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**ASPECTS OF THE GREEK CAMPAIGN, APRIL 1941**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the circumstances by which the British became involved in Greece in 1941. It shows that the British government was influenced by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and more importantly by his emissary to the Middle East, the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. The government had no clear idea of what they hoped to achieve beyond the vain hopes of building a coalition in the Balkans against Axis expansion in that region. This they failed to achieve, and the poorly equipped and under-manned expedition they despatched had little chance of military success against a better equipped and organised enemy.

An analysis of the equipment and numbers of the Allied and Axis forces reveals the handicap suffered by the inadequately supplied Allied troops in Greece had little chance of holding the well-prepared German forces.

The question of whether the British government deliberately misled the New Zealand and Australian governments in their quest to use Dominion troops in Greece is considered and a judgement made.

The performance of one unit of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 21 Battalion, is examined and is found to be wanting, mainly because of poor leadership by its commanding officer. An examination of this officer's personality and defeatist attitude reveals how his command affected the battalion's performance. This is contrasted with the courage and hardiness shown by his men when they were no longer under his influence during their escape after the action at Pinios Gorge.

Finally, the reporting of the campaign in the New Zealand official histories shows that these avoided criticism of any deficiencies in the New Zealanders' performance,

and a more recent work which relied heavily on these histories for its information is similarly flawed in the picture it presents.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Greek campaign holds a special place in New Zealand's military history. It was the first time the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division, the formation on which so many of the country's hopes and fears rested, was in action, and that action resulted in a major defeat which some compared to Gallipoli.<sup>1</sup> And yet, despite its significance, there has been only one examination of New Zealand's contribution to the Greek campaign since W.G. McClymont's *To Greece* in the New Zealand official histories,<sup>2</sup> although various aspects of this have been touched on in other works. Early in 2008 the book *Forgotten ANZACS: The Campaign in Greece, 1941*, by Peter Ewer<sup>3</sup> was published in Australia, a work which also tends to place more emphasis on the Australian contribution. This thesis re-examines critically one of the events of the campaign and one unit that took part in that event. While not setting out to be purely a critique of McClymont's work, it offers a re-evaluation of his narrative and conclusions in the light of current knowledge. There is a suggestion, perhaps reinforced by the comment of the histories' Editor-in-Chief, Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger to one of his authors J.L. Scoullar requiring all judgements in them should 'be expressed with the utmost reserve, sparingly, mercifully, and if there is any doubt, not at all',<sup>4</sup> that the official histories were sanitised. A more critical look at events is now warranted to see if this suggestion is justified and to produce a fuller and more balanced picture of the campaign.

At the same time a similar examination is made of Ewer's work. It will be suggested that Ewer has uncritically followed the arguments set out in the Australian and New Zealand official histories in pursuit of his expressed aim, also implicit in the title of his book, to remind the current populations of Australia and New Zealand of

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<sup>1</sup> N. M. Taylor, *The Home Front; New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45*, Wellington, 1986, v.2, pp.290-1.

<sup>2</sup> W.G. McClymont, *To Greece; New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45*. Wellington, 1959.

<sup>3</sup> P. Ewer, *Forgotten ANZACS: The Campaign in Greece, 1941*, Carlton North, Victoria, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Cit. G. Harper, *Kippenberger: An Inspired New Zealand Commander*, Auckland, 1997, p.272.

their debt to what he calls 'the second, forgotten Anzacs' who 'deserve better.'<sup>5</sup>

The Greek campaign was been controversial right from its inception, with various writers condemning it on several grounds. On military grounds it was been criticised by one involved in the planning of it. Major-General F.W. de Guingand, then a lieutenant-colonel on Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Wavell's Planning Staff, believed that it was not viable from the beginning because not enough men and materials were available to give it any chance of success.<sup>6</sup> Criticism on similar grounds appears in the diaries of Field Marshall Lord Alanbrooke.<sup>7</sup> The campaign has also been criticised on political grounds as being based on unrealistic expectations by the British government, especially those of Winston Churchill, on the possibility of creating a Balkan front against Germany involving Yugoslavia and Turkey as well as Greece.<sup>8</sup> Both these states were strongly inclined to remain neutral. Yugoslavia was divided politically on ethnic lines, with the Croats in the north leaning towards the Axis Powers and the Serbs in the south favouring the Allies. Eventually the Yugoslav Government, under intense pressure from the Germans anxious to secure their right flank in a move against Greece,<sup>9</sup> signed the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941. The Turkish desire for neutrality was founded in an awareness of their unpreparedness for war. General Wavell and Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Longmore (the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief in the Middle East) in fact felt that Turkey 'would be a liability rather than an asset if she entered the war at this stage'.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, how the New Zealand Division came to be involved in Greece very soon became a matter of controversy, with suggestions that the British Government misled the Australian and New Zealand governments as to the likely outcome of the expedition.<sup>11</sup> This may have been deliberate in order to persuade those governments to allow their troops to be used in Greece, or inadvertent through Churchill's natural

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<sup>5</sup> Ewer, p.5

<sup>6</sup> Sir Francis de Guingand, *Operation Victory*, London, 1947, p.51.

<sup>7</sup> Field Marshall Lord Alanbrooke, *War Diaries 1939-1945*, ed. A. Danchev & D. Todman, London, 2002, p.141.

<sup>8</sup> F.L.W. Wood, *Political and External Affairs; New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45*, Wellington, rep. 1971, pp.180-1.

<sup>9</sup> M.L. van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy 1940-41: The Balkan Clue*, Cambridge, 1973, pp.127-8.

<sup>10</sup> I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, London, 1956, v.2, p.71.

<sup>11</sup> Wood, pp.181-6; I. Wards, 'The Balkan Dilemma', in J. Crawford (ed.), *Kia Kaha: New Zealand in the Second World War*, Auckland 2000, pp.20-34, *passim*.

ebullience leading him to over-estimate and overstate the chances of its success.

The events of the actual campaign, the German attack through the Monastir Gap which, by turning the flank of the British forces and threatening their lines of retreat, forced their withdrawal and ultimately their evacuation, are well-known. The New Zealand Division suffered several handicaps in these operations, including being part of a poorly equipped expedition, outnumbered, never having operated as a complete Division before, even on exercises, and this being its first time in action. A re-analysis of the role of 21 Battalion and its commander between 6 April and 30 April 1941, has amplified McClymont's narrative, and provided an opportunity to scrutinise matters which he may not have considered or glossed over. This re-examination enables conclusions drawn by McClymont in his study to be re-evaluated.

21 Battalion came out the New Zealand campaign in Greece of April 1941 as the only unit with a tarnished reputation. Most units acquitted themselves well. For example, 4 and 5 Brigades, performed creditably in the perhaps relatively minor actions at the Servia and Olympus Passes in what for all men except those who served in World War I was their first time in action. Similarly, under the circumstances of one of the most difficult of all military acts, a fighting retreat, all the New Zealand forces held together well, and the aggressive reaction of those New Zealanders trapped at Kalamata during the evacuation, when the British commanding officer was deemed by the admiral who organised the evacuation to have 'lacked the tenacity and aggressive determination ... to turn ... failure into success'<sup>12</sup> surrendered with little attempt to hold the area to allow another attempt at evacuation, showed that they that the experiences of the past three weeks had not dented their morale. This was shown even more clearly in Crete a few weeks later, when the gallant attempts to hold the island attracted widespread admiration.

There was little criticism of the performance of most of the units in the New Zealand Division, with the exception of 21 Battalion. This unit was to attract considerable adverse comments about their performance in the two successive actions in which they fought over a period of days at Platamon Tunnel and Pinios Gorge,

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<sup>12</sup> A. Heckstall-Smith & H.T. Baillie-Grohman, *Greek Tragedy*, London, 1961, p.208.

including some criticisms from the Australian forces alongside which they fought at Pinios Gorge.

When the remnants of the battalion assembled in Crete after the end of the Greek campaign, they were subject to scathing criticism from their commanding general, the then Major-General B.C. Freyberg, which he was later to retract and apologise for in the Foreword to the battalion's official history.<sup>13</sup> Given the good overall performance of the untested New Zealand forces, why then did 21 Battalion come out of the Greek campaign with a flawed reputation?

Similarly, the battalion's commander, Lieutenant-Colonel N.L. Macky, was to receive severe criticism for his performance in this action. Ultimately, when he finally arrived in Crete after his escape from Greece, he was to be relieved of his command, ostensibly on the grounds of his age, but the suspicion remains that it was in fact his poor performance in action that led to his removal.

There was a feeling amongst Macky's friends that he had been harshly treated, and that his condemnation was unwarranted. Certainly Macky himself felt this.

None of these criticisms of the battalion and its commander were discussed in either the official history of the campaign or the battalion, and it is opportune to examine why they were omitted, and what light these omissions throw on the reliability of the histories, and the motives and sensibilities of their authors.

21 Battalion Association was recently wound up, with its collection of memorabilia being transferred from its clubrooms to the Auckland War Memorial Museum. It is perhaps appropriate that a study of one of the blacker moments in the history of the Battalion be undertaken at a time when its Association ceased to exist. Key questions of this study are how did 21 Battalion perform at Platamon and Pinios Gorge, were the criticisms of the battalion justified, and was Lieutenant-Colonel Macky unfairly treated by being deprived of his command?

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<sup>13</sup>J.F. Cody, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45; 21 Battalion*, Wellington, 1953, p.v.

The four major themes to be explored in this thesis therefore include an examination of the expectations and motives of the British government and some of its members, especially Churchill and Eden. This investigation of the activities of the British government also cast light on a second theme, the circumstances of the British request for the use of Australian and New Zealand troops in Greece. Were the series of apparent misunderstandings between the three governments and their commanders in the Middle East accidental, or orchestrated to achieve the British government's, and especially Churchill's, aims? Allied to this is the question of whether or not the expedition was viable on military grounds. Mention has been made of the fact that such commentators as de Guingand and Alanbrooke were seriously concerned even before the fighting began. The concluding theme is an analysis of the performance of 21 Battalion and its commanding officer. An assessment of why their actions at Platamon Tunnel and Pinios Gorge were so criticised after the campaign was over is provided in this thesis.

## CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTS 1: THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

One might begin a study of 21 Battalion's performance during the Greek campaign by wondering why it was even in Greece. It could be said that it was a victim of global politics. Greece had been attacked by Italy from the recently seized Albania in October 1940, without provocation, and for no apparent reason than that Mussolini was jealous of Hitler's military successes, and wanted to show himself to be the Führer's equal. Hitler was furious, as he had not wanted any disturbances in the Balkans, from where he obtained supplies of important war materials.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately for Mussolini, this adventure did not display any similarity with Hitler's campaigns, as his poorly equipped and led armies were soon, once the Greeks had recovered from the surprise of the attack, driven back into Albania by the even more poorly equipped Greek forces.

As early as 13 April 1939, when Italy invaded Albania, Britain and France had guaranteed Greece against external threats.<sup>2</sup> Despite this Mussolini still harboured designs against Greece and Yugoslavia, and immediately following the seizure of Albania began planning for the conquest of those two countries.<sup>3</sup> The nature of the Greek government at this time is confusing. It was certainly right-wing and authoritarian, but it may be going too far to label it as 'fascist'. Greek foreign policy during this period has been labelled as 'typically and formally neutral, but essentially pro-British.'<sup>4</sup> Being well aware of the threat posed by Mussolini and disturbed by the steady build up of Italian troops on the Greco-Albanian border the Greek government was concerned to acquire some form of British military assistance while, at the same time, giving no provocation to the Italians.

Despite Mussolini's statement after Italy entered the Second World War on 10 June 1940 that this implied no threat to his neighbours, Italian pressure on Greece increased. A propaganda campaign alleging Greek provocations in the form of border violations and infringements of its neutral status by Greece in giving support to the

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<sup>1</sup> *The German Campaigns in the Balkans (Spring 1941)*, [U.S.] Department of the Army Pamphlet No.20-260, 1953, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> R. Goralski, *World War II Almanac: 1931-1945*, London, 1981, p.83.

<sup>3</sup> D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, London, 1981, p.231.

<sup>4</sup> P.J Vatikiotis, *Popular Autocracy in Greece 1936-41: A Political Biography of General Ioannis Metaxas*, London, 1998, p.173.

British was initiated in the Italian media. The Greeks maintained their policy of not giving Italy an excuse to attack, but when the Greek cruiser *Helle* was torpedoed while at anchor by a submarine widely believed to have been Italian in August 1940, they felt compelled to inquire of the British what support might be forthcoming under the guarantee of April 1939 if they should be attacked. (The submarine was in fact Italian.) The Greek government initiated a Commission of Inquiry into the incident, and the report of the commission, reprinted in *The Greek White Book*, clearly identified fragments of the exploded torpedoes as Italian. Photographs of the fragments with Italian markings on them were appended to the report. This was not made public at the time as the Greek government wished to avoid any worsening of relations with Italy.<sup>5</sup> The British were conscious of the fact that an Italian seizure of Greece would be a serious blow to Britain's world-wide standing, as well as having a serious impact on their strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean. The British were forced to reply that they could offer only naval support until they had secured the position in Egypt, which was threatened by invasion from Italian Libya.<sup>6</sup>

The Italians continued their build up in Albania to the Greeks' concern, and continued to explore the possibility of an attack on Yugoslavia. To invade Yugoslavia Italy would require German support, and Hitler emphatically denied this.<sup>7</sup> However, Greece was a different story. She was much weaker militarily than Yugoslavia, and was of no economic interest to Hitler. Mussolini could attack her without his ally's consent or support. Mussolini was greatly chagrined at what he saw as Hitler's condescending and overbearing manner towards him, and this was exacerbated when, in October, Hitler began moving troops into Romania to guard the vital Ploesti oil fields, from which Germany acquired most of its oil supplies. Mussolini was particularly infuriated by this as Germany and Italy had previously arbitrated a border dispute between Hungary and Romania, and Mussolini felt as one of the guarantors of this he should have been consulted about the German move into Romania. He was so annoyed that he even instructed his Foreign Minister and son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Greek White Book: Diplomatic Relations relating to Italy's aggression against Greece*, published for the Royal Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs, London, 1942, pp.86-9.

<sup>6</sup> I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East: Vol. 1, The Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941)*, London, 1954, pp.223-4.

<sup>7</sup> van Creveld, pp.11-2.

to encourage the Romanians to request Italian troops be included in the forces in the oil fields.<sup>8</sup>

On 12 October Mussolini told Ciano:

Hitler places me in front of a *fait accompli*. This time I am going to pay him back in his own coin. He will find out from the papers that I have occupied Greece. In this way the equilibrium will be re-established.<sup>9</sup>

On 28 October an ultimatum was delivered to the Greek Prime Minister, Ioannis Metaxas, claiming that Greece had been violating its neutrality by amongst other things giving port access to Royal Navy ships and refuelling Royal Air Force aircraft, and demanding that Italian troops be stationed in Greece to enforce its neutrality. This was delivered at 0300 hours and specified that the troops would move into Greece at 0600 hours, ensuring, as Ciano remarked in his diary, that there was 'no way out for Greece.'<sup>10</sup>

In view of the obvious threat from Italy, over the previous few months the Greeks had been surreptitiously assembling its army without going through a full mobilisation to avoid giving the Italians any excuse to attack. After the delivery of the ultimatum the Greeks invoked the British guarantee of support. There had been previous discussions between the Greeks and the British about the Royal Navy establishing a refuelling depot in Crete, and now that there was no need to avoid provoking Greece's enemies, work commenced on this. However, the Greek government was keen for support in the land battle against the Italians, particularly air support. Although it weakened their position in Egypt Britain did make 'one Blenheim Mark I squadron of which half the aircraft [were] equipped as fighters and half as bombers' available.<sup>11</sup>

The Greeks soon drove the Italians out of Greece and seized a significant portion of southern Albania. Hitler was concerned at this development, as he was already planning to invade the Soviet Union, and if the British were to intervene in force in Greece, they would be a threat to his forces in Russia. Also if they stationed air forces

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<sup>8</sup> G. Ciano, 8 October 1940, *Diary 1937-1943*, London, 2002, p.187.

<sup>9</sup> Ciano, 12 October, 1940, p.388.

<sup>10</sup> Ciano, 22 October, 1940, p.390.

<sup>11</sup> Signal Longmore to Portal, 31 October 1940, cit. R Higham, *Diary of a Disaster: British Aid to Greece, 1940-1941*, Kentucky, 1986, p.19.kj

in Greece they would be able to attack the precious Ploesti oil fields. Accordingly, in November 1940 he ordered a study be made of the implications of intervening in Greece.

In December 1940 British forces in North Africa unleashed their raid against the Italians in North Africa. This developed into an offensive which overran Cyrenaica in two months, inflicting vast numbers of Italian casualties for only minimal losses. However, the British government had been keenly watching the German moves in the Balkans. The steady build up of German forces in the peninsula had not gone unnoticed, and the service commanders in the Middle East were instructed to report on the possibility of giving direct military aid to the Greeks. They came to the conclusion that they could only offer minimal forces, and when they disclosed this to Metaxas during a visit to Athens as they prepared their report, he declined this aid as being insufficient, and only likely to invite a German attack.

Lieutenant-General Alexandros Papagos, Commander in Chief of the Greek Army since 28 October 1940,<sup>12</sup> in his autobiography claimed that he had urged Metaxas to reject the offer of British aid, not only because it was insufficient, but also because he felt it 'would be contrary to the sound principles of strategy' as it would weaken British forces in North Africa by diverting troops to Greece that would be 'more useful in Africa'. He went on to express the belief that the conquest of Libya should have been completed, which would have made 'possible a much more extensive British action in the Balkans'.<sup>13</sup>

As the German build-up in Bulgaria continued, the British continued to press Turkey to collaborate in the struggle against the Axis Powers. Aircraft were offered, to come from Middle East Command, although as Longmore pointed out, he did not have the planes to meet his own needs.<sup>14</sup> Longmore was greatly relieved when the Turks, who feared that accepting help might provoke an attack, turned down this offer as being insufficient.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *An Abridged History of the Greek-Italian and Greek-German War 1940-1941 (Land Operations)*, Hellenic Army General Staff, Army History Directorate, The Army History Directorate Editions, Athens, 1997, p. 298

<sup>13</sup> A. Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941*, Athens, 1949, p.315.

<sup>14</sup> Playfair, p.346.

<sup>15</sup> A. Longmore, *From Sea to Sky, 1910-1945*, London, 1946, p.256.

On 29 January 1941, Metaxas died, and was replaced as Prime Minister of Greece by Alexander Koryzsis. On 8 February Koryzsis issued a statement of his government's position, which followed his predecessor's policy of resisting any German attack, but not offering provocation to the Germans by continuing to keep British forces out of Greece until actually attacked. However, he added that it was opportune to consider what size the British forces should be to repel the attack and persuade Yugoslavia and Turkey to join the fight.<sup>16</sup> This provided an opportunity for a complete review of policy in the area, and a delegation consisting of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill, and the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was sent to undertake this.

Although Churchill was to claim in his memoirs<sup>17</sup> that the War Cabinet had approved this mission and the instructions which he had drafted for Eden, these were not in fact submitted to the Cabinet until after Eden had actually arrived in Cairo, eight days after the instructions were drafted.<sup>18</sup> Eden was given extraordinary powers, being authorised 'to represent His Majesty's Government in all matters diplomatic and military', with the object of 'sending speedy succour to Greece. For this purpose he will initiate any action he may think necessary with the Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East, with the Egyptian Government, and with the Governments of Greece, Yugoslavia, and Turkey', being 'fully empowered to formulate with the Greek Government the best arrangements possible in the circumstances.... In an emergency he can act as he thinks best.'<sup>19</sup>

The party stopped in Cairo for discussions with the service chiefs there before proceeding on to Athens. During those discussions it was agreed that Greece was the most likely target for a German attack, and that Turkey and Yugoslavia would not become involved unless attacked. It was hoped that successful support of Greece might induce one or other of these two countries (most likely Turkey) to join the defence against Germany.

In Athens when discussions began on 22 February 1941 Eden summarised the

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<sup>16</sup> Earl of Avon, *The Eden Memoirs: The Reckoning*, London, 1965, p.188.

<sup>17</sup> W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. 3, The Grand Alliance*, London, 1950, p.60.

<sup>18</sup> R. Parkinson, *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: The War History from Dunkirk to Alamein, based on the War Cabinet papers of 1940 to 1942*, London 1973, p.192

<sup>19</sup> Churchill, pp.60-1.

position for the Greek government and proceeded to offer all military help that could be supplied. The new Greek premier reiterated his country's determination to defend itself if attacked, with or without outside support.<sup>20</sup> In the military talks which followed it was revealed that the Greek army had been denuding its eastern borders facing Bulgaria to provide reinforcements for the Albanian front. Macedonia and Thrace were now held by three understrength divisions, supported by a few other troops, and only a few batteries of artillery. General Papagos, recognising that he had insufficient forces to hold this area, suggested the proper thing to do would be to withdraw to a shorter line running along the foothills of the mountains south of the mouth of the Aliakmon River up to the Yugoslav border in the vicinity of Lake Vegorritis,<sup>21</sup> a position that came to be known as the 'Aliakmon Line'. This had some disadvantages. It meant the surrendering of Salonika, Greece's second city and the only point from which Yugoslavia could be supplied from Greece if she should enter the war. It also depended on Yugoslavia remaining neutral. Otherwise the attackers would be able to get behind this line by entering northern Greece through the mountain pass known as the Monastir Gap.

It was agreed that Eden should sound out the Regent of Yugoslavia, as that country's attitude might have a bearing on whether or not Salonika should be given up. A decision was also recorded 'that preparations should at once be made and put into execution to withdraw the Greek advanced troops in Thrace and Macedonia to the line which we should be obliged to hold if the Yugoslavs did not come in.'<sup>22</sup>

Eden's approach to the Turks was unsuccessful, with their President, General Ismet İnönü, reiterating his country's unpreparedness for war, and its determination not to become involved unless attacked. At the same time as the meeting with the Turkish government, the Yugoslav minister in Ankara informed Eden that in reply to Eden's approach to the Yugoslav regent, his government would not allow German troops to cross their territory and would resist any attack, but could give no more definite commitment at this stage.

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<sup>20</sup> Avon, p.190.

<sup>21</sup> Papagos, p.322

<sup>22</sup> Cit. Playfair, v.1, pp.379-80.

This was disappointing enough, but on their return to Athens Eden's party faced an even greater disappointment. There had been no move by the Greek army to withdraw from Thrace and Macedonia to the Aliakmon position, as the British party thought had been agreed upon. One of the reasons for withdrawing to this position had been uncertainty over the Turkish and Yugoslav stance, and as these uncertainties had not been resolved, the British negotiators were anxious that the withdrawal should take place. There was concern that there may now not be enough time to allow the withdrawal to take place before an attack. Papagos justified his inactivity on the grounds of wanting to find out if Yugoslavia would take part in a war, and that now an attack may be imminent, he could not risk his troops being caught while retreating. There was also the reactions of the inhabitants of eastern Greece if they were abandoned to the Germans to be considered. He therefore suggested that an attempt be made to defend this area, though admitting the lack of men and equipment to do so.<sup>23</sup>

The British were horrified at this situation. Dill believed that Salonika was too close to the proposed theatre of operations to be useful as a disembarkation and supply port, and that British forces arriving in Greece could not get into position before a German attack. Furthermore, even if the British forces did arrive in time, there would still be insufficient troops available to provide an adequate defence. He continued to press for a withdrawal to the Aliakmon position, and suggested that further Greek troops would be necessary to ensure the security of that line. The Greeks replied that all their forces were committed in Albania, that those forces were close to exhaustion, and that no others were available.

Both parties to the negotiation were left in an unenviable position. The Greeks clearly did not want to abandon any territory to a potential invader, and the British were only too well aware of the forces available to face that invader. However, both sides felt that they had little choice but to accept the situation, and an agreement was signed which provided for the British force to occupy the Aliakmon Line, and the Greeks to support them with two infantry divisions, one motorised division, and assorted other troops.

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<sup>23</sup> Papagos, pp.324-5.

This has shown that there was a major difference of opinion between the Greek and British negotiators on a fundamental basis of their apparent agreement and one may legitimately ask how this can have arisen.

The British claimed to have been baffled by Papagos's not having moved his troops back to the Aliakmon Line. Eden in his memoirs quotes Papagos as reporting at the final meeting on 23 February 1941 held to review the discussions of the preceding two days that 'in view of the dubious attitude of the Yugoslavs and Turks, it was not possible to contemplate holding a line covering Salonika, and that the only sound line in view of the circumstances was the line of the Aliakhmon.' He goes on to state:

Later, after discussion about what could be done to enlist Yugoslav help, I asked that the decision be taken on whether preparations should at once be made, and put into execution, to withdraw the Greek advanced troops in Thrace and Macedonia to the line which we should be obliged to hold, if the Yugoslavs did not come in. Our minutes record that it was agreed that this should be done.

