

LIVING THROUGH HISTORY

**NATIONAL
ARMY
MUSEUM**
TE MATA TOA

NZ History
COVID-19 and the New Zealand
experience at Crete in WW2



He waka eke noa

We are all in this together

History isn't something that happens to someone else. Right now, you are living through an extraordinary event that is changing the New Zealand way of life: the COVID-19 pandemic. Future students might look back on this moment and ask: how did they feel? How did they make it through?

We can ask the same questions about another generation of Kiwis who lived through extraordinary times: **New Zealand soldiers in Crete during World War 2** (1939-1945). Then, like now, a major global crisis forced everyday New Zealanders to reconsider the way that they were used to living. Many of the New Zealanders in Crete were scared – they didn't know whether the future would be good or bad – but they put their hope in victory, and sacrificed for it.

For each of the activities below:

- **Read** about the New Zealand experience in Crete in World War 2.
- **Reflect** on how this is similar to what you are seeing now.
- **Respond** to the questions or instructions at the end of each activity.

Share your answers with your classmates and teacher! We'll all have our own unique experiences, and we can all learn just as much from each other as we can from our nation's history.



Activity 1: The Battle of Crete

This is a story about the Battle of Crete and how Kiwis coped with anxiety and uncertainty on the front line during the Second World War. Following the defeat of New Zealand and Commonwealth forces in Greece, Kiwi soldiers were delivered to the Island of Crete by the Royal Navy, and were only able to take with them what they could carry.

Once delivered to the Island of Crete, many problems were uncovered.

- Crete is a small island, its main city only having a population of 30,000 people. Suddenly, the island was now home to an extra 27,500 (soldiers). These soldiers were from all over the world; New Zealand, Britain, Cyprus, Palestine and Greece. They'd even brought several hundred Italian prisoners of war. All these men needed somewhere to stay, water to drink, medical care and food.
- Food was running short. Crete has to import food from Greece normally, so what happens when Greece is occupied by the enemy? The Cretans' harvest of oranges, grapes and olives had not yet started.
- The water situation was the most dangerous. Crete's water comes from wells and these wells were already suffering shortages before all the soldiers arrived. This meant that soldiers' water supplies were tightly rationed. No washing was permitted (Imagine no shower for four weeks, or being able to wash your hands. What are the risks with this?).
- There were shortages of medical supplies and communication equipment. With less than two hundred trucks on the island, all being used for military purposes, and an out of date phone system, units had to keep in touch by using runners, to get messages through. (Hopefully they would not get lost on the plains or in the mountains). There was also only one undersea cable to Allied HQ in Alexandria, meaning that if the cable was cut or if the town of Heraklion (where the cable landed on Crete) fell into the hands of the enemy, all contact with home would be lost.

This resulted in high levels of anxiety amongst the troops. The soldiers only knew that they were hungry, thirsty and having to sleep under trees. Also, they were anxious about what would happen next. Would the Germans attack? Would they be evacuated? Where were their friends? Were they alright? There was also little communication from home so they couldn't even hear about their families back in New Zealand.

The commanders like General Freyberg were also anxious. They knew (and advised high command) that unless they received supplies they had no hope of winning as the Germans had more equipment and could invade at any moment. Despite all their recommendations high command was refusing to send more equipment, while ordering that the Island be defended to the last.

1a If you could only take one backpack with you, what would you take and why?

1b Draw your backpack so that you show where everything was inside. How much do you think it would weigh?

1c There are shortages in New Zealand right now during COVID-19. Shortages of what? Where do we need to go to get what we need? Is it easy to get?

Activity 2: Building Strength

New Zealand soldiers had to get to know the people from Crete while they were waiting for the attack.

The Cretans didn't speak English and the soldiers didn't speak Greek so the Kiwis had to be inventive about how they 'talked' to the Cretans. Others learned the local language in order to communicate. While the soldiers could talk to those around them, they couldn't get any information from New Zealand as there were no newspapers on the island and most of the radios were being used for military purposes.

Our soldiers did their best to help the people of Crete despite the constant air attacks; helping with some of the crops, helping to clear bomb damaged houses and repair the roads. Some even helped the King of Greece to be safely evacuated with the help of the Cretan civilians.

