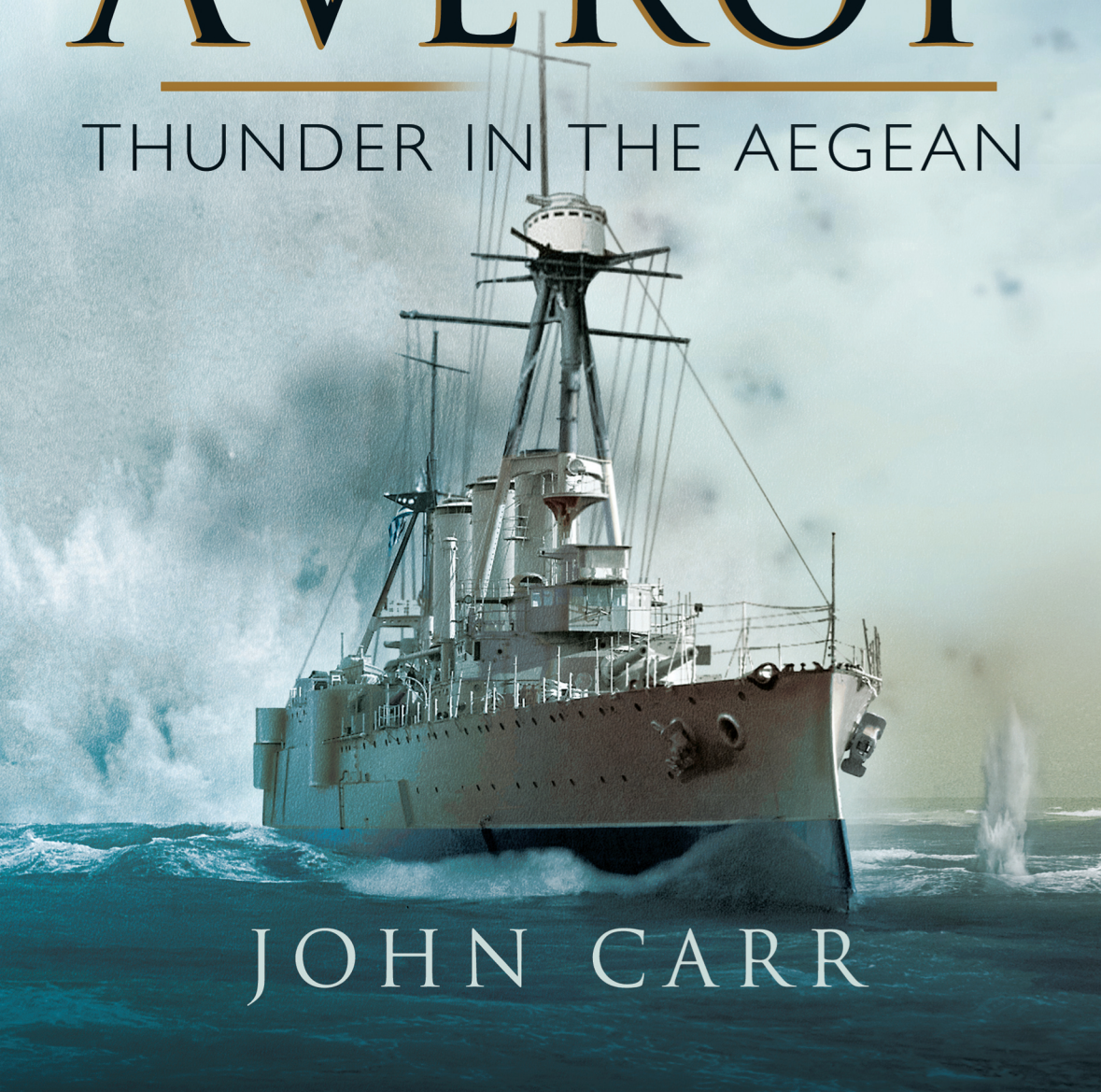




— R.H.N.S. —
AVEROF

THUNDER IN THE AEGEAN



JOHN CARR

RHNS *Averof*

RHNS *Averof*

Thunder in the Aegean

John C. Carr



Pen & Sword
MARITIME

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by
Pen & Sword Maritime
an imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
S70 2AS

