepapadakis) split in two groups that assaulted the outposts at Foka and Steli soon after the attack of the first detachment. Both attacks were crowned by success, resulting in the destruction of war material and the taking of prisoners. The third detachment (under Lieutenant Kantas) landed at the area of Alyki, on the southwestern side of Rhodes, also splitting in two groups in order to attack the outposts in Noti and Vounara. The two attacks took place simultaneously and were crowned by absolute success. Losses of the Sacred Squadron were limited to one wounded.



Rhodes, Symi (to its North) and the little island of Alimnia (to its left)

The operation against Alimnia included the assault of multiple targets and took place in the night of 1-2 May. In charge of the fourth detachment was Major Kyriakos Papageorgopoulos. The assault caught the enemy garrison by surprise and, despite the wounding of two men of the Sacred Squadron, resulted in the sinking of one boat and the destruction of a radio and other war material. The enemy garrison numbered eight dead, three wounded and 27 prisoners.



A group of men of the Sacred Squadron after their successful raid at Alimnia

The success of the assaults in Rhodes and Alimnia resulted in the issuing of a commendatory order by the commander of the Special Service Brigade. It also convinced General Otto Wagener, military commander of Rhodes, that there was no hope of escape for his troops. Thus, after receiving permission from the commander of "Fortress Crete", he surrendered on 8 May. Also

present during his surrender to Brigadier James Moffat was Colonel Tsigantes, to whom the British officer handed the German general's pistol as a token of acknowledgment of the Sacred Squadron's contribution to the liberation of the Aegean islands.



The signing of the German surrender at the Dodecanese by Brigadier Moffat and Colonel Tsigantes (at the far right)

A couple of months later the Sacred Squadron, now about to be disbanded, made its last official appearance in Egypt. On 5 July 1945, it marched along the Special Service Brigade on the grounds of the El Alamein Club in Cairo, in front of C-in-C Middle East Forces, General sir Bernard Paget. Afterwards, the latter addressed the Sacred Squadron with the following words: "You have proved yourselves worthy of your motto "Victory or Death". 2,000 years ago the first Sacred Regiment established that motto, and died to save Thebes from the Spartans. 120 years ago the second Sacred Regiment did likewise, and preferred death to surrender. You of the third Sacred Regiment will return to your

homes as victors... I wish you all good fortune and God Speed” (Paget, pp. 134-5).



Inspection of the Sacred Squadron by General Bernard Padget

On 12 July, the Sacred Squadron started returning its armament to British military authorities in Alexandria, retaining only 500 rifles for those of its men returning to Greece (troops residing abroad, e.g, Egypt, Sudan, Turkey, etc., were decommissioned in Cairo). On 18 July these men boarded a steamship, arriving in Piraeus two days later.

On 7 August 1945, the Squadron's flag was decorated (along with Brigadier Turnbull) by the Greek regent, archbishop Damaskinos, during a ceremony which also involved the unveiling of a commemorative plaque on the monument honouring the

Squadron which had been erected in Pedion tou Areos (in the center of Athens).



Archbishop and Regent Damaskinos decorates the flag of the Sacred Squadron, held for the occasion by kneeling Colonel Tsigantes (7 August 1945)

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Men of the Sacred Squadron holding a swastika captured during one of their operations

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The badge of the Sacred Squadron

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