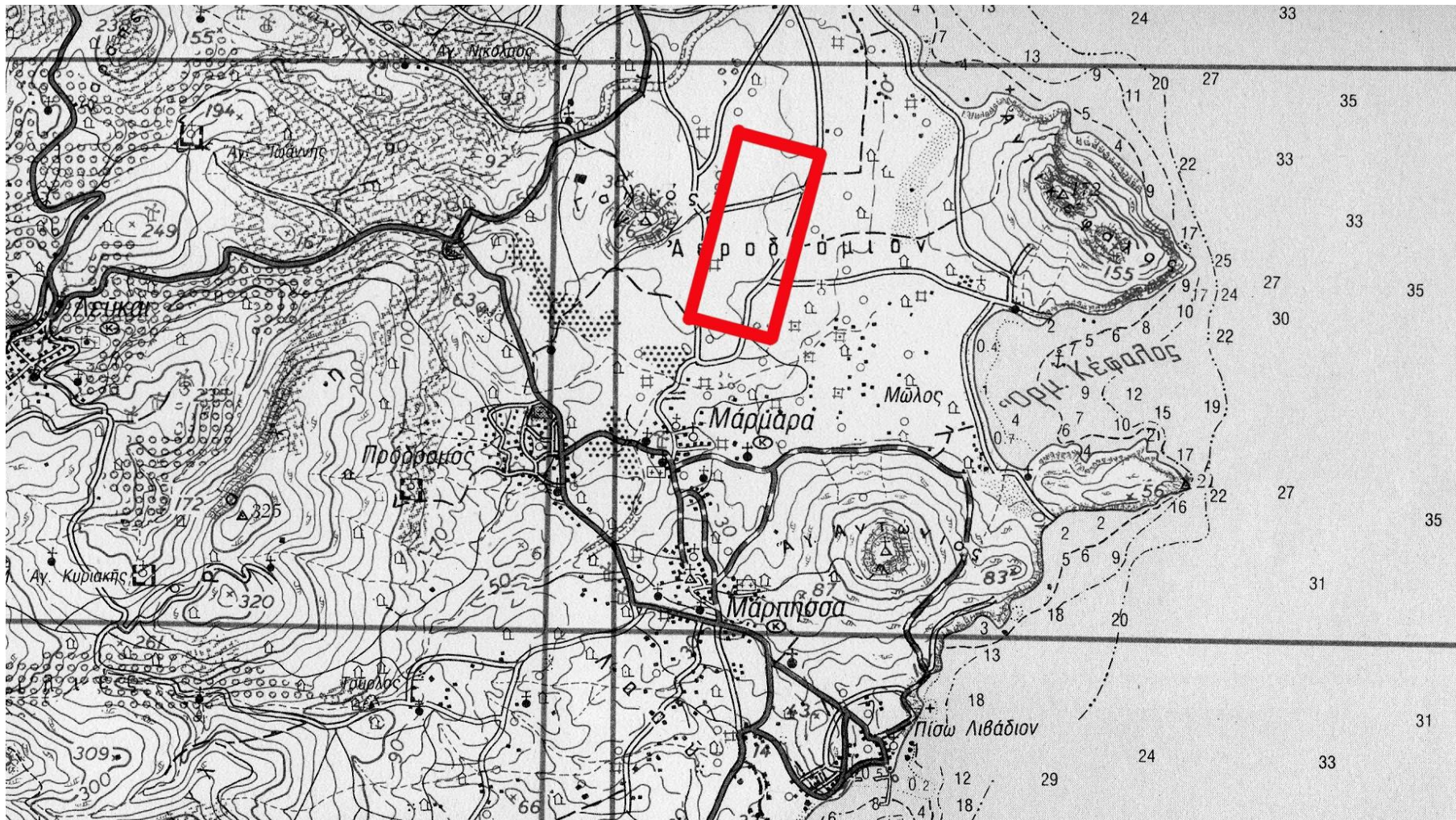


The German airfield at Marmara, Paros.