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ISBN 978 1 78303 021 7

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Typeset in Ehrhardt by
Mac Style Ltd, Bridlington, East Yorkshire
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CRO 4YY

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Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	vii
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
<i>List of Maps</i>	xiv
Chapter 1 Rush Job	1
Chapter 2 The Wine-Dark Sea	13
Chapter 3 Birth of the <i>Averof</i>	19
Chapter 4 Young Turks, Old Ships	37
Chapter 5 The Ship that Won a War	47
Chapter 6 Sailing to Byzantium	81
Chapter 7 Refit and Revolt	95
Chapter 8 To Fight Another Day	105
Chapter 9 Indian Summer	121
Chapter 10 Retirement and Rats	153
Chapter 11 Comeback	159
<i>Notes and References</i>	163
<i>Bibliographical Note</i>	167
<i>Index</i>	169

Prologue

If you consider how many times the *Averof* escaped disaster, you have to agree that the ship was blessed by God.

Leading Seaman (later Sub Lieutenant) George Gousis

In a compartment on the port side of RHNS *Averof* there's an old tin bucket standing upside down on a table. The bucket is one of the many exhibits in the venerable armoured cruiser – 102 years old at this writing – which is enjoying an honourable retirement as a floating museum. A guide points to what looks like a calcium deposit stain on the side of the bucket just below the handle. Look closer, and the stain resolves itself into a tiny face a couple of inches wide – rudimentary eyes and mouth and short beard, surrounded by what looks very like a halo.

The stain has been there for almost as long as the ship itself. It was first noticed by a crewmember on 20 November 1912, when the *Averof* was steaming towards a decisive encounter with the Turkish fleet off Cape Helles at the entrance to the Dardanelles. One officer saw in it the image of Saint Nicholas, the Greeks' patron saint of the sea and seafarers, and forecast – correctly, as it turned out – that the ship would emerge victorious from the coming encounter with minimum casualties.

From that day on, the powder bucket was taken into the ship's tiny chapel as a sacred relic. A good many people today are quite

prepared to believe that some sort of supernatural guidance helped preserve the *Averof* through decades of war and neglect. Whatever one believes, it's an undoubted fact that the way the *Averof* has emerged largely unscathed from a century of ordeals which would have sunk any ordinary vessel many times over, and to survive into the twenty-first century as a venerated veteran of Greece's wars at sea, is something of a miracle in itself.

My first acquaintance with RHNS *Averof* came during my first Greek island holiday at the age of thirteen. Standing at the rail of an island-hopping passenger boat, drinking in that wonderful Greek sunshine, I caught sight of its long grey hull moored at the resort island of Poros and remember that it seemed oddly out of place among the put-putting caiques and small white ships filling the Poros channel. It was obviously a relic of another age.

It was a time when Greece was getting on with the peaceful business of building up tourism, and so it is no surprise that the *Averof* was bypassed by galloping modernity. Only later, when I began a career in journalism, did I get the urge to find out more about that silent hulking presence outside the Naval Petty Officers' School at Poros. It was as late as 1984, when the ship was towed from Poros to become a floating museum in Phaleron Bay, within easy distance of the city of Athens, that the public at large were made aware of what the RHNS *Averof* (or *Georgios Averof*, to give it its official but rarely used full name) had contributed to modern Greek statehood. For in 1913 it had literally been the ship that won a war.

In December 2012 – the centenary, in fact, of the *Averof*'s greatest sea battle, almost to the day – my editor at Pen and Sword, Philip Sidnell, gave me the green light for this book while we were sipping coffee in Saint Pancras station in London. I had just completed the draft of my previous work, *The Defence and Fall of Greece 1940–1941*, and found myself with a large amount of unused research

material in Greek, especially in the naval sector, which could really use a dedicated English-language readership. This, combined with the fact that the *Averof* is the world's oldest surviving pre-dreadnought armoured cruiser still afloat and an active maritime museum wallowing in the warm Saronic Gulf alongside be vies of luxury yachts, argued strongly for a serious history of the vessel in English.

