

## THE IONIAN ISLANDS EARTHQUAKE.

## A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THREE BUSY DAYS.

WE were in my sea cabin, discussing plans for the regatta when, just before supper on Wednesday, August 12th, a signal was received telling us that there had been an earthquake in the Ionian Islands and instructing us to proceed so as to arrive Argostoli by first light next morning. We were then south of Crete, returning to Malta at economical speed after a hot, damp and somewhat drab six weeks at Port Said; a quick calculation showed that we would need all the speed we could produce and orders were given to raise steam for full power. Shortly after, the ship was stopped to connect up the trailing shafts (for we cruise on one unit to save manpower) and we were soon bumping along into a short steep head sea.

I held a meeting of officers to discuss plans after supper; each department made clear what preparations it was making and we pooled our brains and experience to fill in any gaps. The hands were kept busy that evening, especially the special parties, the Supply department, the Royal Marines and a party of R.M. Commandos who were taking passage. I turned in early to get some rest, but I hear that most of the younger members of the ship's company stayed on the upper deck all night, too excited to sleep.

By dawn preparations were complete. The Royal Marines were ready to land, much food was on deck, blankets, stretchers and medical stores were laid out, the gear for a shore signal station was ready, some empty beer drums had been filled with water, the demolition team was fully prepared and we had platoons of seamen and stokers standing by at various degrees of readiness. The bakers had been hard at work all night and the cooks were busy on bag meals. Everyone wanted to land of course, and it was difficult to get across the stern fact that someone had to stay onboard to run the ship.

## FIRST DAY: THURSDAY, AUGUST 13TH.

The first sight of Zacynthos, which is the main town of the Island of Zante and to which we had been diverted during the night, was a great pall of smoke rising several hundred feet in the air. As we approached we could see that the damage was far worse than we had expected. Not a house remained standing, although three modern buildings, a school, a bank and a church, seemed intact; we learnt later that they were built on earthquake-proof foundations. Fires were burning all over the town, which normally holds some eleven thousand people, but except on the jetty which also forms a breakwater for the shallow harbour, there was no sign of life.

At anchor off the breakwater were two Greek warships, an L.S.T. and a minesweeper, and inside the harbour lay a commercial type L.C.T. and a coastal steamer. We anchored at seven-thirty and I immediately boarded the L.S.T. where I found most of the local authorities. The Nomarch (or Prefect) spoke French, but none of the others had anything but Greek. Fortunately, there was a Greek-speaking Briton by the name of Wynne present. He was an economist

working for the U.S. Mutual Aid Mission to Greece and acted as interpreter; and the situation gradually got clearer.

Four days earlier, the island had been damaged by tremors and many of the townsfolk had taken to the countryside. At noon on Wednesday, when some of the people were returning to their houses, a severe earthquake had destroyed the town. Many must have been entombed by falling roofs and walls. The fires which had started then were still out of control and widespread.

Groups of inhabitants had concentrated to the north and south of the town—food was very short and there was no water. Nothing was known of the situation in the countryside. Casualties were being evacuated by small boat to coastal steamers and L.C.T. which took them to Patras on the mainland, but the Government policy was that the uninjured inhabitants must stay where they were. It was brutal but correct, for there was no work, accommodation or money on the mainland and if the people were left in the islands they would be forced to work to recover a means of livelihood. But it was not an easy policy to explain to weeping, starving people.

The first move was clearly to get the L.S.T. inshore to unload. The Captain stated that there was nowhere to beach and seemed reluctant to move. So I decided to carry out a quick reconnaissance with some of my officers and Wynne.

We first sighted the crowds collected to the north of the town which were isolated by blocked roads from the jetty, and I sent a demolition party to make some sort of a boat landing among the rocks to allow supplies to be landed.

Then we landed on the jetty and walked to the southern end of the town along a road on the seafront. This road was clear except for about a hundred yards, so the Royal Marines were sent for to clear away the rubble. There were more people to the south and a tent had been set up for casualties. Then, after confirming the impossibility of getting through the town to the north, I returned to the L.S.T. where no move of any sort was indicated. Firm measures were needed. I sent sixty men to the L.S.T. to unload stores, ordered the Captain to go alongside the jetty, and orders were given to clear a coastal steamer from the berth selected for the L.S.T. It all took time and considerable argument, for tremors were continuing, but the L.S.T. was alongside and being unloaded by noon. There was a convenient landing stage on to which she could lower her ramp, and after our blacksmith had cut away some iron railings with a burner, vehicles could be driven ashore without trouble.

Unloading was not eased by the vast quantities of wood which had to be manhandled out of the tank deck before the important stores could be extracted. This had been loaded after the first tremors for repairs to houses and was of no value for the present. A number of the locals were pressed into service to stack the wood on the jetty, as it would be useful for huts later.

