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Phalanx of the Greeks of Egypt
(Prelude of the Hellenic Military Presence in the Middle East)

Just a few days after the beginning of the Greek-Italian War, [then Prime-Minister] Ioannis Metaxas decided to organise the Phalanx of the Greeks of Egypt (Greek acronym ΦΕΑ) ⁽ⁱ⁾ by mobilising the Greek Diaspora in the Middle East and hoping that the effort would be productive due to the strength of the Greek community in Egypt. Greeks permanent residents abroad have never been exempted of the compulsory military service, with the difference that they could buy it out in case they did not wish to come to Greece and undergo the 4-month training, provided for by the legislation on recruitment.

This initiative, an innovative effort to organise a military force outside the national territory, on one side provided for the enlistment of those residents of Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Sudan that had the Hellenic citizenship and nationality, and belonged to those recruiting years that had already been mobilised in Greece and on the other side, permitted the integration of volunteers from 20 to 45 years of age ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾. The number of units of the Phalanx was not designated, as it was impossible to determine the level of turn-out to the call of the Hellenic Government. If mobilisation and volunteer presentation were not to produce tangible results, a margin was left over to send reservists of older recruiting years from Greece ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ and to recruit residents from other countries of Greek nationality but of foreign citizenship.

The Commander of the Phalanx, reserve Col (Cavalry) Charalampos Oikonomopoulos ^(iv), was joined by three career Captains; it was intended to cover the posts of the Officers in the first place by reservists from Egypt and reserve personnel from Greece; the vacant posts, after the termination of the mobilisation, would be covered by career personnel.

Oikonomopoulos reached Cairo on 5 Nov 1940 and assumed the liaison duties between the Hellenic Embassy, HAGS and the Middle East Command (CRME) headquarters. The Phalanx, for the period that it would deploy in Egypt, would be operationally subordinated to the British headquarters, as a brigade-level command ^(v) with headquarters in Sinti Bishr Camp, 13 kms north of Alexandria.

Initial planning provided for the enlistment of 200 men, in order to organise three Infantry battalions. But the almost simultaneous declaration of the British that they were not in the position to massively equip with the necessary military materials reversed that schedule. Because of this inability, in January 1941 CRME approved the enlistment from only the recruiting years 1940 and 1941 – of almost 1.000 Greeks of Egypt –

for the organisation of one Infantry battalion, with strength of 26 Officers and 877 Soldiers ^(vi).

On 20 Jan 1941, after receiving individual call-ups, 13 reserve Officers, 8 reserve NCOs and 12 literate Soldiers reported for duty. They were immediately transferred to the British Infantry School in Geneifa. Courses in the School started on 27 January and terminated on 15 February and were also attended by personnel, sent in the meantime from mainland Greece ^(vii).

Upon approval by the CRME ^(viii), the Recruiting Cell of the Phalanx issued in the first days of February 1941 the call-ups for recruiting years 1940 and 1941. At the same time, in virtue of the initial decision of the Hellenic Government, it signalled the possibility for enlistment of volunteers, without mentioning the condition of the Hellenic citizenship ^(ix). Enlistment took place on the 16th of that month, with the presentation of 952 conscripts and 778 volunteers. Capable for military service were 912 of them, out of whom 362 were volunteers.

On 21 February, the Phalanx issued an order for the organisation of the first Hellenic unit in the Middle East, under the title of "Battalion of the Dodecanese" ^(x) and with Captain (Infantry) Demosthenes Karavelas as the commander. The battalion included four Skirmisher (Infantry) companies and one Specialties company (later renamed to Command Company). To cover the needs in junior NCOs, all literate soldiers were assigned to one of the Infantry companies, under the command of Captain (Infantry) K Kampanaros, and applied a programme for the training of candidate other-ranks, respective to the Hellenic military courses. Training of the Corporals, necessary for manning the companies, was concluded by the end of May, while training of the remaining ones that were to become Sergeants, went on.