Writing this book was an education for me, as I had always considered myself an aviation specialist in military history. I am by no means a happy sailor, and couldn't tell a swabbed deck from a forestay. I'm glad that this book gave me the opportunity to expand my military knowledge into matters maritime, though I'm tempted to repeat the caveat of Lemuel Gulliver's fictional publisher that 'my own ignorance in sea-affairs shall have led me to commit some mistakes'.¹ If the naval reader does note such mistakes, I beg a landlubber forgiveness.

As the *Averof* (correct pronunciation: Av-AIR-off) was most active during the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, I have found it necessary, of course, to fill in some details and history of Greece's adversary, the Ottoman Empire, which was in its dying days. The Ottoman Turkish navy had fallen a long way since its glory days of the sixteenth century when it all but ruled the Mediterranean. Yet in the years before the First World War it could field powerful pre-dreadnought warships against which the *Averof* would prove its mettle in the Aegean Sea.

To remove possible sources of confusion for the reader, I must include a note on Turkish usage. Regarding references to military officers with names such as Enver Bey and Shevket Pasha, the terms 'Bey' and 'Pasha' were not surnames but titles, roughly corresponding to 'Sir' and 'General'. The Turks did not employ surnames on the Western model until 1935, well after the Kemalist

revolution. However, where my sources list Ottoman-era equivalents to surnames, I use them. In spelling I have resisted the pedantic temptation to retain obscure Turkish orthographical features such as the undotted i (ı) or thick sh (ş) as they might confuse and perhaps annoy the non-linguist (thus the more familiar Pasha instead of *Paşa*), but have kept the umlauted ü (as in Abdülhamid) as having no phonetic equivalent in English.

I have decided not to burden a book of this modest length with numbered references in the text, apart from the occasional footnote. I list my sources in a bibliographical note at the end, with a few comments about each. As regards those who helped me get the material for this book together, first and foremost I must thank fellow-author Alex Martin for setting me upon the naval trail in the first place. Dimitris Pitellos, a shipping executive and naval enthusiast, has been of inestimable value in unearthing priceless source material on his own initiative. A great debt, as always, is owed to George Mermingas for his seemingly inexhaustible library on all aspects of Greek military history, and Vice Admiral (ret.) Ioannis Paloumbis, the curator of the Hellenic Maritime Museum, for his eager and friendly cooperation in securing historic photographs. The museum librarian, Katia Kraniotou, was especially helpful in tracking down old technical documents. Yannis Korodimos, the public relations director of the Hellenic War Museum, was always on hand with his support, while Able Seaman Markos Christodoulidis, a guide and crewmember of the *Averof*, has conducted me several times through its quarters and engine room, offering fascinating glimpses into history and legend.

John C Carr
Athens
April 2013

List of Illustrations

- 1 The *Averof* shortly after commissioning
- 2 Admiral Pavlos Koundouriotis.
- 3 RHNS *Averof* under construction at Livorno, 1909.
- 4 Launch of the *Averof* at Livorno, 12 March 1910.
- 5 Invitation to the launching ceremony, featuring the basic ship plan.
- 6 Orlando Bros. nameplate on the *Averof*.
- 7 The *Averof* dry-docked at Portsmouth after its accident, 1911.
- 8 The *Averof* and fleet leave Phaleron Bay for operations in the Aegean, 5 October 1912.
- 9 Captain Dousmanis at the stern.
- 10 The *Averof*'s crew at Mudros, late 1912.
- 11 The First Balkan War at sea.
- 12 Dousmanis.
- 13 *Barbaros Hayreddin*, Ottoman Navy flagship, late 1912.
- 14 *Hamidiye*, Ottoman Navy armoured cruiser.
- 15 Contemporary painting of the Battle of Cape Helles, December 1912, by S. Plytas.
- 16 Contemporary painting of the Battle of Limnos, January 1913, by C. Alexandris.
- 17 The *Averof* leads the fleet on exercises (c. 1920).
- 18 Admiral Koundouriotis' quarters (restored).
- 19 The captain's cabin (restored).

