RICHARD CAPELL

SIMIOMATA

A Greek Note Book
1944–1945

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Richard Capell (1885 - 1954)
During the Second World War he served as a war correspondent in France, the western Sahara and Greece for the Daily Telegraph

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Naxos, October

This, the conquest of Naxos, has been a battle of three days, a battle with all three services engaged, with land fighting, the siege of a stronghold, naval bombardment and air-force attack; and all on a scene not much more than the size of a handkerchief. Before now I have been out submarine-hunting, but a naval bombardment was a new experience. In one's first naval bombardment to be sniped at with rifles was something unexpected, striking a less than majestic note. It is true that our bombardment was carried out by nothing weightier than two-pounders. His Majesty's destroyer *Hotspur* of the submarine hunt off Tobruk, one July night in 1941, was a powerful vessel compared with Jack Ford's motor-launch which, with Michael Poore's, has in these three days attempted the reduction of the German stronghold, an old and massive convent, on the summit of Naxos town.

Ariadne's island! Its severity is not what the painters have imagined, any more than Keats imagined as it is the rocky barrenness of Arcadia. This week-end must have been the most

surprising in its history since Dionysos descended, as you see him in the great picture in the National Gallery, with his train of satyrs, for Ariadne's consolation.

At Khios on Thursday evening Warden and I were given a bare half-hour's warning to join the expedition. Two motor-launches set out with a party of twenty-four men of the Sacred Company and, as British Liaison officer, Hillman of Force 142 with his wireless signaller, Corporal Sparks. Obscure was the night, obscure the little beach where the landing was made; chilly the small hours, and forbidding the cliffs and looming mountain. The mutter of voices in the would-be silence, the sound of the oars as the dinghies pulled to the shore, it all seemed like reality obediently reproducing fiction. The raiders, Warden along with them, landed, I remaining the guest of the ML officers, Ford and Norman Steele.

What we began the day by doing was to capture the commander of the German garrison. Friday the thirteenth was not the luckiest day in the young life of Stabsfeldwebel Siemt. Between darkness and light we had steamed slowly the few miles between the landing-beach and Naxia town. The plan was for the raiders to approach the town by land and to enquire of the garrison whether they preferred fighting or surrender. It was known that there had been a partial evacuation, and our agents believed some, at least, of the remainder to be half-hearted. The business of the motor-launches was to await reports and, as the case might be, lend support in a fight, join in accepting surrender or, if things went not well, take off the landing party. Day came into a windless sky, and the little town showed itself, its houses clustered round a conical hill, with the big convent as crown. We were at the heart of the Cyclades. Paros was just across the strait; a little to the north Mikonos and Dilos (so we are now told to spell it)—Apollo's Delos.

There was some fighting going on behind the town; machine-gunning was heard and the bursting of mortar-bombs to be seen. The townsfolk were up and, observing our coming, could be descried, first in twos and threes, soon in tens and twenties, collecting on the water-front and exhibiting lively interest. Greek flags appeared at the windows and we ventured, in the absence of a jarring note, to move still nearer to the breakwater. Then a rowboat put off from the beach, making towards us, and as it approached we saw its occupants to be eight or nine Greek boatmen and a man in German uniform. It came alongside, and up on deck they all clambered, the Greeks beaming and shaking hands again and again. I thought the German looked oddly green.

None of us spoke Greek; only I had a little German. Ford's concern was to know how many Germans were on the island. I put the question to our visitor, who stood very stiff and answered: Two hundred! Had he any papers? No. He stood stiffly but could not help shivering. In his thin shirt and slacks, with no badge of rank, he had every look of having just risen from bed. He was a robust young man of twenty-five or so, with a sullen cast of countenance.

I said: "If you are not feeling well, do sit down!" No, he was not ill; he preferred to stand. I asked him his name; it was Siemt. His rank? Stabsfeldwebel. He was Silesian. Had the garrison surrendered? I asked; for we had heard no firing now for some little time. At this he was emphatic: No! He declined a cigarette. I said: "Sorry, but I don't quite understand why you are here." His answer was a surprise: "I thought you were a German ship!"—But, I pointed out, our flag is British.—It is, he said, a very little flag. Rather nettled, I answered: "It is the normal size!" To this he replied: "It hangs like a rag." I looked up, and what he had said was rather true. In the windless air the ensign drooped almost unrecognizable.