It never occurred to the British representatives either then or later that the Aliakhmon line was not the one which we must hold. A variant would only have been possible if the Yugoslavs had promptly declared their intention to enter the conflict, which we none of us expected, and if we and the Greeks had then had time to make detailed plans with them for the co-operation of our forces.<sup>24</sup>

Wavell seems to confirm this view. In his *Despatch* on the campaign he reiterates that Papagos said that without Yugoslavia's active support it would not be possible to hold a line north of the Aliakmon Line, and that he 'proposed to withdraw the Greek troops in Macedonia and Eastern Thrace, except covering detachments, to the Aliakhmon [sic] Line to prepare a defensive position there.' Wavell went on to record that 'the conference agreed to the proposals of General Papagos; and it was understood that he would at once begin the withdrawal of troops from Macedonia to the Aliakhmon Line.'<sup>25</sup>

Eden recorded a discussion between Wavell and himself following the publication of Papagos's autobiography in which it was claimed that the withdrawal was conditional on the position of the Yugoslavs being known. 'We were both at a loss to

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<sup>24</sup> Avon, p.202.

<sup>25</sup> Wavell, General Sir Archibald P., 'Operations in the Middle East from 7<sup>th</sup> February, 1941 to 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1941', *Supplement to the London Gazette of Tuesday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1946*, No. 37638, p.3425.

comprehend how there could have been doubt in the mind of the Greek Commander-in-Chief.<sup>26</sup> He further makes mention of a book he and Wavell decided to write to refute Papagos's claims, but that this did not eventuate because of Wavell's death in 1950.<sup>27</sup>

The Greek position, as stated by Papagos, is clear. He claims that the agreement to withdraw from Macedonia and Thrace was conditional on an undertaking being received from Yugoslavia of her neutrality in any future conflict, and cites as evidence of this his daily approaching the British liaison officer with the Greek government, Major-General T.G.G. Heywood, as to whether such an assurance had been received from the Yugoslavs.<sup>28</sup>

Higham makes much of this disagreement.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately in much of his discussions he does not reveal the sources for his conclusions, but his statement that 'Because of the detailed nature of the Greek minutes [of the discussions], they deserve to be taken very seriously as accurate',<sup>30</sup> is perhaps indicative as to where his sympathies lie, as is his uncritically citing of Papagos's memoirs without revealing the opposing views expressed in Eden's memoirs. It is possible to detect an anti-Eden and ant-British bias in Higham's work. Sarcastic remarks about Eden's public appearances in Greece 'in the sartorial splendour of a gray, impeccably cut, light tropical suit with one of his famous soft felt hats'<sup>31</sup> leave the impression of 'playing the man and not the ball', and do not inspire confidence in Higham's conclusions.

Higham concludes that the misunderstanding came from the fact that the British and the Greeks kept their own minutes of the meetings in their own languages, and did not compare these after the meetings to iron out any inconsistencies.. This he blamed on Eden, 'not a detail man'.<sup>32</sup> Equally, a case could be made that the Greeks, the hosts of the discussions, had a responsibility to ensure that this was done. His biases seem to suggest that Higham did not consider this possibility, or that Papagos, whose case he uncritically accepts, may have had other motives, such as a reluctance to abandon a

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<sup>26</sup> Avon, p.202

<sup>27</sup> Avon, pp.202-3.

<sup>28</sup> Papagos, p.324.

<sup>29</sup> Higham, pp.121-3, 141-4.

<sup>30</sup> Higham, p.141.

<sup>31</sup> Higham, p.140.

<sup>32</sup> Higham, p.143.

large part of his country to an invader, to ignore either deliberately or unconsciously the agreements reached at the 22-23 February meeting.

A final expression of the mystification surrounding the question of where the responsibility lay for this situation could be a confused statement by van Creveld. At one point during the discussions of 22 February the British military representatives held informal talks amongst themselves. In the notes of this discussion it is recorded that:

Unless we could be sure of Yugoslavia coming in, it was not possible to contemplate holding a line covering Salonika; in view of the doubtful attitude of Yugoslavia, the only sound plan from the military point of view was to stand on the Aliakhmon line.<sup>33</sup>

Pouncing on this, van Creveld claims that it proves that Papagos's assertions are vindicated because the decision to withdraw was made at 'an exclusively *British* meeting', whereas the decision made at the plenary meeting was only for preparations for the move to be undertaken and put into execution.<sup>34</sup>

This claim of van Creveld's can be challenged on several points, the first of these being that the notes of the informal British military representatives meeting of 22 February quoted above do not contain a decision that the withdrawal had been agreed upon, but merely that it was 'the only sound plan from the military point of view.'

van Creveld also seems not to have realised the implication of the phrase 'and put into execution' in the minutes of the 22 February plenary meeting. He interprets this to mean that the preparations for the move to be carried out, whereas Eden and Wavell clearly believed that the withdrawal should be carried out. It would seem that this latter interpretation is a valid one as the phrase in the minutes 'made and put into execution' implies to actions. If preparations are 'made', then they are *ipso facto* 'put into execution', so that the additional use of the later expression could refer to separate action, the actual withdrawal. Papagos makes no reference to this question of conflict between preparation and actual withdrawal.

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<sup>33</sup> M. van Creveld, 'Prelude to Disaster: The British Decision to Aid Greece, 1940-41', *Journal of Contemporary History*, v.9, no.3 (July 1974), p. 83, citing 'Informal Meeting of British Representatives held at 7.45 p.m. on 22 February 1941, at the Royal Palace at Tatoi', PRO, FO/371/33145/5218, p.25

<sup>34</sup> van Creveld, 'Prelude to Disaster', pp.85-6.

The British forces for this expedition were to come from General Wavell's small forces in North Africa. Wavell felt that the most he could spare were two Australian divisions, the New Zealand Division, and an Armoured Brigade. It was planned to supplement these later by another Australian division and a Polish Brigade. The use of the Australian and New Zealand troops would require the consent of their respective governments.

An Australian historian has written of his country's involvement in this campaign that 'At the military level consultation with Australian generals appears to have been non-existent.'<sup>35</sup> The same could be said of New Zealand. At no time did Wavell confer with Freyberg or Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Blamey, the Australian Commander, about their involvement. Freyberg was later to write to McClymont that 'My opinion was never asked....[I] Never expected to be asked my opinion by C.I.C. He was far from co-operative: he had a secrecy mania.'<sup>36</sup>

Similarly there is some doubt as to the amount and quality of information that the New Zealand and Australian governments were given by their British counterpart on which they were to base their decision to permit their troops to be used in Greece.<sup>37</sup>

Once the British government had decided to intervene in Greece Wavell was left with the problem of finding troops to take part in the expedition. His command, facing on two fronts large numbers of admittedly inferior Italian troops in Libya and Italian East Africa, was seriously short of manpower, and the Greek adventure would negate any chance of following up its successes against the Italians in Libya.

On 17 February Freyberg was informed that the New Zealand Division would be the advance guard for an expedition to Greece. Freyberg, having been told that the New Zealand Government had been informed of this decision, believed that the matter was out of his hands. 'The decision to go to Greece was taken on a level we could not touch.'<sup>38</sup> By an unfortunate co-incidence, on 23 February, he sent a routine report to the New Zealand Government on the state of the Division, which concluded with the statement

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<sup>35</sup> D.M. Horner, *High Command: Australian and Allied Strategy 1939-1945*, Canberra, 1982, p.65.

<sup>36</sup> Letter Freyberg to McClymont, 15 November 1949 – WAI 3/16 NA.

<sup>37</sup> Wood, p.181.

<sup>38</sup> Letter Freyberg to Kippenberger, 10 September 1956 – cit. McClymont, p.99.

that should the British Government request the release of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force for a full operational role the New Zealand government can now do so with full confidence.<sup>39</sup>

The next day the New Zealand Government received from its British counterpart a formal request for the use of the New Zealand Division to take part in the Greek expedition.<sup>40</sup> It was assumed in Wellington that Freyberg's earlier cable referred to the proposed mission to Greece, and was an endorsement of it.<sup>41</sup> Freyberg was later to emphatically deny this, stating that his cable was only a general comment on the Division's readiness for any action that it might be called on to perform.<sup>42</sup> At no time did he report to the government specifically on the merits of the Greek venture, and the Government was left unaware of his serious doubts as to viability of the campaign.<sup>43</sup> The New Zealand Government and Freyberg, both believing the other to have been fully informed on the implications of the expedition, assented to it in the conviction that the other in the light of superior knowledge supported it.

It has been suggested that the British government was economical with the truth in informing the New Zealand government of the circumstances behind the decision to intervene in Greece. Wood cites three instances of this possible deception. The first of these was that British correspondence continued to imply the possibility of Yugoslav and Turkish support after Eden had reported that this would not be forthcoming. Second, a British cable reported that 'our advisers at present in the Middle East have recommended the enterprise' without also reporting those advisers' considerable misgivings, and finally that at no time was it reported that there were serious qualms by the commanders in the field as to the lack of air support that would be available in Greece.<sup>44</sup>

It would be difficult to make a case for the British having deliberately misled the Dominion governments as to the possibilities of success or failure in Greece. Churchill in correspondence with Eden in Cairo on 7 March told him that

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<sup>39</sup> *Documents*, v.1, No.274.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, No.336.

<sup>41</sup> Wood, p.182.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 2.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, p.183.

<sup>44</sup> Wood, pp.183-4.

We must be able to tell the New Zealand and Australian Governments faithfully that this hazard, from which they will not shrink, is undertaken, not because of any commitment entered into by a British Cabinet Minister at Athens and signed by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, but because Dill, Wavell, and other Commanders-in-Chief are convinced that there is a reasonable fighting chance.<sup>45</sup>

This does not appear to be the work of a man intend on deceiving the Dominion governments, and it is suggested that any misleading that did occur was inadvertent and the result of inadequate preparation of the cables. As the New Zealand historian Ian Wards later put it

Closer to home the New Zealand Prime Minister was never fully informed; as Eden had not fully, or accurately, informed his own prime minister, this should not cause any surprise.<sup>46</sup>

In summary, then, it can be said that the New Zealand involvement in the Greek campaign is traceable back to the Italian invasion of Greece and the British offer of aid to that country. Churchill's desire to hit the enemy anywhere possible led him to the idea of a great Balkan coalition against the Axis, but his enthusiasm for this project led him to overlook the reality that none of the three countries involved would wish to join such a coalition unless Britain could supply overwhelming support to ensure an Axis defeat. He was to pursue this idea for the rest of the war, with repeated futile attempts to induce Turkey to become involved. Part of the reason for becoming involved in Greece was a hope that this would encourage Yugoslavia and Turkey to join the struggle, but when this hope was not realised, Britain and her Commonwealth partners were left attempting to aid a weak and impoverished ally with insufficient forces to have a realistic chance of stemming a German attack.

Judgements may now be made on the questions raised in the Introduction, beginning with analysis of whether or not it was militarily viable. This question has pervaded these discussions. Even before the troops sailed strategists such as

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<sup>45</sup> W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Volume III, The Grand Alliance*, London, 1950, p.92.

<sup>46</sup> Wards, 'Balkan Dilemma', p.30.

Alanbrooke were questioning its wisdom, and certainly on the face of it, it seemed that it faced great odds. Wilson Force, which consisted of two Australian and one New Zealand infantry divisions and an armoured brigade with its tanks in parlous condition needing major overhauls, together with its Greek allies faced 'five panzer divisions, two motorized, three mountain and eight infantry divisions, three independent regiments and the SS Adolf Hitler Division.'<sup>47</sup> Mention has been made of the fact that air cover for this force was almost non-existent, with about eighty Royal Air Force aircraft facing approximately 800 German and 300 Italian machines.<sup>48</sup> Despite this the Middle East command believed that their forces had 'every chance' of resisting a German advance.<sup>49</sup> Where had this belief come from, and was it realistic? Certainly the commanders of the Australian and New Zealand forces that made up the bulk of the troops committed to the expedition did not think so. Freyberg, as he took his leave of Wavell before sailing to Greece, remarked that he was under no illusions as to what difficulties faced him,<sup>50</sup> and Blamey drew the attention of his government to the disparity between the German and Imperial forces, greatly to the fury of Wavell and Dill.<sup>51</sup>

The great inequality between the British and Axis forces shows that it was very unlikely that there was any realistic chance of doing more than inconveniencing a German invasion of Greece. There seems little doubt that the commanders on the ground felt this. The commanders of all three services saw their primary function as the defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal and were loath to get involved in any venture that might dissipate the limited forces they had to achieve this.<sup>52</sup> After the success of his offensive in the Western Desert Wavell was 'fill[ed] ... with dismay' when he received instructions on 10 January 1941 that this operation must be suspended to allow aid to be made to Greece. Not only would this obviate any chance of clearing North Africa of the Italians, it would also be insufficient to defend Greece against a

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<sup>47</sup> Buckley, p.37.

<sup>48</sup> See above, p.22.

<sup>49</sup> F. de Guingand, *Generals at War*, London, 1964, p.28.

<sup>50</sup> P. Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg, VC: Soldier of Two Nations*, London, 1991, p.245.

<sup>51</sup> Freyberg, p.246.

<sup>52</sup> S. Lawlor, *Churchill and the Politics of War*, Cambridge, 1994, pp.159-61.

German attack.<sup>53</sup> A member of Wavell's planning staff later described the problems he foresaw with the expedition:

The forces we could provide were not numerous; neither were they well provided with the most modern implements of war. We were particularly short of such items as tanks, aircraft, transport and anti-aircraft guns. Compare this with the colossal weight of equipment the Germans could muster. They had many and better tanks and an enormous air force which could swamp anything we could produce. In addition, they had a number of troops and leaders who had great experience of modern war in Europe.<sup>54</sup>

This view was shared in London. On 16 February 1941 Major General John Kennedy, the Director of Military Operations, composed a summary of a discussion he had had with Churchill in which he stated that the formation of a political front against the Germans in the Balkans was of no benefit because of the inadequacy of the Balkan countries' armed forces, the limited forces which Britain would be able to put into Greece, and the time it would take forces these forces to arrive and deploy in Greece.<sup>55</sup>

One area of particular weakness was the air. In the initial response to the Italian invasion of Greece two squadrons of Blenheim bombers, one of Blenheim fighters and one of Gladiator fighters had been despatched to Greece where they operated mainly in support of the Greek forces battling the Italians in Albania.. These were reinforced during the early months of 1941 by two more squadrons of Blenheim bombers and one squadron each of Hurricane and Gladiator fighters.<sup>56</sup> While they performed creditably against the Italians in Albania Gladiator biplanes had little chance against the modern monoplane fighters the Germans were expected to deploy against them. Only the single Hurricane squadron would be competitive against the Messerschmitts of the *Luftwaffe*. The twin-engined fighter variant of the Blenheim had a top speed of only 285 miles per hour against the 344 miles per hour of the Messerschmitt Me 109, and would be no match against the nimble single-engined fighter.<sup>57</sup> This problem was compounded by the lack of suitable airfields in Greece. Initially aircraft had to be

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<sup>53</sup> Lawlor, pp. 206-7.

<sup>54</sup> de Guingand, *Operation Victory*, p.51.

<sup>55</sup> Summary reprinted in J. Kennedy, *The Business of War*, London, 1957, pp.81-5.

<sup>56</sup> Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Longmore. 'Air Operations in the Middle East from January 1st, 1941 to May 3rd, 1941', *Supplement to The London Gazette of Tuesday, the 17th of September, 1946*, No. 37729, pp.4678-4679.

<sup>57</sup> *Jane's Fighting Aircraft of World War II*, London, rep. 2001, p.177; J.F. Turner, *British Aircraft of World War II With Colour Photographs*, London, 1975, p.15.

stationed at two airfields in the vicinity of Athens, a long way from their operational areas, and although landing grounds were constructed closer to the fighting, these were barely adequate and hampered by soft surfaces and flooding caused by heavy rains.<sup>58</sup>

All this tends to suggest that there was little likelihood of the expedition succeeding militarily, and that the motives behind its despatch were therefore political rather than military.

Following on from this it is pertinent to ask what were the expectations of the British government when it decided to intervene in Greece. It has been seen that this was originally an initiative of Churchill's, who dispatched Eden to the Middle East to explore the possibilities before even raising the matter at the War Cabinet. What, then, were Churchill's motives and expectations for this venture? Prior to the Italian invasion of Greece, Churchill's strategy for the Mediterranean called for the reinforcing of the Middle East Command once the reduction of the threat of invasion in the British Isles allowed this, with the aim of destroying the Italian forces in North Africa before the Germans arrived to support their allies there, and thereby eliminating any threat to Egypt and the Suez Canal. The only part Greece played in this strategy was the fortifying of Crete to prevent it being used as a base for Axis air strikes against British shipping in the eastern Mediterranean, and against Egypt and the Canal, and to use it as a base for the Royal Navy, especially the natural harbour of Suda Bay.<sup>59</sup> Initially the Italian invasion's only effect on this strategy was to emphasise the importance of securing Crete,<sup>60</sup> but in the days following Churchill's attitude began to change, and he began to show greater support for the idea of becoming more involved in Greece, initially stressing the strategic importance of the Greek Islands and the idea that backing Greece would encourage Turkish support against the Axis.<sup>61</sup>

This was the situation when Churchill learned of Wavell's planned offensive in Libya which was to result in the overwhelming defeat of the Italians. While this was in preparation and underway Churchill's interest in a Greek initiative cooled, but once

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<sup>58</sup> Air Vice-Marshal J.H.D'Albiac. 'Air Operations in Greece, 1940-1941', *Supplement to The London Gazette of Tuesday, the 7th of January, 1947*, No. 37846, pp.206 & 211.

<sup>59</sup> Lawlor, pp.117-9.

<sup>60</sup> Lawlor, p.119.

<sup>61</sup> Lawlor, p.121.

it was over, his mind returned to Greece.<sup>62</sup> Believing that the Italian threat in North Africa had been neutralised he felt free to think now of moving British activity in the Mediterranean to its northern shore. He felt that the sweeping successes in Libya would encourage neutrals in the Balkans, particularly Turkey, to stand up to any threat of German expansion in the region.<sup>63</sup> However, the value of the Libyan victory could be negated if German forces easily overran Greece. London was well aware of the German build up in Romania and Bulgaria, and Churchill expected an attack on Salonika from the latter country.<sup>64</sup> He saw a parallel to the German campaign in northern France in 1940, with the fall of Salonika isolating the Greek forces in Albania and leading to a separate Greek peace.<sup>65</sup> This, he felt, might have a detrimental effect on Turkish opinion 'if we had shown ourselves callous of [the] fate of allies'.<sup>66</sup> He was still hopeful of developing a coalition in the area against the Axis powers, and felt that support for Greece and a successful resistance in Greece would encourage the formation of such a coalition with Turkey and Yugoslavia.<sup>67</sup>

Yet Churchill was well aware of the dangers of intervention in Greece. On at least two occasions he admitted to the Defence Committee that British aid to Greece might not be enough to 'save' that country, and contemporaries were reported as giving 'the impression that he thought "Greece [was] lost"'.<sup>68</sup> He had also worries about what the political ramifications in the United Kingdom might be over a disaster in Greece. There was always the memory of how another of his interventions in the same area, the Gallipoli campaign of 1915, had led to his fall from Cabinet, and more recently the Norwegian disaster had cost Chamberlain the premiership. Churchill had been a prominent advocate for the Norwegian adventure, and had suffered some of the odium it had generated.<sup>69</sup> He had been perhaps lucky that the public and political displeasure had fallen on Chamberlain. That he was aware of this may be seen in one of his messages to Eden, when, after receiving an ominous appreciation from the Director of Military Operations on 16 February 1941, he told the Foreign Secretary 'do not

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<sup>62</sup> Lawlor, p.176.

<sup>63</sup> Lawlor, p.129.

<sup>64</sup> Lawlor, p.177.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Churchill to Wavell and Longmore, 11 Jan. 1941, PREM 3/309/1, cit. Lawlor, p.178.

<sup>67</sup> Lawlor, p.179.

<sup>68</sup> Lawlor, p.179, citing Defence Committee, 8 Jan. 1941, DO(41)1, CAB 69/2, and 12 Jan 1941, DO(41)3, CAB 69/8.

<sup>69</sup> R. Parkinson, *Peace For Our Time: Munich to Dunkirk – the inside story*, London, 1971, p.335.

consider yourselves obligated to a Greek enterprise if in your hearts you feel it will only be another Norwegian fiasco...'<sup>70</sup>

However, Churchill gradually came to believe that British action in Greece could become a long term project. On 11 February 1941 he wrote to Wavell, and alluded to the possibility of holding up the advancing Germans 'for some months'. His motives were still to fulfil Britain's obligations to Greece, and by a show of resistance encourage neutrals in the area to join the war.<sup>71</sup> Even so, his attitude was still ambiguous. His suggestions that not too much may be lost in Greece because the enemy may overrun the country before many British troops arrived do not seem to express a full commitment to the project, and yet he was tempted by the thought that it might be possible to inflict significant damage on the Germans in a successful defence of Greece.<sup>72</sup> It was the unambiguous advice of Eden and the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East that there was a reasonable chance of success that caused him to give in to this temptation.

Churchill believed that the failure to form a Balkan front in the First World War had resulted in the loss of a major possibility for accelerating the defeat of the Central Powers,<sup>73</sup> and his involvement in promoting the Gallipoli campaign is well known. Ben-Mosche suggests that 'Churchill suffered from mental inertia. Wedded to ideas and plans he had formulated before, he attempted to implement them even when new strategic circumstances rendered them irrelevant and impractical.'<sup>74</sup> As early as 25 September 1939, only three weeks after the outbreak of war, he circulated a memorandum amongst his colleagues in the War Cabinet extolling the benefits of forming such a Balkan front,<sup>75</sup> and on 27 October 1940, three days before the Italian invasion of Greece, he mentioned in a letter to Roosevelt that the British campaign in the Middle East expected for early 1941 'may involve Turkey and Greece.'<sup>76</sup> The implication here is that Churchill, despite his misgivings about the possibility of success, was so committed to one of his 'pet' projects that he continued to press it in

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<sup>70</sup> E. Barker, *British Foreign Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, London, 1976, p.102.

<sup>71</sup> Lawlor, p. 182, citing annex to DO941)8.

<sup>72</sup> Lawlor, pp. 246-7.

<sup>73</sup> T. Ben-Mosche, *Churchill: Strategy and History*, Boulder, Colorado, 1992, p.132.

<sup>74</sup> Ben-Mosche, p. 160.

<sup>75</sup> M. Gilbert, *Finest Hour: Winston S. Churchill, 1939-1941*, London, 1983, p.44.

<sup>76</sup> Letter, Churchill to Roosevelt, 27 October 1940, in F.L. Loewenheim, H.D. Langley, & M. Jonas (eds.), *Roosevelt and Churchill: Their Secret Wartime Correspondence*, New York, 1975, p.118.

the face of opposing advice.

Ben-Mosche further puts forward the theory that Churchill's motives were not the defence of Greece, but 'offensive', an attempt to strike a blow at the enemy, citing Churchill's post war remark to Lord Boothby:

...I did not do it simply to save the Greeks. Of course, honour and all that came in. But I wanted to form a Balkan Front. I wanted Yugoslavia, and I hoped for Turkey. That, with Greece, would have given us fifty divisions. A nut for the Germans to crack.<sup>77</sup>

All this suggests that Churchill had no clear idea of what he hoped to achieve in the Greek adventure. It is perhaps telling to remember his retort to Alanbrooke in one of their many rows on strategy "I do not want any of your long term projects, they cripple initiative!" ... I told him he must know where he was going, to which he replied that he did not want to know.'<sup>78</sup> Perhaps his principal ambition was to smite the enemy, and one way of doing this was to assemble a coalition against him. There was also a sense of obligation to the Greeks based on the earlier British guarantee, and admiration for their resolute struggle against the Italians.

And yet there are the hints that Churchill was dubious about getting involved in Greece. What was it that caused him to suppress these doubts and allow the expedition to take place? There has been a tendency to blame Eden for this, even at the time. For example, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Alexander Cadogan, wrote in his diary:

*Wednesday, 5 March [1941]*

Cabinet at 5.30 on A's [Eden] Telegrams from Athens. He has really run rather ahead of his instructions and *agreed* to things which Greeks will take as commitments and on which they may make decisions as to their policy in a critical moment ... really I think his head is turned a little.

*Thursday, 6 March*

A. has evidently committed us up to the hilt. Telegram this morning gives text of agreement signed with Greeks ... Cabinet at 6. Awkward discussion. P.M. evidently thinks we can't go back on A. and Dill, and I don't think we can

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<sup>77</sup> Ben-Mosche, p.158.

<sup>78</sup> Alanbrooke, *Diaries*, 19 August 1943, p.445.