Next, the detachment must be given another task, for the southern road had been cleared of rubble. So the Commandos were left in the southern outskirts and the detachment taken by boat to the hospital area north of the town where there was much work to be done. The Royals spent the rest of the stay in that area, and that first day they set up a medical station for evacuating casualties; they distributed bread, milk and water, and they started to organise the hundreds of refugees who were in a bad way, cut off as they were from the town.

To the south, the job was similar; luckily there was a road to the refugees and the Commandos soon had a borrowed truck working. But the afternoon breeze fanned the fires which spread rapidly southwards and threatened the school, the church and some of the tents which had been set up for casualties. So the Commandos and a demolition party started to make fire-breaks and the two portable diesel pumps were sent for; together with a large fire party from the ship which was quickly on the spot. Unfortunately, the water was too shallow to allow the pinnace to land the pumps near the fire and each one in turn had to be landed and manhandled down the road some half a mile to the place selected for the fire-break. It seemed slow at the time, as the fire was spreading fast and every second counted, but in fact one pump was delivering sea water within forty-five minutes of the call.

These two pumps operated continuously for twenty-four hours, and worked off and on for a further twenty-four, all without the smallest defect; they were invaluable.

Fire parties worked all that night and the following day, being relieved by boat for rest and food. It was hard and sometimes dangerous work, for some houses contained hand-grenades which exploded at intervals and others drums of olive oil and cans of petrol which also exploded, spewing burning oil and debris into the air to leeward. By next day, however, the situation was under control and the school and church no longer threatened.

But to return to the first night; at dark I withdrew all parties except the firefighters, signal station and some guards, and after supper we met again to discuss plans for the next day. It was clear that after firefighting, the main tasks were the housing and feeding of refugees, the rescuing of the wounded and the burying of the dead.

To that end, the Commandos were told to organise a camp to the south of the town and the detachment were given a similar job to the north. A road must be cut through the town to the north camp to avoid the appalling difficulties of landing stores over rocks and manhandling them up a steep hill. Provisions and stores which were beginning to arrive in L.S.T. and coastal steamer must be unloaded, stacked and distributed. Water must be got ashore, together with bread and with milk for the children.

So it was arranged that the demolition team should start on the road through the town, that firefighting reliefs should land at dawn, that a large working party should unload the L.S.T. and that both whalers should be sent in filled with water. We had discovered a broken-down water tanker on the jetty and the Chief hoped to make a quick repair and to pump out the whalers that forenoon.

Most important, a policy was laid down that we must make the Greeks help themselves. Dazed and apathetic, they had been content to watch us work up to now, but that situation could not be allowed to continue. Finally, the evening Sitrep had to be drafted, and by then, the Middle watch was upon us, and we were ready for sleep, grimy and sore-eyed from the fires.

#### SECOND DAY: FRIDAY, AUGUST 14TH.

We were all up at dawn and I landed for a look round while the shore parties were getting into the boats. The fire situation was encouraging, but the jetty was a seething mass of refugees who had not heard or who did not intend to hear the policy of non-evacuation and who were trying to get off to

the coasters. The local gendarmerie were useless and the food dump was being overrun. After much trouble we cleared the landing stage, but the situation was not satisfactory until the arrival of the D.E. *Panther* later in the forenoon, when her Captain took prompt and effective steps to keep the crowds in order.

At about 0630, I hurried back to the ship to meet the Commander-in-Chief, Lady Mountbatten, the Chief of Staff and some staff officers who arrived in a Sunderland from Argostoli. There was breakfast and a discussion on board, and then the whole party landed for a quick tour of the town in Wynne's most useful jeep, which carried at least ten people without complaint.

The Admiral was able to see the worst of the damage and the extent of the fires and I succeeded in rounding up most of the local authorities who were then taken off to the ship for a meeting. The Admiral first described the situation in Cephalonia and said that he had authority from the Greek government to form local international committees in Zante and other places which would work with a higher committee in Argostoli which would co-ordinate all relief work. Captains of foreign warships were to be members of all committees which would be presided over by the Nomarch. There was much discussion and then the Admiral and Lady Mountbatten left for Sami and Vathi where the *Wrangler* was doing great work. They left a most encouraged committee behind them. After their departure further discussions continued, but it was clear that the Nomarch, a delightful and learned old gentleman, was not the man for chairman. Everyone talked together at the top of their voices and nothing was achieved, so that eventually, at the request of the interpreter, I banged the table and took over the proceedings—a course of action which I found necessary at each subsequent meeting. Eventually we decided on some important points: that the committee should set up a tented headquarters in the main square, that officers of gendarmerie should be placed in charge of the two camps, that the main labour effort should be devoted to cutting the road from the centre of the town to the north camp and that the Greeks should take over food distribution themselves. The committee then landed to get on with their work and I followed later for another inspection. But I had only just landed when a minesweeper arrived at high speed with the King and Queen of Greece onboard and I quickly boarded her with a message from the Commander-in-Chief. The King and Queen then landed and made a most thorough tour of the town. They must have got a good impression of our help for everywhere they stopped there seemed to be "Gambias" hard at work, notably in the south camp where the first sight was of a rather portly, short Midshipman, stripped to the waist, standing on the back of a lorry, doling out bread to a mass of refugees, assisted by some Commandos and impeded by the gendarmerie, some of whom had joined in the rush.