Conversation got no farther, for there was a move on. Activity had been noticed on a roof up in the convent area; a mortar was being mounted. The Greeks, all smiles, were bidden a hasty good-bye. We had got but a little way out to sea when mortar-bombs began to fall round us. It was our German's luck to see the events of the next three days from our point of view.

Before long the wardroom steward brought me some coffee, and I said: "If you have a drop to spare, you might give some to the German—he seems to be cold." A little later I asked of the same man: "How is the German?" To get the answer: "He's crying, sir!"—"What, really crying?"—"Yes, sir, crying his heart out!" The Stabsfeldwebel was after that the pet of the mess-deck. All had been affected by his emotion, and none passed him without giving a pat on the shoulder or offering a cigarette.

A good deal later I asked after him again, and was answered: "He's cheering up, sir—he's playing ludo on the mess-deck!" Hours later we learnt that he was the acting commander of the garrison, all the officers having been evacuated. He put a curious question to me after our first bombardment of the convent. A seaman came to me with the message: "The German wants to know if he can have a word with you, sir." He was sitting on deck, disconsolate. What he said, standing up rigidly, was, as I understood: "Will you tell me why, when we meant to go away, you are fighting us?" I tried to make my answer clear—

that we were fighting enemies whom we considered better in the bag than going away to fight us or our friends elsewhere. The point of his question I still do not see, nor why he should have seemed unsatisfied with my answer.

All that came later. After sheering off out of range of the mortar—a biggish mortar—and still receiving no word from our friends on land we went across the strait to keep an appointment on Paros. It was to pick up a patrol that had been there for some days, engaged in rounding up some Germans still left there. It was, too, our job to hail any caiques that were seen and enquire of them their business and destination. We saw small fishing craft. It was an opportunity to practise one's Greek: Who are you? Whither going? All were joyous as they came alongside. They presented us with their catch, they accepted cigarettes. The day had turned out radiant.

In the Parian bay we had not yet got into touch with the patrol before a signal came from Naxos—we were wanted to provide backing for our friends there engaged in a parley. Back we went in haste, and this time straight into Naxia harbour, after picking up a pilot at the breakwater. Warden and Hillman were on the quayside with a couple of German soldiers and jubilant crowds around. When Warden got aboard I heard his tale, while the two Germans engaged in consultation with our Stabsfeldwebel.

What had happened was that after a show of attack by the raiders a party of Germans had come down from their citadel to parley, under a white flag. Their message was that the garrison was prepared to surrender to a British force but on no consideration to Greeks. While it was being proposed that representatives of the attacking party should repair to the citadel to discuss ways and means a contretemps occurred without which Naxos might have been as bloodlessly conquered as Samos had been.

But the local Andartes chose that moment to stage a demonstration, with bursts of fire up and down the valley. Warden made furious signs that it should stop, and it may all have been only lightheartedness. But there the white flag was; and the impression on the truce-party was unfavourable, as became still more clear to Warden when he reached the council chamber in the citadel. There he found the leaderless garrison to be of two minds—the offer of surrender had not commanded all suffrages. The die-hards were strengthened by the exhibition the Andartes had made, their argument being: If the British are so little able to control their irregular friends, is it not preferable to fight on rather than disarm and have our throats cut by this rabble?

Hillman, then turning up, gave them until 1300 hours to make a decision and, having signalled to the motor-launches, granted permission that, on our arrival, two of the Germans might confidentially consult with their missing commander, whose disappearance had left everyone guessing. The white flag should or not, as the decision might be, go up on the citadel at 1300 hours. But it was nearing that time now. We were vulnerable; and now departure was made in haste—in such haste that the Naxian pilot's presence on board was overlooked and he, unwarned and with perturbation written on his face, had to put out with us to sea and witness from our deck the first act of the operation that was to turn his town, or its summit at any rate, all so serene that morning, into flame and ruin before we left.

We put out no great distance. The gunners were rubbing their hands. The hour struck, and no emblem of surrender appeared. Ford made room for me on the bridge. Glasses were not necessary for all to be seen. I have an idea that the gunnery was not strictly conventional, but the hits were manifest. You saw the tracer shells on their course and their impact, while Ford shouted like this to the gunners just below him: "That's the right one! It's in the third window on the second floor! Oh, too bad! That's gone over the top! Oh, good enough! Keep on putting them into the roof!"

