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# **THE GREEK CAMPAIGN**

**‘Freyberg’s circus enters a Balkan imbroglio.’**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

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## Abstract

In April 1941, the New Zealand Division of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force fought its first campaign in Greece. Notwithstanding the campaign's short duration it had significant effect on the New Zealand Division. The Division suffered over 2,500 casualties and it lost all of its heavy equipment. The Greek Campaign also exposed the duplicity of the British Government and High Command who sent the Division to Greece without fully informing the New Zealand Government of the risks that course would entail. As a Dominion within the Commonwealth, pursuing an independent foreign policy, the New Zealand Government wished to have its Expeditionary Force integrated with the British but also expected to be fully informed about the use of its military formations. The conduct of the Balkan campaign so excited the New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser that he sought independent advice about General Freyberg's competency and also sought an explanation on the conduct of the battle from the United Kingdom's Chief of Staff.

Why did the New Zealand Government send its Army so far away from New Zealand when there was a potential threat in the Pacific from Japan? How well prepared were these citizen soldiers in training and equipment for the battles in Greece? To elucidate the above the purpose of this thesis is to answer the following five questions examining New Zealand's involvement in the Greek Campaign of 1941:

1. What was the political and strategic rationale of sending the 2nd New Zealand Division to Greece?
2. How well did the training and composition of the New Zealand Division prepare them for war in Greece?
3. How suitable for command were the major protagonists in the 2nd New Zealand Division?

4. How well did the New Zealand Army's equipment compared with that of the German Army-(*das Heer*)?
5. How did the morale of the New Zealand citizen soldiers stand up after their first campaign?

The method of research to answer these questions were:

1. Interviewing, or sending questionnaires to survivors of the campaign;
2. Interviewing experts who have an academic interest in the campaign;
3. Examining original material in the National Archives, the Turnbull Library and the Kippenberger Memorial Library at Waiouru Army Museum;
4. Obtaining relevant written material in book reviews and articles from libraries and private individuals.

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## INTRODUCTION

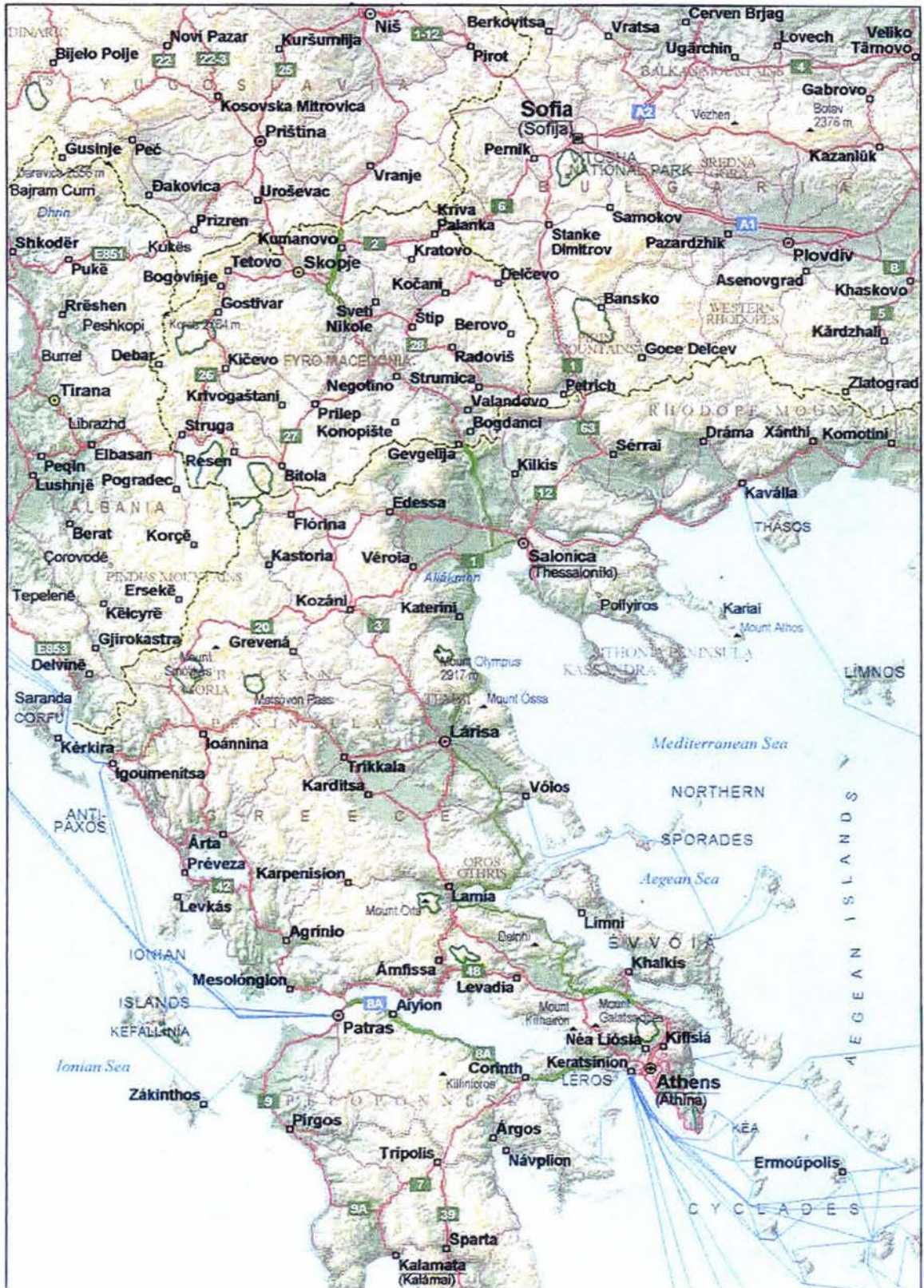
Two disparate views on the Greek Campaign:

When Hitler's armies were fighting desperately to hold several crumbling fronts, he still had to have a dozen German divisions scattered throughout Yugoslavia. This fact afterwards led General Wilson to point out the similarity of the Corunna campaign of 1808 to the Greek Campaign of 1941: 'The effect of the appearance of a small British force on the Dictator causing him to commit larger forces than the situation demanded.'  
*W. G. McClymont.*

Eden stated in the House of Commons: "Our action had delayed Germany's attack on Russia for several weeks."...I suggest such a method of justification is similar to a punter who having bought by mistake the wrong ticket at the tote, finds the horse wins, and then goes about saying "What a clever boy am I!"

*Francis de Guingand*

## Northern Greece and adjoining states.



From when the first 'flight arrived in Piraeus on 7 March 1941 until 28 April 1941 when most of the survivors were evacuated from the beaches of Southern Greece, the New Zealand division was in Greece for seven and a half weeks. Of course, as with all the British campaigns that had taken place upon the continent of Europe up to that date, there were some that did not leave. Two hundred and ninety one New Zealanders were killed and 1,614 were captured along with all of the Division's heavy equipment. In 1941, the third year of the war, the British Government, and the British Army high command had still not displayed the degree of military competence that was essential for victory. It was fortunate that the professionalism and courage of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force deterred the Germans from invading the British Isles. The British army officer cadre of the 1920's and 1930's was one that was more concerned with campaigning in, and administering Britain's Imperial and Mandated territories. In 1939 the British Army, although well disciplined and having an excellent cadre of non-commissioned officers and men did not have the officers in the High Command that could deal with the modern mechanised warfare that the German Army (*das Heer*) imposed upon Europe. Nor did not having the doctrine or the training and skills in inter-unit communication that was essential for a war of manoeuvre

The three weeks of this campaign is not a period that is looked back with any pride or nostalgia by any of the survivors, and yet it is not a campaign that drew shame upon any of the Commonwealth<sup>1</sup> participants. In many ways it was, after France, the most important campaign for the Commonwealth nations in the first three years of the Second World War. Had the British not gone to Greece, General Richard O'Connor could have swept the Italians from Tripolitania. The British would not have had to make up the equipment that they lost in the Balkans. The Australians could have properly reinforced Johore with two extra divisions and even if the allies did not have the proper air cover it is debatable whether with these numbers of trained troops, the Japanese would have contemplated an invasion of the Kra peninsula.

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth, although very rarely used at this time is applied in preference to the now anachronistic term, Imperial.



The Balkan campaign exposed the paucity of strategic and command skills of Winston Churchill and his senior British commanders. It also exposed the sycophantic behaviour of Britain's senior generals who seem to have preferred staying in their exalted positions whilst sacrificing almost fifteen thousand men and the equipment of two and half divisions in the Balkans.

Any army, and the New Zealand's Division was New Zealand's army, is a microcosm of society and the New Zealand Division was almost exactly one percent of New Zealand's population. A volunteer army that is raised quickly will inevitably bring into it, the morés and culture of the society from which it is formed. The vast majority of the expeditionary force's manpower was predominantly civilian in peacetime.

The Greek campaign can be divided in to three components:

- One, the arrival in Greece and disposition of the New Zealand Division between the Aliakmon line and the Olympus line;
- two, the battles at the Mount Olympus passes;
- three, the defence of the Thermopylae line and the evacuation.

Chapter one will examine:

- the political, strategic and military situation in New Zealand in 1939;
- the inauguration and development of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Its composition, for no country, and especially a country with a population the size of New Zealand's in 1939 can assemble such a force and bring it to battle with any rapidity, unless it wishes that force to be destroyed;
- the decision to send 2nd NZEF to the Middle East and a description of the German army.

Chapter two examines the external political strategic and military decisions in Britain, Germany, the Mediterranean, Greece and Italy that brought New Zealand's 2nd Division to the Balkans.

Chapter three examines:

- the New Zealand Division's deployment;
- its first contact with the enemy;
- the German advance through the Monastir Gap which necessitated the retreat of the Commonwealth force.

Chapter four deals with the battles on the Olympus passes.

Chapter six covers the retreat to, and the stand on the Thermopylae line.

These three chapters cover the majority of the military phase of the Campaign and had it ended there the New Zealand Division would in the words of Professor Walter Murphy "Not have put a foot wrong."<sup>2</sup> The three other chapters cover those aspects of the Greek Campaign that reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of the New Zealand Division.

Chapter five examines the two battles that 21 Battalion fought at Platamon and in the Pinios Gorge. These battles reflect the importance of the senior leadership on the conduct of a military unit such as a battalion.

Chapter seven covers the battle at the Corinth Canal and how the 'ad-hoc' organisation almost brought disaster to the evacuation.

Chapter eight covers the battle at Kalamata. In this battle some brave New Zealand, Australian and British soldiers, marooned by the incompetence of the British Movement Control, defeated a substantial German incursion into the port of Kalamata.

Through these chapters this thesis will examine New Zealand's involvement in the Greek Campaign of 1941. The thesis aims to answer five key questions. They are:

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<sup>2</sup> W.E. Murphy to Author, comment August 2004.

1. What was the political and strategic rationale of sending the 2nd New Zealand Division to Greece?
2. How well did the training and composition of the New Zealand Division prepare them for war in Greece?
3. How suitable for command were the major protagonists in the 2nd New Zealand Division?
4. How well did the New Zealand Army's equipment compared with that of the German Army- (*das Heer*)?
5. How did the morale of the New Zealand citizen soldiers stand up after their first campaign?

Amongst the national myths and aggrandisement, the behaviour of the men in the New Zealand Division in the Greek Campaign demonstrated to the World that the New Zealand citizen soldier had unique qualities conferred by this country that distinguished him from soldiers of other nations. It is hoped that this thesis will bring some of them to the fore.

# CHAPTER ONE

## An élite division.

No great dependence is to be placed on the eagerness of young soldiers for action, for fighting has something agreeable in the idea to those who are strangers to it.

*Flavius Vegetius.*

*Book III: De Militari.*



Basel-Landsmuseen, 'Palazzo' di Modigliani

Nazi Germany invaded Poland on Friday 1 September 1939. This act of war was to have its consequences a world away, for at 9.30 p.m. (New Zealand time) on 3 September it was announced in the *New Zealand Gazette Extraordinary* that New Zealand was at war with Nazi Germany. This was no random moment for it was timed to be in conjunction with Great Britain's declaration of War. As the New Zealand Government did not have a representative in Berlin the American Ambassador was requested to deliver the ultimatum to von Ribbentrop. History does not disclose Ribbentrop's reaction.

It was fortunate that New Zealand was twelve thousand miles away from Europe, for the contradictory policies of the 'inter-bellum' administrations and economic constraints had conspired to ensure that the New Zealand Armed Forces had been allowed to run down. The New Zealand division of the Royal Navy was in 1939, the only force that had an adequate defence capability with two cruisers: *Achilles* and *Leander*, and two sloops assigned to New Zealand waters. As for New Zealand's Air Force, it comprised of a few modern Wellington bombers that were still in Britain; the rest of New Zealand's aeroplanes were obsolete.

At the outbreak of World War II New Zealand was just emerging from a debilitating economic depression that had lasted almost two decades. New Zealand's economic well being depended upon its Imperial links and notwithstanding emotional ties, there were excellent strategic and economic reasons for New Zealand throwing her lot in with the United Kingdom. New Zealand is a maritime nation with a very long coastline, a small population and the nearest neighbour; Australia is two thousand kilometres away. Joint action by fellow members of the Commonwealth ensured some protection. The Suez Canal was predominantly British owned and controlled. The numerous British bases in Egypt, ostensibly a neutral country, defended the canal, a major trade route of the Empire. It was logical to base the New Zealand division here, either as a protection against the Italians in Libya, or in the United Kingdom as a base for an attack on or defence from Germany.

After the end of World War I attitudes to military training had changed. In 1914 New Zealand men were so enthusiastic to join the struggle that ten percent of the population had flocked to the colours and when one considers that this proportion of the population was predominantly male and between the ages of eighteen and forty the percentage is even higher. In Christopher Pugsley's opinion:

Service to King, Empire and country was a tenet of New Zealand society. It was a virtue extolled in most outward expressions of New Zealand society...Young boys trained as school cadets from the age of eight years and remained involved in some form of military activity until the age of 25 years.<sup>3</sup>

Regrettably New Zealand casualties, in proportion to population, were comparable with those of Russia. Over half of the service men that served overseas became casualties. Over seventeen thousand men were killed, one sixty-fifth of the population. Another eight and a half thousand New Zealanders died in 1918 through the influenza pandemic. After the recessions of the 'twenties', and the Great Depression, which started in 1929, the nation was tired and demoralised. Initially there was the hope that no world war would ever be fought again. Then economic naivete and political mismanagement ensured that most of the population was concerned just with survival. In 1930 the United Party suspended the compulsory clauses of the 1909 Defence Act and service in the reserves became voluntary.

When it came to power in 1935 the first Labour administration had an ambivalent attitude to defence. Several of their senior parliamentarians such as Peter Fraser were anti-war and anti-conscription or pacifists during World War I.

Harry Holland, Peter Fraser and others had been jailed for sedition in 1917, for their opposition to the war, and Walter Nash and Rev Clyde Carr were Christian pacifists.<sup>4</sup>

Others in the cabinet, such as William Jordan, William Barnard and John A Lee had

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<sup>3</sup> Pugsley, C.(1998). *Gallipoli – The New Zealand Story*. Reed:Auckland, p.30.

<sup>4</sup> McIntyre, W.D. (1988) *New Zealand Prepares for War*. Caxton Press. Christchurch, p. 141.

served in the 1st New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF). What they all had in common was a belief that the New Zealand defence policy needed to be examined. They also believed that New Zealand's survival was strongly tied to the League of Nations. William Jordan in particular, had a distinguished service in the League Assembly, taking a robustly independent line from that of Britain by opposing British policy on Ethiopia, Spain, China and reform of the League Covenant.

Throughout the World, the late 1930's were times of growing uncertainty and in New Zealand there was an increasing disenchantment with the ineffectiveness of the collective security promised by the League of Nations. Four Territorial Force Colonels who had the temerity to criticise the Labour Government's lack of action over the parlous state of New Zealand defence capacity were summarily dismissed, although three were later reinstated when war broke out.<sup>5</sup> The lack of compulsion and the lack of emphasis on service in the Territorial Army had a serious consequence that only a few of the field officers in 1939 were below the age of forty-five. This was going to have a significant affect upon the Division's performance in the Balkans.

Notwithstanding their World War I pacifism there was no gainsaying the patriotism or the feelings of kinship of New Zealand's Government with Britain in 1939. It was quickly agreed with Britain that New Zealand would raise a division to serve overseas. The problem was what to do with it? Any action by New Zealand was governed by the attitude of Japan. In 1939, Japan was seen as the major threat in the Pacific to the British and Commonwealth possessions. New Zealand had not been in favour of Britain dropping the 1902 naval treaty with Japan after World War I. But once the British had decided upon this course, New Zealand then became a strong supporter of the construction of a naval base in Singapore. In the 1930's New Zealand had watched with alarm as Japan became more right wing and bellicose.

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<sup>5</sup>The four criticised the reorganisation of the New Zealand Army by the Chief of the General Staff. Believing that they had no other alternative they published a public manifesto. Notwithstanding its inept handling of the matter the Government had no alternative but to dismiss them.

In November 1939 the new Prime Minister, Peter Fraser after consultation at the Commonwealth conference, it was decided to dispatch a New Zealand division of ten motorised infantry battalions to Egypt. As Britain controlled the Suez Canal the Middle East loomed large in Britains strategic considerations. The canal was a conduit for the oil from the British owned Persian (Iran), Kurdistan and Burmese oilfields and for exports and imports from the Empire.

New Zealand did not have the facilities to equip and train a whole division so it made excellent sense to transfer it to an area where this could take place. Because of the consistency of the weather, Egypt was an excellent choice as a place for training. Therefore it was decided that the first echelon of the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force of which the New Zealand Division was the major component, would leave for Egypt in January 1940. The Government appointed Major General Bernard Freyberg to be the commander of this expeditionary force. In 1939 Freyberg had offered his services to the Dominion and expressed the hope that he might serve with his compatriots. With his bluff exterior and high voiced 'pommy' accent Freyberg could have been the epitome of the 'blimpish' generals that the British were particularly good at producing. Instead, within this exterior was a sensitive, considerate and intelligent man for whom his soldiers' welfare was always paramount. Freyberg, although not born in New Zealand, had spent his boyhood and youth in this country. Major General Freyberg was once a New Zealand dentist with a territorial commission. He had travelled across the world and gained a commission into the British Naval Division by buttonholing Winston Churchill on Horse-Guards Parade. This piece of legerdemain endeared him to Churchill, and despite vicissitudes they remain friends for the rest of Freyberg's life. There was a legend that he had fought in Pancho Villa's Army in Mexico - one he did nothing to dispel. He referred to himself as a New Zealander, and identified strongly with his Division. Physically brave he appeared not to know that insidious fear that grips ordinary mortals in battle. He had swum ashore at Gallipoli to light flares to distract the Turks from the real area of the Anzac landing. Later on in the war, leading a charge on a horse, he seized the Dendres bridges at Lessines a few minutes before the start of the armistice. This was



no mean achievement for a man who had amused striking 'wharfies' with the uncertainty of his seat in 1912 when he rode as one of Massey's 'cossacks' in Wellington. Freyberg came out of World War I with the Victoria Cross, a bar to the Distinguished Service Order and nine wound stripes<sup>6</sup>. After World War I, Freyberg had joined the Grenadier Guards, and then been appointed the Lieutenant Colonel of the 1st Manchester battalion and whilst a Colonel he wrote on a succinct book '*A Study of Unit Administration*' about the correct method of victualing of soldiers. Freyberg finally rose to the rank of Major General in the British Army before being discharged due to a heart murmur in 1937. Upon the outbreak of War he was re-activated and because of his outstanding record and connection with New Zealand he was quickly seized upon by the New Zealand Government to command the New Zealand Division<sup>7</sup>. Freyberg has had many critics of his military conduct, but history has shown that as a divisional general he was the equal of, if not better than most of his contemporaries, and in his concern for his men he was second to none. Always a realist about the efficiency of the German Army (*das Heer*), he somewhat startled his officers and other ranks with his assessment of the German Army. To meet the threat of this army he was determined to create an elite division, a division that would eventually serve in more campaigns in the western theatre of operations than any other. As soon as he took command, Freyberg showed his unconventional attitudes and his legendary concern for his soldiers. Units such as Dental and Field Ambulance were entirely staffed by non-regulars. Freyberg made no attempt to change this as he believed that a non-military view on certain aspects of soldiering was beneficial and this was certainly true for the New Zealand Division's Medical Services. In February 1941 Freyberg was also instrumental in establishing the New Zealand Services Club. Although rousing the ire of 'wowsers' in New Zealand when reports of drunkenness by soldiers filtered back home, he resisted its closure until the Division was well into Italy.

The New Zealand Army of 1939 had only one hundred officers and four hundred and seventy eight other ranks in Regular Force. From its apogee in 1914, when from a

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<sup>6</sup>The British Army would issue a chevron for each major combat wound that a soldier received.

<sup>7</sup> At the time Freyberg was GOC Salisbury Plains, but he had let Fraser know that he wished to serve with his fellow countrymen (His words). However, in 1940, there is some doubt about how much Freyberg actually regarded himself as a New Zealander.

population of just over a million, New Zealand was able to provide 17,500 reservists to serve overseas, the New Zealand Territorial Force had been allowed to run down during the 1930's. In March 1939 there were just over 10,000 men in the two Reserve schemes. By October 1939, under the impetus of War there were just under 15,000 reservists who were to comprise the First echelon.

What was the composition of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) that was to be sent overseas? The majority of this force had volunteered for the duration. The senior officers of the New Zealand Division were predominantly lawyers and schoolmasters with a leaven of regulars. The brigadiers came from various backgrounds: 4th Brigade was commanded by Brigadier Edward Puttick. Puttick was a somewhat younger man than Freyberg and had been a Colonel in New Zealand's regular force at the outbreak of war. A rather colourless individual, there appears to have been some resentment at Freyberg getting the command of the 2nd NZEF. He was an enigma to Howard Kippenberger, in that he appeared to have no interest in training or of doctrine:

He seldom looked at training, almost never directed it, but he had a knack of knowing what was going on, and all his written work was informed and instructive.<sup>3</sup>

He commanded the 4th Brigade in Greece and was in charge of the New Zealand Division in Crete, he later became the New Zealand Chief of General Staff.

Brigadier James Hargest, commander of 5th Brigade was a farmer and National Party Member of Parliament. Kippenberger's opinion was that he was easy going, good-natured and rather self-indulgent. Due to his age and the lasting affects of shell shock (Hargest was fifty) Freyberg was not keen on his appointment, but because he was a Member of Parliament, he was foistered on Freyberg by the Government, notwithstanding that he had been turned down by a medical board. He had served with distinction in World War I with the Otago Regiment, and later was the Commanding

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<sup>3</sup>Kippenberger, H. to McClymont, M. Letter 6 March 1953. WA II 3/16. National Archives.

Officer of the 2nd Otago Battalion. Kippenberger felt that he never really had a grip on the 5th Brigade. Accustomed to the static trench warfare in World War I he was somewhat fixed in his attitude to war and his hesitation in Crete contributed to the aerodrome at Maleme falling into German hands. It is Kippenberger's opinion that no other Brigade would have lost Maleme aerodrome<sup>9</sup>.

Brigadier Harold Barraclough led the 6th Brigade to Greece. A lawyer by profession, he had served with distinction in World War I, rising to the command of 4 Battalion, New Zealand Rifle Brigade in World War I and gaining the Distinguished Service Order for being instrumental in driving back a German attack in Havrincourt. On November of 1918 he led his battalion over the castle walls of Le Quesnoy. A forceful, aggressive man, he lobbied constantly against the decline of New Zealand's preparedness for war.<sup>10</sup> In August 1939, with the imminence of war apparent, he again volunteered his services and was accepted.

Other senior officers who were to distinguish themselves in Greece were Lieutenant Colonels: William Inglis and Howard Kippenberger. William Inglis, 'Whisky Bill' was commissioned in the New Zealand Rifle Brigade in the First World War where he won the Military Cross. During the locust years of inter-war period he was a Reserve Lieutenant Colonel. Before he was able to go overseas he had to have an operation to make him fit for service.<sup>11</sup> He was perhaps too fixed in his ways for the rapid type of warfare in World War II. A telling anecdote is when the Division was under his command after Freyberg was wounded at Minqar Qaim he was found by Kippenberger having breakfast while the 4th Brigade was being destroyed at Ruweisat ridge. He also had a habit of disappearing for days at a time to Cairo where no one could find him.<sup>12</sup> Another lawyer, Howard Kippenberger was an austere man in the 'cromwellian' mould. A private soldier in World War I, he had continued in the Territorial Force, enduring the neglect of the inter-war years to become a Lieutenant Colonel in the

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<sup>9</sup> Kippenberger's comments on the senior officers can be found in WA II 3/16 vol 2. Draft of W.G. McClymonts To Greece.N.A.

<sup>10</sup> Barraclough was responsible for the reinvigoration of the Defence League – a defence lobby group.

<sup>11</sup> It was difficult to ascertain what type of operation this was.

<sup>12</sup> It was I.McL. Wards the historian and archivist, opinion that he had a mistress in Cairo. This caused Kippenberger's revised opinion of him.

Reserves. To prepare himself for another war, he assiduously read military history. His outward severity was softened by his concern for his infantrymen and a refusal to take himself too seriously.

The Commander of the Royal Artillery (CRA) was Brigadier Reginald Miles. A regular soldier, he was physically brave, energetic and a forceful leader, he was responsible for the professionalism of the artillery, which gave the Division its powerful 'punch' throughout the war. Until he was captured at Sidi Rezegh, Freyberg considered him his natural successor.<sup>11</sup> The Commander of the New Zealand Army Service Corps (Logistics and Supply) was Brigadier Stanley Crump, a highly capable man and as with other senior officers he was a veteran of the 1st New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Major Clifton commanded the Engineers and Lieutenant Colonel S.F. Allen the Signallers. S.F. Allen was later to be killed in the battle for Ruweisat ridge. Head of the Army Medical Corps was Lieutenant Colonel K. McCormick who was an Auckland surgeon, but was familiar to war, having served in World War I. Under McCormick's aegis the Division developed a mobile hospital unit which always operated close to the front line.

Because of the rapidity of the increase in size of the Army, the majority of the field and company officers were not from the Regular Force. Most of them had commissions from the Territorial Force, but some of the younger officers were commissioned on the strength of having experience in the School Cadet Force. Cadet Force was a phenomenon of some New Zealand high schools and boarding schools that endured from just before World War I until the late 1960's. The writer Peter Winter has a stronger opinion:

Our junior officers, who had progressed from [boy] scouts to territorial in this naive army, were arrogant in their newfound authority. With the stock phrase: 'You aren't paid to think soldier.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Miles escaped from Prisoner of War camp in 1943, only to commit suicide in Spain. Professor W. Murphy believes that Miles was of the opinion that Freyberg had lost confidence in him after a fierce argument prior to the battle of Sidi Rezegh. Miles may have also thought he compromised a French family when he crossed Vichy France in 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Winter, P.(1989). *Expendable The Crete campaign – a front line view*. Moa Press Ltd, Tauranga, p.7.

This attitude quickly lost credence in Greece and Crete, where a more professional attitude was forced on young men who were expected to lead men from an egalitarian society. One of the reasons that New Zealanders fought so well, is because they came from a small, relatively poor, colonial country where there was a good chance of being known in the community. 'Mateship' was not so heavily emphasised in New Zealand as it was in Australia but it was considered bad form to let your mates down. The New Zealand Army never really came to terms with egalitarian leadership. Junior officers were tolerated if they were liked and ignored if they were not up to the job.<sup>15</sup>

What sort of men were they, these New Zealanders who were to confront the German attack? Their non-commissioned officers were predominantly from the Territorial Force who had impressed their officers with their tough demeanour, and most of the men who enlisted were physically and mentally tough. The men who were to fill its ranks were products of the 'thirties'. Many were prematurely aged, hardened physically and mentally by the Depression, and cynical about authority. Keith Sinclair wrote:

It is as hard now to recall New Zealand in 1932... the ragged army of men 'on the dole',...architects teachers carpenters, chipping weeds on the footpaths; malnutrition in the schools – and children stealing lunches, ex-servicemen begging outside a pub; the queue at the 'soup kitchen'.<sup>16</sup>

For many, the army was an opportunity for a decent set of clothes, boots, and the opportunity for medical and dental treatment. For the younger men it was an opportunity for adventure which is a greater recruiting sergeant than any call to patriotism. For the Maori members of Parliament such as Sir Apirana Ngata it was the opportunity for the Maori to contribute to the world struggle in order to be recognised as equals to the European settlers.

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<sup>15</sup> Several interviewees commented on this. Agreement with the officer circumvented disobedience and then doing what the men thought was the sensible action.

<sup>16</sup>Keith Sinclair.(1988). *A History of New Zealand*. Penguin: Auckland, p.258.

For countrymen of such a new country, they had a formidable reputation. In World War I they were: "...in the judgement of many soldiers ...the best division in France."<sup>16</sup> The majority were city or town dwellers. Two thirds of them were unmarried; two thirds were Anglican in denomination, the other third comprised of Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist and around one percent were Jewish. In World Wars I and II, New Zealanders were commonly described as being tall men, so it will come as a surprise to learn that the average height was 5 foot 8 eight inches (1.72 metres).<sup>17</sup> Most were relatively young - the largest age group being twenty-one. (This is perhaps somewhat inaccurate as a lot of the younger men put up their ages to the requisite twenty one years to make them eligible to leave New Zealand.) However there was a leavening of experience with a substantial number of volunteers in their mid-twenties. Upon enlistment the largest numbers of recruits were labourers, then drivers and mechanics and a substantial number were salesmen. Some units had a disproportionate representation. Divisional Cavalry had a large number of farmers and farm labourers. A large number of the volunteers had previous military experience. In some units, for example the Divisional Artillery, over half had served in the territorial force.<sup>18</sup> For instance two of the veterans interviewed for this thesis: D.G. Morrison and Harry Spencer, prior to the war had spent thirteen and seven years in the Territorial Force respectively. For Harry Spencer 'Camp Life' was especially halcyon, ammunition was acquired to go along with the issued Enfield 303 rifle and this put to good use hunting pigs in the hills surrounding Blenheim and Marlborough. Some had undertaken cadet training at school and some had served in the various Commonwealth armed forces, including the Royal Navy. One at least had served in the White Russian Army.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> J Vader (1974) *Purnell's History of Second World War The Anzac Soldier*. Purnell: London (Attributed to Conan Doyle), p.3065.

<sup>17</sup>The New Zealanders were probably tall in comparison with the English 'Tommy' and the French 'Poilu'. General Haig described them as 'a sturdy, thickset type of man.' Pugsley, C. (2003). *The Anzac Experience New Zealand, Australia and Empire in the First World War*, p.123.

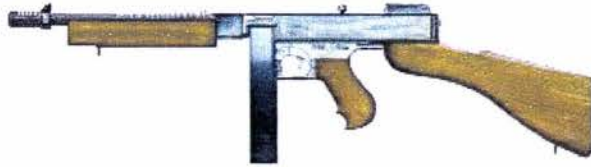
<sup>18</sup> Statistics obtained from: <sup>20</sup> Murphy, W.E. (1966) *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, 2nd Divisional Artillery*. War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, W.E. (1966) *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, 2nd Divisional Artillery*. War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, p.13.

The New Zealanders who interviewed for this thesis, or left their recollections on an oral history: Peter Winter was working as a newspaper journalist, Max Ritter as a plumber, Karl Yortt and Stocker Boyd were bank officers. Dan Davin, a Rhode Scholar, was studying (or as the English would say reading) the 'Greats' at Oxford. Harry Spencer was a diesel 'shunter' driver with New Zealand railways, D.G. Morrison was a farmer, Harry Palmer worked at a dairy factory near Palmerston North, Jack Turvey worked at a Woollen Mills in Oamaru; Walter E. Murphy was a business analyst in London and A.H. Armour a lawyer. These men and many others came from many diverse occupations to form one of the largest bodies of men to leave the shores of this country.

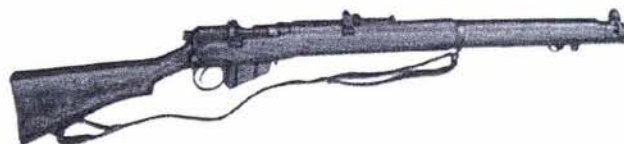
The New Zealand Division was to be clothed by New Zealand and the soldiers of the First echelon left New Zealand wearing the old style World War I tunic. In 1940 they would change into the 'battle-dress' recently adopted by the British who had discarded the four pocket, single breasted jacket that they had had since World War I (the Australians continued with this fashion). The New Zealand Division was until 1943 an infantry division. An infantry division had two arms for offensive action, its artillery and its infantry. The small arms were to be acquired from Australia and Britain. The famous short magazine Lee Enfield rifle (SMLE) and Vickers Medium machine gun were obtained from Australia and the Bren-gun from Britain. The Mark III SMLE Enfield rifle originated in 1907. It had done stalwart service in World War I and it had been responsible for the '*Kindertodt*' at Ypres in 1914 when German reservists walked into a hail of accurate rapid fire from the 'Old Contemptibles'.<sup>22</sup> It may have been a World War I weapon, but it was still very effective. A skilled marksman would be capable of accurate aimed fire at ranges of one and a half kilometres with the rear sights calibrated in 200-yard intervals from 200 to 2000 yards (183 – 1830 metres). Its box magazine was capable of holding ten 303 rimmed rounds. The SMLE also had a 'cut-out' that allowed an extra round to be loaded without using any of the rounds in the magazine. It is considered to have been one of the best military bolt-action rifles ever devised. Equally distinguishable was the sword bayonet. The blade was over twelve

inches long, and was a distinguishing feature of the New Zealand infantryman. The New Zealanders who retained



**Thompson (Tommy) sub-machine gun Mk 1928.**

the SMLE continued to use the 'sword bayonet' when the British moved away to the Number IV Lee-Enfield and went to the 'pig-sticker' spiked bayonet. Although the bayonet was used infrequently for the purpose that it was designed, the 'sword bayonet' was an excellent can opener, and very popular with the soldiers. The infantryman also carried the 'Mills' bomb. Although it could not be thrown as far as the



**Lee-Enfield SMLE 303 Rifle.**

German 'potato masher' with its round crenellated shape it was far more deadly. The section light machine gun, was the beloved and redoubtable Bren gun. An Enfield adaptation of the original weapon from Brno, Czecho-Slovakia it was an extremely effective weapon when used properly. Although not having the rate of fire of the *maschinengewehr 34* or *42* (popularly and incorrectly known as the Spandau) it was a reliable and efficient weapon. Firing a rimmed 303 round, it was a two man weapon, although some New Zealand soldiers used them 'tommy-gun' style in close encounters, which is quite remarkable as the gun was over twice the weight of the SMLE. Its cyclic rate of fire was 550 rounds per minute, although the well-trained soldier would fire in short five round bursts to prevent jamming and bouncing on its bipod.

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<sup>22</sup> A term attributed to the kaiser Wilhelm II, who is supposed to have referred to the British Army in 1914 as 'that contemptible little army'. For the 'kindertodt' see Macdonald, L. (1989). *1914*. Penguin Books: London, p.365.



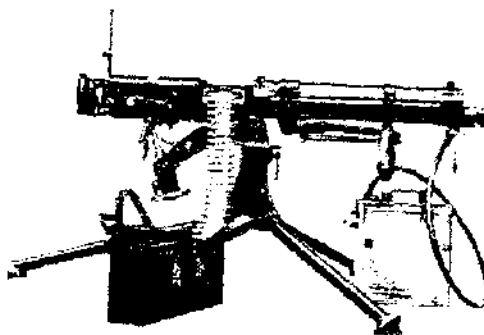
## Bren Gun.



Just prior to going to Greece, some soldiers in the infantry platoon, - and they would have considered themselves lucky, were issued with the Thompson sub-machine gun. The 'tommy-gun' had a cachet from the Hollywood 'gangster' movies of the 1930's. The M1928 'trench sweeper' was a heavy weapon, firing a low velocity large calibre 0.45-inch round. The original 50 round drum was not particularly effective for military use, nor was the front pistol grip and was quickly replaced by the 20-30 round box magazine and the horizontal fore-grip.

The weapon of the 27th (Machine-Gun) Battalion was the Vickers Machine Gun Mk1 a medium machine-gun. Although not as glamorous as the German *MG 34* and *MG 42*, it was an extremely reliable and efficient weapon. The 27th Battalion would often use mass indirect fire to 'beat' the enemy positions at extreme range. In five man teams the medium machine gun was particularly effective in Greece. This machine-gun was used on fixed lines for direct and in-direct fire. Several were lashed together on the ship carrying the 27 Battalion to Greece and brought down a German bomber. For the heavier equipment, the New Zealanders had to wait until they reached Maadi camp in Egypt.

### Vickers Mk I M.G..



By early 1941 the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force was almost fully equipped.

An attempt was made to issue all the troops with the full G1098 equipment. By February it was fashionable for the well-dressed soldier to be wearing khaki drill by day and the new battle-dress uniform at night.<sup>23</sup>

The Divisional Cavalry performed the reconnaissance of the New Zealand Division. Although no longer endowed with horses, they still retained the elan of a cavalry regiment. The Divisional Cavalry were 'saddled' with the Marmon-Herrington Mk II Armoured car. This car was a South African assembled vehicle that was both comfortable and fast on a light truck chassis. Its power plant was a Canadian Ford V-8 Engine, it was a reliable vehicle on the road but their armour and its Vickers 303 machine gun were not up to confronting the excellent German armoured cars, the heavier armoured *schwerer Panzerwagen SdKfz232* or the *leichter Panzerwagen SdKfz222*.

The Divisional Artillery obtained the MKII 25-pounder. There were few heavy British weapons that were equal to their German equivalents but this most certainly was. In the

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<sup>23</sup> McClymont, W. G. (1953). *The Official History of New Zealand in World War II. To Greece* War History Branch Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington. P.81. The synopsis of the complete equipment of a unit, itemised and enumerated.

division there were seventy-two of these weapons with twenty-four guns in each of the three artillery Regiments. With eight guns to each battery, this gave the Division a



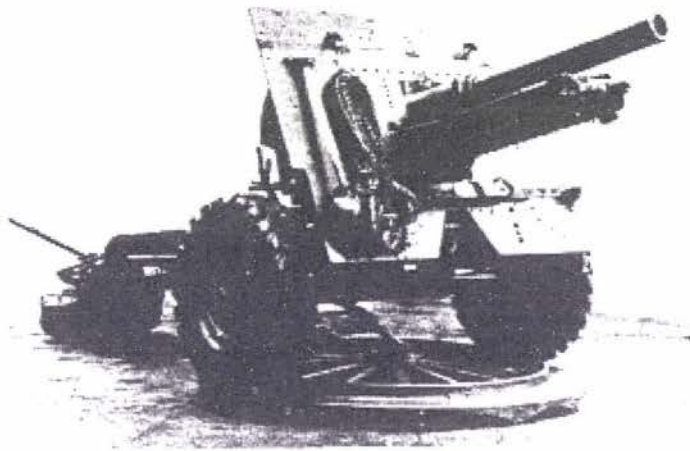
**Marmon-Herrington Armoured Car.**

formidable punch. A purpose built 'gun-howitzer' with a range of 13,400 yards (12,253 metres) on supercharge, it was a distinctive weapon with its accompanying limber and 'quad' tractor. It fired a twenty five-pound 3.45-inch (87.6-mm) round at a rate of four to seven rounds a minute. In Greece and later on in the desert it was often used as an anti-tank weapon. With its circular firing table it could rapidly be transferred to different targets. Attached to its quad tractor and limber it was a familiar sight to the New Zealanders in World War II. The infantry in Greece would come to bless the gunners of the Australian, New Zealand and Royal Horse Artillery field regiments who were prepared to fight their guns until the German tanks were in their lines. Its efficiency would certainly be needed as the two-pounder anti-tank weapon unless used properly would be found to be inadequate against the 30mm (1.25 inch) of armour of a German Mark IV or Mark III.<sup>24</sup>

The platoons were issued with the British two inch or three inch mortars as an infantry support weapon. Both weapons could be carried in the Bren-gun Carrier. Initially this

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<sup>24</sup> The writer and gunner Professor Walter Murphy believes that a lot of the anti-tank gunners did not know how to use their weapon properly.



**Mark II 25 pounder.**



**Twenty-five pounder with limber and Quad tractor**

**2pdr anti-tank gun on a portée**



**An L Troop portée firing near Point 175, 1 December 1941**



### **Bren Gun Carrier**

weapon had a mediocre range of 1463 metres and could be out-shot by its German counterpart the 8-cm *Grw 34* but later in the War more efficient propellants brought it up to a useful range of 2515 metres. Every company had a carrier platoon. This was the Bren gun (Universal) carrier on a Lloyd suspension. Although it was not able to 'mix-it' with armoured vehicles it made an excellent cross-country vehicle for the larger machine guns and mortars of the infantry. In Greece they sometimes used to charge enemy tanks, generally unsuccessfully.

The men of the First echelon were to have three months of basic training before going overseas. Lest it be thought that all New Zealanders were natural soldiers, J.L. Scoullar recalled a meeting that he had with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence in early 1940:

Our politicians and the people generally believe the New Zealand soldier fit to take a place in battle as soon as weapons are placed in his hands. I had an hour and a half with the Minister of Defence and ...with Mr Savage the next morning in January 1940, trying to convince him that sending untrained men into battle was murder. The New Zealander is only the raw material of a good soldier. Train him and he is only the equal of any...We must destroy the illusion that every New Zealander is naturally a good

shot, a belief that has its origins in the idea of life in the wide open spaces where meals are hunted.<sup>25</sup>

There was marching, physical training and of course bayonet drill. For most service personnel there is an instinctive distaste to impaling someone on the end of a bayonet. Bayonet training was an attempt to make the thrust an instinctive action. Some such as D.G. Morrison and Harry Spencer found the training adequate, but they were long time members of the Territorial Force and were used to Military Camps. More realistic training would occur in Egypt, where an attempt would be made to simulate the stress and chaos of battle. Others who had not been 'Territorials' and had volunteered in 1939 thought that, apart from the marching, it was a waste of time; Peter Winter<sup>26</sup> recalls with disgust the "antics of a drunken cook [a regular]... ..chasing roasts of beef around the filthy kitchen floor with a carving fork..."<sup>27</sup> Peter Winter was a member of Petrol Company and was later taken prisoner on Crete. His opinions of army life and senior officers are somewhat jaundiced. However as one who was considered for a commission and worked in the Historical Publication Branch for a short period his views are a legitimate contrast to some of the more anodyne accounts of the early years of the Division.

The infantry components of the New Zealand Division's ten battalions were organised into three Brigades. The numbering followed consecutively the numbers of the three original Brigades in the 1st New Zealand Division stationed in New Zealand for home defence. A brigade was not expected to operate in isolation and if it was detached from the division it could expect other elements from the division to be attached. For instance a regiment of artillery (24 guns), anti-tank weapons, signals, divisional cavalry and engineers would be attached depending on circumstances. The 4th Brigade was commanded by Brigadier Puttick comprised of the 18, 19 and 20 Battalions. The battalions of 4th Brigade were commanded respectively by Lieutenant Colonels Gray, a

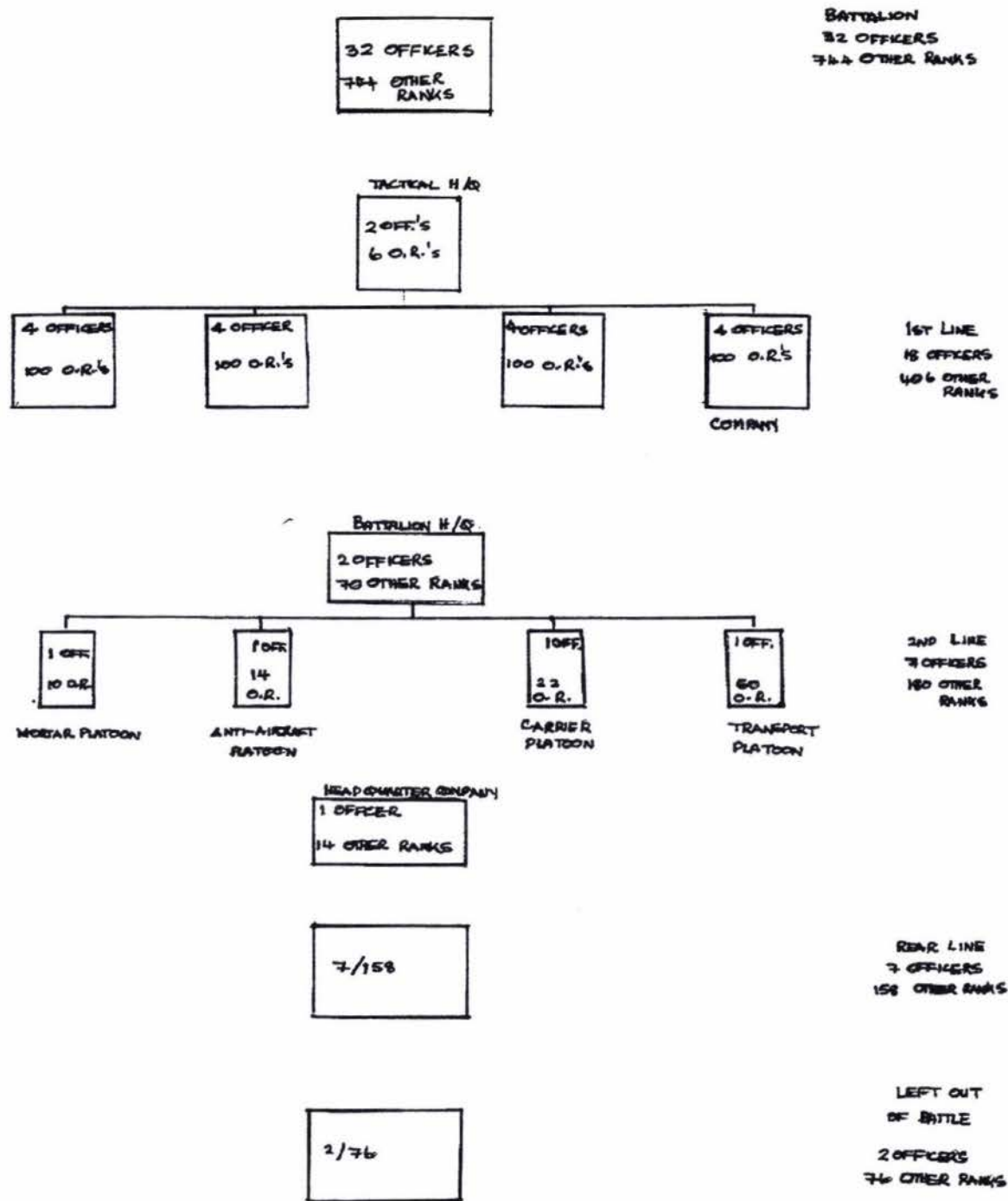
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<sup>25</sup> McLeod, p.16.

<sup>26</sup> Winter, P. (1989) *Expendable. The Crete campaign - a front line view*. Moana Press Ltd. Tauranga, p.7

<sup>27</sup> Winter, p. 7

# DIAGRAM OF AN INFANTRY BATTALION



former barrister and solicitor, Varnham an newspaper manager and Kippenberger. The 5th Brigade was commanded by Brigadier Hargest and comprised of the 21, 22, 23 and 28 (Maori Battalion) battalions. They were commanded respectively by Lieutenant Colonels Macky a barrister and solicitor, Andrew a regular soldier since the end of World War I, Falconer a tobacconist and Dittmer who like Andrew was a regular soldier since the end of World War I. The 6th Brigade was commanded by Brigadier Barraclough and comprised of the 24 25 and 26 Battalions. Barraclough's three Battalion Commanders were Wilder, Shuttleworth and Page.

A New Zealand infantry battalion was normally commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel and generally comprised of thirty-two officers and 744 other ranks (O.R.s). The front line fighting strength of the battalion was composed of four companies of ninety men in three platoons of thirty each. Each platoon was normally commanded by an officer generally a first or second lieutenant. Each company had a company headquarters platoon that was commanded by the Company commander, normally a captain with a staff of ten. There was also a tactical headquarters staffed by two officers and six company comprising of an administration staff of one officer and fourteen O.R.s. A mortar-platoon with one officer and ten O.R.s an anti-aircraft platoon with one officer and fourteen O.R.s and a carrier platoon of one officer and twenty-two O.R.s. There was also a reserve of five officers and eighty-two O.R.s. Should the battalion be destroyed, two officers and seventy-six O.R.s would be left out of battle to form a cadre for its reconstruction. (See diagram page 25.)

On the morning of 12 February 1940 the RMS *Empress of Canada* dropped anchor at Port Tewfik at the head of the Gulf of Suez. The *Empress of Canada* carried 809 New Zealand service personnel who were predominantly the Head-Quarters contingent of the New Zealand Division and the 4th Field Regiment. As they disembarked, they were greeted by the British Ambassador to Egypt, Generals Freyberg and Wavell and Anthony Eden, a man who was to play such a prominent part in sending them to Greece. These were the advance guards for later arrivals. Those who travelled on the converted passenger liners such as the *Empress of*



*Canada, Rangitata, Orion, Strathaird* and *Sobieski* counted themselves fortunate in comparison with the squalid conditions of the *Dunera* “an army transport with all the simplicity and most of the discomforts of such ships.”<sup>28</sup> On the way to Egypt in the First echelon, some troopers (they were gunners), disgusted with the meat supply that had been sitting on the wharf in Bombay intended for their meals, occupied the bridge of the Troopship *Ormonde*. “Their action was tantamount to mutiny; but it was warmly supported by other troops on board, including infantry.”<sup>29</sup> These were the men who were prepared to do their bit, but they were not prepared to put up with the living conditions that were inflicted on British regulars. After enduring a boring rail trip beside the Nile the first echelon marched into their first camp at Maadi camp behind the pipe band of the Cameron Highlanders. Maadi was ninety miles from Port Tewfik and eight miles from Cairo. From this location the pyramids were clearly visible. A camp was the appropriate term; Kippenberger describes the location as little more than a desert, “a sandy plateau overlooked by a rock strewn hillock.”<sup>30</sup> Kippenberger also comments that this ‘hill’ was to be known as ‘Bludgers Hill’ as this was the initial headquarters of the 4th Brigade. Here the New Zealanders were to receive the first of their heavy equipment. The Divisional Cavalry received the utilitarian Bren-gun carrier and the antiquated Mark VIB Rolls Royce tanks. The 4th Field Regiment received the World War vintage 18-pounder gun and the 4.5-inch Howitzer.

Relationships with the British in Egypt were initially very good. Wavell and Freyberg were quite close friends who would often mess together when Freyberg was in Egypt.<sup>31</sup> Desiring cordial relations with the British Freyberg released NZEF units to work with the British provided his permission was sought. To this purpose, New Zealand units took part in ensuring the internal security of British areas and the 4th Brigade was given the security of Cairo and the adjacent airfields to manage. Requests were made for use of the Divisional Signallers and of Railway troops, which were granted, but this

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<sup>28</sup> Murphy, p.21.

<sup>29</sup> Murphy, p.14.

<sup>30</sup> Murphy, P.22.

<sup>31</sup> Freyberg, P.(1991) *Bernard Freyberg V.C.* Hodder & Stoughton. London, pp 187-8.

happy state of affairs did not last. In July of 1940 whilst Freyberg was in England, General Wavell proposed merging 16th Australian Brigade with the 4th New Zealand Brigade to form a 6th Australian Division. Wavell also proposed that the Divisional Cavalry and 27 (Machine Gun) battalion be put under the command of the 4th Indian Division. Freyberg quickly cabled Wavell an expression of his disapproval.

[N]o such change can be made without the approval of the New Zealand Government, I hope these proposals will not be proceeded with. I do not wish to disclose to the New Zealand Government the proposals as outlined by you to break up the New Zealand Force, as they would make a most unfavourable impression in New Zealand official circles with repercussions you probably have not foreseen.<sup>32</sup>

Disapproval or not, when Freyberg returned to Egypt from the United Kingdom in September of 1940 he found, contrary to the New Zealand Governments Charter, (See appendix 1) that all that he had under his command were his Headquarter troops.. He found that Wavell was about to dissolve the New Zealand Division.

[H]e had reverted to the First World War policy that Dominion troops were part of the British Army, and as such the supreme Commander was able to do what he wished with them. The over-riding policy was that they must conform to an overall plan, and that the New Zealand government's instructions to keep the Division together were, in effect, to be disregarded.<sup>33</sup>

To his shock the New Zealand Division had been dispersed to various areas in the Middle East:

All he [Freyberg] had left under his direct control was his own headquarters.... [T]he original plan of dispersal, which he thought the CIGS had countermanded, had been enacted under another guise.<sup>34</sup>

General Freyberg writes about his dealings with General Wavell in a letter to McClymont:

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<sup>32</sup> McCleod, J. (1989). *Myth And Reality - The New Zealand Soldier in World War II*. Heinmann Reed: Auckland. p.174.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Freyberg, P., p.235.

<sup>34</sup> Freyberg, p.232.

General Wavell about that time was very secretive. He...dealt with Government's direct. He had been very successful against the Italians in telling us nothing. I had lent the British forces all the units that they had asked for, for the defence of Egypt. When I wanted them back to train the NZ Div they put me off and then refused to let me have them. I took great exception to the fact that they had used these NZ Div signs[signallers], sappers and Tpt[Transport] on operations in the first desert battle without informing me or my Gov't. I personally found Gen Wavell and his staff,...most unsatisfactory to deal with.<sup>35</sup>

Whilst in the United Kingdom Freyberg had expressed his opinions to General Dill the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) about the inadvisability of attempting to split up the New Zealand contingent, obviously with little effect. Whether Dill, whom the Private Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office, Sir Alexander Cadogan referred to as a 'nunny', actually referred Freyberg's complaint to Wavell or not is one of conjecture. Lieutenant General Thomas Blamey's opinion was that Freyberg was a fool to offer the New Zealand units piecemeal.<sup>36</sup> He had been well aware, as a staff officer in World War I, of the arguments between Generals Monash and Haig over the use of the Australian contingents. In 1941, Wavell was regarded as one of Britain's most able soldiers, but he had incurred the asperity of Churchill early on in the War. Other than the United Kingdom, the Middle East was the largest source of trained Regular troops and Churchill disagreed with the dispositions of the forces with which Wavell had chosen to defend this region. Wavell did not help his case by his customary taciturnity and secrecy. Wavell is referred to being an 'intellectual' General. Undoubtedly he was well read and had published a biography of his hero Lord Allenby. He was also a man who was laconic to the point of inarticulateness. Wavell was also not a stranger to intrigue. In 1940 he and Lieutenant General Henry Maitland Wilson conspired to remove Major General Percy Hobart from the command of the Mobile division (later to become the 7th Division - The Desert Rats). It is interesting to note that Hobart and his innovations had gained the attention of Churchill, who brought him

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<sup>34</sup> Freyberg, p.233.

<sup>35</sup> Freyberg to McClymont, letter dated 15 November 1948. WA 11 3/16. N.A.

back out of retirement to form the British 79th armoured division. Churchill never particularly cared for the taciturn Wavell, and appointed him to be the Commander in Chief in India as soon as possible.

Freyberg, unlike Blamey was a serving officer in the British Army and therefore was in an invidious position. He felt that matters had come to such a state that an official letter to Lieutenant General Maitland Wilson would be in order. In it Freyberg states that the New Zealand Forces cannot be split up without the expressed permission of the New Zealand Government. To emphasise this point he enclosed a copy of the charter of the special powers vested in him. (See appendix one). Freyberg wrote:

The position is quite clear; in an emergency we will all work under anybody's command, and do any job for which we are trained and equipped. The Division cannot be used piecemeal. When the equipment has been completed up to an operational scale and has been in its position for at least a month, the NZEF will handed over by the New Zealand Government and placed under command of the AIF or BTE (British Troops Egypt), or it may even take part in some theatre of war not yet decided upon.<sup>37</sup>

Freyberg quickly found that old friendships count for naught when one is caught up in a power struggle. Even Anthony Eden turned his substantial charm in an attempt to subvert Freyberg from his perceived duty to New Zealand.

Mr Eden asked why I would not let 4 New Zealand Brigade Group take part in the [coming] offensive, and I gave the ordinary common-sense reply that my job was to concentrate the New Zealanders for use as a Division. In a crisis, I would allow New Zealand Forces to be used piecemeal, but not otherwise. When I added that the New Zealand Government would not agree to breaking up the Division, I was given the astonishing reply, 'What, those dear old men, they would agree to anything.'<sup>38</sup>

When looking back sixty years one can sympathise with Freyberg for all he really wanted was the best for his division. It must have come as a great disappointment to

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<sup>37</sup> Freyberg, p.235.

<sup>38</sup> Freyberg, p.236

him to have an argument with his old friend Wavell “when things were said that cannot be too quickly forgotten.”<sup>39</sup>

Wavell had been planning a counter-attack on the Italians who were sitting immobile on the Egyptian border. He had hoped to use the 4th Brigade in this attack but had been disabused by the New Zealand Government (and presumably forcefully by Freyberg) who wanted the Division ‘to go into action as a complete division under their own commander.’<sup>40</sup> This does not mean that elements of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force were not used during the First Libyan campaign. The Army Supply Corps was utilised taking men and supplies to the Front and then transporting Italian prisoners back to the prison cages in the Delta. Driver Peter Winter in Petrol Company spoke of the confusion of driving trucks through Cairo when there were no maps and as they left in five-minute intervals, no contact with the truck ahead or behind. The New Zealanders also first experienced the lack of knowledge that the average British soldier had with their transport. Most New Zealand soldiers, coming from a mobile society had some knowledge of how vehicles worked. They were astounded to find that the average British soldier (most who could not drive) did not know how to fix trucks and cars. In this milieu little-known elements of the Expeditionary Force came into their own. The Railway companies took over eighty miles of track between El Daba and Mersa Matruh. The Engineers in 6 Field Company built eighteen miles of water pipe-lines, whilst another group in the Fifth Field Park Company took over operating the water pump and supervising the pipe lines. Regrettably close proximity to the front line was bound to bring casualties. On Christmas Eve 1940 New Zealand Army Supply Troops in company with British and Cypriot soldiers were unloading the Christmas supplies from barges when the Italian Airforce bombed them. Thirteen New Zealand soldiers were killed. Other New Zealand soldiers to see action were members of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). For this force the British provided the officers, who were experienced desert navigators in the Western Desert, the Egyptian Army provided the

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<sup>39</sup> Freyberg, p.236.

<sup>40</sup> Freyberg., p.63.

vehicles and the New Zealand Army provided the soldiers for the first three patrols.<sup>41</sup> In between 4th Brigade's duties there were more training exercises and according to John McLeod:

4 Brigade in their first divisional training exercise in April 1940 – [was] nothing short of a fiasco. The 4 Brigade attack was a total disaster. Major General Sir William Gentry, then a staff officer at Divisional Headquarters considered that 'the whole brigade would have been annihilated without any doubt. I've never forgotten them coming over the hill...all the machine guns there waiting for them'.<sup>42</sup>

The second echelon (5th Brigade) of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force was raised by early January 1940. Its commander was Brigadier James Hargest. The second echelon was well at sea when the decision was made to divert it to Britain. The military situation in Europe had become so serious that it was decided not to take the Brigade through the Mediterranean but by the Cape of Good Hope route. On 16 June 1940 the Convoy anchored in the Clyde. Coming as they did just after the evacuation of Dunkirk; the Australian and New Zealand contingents were met by a rapturous welcome. They were quickly entrained to southern England. Initially they were at the British army base of Aldershot in southern England, they were then based at Mychett, behind the beaches of Kent and Sussex. From their camps the soldiers of 5th Brigade had a grandstand view of the 'Battle of Britain'. Some New Zealand soldiers on leave were caught up in the 'Blitz' the German bombing of the capital. Several helped dig for survivors when the 'Bank' Tube station took a direct hit. Notwithstanding the tension of awaiting an invasion most the 5th Brigade regarded their time in southeast England as sublime. Lieutenant Stocker Boyd of the 7th Anti-tank Regiment spoke of how a considerate battery commander would always arrange for their route marches to end at a Kent country pub. Towards the end of 1940 it became apparent that the Germans were not going to invade England. Finally in December the Second Echelon was finally able to leave for Egypt, as affairs were afoot in the Middle East.

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<sup>41</sup> In 1943 New Zealanders were still being used in the LRDG, and after the failure of the Dodacanese expedition Freyberg insisted that they were returned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZEF.

<sup>42</sup> McLeod, quoting General Sir William Gentry, p.16.

In October 1940 when the Third Echelon arrived in the Gulf of Suez from New Zealand; the Military situation had changed radically from when the First Echelon arrived. The British had been defeated in Norway and France. The German occupation of the northern French industrialised areas and the eastern seaboard now meant that the contest with the Italians for the control of the Mediterranean devolved onto the British Navy. During this period British relations with the Japanese had worsened. The Japanese had forced the British to close the Burma Road<sup>43</sup> and travel to British concessions in China through Japanese occupied areas was becoming difficult. The British were now in no condition to send a fleet to the Far East to guard their interests there. As the Foreign Secretary of Japan, Matsuoka commented to Hitler that this was an opportunity that could only occur for Japan in a thousand years. Given this situation with the Japanese, the New Zealand Government took a particularly long-sighted view and decided to release the Third echelon to join the First Echelon in Egypt.

It was early in 1941 that the New Zealand Division was separated from the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary force. "There were four elements of 2NZEF: the 2nd New Zealand Division, non-divisional units, line of communication units, and Base units."<sup>44</sup> The 6th Brigade moved out of Maadi Camp to join the elements of the New Zealand Division at Helwan. Most of the 4th Brigade was in the Baggush box where it was to be used as a reserve should the desert offensive against the Italians falter. Maadi Camp, from now on, was to be used as the headquarters for the Base units and as a training depot for reinforcements. When the 4th Brigade returned to Helwan amenities and food had markedly improved. With this improvement came intensive training, mock attacks, and river crossings. Freyberg was still not happy with the performance of the skills of the infantryman:

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<sup>43</sup> A significant proportion of *materiel* for the Republic of China went from the Port of Rangoon to Chungking in China.

<sup>44</sup> McGibbon, I. (Ed). (2000). *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*. Oxford University Press: Auckland. Pp 367-368.