The royal visitors also saw the firefighters at work and the demolition team preparing charges, while a platoon of seamen had just dug out an old woman who had been buried for three days and who appeared little the worse for it. There were many emotional scenes of weeping and wailing, but the people seemed most encouraged by the visit. We had been told that Zante was a hotbed of communism, but there was no sign of anti-monarchist feeling that day.

Not long after the royal departure, we had another distinguished visitor, the General in charge of all relief work, who arrived by helicopter from Argostoli and who was soon discussing the situation with the local committee. He took note of our special needs, and then announced that he was sending "tomorrow"

a Brigadier to take over complete charge of the Island. This overdue step was well received even by the Nomarch who had no illusions about his own position. Unfortunately, tomorrow turned out to be some four days later, but a strong man did turn up in the end, and I gather that it was just in time.

Then the General left by helicopter and I took the Nomarch off for a tour of the northern end where the detachment had selected a site for a camp and were making much progress. They had recovered food from ruined shops, had commandeered two trucks and were reconnoitring the village near by. They were also burying a number of bodies. Food distribution was most orderly and the Marines were making themselves well at home.

We returned to the main square by boat just in time for the evening committee meeting, which accomplished little but incrimination in two hours' talk. But we did get a new Food Controller appointed—the last one had given out all the bread, and then realising that there would be none for the morning, decided to go sick. He was outstandingly incompetent among some fine specimens of the breed.

We also decided to use the Greek army contingent of two bulldozers and sixty infantrymen on the road cutting, and also to ask for a helicopter survey of the island to find out the situation in the outlying villages. The *Bermuda's* helicopters were to do this most efficiently next morning.

Irritated by a difficult meeting, I returned to the ship, and, after a meal, embarked on yet another session with ship's officers to decide on our plans for the morning. In particular, on what we should ask the *Bermuda*, which was well supplied with transport, helicopters and special stores of every description, to do. In addition, parties must be told off to hump the tents to the north camp landing and thence up the hill to the site; bread and water must be landed again, and fire watching must continue as must the demolition work.

Just as we had finished and were making out the evening Sitrep, an American attack transport, the *Rockbridge*, arrived: her Captain was soon onboard to find out what was going on and at midnight I embarked on my seventh meeting of the day. It was soon clear that the *Rockbridge* was exactly what Zante wanted. She carried over twenty landing craft, which would solve the problem of getting the *Bermuda's* transport ashore; she had trucks, water bowzers, jeeps, bulldozers, special engineer stores and eight hundred Marines.

The Americans were co-operative and keen to get on with the job. They started to land transport and marines at dawn, and soon had a team ashore, taking food to the south camp, helping with the road and, most important, making a systematic search of the ruins for bodies, alive or dead.

#### THIRD DAY: SATURDAY, AUGUST 15TH.

At dawn I took the Captain of the *Rockbridge* and his senior officers for a tour of the town and then returned to the ship in time to board the *Bermuda* which arrived at six-thirty.

A quick discussion with Captain Collett decided on a site for the helicopter base, on a turn-over meeting in *Bermuda*, and on a target for our departure the following forenoon; for we were to start a short refit on Monday morning. Not long after, the Captain of the *Rockbridge* arrived and readily agreed to provide landing craft to help unload the transport and stores. At nine o'clock we had a turn-over meeting and then heads of department took their opposite

numbers ashore for a tour in preparation for taking over the various commitments on which *Gambias* were engaged.

Everything seemed to go most smoothly. The helicopters flew off the *Bermuda's* quarterdeck and Y turret without incident, the trucks were soon ashore, ammunition derricks proving useful when the crane failed to plumb, and Captain Collett and I soon landed for a look round.