The raiders on land were contributing with their machine-guns and mortars. At times the hilltop was blurred by smoke, then cleared and was blurred again. In the foreground, really quite near, were the old ruins of the Dionysian temple, with a portal still standing, on the little peninsula that juts out from the town. The other motor-launch was spurting just like us. We were rolling in a gentle swell. There was no fear now from the mortar on the convent roof, but bullets from somewhere or other began to be a nuisance. An aerial was shot away, and afterwards a mess was found to have been made of the big rubber dinghy on deck. Our Bofors guns and the land-party's two-inch mortars—what impression had they made on all that masonry? What was clear enough was that the Naxian nuns would, to be comfortable again, need new windows and roof. We withdrew down the coast for the night.

Our Saturday's performance was a repetition of Friday's. There was an interlude, an excursion to Paros again, to carry out the interrupted mission. This time we went into the big, shallow haven at the north end of the island. They saw us coming from afar; bells began to ring and it was like a moving frieze, the sight of the people hurrying along the coast road towards the

pier, waving small flags as they ran or urged their donkeys. It was like a regatta, when every craft and raft put out to meet us, to surround us and congratulate. They looked poorly, but glad as though it were the day of their lives. They brought generous presents. An old man gave me—insisted upon giving me—a big sponge. (The extraordinary smell in my kitbag comes from the sponge, a smell between sweet and fishy, all-pervading. It needs, they say, repeated soaking in fresh water.) Others brought a dressed lamb or kid, welcome to the galley. My cigarettes, too few, went to the men, the last of some Haifa chocolate to the children, poor dears. Well, they were pleased to see us.

The German prisoners rounded up on Paros would have been in the way, so, leaving them for another time we took on board only the patrol, all cheerful on learning that there was still a job for them on Naxos. Our Stabsfeldwebel looked on. In the course of the day a request was signalled back to Khios for more and weightier mortars; and also a hint to the RAF. At night, then, a third motor-launch joined us, bearing Colonel Kalinski and twenty-four more men of the Sacred Company, with three-inch mortars.

Early this Sunday morning a couple of surprising visitors put in an appearance—two big German flying-boats which, coming in low over the hills, had certainly intended to alight in Naxia harbour. Nothing was clearer than their surprise at seeing us, expressed in their agitated sheering off. Slow and clumsy, they were lucky to get away; but the surprise of their appearance had been too sudden. The motor-launches—not meanly armed for such occasions—shivered with their outbursts; but not quite in time. Machine-gunners claimed hits, but nothing mortal. Like enormous and frightened insects the aircraft escaped.

Our own aircraft put in their appearance after noon, and this was anything but funny. Deadly. They were Beaufighters, four of them, with rockets. Awful is the effect, seen at close quarters, of such a rocket attack, its preternatural swiftness and precise power of destruction. They came streaking down; there were crashes, and it was like an avenging deity. Within minutes the big buildings were irretrievably ablaze. The motor-launches contributed all they had, and amid what we saw were Kalinski's mortar explosions. The raiders' assault followed. But the garrison, driven to shelter in the dungeons of their citadel, had had enough. There was, we were to hear, something of a scrap with Kalinski's men in the corridors; and then surrender.

The day had turned stormy; it was beginning to rain, and as once again we steamed into Naxia harbour the sight was of the

upper town flaming against grey-black and rolling clouds. A dinghy took me ashore. As it happened I was the first to land. All the population was on the water-front. Their faces, wan and smiling, tearful and joyful, were strangely lighted by the yellow that came in shafts from the cloudy sunset.