In a refresher course for the riflemen of 4 and 6 Brigades in January 1941, Freyberg, appalled at the high proportion of failures, chided his brigadiers that "the standards of weapon training is very low". What particularly disturbed him was that the men who failed to qualify were those in the combat units – men who would soon be at the sharp end of the war. Lieutenant Colonel J. R. Page, Commanding Officer (CO) of 26 Battalion, went so far as to admit that the failures in his Battalion "appeared hopeless cases."<sup>45</sup>

Freyberg had reason to be concerned, he had hinted to his senior officers that the Division probably would not remain in the Western Desert for much longer...<sup>46</sup> On 17 February 1941 Wavell informed him that the New Zealand Division would be moving to Greece as an advance guard. The force would be under the control of Lieutenant General Maitland Wilson.<sup>47</sup> Units of New Zealanders began to leave for Greece on the 28th of February 1941. This was happening as other units were returning to the division. The Signals Corps and Engineers were released by the British, and on 3rd March when the main body of 4th Brigade was leaving Helwan, The Second Echelon incorporating the 5th Brigade fresh from Britain steamed into Port Tewfik. The Second echelon of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force had arrived. They had been told by Brigadier Hargest that their stay in Egypt was to be short, but they did not know how short that was going to be, for in a few days after some training and re-equipping, they too were to be on their way to Greece. Freyberg finally had his Division but they were yet to fight together.

Although the New Zealanders did not have an armoured Brigade until 1943; in Greece they and the Australians would work in co-operation with the British 1st Armoured Brigade. A mixture of regular and territorial units, it was comprised of: the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment; the 64th and 17th Medium Artillery Regiments; three regiments of Royal Horse Artillery; the anti-tank regiment was the Northumberland Hussars; an infantry battalion of the Kings Royal Rifle Corps (the Rangers) and the 1st Brigade's

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<sup>45</sup>McLeod, p.17.

<sup>46</sup> Freyberg had noted in his papers that he expected that Greece would probably be an area of conflict

<sup>47</sup> The obvious choice was Richard O'Connor, but Wilson was a large man to the point of obesity and it was thought that his bulk would awe the Greek Generals.



reconnaissance unit was the 11th Hussars with their Vickers Mark V light tanks. The personnel of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment were upset to have their Cruiser A12's taken off of them and replaced with the 1935 model A9 or A10 cruiser tanks. This was to be no obstacle to the German Mark III or Mark IV's. Whilst in Greece, only one tank of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment was lost to enemy action. The others either threw their tracks or had to be destroyed when the brigade was evacuated.

The New Zealanders and other Commonwealth troops would soon face the German army, the principal tool of Blitzkrieg; an army that had yet to taste defeat. The German army was not a homogenous force. Only ten percent of *das Heer*<sup>48</sup> was fully mechanised. The other ninety percent of the Army had to march. The soldier had to carry about his person over thirty six kilograms of equipment including his kit, blanket, tent half, rifle and ammunition. On campaign, his rations were equally as monotonous as that of the New Zealand soldier. The basic ration was bread, a loaf of *Kommisbrot*, baked in the field. The German army Field kitchens served one hot meal a day, usually at noon, although *ersatz* coffee or tea was provided mornings and evenings. Canned foods, sausage, cheese; marmalade and margarine were the fare for breakfast and supper.<sup>49</sup> Horses, normally drew artillery that was not attached to Panzer divisions. Nor was the German Army solely German. For apart from a few Germanic foreigners such as Swiss and others, the German Army had a large component of Sudeten Germans and soldiers from Austria now part of Germany since 'Anschluss' in 1938.

The difference in character between a Bavarian and East Prussian, a Saxon and above all an Austrian division would be remarked upon immediately.<sup>50</sup>

Among those who had to walk were the mountain troops. The *Gebirgsdivision* was a two regiment, six-battalion division. Most of the men were recruited from the mountains of southern Germany and the Tyrol of Austria and were skilled in

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<sup>48</sup> *Wehrmacht* is German for Armed Forces. The Airforce is the *Luftwaffe*, the Army *das Heer* and the Navy *die Kriegsmarine*.

<sup>49</sup> Von Luttichau, C. (1974). *Purnell's The History of the Second World War. (110) Fighting Men-The German Soldier*. BPC Publishers. London, p.3073.

<sup>50</sup> Beevor, A. (1999) *Stalingrad*. Penguin Books. London, p.17.

mountaineering and living in high altitudes. They would depend upon mules and other pack animals to carry their heavier weapons. What made the German soldier so formidable was his ability to provide the necessary firepower at the point of 'contact'. The German army depended upon their *panzers* for the aggression and rapidity of their attack, but even the infantrymen were better armed than other comparable infantry with their own artillery pieces and each company had a machine gun and mortar platoon. The German soldier was also aware of his part within the division. No matter how much 'esprit de corps' that a battalion or regiment could derive the British system in World War II with its inter-unit rivalry never obtained the cohesiveness of a German division. No matter how good and well skilled the World War II German soldier was; throughout these commendable qualities ran the skein of National Socialism. The German soldier had given a personal oath to Adolf Hitler and coupled with the ruthlessness that was inherent in the German Army was a racial consciousness that would lead to atrocities and cruel treatment of civilians and prisoners.

The first unit that the New Zealanders confronted was not from *das Heer* at all, but men of the *Waffen SS*<sup>51</sup> *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* Division. Originally formed as Hitler's bodyguard, these men had to meet rigorous physical and racial examination. Himmler the head of the *SS* intended to have the *SS* as the cadre for the German Police Force after the war, and to gain respect with the public these police would be expected to have served time as a fighting force. Notwithstanding atrocities that this Division committed against British forces in France, they appear to have fought and behaved 'correctly' to the New Zealanders and Australians they captured in Greece.

Events and personalities had conspired that some of the least indoctrinated soldiers in the world were about to confront some of the most indoctrinated. The British were about to return to Europe, in the form of a Commonwealth unit composed of seventeen thousand Australians, almost seventeen thousand New Zealanders and twenty-two

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<sup>51</sup> *SS* is an abbreviation of *Schutzstaffel* – Security Squadron.

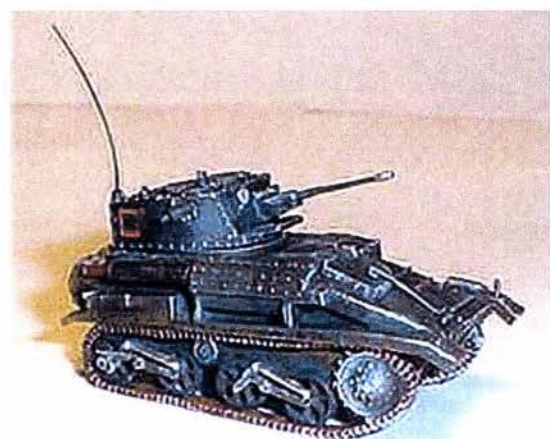
thousand British soldiers. It would not be long before they confronted the might of the *Wehrmacht*.

In 1941 the strategic interests of Britain, and by implication the Commonwealth, collided with the strategic interests of Germany. For Britain the Balkans were the northern flank of a major supply route from the Empire. For Germany it was the southern flank for an advance into the Soviet Union and a bulwark for its principal oil supplies from Rumania. Responding to the Commonwealth strategic and military imperative, the New Zealand Division was to be based in Egypt, but the Division was not to remain there for very long. The personalities of the principal actors on the European stage: Churchill, Hitler and Mussolini and their response to the military and political circumstances in Britain, Germany, Greece, Italy and the Mediterranean were conspiring to bring New Zealand's Division to the Balkans.



**British Cruiser Tank A-9.**

**Vickers Light Tank.**

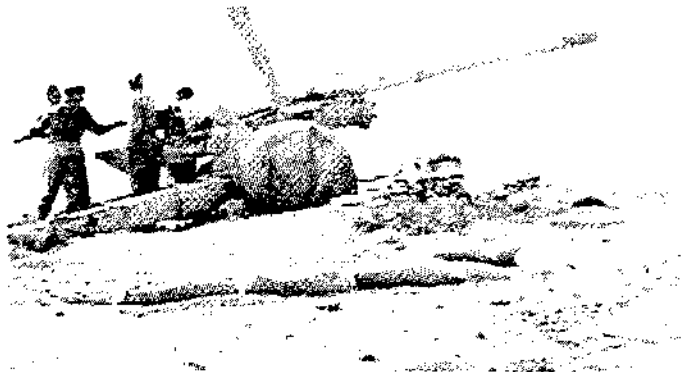


**British Cruiser Tank A-10.**



**Artillery piece used by the 64th and 17th Medium  
Artillery Regiment, Royal Artillery**

*A 4.5 medium gun at Lulea, 1941*



**Some Senior Officers of the 2nd New Zealand Division.**

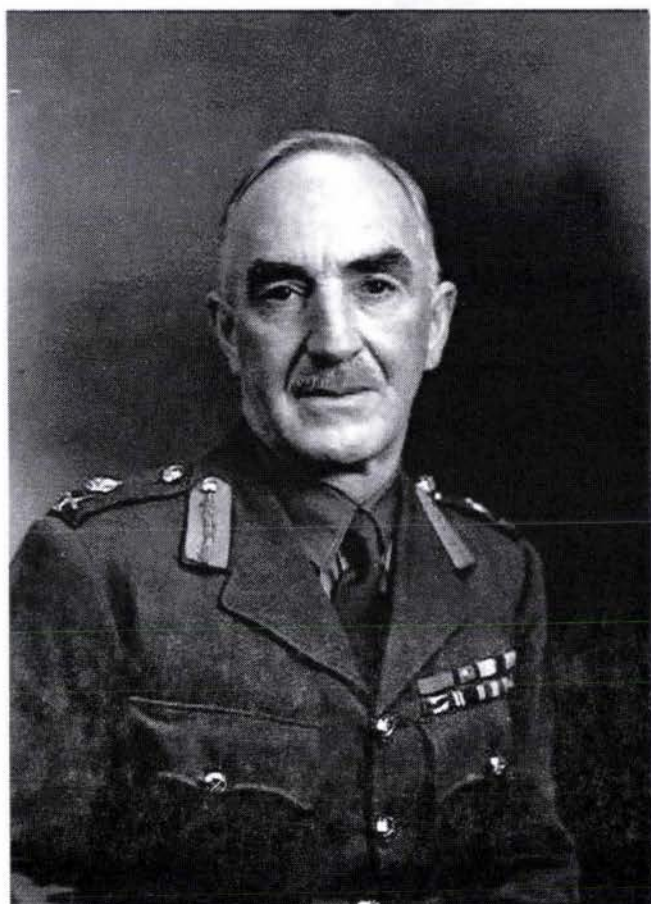
**Lt Colonel Andrew and Brigadier Hargest.**



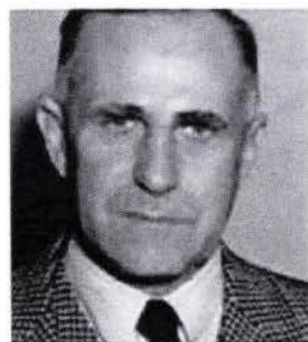
**General Bernard Freyberg.**



**Brigadier Puttick.**



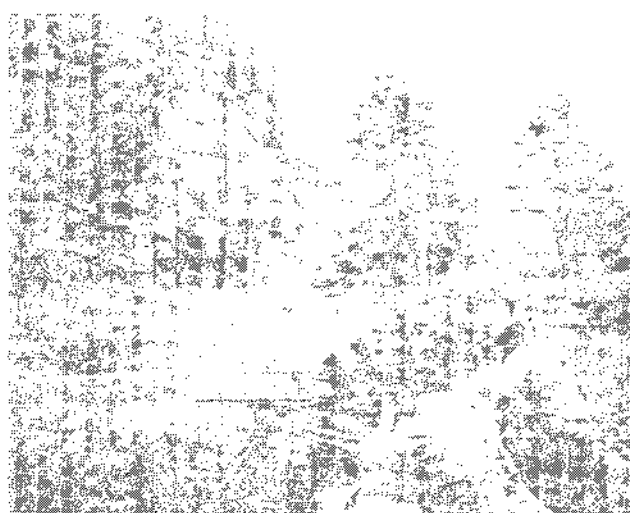
**Lieutenant Colonel Kippenberger.**



General Freyberg and Brigadier Harold Barrowclough. (Centre).



Looking Eastwards from Sappers' Camp.



View from the summit of Mt. Ruapehu.

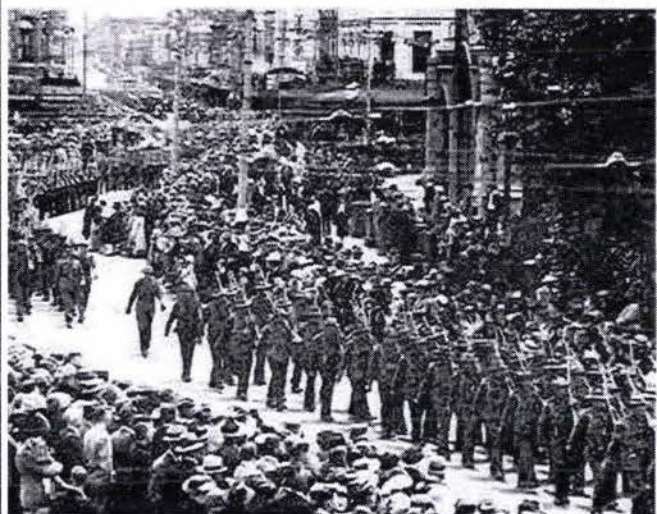
Filling palliases, Papakura



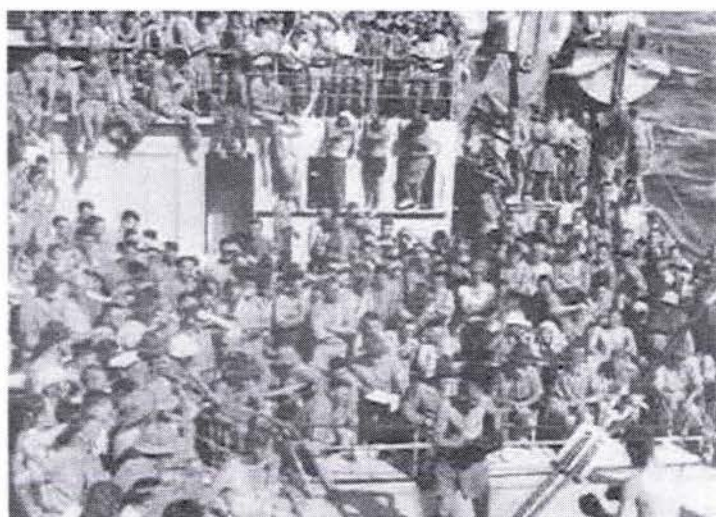
18 Battalion marches into Papakura



Farewell parade, Christchurch, January 1940



Troopship amusements—Boxing



Troopship amusements—Race Day



The battalion goes ashore at Tewfik

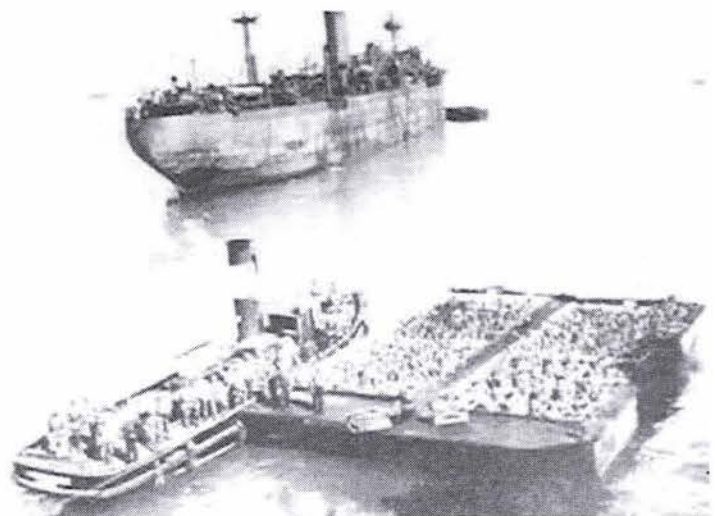
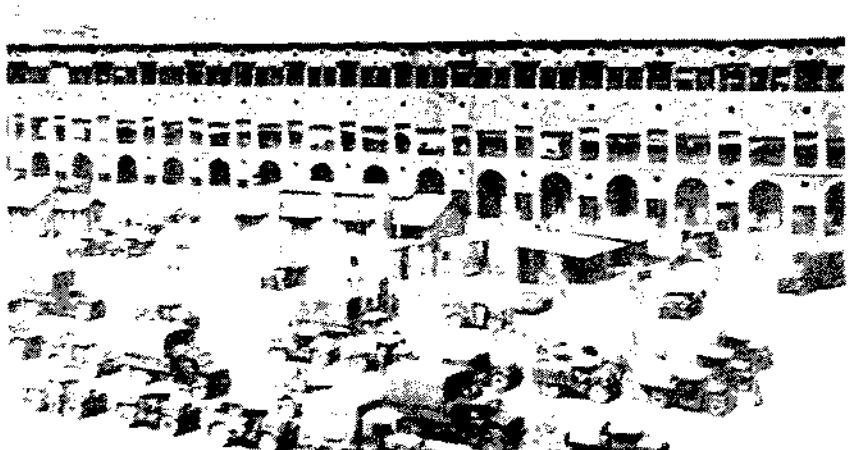




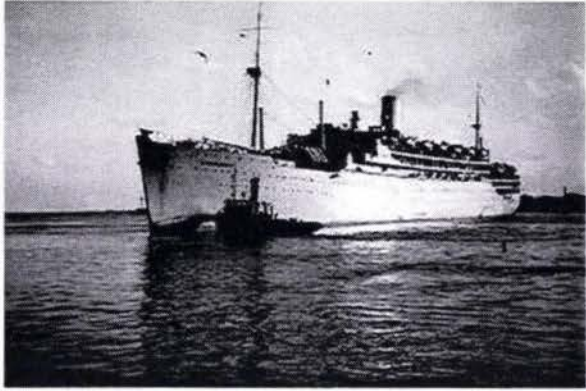
Figure 1. Training exercise.

#### Results and discussion (Table 1, Figure 1)

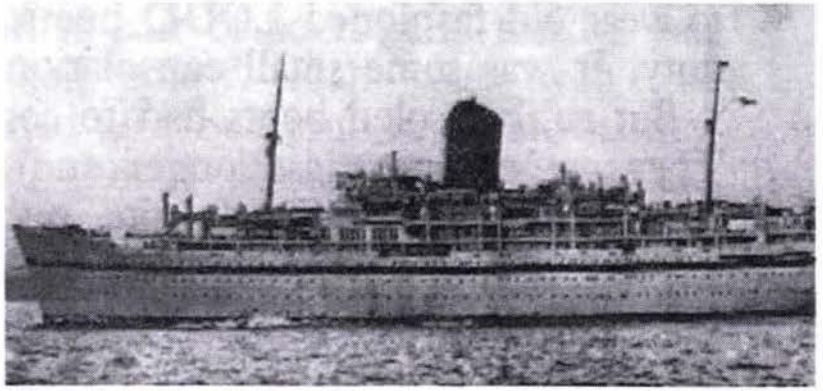




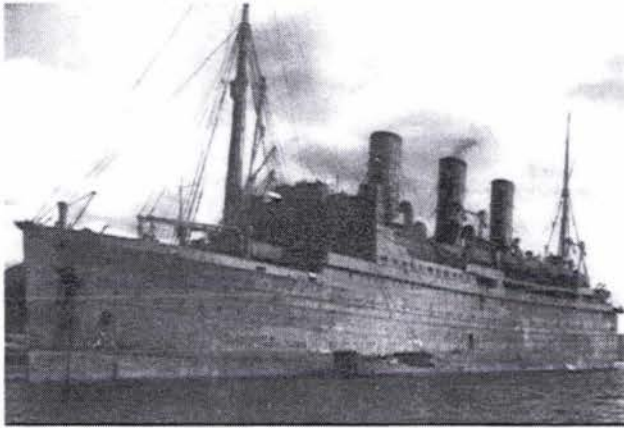
Some of the Troopships used to convey the New Zealanders to Egypt and Britain.



**The Strathmore**



**The Nevasa**

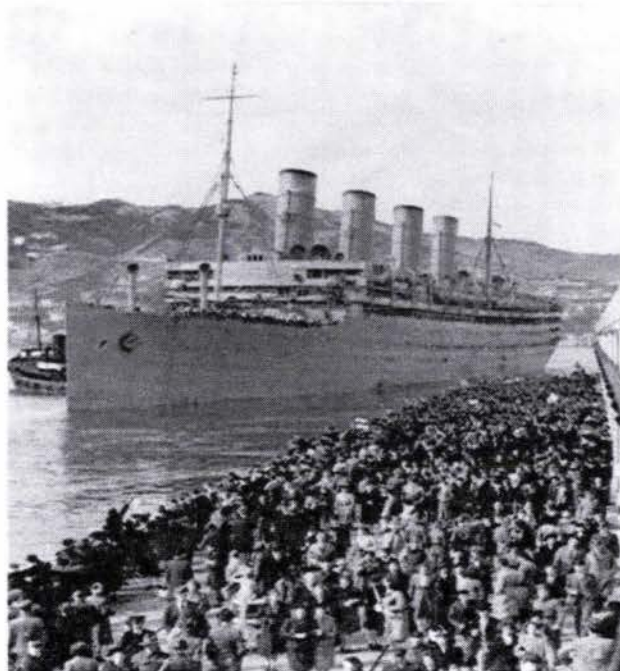


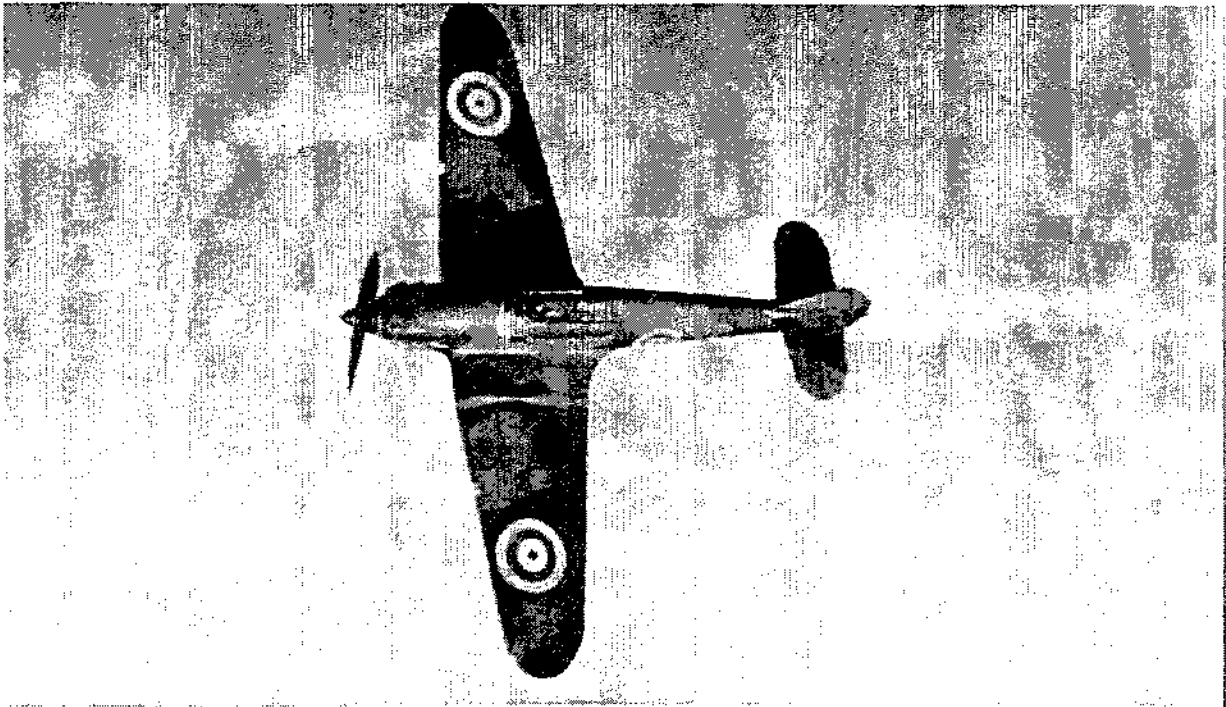
**The Empress of Canada**



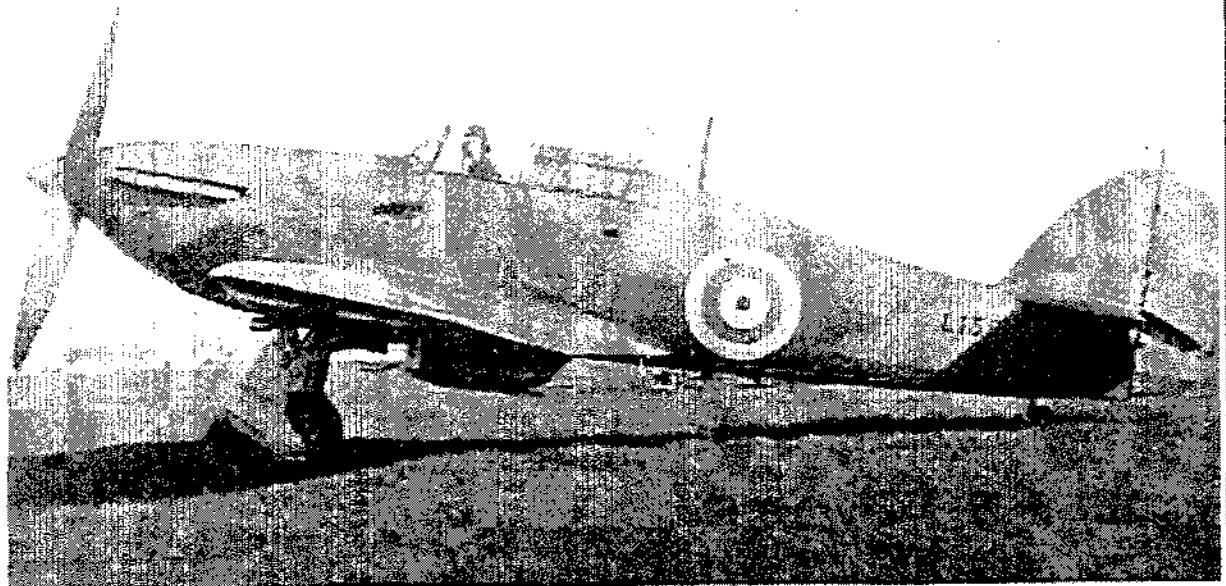
**The troopship Dunera**

**The Aquitania**



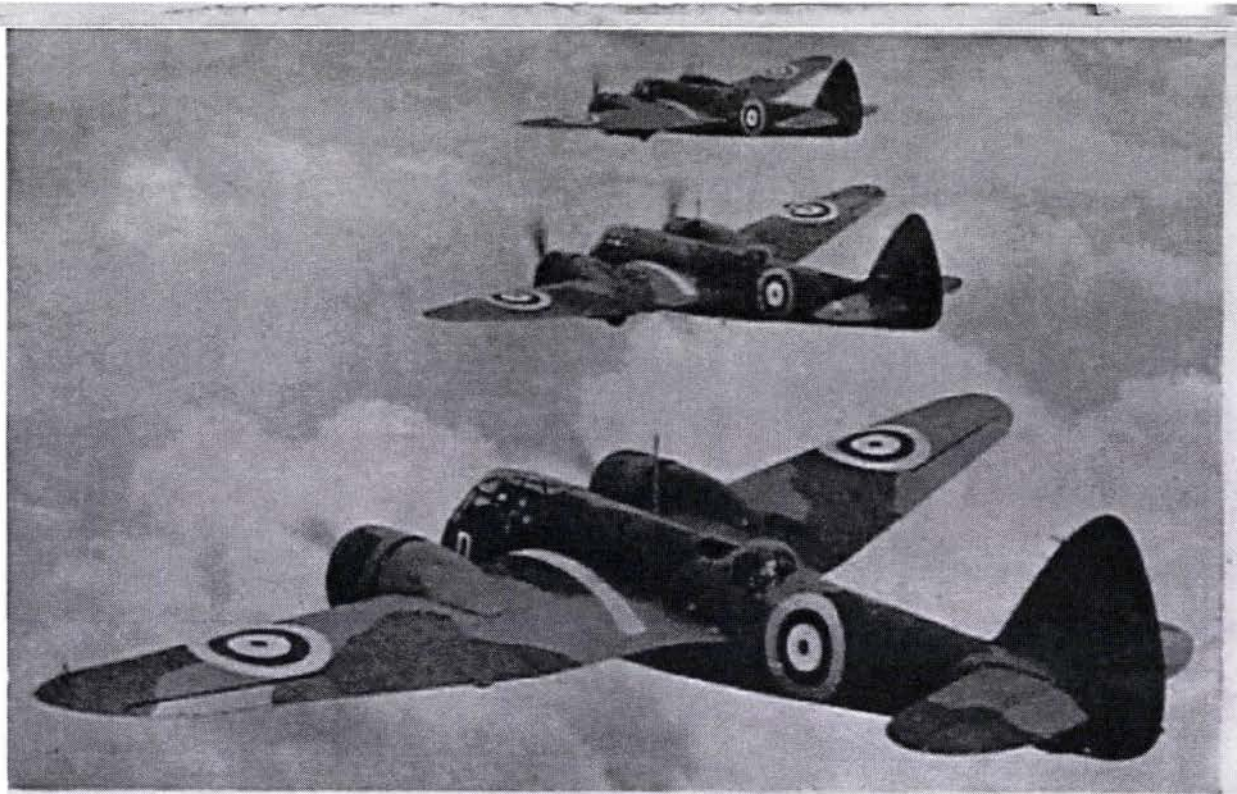


HURRICANE

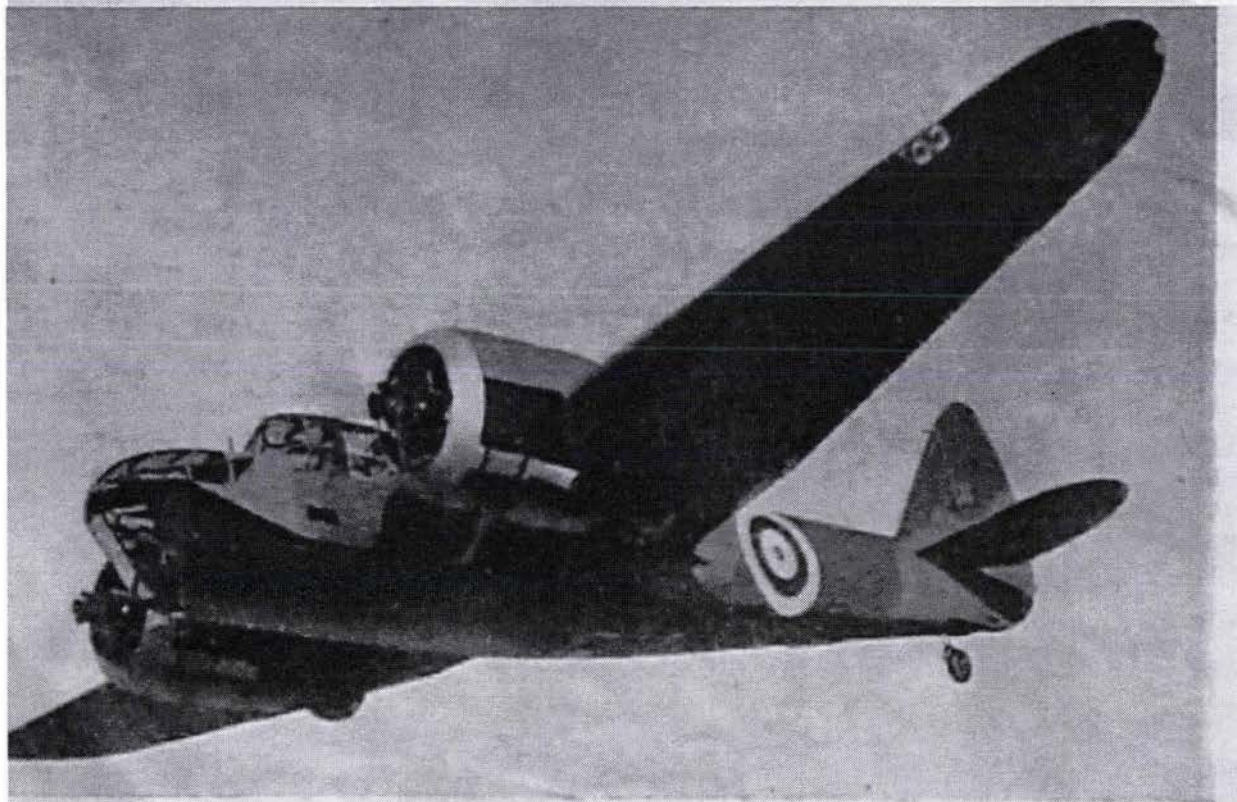


HURRICANE

Britain's principle Fighter in Greece: The Hawker Hurricane.



BLENHEIM Mk. I



BLENHEIM Mk. IV

**Britains Principle Bomber: Bristol Blenheim.**

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Balkan house of cards collapses.

*Lustre* was an unnecessary and disastrous enterprise which brought virtually no profit and a great deal of loss.

*Cruickshank, C. Greece 1940-41.*



German soldiers in action.

After sixty years, it is still difficult to discern Hitler's feelings when, upon meeting Mussolini on the 28th October 1940 in Florence, he was greeted with the words: 'Führer, we are on the march.' Did Hitler feel his world shift as his carefully contrived house of cards came crashing down? Hitler professed to admire Mussolini, but even he must have wondered why his capricious ally had chosen to invade a country whose politicians were ardent admirers of fascism. However, the historian Martin van Creveld believes that Hitler was aware of Mussolini's intention and that this had been discussed at their previous meeting earlier in the month:

The Brenner meeting of 4 October 1940 is one of the most 'fishy' in the history of World War II, in that it was hard to get a good account of it, and because it gave rise to a heap of ambiguities in the [foreign] ministries of both sides.<sup>52</sup>

Hitler by professing ignorance was trying to distance himself from what he believed would be a military blunder by his ally. It is now known that, by this time, Hitler's mind was fixed upon implementing Operation *Barbarossa*. This was to fulfil his desire to colonise the *Ostenland* of Russia and the Ukraine. After 21 September it is doubtful whether Hitler was ever really enthusiastic about an invasion of Britain.<sup>53</sup> When the *Luftwaffe* failed to gain command of the air over southern England 1940, Hitler's eyes turned eastward. Yet for any incursion into the Soviet Union, the British still threatened his southern flank. Although the Mediterranean theatre of operations was only peripheral to Hitler, the Mediterranean was one area where the axis powers were vulnerable to British attack and it was also an area where he could strike at the British Empire. To occupy the attention of the British, to protect his Eastern flank for his incursion into the Soviet Union, intimidate Turkey and protect the vital oil fields of Rumania Hitler mooted Operation *Felix* to Franco. This involved German troops co-operating with the Spanish army in an invasion of Gibraltar. Once Gibraltar had been taken the German Army could move along the African coast to invade Egypt and take the Suez Canal. This action would also have the additional benefit of threatening British colonies in Africa. However, Hitler found dealing with Franco extremely

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<sup>52</sup> Van Creveld, M.L. (1973). *Hitler's Strategy 1940-1941 The Balkan Clue*. Cambridge University Press: London, p.34.

difficult. 'Like drawing teeth' was his attributed description. The Americans had also threatened Franco that if he participated in any attack on the British; his oil supplies would be cut. Consequently any co-operation with Hitler came to nothing.

Since August 1939 when Hitler had signed the 'non-aggression' treaty with Stalin he had been in a race with the Soviet Union to control the nations of Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union invaded Finland in late 1939 and had occupied the Karelian peninsula. While the world watched the conflict of the Allies and Germany; Stalin had also taken the opportunity to annex the Baltic States of Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and imposed the cession of Bessarabia on Rumania whilst Hitler was occupied in France. The Soviet Union was too much an unpredictable element in Hitler's strategic plans; Hitler also had a suspicion that the Soviet Union was planning to invade Germany's possessions in eastern Europe.<sup>53</sup> In late June 1940 Hitler ordered the *Wehrmacht* to start making plans to attack the Soviet Union.

In the 1930's fascism did not carry the opprobrium that it does today. Not only was it seen as an instant answer to the economic chaos of the 1920's and 1930's, fascism was also regarded as a bulwark against communism. Each Balkan state, more afraid of the motives of the Soviet Union's 'Comintern' than of Nazi Germany established closer political and economic ties with Germany. The nations of Bulgaria, Hungary, Rumania, and Greece demonstrated their admiration of Germany by copying its political customs and attitudes. German intervention in the Balkans then stripped the independence of action from most of the Balkan states. Bulgaria, a nation culturally and physically close to the Soviet Union was the most pro-'axis', and an avowed pro-German was appointed Prime Minister. The Hungarian President acceded to a request for transit rights for German troops travelling through his country to protect the Rumanian oilfields at Ploesti. In 1940, of all the Balkan nations, Rumania was the most ostensibly 'fascist' and anti-Semitic. Rumania had done particularly well from

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<sup>53</sup> It is now known that Hitler had a meeting on 31 July 1940 at the Berghof to direct his senior military leaders to prepare a plan for the invasion of the U.S.S.R.

<sup>54</sup> The Historian, Heinz Magenheimer believes that the early successes of operation *Barbarossa* was due to the Soviet Union Army being forward in an attack posture.

the settlements of Versailles at the expense of territories of its neighbours and was particular anxious over the ceded province of Bessarabia. When the Soviet Union demanded that the Rumanians cede this province to her, the Rumanians promptly sought guarantees of her frontiers from Berlin. Far from guaranteeing Rumania's frontiers, Germany advised them to cede the province. German involvement redounded upon Rumania as both Hungary and Bulgaria then sought to reclaim territories that they had lost in the 1919 peace settlement.

By late 1940 most the British residents in Rumania had fled. It became increasingly untenable for them to reside in Rumania, especially as British engineers were attempting to sabotage the oil supplies to Germany.<sup>55</sup> Only the Yugoslavs were out of step in the Balkans; Yugoslavia was still a right wing monarchy, with a weak regent, Prince Paul. It was a country formed from the uneasy coalition of four states and two religions: Islam and Christianity, with the Christians divided between the Catholic and the Orthodox denominations. Politicians from Croatia, with its proximity to Italy tended to be pro-Italian and pro-Mussolini. The Croatians despised the seemingly unsophisticated Serbs. Yugoslavia was the Balkans writ in miniature.

[T]here was only a single period of five months in the 23 years of the Yugoslav kingdom when the Prime Minister was not a serb.(sic) ...belatedly they established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and closed the White Russian 'embassy' in Belgrade....<sup>56</sup>

Yugoslavia continued to hedge its bets. It was still sending all of its copper to Germany and in return the Germans helped Yugoslavia to re-arm. Prince Paul, the regent of Yugoslavia was a 'pro-West' aesthete. He realised that while his heart was in Paris his body was in Belgrade and he was at all times a pragmatist.<sup>57</sup> He was married to a German princess, and through her, had connections with the British Royal family. He knew that should Germany threaten Yugoslavia the British could give very

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<sup>55</sup> The British were the first to develop the oil fields and in early 1941, most of the engineers were still British.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in: Palmer, A. *Purnell's History of the Second World War. Operation Punishment*, p.374.

little military assistance. After *Anschluss*, Greater Germany was now on Yugoslavia's borders. There is a photograph (p.52) that catches the German Yugoslav relationship perfectly. It is taken at an evening function. Hitler is in evening dress; he is staring fixedly at Prince Paul whilst standing very close to the Regent. Paul has his left arm protectively across his body whilst his other hand rests on his sword. His eyes, avoiding Hitler's, flee like timid animals over Hitler's shoulders.<sup>57</sup> Churchill somewhat unfairly nicknamed him 'Prince Palsy'. Prince Paul was convinced, quite rightly, that more British involvement in the Balkans would not deter the Germans but would bring them in:

The evidence in our possession of German movements seems overwhelming. In the face of it Prince Paul's attitude looks like an unfortunate man with a tiger, hoping not to provoke him while steadily dinner-time approaches<sup>58</sup>

Now that Mussolini had ensured that the Greeks were in the allied camp, Hitler's southern flank was no longer secure. For Hitler's planned thrust into the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941, Hitler required that his southern flank to be covered by sympathetic or cowed allies. Prior to the Italian invasion, the Greek dictator, Ioannis Metaxas had chosen the path of appeasement. Now this all this stood for nought. Greece had been invaded and its pride affronted. This pride quickly superseded any admiration Metaxas and his followers had for Mussolini. Mussolini had swaggered about the Mediterranean throughout the latter part of the 1930's. Even the British Navy was cautious about coming into conflict with the modern Italian Navy. Now, suddenly, the weaknesses in the Italian command structure were exposed. Mussolini, like Hitler, knew of the value of martial display, but, unlike the Germans, competency for aspiring Italian military leaders was not as valued as much as sycophancy, and this was the predominant characteristic for promotion in the Italian Army. The braggadocio with which the Italians went to war was no counter to the "toughness training and knowledge of the country"<sup>59</sup> that the Greek soldiers displayed in their

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<sup>57</sup> See Palmer, p.376.

<sup>58</sup> Palmer, p.376.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted by: D Dilkes ed (1971) *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*. Cassel. London, p.349.

<sup>60</sup> Edwin Packer (1967) *Purnell's History of the Second World War Italian Fiasco – The attack on Greece*, p.343.





**Prince Paul of Yugoslavia and Adolf Hitler.**

counterattack. The Greeks, angered by the many provocations that they had to put up with, attacked the Italians with an unexpected aggression. Caught in a series of passes, the elite *III Alpine Division* was all but destroyed and the Italians were quickly bundled back into Albania.

Greece may have once been the cradle of democracy, but by 1940 a military junta ruled Greece. In 1936, Ioannis Metaxas, a retired general, encouraged by the Greek King George II, overthrew the constitutional government; for in Greece, tyranny is a tradition older than democracy. The Greek dictator Metaxas, a lifetime admirer of Germany, copied the Nazi political machine, institutions and youth movement. By 1940, his internal security systems were close imitations of Nazi Germany.<sup>61</sup> The Greek State of the late 1930's bore a marked resemblance to a South American 'banana republic' rather than the country that had given representative government to the world. Had it not been for Mussolini's hubris in his desire to be the emperor of another Roman empire, Greece would have fallen easily into the Axis sphere. It was Mussolini, wanting to impress Hitler and his countrymen that caused the carefully contrived Balkan 'house of cards' to collapse. He did this first by invading Albania, the most backward country in Europe in 1940 and then in 1941 invading northern Greece.

By his impetuous vainglorious act, Mussolini had converted a potential ally and admirer of Hitler's into an implacable enemy. Metaxas was a very careful man. He had been trained in a German military school. He was also a Greek patriot. He had a great deal of admiration for Hitler and the Germans, but like a lot of Greeks he also remembered that it was the British, in particular the British Navy that had helped win his country's freedom from the Turks. He assured the British that he and the:

Greek people were capable of understanding the strategic and other factors involved including the British inability to come to her aid. General Metaxas ended by saying that the quicker the war was won the quicker Greece would be liberated.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>See: Packer, E. (1972), *Purnell's History of the Second World War. The Attack on Greece*, p.263.

<sup>62</sup>Mott-Radcliff C. (1975) *Foreign Body in the Eye*. Leo Cooper: London, p.56.

In the period between the two World Wars, when most British politicians tended to be unconcerned with this region, there was one who had a particular interest in the Balkans. Winston Churchill had had a long fascination with the Southern approaches to Europe and as a proponent of the indirect approach method of warfare; areas as diverse as the Balkans and Norway fascinated his eclectic mind. Churchill had been the prime instigator of the fiasco of the Gallipoli landings in 1915. Forever staring at maps of Southern Europe and Asia, Churchill was ever trying to form alliances with disparate nations such as Greece Yugoslavia, and Turkey. As with every other field of British endeavour during World War II, Churchill's personality dominated. Throughout his life Churchill was beset with a form of mild 'manic depression'. This led to "Churchill's moments of irrationality, quirkiness, senility, his absurd operational proposals and flights of fantasy and depression"<sup>63</sup>. Once his mind was set on a course of action he allowed no one, but himself to deviate him from that course. Although Churchill was a Prime Minister from the House of Commons he was an aristocrat, with an aristocrat's disregard of convention. Petulant, arbitrary and bellicose, he dominated the British military leaders. Contemptuous of most of his senior generals, whom he regarded as technicians, they were expected to implement his decisions, not to make them. A man of great energy he wore down his military subordinates with harangues if they were present and with cables if they were not. "He...deferred to professional views when they were expressed as coherently as his own – a hard condition to fulfil."<sup>64</sup> Very few military leaders could resist his formidable persuasive powers. Rear Admiral Reginald Hall relates how he resorted to repeating his own name to prevent Churchill from overwhelming his convictions.<sup>65</sup> It was A.J.P. Taylor's opinion that: "He always persuaded himself easily into believing anything that he wanted to believe..."<sup>66</sup> Churchill was a man who was swayed by his emotions and he acted upon his intuitions. In a remark attributed to Lord Esher:

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<sup>63</sup> Hastings, M. (1984). *Overlord D-Day and the Battle for Normandy 1944*. Book Club Associates. London. P.23

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, A.J.P. (1988). *English History 1914-1945*. The Clarendon Press: Oxford. P.481

<sup>65</sup> Massie, R.K. (2003). *Castles of Steel. Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea*. Random House: New York, pp.292-3.

<sup>66</sup> A J P Taylor (1988). *English History 1914-45*. Oxford, p.467.

He [Churchill] handles great subjects in rhythmical language and becomes quickly enslaved by these phrases. He deceives himself into the belief that he takes broad views, when his mind is fixed upon one comparatively small aspect of his question.<sup>67</sup>

For Churchill in London the Italian invasion of Greece was an answer to a prayer, an opportunity to have British forces operating again on the mainland of Europe. Now Churchill was given an opportunity to demonstrate British resolve in front of the putative allies: Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey and most importantly the United States of America. Surely he could bring both Greece and Turkey into the allied camp and win the admiration of the Americans. Turkey professed to be pro-British, but was not prepared to commit herself to become an active ally. Churchill offered President Inonu of Turkey ten squadrons of planes as an incentive, but still he would not be drawn.<sup>68</sup> Suddenly Churchill saw the strategic position shifting towards the allied camp and, like the gambler he was, he quickly utilised the cards that had fallen into his hands. Prior to March 1941, the British Government was convinced that the Germans were going to drive through the Balkans into Egypt, possibly in conjunction with an attack upon Gibraltar.<sup>69</sup> When the Italians invaded Greece, it was impossible for the British to believe that it could have been contemplated without Hitler knowing anything of Mussolini's plans. Because of the Italian attack the Greek Government invoked the April 1939 Agreement of Assistance with Britain and the British now looked upon the Balkans with less than an altruistic gaze. The British Minister in Athens, Sir Michael Palairer also brought a disproportionate amount of influence to bear on the British Government to encourage a favourable outcome. This agreement brought about the sending of *Barbarity Force* to Crete and Greece. Its primary objectives were:

1. To help train the Greek Army;
2. To collect information that would be useful in the event operating in Greece.
3. To co-ordinate the question of supply of not only war materials, but food and other commodities for the Greek Army and Civil population.

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<sup>67</sup> Connell, J. (1966). *Purnell's History of the Second World War* – Attributed to Lord Esher in 1917, p.317.

<sup>68</sup> Packer, E.(1972). *Purnell's History of the Second World War. Italian Fiasco - The Attack on Greece*. p.395.

<sup>69</sup> Pimlott, J.L. (Ed).(1989).*The World At Arms. The Readers Digest Illustrated History Of World War II*. Readers Digest: London. p.74.

[And in General Freyberg's opinion, [[It] established itself in the Grand Bretagne Hotel. Developed an air of diplomacy and super politeness.<sup>70</sup>

Although accepting British troops, they were to be used to fortify Crete. The major British contribution to Greece were three squadrons of Blenheim fighter-bombers and one squadron of Gloster Gladiator fighters, a biplane that would have been obsolete in any other theatre of war. The British attributed the reluctance of Metaxas to take anymore assistance as due to the influence of Prince Paul. Even a career diplomat such as Alexander Cadogan, frustrated by what he perceived as Greek timidity, expressed his fears in his diary: "I think that these Balkan States are probably wrong but they are all terrified. And it may be that the Germans are hoping to lure a small British force into the Balkans, to destroy it."<sup>71</sup>

The Italian attack on Greece was viewed as an opportunity for the British to retrieve the influence that they had lost after the invasion of France. The wily Metaxas agreed to take British planes and pilots in mainland Greece, and to allow Crete to be used as a Naval base by the Royal Navy and permitted British to take over the defence of the island. However Metaxas was not about to allow the British to become directly involved in the fighting on the Albanian front. No matter how cautious Metaxas was any British involvement in Greece would place the Rumanian oilfields within the range of British bombers. The oil supplies were so important to his invasion of the Soviet Union; Hitler was not going to allow any British threat to them.

During this period after the Italian invasion the British Navy and Army were not inactive. Under the command of Admiral Andrew Cunningham the British Navy in the Mediterranean had cast off its policy of appeasement of the late 1930's and had chased the Italians from the 'Mare nostrum'. British Fairey Swordfish torpedo planes had swept into Taranto harbour and sunk several Italian battleships at their moorings. The Italian warships then fled back to their ports leaving their supply ships without any escorts. This slowed down the sea supply to the Italian ports on the Albanian coast.

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<sup>70</sup> WA II 8 Freyberg Papers. N.A.

Then the lack of railways in Albania ensured that supplies to the front were even slower.

In November 1940, Anthony Eden was in Cairo for discussions with Wavell and his military advisers. He received telegrams from Churchill urging that all effort must now be concentrated upon aid to Greece. It is Charles Cruickshank's opinion that:

Eden and his advisers in North Africa were equally certain that the defence of Egypt must have the first priority, and that no help could be spared for Greece.<sup>72</sup>

On the 1st November Eden said that there was no hope of sending sufficient forces to Greece that would have a significant effect. Churchill, being particularly obtuse insisted that the Greek situation dominated everything else. After dropping veiled hints, Eden was forced to make Churchill aware that General Wavell was about to launch an attack on the Italians in the Western desert. In his memoirs Churchill gives the opinion that he was not aware of the offensive until Eden arrived back in London:

The Secretary of State for War got back home on November 8,... He brought with him the carefully-guarded secret which I wished I had known earlier...No longer were we to await in our fortified lines at Mersa Matruh an Italian assault,... On the contrary, within a month or so we were ourselves to attack.<sup>73</sup>

On the 18 December 1941, in the Western Desert, the British cut around the lines of Italian fortification and outflanked the Italians. What had started off as a raid then developed into a full-blown attack. General Richard O'Connor, by a series of flanking movements, captured Tobruk and then moved onto Benghazi. As the Italians retreated from this position their way was blocked by elements of the 7th Armoured Division. After a gallant fight, the Italians surrendered. The next day the Australians entered Benghazi. For a casualty list of less than 2,000 soldiers, O'Connor's forces "had advanced 800 km, destroyed ten Italian divisions, and taken two fortresses, 130,000

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<sup>71</sup>D Dilkes (ed), p.350.

<sup>72</sup> Cruickshank C. (1975). *Greece 1940-41*. Newark: University of Delaware, p.107.

<sup>73</sup> Churchill, W.S. (1951). *The Second World War Vol II Alone*. Reprint Society. London, p.430.

prisoners, some 400 tanks and over 800 guns.”<sup>74</sup> This was to be the last major military success for the British for almost two years.

Once the British had entered Benghazi, Churchill was of the opinion that the western flank was secure and Wavell was ordered to make plans for the British to enter Europe once more, this time through Greece. This strategy was flawed as the port of Tripoli was left in Italian hands. A force moving from this direction could easily invest Benghazi. As Francis de Guingand points out:

Benghazi is tucked up in the North-West corner of Cyrenaica and therefore could be outflanked and cut off by mobile forces from the Agheila area towards Tobruk.<sup>75</sup>

Early in January 1941 the Italians commenced a second offensive. Like the first one it did not get very far, but it did prevent further Greek penetration of Albania. At the end of January General Metaxas died. With his death, any chance that Hitler was not going to invade vanished. Hitler told Mussolini that he would avenge him in Greece, but reading Hitler’s intention sixty years later, whilst Metaxas was alive Greece was safe from all but a symbolic attack across its Northern borders.<sup>76</sup> The original German attack on Greece, prior to the British involvement, was to be extremely limited. The German army was to invade Greece but only as far as the northern approaches of the Aegean. Admiral Raeder’s Directive No.18 of the 14 November pressed for a more active Mediterranean policy. In the Führer Directive No.20 of the 13 December made it clear that Hitler had only limited aims for the Balkans:

The offensive would begin when weather conditions were favourable - probably in March 1941 - and when the operation was successfully completed most of the troops would be withdrawn elsewhere.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Wright, M (Ed), p.76.

<sup>75</sup> De Guingand, F. (1947) *Operation Victory*. Hodder and Stoughton: London, p.48.

<sup>76</sup> Metaxas was very careful to limit British involvement. The original German plan involved an attack through Bulgaria to Salonika.

<sup>77</sup> Cruikshank, p.77.

Although Metaxas was a soldier, he did understand the necessities of strategy and realised that the British Army could not operate everywhere. Metaxas emphasised that, to defend Greece, any force that the British could send would have to be ten divisions.<sup>78</sup> Metaxas would allow no provocation that would bring Germany into the conflict. Metaxas perhaps had a better understanding of strategy than Churchill did. It is Mott-Radclyffe's opinion that:

He was quite capable of understanding, and the Greek people were quite capable of understanding the strategic and other factors involved including the British inability to come to her (Greece) aid. General Metaxas ended by saying that the quicker the war was won the quicker Greece would be liberated.<sup>79</sup>

With his death Greece lost a skilled politician and soldier. His successor as Prime Minister was Alexandros Koryzis, a banker. Alexandros Koryzis was no strategist he was not even a politician. He was a banker "of great integrity and with little experience of public life, and whose pallid complexion did not suggest a constitution equal to the onerous task which he had assumed."<sup>80</sup>

12 February 1941 was to be a seminal day both the Germans and the British. For as Freyberg was arriving back from England and O'Connor was planning his last offensive, the strategic situation was swinging back to the Germans. General Erwin Rommel arrived in Tripoli. On the same day Anthony Eden and General John Dill the Chief of the Imperial General Staff were leaving Britain on a Sunderland Flying boat for Cairo, Athens and Ankara, in an endeavour to form a Balkan alliance of neutral nations against Hitler. Air travel sixty years ago was far more hazardous and dependent upon the vagaries of the weather. Eden and Dill were held up by bad weather in Gibraltar.<sup>81</sup> Eden initially had doubts about the wisdom of giving extensive aid to Greece. On November 1, 1940 he sent a telegram to Churchill where he stated:

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<sup>78</sup> McClymont, p.101

<sup>79</sup> Mott-Radclyffe, p.56.

<sup>80</sup> Mott-Radclyffe, p.59.

<sup>81</sup> Aeroplanes in the 1940's did not have the endurance to fly above the weather. One of the accompanying planes was lost in the Bay of Biscay.



The best way we can help Greece is by striking at Italy, and we can do that most effectively from areas where our strength has been developed, and where our plans made.<sup>82</sup>

It is obvious that when Eden returned to the Middle East in February 1941 his opinion had changed, either by conviction or by Churchill's persuasive powers.

Eden and Dill wanted to show that they could be as daring as Churchill. When Churchill and the war cabinet for once hesitated, the men in Egypt regarded this as a challenge, which it was no doubt intended to be, and declared their readiness to go forward. No systematic military appreciation was ever made. The decision to intervene in Greece was taken on political and sentimental grounds. Norway all over again.<sup>83</sup>

During this period, the Germans were not idle. The Germans were the mid-wife to a Pact of 'Eternal Friendship' between Turkey and Bulgaria that meant that the Turks would not object if the Germans were to move through Bulgaria. At the same time the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Yugoslavia had visited Hitler at Berchtesgaden where Hitler expounded the advantages of joining the Tripartite Pact. This decision was sealed when Prince Paul the Regent of Yugoslavia put aside his pro-ally stance and also went to Germany to ensure that Yugoslavia was not to be on the losing side.

By the time Eden and Dill finally arrived in the region, circumstances had changed. Prince Paul of Yugoslavia refused to see Eden, and the pragmatic President of Turkey, Inonu:

stressed that Turkey was unprepared for war; she would remain neutral until her military deficiencies were made good – when she might become an effective ally and not a liability.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Churchill, W.S. (1952). *The Second World War – Volume Two. Their Finest Hour*. Reprint Society. London. P.426.

<sup>83</sup> Playfair. P.525.

<sup>84</sup> Freyberg, P., p.480.

On 22 February Eden Dill and Wavell flew to Athens for further talks: with the King George II of the Hellenes, General Alexander Papagos and Alexandros Koryzis at the Royal Palace on the 23 April. At the moment when Churchill was beginning to have doubts about the success of the campaign it was suggested by Wards that Eden who took up Churchill's 'challenge' with enthusiasm and carried along the implementation, disregarding his caution of November 1940. At Tatoi, King George II assured the British that the Greeks would fight anyone who invaded them. However he warned that inadequate assistance would probably precipitate a German attack.<sup>85</sup> At this meeting was a junior staff officer, Francis de Guingand. His observations of Anthony Eden are interesting, with the caveat that he was not privy to all that was discussed at the meeting.

I think it was Eden who stressed and enumerated the "formidable" resources which we were prepared to send over. It sounded pretty good, but if a real expert had carried out a more detailed investigation, I doubt whether those present would have been so satisfied. Totals of men and guns are generally impressive. In the aircraft flying over I had been asked to produce a list showing totals of items we were proposing to send. My first manpower figures excluded such categories as pioneers, and in the gun totals I only produced artillery pieces. This was nothing like good enough for one of Mr. Eden's party who was preparing the brief. He asked that the figures should be swelled with what to my mind were doubtful values.<sup>86</sup>

It was at these meetings that the seeds of the failure of Operation *Lustre*, the allied expedition to Greece – were sown. According to Charles Cruikshank:

Eden's first task was to get the Greeks to accept that the principal defensive position would be the line of the Aliakmon river, a strong natural defensive position in the heart of Greece, where there was thought to be a good chance of stopping the enemy with the available forces.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> McClymont, p.101.

<sup>86</sup> De Guingand, p.57.

<sup>87</sup> Cruikshank, p.101.

The Greeks were loath to withdraw to the Aliakmon River. This would mean abandoning the Metaxas line, a series of forts on the Bulgarian border, yet any invader entering from Yugoslavia could turn the Aliakmon line and the other proposed line running from the river Nestos. Therefore Eden's suggestion that the Greeks should start withdrawing troops to the Aliakmon line was received sullenly, especially as this withdrawal should be taken unilaterally of any action or attitude of Yugoslavia and Turkey.<sup>88</sup> Eden then, inadvertently gave the Greeks a means of opting out. He suggested that he send a British staff officer to Belgrade to discuss co-operation with the Yugoslavs. This was accepted readily by the Greeks because: "it would put off the evil day when they had to reveal to the world that they had invited the British to send an expedition...."<sup>89</sup> This opportunity to temporise meant that no effort was made to withdraw to the Aliakmon line. It was at the Tatoi Palace meeting that the ebullient Eden allowed political considerations to take precedence over military ones when he finally convinced the Greeks to accept British military aid, de Guingand describes when:

Eden came in [to the ante-room] looking buoyant. He strode over to the fire and warmed his hands, and then stood with his back to it dictating signals to his staff. They in turn looked nearly as triumphant as he did, and were positively oozing congratulations. Presumably he had done his job, and accomplished what he had set out to achieve. He was, therefore, no doubt entitled to be pleased with himself. But whether it was a job worth doing and in our best interests seemed to me very doubtful.<sup>90</sup>

As Eden moved between Cairo, Athens and Ankara the cabinet met in London, Churchill said that both Eden and Wavell wanted to send troops to Greece:

He thought they had made out an impressive case, particularly since Wavell was a man who always wanted to be better than his word. His opinion carried particularly great weight since his first wish must be to finish off the North African campaign.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The Greeks were hoping that the Yugoslavs and Turks would form an alliance once the Germans entered the Balkans.

<sup>89</sup> Cruikshank, p.102.

<sup>90</sup> De Guingand, p.59.

<sup>91</sup> Cruikshank, pp.105-106.

Churchill never slow in dropping other names to reinforce his argument also stated that General Dill had been cautious about any incursion in Greece because he doubted whether the Germans could be resisted, but now Dill was in favour of this action. Churchill also met with Colonel Donovan, President Roosevelt's personal messenger. Donovan passed on Roosevelt's opinion that if Britain abandoned Greece to its own devices it would be viewed adversely in the United States.<sup>92</sup> Britain was expected to unite the countries in a common cause and form a Balkan front. Churchill expressed the opinion that all of his War Cabinet had:

[D]eclared themselves in favour of sending armed help to Greece, subject only to clearance with the governments of Australia and New Zealand, since most of the troops earmarked for the operation came from those countries.<sup>93</sup>

Then when Eden again returned to Athens for further talks:

He was astonished to learn 'that the Greek government had failed to carry out the agreement reached on the 22nd February at Tatoi and that the order for the withdrawal of troops from Macedonia had not yet been given'.<sup>94</sup>

The Greeks were procrastinating and any movement they were about to make depended upon the Yugoslav Foreign Minister's reply to the Foreign Secretary. The backbone seems to have gone out of Papagos since the death of Metaxas: "[H]e suggested that the British troops should be sent piecemeal to Macedonia, although he thought it unlikely that they would arrive in time to be of any use."<sup>95</sup> Churchill then sought advice from a man he admired, General Jan Smuts once an enemy but now a close confidant "arriving in Cairo, contributed the loud sounding nothings of which he was master".<sup>96</sup> He convinced Churchill that the Greek expedition had a good chance of success. In Smuts opinion:

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<sup>92</sup> Churchill was awaiting the outcome of the United States decision whether to pass the 'Lend-Lease' bill in the Houses of Congress.

<sup>93</sup> Cruikshank, p.107.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Note. WA II 3/16. N.A.

<sup>95</sup> Cruikshank, p.109.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor, p.525.