- 20 The captain's bathroom (restored).
- 21 Inside the closed bridge.
- 22 The open and closed bridge.
- 23 Officers' dining room (restored).
- 24 Officers' lounge (restored).
- 25 Ship's chapel.
- 26 'Saint' image on the powder bucket.
- 27 Balkan Wars naval uniforms. Left to right: Lieutenant, Chief Petty Officer, Lieutenant Commander.
- 28 More naval uniforms. Left to right: Able Seaman, Captain, Admiral.
- 29 Stern view of the *Averof* today.
- 30 View of the afterdeck.
- 31 Aft guns.
- 32 Port aft gun turret.
- 33 Port fore gun turret.
- 34 Capstan with Orlando Bros. insignia.
- 35 Aft smokestack.
- 36 View of the foredeck.
- 37 Fore guns.
- 38 Shrapnel damage on a gun barrel from the Battle of Cape Helles.
- 39 Fire control post from 1925 refit.
- 40 Vintage 1912 rangefinder.
- 41 Main kitchen.
- 42 Sick bay kitchen.
- 43 The armoury.
- 44 Crew's hammocks (restored).
- 45 A wooden cross brought out by the ship's chaplain in times of danger to encourage the crew.
- 46 Canvas slings for loading coal down the chutes.
- 47 Stoker's uniform, Balkan Wars era.

- 48 The Ansaldo triple-expansion engine.
- 49 View of the engine room.
- 50 Boiler pressure gauges.
- 51 Boiler diagram for engine room crew.
- 52 Rear Admiral Alexander Sakellariou.
- 53 The *Averof* in the Indian Ocean, 1941–42.
- 54 Docked at Bombay, 1941.
- 55 HNS *Velos*, moored alongside the *Averof*, today.

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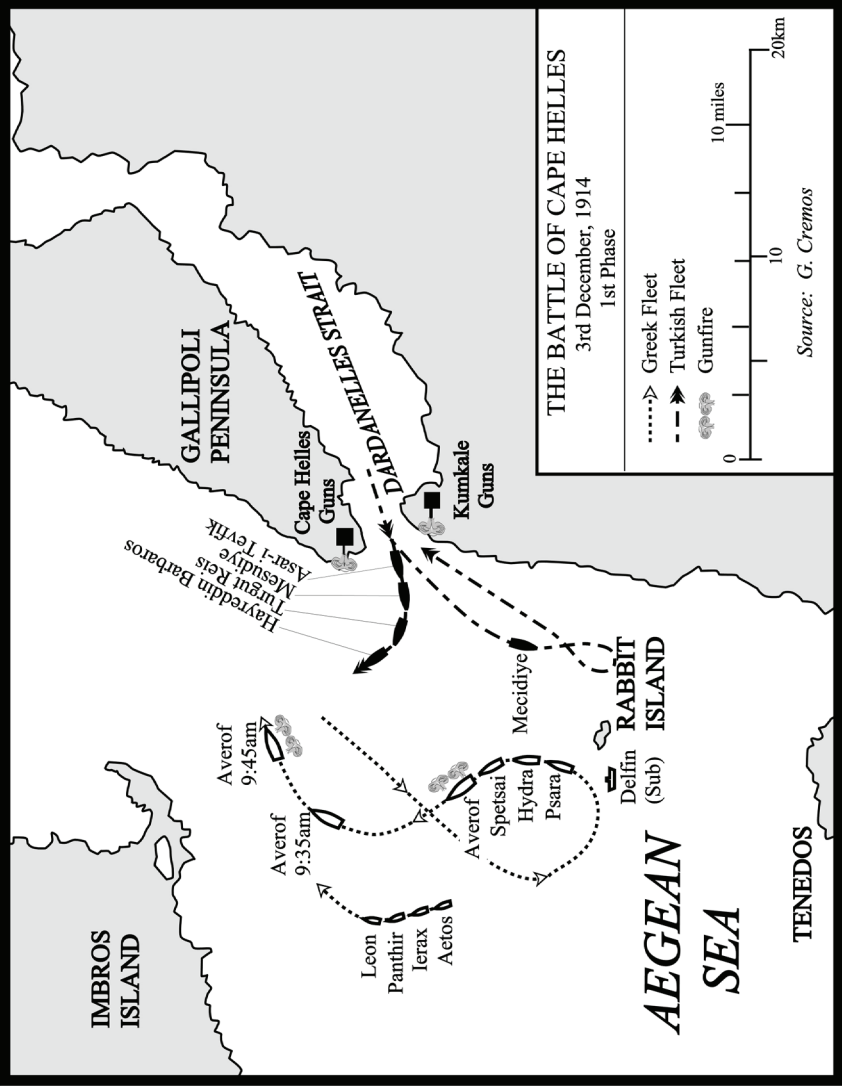
Hellenic Maritime Museum: Nos. 1–5, 7–17, 52–3.