– though I would if I could see any better alternative! K. Wood, Alexander and J. Anderson evidently out for A.’s blood.<sup>79</sup>

Another contemporary who, by implication blamed Eden was General Sir Hastings Ismay, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister in his capacity as Minister of Defence, who, quoting from a telegram of Eden’s, noted in his *Memoirs* ‘ “We are all agreed that the course advocated should be followed and help given to Greece.” That settled it.’<sup>80</sup>

Eden had returned to the government with the post of Secretary of State for the Dominions, a position outside Cabinet, on the outbreak of war, and moved to the War Office when Churchill became Prime Minister on 10 May 1940, though still not a member of the War Cabinet. His relationship with Churchill was complex, but at this time was close and affectionate, most commonly being described as that of ‘father and son’. It is not unlikely that Churchill, given his own tempestuous relationship with his hard-drinking and uncontrollable son Randolph, did feel some special bond with the man who was everything Randolph was not. Whether or not this was sufficient to sway his judgement over projects that Eden favoured is an open question.

During the troubled summer of 1940, when, after the Germans had overrun most of western Europe and Britain appeared to be threatened with invasion, Eden had been a consistent supporter of the armies under his political control, supporting the reinforcement of the Middle East at a time when Churchill was doubtful.<sup>81</sup> In October and early November Eden was in Egypt, where he learned for the first time of Wavell’s plans for his offensive against the Italians in the Western desert. The naturally secretive Wavell was so concerned about security that he had not even informed London that he was contemplating this attack. At the same time the War Cabinet in London was considering what aid could be despatched to Greece following the Italian invasion. Fearing that any help for Greece might dissipate the forces earmarked for Wavell’s offensive Eden was desperate to return home to brief the War Cabinet on Wavell’s plans. His attitude may be summed up in a comment he wrote

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<sup>79</sup> *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan O.M. 1938-1945*, ed. D. Dilks, London, 1971, pp. 361-2.

<sup>80</sup> *The Memoirs of General the Lord Ismay K.G., P.C., G.C.B., C.H., D.S.O.*, London, 1960, p.199

<sup>81</sup> D. Carlton, *Anthony Eden: A Biography*, London, 1981, p.167-8.

across a telegram received from Churchill urging aid to Greece: 'Egypt more important than Greece.'<sup>82</sup> How, then, did such an opponent of aid to Greece change into a proponent of it?

In December, the death of the British ambassador in Washington provided an opportunity for a further Cabinet reshuffle. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, who seemed somewhat irresolute in the prosecution of the war,<sup>83</sup> was pressured into accepting the Washington post, thereby creating a vacancy which allowed Eden to return to the office he had held before the war, with a seat on the War Cabinet. This seems to have produced a change in Eden's thinking. As Carlton put it, 'This was a sudden reversal of his earlier hostility to Churchill's policy of diverting at least some aid to Greece from the north African theatre.' He attributed this 'reversal' to Eden's fear that without aid Greece might bow to Axis pressure and become neutral, thereby causing Yugoslavia and Turkey to follow suit, and forcing the withdrawal of British forces already in Greece.<sup>84</sup>

The version put forward in Eden's *Memoirs* supports this theory. Speaking of the period of early February 1941 he writes

In contrast to the previous autumn, the desert battle had now been fought and won. If a secure flank could be established at Benghazi, forces would be released for use elsewhere. Moreover, German infiltration into Bulgaria posed a threat which had not existed in the autumn of 1940. We could attempt to meet this by help to Greece or Turkey. We could not do both.<sup>85</sup>

But was there more to it than this? This quotation suggests a decision rationally arrived at, and no doubt Eden felt that he had made such a rational decision, but the concern, and even disgust, felt by Cadogan at the result of Eden's negotiations with the Greek government has been seen above. A further telling example of the fact that there may have been more behind Eden's support for the Greek adventure may be found in de Guingand's autobiography in his account of the negotiations with the Greek government of February 1941, the negotiations that committed Britain to

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<sup>82</sup> Parkinson, *Blood, Toil*, p.148.

<sup>83</sup> Halifax had been one of those who advocated 'not absolutely shut[ting] the door' on negotiations with the Germans after the fall of Poland. Churchill used Halifax's unpopularity at home because of his association with Chamberlain and appeasement as one of his reasons for sending Halifax to Washington. Gilbert, pp. 55 & 953.

<sup>84</sup> Carlton, pp.170-1.

<sup>85</sup> Avon, p.189.

involvement in Greece. As a member of the planning staff of Middle East Command de Guingand attended the conference to provide detailed information on the British forces available for the venture. It will be remembered that all previous offers of British aid had been rejected by the Greeks as inadequate to repel a German advance. de Guingand records that

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 produced only 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. I felt that this was hardly a fair do, and bordering upon dishonesty.

de Guingand was waiting outside the conference room after the meeting.

Eden came in 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>86</sup>

Mention has already been made of Eden's almost notorious vanity, and detractors such as Higham have seized upon it as a weapon in their condemnation of him. However, a more moderate analysis suggests that this vanity may have played a part in Eden's thinking about Greece. Ben-Moshe makes the point that 'Eden had orchestrated Britain's intense diplomatic activity in the Balkans' since his return to the Foreign Office, but suffered the fatal flaw of 'not fully appreciat[ing] that diplomacy and policy had to have effective military and strategic backing.'<sup>87</sup> As the Greek campaign wound to its dismal end Cadogan made the same point when he recorded in his diary a conversation with Eden on 28 April 1941, in which he told Eden

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<sup>86</sup> de Guingand, *Operation Victory*, pp.57-9.

<sup>87</sup> Ben-Moshe, p.147.

‘Please don’t do anything for the sake of *doing* something! Don’t throw in small packets here and there to get chewed up. I know it’s disappointing and humiliating to look forward to another year on the defensive, but *don’t* squander the little you’ve got.’ He professed to agree. I begged him to believe that diplomacy could only be prepared in our munition factories. But will o’ the wisps have a fatal attraction for him and Winston.<sup>88</sup>

This, then, can be suggested as the explanation for Eden’s propelling Britain into intervening in Greece. A man who had resigned from Chamberlain’s Cabinet in protest at Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement, who had wanted to ‘stand up’ to Hitler in the days before the war, now saw a way to give expression to those impulses and also to obtain for himself a great diplomatic triumph. Churchill, by giving Eden such wide powers on his mission to Greece, had in fact locked himself into Eden’s agenda, and, when Eden did not respond to Churchill’s expressions of doubt about the project, was forced to accept the agreement his protégé made with the Greek authorities.

Eden, after the agreement had been reached, mentioned to Dill that he was prepared to resign if the Greek adventure was a failure, to which Dill replied that he had no need to, as he acted on military advice.<sup>89</sup> Given that, as seen above, there was considerable military opposition to the diversion of forces from North Africa to Greece, some explanation must be given as to how Eden was eventually able to obtain military support for the final expedition. Ben-Moshe suggests the crucial factor here was the bowing of Dill to the pressure of the politicians, and in particular, Eden. Dill was renowned for being a ‘nice’ person, and as such, not capable of dealing with pressure.<sup>90</sup> Dill seemed particularly confused by the animosity shown to him by Churchill who had developed an animus against him as ‘lacking in drive.’ This situation was compounded on the trip he and Eden took to Greece, which was plagued by bad weather, and the fact that Dill was ill. He was thus in no condition to withstand any pressure that Eden placed on him during the flight, and by the time the party arrived in Egypt he had reached the position of believing that a defensive line against

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<sup>88</sup> Cadogan, p.374.

<sup>89</sup> Ben-Moshe, p.154.

<sup>90</sup> See the comments of Dill’s contemporaries cited by Ben-Moshe, p.155.

the Germans could be developed in northern Greece. Wavell too had swung around to this point of view. The process at which he had arrived at this is less clear. It would appear that he was persuaded that the political necessities of the situation required participation despite the military precariousness of such involvement. In an appreciation summarised by his biographer dated 19 February 1941, just before the conference at Tatoi Palace, he stressed the significance the abandoning of an ally would have world opinion and suggested that this would destroy any chance of gaining Yugoslav or Turkish support in the area.<sup>91</sup> de Guingand goes further, and suggests that Wavell was overly influenced by political necessities. 'He [Wavell] found himself unable to say "No" to the politician, and agreed to an operation which was fundamentally unsound.'<sup>92</sup> Shortly before Eden and Dill's arrival in Cairo Wavell had received a signal from Churchill about the proposed Greek action, and it appears that this may have convinced him of the political importance of the venture.

There has been much controversy as to whether the New Zealand government was properly advised of the situation in the Balkans so as to be able to reach an informed decision as to whether to allow New Zealand troops to take part. This question turns on whether or not the British government minimised the risks when communicating with its Australasian counterparts to persuade them to commit troops.

The biographers of New Zealand's wartime Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, imply that it did not.

A series of messages in code now bombarded Wellington, and only served further to alarm the Prime Minister. More shrewdly than either Wavell or the British Cabinet he served, Fraser divined the true state of affairs in Greece. He guessed the Greeks might well collapse before a German onslaught, leaving the small Allied force to carry the brunt of the battle....<sup>93</sup>

A study of the documentation provides evidence supporting this view. The first request for New Zealand troops came on 25 February 1941, and provided little detail of the military situation, merely stating that the British Cabinet had agreed to intervene

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<sup>91</sup> J. Connell, *Wavell; Scholar and Soldier*, London, 1964, pp.335-6

<sup>92</sup> de Guingand, *Generals at War*, p.45

<sup>93</sup> M. Bassett & M. King, *Tomorrow Comes The Song: A Life of Peter Fraser*, Auckland, 2000, p.209.

in Greece on the advice of its personnel in the Middle East.<sup>94</sup> A request from the New Zealand government for more information produced little detail, but after the situation changed when it became known that the Greek army had not withdrawn from Thrace and Macedonia, a detailed analysis of the situation was sent from London dated 8 March 1941. This revealed that instead of the anticipated 35 there would be only three Greek battalions supporting the Imperial forces on the Aliakmon Line.<sup>95</sup> This prompted several more anxious enquiries from Wellington, and on 14 March 1941 the British government forwarded a copy of a report from the British Chiefs of Staff which accepted the point of view set forth by Middle East Command that 'there is a good chance of holding the enemy's advance.' This report also set out details of British aircraft available in the Middle East theatre in general, and in Greece in particular, and an assessment of German aircraft in the area, thus showing the great disparity between the two air forces.<sup>96</sup> The alarm expressed by the New Zealand government at the dangers of the expedition in correspondence between London and Wellington at this time shows that, although we might be surprised that such a major venture should be decided upon on relatively little information, there was sufficient detail for the New Zealand decision-makers to be well aware of the hazards.

Following on from this it is pertinent to ask why this information was so scarce. It is suggested that this was the result of the circumstances in which decisions were made by the British government. It has been seen that the British decision to become involved in Greece was based largely on information reported back to London from Eden's mission to the region, and that this was greeted with a certain amount of scepticism. Therefore, the London government lacked the detailed arguments to present to their Australasian counterpart, and as it drifted into involvement in Greece with poorly defined objectives and strategies it towed the Antipodean governments with it. Because of the lack of decisive information from their commanders in the field these governments lacked grounds to refuse their support.

Later apologists for the Greek expedition claimed that it had significant effects on public opinion in the United States, and because it so delayed the German invasion of

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<sup>94</sup> *Documents*, v.1, no.335.

<sup>95</sup> *Documents* v.1, no.346.

<sup>96</sup> *Documents*, v.1, no.356.

the Soviet Union that the invaders were not able to capture Moscow before winter. These claims are considered in an Appendix to this thesis.

Thus, a fatal combination of circumstances led to the launching of the ill-fated expedition. In the beginning the British government concentrated on the war in North Africa with no interest in expanding this into the Balkans. It was only after the Italian invasion of Greece in 1940 that Churchill reawakened the possibility of establishing a Balkan front. This was rejected by the Greeks and by the potential other members, the Yugoslavs and the Turks, as it was felt that any assistance the British could offer would be insufficient to stem a German onslaught. It was only after the death of the Greek prime minister that the Greek government began to seek British support. The British government, led by Churchill and Eden, seized on the possibility to resurrect their unrealistic dream of a Balkan front. The more limited agreement reached with Greece was marred by a misunderstanding about where to make a stand against the Germans. It was also handicapped by the inadequate forces the British could make available. The evidence suggests that this agreement was driven by the personal ambitions of the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, and that insufficient weight was placed on the military side of the proposed expedition. The limited background material available was presented to the Australian and New Zealand governments when they were requested to supply troops for the expedition. The New Zealand government was aware of the hazards of the venture, although, because methods of communication had not been worked out, it was not aware of the doubts of its commander in the field about its viability.

## CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTS 2: THE MILITARY SITUATION

The commanders of the Imperial forces were under no illusions as to the magnitude of the task before them. Freyberg, although he did not make his doubts explicit in his communications with the New Zealand government at the time, was later to report to the Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, that 'he had never considered the operation a feasible one'.<sup>1</sup> A similar situation applied with the Australian forces. Their commanding officer, Lieutenant-General T. Blamey, also had forebodings that the operation was 'foredoomed', although, as with Freyberg, he was slow in making this known to his government.<sup>2</sup>

They had good reason for their forebodings. The allied ground forces in Greece consisted of only one Australian Division (the Sixth), the New Zealand Division, the British 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Brigade, plus the native Greek forces. The Armoured Brigade had arrived in the Middle East with worn vehicles, and after training and supporting operations in the Cyrenaica campaign its tanks were in dire need of maintenance and overhaul.<sup>3</sup> The Imperial forces have been described as having 'a shortage of tanks and anti-aircraft guns', and 'their equipment [as being] suitable for desert warfare, not the steep mountain roads in Greece.'<sup>4</sup> Also one important component of the force, the New Zealand Division, which made up nearly half the ground forces, was short of experience, having never been in action, nor even exercised as a whole division.

Their allies, the Greeks, had most of their forces committed to the Albanian front, where the First Army of 14 divisions was fighting the Italians. In north-eastern Greece, two brigades were situated around Xanthi and eastwards into Thrace. The Metaxas Line was still held by the three disputed divisions that the British negotiators had expected to be withdrawn to the Aliakmon position. However, as this area had

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<sup>1</sup> Message Fraser to acting Prime Minister, 7 June 1941, *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War*, Wellington, 1949, v.1, p.323.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hetherington, *Blamey: Controversial Soldier*, Canberra, 1973, p.136.

<sup>3</sup> B. Pitt, *The Crucible of War: Vol.1; Wavell's Command*, London, 1986, p.217.

<sup>4</sup> Pamphlet No.20-260, p.80.

been drawn on to provide reinforcements for the Albanian operations, these forces were below strength and made up of second-grade soldiers. One motorised infantry



**Figure 1: Greek gun emplacement in Metaxas Line**  
from *The German Campaigns in the Balkans (Spring 1941)*, [U.S.] Department of the Army Pamphlet No. 20-2660, 1953, p.73.

division was held in reserve, and this force, known as the Second Army, totalled about 70,000 men. Two further divisions were stationed in central Macedonia.<sup>5</sup> All these forces were below strength and poorly equipped, one 'division' consisting of six battalions with no artillery.<sup>6</sup> Maitland Wilson has recorded his feeling of despair at meeting a Greek battalion on the move with its transport made up of bullock carts.<sup>7</sup>

No doubt some of the allies' concern stemmed from the gross overestimation of the enemy forces they were facing. Intelligence estimates suggested that there were between 19 and 21 German divisions threatening them from Bulgaria, 11 of which were aligned against the weakly held Metaxas Line.<sup>8</sup> The German forces in fact (excluding those in Bulgaria not used on the attack on Greece), consisted of only eight

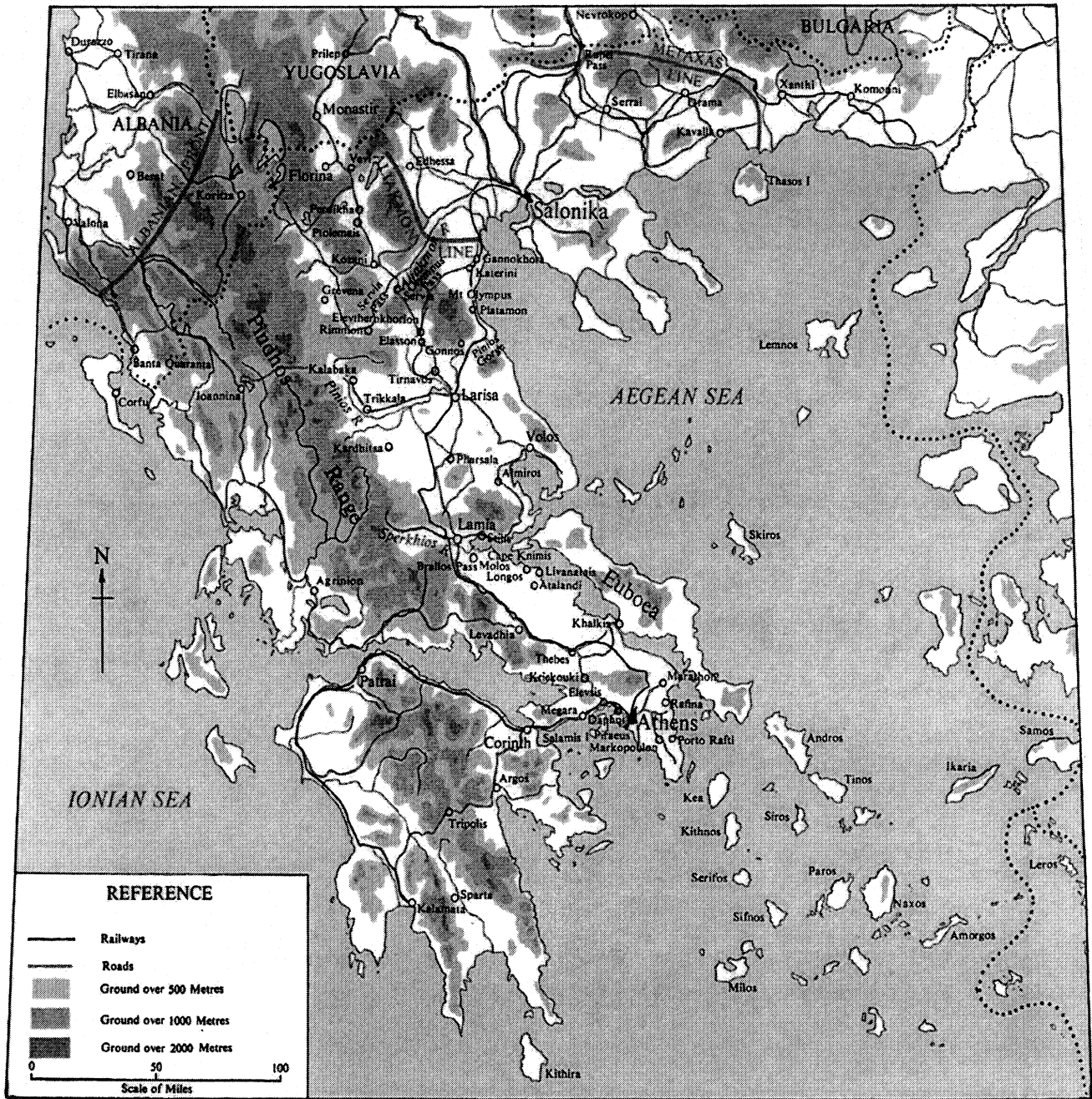
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<sup>5</sup> Pamphlet No.20-260, p.79.

<sup>6</sup> C. Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, HMSO, London, 1952, p.32.

<sup>7</sup> F.M Lord Wilson of Libya, *Eight Years Overseas*, London, 1951, p.84.

<sup>8</sup> Buckley, p.33.



Map 1 : Greece

from W.G. McClymont, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, To Greece*. War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1959, facing p. 85

divisions, plus some associated troops.<sup>9</sup> This was still a formidable force to face, especially as it contained two Panzer Divisions. Figures vary as to the exact strength of the enemy air power facing Greece, but it seems that there were in the vicinity of 800 German and 300 Italian aircraft facing eighty Royal Air Force machines, although the Italian aircraft operated mainly over Albania.<sup>10</sup> The British aeroplanes were three squadrons of Blenheim bombers, and one squadron each of Hurricane and Gladiator fighters. The Gladiator bi-planes were effective against their Italian counter-parts but no match for the modern single-wing German fighters.

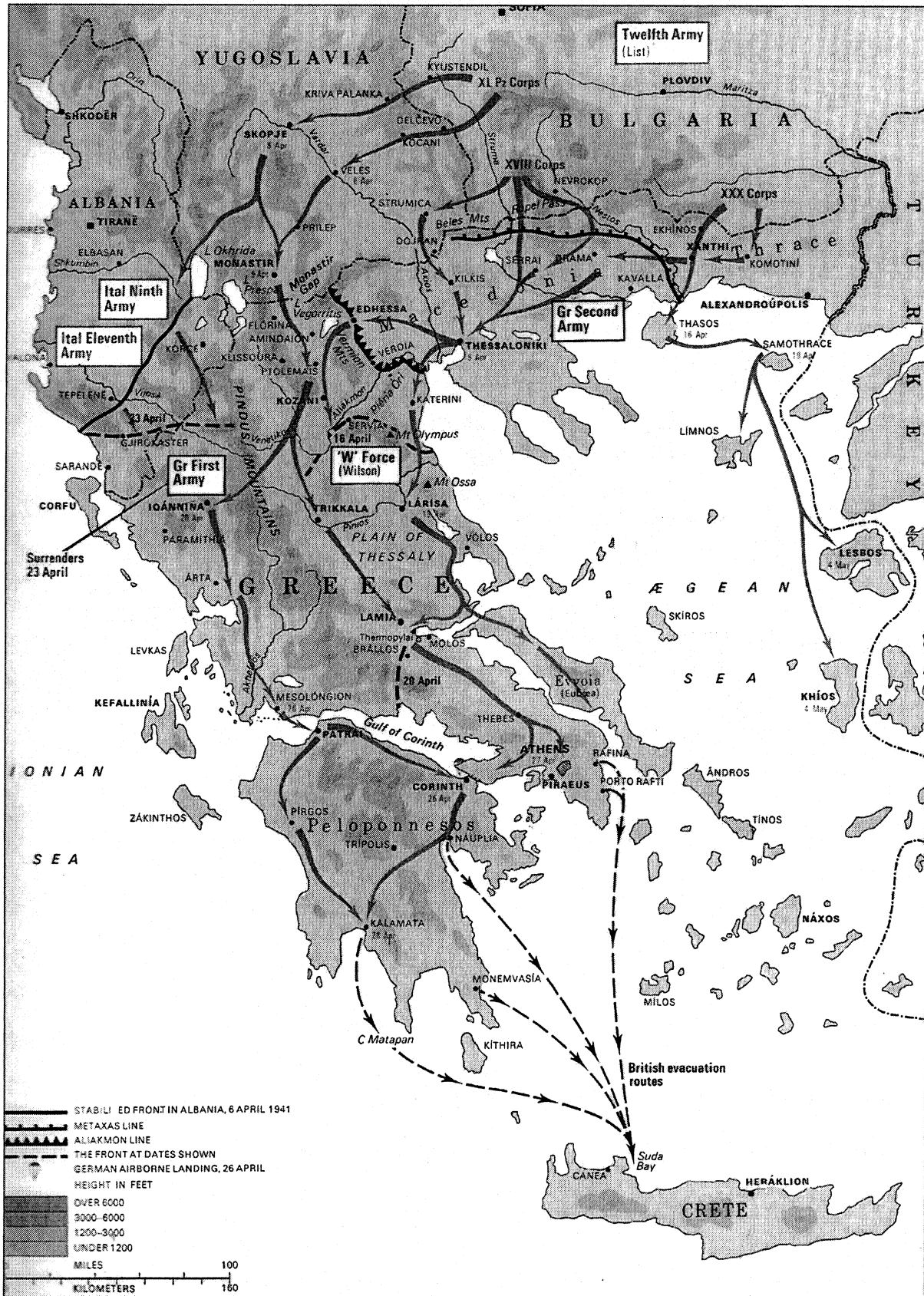
Greece is a country eminently suitable for defence. Most of its land borders are mountainous, and if the passes through those mountains are able to be defended, attackers face serious problems (See Map 1, previous page.). In 1941 the Greeks were successfully holding the north-west against the Italians in Albania, and, in fact, pushing the despised attackers back. Threats would come therefore in the north and north-east, from the German forces massing in Bulgaria. These could attack Greece directly around the eastern end of the Rupel Mountains, or through the Rupel Pass at the western end of the same mountain range. An indirect attack could be made from southern Yugoslavia down the valley of the Vardar River,<sup>11</sup> or further west through the Monastir Gap, a pass leading south from the town formerly known by that name. Further south, all routes at some point ran through mountain defiles which offered defenders strong points at which to halt an enemy advance. The German strategy for their attack planned to use all these avenues of advance. *XL Panzer Corp* was to drive west from Bulgaria into southern Yugoslavia, seizing the important rail centre of Skoplje and sever road and rail communications between Yugoslavia and Greece. It would then be in a position to swing south, menacing the Monastir Gap. *XVIII Corps* was to advance through the Vardar valley and the Rupel Pass, whilst *XXX Corps* pressed forward around the eastern end of the Rupel range into Thrace. It was

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<sup>9</sup> Pamphlet No. 20-260, p.81.

