The Battle of Pink Hill - Crete, 1941

Prior to the German invasion, the Galatas/Prison (named after the Agia Prison a formidable structure on the main road to Canea) Valley area was expected to be a relatively quiet.

Consequently, it was mainly defended by ill-equipped, non-infantry soldiers (gunners with no artillery and drivers without trucks) from the New Zealand Division who had been hastily evacuated from Greece some 3 weeks prior to the invasion.

These troops had been forced to leave most of their vital military equipment on the beaches in Southern Greece. However, the hills around Galatas were the battleground of some of the most bitter and critical fighting on Crete. In particular Pink Hill was the gateway to the Galatas Heights, effective control of the surrounding area and the encirclement of the NZ 5th Brigade stationed further to the west at Maleme. Over the six days from Tuesday 20 May to Sunday 25 May 1941 the paratroopers of 3.Fallschirmjager regiment, from their base in the Agia Prison, launched a series of sustained attacks on Pink Hill. Although pounded by the Luftwaffe, who had total air supremacy, each attack was repulsed by the defenders.

For the first 2 days the paratroopers, under the command of Oberst (Colonel) R. Heidrich feared that a concerted counter-attack on the prison would defeat them. But no effective counter attack was launched. By Sunday (25 May) evening, the Germans, with their greater firepower, total command of the air and reinforced by elite troops from the 5th Mountain Division, eventually outflanked the New Zealand line to the north-west of Pink Hill and occupied the village of Galatas.

However, the stubborn defence of Pink Hill had enabled the NZ 5th Brigade and other units to withdraw to a new defensive line to the east of Galatas. With the fall of Galatas Crete was lost and the order was given to evacuate.

Exhausted, hungry and thirsty, with their nerves wracked by 6 days of continuous aerial bombardment, the defenders of Pink Hill weary made the 60 mile trek over the White Mountains (Levka Ori) to Hora Sfakion (often referred to as Sfakia) and the hope of evacuation to Alexandria.
I have primarily based the 6 day story of the battle on interviews with the following veterans who were all volunteers and in their early twenties on Crete:

Sergeant Les Williams:

First Echelon, Reg. No. 4521

Les was one of the sergeants in the Workshops Section of the Company.

Late in the afternoon on the first day, while defending the right flank of Pink Hill, he suffered shrapnel wounds to the stomach, shoulder and arm but as one of the walking wounded was evacuated from Suda Bay a few days later.

Dispatch-Rider Owen Jones:

First Echelon, Reg. No. 6014-m.i.d.

Owen smuggled a Bren Gun under his greatcoat when evacuated from Greece. He set up the Bren Gun on Pink Hill.

However, he was severely wounded on day one of the battle and was taken to a temporary casualty post.

Just before the Germans overran the post, he escaped on a motor bike. Through a stroke of good fortune, he met up with his friend Charlie Barker who helped him complete the trek to Hora Sfakion and eventual evacuation.

He spent 3 months in hospital recovering from his wounds.
Driver Charlie Barker:

**First Echelon, Reg. No. 4291.**

With his friend, Owen Jones, Charlie manned the Bren Gun on Pink Hill which was used effectively to repel the first attacks of the paratroopers.

In common with many Petrol Company soldiers he was wounded on the first day of the battle but was patched up and returned to the frontline a few days later. With a combination of determination and some good luck, Charlie and the severely wounded Owen Jones were evacuated from Hora Sfakion.

Driver Ben Standen:

**First Echelon, Reg. No. 6421**

Ben was one of 3 brothers with the Petrol Company on Crete. His brothers Ivan and Colin were killed on Crete. Seven of the Standen brothers served in World War II.

Positioned on the eastern side of Pink Hill, Ben was severely wounded attempting to get a message to Captain McDonagh. He lay in a ditch for 2 days before being transported to the hospital in the caves. He was not expected to survive but after the fall of Galatas the Germans airlifted him to a hospital in Athens.