The Germans had occupied Paros since October 10, 1943, and were approaching their fifth month of occupation of the island. Its strategic geographical location, crucial for air cover and the safe passage of German convoys through the Paronaxia Channel and around the surrounding islands, made the construction of an airfield imperative.

In addition to the German battalion headquarters, Paros was home to the 1st Company in Marmara, the 2nd Company in Tshipido (Marpissa), commanded by Second Lieutenants **Ltn. Hermann** and **Ltn. Zölner**, and the 3rd Company in Parikia, commanded by Second Lieutenant **Oblt. Höbel**. [7]

On March 8, 1944, an official order was issued by the German **Feldbauamt I Athens** Command for the construction of the airfield, half a mile north of the village of Marmara, on western Paros. The order specified the construction of a natural-surface runway measuring 800 x 100 meters, with a completion date set for April 15, 1944. [10]

It is unknown exactly when the work began, but as early as March 13, 1944, it was reported that the number of workers laboring on its completion had risen to 400. [10] They were mainly conscripted islanders from Paros, Naxos, and Antiparos.

It did not take long for the Allied forces to learn of the airport's construction; on April 11, 1944, the airport under construction was spotted by Allied *Beaufighter* aircraft of the 603rdth RAF Squadron [6], [9], [12]. A second attack was launched by aircraft of the 603rdth RAF Squadron on April 13, 1944, but no significant damage was inflicted. Later, on April 20, it came under a third attack by four aircraft of the same type from the 252ndth RAF Squadron, led by Squadron **Leader Christopher Foxley-Norris**, who succeeded in putting several trucks and a fuel tanker out of action. [12]

Allied headquarters had to spare no effort to prevent the construction of the airfield. The location chosen by the Germans was of great strategic importance, as it lay in the center of the Aegean Sea and would serve as an intermediate hub between the airfields in Piraeus and Rhodes, which were already under their control, as well as a base for German *Bf-109 Messerschmitt* aircraft, from which—using Paros as a base—they could more easily intercept *Beaufighter* operations in the Aegean. [9]

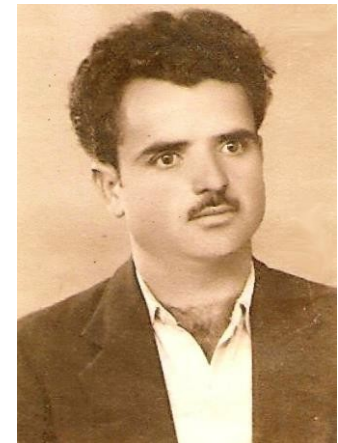
Despite the three attacks, by May 9, 1944, a 1,000 x 60-meter runway strip had been nearly completed. [10]

Account and Testimony of **Apostolos Georgios Vintzileos** from Skados, Naxos, who worked at the airfield as a conscript, to his son Vasilis.

"Those from Axos who wanted to leave Naxos, due to the hunger and other hardships caused by the war, found a pretext—claiming they needed medical care—in order to get past the German committee that decided who would leave the island. The Germans, of course, weren't fooled, and to most of them they said that, ...there are doctors here too... and they wouldn't let them leave. So some of us from Axos—myself included—once we realized that the health excuse wouldn't work, chose to say that we wanted to go to Piraeus for work. An officer from the German commission replied:

"For work? From here...

...and they grouped us together and sent us to work at the German airfield on Paros. As conscripts. We went through terrible hardships. We were bombed and barely escaped!" [23]





On the same date, *SBS* commandos and members of the Sacred Band, following a successful mission to Santorini, returned to a schooner off the coast of Turkey that they were using as a secret base. There they reassembled a joint force of British and Greek soldiers.[13]

The commando force consisted of a total of 16 men. Eleven *SBS* commandos, including the **2nd Earl "George" Jellicoe**, **Sgt. Dougie Wright**, **Sgt. Nicholson**, [11] and led by Danish Captain **Anders Lassen**, along with the Greek sergeants **Konstantinos Chalkias**, **Theodoros Pyrialas**, and **Stylianios Chrysos**, led by Reserve Second Lieutenant **Kyriakos Sofoulis**. This time, the target was Paros.[19]

On the night of May 9–10, they set sail in the caique owned by **Ilias Perantinos (of Firo)** toward Paros,[19] but bad weather and rough seas forced them to take shelter at Syrna,[13] an uninhabited rocky islet southeast of Astypalaia. The weather improved, and over the next few days they continued their journey.