The Cretan gratitude became clear when they hid Kiwi soldiers after the battle. Some soldiers remained hidden for up to four years. This shows the massive impact even a little kindness can have.

3a How do we get to know people nowadays?

3b What would you write in a letter from Crete if you were a soldier? Would you focus on the fighting or other things you had been doing?

3c How do you think they would have coped with not knowing what was happening with their families back home? Or not being able to send word?



Activity 3: Confusion

When the Battle finally started just after dawn on the 20th of May 1941, it was a surprise attack. Many of our 7700 soldiers were eating breakfast.

The Germans had been bombarding the island for days with aircraft that the soldiers couldn't defend themselves against, or hide from. There were no bunkers, just trenches that the soldiers had dug themselves or they could hide behind stone walls or in ditches. The bombing grew so intense that it became impossible to move during daylight.

It didn't help that every time the bombers saw something, they would dive down to attack it, making a distinct wailing sound (watch the Jericho horn video).

Large German airplanes, some towing gliders, flew in over the island. Suddenly the air filled with parachutes as thousands of elite German paratroopers began to descend from the sky.

Once the attack began, being unable to communicate made fighting back against the attack almost impossible. The same problem was encountered by the Germans as their radios were mostly destroyed as they landed, leaving them cut off from support or any communication from their commanders.

Soldiers on both sides therefore had to take the initiative, listening and taking note of those around them to make sure that they survived.

2a Why do we need leaders in a crisis?

2b Think of a leader you know in your life – what makes them a good leader for you?

2c What can you do to look after those around you? Do you check in with anyone to make sure they're OK?



Activity 4: The Enemy

During 1941, Kiwis did not know whether they would win the war or not. They were fighting their hardest but the enemy seemed to win whenever they clashed. Soldiers were very worried about what would happen back home if the enemy won.

This uncertainty and anxiety was hard on everyone, especially as they very rarely saw the enemy face to face. Instead the soldiers were being attacked by long range artillery, or aircraft, which they couldn't fight back against.

The soldiers had to fight, and they obeyed orders from their commanders because it was the best thing to do in their situation. What do you think would have happened if they had all done whatever they wanted? Thousands of people would have been captured or killed.

Because the commanders had a plan and could rely on their men to follow their instructions, New Zealand troops fought well and were able to escape without being wiped out.

4a Think of the orders the country was given during lock down. What happened to those who disobeyed orders?

4b What was the biggest enemy during lockdown?

What happens next?

Everyone on Crete from the humblest civilian all the way through to General Freyberg were asking the question: What comes next? The soldiers on Crete had the same questions, although they were also asking, "Will I survive this? Will my friends survive? What about my family? Will we win the war?"

For the soldiers on Crete, only time and their actions could answer these questions.

Many people in New Zealand and around the world are asking the same question now. Will the virus spread through New Zealand? Will it get worse? When will it get better? Are my friends and family alright? Some are looking further ahead - what will the world and New Zealand be like once all this is over? What will it be like to travel overseas?"

4c How do you think those who have caught the virus feel? How are they coping with their uncertainty?

4d How can you ensure that the virus is defeated? What part can you play?



Beyond the Worksheet

These activities have shown you just a few examples of how past New Zealanders kept up with a crisis and came through it together. But history doesn't stop happening, and there's more you can do to make sure that the times you live in aren't forgotten. Here are a couple of activities that can help you learn more and think about our situation.

- New Zealand is a food producing nation. We sell food all around the world. So, we will not run out of food here. But what if you lived in a country like China that needs to buy food because they can't grow enough for their people. How could your food or drink be rationed if needed?
- Find out more about the elite German Fallschirmjäger who were dropped into Crete. Despite all their planning and experience, many of them were killed. See if you can find out why. See if you can find out about some of their stories.



References

Documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cZGqApwycw>

German Paratroopers and Kiwi forces on Crete: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvxAE-eALhl>

Jericho Horn: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7x6Lzd075_0

Kiwis on their adventures: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUuVwnDXVII>

Paratroopers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S985QkNPUoM>