He endured 4 years as a POW.
Driver Arthur Stubbs:

First Echelon, Reg. No. 4379

Arthur and his friend, Geoff Harman, were experienced pig hunters before the war. Their accurate fire halted the attacks on the western side of Pink Hill until they were ordered to withdraw on day six of the battle.

Later that evening, he took part in the bayonet charge to retake Galatas. Arthur got the Hora Sfakion and was positioned on the beach next to Freyberg’s HQ.

Offered the opportunity to be evacuated on Freyberg’s flying boat, he refused and joined the rear-guard in the hills but was forced to surrender the next day and became a POW.

Trooper Jack Dalton:

First Echelon-Regimental Number 1008.

Jack had a marksman badge and provided effective fire from his .303 on the flanks of the paratroopers as they attacked up the slope of Pink Hill.

However, his best mate, Hughie Marshall, situated alongside him in the trench was killed by a sniper.

He took part in the arduous 60 mile retreat to Hora Sfakion and was evacuated from Crete.

Trooper George Mandeno:

First Echelon, Reg.No. 1318.

George took part in a number of bayonet charges to dislodge the paratroopers from Pink Hill. However, during the campaign, he contracted malaria and although he made it to Hora Sfakion, he, along with 5,500 other soldiers, was left on the beach and became a POW.

While a prisoner on Crete, he escaped and spent 12 weeks in the mountains living rough, before being recaptured.
Trooper Matt Scott:

Third Echelon, Reg. No. 24284.

Just before dusk on the first day of the invasion, while the Div. Cav. was digging in on the left flank of Pink Hill, Matt was hit in the top of his head by an explosive bullet. If the bullet had been a centimetre lower it would have killed him.

He was transported to a cave near Canea that served as a makeshift hospital. He became a POW.

Divisional Signals

Signalman George Coughlan:

Second Echelon, Reg. No.6689

George was a signalman at the HQ of the Composite Battalion where Kippenberger also had his Headquarters.

HQ was located about a thousand yards to the north of Pink Hill on Ruin Ridge. With no wireless, communication was by telephone cable which was regularly cut by the paratroopers.

With paratroopers scattered throughout the area, finding and mending the line was a hazardous activity for a signalman. George took part in the retreat to Hora Sfakion, but was not evacuated and became a POW.

He kept a diary of his time in Crete.

The following units were involved in the defence of Pink Hill:

FROM THE NEW ZEALAND SECOND DIVISION.

Petrol Company.

“It was particularly noticeable that a very large proportion of our casualties had been shot in the head. This fact and the controlled fire and discipline of the enemy led us to believe that we were up against a specialist force of picked snipers.”

Under the command of Captain W.G.S. McDonagh, 200 soldiers of the Company were entrenched on Pink Hill when the paratroopers landed. A further 100 soldiers of the Company were stationed in other parts of the Canea/Suda Bay sector. Unfortunately, McDonagh was killed on the first day of the invasion and the remaining officers in the Company were wounded. Kippenberger appointed his supply officer (Captain H. Rowe) to command the Company. However, the Company continued to be led by CSM Ces James for the remaining 5 days of the battle. James was severely wounded on day six but was nursed by a family in Galatas. He eventually surrendered to the Germans.

However, with their .303’s and limited ammunition, they stoically defended Pink Hill for the next 6 days.

Occupying the lower slopes of Pink Hill, the Petrol Company bore the brunt of the attacks by the paratroopers. Over the 12 days of the Battle of Crete, 25 soldiers of the Petrol Company were killed, 62 were wounded and 96 became POW’s - a casualty rate of 60%. Crete was the graveyard of the redoubtable Petrol Company.

Divisional Cavalry (Div. Cav.)

“They were mostly farmers, brown-faced, weather-beaten men, sinewy and fit, with at their head the huge figure of their commander, Major John Russell. Had the 2nd New Zealand Division run to an elite force, the Divisional Cavalry would have been a candidate for that title.’


The Regiment had a complement of 200 soldiers commanded by Major J. Russell.