A firm British front in the Balkans would transform the situation in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean basin...I would thus urge most strongly that this new front be supported with all our strength.<sup>97</sup>

To ensure that the British High Command could use the New Zealand Division in Operation *Lustre*, Ian Wards believed that the British Government used a degree of duplicity in their dealing with the New Zealand Government.<sup>98</sup> For Wards<sup>99</sup>, and also Kippenberger, the duplicity was Churchill and Eden giving the impression that the British Government could achieve a successful coalition of Greeks, Turks and Yugoslavs, when asking for military assistance from the Dominions. Wards wrote in pencil in the margin of Page two of Butler's letter:

Duplicity is between HMG and HMNZG. There is no doubt of this what ever it is called. As between Churchill – Eden and HMG, it was not duplicity. Churchill ruled here and Cabinet followed. Menzies and Andersen have both stated that Cabinet played small part in decision.<sup>100</sup>

In a letter from Professor Butler, head of the British Government's Historical Section of the Cabinet Office date 4 October 1955 to Sir Howard Kippenberger, Butler queries Ian Wards use of the word duplicity in the draft narrative when referring to Churchill's transactions with the New Zealand Government. Butler wrote: "Does it mean that Mr Wards thinks that relevant evidence is missing, and suggests that before Eden started Churchill gave him instructions somewhat different from his written ones?"<sup>101</sup>

The New Zealand Division was saved from any more British attempts to break it up, by the decision to send it, the Australian 6th Division with elements of the British Army to Greece. On 10 January 1941, in a telegram from Churchill to General Wavell he says in the third paragraph:

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<sup>97</sup> Cruikshank, p.113.

<sup>98</sup> Butler, J.R..M. to Kippenberger, H.K.K., letter 4 October 1955. WA II 3/16.N.A.

<sup>99</sup> I.McL. Wards was a narrator in the War History Branch and as such was responsible with W.G. McClymont for the publication of the War History *To Greece*.

<sup>100</sup> Butler to Kippenberger 4.10.1955. WA II 3/16.N.A.

<sup>101</sup> Butler to Kippenberger 4.10.1955. WA II 3/16.N.A.

Nothing must hamper the capture of Tobruk, thereafter all operations in Libya are subordinated to aiding Greece, and all preparations must be made from the receipt of this telegram for the immediate succour of Greece up to the limits prescribed.<sup>102</sup>

Eden found a ready ally in General Wavell. It is General Wavell who plays one of the most enigmatic moiety in the implementation of the campaign:

The Greeks were going to defend themselves against the Germans then we should bring them what help we could and Dill and I were sent out after Wavell's victory at Cairo to look into this. When we got there Wavell said "and I hope you wont' mind what I have got to say. I didn't think I ought to waste time and I have begun the movement of troops and the concentration to enable us to go to Greece."<sup>103</sup>

However it is General Playfair's opinion that General Wavell "...hoped...that there was always a possibility that the Germans would not decide to occupy Greece."<sup>104</sup>

Wavell further compounded The British Government's duplicity by giving the impression in his communications with the Australian and New Zealand Government's that Blamey and Freyberg were better informed than they were about the risks in the campaign. He informed the New Zealand and Australian Governments that he had seen both General Blamey and Freyberg on the afternoon of the 17 February 1941: "Both had been apprised of the situation and the greater risk. Both appeared to face this risk and shown no signs of backing down."<sup>105</sup> Whereas Freyberg's recollection was: "My opinion was never asked....[I] Never expected to be asked my opinion by C.I.C. [Commander in Chief]. He was far from co-operative: he had a secrecy mania."<sup>106</sup> Both Generals Blamey and Freyberg were assured that their Governments had been apprised, and approved of the move of a significant portion of their forces into Greece, but as Paul Freyberg comments:

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<sup>102</sup> Quoted in: Churchill, W.S. (1952). *The Second World War II Their Finest Hour*. Reprint Society: London, p.17.

<sup>103</sup> Sir Anthony Eden, Lord Avon. Interviewed for *World at War - Britain Alone May 1940 - June 1941*. Thames Television 1973. Writer Laurence Thompson, Producers: Jeremy Isaacs and David Elstein.

<sup>104</sup> Playfair. P.220-1

<sup>105</sup> Long, G. Commentaries on Playfair. I.S.O. *The War in the Mediterranean and the Middle East Vol I.* WA II 3/16. N.A.

<sup>106</sup> Freyberg to McClymont. letter 15 November 1949. WA II 3/16. N.A.

In fact the situation was far more complicated, with both Freyberg and the New Zealand government believing the other to be better informed about the situation than was the case.<sup>107</sup>

As a General with Pro-Consul responsibilities in the middle-east, Wavell was accustomed to dealing with 'quasi' independent Governments and it would have been little different for Wavell to perceive the New Zealand and Australian Governments in this manner.

The New Zealand Government was doubtful about the size of the Force being sent, given the smaller Greek commitment to the Aliakmon line defensive line, the Australian and New Zealand Governments had yet to agree to the commitment of their forces this far north in Greece. "[B]ut agreed without hesitation that their Division should be employed."<sup>108</sup> The New Zealand Government was proud of its Division and was keen to play its part in the survival of the British Empire. The New Zealand government's motives were: "[a] mixture of duty to UK, determination to win the war, a sense of obligation as a free nation and concern over the division"<sup>109</sup>. The Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, who had spent a lot of time with Churchill during this period, believed the decision to send troops was based on the judgement of Eden, Dill and their advisers in the Middle East. Churchill emphasised to Eden:

[T]hat he had made no case for the operation other than *noblesse oblige*. A precise military appreciation was indispensable if the Australians and the New Zealanders were to be convinced that Lustre should go ahead.<sup>110</sup>

Ian Wards the Chief Historian of the Historical Publications Branch of the Internal Affairs, and narrator of the Official New Zealand History of the Second World War 1939-45 The Greek Campaign was of the opinion that Freyberg also had deliberately misled the New Zealand Government. Writing to McClymont on 22 February 1955:

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<sup>107</sup> Freyberg, P., p.238.

<sup>108</sup> Cruickshank, p.107.

<sup>109</sup> I. McL. Wards to W.G. McClymont, undated note. WA II 3/16.N.A.

<sup>110</sup> Cruickshank, p..107.

He had given his views freely to the NZ Government before – why not this time? His Charter was no accident.... Freyberg wanted to get his division into action as a complete division as soon as possible. In Africa at this time this would have meant dispersion of units which Freyberg disliked. Greece gave the opportunity as a complete division.<sup>111</sup>

As a serving officer in the British Army now placed in command of another nation's army Freyberg was in an invidious position. His dilemma was on one hand, his loyalty to the New Zealand Government. Its Charter required that he inform the New Zealand Government about any doubts that he had about a campaign, on the other hand, he was a serving British officer with a requisite loyalty to the British High Command. Notwithstanding his position on the British Army List; as a major general in the hierarchical British Army, his was a junior rank compared to a full general. He was aware that his superior officer, General Wavell was already going over his and Blamey's heads and communicating directly with the New Zealand and Australian governments. "Wavell had established the right to deal directly with the New Zealand Government, without letting me know what was happening...."<sup>112</sup> Or so Freyberg thought, the actual channel was Eden, Churchill, the Dominion Office and the New Zealand Government.<sup>113</sup> Freyberg also wanted to lead his Division into battle and whilst in Egypt his Division was under constant threat of being broken up and dispersed. Freyberg as shown later in his concern about the Aliakmon line preferred working through the 'military system' before invoking New Zealand's charter. Yet after the Campaign Freyberg maintained that he had his doubts about going to Greece. Fraser wrote from Egypt in June 1941:

[I] am surprised to learn from Freyberg that he never considered the operation a feasible one, though, as I pointed out to him, his telegram to us conveyed a contrary impression.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ward to McClymont letter, 22 February 1955. WA 11 3/16 N.A.

<sup>112</sup> McClymont, p.99.

<sup>113</sup> McClymont, p.99.

<sup>114</sup> Fraser to New Zealand Government, Cable 7 June 1941. WA 11 3/16. N.A.



Freyberg certainly did not show any doubts in his cable No. 271 on 13 January 1941. "Still think as I did in 250 [Cable] of 7 November 1940, that Greece must be added to list of countries we might be called upon to defend"<sup>115</sup> and this is reinforced by his letter of 6 March 1941:

I wonder who gave us the order to come. If we did not send help to Greece all the Balkans would have gone into the Axis... ...I feel the Germans don't want to fight in the direction so from that point of view it will be to the good.<sup>116</sup>

In another letter to McClymont dated 20 March 1953 Wards details the time scale of his notification:

General Freyberg was told on 17/2 he was going to Greece he had not told his Gov't. Freyberg wanted to go into action with the Division – took it upon himself responsibility of agreeing that the division would go in without first informing the New Zealand Government.<sup>117</sup>

Freyberg then took five days until before he notified Fraser on 23 February (Cable 274). On 24 April, Freyberg told his Brigadiers that the Division was going to Greece. At 5.15 p.m. New Zealand time 26 February 1941, the New Zealand Government agreed to send the Division to Greece. Whatever his emotion on the 17 February 1941 when he was instructed to prepare to go to Greece Freyberg believed that his first loyalty was to the British Army and he went along with Wavell's decision and did not communicate his doubts to the New Zealand Government.<sup>118</sup>

Although the majority of combatant troops were Australians and New Zealanders a British general Lieutenant General Maitland Wilson was appointed the commander of the force for Operation *Lustre*. General O'Connor, the victor in the western desert was the first choice but Eden thought Wilson's imposing build would impress the Greeks.

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<sup>115</sup> Freyberg to NZ Government, Cable 271 13 January 1941. The Freyberg Papers WA II 8/10. N.A.

<sup>116</sup> Freyberg to Wife, Letter 6 March 1941, The Freyberg Papers.

<sup>117</sup> I.McL Wards to McClymont, letter dated 20 March 1953. The Freyberg Papers.

<sup>118</sup> I.McL Wards to McClymont, letter dated 15 November 1949. W.A. II 3/16. N.A.

Freyberg states that Eden commented "As Freyberg and Blamey are such strong characters, I think we should pick Wilson."<sup>119</sup>. Freyberg opinion on this comment was:

Notwithstanding our being strong characters, we were never consulted in either the general detailed planning of the Greek campaign. Although when we got there we were given an impossible task and told to make it work, and when it went to bits we had to shoulder the whole burden of bad policy decisions and the lack of proper staff work.<sup>120</sup>

No matter the effect that: Wavell, Eden, Freyberg and Blamey had in ensuring that W Force went to Greece. they were subordinates in a larger drama. The three principle personalities that were responsible for the strategic decisions that brought about the Greek campaign:

Hitler, who decided that an attack on the Soviet Union in mid 1941 was more strategically advantageous, than pursuing the Mediterranean policy advocated by Admiral Raeder. The British attack on the Italians in Libya was a minor distraction to Hitler, which he dealt with by sending General Rommel and two German divisions to distract the British.

Mussolini, whose vain unilateral action almost brought chaos to Hitler's plan for the invasion of the Soviet Union, had it not been for Mussolini, the Balkans would have remained quiescent. His action confirmed to the British that Mussolini could not be acting on his own initiative and that Hitler intended to make a strike through the Mediterranean towards British possession and interests in the Middle East.

Churchill, whose emotional response to Mussolini's invasion overrode his strategic and military common sense. The Italian attack on Greece enabled him to initiate his policy of striking at the primary antagonist through the weaker secondary antagonist. His power of his personality and oratory enabled him to overrule his senior generals and advisers.

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<sup>119</sup> Freyberg's comments in letter to McClymont 15/11/49.

<sup>120</sup> Freyberg's comments in letter to McClymont 15/11/49.

These men and the decisions of others had contrived that a British force comprising of a New Zealand division an Australian division, and a British armoured brigade, was returning to Europe a year since a significantly larger force with greater air elements was bundled out. They were destined not to remain there for long.

# CHAPTER THREE

## FLIGHTING TO GREECE.

The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece!  
Where burning Sappho loved and sung,  
Where grew the arts of war and peace  
*Byron Don Juan Canto III 86 3*



On 29 March 1941, the majority of the New Zealand Division of the 2nd NZEF, for the first time in its existence had unified in Greece. The Division had travelled to the Port of Piraeus by sea in a series of flights.<sup>121</sup> This somewhat ramshackle lift of troops was brought about by the mining of the Suez Canal that had left several military transports on the Red Sea side of the Canal. The first flights on 6 and 7 March travelled on British cruisers. "Some units enjoyed the comparative luxury of travel on the fast cruisers, but others had to endure a slow crossing on small cargo vessels."<sup>122</sup> Charles Upham who was then a Second Lieutenant in C Company 20 Battalion was fortunate to cross the Mediterranean in a fast destroyer was glad to leave Egypt. For the New Zealanders, Greece, was a balm to the eyes and the soul after the heat, dust and flies of Egypt. Unlike the Egyptians, the people were extremely friendly, the young women were pretty and chaste, and the alcohol was cheap and potent. As many Greeks had lived in the United States a surprising number of them spoke English. Charles Upham spent an evening at the nightclub 'Maxines', which was also frequented by the staff of the German Embassy. Sometime during the evening a New Zealander stole some pyjamas as souvenirs from the German Embassy.<sup>123</sup>

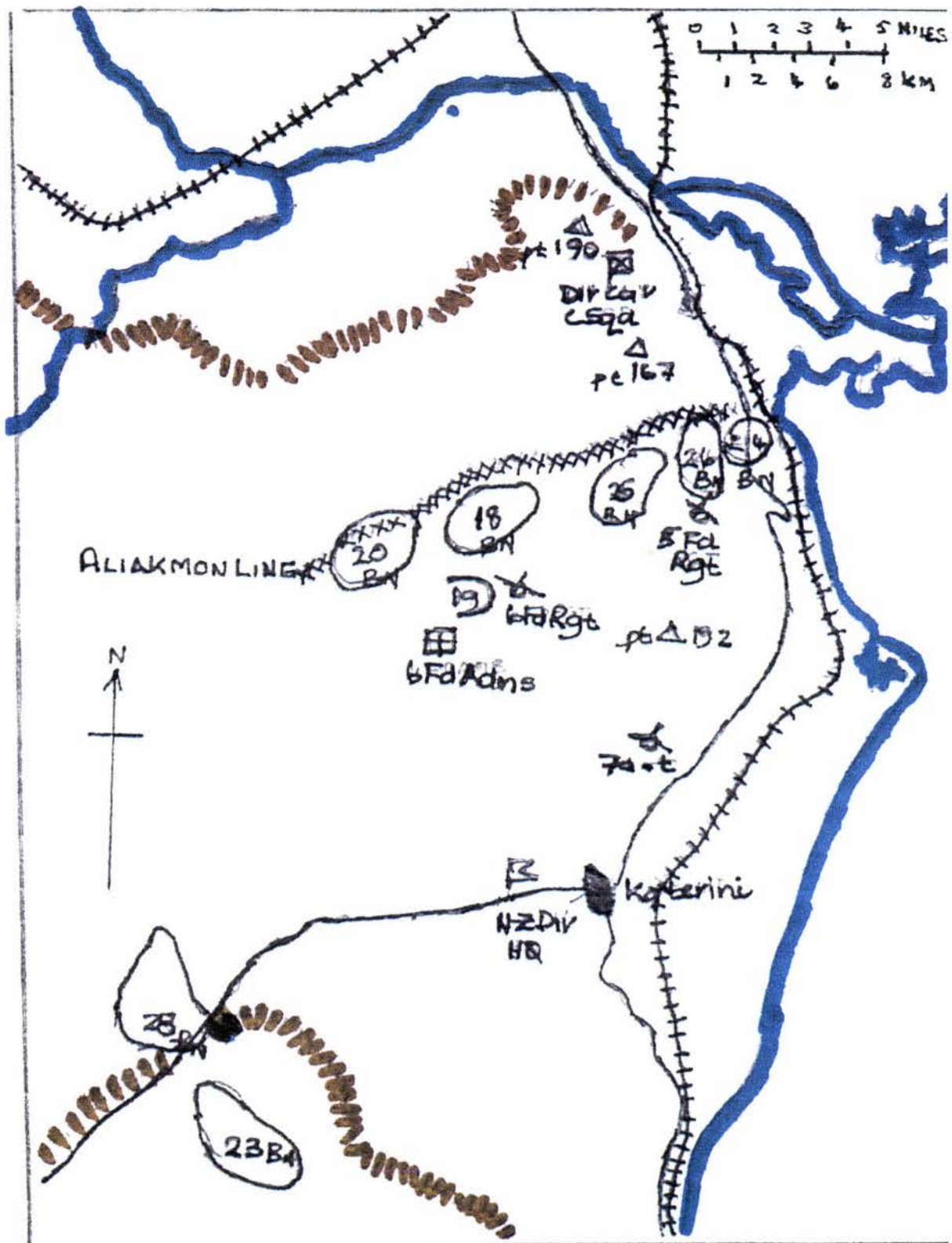
The commander of the force, Maitland Wilson had a difficult, disparate command. The Generals in command of both Australian and New Zealand contingents had doubts about his ability and were sensitive to the welfare of their soldiers. He also had to co-operate with his nominal superior General A. Papagos; a man whose heart, as it later transpired, was no longer in the conflict. Even had Papagos been more enthusiastic, the condition of the Greek Army, made it difficult for his forces to conform to the Commonwealth mechanised forces. Wilson was also disadvantaged by the political considerations of the campaign in that he was forced to await the German attack before he could act, whereas his opponent General Wilhelm List had the choice of where, when and what forces to use and the choice of the axes of advance. The German army also had the advantage of internal lines of supply whereas the Commonwealth force was dependent upon a ramshackle supply line.

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<sup>121</sup> Flight: although somewhat confusing is the correct technical term for this type of movement.

<sup>122</sup> McClymont, p.120.

<sup>123</sup> Charles Upham to Tony Simpson, Interview (1979). Oht 0200 collection. Alexander Turnbull Library archives.



Dispositions on the Aliakmon Line as at 6 April 1941.

As the New Zealand battalions made their way up to the Aliakmon line many New Zealanders commented on how much Greek countryside resembled that of New Zealand, it was spring and spring flowers were beginning to bloom.<sup>124</sup> What the New Zealanders also noticed and commented on were the troop trains full of Greek soldiers going in the opposite direction. This was prior to the ten days leave over Easter, but several of the interviewees commented upon this fact. The New Zealand Division's problems were compounded when the 19th Greek Division on the right flank of the New Zealanders was moved forward and instead of a front of ten miles (16 kilometres) the New Zealanders would be expected to hold a line of fifteen miles (24 kilometres). The Division, less 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade as Corps Reserve behind the Veroia Pass, would be responsible for the quadrilateral area between Miliki, Neon Enevtheronkhorion, Katerini and Mega Enevtherokhorion.<sup>125</sup>

When Germany declared War simultaneously on Yugoslavia and Greece on 6 April 1941, the majority of the New Zealand Division was sitting on the Aliakmon line. The 4th and 6th Brigades were sitting slightly north of Neon Enevtheronkhorion with the Divisional Cavalry forming a screen north of this position. The 5th Brigade was in the Olympus pass area preparing defences in this region. West of this position was the Greek 12th Division and the Greek 20th Division. The former held the line south of Veliki to north of Ptolemais and the latter continued the line to the Yugoslav border on the slopes of Mount Kaimakchalan. Twelve Greek infantry divisions, three independent infantry brigades and one cavalry division were on the Albanian front; their right flank on Lake Ochrida and the left flank anchored on the Albanian coastal town of Himare. On the Metaxas line, a series of 'Maginot' style camouflaged forts commanding the main passes south of the Bulgarian border. At the border were the Greek 19th, 14th and 7th Divisions with elements of the 18th Division. Most of the 6th Australian Division had also arrived directly from Libya. The "16 Brigade was taking over the pass at Veroia from Greeks, 19 Brigade was moving up from Piraeus and 17 Brigade was about to leave Alexandria."<sup>126</sup> The British 1st Armoured Brigade was in the Edhessa-Vevi area north of Lake Vegorritis.

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<sup>124</sup> Several of the interviewees commented on the similarity to New Zealand. For more descriptions see: McClymont, p.124 and in the draft narrative: WA II 3/16.N.A.

<sup>125</sup> McClymont, p.123.

<sup>126</sup> McClymont, p.150.

An army has to be supplied and every third day a convoy from Egypt arrived at the port of Piraeus. Piraeus is the closest port to Athens and from the day that war was declared, was vulnerable to air attacks from the *Luftwaffe*. On Sunday 9 April every berth in Piraeus harbour was taken up with ships from the convoy AFN 24. Because of the lack of co-operation between the Royal Naval liaison officers and the Greek harbour authorities, the Greek stevedores stopped loading the ships with the coming of nightfall. At 9.00 p.m. the *Luftwaffe* attacked the Port of Piraeus dropping bombs and aerial mines. One of the ships to be hit and damaged was the partially unloaded *Clan Fraser*, still carrying two hundred and fifty tons of ammunition on board. At this moment Brigadier G.S. (Bruno) Brunskill the senior British Officer in charge of the Logistics of Operation *Lustre* was having dinner with his Greek opposite number at the Hotel Bretagne. Driving down to Piraeus he was told by the Royal Naval port contingent that although the bombing had missed two warships, the *Calcutta* and the *Ajax*, the ammunition ship, SS *Clan Fraser* had been hit and severely damaged.

Brunskill was surprised that, apart from a company of New Zealand soldiers and a small contingent of British sailors, no other group was doing any thing about minimising the risk from the burning *Clan Fraser*. With the help of the New Zealanders the sailors pulled other merchantmen along the wharf, away from the doomed ship. After summoning and handing over command to the Port Admiral. Brigadier Brunskill went back to the Hotel. At four o'clock in the morning he heard the explosion of the *Clan Fraser* blowing up. The irrepressible Brunskill then returned to Piraeus where he was confronted with a scene of absolute devastation.

The damage was terrific. Sheds and offices, equipment and rolling stock were wrecked; six merchant ships, twenty lighters and one tug were burnt out and another ship sunk by an aerial mine. The port was closed for two days for clearing and reorganisation, but the damage to the facilities for unloading was a problem for the rest of the campaign.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> McClymont, p.161.



An attack that should have caused only minor damage was transformed by the incompetence of the Greek Port Authorities and the Royal Navy liaison personnel into a disaster that affected the problems of supply for the rest of the campaign.

Part of the agreement at the conference at King George's Palace at Tatoi was that the rest of the Anzac force would move up to the Aliakmon line and the Greeks would move back from Epirus to conform to the Anzac positions.<sup>128</sup> This defensive position of over sixteen miles (twenty-six kilometres) was so long that companies held positions that normally should have been allocated to a battalion. The 24 Battalion had arrived on 29 March replacing the Greek troops who then moved west. Captain D. G. Morrison's Waikato Company held a front of 1200 yards (1100 metres). His was the most easterly position, right on the beach.

My own company in fact holding the eastern [position] and including the beach, the north-south railway and main road. ...[W]e knew nothing of what happened on the Australian and British 1st Armoured Brigade sector further west, nor of the effort of the Greeks.<sup>129</sup>

The railway, the road and the tank ditch had bridges over them. When Morrison asked for mines "to cover the beach where there was no Anti-tank defence, [I] was told there were none available." At one point there was a five-kilometre gap (5,500 yards) between 4th Brigade and the sector held by the Greek 12th Division. To make matters worse, there was only enough wire and sandbags for the 4th brigade the 6th having to make do with what came to hand.

Lieutenant General Wilson indulging in imperturbability to the point of complacency insisted that any attack on the Metaxas line would devolve around the town of Edhessa, between Salonika and Florina. Although it is in a pass, the pass runs east to west and not north to south. What he based this opinion on is not disclosed, nor was it substantiated by subsequent occurrences. These beliefs in his own strategic ability gave him the assurance

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<sup>128</sup> For more detail on the conference and the misunderstanding about the withdrawal of Greek troops to the Aliakmon line. See McClymont, pp 100-105.

<sup>129</sup> D.G. Morrison to Author, letter dated 15 April 2003, p.2.

<sup>129</sup> D.G. Morrison, p.3

to release the Greek 19th Motorised Division from the central sector of the front and replace it with the Greek 6th Brigade. Telling Freyberg:

You may not like this but it can't be helped. It is imperative that they be released for service NE [Neon Elevtherokhorion].<sup>130</sup>

Freyberg never had much faith in Wilson's ability as a general. He had known Maitland Wilson since their Camberley days at Staff College and "he regarded Jumbo [Wilson] as an amiable 'yes man', one that would always bend in the wind and side with those in authority".<sup>131</sup> Up to this moment, Generals Blamey and Freyberg had not been involved in or consulted about the strategic discussions between Maitland Wilson and the senior Greek commander General Papagos. From the very beginning of Operation Lustre, Freyberg, the most optimistic of men had his doubts about the Aliakmon line position and made his opinion known to Maitland Wilson. Freyberg was doubtful about the New Zealanders' ability to hold a defensive line that was sixteen miles long.

[B]linded by woods of stunted oak, and could be turned by the empty high ground on our left. It was vulnerable to infiltration tactics and I was very thankful that we never had to fight on it.<sup>132</sup>

Even had the Aliakmon line been a good defensive position, once the Germans turned the flank at the Monastir Gap, the position became untenable. However the quiet period gave the division time to dig fortifications and train and practise tactics during the fine days of early spring. The problems of the line were compounded by the difficulty of getting the Greek Army to retreat to the Aliakmon position. The New Zealand Division was expected to remain behind the 'anti-tank' ditch that ran intermittently in front of their positions. It was Freyberg's opinion that this line was only defensible for two days and it would be preferable to prepare defences in the Mount Olympus area.<sup>133</sup> Freyberg was not idle in the time leading up to the invasion. On the 18 March two companies of 18 Battalion had been

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<sup>130</sup> McClymont, p.136.

<sup>131</sup> Freyberg P, p.247.

<sup>132</sup> Kippenberger, H. Sir. (1961). *Infantry Brigadier*. Oxford University Press: London, p.18

<sup>133</sup> Kippenberger to McClymont, letter: The expression 'derided the dispositions on the Aliakmon line' is used. .WA II 3/16 [181/42/3] N.A.

sent back to prepare positions in the Olympus pass. On the 19 March when Blamey arrived in Athens and sent up a staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel H.Wells, to tour the line, Wells was “impressed by the unwisdom of trying to hold broken country north of Katerine instead of the passes to south.”<sup>134</sup> On 23 March when General Blamey visited the Aliakmon line for the first time Freyberg told him that:

[H]olding a front of 25,000 yards with 2 infantry brigades and one Field Artillery Regiment with no a-t guns...we would not be able to defend ourselves against tanks.<sup>135</sup>

After viewing the position with Freyberg, General Blamey agreed so strongly with Freyberg about the defence lines and so lacked confidence in the defences of the Aliakmon position, that he was determined to order a withdrawal to the Mount Olympus pass area once he became Corps Commander.

When the Germans did invade on the 6 April, the Greeks still had not moved their forces back to the Aliakmon line. General Papagos recollection was that the inertia of the Greek Army was not due to any political pressure but the Greek Army was awaiting the Yugoslav Government to clarify their intentions:

I insisted however that before commencing such a final decision as would be the evacuation of the whole region east of the Axios (Vardar) and the abandonment of the defences, this portion of national territory, the attitudes of Yugoslavia should be completely clarified, and I proposed that the Yugoslav Government be informed of the decisions...we were perforce to be dependent on the policy they would adopt.<sup>136</sup>

In the preface to the English edition of Papagos's book Cyril Falls comments:

The Greek General Staff in February were obviously on the horns of a dilemma whether to withdraw to the Aliakmon line, thereby destroying all hope of a Yugoslav intervention once

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid 181/42/3.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 181/42/3.

<sup>136</sup> Papagos,A. (1946).. *The German Attack on Greece*. Synopsis. Greek Office of Information: London, WA II 3/16 Vol 2. N.A, p.265.

Salonika was abandoned; or to risk waiting until the last moment in the hope of Yugoslavia coming in.<sup>137</sup>

This meeting was held prior to Dill's and Eden's visit to Ankara. Papagos was at pains to point out to them: that first, any decision to move would depend upon the attitude of the Yugoslav Government and second, any withdrawal to the Aliakmon line would take at least twenty days for the predominantly non-mechanised Greek Army. Eden and Dill were apparently unaware, or did not hear, this codicil about the withdrawal to the Aliakmon line and when Eden and Dill returned to Athens in March, both were horrified to hear that the Greek Army had still not moved to the Aliakmon positions. However it appears that Major General T.G. Heywood, an Army member of the original Operation *Barbarity*, was aware of this, for from the 22 March until the 4 April he was constantly queried by General Papagos whether any answer had been received from Yugoslavia about its movements and disposition.<sup>138</sup>

Because of the political and military constraints, coupled with his own shortcomings as a commander, Maitland Wilson was never able to take a proper grip on the situation. As he was unsure what the Yugoslavs were going to do, he insisted that the forward Aliakmon line positions be held. Even after the Serbian officers' coup, when the Yugoslavs were still wavering about joining the allies; Wilson was still waiting for the Yugoslav decision to defend the Monastir Gap, an important strategic egress. Ultimately Wilson expected the Yugoslav's to defend the 'Gap', and consequently did not make any dispositions there. On the afternoon of 7 April, Maitland Wilson came to visit the Aliakmon position. He met with Freyberg, Blamey and the Australian General Mackay, who were already there and he acceded to Blamey's "original opinion that the brigades should be withdrawn to the passes about Mount Olympus"<sup>139</sup> as they were the stronger positions.<sup>140</sup>

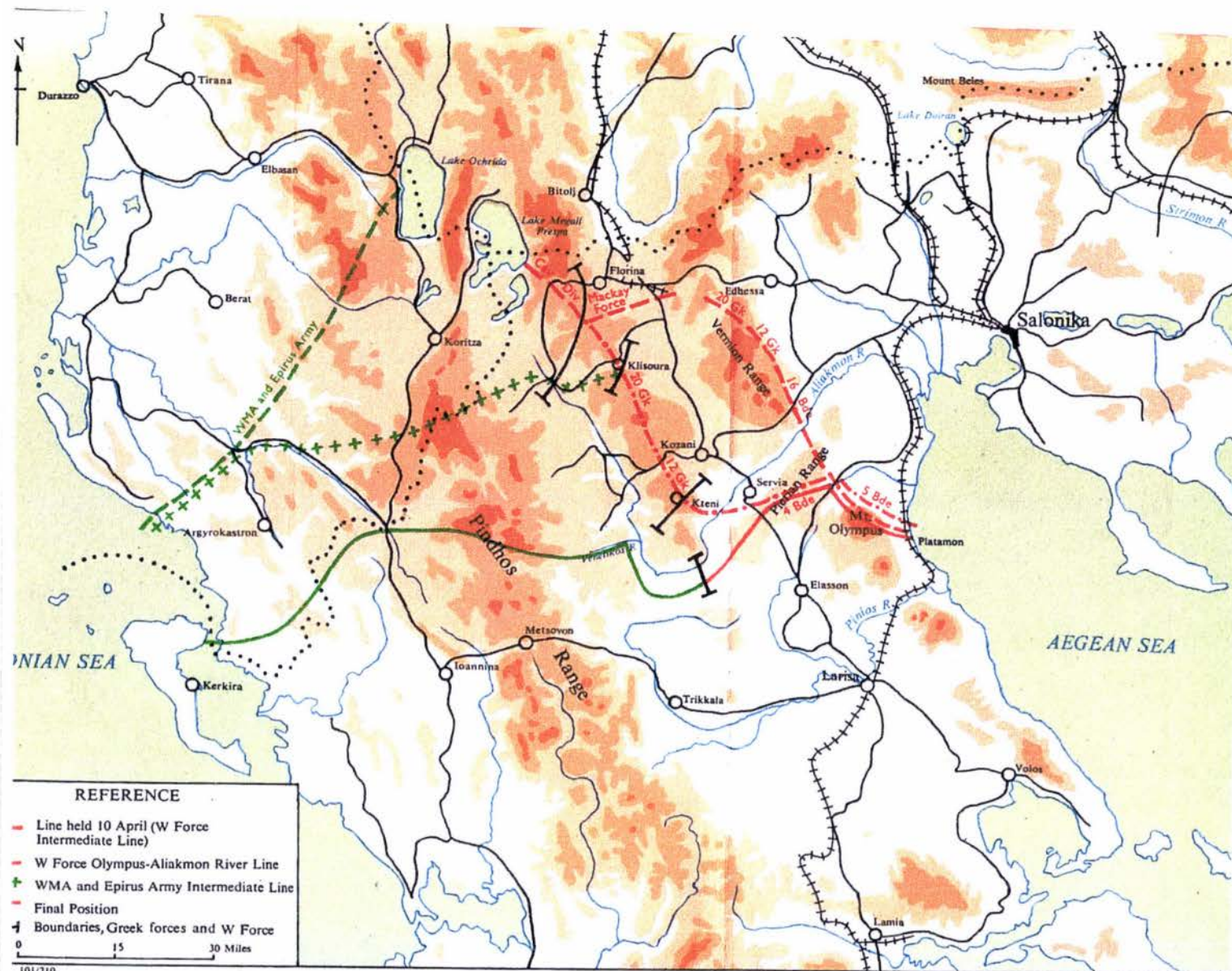
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<sup>137</sup> Papagos. Introduction. synopsis. WA II 3/216.

<sup>138</sup> McClymont, p.162.

<sup>139</sup> Freyberg, B. *Report by the GOC NZEF Major General Feyberg on the Campaign in Greece*. WA III/1 DA 401.21.3. N.A. Appendices, p.10

<sup>140</sup> The Olympus pass defences were a compromise position to the Aliakmon line.



Planned Positions. 11-14 April 1941

Drawn by Lands & Survey De

It was Freyberg's opinion that this decision to withdraw probably saved the Division from being outflanked and spending the rest of the War in a Prisoner of War camp.<sup>141</sup> The withdrawal was at the cost of a lot of wasted work and telecommunication wiring:

The New Zealanders, after wasting a month preparing the line, would have to leave a large proportion of their wire and mines alongside the anti-tank ditch.<sup>142</sup>

The 4th Brigade was sent to the Servia Pass area and 6th Brigade was withdrawn into reserve positions behind the Olympia and Servia Passes. This is a move that should have been done a month earlier and it reflects the 'haphazard' British approach to the whole campaign. There was no meeting of minds or synchronicity of action. The British

<sup>141</sup> McClymont, p.163.

<sup>142</sup> McClymont, p.163.

Generals disagreed with the Greek disposition of forces. Generals' Blamey, Freyberg and Mackay disagreed with the British dispositions, but did not have the authority to act. General Maitland Wilson had been following a course of prevarication. It was the opinion of Major General K.L. Stewart that Wilson was compelled by political pressure, to hold the Aliakmon line until the Germans attacked Greece and Yugoslavia, and the defence lines were predicated on the behaviour of the Yugoslavs. Major Stewart, Freyberg's chief of staff was of the opinion that:

General Wilson ...knowing that rearward positions were in preparation, that Katerine railhead was available, expecting the main attack on the left of his line and that the Greeks in the Metaxas line would impose some delay, deliberately refrained from ordering NZ div (sic) to retire until last moment. The document makes it clear he did not expect NZ div to fight in its forward position.<sup>143</sup>

Although it now appears that the Commonwealth Force in Greece was there for reasons primarily political and as deterrence. It now became more imperative, as a conflict was approaching, to take up defensible positions instead of deferring to Greek wishes. Notwithstanding Wilson's stated belief that there would be a 'blitzkrieg' in the Monastir Gap, which runs south from the town of Bitolji (known by the Turks as Monastir) in the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia across the Greek border at Florina and onto the town of Kozani and ends only a short distance from Servia on the Aliakmon River. At the time of the German invasion on 6 April there were negligible forces defending the passes from Monastir (Bitolji) to Kozani in Greece.

If the Germans could force this pass, they would outflank the Commonwealth forces on the Aliakmon river and the Mount Olympus passes and the Greek Army confronting the Italians outside Vlone. Any opportunity for the Commonwealth and Greek forces to withdraw to another defensive position would be severely limited. Conversely, the Monastir gap is a natural defensive position. It is in mountainous country with narrow roads spanning rivers on equally narrow bridges. The pass is particularly narrow at Vevi:

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<sup>143</sup> Major General Stewart to I. McL Wards, letter dated 4 July 1950. WA II 3/16.N.A.

To the west steep hills rise to more than 3,000 feet; east of the pass, the lakes Vegorritis and Petron lie across the path of an advance over the foothills. The pass itself varied in width from 100 to 500 yards and followed a winding course through a defile flanked by steep rock-strewn hills with few trees.<sup>144</sup>

The failure of the senior Greek and British generals to allocate more troops to the Monastir Gap can be directly attributable to two things. First, a fortress mentality; if a country prepares defences in a particular area then there is an expectation that the enemy will attack in that area. Secondly, a belief that the Yugoslav Army would hold this position if attacked, and if not attacked, would deter the Germans from coming by this route and defend their side of the border in which the 'Gap' was situated.<sup>145</sup> Unfortunately the Germans had shown a tendency to avoid the conventional method of attack.

On 6 April invading from Bulgaria, the Germans met a different type of resistance from the Greeks to that of the Yugoslavs. Contrary to expectations, the Greek forts manned by regular troops, refused to surrender immediately; the 'Hellas' fort held out for 36 hours and only succumbed after the entire artillery of the German *XXX Corps* had been in action against it. The 'Ekhnos' fort held out for several days in the German rear.<sup>146</sup> Although the German plans were inconvenienced for a short time by Greek gallantry, it did not hold the Germans for very long. On 6 April the Germans cut the Salonika-Serrai railway at Rhodopoles. On 7 April the *5th Mountain Division* broke through the Metaxas line west of the Rupel pass. By 8 April the resistance in Yugoslavia had been broken. The *Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler* division wheeled south for the Monastir Gap and the *2nd Armoured Division* was approaching Salonika. On the 9 April, the *2nd Armoured Division* occupied Salonika. On the left General Hartmann's corps, with the *164th Division* on the right flank and the *50th Division* on the left advanced to the sea. The *50th* then swung towards Salonika and the *164th* using a small fleet of caiques, occupied the islands of Samothrace, Thasos, Lemnos, Mytiline and Chios. Greece now lay vulnerable to the Germans.

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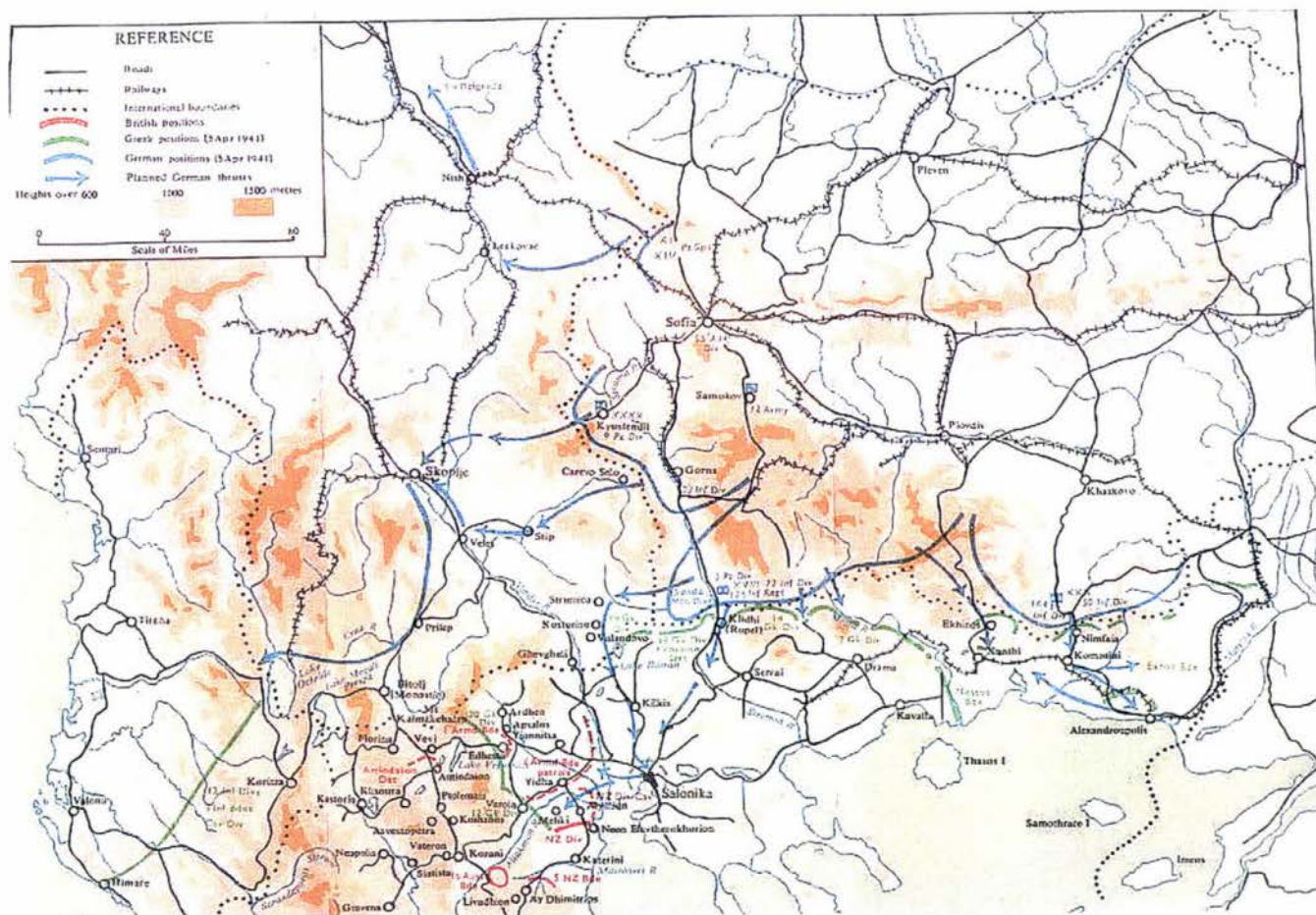
<sup>144</sup> Long, G.(1953) *Australia in the War 1939-45. Greece, Crete and Syria*..Australian War Memorial: Canberra, p.47.

<sup>145</sup> There was every chance that Yugoslavia would resist such violation of her neutrality, so the military experts, remembering Serbian resistance in 1914-18 and the mountainous nature of the country though the flank was reasonably safe. McClymont, p.101.

<sup>146</sup> Long, p.52.

Fearing that a German advance through the 'Gap' would threaten the 'rear' of the Western Macedonian Army and the Commonwealth Forces on the Aliakmon line. General Papagos sent instructions to Lieutenant General Wilson to dispatch elements of the 1st Armoured Brigade into the 'Gap' and make contact with the Germans. These were the tanks of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, the armoured cars of the 4th Hussars, the 1st Rangers a territorial battalion of Royal Rifle Corps, a troop of 25-pounders of the Royal Horse Artillery and a few batteries from the 64th Medium Artillery Regiment. This was to be the Amindaion detachment. The rapid German conquest of Yugoslavia meant Wilson had to make new dispositions. The defence of the 'Gap' could only be for a finite time. Enough time to allow the Commonwealth forces to retreat to the defended Olympus passes. Wilson met with the Australian Major General Mackay on the morning of the 8 April and he instructed Mackay to take command of a force that included the detachment and "such

### The German advance into Northern Greece





troops of the 6th Division as became available".<sup>147</sup> Initially his force would consist of the aforementioned elements of the 1st Armoured Brigade, two battalions of the 19th Brigade, the 2/3rd Field regiment and two attached companies of the New Zealand Machine Gun battalion. This was to be Mackay Force. According the Gavin Long, the Australian official historian: "It was a minute and ill-balanced force with which to meet what might be the main German thrust into Greece."<sup>148</sup>

On 9 April 1941 Mackay Force began to deploy. On their right, in the region of the Lakes Vegorritis and Petron was the Dodacanese Regiment. On the previous day General Mackay had attempted to liaise with his opposite number General Karassos in the village of Perdika, but in Mackay's opinion the meeting was of little importance: "[a] difficult three-hour conference...during which the commanders exchanged views through interpreters and liaison officers...."<sup>149</sup> Three battalions, the Australian 2/8 and 2/4 and the 1st Rangers, had travelled up to this position the previous day along the treacherous mountain roads. Having left their transport they then had to march ten miles over the difficult mountainous terrain. On arrival the infantry battalions had to spend the night in the cold. "They had only their great-coats and one blanket each and the intense cold sapped their reserve."<sup>150</sup> In the morning the soldiers viewed the terrain where they were expected to fight. It was a natural defensive position but it did have its problems:

[O]n each flank the front was so extended that it was necessary to separate platoons widely, and some could keep touch only by patrolling the considerable gaps between. On the right and left the steep hillsides and lack of tracks made it necessary to man-handle all weapons and supplies to the forward positions.<sup>151</sup>

Sharing the Mackay's Force's travails were the two New Zealand companies of the 27 Machine-Gun Battalion. One platoon was positioned near Vevi supporting the 2/8 Australian Battalion. The rest of the two companies were dispersed on the right giving support to the 2/4 Battalion and the Rangers. The three infantry battalions and their support

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<sup>147</sup> Long, p. 43.

<sup>148</sup> Long, p. 47.

<sup>149</sup> Peter Elstob.(1967), *Gallant Failure – The Loss of Greece*, Purnell History of the Second World War ,p.497.

<sup>150</sup> Long, p. 48.

<sup>151</sup> Long, p.47.

troops were expected to defend a position on difficult terrain, of over ten miles. The Ranger's took the central position overlooking the road through the Vevi pass, but after their exhausting march the Rangers were limited in the time that they had to prepare their positions or make a reconnaissance. Forward of the Rangers was a minefield laid by the Australian Engineers of the 2/1st Field Regiment. It was a good defensive position, but the terrain would make it a difficult position to retreat from.

On the night of 9 April the New Zealand Machine Gunners defending the Vevi pass were told to expect a German attack. The attack did not eventuate. However a patrol of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry on attachment to the 4th Hussars of the 1st Armoured Brigade had been charged personally by Brigadier R. Charrington (The commander of the 1st Armoured Brigade) to find the Germans and report back as quickly as possible. Concurrent with this duty they were detailed to protect a detachment of Royal Engineers who were destroying bridges in the pass. Divisional Cavalry troop A under the command of the New Zealand Lieutenant D'arcy Cole had travelled almost as far the town of Bitolji to ascertain how far the Germans had advanced. Lieutenant D'arcy Cole's troop of three armoured cars was on the way back from Bitolji when they noticed a German reconnaissance patrol followed "by a column of 'limousines, motorcycles and side cars, light trucks and armoured cars'".<sup>152</sup> The three Marmon Armoured cars of the New Zealanders moved forward aggressively to engage the Germans but the volume of mortar and machine gun fire from the German troop carriers caused the British Engineers and the Divisional Cavalry patrol to withdraw precipitately. Because of this, the stone bridge that the sappers were preparing for destruction could not be blown. The detachment was more fortunate with the next two bridges. They were able to soak the wooden bridges in petrol and leave them burning. Just outside Sotir a German reconnaissance column of 'thirty odd vehicles' managed to get behind them. The car commander J.W. (Lofty) King said 'charge them!' (Or words to that effect).<sup>153</sup> The squadron raced towards the German column and 'got among them guns blazing'. This unexpected behaviour worked and the Germans retreated in disorder. It was only when they got back did they find the one of the Marmon armoured

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<sup>152</sup> McClymont, p195.

<sup>153</sup> Spencer, H. to author, interview 30 May 2003.

cars had only one bolt left on one of the wheels. Brigadier Charrington suggested that they 'ditch' the car, but he was told laconically by Lieutenant D'arcy Cole 'We don't ditch our cars in the divisional cavalry.'<sup>154</sup>

The British and New Zealand Engineers activity had held the Germans up, but had not stopped them. The German combat engineers (*Pionieren*) quickly rebuilt the bridges, or re-bridged the gorges. The efforts of the sappers did have some effect and the Germans were held up for one day. This day's grace enabled the Commonwealth troops to dig in around Vevi. The well 'dug-in' British, Australian and New Zealand Medium and Field Regiments shelled incautious German vehicles that were sighted. Then:

Next day, the 10th of April, the New Zealand machine gunners dug in above the small town of Vevi, had a grandstand view of the 64 Medium Regiment Royal Artillery (4.5" Howitzers) wreaking havoc on the German Motorised column coming down the road. The shelling went on all day for the Germans had a traffic jam. There was untold damage and we could see the enemy inf[antry] running through the shell bursts for the shelter of shell holes.<sup>155</sup>

When the German attack finally developed, the British for once had the advantage of air-superiority, a luxury that was not going to last in the air over Greece. The New Zealanders witnessed a rare sight of Blenheim bombers of the Royal Airforce bombing the German column, adding to the congestion and the confusion.

The Germans were not to be thwarted for very long. In the afternoon, movement to the southwest indicated that the Germans were preparing to probe the defences. There was supposed to be a Greek Infantry Brigade on the left flank covering the Flambouron - Xylon Neron road, but this force consisted of several untrained Greek battalions which had withdrawn to this position after making an exhausting march from one mountain ridge to another. At 9.30 p.m. on Thursday evening 10 April, German motor cyclists were seen

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<sup>154</sup> Spencer, H. - interview. Harry was a trooper in this action and the quotations are his own words. The Divisional Cavalry Regiment was one of the few verifiable units that did maintain a degree of informality that supposedly existed between officers and men. Harry described Lt Cole 'as a good officer, once we had knocked all the nonsense out of him'.

<sup>155</sup> Kay, R (1958) *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945.27 (Machine Gun) Battalion.* Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, p.38.

entering the village of Vevi and the two Machine Gun sections covering this area opened fire upon them. Also ominously the Rangers could hear the movement of tanks. The German *panzers* were edging forward behind the infantry, probing the Vevi positions. Several incautious tanks were left burning in the minefield. These incursions became increasingly persistent and to counter them number 6 platoon of 27 Battalion opened fire on fixed lines. This activity brought about a mortar attack from the village at around midnight. An hour later the machine guns of this platoon held off an infantry probe.<sup>156</sup>

The Germans were too skilled in night fighting to be held off by static defences for very long. Moving around the positions the Germans were constantly probing the defences for a weak spot. A weak spot was found at the juncture of Rangers and the 2/8th Australian battalion by a German combat patrol (*Gefechtsspahtruppen* or *Stosstruppen*).<sup>157</sup>

They had been in position a few hours when they heard voices in the darkness calling in English "Stand up, Steve", "Friendly patrol here", and the like. It was discovered that these calls came from German patrols probing among their widely-spaced positions.<sup>158</sup>

The Germans from the *Waffen SS* had got behind the positions of 6 platoon and captured some of the Ranger defence screen and some Australians. The New Zealanders were convinced that the Germans were wearing Australian uniforms.<sup>159</sup> The Germans coming forward and behind the New Zealand position, "brought the 'Aussies' down in front of them as though nothing was wrong".<sup>160</sup> As they had mingled with their British and Australian prisoners they were among the New Zealanders before the Machine-Gunners could react. Sergeant Green had been suspicious of the approaching group and was able to make his escape but eleven New Zealanders were captured.

11 April 1941, was Good Friday, a fine cold day, but this must have been little consolation for the cold and rain sodden machine-gunners. During the night 27 Battalion's Lieutenant

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<sup>156</sup> Kay, p.39

<sup>157</sup> These patrols skilled in night fighting and aggressive patrolling were substantial in number being comprised of thirty to forty men.

<sup>158</sup> Long, p.196.

<sup>159</sup> Thought to be unlikely, the Machine Gunners probably confused the Australian Prisoners for Germans. However the Germans did use British Uniform as a 'ruse de guerre'. W.E. Murphy was responsible for having one 'spy' shot

<sup>160</sup> Robert D. to Wards, I.McL., Letter 17 February 1952, Correspondence of the 27<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion. WAI 3/11, N.A.

Colonel F.J. Gwilliam had gone around his men's positions with a bottle of whisky. He noticed that his men's boots had become waterlogged in the trenches. Left unattended this could cause 'trench foot'. At this stage Gwilliam could do little, but encourage his men verbally and with tots of whisky and rum but he realised that they could not be left in this position for too long. Lieutenant Liley the commander of 2 Company's 6 platoon describes their condition:

The machine-gunners were scarcely in a fit state to handle their guns. Probably none of them had slept for three nights. Corporal Cook was evacuated with frostbite. 'After the cold night in wet boots I was very concerned, didn't want to see them crippled,' says Liley.<sup>161</sup>

With the morning came a spotter plane that quickly discovered their location. Soon salvos from the German heavy mortars necessitated the Machine Gunners moving every ten minutes. The Germans continued to probe forward under an umbrella of heavy mortar fire. To compound their misery it began to snow.

It was during these three days that the British had the first experience of the German's ability at night fighting. Patrols were comprised of the aforementioned 'shock-troops' infiltrating between the lines and causing the maximum disruption. When captured they appeared as if they were ordinary soldiers. The Germans also had troops that were experienced in mountain warfare. Recruited from the alpine regions of Austria and Germany, they were specially trained to fight in mountainous conditions. It soon became apparent to them, that although the Commonwealth troops were doughty fighters, the cold had sapped their aggression and they were not engaging in aggressive patrolling to counter the German infiltration. For although it was spring, they were high in the Greek Mountains. During the evening of the 11/12 April the New Zealand machine gunners were firing their machine guns on fixed positions all night. When morning came some had to be relieved and others were suffering from frostbite. Most were in no condition to repel an attack from a well-trained and well-provisioned German force. The Australians were in a similar condition. The cold of the Greek Mountains had come as an unpleasant surprise to

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<sup>161</sup> Kay, p.42.

men fresh from the Western Desert. During the early morning the Rangers without notice pulled back their right company.<sup>162</sup> This left number one section of the Machine Gunners facing the Germans alone. Only quick action by Lieutenant W. Liley in ordering this section back prevented this section joining their unlucky compatriots on a trip as prisoners of war back to Yugoslavia. This precipitate move by the Rangers not only inconvenienced the New Zealanders but also the Australians who were forced to conform to the new positions of the British riflemen. This was no small task for men who had trudged up the pass the night before, and many had had a sleepless night and for rain sodden and sleep deprived machine gunners evading capture must have seemed the least of their problems.

Further down the pass at Kleidi Lieutenant G. Kirk's 3 Platoon under was also receiving attention from the Germans. His machine gunners had knocked out three or four combination motorcycles. Towards evening they were firing at mule trains bringing up the Germans heavy automatic equipment. The Germans continued to infiltrate through the lines. Two Vickers machine gunners firing down a fixed line into a gully caused significant casualties among the enemy probing the Commonwealth positions but having had three nights without sleep, in atrocious conditions, the machine-gunners of the 27 Battalion was no longer a wholly effective fighting force. "Colonel Gwilliam and Major Wright brought up dry greatcoats and a rum ration, and some hot food arrived from the Australians..."<sup>163</sup> It was apparent that the machine gunners would either had to be withdrawn or they would be overrun and captured.

It was decided to withdraw Mackay Force on Saturday 12 April. The timetable had been prepared on the afternoon of the 10 April between General Mackay and General Karassos. As the Greek forces were not motorised the withdrawal was to take more than three days. The 19th Australian Brigade was required to march thirty miles over hilly terrain to come up on the right flank of the 4th New Zealand Brigade at Servia. Should the Germans break through Mackay Force, it was thought that the 19th Brigade had better not be caught on the move, but it was a stiff march for troops not long out of the desert and untrained for

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<sup>162</sup> The Rangers thought the Australians were withdrawing from one of their positions. So they decided to pull back two miles  
McClymont, p.205.

<sup>163</sup> Kay, p.41.

mountain warfare. The two Australian battalions were to withdraw, covered by the 1st Armoured Brigade, the two companies of machine gunners and the tanks who were to be the last to leave. This withdrawal was not unimpeded. The Germans who had infiltrated during the evening of the 11/12th April attacked Point 997 where Lieutenant Liley's 3 platoon was dug in. The Germans had some initial success, overrunning an Australian position and again putting the Ranger battalion to flight. The Australians put in a counter-attack, but were not able to dislodge the Germans from all the captured positions. Liley was forced to withdraw 120 metres due to the difficulty in supporting the Australians in their close quarter fighting after it became difficult to distinguish friend from foe.

On the other side of the Kleidi Pass, the two platoons of 1 Company 27 Machine Gun Battalion were surprised to see Germans occupying the high ground on the right of their positions. They were even more disconcerted when they saw the Rangers, without informing them, pulling out, and leaving their heavy equipment behind. At around 11.00 a.m. the Rangers retreated through number 1 Company's position leaving the machine gunners who they were supposed to protect, facing the advancing Germans. A New Zealand machine-gunner describes the situation:

From my position, the first intimation I had of the enemy break through was seeing them scramble over the high ground on our right at approximately 7765(a map reference). Shortly before midday the K.R.R. (Rangers) withdrew without orders through the M.G. positions.<sup>164</sup>

Their rapid withdrawal of the Rangers left the anti-tank guns unprotected. Lieutenant R. Hains's section gave protective fire for an Australian 2-pounder gun in order to allow them to get away their gun. At 2.00 p.m. the machine gunners were able to withdraw under the cover of the Australian 2/8 battalion. So precipitate was the withdrawal of the Rangers that the commanding officer of the Australian field artillery battery "immediately communicated with the Australian Brigade Headquarters, which refused to believe that the Rangers were not still in position."<sup>165</sup> They also initially refused to believe Lieutenant

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<sup>164</sup> Hains, R to Wards I. McL Letter. 26 April 1952. Correspondence of the 27<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion. WAI/3/11.N.A..

<sup>165</sup> Cody, p.44.

Hain's explanation that the retreating British Infantry were now in the rear of the medium artillery battery and it would soon be at risk from small arms fire. The two platoons of number 1 Company split into squads and finally, after a fatiguing tramp, the waiting trucks picked them up.

On the left of the pass, a stiff rear-guard fight was still going on. 5 and 6 platoons were firing in support of the Australian 2/8 Battalion. This was not as helpful as it first sounds. It appears that the machine gun fire over the heads of the forward Australian platoons disconcerted them into withdrawing as they thought it was fire from the Germans infiltrating to their rear.

I [Liley] was told by an infantry officer that the shoot was at least partly successful; he said the enemy withdrew a little but so did some of his [the Australian] forward sections. They could probably hear it going over and thought they were being fired on from the rear.<sup>166</sup>

The two machine gun platoons thought that it was time for them to withdraw as well, when the 25 pounders began dropping shells onto targets in their rear. The two platoons withdrew five or six miles carrying their guns.

At 5.00 p.m. in the afternoon some machine gunners on the heights above the village of Flambouron were still engaging the enemy when Captain J. Robbie overheard instructions on the wireless for 27 Battalion to withdraw. Once the machine gunners withdrew the Germans were then able to overrun the anti-tank gun battery leaving the Australian 2/8 Battalion surrounded on three sides. It was a case of 'every man for himself' as the Australian battalion disintegrated and "that their only chance of escape was to move fast and use what cover the hills offered."<sup>167</sup>

The defences of the Kleidi Pass had collapsed, placing 2/4 Battalion and the supporting elements in great danger. The machine-gunners were able to manhandle their guns to the road and finally onto some Australian trucks after setting fire to their own transport that had

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<sup>166</sup> Cody, p.45.

<sup>167</sup> Long, p.61.



become bogged down. While all this was going on, a battery of the Royal Horse Artillery was engaging elements of the enemy over 'open sights' at a range of less than quarter of a mile (450 metres). Although the machine gunners were able to extract themselves relatively intact (less the killed, wounded and the eleven captured) their supporting Australian company was almost destroyed when it ran into a German ambush astride the road. Seventy were captured and the company commander killed.

The column moved on but only to walk, section by section, into a strong enemy position astride the road. There, covered by Germans in weapon pits, they were disarmed and shepherded into a near-by field.<sup>168</sup>

Extracting a force from a defensive position that is under attack is a difficult military operation. The pass had been held for three days. The Rangers and the two Australian battalions had been badly cut up. The Australian 2/8th Battalion had to throw away its heavy weapons in order to march faster. In the company commander's words:

[T]he men were simply too tired to withdraw carrying weapons, and perhaps 20 per cent(sic) threw away Brens and even rifles.<sup>169</sup>

Whilst this was occurring, the First Armoured Brigade's A9 and A10 cruiser tanks of the Amindaion detachment had been steadily breaking down. They had been ordered up to cover the junction between Dodacanese Regiment and 2/8 Battalion at the exit of the Monastir Gap. This position was attacked and the Germans repulsed but seven Cruiser tanks were lost to engine failure and broken tracks and according to Robert Crisp, at least one tank was lost due to deliberate action of its driver.<sup>170</sup> After the defence of the pass only ten tanks were left serviceable.

By nightfall of 12 April the Commonwealth troops and the Greeks were away from the Klidhi Pass. Covered by the rearguard they then assembled on the Sotir ridge, only six miles from the southern exit of the pass. Casualties occurred, not so much in the fighting,

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<sup>168</sup> Long, p.63.

<sup>169</sup> Long, p.61.

<sup>170</sup> Crisp, R. (1960). *The Gods Were Neutral- A Story of the Greek Campaign 1941*. Frederick Muller Ltd:London, p.117.

but in the withdrawal to the awaiting transport. When 2/8 Battalion reached the Rodhonas area it had only 250 men and many were without weapons. 2/4 Battalion was down to less than two thirds of its effective fighting force. No 1 Australian Anti-tank Regiment had lost fifteen guns; ten when a demolition isolated them and their crews<sup>171</sup> and “five when the Rangers had withdrawn from the Klidhi Pass....”<sup>172</sup>

Nineteenth Australian Brigade had lost heavily and 1 Armoured Brigade, the only Allied unit of its type in Greece, had been shattered. Fourth Hussars still had the majority of its light tanks, but 3 Royal Tank Regiment because of mechanical defects was reduced to one composite squadron. The 102nd Anti-Tank Regiment and 2 Royal Horse Artillery had both lost guns and 1 Rangers had lost at least 15 percent of its establishment.<sup>173</sup>

In forcing the Klidhi pass, the German losses are thought have been low: “The assault unit, 1 Battalion SS ‘Adolf Hitler’ Division, had 37 killed, 98 wounded, and two missing...”<sup>174</sup> It was a small sacrifice for opening the Monastir Gap to the German advance.

Up to now the Greek forces in the area had fought well. The 21st Brigade on the right of Mackay force had made a fighting retreat to rejoin the Greek 20th and 112th Divisions covering the Klisouura-Vlasti-Siatista passes. The non-motorised 20th and 112th Divisions were limited to the pace of mules and oxen and were still in position. The Dodecanese Regiment on the right side of the Klidhi pass had been assisted in its withdrawal by Australian transport. General Papagos complained that the British did not offer sufficient protection to the retreating Greek forces, but, however, time was not on the allies side. The modes of transport were incompatible, and language and liaison difficulties resulted in minimal co-operation.

With the Germans through the Klidhi pass, their way was clear for two separate thrusts into northern Greece. *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler SS Division* was to send a force southwest to destroy the 3rd Greek Corps Headquarter at Koritza. This eventually would compel the

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<sup>171</sup> Long, p.64.

<sup>172</sup> McClymont, p.209.

<sup>173</sup> McClymont, p.214

<sup>174</sup> McClymont, p.210

surrender of the Greek Army in Albania. The *9th Panzer Division* would continue on the road towards Larissa.