On May 14, 1944, at 10:00 p.m., they arrived and disembarked at Avlakas, at the Glyfa site, near Mavro Kavos on the southwestern coast of Paros.[13],[19] There, they were met by Parian resistance liaisons who led them to the home of **Manolis Perrakis** and informed them that the Germans were not in Parikia, as they had initially been told. They had moved toward the village of Marmara to support the construction of the airfield.

At dawn on May 15, Captain Lassen, along with a small reconnaissance patrol, set up an observation post on the Koromboli (Stroumboulas) hill near the village of Marpissa. The people of Paros then led him to the home of **Iakovos Stella**, where all the resistance couriers relayed information regarding German troop deployments.[13],[17],[19],

A caique carrying *SBS* men and members of the Hierolochites in the Aegean Sea in 1944. Captain *Anders Lassen* is standing at the stern.[13]

According to the information they had, it appeared that the German garrison consisted of 150 men and was equipped with anti-aircraft guns and radio transmitters. [13]

The commando mission had a specific plan of action aimed at destroying the facilities and rendering the airfield inoperable, but they did not expect the German force in the area to be so strong and spread out across different positions. Captain Lassen had to make a difficult decision: whether to cancel or carry out the operation. Shortly thereafter, he announced to the rest of the team:

“Our mission remains the same; only the method of execution has changed.”[13]

Without wasting any time, they organized the commando raid from the observation post. The plan for carrying out the raid was as follows.

Time of attack (“K”) on the targets: 9:45 p.m. that same night. Time of departure: 2:45 a.m. at dawn on May 16, from Piso Livadi. For those who, due to delays, injuries, etc., were unable to , an alternative departure point was designated for the evening of May 17.

There would be four operational teams carrying out the mission.

The first team, led by Captain *Lassen*, consisted of 8 SBS commandos, 2 members of the Hierolochites, and **Nikolaos Stella**, the son of Iakovos, who was 23 years old at the time and would guide them from the villages to the airfield. This team’s objective was to destroy the guard post, the fuel depot, the airport’s anti-aircraft guns, and the radios installed by the Germans on Galio Hill, northwest of Marmara.

The second team would consist of Second Lieutenant **Kyriakos Sofoulis**, along with another sergeant, four SBS commandos, **Yiannis Aliprantis**, and rural police officer **Manolis Gryllakis**, who would guide them to the assault points. Their objective was to surround the guarded residence of the commander of the airport security company, Second Lieutenant **Oblt. Tabel**, [7] located in Marpissa, and to destroy the ammunition depots and a nearby guard post housing 30 German officers. They split into three smaller groups, one for each target.

The third and fourth groups, led by **Antonis Delentas**, **Panagiotis Emm. Tsigonia**, **Dimitris Perantinos**, and other Parian resistance fighters, were tasked with cutting the airport’s telephone lines and destroying the central radio transmitters located in the village of Dragoula (Prodromos). [13], [17], [19]



Danish Captain Anders Lassen (*Anders Frederik Emil Victor Schau Lassen*). He was killed on April 9, 1945, during a commando operation in northern Italy.[22]

The Allied forces' operations would continue from the air as well.

In the early morning hours of May 15, 1944, an aircraft from the 680th RAF Squadron (formerly 2PRU), piloted by **F/Lt. John W. Keller**, who was conducting a reconnaissance/photographic flight, photographed the progress of the runway's construction. Expert analysts at Allied headquarters determined that within the circle in the photograph (right)[14], a German *Junkers Ju52* aircraft was visible inside the circle in the photograph (right)[15].

At 3:20 p.m. that same day, four *Beaufighter TF Mk.X* aircraft from the 603rd RAF Squadron, armed with rockets, took off from Gabut, Libya, with the objective of searching for German ships off Tinos and subsequently striking the airfield at Marmara on Paros.