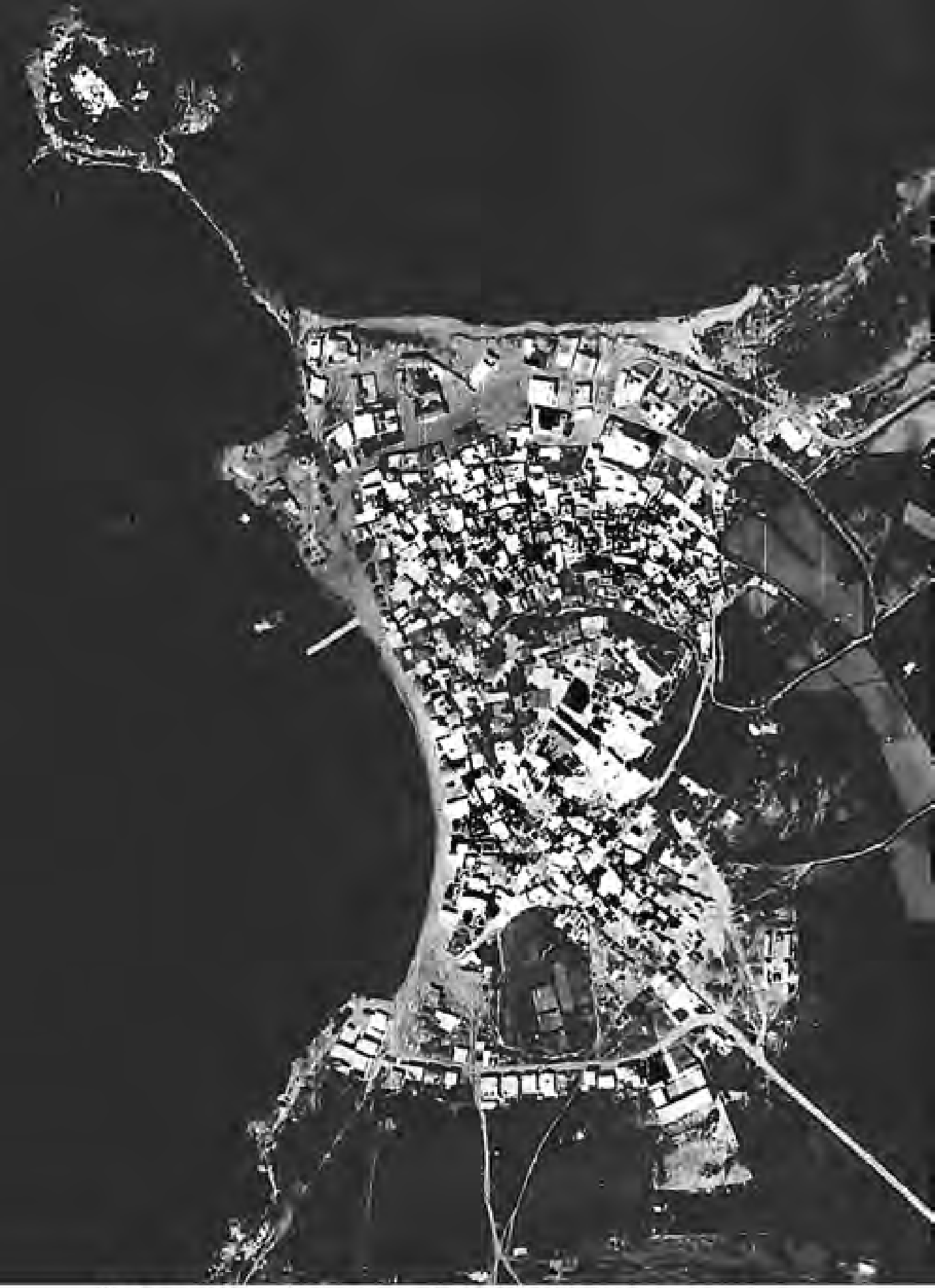
Hand-shaking—it was more like hand-wringing. There was kissing of hands and embraces. All seemed to have at least one English word: Welcome! It was a relief to come upon Kalinski and indicate that not my due but his were the honours. Another relief was in finding no serious hurt had been suffered by any civilian from the firing and bombardment. They had, expecting no less, hidden out of harm's way. As for the material damage, it was truly Greek that not one in all the dozens I talked with thought it worth a regret. All that counted was the blessed liberation. I asked after the nuns of the convent, to be told they had all found refuge inland. Someone mentioned there was an English nun among them; two or three young women said they had been her pupils, and one had her home address—it was, The Old Garden Cottage, Sunbury-on-Thames.

The German prisoners were being marched down the steep lane from the citadel and paraded on the quayside. The rain came on in earnest, and it was getting dark. We embarked. It turned out that Siemt's figure of two hundred for the garrison had been an exaggeration. We have sixty-five prisoners divided between the three motor-launches. Such few Germans as may not have been rounded up we have left to a detachment of the raiding party. One prisoner had told me they had been expecting to be evacuated this very day, probably to Milos, where the Germans are still in strength. They report they had six killed in the citadel. The raiders have lost one killed, a Greek signaller.

It has turned into a wild night; the motor-launch is rolling with a vengeance. A comfortless night for the Germans under tarpaulins on deck; but we shall be at Khios by the morning. No one denies they have shown themselves men. We still see Naxos, a far-off glow like a volcano in the night.

Oct.1944:British motor launch in the harbour of Naxos

15-10-1944: Ursuline's school & convent burning



Aerial photograph Naxos 15.07.1941 /German army