<sup>10</sup> G. Long, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Canberra, 1953, p.37.

<sup>11</sup> Known as the Axios River in Greece.



**Map 2: The German Attack on Greece**  
 from R. Natkiel, *Atlas of World War II*, North Dighton, MA, rep. 2002, p.31.

envisaged that the *blitzkrieg* tactics so successful in the conquests of Poland and western Europe would cause the defending forces to collapse and allow a rapid German advance.<sup>12</sup>

To face this peril the commanders of W Force proposed not to defend the borders but to establish a defensive line within Greece itself. Believing the Metaxas Line to be indefensible with the number of troops available, they proposed to follow the strategy they thought had been agreed upon at the earlier negotiations, withdrawing from Thrace and Macedonia and defending a line running from the Gulf of Salonika north of Katerini along the foothills of the Vermion Mountains through Edhessa to the Yugoslav border. Because part of this line lay along the river of the name it became known as the Aliakmon Line. It was still hoped that Yugoslavia would either remain neutral or put up a strong defence to anchor the western end of this line. As has been related above, the Greeks would not agree to the withdrawal from Thrace and Macedonia, thus reducing the forces available to man the Aliakmon Line.

Now the full implications of this were revealed. Instead of good quality troops from the Metaxas Line, the Greek forces on the Katerini front were to be made up of improvised units with little training and minimal equipment<sup>13</sup> It was initially planned that the Greek 19<sup>th</sup> Division should be placed on the right of the line, stretching inland from the coast. On its left were to be stationed the New Zealand Division, with 6 Australian Division on its left. The Greek 12<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Divisions were to hold the mountains west of the Australian positions up to the Yugoslav border.<sup>14</sup> Finally, 1 Armoured Brigade, supported by 6 Australian Division less one brigade, 27 New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion, and 64 Medium Regiment was deployed in the valley of the Axios River to cover the Imperial forces to the south while they prepared defensive positions.

By the time orders for the New Zealanders to move north from Athens had been issued on 9 March, the plans had changed. The defensive line had been advanced to include all of the lowlands between the northern foothills of the Mount Olympus range

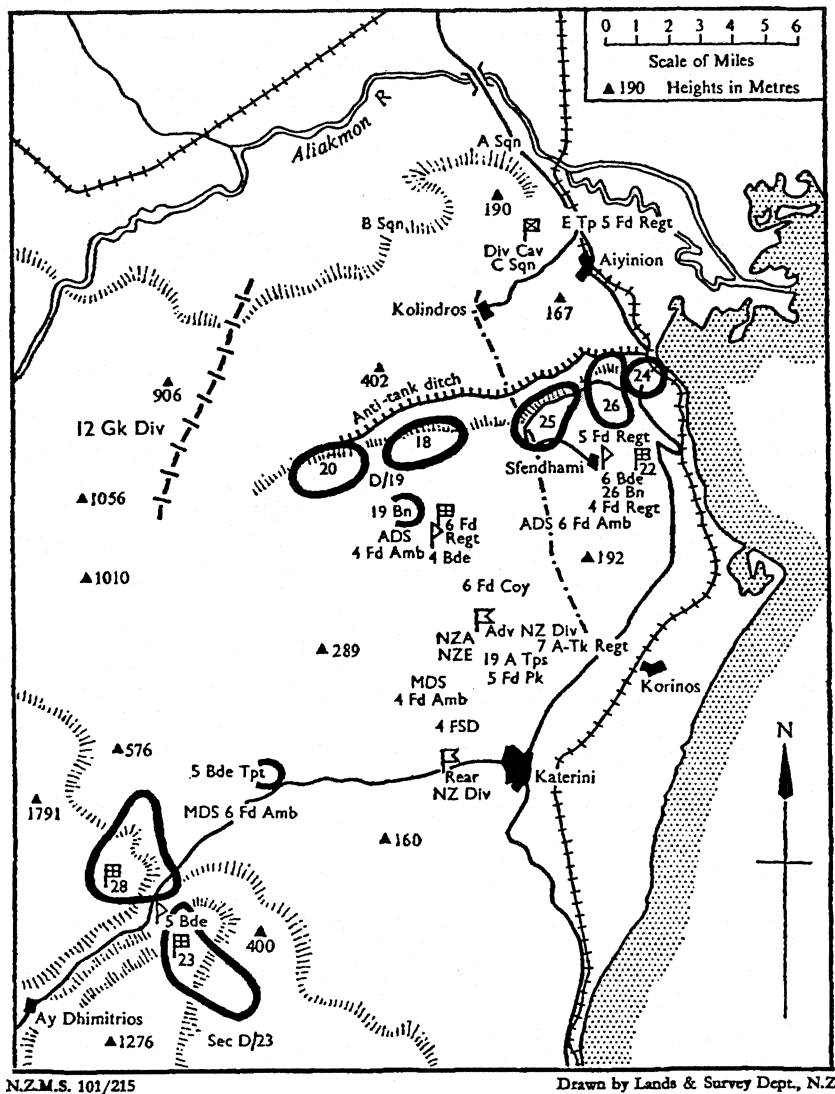
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<sup>12</sup> Pamphlet No. 20-260, pp. 82-3

<sup>13</sup> C. Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, HMSO, London, 1952, p.32.

<sup>14</sup> Buckley, pp.32-3.

and the Aliakmon River, with the New Zealand Division being responsible for a line running inland from Neon Elevation on the coast of the Gulf of Salonika. Greek forces in this area would in due course be withdrawn leaving the division covering a front stretching to the foothills of the Pieria Mountains to the west, a distance of some fifteen miles, with the Greek 12<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Divisions holding the foothills of the mountains on the New Zealanders' left in a line running northeast to the Yugoslav border.



**Map 3: New Zealand Division Positions on the Aliakmon Line 5 April**  
 from W.G. McClymont, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, To Greece*. War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1959, p.143.

New Zealand troops began to leave Athens for the Katerini area on 11 March. They were to remain in that town until 18 March. In the interim, arrangements were made

with the Greek commanders in the area as to what position the various forces should occupy. It was agreed that the New Zealand forces should be placed between 19 Greek Division on the shores of the Gulf of Salonika and 12 Greek Division in the foothills of the Pieria Mountains to the west, with 6 Brigade in the west alongside 12 Division and 4 Brigade on its right adjoining 19 Division. As the New Zealand forces arrived they began to prepare defences, including the building of an anti-tank ditch.

As Freyberg was only too well aware, the New Zealanders' position was at best precarious.<sup>15</sup> The line was too long to be held by such a small force. It was not continuous, with natural strong points being held by small groups of men, frequently leaving large gaps between them. There were inadequate supplies of wire and sandbags for creating defensive positions, and communications were poor. Kippenberger later described this position as being

Blinded by woods of stunted oak, and could easily 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>16</sup>

As early as 20 March, when the removal of Greek forces from the Katerini area was being prepared, Freyberg advised W Force Headquarters that he did not have adequate forces to defend the extended front this would produce. He suggested that his forces would be better placed defending the passes to the south, rather than out on the open plain.<sup>17</sup> He reiterated this advice to Blamey when the latter visited him on 23 March. Blamey concurred, and on returning to Athens got Wilson's agreement to the New Zealanders beginning to prepare defensive positions in the passes to their rear.<sup>18</sup> As a result Freyberg was instructed to begin preparing defences in the passes on each side of Mount Olympus, the Olympus Pass (also known as the Katerini Pass) on the mountain's west, and the narrow defile above the railway tunnel at Platamon on the coast.

Accordingly, 19 Battalion and 26 Battalion, the reserve battalions for 4 and 6 Brigades, were despatched to the pass and began work on the defences until 5 Brigade

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<sup>15</sup> McClymont, p.134.

<sup>16</sup> Letter, Kippenberger to McClymont, WAI 3/16 [181/42/3], NA.

<sup>17</sup> McClymont, p.134.

<sup>18</sup> Long, pp.34-5.

arrived from Athens on 31 March and 1 April, thereby allowing 19 and 21 Battalions to return to their own brigade areas.

During this period detachments of the Divisional Cavalry had been positioned north of the infantry positions about Katerini on the southern bank of the Aliakmon River, where they had prepared defensive positions with the intention of fighting delaying actions if the need should arise.

On 6 April Hitler unleashed his forces on Greece and Yugoslavia. The hapless Greek forces in Thrace and Eastern Macedonia fought valiantly, but were soon overwhelmed by their enemy's greatly superior forces. By 9 April Salonika had been captured, and the Greek 2<sup>nd</sup> Army in the northeast of the country had surrendered. At the same time, German forces advancing west from Bulgaria had overrun southern Yugoslavia, and by 10 April were advancing south through the Monastir Gap into Greece.

As early as 8 April it had become apparent to W Force Headquarters that the Yugoslav resistance in southern Yugoslavia was failing and that the Monastir Gap was threatened.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, at a conference between Blamey and Wilson it was agreed to despatch a force (Mackay Force) to attempt to delay any German advance south of the Gap, and that a defensive line be formed along the northern flank of Mount Olympus to the Aliakmon River, where it would swing west along the south bank of the river. 4 Brigade was warned that it would be moving to this latter position on the southern bank of the river in the vicinity of the small town of Servia, where it would come under the command of 1 Australian Corps. A similar warning was given to 6 Brigade that it would be withdrawing to the Olympus Pass in support of 5 Brigade. Kippenberger has recorded his surprise, when, after surmising from seeing the artillery units in 20 Battalion's area on the Katerini front moving out that the New Zealanders were advancing to meet the threat of a German advance from the north, he received orders to prepare for a move back through the passes about Mount Olympus and north to Servia.<sup>20</sup> With some difficulty in the wet conditions the brigade marched south over the muddy roads in the early hours of 9 April to transport waiting some ten miles in

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<sup>19</sup> Wilson, p.85.

<sup>20</sup> Kippenberger, p.20.

the rear, north of Katerini. Late that night the brigade arrived at Servia Pass.

Mackay Force, which was to attempt to slow the German advance south from the Monastir Gap, was to be made up of those forces already in the Axios River valley. These would withdraw through Edhessa to the vicinity of the Khidhi Pass where they would conduct 'a vigorous defence' to allow the Greek forces in Albania and Macedonia to withdraw into Epirus where they would hold a line running west from the Servia position through Grevena to the sea.<sup>21</sup>

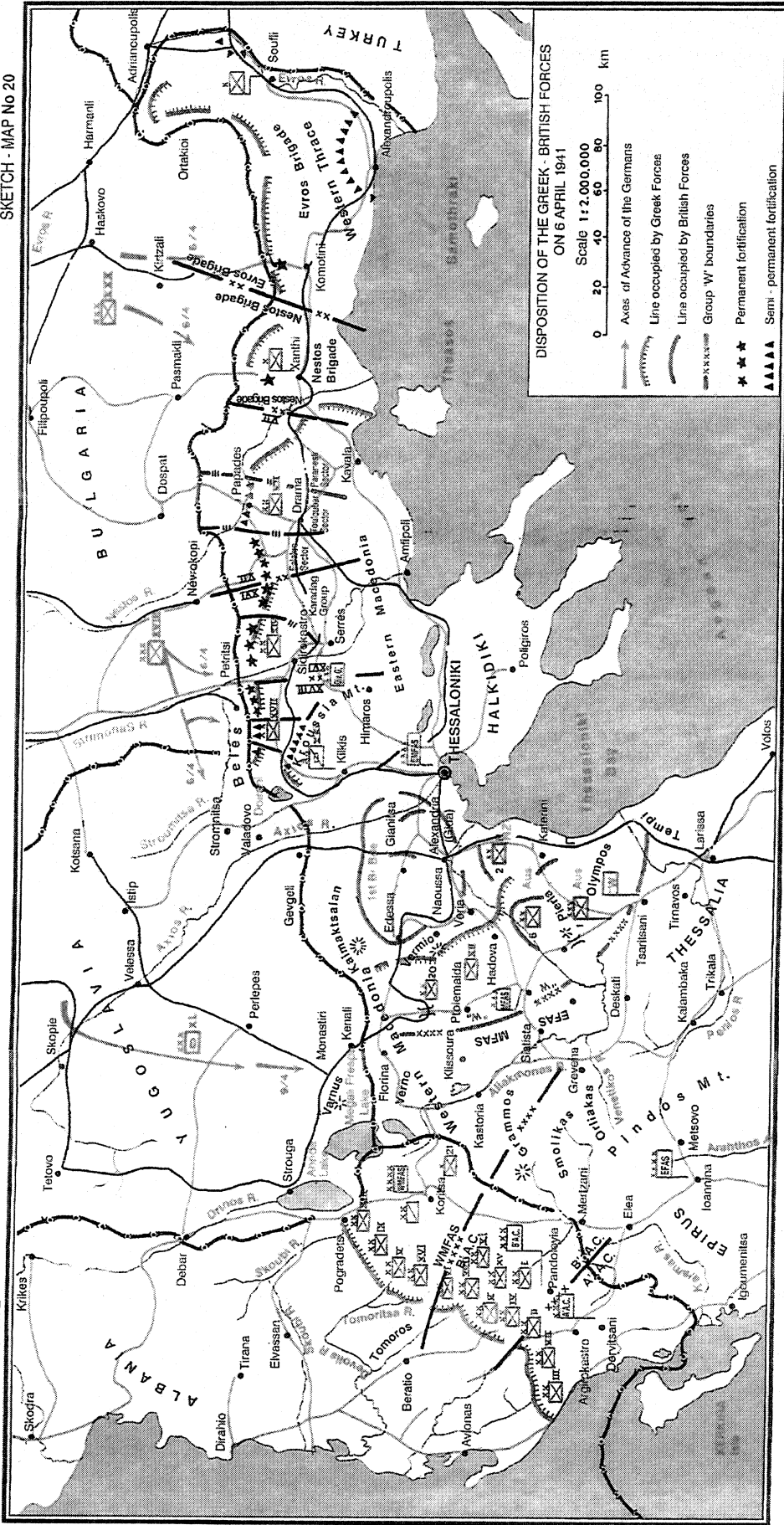
These, then, as illustrated in Map 4, were the positions of the defending forces defending Greece when 21 Battalion was moved from Athens to a position on the coast at Platamon to defend the right wing of the Allied line against an advance down the coast from Salonika.

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<sup>21</sup> Long, p.46.

HELLENIC ARMY GENERAL STAFF  
ARMY HISTORY DIRECTORATE

SKETCH - MAP No 20



**Map 4: Dispositions of Allied Troops**

from *An Abridged History of the Greek-Italian and Greek-German War 1940-1941 (Land Operations)*, Hellenic Army General Staff, Army History Directorate, The Army History Directorate Editions, Athens, 1997. facing p. 85

## CHAPTER 4: THE COMMANDER, LIEUTENANT-COLONEL N.L. MACKY

As conscription was not introduced in New Zealand until May 1940 the first members of 21 Battalion were all volunteers, coming mainly from Auckland and Northland, with additional men coming from the Waikato and Hauraki districts. Although officers and non-commissioned officers assembled in November and December for preliminary training, the battalion officially came into being on 12 January 1940.<sup>1</sup>

The commander of this battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel N.L. Macky, M.C. was a controversial figure. He had commenced his military career in the First World War as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, serving in Egypt and France, during which time he rose to the rank of captain and was awarded the Military Cross and was mentioned in despatches. Following his return to New Zealand in May 1919 he was placed on the Officers' Reserve until February 1926 when he was transferred to the Auckland (Countess of Ranfurly's Own) Regiment, rising through the ranks to that of Lieutenant-Colonel in June 1931, when he was appointed to command the regiment. In 1935 he was appointed an honorary *Aide-de-Camp* to the Governor-General. In 1937 he was promoted to colonel and for a brief period commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> New Zealand Infantry Brigade, before relinquishing that command and being transferred to the Colonel's List.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cody, pp.1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Statement of Service dated 27 October 1938 by Adjutant & Quartermaster-General, New Zealand Army, in Macky Papers, Kippenberger Military Archive and Research Library, Queen Elizabeth II Army Memorial Museum, Waiouru.



**Figure 2: Lieutenant-Colonel N.L. Macky**

from Cody, J.F. *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45*, 21  
*Battalion*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1953, facing p.50.

In private life Macky was a barrister and solicitor, and a partner in the prominent Auckland law firm of Russell, McVeagh, Macky and Barrowclough. The fourth named member of this partnership was Harold Eric Barrowclough, who had a distinguished career in the First World War, and as a Territorial Force officer while practicing law in Dunedin after the war rose to command the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade. He resigned this position when he moved to Auckland in 1930, where he became prominent in the pressure groups seeking increases in New Zealand's defences. When war broke out Barrowclough offered his services to the army and served in Greece and North Africa as commander of 6 Brigade<sup>3</sup>. He later commanded 3 New Zealand Division in the Pacific.

Macky was well-known in Auckland society and had been Commodore of the New Zealand Yacht Club.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, he also suffered from personality defects that made him unsuitable for his position of commander of the battalion. He was arrogant and patronising. He had been part of the 'Four Colonels' Revolt' of 1938, when four serving Territorial officers had publicly criticised the government's defence policy. During this time he wrote

'I am afraid I am too much of a Tory. To kowtow to a bootmaker as

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<sup>3</sup> I. McGibbon (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*, Auckland, 2000, p.53.

<sup>4</sup> Cody, p.2.

Minister of Defence was too much for me.’<sup>5</sup>

His comments on Greece and the Greeks in his personal *Report on Operations* are condescending, and show no understanding of a way of life different to the that of the society in which he himself lived.<sup>6</sup>

The ‘Four Colonel’s Revolt’ had its inception in a reorganisation of the country’s minute army undertaken by the Chief of the General Staff, Major-General J.E. Duigan. The army at that time consisted of 510 regulars and 7,112 territorials. There were many reasons for such low levels, including cuts on defence spending during the Depression.<sup>7</sup> One of these cuts involved the cessation of compulsory military training for young men in 1930, although the scheme had been running down throughout the previous decade because of financial constraints. In addition, a general mood had developed in the country of ‘opposition to militarism’. The speeches at Anzac Day services had swung from stirring tales of heroism at the end of World War I to clergymen’s sermons on the horrors of war by 1933, and anti-war sentiments were expressed in the *New Zealand School Journal* from 1929.<sup>8</sup> Those territorials (and regular soldiers) who ventured out in uniform experienced public derision.<sup>9</sup> It was an attempt to revive the flagging fortunes of the territorial force that led to Duigan’s reorganisation of it in 1937.

The main feature of this review was the substitution of the existing divisional structure by a brigade group with garrison troops at Auckland, Wellington and Lyttelton. This would result in the halving of the number infantry battalions to six, which would in turn result in redundancies amongst officers. Also, the review called for the size of the territorial force to be reduced from 12,500 to 9,000, which was not unreasonable in view of the fact that its membership had never approached the original number.<sup>10</sup> Declining interest in joining the territorials led to calls for the reintroduction of conscription, not only from members of the army, including territorials, but also from certain sectors of the civilian community. The philosophy of the Labour government totally opposed conscription and these calls met with a flat

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<sup>5</sup> Cit.W.D. McIntyre, *New Zealand Prepares for War*, Christchurch, 1988, p.184

<sup>6</sup> Macky, *Report*.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, p.23.

<sup>8</sup> Wood, pp.26-7.

<sup>9</sup> Harper, p.58

<sup>10</sup> McIntyre, pp.176-7.

refusal from the government.

It was against this background that 'the Four Colonels' Revolt' began. Colonel R.F. Gambrill commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade, after being informed of the reorganisation at a conference on 26 August 1937, wrote to the Minister of Defence, Frederick Jones, through army channels expressing his and his officers' opposition to the scheme, and calling for the reintroduction of 'a modified scheme of compulsory training'. A similar letter was received from Colonel A.S. Wilder, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mounted Rifles Brigade. Jones' replies reiterated the government's opposition to compulsion.<sup>11</sup>

Gambrill was not prepared to let the matter rest. On 17 September 1937<sup>12</sup> he wrote to Macky, who had lost the command of 1 Infantry Brigade and been posted to the Colonel's List at the beginning of that month,<sup>13</sup> asking if their duty as officers required them to override their normal responsibility to established army practice by making their concerns public. Macky, in the meantime, had written to Duigan, criticising the territorial force reorganisation. He had received a reply in which the Major-General stated that he had 'been unable to find any very constructive ideas in it.'<sup>14</sup> Events at this stage had not reached a crisis. Those officers who were opposed to the reorganisation and the government's defence policy had expressed their opposition in a proper form through official channels. However, during the next year the situation was to escalate.

Gambrill attended the Australian Anzac day celebrations in Sydney, and, as a consequence, missed the beginning of a senior officer's course at Trentham. Those attending this course included former brigade commanders who had lost their commands in the reorganisation and been posted to the Colonels List, one of whom was Macky. Before Gambrill arrived, he was scathingly criticised as 'disloyal' by Duigan.<sup>15</sup> Both Macky and Wilder were enraged by this, Macky implying that this was in part caused by the attack being made in Gambrill's absence. The meeting seems to have degenerated into a serious row about the merits or otherwise of the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.183

<sup>12</sup> McIntyre, p.183; L.H. Barber, 'The New Zealand Colonels' "Revolt", 1938', *New Zealand Law Journal*, 6 December 1977, p.498, dates this letter to 17 December 1937.

<sup>13</sup> Statement of Service, Macky Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Letter, Duigan to Macky, 24 August 1937, Macky Papers.

<sup>15</sup> McIntyre, p.184.

reorganisation.<sup>16</sup> After Gambrill arrived at the course on his return from Sydney, the dissident officers were asked to meet with Jones.<sup>17</sup> At the meeting Macky acted as spokesman and gave the minister a virtual ultimatum that he publicly reveal the parlous state of the army and issue an appeal for recruits. When Jones made a speech at Dargaville on 17 May in which he simply 'made a few references to the need for adequate defence',<sup>18</sup> the 'Four Colonels' issued a press statement setting out the sorry state of New Zealand's defences as they saw them. As a result they were transferred to the Retired List.

What, then, does this sorry saga tell us about Macky? His arrogance, as evidenced by his refusal 'to kowtow to a bootmaker as Minister of Defence', has already been noted. This arrogance was further expressed in a letter he wrote after being posted to the Retired List. In this he rails against 'our own brother officers' who refused to support the 'revolt', implying the superiority of those who took part in it. In the same letter he complains of not being treated as a 'gentleman', and that it was 'a little hard' that his 'punishment' should 'be handed out by a man who has never seen a shot fired in anger' [Jones].<sup>19</sup>

This hardly gives a picture of a man fitted for command. Both as a lawyer and as a soldier, Macky knew that he was breaking King's Regulations by publicly criticising government policy. Those 'brother officers' who shared his concerns but expressed them in a proper way were presenting a better example for the men they might command in a war which was now thought to be imminent. Macky's actions might be compared to those of Kippenberger, then a Territorial Force lieutenant-colonel commanding the Canterbury Regiment. His response to a speech by the Minister of Defence the previous year querying the need for a Territorial Force was to write to his officers requiring them rise above this and set a positive example to overcome any

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<sup>16</sup> Letter, Macky to A. Purvis, 13 July 1938, Macky Papers.

<sup>17</sup> McIntyre, p.184, states that this meeting was at the Minister's request; Barber, p.499, stated that 'the four colonels decided to make a unified personal approach to the minister....' McIntyre also states that this meeting took place on 6 June. It is suggested this is probably an error, 6 May being the correct date.

<sup>18</sup> Barber, p.499.

<sup>19</sup> Letter, Macky to A. Purvis, 13 July 1938, Macky Papers.



**Figure 3: 'Bumped Off!': Minhinick's Cartoon of the Four Colonel's Revolt**

from the *New Zealand Herald*, as reproduced in W.D. McIntyre, *New Zealand Prepares for War: Defence Policy 1919-39*, Christchurch, 1988, p.196

(The drastic purges of the Soviet Army's high command were then underway in the Soviet Union, although the black shirts and use of the Nazi salute and greeting are more representative of Nazi Germany.)

discouragement that might develop amongst their men as a result of this speech.<sup>20</sup>

Doubts might also be expressed about Macky's motives. He claimed to be motivated by concern for the country's welfare, and no doubt that this was at least in part true, but it is also noticeable that he and his fellow dissidents were prominent members of the opposition National Party.<sup>21</sup> Any embarrassment their stand would cause the government should not be discounted. After being placed on the Retired List Macky wrote to various contacts and officials of the British army seeking a position in that army if war should break out. This will be discussed further below but it may be stated here that it is noticeable that in these letters he refers to Duigan's actions being

<sup>20</sup> Harper, p.59.

<sup>21</sup> Barber, p.496.