The title of the Battalion was an inspiration of Ioannis Metaxas, making an allusion to the Greek character of the Dodecanese¹, as an open invitation to its inhabitants to show their reaction to the Italian domination by escaping to Egypt. In a emotionally very intense atmosphere, the newly-recruited were sworn-in on 25 Mar 1941, the anniversary of the beginning of the national liberation struggle², shortly before the new subjugation of Greece. The adverse evolution of the military situation after the decision of Adolf Hitler to occupy the Balkans, dictated the reconsideration of the objectives of the organisation of the Phalanx.

Training of the conscripts started with an optimistic goal to achieve operational readiness of the battalion by the end of June [1941], as in accordance with the directives of the British headquarters, the programme of training would not be accelerated. Problems that emerged from the very first days led to the conclusion that finally insurmountable difficulties

¹ Complex of 12 major and many smaller islands in the SE Aegean Sea

² 1821

to implement the scheduled plan were not promptly examined, in particular the lack of experienced Officers. Three career captains were not enough to cover the training requirements, while the only available firing range in the area of Abukir was open for the training of the unit only once a month. Moreover, the failures of the British logistic support services, in regard to the equipment and clothing of the unit, worsened the problems and halted the progress of training. Indicatively, it was reported in February 1941 that the newly-recruited were issued "summer clothing" with a greatcoat (!); Italian 6,5 mm rifles, war spoils in deteriorating condition; and Breda machine-guns, all in restricted quantities for the familiarisation of the warriors with firing ^(xi).

Difficulties for the completion of training was aggravated by the order for the change of location of the battalion to Geneifa, south of Ismailia, in order to reinforce the front of Northern Africa. Given the incorrect preparation of the Hellenic unit, the decision of CRME aimed at relieving British combat units from war prisoners' detention duties at Fagient Camp. The "Battalion of the Dodecanese", which 135 Greeks joined in early May ^(xii), assumed the new mission on 25 May. At the same time, it was decided to organise a Base Camp for the reception and onward movement at Sinti Bishr Camp ^(xiii). This new unit assumed the tasks to receive, process, and enlist both volunteer Greeks of the Middle East and expatriates that fled to Egypt after the occupation of Greece.

Alongside the efforts to organise the Phalanx, it was decided to organise logistic support units. By the end of 1940, the British proposed to Oikonomopoulos to organise two transport vehicle repair-shops, and one machine-gun repair-shop, manning of which would be effected from Greek technicians of Alexandria. The 1st Transport Vehicle Recovery Repair-Shop, 60-men strong, was organised on 8 Jan 1941, at the British military base of Marsa Matruh. The 2nd Transport Vehicle Recovery Repair-Shop, 80-men strong, was organised on 20 January, at Uardian of Alexandria. By the end of that month, the 1st Machine-gun Repair-shop was organised in the British "Mustafa" Camp of Alexandria, and was manned by personnel made available by Greek industrialists of the region. Mission of all three shops was to refurbish repairable spoils of the Northern Africa operations that the CRMA would supply for the reinforcement of the war of Greece against the Italians. During the next two months, they managed to make work in order to sent to Epirus front 150 transport vehicles, 100 ea 65 mm pack guns, and significant quantities of rifles, anti-tank guns, mortars and ammunition. The 1st Vehicle Repair-Shop and the 1st Machine-gun Repair-shop were dissolved in June 1941, while the 2nd Vehicle Repair-Shop was subordinated to the Base Camp, when relocated to Geneifa.

Thus, when the Hellenic Government in exile assumed the responsibility to reorganise the Hellenic Armed Forces, the Phalanx composed of the Battalion of the Dodecanese, the Base Camp and the 2nd Vehicle Repair-Shop ^(xiv). In order to realise the level of readiness of the sections that were to become the nucleuses for the development of the military or-

ganisation, these units were inspected on 10 June by the Minister of the Army and, three days later, by King [George II].