Although the Commonwealth troops had been driven out of the pass, and despite the atrocious conditions they were still capable of a skilled retreat:

Retreating before vastly superior forces is a grim experience: weary men have to keep moving longer than their pursuers, they have to turn and fight when the terrain favours them and then start moving back again without rest in order not to be outflanked. Nothing saps courage like cold, hunger, and exhaustion - the will falters when the body is incapable of obeying its command.<sup>175</sup>

Although this speaks volumes about the morale of the Commonwealth Force it was fortunate that it was a fully mechanised force able to keep ahead of the German tanks.

The first rearguard was at Sotir, anchored on the marshes surrounding Lake Rudnik. The second was to be just north of the small town of Proastion. Over-night the Commonwealth troops had organised a temporary defensive position. It consisted of: the two surviving companies of 2/4, the Rangers on their left, augmented by two machine guns from the 2nd platoon of 27 Battalion; and supported by a battery of Australian anti-tank guns and the Royal Horse Artillery. In reserve were two squadrons of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment. The enemy had approached the Sotir ridge the evening of 12 April but were content with sending out 'jitter parties' to harass and probe the defenders. By dawn of the 13 April elements of the *9th Panzer Division* claimed they were over the Sotir Ridge and were in pursuit of "large motorised columns and an English armoured division".<sup>176</sup> The Commonwealth rearguard was mostly away by 9 a.m., protected by the tanks of the Royal Tank Regiment. Four more tanks were lost to mechanical defects and one received a shell hit from a German Mark III tank. The burning tank left a pall of smoke in the morning air. A reserve of several tanks and two-pounder anti-tank guns were sent to establish a screen for the retreating rearguard south of the small town of Ptolemais. According to Peter

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<sup>175</sup> Elstob. p.498

<sup>176</sup> Appendix 256, *9 Panzer war diary* - quoted in *To Greece*. McClymont, p.210.

Elstob: "Here the main road to the south crosses a dyke and then runs alongside a river and between two ridges - a natural ambushade."<sup>177</sup>

The Germans found that countryside outside of Proastion was easier to flank the allied positions. The German armoured column was made to suffer as the artillery and bombers caught them in the open, but they determinedly pressed on driving the allied forces back. The German *panzers* had got through the difficult countryside of swamps and ditches and were threatening British positions in the rear. In this position the machine gunners were again in action, helping to slow the German advance. It was almost dark when the machine gunners withdrew, their stand had allowed the tanks of the 1st Armoured Brigade to come up, and supported by the 25-pounders of the Royal Horse Artillery. The action:

was a most pretty sight, blazing tanks and trucks, 2-pr. and 50 mm. tracer. m.g. and Bren tracer, flashes from guns and rifles, and bursting shells, with the last afterglow of the setting sun and the dark mass of the mountains as the background.<sup>178</sup>

At 7.30 p.m. Brigadier Charrington decided to withdraw the rearguard to the third position at Mawrohdendhri, but the Germans were now a spent force and "made no effort to go beyond Proastion."<sup>179</sup> Early on the morning of 14 April the Rangers, 102 Anti-tank Regiment and the two companies of 27 Machine Gun Battalion were falling back to the Grevena area covered by the surviving light- Vickers tanks of the 4th Hussars. As soon as the last infantry passed through the artillery and the light and cruiser tanks fell back to a defensive position at Grevena. In the New Zealand Official War History of the Second World War *To Greece*, McClymont claims that the German approach was 'checked' and "that W Force and the Greek armies were in their respective sectors of the Aliakmon line."<sup>180</sup> The attack had not been 'checked' by any action of the allies. The tempo of the German vanguard had been slowed due to a traffic jam between two competing divisions (9 *Panzer* and *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*).

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<sup>177</sup> Elstob, p.497

<sup>178</sup> McClymont, p.214

<sup>179</sup> McClymont, p.214.

Apparently 9 Panzer and SS 'Adolf Hitler' divisions in their haste to get forward had entered the Klidhi Pass at the same time, thereby creating a congestion of traffic that had stopped the movement of both troops and supplies.<sup>181</sup>

The Germans had also been confounded by the problem that was to be-devil them throughout the War. Only the forefront of their force was fully mechanised. Most artillery was horse drawn; some infantry still walked; supplies were still brought up by horse drawn transport. Blitzkrieg was only fully effective against advancing or static forces. As in France with the British Expeditionary Force, it had difficulty attacking a fully mechanised force that is in retreat.

This was the beginning of the campaign, yet the allies had already offended against several of the principles of military strategy that was to militate against the campaign's successful conclusion. The initial disruption caused to the transportation of the force by half-hearted attacks by the Italian Airforce and the Navy exposed the ill-conceived and ramshackle element of the Greek campaign. Then by sending a force away from an area of known threat to one of potential threat was contrary to the principle of war,<sup>182</sup> economy of force. As Commodore Gordon Craig once stated: "It is axiomatic in risk-taking that you should always concentrate upon dealing with the threat that you know to exist, rather than those you *imagine*."<sup>183</sup> Once the force was in Greece, the activities of the German ambassador and his staff, and the pro-axis sympathisers that permeated the senior ranks of the Greek army would ensure that the dispositions of W Force were well known to the enemy, offending against the principle of security. Then the destruction of the *Clan Fraser* fatally compromised the logistic chain of W Force already weakened by the lack of co-operation and the incompetence. A principal route of attack the Monastir Gap was compromised by the collapse of the Yugoslav army, subsequent after the German invasion attests to the paucity of military intelligence on the Yugoslav army. Then the Germans were able to manoeuvre the superficial allied force out of the Gap, outflanking the forward Aliakmon line positions. This exposed the two New Zealand brigades north of Katerini and

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<sup>181</sup> McClymont, p.214.

<sup>182</sup> For a definition of some the principles of War (or strategy), see table p.223.

<sup>183</sup> Gordon, A. (1999).(quoting Commodore Craig) *The Rules of the Game Jutland And British Naval Command*. John Murray:London,p.467.

necessitated the abandonment of the forward positions and a retreat to the Mount Olympia passes. The position's abandonment meant that not only that it was a waste of time installing defensive positions, but communication cable and barbed wire was left behind. With no apparent answer to the technique *Blitzkrieg*, the allies had to conform: first to the German attack, and second to the imperatives of the withdrawal to the evacuation beaches.

Some things had been done well, the Divisional Cavalry had accomplished their reconnaissance successfully against a better equipped enemy; the Divisional Artillery had achieved everything that they were required to do, and notwithstanding the cold, the soldiers had fought well and then withdrawn in good order. By forcing the Monastir Gap the German forces had separated the Greek army from the Commonwealth forces. The Germans now had a choice of approach: the littoral plain defended by W Force or the interior held by the Greek Army. Threatened by being outflanked, the allies had to conform to the German attack, the Commonwealth forces could only withdraw to the evacuation beaches and the Greek Army could only surrender.

**THE GREEK DEFENCES.**



**Metaxas Line Defences.  
Gun position on the Metaxas line.**





Metaxas Line Fortifications.

Greek defences on the Yugoslav border.





## CHAPTER FOUR

### The battles on the Olympus passes.

We are in an exposed position, and cannot be expected, alone and unassisted, to give our lives merely to save the rest of you. If you are unwilling to send us aid, you cannot compel us to fight your battle for you: for sheer inability is stronger than any compulsion. We shall try to devise some means of saving ourselves.

*Book VII, Herodotus.*



**German tanks advancing through Greece.**

18 Battalion was the first battalion to reach Katerini in northern Greece. When ordered to move up to the front, 18 Battalion had left Katerini in high spirits. Two companies, B and D travelled up to the forward positions of the Aliakmon line whereas A and C companies travelled back to work on positions around the Olympus passes. A and C Companies spent their time fortifying the area around a position under a rocky cliff called 'Gibraltar'. Further north B and D companies witnessed to the rest of 4th brigade moving north up to join them on the Aliakmon line.

The battle position of 18 Battalion ran along a ridge through the villages of Mikri Milia and Paliostani:

The Mikri Milia–Paliostani ridge dropped away abruptly on the north to the Toponitsa River. From it there was a wide view over the lower hills falling away to the Aliakmon plain, and beyond that the peaks of Eastern Macedonia, with Salonika gleaming across the gulf on a clear day. The ridge was a hotchpotch of small ploughed fields, patches of young green wheat, and oak thickets, from which rose the thin smoke of charcoal-burners' fires.<sup>184</sup>

The battalion did not have any time to rest and admire the view. They spent their time helping the engineers widen the track that ran through the village of Palionellini, which was four miles south of 18 Battalions position and was to be the main access route for 4th Brigade.

The Battalion was billeted on the local villagers and in the nearby monastery which was unstinting in its hospitality. While they waited for the war to start, they dug weapon pits and covered bunkers. The incessant cold was a problem "and many men spent sleepless nights, numb with cold, before extra clothes and blankets were organised."<sup>185</sup> Finally by 6 April the 18 Battalion:

had its positions wired, had cleared fields of fire through the scrub, and was as ready as it could ever have been under the unfavourable conditions. It hadn't been easy. All the wire

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<sup>184</sup> Dawson, W.D. (1961). *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945 18 Battalion Official History* War History Branch Department of Internal Affairs: Wellington, p.80.

<sup>185</sup>Dawson, p.81.

and sandbags, food, ammunition and other necessities had been manhandled up. The battalion would have been in a bad position if it had been attacked during that fortnight, especially as until early April it was away up there on its own.<sup>186</sup>

There were gaps of up to two miles between defended positions and this was partially rectified by having the areas patrolled by Bren-gun carriers. On 7 April the rumble of artillery in the distance gave an impetus to the 4th and 6th Brigades to finish off the wiring, entrenching and digging in the weapon pits in the bitterly cold wind.

On 6 April 1941, the Germans simultaneously declared war on Greece and Yugoslavia. It was also a special day for the 4th Brigade, not because of any activity by the enemy, but because the Brigade received its first mail from New Zealand since leaving Egypt. The next day the 7 April when the defeat of Yugoslavia seemed certain, it was decided to withdraw the division to the Olympus area. Wilson decided W force would be withdrawn to the Olympus Aliakmon River line position. The 5th and 6th Brigades were to move together and the 4th Brigade was to be sent to Servia to act as a pivot.

It came to a surprise to Colonel Kippenberger when on the evening of 7 April he was given orders to move the 20 Battalion (Part of 4th Brigade) through the Olympus pass to Servia. Instead of the expected move forward, they were about to move back. Travelling to their new positions was not a particularly easy journey.

The journey up to the Sarantoporon pass was slow and unpleasant, in heavy rain at first and later snow, on winding slippery roads. At one point an Australian truck had gone over the bank and half a dozen bodies were lying beside it.<sup>187</sup>

On arrival, 4th Brigade occupied positions to the south of the village of Servia. In Kippenberger's words: "The whole position appeared very strong and had good observation, but it was over-extended and artillery support must have been very difficult."<sup>188</sup> The 6th Brigade was ordered to remain in position until contact was made and then it would

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<sup>186</sup> Dawson, p.83.

<sup>187</sup> Kippenberger, p.21.

<sup>188</sup> Kippenberger, p.21.

withdraw through the 4th Brigade. The 5th Brigade, in reserve, had been allocated the 26 Battalion that had been tasked with setting the demolitions in the Platamon tunnel. The 26 Battalion would combine with the 22 and 23 Battalions to the east of the Olympus pass with the 28 (Maori) Battalion on the west.

By the evening of 8 April, the front was crumbling; the Germans were expected in Salonika at any moment. As with the Greeks in 480 BC: “The proposal which found most favour was to guard the pass of Thermopylae, on the grounds that it was narrower than the pass into Thessaly”.<sup>189</sup> Therefore it was finally decided to withdraw W Force further south to Thermopylae. To enable this to be accomplished successfully, the defence of the Olympus passes was to be the responsibility of the 5th Brigade (22, 23, and 28 Battalions) and 6th Brigade’s 26 Battalion. In conformance to this, the 22 Battalion was to move to positions astride the entrance to the Olympus pass. The 26 Battalion was withdrawn from the Platamon area to be replaced by the 21 Battalion, which was coming up from Athens.

On April 9, situated high up on the slopes of Mount Olympus, the soldiers of 23 Battalion saw the smoke of Salonika burning 40 miles across the Gulf. This day also brought the detritus of retreat: refugees, Greek and Yugoslav soldiers, smartly dressed Greek policemen, artillery pieces of various types and a constant stream of motorised traffic. One of these soldiers watching the retreat, was the writer and scholar Dan Davin. Davin’s had been a rough crossing to Greece and they had been bombed ineffectively by the Italians. When they arrived in Piraeus (bombed to hell), he was amused by the decision to pay his 23 Battalion. Then the soldiers went out and became “all schickered as gnats”.<sup>190</sup> Some became difficult about entraining for the front. One soldier had to be knocked out and thrown onto the train. Davin, who was slightly older and worldlier, was cynical about the reasons of his compatriots for being in Greece. One comment he heard was: “the Germans had been making a nuisance of themselves and the poor old pongos can’t do anything about it so we will solve it for them”.<sup>191</sup> More immediately, Davin was somewhat concerned that

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<sup>189</sup>Herodotus. (trans A. de Selincourt).(1972). *The Histories*. Penguin Books.England, p.503

<sup>190</sup>D.Davin to Tony Simpson, Interview, 1979. OHColl. Oral History Section. Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>191</sup>Davin interview.

his Commanding Officer had positioned his platoon forward of the others to absorb the attack when it came.

Further down towards the Petras Sanatorium, 22 Battalion held positions astride the confluence of the Elikon and Itamos rivers. It was a strong position but the demolition of the 'back road' a subsidiary route, and the road through the pass would mean that 23 Battalion would be dependent upon retreating along a newly constructed road from Petras Sanatorium to the village of Kokkinoplos. By April 14, five miles of this road had been completed and the remaining two miles would take another three weeks to complete, but time was not to be on 23 Battalion's side:

At 8 a.m. next day [14 April 1941] Colonel Falconer attended a conference at 5 Brigade Headquarters, where he was told that the Yugoslav-Greek line to the west had broken and that 5 Brigade was to withdraw at nine o'clock that night.<sup>192</sup>

The three battalions of the 5th Brigade were covering a front of approximately six miles (9.5 Kilometres). Where the road ran along the Movroneri River, the Maori Battalion faced north, refused (at right angles to) along the road to Skotina. In support of 5th Brigade were the 5th Field Regiment, 32nd Battery 7th Anti-Tank and 4th Company 27 (machine gun) Battalion. The 4th Field Regiment should have been there as well. Guns, ammunition and supplies had been winched into precipitous positions but on the evening of 14 April, the 4th and its indomitable commander Lieutenant Colonel Ike Parkinson, was sent to Kalabaka to be placed under the command of the 17th Australian Brigade. By a fortuitous misunderstanding, the copious supply of ammunition left by the 4th Field Regiment was transported south of Elasson by parties of the 5th Field Regiment. Instead of the one trip that they should have made, they made three and through this tiring mistake the 2/3rd Australian Field Regiment had enough ammunition to keep the Germans out of Elasson for a day, and enable the 6th Brigade to withdraw in good order.

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<sup>192</sup>Ross, A. (1961) *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945 23 Battalion Official History* Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, p.36.

On 14 April the carriers of the 23 and 28 Battalions came back to their battalion areas followed by the vehicles of the Divisional Cavalry. Then, with a bang, the demolitions went off at 6.00 p.m., and 11 platoon 22 Battalion saw to their delight the bridge over the Elikon river explode and fall into the stream. At 11.00 p.m. German reconnaissance motorcyclists from the anti-tank unit of 2 *Panzer Division* drove up to examine the damage. The 11 platoon, under the command of Lt Armstrong, shot them up most efficiently; “the startled vanguard shrank back leaving, as was discovered next morning, five wrecked motor-cycles, some with sidecars and all with weapons, lying about the road.”<sup>193</sup> Then quiet descended upon the area. However, in the distance could be heard the rumble of vehicles, and a diffuse glow of headlamps. *Kampfgruppe Zwei* was moving towards their rendezvous with the 21 Battalion. (See chapter five).

That evening Brigadier Hargest of 5th Brigade was summoned to a meeting with Freyberg and was told to prepare to move to the head of the pass to enable the 4th and 6th Brigades in the Servia area to withdraw. The predominant emotion among the New Zealand soldiers seems to have been one of disappointment at the withdrawal. The official historian of the 23 Battalion, Angus Ross describes this feeling:

For the officers and men who had put days and nights of hard work into perfecting their positions and who were confident that they could beat off any ordinary infantry attacks, these orders to withdraw were most depressing.<sup>194</sup>

No soldier enjoys retreating from an enemy that he feels is not as good as he is. Then came the news that the Brigade was to hold on another day, and their morale rose. Davin was objective about the ability of New Zealanders to fight. “They had the natural courage of people who had been fed on good meat. The New Zealanders were not afraid...but it was the courage of ignorance”.<sup>195</sup> Notwithstanding this, Davin admits that “they had the confidence of men who had a sense of their own integrity and strength and their morale stood up very well”.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Henderson, J. (1958). *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45 22 Battalion*. Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington

<sup>194</sup> Ross, p.35.

<sup>195</sup> Davin – Interview.

<sup>196</sup> Davin – Interview.

On 15 April the Germans started sending in strong probing patrols in the 5th Brigade's area, but the artillery of the 5th Field Regiment appeared to have discouraged them from making too close an investigation. In the afternoon the German artillery attempted counter battery fire, but was unable to find the effectively camouflaged guns, "none of the rounds fell anywhere near the guns. Perhaps the crest-clearance troubles were compensated for by a parallel difficulty on the enemy side of locating and engaging the New Zealand guns."<sup>197</sup> During the evening, forward posts of the 22 Battalion heard the Germans calling out in English. Sensibly the soldiers held their fire in the belief that the Germans were trying to pinpoint their camouflaged positions. To their chagrin they found out in the morning that the Germans had cut their barbed wire and lifted some mines.<sup>198</sup> Davin's platoon had also laid anti-personnel mines forward of the 23 Battalion's position, but it appears that the fuses were faulty and no German was blown up by them.<sup>199</sup>

At 8.30 a.m. *Kampfengruppe Ein*<sup>200</sup> made its move. Two companies of the *1/2 Infanterie Regiment* moved down the flank of the 22 Battalion with the intention to 'clean-out' any machine gun posts and to act as a screen for the main force moving down the highway from Katerini. Artillery fire from the 5th Field Regiment and then medium machine gun from the 27 Battalion's attached machine gunners broke up the first company's advance. The other company moving down the highway came under a barrage of artillery and machine gun fire. They retreated leaving nine vehicles burning and strewn across their wake.<sup>201</sup> Another attack by tanks attempting to by-pass the bridge also came to naught as the intense fire from 5th Field Regiment caused them to withdraw, leaving one tank stuck in the mud of the riverbank. Lieutenant Colonel K.W. Fraser of the 5th Field Regiment came forward among the 22 Battalion and by directing the artillery with wireless managed to silence at least one concealed German mortar. The gunners of E troop of the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment were well aware of the limitations of their two-pounder anti-tank weapons, did not commence firing until the *panzers* again advanced down the road at 8.40 a.m. they then

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<sup>197</sup> Murphy, W.E. (1966). ). *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45. 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Artillery*. Historical Publication Branch. Wellington, p.42.

<sup>198</sup> Henderson, p.18.

<sup>199</sup> Davin -interview.

<sup>200</sup> *2nd Inf Regt, II/74 Arty Regt, II/3 Pz Regt, 3/38 A-tk Unit, 1/38 Engr Bn, 8/800 Brandenburg Regt, 2/76 Lt AA Regt, (III/74 Arty Regt & 3/70 Eng Bn) were added later.*

<sup>201</sup> Henderson, p.21.

laid down concentrated fire on individual tanks. The Germans retreated leaving another tank burning on the riverbank. Finally the Germans realised that the road could not be forced directly and decided to encircle the 5th Brigade's position. As 5th Brigade was holding a very wide front, the German movement was not only hard to stop, but also difficult to see, as they moved through the misty, pine forests on the Brigades flanks. For the rest of the day, the Germans were content to fire into the 22 Battalion's positions with 75mm fire from the cannons of their Mark IV tanks.

Davin, " [H]ad a sense of something happening on the right...I could not find out what was happening".<sup>202</sup> Contradictory messages came through from the company headquarters, first withdraw and then "to hold for another hour or so".<sup>203</sup> In the gloom of late afternoon the Germans put in a determined attack on the forward positions of C Company of 23 Battalion. They came in from the right flank and overran the right section of Davin's platoon. "Firing sub-machine guns and tossing over grenades, they pressed through the wire".<sup>204</sup> Despite the confusion of battle Davin was still able to observe that the New Zealand artillery and machine gun fire "was beautifully co-ordinated, giving the Germans a good thrashing."<sup>205</sup> As it is with most actions the fog of war was paramount. The Germans overran a section of 13 platoon and some New Zealanders were captured, but a counter-attack was put in and the Germans were ousted and driven back. Davin experienced the disconcerting experience of one of his Bren-gunners Private R. Inglis, one of Corporal A. Quinn's No. 3 Section, jumping into Davin's trench, crying 'they're all killed, they're all killed'. According to Inglis he was the only survivor of Quinn' section, the rest had all been wiped out.<sup>206</sup> Inglis experience and reaction was not an unusual experience. Soldiers confronted with close quarter combat for the first time, often become disorientated and believe that they are the only ones left alive. Davin first got the survivors of his platoon into shelter behind the rest of the Company before going back to find what had happened to the missing section. Davin admitted to feeling very conspicuous in his pale coloured

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<sup>202</sup> Davin - interview.

<sup>203</sup> Davin - interview.

<sup>204</sup> McClymont, p.265.

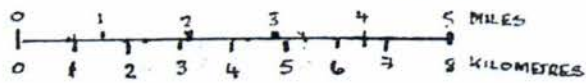
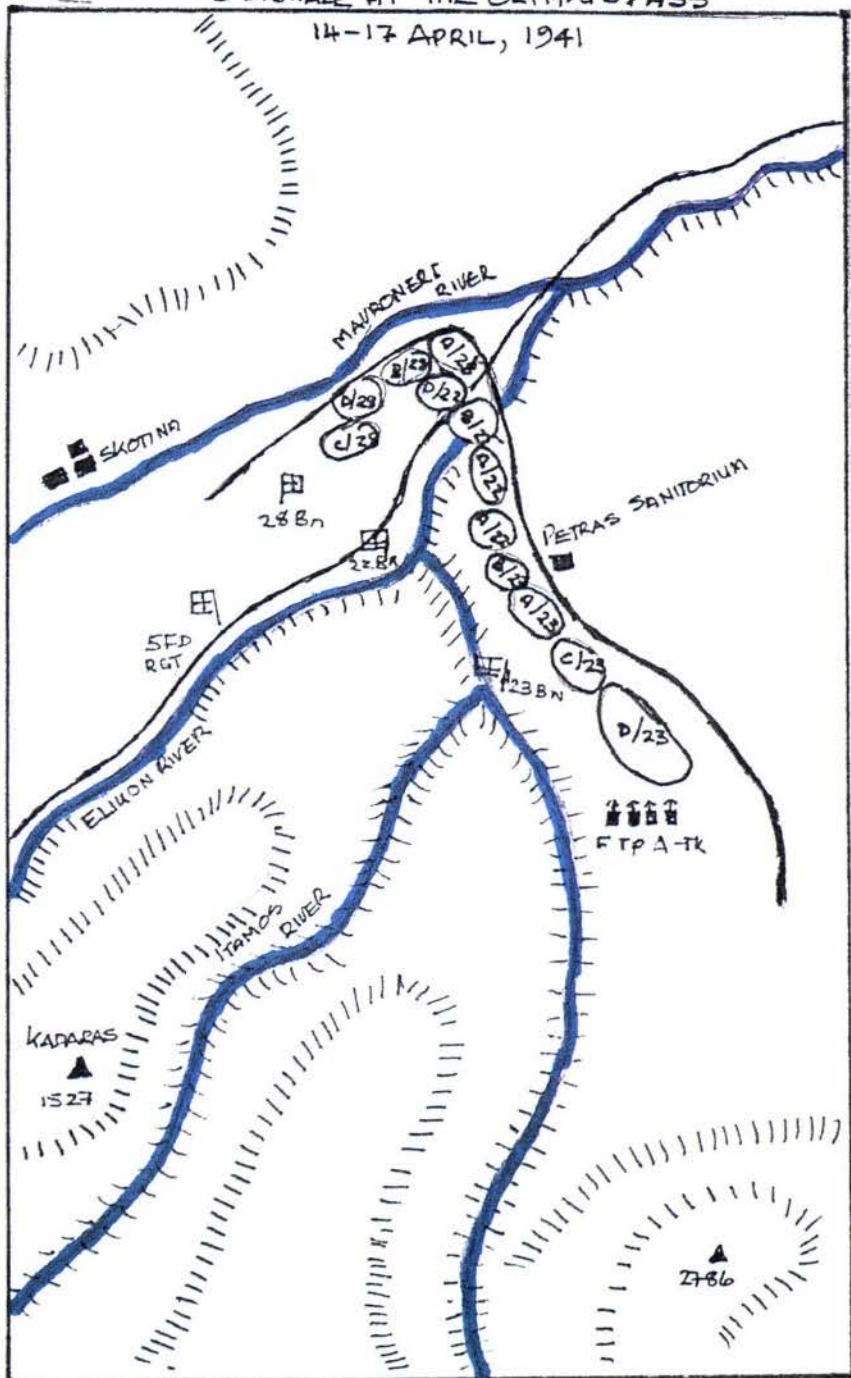
<sup>205</sup> Davin - interview.

<sup>206</sup> Davin - interview.



# 5 BRIGADE AT THE OLYMPUS PASS

14-17 APRIL, 1941



'trench coat' as bullets hit the birch trees around him. As he went about his lonely task he was grateful to find that one of his platoon's 'hard cases' an ex-sailor 'Congo' Smith had decided to come with him, against orders, to find out what had happened to his mates.

We hadn't gone far when we heard cries. Eventually we found Todd [one of the missing section] - almost exhausted, but still with his Bren.<sup>207</sup>

He also found three to four members of the missing section trapped by the barbed wire in front of the Company positions, but otherwise all right. Missing and presumed captured were Quinn and four others.

B Company of 23 Battalion had its lines probed to little avail. Lieutenant R.L. Bond was able to check some infiltration on the extreme right of the position as the Germans attempted to get between the D Company of 23 Battalion and the village of Kokkinoplos in the swirling evening mist. A scratch team of signallers, quartermaster staff and members of the transport platoon were lead by Major D. Leckie high up onto the slopes of Mount Olympus, but apart from an initial sighting, no Germans were found on the slopes and the withdrawal route of 23 Battalion was still protected.<sup>208</sup>

On the left flank of the Brigade the 28 (Maori) Battalion was situated on both sides of the higher slopes of Olympus Pass road with the forward positions among the steep rugged wooded slopes of Mount Brusi (Part of the Olympus Massif). They could see the German vehicles crowding the road twenty-three kilometres back to Katerini. From 11.00 a.m. to 3.00 p.m. the mist made it impossible to see what the enemy was up to, but when it lifted the Germans were seen be making a long encirclement in a ravine of the Mavroneri River. Francis Rangī Logan, then a young lieutenant in the Maori Battalion describes the positions:

16 platoon was RIGHT FORWARD (sic) and 17 platoon was LEFT FORWARD and 18 Platoon was in RESERVE between 16 & 17, but much higher up the mountain road which

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<sup>207</sup> Davin – interview.

<sup>208</sup> McClymont, p.264.

ran alongside the MAVRONERI stream in the MAVRONERI GORGE. This road was the access (sic) to a sawmill at the village of SKOTEINA, three miles higher up the BRUSI & close to OLYMPUS. While 16 Platoon was near the bottom of the gorge, the road & stream made a sweeping turn & started a steepish climb to SKOTEINA. 17 Platoon was on this bend & higher up the road.<sup>209</sup>

At twilight the Germans were seen to be gathering in the ravine through which ran the road to Skotina on the front refused flank of the 28 Battalion, D Company the 'Ngati Walkabouts' commanded by Major H. Dyer held this position. Then two elite companies of mountain troops put in a charge. Throwing grenades and firing their 'schmeisser' sub-machine guns they were thrown back once, but on the second attack carried the forward Maori positions, killing three of the defenders. Harry Taituha the section leader, covering the others, was wounded and left for dead. The Germans had lost heavily in the attack and were in turn chased back into the ravine. As evening crept on the weather "turned foul, wind and cold sleety rain."<sup>210</sup> The flank was reinforced and the position stabilised, but the attack had delayed the retreat for over an hour and a half. Again the fog of war ensured that John Palmer, also in 17 platoon, a Bren gunner in one of the forward trenches among the pine trees was only vaguely aware of the firing.<sup>211</sup> Then everything went quiet. In the middle of the night having not heard anything from the rest of the Company, he and his companion, decided to make it back to the D Company bivouac. It was deserted, the German 'potato masher' grenades scattered over the area, were the only indication that some sort of struggle had taken place. There were other members of D Company in the area, and once they had established that John and his companions were friendly they came out of the surrounding bushes. It transpired that when Jim Koti came down to tell 17 Platoon to withdraw he met 'Darkie' Wehi a section leader, but they could not find Les Wipiti's section (with John Palmer) and consequently overlooked the three forward trenches concealed among the pine trees. Wehi had done his duty and passed on the message, but as the order to withdraw could only be passed on verbally, and as there were still Germans in the area it was inevitable that some members were going to be left behind.

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<sup>209</sup> Francis Rangi Logan, to Massie Palmer, Letter 8 September 1998, p.1.

<sup>210</sup> Logan, P.1

<sup>211</sup> Palmer, J. to Author, interview.

What had happened was that when the German *72 Regiment* started to make a wide encirclement of the position it was decided to withdraw D Company. The 28 Battalion was to pull out at 8.00 p.m., the forward platoon, number 17 was to remain in position until 7.00 p.m. then rapidly withdraw until it reached battalion lines at 7.30 p.m.. When Les Wipiti's section did not turn up, Lieutenant Rangi Logan in command of 17 platoon wanted to go back but was prevented from doing so by the N.C.O.'s of the platoon.

I [Logan] became more concerned &(sic) said I would go down to find WIPITI'S section myself. To this Jim & the other objected strongly saying "you are the only one who could find D Company HQ in the dark. If you get lost now we well all be lost."<sup>212</sup>

The Battalion was on a tight schedule, and if Logan had gone back, he could have been lost to the unit. It says much for the man, that the loss of his section remained on his mind for the rest of his life.

Neither the Maori Battalion (28) nor the 23 Battalion had an easy time withdrawing through heavily forested mountain tracks. 23 Battalion's positions was astride the main road, and they found it somewhat easier going, but it still took C Company - the closest company to the road - three hours to reach the main road, clambering through "the precipitous ridges and dense undergrowth."<sup>213</sup> During this withdrawal it was found that 32nd Battery of the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment could not get its guns across the Poras stream. The anti-tank gunners had to do what every gunner dreads - wreck, or roll the guns down into the stream. The gunners of 32nd Battery then served as infantry with the 23 Battalion. The 23 Battalion withdrew up towards Kokkinoplos, but it had to leave their heavy equipment behind. Although the Greek muleteers had taken away the sick and wounded the previous day, they had been disconcerted by the shellfire and had not returned. With a vanguard of one platoon from B Company to discourage any German mountain troops that might have infiltrated their way around the mountain, the battalion picked its way through the mud and over precipices, discarding packs and personal equipment as they went. Finally they staggered into the Kokkinoplos village at 6.30 a.m. for a well-earned sleep.

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<sup>212</sup> Logan, p.2.

<sup>188</sup> Mclymont, p.267

The 28 Battalion's heavy equipment had been moved back during the day. Mules and muleteers had been arranged to carry the packs of the soldiers, but when it was found that they had deserted, the Maori Battalion was faced with an exhausting tramp after the last German attack had faded away at 10.30 p.m. "A withdrawal over mountainous terrain is even more difficult and with the heavy packs the operation becomes extremely dangerous."<sup>214</sup> Major Dyer waited an extra hour for a missing section to turn up. Regrettably Corporal Wipiti and his section had disappeared, never to appear again. Although they evaded the Germans for a week they were finally captured and immured in a Prisoner of War Camp. The Battalion was forced to withdraw in single file through the heavily timbered forest. They only had cigarette papers to follow in the dark. Captain A. Scott, commander of C Company, a short plump man periodically slipped off the track. Three times he did this and three times Logan and another man hauled him and his kit back onto the track. Lieutenant Ruihi Pene described the hell of the withdrawal: "We climbed this precipice, packs and all by grabbing and clutching at trees and branches and hauling ourselves up foot by foot."<sup>215</sup> So exhausted were the Maori soldiers that Colonel G. Dittmer gave the order that their packs were to be abandoned when he realised that they were not going to get out of the pass before the New Zealand Engineers blew the road.<sup>216</sup> His decision came just in time, when the first of the battalion reached the head of the pass at 3.30a.m., they were "a sad sight – soaked to the skin"<sup>217</sup> they found the engineers about to demolish the road. Brigadier Hargest had regretfully decided at 3.00 a.m. that if the 28 did not turn up in half an hour, the pass was to be blown and the transport sent back. The battalion was withdrawn to defensive positions in Ay Dhimitrios. They had lost three men killed and nineteen missing, they had blooded some of the best of the German Army, and then withdrawn in good order.

At 12.15 p.m. on 17 April a series of explosions reverberated through the pass. The explosion cratered the road, but the 'sappers' were disappointed when the adjacent cliff did

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<sup>214</sup> Gardiner, W. (1992) *Te Mura o Te Ahi-The Story of the Maori Battalion*. Reed, Auckland P.53

<sup>215</sup> Gardiner, P.54.

<sup>216</sup> Cody, J.F. (1956) *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45. 2<sup>o</sup> (Maori) Battalion*, Historical Publication Branch, Wellington, p.65.

<sup>217</sup> Logan, p.2.

not fall in as well. It was: "A most disappointing fact when it is remembered that the Division had five weeks in the area to prepare for such an event."<sup>218</sup>

The 4th Brigade even had less time to prepare for the withdrawal than did the 5th Brigade. 4th Brigade, the hinge in the Servia pass was tasked with holding the pass to enable the other brigades to withdraw. Through the evening and early morning of the 8 and 9 April 1941, the brigade had moved over from Mount Olympus to Servia through the gelatinous mud, finally moving into position in the early hours of the morning. The 19 Battalion had an early start at 3.00 a.m. on the 9 April. This early start was made worse when it was found that their transport could not carry all the battalion.<sup>219</sup> But at around 5.00 a.m. they were picked up by the drivers of Divisional Petrol Company (Later on in Crete this unit was to inflict, more casualties on the Germans than any other comparable unit). In the Petrol Company's 'three-tonners' they continued the 90 mile (154 kilometre) journey over the precipitous route to Servia. The weather in the Servia pass was as bad as the soldiers in the Monastir Gap had to face. Heavy rain, sleet and the unaccustomed heavy traffic were tearing up the roads

The village of Servia occupies a strategic position. South of the Aliakmon River, the skyline above it is dominated by a 12th Century Byzantine castle. Once through the town there is a road junction. One road leading to Elasson, and one to Karperon. It was regarded as being a poor position as once through the town and pass, the Germans could turn the allies flank. This was the least of the 4th Brigade's problems as the infantry laid their groundsheets and huddled into their great coats and blankets. Luckier by far was the Hawkes Bay Company of 19 Battalion; they all managed to crowd into a barn.

Next morning, the 4th Brigade faced a morning bright and cold, but the shivering soldiers were revived by their breakfast that the cooks had prepared against all odds. Once this was done they had to reconnoitre their new positions. "Eighteenth (sic) and 19 Battalions went to the steep escarpment which extends westward from Servia to the Aliakmon River and 20

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<sup>218</sup> Mclymont p.269.

<sup>219</sup> Sinclair, D. W. (1954) *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45 19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment* Department of Internal Affairs: Wellington, p.70.



Battalion to reserve positions”<sup>206</sup>

On the 12 April, a company of the 2/1 Australian Machine Gun Battalion was taken under command. 4th Brigade had the opportunity to view what the Mackay force had seen in the Monastir Gap, a constant stream of refugees; Greek and Yugoslav soldiers and, more usefully, a Yugoslav 88mm battery and its crew. This was the German manufactured dual-purpose weapon, which must have come as a fillip to the brigade, and it was quickly put into an anti-tank role. However everyone did not appreciate this gift. Kippenberger thought that the guns were “settled in unpleasantly close to my headquarters.”<sup>207</sup>

On the evening of the 12 April the warning went around the brigade that the Germans were expected in the pass the next morning, but the Germans also had logistic problems and their progress had stopped outside Kozani about seven kilometres away. This enforced halt allowed the 19th Australian Brigade to assemble on the left flank of 4th Brigade. This also enabled demolitions to be laid and defences improved.

During this enforced break the *Luftwaffe* had also been busy, straffing and bombing: “but the casualty list was relatively light”<sup>208</sup>. There were three killed and four wounded. On the 14 April the enemy made its move. Patrols were seen entering Kozanis and this drew fire from the medium and field artillery regiments. The Germans tried to engage in counter

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<sup>206</sup> McClymont, p.270.

<sup>207</sup> Kippenberger, P. (1961) *Infantry Brigadier* Oxford University Press, London.

<sup>208</sup> McClymont, p.271

battery fire, and although its airbursts were spectacular its efforts were futile due to the efficiency of the Commonwealth gunners camouflage.

Notwithstanding extensive aerial and ground reconnaissance the Germans were of the opinion that the allies had withdrawn south of Servia.<sup>223</sup> Oberst (Colonel) Graf von Sponeck had been sent forward to take the Aliakmon river bridge only to see it fall into the river. The normally efficient German *Pioneeren* were unable to repair the demolitions to the bridge.<sup>224</sup> So two augmented companies of Germans crossed the river by rubber boat and were advancing on Servia in the happy belief that the British did not only hold the pass in any great numbers but were also in full flight.

The fact that they had captured two Greeks who were escaping on horseback had strengthened their belief that the Allies were making a hurried withdrawal...<sup>225</sup>

At 5.30 a.m. these two companies casually walked<sup>226</sup> (this is the description used) through the two anti-tank ditches into the lines of 19 Battalion. This lack of order and discipline fooled a New Zealand sentry into believing that they were refugees.<sup>227</sup> This happy time for the Germans was not to last. A Company of 19 Battalion, the company that had inflicted the last sharp lesson was ready. Their listening posts had already reported abnormal movement. Grenade explosions and small arms fire echoed around the cutting. The Germans tried to regroup but were cut down by the Australian machine gunners. Some retreating Germans actually took a New Zealand position from the rear, killing several men before Private R. McKay killed several of the enemy with a grenade, and Private P. (Jim) Frain disconcerted several others with his 'tommy-gun' and took them prisoner.<sup>228</sup> Another aggressive withdrawal was discouraged by a Private R. Wellman wielding another 'tommy-gun' "so effectively that the attack faded away."<sup>229</sup> It must have been a very demoralised group of Germans who sheltered from the Anzacs in the gorge. Some seventy surrendered at 7.15 a.m. and the rest, who had come under sniper fire surrendered at

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<sup>223</sup> McClymont, p.272.

<sup>224</sup> McClymont, p.273.

<sup>225</sup> McClymont, p.273

<sup>226</sup> McClymont, pp.273-6

<sup>227</sup> McClymont, p.274.

<sup>228</sup> Sinclair, p.80.

<sup>229</sup> McClymont, P.275



8.00am. In this sharp battle the Germans gave its losses as twenty-one killed, thirty-seven wounded and 168 missing for two New Zealanders killed and five wounded.<sup>230</sup> It would appear that the Germans had some difficulty in learning from experience, for two platoons were seen in mid-morning approaching the cutting with slung rifles. Unfortunately, for the New Zealanders, a 19 Battalion rifle platoon opened fire too soon, and the Germans were able to withdraw under a hail of allied mortar fire.<sup>231</sup> Blissfully unaware of the reversals that had happened to his regiment, von Sponeck sent two more companies forward. By now the Commonwealth artillery had got into the act and these two companies were severely dealt with as they tried to cross the Aliakmon River. Colonel von Sponeck led the rest of his Regiment over the river by swimming, but they then spent a very uncomfortable day under shellfire and when the night came withdrew to the bridgehead where a defensive position had been made. The day had resulted in a significant victory for 19 Battalion. It had defeated in detail a force twice its size and driven it back to the river.<sup>232</sup> In that moment of triumph its commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel F.S. Varnham was seriously injured and the command taken over by Major C. Blackburn.

The *Luftwaffe* ensured that the 19 and the other two battalions in the Brigade did not have an easy day. According to McClymont's Official History: "Those who stayed still were reasonably safe but anyone moving across country was likely to be strafed."<sup>233</sup> During the day 6th Field Regiment was operating in a target rich environment. The *9 Panzer War Diary* reports that "the bridge building operation made no progress because the enemy's accurate shellfire made it impossible at times to work on the bridge and destroyed what work had been done."<sup>234</sup> Lieutenant General Hubicki in command of the *9 Panzer Division* convinced General Stumme, his corps commander that another attack would be costly and it would be far better to outflank the British whilst "tying them down in the Serbia position."<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> McClymont, p.276.

<sup>231</sup> McClymont, p.276.

<sup>232</sup> McClymont, p.277.

<sup>233</sup> McClymont, p.279

<sup>234</sup> *9 Panzer Division war diary*, 15 April. Reported in McClymont, p.279,

<sup>235</sup> McClymont, p.280.

General Hubicki had hoped to outflank the British by moving down the flank and moving through the town of Grevena to take Elasson, through which the British had to withdraw. At the same time the British were preparing to disengage and withdraw to Thermopylae. The withdrawal began with the 2/3rd Field Regiment, the 26 Battalion and some of the 19th Australian Brigade moving back through Karperon and Dheskati, thus avoiding the heavy shelling of the crossroads, and joining the left flank at Zarkos. While the German's were trying to outflank the Allies, the Anzacs were preparing to withdraw from the Servia pass area.

On 16 April Kippenberger was somewhat disquieted to find both battalions in his vicinity, an Australian battalion and the New Zealand 26 Battalion of the 6th Brigade retreating without notifying the 4th Brigade.<sup>236</sup> The disturbing movements of the Germans across their front and the steady disappearance of the battalions on the left flank did much to excite comment in 20 Battalion, the only battalion with the luxury of a view on that rainy misty day. Explanatory orders finally arrived. Around 8.00 p.m. the Battalion slipped away through the heavily shelled cross roads near Prosilion; "...where there was already 'a smell of death', but two trucks, one bren carrier and two motor-cycles were lost over the crumbling banks."<sup>237</sup>

By 5.00 a.m. the next day, mud spattered and grey with fatigue, they were in their new positions astride the road at Lava. It was a tribute to Kippenberger's training that not one man fell out.<sup>238</sup> Around them on the road came the rumble of the withdrawing field and medium artillery regiments. The only artillery left in the pass area was the 6th Field and the British 7th Medium Regiments. The responsibility for the rearguard of the 4th Brigade fell on Colonel Kippenberger. A serious conscientious man the welfare of his men were his primary concern. This concern made him hold on longer than he should have for several stragglers. This lapse almost caused Kippenberger to be incarcerated in a German *Offlager*. Taking advantage of the mist the 7th Medium and the 6th Field Regiment moved off at once. Two gunners gallantly rescued their guns when a break in the mist

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<sup>236</sup> Kippenberger, p.24.

<sup>237</sup> McClymont, p.281.

<sup>238</sup> Kippenberger, p.24.

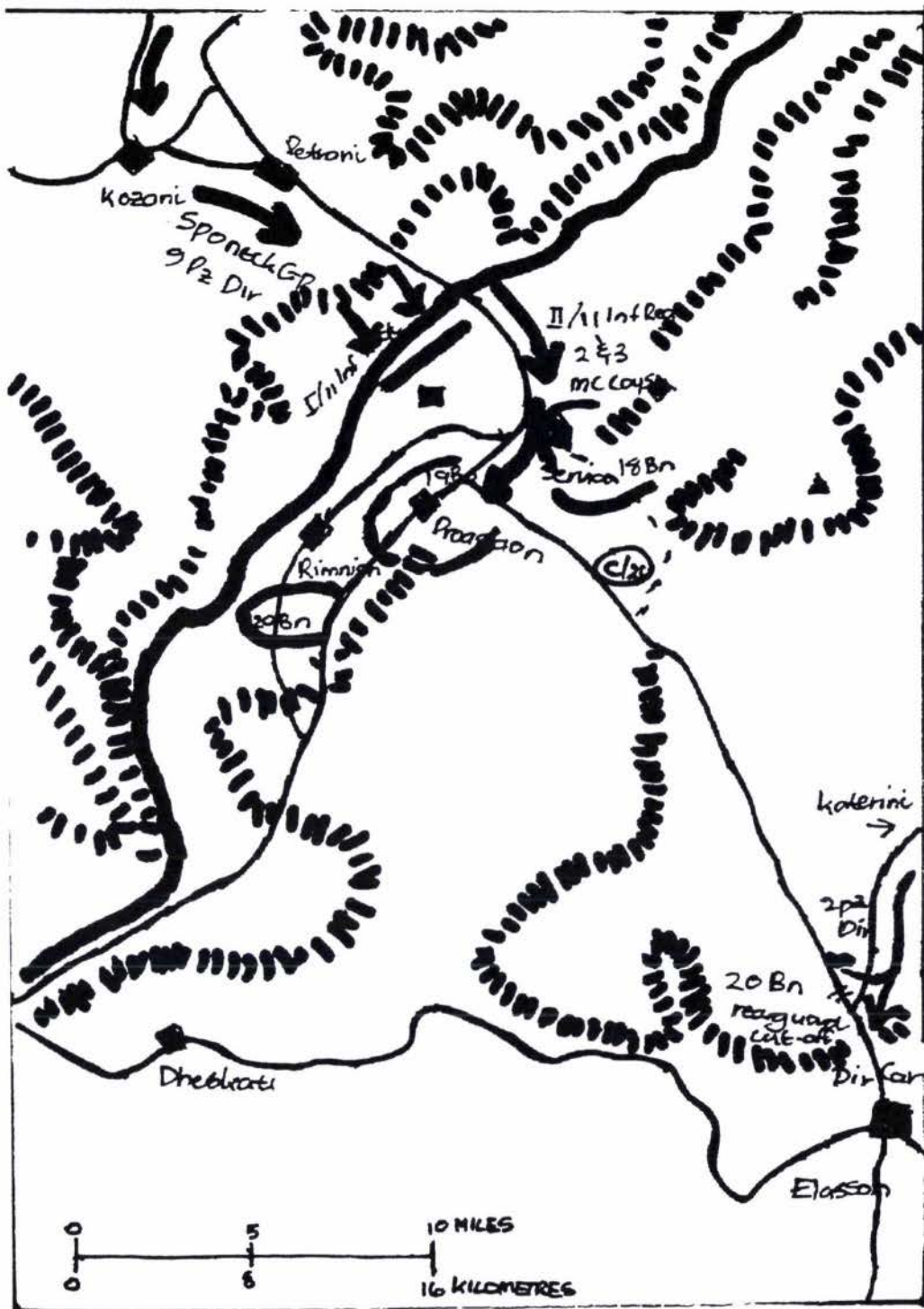
exposed them to German fire. 18 Battalion had the most difficult withdrawal. Their position overlooking Servia was high on an escarpment. They had to move quickly with full equipment. As with the Maori at the Olympus pass the order was given to abandon packs.

Everything else, including food, blankets, and the nice new two-man bivouac tents only received within the last couple of days, was to be left behind, and if possible destroyed.<sup>259</sup>

This is something no soldier likes to do, as his contact with the outside world falls away with his personal effects in the pack. Unit cohesion and the timetable broke down as the demoralised men staggered like automatons over ridges. By this time the companies had separated. When the first company reached the road at 2.00 a.m. they had no idea of the whereabouts of the others who had withdrawn by the 'back route'. After a gruelling five-hour tramp, only C Company came out onto the main road and into the welcoming arms of Brigadier Puttick who shepherded the exhausted men into the awaiting trucks. Captain W. Lyon a serving Member of Parliament, and soon to be killed on Crete, realising that the men could not manage to march much longer pointed this out to Kippenberger. Lyon was sent ahead to bring the trucks closer. This had the consequence that the engineers had to lift their demolitions. It speaks much for Kippenberger's moral courage that he was prepared to wait so long for 18 Battalion's stragglers. With the morning light touching the sky, Kippenberger knew that he could wait no longer. At 5.40 a.m. the first demolition was blown. This caused a gaggle of 18 Battalion stragglers to call that out they were still across the gorge. Kippenberger then waited for another young private still carrying his Bren gun and great coat. At 6.20 a.m. when he could wait no longer, the demolitions finally went up. The failure of the 5th Brigade to cause the collapse of the cliff in the pass was to have its consequence, when several German tanks and motorised infantry cut off Kippenberger's rearguard outside Servia village. Lieutenant H. Robinson was surprised when preparatory to blowing the culvert, he heard firing ahead of him. Then a New Zealand truck appeared quickly followed by a tank, a German *panzer*. The truck was beckoned frantically around the bend as the machine guns and 'Boyes' anti-tank guns

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<sup>259</sup> Dawson, p.98.



4 BRIGADE POSITIONS AROUND SERVIA  
15-18 APRIL 1941

opened fire.

The first intimation that Kippenberger had that the Germans were there was when a truck blew up in front of him, and started to burn. Through his binoculars Kippenberger could see two German tanks “firing fast down the road at me.”<sup>240</sup> The tanks were being subjected to a torrent of fire from the Divisional Cavalry and a gallant two-pounder on a ‘portee’, but with little effect. “A carrier from somewhere ahead in the column swung out from behind the truck and raced straight at the tanks.”<sup>241</sup> Alas this gallantry was ineffective as the carrier capsized into a ditch. Then Kippenberger saw the lorry borne troops approaching and sadly realised that any chance of forcing the crossroads had gone. It was time to take to the hills on foot. Looking back Kippenberger saw a dismal scene. All the trucks had stopped and some were on fire. Two anti-tank gunners lay dead on their ‘portee’ and the carriers were stuck in the field and their crews were running for the bank behind them.<sup>242</sup> “Very soon the firing slackened, until there was only one Bren gun firing lonely- sounding bursts, then it stopped. I realised that our rearguard had gone...”<sup>243</sup> Battles appear differently to where a person is stationed and Kippenberger may have decided it was time to leave, but the rear-guard battle went on. The battle was not as one-sided as Kippenberger believed. P troop of 7th Anti-Tank and C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry continued to fight the Germans after Robinson blew the bridge. Bombardier Bellringer’s crew claimed two German tanks. This was probably the ‘portee’ that Kippenberger saw the anti-tank gunners and the Divisional Cavalry claimed four tanks, two armoured cars and one truck before they were driven off, killed or captured.<sup>244</sup> It was a reduced but not demoralised P Troop that withdrew to Elasson with A Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry.

After an exciting and extremely tense trudge where they were fired on by both sides; Kippenberger and his companions eventually evaded capture to escape to the new lines at Thermopylae. “Suddenly we were halted by a sharp challenge. The party stood frozen

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<sup>240</sup> Kippenberger. P.30

<sup>241</sup> Kippenberger. P.30

<sup>242</sup> Kippenberger, p.31.

<sup>243</sup> Kippenberger. p.31.

<sup>244</sup> McClymont, p.302.

while I obeyed a very keen-looking New Zealand infantryman standing in a slit trench and pointing a sub-machine gun at us.”<sup>245</sup> They had rejoined the Division.

The morning of 18 April brought disturbing news for 6th Brigade’s commander, Brigadier Barraclough. At 6.00 p.m. a liaison officer reported that the Germans had occupied village of Gonnos opposite Tempe and were probing towards the Pinios River. At 8 p.m. Brigadier Puttick brought even more disturbing news; a German column had cut the road between Servia and Eleutherolhorion; attacked the 4th Brigade withdrawing from the Servia Pass. They had cut off some of the rear-guard and were engaging some of 4th Brigades’ anti-tank guns.<sup>246</sup> There was now a fear that the Germans could isolate 6th Brigade, Allen force, including 21 Battalion, and other elements of the Anzac Corps by dropping paratroopers in their rear and then thrusting across the foothills of Mount Olympus from Gonnos to Tirnavos. Barrowclough and Miles acted decisively. The HQ squadron of the 5th Field Regiment and the 28 Battery was sent forward. F troop was to join 26 Battalion carrier platoon to protect the outskirts of Tirnavos and the airfield at Larissa.

The 6th Brigade was deployed south of Elasson, where two roads lead to Larissa. One of the roads, the south-east was covered by the 24 Battalion. Because of the steepness of the pass no anti-tank guns were placed around the 24 Battalion, but the demolitions and the mines were thought to provide adequate protection against tank attack. Also the area in front of the 24 Battalion was covered at a distance by the twenty 25-pounders of the Australian 2/3rd Field Regiment and some of the 4.5 inch guns of the British 64th Medium Regiment. The other road running south-west, over the steep Menexes Pass was an easier but longer route covered by the 25 Battalion with eight 25-pounders in an anti-tank role, in support. Around each position was a screen of 2-pounder anti-tank guns. The 26 Battalion was placed in reserve.

The 26 Battalion was impatiently awaiting action. It was dug in on high ground running along the Aliakmon River. Because of the constant adjusting of positions the troops were

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<sup>245</sup> Kippenberger, P.34.

<sup>246</sup> McClymont, p.303.

not able to get much rest and were forced to sleep out in the open. On the evening of 16 April, Jack Turvey, a runner for Lt. Colonel J. Page, was sent for, to deliver a message to the Colonel. Before he left, Page, an aggressive regular soldier popular with the men, said to Jack "We and the Aussies on our left are going to have a 'go' tonight."<sup>247</sup> Page's optimistic assessment came to naught, and as the Germans entered the north of Serbia the 26 Battalion was pulling out heading to Diskata on a very rough secondary road. There was not enough transport for the battalion and so began what the 26 Battalion History describes as the "longest forced march in the campaign"<sup>248</sup>. What Jack remembers is the rain and when the rain stopped, the *stukas* came down. Once being 'strafed' Jack and a group jumped off the road into a gully to avoid one attack and hid in the scrub. As the bombs exploded, a piece of shrapnel killed his friend, Private G. Webster who was only two metres away from Jack. Private Webster was the first dead body Jack had seen. It was on this retreat that the men were told to eat their 'iron rations', 'bully beef and biscuits. Jack had acquired a tin of MVP (Meat and Vegetable Pie). He was not allowed to enjoy it, several of the larger men in the battalion took it away from him. Jack bears no bitterness from this episode, as he says, "we were all awfully hungry."<sup>249</sup>

Once the Divisional Cavalry screen withdrew it was not long before the German *panzers* began to probe forward to Elasson. The attack commenced at 11 p.m. but the terrain caused the *panzers* to bunch-up north of Elasson. This congestion made them easy targets for, first the medium guns of the 64th and then the 25-pounders of the 2/3rd Field Regiment. Several tanks were destroyed at ranges of 10,000 yards (9,145 metres). During this engagement the 2/3rd regiment fired 6,500 rounds and discovered that the German tanks would not advance through the heavy artillery fire.<sup>250</sup> This concentrated fire prevented any German attack developing until evening. The Germans were not idle and were infiltrating by a secondary road between Tsaritsani and Elasson. As dusk fell on the smoking battlefield and the dark made accurate observation difficult; a German attack began against the 24 Battalion. At 6.00 p.m. shells began to fall on the positions of this

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<sup>247</sup> Jack Turvey to Author, interview July 2003.

<sup>248</sup> Norton, F.D. (1952). *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45. 26 Battalion*. Department of Internal Affairs Wellington.

<sup>249</sup> Jack Turvey

<sup>250</sup> McClymont, p.305.

battalion. Lorries carrying *panzer-grenadiers* led by tanks advanced towards the Menexes pass. The leading tanks ran over the mines in the pass and their tracks were blown off delaying the advance towards 24 Battalion's positions. Unfortunately, although initially spectacular the demolitions, as with the others prepared by the 5th Brigade, had been half hearted and were cleared within half an hour.<sup>251</sup> The German infantry were soon fanning out and passing through the disabled tanks. The shells and the defence of the 24 Battalion did have the effect of slowing down the advance which 'petered out ' by 9.00 p.m. "...[T]he 24th ... was withdrawing in accordance with the plan, but the attackers succeeded only in delaying the withdrawal for a time."<sup>252</sup> As the New Zealanders withdrew, the defence positions were thinned out until 11.30 p.m. only "...a troop of New Zealand field guns, four anti-tank guns and small parties of infantry were left."<sup>253</sup> Then suddenly they were gone.

The town of Larissa was a bottle-neck; an earthquake had all but destroyed it in early March of 1941. Now it was devastated by German bombing, the town was still burning as the last of the rear-guard passed through at around 3.00 p.m. when they were able to join up with part of Allen force withdrawing from the battle at Tempe. At this time the writer and farmer, Peter Winter of Petrol Company was also on the road from Larissa. "The roads were crammed with trucks travelling nose to tail and from dawn to dusk the planes from the Luftwaffe strafed and bombed them. Driving my water truck I was spared the anxiety of carrying troops.<sup>254</sup>" Winter was one of the last to leave Larissa:

Of our own volition we began taking food supplies from a deserted dump near at hand and handing them on to the tired and hungry infantry as their trucks went by. Their obvious gratitude rewarded us for our endeavours. Then a young lieutenant turned up from somewhere and accused us of looting. We protested and pointed out as we were distributing as much as possible of the stores [it] prevented the approaching German (sic) from getting them and kept on with our self-imposed task. The officer drew his revolver

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<sup>251</sup> McClymont, p.305.

<sup>252</sup> Long P.124

<sup>253</sup> Long, p.124.

<sup>254</sup> Peter Winter to Author, interview, April 2003.



and cocked it. Perhaps he wanted to get a signed 'chitty' from the Germans. To my delight we ignored him and he went away.<sup>255</sup>

(The nationality of the lieutenant was not disclosed.)

Freyberg appeared shortly afterwards; waving to the troops and sometimes directing traffic. It was at one of these times that Max Ritter of the 19 Battalion relates that Freyberg's son, Paul Freyberg, then an infantryman in 19 Battalion, stuck his head out of a truck to shout friendly abuse at his father.<sup>256</sup> Freyberg sensibly told the drivers to turn on their headlights and sent them on their way. This order permeated its way through the retreating ranks and from then on all the transport travelled by night. Freyberg and his Australian colleague General Mackay did much to allay their soldiers' fear by appearing to be impervious to German strafing. According to Peter Winter the sight of Freyberg sitting in his 'spic and span' car relaxed and apparently at ease, did much to bolster the morale of the retreating New Zealanders.<sup>257</sup> Driver Winter did not retain his water truck for very long.

At one stage we were directed into open fields to reduce congestion on the roads and the German air force was presented with even better targets. We lost ten trucks including my water truck. I also lost my co-driver who was not there when we were ordered to move off. [They were separated in the confusion.] I next met him in a prisoner-of-war camp.<sup>258</sup>

What none of the veterans whom, I was privileged to interview, ever disclosed was the tension of watching the bombers come down and destroy their trucks and kill and wound their comrades. One of them, Gunner Walter Murphy, also an author of two official war histories shot at a bomber that had destroyed a truck further up the convoy. He was gratified to see the plane crash but suspects that it was damaged already.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Winter – interview

<sup>256</sup> Ritter, M to Author, reminiscence.

<sup>257</sup> Winter – Interview.

<sup>258</sup> Walter Murphy had won a competition in the UK on the 2-pounder gun and he was regarded as a 'crack-shot'.

<sup>259</sup> Winter – interview

<sup>256</sup> Ritter, M to Author, reminiscence.

<sup>257</sup> Winter – Interview.

<sup>258</sup> Winter – interview

<sup>259</sup> Walter Murphy had won a competition in the UK on the 2-pounder gun and he was regarded as a 'crack-shot'.

There are two roads and two railway lines going south from Larissa. 6th Brigade retreating from the town was split into two components: the 24 and 25 Battalions took the road to Volos, which was strewn with cars and trucks broken down through over use. The Battalion went by train. Two sappers (Gibson and Smith) from the 19 Army Troops Company (Engineers) convinced Lt-Colonel William Gentry the Quarter Master General that they could assemble a train. As the signals on the line had been destroyed, the troops flashed warnings by torch. "Moreover, neither of the drivers had been over the track before and much had to be left to providence and their intuition."<sup>260</sup> Travelling by train was as hazardous as by road. Just Outside Larissa the troops had to evacuate the train and go to ground when *Junkers 87*'s tried to destroy the bridge over the Pinios River. The soldiers evacuated the train and sheltered in the adjoining fields. The bombers were unsuccessful but a shell splinter killed one of the sheltering soldiers. The train also ran into the obstacle of abandoned wagons that were pushed in front until they could be shunted into sidings.

Outside Lamia the gradient rose sharply on the slope of Mount Ossa. To get up this steep grade the New Zealanders had to behave ruthlessly with their Greek allies, five trucks full of Greek soldiers were surreptitiously disconnected and the New Zealanders crammed into the remaining nine trucks.<sup>261</sup> It was doubtful whether these Greeks were able to be formed into a coherent force again, whereas the New Zealanders were retreating to another defensive position. On the reverse slope the situation turned to farce, although the troops would not have seen it that way. Because the break van was one of the rolling stock that was disconnected there was no way to break the train. The train hurtled down the slope into Lamia 'knocking all obstacles out of the way'.

At Lamia the train and the battalion ran into Greek bureaucracy. The train required a Greek crew to interpret the Greek signals and as the New Zealanders appeared not to want to use coercion the remaining trucks were attached to a train already made up for some retreating Australians. As this was being done, another attack came in. The line was cut, carriages damaged and several Australians were killed. The two redoubtable sappers Gibson and

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<sup>260</sup> McClymont. p.309

<sup>261</sup> Norton, p.51. and interview – Jack Turvey.

Smith with an equally determined Australian driver came to the rescue. Another train was made up and handed to the Greek crew. This time the Anzacs were more ruthless, dislodging the Greek soldiers and ignoring the protesting stationmaster the train was taken onto the main line. "...[W]here the men of 26 Battalion were collected from the fields of corn and poppies in which they had been sheltering."<sup>262</sup> The train finally stopped at the town of Kifissokhori where the troops detrained to spend a night in the open. The British railway transport officer (RTO) arranged rations and some transport for C and D Companies, but the other companies prepared to march the forty miles to Molos but after three hours the vehicles of the NZASC picked them up. Finally the New Zealanders were on the Thermopylae line.

Wars are not won by withdrawals, but this retreat was conducted with tenacity and skill whilst inflicting losses on the enemy, enabled the Anzacs to keep out of the German army's grasp and fall back to another defensible position.