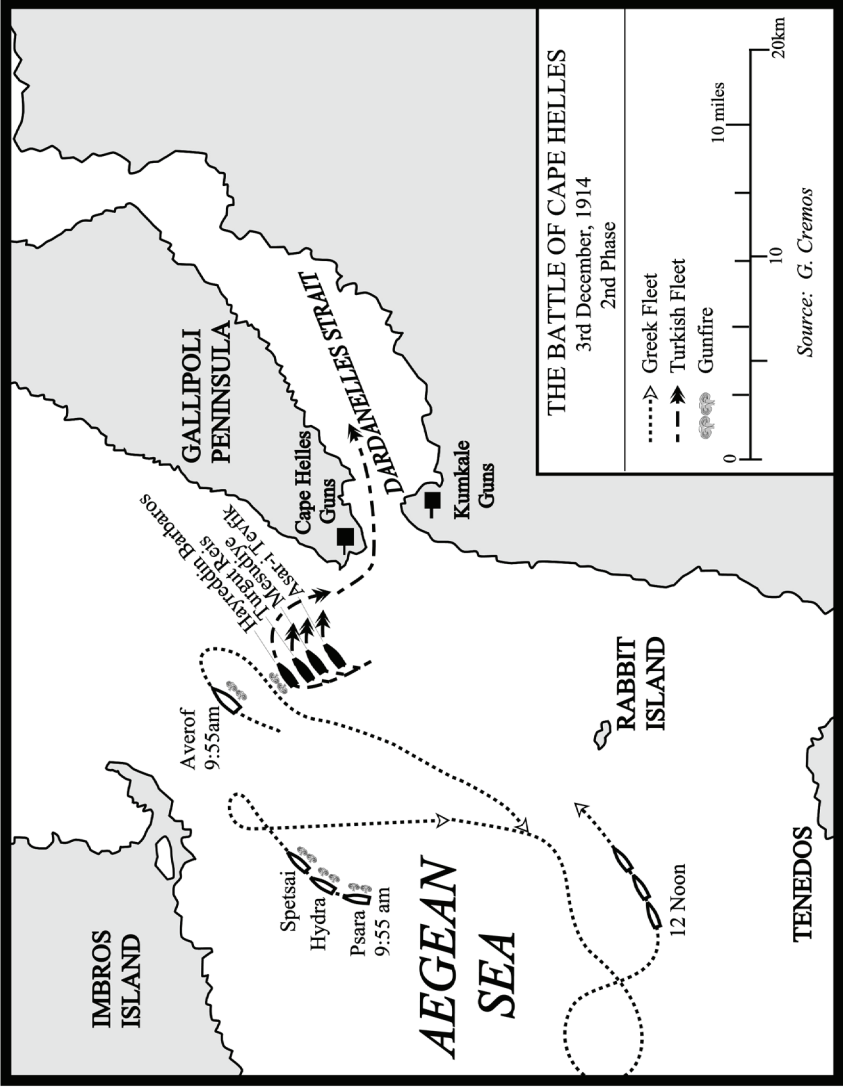
Nike Morgan: Nos. 6, 18, 20–1, 44, 50.

Author: Nos. 15, 19, 22–49, 51, 55.