ⁱ Document Nr 10143 / 5 Nov 1940 / Ministry of the Army / HAGS / 1st Office / B' – HAGS / AHD Archives F 802 / H / 10 / 1

ⁱⁱ Encyclical Order 322 / 2 Nov 1940 / Ministry of the Army – HAGS / AHD Archives F 802 / H / 10 / 2

ⁱⁱⁱ Reserve Officers and Soldiers of the recruiting years 1910 and 1920 and afterwards, respectively

^{iv} Charalampos Oikonomopoulos, an extremist Royalist, was commissioned as 2Lt in the Cavalry in 1914 and removed from duty in 1917. His commission with the rank of Captain was revalidated in 1920; however, in 1923, he was removed again from duty due to his participation in the counter-coup d'état organised by Major Generals Gargalidis and Leonardopoulos. Four years later, he was promoted to Lt Col, but was not recalled to active duty. Upon declaration of the Greek-Italian War, he was recalled to active duty with the rank of reserve Colonel and was sent to Egypt to organise the Phalanx. When in June 1941, the Phalanx ceased to exist, he was appointed as Commander of the Base Camp and, when this unit was dissolved, he assumed the post of the Director General of the Ministry of the Army. He stayed in that post until the reorganisation of the Hellenic Armed Forces in May 1942, when he terminated his involvement in the war effort. HAGS / AHD Archives, Military Personnel Files

^v Document Nr 2 / 19 Feb 1941 / ΦΕΑ – HAGS / AHD Archives F 802 / H / 10 / 4

^{vi} The battalion implemented the British type of organisation of Infantry units: it composed of four Infantry companies each of three platoons and a command squad, one command company of six platoons (Signals, mortars, carriers, anti-tank weapons, administration and machine-guns). CRME 9032 / AG1(c) / 24 Jan 1941 – HAGS / AHD Archives F 800 / Γ / 5 / 3

^{vii} In January 1941, career Captains (Infantry) D Karavelas, K Kampanaros and Ch Arachovitis were sent to Egypt, along with career Captain (Recruiting) Mentzelopoulos, reserve Lt (MD) K Kotzakis and a reserve Lieutenant of the Administration. These were joined by 12 2nd-year Military Cadets (Evelpides) of the 1942 Class, enlisted as Warrant Officers by the Royal Decree of 13 April 1941, who reached Egypt after the Battle of Crete. Training of the Evelpides lasted only 9 days; this necessitated their full supervision and direction in commanding the troops, because of their inexperience. Confidential Document Nr 16 / 6 Mar 1941 / ΦΕΑ / 1st Office – HAGS / AHD Archives F 802 / H / 10 / 13

^{viii} CRME / 9032 / AG1(c) / 3 Feb 1941 – HAGS / AHD Archives F 810 / B / 3 / 5

^{ix} Encyclical Order 322 / 2 Nov 1940 / Ministry of the Army – HAGS / AHD Archives F 802 / H / 10 / 1

^x Document Nr 1 / 19 Feb 1941 / ΦΕΑ / 1st Office – HAGS / AHD Archives F 802 / H / 10 / 3

^{xi} According to the report of the commander of the troops stationed in the area of Suez, main causes of problems were the lack of experienced trainers; shortages in operational and training materials; and the obsolete training system. Under such conditions, it was impossible to raise the morale of the troops and repress reactions that almost led to rebellion. Emm Tsouderos, Historic Archive, volume D, p 22

^{xii} They were 110 Cavalrymen, sent to South Africa in Dec 1940 to receive horses, under the command of reserve Lt Col (Arty) Papastathopoulos, who after the establishment of the British Middle East Expeditionary Corps assumed the command of the 1st Field Artillery Regiment; and 25 auxiliary soldiers-escorts of Italian prisoners of war from Northern Epirus front. The occupation of mainland Greece found all of them in Egypt.

^{xiii} CRME Order 9032 / 21 / AG1(c) / 29 May 1941 – HAGS / AHD Archives F 802 / Δ / 3 / 91

^{xiv} This development cancelled the implementation of CRME decision to organise the 2nd Battalion of the Phalanx, with 32 Officers and 752 Soldiers. CRME / 11489 / AG1(c) / 29 May 1941 – HAGS / AHD Archives F 802 / H / 10 / 22