The aircraft, **LZ465/R**, with a crew consisting of pilot **F/Lt. A. P. Pringle** and navigator **F/O A. E. Boss**,
LZ404/K, with a crew consisting of pilot **F/Sgt. Eric G. Harman** and navigator **F/Sgt. Leslie E. Hopkin**,
NE367/C, with a crew consisting of pilot **F/Sgt. J. R. Edgar** and navigator **F/Sgt. H. W. Wood**, and
NE607/Q, with pilot **F/Sgt. James E. Paddison** and navigator **F/Sgt. John C. Rhodes**.

Under the command of **F/Lt. Pringle**, the formation struck a 100-metric-ton freighter off Tinos and continued on to attack the Paros airfield from the north. As they approached, they saw that the runway was unfinished and that there were no aircraft on the ground. They attacked in order to destroy the construction sites and buildings, but they were met with heavy and intense anti-aircraft fire. [1], [2]





On the left is pilot F/Sgt. Eric G. Harman and on the right is navigator F/Sgt. Leslie E. Hopkin [9], who were killed when their aircraft, the Beaufighter LZ404/K, was shot down by German anti-aircraft fire.

The Germans managed to shoot down *NE607/Q*, which was split in two in midair, and the explosion upon its crash to the ground (near Lefkes on Paros) left the crew with no chance of survival. Subsequently, the remaining aircraft, which had sustained minor damage, came under attack from four German Bf-109 Messerschmitts and another Beaufighter, the LZ404/K; its crew was lost when it crashed to the ground. Ultimately, two aircraft managed, despite their damage, to return to their base in Gabut, Libya. [1], [2]

On the night of May 15–16, the Germans had just recovered from the morning's enemy air raid.

At 9:45 p.m., the commando operation began. By 11:30 p.m., everyone had taken up their positions and was ready for a surprise attack. The element of surprise, however, was lost when a dog was heard barking from the hill of Galiou. Almost at the same time, three gunshots rang out, and the Germans fired a flare that illuminated the airport area. Lassen's team's position had been exposed, and they were forced to retreat without having managed to engage their targets.

Second Lieutenant Sofoulis and his team, acting swiftly, left the Germans no time to mobilize. At 11:40 p.m., they attacked with heavy and sustained machine-gun fire. Three Germans were killed on the spot; the radio was destroyed; ammunition was detonated; and at the quarters, the sentry was killed and the German commander of the airport guard company, Second Lieutenant *Oblt. Tabel*, was taken prisoner. During the skirmish, the second lieutenant and a British SBS paratrooper/radio operator were wounded.

Meanwhile, the other teams, along with the Parian resistance fighters, had managed to cut the airport's power and telephone lines, destroy the radios at Dragoula—killing two German radio operators—and also destroy a German warehouse.

During their retreat, Second Lieutenant Sofoulis's team unexpectedly encountered a German patrol, and in the ensuing firefight, the captured German commander was seriously wounded, while from the commando team, rural police officer Manolis Gryllakis was wounded.

After the operation ended, all the men gathered at Agios Charalambos (southwest of Marpissa). During the headcount, Nikolaos Stellas and an English commando (a doctor) were missing, while present but wounded was the rural police officer Manolis Gryllakis.

Everyone, except for two members of the Sacred Guard, arrived on time at the boarding point in Piso Livadi. They boarded an inflatable boat, along with Manolis Gryllakis, and set out to sea to meet the caique that was waiting to transport them to Herakleia. The two members of the Sacred Guard were left behind the following day. The SBS commandos and the members of the Sacred Guard returned to their base on May 18.

German casualties totaled 6–7 dead, 1 wounded, and extensive material damage. The raid was not considered a success.