There was plenty going on ashore, and though chaotic, the situation was less out of hand than yesterday and there were signs of self-help by the local people. The firefighters were confining their activities to watching the smouldering ruins and stopping fresh outbreaks, the food was getting to the camps, and the water was being pumped out of whalers into tankers. But the south camp was in a fearful mess. Crowds of refugees were pouring in. The gendarmerie officer who was supposed to be in charge was worse than useless, and food distribution was difficult, for the food was going to the men only. Although the gendarmerie had agreed to get latrines dug, nothing had been done, and the health problem would obviously be soon serious. The Commandos were having a difficult time and the arrival of the *Bermuda's* detachment was welcome. It was found possible to improve the food distribution by shifting the centre to a nearby football ground where railings could be used to marshal the queues, and a form of rationing by marking recipients of food with iodine was started.

Towards the centre of the town, bulldozers were doing great work in forcing a road through to the north camp. There was no question of pushing the rubble aside; it was so deep that the bulldozer climbed on top and levelled a new road between the houses, dangerous walls having been previously pulled or blown down by our demolition parties.

Explosions were frequent, the noise and dust produced by the bulldozers was very great, there was much activity by soldiers and marines with picks and shovels, and overall hung the insistent proclamation of their presence by the corpses buried in the ruins. It was a macabre scene.

After lunch in the *Rockbridge* we visited the north camp. It was a pleasant change. The site was in an olive grove at the top of a hill overlooking the town. Well water was plentiful and good. There were not more than a thousand people there and the Greek Major was co-operative and capable. Seamen were humping tents up the steep hill from the rocky shore, and the Marines were teaching the Greeks to put them up. Food distribution was orderly and the medical station well set up. It was near this camp that a most remarkable helicopter rescue took place that afternoon. One of our parties found an eighty-year-old, twenty stone woman lying injured in an awkward spot on the hillside. Six men failed to move her, and the helicopter was asked for. It succeeded in landing in an open space not far from the woman, and the stretcher party lugged her to the machine and forced her into the cabin. It was not easy for she was very large indeed, but the operation was entirely successful and it was certain that she could have been got out in no other way.

Then it was time for the evening committee meeting. It was even more frustrating than its predecessors. We listened to complaints about the south camp by the Mayor and silenced them by suggesting that he should take over the running of the place. We received reports of the helicopter surveys of the island, and we agreed after fierce argument to supply bread, milk and tents to five villages next morning, using Greek army transport. We complained

about the lack of work by the Greeks and were promised more. We insisted on co-ordination of demands for stores from the mainland, for the local radio had been repaired and a mass of conflicting telegrams were being sent to Athens instead of channelling demands through the main committee at Argostoli.

One of the local M.P.s had contrived to get into the meeting and then to talk volubly and stupidly. It was necessary to be rather rude to him before he shut up. The only curb of our tempers was the presence of the Bishop—a dignified bearded man, who took little part in the proceedings except to nod gravely at intervals.

Worse still, journalists were beginning to flock in, asking innumerable questions and making up their own answers if the reply was not sufficiently sensational. With the end of the meeting, my turn-over was complete: Captain Collett had seen the worst and I was able to return to the ship satisfied by the knowledge that we had done a good deal for Zante, but vaguely ashamed by the chaos which confronted my successor.

SUNDAY, 16TH AUGUST.

By early next morning, the *Bermuda* had taken over all our commitments. We recovered some stores, portable pumps, loud hailers and other articles of which the *Bermuda* had a good supply and by noon we had sailed for Malta.

#### MISCELLANEOUS.

Warships are not fitted as relief ships, but it is interesting to consider what stores we found deficient. Water storage ashore was a problem: barricoes are too small and slow to fill. Beer drums were useful, but olive oil drums with the tops cut off provided the final answer. We did not have enough petrol—but for the skimmer we would have none at all. A tyre pump would have been invaluable, for every truck seemed to have flat tyres. More portable loud hailers would have been useful; one we fitted to a police jeep was a great success. More firehoses would have been invaluable; as it was we could only tackle fires near the sea front. We had no quicklime for graves. But it was remarkable how improvisation answered all calls; and the commissioning of a mechanical grab which had been broken down for months was a fine feat.

We were lucky to be first on the scene. The way was clear and there was no doubt what to do. But later on, decisions must have been difficult. Men and stores were pouring in and it became important to use them in the most economical way and to turn some back if not required.

It was great luck (and management) that the Navy was able to get first on the scene in Cephalonia and Zante. The *Daring* at Argostoli, the *Wrangler* in Ithaca and the *Gambia* at Zante were in each case able to initiate the relief measures and later comers were more or less bound to follow our lead. The Greeks, who were embarrassingly grateful, commented freely on the fact that we were following our old traditions.

The ship's company rose splendidly to the occasion. The training for the junior officers and younger men was excellent, and it was altogether a most satisfying experience for we felt that we were being of real use to the victims of an appalling disaster.

P. W. GRETTON.