‘comprehensible when we know that he only holds his appointment as a servant of the Labour Party’, and as his family were ‘acknowledged upholders of the conservative party in this country’ his motives ‘were ...construed by the Socialist Government as...political....’<sup>22</sup>

Macky seemed surprised at his dismissal. The four colonels had expected and welcomed the prospect of a court martial. They at least saw this as a way of further publicising the issue, and may have expected a public outcry would lead to their reinstatement. In this they were disappointed. After a flurry in the pro-National Party press, with which some of the dismissed officers had family connections,<sup>23</sup> the matter soon died away in the public consciousness. Macky, believing that he had no future with the New Zealand defence forces, cast about for an alternative, writing to various senior British officers, seeking their support for his being offered a position with the British forces. One of these was Major-General T.R. Eastwood, the commander of the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. This letter shows signs of Macky’s self pity, referring to ‘This position [of expected unemployment in the event of hostilities] after a life of study and service is rather devastating to one’s vanity.’<sup>24</sup> Eastwood’s reply is telling, stating that that in a discussion of Macky’s letter, Miles [?Brigadier R. Miles of the New Zealand Artillery] felt that in the event of hostilities he (Miles) felt that Macky would be offered a position and he should wait for that. Alternatively, Macky could write to the War Office offering his services to the Officers Emergency Reserve. However, Eastwood felt that the War Office would feel it ‘peculiar’ that a New Zealander should approach it rather than his own government.<sup>25</sup>

On 3 July 1939 Macky did approach the Officers Emergency Reserve at the War Office, offering his services in the event of an emergency. He probably did his cause no good by summarising the events of the previous year and implying that he was a victim of political prejudice.<sup>26</sup> The reply to this letter was not made until 6 October. Macky was advised that it was ‘not possible to offer [him] any employment for an officer of [his] standing at present.’ The time taken to reply to Macky’s offer suggests that the British were not keen to employ such a controversial officer, although the

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<sup>22</sup> Letters, Macky to Major-General T.R Eastwood, 22 November 1938; Macky to Officers Emergency Reserve, War Office, London, 3 July 1939, Macky Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Barber, p.496.

<sup>24</sup> Letter, Macky to Major-General T.R Eastwood, 22 November 1938, Macky Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Letter, Eastwood to Macky, 30 December 1938, Macky Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Letter, Macky to Officers Emergency Reserve, War Office, London, 3 July 1939, Macky Papers.

delay was explained on the need to seek advice from various sources. The letter also contained the dismissive comment 'that it is not possible to arrange for your passage to this country at government expense at present.'<sup>27</sup>

Despite this controversy, Macky was offered command of 21 Battalion, and on 24 January 1940 Duigan wrote to Freyberg, discussing the Second Echelon which had begun assembling. In this he commented that he 'was doubtful about Macky', suggesting that he was a grumbler, 'a bad thing in a CO, as it will permeate through the officers and ORs.'<sup>28</sup> After his recent experiences with Macky, Duigan might be expected to be prejudiced, but from the tone of Macky's correspondence mentioned above, and his writings after the Greek campaign to be discussed below, it can be suggested that there was an element of truth in Duigan's comment.

It is suggested then that Macky was a dubious choice to command 21 Battalion. He was vain and querulous. Vanity is not necessarily a defect in a soldier. Montgomery's was legendary, and although it caused problems in his relations with others it did not detract from his qualities as a fighting soldier<sup>29</sup>. Unfortunately Macky does not stand comparison with Montgomery. His qualities are better compared with another soldier renowned for his self-conceit, General George B. McClellan, a Union general in the American Civil War. He too believed himself to be a victim of government interference and prejudice, continually railing against his lot and condemning his superiors, including President Abraham Lincoln, for conspiring against him. Macky and McClellan probably shared, as well as inflated opinions of themselves, a certain lack of self-confidence, a surprising feature in men who seemed so sure of themselves. Macky's early thoughts about withdrawal at Platamon Castle and his conference at Tempe which 'decided' to escape over the hills (both to be discussed below) compare with McClellan's continual refusals to engage Confederate forces because of his fears (fed by exaggerated information supplied by his amateur 'intelligence officer' Allan Pinkerton, the founder of the private detective agency) that he was heavily outnumbered. Similarly, McClellan's continual complaints about his 'lack of support' by the Union government may be compared with Macky's comment in his later defence of actions in Greece that he 'realised that we would be left very much on our

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<sup>27</sup> Letter, Director of Mobilization, War Office to Macky, 6 October 1939, Macky Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Letter, Duigan to Freyberg., 24 January 1940, WAI 8/0, NA

<sup>29</sup> T.N. Dupuy, C. Jonson, & D.L. Bongard, *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military Biography*, Edison, NJ, rep.1995, pp.520-1

own if anything happened.’<sup>30</sup> Like Macky’s, McClellan’s military career ended when he was relieved of his command, in his case for not preventing the escape of General Robert E. Lee’s army following its mauling at the battle of Antietam.<sup>31</sup>

So it was with this commander, a man with a controversial background and a difficult personality, that 21 Battalion was to go into its first action, an action that was to earn it an unenviable reputation.

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<sup>30</sup> See page 57 below.

<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of McClellan’s career, see S.W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, New York, 1988.

## CHAPTER 5: MISMANAGEMENT AT PLATAMON TUNNEL AND PINIOS GORGE

21 Battalion arrived in Athens from Egypt on 31 March, and had to its disgust been appointed the garrison battalion for that city.<sup>1</sup> However, with the changing situation and the decision to fall back to the defence of the passes, Wilson had suggested at the conference held on 6 April that it be used to replace the company from 26 Battalion above the tunnel at Platamon, and allow that company to return to its unit.<sup>2</sup>

The defence of this area was of major importance. Axis forces advancing south from Bulgaria through Thrace and Macedonia, unless they went west through Edessa or Veria and then turned south, had only two routes through the steep country around Mt Olympus. These were through the Olympus Pass to the north of the mountain, or along the coast. At Platamon a spur of Mt Olympus ends in cliffs above the sea and the only access in 1941 was through a railway tunnel or over a rough track over a saddle on the spur of Mt Olympus. Holding this area would deny the Germans access to Larissa, the crucial road junction through which ran most of the major routes from the north on the east of the Pindos Mountains. The loss of Larissa would result in the forces at Servia and Olympus Passes, and Mackay Force further north, being cut off. (This crucial roading network is illustrated on Map 1 on page 34.) The importance of the position was emphasised in instructions received by Macky as the battalion's commander from Brigadier Hargest on 10 April, which required the battalion to

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<sup>1</sup> N.L. Macky, *Report on Operations 21 Bn in Greece (prepared after return to New Zealand and circulated privately)*, WAI 3/8, 21 Battalion – Cody Correspondence re Greece, NA.

<sup>2</sup> McClymont, p.173.

complete the defences commenced by 26 Battalion, and defend the position. There was to be 'NO retirement.'<sup>3</sup>

21 Battalion arrived at Platamon at about 1600 hours on 9 April. The move appears to have been poorly managed. Macky initially believed that he was going to Katerini, and was only informed on his arrival at Larissa that he was to take over the Platamon position.<sup>4</sup> There was no one to meet them on their arrival at Platamon, and Macky only learned of D Company, 26 Battalion' position from a batman who was at the railway station to collect his officer's laundry. It was only the next day that Macky received a message from Freyberg informing him that he was expected to hold that area, and somewhat surprisingly suggesting that he was not likely to face attack by armoured forces. It has been suggested that this originated from a belief by Wilson that the main German attack would fall on one of the passes to the north, although the original report selecting Platamon as a defensive position had suggested that it was passable to vehicles.<sup>5</sup> This message was amplified by the more detailed instructions referred to above from Hargest later in the day. The battalion was joined by a detachment of engineers from 19 Army Troops Company and A Troop from 27 Battery of 5 Field Regiment, both from Katerini, later that afternoon.

The battalion spent the next three days preparing defensive positions. A Company was positioned on the right towards the cliffs at the sea's edge in the vicinity of an old Frankish castle, an area known to the troops as Castle Hill. B Company was placed on their left but higher up the ridge in the front of a conical knoll labelled Hill 266. Further east along the spur of Mount Olympus, about 1500 feet above the sea, C Company was placed to defend the small village of Pandeimon. This was an important feature, as three rough tracks converged on it. The first of these provided access to the coast at the village of Platamon, the second ran along the ridge to join the track that provided access across the saddle in the rear of B Company's position, and the third led east to the village of Gonos. Thus, if the enemy could take Pandeimon he would have access not only to the flank and rear of B Company, but also to the whole position. 21 Battalion's D Company was held in reserve and placed south of Castle Hill, whilst the battalion Headquarters was situated behind A Company's

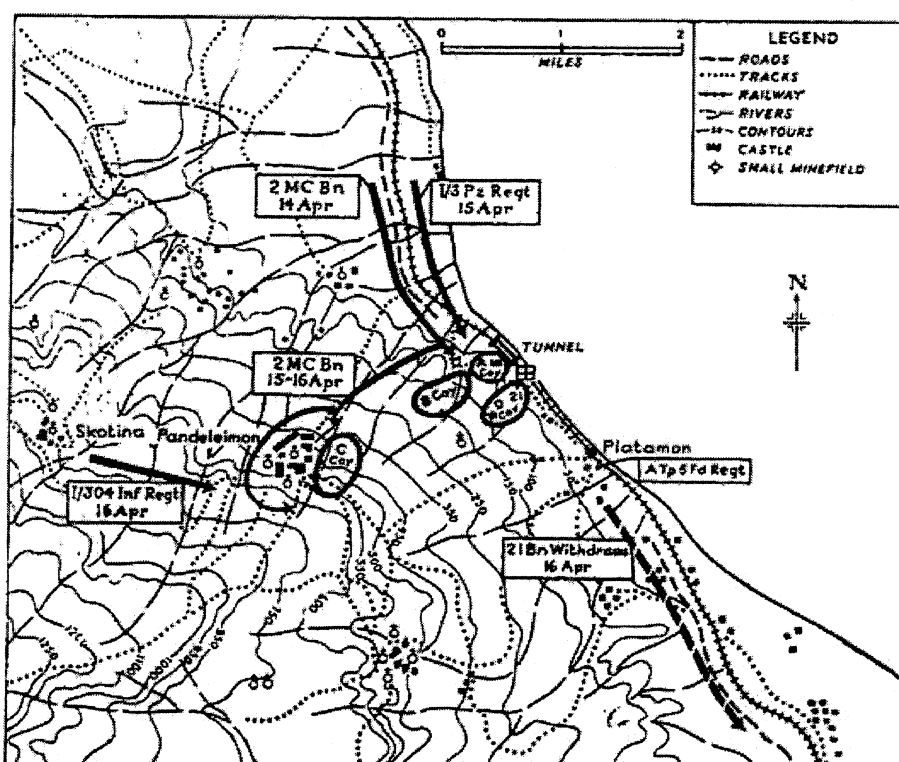
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<sup>3</sup> McClymont, p.175.

<sup>4</sup> Macky, *Report*.

<sup>5</sup> McClymont, pp.146, 174

position on Castle Hill There seems to be some doubt as to where the guns of A Troop 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment were. McClymont sites them as being 'about 500 yards to the south of the Platamon railway station',<sup>6</sup> whereas the Official History of the Divisional Artillery claims that they were 'sited in Headquarters Company area just south-east of the tunnel and the old Venetian fortress that capped the rock above it.'<sup>7</sup> It would seem unlikely that the guns would be sited at the station, at least one-and-a-half miles to the rear of the defended position and on the flat ground behind a ridge about 200 feet high.



**Map 5: 21 Battalion's Position, Platamon**

from J.F.Cody, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, 21 Battalion*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1953, p.41.

21 Battalion was holding a good defensive position. The sea on one side prevented any chance of being outflanked to the right, and it was thought that mountainous terrain on the left would reduce the chances of an outflanking move in that sector. From their lofty position on the ridge the New Zealanders had a good view across the open plain of any approaching enemy, and it was believed that the rocky terrain of the ridge was too steep to allow tanks to climb it. The only disadvantage was the wooded

<sup>6</sup> McClymont, p.176.

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, p.38.

nature of the ridge, which would give good cover to an infiltrating enemy.<sup>8</sup>

The force that was to oppose the battalion consisted of a battle group from the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Panzer Division*, under the command of Colonel Hermann Balck. Chapter 4 above has explained how, after the Germans had taken Salonika, *XVIII Corps* commanded by General Böhme, was given the task of advancing around Mt Olympus on Larissa with the intention of cutting off the Imperial forces, and how, to achieve this, he created two battle groups, one to attack through the Olympus Pass towards Elasson, and the second along the coast from Katerini. The coastal battle group consisted of *I Battalion 3 Panzer Regiment*, *II Battalion 304 Rifle Regiment*, and *2 Motorcycle Battalion*, plus an artillery detachment which included twelve 105mm. and four 150mm. guns, and some technical units.<sup>9</sup>

This German force did not reach the Platamon area until late on 14 April. 21 Battalion spent the intervening time completing the defences started by D Company of 26 Battalion, which withdrew to rejoin its parent unit on 12 April. Earlier on 14 April a Greek General had passed through the area by train and advised Macky that there were no Allied forces left to the north. Freyberg visited the area and discussed the situation with Macky, again stating that because of the terrain the most 21 Battalion was expected to face was attacks by infantry. In addition he explained that Wilson had decided to withdraw his forces to a shorter line at Thermopylae. He again reiterated the importance of holding the Platamon position until the withdrawal of other Imperial forces was complete.<sup>10</sup> There can be no doubt that Macky was aware of the importance of his position. Freyberg also authorised Macky to blow the demolitions which had been placed on the tracks and in the railway tunnel. An enemy patrol, which Macky described as consisting of 'Scout Cars and m.c.'s' [motor cyclists],<sup>11</sup> approached the northern foot of the spur at about 1820 hours. Macky thereupon ordered the demolitions which had been scheduled for 1900 hours to be blown forthwith, which was done at 1850 hours. The patrol was dispersed by New Zealand artillery fire.

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<sup>8</sup> McClymont, pp.175-6.

<sup>9</sup> [F.W.] von Mellenthin, 'The Balkan and Greek Campaigns, July 1940 to March, 1941', - WA II, 1, DA438/21/10 Greek Campaigns, NA; *The German Campaigns in the Balkans (Spring 1941)*, Department of the [US] Army Pamphlet No. 20-260, November 1953, p.98.

<sup>10</sup> McClymont, pp.244-5.

<sup>11</sup> N.L. Macky, 'APPENDIX C TO 21 BATTALION WAR DIARY - Narrative of actions at Platamon & Tempe Gorge by Lt Col Mackay [sic]' - WA II 1 DA54/1/16 21 Bn War Diary Apr 1941 NA.

The report from this patrol, which was from *2 Motorcycle Battalion*, led its battalion commander to deduce that the Platamon ridge was only lightly held in the vicinity of the castle, and he determined on an attack at dawn the next day (15 April). During the night the battalion prepared for its assault harassed by fire from 21 Battalion's guns. The enemy attack was a simple frontal move up the ridge towards the castle at battalion strength.<sup>12</sup> As it approached the castle ridge it came under heavy fire and suffered a large number of casualties. Troops on the right of the attack found themselves coming under fire from the right flank and were forced to reconnoitre to find out how far the New Zealand line extended. Some consternation was caused by the discovery that the ridge was occupied as far as Pandeliemon, about a mile inland.<sup>13</sup>

When the German battle group commander arrived on the scene about 1400 hours he ordered the withdrawal of *2 Motorcycle Battalion* and its regrouping preparatory to another attack, this time on the New Zealander's left flank at Pandeimon. *I/3 Panzer Regiment*, which had arrived at Platamon at 1800 hours after leaving Katerini at 1430 hours, was ordered to make a frontal assault at the same time up the ridge in the vicinity of the castle. This combined attack also failed. *I/3 Panzer Regiment's* report on its advance up the ridge stated that

The tanks attacking the ridge were forced by the fall of darkness and terrible going to halt by the foot of the castle. The light troops of the unit advanced to the obstacle just in front of the enemy positions but could go no further. Every vehicle shed its tracks.<sup>14</sup>

The advance by *2 Motor Cycle Battalion* ran into difficulties of co-ordination. The plan called for two companies to make a frontal attack the New Zealanders' position, while a third company made a flanking attack from higher up the ridge. Unfortunately for the attackers the two companies attacking frontally made contact with C Company before the outflanking force was in position. Although the Germans did manage to enter parts of the Company's position, they were driven out by a counter-attack. This stalemate remained overnight.

During the night of 15-16 April, Balck prepared his plans for an attack on 21

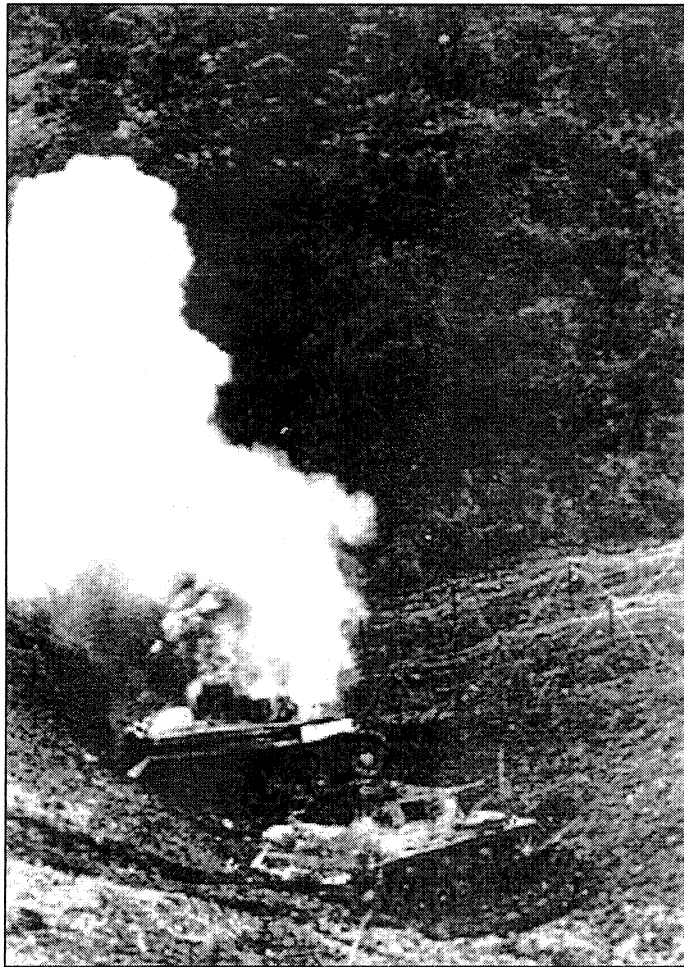
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<sup>12</sup> I. McL. Wards, 'Panzer Attack in Greece' in *The Other Side of the Hill*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1952, p.4.

<sup>13</sup> Wards, 'Panzer Attack', p.4.

<sup>14</sup> Report by 3 Pz Regt (2 Pz Div) from GMDS File 14749/27, DA438/21/4 Dawson translations War Diary 12 Army Greece, NA.

Battalion's positions for the next morning. He had been reinforced during the night by the arrival of *I/304 Infantry Regiment*, and he proposed to use this to support the *2<sup>nd</sup> Motorcycle Battalion* in a new attack on Pandeimon, whilst *I/3 Panzer Regiment* was to renew its frontal attack. Much to the German commander's displeasure, contact was lost during the night with the various components of this attack, preventing the two attacks to be co-ordinated.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 4: German tank burns during attack on ridge near Platamon**  
from *The German Campaigns in the Balkans (Spring 1941)*, [U.S.] Department of the Army  
Pamphlet No. 20-2660, 1953, p.97

Notwithstanding this, when *2 Motorcycle Battalion* attacked C Company at Pandeimon at dawn, after a period of bitter fighting it was joined by *I/304 Infantry*

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<sup>15</sup> Wards, 'Panzer Attack', p.5

*Regiment* and this reinforcement resulted in C Company being surrounded. Some men were taken prisoner but the majority were able to avoid capture. However, the area around Pandeleimon was now in German hands, giving the enemy access to a good track from which they could launch a flanking attack that might enable them to roll up the battalion's position.

In the meantime *I/3 Panzer Regiment's* attack up the ridge was proceeding slowly. The rough going caused serious delays for the tanks, with many of them losing their tracks or becoming bogged in soft ground, but eventually 'the right-hand company of tanks forced its way forward through scrub and over rocks, and in spite of the steepness of the hillside got to the top of the ridge.'<sup>16</sup> The ridge top had been under artillery bombardment, and parties of German infantry had taken advantage of the smoke this caused to infiltrate 21 Battalion's positions on their right. As well the New Zealanders' artillery shells were nearly exhausted. It was at this point, about 1000 hours, that Macky gave the order to withdraw, but he had clearly been considering it for some time, for following a report from C Company that it had been surrounded at 0900 hours, he advised his quartermaster, Captain G.H. Panckhurst, to prepare for a withdrawal.<sup>17</sup>

The whole situation at Platamon had been causing concern at ANZAC Corps Headquarters since the preceding afternoon. Brigadier S.F. Rowell of the Australian Army, the Brigadier General Staff at Corps Headquarters, has expressed his belief that Macky was unsure of what to do if he was not able to sustain the position. He has described what he called 'a string of messages on the radio telephone rather like a ball-to-ball description of a cricket match' arriving at Corps Headquarters on the evening of 15 April which led him to get the consent of Blamey to send the Commander, Corps Royal Artillery, Brigadier Cyril Clowes, to assess the situation and to take any action he thought necessary. Macky was advised that Clowes was on his way and to stick it out.<sup>18</sup> Some consternation was raised in Headquarters when a message was received about 1015 hours that 21 Battalion was withdrawing and the radio link was being closed down.

Why, then, was 21 Battalion unable to hold the Platamon ridge against the German

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<sup>16</sup> Report by 3 Pz Regt.

<sup>17</sup> McClymont, p.249.

<sup>18</sup> S.F. Rowell, *Full Circle*, Melbourne, 1974, p.73.

attack? The first reason must be the poor appreciation of the situation by W Force Headquarters. No evidence has come to light as to the origin of Freyberg's statement to Macky that it was not expected that tanks would be used against him, but that belief meant that 21 Battalion was not equipped to deal with tanks when they were in fact introduced into the action. The only anti-tank weapon the battalion had was the ineffective Boyes Anti-Tank Rifle, which Macky reported 'only raised sparks when they hit.'<sup>19</sup> A few properly sited anti-tank guns concealed amongst the rocks would have been able to impede the advance of enemy tanks, as the difficult terrain gave them limited lines of advance, and even the somewhat limited effectiveness of the 2-pounder gun would have been off set by the fact that the ranges would have been so short, especially since the attacking tanks were Panzer Mark IIs which 'suffered from very thin armour, which offered minimal protection in battle....'<sup>20</sup>

A second disadvantage suffered by 21 Battalion at Platamon was the size of the line that they had to defend. C Company position at Pandeimon was some 1500 feet up the mountain, and it took one-and-a-half hours to traverse from one end of the battalion's line to the other.<sup>21</sup> There were substantial gaps between the companies' positions, which gave the German forces opportunities to infiltrate between them.

Related to this problem of the gaps in the battalion's front was a third reason for it being driven from the ridge, this being the tactics adopted. The Germans commented that the British forces in Greece did little patrolling at night.<sup>22</sup> German forces spent the night of 15-16 April preparing for the attack of the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, and sitting 'outside the village of Pandeimon waiting to attack again at first light.'<sup>23</sup> Aggressive fighting patrolling at night may well have resulted in the Germans' preparations being disrupted.

This lack of aggression points towards what may have been a fourth reason for the New Zealanders being pushed off the ridge so quickly, this being an apparent hint of defeatism in their commanding officer. It had been made abundantly clear to Macky the importance of holding the position until other forces could clear Larissa, and the suspicion is that more effort could have been put into defending it. Casualties were

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<sup>19</sup> Macky, APPENDIX C.

<sup>20</sup> B. Carruthers, *German Tanks At War*, London, 2000, p 20.

<sup>21</sup> Macky, APPENDIX C.

<sup>22</sup> Pamphlet 20-260, p.114-5.