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<sup>262</sup> McClymont, p.310.

**German Military Equipment as used in the Greek Campaign**

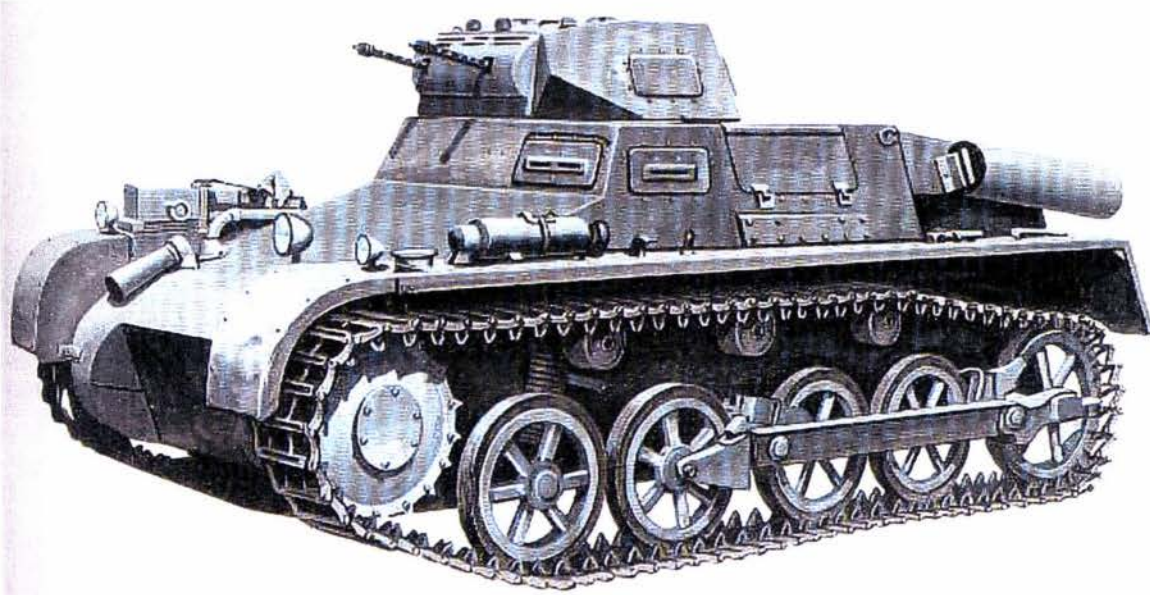


**Light Armoured Car – Sdkfz 221  
Heavy Armoured Car – Sdkfz231**



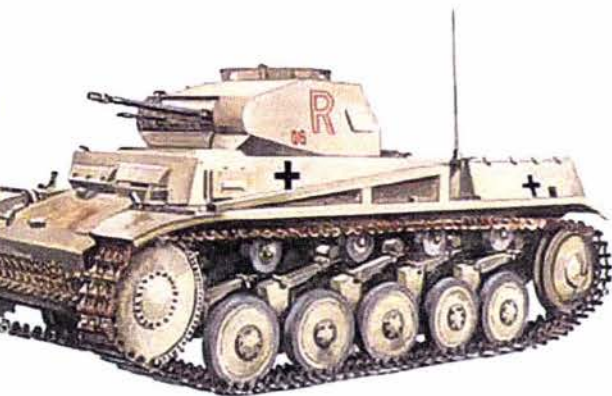


Heavy Armoured Car Sdkfz323



Mark I Panzer

Mark II Panzer



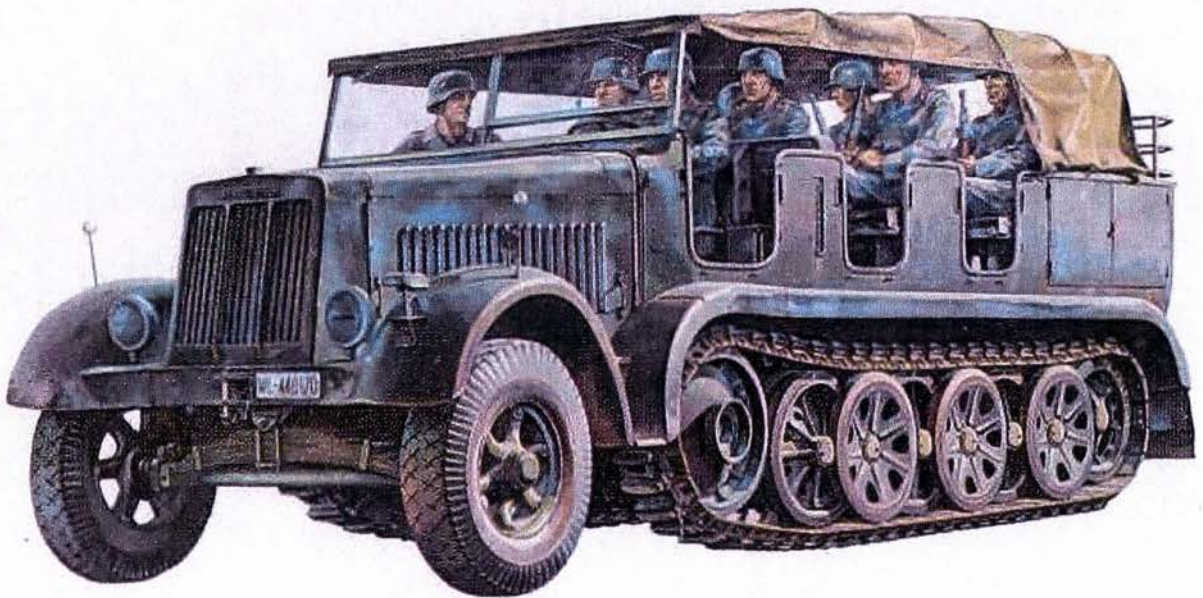
Mark III Panzer



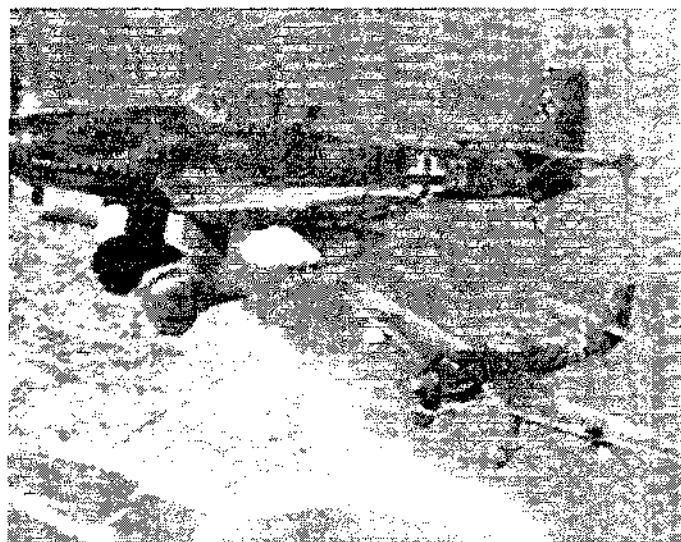


**Mark IV Panzer**

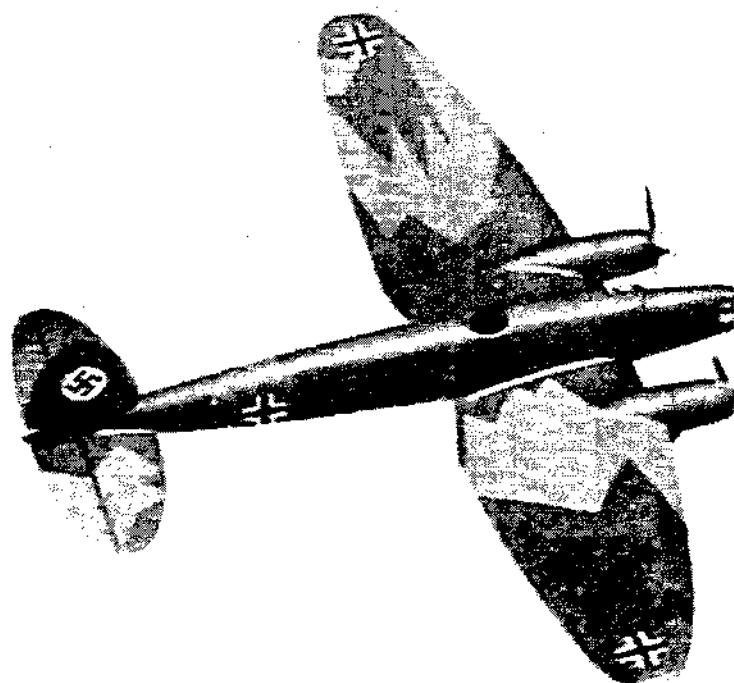
**German Prime Mover.**



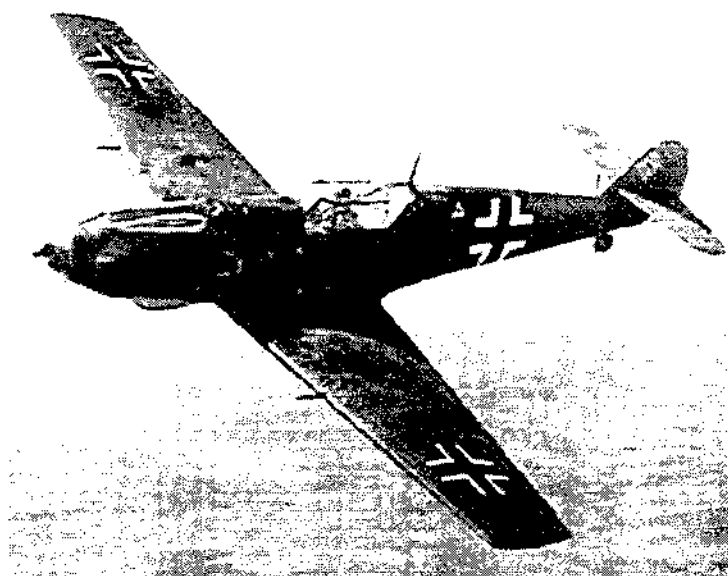
Principal German bombers and fighters in the Greek Campaign.



Junkers 87 dive-bomber



Heinkel III



Messerschmitt Bf109E

# CHAPTER FIVE

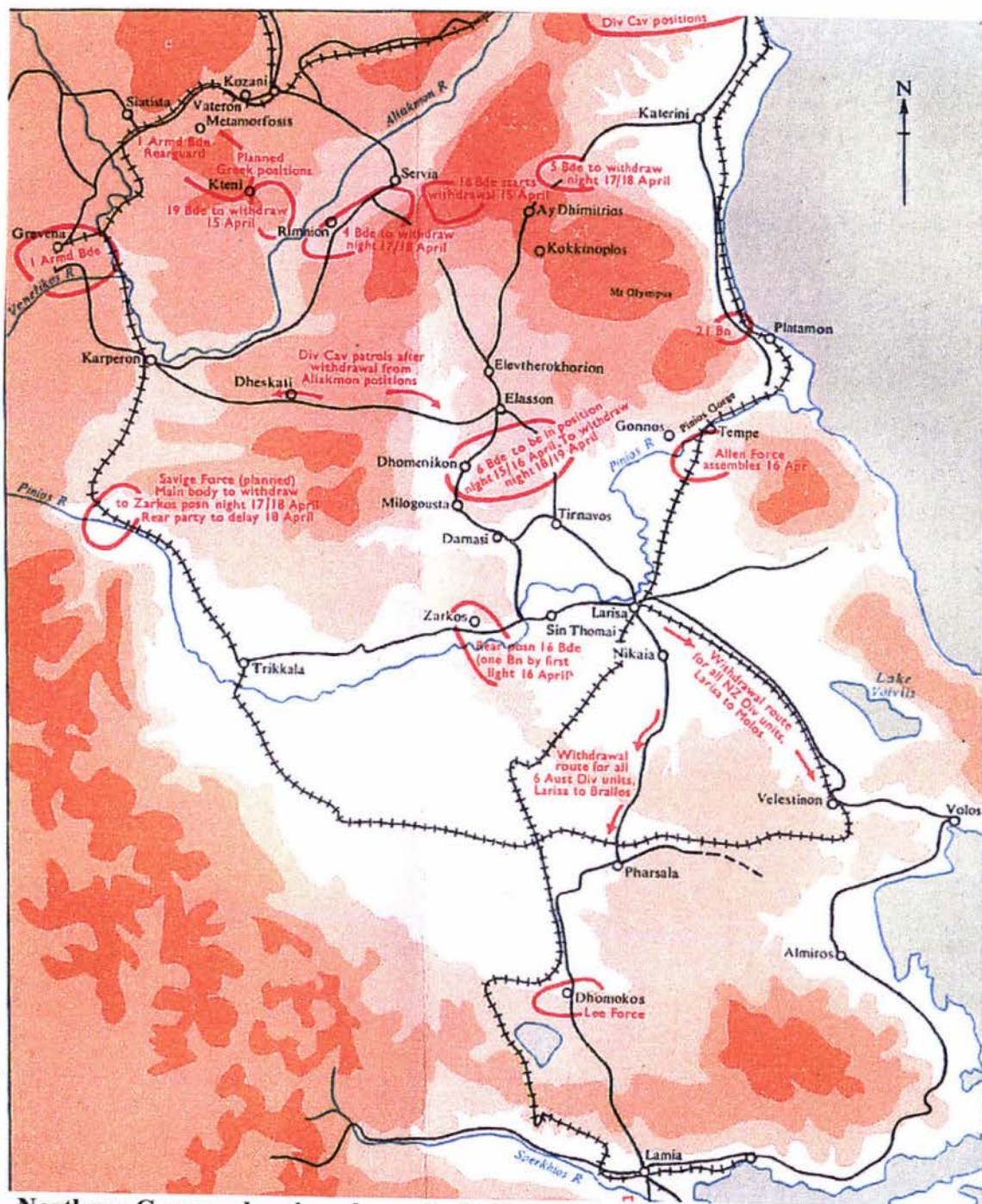
## THE 'LONELY STAND' OF 21 BATTALION

I do freely agree that the 21st Battalion were placed in an impossible position, and attacked by a superior force, but so were the rest of the Division in the same plight, in fact, so was the whole of the British force. That we got out at all was a surprise to me.

*Lt General Freyberg*

Lt-Col N. L. Macky





Northern Greece, showing planned withdrawal to the Thermopylae line.

On the evening of 8 April 1941 the 21 Battalion, the last New Zealand battalion to leave the Athens area, was finally moving up to the front. The Battalion had been in Athens on the evening of 6 April when the Germans bombed Piraeus harbour then full of ships from the AFN 24 convoy. The 21 Battalion would have been aware of the catastrophic explosion of the ammunition ship, the 12,000 tonne *Clan Fraser*. The blast was so powerful, that it blew in the tent flaps of Colonel Macky's tent 12 miles away.

The Battalion commander, Colonel Noel Macky, had frequently enjoyed the hospitality of the officers of the Base Area in Athens and was somewhat sorry to move northward when, eventually, the battalion sloughed off the control of the 80 Base Area.<sup>263</sup> Macky's instruction was that their destination was to be Katerini, but before they arrived a decision had been made to withdraw the Division from Katerini to the Olympus Pass area. On the way to the front, the train transporting 21 Battalion had to pull off the main track several times to allow Greek troop trains to go in the opposite direction. Colonel Macky commented that:

The true story of the defection of the Greek troops is yet to be told. One story we had was that a divisional commander gave general leave just at a critical moment. As we proceeded up country our train was often side tracked to allow Greek troop trains to pass through in the opposite direction. We could only goggle at the phenomenon.<sup>264</sup>

When the train drawing the cattle trucks carrying the 21 Battalion reached Larissa, the German columns had already occupied Salonika. Larissa, already ravaged by an earthquake, was now in the path of an invading army. At Larissa, Colonel Macky professed to be astonished by the informality of a telephone instruction to detrain at the town of Platamon fifteen miles further north. In a letter to J.F. Cody, (author of several Official Histories of New Zealand in the Second World War), L.N. Wallace who was a witness to the conversation between the two officers was of the opinion that the Railway Transport Officer (RTO) who called Macky to the phone was drunk.<sup>265</sup> Macky's instructions was that 21 Battalion was not to join 5th Brigade, as he had originally been instructed, but

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<sup>263</sup> Greece was divided into Military areas for the purpose of administration. 80 Sub base area was the designation for the Athens area. 21 Battalion had been retained in Athens for internal security under the control of the British.

<sup>264</sup> Macky, N.L. *Report on Operations 21 Battalion in Greece*. DA 54/10/19 within WA II 3/8 National Archives

<sup>265</sup> L.N. Wallace to J.F. Cody, Letter dated 27 June 1950. WA II 3/7 N.A.

it was to take over the defences above the Platamon tunnel presently defended by D Company of the 26 Battalion.

The German *XXXX* Corps under the command of General Georg Stumme had been ordered by Field Marshal Wilhelm List to attack in the Edhessa-Florina region with three divisions. *XVIII* Corps with one *panzer* division, two mountain divisions and two infantry divisions was ordered to proceed down the coast through Larissa and force the British defences in Platamon and the Pinios Gorge. The combined movements of *XXXX* Corps and *XVIII* Corps would have the effect of cutting off the allies before they were able to withdraw to the Thermopylae line. General Maitland Wilson unaware of *XVIII* movements, was convinced that the Edhessa-Florina region was where the main German attack was going to fall. "General Wilson at this stage anticipated a greater threat from *XXXX* Corps, and his rearguards were so disposed."<sup>266</sup>

The town of Platamon lies on the coast, surrounded by mountains, north of the Vale of Tempe, which is in the gorge of the Pinios River. When the train reached Platamon a solitary soldier at the station greeted the 21 Battalion. He was the batman of Captain F. Huggins, the commander of D Company, 26 Battalion and his presence at the station was a coincidence as he was there to collect his officer's laundry.<sup>267</sup> Huggins's company was further up the line mining a tunnel.

Macky had been given specific orders From Brigadier Hargest, for the defence of the position on 10 April.

It had to deny the approaches to the gap [at Platamon], watch for landings along the coast to the south and defend Castle Hill and Hill 266. If either of them were captured there had to be an immediate counter-attack; there would be 'NO retirement'.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Wards, I. McL. (1952). *The Official History Of New Zealand In The Second World War 1939-45 The Other Side of the Hill*. War History Department of Internal Affairs: Wellington, p.3.

<sup>267</sup> Macky.

<sup>268</sup> McClymont, p.175.

Macky immediately ordered the 21 Battalion to prepare defensive positions on the ridge overlooking the railway tunnel:

The ridge, comparatively flat on top and about 200 feet high, fell away steeply on each side. At first glance it appeared impassable to any form of wheeled traffic, but along half a mile inland there was saddle across which a track alongside the railway deviated to rejoin the line at the tunnel's southern exit.<sup>269</sup>

21 Battalion positions were disposed in order to command the track. (Macky refers to it as "a rough and unmetalled" road) and to deny access to the tunnel.<sup>270</sup> A Company was positioned on 'Castle Hill', a hill that dominated the tunnel, and B Company on Point 266, a hill to the left of 'Castle Hill'. The two other companies were held in reserve. Eventually, C Company was to cover the small town of Pandelemon just north of the



Platamon ridge looking south.

<sup>269</sup> Cody, J.F. (1953) *21 Battalion Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1941*. War History Branch Department of Internal Affairs: Wellington, p.43.

<sup>270</sup> Macky.

tunnel and D Company would dig into the reverse slope of 'Castle Hill'. The hill itself was "covered by dense and impassable shrubs and large flinty rocks through which mule tracks meandered."<sup>271</sup>

At 5.00 p.m. welcome reinforcements arrived. They were the sappers of the 19th Army Troop Company, New Zealand Engineers, under the command of Lieutenant F.W.O. Jones and a troop of four 25-pounders under the command of Lieutenant L.G. Williams. Williams decided to site his observation post on the 'castle'. It was not easy getting the guns into position, and on one occasion, a carrier had to tow a gun up the slope. The battalion and its support troops then had to endure a drizzly cold evening. Early next morning Colonel Macky and Captain W.M. Tongue, the commander of C Company, made a reconnaissance and decided that the adjacent village of Pandeimon would have to be defended or the Platamon position could be turned. Tongue and his C Company were allocated to defend Pandeimon village. Tongue did not have enough men to defend the actual village so C Company was not placed in the village, but on the hill above it. 15 Platoon was placed in a gully astride of the track leading from the village. 14 Platoon was to the left of 15 Platoon, and in the front of 13 Platoon. Captain R.B. McClymont's A Company was to hold the 'castle' area; Major C. Le Lievre's B Company was to hold the most difficult position to the left of the 'castle' scattered among the scrub and the rocks. Captain Trousdale's Company was in reserve and Captain Wilson's mortar platoon was placed in front of McClymont's company.

Some time during the morning a train arrived to 'dump' ten days supply of rations as well as 1200 rounds for the 25-pounders. With the supplies came a letter from General Freyberg stating that "I [Macky] should expect infantry only [attacking his position] as the country was impassable to tanks."<sup>272</sup> It appears that General Wilson was still holding to his original belief that the attack would come in one of the passes to the north.<sup>273</sup> It was at this point that Macky, in his report, made the claim that his battalion had been allocated to the Anzac Corps. Macky claims that his original orders to occupy the Platamon position came

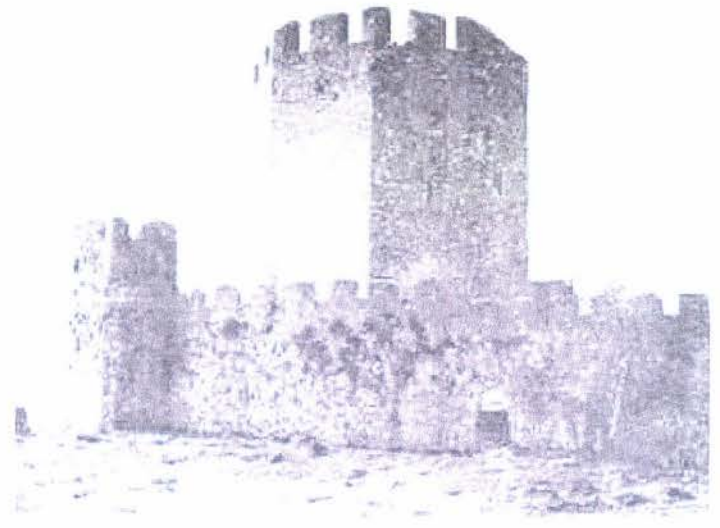
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<sup>271</sup> Macky.

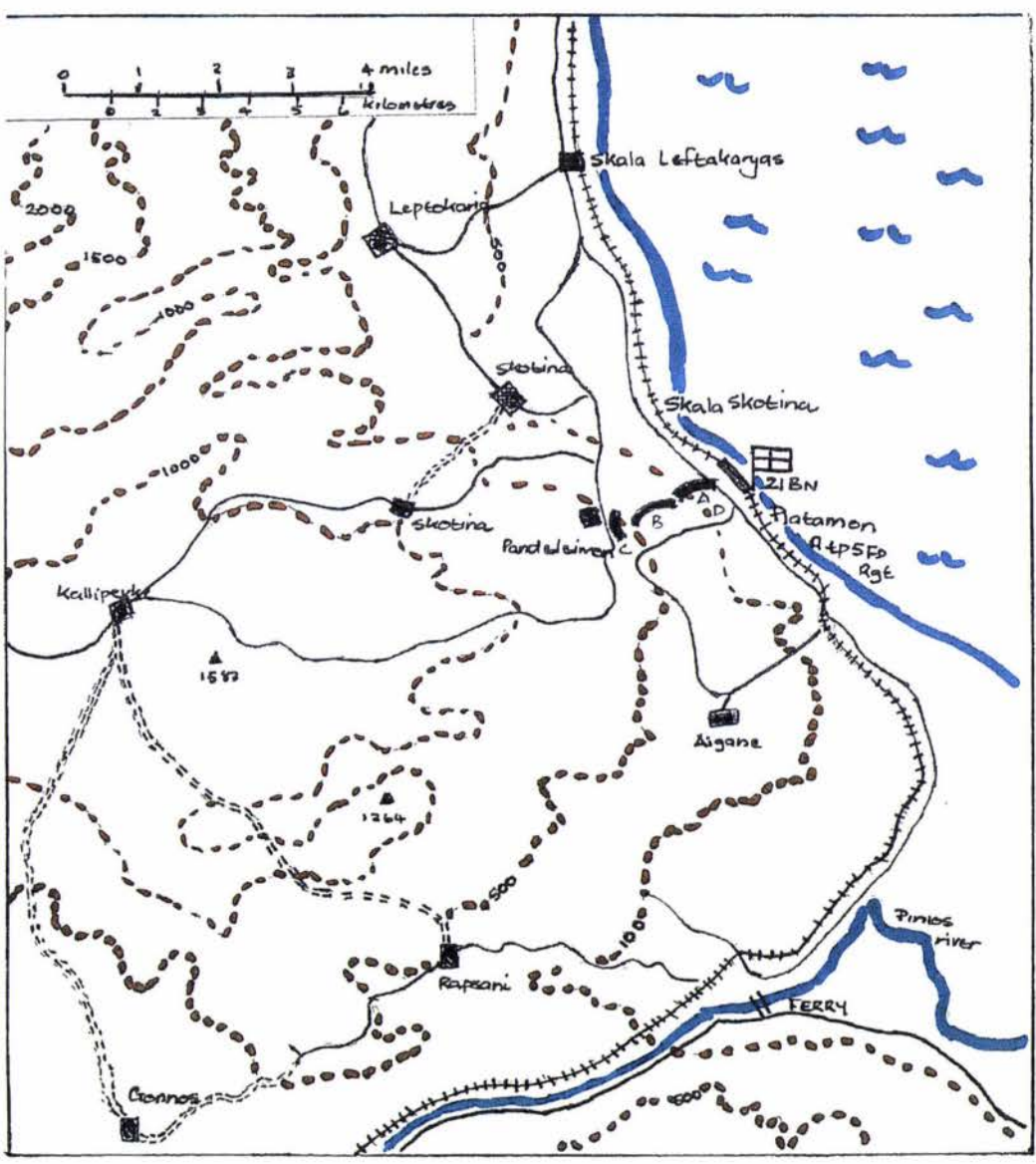
<sup>272</sup> Macky.

<sup>273</sup> McClymont, p.174.

The coastline north of Platamon from the castle—the railway is on the left



The castle on the ridge at Platamon



21 Battalion at Platamon 14-16 April 1941

from Blamey's headquarters. Beside this in the margin Ian Wards has written: 'contrary to the facts – nonsense.'<sup>274</sup>

Later on the same day (Saturday) a despatch rider came through with more instructions from Freyberg. If Macky had been allocated to Corps as he maintained then it appears that Freyberg was not aware of this fact. These instructions were specific about demolitions in the tunnel and in the Pinios Gorge. That day those of the battalion around the 'castle' were also heartened to see a British fighter shoot down 'Hawkeye', the persistent German reconnaissance plane,<sup>275</sup> into the sea. Macky makes the comment that this was the only time that they saw the R.A.F. This was one of several planes that were reported shot down that day. 21 Battalion claimed some, but Lieutenant M.C. O'Neill confirms that a British fighter brought down this one.

Easter morning was a day of activity. All the Allied Forces were bedevilled by the inability to communicate directly in the mountainous terrain of Northern Greece. To rectify this a better wireless arrived from headquarters. According to Macky: "we could not get over Olympus, but could dogs-hind-leg through Larissa".<sup>276</sup> Using other units as relay stations.

Around mid-afternoon, the last train from Katerini passed through the 21 Battalion position. It contained a short stout Greek general who gave a certificate to Macky stating that this was the last train from the north. At 3.00 p.m., Macky, was 'wandering down to the station' (his words) to meet his second in command, Major Harding who was expected by train, was astonished to see General Freyberg and Freyberg's G.S.O.3.<sup>277</sup> Major J. Peart who had also arrived from Larissa.<sup>278</sup> Freyberg brought the news no battalion commander wants to hear. The division was withdrawing to the Thermopylae line, but the Battalion was to deny the Platamon ridge and coast road to the Germans for as long as possible. "I

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<sup>274</sup> Macky..

<sup>275</sup> Macky.

<sup>276</sup> Macky.

<sup>277</sup> G.S.O. Stands for General Staff Officer, 3 indicates the grade. 1 is generally a Colonel, 2 a Lieutenant Colonel.

<sup>278</sup> Macky.

was assured again I should only expect an Infantry advance. Got authority to blow the tunnel."<sup>279</sup>

For the rest of the afternoon, Macky was subjected to the continual explosions from the tunnel area as Lieutenant Jones' Company got into their work. Macky writes, somewhat petulantly, in his report: "In the defile below a fiendish corporal put in blow after blow. It was all below my headquarters and most unpleasant."<sup>280</sup> For all this activity, the demolitions were thought not to be satisfactory, and the sappers were of the opinion that the damage to the tunnel would only offer a four to six hour stoppage.<sup>281</sup>

The last units of 26 Battalion had withdrawn south on 13 April but not before they had left the positions wired in. The 21 Battalion and their supporting arms were going to be on their own. The closest New Zealand unit was on the other side of Mount Olympus. Not withstanding Hargest's orders, Colonel Macky was also aware that sooner or later his flank would be turned at Pandeimon, as he had only a company covering it. Contrary to the assurances of Freyberg, the New Zealanders were about to meet the full force of a German panzer attack.

The German *XVIII Corps* commanded by General Franz Boehme believed that the allied forces were in headlong retreat. In this belief he ordered the divisions under his command to pursue, destroy or capture the Greek and Commonwealth forces in his path.

2 Panzer Division was instructed to capture Katerini and carry on the advance on both sides of Mount Olympus. The 6th Mountain Division was to close up on the high ground between Verioa and the Olympus Pass and was to be in a position to push forward towards Katerini, or to the area south of Servia.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Macky.

<sup>280</sup> Macky.

<sup>281</sup> Macky.

<sup>282</sup> Wards, p.3.



It was the lonely task of 21 Battalion to slow up this pursuit as much as possible, for the German's instructions were: "If they advanced 'as quickly as possible' they could cut off the retreat of the British units withdrawing towards Larissa."<sup>283</sup>

It was the 2nd Motor Cycle Battalion of the German *2nd Panzer* that made contact with the 21 Battalion on the late afternoon, (6.20 p.m. according to Macky), on 14 April.<sup>284</sup> The scout cars saw soldiers lounging in trenches on the forward slopes of the 'castle' dominated ridge. These were the soldiers of the 21 Battalion. The soldiers had just been paid and were preparing to 'stand-to' for dusk when setting sun caught a moving windscreen and the flash of light indicated that the Germans had arrived. The New Zealanders supporting artillery opened fire at a range of 5000 yards (4572 metres) at the German reconnaissance patrol. The German motorcyclists were under the impression that they were unobserved until the moment when artillery fire burst around them. The Germans, having discovered, and in turn been discovered by the New Zealanders rapidly withdrew to join the stream of traffic some four miles behind them. The vehicles had stopped in tidy lines just out of range of the 25-pounder guns. The commander of the *2nd Panzer* gained the impression from the reconnaissance that although the British held the Castle Hill they did not hold the surrounding countryside. The German divisional commander divided his forces into two, one was sent towards the Olympus Pass and the other to force the Platamon tunnel. The battle group detailed to attack Platamon was the aforementioned motor cycle battalion and the *I/3rd Panzer Regiment*, the *II/304th Infantry Regiment* with one battalion in reserve and two batteries of artillery Colonel Hermann Balck of the *3rd Panzer Regiment* commanded this battle group: "...[A] hard strong-willed man who later commanded an army group."<sup>285</sup> Balck's second battle group drove down the coastal road towards the tunnel. His reconnaissance parties reported that the New Zealanders held the tunnel in force and the flank was anchored high on Mount Olympus above the village of Pandeimon.

The New Zealand soldiers were soon unsettled to see a long stream of traffic moving towards them. This traffic was quickly seen to include German tanks deploying onto the

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<sup>283</sup> McClymont, p.245.

<sup>284</sup> Macky.

<sup>285</sup> Wards, p.3.

plain. Captain Tongue reported that he counted a hundred tanks, to which Macky retorted: "Nobody will believe us, so officially there are 50 tanks in front of us."<sup>286</sup> The German deployment soon drew 25-pounder fire... "...without much hope of damaging them, but with the intention of discouraging their closer approach."<sup>287</sup> Then a loud crash indicated that the engineers had blown the tunnel with a naval depth charge and gelignite. This explosion had not only its desired affect but also sent the children who had been interested onlookers scurrying back to their village.<sup>288</sup> At some time Macky must have received some of instructions about pulling back to the Pinios Gorge otherwise he would not have had instructions to carry out demolitions in that area. Whether it was on 13 April when the despatch rider came through or directly from Freyberg cannot be ascertained. Lieutenant Jones was then instructed to go to the Pinios in conformance with the orders to carry out demolitions there. Macky doubted that Jones would have much sleep that night.

As it was a dry day, clouds of dust soon rose over the positions of the Germans and 21 Battalion revealing to both sides their mutual locations. Colonel Macky observed that: "the Germans parked their vehicles neatly off the road. Like the old-time horse lines."<sup>289</sup> As night fell on Easter Sunday, Macky's rather fatuous comment was: "[D]ark fell on a surprised, but resolute battalion"<sup>290</sup> Macky does not say what sort of surprise this was, but probably referred to the German use of tanks, as the Battalion had several days to prepare for an attack. Macky also stated that he wanted to see the Battalion 'properly blooded'.

Neither side had much chance for sleep. The Germans used the night to probe the New Zealanders lines and to bring up equipment. Enemy vehicles that came into range of the four-gun battery or the two mortars drew fire. A satisfactory moment occurred when a mortar bomb hit an enemy truck; it exploded and then burned throughout the night. The leading element of the German attack – the *2nd Motor Cycle Battalion* spent an uncomfortable night being shelled. Moving forward after an artillery bombardment they had met heavy fire from the ridge and they incurred substantial casualties. A patrol on the

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<sup>286</sup> Macky.

<sup>287</sup> Macky.

<sup>288</sup> A. Ferguson to J.F.Cody enclosed in a letter from W.J. Gorrie dated 3 July 1950. WA II 3/8 N.A.

<sup>289</sup> Macky.

<sup>290</sup> H.W. Smith to I.McL. Wards letter dated 19 March 1950 WA II 3/8 N.A.

right flank confirmed that the New Zealanders defences stretched as far as the village of Pandeimon. Lieutenant M.C. O'Neill set out with a patrol to 'straighten the line' when he was fired on by a strong German patrol comprised of one or two companies. Macky was also under the impression that the Germans had got into the village and later on in the evening Lieutenant C.T. Mason was told to re-take the village of Pandeimon. The New Zealanders had made the same mistake as the Germans, and thought that the enemy had occupied the village. Although the Germans had infiltrated patrols into the village during the night, their main positions were outside the village. There is some confusion whether Mason's attack actually reached the village. The evidence is that both sides seem to have been content to fire at each other from either side of Pandeimon. In a letter to Ian Wards from Harold Smith, a private in C Company, Smith states that the 15 Platoon did counter-attack the village of Pandeimon and there was a lot of firing coming from around the village.<sup>290</sup> C.J. Bosworth, a private in the C Company, says he was told to lay low by a NCO who thought that to attack a securely held village with just a platoon would be futile.<sup>291</sup> Next morning at daylight, Bosworth's platoon was itself attacked. The German attack was initially broken up and the German soldiers scattered by light machine gun fire, but soon brought their mortars into play and drove the New Zealanders off.

With the dawn came the persistent reconnaissance Fieseler Storch, or 'Hawkeye' as the soldiers knew it. The plane must have seen something, for at 6.00 a.m. a shell burst just above the mortar positions.<sup>292</sup> This signalled the beginning of the enemy bombardment. This attack was concentrated on McClymont's A Company, defending the centre of the ridge. The German motor cycle battalion, moving forward after an artillery bombardment on the 21 Battalion positions met heavy fire from 'Castle' ridge and incurred heavy casualties. A patrol on the right flank found that the New Zealanders not only held 'Castle' ridge but also, that their defences stretched as far as the village of Pandeimon. Colonel Hermann Balck arrived at 2.00 p.m. on 15 April. He found that the motor cycle battalion had been driven to ground in front of the ridge and were sheltering among the boulders and the scrub. Balck ordered them back to be re-formed. It was now time for the

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<sup>290</sup> H.W. Smith to I.McL. Wards letter dated 19 March 1950 WA II 3/8 N.A.

<sup>291</sup> C.J. Bosworth to I.McL. Wards, letter dated 6 December 1959. WA II 3/8 N.A.

*panzers*. Balck's personality being what it was, he was not going to accept any delay. The whole regiment was deployed to support the light tanks (*Panzer Mk II's*). In the attack the *Panzer Mk II's* all shed their tracks, but no casualties were suffered by the regiment. The *Panzer Regiment I/3rd* attacked frontally while the *2nd Motor Cycle Regiment* worked around the flank. Their targets were A Company on the ridge above the railway. The castle also came under a disproportionate amount of enemy fire, but, apart from the artillery observation post, the unromantic New Zealanders had not manned such an obvious target. As W.J. Gorrie recalls: The Huns blasted hell out of the old castle, much to our satisfaction as none of our men were near the place.<sup>293</sup> A probing German patrol received a home-made grenade, killing the officer and driving the others into the bushes. The enemy continued their fire throughout the day but with little effect. In the afternoon the tanks were again heard trying to force their way up the ridge. To the left of the tunnel, three companies of the motorcycle regiment probed C Company above the village of Pandeileimon. One company of the motorcycle regiment was ordered to flank Pandeileimon, was slowed in its advance towards the village of Skotina whilst the other two attacked Pandeileimon frontally. Some of the positions held by Lieutenant Mason's platoon were taken temporarily, but the Germans were driven off by a determined counter attack by the platoons of Lieutenants C. Mason and H. Smith. Balck was not to be thwarted, and decided to attack Pandeileimon again. This time the *I/304th Infantry Regiment* supported the *2nd Motor Cycle Battalion*, and the *I/3rd Panzer Regiment*, with one company of infantry in the attack during the night. Much to Balck's annoyance contact was lost between the various arms of the attacking forces and the attack was not synchronised.<sup>294</sup> It was to the grim satisfaction to the 21 Battalion the attack was ineffective. At 8.00 p.m. there was another determined infantry and tank attack, but the tanks were unable to get up the ridge to A Company, which was just as well, because the Boyes anti-tank rifle was found to be useless at anything but removing the paint off the German *panzers*. One tank at least must have been hit by indirect fire from Lieutenant William's 25-pounder battery because it was left derelict and burning. An observation on the day's fighting in the diary of the *3rd Panzer Regiment (2nd Panzer Division)* was that the tanks and the infantry were unable to establish themselves on the

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<sup>293</sup> Cody, p.53.

<sup>294</sup> Feguson enclosure. W.J. Gorrie to C.J. Cody, letter dated 3 July 1950. WA II 3/7.

<sup>295</sup> Wards, p.5.

ridge, but again commented on the New Zealander's failure to counter-attack.<sup>296</sup> During the night German aggressive patrolling and probing parties ensured that there was very little sleep for anyone in the 21 Battalion. Major C. Le Lievre was so concerned by the level of infiltration that he decided to pull B Company's 11 platoon into reserve behind 12 Platoon. C Company, on the flank on the ridge overlooking the village of Pandeimon, suffered the most from infiltration and aggressive patrolling by the Germans. Nevertheless Macky was satisfied with his Battalion's performance; as he writes in his report: "[T]hey [The Germans] were severely dealt with...[and suffered] ...many casualties. Never turned us out of one post."<sup>297</sup> Macky's satisfaction aside, things were going to be difficult in the morning. Lieutenant William's artillery battery was now down to eighty rounds. It was at this time "that General Freyberg, very occupied with the imminent withdrawal of 4 and 5 Brigades, had arranged for Anzac Corps Headquarters to take 21 Battalion under command."<sup>298</sup>

When the attack came at 7.30 a.m. on the morning of 16 April it fell upon C Company on the ridge above Pandeimon. The company was attacked from the front and the flanks. At 9.00 a.m. the bombardment of the 'castle' started again. At 9.15 a.m. Tongue reported that his company headquarters was surrounded.<sup>299</sup> C Company put up a stiff fight to hold their positions but after an initial discomfiture, the Germans regrouped and overran the now scattered sections of C Company. Late on 14 April the *1/304 Infantry Company* climbed up a 700 metre ridge to the west of the New Zealand positions, outflanking them.<sup>300</sup> "[T]he appearance of this company coming up to give support turned the tide, and Pandeimon was captured with all field positions in the area."<sup>301</sup> Those New Zealanders taken prisoner were initially surprised by their captors demands for food and then angered when in

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<sup>296</sup> Cody, p.55.

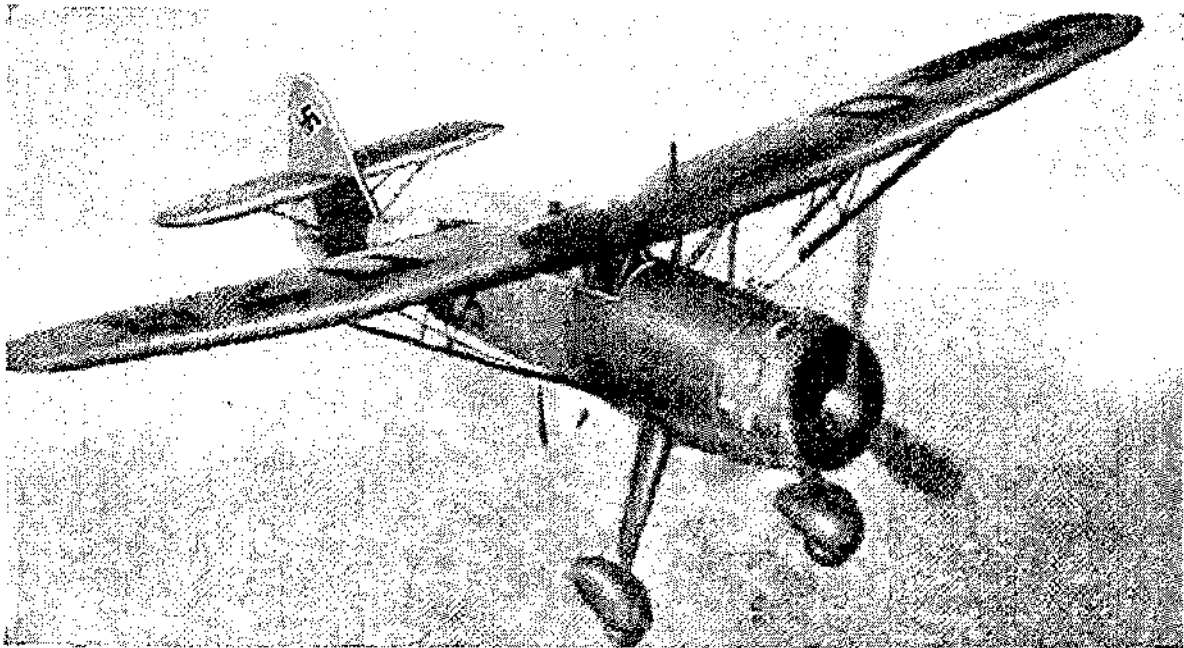
<sup>297</sup> Macky.

<sup>298</sup> McClymont, p.248.

<sup>299</sup> Cody, p.57.

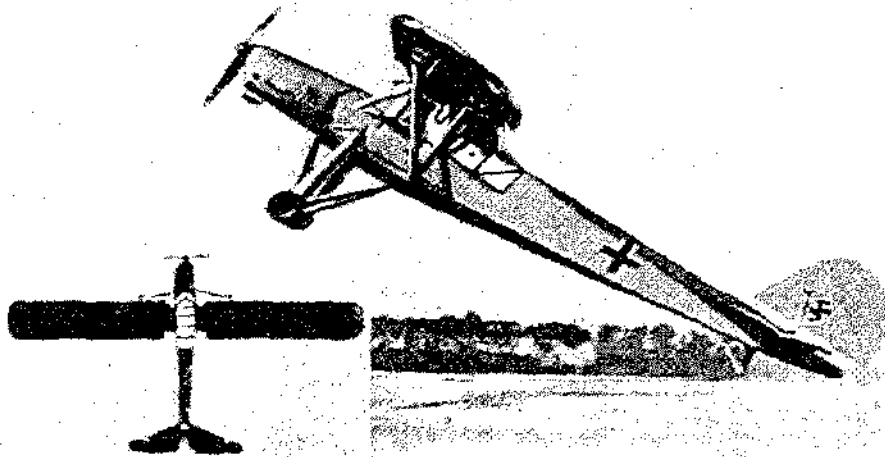
<sup>300</sup> McCleod, J. (1986). *Myth and Reality – The New Zealand Soldier In World War II*. Heinmann Reed: Auckland, p.31

<sup>301</sup> Wards, p.6.



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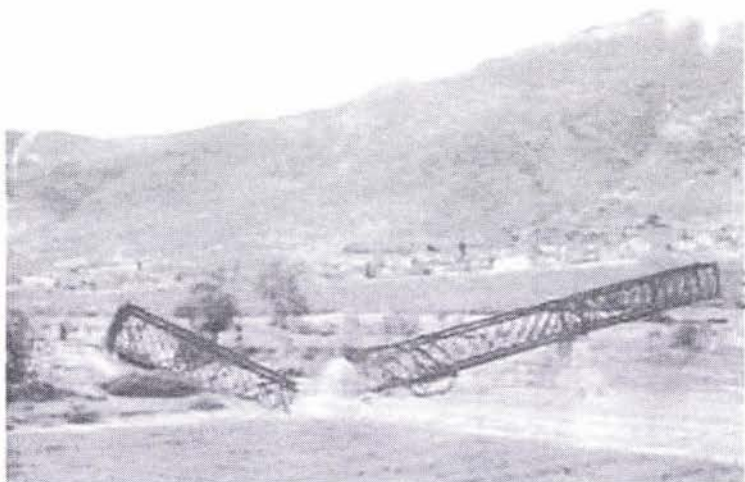
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HAWKEYE OR PERCY THE PIMP

### Hawkeye or Percy the Pimp.

contravention of the Geneva Convention they were made to clear the railway tunnel. C.J. Bosworth thought that his German captors were 'quite decent' and 'sportsmen', but he was somewhat startled by them asking if the New Zealanders had any cigarettes or 'bully beef'. He admits that his favourable impression was somewhat diminished when he was made to work clearing the tunnel by some of the rear echelon troops. One German N.C.O. spent



Demolition of the Penche railway bridge.



Loading up a donkey between Pandeimon and Tempe

most of the day trying to ride a donkey and then threatened Bosworth with a revolver whenever he tried to take a break.<sup>302</sup>

At 9.40 a.m. Colonel Macky contacted Corps Headquarters to notify it of the seriousness of the situation, C Company had been dispersed and was out of the battle.

I think C Coy 21 Bn had 'had it' by this stage – but it had fought a splendid little action against overwhelming odds. C Company 21 Bn actually fought a withdrawal action down the ridge – platoon leapfrogging platoon and got away with the rest of the Bn.<sup>303</sup>

D Company was now pinned down by fire from Pandeimon. But more ominously Williams' battery, firing in support, was almost out of ammunition. Now that the Germans had a clear path to his rear positions, Colonel Macky ordered a general withdrawal and with a last message at 10.15 a.m.: "w/t sta 21 Bn closing down. Getting out."<sup>304</sup> With that his signallers destroyed the wireless set. The Battalion cooks thoughtfully left containers of stew by the castle, just in case the retreating soldiers were able to have something to eat as they retreated.<sup>305</sup> 18 platoon covered the withdrawal as the various companies retreated through their lines. Last to arrive were the survivors of C Company, among them Captain Tongue. They were somewhat despondent in that they felt that they had let the side down, but there was little more they could have done. They had fought a battle for four hours

<sup>302</sup> Bosworth, to LMcL. Wards C.J., letter 6 December 1959. WA II 3/8 N.A..

<sup>303</sup> Long, G. Commentaries. WA II 3/8 N.A., p.8.

<sup>304</sup> D.A. 54/10/19. in WA II 3/8 N.A.

<sup>305</sup> One is struck by the trouble that the Quartermaster department went to, to ensure the soldiers had hot food, in contrast to the Germans.

while surrounded by a superior force and had succeeded in extricating themselves. This was a commendable manoeuvre as it is very difficult to retreat while still maintaining contact with the enemy. Colonel Macky withdrew 21 Battalion just before 10.15 a.m. Given the confidence that Macky had displayed the previous day, the rapidity of the withdrawal "came as a shock to Anzac Corps, Headquarters."<sup>98</sup>

At 10.05 a.m. Balck signalled that the 'castle' had been captured and that his forward units had suffered thirty five percent casualties.<sup>99</sup> Later in the evening the Germans hoisted the swastika on the turret of the 'castle'. They had been held up for thirty-six hours and the New Zealanders had suffered 36 casualties.<sup>100</sup> Behind the celebrating Germans, the saddle track leading to the 'castle' was littered with damaged tanks that had thrown tracks or split their assemblies. The Germans attempted to pursue the 21 Battalion but as yet no tanks could move along the track by the sea. The ridge on which the castle stood, had been so thoroughly demolished that no tanks could get off the southern end and the railway tunnel's roof, although not properly demolished, kept falling in. The Germans finally had to resort to towing their tanks over the ridge.<sup>101</sup> By 11.00 a.m., the next day only twenty-five tanks had been moved across.

The 21 Battalion was not wanting in courage, but during the night of the 15/16 April they displayed a lack of aggressive patrolling that the Germans had used to manoeuvre some of the platoons out of their dug in positions. A favourite tactic was to send in two man sniper teams behind the New Zealanders, "it was most difficult to face a frontal attack when your back was exposed to snipers."<sup>102</sup> Had the New Zealanders sent out 'fighting' patrols, and ambushed the infiltrating German patrols, infiltrated the German positions themselves, and attacking the tank 'laagers' the enemy would not have been in such good condition on the morning of 16 April. However the fighting withdrawal of C Company was very skilfully undertaken and the Battalion withdrew to the Pinios gorge in good order.

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<sup>98</sup> McClymont, p.250.

<sup>99</sup> Wards, P.7

<sup>100</sup> Cody, p.57.

<sup>101</sup> McClymont, p.250.

<sup>102</sup> Yeoman, A. (1991). *The Long Road to Freedom*. Random Century: Auckland, p.24



Two soldiers missing in the action, were Bill Davies and 'Tommy' Thompson. They were two New Zealand 'bushmen' (forestry workers) who had been sent by Lieutenant Allan Yeoman to estimate the number of Germans who were facing them. In clambering over the ridges forward of their positions they ran into a German wiring party. Bill Davies laconically reported that it was a "win on points for Gerry"<sup>311</sup>. They took to the hills, only to reappear on the wrong side of the Pinios Gorge to witness the German attack on their Battalion. The two bushmen persuaded a friendly Greek to ferry them across the Pinios when the firing had died down. They eventually fell in with a group commanded by Captain W. Dickson and made it to Athens. Major Le Lievre refused to have the two posted as missing, as he knew that being bushmen they would find their way to safety, and he was right.

The next position that the Battalion fell back to was the Pinios River and the gorge through which it flows through to the sea.

The Gorge was a natural defensive barrier, being impossible to outflank on its seaward side, while 300m high cliffs extending 6 km inland, prevented any river crossing in force. It was hoped that road and rail demolitions on either side of the river together with the depth and speed of the water would prevent tanks from progressing up the Gorge.<sup>312</sup>

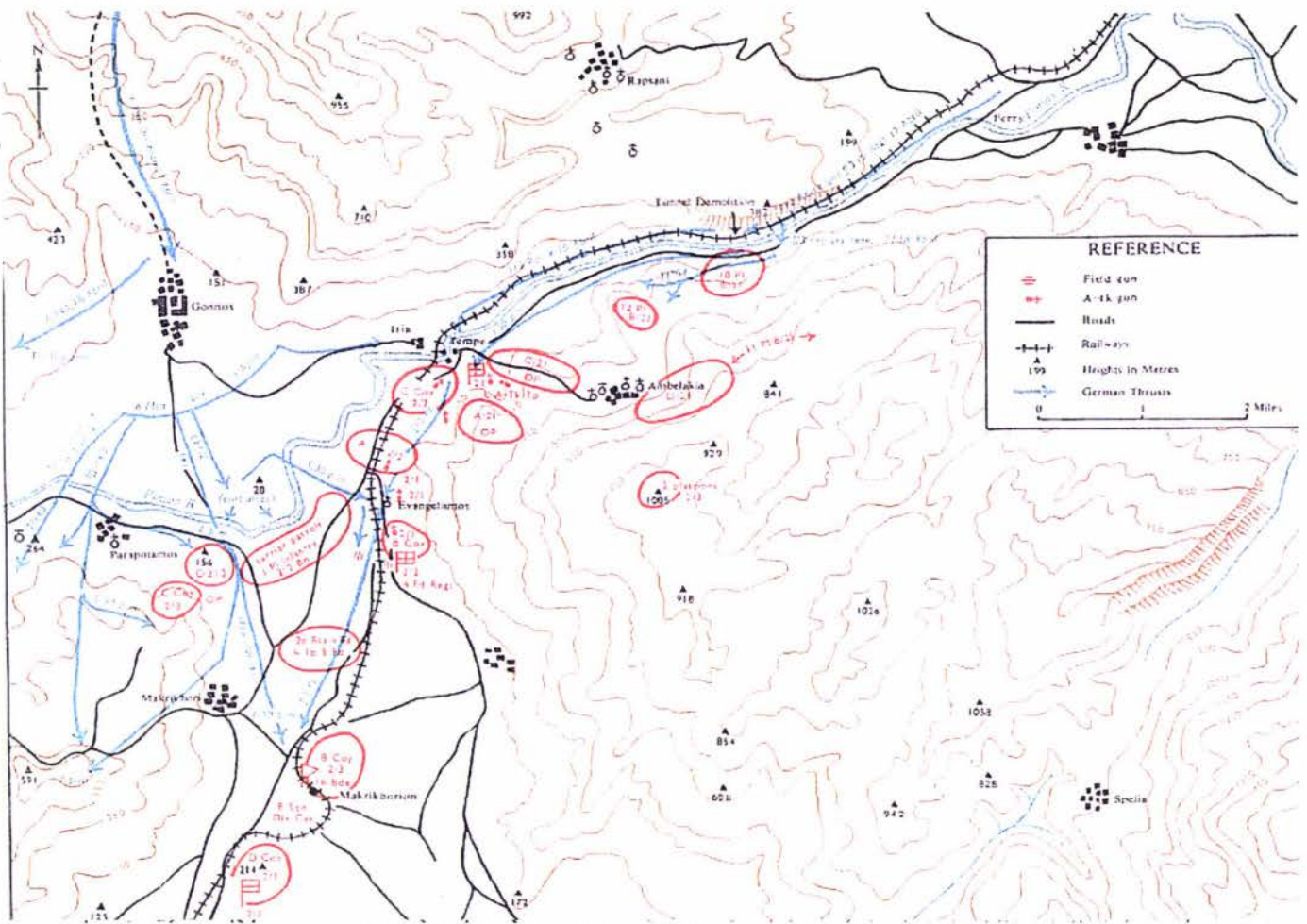
North of the Gorge are the highlands running up to the slopes of Mount Olympus, impassable to motor transport. The gorge is five miles long, narrow and steep with cliffs running down to the river. The railway line crossed the gorge at the small town of Tempe on the southern bank and Itia on the northern bank. This is where the next defensive position of 21 Battalion was established. The day of 17 April was used to prepare the defences. The bridge was blown and the ferry destroyed.

At 11.00 am that day, Brigadier C.A. Clowes arrived in the Gorge. General Blamey, the

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<sup>311</sup> Davies, to J.F. Cody W, letter dated , 27 October 1950. WA II 3/7.N.A.

<sup>312</sup> McCleod, p.31.



**New Zealand and Australian positions in the Pinios gorge.**

Corps commander had sent Clowes, his commander of artillery, to ascertain what the situation was with the 21 Battalion. He had thought to find it in Platamon and was somewhat surprised to find Macky and his battalion by the ferry in the gorge. Clowes instructed Macky that: one, it was “essential to deny the gorge to the enemy till 19th April even if it meant extinction”,<sup>313</sup> and two, if the enemy broke through the gorge, to fall back to a position astride the point where the road and railway crossed seven miles south of the western exit.<sup>314</sup> This position had to be held to enable the rest of the Anzac Corps (formed on 12 April) to withdraw through Larissa. Larissa was a choke point and an excellent defensive position, but it also was a hindrance to the retreating Anzac Corps as all roads ran through the devastated town. The Anzac Corps had expected the German *schwerpunkt* through the Olympus passes, but now it appeared that the main thrust was to be towards the Pinios river. Two thousand years earlier the generals of the Greek confederation had been presented with the same dilemma. The Pinios Gorge is an excellent defensive position but it can be turned on its western flank. The Greeks decided to continue to retreat to Thermopylae drawing the Persians on to its well-known conclusion. Now it was not the

<sup>313</sup> Long, p.97.

gallant Leonidas who faced extinction, but Colonel Macky and his Battalion and the supporting AIF battalions and support troops. They were expected to hold the Germans for three days, until 19 April. Once Blamey received the information on the 21 Battalion's location, he sent another one of his staff officers; Brigadier S. Rowell with instructions to stop the first battalion of the Australian 16th Brigade that he met on the road and detour them to the Pinios gorge. The first one he met was Colonel F. Chilton's 2/2nd at 10.00 am. They had been "marching since 2 a.m., many on blistered feet and most with worn-out boots and torn clothing".<sup>315</sup>

After receiving his orders from Brigadier Rowell, Chilton set out in his car to find the 21 Battalion. On the way to Platamon he met Brigadier Clowes on the way back from Tempe, and was told that Macky's battalion was in the Pinios Gorge. As the roads through Larissa were cratered, Chilton changed to a Bren Gun carrier after instructing his adjutant to make best speed with the battalion to Tempe. At dusk Chilton met up with Macky who explained his and the Battalion's situation.

Macky agreed to deploy his Battalion to conform to the dispositions of Chilton's 2/2nd, but not without an argument over the siting of the anti-tank guns.

I wanted them out of the gorge – deployed to catch the tanks debouching there from. He was anxious to site them behind the spurs, which here and there ran to the river making small flats between them.<sup>316</sup>

While the 2/2nd AIF Battalion was making its weary way to the Pinios Gorge, Blamey was looking around for other troops he could send to assist Chilton and Macky. The Australian Brigadier S.F. Allen was given command of the "21st, the 2/2nd, 2/3rd, 4th Field Regiment, a troop of New Zealand 2-pounders, seven carriers of the 2/5th Battalion and four of the 2/11th".<sup>317</sup> Allen's task was to prevent the Germans outflanking Larissa from the east.

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<sup>315</sup> Long, p.97.

<sup>316</sup> Macky.

<sup>317</sup> Long, p.97.

The narrow, steep-sided gorge was about five miles long. The river running through it was from 30 to 50 yards wide and fast flowing. The railway travelled along the north side of the river, the road along the south. At the western end of the gorge the railway crossed the river and turned south towards Larisa.<sup>318</sup>

The 21 Battalion blew up or destroyed culverts and tunnels around their defence positions. "The tanks, when they got so far, would certainly have to swim the river before they could advance further."<sup>319</sup> The Battalion have been somewhat disconcerted to know that although the German tanks did not actually swim across, several were able to ford the Pinios. Another Australian Battalion (2/3rd) coming up on the left of the 2/2nd Battalion also was a reassuring sight to the 21 Battalion. It was decided that the 21 Battalion was to be responsible for defending the gorge and the high ground on the south side of the Pinios River. The Australian positions were west of the village of Tempe stretching along the Pinios River almost as far as the village of Parapotomos and also defending the railway line south of the village of Evangelismos. Communications were going to be difficult for the 21 Battalion. All the telephone cable had been left behind after the Battalion's precipitate departure from the Platamon area. The geography of the area also militated against wireless communication in certain areas. Consequently, communication would have to be by a runner, the feeling of isolation was heightened when Macky heard, to his anger that the Battalion transport had been withdrawn 60 miles to the rear.<sup>320</sup>

The morning of 18 April was crisp and clear. Soon, the guns of the two armies were duelling in counter-battery fire. The German mortars and mountain guns then changed to firing on the anti-guns along the riverbank and in the re-entrants. Whilst the German guns were seeking to knock out the Anzac anti-tank guns, the twenty-five pounders of the 26th New Zealand Field Regiment was seeking to distract or destroy the German mortars and the mountain guns. In mid-morning, Macky held a conference with his company commanders. His orders to them were that should the Battalion be overwhelmed, each company commander would be responsible for the extraction of his company. The Germans' first

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<sup>318</sup> Long, p.106.

<sup>319</sup> Long, p.62.

<sup>320</sup> Macky.

attempted a crossing at the juncture of the two Australian companies, and the carriers of the 21 Battalion Bren-gun carrier platoon were ordered to throw it back. This attack was a feint to enable the main attack to develop further along the gorge. The Germans had put a cable across the river and had two pontoon boats in the water. The fire from the New Zealand and Australian carriers and mortars whipped up the water. This later led to British newspapers, sensationally but accurately describing this minor action as having made the river run with blood.<sup>321</sup>

The real attack descended on a B Company platoon commanded by Lieutenant H. Rose, who was operating a 'block' in the gorge. Rose's platoon contained most of the 'hard cases' of the Battalion. Macky expressed some regret that he could not support this block with artillery. The rest of B Company was engaged by German tanks, lorried infantry and soldiers on foot, the company already under heavy mortar fire, was forced further along the ridge, away from Rose's block.

The small village of Tempe at the western end of the gorge, came under intense shellfire as a prelude to another probe by the Germans. Macky wisely shifted his Headquarters from a house in the village to a deep ditch. The Germans, showing great initiative, found a ford, which allowed several of their tanks across the river. Several stalled in the Pinios,(see page 155) but enough tanks got across to surprise the defenders on the morning of the 18 April. Supported by troops that had crossed the gorge during the night:

The tanks were first seen by 12 Platoon, the forward element of B Company, which had throughout the morning been engaging the enemy across the river. About 12.15 p.m., when enemy fire across the river had been intensified, 'at least 6 enemy tanks came through the mouth of the gorge' and rolled on below the company.<sup>322</sup>

The New Zealand two-pounder anti-tank guns were able to destroy two tanks before being destroyed in turn. The Germans had also got into the village of Evangelismos whose

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<sup>321</sup> McLeod, p.32.

<sup>322</sup> Cody, report from Lt. R. Findlayson, p.325

occupancy was being contested by the Australians. The German tanks overran the depleted A Company and controlled the road and the railway links to Larissa.