With their armoured cars and Bren Gun carriers, the Div. Cav. had fought a valiant, rear-guard action in Greece as the allies retreated to the south that earned special praise from General Freyberg. However, they had to destroy all their armoured vehicles on the beaches in Greece and arrived in Crete with only the arms and clothing they could carry. In addition about a third of the Regiment was evacuated directly to Egypt. On Crete the Regiment had to adapt to the unaccustomed role of infantrymen.
When the paratroopers landed, Divisional Cavalry were dug in around Lake Agia. Fearing encirclement, the Regiment made a perilous 5 mile withdrawal over exposed and hilly ground to Galatas to strengthen the left flank of Pink Hill.

Given their farming background, many of the troopers were superb marksmen. When the paratroopers launched their frequent attacks from the Prison, deadly enfilading fire from the Divisional Cavalry faltered their advances.

When the Paratroopers occupied Pink Hill before dusk on Thursday 22 May, Sgt-Major Secombe led a combined attack of Greek soldiers, Petrol Company soldiers and Galatas civilians, who cleared the eastern side of the Hill. At the same time other groups of troopers led bayonet charges and drove the Germans off the Hill. For this and other actions Secombe was awarded the DCM (Distinguished Conduct Medal). On this day Kippenberger formed ‘Russell Force’ under the command of Major Russell and with the primary purpose of defending Pink Hill. In addition to his fellow Div. Cav. troopers, the Force included the Petrol Company, the Greeks under Captain David Forrester (held in reserve in Galatas) and platoons from the 4th Field Regiment and the 19th Battalion.

Major Russell was awarded the DSO for his leadership in Crete. Promoted to Lt-Colonel and placed in command of the 22nd Battalion, Russell was killed in action in Egypt on 6 September 1942.

4th Field Regiment

After the paratroopers were driven off Pink Hill on 22 May, a platoon of gunners (described as ‘infantillery’) under Lieutenant J.P. Dill were given the unenviable task of holding the exposed summit of Pink Hill for the next 3 days. Dill’s platoon stubbornly defended the summit until ordered to withdraw on Sunday evening. However, Dill was mortally wounded in the withdrawal and died of his wounds a week later while a POW.

Other Units

Platoons from the 19th Battalion and the Composite Battalion (mainly gunners from the 4th and 5th Field Regiments) also experienced action on Pink Hill.
FROM THE GREEK ARMY.

6th Greek Regiment

Each poorly armed soldier of the regiment had only 3 rounds of ammunition when the paratroopers landed. Out of ammunition, they were forced to withdraw to Galatas where they were placed under the command of Captain Forrester (just 23 years of age) of the Queens Royal Regiment.

When the paratroopers occupied the summit of Pink Hill at 1900 hours on 22 May, Capt. Forrester led a charge of Greek soldiers and Galatas villagers that has achieved legendary status.

“Then came a terrific clamour behind. Out of the trees came Capt. Forrester ... He was tall, thin-faced, fair-haired, with no tin hat – the very opposite of a soldier hero; as if he had just stepped on the parade ground. He looked like ... a Wodehouse character. It was a most inspiring sight. Forrester was at the head of a crowd of disorderly Greeks, including women; one Greek had a shot gun with a serrated-edge bread knife tied on like a bayonet, others had ancient weapons – all sorts. Without hesitation this uncouth group, with Forrester right out in front, went over the top of a parapet and headlong at the crest of the hill. The enemy fled.”

(Davin, D.M, Crete, pp. 234-5)

Forrester was awarded a bar to his Military Cross for his actions on Pink Hill.

On Pink Hill and in other parts of Crete, this was the first time during the war that the Germans had been attacked by civilians. Resistance continued during the Axis occupation over the next 4 years and during this time some 10,000 Cretans (men, women and children) were killed in battle or executed.


**Petrol Company**

Petrol Company Soldiers evacuated from Crete.

**Divisional Cavalry**

Airborne paratroopers viewed from Pink Hill.