Despite their heavy losses, the Germans managed to capture Nikolaos Stellas. They tortured him severely, but the young Stellas did not reveal any names or information. Enraged, the Germans sentenced him to death by hanging at the makeshift court-martial they had set up. As his last wish, Stellas chose to confess and receive Holy Communion. The Germans summoned Father **Yiannis Papazoglou**. After his confession, Stellas asked the priest to tell his parents “to forgive him for the pain he had caused them.” On May 22, they led him in chains to Marpissa Square, where they publicly hanged him as a grim warning to the other Parian resistance fighters. [13], [17], [19]



Nikolaos Iak. Stellas, at a young age.[16]

However, in addition to the horrific execution of Stellas, the Germans also announced even harsher reprisals. Within a few days, 125 Parian men were to be selected by the community leaders, following a German order, to face the firing squad. [15]

The new (as of May 1944) German commander of ***Festungs Infanterie Bataillon 1010*** on Paros was ***Major der Lw. Georg Graf (Count) von Merenberg***, a *Luftwaffe* pilot, [7] who succeeded *Tabel* as commander of airfield operations as well as the German troops on Paros; he was also responsible for carrying out the execution. He was an unusual officer. On his mother's side he descended from the Russian aristocracy, and his ancestors included Tsar Alexander II and the great Russian poet *Alexander Pushkin*. His German father came from an old military family. He himself despised brutal and lawless ways. He was capable of killing in battle but considered the murder of noncombatants a crime. He had been charged twice by military courts. Once for failing to use the Hitler salute and once for striking a Nazi party member. Nevertheless, he had to set aside his emotions and obey the orders for reprisals, which were reportedly given by Hitler himself.[15]

Major Georg Graf (Count) von Merenberg.
Photograph from 1943, from the archives of his
descendants, Dr. Clotilde von Rintelen and Gräfin von
Merenberg.[15]



Meanwhile, the Middle East Command had planned a heavy bombing raid on the airfield.

On the afternoon of June 5, around 6:30 p.m., nine *B-24 Liberator VI* aircraft from the South African *31st SAAF Squadron* took off from *Gebel Hamzi* (also known as *Kilo 40*) in Egypt[8], with the aim of bombing the airport at Marmara on Paros. One of the aircraft, ...*EE199/D*, returned to base early due to a technical problem, while the remaining eight—...*104/Y*, ...*144/A*, ...*146/R*, ...*147/H*, ...*161/W*, ...*166/Z*, ...*937/J*, and ...*970/F*, continued on to the target.



B-24 Liberator bombers of the 31st SAAF on a daytime bombing mission. [26]

At approximately 22:35, they had reached the area above Paros and began bombing the airfield from an altitude of 9,000–11,000 feet. They dropped a total of 12 1,000-pound bombs and 72 500-pound *GP Mk.IV* bombs (a total of 48,000 pounds = 21,772 kilograms), but they failed to create craters on the runway, as most of the bombs fell to the west and at the southern end of the runway. [4],

The 31SAAF bombers suffered no losses, although they came under fire from both Mount Kefalos and four rockets launched from a German motorboat located to the north within the Gulf of Marmara. [4]

Following the bombardment—even though it was unsuccessful—work gradually slowed down.

In the days that followed, representatives of the people of Paros and Antiparos, clergy, and other prominent citizens of Paros, including **Dr. Alibrandis**, the President of the Archilochos Community, **Emmanouil Kavallis**, and the abbot of the Loggovarda Monastery, **Philotheos Zervakos**, [25] formed a committee to save the 125 condemned men. They approached the German commander of *the Kommandantur*, Second Lieutenant **Ltn. Sasse**, [7] a close associate of *Merenberg*, to present their problem to him. He told them that their chances would be slim if they officially requested clemency for the 125 from *Merenberg*, and that formal negotiations with him would amount to a betrayal on his part. [15]



Nevertheless, he suggested that it would be better to invite the commander to visit the Monastery of Loggovarda, where the discussion could be informal and more relaxed, and there was no higher German order prohibiting it.

Abbot Philotheos wasted no time and invited *Merenberg* to the monastery. *Merenberg*, who was interested in local customs, architecture, art, and history—and, above all, had a Russian Orthodox mother—accepted the invitation.