By late morning, the Mountain troops from the *6th Mountain Division* after having crossed the southern slopes of Mount Olympus, began to filter through the village of Gonnos. At 11.00 p.m. the Mountain troops were making for an 'S' bend in the Pinios Gorge. Macky makes the comment: "Our artillery did not seem to get onto the target as well as usual. I have the idea that they were being dive bombed at the time."<sup>327</sup> The determination of the German Mountain troops was admirable. They soon established a crossing with pontoon boats. Once again the carriers had to go in and restore the situation with Bren-gun and Vickers machine-gun fire. According to Macky the Germans were able to get tanks across the gorge at Gonnos and into the village of Tempe and concentrated on C Company. Lieutenant O'Neill had pointed out to Captain Tongue, C Company's commander, when he assigned him the position that it would become vulnerable under certain conditions, and if they had to retreat, certain features would give O'Neill's platoon 'a line of withdrawal'. Tongue tersely replied "There will be no withdrawal, Colonel Macky wants this to be another Gallipoli".<sup>328</sup>

That was to be O'Neill's last contact with the widely dispersed Battalion, apart from a visit by a Captain McIlroy with ammunition "I fought my own little war according to orders and without contact with company or battalion."<sup>329</sup> O'Neill dispersed his platoon as five units in five weapon pits and with the coming darkness the platoon could hear the voices of infiltrating Germans. However, O'Neill was not totally on his own, some Australians brought him some tea and a meal of hot chicken for his platoon. With dawn came the enemy. The platoon spotted half a dozen Germans standing outside a building across the river. O'Neill was gratified to see his platoon break-up 'this party', and the Germans quickly scattered, realising that the allied troops were much closer than they thought.<sup>326</sup> O'Neill spent the morning firing at the Germans infiltrating across the gorge. "We were

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<sup>327</sup> Macky

<sup>328</sup> O'Neill, M.C. to I.McL. Wards. letter dated 19 February 1953. WAI 2/30. N.A.

<sup>329</sup> O'Neill.

<sup>326</sup> O'Neill.

very happy in our work.”<sup>327</sup> Then a voice from the observation position above their positions called out “Infanteers, the tanks are coming.”<sup>328</sup> Two anti-tank guns were in their vicinity and as the German tanks came out of the gorge they were met with a hail of fire. At 12.30 p.m. three tanks stopped about ninety metres in front of their position, at the foot of a low rise. O’Neill was surprised to see one crew get out and make a reconnaissance. “We withstood most of their cannon and machine gun fire and at less than 100 yards range.”<sup>329</sup> O’Neill was upset<sup>330</sup> to see a corporal and two privates run away (they were later captured by the Germans). At 1.00 p.m. the firing in their vicinity slackened and O’Neill concluded from this that A Company had been wiped out. An hour later, when firing was reverberating from the hills, O’Neill opined that this was the last stand of the Battalion<sup>331</sup>. There were still the sounds of heavy fire from the Australian positions, although by now the anti-tank guns in their vicinity had been knocked out. At 2.00 p.m. the German tanks were passing through their positions and their fire on them was ‘tremendous’. “Tongue counted 17 tanks which simply battered O’Neill’s platoon in a welter of dust and explosions.”<sup>332</sup> At 3.30 p.m. O’Neill regretfully surrendered. He saw that he could not inflict any more casualties on the Germans whereas the Germans now had them surrounded. In this gallant little action, contrary to Tongue’s observation, O’Neill had only three casualties. He ascribes this to the Germans siting their positions too close to have real affect. By this time Macky had vacated his headquarters in the ditch for a position on top of a ridge overlooking Tempe village. His Battalion was down to one defensive position. The battalion carriers were sent out once more to restore the situation and Lieutenant S.M Lockett gallantly engaged the German *panzers* with his carriers. During the morning Chilton had spoken several times to Macky. Macky’s last report was that the village of Tempe was under heavy fire and his soldiers were firing across the river at the Germans. At midday Macky went silent. Soon afterwards, New Zealand soldiers began to filter through the Australian position. Most of these survivors were not in good

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<sup>327</sup> O’Neill.

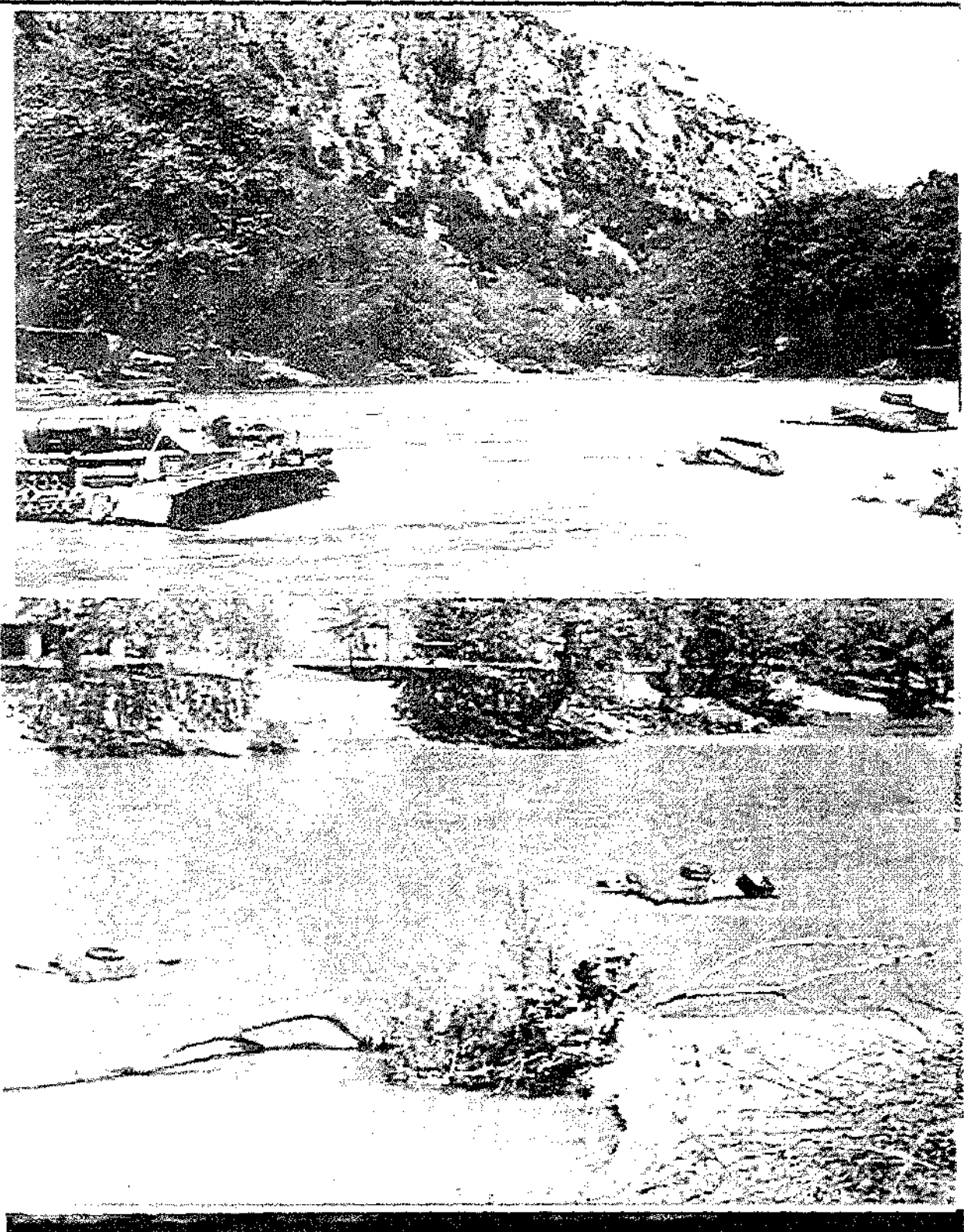
<sup>328</sup> O’Neill.

<sup>329</sup> O’Neill.

<sup>330</sup> Even after over a decade O’Neill felt that it was somehow a reflection upon himself.

<sup>331</sup> O’Neill.

<sup>332</sup> Macky.



**German Tanks in the Pinios Gorge.**



order, but one platoon under Lieutenant Southworth reported to Chilton, and was placed in a defensive position near the village of Evangelismos. Chilton's impression was that 21 Battalion had been forced south-east up the slope of Mount Ossa. Chilton "claimed that many New Zealand troops had no weapons and ignored all entreaties from senior officers to make them stand and fight. Most of them were "very distressed and inclined to urge my gunners that all was lost and the best thing to do was run.""<sup>333</sup> General Allen's headquarters had been notified that German tanks had taken Tempe village and Macky's Battalion had withdrawn into the hills.

In the *Report on Operations 21 Battalion in Greece*, in an echo of his subordinate O'Neill's 'plaint, Macky complained that all the time that he was in the Gorge he never received an order or direction. On the morning of 18 April Macky says:

So that when I saw the company commanders on the morning of the 18th and the threat from Gonnos looked serious, we decided that if we were completely cut-off and overwhelmed, those left would make out in small companies to Volos. I myself could then see that no effort was going to be made to withdraw us and that we must stave off the enemy as best we could for as long as possible. This I think we achieved.<sup>334</sup>

In an undated letter to J.F. Cody (author of the Official History of the 21 Battalion) E.G. Smith states that the German tanks broke through the 21 Battalion's position at 2.00 p.m. "About 2 McClymont and I called to Battalion Headquarters. Colonel Macky gave the order to withdraw into the hills and attempt to reassemble at Volos."<sup>335</sup> Macky, thinking the Australians had been outflanked, ordered his men to take to the hills."<sup>336</sup> Some thought that Macky was in a 'blue funk' and Kippenberger records his remarks as "Take to the hills. It's every man for himself."<sup>337</sup>

General Freyberg had gone up to 21 Battalion's rear position shortly after lunch. "I went forward to Larissa to the 21 Battalion's rear headquarters, who were many miles behind the

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<sup>333</sup> McLeod, p.32.

<sup>334</sup> O'Neill.

<sup>335</sup> Smith, E.G. to J.F. Cody letter WA II 2/30 N.A.

<sup>336</sup> Murphy, Footnote 58, p.62.

<sup>337</sup> Harper, G. to author, November 2004.

major position.”<sup>338</sup> Major Harding, Macky’s second in command, gave a gloomy picture of the situation of the Battalion. Harding had said that the Battalion had disintegrated. Freyberg then went forward, through a dive-bomber attack, to Tempe. Passing through Colonel G. (Ike) Parkinson’s 4th Artillery Regiment, he made contact with both the commanders of the 2/2nd and the 2/3rd but as he says: “No New Zealand infantry were to be found. I did not contact any of the 21st”.<sup>339</sup> So concerned was Freyberg with the situation that he took Brigadier Allen under his command. “Had I not done so all would have been lost.”<sup>340</sup>

At 3.00 p.m. the German attack fell upon the Australians. The Germans were discomfited at Tempe by the accurate fire of the detached battery from the 26th Field Regiment. The German assault began with an aerial attack on General Allen’s Headquarters. The German ground attack was lead by the heavy German *panzers*, the Mark IV’s and Mark III’s. They quickly overran the anti-tank guns in the gorge and captured the crews. Slowly the Australian battalions were pushed back by the tanks. Macky reports that by evening the German tanks had got ‘behind and through the Australian infantry’. He describes how the Germans marked their progress and communicated by firing very lights and tracers. The only check the *panzers* received were from the New Zealand field artillery that was steadily knocking out the German armour. Although the anti-tank gunfire had very little affect on the tanks it did slow down the supporting infantry and the two Australian battalions were able to make a fighting retreat.

As the guns of 26th Battery held up the Germans from taking Larissa that evening, Colonel Macky, watching from on a ridge of Mount Ossa, where he had withdrawn, could see the remnants of his Battalion retreating from the area. The 21 Battalion was now a spent force and it was now left for them to ‘save themselves’ they had fought most of the day and now it was time for the survivors to disperse. Eventually only just over three hundred men were to assemble in Crete.

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<sup>338</sup> A rear H.Q. was essential should the forward H.Q. be overwhelmed. Freyberg, B. to I.McL. Wards, letter dated 9 May 1951 WA II 2/30.N.A.

<sup>339</sup> Freyberg.

By early evening the German *panzers*, discomfited by the 25-pounder fire had taken a 'down-hull' position awhile waiting the supporting infantry to arrive. Their firing drove out 2/2nd Battalion of the AIF and the last organised resistance of the 21 Battalion, Lieutenant Southwood and his platoon who had not taken to the hills. Eventually the 2/2nd Battalion also retreated into the hills. Once the organised resistance from the Australian Battalions had ceased, General Allen had the task to cover the road to Larissa. The New Zealand guns that had retreated through the covering 2/3rd Battalion were placed to cover the Tempe-Sikourion road until 03.00 a.m. next morning. Allen also had in his possession the carriers of the three battalions, although he now only had the equivalent of a composite battalion of infantry under his command.

At 7.30 p.m. five German tanks approached up the road. Small arms fire was to no avail so that two 25-pounders firing over open sights were moved into action. Two German tanks were destroyed before the remaining gun and the wounded had to be pulled out. At one instance a German tank ran over two soldiers, but due to the softness of the ground they were, remarkably, only seriously injured. As dark came on, an admirable fighting withdrawal was made under the command of a middle-aged Australian sergeant; a veteran from the previous War, forcing the tanks to slow their advance. Then the armoured cars of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry came up to enable the force to withdraw in good order.

The escape of the Anzac forces was made even more difficult by a small party of determined Germans who had swum the Pinios River and established a roadblock on the road to Larissa. The German's block on the road successfully diverted the retreat to Larissa onto side roads until the Germans were killed. At first it was thought that there were at least "fifty Germans firing, throwing grenades and calling for surrender."<sup>341</sup> Eventually the party was overrun and killed; it was found that the Force was composed of only four men.

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<sup>340</sup> Freyberg.

<sup>341</sup> Long, p.121.

Allen force had held the Tempe-Sikourion road until 0300 albeit the gallant German force had caused some major disruption. The 21st New Zealand Battalion had been pushed into the hills above Tempe; most of the 2/2nd into the hills above Evangelismos.<sup>342</sup>

As usual the New Zealand gunners and Divisional Cavalry had fought gallantly. The retreat of the Battalion was not one of cowardice, but the defence of Tempe village could have carried out with more determination. The historian Ian Wards was of the opinion that the battle itself was not very intense.<sup>343</sup>

No matter how well Macky and his battalion fought a defensive battle at Platamon, his orders when he first arrived were that 'there was no retirement'. Then on 12 April Macky received instructions that the position should be held for as long as possible to deny the coast road and the Platamon position to the Germans. Although the Battalion was surprised by the arrival of *panzers*, contrary to Freyberg's assurance that there would only be an infantry attack, the conditions were not conducive to the use of tanks and they did not play a significant role in the battle. It does appear that C Company was too far forward, vulnerable to being surrounded and without support from other companies. It also appears that no attempt was made to set up an ambush position on the track leading from Pandeimon to the rear of the battalion's positions. When he withdrew, Macky had his wish and the 'battalion had been bloodied'. To his own lights he had obeyed Freyberg's orders to delay the Germans for as long as possible and then withdrawn the Battalion in good order to the Pinios Gorge.

If the orders at Platamon were open to interpretation, it was at the Pinios Gorge that Macky disregarded a direct order. He was ordered by Brigadier Clowes to deny the gorge until 19 April 'even if it meant extinction'; then "to fall back to a position astride the point where the road and railway crossed seven miles south of the western exit if the enemy broke through the gorge".<sup>344</sup> His relayed instructions to O'Neill 'that there were to be no withdrawals' indicated his awareness of the seriousness of the situation and that he

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<sup>342</sup> Long, p.122.

<sup>343</sup> Wards to author, comment October 2002.

<sup>344</sup> Long, p.122.

certainly expected his subordinate to fight to the last. When the German *panzers* came through the gorge, the Battalion was too dispersed to deal with them. Macky and his company commanders, unused to modern warfare, were unaware that well dug in men can sustain a considerable bombardment without too many casualties. One is left with the impression that the sight of the 'welter' of fire that was directed at O'Neill's position demoralised Macky and his senior officers and influenced their decision to withdraw. There is, and was criticism of Macky's decision to retreat into the hills. Freyberg, Kippenberger and Thornton thought it was a bad decision to give his men this order. Kippenberger in particular believed that as Macky had been ordered to fight to the last<sup>345</sup> he should have done just that. Kippenberger believed that 21 Battalion should have formed a defensive position as did the Gloucesters at the Imjin River and fought until their ammunition ran out.<sup>346</sup> Only then should they have attempted a breakout. The fact that Macky never held a command again was not sufficient enough punishment for Kippenberger. He believed that Macky should have been court-martialled for deserting his position: Bad orders, bad dispositions, and I would add absence of determination and fighting spirit in the C.O. were the causes of the disaster.<sup>347</sup> Strangely, in an earlier opinion, Kippenberger defends Macky, for in a letter to J.L. Scoullar he states: "no other battalion could have done better –we simply were not trained to the standard that was required then and there."<sup>348</sup> Kippenberger in his attempt to be impartial is excusing Macky; there were times in Greece that the New Zealanders outclassed the Germans, notably at Thermopylae and at Kalamata.

A Colonel ordered to hold a position by his General is duty bound to do so, even if it means the destruction of his unit. Macky was no coward; this had been demonstrated in World War I. He certainly did not lack in moral courage; he was one of the rebellious 'Four Colonels' and suffered the humiliation of being dismissed by the Government. Macky was petulant and arrogant. He also displayed a remarkable lack of initiative in battle, complaining about his lack of orders during the day. Hargest, his Brigadier, appears to be

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<sup>345</sup> Most last stands are not like the Alamo, to the last man or bullet. They are more like the Gloucesters stand on the Imjin, where the survivors exfiltrate once the ammunition has run out.

<sup>346</sup> Kippenberger to I.McL. Wards letter 7 March 1956. WA II 3/16.

<sup>347</sup> Kippenberger to McClymont. letter 7 March 1956 WA II Series 3/16. N.A.

<sup>348</sup> McCleod, p.35 reporting: Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter dated 11 January 1950. WA II 11/6 N.A.

too easy-going to impose his personality on a man that was a contemporary in New Zealand. A telling comment is found in a letter to Brigadier Miles. Macky writes, referring to the Minister of Defence, the Honourable F. Jones: "I am afraid I am too much of a Tory to 'kowitz' to a bootmaker as a Minister of Defence was too much for me".<sup>349</sup> At Pinios Gorge, Macky failed to display the determination that is required to win battles. At times consideration for the safety and welfare of subordinates has to be subjugated by a greater need. But when ordered to hold a position to the last, and then when threatened with being overrun and failing to provide a rallying point for the survivors to reform, Macky allowed not only the Australian positions to be compromised but also jeopardised the Anzac Corps retreat to the Thermopylae line. The evidence that 21 Battalion had not been destroyed as a unit is in a letter from Bill Davies to the historian J.F. Cody. He gave the opinion of Company Sergeant Major Jack Brown of 'B' Company: "The reason for so many men going into the bag in this area, [was because] so many had stuck together in large gangs. Major Le Lievre had 72 with him when he was taken."<sup>350</sup>

Bill Davies the bushman eventually fell in with Captain Dickson of B Company. Here he was informed that the battalion had: "taken to the hills and would endeavour to reach the coast."<sup>351</sup> That large parties attempted to break out is another indication that the fighting for the rest of the battalion was not particularly heavy. Five infantry battalions and the Army Service Corps had heavier mortality rates than the 21 Battalion in Greece, and they were not required to make a last stand. A 'territorial' battalion such as 21 Battalion, would take on the strengths and faults of its commanding officer. Lacking a cadre of professional NCO's a good colonel was responsible for engendering *esprit de corps* within the battalion.

The behaviour of the 21 Battalion goes to the very heart of one of the significant faults with the New Zealand Division in the first two years. Of the three Brigades, the commanders and senior officers of the two other Brigades regarded the 5th Brigade with concern. In a letter Kippenberger states about the 5th Brigade: [The] "Battalions never helped one another. Units quarrelled with one another. – conformed with mutual dislike. Both the

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<sup>349</sup> Macky, N.L. to Brigadier Miles letter The Macky Papers., Army Museum, Waiouru.

<sup>350</sup> Davies, W. to J.F. Cody, letter WA II 3/7.

<sup>351</sup> Davies

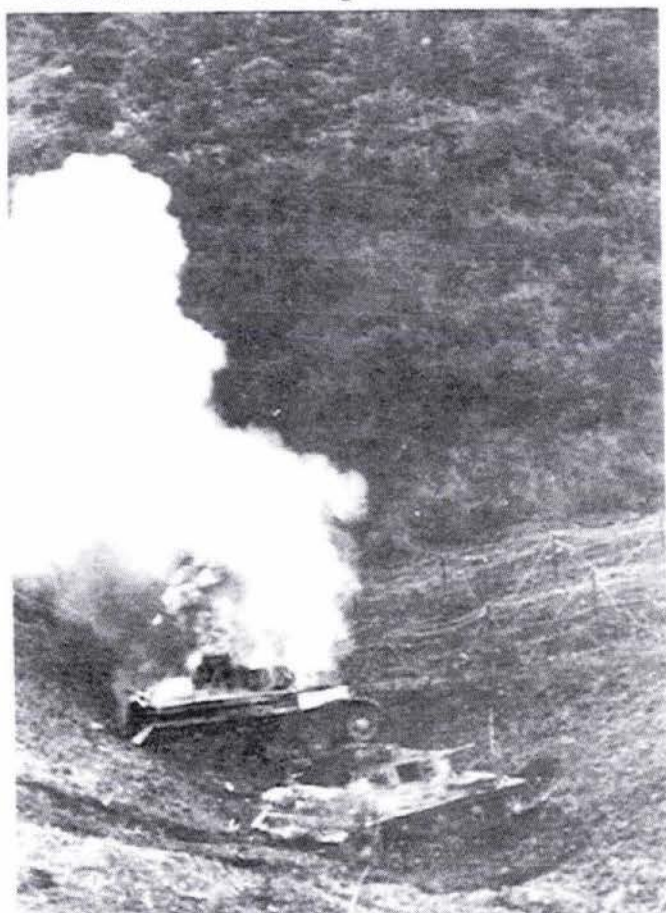
<sup>352</sup> WA II/30. Kippenberger

other Brigades thought poorly of 5 Brigade discipline."<sup>352</sup> Some officers, particularly the field and brigade officers were too old and set in their ways. For many men, having a commission gave them a social life that they could not achieve in Civilian life. Kippenberger comments<sup>353</sup>:

His [Hargest] personal standards were not as those of the other brigadiers, he and his Brigade were far more socially inclined. He never gripped his Brigade. ...Both the other brigades thought poorly of 5 Brigade's discipline and turn out.<sup>354</sup>

This weakness was to have fatal consequences for the defence of Maleme aerodrome on Crete.

**German tanks burning below the Platamon ridge.**



**German Mk III tank at Pinios.**



<sup>352</sup> WA II/30 Letter to McClymont. 6 March 1956

<sup>353</sup> WA II/30. Kippenberger

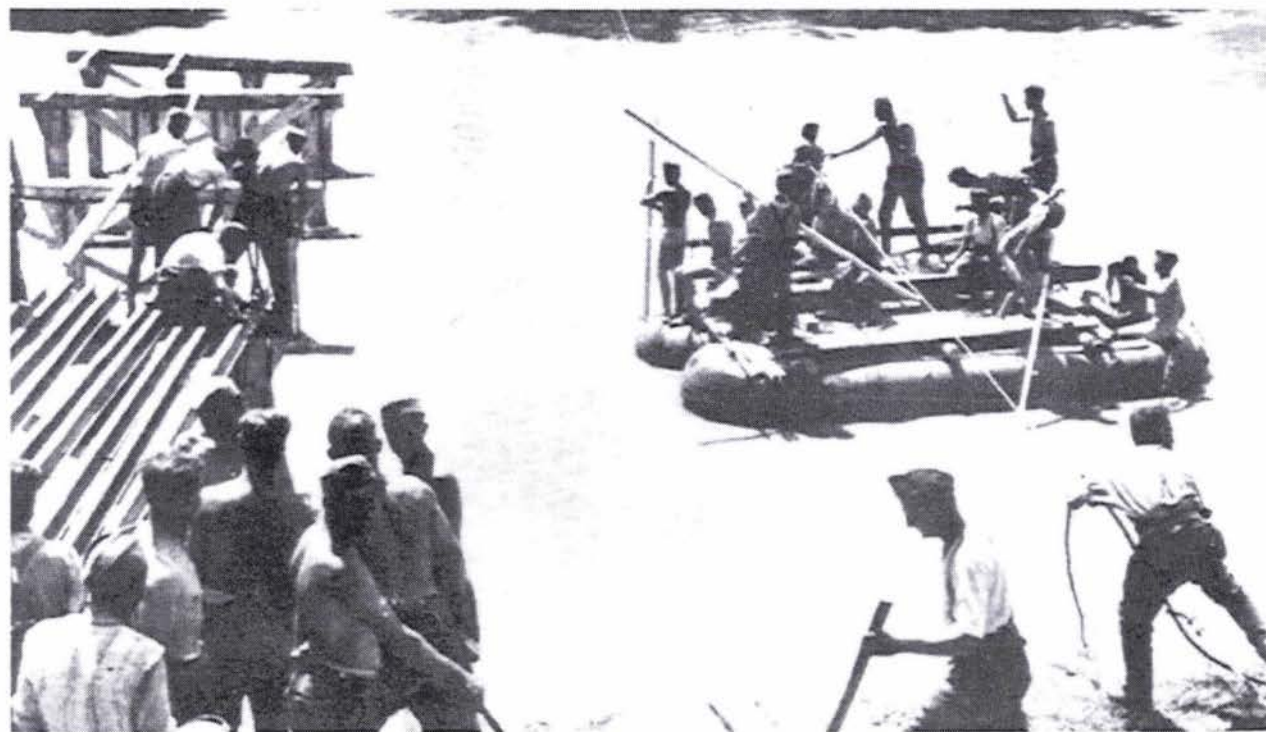


*March 26, 1891, 10:30 A.M.*  
The term which caused the 1891 Brigade across the Mountain Range.

### The Retreat to the Vale of Tempe.



**German Engineers bridging the Pinios river.**



**German mountain troops fording the Pinios river.**

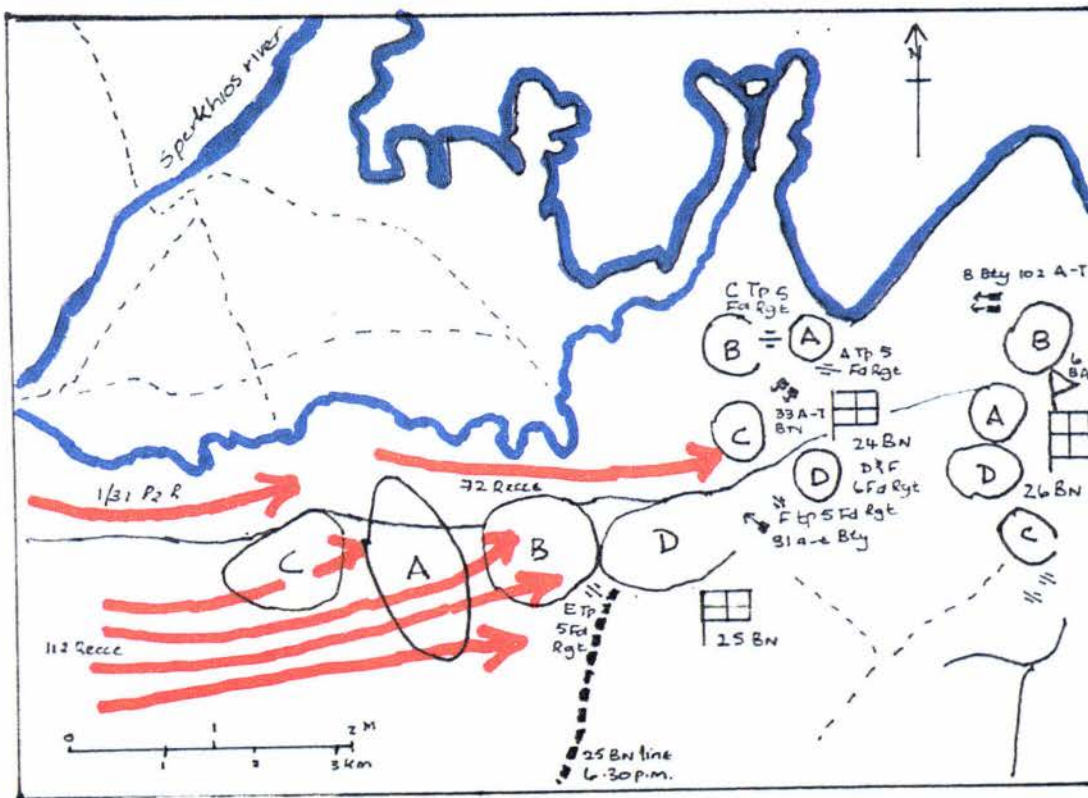


# CHAPTER SIX

## From the gates of fire (Thermopylae) to the Evacuation beaches

Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.

*Winston Churchill*



THE GUNS AND 6 BRIGADE AT MOLOS

From the time that W Force went to Greece, the Royal Navy was preparing for its evacuation. Admiral Andrew Cunningham for one was in no doubt that the force would eventually have to be brought out. In a reply to the Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Dudley Pound asking for confirmation that “adequate arrangements might be prepared to withdraw on their [Australian and New Zealand] forces.”<sup>355</sup> Admiral Cunningham replied:

The problem has never been far from my thoughts since decision was reached to move into Greece.... I can only guarantee that everything possible will be done to withdraw the Dominion troops with British.<sup>356</sup>

Between 4 April and 7 April the strategic situation in the Mediterranean theatre of operations was changed by the intervention of Rommel in the Western desert. The German expeditionary force (*Deutsche Afrika Korps*) captured a clutch of British senior officers in its rapid drive for the Egyptian frontier. First Brigadier R.G.W. Rimmington the Commander of the 3rd Armoured Brigade, and then Generals Philip Neame and Richard O'Connor awoke from a doze in their car to find themselves surrounded by Germans. General M. Gambier-Parry was captured at Mechili when he went there to do some forward observation. By the time that Bardia fell on 15 April, the British 2nd Armoured Division was in headlong flight east. The only check to the Germans was the Australian 9th Division. Withdrawing in the face of the enemy, its commander Major General Leslie Morshead brought it into the fortified port of Tobruk. Because of the grim situation in Cyrenaica even the most sanguine of British commanders must have realised that W Force was in an untenable position in Greece. On 14 April:

[T]he New Zealand Government was told that because of the critical conditions in Cyrenaica the Polish Brigade and 7 Australian Division could not be sent to Greece. Fearing the worst, it immediately suggested that preparations be made for the possible evacuation of W Force.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Dudley Pound to A Cunningham, Cable 24 March 1943. Long, p.20.

<sup>356</sup> Long, p.20-21.

<sup>357</sup> McClymont, p.363.

On 16 April General Papagos suggested that Force W be withdrawn. Papagos must have realised that the hearts of some of Metaxist appointed senior officers, (the pro-British Venezilists officers had long been purged) were not in a war against Germany and the British had sent too few units for a successful defence.

During and after Easter, Athens was thronged with Greek soldiers on leave. McClymont describes them as being 'bewildered and angry'<sup>358</sup>, but surely the predominant emotion would have been confusion and then relief from being away from the battle zone. Koryzis accused the Minister of War of treachery for giving some of the soldiers on the Albanian front leave, but it was too late. Taking the burden of the disgrace on himself the Prime Minister, Alexandros Koryzis shot himself, a futile gesture as he had done all that was within his limited powers to avert the disaster. Six years of divisive rule by the pro-German Metaxas administration had divided and demoralised the country and the patriotic fervour with which had nurtured the Greeks in the war against the Italians could not be sustained in the battles against the Germans.

Churchill was enthused by the news of the successful withdrawal to Thermopylae, and undoubtedly buoyed by historic significance of the position, did something that his illustrious ancestor, Marlborough would never have done, he changed his objectives. Writing to Anthony Eden, still marooned in Egypt, he counselled: "victory in Libya counts first, evacuation of troops from Greece second."<sup>359</sup> Elaborating, and moving further from the reality of the situation, Churchill indicated his intention to seek the approval of the Australian and New Zealand Dominions:

I am increasing of the opinion that if the generals on the spot think that they can hold on in the Thermopylae line for a fortnight or three weeks, and we can keep the Greek Army fighting, or enough of it, we should certainly support them, if the Dominions will agree. ...[A]nd if the troops were British only and the matter could be decided on military grounds alone I would urge Wilson to fight if he thought it possible. Anyhow, before we commit

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<sup>358</sup> McClymont, p.363.

<sup>359</sup> McClymont, p.363.

ourselves to evacuation the case must be put squarely to the Dominions after to-morrow's Cabinet.<sup>360</sup>

Wavell also believed that if the Thermopylae line could be held then this would enable the situation in the Western Desert to be stabilised. Then evacuation plans could be properly prepared. General Wilson at first thought that his forces could hold for another month but doubted whether the Germans could be held at the Thermopylae position.<sup>361</sup> The only other alternative was a withdrawal into the Peloponnese with a defence position at the Corinth canal, but this position could easily be outflanked at Patras.

Wavell had already advised Wilson that because of the situation in the desert, Wilson could not expect any more reinforcements.<sup>362</sup> At this moment of time the ubiquitous 'Freddie' de Guingand was in Athens. General Smith had sent him there as a member of the Joint Planning Staff.<sup>363</sup> On 15 April Wavell phoned de Guingand in Athens, to give him permission "to discuss all our plans with certain officers whom he notified."<sup>364</sup> Obviously these certain officers did not include Major Generals and those below. For on the 20 April both Generals Mackay and Freyberg were still "impressing on their subordinates that there would be no more withdrawals."<sup>365</sup>

On 17 April Rear-Admiral H.T. Baillie-Groham was sent to Athens to prepare for the evacuation. Earlier in the campaign British Naval officers had checked certain beaches suitable for evacuation in southern Greece. When this was commented on, it was explained that they were being considered for landing stores and equipment as the main port of Piraeus was partially blocked.

On 18 April there was a meeting at General Wilson's Headquarters with the British and Greek High Command. Those attending the meeting were: King George of the Hellenes;

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<sup>360</sup> McClymont, p.365.

<sup>361</sup> McClymont, p.363.

<sup>362</sup> McClymont, p.362.

<sup>363</sup> It is interesting to note that General Wavell was unaware of de Guingand's mission to Greece until he met him on the same flying boat on the Nile.

<sup>364</sup> De Guingand, pp.76-77.

<sup>365</sup> Long, p.143.

Sir Michael Palairret the British Minister to Greece; General Papagos; Air Vice-Marshal J. D'Albiac and Rear-Admiral C.Turle. The decision to withdraw had already been made but the Generals still considered whether W force could hold the Germans at the Thermopylae line for a time. Wilson was of the opinion that:

The arguments in favour of fighting it out, which [it] is always better to do if possible, ...were: the tying up of enemy forces, army and air, which would result there from; the strain the evacuation would place on the Navy and Merchant Marine; the effect on the morale of the troops and the loss of equipment which would be incurred. In favour of withdrawal the arguments were: the question as to whether our forces in Greece could be reinforced as this was essential; the question of the maintenance of our forces, plus the feeding of the civil population; the weakness of our forces with few airfields and little prospect of receiving reinforcements; the little hope of the Greek Army being able to recover its morale. The decision was made to withdraw from Greece.<sup>366</sup>

On 19 April General Wavell again arrived in Athens and immediately went to a conference at the Tatoi Palace with the same participants as the previous day, plus the leader of the Venizelist Republican Party who had already declined the proffered Prime Ministership. It was decided at this meeting that the Greek Army in Epirus should continue to fight to enable 'W' force to withdraw. Unfortunately for Wavell, Wilson and Churchill, events had moved on apace in the Balkans. General Tsolakoglou with support from the Bishop of Yannina had overthrown the leader of the Greek Epirus Army (General Pitsikas) and started negotiations with Sepp Dietrich the commander of the *SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* Division to surrender the Epirus Army. With the change in circumstances and the brevity of the time factor Wilson and Wavell thought that only thirty percent of 'W' Force could be withdrawn.<sup>367</sup>

On 20 April the effective end of the Royal Airforce's presence in Greece came with the aerial 'Battle of Athens'. Roald Dahl, the children's writer, was a pilot in 80 squadron that had been sent up in a formation of twelve fighters. According to Dahl, it was a public relations exercise to inspire the people of Athens. German fighters bounced the formation,

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<sup>366</sup> Baillie-Grohman Report in Long, p.131.

<sup>367</sup> McClymont, p.364.

Long states that the fighters went to intercept a German raid, but Dahl, insists that they were taken by surprise and a 'dog-fight' commenced with the German fighters.<sup>368</sup> Twenty-two enemy planes were claimed but four British pilots were killed.<sup>369</sup>

The 20 April was the day that Freyberg was given the task of defending the historic Thermopylae coastal pass. Coincidentally, although silting had pushed the coastline out eight kilometres, the New Zealand positions would be where Leonidas had made his last stand. As the artillery would be the determinant force in the battle, the New Zealand division adjusted its positions on the 21 April to conform to the artillery's dispositions:

[T]he observed fire of the artillery and, as the gun positions could be encircled by landing on the coast, the occupied area had to be extended far to the rear.<sup>370</sup>

To enable maximum co-operation with the divisional artillery 6th Brigade was disposed on the right, moving forward to east of Molos, taking over 28 (Maori) Battalion sector. The 24 Battalion took a position north of Molos with its right flank protecting the anti-tank guns overlooking the coast road and the 25 Battalion covering the road from Alamanas bridge to Molos, and the 26 Battalion remaining in reserve. On the left was the 5th Brigade, with 24 Battalion's positions anchored on the coast, 22 on its left and 28 displaced by the 6th Brigade moved to a position overlooking the road. The 4th Brigade, with the divisional cavalry would be in the rear on watch for sea-borne landings.

Notwithstanding Churchill's and his senior Generals enthusiasm for a 'stand' on the Thermopylae line, without a Greek force holding the rest of the peninsula, it was a position that would soon be outflanked. The Commonwealth force occupied only a third of the peninsula defending the two principal passes in the Thermopylae area: the Molos pass (the pass that was held by Leonidas) and the Brallos, (known by the Germans as the new Thermopylae) pass. The New Zealanders could be outflanked by a movement down the island of Euboea and the Australians through the tracks in the surrounding mountains or down the coast from Epirus. Supporting the New Zealanders in the Molos area, were the

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<sup>368</sup> Dahl, R. (1986). *Going Solo*. Penguin Books. Middlesex: U.K, pp. 149-151.

<sup>369</sup> Long, p.133.

25-pounders of the 2nd Royal Horse Artillery. Supporting both the Australian and New Zealand divisions was the 64th Medium Regiment with its batteries of 4.5" medium guns. Both British artillery regiments were part of the 1st Armoured Brigade by now a shadow of its former size. It was pointed out to General Wilson by the Anzac commander, General Blamey at a roadside meeting with Wilson and Baillie-Grohman that the Thermopylae line was too long for two divisions to defend. Wilson then announced his intention of putting forward the evacuation to 24 April because of the surrender of the Epirus Army.

In the Australian sector elements of the German *5th Mountain Division* reached the Brallos pass on 21 April. The first German unit to make contact; *No.3 Company 8 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit* was driven back by the intense fire from the heavy and medium artillery, mortar and medium machine guns. On 22 April the *5th Mountain Division* was further held up when the *5th Panzer Division* was given preference on the road between Larissa and Lamia. McClymont describes the situation:

As the former [*5th Panzer Division*] had priority the mountain troops had, very often, to 'stand uselessly round' while a bakery company or the postal services of the panzer division went through to Lamia.<sup>371</sup>

This period of inactivity ended when General Georg Stumme reached Lamia and re-energised the plans of *XXXX Corps*. The *5th Panzer Division* would attack the Australian positions on the Lamia-Thermopylae line driving down the Brallos pass. Simultaneously the *Baacke Group*<sup>372</sup> would advance towards New Zealanders at Molos. *Jais Group* would endeavour to outflank the Australians and New Zealanders in an attempt to prevent their withdrawal. At 7.30 a.m. on 24 April the main attack commenced when the *Luftwaffe* of the *Eighth Air Corps* came seeking out the Anzac and British gun pits and troop concentrations.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> McClymont, p.355.

<sup>371</sup> McClymont, p.384.

<sup>372</sup> the Germans were accustomed to breaking elements of a Division or Regiment into a 'Battle Group' –*Kampfgruppe* Approximately the size of a battalion, but with more fire power. The appropriate officer no matter what the rank would command this unit. In the German Army a Captain, could command a battalion.

<sup>373</sup> McClymont, pp.384-385.



The German attack on the Australian positions in the Brallos pass fell upon the Australian 19th Brigade. The 19th Brigade comprised of the 2/11th Battalion with elements of the 2/8th under its control; the 2/1st Battalion covering the eastern flank; whilst the 2/4th Battalion covered the western flank. The 2/2nd Field Regiment firing from their camouflaged gun pits supplied the artillery support. Under accurate artillery fire, the German attack stalled almost immediately. *55th Motor Cycle Battalion* advancing without any artillery support was quickly pinned down in a ravine near Kalivia by the 2/11th Battalion and its attached machine gunners. *Oberst* Maximillian Jais believing that he made contact with the withdrawing Commonwealth divisions took a battle group to cut the highway south of Brallos. Elements of his unit *Jais Group* reached the *55th Motor Cycle Battalion* that was still pinned down. Because of the intensity of the artillery and machine-gun fire *Oberst* Jais and his unit could not go any further. *1/31 Panzer Regiment* augmented by four tanks from *3 Company* and some 88mm guns moved forward to the 'new Thermopylae' and met the same resistance. The 88mm guns then entered into a duel with the 25-pounders. As the Australian field guns fired, the 88mm 'dual purpose' guns searched for their positions. The shells were:

[B]ursting closer and closer until they were landing within 15 feet of the gun pits. One German shell hit a truck carrying smoke shells which exploded and covered the area round the Australian guns with smoke for half an hour. A trailer carrying high-explosive shells was set on fire and the shells began to explode.<sup>374</sup>

Meeting unexpected resistance in front of the Australian positions, General Stumme came forward and decided that because of the resistance at the Brallos pass, the road to Molos would not be strongly held. General Stumme was determined that he was going to force the Molos position and destroy the artillery. Therefore one platoon of tanks was told to push through to Molos where the New Zealanders were entrenched.

Artillery fire and then a *stuka* attack announced that an attack on the New Zealand division's positions was not far away. The efficiency of the camouflage and the fire discipline which ensured the field guns of the New Zealand artillery ceased firing when the

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<sup>374</sup> Long, p.146.

*stukas* were overhead meant that no guns were lost to air attack.<sup>375</sup> Then four tanks nosed their way around the bluffs leading from Brallos pass. The field guns opened fire and one tank was quickly destroyed and the other three retreated. This unexpected resistance appears to have surprised the Germans.<sup>376</sup> As the elements of the *5th Panzer* were coming down from Lamia there must have been some disagreement between the commanders of the infantry and the tanks. Captain Karl Baacke wanted to take command of the tanks, but the *panzers'* regimental commander decided that his unit would advance to support the infantry. Unusually for the Germans, there was no co-ordinated attack and the infantry and tanks acted independently. This was not going to be the 'drive to Molos' that General Stumme anticipated. The German:

infantry clambered over ridges and through gullies to lever 25th New Zealand Battalion off its hillside positions commanding the road. The 700-odd NZ soldiers, who had only come under fire for the first time in the last week, were deployed almost exactly along the line of the ancient pass fought over the ancient Greeks and Persians.<sup>377</sup>

The intense fire from 25 Battalion drove the German infantry into the ground and they soon faded away. Support from the *panzers* was then called for. Once again, Germans underestimated the opposition in front of them. One tank was lost in the swamp that surrounded the alluvial Sperkhios River and then the *panzer* commander sent the tanks recklessly down the road in file in a tactic that had been used successfully elsewhere in the Balkans.<sup>378</sup> Under the command of *Hauptmann* (Captain) Prince von Schoenburg, the nineteen tanks charged into a 'twenty-five' and 'two-pounder' hell. "A heavy tank was hit direct...in the middle of the road sat three other tanks, all on fire...."<sup>379</sup> Von Schoenburg reached the site of the Spartans' last stand before a two-pounder gun knocked out his tank.<sup>380</sup> Attempts to silence the guns were then attempted by the 88mm troop, but to little avail. Then the *stukas* were called in, but the Divisional Artillery cunningly held their fire again whilst the bombers were above them.

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<sup>375</sup> McClymont, p.387.

<sup>376</sup> McClymont, p.390

<sup>377</sup> Lunt, J. (1975). *Thermopylae 1941*. War Monthly Issue 20. Marshall Cavendish Ltd:London. p.30.

<sup>378</sup> Lunt, p.30.

<sup>379</sup> Attributed to Appendix 1/51 *Panzer Regiment* report, McClymont, P.390.

<sup>380</sup> Lunt, p.32.

Although the Germans seriously under-estimated the size of the force that opposed them the extremely skilful German infantry were able to infiltrate their way behind the forward positions of 25 Battalion's C Company who were unable to withdraw when the Divisional Artillery shortened its range. While many of 25 Battalion had seen battle, several had been wounded, captured or killed; more had not any direct action at all. Second lieutenant C<sup>381</sup> had only seen the Germans at a distance through his binoculars. This is one of the enigmas of war that people can be involved in heavy fighting over the hill, whereas on this side of the hill, nothing is happening. Second lieutenant C went forward to check on his forward sections. As he was going forward the order for retirement was given. When he reached the forward positions no one was there. Another platoon had gathered up his men and taken them with them. Lieutenant C then started walking in a futile attempt to catch up with the division. He was captured six months later whilst swimming in a lake. He had been in hiding at a Greek monastery.<sup>382</sup>

This was certainly the artillery's day for:

This concentration [of fire] halted the supporting tanks and infantry so effectively that one German afterwards wrote of the shell and anti-tank fire performing a 'danse macabre'. In the cruder language of the New Zealand Divisions the artillery had fired its first 'stunk': the terrifying concentration of the fire of all the division artillery upon a single crucial point.<sup>383</sup>

The efficacy of this tactic was demonstrated as not one German tank involved in the action remained undamaged and twelve or thirteen tanks remained burning on the road. To keep this bombardment up, ammunition was ferried continuously forward under *stuka* attack; the Germans suffered at this stage of the battle from not having as much artillery in their *panzer* divisions, as did the Commonwealth infantry divisions, or having sufficient artillery forward. When the German artillery attempted to support their attack the guns of the British 64th Medium Regiment sought for, found, and dealt with the German artillery.

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<sup>381</sup> Interviewee C asked that his name be kept confidential.

<sup>382</sup> Interview C. August 2003.

<sup>383</sup> McClymont, p.393.

No matter how successful the defence was, to conform to the evacuation timetable the Anzacs had to withdraw. Much must be said for the determination of the German troops facing the Anzacs. While the *55 Motor Cycle Battalion* was pinned down by machine gun and artillery fire, the Germans were still attempting to turn the flank. *II/141 Mountain Regiment* had made a wide hook and was by early evening engaging the Australian 2/11th Battalion. This 'right hook' was slowed by the intense fire, but the threat was such that at 6.00 p.m. Brigadier G.A. Vasey took the decision to move ahead the withdrawal by half an hour to 8.00 p.m. The Australian 2/11th Battalion was successfully withdrawn and the German trap snapped futilely on their empty positions. As the three Australian battalions 'embussed' the Very lights of the *II/141 Mountain Regiment* could be seen behind them to the south indicating their locations. But:

The German attempt to turn the left flank of W Force had failed. The country had been too rough, food had been short and the supporting artillery could not be brought within range. The Australian defensive fire, particularly that of 2/2 Field Regiment, had been most effective. And now on the morning of 25 April 19 Brigade was through the New Zealand rearguard south of Thebes and moving back to the olive groves at Megara and the beaches from which it was to embark that night 25-26 April.<sup>384</sup>

As night fell, the battles around Thermopylae ground to a halt. The Germans there could only advance with their tanks but too many were being destroyed before they reached the New Zealand positions. The New Zealanders later claimed that twenty tanks had been destroyed in front of their positions. "The Germans admitted that all the tanks in the action-18 or 19-were damaged, 12 of them being total losses."<sup>385</sup>

No matter how successful the defence was, the Germans would eventually outflank the Anzacs. Sooner or later, the Germans were bound to occupy the island of Euboea and flank the Thermopylae position from the west. To stay would mean that W Force would be surrounded and destroyed. To prevent this they had to withdraw again. The plan for the withdrawal of the New Zealand division was for the majority of 6th Brigade to leave the Brigade lines at 9.00 p.m. on 25 April. This withdrawal would be covered by a rear-guard

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<sup>384</sup> McClymont, p.395.

of one company each, from 24 and 25 Battalions and a regiment of field guns under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Page. General Freyberg specifically ordered that some of these guns must not be destroyed but were to be withdrawn with the infantry.

This withdrawal was not without incident. Some of the drivers of C Company 25 Battalion, wishing to shorten the walk of the infantrymen as much as possible, ignored several warnings and drove straight into the lines of *I/31 Panzer Regiment*.<sup>386</sup> The windscreens of the trucks were shattered by machine gun fire. Most of the drivers escaped into the dark leaving quantities of tinned fruit for the grateful German recipients. What was more serious, the 25 Battalion carrier platoon was mistaken for a German column and engaged by New Zealand anti-tank fire as they drove past a burning German tank. Of the ten occupants, three were killed and the other seven were wounded and later captured.<sup>387</sup>

The night then went quiet. At 10.30 p.m. D Company, 25 Battalion withdrew from their positions. By midnight 26 Battalion less the company detailed as a rearguard was away from the Molos area. With the exception of 33 Battery the gunners were told to destroy their guns. Gunner Karl Yortt remembers Captain (later Lieutenant General, Sir) Leonard Thornton sitting absolutely 'shattered' as his beloved guns were destroyed around him, conveying the distress that all gunners feel when their weapons are destroyed.<sup>388</sup>

Whilst this was going on, there were periods of levity. Lieutenant Robert Crisp of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment had acquired a damaged 26 Battalion truck, patched up its damaged radiator, placed his crew on board, who then found to their delight it was the 26 Battalions' Officers mess lorry. It was a very happy group of tankers who eventually drove it into the 26 Battalion lines and parlayed its return for a lift to Athens.<sup>389</sup>

Upon its successful withdrawal 6th Brigade was then instructed to block the road north of Tatoi until 6.00 p.m. on the evening of the 26-27 April. It was then to be evacuated from

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<sup>385</sup> McClymont, p.393.

<sup>386</sup> McClymont, p.390.

<sup>387</sup> McClymont, p.391.

<sup>388</sup> Yortt, K. Interview 30 April 2003.

<sup>389</sup> Crisp, p.187.

the beaches of Rafina and Porto Rafti. The evacuation was to take over three nights commencing on the evening of 24 April and completing by the morning of 27 April. To ensure co-ordination and co-operation from the Greek Army:

British officers were sent south to ensure the support of the Greek commanders at Corinth and Tripolis; a senior officer was appointed control the Peloponnese; and a force was hastily organised for the defence of the Corinth Canal.<sup>390</sup>

There were eight designated beaches, they were:

	Beach	
C	Rafina	3000 personnel from the New Zealand 6th Brigade on the evening of the 26/27.
D	Porto Rafti	4000 from 5th Brigade on 24 April, 4500 from the 19th Australian Brigade Group and the British 1st Armoured Brigade.
P	Megara	4000 personnel 4th New Zealand Brigade on the evening of the 26/27 April.
S	Navplion	HQ Anzac Corps and RAF base details. 5000 personnel.
T	East Navplion	2000 personnel Line of communication personnel on the 26 April.
Z	Kalamata	The beach was designated for 4000 men of the 16th and 17th Australian Base details.
X	Yithion	Stragglers only
Y	Plitra	As above. <sup>391</sup>

On the 24 April, General Papagos resigned and King George with some of his ministers left for Crete. Blamey, ordered by Wilson to leave Greece, flew to Egypt in a flying boat and found his way to Admiral Cunningham's H.Q. in Alexandria "and impressed upon [him]

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<sup>390</sup> McClymont, p.400.

<sup>391</sup> This chart is based upon the one in McClymont, p.401.

the full seriousness of the situation.”<sup>392</sup> With Blamey gone, the Anzac Corps Headquarters closed. General Mackay and his divisional staff went to their dispersal point for evacuation from Greece.

Freyberg had the same orders as Mackay but decided to ignore them.<sup>393</sup> He was not satisfied that the British Movement Control was up to the task of handling the evacuation. It was Freyberg’s desire that the New Zealand Division was to go to Egypt to refit, re-train and re-equip.

[W]hen the instructions for the evacuation of Mackay and Freyberg were sent over from GHQ Middle East the last suggested night, 25-26 April, was to have seen all units, except the rearguard, in their lying-up areas awaiting embarkation. It seems that Middle East command was paying attention to the safety of the Dominion commanders.<sup>394</sup>

On the first evening at Port Rafti, of the evacuation went relatively easily. Two cruisers with the comforting bulk of the assault landing ship *Glengyle* with her useful complement of landing craft loomed out of the evening gloom. For ‘Lofty’ Fellows a Private in 22 Battalion the evacuation went very smoothly. He drained the oil out of his truck and ran the engine until it seized. He then marched down to the beach where he was ferried by barge to the cruiser *Calcutta*.<sup>395</sup> Brigadier Hargest had acted with alacrity and ensured that all the ships were full when they left for Crete, yet 500 men were still left on the beach. These were later crammed into a Tank Landing Craft which only took them as far as Kea island 15 miles away then sailed with a hope that they would collect them later, but they were warned they should be prepared to make their own way to Crete.<sup>396</sup> They were later picked up by a caique, and taken to Crete.

Jack Turvey of 26 Battalion, missed the battle at Molos. After the retreat from Larissa he had become very unwell with malaria and dysentery. Because of this he was taken to a Greek hospital to Athens. When evacuation came, he and his fellow patients were

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<sup>392</sup> McClymont, p.401.

<sup>393</sup> McClymont, p.401.

<sup>394</sup> McClymont, p.401.

<sup>395</sup> Fellows, (Lofty) to Simpson, A., Interview 1979. OHColl-0200. Alexander Turnbull Library.

transported to a beach. When night came they waded out to sea and was picked up by a small boat and eventually rescued by the Australian destroyer *Vendetta*. The *Vendetta* dropped them at Suda bay in Crete.<sup>397</sup> As there were few or no ongoing troop ships to Alexandria; it was more convenient to drop the majority of troops in Crete. Successfully evacuated, the 5th Brigade Group was set to preparing the defences around Maleme.

At Navplion the embarkation was disrupted when the *Ulster Prince* ran around, denying the use of the wharves. The Royal Navy partially circumvented this by employing caiques to ferry the troops out to the warships.

During the day, at the Port of Piraeus the yacht *Hellas* turned up unexpectedly and offered to take off some of the Commonwealth personnel. Whilst tied up along side, the ship was bombed, the gangway destroyed and the ship began to roll over. At this time, around 900 civilians, troops and wounded were on board. Notwithstanding gallant efforts by two New Zealand staff sergeants there were up to 700 casualties, some of which were New Zealanders. Some of the killed and wounded were from E Section 4 RMT Company. The wounded were transferred to Kifisia Hospital where they were later captured. The twenty-five non-wounded survivors were evacuated from T beach at Tolos.<sup>398</sup>

On 25 of April amongst the chaos of the evacuation General Freyberg set up unsuccessfully to find the Headquarters of Anzac Corps 'somewhere in the vicinity of Elefsis'. Freyberg found that Blamey had left the previous day but was able to phone Wilson at his headquarters in Athens. Freyberg then drove to meet with Wilson. Freyberg's drive to Athens:

[F]illed me with concern; all the dumps of military stores, petrol, food and trucks that are part of the Base organisation of an Expeditionary Force were left completely unattended. There were numbers of Greeks looting everything that had been left. This disorganisation and appearance of almost desperation had not been evident in the forward areas.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> McClymont, pp.401-403.

<sup>397</sup> Turvey J, to Author, interview May 2003.

<sup>398</sup> McClymont, P.405.

<sup>399</sup> McClymont, p.407.



When Freyberg arrived at Wilson's headquarters, Wilson was already in conference with Rear Admiral Baillie-Grohman. Both men were very concerned about how quickly the situation had deteriorated. At Kriekouki the 4th Brigade was still holding the rearguard. Because of the rapidity of the German advance, Rafina and Port Rafti were now within the range of the Luftwaffe. This meant that the evacuation would have to continue from beaches west of Athens and south on the Peloponnese peninsula. To allow for the changes in circumstances, an extra three days for the evacuation would have to be allowed. These changes meant that the 6th New Zealand Brigade would have to cross the Corinth canal to be evacuated from one of the southern Peloponnese beaches and that the 4th Brigade Group would withdraw south of the Corinth canal and embark from Navplion. Those who did not reach the Navplion beaches were to be evacuated from Monemvasia, Plitra and Kalamata. Because the change to the evacuation beaches in the Peloponnese, elements of the New Zealand Division were required to defend the Canal. Isthmus Force, as it was named came under the command of General Freyberg who ensured that:

The subsequent withdrawal of the New Zealand troops and those under command would be directed 'with all possible speed' and in 'approximately equal proportions' to the beaches at Monemvasia, Plitra, Yithion and Kalamata. From there they would embark on the nights 28-29 and 29-30 April.<sup>400</sup>

On the night 26/27 April Wilson departed from Greece and Freyberg became the commander of the troops in the Peloponnese. The 4th New Zealand Brigade then became the rear-guard south of the Corinth canal. The 4th Hussars and the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment would embark from the beaches at Navplion. 16th and 17th Australian Brigades would embark from Kalamata.

On 25 April, the Australian 16th and 17th Brigades were hidden among the olive groves near Elefsis expecting to be evacuated from Megara over that night of 25/26 April. Because of the change of plans and the decision to prolong the evacuation for another three

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<sup>400</sup> McClymont, p.409.

<sup>400</sup> McClymont, p.409.

days these two brigades were instructed to cross the Corinth Canal and to be evacuated from Kalamata, a southern Peloponnese beach. In the vicinity at Elefsis were the injured and walking wounded from the New Zealand convalescent group. On the orders of Brigadier Vasey only fit soldiers were to be taken by truck to Kalamata. As this included the 16th and 17th Australian Brigades, most of the 500 soldiers left behind to make their own way across the Corinth canal were the convalescent New Zealanders and their medical staff. The majority of those that later found transport, were later captured at Corinth Canal.<sup>401</sup> Others of the walking wounded who had set off, hoping that the trucks and ambulances would pick them up on the way back were disquieted to find out that the Germans had captured the canal and the majority of ambulances and trucks. They now had to trudge back to Megara. Major N. Rattray, the New Zealand liaison officer at 'W' Force headquarters, was held up in Athens, and then on the way south by slowed down by straffing. He, with the convoy of trucks that he had been using to pick up walking wounded on the way to the Peloponnese were captured by the Germans near the canal. A few of the walking wounded that avoided capture were able to hire a caique in which they reached Crete.

The original orders for 4th Brigade were to hold on for two days at Kriekouki to allow the 5th and 6th Brigades to get away, "but orders came that they would have to stay an additional twenty-four hours. Kriekouki was christened 'Twenty-four Hour Pass'."<sup>402</sup> Here Kippenberger planned to ambush the German column coming down from Thebes.

I fully expected a satisfactory butchery, but the plan got no trial. The gunners had been warned, but I had had no chance to see the Brigadier and get his approval.<sup>403</sup>

Because of this, the unregistered guns fired prematurely and, the Germans promptly fled back into Thebes. The artillery on both sides then settled down to a firing duel. What was more disconcerting was that the main column was heading "into the hills in the east, where our maps showed a bad road leading past our right."<sup>404</sup> The afternoon of 26 April, brought

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<sup>401</sup>Sandford, K. (1987). *Mark of the Lion*. Century Hutchinson: London, p.57.

<sup>403</sup> Kippenberger, p.40.

<sup>404</sup> Kippenberger, p.41.

news of the German seizure of the Corinth Canal. Puttick came up with a plan to attack the German paratroopers:

[S]eizing two hills east of Corinth and close to embarkation beaches. We were fully armed and equipped; in fact we had all the British guns in Greece, seventeen of them, and had several days' supplies. We would destroy the parachutists, embark if possible later, and in any case have a very good fight. At the worst we could pass the Canal on foot, presumably by swimming it, and march south. Putt, didn't have his red hair for nothing.<sup>405</sup>

This death or glory attack did not eventuate because a message came through directing them to the beaches in the vicinity of Porto Rafti. Apart from a mild fright when it appeared that the whole Brigade had disembarked the previous evening without them, Kippenberger found Puttick and the rest of the Brigade, well camouflaged around the embarkation point. With the Germans following closely behind' Kippenberger successfully passed his battalion through the lines of 19 Battalion and embarked on the *Ajax*.<sup>406</sup>

Given that the time to prepare for the evacuation was so limited, the efficiency of the New Zealand rear-guard ensured that most of the Commonwealth force could be evacuated. Once the soldiers were on the beach, their discipline and the professionalism of the Royal Navy ensured that the evacuation was extremely successful.

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<sup>405</sup> Kippenberger, p.43.

<sup>406</sup> Kippenberger, p.45.