List of Maps


1. Battle of Cape Helles, 3 December 1912, first phase
2. Battle of Cape Helles, second phase
3. Battle of Limnos, 5 January 1913
4. The *Averof's* route, Piraeus-Alexandria and vice versa, April 1941 and October 1944
5. The *Averof* in the Middle East and India, June 1941 to November 1942

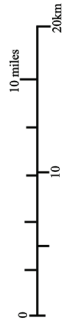




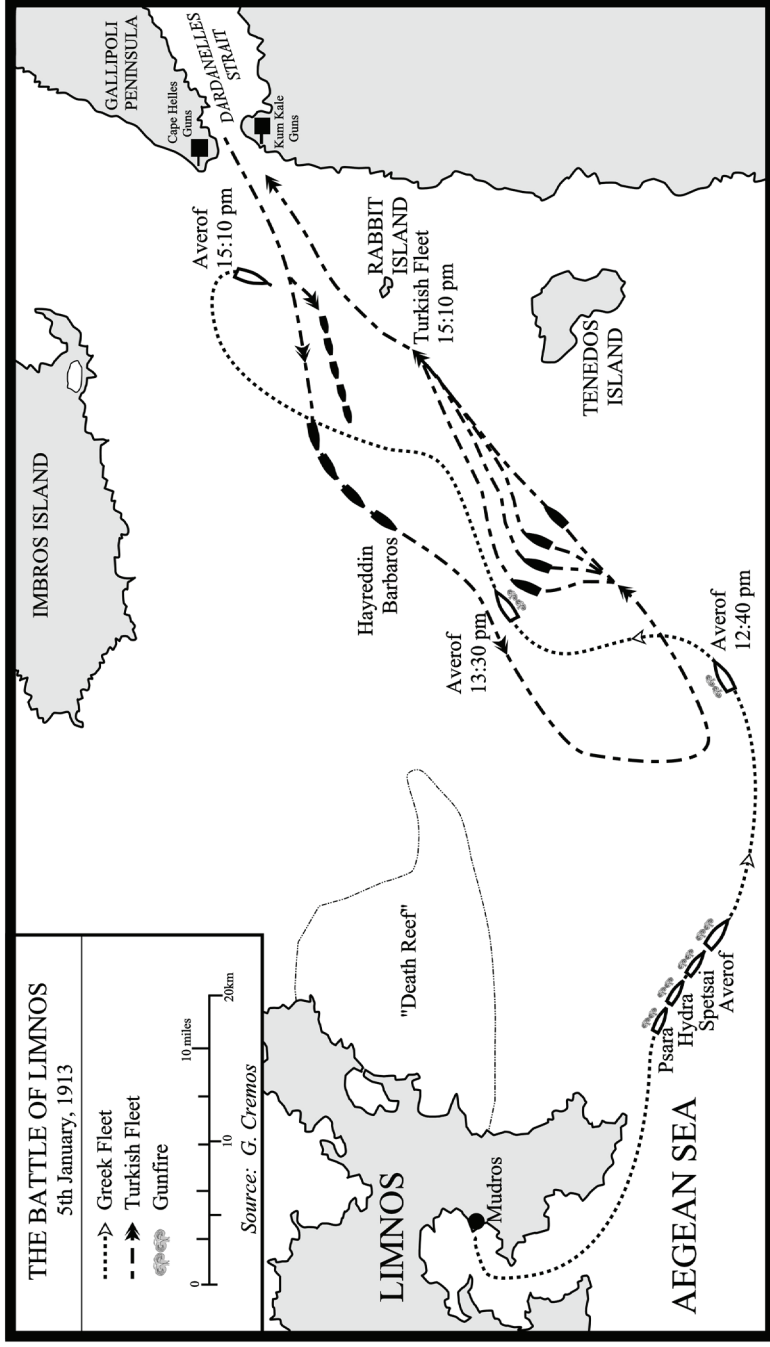