<sup>23</sup> McClymont, p.247.

light, totalling only 36.<sup>24</sup> C Company, in extricating itself from Pandeimon, had conducted a fighting withdrawal down the ridge to rejoin the rest of the battalion. This is not to suggest that the position could have been held indefinitely. Once the enemy gained the crest they must eventually overwhelm it, if only by sheer weight of numbers, but before this situation had occurred, as early as 0900 hours, Macky had been thinking of withdrawal. The report of *3 Panzer Regiment* on this action comments on the large number of stores abandoned in the withdrawal, 'signs of a hasty panic-stricken flight.'<sup>25</sup>

The Germans were in no position to pursue. The terrain was so difficult that it was to be another day before they could get sufficient tanks for a pursuit across the ridge, and their infantry were in no condition to advance immediately. They had suffered heavy casualties, Balck reporting at the end of the operation '149 wounded in hospital at Katerini and a large number more still with the forward troops....'<sup>26</sup> Macky had initially thought of forming a new defensive line at a bridge about a mile south of Platamon Station, but reconsidered this, and continued the retreat to the northern end of Pinios Gorge, where he met up with Brigadier Clowes, the officer sent up by ANZAC Corps Headquarters to assess the situation. To Clowes, Macky expressed his intention of blowing demolitions in the Pinios Gorge, and, trusting in them to create sufficient delays, press on to Lamia, some 50 miles to the rear.<sup>27</sup> The desire to retreat as far as Lamia can be seen as a further expression of Macky's defeatist attitude. Such a retreat would have been disastrous, uncovering the vital road junction at Larissa, and Clowes ordered him to remain and defend the gorge. After some discussion it was decided that an attempt to hold the northern end of the gorge would be pointless, as the enemy could bypass this position by proceeding through the hills on the north bank of the river, and crossing the river at Tempe village at the southern end of the gorge, where there was a railway bridge. Various tracks which the Germans would be able to use linked the villages on the northern side of the river.

Ewer in his discussion of this incident makes no reference to Macky's desire to retreat as far as Lamia, and implies that after Macky and Clowes met they merely

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<sup>24</sup> Cody, *21 Battalion*, p.59.

<sup>25</sup> Report by 3 Pz Regt (2 Pz Div) from GMDS File 14749/27 - DA438/21/4 Dawson translations War Diary 12 Army Greece, NA.

<sup>26</sup> Cit. Wards, 'Panzer Attack', p.6.

<sup>27</sup> Rowell, p.74.

discussed the situation and reached the decision to make a stand at the southern end of the gorge, rather than the northern.<sup>28</sup> Rowell, on the other hand, is explicit that it was only after Clowes *ordered* Macky to hold the gorge that this decision was reached.<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly the battalion moved through the gorge to the vicinity of Tempe at its southern exit. The road through the gorge lay on the southern bank, and there was no bridge across the Pinios River at the northern end, all crossings being made by a ferry. It was thought that this would not support the heavy equipment, so this was driven along the railway line on the northern bank, and across the railway bridge at Tempe, where the open deck of the bridge was filled in with some lengths of timber found in the locality. The railway line was then blocked by the simple expedient of towing a railway wagon into a tunnel in the middle of the gorge and blowing it up.

On the south bank, after all troops had crossed the river the ferry was sunk, and the battalion proceeded to Tempe, blowing two demolitions in the road as they went. However, these were not seen as major obstacles to the German advance. No. 10 Platoon was left to cover the last demolition, some three miles east of the village. As well the railway bridge was blown up at 2000 hours.

The concern at Corps Headquarters over the situation at Platamon and Pinios Gorge had been such that it had been decided to reinforce 21 Battalion. Accordingly, late on the afternoon of 16 April, it was joined by the Australian 2/2 Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel F.O Chilton, at the Tempe position, where it was later joined by the Australian 2/3 Battalion, the New Zealand 26 Battery of the 4 Field Regiment and L Troop of the 33 Anti-Tank Regiment.

On the morning of 17 April a conference between Macky, Chilton, Lieutenant-Colonel G.B. Parkinson, the commander of 4 Field Regiment, and the commanders of the various artillery units was held to plan the defence of the area. During this conference the question of command of the forces in the area arose, with Macky proposing himself as commander. Chilton refused 'in view of my instructions',<sup>30</sup> to accept this. *En route* to Tempe Chilton had been briefed by Rowell at Corps Headquarters, where he had been told that signals 'of a disquieting nature' had been

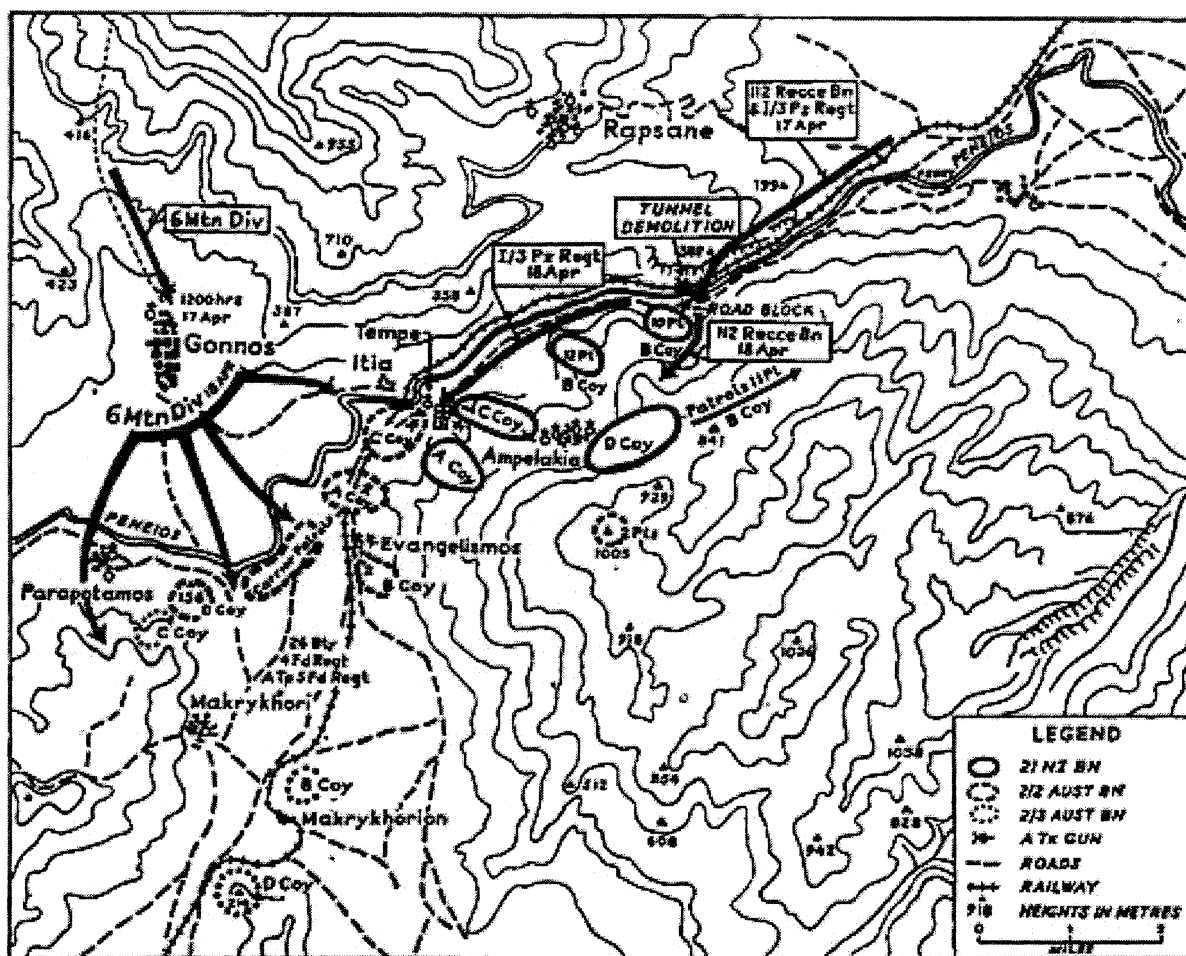
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<sup>28</sup> Ewer, p.175.

<sup>29</sup> Rowell, p.74.

<sup>30</sup> Report on Operations of 2/2 Aust. Inf. Bn at Pinios Gorge, WA II, Series 2, Microfilm 3850, NA.

received from 21 Battalion at Platamon, and ordered to 'move to the Pinios area and to take such steps as [he] thought best to hold that approach...for three or four days.' Proceeding on to Tempe he met Clowes on the road who told him he did not know what action Macky intended to take.<sup>31</sup> Reading between the lines of an official report one is left with the impression that both Rowell at Corps Headquarters and Clowes who had met him had little confidence in Macky and advised Chilton to be wary of him. The question of command was resolved later that day when Brigadier A.S. Allen of the Australian 16 Infantry Brigade arrived and took command of the force.



**Map 6: Pinios Gorge Positions, 17-18 April 1941**

from J.F.Cody, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, 21 Battalion*, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1953, p.59.

In the meantime those already at Tempe had positioned their forces to defend the exit from the gorge. 21 Battalion was placed along the ridges on the south side of the

<sup>31</sup> Report on Operations of 2/2 Aust. Inf. Bn at Pinios Gorge, WA II, Series 2, Microfilm 3850, NA.

river from the demolition guarded by 10 Platoon to just south of the village, with D Company placed high up on the side of Mount Ossa at the village of Ambelakia. 2/2 battalion was deployed south of Tempe and along the river bank to the west to guard against any German attempts to cross the river from the village of Gonnos on the northern bank.

The two commanders had some differences about the siting of their anti-tank guns. Macky did not want them situated in the gorge itself but 'deployed so as to catch the tanks debouching therefrom.'<sup>32</sup> Chilton preferred to have them placed within the gorge where they would be able to produce a harassing fire on the panzers as they proceeded through it. As these weapons had been placed under Chilton's command,<sup>33</sup> his wishes prevailed.

Brigadier Allen arrived to take command about 1300 hours on 17 April. The Australian 2/2 Battalion arrived the same afternoon and Allen placed its C and D Companies further to the west on high ground overlooking the village of Parapotamos. This left a significant gap estimated at 3000 yards to the troops clustered around the village of Tempe and the mouth of the gorge. It was intended to cover this gap with Bren carriers and a patrol one platoon strong from D Company. The balance of the battalion was positioned south of Tempe along the road to Larissa. In addition three guns of the Australian 2/1 Anti-Tank Regiment were positioned amongst the Australian companies placed along the road, and the guns of A Troop 5 Field Regiment which had arrived from Platamon were positioned in a field south of Evangelismos.

The Germans did not rejoin contact with the Australasian forces until 18 April. This delay, vital to allow the Imperial forces to prepare position at the southern end of the gorge, resulted mainly from the difficulty the Germans were having in moving the forces over the Platamon saddle. Although the New Zealanders had been unhappy with the demolition they had fired in the tunnel at Platamon, this in fact had been so successful that rocks were still falling from the roof of the tunnel several days later. An attempt to move tanks along the narrow strip coastal land between the cliffs and the sea had proved impossible. The Germans therefore had no option but to move

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<sup>32</sup> Macky, *Report on Operations*.

<sup>33</sup> Report on Operations of 2/2 Aust. Inf. Bn at Pinios Gorge, WA II, Series 2, Microfilm 3850, NA.

their tanks over the ridge by the tracks that had proved so difficult during the attack on the New Zealand positions during the fighting. This required a major effort by their engineers to improve the tracks, including blasting a route through the rocky outcrops. Even after this the going was so tough that tanks had to be towed over the ridge, and by 1100 hours on 17 April only some twenty-five to thirty tanks had made it across.

The Germans were still anxious to take Larissa to cut off Imperial forces to the north. Accordingly, *6 Mountain Division* was ordered to advance over the foothills of Mount Olympus north of the Pinios River to Gonnos with 'the intention of attacking the Tempe hills from the flank and opening the road for tanks.'<sup>34</sup>

While the *Division* was making this advance the remainder of *Battle Group 2* advanced to the northern end of Pinios Gorge. Troops from *112 Reconnaissance Unit*, unable to cross the river because of the sunken ferry carried on along the railway line until they reached the demolition at the tunnel.<sup>35</sup> Here they came under fire from 10 Platoon B Company holding the demolition on the southern bank. By now the first tank of *I/3 Panzer Regiment* following the railway line on the north bank had reached the scene and its fire forced 10 Platoon to find cover further up the gorge. They had sought artillery support but radio transmission difficulties in the narrow gorge meant that this was not forthcoming until 1930 hours, when communications were established using the telephone in the A Company Observation Post. The platoon was withdrawn shortly after dusk, having in the meantime been involved in a fire-fight with the enemy, supported by a platoon from *2/2 Battalion* which had been patrolling in the gorge. Artillery fire during the night prevented any enemy advances in the gorge, and the *3 Panzer Regiment's* diarist reported that 'The MO had a lot of work to do, for there were dead and wounded on both sides of the Pinios.'<sup>36</sup>

Prior to this, however, the Germans had managed to move some five tanks across the river onto the south bank. After exploring the banks and swimming the river a shallow place was found which seemed to offer a crossing place. One tank, with the driver sitting in water up to his waist, managed to ford the river, and others followed. Two were lost when their drivers missed the ford. The five survivors headed through

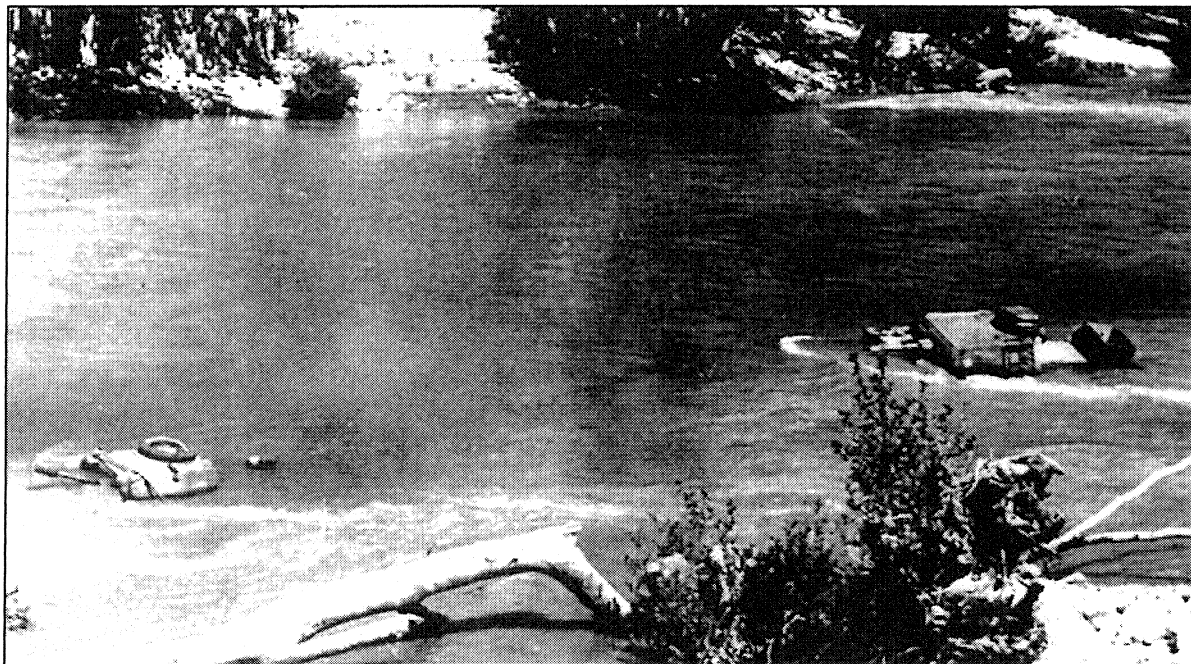
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<sup>34</sup> *6 Mtn Div War Diary* (Greece and Crete) (from GMDS file 11506/1) - DA438/21/4 Dawson translations War Diary 12 Army Greece, NA.

<sup>35</sup> Report by *3 Pz Regt.*

<sup>36</sup> Report by *3 Pz Regt.*

the gorge where three more were lost in swampy ground trying to bypass one of the



**Figure 5: German tanks sunk during Pinios River crossing**  
from *The German Campaigns in the Balkans (Spring 1941)*, [U.S.] Department of the Army  
Pamphlet No. 20-2660, 1953, p.101.

demolitions.

By the morning of 18 April the advance elements of *6 Mountain Division* had reached Gonnos, from where they could be seen by the Imperial troops on the south bank. As well, elements of *112 Reconnaissance Unit* made a further attempt to advance along the northern bank of the river towards Itia and Gonnos from the demolitions on the railway line. *21 Battalion* engaged these forces with rifle, mortar and artillery fire. As a result, with their attention fixed across the river, they did not realise that there were enemy forces on the south bank. As well as six more tanks, the Germans had brought over infantry from *304 Regiment* which was used to repair the demolitions on the road. By midday they were in a position to advance on the southern end of the gorge with a force composed of six tanks, two platoons from *7/304 Regiment*,<sup>37</sup> and two detachments from *8/800 Brandenburg Regiment*.

The siting of the defences in the gorge was a mistake as Macky himself was to

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<sup>37</sup> But see McClymont, p.324, footnote 2.

acknowledge.<sup>38</sup> The road blocks should have been sited where they could be observed and defended. Once 10 Platoon had withdrawn from the demolition it was covering the Germans were free to repair it without hindrance, and the gorge was so narrow that, even if it had been observed, it was almost impossible to call down artillery fire on to it.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the two anti-tank guns which Chilton had insisted be placed in defile at the end of the gorge adjacent to the track which led up to Ambelakia were poorly positioned. The ridges which rose on either side of them limited their field of fire, and they could only attack approaching armour while it was crossing the mouth of the defile. Once their position was discovered they were trapped and vulnerable to fire from the entrance of their little valley. These errors were to be proved critical as the afternoon unfolded.

In the meantime German infantry had been assembling in Gonnos. This consisted of *143 Mountain Regiment*, less *II Battalion*, supported by artillery from *I/118 Mountain Artillery Regiment*. The plan of attack for this force envisaged a feint attack by *I/113 Mountain Regiment* across the Pinios River into the gap between A and D Companies of *2/2 Battalion*, whilst *III/143 Mountain Regiment* crossed the river to the west of Parapotamos and took C and D Companies of *2/2 Battalion* in their left flank. To ensure the capture of the whole of Allen Force *2 Company* was to cross the river further to the west and attempt to block the road to Larissa, so destroying the Force's line of retreat.

German troops assembling on the river bank south of Gonnos for the feint attacks were observed by their opponents on the other bank and came under heavy fire. However, although they had been seen moving down to the river, German troops had succeeded crossing the river unobserved to the west of Parapotamos. When they were eventually noticed around Parapotamos Bren carriers were sent to investigate and fighting developed. At the same time, worried by the build-up of enemy troops on the northern bank of the river south of Gonnos, Chilton asked Macky for the use of his Bren carriers to repel an anticipated attack. As these troops were in fact the decoys of the feint attack, the expected assault did not occur, but this did mean that with the poor communications existing at the time, *21 Battalion* had lost control of its carriers.

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<sup>38</sup> Letter, Macky to one of the official historians, I. McL. Wards, 9 February 1954 -WA II 3/7 Campaign in Greece Correspondence File, NA

<sup>39</sup> Macky, *Report on Operations*.

The Germans continued to pass troops across the river in the Parapotamos area and pressure the Australians in that locality. At this time a misunderstanding occurred which was to materially affect the outcome of the action. During the afternoon Freyberg visited Allen's Headquarters and spoke by telephone to Chilton. After studying the situation he came to the conclusion that the Tempe position could not be held and issued orders for contact with the enemy to be broken at nightfall and the force to make a fighting withdrawal, delaying the enemy's advance on Larissa. As a result orders were issued to the Australian troops on the left in the vicinity of Parapotamos by Lieutenant-Colonel D.J. Lamb of 2/3 Battalion that C Company of that battalion should withdraw when the neighbouring D Company 2/2 Battalion did. The two company commanders were confused by these orders, and misunderstood them to require an immediate retirement. By so withdrawing they left the left flank open.

The situation was also deteriorating on the right. The German force in the gorge was continuing to advance, and to clear the way for it, those forces of *I/143 Mountain Regiment* detailed to make feint attacks on north bank of the river opposite Evangelismos were instructed to cross the river and clear the way to allow the armoured forces in the gorge to advance. Under heavy small arms and artillery fire they succeeded in crossing the river and about 1430 hours began to advance on Evangelismos from the west. Half-an-hour later the tanks and troops in the gorge began to advance on Tempe. Under the combined pressure of the Germans crossing the river and emerging from the gorge 21 Battalion began to crumple. The troops holding the ridges about Tempe came under heavy fire from the tanks, and from mountain artillery and mortars on the northern bank and eventually began to fall back into the hills to the east or south along the Larissa road. During the morning Macky had held a conference with his company commanders, during which he informed them of the German advances on the Australian positions, and ordered that 'if completely cut off and overwhelmed those left would make out in small parties to Volos.'<sup>40</sup>

When the tanks very cautiously advanced out of the gorge towards Tempe C Company 21 Battalion, positioned on the last ridge at the end of the gorge, came under attack. 14 and 15 Platoons were able to escape under the ridge, but 13 Platoon was

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<sup>40</sup> Macky, *Report on Operations*.

trapped in shallow weapon pits and forced to surrender.

The poor siting of the artillery now began to have an effect. The anti-tanks guns of L Troop, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment on the outskirts of Tempe were so sited that one gun's fire was so restricted by the adjacent ridge that the approaching tanks were able to get within thirty yards of it before they could be fired upon. However, it was able to get off twenty-eight shots and set fire to two tanks before the crew was forced to flee from approaching infantry. The second gun in this position was destroyed by enemy fire from across the river. The other two guns never came into action, one of them at least being knocked out by the enemy fire from across the river,<sup>41</sup> but there is some controversy about the operation of one of these guns. Chilton's report on the action states when he ordered C Company 2/2 Battalion to warn one of these guns positioned in its area of the approaching tanks he received a report that the crew had disabled the gun and retreated. This is disputed by the Divisional Artillery's official historian, who suggests that disparaging remarks by the Australians and New Zealanders about each other's performances, where they are able to be checked, are the results of misunderstanding, stating that poor communications led to confusion.<sup>42</sup>

The German advance from the west was now threatening the position of A Company 21 Battalion and the adjoining Australian troops on the Larissa road between Tempe and Evangelismos. Fortunately the German commander was slow to deploy and this gave those troops a chance to disperse. Some escaped over the ridges and others were taken out by motor transport which had been assembled on the road south of Evangelismos.

Why then had the Germans been able to break through the defences at the southern end of Pinios Gorge so easily? The Editor-in-Chief of the New Zealand official histories, Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, had no doubts when he wrote to one of the histories' authors in 1954, expressing the belief that 'It is a classic example of bad dispositions and a bad order...causing a fiasco.'<sup>43</sup>

All aspects of the positioning of the defences may be criticised, commencing with the demolitions in the gorge itself. These were of vital importance in slowing the

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<sup>41</sup> Murphy, pp.61-2.

<sup>42</sup> Murphy, p.62, footnote 58.

<sup>43</sup> Letter, Kippenberger to J.L. Scoullar, 21 January 1954 - WA II 11/7 R. Walker's Notes, NA

German advance. There was no other way of getting tanks forward. The terrain to the north of the river was passable only by infantry moving on foot with mule transport. The destruction of the railway tunnel in the gorge was so successful that it ensured that tanks could not advance along the north bank of the river on the railway line, and even if they had been able to, a determined defence would have made it unlikely that they would have been able to cross the river in the vicinity of Tempe, or west of the village, after the railway bridge had been blown. This made it essential to deny tanks access along the road on the south bank, and yet the not very substantial demolitions were not defended. In fact, 10 Platoon was withdrawn from the forward demolition on the evening of 18 April on the grounds that the men were exhausted after three days without rest.<sup>44</sup> No attempt was made to replace the platoon. This allowed the Germans to repair the road block at their leisure. A determined defence in this area, especially if artillery support could have been supplied, should have held up the enemy for a significant time. It should be remembered that the Pinios Gorge action was only a delaying action. Its purpose was to hold up the Germans only long enough to allow the rest of W Force to clear Larissa, and by not taking this opportunity to delay the enemy, Macky was not only jeopardising this purpose, but also risking allowing the German tanks to attack his positions outside the gorge and inflict casualties on his men. Allied to this matter of poor demolitions and their defence was the poor positioning of the artillery discussed above.

There are also suggestions of poor command. Macky's performance has been questioned throughout this discussion. It appears, as mentioned above, that he had a defeatist attitude. To suggest as early as he did on the morning of the attack on Tempe village that the battalion should escape to Volos in small parties was at best premature. Although the fighting was not proceeding well, with the Germans establishing themselves on the south bank of the river about Parapotamos, the tanks had still not cleared the gorge, and it may be thought that more determined resistance could have delayed the enemy advance. Also, in his exculpatory *Report on Operations*, Macky states that at that conference 'we decided' to escape over the hills, implying that it was a shared decision. In addition, throughout the report, Macky complains of the lack of support he received from his superiors. Speaking of the abandonment of the Tempe

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<sup>44</sup> Cody, *21 Battalion*, p.66.

position he comments

We had felt very much on our own since we had detrained at Platamon. Now there was no doubt about it....Very early at Platamon I realised that we would be left very much on our own if anything happened.<sup>45</sup>

None of this creates an impression of a confident commander. Any decision to escape was Macky's responsibility, and if his words are to be taken exactly, he either abdicated this responsibility to a group decision, or he was trying in the report to shift any blame from himself to the group. Later in the war, after Macky had been sent back to New Zealand, Brigadier Barrowclough, a partner in Macky's law firm, wrote to the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Puttick, seeking command of a battalion in New Zealand for Macky:

From Macky's personal point of view...he is at the moment regarded as an officer who was sent back from Egypt as unfitted for his command. I don't think that he deserves that....He was sent back chiefly on the score of age. I agree he is too old to be a bn cmd in the ME....<sup>46</sup>

Macky at the time of the Platamon-Pinios Gorge action was fifty years old. At the same time Freyberg was fifty-two, Inglis forty-seven, and Hargest fifty. It is suggested that Macky's age alone, therefore, would not disqualify him from command, especially as the latter two, both of dubious competency, retained theirs. A more telling statement may lie in the comment of an Australian officer who was at Tempe that Macky was in 'a blue funk'.<sup>47</sup>

If Macky's command was inadequate, it may be that his uncertainties extended to his battalion. Certainly the Australians were critical of the New Zealanders' performance, feeling they 'had tended to panic and had not held on long enough.'<sup>48</sup> The reports of the commanders of 2/2 and 2/3 Battalions both complain in particular that the New Zealand artillery support was wanting, and that New Zealand units, including 21 Battalion Headquarters, withdrew without informing the Australians that they were doing so.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Macky, Report on Operations.