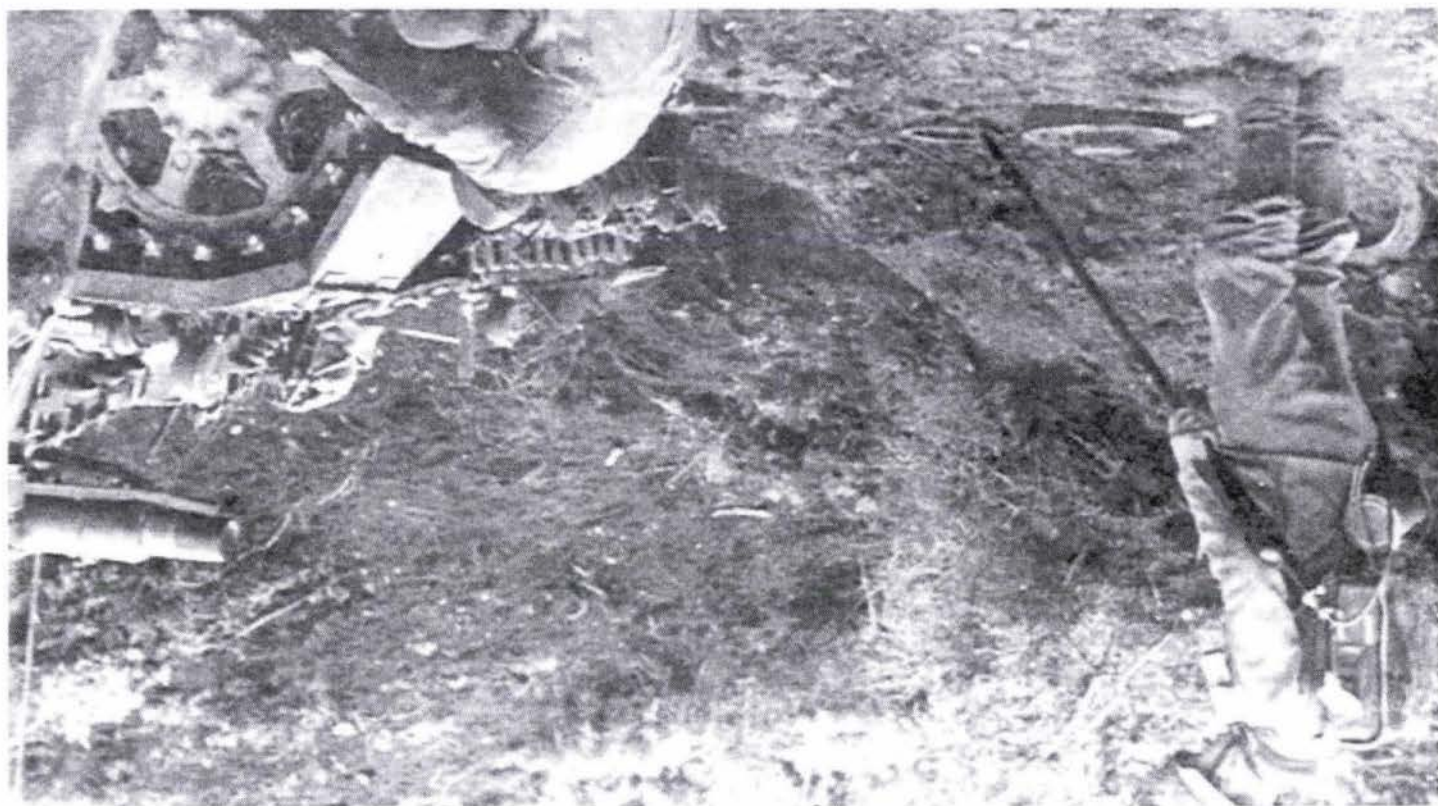
**Demolitions and destruction on the retreat.**



**Road-block**

**German engineers repair demolitions.**

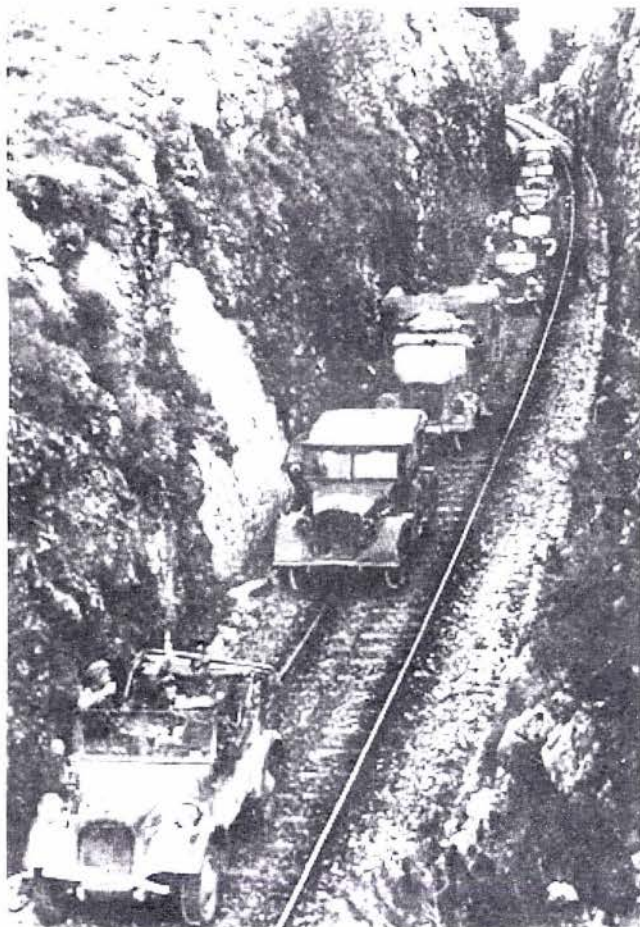




Successful demolition with damaged MK IV tank.



**Germans advancing through Greece.**



**German forces outside Larissa.**



**Various forms of German transport.**

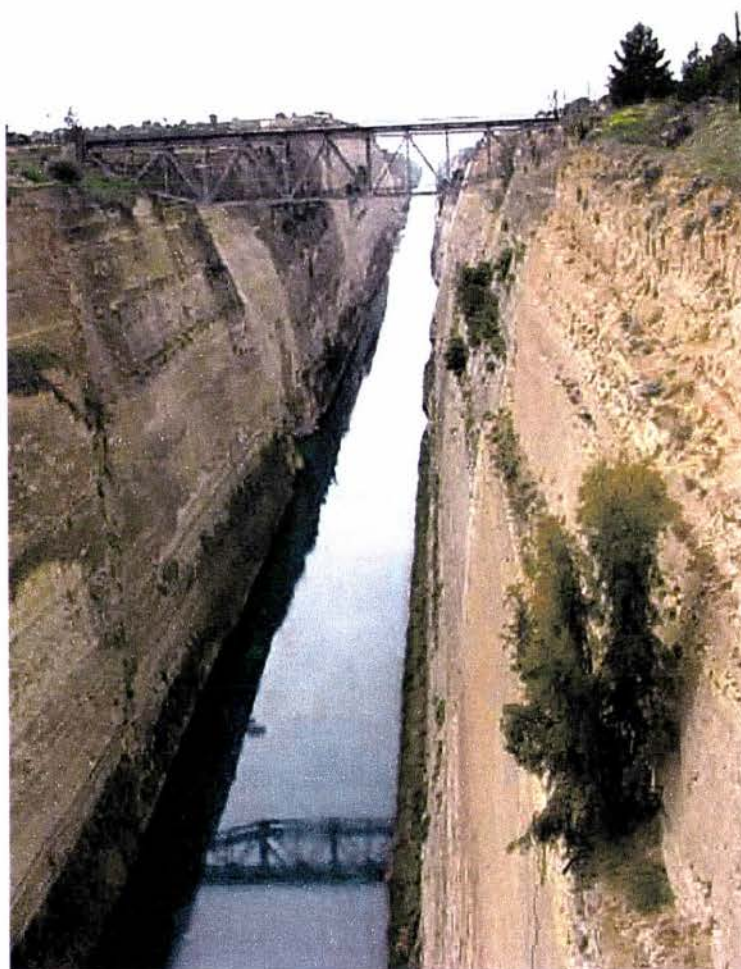


**German artillery in action at Thermopylae.**

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Battle of the Corinth Canal

A shipment of umbrellas expected at the canal  
*Brigadier Rankin, British Military Attaché, Athens.*



**The Corinth Canal**



The morning of 25 April 1941 was fine and clear, if somewhat cold. For the majority of W Force this was Anzac day and as, twenty-six years before, an Anzac Corps was once again in the Balkans. On this morning the Wellington West Coast Company of 19 Battalion was early on parade to greet the dawn for this grim ceremony. Later at 4.00 a.m. Major R.K. Gordon, the commander of B Company was given orders to leave the battalion lines at Kriekouki and take his company to join Isthmus force which he was ordered to then command. Isthmus force would consist of:

B Company 19 Battalion;

C Squadron of Divisional Cavalry with the carriers of 22 and 28 Battalions under command;

6 Field Company of the New Zealand Engineers with some British sappers attached;

A detachment of Royal Hussars and a section of the British 122 light Anti-Aircraft battery comprising of three 3.7-inch anti-aircraft guns, eight 3-inch, and sixteen Bofors.

Isthmus force was to guard the Corinth Canal against any surprise attack. The canal is twenty metres in width and up to eight metres deep and divides the sandy isthmus leading from the northern part of Greece to the Peloponnese. Any troops embarking from a Peloponnese beach would have to cross the road and railway-bridge at Corinth or take the ferry at Patras. 4th Brigade, of which 19 Battalion was a part, was due to be evacuated on the evening of 26 April from Megara. If the rapid advance of the Germans<sup>407</sup> prevented this then the 4th Brigade would have to be evacuated near Navplion in the Peloponnese. The Corinth canal was therefore considered vital for the safety of the 4th Brigade.

Until they were assigned to 'Isthmus Force' the engineers of the 6th Field Company were responsible for the maintenance of the road from Thebes to Corinth. Their responsibility included the Corinth Canal road-bridge, to be repaired if damaged and also, to prepare it for demolition. On 25 April they had been ordered to join Isthmus force. As with most of the preparations concerned with Greece it was haphazard and to quote McClymont there was 'No unity of command'. The plan was, once these duties were completed:

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<sup>407</sup> The Germans advanced 29 kilometres a day in Greece, in contrast with 24 kilometres a day in France.

[T] he Company would join Clifton Force<sup>408</sup>, blow the road behind them, then send the bridge up, thus placing a sizeable barrier between themselves and the enemy.<sup>409</sup>

The rest of the Field Company had been based at Megara. Bombing had made their positions in the town of Megara untenable, so they moved south of the bridge. Major L.F. Rudd, the officer in command of 6 Field Company, set up his Headquarters with Captain H.F. Willis and Lieutenant J.O. Wells in an olive grove, about two miles south of the canal. By 25 April the combined road and railway bridge had been prepared for demolition and the ferry, the parallel pontoon bridge and the ancillary bridges had been destroyed.

Sapper Lou Mumford of the New Zealand 6th Field Company described how the girders were strapped with gun cotton:

[A]bout a ton of explosives were put under the abutments. On top of the bridge was placed a large dump of TNT (Which could have easily have been fired by rifle bullets.) There was no electrical connection because we had none. There were only safety fuzes at the South end. It was the first bridge of that type we had seen so we made certain of the job. Having plenty of explosive. The general plans was that we should blow it up and drop block the Canal.<sup>410</sup>

On the evening of 25 April, exhausted by their exertions and the continual 'straffing' and bombing Lieutenant D.V. Kelsall decided to seek shelter in a lemon orchard to enable his sappers to get some sleep.

Also on the move on 25 April were the remnants of 'C' Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry. They had been the first to confront the Germans in the Monastir Gap and now their force comprised only of eight or nine carriers and two armoured cars. The Squadron commander, Major E. R. Harford, DSO, had returned from the divisional headquarters with the remainder of his squadron. Their orders were to debouch towards to the Corinth Canal. His squadron also took command of the carriers of 22 and 28 Battalions and, as they

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<sup>408</sup> Clifton Force was the Divisional rear-guard and included the Divisional Cavalry, carrier platoons of 5th Brigade and 34 a-t battery, under the commander of Lt-Col. Clifton the Commander of the Royal Engineers(NZ). McClymont, p.374.

<sup>409</sup> Cody, J.F. (1961). *Official History Of New Zealand In The Second World War New Zealand Engineers Middle East*. War History Branch Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, p.113.

<sup>410</sup> Mumford, L (Sapper. No.2 (1.1 Pl) 6 Field Company.) to C.G. McClymont, written memoir. Vol 1, WA II 3/16. N.A.

headed south they must have cast envious glances at the administration personnel and the headquarters company, who were to be evacuated that evening. South of the Canal on the way to Corinth they took petrol from a supply dump. From that moment on all the vehicles developed engine problems. Although nothing could be proven, Fifth columnists were suspected. (Another explanation was that the dump contained high-octane aviation fuel). Periodically, vehicles would drop out and were not able to rejoin the column.<sup>411</sup> Sometime, during the same period the carriers of the 22 Battalion took a wrong turn, their engines broke down and they also never rejoined the column.<sup>412</sup>

On the evening of 25 April, Captain O.J. Hutchison, a New Zealand Division liaison officer was called up to Athens for a conference with the British military attaché, one Brigadier Rankin. Rankin was not able to make the rendezvous but Hutchison received an enigmatic message (pun intended) "Sorry will not be able to see you tomorrow, very busy as friends expected. No pals in town after dawn. A shipment of umbrellas expected at the canal, best of luck for the trip."<sup>413</sup>

When Major R.K.Gordon arrived in the canal area he was somewhat surprised to find several companies of Australian infantry under the overall command of Colonel E.G. Lillington of the 4th Hussars. The Australians were dug in; occupying positions already prepared by the Greek Army on the north side of the bridge, overlooking its eastern end. They were part of 'Lee Force'. Earlier the same day the Australian 2/6th Battalion were passing over the Canal at 1.30 p.m. when Major J.A. Bishop, a staff officer of Brigadier Stanley Savige, halted them. Three and half companies of the 2/6th were allocated to Brigadier E.A. Lee. Captain K.A. Dean of the 2/6th was placed on the north side of the canal under the direct command of Colonel Lillington. Captain J.S. Jones was sent to the southern end of the canal and Captain Carrol was assigned to guard the airfield near Argos. On his way back to Corinth Jones met General Freyberg who 'suggested' that he and his men clear an evacuation route through the town of Corinth. Only when he had done this was Jones to move closer to the canal. Jones and his men must have been exhausted when

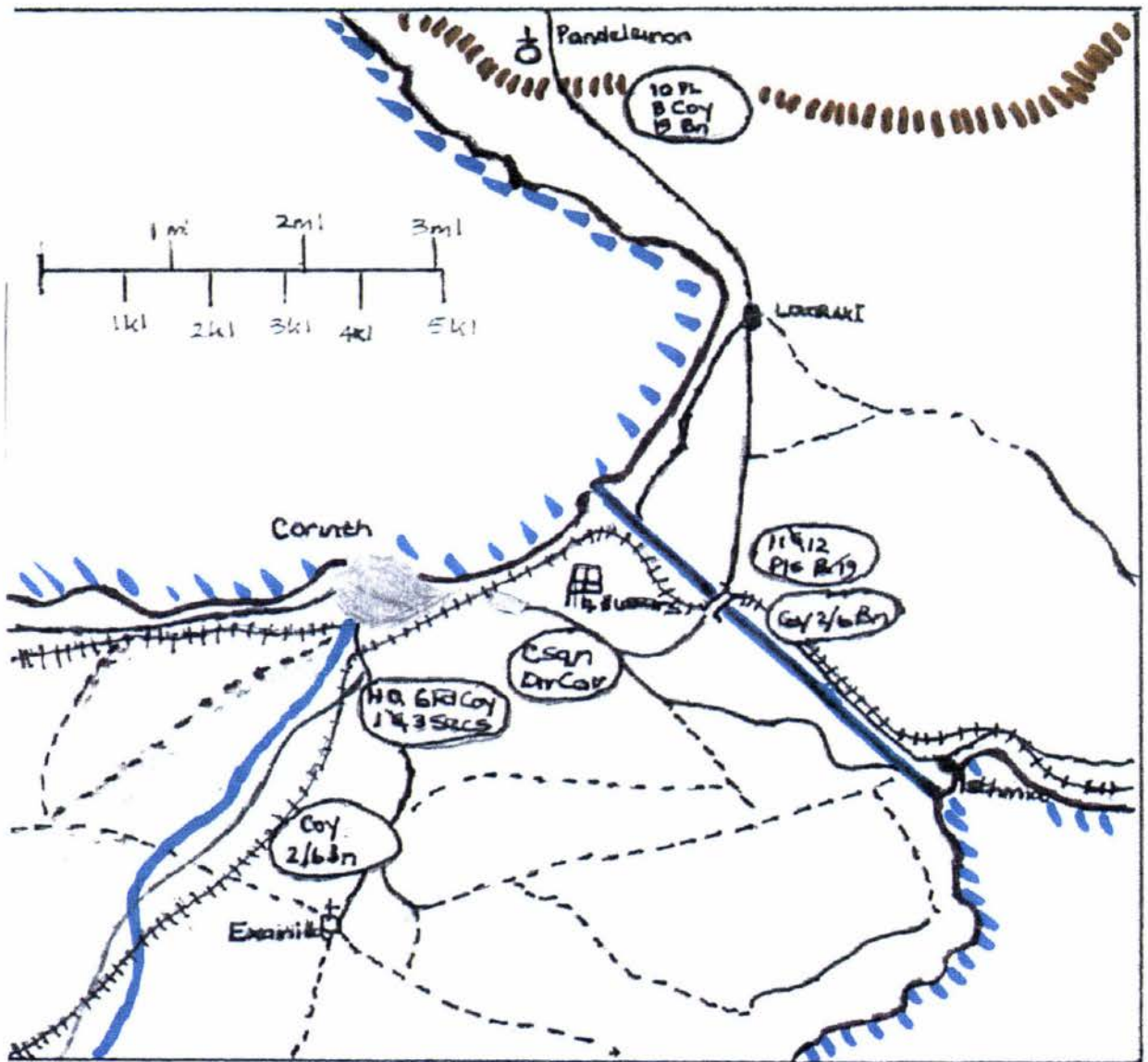
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<sup>411</sup> Secombe, G. (Sgt-Major C Company Divisional Cavalry) to McClymont, written memoir. Vol 1 WA II 3/16. N.A.

<sup>412</sup> Henderson, J. (1958). *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45 22 Battalion*. War History Branch Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, p.31.

they were finally able to catch some sleep after digging weapon pits for a second night beside the canal.

**Positions on the Corinth Canal 26 of April 1941.**



Major Gordon had no inkling of the presence of 'Lee Force', nor had 'Lee Force' been made aware of the New Zealanders moving into the position, but Major Gordon was delighted to have Jones's Company of the 2/6th in close proximity. Realising that he was junior to Lillington, Gordon set out to find the senior officer, but was unable to find him.

<sup>413</sup> Hutchinson, O.J. to McClymont, written memoir. Vol 1, WA II 3/16. N.A.

Receiving no instructions to the contrary, he went ahead and set up his positions north of Loutraki village with two platoons close to the bridge, where it looked suitable for parachute landings. Gordon had already sent the other (the 10th) platoon ahead, under the command of Lieutenant Heiford north of the village. Gordon was also concerned that the ground closer to the canal was a suitable landing site for the Germans to land aeroplanes and gliders near the canal. Consequently Gordon moved the 11th and 12th platoons closer to the bridge on a small, fir tree (in other accounts it is described as being olive trees) covered hill 750 metres northeast of the canal. Here he set up his headquarters with two platoons.

Later on in the evening B Company was reinforced by some of the indomitable 4th Hussars. The 4th Hussars had been dispersed to patrol both to the north and the south of the bridge, an almost impossible task. The regiment was down to twelve tanks, six Bren-gun carriers and one armoured car, all to patrol a front of seventy miles. Also in the area were the afore-mentioned anti-aircraft guns. "The sixteen Bofors were dispersed along the road from the canal to Argos 30 miles south."<sup>414</sup> The increased activity around the canal had drawn German attention. The area around the crossing had been bombed and 'strafed' constantly for the last four days, increasing to a crescendo on the evening of 25 April, when several guns were destroyed.<sup>415</sup>

Captain J Wells of the 6th Field Company reported that around 11.00 p.m. on 25 April, Generals Wilson and Freyberg crossed the bridge to inspect dispositions in the Peloponnese. <sup>416</sup> Later Freyberg was to be evacuated to Egypt with the 6th Brigade at Monemvasia. Wilson was to leave by flying boat the next day (the 26 April) for Egypt. At 4.00 p.m. on that day he handed over the command to Freyberg with the words "Bernard I hand over Greece to you."<sup>417</sup> (Blamey had also closed down the Corps Headquarters and was also about to leave).

It was early morning of the 26 April when the depleted column of the combined

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<sup>414</sup> Long, p.166.

<sup>415</sup> Long, p.166.

<sup>416</sup> In other accounts it is reported about two hours before dawn.

armoured car and carrier platoons from C squadron Divisional Cavalry and 28 Battalion clattered across the bridge. They were the last unit tasked with the Canal's defence to enter the area. The instructions of the officer in command of the column, Major E.R. Harford were:

[T]o report to the 'OC Isthmus Force' and, on the withdrawal of 4 Brigade across the canal, to move his detachment westwards to Patrai and then southwards to Kalamata.<sup>418</sup>

Although he could see vehicles of the 4th Hussars in the vicinity of the bridge, Major Harford, also could not find the titular Isthmus force commander, Lieutenant Colonel Lillington. At first light Major Harford shepherded his command into defensive positions overlooking the canal. In his memoir G. Secombe, a Sergeant Major in the Divisional Cavalry described the location:

From memory the ground immediately south of the canal for fifteen to twenty chains was more or less flat and then rose in a couple of easy terraces to another flat which may have been half a mile wide which was bounded on the south side by a range of low hills.<sup>419</sup>

The position that they moved into was under a few scattered olive trees near the north end of the terrace. From their positions they could see Corinth village on the left and the bridge on the right. There was no time to admire the view or even get any rest for the machines had to be camouflaged and weapon pits dug. The carriers moved on to the ridge below and were soon concealed by the straggling vineyards. Secombe was aware that there were New Zealand infantry from 19 Battalion opposite them on the other side of the bridge.

The aerial attack started at 6.30 a.m. when bombs from the Junker 87 *stukas* hit and destroyed several anti-aircraft guns. At 7.00 a.m. the attack intensified when one hundred and twenty bombers escorted by fighters, swooped into the attack. The bombers attacked the guns and vehicles whilst the fighters machine-gunned targets of opportunity in the general area. For Sergeant Major Secombe the German attack was heralded by the Bf109's

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<sup>417</sup> Freyberg, P., p.261.

<sup>418</sup> G. Secombe.

<sup>419</sup> G. Secombe.

and Bf110's attacking the British Light Anti-Aircraft unit: "...their crews were magnificent, keeping the guns in action until either the guns were destroyed or the crews killed."<sup>420</sup> At 7.15 a.m. the Bofors had hardly been silenced when the tri-motor Junkers 52 transports flew in from the direction of the Gulf of Corinth. Flying low in 'vics' of three they began to disgorge men (*Fallschirmjaeger*) and equipment.

Still hidden in the orchard, the exhausted 6th Field Company led by Lieutenant Kelsall was awoken on the morning of 26 April by the sound of 'straffing'. A sentry informed Kelsall that German paratroopers were landing to the east. Kelsall wrote later "he could not see the bridge because of intervening trees." However as he admits "...we were probably not seen ourselves in the orchard."<sup>421</sup> Closer to the bridge, Lieutenant Wheeler's No.2 section were awakened by the 'usual morning hate'. It was something that they were accustomed to and they went on with their tasks of preparing the surrounding roads and bridges for demolition when they were startled to see German paratroopers leaping out of Junker 52's.<sup>422</sup>

Still concealed in the orchard, Lieutenant Kelsall could see from where he was the German fighters, the Bf109's and Bf110's were skimming the pine trees looking for any Commonwealth soldiers. To his surprise the German Transports were so low that: "he could look right into the open doors of the Junker 52 transports that were dropping the paratroops".<sup>423</sup> The British were initially surprised at the low altitude that the German *Fallschirmjaeger* jumped from. This notwithstanding, Kelsall reacted quickly, before they had turned in the previous evening, the orchard had been turned into a defensive position.

As my troops were not trained infantry, told the sec. commanders to husband ammunition and not to fire until the enemy were at least 400X(yards). No. 3 section a bit eager must have fired at 800X and perhaps let the enemy know we were there.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Cody, p.91.

<sup>421</sup> Kelsall, D.V to McClymont, memoir NZ Archives WA II 3/16.

<sup>422</sup> Wheeler, C.M to McClymont., memoir NZ Archives WA II 3/16.

<sup>423</sup> Kelsall.

<sup>424</sup> Kelsall.

During this period, Sapper Mumford, who had taken so much trouble preparing the bridge for demolition, was very sensibly sheltering in a culvert in a dry stream. He was aware of the sudden silence as the 'straffing' stopped around the bridge. This silence heralded the arrival of the gliders. An augmented battalion of around 1,200 men had dropped or glided into the vicinity of the bridge. The bridge was quickly captured, and the surrounding troops overrun including the sheltering Mumford. "Germans were about with me with Tommy guns and there I was."<sup>425</sup> As this was happening, the German fighter planes were drawing further and further away from the centre of the fighting to seal off the area. On both sides of the bridge the paratroopers were landing 'like mushrooms'. The anti-aircraft fire went on until the bridge was taken. There are some reports that the Germans machine-gunned some the gunners when they tried to surrender.<sup>426</sup>

The Germans marched six prisoners across the bridge to help with the demolitions. Then inexplicably the bridge blew up. It seems that the P.O.W.'s survived although six Germans, including a newsreel cameraman, on the bridge were killed.<sup>427</sup> An Australian soldier later told Mumford that the Germans were slashing at the fuses of the explosives. This was hardly the thing to do because the New Zealanders had been using the sensitive cortex explosives on the bridge. The Germans guarding the captured troops shrugged their shoulders and carried with their task of organising the prisoners.<sup>428</sup> After the bridge was destroyed, the Germans went to a lot of trouble to find out who actually blew the bridge. Two British Royal Engineers had also been shooting at the Bridge, and it had been proved by experimentation that bullets could explode cortex. The official candidate is a Lieutenant J.T. Tyson of the Royal Engineers. Prevented from getting to the bridge by a glider he fired at the charges on the bridge with a rifle. After the second shot the bridge blew up, and Tyson slipped away to the Navplion area for embarkation.<sup>429</sup> General Wilson was of the opinion that it was he that caused the explosion and recommended him for a decoration. As is often the way, being an officer and senior to the other ranks involved, he received the Military Cross. In a letter to General Kippenberger Brigadier H.B. Latham, head of the

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<sup>425</sup> Mumford, L. to McClymont, memoir. NZ Archives WA II 3/16.

<sup>426</sup> Mumford L The Germans thought that firing at paratroopers in the air was 'unsporting'!

<sup>427</sup> McClymont, p.418.

<sup>428</sup> Mumford L NZ Archives WA II 3/16.

<sup>429</sup> McClymont, p.418.



Historical Section of the United Kingdom Cabinet Office was disparaging of this account. "I am very sorry that the story of the Sapper officer blowing up the bridge by firing at the charges is untrue, but it never sounded very likely to me."<sup>430</sup> Other prime suspects were Sapper Eastgate as he had been seen crawling towards the bridge with George Quinlan another sapper who was suspected of lighting the fuse. "Unless George Quinlan lit a fuse when him and I went on the bridge to get Lou Mumford. I don't know."<sup>431</sup> The Germans said that they saw a man with a bandaged head crawling towards the bridge. Sapper Eastgate had an injury to his head, which was bandaged, but he denied the honour. Another dramatic account is from Gunner H.E. Smith, who had the misfortune to arrive in a truck in the middle of the attack, and was just across the bridge on the south side. He jumped out of the truck and was sheltering when he met up with two sappers, Lance Corporal C. Boswell and Sapper A. G. Thornton. They watched in frustration as the Germans dropped down around the bridge and it remained intact.

One sapper said to the other, 'They're after that bridge Bos'[Boswell]. It was here that the idea came to blow the bridge. There was a hurried huddle to see whether the three of us went or one or two. It was decided on two and I'd cover them with the bren as the Huns were well on the ground and making things hot. From where I could give complete cover as the bridge was plain to see just ahead....Quite a fair bunch of huns were coming in from the northern end and soon apparently guessed what was going on and endeavoured to stop them. Just short of the bridge, one of the boys fell. The other made the bridge for sure as he came into sight. For a moment I thought he'd been hit as he seemed to fall but the next I saw he was coming back. He looked to have cleared the bridge when it seemed to heave and the next moment she was sky high.<sup>432</sup>

No trace was found of the two gallant sappers, but their claim is as good as any. Roy Natusch a sapper from 6th Field Company also witnessed two New Zealanders blow up the bridge:

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<sup>430</sup> Latham H.B. to Kippenberger, H.K, letter, 14 November 1955. WA 3/16.

<sup>431</sup> G. Eastgate to McClymont, memoir, NZ Archives WA II 3/16.

<sup>432</sup> Smith H. to McClymont.E. memoir NZ Archives WA II 3/16.

As the Huns appeared on the far side of the bridge these two [NZ's] made a rush back to the bridge, the Huns got one of these but the other dived underneath, [pulled] out the fuse near the detonator and lit it, and was able to take a few steps when the whole shoot went up.<sup>433</sup>

Joe Gretton, a private with W Force Head Quarter's Special Reconnaissance Squadron who also witnessed this action asserted that the two men were New Zealand sappers.

North of the bridge in the orchard, at 6.50 p.m. Kelsall heard a colossal explosion and assumed that the bridge had been blown. That was the least of Kelsall's worries. His eager Section three had also drawn the attention of the Germans by their firing. By 9.00 a.m. Kelsall had decided that the position had become too hot. He ordered that the equipment be thrown out of the trucks in preparation for leaving in a hurry. Making a quick reconnaissance: "I climbed a tree.....and saw to my horror blazing tanks of 4H(4 Hussars) -at least three (men) had run to them and then been shot at I think, and Bren carriers in an open field."<sup>434</sup> Caught in the open the 4th Hussars armoured cars and their carriers were being successfully destroyed by the German fighters.

Overwhelmed by superior numbers and the 'straffing' Dean's Company surrendered at 11.45 a.m. Some New Zealanders close by (Their unit is not identified) fought on for another fifteen minutes before being overwhelmed.<sup>435</sup> The two platoons of B Company that were sheltered by olive trees on a hill on the north bank were initially not noticed by the Germans. Bravely they counter-attacked but were soon contained by superior forces. Captain Gordon, realising that the situation was hopeless decided to withdraw north to Megara. Gordon and his two subordinate officers were soon wounded and command was handed over to Warrant Officer J.M.C. Jones. Jones was able to clear the remnants of the two platoons from the hill and headed north. The Germans, reporting this action afterwards (The battle of Blood hill) resorted to a certain amount of melodrama.

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<sup>433</sup> Wynne Mason to W.C. McClymont, Letter dated 29 January 1947 quoting R.S. Natusch . WA II 3/16 Vol. 2

<sup>434</sup> Kelsall WA II 3/16. N A.

<sup>435</sup> Long, p.167.



**German Paratroopers over the canal.  
The canal and the destroyed bridge.**



“The Britishers with troops from their auxiliary nations had dug themselves in properly. Many were placed in the trees barely visible – and didn’t they shoot well.”<sup>436</sup> South of the bridge, the fighting was still confused. The Divisional Cavalry positions were not discovered until the Germans working their way methodically south, started to run onto their entrenchments. Eventually the carriers were pinned down by the intensity of the fighting. When they tried to communicate with divisional headquarters it was discovered that the wireless batteries were flat, so that divisional headquarters could not be warned of the success of the German attack. Slowly small groups disengaged and began to make their way up the terraces. Major Harford met G. Secombe after he had come back after another unsuccessful attempt to contact Lillington. He informed Secombe that Corinth had been bombed and their passage through their was blocked by “a mass of bombed and burning vehicles”.<sup>437</sup> As the *Fallschirmjaeger* had now got among the Divisional Cavalry lines, Secombe was instructed to withdraw to the low hills a mile south. Leaving behind their vehicles which at this time comprised: two armoured cars, five carriers from C Squadron, and three or four carriers from 28 Battalion Captain Harford’s command, now reduced to less than fifty men, made their way south to the evacuation beaches.

Of the other fugitives from the battle, including some of Sergeant Major Jones’ group from the 19 Battalion, were able to reach Megara and were evacuated with 4th Brigade to Egypt. Unfortunately most, including Jones were captured the next day. The inference in a survivor’s recollections was that they were betrayed by Fifth columnists.<sup>438</sup>

Lieutenant Heiford’s third platoon spent the morning listening to and watching the battle unfold beneath them, but they were frustrated that they were too far away and not able to take part in the fighting.<sup>439</sup> At midday a villager came to tell them that the Germans had entered Loutraki. Cut off from B Company’s headquarters and without any instructions to the contrary, Heiford decided that it was time to make for Kriekouki, where he still surmised the rest of the Battalion still was. They withdrew northwards capturing as they

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<sup>436</sup> D.W. Sinclair (1954) *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War. 19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*. Historical Section, Dept Internal Affairs. Wellington. p.107

<sup>437</sup> WA II 3/16 G.Secombe.

<sup>438</sup> Sinclair, p.108.

<sup>439</sup> Sinclair, p.408.

did a drunken *Fallschirmjaeger* officer who had somehow managed to commandeer a British motorbike. The platoon sheltered for an evening in a cave with their suddenly sober prisoner. Obviously their location was not a secret, for the German officer was able to get word to some local Greeks who were visiting them, and they were betrayed. In the morning, they found their cave surrounded by Germans and were forced to surrender.<sup>440</sup> Now all that was left of B Company were a few determined men desperately eluding capture.

Tripolis is a large town on the cross roads of the Arcadian plain. On 26 April this is where Brigadier Harold Barrowclough, the commanding officer of the 6th Brigade was. He had heard that paratroopers had landed around the Corinth Canal. He quickly gave orders for a relief force of A and C Companies of 26 Battalion to head north. By 11.00 a.m. the column was heading towards Corinth. It was not a simple progression. The fine clear day was perfect for the German fighters and *stukas*. Captain T. Milliken commander of A Company was exasperated by his soldiers continually having to jump from the trucks every time a 'plane (inevitably a German) came over. "...he ordered the drivers not to stop unless absolutely forced to do so."<sup>441</sup> Five miles (8 kilometres) from the Canal, the strafing became so heavy that even the determined Milliken was forced to order his men to take cover. As they were sheltering he was astounded to see "German helmets... ..bobbing up and down in the defile."<sup>442</sup> Milliken shouted a quick warning to his troops. There was a sustained volley and a small enemy scouting party was quickly taken prisoner. It was with some satisfaction that they released some ten previously captured Australian and New Zealand soldiers.<sup>443</sup> This was as far as the two companies could progress, as now the opposition began to stiffen, but D Company had the satisfaction of ambushing and shooting up a captured 28 Battalion truck killing the German driver. Just before they withdrew Lieutenant J. Beale, the Intelligence Officer of 4th Brigade, came through the lines (his must have been an exciting journey) with the news that the Canal bridge had been blown. It was decided to withdraw to the port of Navplion and wait for evacuation.

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<sup>440</sup> Sinclair, p.409.

<sup>441</sup> Norton, F.D. (1952). *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45. 26 Battalion*. War History Branch Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, p.61

<sup>442</sup> Norton, p.61.

<sup>443</sup> Norton, p.61.

Brigadier Barrowlough's fast reaction in sending the two companies of 26 Battalion north had enabled organised groups of British and Anzac soldiers to escape. Substantial numbers of Australians, New Zealand Engineers and Divisional Cavalry were able to withdraw through 26 Battalion lines. This included the 6th Field Company, their job done in destroying the bridge also made fighting retreat southwards, meeting up with the two companies of the 26 Battalion at 9.00 p.m.

As Kelsall had observed the Headquarters of the 4th Hussars were overwhelmed at the Canal but three squadrons in the Patras area were able to withdraw to Kalamata, where later most of them would be captured.

Some other New Zealanders used a considerable amount of initiative in escaping: Sappers George Quinlan, (one of the candidates in blowing the bridge) Bruce Henderson and J Dalziell escaped in a 'Pommy' military police car. The two British military policemen had had enough and wanted to surrender. Other sappers were not quite so lucky. Some sheltering in an air-raid shelter just outside of Corinth were betrayed by a Greek officer and conveyed to a Prisoner of War cage in a cemetery in Corinth. Other sappers heading for Milos found a large party of Cretans, some other ranks from the 4th Hussars and assorted British and Australians who were trying to hire a caique to sail to Crete. Sadly three German launches captured them as they were leaving Milos. The fact that the Germans knew of their location indicates betrayal.<sup>444</sup>

The remnants of C squadron of the Divisional Cavalry were still withdrawing in good order south. Just south of the bridge Lieutenant van Slyke, the second in command was initially captured but was freed in a determined counter attack.<sup>445</sup> Some of the carriers became casualties in a gully and some of the crews were taken prisoner but the majority reached the highway to Tripolis. Others destroyed their carriers before withdrawing towards the embarkation point in Navplion guided by Greeks and hoping that they would be in time for the evacuation. Regrettably they reached the water edge at the evacuation beach only to

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<sup>444</sup> McClymont, pp.420-421.

<sup>445</sup> WA II 3/16. Secombe.

find that the last ships had sailed. In the confusion this group was split up and a few made it down the coast where thirteen bribed a fisherman to take them to Crete.<sup>446</sup>

The success of the German 'airborne' troops in seizing the canal bridge by 'coup de main' possibly gave the German High Command the optimistic expectation that their invasion of Crete would be equally as successful with equally low casualties. For the Commonwealth forces the battle of the Corinth Canal was symptomatic of, and symbolised the whole campaign for Greece. The Greeks and Commonwealth forces, from the outset, were ill-organised, resorting to 'ad-hoc' tactics. This is all the more inexcusable as the Commonwealth forces did have notice on the previous evening that airborne troops were going to be used against the canal.<sup>447</sup> There is no indication that this information was communicated to the soldiers defending the canal. For example once at the canal Major Gordon discovered that he was not the commander of 'Isthmus Force', and he could not find and report to Colonel Lillington. Disparity of objectives and lack of unity of command meant, when they came up against the German forces, individual courage was as naught. The Commonwealth forces were attacked in force and defeated in detail. This of course was due in no large part, to the German control of the air. The fighters and bombers were first able to destroy the anti-aircraft screen and then pin down each individual unit and prevent them from reinforcing each other. This notwithstanding, the German attack was a strategic failure, the bridge was destroyed and that although it inconvenienced the British evacuation plans it did not prevent the majority of W force from withdrawing in good order.

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<sup>446</sup> WA II 3/16, Secombe.

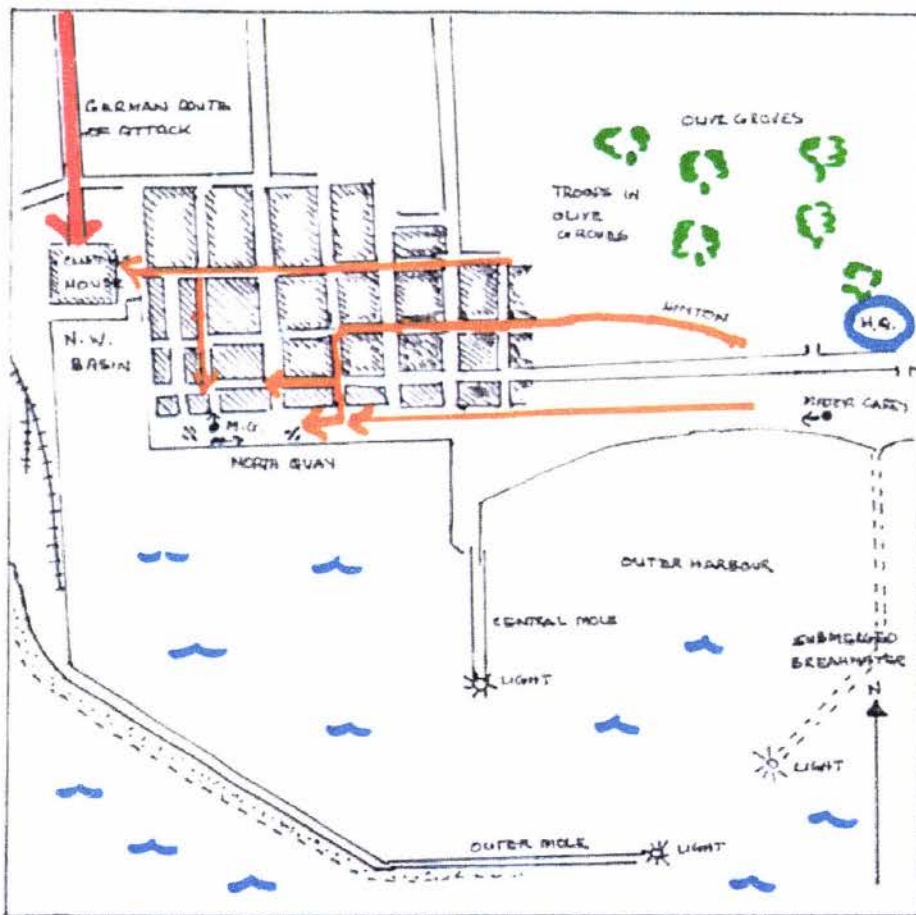
<sup>447</sup> WA II 3/16, Hutchison.

# Chapter Eight

## The Battle of Kalamata

The only occasion in Greece when British troops advanced to the attack and made their ground good.

Major Topham R.A.



THE BATTLE FOR KALAMATA WATERFRONT 28-29 APR.



On 28 April 1941, the élan of a *panzer* regiment was pitted against the dogged determination of a small group of New Zealand, Australian and British soldiers. Although the Commonwealth troops were forced to surrender the next morning to the Germans it was not in ignominy or disgrace. Major Topham a British Gunner described the action as “the only occasion in Greece when British troops advanced to the attack and made their ground good.”<sup>448</sup> Disparate groups of men, unwilling to surrender, overcame a well-disciplined and equipped unit comprising of the élite of the German Army.

Not all the members of the New Zealand Division were up on the line on 21 April 1941. There is a convention that approximately ten percent of a battalion is ‘Left out of Battle’ (LOB), to act as a cadre for rebuilding the battalion should it be destroyed. The reserve generally comprises of two officers and up to eighty men per battalion. This reserve was left in the reinforcement camp at Voula, “a pleasant resort along the coast...Southeast of Piraeus”.<sup>449</sup> Later during the campaign a convalescent hospital was also set up near the camp.

Two officers who were constrained in Voula Camp and have left reports about its conditions were Captain O.J. Hutchison and Lieutenant K. Simmons. Simmons, notwithstanding the pleasant surroundings, found that life at Voula camp was difficult and disorganised and the contradictory orders from the British 80-Base Sub-Area subverted the camp’s organisation. The reinforcements, that should have made up the losses of their respective units could not be sent forward because of the rapidity of the retreat. The LOB troops had to content themselves with guard and provost duties in the Athens area.

Captain Hutchison, in command of 26 Battalion reinforcements, had also been placed in command of the New Zealand soldiers guarding Hassani aerodrome. He was horrified by the casual way the Royal Air Force regarded protection. At one time he had to drive Greek soldiers off the aerodrome with force when they came to destroy and loot the RAF property. The proximity of the German Army and the inevitability of evacuation were

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<sup>448</sup> Canavan C.A. to McClymont, , memoir containing Major Topham R.A, remarks. WA II 3/16 Vol II.National Archives.

<sup>449</sup> McClymont, p.119.

made apparent as more and more weapon-less soldiers and Cypriot drivers drifted into camp.

On 22 April the New Zealand liaison officer, Major N.A. Rattray gave instructions to Major A.P. McDuff, the senior New Zealand officer at Voula to form a battalion out of reinforcements and released convalescents, and to be ready to move at short notice. Simmons found to his horror, that only half the men in the reinforcement battalion had weapons and that there were only two Bren guns. The Cypriot drivers detailed to provide the transport for the reinforcement battalion were too scared to drive it and had to be replaced by New Zealanders. McDuff gave Captain Hutchison instructions to destroy the stores at Voula. In anticipation of the evacuation truck convoys had begun to leave Voula on 21 April. Before he left Voula, Captain Hutchison was ordered to burn the RAF camp at Hassani. He first collected the eighty-five New Zealanders, who were guards at the Aerodrome, one of which was Sergeant J. Hinton of 20 Battalion. On his own initiative Hutchinson stripped the machine guns from the damaged planes at the aerodrome. One convoy comprising of convalescents, New Zealand Medical Corps and Postal Unit personnel was placed under the command of Captain J. Ritchie of the Divisional Cavalry. His instructions were to head towards the Peloponnese via Corinth. However, Ritchie only got as far as Megara where the troops were ordered into olive groves near the village whilst the British Movement Control Authorities sent the trucks back to Athens. Fortunately, one of Ritchie's officers, making his way back to Athens, found that the convoy had been forgotten, and arranged for the forgotten convoy to be picked up.<sup>450</sup>

Lieutenant Simmons was particularly lucky that his convoy was able to get through Corinth before the canal fell to the German paratroopers. Whereas Captain Ritchie just avoided being captured by a group of paratroopers some distance from their drop zone, before being rescued by the carriers of 19 Battalion and driven back to Eleusis.

Sapper Gourlick of 19 Field company New Zealand engineers was one of the drivers on a convoy leaving Voula for Kalamata (Gourlick thought the destination was Navplion). At

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<sup>450</sup> McClymont, p.368-369.

6.45 p.m. on 25 April. At 7.00 p.m. they were discovered by a 'spotter-plane' and 'done-over' by the bombers that soon arrived.<sup>451</sup> By the early morning the trucks were across the Corinth canal and, as dawn was breaking they reached Argos. Because of the confusion of where to embark, some of the senior officers thought that Navplion was the evacuation beach. This belief was reinforced by the fact that they could see the houses in Navplion from a distance, and not unreasonably believed that this was where they were to go.

What was more disconcerting, was that on the way to Navplion they passed a burning ship the *Ulster Prince* that had been bombed and beached. Several convoys, including that of Lieutenant Simmons, set off towards Navplion meeting vehicles that had been turned around by Movement Control and were returning from the town. A traffic jam inevitably occurred and Freyberg arrived to sort it out and sent the convoy back towards Tripolis. It was at this time that Captain J.A.D. Ritchie observed Freyberg directing traffic alone on a small bridge, while being 'straffed' and bombed 'with little effect' by the Germans.<sup>452</sup> The traffic jam was not helped by an Australian convoy passing through in a hurry at 9.00 a.m. The NZMC doctor, J Kennedy Elliot was quite dismissive of the Australian road discipline in the evacuation. "Making as fast as they could for the south. Australian trucks piled up like a mob of sheep."<sup>453</sup> Finally, because of the number of Australian troops congesting the port of Navplion, and the destruction of the *Ulster Prince* the convoy was then diverted at Tripolis to Kalamata.

Inevitably in this confusion, some of the trucks went the wrong way and had to be abandoned, while the troops set out on foot. Some, containing 28 Battalion personnel, survivors from the Corinth Canal battle persevered on, going over a badly maintained track up a hill. One of the trucks went off the road injuring some of the soldiers on board. This small convoy was then caught at the top of the pass by bombers, adding to the confusion.<sup>454</sup> Bereft of their trucks the soldiers joined the others walking over ploughed fields while being continually bombed and 'straffed'. In one of these groups that eventually reached a

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<sup>451</sup> Gourlick, W.P. memoir to McClymont. WA 3/16 N.A.

<sup>452</sup> Ritchie, J.A.D. Memoir for McClymont. WA II 3/16. N.A.

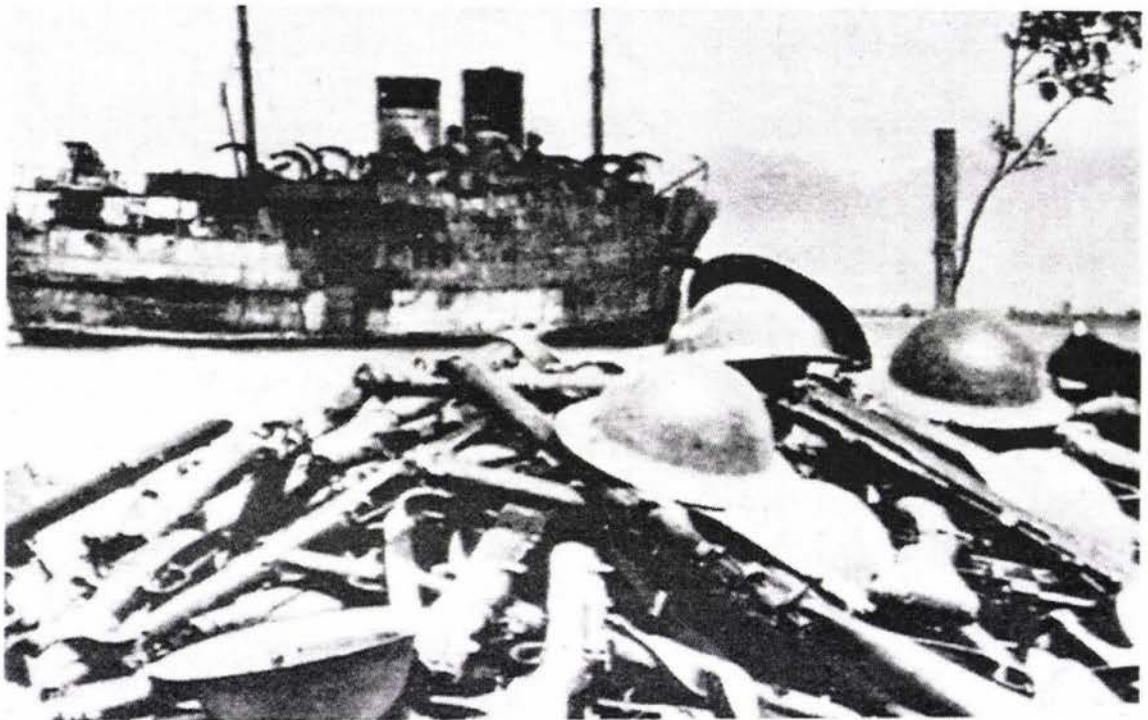
<sup>453</sup> Kennedy Elliot, J. *Account of the Greek Campaign*. MS Papers 6002-3. Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>454</sup> Gourlick.



**Ulster Prince before the Evacuation.**

**Ulster Prince after the evacuation**



**Abandoned in retreat: British steel helmets and rifles**

small village outside Kalamata, was Sapper Gourlick. In the village they met up with ambulances that had come to collect the wounded. However the travail of the wounded was not over for the German bombers in what appeared to be a deliberate attack targeted the ambulances. Those wounded that were unable to walk were put under a culvert.

On the evening of 27 April most of the remaining trucks of the 'strung out convoy' drove through the town to reach an orchard north-east of Kalamata, which was the parking area for the trucks. Later arrivals parked on the road leading north which was the secondary dispersal point that had been set up the previous evening to muster stragglers. The first thing the troops in the olive grove had to do was to dig slit trenches. Major McDuff set off to find Brigadier Parrington, the officer in command of the evacuation. As the 4th Hussars was providing a screen thirty kilometres to the north it was believed that the evacuation would be successful. There were now approximately 16,000 personnel at Kalamata under the command of Brigadier L.C. Parrington. The scene is described by Pringle and Glue the authors of 20 Battalion Official History:

Kalamata, however, was becoming congested with thousands of survivors of miscellaneous units—Base Details, RASC, signallers, drivers, Lascars, Cypriot and Palestinian pioneers, and some Yugoslavs who claimed to have authority from Mr Anthony Eden for a high priority in embarkation.<sup>455</sup>

Parrington emphasised that he would ensure that the fighting soldiers would be got away, but also the New Zealand reinforcement battalion would also be expected to form the rear-guard. The previous evening 16,000 men, predominantly Australians, from the Allen Group (16th and 17th Brigades and the supporting Corps troops), had been evacuated. The majority of the troops of the Reinforcement Battalion went down to the beach on the evening of the 27/28 April and attached themselves to the lines of soldiers awaiting evacuation that evening. At midnight the soldiers were told that there would be no more evacuations that night.<sup>456</sup> Most troops appeared to have drifted back to the New Zealand assembly area when the ships left but some like Sapper Gourlick stayed on the beach. He

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<sup>455</sup> Pringle, D.J.C. & Glue, W.A. (1957). *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945 20 Battalion and Amoured Regiment*. History Branch Internal Affairs Department. Wellington.

<sup>456</sup> McClymont, p.451.

was recognised as a New Zealander and put into a group commanded by a Lieutenant George. (an excellent fellow according to Gourlick). In the afternoon of the 28 April, George ordered him to take a truck and check the Hospital for New Zealand wounded and bring those that could be moved down to the beach. Around 5.00 p.m. Gourlick was just walking up the 'marble' steps of the hospital entrance when he heard firing and excited Greek women and children rushed up to him to say that Germans were in the town.

It was an enemy column of the *5th Panzer Division*, consisting of four companies of motorised infantry plus one anti-tank company.<sup>457</sup> This attached company appears to have brought at least two very large 15.00cm (5.9") field guns and several anti-tank weapons, which were described as 'two-pounders, probably a 3.7-cm or possibly a 5.0-cm weapon. Both weapons resembled the British 'two-pounder' anti-tank weapon. This advance party of the *5th Panzer Division* had crossed the Gulf of Corinth via Megalopolis and pushed aside the remnants of the 4th Hussars at 4.45 p.m, they were guarding the road entering Kalamata from the north. The Germans also captured several New Zealand officers including Major G. H. (Two pill) Thompson, a doctor in the New Zealand Medical Corps, as they moved through the dispersal area<sup>458</sup> of the Reinforcement Battalion at 4.45 p.m. The captured troops were sent back to the rear of the column, but the Germans asked Major Thompson if he would like to come with them to succour the wounded. Thompson readily agreed as "he told the enemy they [the Germans] were sure to have plenty of wounded."<sup>459</sup> As the Germans made their way to the water front they also captured Captain Clarke-Hall RN, the Naval liaison officer with his staff and codes. This was to have disastrous consequences for the majority of soldiers awaiting embarkation.

The first organised resistance to the Germans came from Major Basil Carey of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment and Major Pemberton of the Royal Signals, who were 'policing' the quayside area. They heard firing and then noticed men fleeing the scene of the action. Pemberton went back to warn Brigadier Parrington, while Carey acquired a Bren gun and engaged the German guns being set up on the quay. The German description of the account

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<sup>457</sup> McClymont, p.448.

<sup>458</sup> Canavan, W.A.. Memoir to McClymont-reported comment of Thompson, G.H.. WA II 3/16. N.A.

<sup>459</sup> Canavan.

implies that the Germans fired off a quantity of rounds, but British accounts record only two salvos were fired before the guns were silenced. It was here that Sergeant Hinton found Carey when he jumped into his 'dug-out'. It appears that Hinton who was making his way to McDuff's corner where Major McDuff had set up headquarters in Beach Road leading down to the waterfront. Hearing firing McDuff began to distribute weapons from the holding area in the olive groves when he heard the firing, and acting on his own initiative decided to do something about it. Hinton said: "He had two 'mills bombs' and what could he do? Carey said "[I] told him to go over the wall and throw them at the 2 guns."<sup>460</sup>

By this time Gourlick had driven back to the edge of town by the olive trees, where McDuff had established his Headquarters 'McDuff's corner'. McDuff was initially surprised when told by Gourlick that there were Germans in the town and told Gourlick that he was 'bomb happy' and then on second thoughts, he thought that they were German 'Paras'.<sup>461</sup> There was a hyper-awareness of parachutists throughout the campaign, yet the only occasion they were actually used, the allied troops were badly dispersed to deal with them. McDuff then asked Gourlick to volunteer himself and his truck and with some other volunteers to go back into the town to deal with the 'Para' penetration in the town. Gourlick readily agreed, and according to him, the party to deal with the German guns comprised two Bren-gunners, a Lewis gunner, one soldier carrying a 'Boyes' anti-tank rifle and two or three soldiers carrying tommy-guns. At 3.00 p.m. Private A.M. (Jonah) Jones, who had been in the main dispersal area decided to go into the town. He just avoided being captured by the Germans, who had captured some soldiers looking for 'vino'. He then joined a group of nine including his friends from 20 Battalion, Sergeant J. Hesson and Private O'Rourke and one other Bren-gunner. Working along a street parallel to the beach they ran into Sergeant Jack Hinton who had already wiped out one German machine gun position. "There were dead Germans lying around and one (presumably not quite dead) groaning."<sup>462</sup> Jones, who by now had the Bren-gun, lay down covering fire while Hinton, who was described as

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<sup>460</sup> H.K. Kippenberger to McClymont, letter dated 2 March 1956, reporting part of a letter from Lt Col. Basil Carey RTR. WA II 3/16 Vol II N.A..

<sup>460</sup> Gourlick

<sup>461</sup> Jones, W.A. to McClymont, memoir. WA II 3/16. N.A.

having a bag of hand-grenades, went down towards the waterfront and wiped out another machine gun position. Around this time, according to Jones, the truck without a canopy, driven by Sapper Gourlick 'and full of Kiwis, whizzed past me [Jones]' heading for the quay to confront the German advance party.<sup>463</sup>

Private O.R. Lewis of 22 Battalion had contracted dysentery in the Mount Olympus area and had been sent to the Base Hospital in Athens. On the 27 April, around 8.00 p.m., he left the convalescent camp at Voula to go south to Kalamata in a group under the command of Lieutenant H.R. Harris. According to Lt Harris, Lewis appears to have been somewhat of a 'hard-case'. As with most of the Reinforcement Battalion, he had failed to get on an evacuation ship on the evening of the 28 April, and next morning had decided to go for a swim. After the swim Lewis had fallen asleep in a vineyard. This was while the German fighters and bombers were constantly 'straffing' the troops in Kalamata.

Around quarter to five in the afternoon Lewis "heard machine-gun fire in town."<sup>464</sup> Obviously a curious man, he went down the track to find out what was happening. On the way to Kalamata he found crowds of soldiers lying in ditches in general confusion. Arriving in the town he met the Australian Colonel W. Harlock with some men already aboard a 'flat-bed' truck with low sides and without a canvas top. Harlock was asking if there was a light machine gunner in the group. "Surely there is a Bren-gunner among you?"<sup>465</sup> "I [Lewis] said I could use the gun if they had one – Harlock produced it, I got into the truck, the others being ready off we went."<sup>466</sup> Among this small band of very well armed-heroes was, not only the afore-mentioned Private Lewis and Sapper Gourlick but also Privates C. Snooks, G. Turner, W. Flint and two or three others, including some Australians and some members of the Maori Battalion, to clear out the German penetration. As the truck made its way down the road Lewis asked what the mission was. "I was told it was to investigate what was going on and report, a suicide job. There was a hectic drive

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<sup>462</sup> Jones, W.A. to McClymont, memoir. WA II 3/16. N.A.

<sup>463</sup> Jones.

<sup>464</sup> Lewis, O.R. memoir for McClymont WA II 3/16 N.A.

<sup>465</sup> Lewis.

<sup>466</sup> Lewis.



down to the beach. Ahead we could see flares going up and tracers fire all around.”<sup>467</sup> The truck drove. into beach road, ...“it seemed alive with small arms fire, went really fast. Drove around a corner and nearly turned over in bomb crater. Nearly bumped into the Germans with two guns.”<sup>468</sup>.

The guns were described as large, split trail with pneumatic tyres. Lewis adds somewhat unnecessarily. “They appeared to have heard us”.<sup>469</sup> The truck ‘broad-sided’ along a wall and into a gutter, and the soldiers in the back jumped out of the truck firing at the Germans who were trying to traverse the gun while bringing others up to the beach. Evidently one of the anti-tank guns was fired at the truck whose occupants “ducked and yelled out and they scarpered.”<sup>470</sup> This was not so easy as this first sounds. They captured the German “‘2 pounder’ which was then trained on the 5.9 and some dozen rounds fired.”<sup>471</sup> The soldiers were all firing the automatic weapons from the hip as none of the weapons had bipods. The Germans who did not retreat were shot down among the guns. Around about this time the group containing Hinton, Patterson, Hesson and Jones turned up and Lieutenant Canavan who was close to the action reports that they put in a bayonet charge to finish off the Germans. Hinton who still had his ‘bag of grenades’ lobbed two among a remaining field gun and destroyed it. It must have been around this time that Hinton was severely wounded in the stomach when a German soldier shot him.

The two groups had driven off the Germans, but couldn’t continue their battle as they had run out of ammunition. Undoubtedly a demonstration of bravery, this bloody little battle had an element of farce, because the group then had a conference to find out who was in charge! Now out of ammunition Goulick’s group made its way back to McDuff’s corner and was halted by a challenge from Lieutenant Harris. They could not have got very far from the scene of the action as Harris said he could see the tyres and wheels of the guns burning. As for Lewis’s story, who in some previous incarnation was Harris’s batman: “I took it with a grain of salt”.<sup>472</sup> Major Carey met Hinton, now wounded when he was carried

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<sup>467</sup> Lewis.

<sup>468</sup> Gourlick, WA II 3/16 N.A.

<sup>469</sup> Lewis.

<sup>470</sup> Gourlick.

<sup>471</sup> Gourlick.

<sup>472</sup> Harris to McClymont H.R, memoir. WA II 3/16 N.A.

back. He reported him as saying "I threw those two bombs and I have two bloody holes now."<sup>473</sup>

Doug Patterson of 20 Battalion was another who was drawn to the sounds of firing. He came out of the olive groves near McDuff's corner and found Major Carey busy handing out ammunition. Exhorted by McDuff to 'Get into it', Patterson made his way down to the quay where the firing was the heaviest. His own section dissolved when the officer in charge disappeared so he joined his friends from 20 Battalion. The Germans appeared to have set up their machine guns to 'enfilade' the streets running parallel to the beach. A block before Patterson reached the quay some Germans suddenly ran out of a nearby building. Patterson was of the opinion they had been looting when the New Zealanders cornered them. Initially they had been firing from the upper windows before trying to make a break for it to their armoured vehicle. Private Jones quickly shot down the Germans. Jones friend, Sergeant Hesson, was wounded in the arm in the exchange.<sup>474</sup>

By now it was getting dark and although the field and anti-tanks guns were destroyed there were still some Germans around. In a building just up from the water in the second block 'were some Jerries' by this time Jones' blood was up. As he confided to Patterson, "it was the best time he had during the whole campaign"<sup>475</sup>. Jones' luck was not to last. An Australian officer called upon a group of Germans 'holed-up' in a building by the waterfront to surrender. This officer was shot and wounded. As he lay on the ground he instructed the others behind him not to rescue him or they also would be shot. In the same building a German was firing from a balcony with a 'schmeisser' sub-machine gun. Jones was hit and was wounded in the throat and the chest by bullets and flying masonry. Patterson then swept the veranda with his Bren-gun and killed the German. At the same time, other New Zealanders had set fire to the rear of the building. A New Zealander then threw in a hand grenade. About sixty Germans came out and surrendered. It says a great

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<sup>473</sup> Kippenberger, to McClymont, letter reporting Carey's letter 2/3/1956H.K.K.

<sup>474</sup> Jones, A.M. to McClymont memoir. WAII 3/16.N.A.