THE BATTLE OF LIMNOS

5th January, 1913

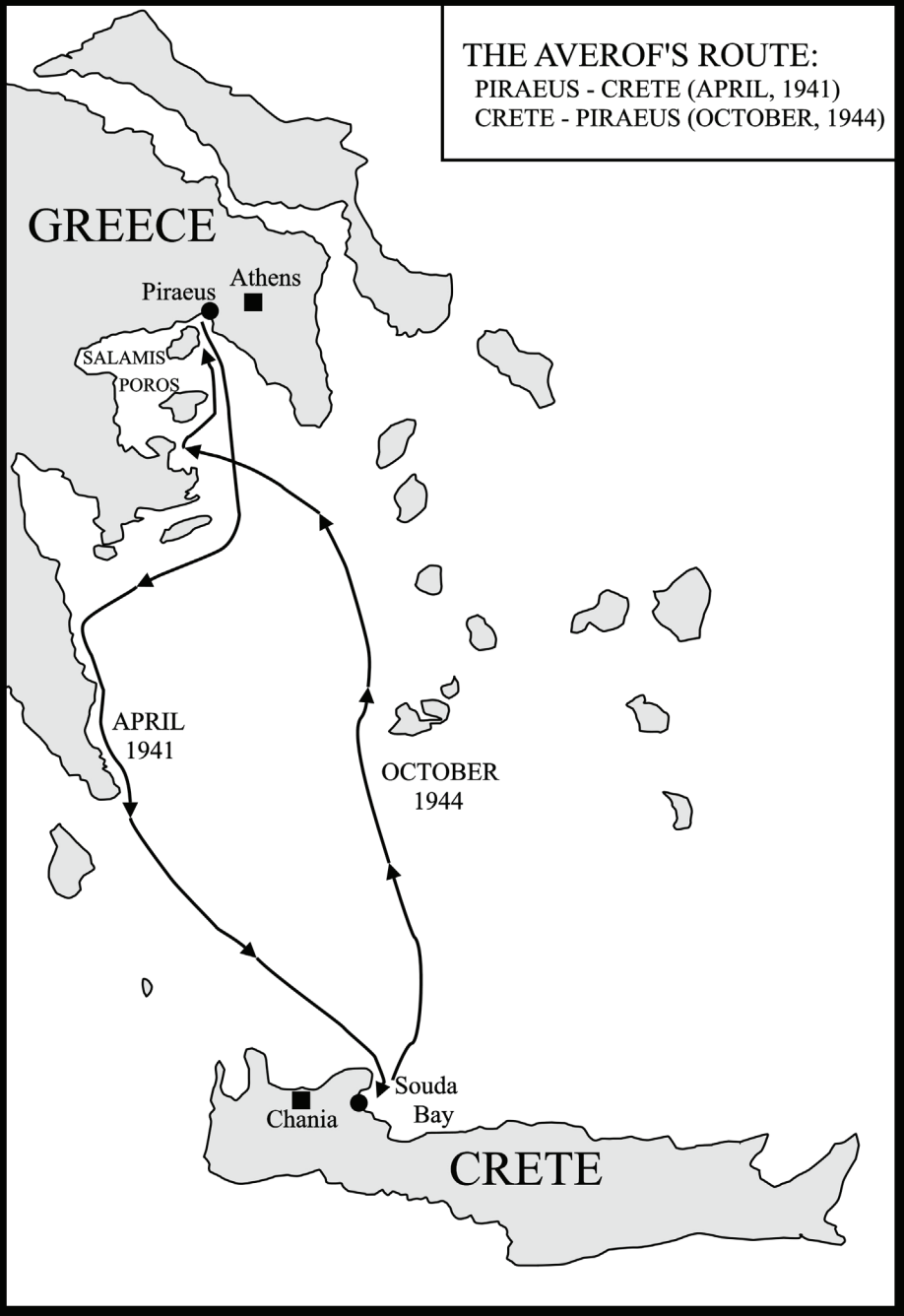
-> Greek Fleet
- - -> Turkish Fleet
-  Gunfire



Source: G. Cremos



THE AVEROF'S ROUTE:
PIRAEUS - CRETE (APRIL, 1941)
CRETE - PIRAEUS (OCTOBER, 1944)



THE AVEROF IN THE MIDDLE

EAST AND INDIA

June 1941 - November 1942

Outbound: June 1941

Inbound: November 1942

←-·-·-·-→ Convoy Duty