<sup>46</sup> Letter, Barrowclough to Puttick, 7 June 1941 – PERS Puttick Series 5/7, NA.

<sup>47</sup> Cit. Harper, p.82.

<sup>48</sup> D.M. Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945*, Canberra, 1982, p.98.

<sup>49</sup> Reports on Operations of 2/2 & 2/3 Aust. Inf. Bns at Pinios Gorge, WA II, Series 2, Microfilm 3850, NA.

McClymont skirts around the controversial issues of these actions. He does not mention the fact that the Germans thought they had found evidence of 'a hasty panic-stricken flight' at Platamon Castle, and does not explore the possibility of whether a stronger defence or fighting withdrawal could have been mounted there. Similarly, there is no discussion of Macky's performance at Pinios Gorge. It is acknowledged that the demolitions and dispositions in the gorge itself were inadequate, and that Macky may have been premature in his plans for the flight of the battalion's troops over the hills to Volos, but no deeper analysis is undertaken. There can be no doubt that the official historians were aware of the problems. One of those assisting McClymont in the preparation of the volume on Greece wrote to him expressing the opinion that 'The dispositions [in the action] were bloody', but nowhere in the published work is this theory developed.<sup>50</sup> We are left then with the conclusion that the official historians were concerned to preserve the sensitivities and protect the reputations of the survivors of the action.

Ewer, who relies so uncritically on the official histories, perforce presents a similar picture. Nowhere in his discussion of the Platamon and Pinios Gorge actions does he cite an original New Zealand document, depending solely on various volumes of the official histories for his narrative.

Subsequent reporting of these actions has aroused controversy. One writer, Eric Halstead, originally contracted to write the official history of 21 Battalion claimed that he had been replaced because he was enquiring too deeply into the events at Pinios Gorge,<sup>51</sup> and Brigadier Allen expressed his resentment of the official history's report on the action, claiming to know what really happened because 'I was there'.<sup>52</sup> How, then, may the performance of the battalion and its commander be assessed?

21 Battalion and its commanding officer had the same background as the other New Zealand battalions in Greece. It was a new unit that had not been in action before, and most of its men, with the exception of those who had served in the previous World War, had never been under fire. The same statement could be applied to all the other units. It would seem, therefore, that an examination of how other New Zealand units

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<sup>50</sup> Letter, I.McL. Wards to McClymont, 25 February 1953 – WA II, 3/7, Correspondence File 21 Battalion Campaign in Greece, NA.

<sup>51</sup> Correspondence between E.H. Halstead, M.C. Fairbrother (Associate Editor, War History Branch), February-March 1948 – File IA 181/7/21 NA.

<sup>52</sup> McLeod, p.33.

met the challenge of their first action could provide a benchmark against which Macky and his battalion's performances may be evaluated. One body whose experiences were somewhat similar to those of 21 Battalion's was its sister battalion, Number 22, which saw action at the delaying action in the Olympus Pass. This action took place at the same time as those at Platamon and Pinios Gorge, and involved 22 Battalion as part of a larger force fighting a defensive delaying action against a greater enemy force which included tanks.

22 Battalion was part of 5 Brigade which was charged with the defence of the Olympus Pass until forces further north could withdraw past its western end at Elevation. The Brigade was stationed across the entrance of the Pass, with 22 Battalion in the centre astride the road with 28 (Maori) Battalion on the slopes on its left and 23 Battalion deployed on the lower slopes of Mount Olympus on its right. The battalion had some days to prepare its position which were spread across very rough terrain. The country to its front was broken and crossed with numerous ravines and water courses. These, together with the cover of thick scrub, provided ideal conditions for enemy infiltration. The road approaching from Katerini to the north-west was impeded by demolitions.<sup>53</sup>

About 2300 hours on Monday 14 April the battalion had its first contact with the enemy when a group of motorcyclists with their headlights on approached from the direction of Katerini. A burst of fire from 11 Platoon halted their approach and in the morning five wrecked motorcycles were seen on the road. The same evening the Brigade was informed that it would be withdrawing the following night.<sup>54</sup>

The order to withdraw was countermanded the following day, but not before 22 Battalion had destroyed quite a bit of its equipment. However, there was no approach from the enemy apart from some at times quite intensive shelling.

The German attack came on 16 April, commencing with shelling during which the battalion suffered its first fatal casualty. This was followed by an attack led by tanks and supporting vehicles. Heavy artillery and mortar fire broke up this attack, but about 0700 hours five tanks were able to approach within 400 yards of 11 Platoon and open fire. Although sustaining casualties the men held their position and the tanks

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<sup>53</sup> J. Henderson, *New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: 22 Battalion*, Wellington, 1958, pp.10-1.

<sup>54</sup> McClymont, p.261.

eventually withdrew, harassed by indirect artillery fire from 25 pounder howitzers situated in the rear of the battalion's position.<sup>55</sup>

At 0840 hours a new attack was launched against the battalion's position, this time by tanks supported by infantry. Again the attack was broken up, mainly by artillery fire, although one truck was destroyed by a shot from a Boys anti-tank rifle.<sup>56</sup>

A second tank attack was launched on 11 Platoon's position at 0918 hours. The leading tank became trapped in a demolition, and two following tanks, unable to get past it, continued to shell the platoon. The platoon's forward post had to be abandoned in the face of this fire as

'their post was virtually shot away from underneath them: tanks had fired at the weapon pit until the soil below the parapet collapsed.'<sup>57</sup>

Further probing attacks throughout the day at various points along the battalion's front were all successfully resisted, and when enemy activity died down at nightfall the battalion was able to make its planned withdrawal.

We see here a distinct contrast between the performances of 21 and 22 Battalions. It is difficult to be sure if the attacks against 22 Battalion were as strong as those against 21 Battalion, but it would seem that 22 Battalion did come under an appreciable amount of pressure which it was able to resist successfully. Certainly it suffered more casualties than 21 Battalion. From a probably incomplete list in the battalion's official history it is possible to count 6 killed and 11 wounded.<sup>58</sup> How, then, can we account for this difference in the performance of the two units?

Turning first to the two positions defended we can say that the position at Olympus Pass was better prepared than that at Pinios Gorge. To some extent this is a function of the terrain and outside the control of the defending forces, but the defences at the Pass showed a better appreciation of the use of terrain. The demolitions on the approaches to the defensive line were so sited that they were under direct observation of the defenders, and at critical times observed fire could be employed to break up an enemy attack. Also, a sniper was able to prevent German pioneers from attempting to

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<sup>55</sup> Henderson, pp.19-20

<sup>56</sup> Henderson, p.20.

<sup>57</sup> Henderson, p.21.

<sup>58</sup> Henderson, pp.18-21

repair demolitions.<sup>59</sup> The contrast with the situation at Pinios Gorge is obvious. The main demolition there was so positioned that it could not be observed and the unit defending it was withdrawn before there was any serious German advance on it. This left the enemy free to make repairs at their leisure, and the Imperial troops at the mouth of the gorge were so unaware of this that they were taken by surprise when enemy tanks appeared at their position. Furthermore, the position of the demolition in the middle of the gorge was such that even if it had been possible to monitor it the narrow walls of the gorge made it unlikely that artillery fire could have been called down onto it.

Perhaps one of the keys to understanding the differences between the two units was the question of command. Macky's deficiencies have already been discussed. 22 Battalion was at the time commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel L.W. Andrew who had won the Victoria Cross in the First World War when, as a lance-corporal, he had led attacks that had destroyed two German machine-gun posts at La Basseville. He was renowned as a strict disciplinarian and for imbuing a 'pride in unit' amongst his men.<sup>60</sup> No evidence has been discovered of Macky leaving his command posts during the actions at Platamon and Pinios Gorge, but there is at least one report of Andrew out inspecting his unit's positions during shelling at Olympus Pass.<sup>61</sup>

Field Marshal Montgomery believed that 'morale is the single greatest factor in war', and that a soldier 'likes to see the C.-in-C. regularly in the forward area, and be spoken to and noticed'.<sup>62</sup> Montgomery was to put this belief into practice during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 when the Germans launched a heavy and unexpected attack on a front weakly held by inexperienced American troops. While Eisenhower allowed himself to become prisoner of his security detail's fears and remain in seclusion for fear of German assassination squads, Montgomery was out touring the battlefield, allowing himself to be seen by the men fighting the battle, and advising and supporting their commanding officers. One of his liaison officers, Major R. Harden, recalled a visit Montgomery made to the hard pressed American 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division which 'was very shaken but only because their commander was so

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<sup>59</sup> Henderson, p.22.

<sup>60</sup> I. McGibbon (ed.), *The Oxford Companion To New Zealand Military History*, Auckland, 2000, p.17: Henderson, pp.1-4.

<sup>61</sup> Henderson, p.17.

<sup>62</sup> *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London, 1958, pp.83-4.

shaken....I must say that that the effect of his talk to all ranks had an electric effect. At least they knew what it was all about and that they were on the winning side and not the other.<sup>63</sup>

Macky, who was an officer during the whole of his service during the First World War, does not seem to have learned this lesson. Andrew joined up in 1915 and was not commissioned until March 1918. It is suggested that in light of Macky's 'Tory attitude' it would not have occurred to him that associating with his men would have an influence on their morale.

That the morale of 22 Battalion was high there can be no doubt. Although in a few instances men were driven from vulnerable positions by overwhelming forces at no time was there any large retirement until the official withdrawal was ordered. The confidence of the men was so high that at one stage a party made an unsuccessful attempt under fire to recover the bodies of their dead comrades for burial.<sup>64</sup>

The difficulties of detailing the history of 21 Battalion were recognised by the War History Branch, and the instructions given to the writer who replaced Halstead, T.R. Shaw, not only reflect this, but also give an indication of the problems that were perceived to pervade the early years of the battalion:

Traditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> are difficult. Generally speaking, the traditions and characteristics of all 2 NZEF units were those built from the date of formation and they reflected the C.O. and his officers and their efforts. But there was definitely a carry over from 1 NZEF. Although the 21st Bn was not a formed unit merely being placed on a war footing, it was recruited from Territorial units which had deeply ingrained traditions from the 1914-18 war. Many of the officers including the C.O. had long service in that war, and certainly the experience on which to build a unit. In due course the 21st acquired its own very worthy traditions.<sup>65</sup>

This can be interpreted as a veiled warning to Shaw of the difficulties he was likely to encounter, especially in view of Halstead's dismissal, and an indication of a line of research that he might follow. The reference to traditions of units reflecting their

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<sup>63</sup> Major R. Harden, letter to Lt-Colonel T.S. Bigland, 6 November 1958 – cit. N. Hamilton, *Monty: The Field-Marshal, 1944-1976*, London, 1987, p.245.

<sup>64</sup> Henderson, p.22.

<sup>65</sup> Letter Fairbrother to T.R. Shaw, 11 January 1949 – File IA 181/7/12 NA

commanding officer may well be a suggestion that the poor performance of 21 battalion in its first campaign had its roots in the battalion's leadership

It is clear that Macky and other officers of 21 Battalion were concerned about protecting the reputation of the battalion (and themselves). Macky's self-serving *Report on Operations* was clearly intended to defend himself against what he considered an unfair removal from the command of the unit, and later, Shaw reported to Fairbrother on his difficulties in preparing his account of the Pinios Gorge action at some length:

As far as the Platamon show was concerned the few officers I contacted were happy to give me details. But when it came to Tempe the general comment was "Col Macky's account [Macky's *Report on Operations*] covers that for my company." And as you saw Col Macky's account was so gloriously vague as to get me nowhere. The only person who was frank enough with me was Col Trousdale. From what he said I quite understand why several other officers were not prepared to add anything to Col Macky's account. All Bullock-Douglas wrote me about the action was that he had nothing more to say than the brief account in the War Diary which Col Macky made after the action, except that he wished to give the highest praise to Col. Macky for his actions. (There was a reason for this attitude!)

At the moment I don't feel happy about going further into the campaign. I know I would only raise a hornet's nest and probably very quickly follow Halstead.<sup>66</sup>

The following year, when Shaw resigned the authorship of his own choice and not through any difficulties arising from his writings, he was replaced by W.F Cody. This again caused a stir emanating from the battalion's former officers. H.M McElroy, at the time of the Greek campaign a captain in C Company, and later a commander of the battalion, wrote to Fairbrother, stating that neither he nor Macky would agree to Cody's appointment because of 'the difficulties we experienced as a unit when controlled from the South Island.' This produced a stinging reply from Kippenberger, a South Islander who had had 21 Battalion under his control as commander of 5 Brigade, in which he considered McElroy's comment as 'a deliberate insult' to himself and several other prominent high ranking South Island officers. After a brief flurry of letters, in which Kippenberger advised McElroy that should he and Macky refuse to assist with the completion of the history that he, Kippenberger, would make a public

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<sup>66</sup> Letter T.R. Shaw to Fairbrother, 2 November 1949 – File IA 181/7/21.

appeal for other officers' help, giving Macky and McElroy's refusal as the reason for his appeal, Cody was appointed.<sup>67</sup> This is in marked contrast to the lack of support given to Halstead when he was having difficulties with Macky and McElroy in the early days of the preparation of the battalion's history. Whether this is because Kippenberger was personally stung by the comment about southern control or because the personnel of the War History Branch had run out of patience with the obstructionism of some of the battalion's officers is open to debate, although it is known that Kippenberger did not like Halstead.

The reason why there should be objections to Cody's appointment is not obvious. McElroy makes it clear that it was not personal, as McElroy did not know him.<sup>68</sup> It may be that the phrase 'southern control' was a reflection of the fact that Cody lived in Wellington and would not be subject to the personal control of Macky and McElroy as had been Halstead during his brief tenure, and later as was Shaw. Halstead made it clear that Macky and McElroy were the controlling elements of the committee overseeing the 21 Battalion history,<sup>69</sup> and with their keen interest, especially Macky's, in ensuring the final product presented their views they may well have felt that it would be advantageous to have the official historian under their direct supervision in Auckland. Shaw's comment in the extract quoted above about quickly following Halstead shows that he was aware of the dangers of upsetting the 21 Battalion hierarchy.

All this evidence of attempts to control the publication of the battalion's official history suggests those doing so, and in particular Macky and McElroy, were aware that shortcomings in the command at Pinios Gorge could be revealed. It was these shortcomings that they were so desperate to suppress that led to the poor performance of the battalion in that action.

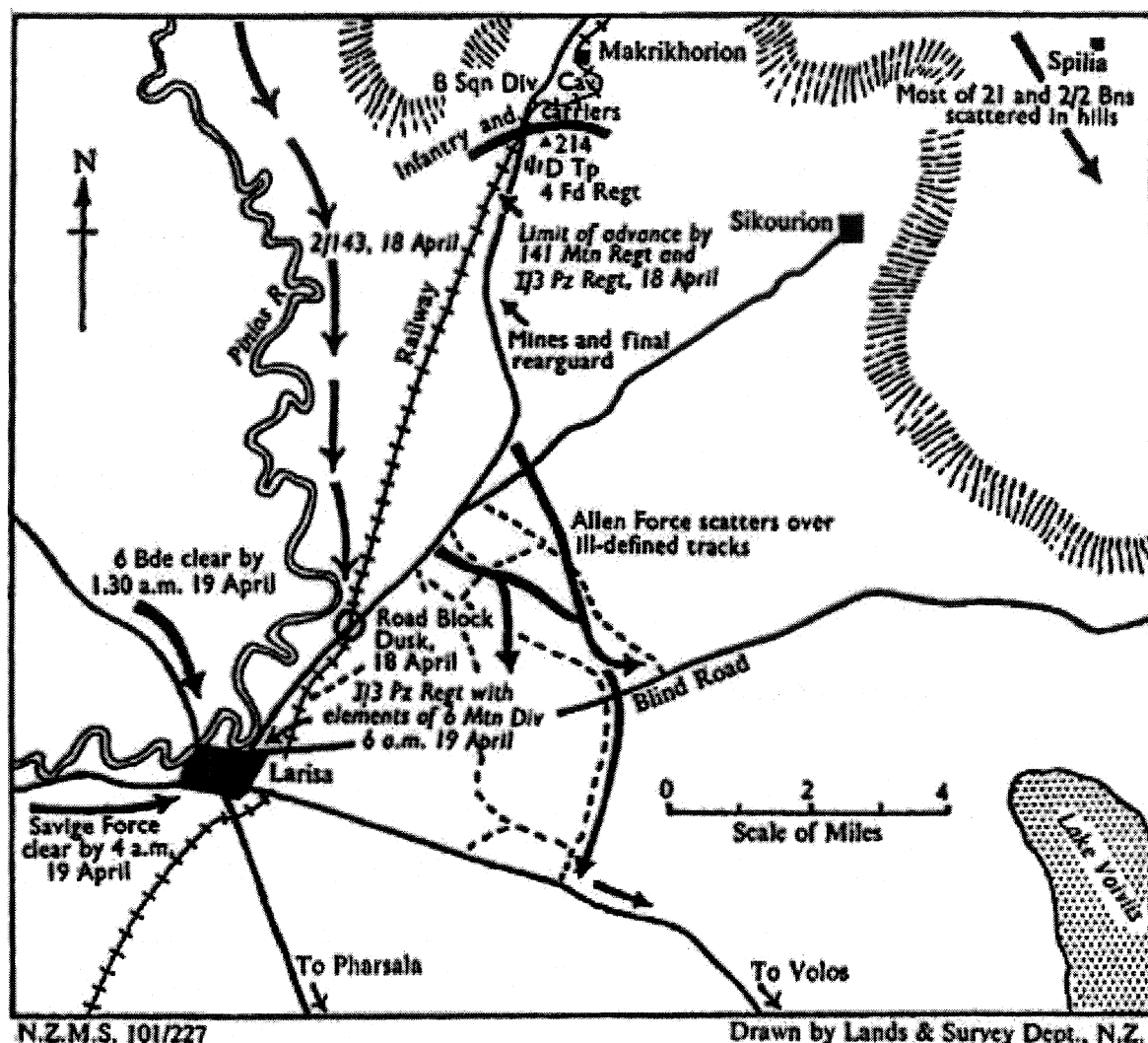
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<sup>67</sup> Correspondence between McElroy, Fairbrother, Kippenberger, February-March 1950 – File IA 18/7/21 NA.

<sup>68</sup> Letter, McElroy to Fairbrother, 14 February 1950 – File IA 181/7/21 NA

<sup>69</sup> Letter Halstead to Fairbrother, 25 February 1948 – File IA 181/7/21 NA>

## CHAPTER 6: THE RETREAT FROM PINIOS GORGE



### Map 7: The Retreat from Pinios Gorge

from W.G. McClymont, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, To Greece*. War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1959, p.338.

In the face of the German advance the Australian and New Zealand forces were forced into retreat. As the German tanks debouching from the Gorge and the infantry that had crossed the river further to the west spread across the flat land between Tempe, Parapotamos and Makrikhori villages, the Australians and New Zealanders facing them fell back. The first to be affected by the German advance was 12 Platoon, stationed on a ridge at the exit to the gorge about one-and-a-half miles east of Tempe.

The troops from B Company (of which 12 Platoon formed a part) had been under artillery, mortar and small arms fire from the northern bank of the river throughout the morning and had eventually been forced to retire further up the ridges behind them.<sup>1</sup> As the tanks approached B Company continued to withdraw towards Ambelakia. McClymont suggests that this was because the company commander, Major C.A. Le Lievre, was acting on the decision made at the company commanders conference that troops cut off should attempt to escape on foot towards Volos.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, it appears that no effort was made to inform 11 Platoon patrolling in the hills to the east of Ambelakia of the company's withdrawal, and it was only after its officer, Lieutenant A.A. Yeoman, sought orders after an enemy approach that he found his Company Headquarters had withdrawn. It was with considerable difficulty that he was able to disengage his forward sections and retreat into the hills.<sup>3</sup>

C Company on the ridge above Tempe was driven from its position by the advancing tanks. 13 Platoon was stationed in weapon pits at the foot of the ridge and was trapped by the approaching enemy armour, but 14 and 15 Platoons, under *panzer* fire, were able to escape up the ridge.<sup>4</sup>

This left the Germans exiting the gorge free to advance south-west towards Evangelismos. Lying in front of them were A Company 21 New Zealand Battalion and C Company 2/2 Australian Battalion. By this time it was about 1400 hours. However, the Germans, perhaps made wary after losing two tanks, were slow to move forward. The tanks did not enter Tempe village until 1500 hours and the supporting infantry from *112 Reconnaissance Unit* did not join them until 1530. This gave A Company time to withdraw, 7 Platoon moving west to link up with 2/2 Battalion and other groups going up the ridge to join Battalion Headquarters from where they were evacuated. Other groups of stragglers on the ridge were collected up by the battalion adjutant, and were eventually led to trucks waiting south of Evangelismos to be driven south.

As part of their plan for the attack on Tempe the Germans had detailed 2 *Company* of *I/143 Mountain Regiment* to proceed west from Gonnos to get behind the Imperial

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<sup>1</sup> Cody, pp.66-7.

<sup>2</sup> McClymont, p.325.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> McClymont, p.327.

troops' positions and cut off their obvious escape route to Larissa. By about 2000 hours on the evening of 18 April this force had established itself on a railway crossing on the road from Tempe to Larissa about two-and-a-half miles north-east of the latter town. Details of what followed are confused,<sup>5</sup> but it is clear that almost immediately the road block was established the Germans were able to ambush two trucks under the command of Lieutenant R. Penney, the transport officer from 21 Battalion, who was reconnoitring an escape route to Volos that bypassed the bottleneck of the heavily bombed Larissa. This resulted in the wounding of three men, including Penney, and the capture of the whole party. The Germans claim to have also captured as many as ten English ammunition trucks, but this has not been verified.<sup>6</sup>

As other parties leaving Tempe approached the roadblock more confused fighting occurred. One group of perhaps seven lorries from 4 RMT containing Australians and troops from 21 Battalion and led by an officer familiar with the area took a side road before the road block and successfully reached the Volos road, but the party left to guide others on this route failed to do so, and later groups continued to follow the Larissa road until halted by *I/143 Mountain Regiment's* roadblock. The destruction of an Australian vehicle completely blocked the road so that a traffic jam of following trucks soon developed. Volunteers were called for to man a Bren carrier to attempt to break through the road block. The four chosen included Sergeant R.A. Marshall-Inman from 21 Battalion's Headquarters Company who later reported that the carrier advanced under heavy machine-gun fire from the front and both sides of the road. An explosion, thought to have been from a two inch mortar bomb, blew the carrier off the road, where it became stuck. Under fire the crew abandoned it and head south on foot. After about three hours they were picked up by an Australian artillery convoy and delivered to 24 Battalion at 'a sea-port North of Volos'.<sup>7</sup>

Several improvised infantry attacks on the German road block back on the Tempe-Larissa road also failed.<sup>8</sup> Gradually the fighting died away and alternative routes were found so that the trucks could proceed south *via* the Volos road, joining up with convoys from 6 Brigade from Elasson. When the remnants of the battalion

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<sup>5</sup> McClymont, p.341.

<sup>6</sup> McClymont, p.340; Cody, p.72.

<sup>7</sup> Undated report by Sgt. R.A Marshall-Inman in Appendix B, 21 Battalion War Diary – DA54/1/16, NA.

<sup>8</sup> McClymont, p.341.

reassembled at the new British position of the Thermopylae line they comprised only 132 all ranks. The reported battle casualties for the fighting at Tempe were the incredibly light figures of only one officer and three other ranks killed or wounded. However, the greater part of the battalion, including most of its senior officers, was missing.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the missing were at large in the hills around the Pinios Gorge. As the Germans overran the New Zealand positions the troops were able to withdraw into the hill surrounding the position, and were now making their way south in an attempt to rejoin the main Imperial forces, as were others who had been scattered in the fighting at the roadblock outside Larissa. Several of these groups made for the coast where they were able to obtain passage on coastal vessels or to steal boats which they sailed south.