<sup>475</sup> Patterson, D. to Pringle, D.J.C. Letter, dated 18 dated 1949. WA II 3/16.N.A.

deal about the self-control of the New Zealanders that the Germans were not shot out of hand.<sup>476</sup>

Of the several roadblocks the McDuff had ordered to be placed around the town, the one manned by Lieutenant Canavan was the most successful. Coming up to his position he met a bloodthirsty Sergeant Graham of the 9th Australian Field Ambulance. The sergeant had personally destroyed two German half-tracks and a 30-cwt truck. Lying around were half-a-dozen bodies. "Some of the bunch of the bastards I shot"<sup>477</sup>. In the trucks were the German reserves of small arms ammunition. Sergeant Graham said exultantly "we've got Jerry fucked and nobody knows but us."<sup>478</sup> Graham was to increase his tally of enemy killed through the evening.

As the night progressed the fighting became more confused. "The enemy were constantly on the defensive, constantly attacked and constantly withdrawing."<sup>479</sup> The majority of the troops in this action were between two hundred and two hundred and fifty New Zealanders accompanied by some Australians from the 10th Brigade and 1/1 Field Regiment AIF. Because of the confusion, many of the New Zealand casualties were caused by the German fire from areas that the New Zealanders thought they had already cleared. The Germans however, were also using tracer, and in consequence were easy to locate. Eventually the firing died down when the Germans surrendered. The casualties were eighty Germans killed and 140 wounded. Ninety-two Germans under the command of a Hauptmann Hertzog surrendered. The New Zealanders lost sixteen killed and forty wounded. Lieutenant H. Harris was given the task of interrogating Hertzog, later in his correspondence with McClymont he says that he was glad that he had been pleasant to Hertzog as they had to surrender the next day.<sup>480</sup> Contact was then established with the Royal Naval flotilla comprising of the cruisers *Perth* and *Phoebe* and the destroyers *Nubian*, *Defender*, *Hereward*, *Hasty* and *Hero*. The *Hero* made contact with the shore and her first lieutenant came ashore to ascertain the situation. A signal was sent to *Perth* at

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<sup>476</sup> Patterson.

<sup>477</sup> Canavan, W.A. to McClymont, memoir WAII 3/16.N.A.

<sup>478</sup> Canavan.

<sup>479</sup> Canavan.

<sup>480</sup> Harris, H.R., to McClymont, memoir. WA II 3/16. N.A.

9.30 p.m.: "Troops collecting on the beach Southeast of town. All firing ceased in town. Consider evacuation possible from beach. Brigadier is reporting."<sup>481</sup>

It was possible for a destroyer to embark a thousand men. The problem for evacuation is the arrangement of boats that are to be on the beach to ferry men to the waiting ships. Eight thousand men had been evacuated the previous evening so there should have been sufficient boats and caiques to ferry the troops to the awaiting warships. However Captain Sir Philip Bowyer-Smith RN of *Perth* had already made up his mind and the evacuation was abandoned at 9.29 p.m.

The cruiser he[Bowyers-Smith] had commanded had not yet taken any part in the evacuation from Greece, and the appearances on shore might well have seemed much worse than they were.<sup>482</sup>

From a perspective of over sixty years it is difficult to understand this decision, but fatigue and stress obviously had their effects. Given the courage of the Royal Navy in the evacuation of Crete, it certainly cannot be attributed to cowardice. Only the *Hero* remained to ferry troops with her whalers. At midnight, three more destroyers arrived.

[T]he naval authorities in Crete, having been told that there were 1500 Yugoslavs and thousands of troops still in Kalamata had sent over the *Kandahar*, *Kingston* and *Kimberley* to assist the original force<sup>483</sup>.

These destroyers suffered under the same constraint as *Hero* and had to move out by 3.00 a.m. or they would fall victim to the German *stuka* attack. In an attempt to get off those New Zealanders that had been so effective in the defence of the town twenty four were taken down to the beach in a lorry. They got there to see the last boats full of soldiers leave. They were told that the boats would return, but the only movement was the destroyers slipping out of the harbour. It is doubtful whether the initial two cruisers and four destroyers could have evacuated all the eight thousand including the Palestinian,

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<sup>481</sup> McClymont, p.459.

<sup>482</sup> Elstob, p.419.

<sup>483</sup> McClymont, p.459.

<sup>483</sup> McDonald, G. (1997). *Jack Hinton V.C. A Man Amongst Men*. David Ling Publishing Ltd: Auckland, p.81.

Cypriot and British Base personnel in Kalamata but the cohesive 'fighting' units could have been evacuated. The success of most the other evacuations was due to the presence of troop and landing ships.

Late on the evening of the 28 April, Parrington had decided to surrender the next morning. There is some doubt whether Parrington's heart was in the battle. He was about to surrender the previous evening when the Germans first arrived and had an argument with Hinton who threatened to have him court-martialled for defeatism<sup>484</sup>

Canavan had gone back to see Major McDuff, to be told "Due to Navy's inability to take us off the Brigadier had decided to surrender at 5.30 a.m. that morning. "Those that wanted to take to the hills could do so."<sup>485</sup> Some did escape. Determined parties of men acquired caiques, rowing boats and small dinghies. Patrolling British destroyers picked up some and some eventually sailed their way to Crete, but for most, the wounded, the tired and the dispirited it was the railway back to Germany and four years of boredom and inadequate food in a prison camp. One of those captured was Sergeant 'Jack' Hinton; a tough, independent and adventurous man that New Zealand was so good at producing in the 1930's. He was later awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallant action in a prisoner of war camp.

That so many were captured at Kalamata was due to several factors: the inefficiency of the British Base Units tasked with the evacuation; the capture of the Corinth Canal; the rapidity of the German advance across the Peloponnese; the inadequacy of the 4th Hussars screen; the inability of Major McDuff to set up a defence screen around Kalamata and allowing his men to drifted off; the capture of the Royal Naval liaison officer and his signal rating; the unwillingness of the senior British Naval officer on the *Perth* to remain near the port whilst there were Germans in the area and perhaps the defeatism of the senior British officer, Brigadier Parrington. Hinton accused him of defeatism by, but he was disadvantaged by

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<sup>484</sup>McDonald, p.81.

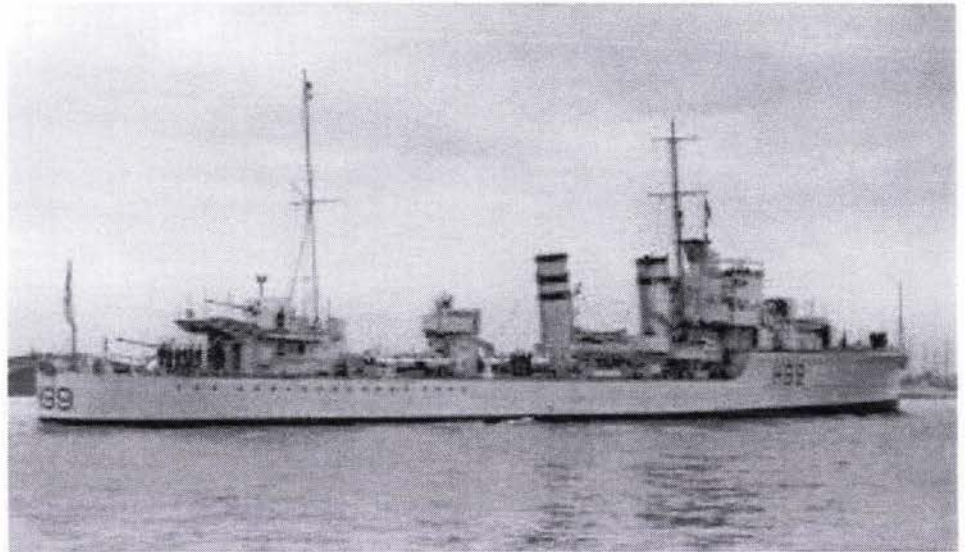
<sup>484</sup> Canavan.

being in nominal command of a 'rag-bag' of units and nationalities, many of which were non-combatants or combatants without weapons.

**Warships involved in the Evacuation at Kalamata.**

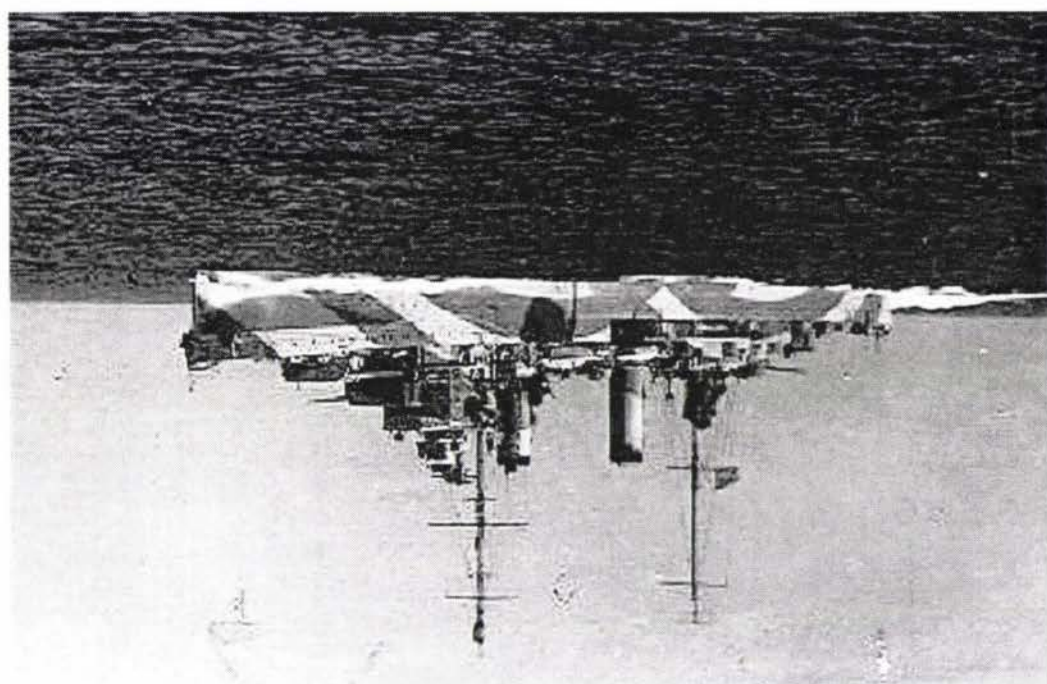


**HMAS Perth**

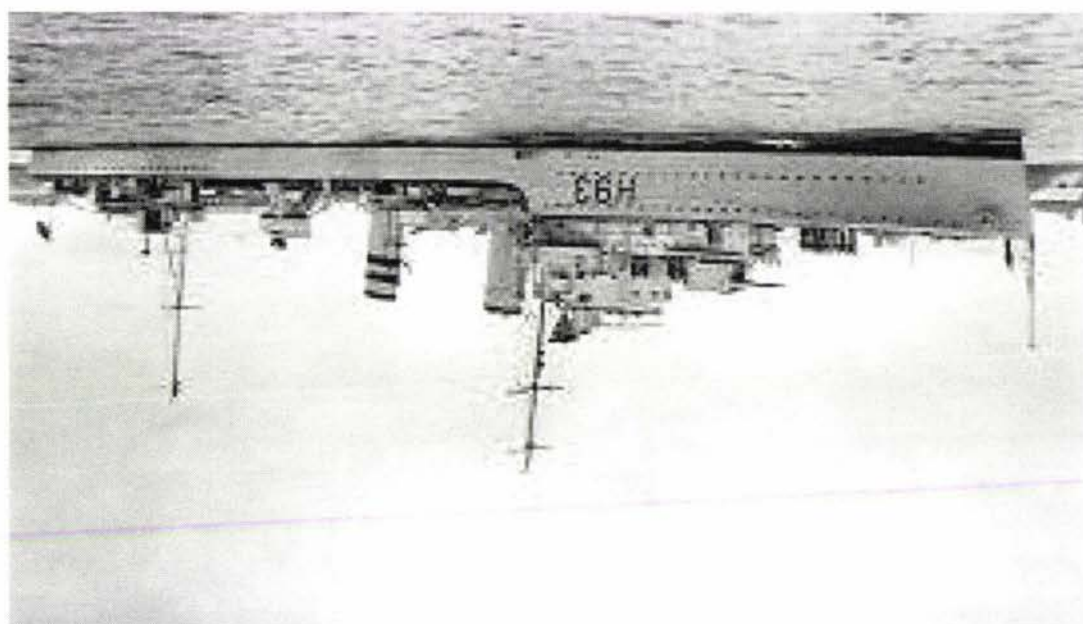


**HMS Hasty**

HMS Phoebe



HMS Hero

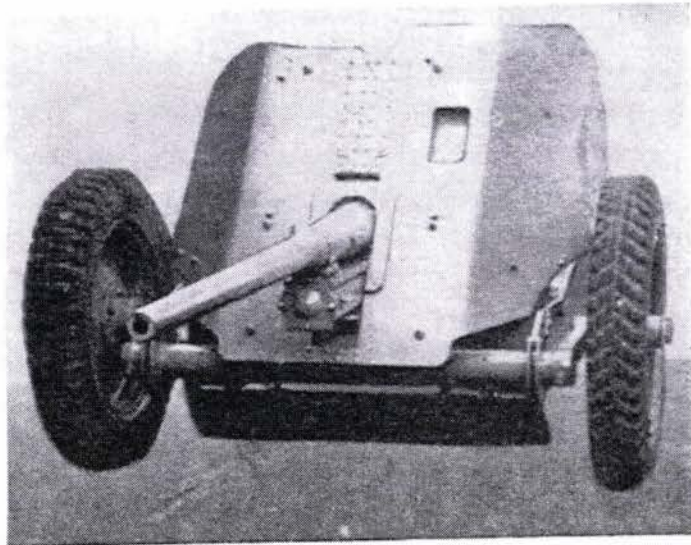




**German artillery as used at Kalamata**



**150cm field gun as used at Kalamata**



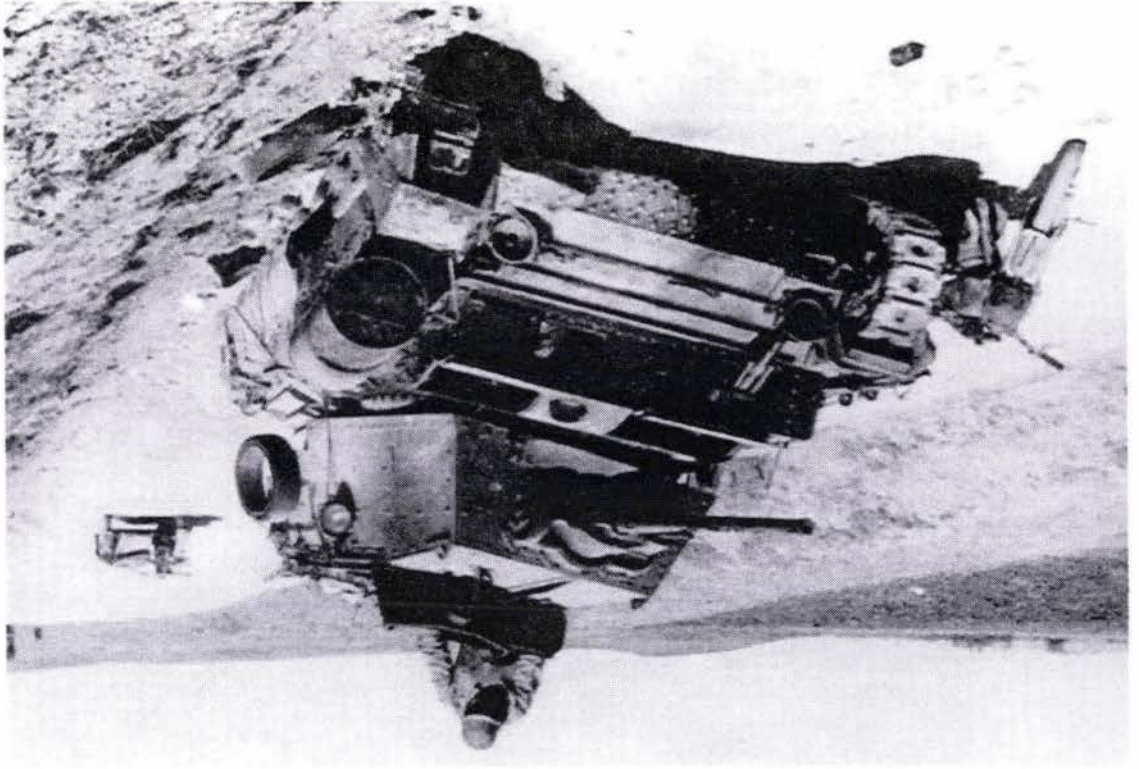
*Figure 47.—4.2 cm le. Pak 41 (42/28-mm tapered-bore antitank gun) showing front of double shield.*



△POWs: some Allied soldiers who did not reach the ships



△ Exhausted: some of the lucky ones who did



A-9/A-10 Crusier tanks destroyed on the retreat.

## CONCLUSION

The affair appears to have been handled with political and strategic frivolity, and the British Government did not deserve to get off so lightly as it did.

Cyril Falls  
*The Second World War*



**Marching back to a Prisoner of War Camp.**

On the 3 April 1941, while in Greece, Freyberg noted in his diary, that: “The situation is a grave one: we shall be fighting against heavy odds in a plan that has been ill conceived and one that violates every principle of military strategy.”<sup>486</sup> These principles of military strategy (they are also known as the principles of war) have been distilled from the experience of centuries of warfare and are essential for “the planning and conduct of campaigns, movement and disposition of forces and the deception of the enemy.”<sup>487</sup> Warfare may be one of the most unpredictable of human activities, but to quote T.E. Lawrence, “With 2,000 years of examples behind us we have no excuse when fighting, for not fighting well.”<sup>488</sup> “Sun Tzu defined 13 principles in his *The Art of War* while Napoleon listed 115 maxims. American Civil War General Nathan Bedford Forrest required only one; ‘get there furthest with the mostest’.<sup>489</sup> Some of these principles will be used to elucidate the answers to the five questions that were asked in the introduction. These are:

1. maintenance of the objective: maintaining the ‘raison d’etre’ of the campaign or battle.
2. unity of Command: in practise one of the most difficult of the principles to achieve. This means co-ordinating the leadership of the force to ensure that all its arms are effective.
3. economy of Force: The careful husbanding of resources to enable the application of combat power where it will be most effective;
4. mass (concentration): This is best summed up in the quotation of Nathan Bedford Forrest (above). It means that victory normally goes to the force that can place the most combat power on the battlefield at the *schwerpunkt* the point of contact;
5. manoeuvre: The ability to move forces around to achieve victory; The Germans were particularly skilled at the difficult tactic of *Blitzkrieg* which is a specific military technique of manoeuvre warfare. Lack of manoeuvre; can only bring stalemate and a war of attrition;

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<sup>486</sup> Freyberg, diary 3 April 1941. DA.401.21.3 in WA II/1 Greek Narrative. N.A., p.12

<sup>487</sup> Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military\\_strategy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_strategy), p.1

<sup>488</sup> Lawrence, T.E. to Liddell Hart, in *Memoirs*. Quoted in Dixon, N. ((1995). *On Psychology of Military Incompetence*. Random House: London, p.15.

<sup>489</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military\\_strategy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_strategy)

6. security: The use of counter intelligence to prevent the enemy finding out ones plans and thwarting ones objectives;
7. surprise: This comes from the application of security and enables the enemy to be attacked at the time and place of ones choosing;
8. morale: is an abstruse factor in battle, an complex amalgam of several factors: “training, comradeship, leadership and discipline all play their parts in its creation.”<sup>490</sup> It is a commodity that can palliate against an Army that has superior equipment;
9. flexibility: The ability to adapt to changing circumstances, other wise known as common sense;
10. initiative: Taking advantage of a situation, and leaving the enemy less opportunity to deal with one’s moves and plans.<sup>491</sup>

Question one asked: “What was the political and strategic rationale for sending the New Zealand Division to Greece?”

A definition of “Strategy is the bridge that relates military power to political purpose.”<sup>492</sup> From 1940 Britain had committed herself to the political and military purpose of:

Victory, even if this meant placing the British empire in pawn to the United States; victory, even if it meant Soviet domination of Europe; victory at all costs.<sup>493</sup>

By early 1941 Britain was running out of the economic and *matériel* resources necessary to combat the military strength of a Nazi Germany that had the assets of all the conquered nations in Europe. Apart from loans from the wealthier Commonwealth nations, Britain had the hope that it would be the recipient “of ‘lend-lease’ first mooted by President Roosevelt this in December of 1940. This was a contrivance by which

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<sup>490</sup> Keegan, J. & Holmes, R. (1985). *Soldiers A History Of Men In Battle*. Hamish Hamilton Ltd: London, p.39.

<sup>491</sup> The above Principles of Strategy were obtained from: Dunningan, F. (1993). *How To Make War*. William Morrow and Company Inc. New York, p. 16-18.

<sup>492</sup> Gray, C. (1999). *Modern Strategy*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, p.17.

<sup>493</sup> Taylor, p.475.

American goods could be provided without cash payment.”<sup>494</sup> To obtain the goods and services provided by ‘Lend-Lease’, The British needed to persuade the United States Congress to pass the ‘Lend-Lease’ Bill. To achieve this Britain needed to prove that it was a worthy recipient, by confronting nazism and fascism and supporting other nations doing so.

When the Greek Government invoked the April 1939 Agreement of Assistance in early 1941 it gave the British Government an opportunity to display its assiduity in confronting the axis by achieve a coalition of Balkan states.

The strategic objectives of this coalition were to:

- enable the return of British Forces to the continent of Europe;
- protect Britain’s northern Mediterranean flank;
- deter the Germans from striking at British and her allies possessions in the Middle East, whilst being in the position to strike at Italian and German interests in southern Europe.

However by 1941 the strategic situation had changed radically. Only Britain and the Commonwealth were confronting the axis powers, and the British were already fully committed in the Middle East theatre of operations in Libya and Ethiopia. The original promise to support Greece was made in the early months of the war prior to France’s defeat in June 1940 when Britain’s strategic and military options were greater.

The intention of the political coalition was to achieve mass, and to achieve this, Britain would have had to combine the Yugoslav, Greek, and Turkish Armies with their own forces. The Turkish administration was sympathetic but unwilling to ally itself with the British. The Turks did not have the equipment or training of their Armed Forces to ever be involved in offensive operations against the Germans even had they wanted to,

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<sup>494</sup> Taylor, p.513.

Gavin Long, author of *Australia in the War of 1939-145 Greece, Crete and Syria* comments that:

There is a case to be made against the U.K. Govt (sic) for insisting that British aid be sent to Greece in the hopes that Yugoslavia and Turkey would come in, when all the evidence indicates that Turkey would remain neutral and Yugoslavia was not reliable. The U.K. Government did not inform the Dominion Governments of all the risks involved in sufficient time.<sup>495</sup>

The Yugoslavs hoped that Hitler would leave them alone and were never really willing to co-operate with the British forces prior to and after the coup by General Simovic. The Greek Army was never able to co-operate or conform to the fully mechanised W Force in the field and by March 1941, the fighting on the Albanian Front had exhausted the Greek Army. Had the Yugoslav and Turkish Governments been willing to commit their forces, the problems of mobility would have been the same difficulties multiplied by three. The achievement of mass also requires unity of command, and in Greece, during the campaign there never was any actual unity of command. Although General Papagos was the titular commander; General Wilson tended to ignore him when it suited his purpose and in reality there was very little co-operation with the Greek Army. Even among the British, there was only a negligible amount of co-operation between the two British headquarters, D'Albiac's (Operation *Barbarity*) and Wilson's (W Force – Operation *Lustre*).

Prior to the decision to go to Greece, the principle military objective in early 1941 was the destruction of the Italian armed forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations. As they were in substantial numbers in North Africa, it was common sense to strike at them there. Once Churchill's decided that Greece was to be the British principal area of effort in the Mediterranean, this contradicted maintenance of the objective. Wavell, on Churchill's instructions, had to halt the offensive in Cyrenaica and divide his forces in the face of the enemy and send the only units that were not actively engaged in the

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<sup>495</sup> Long, G. comment on Ch1 of the draft narrative *To Greece* WA II 3/16.National Archives.



Western desert to Greece. This prevented General O'Connor's driving the Italians out of Libya.

W Force was effectively Wavell's reserve. Once Rommel attacked the British forces in North Africa Wavell could not even send the Force that he originally earmarked for Greece. In splitting his forces to achieve two objectives instead of one, Wavell's forces were defeated in Greece and in North Africa, contradicting economy of force: To gain an ill-conceived political objective the military objective of destroying the Italians was forfeited. By the time W Force embarked for Greece the 'Lend-Lease' Bill had been passed. Sending Barbarity Force to Crete and Greece would have fulfilled Britain's treaty obligations. Given the ambiguity of the Greek Government about fully confronting the 'axis' forces. This gesture was probably enough to comply with the Greek request.

Wavell, it appears gave up trying to prevent Churchill's interference with the running of his command, and ignoring the military reality of the situation, sent only a token force to Greece. In a memorandum to the Editor in Chief of the New Zealand War Histories (Howard Kippenberger) dated 3 October 1949 Wards writes:

The inference was that Mr Eden's enthusiasm outran his discretion and that General Wavell lost sight of these military considerations that should have been kept prominently in view.<sup>496</sup>

Wavell further compounded The British Government's duplicity by giving the impression in his communications with the Australian and New Zealand Governments that Blamey and Freyberg were better informed than they really were. The New Zealand Government was very proud of its military commitment and wanted the division to be a fully integrated unit within the British Army. In return the New Zealand Government expected to be fully apprised of the risks that the Division would have to run. It was the responsibility of the Divisional commander inform the Government of any concerns that

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<sup>496</sup> Wards to Kippenberger, memorandum, Paragraph 5,3 October 1949.WA II 3/16. N.A.

he might have about a campaign, and it does not reflect well on Freyberg, that he did not disclose his doubts to the New Zealand Government.

It was to both New Zealand's and Britain's strategic and economic interests to have the New Zealand Expeditionary Force based in Egypt in 1941. However examined in isolation there were negligible strategic reasons for New Zealand and Australia to have a significant element of their armed forces sent to the Balkans, but it would have been churlish not to contribute to a force if requested. It would have been equally churlish of the British had they ignored New Zealand and Australia's proper concerns about the Japanese threat in the Pacific.

Greece in 1941 was a neo-fascist country. George King of the Hellenes had actively assisted Metaxas to overthrow and then ruthlessly purge the members of constitutional Venezilist government. Quite rightly, much is made of the kindness and assistance of the 'ordinary people' of Greece; but scattered throughout the Official Histories and personal accounts are with references to the less than committed behaviour of the Greek High Command, the Greek Police and some citizens. This included the gross treachery of General Tsolakoglou and the betrayal of escaping soldiers and prisoners of war by the Greek civil authorities. . This less the committed attitude prevented the retreating allies from fully destroying bridges and tunnels and other infrastructure including oil-refineries. This meant that when the allies retreated to Crete, the Germans were able to bring their forces and equipment to the Greek airfields closest to Crete.

To engage in a high-risk activity, the expectation is that the return justifies the higher risk. Even with the luxury of hindsight, there were at the time doubts about the success of the campaign. It is apparent from Churchill's correspondence with Anthony Eden in Cairo that Churchill was torn between breaking his word to the Greeks and the looming probability that the campaign would be doomed because of the inability to bring Yugoslavia and Turkey into the coalition. Towards the end of his life, Ian Wards stated to author of this thesis that he believed that it was Anthony Eden who was the 'principal

villain of the piece.<sup>497</sup> “When Churchill and the war cabinet for once hesitated, the men in Egypt regarded this as a challenge, which it was no doubt intended to be.”<sup>498</sup> Wards suggested that Eden, disregarding his caution of November 1940, took up Churchill’s ‘challenge’ with enthusiasm and carried along the implementation. Notwithstanding Eden’s new found enthusiasm, at this stage of the war, only one man could have prevented W Force going to Greece. That was Winston Churchill.

A campaign that had its origin in an attempt to achieve a difficult coalition of the forces of four nations confronting the axis in the Balkans, finally became one of British *Noblesse Oblige*; sharing the suffering of a dubious ally with the divisions of their most loyal Dominions.

Question two asked how well did the training and composition of the New Zealand Division prepare them for a war in Greece?

No matter how good training is, nothing ever prepares a soldier for war, except war itself. Most of the soldiers that went to Greece had only a rudimentary idea of what real war would be like, as observed by John McLeod:

Despite these problems, it was still not difficult to bring a man to a level of physical fitness sufficient to sustain the rigours of combat, or teach him the basic rudiments of soldiering – handling weapons, the application of fire, minor tactics, both individuals and collective, and routine administration. Of greater difficulty, however, was the need to prepare the soldier for the mental stresses of battle. Not only was he required to kill fellow human beings, but also to cope with a multitude of unparalleled noises, sights and fears. It was believed that realistic collective training could enable the soldiers to overcome this, thus encouraging him to go on with “his job of killing when he meets enemy fire”.<sup>499</sup>

This notwithstanding the New Zealanders behaved extremely well under fire and excepting Colonel Macky’s premature retreat, one is inclined to agree with Professor

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<sup>497</sup> Wards, I.McL., comment to author October 2002.

<sup>498</sup> Taylor, p.525.

<sup>499</sup> McLeod, p.17

Murphy that: “the New Zealand Division did not put a foot wrong.”<sup>500</sup> The New Zealand Division was fortunate that the composition was relatively homogenous. This benefited the two offensive arms, the artillery and infantry. The artillery had a leaven of professional and long term territorials officers and non-commissioned officers. The infantry had the advantage that the infantry were able to obtain men of average and better intelligence, good mechanical skills and physically fit.<sup>501</sup> Some writers have stated that there was some competition between units recruited from different provinces, but this has not been apparent in the oral or written interviews of the participants.

After World War II, Brigadier S.L.A. Marshall made a study of the efficacy of the training methods used by the United States Army and it indicated that only fifteen to twenty five percent of United States infantrymen used their personal weapons.<sup>502</sup> This survey so interested Kippenberger that he arranged for Marshall’s questions to be circulated around some of the officers that served in the 2nd New Zealand Division.<sup>503</sup> General L.W. (Bill) Thornton compiled the answers in a summary and although the officers tended agree with some of Marshall’s findings did offer some useful observations that:

[T]he New Zealander in action is more dour, more objective, and constantly aware of his place in a mutually reliant ‘team’ than his American counterpart [and] the New Zealand infantryman tended to hold his fire until he saw a definite target.<sup>504</sup>

However lest we think that New Zealanders make natural killers, Thornton also observes that: “New Zealanders had an aversion to killing and would prefer to take prisoners.”<sup>505</sup> One of the areas where the former officers disagreed with Marshall is his assessment: “Our infantry, in the great majority, held a low opinion of the importance of their arm.”<sup>506</sup> Upham and Andrew disagreed strongly with this opinion, and stated

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<sup>500</sup> Professor Murphy, comment to Author, interview October 2004.

<sup>501</sup> Dunningan, p.30.

<sup>502</sup> Marshall, p.56.

<sup>503</sup> Kippenberger to L.W. Thornton, letter 4 August 1948. WA II 3/16 Vol. II. N.A.

<sup>504</sup> Thornton to Kippenberger, letter containing summary dated 29 March 1949. WA II 3/16 Vol II. N.A, p’s.1 & 3.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.* p.18.

<sup>506</sup> Marshall, Q.I critique.

that the infantrymen had a very high opinion of themselves, (morale) especially after a few battles. Marshall also postulated that only quarter of the infantrymen actually used their weapons in combat. Upham in particular disagreed with this statement. The general consensus was that only quarter of the infantry get the opportunity to use their weapons in a battle, but that “seventy-five percent persist in firing”<sup>507</sup> What is somewhat disquieting is Upham’s statement that: “Most of the enemy bayoneted would be men surrendering. Two thirds of our men would not exactly be in at the kill, often because they were loaded up with too much gear to be able to grapple with anyone.”<sup>508</sup>

The New Zealand Army that confronted the Germans in 1941 was an Army well aware of the sacrifices that would have to be made. All were aware of the heavy casualties that New Zealand had suffered in World War I all of its personnel were either, volunteers or Regular Force. Some had served in, and most would have had relatives who had served in World War I, and yet they still volunteered. In some ways the Territorial Army of 1914 was better trained as it had a reservoir of young men who were compelled to join the Territorials by the 1909 Defence Act. It also must be remembered that there were a large number of unemployed and others in low paid employment, for whom joining the Army gave a degree of stability. An army, especially a volunteer army, reflects the social structure and mores of the society from which it arose. New Zealand of the late nineteen thirties was a New Zealand where a degree of initiative and adaptability were necessary for survival. These skills initially were initially not valued or encouraged in the Army. “You aren’t paid to think soldier.” This was not a deliberate policy, but one of expediency. Apart from Freyberg, Puttick Miles and Weir the senior officers were well meaning amateurs, who had experience in World War I but would find it hard to adapt to the rapidity of warfare in the Second World War. The last thing that they wished was people criticising their efforts. The New Zealand Army was also, in many ways an Army designed for the battles of that World War. The changes to the New Zealand Army from the time of the First World War were ones of increment. Its equipment and philosophy was that of an army, of 1918, whereas the German Army that they were going to fight had undergone a

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<sup>507</sup> Upham to Thornton, memorandum dated 29 March, 1949, p.1.

generational equipment and philosophical change. Few officers in either the British or the New Zealand Army would have been aware of the innovations in manoeuvre warfare.

The Germans were particularly skilled at the difficult tactic of *Blitzkrieg*, which is a specific military technique of manoeuvre warfare. When confronted with a strong static position, the Germans would first attempt to force it, then manoeuvre around it. Consequently the allies constantly had to conform: firstly to the German attack, and secondly to the imperatives of the withdrawal to the evacuation beaches. The element of surprise was always with the Germans. The geography of Greece was thought to be one limitation for the Germans, but the terrain also did not work to the Allies advantage as much as it was expected. The passes led directly into Greece and once these were breached the mountains in between prevented the allies from stabilising or holding their lines of defence. Advancing rapidly the Germans were always able to turn the allies left flank. The only advantage that the W Force had was that, it was mechanised, and in most cases could retreat faster than the German Army could advance. The allies did not have the flexibility that years of planning and training gave to the German Army. Nor did they have a fully compatible communication system that manoeuvre warfare requires. From the moment the Germans attacked the allies, the allies were always on the defensive and the initiative was always with the Germans. The retreating Commonwealth forces were also hindered by the paucity of planes of the Royal Air Force. The German advance was advantaged by its command of the sky. Two more squadrons of Hurricanes could have made observation and bombing by the *Luftwaffe* a lot more difficult. As Freyberg observed in a memorandum written to the New Zealand Prime Minister after the completion of the Balkan campaign:

[F]or the last twenty years the R.A.F. has been practising a doctrine that has led to the existing state of affairs as regards air support for the Army in the M.E. (Middle East)...In so far as air co-operation was concerned, [it] was marked by almost complete lack of absence(sic) support by the R.A.F. We practically never saw Reconnaissance

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<sup>64</sup> Upham to Thornton, p.3.

planes, fighters or bombers upon our front, whilst the enemy completely dominated our position to a great depth.<sup>509</sup>

Notwithstanding that the British generals visiting Greece in 'mufti', there was certainly any real attempt at security. From the moment 'W' Force arrived in Piraeus the German ambassador was aware of the strength and composition of the force. It is surprising that British Intelligence either was not aware of this, or did not make the respective military authorities aware of this. All the Greek Generals were all Metaxist appointees and some like General Tsolakoglou were actively pro-German and it is likely that there must have been leakage of intelligence to the Germans. The British compounded this by their limited intelligence about their allies. The Yugoslav Army in 1941 was expected to perform as stubbornly as the Serbian Army had in 1914-18, but instead broke up into disorder some Croatian regiments surrendering 'en masse' and some of Yugoslavia's *Volkdeutsche* behaving as a fifth column.

Defence calls for attack in order to become a complete concept in terms of the very nature of war."<sup>510</sup> Once the attacker has made the first move, a counter attack is expected. Defeat is the likely outcome for any commander who always waits for something to happen. Unfortunately the British forces not only lost the advantage of the attack but also of the counter attack and the initiative was always with the Germans. The destruction of Piraeus, the only substantial port able to supply W Force (Salonika was too close Bulgaria's borders), limited the allies flexibility in response even more, by placing more pressure on the fragile internal and external lines of supply.

Question 3: How suitable for command were the major protagonists in the New Zealand Division?

The Division's commanding officer, General Freyberg's conduct, courage and humour in Greece only reinforced his legend. Because of the previous separation of his

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<sup>509</sup> Freyberg to Peter Fraser, memorandum, 3 June 1941. WA II 8 Freyberg Papers: The air component of Greece and Crete. N.A.

<sup>510</sup> Aron, R. (1983) *Clausewitz Philosopher of War*. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, p.148

command, Freyberg was feeling his way into the job with senior officers that were not of his choosing, he did not know, only knew him by repute, and in some instances were resentful and jealous of him. The Division's disposition to Greece came, as no surprise to Freyberg, for in his earlier papers there are estimations that Greece, sooner or later, would be a theatre of war.<sup>511</sup> The disposition enabled Freyberg to unite his Division and render it safe from the depredations of the Middle East command. When ordered up to Northern Greece, he expressed to Wilson and his staff the grave doubts he had about the Division's ability to hold the Aliakmon line with only two brigades. Although he had differences with Wavell over the disposition of the division he had no reason to doubt Wavell's integrity. As a British General commanding a New Zealand Division within the framework of the British Army, coupled with the desire for his Division to see action and his loyalty to Wavell probably led him not to tell Fraser of his doubts about the expedition. Freyberg was also aware that Wavell was communicating directly with the governments in Wellington and Canberra. When ordered to withdraw from Greece, his concern about the inadequacy of the evacuation plans for the New Zealand Division, unlike Blamey, caused him to ignore the order for the Corps and Divisional Generals to withdraw.<sup>512</sup> As later observed by Montgomery, "Freyberg was the best fighting General he had ever met."<sup>513</sup> He created an élite division that was one, if not the most feared and respected by the enemy in the Mediterranean theatre of operations.

The other senior officers of the New Zealand Division all behaved competently in Greece. These were men who had served in the Territorial and Regular Force between the wars with very little governmental and public acknowledgement. Their sacrifice of time, and sometimes their lives gave the country the opportunity to produce younger more experienced commanders. The fatigue<sup>514</sup> that was to handicap Hargest in Crete was not evident in Greece. Despite Kippenberger's criticism, his leadership of his

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<sup>511</sup> Freyberg to Fraser, Cable271, 13 January 1941, WA II 3/16, N.A.

<sup>512</sup> It is also interesting to contrast the attitude of Blamey and Freyberg to their sons. At this time Paul was serving in 19 Battalion as a private, taking all the risks that this entailed whereas Blamey's son was a staff officer on Blamey's staff and was evacuated with General Blamey on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April.

<sup>513</sup> Hamilton, p.836.

<sup>514</sup> The symptoms of Shell shock (Neurasthenia) are emotional detachment, hopelessness, irritability, difficulty in sleeping and hyper-vigilance.



Brigade in the Olympus pass and his strength of character in ensuring that most of the 5th Brigade were evacuated from Porto Rafti.

Brigadier Hargest went aboard early and so impressed upon Captain Petrie of HMS *Glengyle* the urgency of the embarkation that when the converted liner was full over 700 men were taken aboard HMS *Calcutta*.<sup>515</sup>

However Hargest's *laissez-faire* attitude to the training of the battalions within his Brigade may have contributed to the less than satisfactory performance of 21 Battalion. 5th Brigade also was negligent in properly preparing the Olympus passes for demolition, which jeopardised the retreat of the other two brigades.

Brigadier Puttick proved to be an aggressive leader quite prepared to shoot his way through the German paratroopers that had captured the Corinth Canal. This somewhat extreme manoeuvre was obviated by a message from Brigadier Charrington who had picked up a New Zealand Divisional signal directing the Brigade to the beaches east of Athens. Like Hargest, Puttick displayed uncharacteristic hesitation in his allocation of forces when he had temporary command of the Division in Crete.

Brigadier Barrowclough's insistence that his Brigade engage in long forced marches while in Egypt paid off during the retreat from the Aliakmon line. The defence of the Molos pass fell predominantly on Barrowclough's 6th Brigade and was conducted with skill and aggression. Barrowclough also reacted with alacrity when he heard that the Corinth canal had been attacked and 26 Battalion was responsible for the rescue of many of the retreating Commonwealth soldiers. It was fortunate that Barrowclough and his Brigade that they were taken back to Egypt and consequently were able to rest and recuperate.

Brigadier Miles created artillery forces that the *stukas* could not silence. At Thermopylae, the Commonwealth guns ended the invincibility of *blitzkrieg*. For

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<sup>515</sup> McClymont. P.402

Brigadier Crump, logistics was never a real problem as the New Zealanders were only in Greece for three weeks. The primary problem of supply was protecting the convoys from Egypt from the half hearted attacks of the Italian Airforce and then, with the major port of Piraeus substantially damaged, unloading the ships once they reached Greece. One of the reasons that the Commonwealth forces were able to retreat in good order was that ammunition was never in short supply as they were falling back on their supply 'dumps'. This was just as well, for in the Balkans the German Army was substantially larger, better equipped and operating on internal lines of supply whereas the British forces were dependent on a rickety sea-borne supply line. The problems of the allied forces were compounded when the German *Luftwaffe* destroyed most of the Port facilities at Piraeus on the first day of their attack on Greece.

Question four asked how well did the New Zealand Army's equipment compare with that of the German Army – *das Heer*?

The cause of casualties on a battlefield is normally an inverse relationship between the type of weapon and the proximity of the enemy. For example, in "World War II artillery caused nearly 60 percent of all casualties"<sup>516</sup> much more than an infantryman with his rifle. With the notable exceptions of the 'Boyes' anti-tank rifle the British equipment issued to the New Zealanders was adequate to the conditions in Greece. As an Infantry Division, the New Zealand Division was particularly well suited in a defensive role. It is noted in several publications that the Greek Campaign was a 'gunners' campaign. The Germans never had an answer to the Commonwealth artillery that out-gunned them at every opportunity. The New Zealand Division's Artillery compared to other New Zealand units was fortunate that it had a disproportionate amount of professionals, because of the New Zealand policy of ensuring that officer cadets sent to Duntroon were trained as gunners. Although the 2-pounder was inadequate for penetrating the heavily armoured Mark III's and Mark IV *panzers*, this was partially rectified by mass firing by a 2-pounder battery when the opportunity occurred, and by using twenty-five pounders in anti-tank roles. Professor

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<sup>516</sup> Dunnigan, p.107.

Walter Murphy points out however, that it is only necessary to damage a tanks track, no matter how large, to render it useless. The gun of the campaign was the twenty-five pounder gun-howitzer. The twenty-five pounder batteries could form a 'curtain of fire' using high explosive through which the *panzers* would not venture, it could also revert to a twenty-pounder solid shot for individual targets. The twenty-five pounder has sometimes been criticised for not having the 'killing-power' of larger guns, but its portability and once unlimbered from its tray, was a gun that could rapidly switch targets. Much is made of the German 88cm dual-purpose gun, but in the 25-pounder the Commonwealth had an adequate weapon adaptable to anti-infantry and anti-tank roles.

The Divisional cavalry also had an adequate vehicle in the Marmon-Herrington armoured car. Although it was not as good as some of the better German reconnaissance vehicles, such as the *Sd 222* or *Sd 231* it was a very good 'on-road' vehicle quite suitable for 'finding' the enemy, but not fixing them as the German reconnaissance vehicles were expected to do. The Bren-gun carrier also performed adequately. With its' thin armour and open top it was not designed to charge tanks, and those soldiers that did, generally paid for it with their lives. The Commonwealth soldiers made this most of this rather strange looking vehicle that could place several light or medium machine guns close to enemy infantry with a degree of impunity.

The section weapons appear to have performed adequately. Neither the Vickers or Bren guns had the rate of fire of the German MG 34, nor was the Vickers machine gun as quickly transportable, but neither of these drawbacks appear to have affected the performance of their teams. The section mortar also appears to have performed adequately, notwithstanding that it was not as powerful as its German equivalent. R. Boord who later became a company commander was an operator of a three inch mortar at Platamon, and wrote of the deadly effect of the 3 inch Mortar.<sup>517</sup> Section weapons have the advantage that the operators work in a 'team' which is mutually reassuring.

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<sup>517</sup> R. Boord to L.W. Thornton, questionnaire 7 October 1948. WA II 3/16 vol II. N.A., p.12.

Because of this reassurance, section weapon operators do not suffer from the weapon paralysis that besets the individual rifleman.<sup>518</sup>

Those soldiers that had 'tommy'-guns seemed to have handled them well and they made a welcome addition to a section's fire-power. The Lee-Enfield behaved as well as it was expected to and was equal to the German Mauser, as a general infantry weapon, although the Mauser was more accurate. The 'mills-bomb' hand grenade, also appears to have worked well, although its use did require close contact with the enemy. It is noticeable that on several occasions the German equivalent, the 'stick-grenade' did not explode when thrown and they often littered the ground after an engagement. However, studies have shown that personal weapons are either not used by a majority of soldiers or are not aimed at an enemy.

A weapon requiring more than one person to operate, such as a machine gun that needs another man to feed the ammunition and look out for targets, is more likely to be fired- an isolated soldier will tend to not fire.<sup>519</sup>

Question five asked; how did the morale of the New Zealand citizen soldiers stand up after their first campaign?

The majority of the interviewees and personal commentaries mention that the soldiers felt that 'man-for-man' the Germans were not as good as the New Zealanders and it was only sheer numbers and equipment that forced them to withdraw.

An armed force's strength is calculated by multiplying numbers of men, weapons, munitions, and equipment by the quality factor. Quality is a nebulous thing, but it includes the effectiveness of leadership, training, morale, weapons and equipment. Numbers alone are not the standard by which you can calculate a nation's combat strength. Units with equal numbers of men and equipment can vary substantially in terms of combat effectiveness.<sup>520</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Marshall, S.L.A. (1978). *Men against Fire – The Problem of Command in Future War*. Peter Smith: Massachusetts, U.S.A., p.57.

<sup>519</sup> Dunnigan, J.F. (1993). *How to make War*. William Morrow and Company. New York, p.30.

<sup>520</sup> Dunnigan, J.F. *How to Make War*. P.19.

This opinion appears to have been substantiated on the few occasions that the protagonists came to grips. The New Zealand male of the late 1930's was a keen sportsman and most males would have played the national game at some time. Rugby is a game that requires not only physical robustness but also the courage to physically confront players that are bigger than one's-self. In the words of Colonel Page of the 26th Battalion, a former All Black: "We've beaten the Germans in every battle we've had with them, and there's not a man in this division who does not believe we can do it every time."<sup>521</sup>

It is apparent from those who met or served with the New Zealanders that there was something special about the New Zealand soldier. The New Zealand writer John Mulgan said of his compatriots when meeting them later in North Africa.

They had confidence in themselves...knowing themselves as good as the best the world could bring against them, like a football team in a more deadly game, coherent, practical, successful. Everything that was good from that small remote country had gone into them-sunshine and strength, good sense, patience, the versatility of practical men.<sup>522</sup>

The New Zealand Division was also fortunate that it was a relatively homogenous force. Some writers have stated that there was some competition between units recruited from different provinces, but this has not been apparent in the oral or written interviews of the participants. For the volunteers in the New Zealand Division were normally allocated to units on a basis of need not preference and this ensured a uniformity of quality. No democratic nation can produce natural soldiers and the New Zealanders were by no means natural soldiers, but New Zealand in the 1930's produced men that had attributes which suited soldiering, for example: an eye for country, the ability to survive in the outdoors, mechanical ability and initiative.

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<sup>521</sup> Crisp, R. Direct quotation from Page. *The Gods Were Neutral*. P.187.

<sup>522</sup> Mulgan, J. (1947). *Report on Experience*. Geoffrey Cumberlege Oxford University Press: London, p.8.

Morale is a fragile commodity that does not stand up too readily to retreat and defeat, among the soldiers interviewed and were not captured during the campaign, extreme fatigue seems to have deadened any other emotions. Once they were aboard the transports and the warships most fell into a deep sleep. For the individuals, Stocker Boyd threw his last can of 'bully beef overboard that he had been carrying, in celebration at being rescued. Harry Spencer was profoundly depressed when he arrived in Crete only to find a few of his squadron there, although more did turn up later. His companions however, were glad to see him as he had the only toothbrush in the unit. Peter Winter was angered when a petty officer threw his rifle overboard when embarked on the *Glengyle*. He was however, glad to be away from the constant 'straffing' and bombing and could safely fall asleep. Always an individual, he dropped out of the marching column in Crete to go absent without leave so he could see the sights. Charles Upham remembered the pall of smoke over Suda Bay as he disembarked from the cruiser *Ajax*. Then he and his men marched to an olive grove, "like a good camping spot in New Zealand."<sup>521</sup> Dan Davin had become separated from his unit through illness in Greece. He reached Suda Bay around midnight on the 27/28 April. What he recalled was the wounded that were left lying on the beach on a very cold night. At the reception camp, angered by a solitary 'pedantic clerk' who was taking down the particulars of a long line of fatigued soldiers. Davin using his 'officer's' trench coat to disguise his lowly commissioned rank, ordered him to "Get your colleagues out of bed."<sup>522</sup> For Walter Murphy, it was the beginning of several days of marching 'to and fro', for the group of weapon-less men he was with, before being evacuated on a troopship.<sup>523</sup>

Most interviewees and commentators echo Colonel Page, they thought that 'man for man' the Germans were not as good as they were. They may have been driven out of Greece but in no way had they been defeated.<sup>524</sup> Of course they had been, but this comforting thought was a way of dealing with defeat.

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<sup>521</sup> Upham to Simpson, interview, 1979. Simpson, A. OHC01-0200. Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>522</sup> Davin to Simpson, interview.

<sup>523</sup> Murphy, W. comment to Author, October 2004.

<sup>524</sup> Crisp, p.187

This thesis has been a 'snap-shot' of a small period in time but the problems that confronted a government sixty years ago are just as relevant now. The enthusiasm, courage and youth of this country was placed in the hands of political and military leaders of another country, and in the main were badly served by them. For New Zealand, the Greek Campaign was strategic dead end. Poorly planned and badly executed, it was only due to the courage of the Commonwealth soldiers and the stolid endurance of the Royal Navy that so many were able to escape.

New Zealand is still a small country with a long vulnerable coastline. New Zealand still prefers to solve international problems through international law in international fora. Our trade routes to the rest of the world are still open to incursion by hostile nations. New Zealand Armed Forces are still too small to operate, except for the smallest of operations in isolation. Consequently the situations faced in 1941 are still relevant today.

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## **QUEEN ELIZABETH II ARMY MEMORIAL MUSEUM**

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Major General, Sir William Gentry. Presentation on Greek Campaigns.

#### **INTERVIEWS:**

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Mr H. Palmer, Pahiatua, February 2003.

Mr K. Yortt, Havelock North, May 2003.

Mr H. Spencer, Hastings, May 2003.

Mr J. Turvey, Palmerston North, May and June 2003.

Mr A.H. Armour, Lower-Hutt, June 2003.

Professor (Retired) W.E. Murphy, July 2004 – January 2005.

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## **APPENDICES:**

**APPENDIX ONE: Freyberg's charter from the New Zealand Government**

**APPENDIX TWO: Strengths and casualties in Greek Campaign**

**APPENDIX THREE: Glossary**



## APPENDIX ONE.

### The New Zealand Charter

5 January 1940

The General Officer

Commanding the 2nd New Zealand  
Expeditionary Force Overseas

The General Officer Commanding will act in accordance with the instructions he receives from the Commander-in-Chief under whose command he is serving, subject only to the requirements of His Majesty's Government in New Zealand. He will, in addition to powers appearing in any relevant Statute or Regulations, be vested with the following powers:

- (a) In the case of sufficiently grave emergency or in special circumstances, of which he must be the sole judge, to make decisions as to the employment of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, and to communicate such decisions directly to the New Zealand Government, notwithstanding that in the absence of that extra-ordinary cause such communication would not be in accordance with the normal channels of communication indicated in the following paragraphs and which for greater clearness are also indicted in an attached diagram.
- (b) To communicate directly with the New Zealand Government and with the Army Department concerning any matter connected with the training administration of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force.
- (c) To communicate directly either with the New Zealand Government or with the Commander-in-Chief under whose command he is serving, in respect of all details leading up to and arising from policy decisions.
- (d) In all matters pertaining to equipment, to communicate with the War Office through normal channels, and through the liaison officer of the High Commissioner's office in London, the former to be the official channel.
- (e) In matters of command, to adhere to the normal military channels between the War Office and the General Officer Commanding the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force overseas.
- (f) To establish such administrative headquarters and base and line of communications units as are necessary for the functions of command, organisation [including training], and administration with which he has been invested.
- (g) To organise [train], change, vary, or group units and formations in such manner as he considers expedient from time to time.
- (h) To fix and alter the establishment and composition of units and formations as the exigencies of service may in his opinion require from time to time.

After the Third Echelon has left New Zealand no officer above the substantive rank of captain will be sent overseas without the concurrence of the General Officer Commanding.

M.J. Savage,  
Prime Minister

## APPENDIX TWO:

### Strengths and casualties in Greek Campaign.<sup>527</sup>

	Strength	Killed	Wounded	Prisoners
<b>New Zealand</b>	16,720	291	599	1,614
<b>Australia</b>	17,125	320	494	2,030
<b>British Army</b>	21,880	146	87	6,480
<b>Royal Air Force</b>	2,217	110	45	28
<b>Palestinians and Cypriots</b>	4,670	36	87	3,806
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>62,612</u></b>	<b><u>903</u></b>	<b><u>1,250</u></b>	<b><u>13,958</u></b>

#### New Zealand casualties by unit:

HQ NZ Division	2	5	10
<b>Divisional troops</b>			
Divisional Cavalry Regiment	7	12	49
4 Field Regiment (Artillery)	4	16	69
5 Field Regiment	3	7	36
6 Field Regiment	2	14	23
7 Anti-tank Regiment	18	22	73
5 Field Park Company (Engineers)		2	3
6 Field Company (Engineers)	17	11	121
7 Field Company	3	3	19
19 Army Troops Company (Engineers)			11
2 Divisional Signals	3	11	25
27 Machine Gun Battalion	8	13	33
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>472</b>
<b>4 NZ Infantry Brigade</b>			
Brigade HQ		2	4
18 Battalion	21	42	117
19 Battalion	24	20	149
20 Battalion	24	45	80
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>350</b>
<b>5 NZ Infantry Brigade</b>			
Brigade HQ			
21 Battalion	14	26	235
22 Battalion	12	19	22

<sup>527</sup> Figures based on those in McClymont, pp. 486-487.

23 Battalion	9	8	36
28 (Maori) Battalion	10	6	100
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>393</b>
<b>6 NZ Infantry Brigade</b>			
Brigade HQ	2	1	
24 Battalion	8	6	138
25 Battalion	16	13	159
26 Battalion	15	32	57
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>354</b>
NZ Army Service Corps	26	33	116
NZ Ordnance Corps	3	3	7
NZ Medical Corps	8	5	107
Miscellaneous units	2	10	57
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>287</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>387</b>	<b>1,856</b>

#### Embarkations:

<i>Night</i>	Kalamata	Monemvasia	Tolos Navplion	Rafina and Porto Rafti	Megara	Kithira	Milos
April							
24/25			6,685	5,700			
25/26					5,900		
26/27	8,650		4,527	8,223			
27/28				4,640			
28/29	332	4,320				760	
29/30	33						
30/1	202						700
May							
	<u>9,217</u>	<u>4,320</u>	<u>11,212</u>	<u>18,563</u>	<u>5,900</u>	<u>760</u>	<u>700</u>
<b>Total Embarked:</b>				<b>50,672</b>			
<b>Lost when Troopship <i>Slamat</i> was sunk:</b>				<b>500</b>			
				<u><b>50,172</b></u>			

## APPENDIX THREE.

### Glossary

A9	Fast but lightly armoured British tanks.
A10	“
A12	“
AA	Anti-aircraft.
AFV	Armoured fighting vehicle.
AIF	Australian Imperial Force.
<i>Anschluss</i>	The forced incorporation of Austria into the Third Reich in 1938.
Arty	Artillery.
ASC	Army Service Corps.
A-tk	Anti-tank.
<i>Barbarossa</i>	The German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Named after the Holy Roman Emperor (Red Beard).
Bde	Brigade.
BGS	Brigadier General Staff.
BM	Brigade Major.
Bn	Battalion.
BREN	Combination of BR(Brno, town in Czecho-slovakia where the weapon was first designed) and EN(Enfield where it was made under license).
BTE	British Troops in Egypt.
Bty	Battery.
CGS	Chief General Staff (New Zealand).
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff (United Kingdom).
CO	Commanding Officer.
Coy	Company.
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery.
CRASC	Commander Royal Army Service Corps.
CRE	Commander Royal Engineers.
CRS	Commander Royal Signals.
CSM	Company Sergeant Major.
DAQMG	Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General.
DAK	<i>Deutsche Afrika Korps.</i>
<i>Das Heer</i>	German Army.
Div	Division(al).
Div Pet Coy	Divisional Petrol Company.
GHQ	General Headquarters.
GOC	General Officer Commanding.
Gp	Group.

<i>Grw</i>	<i>Granatenwerfer.</i> Mortar.
GSO1	General Staff Officer, 1st Grade.
HAA	Heavy Anti-aircraft artillery.
HE	High Explosive.
HQ	Head quarters.
HMGs	Heavy Machine Guns.
4H	Fourth Hussars.
2 i/c	Second in command.
Km	Kilometre.
<i>Kommisbrot</i>	Bread baked in a German field kitchen.
<i>Kriegsmarine</i>	German Navy.
LCA	Landing Craft, Assault.
LCM	Landing Craft, Mechanised.
LCT	Landing Craft, Tank.
LMG	Light Machine Gun.
LOB	Left out of Battle.
LRDG	Long Range Desert Group.
<i>Luftwaffe</i>	German Air Force.
Matilda	British infantry tank.
MG	Machine Gun.
MMG	Medium Machine Gun.
MO	Medical Officer.
MT	Mechanical Transport.
NCO	Non-commissioned officer.
NZA	New Zealand Artillery.
NZE	New Zealand Engineers.
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force.
NZMC	New Zealand Medical Corps.
OC	Officer Commanding.
OP	Observation Post.
OR	Other ranks.
Pioneer.	A soldier employed to do basic labouring tasks, not to be confused with an Engineer.
Pl	Platoon.
2-pdr	Two pounder, anti-tank gun. New Zealand's principal anti-tank weapon.
25-pdr	Twenty five pounder gun-howitzer. New Zealand's principal field gun.
POW	Prisoner of War.
<i>Pz</i>	<i>Panzer.</i> Means 'mailed' or armoured. Normally refers to Tanks.
QMG	Quarter Master General.

RA	Royal Artillery.
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps.
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps.
RE	Royal Engineers.
Recce	Reconnaissance.
Regt	Regiment.
RE	Royal Engineers.
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery.
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer.
RMT	Reserved Mechanical Transport.
RTO	Railway Transport Officer.
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major.
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment.
Sappers	Military Engineers.
<i>Schwerpunkt</i>	The place of maximum effort; a term first coined by Clausewitz, this is the area that military force should be applied, to have the maximum effect.
Sigs	Signals.
SMLE	Short Magazine Lee Enfield (Rifle)
Sqn	Squadron.
SMG	Sub-machine gun.
Tps	Troops.
Tpt	Transport.
<i>Volkdeutsche</i>	People of German race living outside Germany.
W/T	Wireless Telegraphy.
X	yards
<i>Waffen</i>	Weapon. (Armed)
<i>Wehrmacht</i>	German Armed Forces.

### **German Ranks.**

(A German soldier was accustomed to hold greater responsibility than his British or New Zealand equivalent).

<i>Generalfeldmarschall</i>	Field Marshall.
<i>Generaloberst</i>	General.
<i>General</i>	Lieutenant General.
<i>Generalleutnant</i>	Major General.
<i>Generalmajor</i>	Brigadier.
<i>Oberst</i>	Colonel.
<i>Oberstleutnant</i>	Lieutenant Colonel.
<i>Major</i>	Major.

<i>Hauptmann</i>	Captain.
<i>Oberleutnant</i>	First lieutenant.
<i>Leutnant</i>	Second lieutenant.
<i>Stabsfeldwebel</i>	Warrant Officer First class (Regimental Sergeant Major).
<i>Hauptfeldwebel</i>	Warrant Officer Second class. Battalion Sergeant Major.
<i>Oberfeldwebel</i>	Staff Sergeant.
<i>Feldwebel</i>	Sergeant.
<i>Unterfeldwebel</i>	Lance Sergeant (Acting Sergeant's rank).
<i>Unteroffizier</i>	No equivalent.
<i>Stabsgefreiter</i>	Corporal.
<i>Gefreiter</i>	Lance Corporal.
<i>Oberschütze</i>	No equivalent.
<i>Schütze</i>	Private.
<i>Fallschirmjaeger</i>	Paratrooper.
<i>Pioniere</i>	Engineer.

**German Airforce - Luftwaffe In 1941.**

Heinkel III	Germany's principal bomber.
Messerschmitt Bf 109 ( <i>Bayerische Flugzeugwerke</i> )	Germany's principal fighter.
Bf 110	Two engine fighter-bomber.
Junker (Ju) 52	Germany's principal transport plane.
(Ju) 87	Single engined dive bomber.
(Ju) 88	Two engined dive bomber.
<i>Stuka (Sturzkampfflugzeug)</i>	Dive-bomber ( Ju 87 and 88)

**Principal weapons used by the German Army (*Das Heer*)**

<i>Feld Kanone</i>	Field artillery.
<i>Gewehr 98</i>	General rifle carried by infantry in 1941.
<i>Leichte Feld Haubitze</i>	Field Howitzer.
<i>Maschinenpistole (Schmeisser)</i>	9 mm sub-machine gun.
	Incorrectly called a 'tommy gun' by the New Zealanders.
<i>M.G. (Maschinengewehr) 34</i>	General German light and medium machine gun in 1941.
<i>PAK(PanzerabwehrKanone)</i>	Anti-tank gun.
<i>Panzer</i>	Armoured vehicle or tank.
<i>Pz.Kpfw. (Panzerkampfwagen)</i>	Armoured fighting vehicle.
<i>Pz.Kpfw. II.</i>	Light tank with a 2cm gun.
<i>Pz.Kpfw. III</i>	Medium tank with a 5cm gun.
<i>Pz.Kpfw. IV</i>	Medium tank with a short barrelled 7.5cm gun.

*Sd.Kfz.8 (Sonderstab Kampfwagen)*

German prime mover, used for towing heavy artillery.

*Sd.Kfz.221*

A light 2 man armoured car similar to the British Daimler armoured cars.

*Sd.Kfz.231*

Large, powerful eight wheeled armoured car.