On the morning of Sunday, July 23, accompanied by an interpreter, six officers, and soldiers, he visited the monastery. [15], [25] She was given a tour of the monastery's library, where she was shown the icons and the guestbook; afterward, a luncheon was served in her honor. Given the extraordinary circumstances of this crucial visit, the monks, as an exception to the monastery's rules, served him lamb, fine cheeses, olives, figs, preserves made at the monastery, and dark red wine. Impressed by the warm hospitality, friendliness, and kindness of the monks, the German commander expressed his admiration for their ascetic, disciplined life, their hard work, and their kindness, as well as for the serene tranquility of the monastery. Gradually, he relaxed, becoming more approachable and human, and less like an army officer.

When evening fell, the commander and his entourage attended Vespers, during which the monks prayed for the 125 condemned men. Afterward, the monks served spoon sweets and coffee, as was the custom for their German guests.

The Abbot of the Loggovarda Monastery, Philotheos Zervakis (1884–1980), whose secular name was Konstantinos Zervakis [15], [18].

At this point, something completely unexpected happened. Among the icons and portraits of former abbots that adorned the reception hall was an icon depicting a seaside village. Two Russian monks had brought this icon to Paros after their monastery was dissolved during the Russian Revolution. As soon as *Von Merenberg* laid eyes on it, he stood motionless, examining the icon carefully and intently. He told the astonished monks that the icon depicted none other than his mother's village, Yalta.

"You have no idea how moved I was by this image; that is where I spent my summers during my happy childhood years."

Abbot Philotheos later recounted,...

"At that moment, the atmosphere around us was filled with peace and goodwill. I felt deep within me that we had entered the realm of the miracle-worker."

As the visit drew to a close, *Merenberg* warmly thanked the abbot for his hospitality and promised to help him and the monastery in any way he could. Philotheos asked those present to leave the room, except for the commander, the interpreter, and one other monk. He thanked the commander for his kind offer and asked him if he sincerely promised to grant his favor. The commander extended his right hand and assured him that he would keep his promise.

The abbot took heart and begged him to grant clemency to the condemned. When the commander heard the favor the abbot requested, the following dialogue ensued between the two men.

Merenberg—"That's not possible. I know it's unfair, but it's not up to me to decide. I have orders from my superiors. If I don't follow them, I myself will be executed. Ask me for something else."

Philotheos—"Since you promised clemency, you must keep your word. If it's still too difficult for you, execute me instead of them."

Merenberg—"That cannot happen under any circumstances."

Philotheos—"I must insist. Please, at least grant me a personal favor, then: include me among those who are to be executed."

The atmosphere was one of gravity and intense emotion. *Merenberg* found himself facing a profound internal dilemma. To obey and carry out the order to execute the 125 Parian men, violating his deepest principles and provoking an irreconcilable enmity between himself and the local population—who would continue to fight more dangerously than ever and carry out acts of sabotage at the airfield—or to follow his moral principles, to protect civilians as a true officer and, at the same time, win the sympathy of the people of Paros.

The peaceful moments he spent at the monastery and the pleasant memories that surfaced from his childhood led him to decide to disobey orders and spare the people of Paros—on one condition. There must be no further acts of sabotage at the airport.

The abbot agreed and made a promise of his own. He blessed the commander and prayed to the Virgin Mary of the Life-Giving Spring to protect him and his family forever. Thus, the commander left the monastery, and the 125 Parian men were spared execution as a result of a miracle.[15],[24],[25]

The airport area remained a target for Allied forces for the following months until the end of the war. On the night of August¹, 1944, a *Vickers Wellington Mk. XIII* aircraft of the 38th Squadron RAF, with the call sign *MF250/W* and a six-member crew (*F/O F. West, F/O L. Boys, Sgt. G. Fennimore, W/O R. Young, Sgt. R. Pundle, and Sgt. K. Burt*), dropped sea mines from an altitude of 6,000 feet and mined Marmara Bay[3]. The cove is and has always been a safe natural shelter from the northerly winds that blow most frequently in the area, and, of course, with the small boats arriving there, it was easy to supply the airfield and transport equipment to it.