One such group was led by Macky himself. At some stage during the action Macky and 21 Battalion Headquarters had withdrawn from their position in a depression in the ground a little south of Tempe village up the ridge behind it. It is not clear exactly when this occurred. Macky does not mention a time in his *Report on Operations*, but there is in existence an undated letter to the official historian for 21 Battalion which states that Macky ordered the commander of A Company to withdraw his men up the ridge at 1400 hours.<sup>10</sup> It would seem that Battalion Headquarters must therefore have moved up the ridge after that time.

After observing the remainder of the day's fighting from his new position on the ridge, Macky decided to travel across Mount Ossa during the night in the hope of eventually reaching Volos.<sup>11</sup> Whilst watching the fighting he saw a German dive-bomber attack on an Imperial artillery position below, which he surprisingly called in his *Report* 'a wonderful sight'.<sup>12</sup> This is surely not a suitable comment from a senior officer to describe a strike on his own troops. During the first night's march, four men were left behind after a rest stop. This again appears to be a failure on Macky's part, as the group's leader could be expected to do a head count to ensure the party was all

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<sup>9</sup> Cody, p.73; McClymont, pp.341-3.

<sup>10</sup> Undated letter, E.G. Smith to Cody, - WAI 2/30, NA.

<sup>11</sup> Macky, *Report*

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

together before moving on.<sup>13</sup>

The party spent the next few days travelling cross country to the coast. They were fed and guided by local Greeks whom they met in their travels, and from suffered from the cold wet weather as they progressed through mountainous terrain, often at high altitudes. Included in this party was Lieutenant H.H. W.Smith who recorded in his diary:

20/4/41 Slept all day in hideouts, started again at night. Next to no food.

21/4/41 Arrived at Speilia, a pretty Greek village situated far up the slopes of Mt Ossa. Were received with open arms. We were fed and slept, then went on through pass as high as the snow-line, then were led by a smuggler towards the coast. Everyone very tired. Feet bruised and sore.

Smith also reported with a hint of disgust that when some women in Speilia produced a chair and a bowl of water and offered to wash the party's feet, Macky and some others sat down and had their feet washed and dried – 'I just couldn't'.<sup>14</sup>

When the party reached the coast they were met by others escapees from 21 Battalion who had acquired a *caique* and managed to sail this as far as Siros, an island in the Cyclades group in the Aegean, where they fell in with a group of Greek officers who took them on to Crete.<sup>15</sup> Macky again displayed his lack of sympathy with his men by declaring himself to be 'rather astonished' that only he and another officer in the party knew anything about yachting – this 'in an Auckland Battalion.'<sup>16</sup> He clearly had no conception of the hardship many of the men would have suffered in the Depression years leading up to the War, with no money for such luxuries as yachting.

Another party to pass through Speilia was that led by Captain A.C. Trousdale, the officer commanding D Company. Situated as it was on on the ridge above Tempe around the village of Ambelakia the company had little involvement in the fighting. As the situation below deteriorated most of B and C Companies, including B Company's commander, Major Le Lievre, withdrew through D Company's position. Trousdale ordered his men to follow them, he himself being in the last group to leave. When he reached the top of the ridge he found that the rest of his company had gone on. Now leading a party of two officers and nineteen other ranks he conducted the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> H.H.W Smith, *Memories of a Junior Officer: Experiences of a Junior Officer Greece, Crete, Egypt, Libya and POW*, Pokeno, 1996, pp.42-3.

<sup>15</sup> Macky, *Report on Operations*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

party across the mountains, following a compass bearing for most of the night. Dawn found them near Speilia, where they were able to buy food, and were joined by a party from 11 Platoon and a group of thirty other ranks.<sup>17</sup>

Also stationed about the village of Ambelakia 11 Platoon had seen little action itself as it watched the fighting evolve below. Yeoman became increasingly concerned as he watched several tanks traverse the gorge and emerge on to the open ground. He realised that they must have overwhelmed A and C Companies, so uncovering the track leading up the ridge to Ambelakia. It seemed not unreasonable to conclude that they might send a force up to seize the village.<sup>18</sup>

D Company was holding the village while 11 Platoon mounted patrols along the mountainside to the east to guard against enemy infiltration. As related earlier, he received no notification from his Company Headquarters that the company was withdrawing. In addition, the commander of D Company had left a man in Ambelakia to inform 11 Platoon of any withdrawal of D Company and when Yeoman tried to contact that man he found he had gone. It was at this point that Yeoman was warned in pantomime by a local Greek that the Germans were advancing up the road from Tempe. With some reluctance, for he still had a patrol out on the mountainside, Yeoman allowed the Greek to guide the platoon to a track higher up the mountain, which was screened from the Germans and offered an escape route. (The missing squad had not returned from its patrol because it had been cut off by infiltrating Germans, but was able to make its way higher up the mountain and escape to rejoin the platoon a few days later.)<sup>19</sup>

The platoon headed south and south-east into the night, until at last it came under threat of being lost in the darkness and halted for the night. The next day after re-establishing their position they continued south and soon came up with D Company, and later with a group of Australian troops. These groups coalesced and carried on under the command of an Australian major, now a party some 250 strong.<sup>20</sup>

The major wished to proceed south, but several others in the party felt that it was more important to get to the coast to have a chance of being picked up by the Navy,

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<sup>17</sup> Undated report by Captain A.C. Trousdale in Appendix B, 21 Battalion War Diary – DA54/1/16, NA

<sup>18</sup> A. Yeoman, *The Long Road to Freedom*, Auckland, 1991, p.29.

<sup>19</sup> Yeoman, pp.29-30.

<sup>20</sup> Yeoman, pp.33-34.

and this view prevailed. Unfortunately, when they reached the coast on 20 April they failed to find any Navy ships, and so travelled south along the shore. They had run out of food, and the forcible purchase of several pigs from a young swineherd had disappointing results, as their attempt to cook these proved less than successful. On 24 April the party had reached Keramidi. By this time their numbers had sunk to about seventy, as men who believed they had a better plan of escape had struck out on their own. Many of the men had been carrying their weapons when they left the Pinios Gorge area, but as the trek south became more arduous most of these had been abandoned.<sup>21</sup>

Just prior to the German attack at Pinios Gorge the Australian major had withdrawn a large amount of Greek currency to pay his unit, but because of the German advance this money had never been disbursed. As a result he now had a large amount of cash which he was able to use to buy passages on various vessels which eventually led to the party arriving in Crete. As the Germans had placed restrictions on Greek shipping the party would charter a boat that would take them overnight to the next island where the same procedure would be followed the next night. The voyage was relatively uneventful except for one unfortunate incident on the island of Hios where a ship left earlier than expected, and some of the men were left behind. They were able to follow on later, but felt they had been abandoned and there were recriminations later in Egypt.<sup>22</sup> This was another incident which the official historian of the battalion did not feel warranted inclusion in his work.

These escapes were typical of a number of getaways made by varying sized groups after the Pinios Gorge action. Not all involved sea voyages. Some parties travelled overland to rejoin the Allied forces at various places in Greece, and were included in the later seaborne evacuation to Crete or Egypt. Others were not so fortunate, being captured by the Germans and spending the rest of the war as prisoners. However, the attempts at escape, whether successful or not, show a resilience that does not appear to have been exhibited in the fighting around Tempe. The escapees travelled through difficult terrain in terrible weather conditions. They were often high up in mountainous country, cold and wet, with little or no food. If they could exhibit

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<sup>21</sup> Yeoman, pp.35-36.

<sup>22</sup> Yeoman, pp.37-42.

such fortitude during the escapes, why did they not do so during the fighting?

It is suggested that this was because of the quality of the command of the battalion during the action. Some discussion has already been made of Macky's defeatist attitude. Duigan in his letter to Freyberg of 24 January 1940 referred to above suggests that a commanding officer's attitude would 'permeate through the officers and ORs'. Macky's orders for his men to head for Volos in small parties if overwhelmed at Tempe would surely have reinforced any doubts amongst his men as to their chances as the action commenced, and his failure to plan instead for them to fall back to a pre-arranged rallying point left men disorientated by the advance of German tanks no option but to scatter. Once their cohesion had been lost their value as a fighting force had also been lost.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> McLeod, p.34-5.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the titles of the books about the Greek adventure express the impression left in men's memories about it. Higham's title *Diary of a Disaster* and Heckstall-Smith and Baillie-Grohman's *Greek Tragedy* both leave the reader in no doubt as to what those authors thought about their subject. Yet their emphasis may be wrong. The use of words like 'tragedy' imply an inevitability beyond their participants' control. Perhaps a title including the word 'muddle' would be more accurate.

Right from the start there was confusion about the project. It has been seen that the initial impulse came from Churchill, who as early as September 1939 was raising with the War Cabinet the possibility of forming a Balkan front. This produced no response from the Chamberlain government, and once Churchill succeeded to the premiership he showed little inclination to revive the scheme, preferring to concentrate on the elimination of Italy in North Africa. It was only after the Italian invasion of Greece and the sweeping defeat of the Italians in North Africa that he returned to the idea of forming an anti-Axis coalition in the Balkans, believing that the victories in Libya would act as a spur to the Balkan countries to join such a grouping. It was against this background that he despatched Eden to the Middle East with such sweeping powers to negotiate a defensive agreement with Greece, with the additional vain hope of adding other countries in the region to the alliance. However, he was curiously ambivalent to his scheme, frequently warning his emissary in the Middle East that he was free not to involve Britain in the region if he felt the risks were too great.

This did not augur well for the expedition. If its principal proponent was dubious then it would be because he was aware that there weaknesses in the scheme. Also, Churchill harboured unrealistic hopes of forming a coalition against Axis aggression in the area. Turkey was well aware of its military weakness, and had no intentions of becoming embroiled in the conflict, a position it was to maintain throughout the war.

A similar attitude prevailed in Yugoslavia, where the government of the Regent, Prince Paul, made every effort to avoid involvement, and this effort continued after the *coup d'état* that overthrew him. Further, the ease with which the Germans overran that country shows that Yugoslavia would have been of little use in any coalition that the British may have been able to cobble together.

It was the activities of Anthony Eden during his diplomatic mission to the Middle East that reduced Churchill's hesitations sufficiently to allow him to agree to the involvement in Greece. Eden, like Churchill, had initially not been in favour of involvement and during his tenure at the War Office had favoured, and indeed pushed for, all military activity in the Middle East being concentrated on the defeat of Italy in Libya. However, once he returned to the Foreign Secretary's office his attitude changed and he became a fervent supporter of the expedition. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but would seem that personal ambition played a part. He had been a prominent anti-appeaser in Chamberlain's government, eventually resigning as Foreign Secretary over this issue, and the proposals for an intervention in Greece provided him with a platform from which he could re-establish himself in the Foreign Secretary's role. Promoting an active campaign against the enemy coupled with his well-known stand against appeasement before the war would allow him to take advantage of the violent swing in public opinion which had occurred since 1938 to promote his image as a major figure in the wartime government. de Guingand has recorded the lengths that Eden and his staff were prepared to go to achieve their aims by influencing the figures he produced for a critical meeting, and their triumphant attitude at the outcome of that meeting. The commitment that Eden entered into in Greece caused consternation in London, and contemporaries such as Cadogan blamed the intervention solely on the Foreign Secretary rash behaviour.

The British government's military advisers had been strongly opposed to any involvement in Greece, feeling they lacked the resources to prosecute it adequately, and preferring to complete the conquest of Italian Libya. They capitulated to political pressure and agreed to the venture on political grounds. This placed a serious handicap on the expedition, as it meant that it was under-resourced. This, compounded by the apparent misunderstanding with the Greeks about the strategy to be employed against the invader, mitigated severely against the campaign having any

chance of success.

There was no military consultation with the Australian and New Zealand commanders about the proposed move into Greece. They were merely told that their governments had agreed to the proposal and to prepare their forces for movement. At this early stage of the war no mechanisms had been worked out for communication between commanders and governments on matters of major policy, and, as a result, both parties agreed to the campaign without fully understanding the other's position. The unfortunate outcomes of the Greek campaign and the later campaign in Crete caused an examination of this problem, and this situation did not arise again in the war.

A feeling has arisen in Australia and New Zealand that those countries were lured into committing to an unwise and ill-prepared venture by the British government. It is suggested that this is an over-reaction. The London government suffered the handicap of not being fully informed itself by its representatives in the Middle East, and appears to have forwarded as much information as it had. Certainly this was enough to cause the New Zealand government to consider the forthcoming campaign 'hazardous'.

One component of the New Zealand force that went to Greece returned with a less than desirable reputation. 21 Battalion fought reasonably well at Platamon where it had to hold a too extended front for the number of men available, although there are suggestions that the commander, Lieutenant-Colonel N.L. Macky, began to harbour thoughts of withdrawal very early in the action. However, when the unit fell back and made its next stand at Tempe at the southern end of the Pinios Gorge, the situation changed markedly. It appeared that Macky had completely lost control. He talked of creating demolitions in the Gorge to impede the Germans' advance and retreating to Lamia, some fifty miles to the rear. 21 Battalion was stationed in this region to prevent a German advance on the vital road junction of Larissa, and a withdrawal to Lamia would have completely uncovered the junction, the capture of which by the Germans would have trapped the bulk of the British forces in northern Greece. Ordered to stay and defend the Gorge with approaching Australian forces, Macky and 21 Battalion began preparing defences.

The joint Australian and New Zealand force had insufficient men to hold the area. The defence was sited at the southern end of the Gorge where the Germans would debouch from the narrow Gorge mouth, but there was a wide front to hold against a German advance across the river to the north. A large gap in this front was left to be patrolled by Bren Carriers, and demolitions were prepared in the Gorge but were poorly sited and not adequately defended. This force was not able to prevent the Germans crossing the river, and when enemy tanks by-passed the demolitions in the Gorge and evaded poorly sited anti-tank guns at the southern end of the Gorge the position was overrun. The poor performance of 21 Battalion in this action was compounded by the poor leadership of Macky. He had shown a defeatist attitude, advising his officers before the action even began that if things went badly they were to scatter and make their way to Volos.

Macky's background revealed him to be unsuited for command. He was a prominent lawyer in a prestigious law firm and held a recognised position in Auckland society. He was also vain and condescending. It is unlikely that he established much rapport with his men. It is noticeable that men in the escaping parties away from Macky's influence after the debacle at the Gorge showed resilience in coping with atrocious weather conditions and terrain, and initiative in obtaining food and transport. They also fought well in Crete under different command.

The questionable performance of 21 Battalion and its commander were not reported in the New Zealand official histories, either that of the campaign or the battalion's own unit history. The reasons for this are not hard to ascertain. There was a conscious decision that the histories should not contain anything controversial or liable to offend the sensibilities of those who took part, as is illustrated by Kippenberger's comment quoted in the Introduction to this thesis. In addition, some of those involved in the operation waged a determined campaign to ensure that the version published represented their own views. As a result Ewer's recent work on the campaign, which relies heavily on published works and show little sign of much original research, is also deficient in the picture it presents.

This ill-fated campaign has been defended on the grounds that it delayed the German invasion of the Soviet Union, and so made it impossible for the Germans to

take Moscow before the snows of winter smothered their advance. An analysis of the circumstances of this shows that the Greek affair had little effect on the Germans' performance in the Soviet Union, and so cannot be used as a justification for the Greek intervention.

In summary, therefore, it can be said that the Greek campaign was flawed in its conception, flawed in its execution, and is still flawed in the New Zealand histories of the campaign.

## APPENDIX: PUBLIC OPINION AND OPERATION BARBAROSSA

The Greek expedition has been justified on the grounds that it was important for the preservation of favourable public opinion in the United States, and because it delayed the commencement of Operation BARBAROSSA, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, to such an extent that the final German advance on Moscow was so belated that it became bogged down in the snows of the Russian winter, thus saving the Soviet capital. Churchill made much of the effect of the influence of the venture on American public opinion, claiming that it 'appealed profoundly to the people of the United States, and above all to the great man who led them.'<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Roosevelt did state that 'You have done not only heroic but very useful work in Greece...'<sup>2</sup> but Roosevelt was already a strong believer in the importance of defeating Nazism, and it was the wider American community that needed to be convinced. It is difficult to find any evidence that this was achieved. Douglas Porch reports that American newspaper correspondents in Cairo at that time were impressed by the courage of the British in battle, but does not mention that they were also impressed by the decision to aid Greece.<sup>3</sup> An observer sympathetic to the British, General Raymond Lee, the then American military attaché in London, makes no expression of admiration for the British stand in his diary,<sup>4</sup> and Cordell Hull, the American Secretary of State, seems to have been more concerned with encouraging Yugoslav resistance, and merely states in his *Memoirs* that if Britain had not sent forces to Greece, the Yugoslav resistance movement that tied down so many German troops might not have arisen, freeing those German troops for action in Russia.<sup>5</sup> The American ambassador to Greece, Lincoln MacVeagh went further, not only by not expressing any approval of Britain's actions in his diary, but by condemning the inadequate support given to the Greeks.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, p.207.

<sup>2</sup> Letter, Roosevelt to Churchill, 1 May 1941, in F.L. Loewenheim et al., p.138.

<sup>3</sup> D. Porch, *Hitler's Mediterranean Gamble: The North African and the Mediterranean Campaigns in World War II*, London, 2004, p.175.

<sup>4</sup> *The London Observer: The Journals of General Raymond E. Lee 1940-1941*, ed. J. Leutze, London, 1972, *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, London, 1948, p.933.

<sup>6</sup> *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports*, ed. J.O. Iatrides, Princeton, 1980., chapters V and VI, *passim*.

When we examine the claims, made by such people as Churchill<sup>7</sup> and Eden<sup>8</sup>, and repeated by later commentators,<sup>9</sup> that Operation MARITA caused such delays to German preparations for the invasion of the Soviet Union that they were unable to complete the capture of Moscow before winter set in, an examination of the circumstances casts serious doubt on these claims. Also, as Sir Basil Liddell Hart remarks, the British could not claim that any delays resulting from the Greek adventure justified their involvement there, as any benefits were inadvertent and not planned.<sup>10</sup>

Original planning for BARBAROSSA suggested a commencement date of 15 May 1941, and possibly as late as the beginning of June.<sup>11</sup> This was dictated by the weather, as, with the poor roads and flood control existing in eastern Europe at that time, military operations were not possible until the ground had dried out after the spring rains, probably no earlier than the middle of May. In 1941 late spring rains extended the non-campaigning season until well into June. General Guenther Blumentritt, at that time Chief of Staff to Field Marshall Gunther von Kluge, commander of the German Fourth Army in Army Group Centre, which was to attack north-eastwards from northern Poland towards Minsk, Smolensk, and ultimately Moscow, testified that

1941 was an exceptional year. The winter lasted longer. As late as the beginning of June the [river] Bug in front of our army was over its banks for miles.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, General Erich von Manstein, commanding a panzer corps in Army Group North, also told Liddell Hart of late, heavy rains in his area.<sup>13</sup> In the end the attack on the Soviet Union began on 22 June 1941.

These weather delays gave ample time for troops who had taken part in the campaigns in Yugoslavia and Greece to be refitted and incorporated into the forces

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<sup>7</sup> Churchill, p.316.

<sup>8</sup> Avon, p.241.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, McClymont, p.484.

<sup>10</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*, London, 1956, p.182.

<sup>11</sup> M. van Creveld, 'The German Attack on the USSR: the Destruction of a Legend', *European Studies Review*, v.2. no.1 (1972), p.71

<sup>12</sup> Liddell, Hart, p.185.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

poised against the Soviet Union. In addition van Creveld has shown that the unexpectedly rapid overthrow of Yugoslavia released the forces involved in its conquest in time to take their place in the invasion of Russia, and the limited number of troops still active in Greece had little impact on the forces used in that invasion.<sup>14</sup>

However, there has been one challenge to this theory that the delays to the commencement of Operation BARBAROSSA were caused by the weather. Andrew Zapantis has attempted to analyse weather conditions in Eastern Europe in the spring of 1941 in an endeavour to see what effect these might have on military operations at the time.<sup>15</sup> As the meteorological records for the time have been lost, he examines the records for that season in other years, and those for other regions which he considers to be similar to the localities from where the invading armies would jump off. As a result of these comparisons he goes on to suggest that there would not be any flooding that late in the year. He also cites the lack of entries in the diary of Colonel-General Franz Halder, the army Chief of General Staff, about flooding in the jump off areas, and particularly his failure to mention any flooding when he flew over the area on 9 June.<sup>16</sup> It is suggested that this is a dangerous technique on which to build a hypothesis. A statement of 'typical' weather conditions does not mean those conditions applied at the period under study, and indeed the reports made after the war by the German generals make the point that 1941 was unusual, with the rains and floods being 'late'. Similarly it is unsafe to draw conclusions about weather conditions in one locality based on conditions applying in others. Heavy localised rains could cause local flooding that did not occur in adjacent regions. Also, drawing conclusions from negative evidence, as Zapantis does by relying on Halder's not mentioning flooding in his diary, is risky, as Halder may have reasons for omitting this, such as it not being relevant to matters which he wished to record. Also, it is noticeable that most senior German officers involved make mention at some point of the delays to the start of the invasion caused by the weather. If the weather was not so bad, as Zapantis claims, we are left with the unlikely hypothesis that all these officers got together and created the myth of the bad weather to explain their later failure to take Moscow.

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<sup>14</sup> van Creveld, 'German Attack', pp.79-86.

<sup>15</sup> A.L. Zapantis, *Hitler's Balkan Campaign and the Invasion of the USSR*, Boulder, Colorado, 1987, pp.146-63.

<sup>16</sup> Zapantis, p.112

Evidence that originally a principal objective of Operation BARBAROSSA was the capture of Moscow can be seen in several places. The army High Command, the *Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH)*, once the decision to invade Russia had been taken, had always considered an advance on Moscow a prime focus, feeling that it would draw the Soviet forces into a major battle in which they could be destroyed.<sup>17</sup> To this end they carried out a war game in December 1940, following which it was concluded that

The main task of all three Army Groups will be to ensure that the operations of all three of them are conducted in a manner that will result in the co-ordinated concentration of all available forces for the ultimate and decisive advance on Moscow.<sup>18</sup>

This attitude was retained when the invasion actually began. 'The primary objective was Moscow.'<sup>19</sup> Of the three attacking army groups, Army Group Centre was to advance towards the Soviet capital, with its northern flank being protected by Army Group North proceeding towards Leningrad. Stolfi asserts by 16 July 1941 the German advance was proceeding so well that the invaders were in a position to complete their advance on Moscow. 'Only the most desperate German error at the highest strategic level could save the Soviet Union.'<sup>20</sup> Hitler committed this error.

On 19 July 1941 *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW)*, Hitler's headquarters, issued Directive No.33. This in effect halted Army Group Centre's drive towards Moscow. Apparently concerned by a large Russian salient held by the Soviet 5<sup>th</sup> Army south of the Pripet Marshes Hitler, in this Directive, required German forces on the southern flank of Army Group Centre to combine with troops from the northern flank of Army Group South to destroy this enemy force. At the same time, Army Group Centre was to use its 'mobile elements' to guard the flanks of Army Group North in its drive towards Leningrad.<sup>21</sup> Hitler was to claim later that Moscow was 'merely a geographical idea', and that the seizure of the important Soviet industrial and agricultural areas of Leningrad and the Donetz basin were more important.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> W. Warloimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters 1939-45*, London, 1964, p.138.

<sup>18</sup> W. Goerlitz, *Paulus and Stalingrad*, London, 1963, p.118.

<sup>19</sup> Goerlitz, p.127.

<sup>20</sup> R.H.S. Stolfi, 'Barbarossa Revisited: A Critical Re-appraisal of the Opening Stages of the Russo-German Campaign (June-December 1941)', *The Journal of Modern History*, v.54, no.1 (March 1982), p.32.

<sup>21</sup> A. Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict 1941-1945*, London, rep. 2001, p.79.

<sup>22</sup> Warloimont, p.186

Whatever Hitler's motives were, and these are relevant to this study, it was not until mid September 1941 that orders were issued for the drive towards Moscow be resumed, and Colonel-General Heinz Guderian's 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Army began the advance on 28 September.<sup>23</sup> However, as early as 12 September, as Goralski records, 'King Winter' entered the war, when 'early snow began falling along most of the front',<sup>24</sup> and by 1 December the German advance had come to a halt with the leading forces in sight of Moscow.

In light of this it is difficult to accept the claims of the apologists for the Greek campaign that it was justified because it delayed the German advance on Moscow. The evidence suggests that the initial advance was deferred because of wet conditions in eastern Europe and that the delays this caused were compounded by Hitler's diverting the attack away from Moscow. The six week gap in the drive on the Russian capital that this produced was sufficient to setback the German advance enough for it to become bogged down in the snows of an early winter.

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<sup>23</sup> K. Macksey, 'Guderian', in C. Barnett (ed.), *Hitler's Generals*, New York, 1989, p.453.

<sup>24</sup> Goralski, p.174.

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