Capt. Wilhelm Anhalt (March 28, 1917 – May 13, 1979).
Pilot of the R38.[21]

Toward the end of the month, on August 27, 1944, as the German retreat from the Aegean islands had begun, the minesweeper (*Räumboot*) **R38**, commanded by **Kplt. Johannes Friedrich Wilhelm Anhalt**, arrived in Marmara Bay (Molos) to pick up German military personnel from the airport station as part of the evacuation of the area. The *R38* struck one of the mines that the *Wellington* had dropped inside the bay and sank. Of the 32 Germans on board, only 16 were rescued with the immediate assistance of the people of Paros, who swam out to pull them from the sea, including the captain and **Erwin Ostman** (a crew member of the *R38*), from whom the testimony originates. [5]

In the months that followed, the war came to an end, and Paros was liberated from German occupation.

According to the records that have been found, the airfield was never used as a base by any German Air Force (*Luftwaffe*) squadron or wing [10]. The coordinates provided by the Germans for the airfield are (01.04.44 E 204/XVII) 37° 05' N, 25° 08' E. [7]

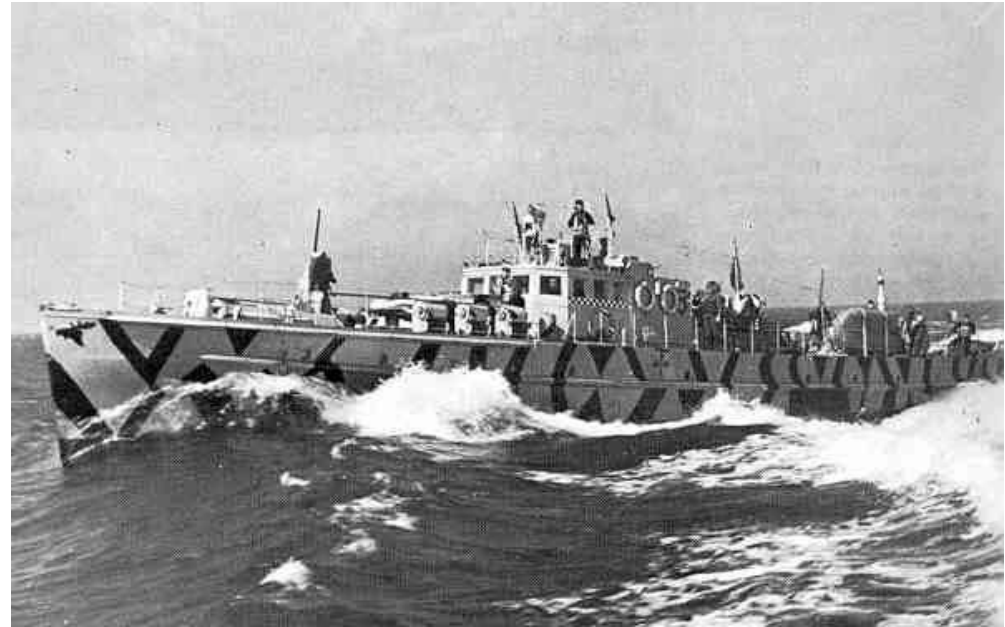
While still under construction, the coordinates of the runway axis are approximately 37°04.000'N, 25°15.375'E – 37°03.500'N, 25°15.215'E (WGS84), and its direction is 015° – 195°.

Construction of the airfield was never completed.



Abbreviations, Acronyms, Equivalent Rank.

F/Lt. Flight Lieutenant = Flight
Lieutenant F/O Flying Officer = Second
Lieutenant F/Sgt. Flight Sergeant =
Staff Sergeant Kplt. Kapitänleutnant =
Lieutenant (Navy) Lt. Lieutenant =
Second Lieutenant
Lt. Leutnant = Second Lieutenant
Major = Major
Oblt. Oberleutnant
RAF Royal Air Force
SAAF South African Air Force
SBS Special Boat Service
Sgt. Sergeant = Sergeant
S/Ldr. Squadron Leader = Squadron
Leader W/O Warrant Officer = Warrant
Officer



The German minesweeper (*Räumboot*) R38, [20] whose wreckage remains to this day on the seabed, to the north, within the Gulf of Marmara.

SOURCES:

NARA: [1]AIR27/2080/9,10 War Diary of 603 Squadron, RAF

[2]AIR 27/2080/11,12 War Diary of 603 Squadron

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